

top ten

Desert retreats

Kitty Melrose picks some of the best spots in the sand



Courtesy: Emirates Hotels & Resorts

1

Al Maha Desert Resort and Spa, UAE

Set inside a wildlife reserve with the desert stretched across the horizon, this stylish retreat named after the Arabian oryx lives up to its description as a secluded sanctuary. Though it's only a 45-minute drive from Dubai, Al Maha feels hours away from civilisation, in part because no day trippers are allowed. Designed to reflect a Bedouin encampment, the 42 tents-cum-suites merge into the sandy hillsides, each with their own pool and terrace. For activities, there's falconry, horse and camel riding, archery or a guided desert safari. Guests can dine at the Al Diwaan restaurant or on private decks. The Timeless Spa is a welcome treat after a day in the sun. The resort, which helped to set up the reserve, has also won awards for its conservation work. Double rooms cost from US\$980 (Dh3,599), per night including transfers, meals and two activities (www.al-maha.com; 04 303 4222).

2

Adrere Amellal, Egypt

In the Saharan oasis at Siwa, Adrere Amellal, a remote lodge nine hours from Cairo, is a stunning piece of fortress-like architecture. Each of the 40 rooms were built by hand by local tradesmen using the traditional kershef method, which uses rock salt, straw and clay. The lodge's design and approach give it a spartan, eco-conscious feel, and the place operates without using electricity and by growing organic food on the grounds. Yet it also features comfy Bedouin furnishings, an infinity pool fed by natural springs that have been used since Roman times at least, as well as activities on the dunes bordering the Great Sand Sea. Each delicious meal that the retreat serves can be taken in a different setting – on terraces, balconies, by the pool or in the glow of oil lamps and stars while overlooking Siwa Lake, the site of the Temple of Oracle. Double rooms cost from US\$550 (Dh2,020), per night, including all meals and day trips in the desert (www.adrereamellal.net; 00 20 2736 7879).



Courtesy: SIWA

3

Awasi, Chile

The vast, harsh Atacama Desert might seem an unlikely spot for a boutique retreat. But you'll find Awasi, which is the Quechua word for home, to be situated smack in the middle of this rugged scenery in the pleasant oasis town of San Pedro de Atacama. Eight thatched cottages, built from wood, stone, straw and adobe, come with their own private sun terrace and rustic interiors. Landscaped paths connect the cottages with a candlelit patio and a pool. And with more than double the number of staff attending to a maximum of 16 guests, the highly personalised service is as fantastic as the surrounding area's, flamingo-filled salt lagoons, hot springs, dunes and desert canyons. A local guide can take visitors on llama caravans or hikes to the Moon Valley, which end with sundowners. Cottages cost from \$1,280 (Dh4,701) per person, for the minimum stay of two nights, including meals, drinks and transfers (www.awasi.cl; 00 56 2 233 9641).

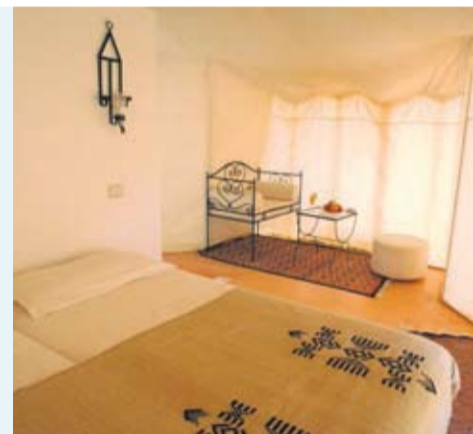


Courtesy: Awasi

4

Pansea, Tunisia

Nestled in an oasis in the world's largest desert is Pansea, a collection of 60 bright-white round linen tents that make up a romantic 10-hectare date-palm-rimmed resort in Ksar Ghilane. Each of the spacious tents come with big beds, marble floors, heating and air conditioning and bathrooms with hot showers. There's also a shady pool for a waterside midday siesta, an authentic hammam and a domed restaurant that serves both French and Bedouin cuisines. Pansea's highlight, however, is a restored desert lookout tower with splendid views of the Great Eastern Erg's rippling dunes, which extend all the way to Libya. As for other ways to pass your time, try riding a camel to ancient desert forts or the springs of Atn Rath. At night, guests can sample delicacies grilled on the open-pit barbecues while they are serenaded by Bedouin musicians. Tents sleeping two cost from \$162 (Dh597), per night, including breakfast (www.pansea.com; 00 216 75 759 330).



David Lefranc / Thalazar

5

Voyages Longitude 131°, Australia

Longitude 131° is set on the edge of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. A string of 15 glass-fronted conical tents poke through the deep-red dunes. The design is a creation of the architect Philip Cox, who named each lodging after an Australian pioneer such as Ernest Giles, the first European to discover the red hills of the Gibson Desert. A flick of a bedside switch raises the blinds to reveal Ayers Rock, 12km away, which is absolutely radiant at sunrise. All tents have views of the famous monolith. By day, Aboriginal Australians lead tours around the park. When night falls, the focus switches to relaxation on the Dune House's terrace for sunset drinks, followed by a dinner of French or Australian cuisine by the pool or on a secluded dune. A two-night stay in a tent that sleeps two costs from \$2,537 (Dh9,319), with meals, drinks, transfers and out-ings included (www.longitude131.com.au; 00 61 2 8296 8010).



Courtesy: Voyages Hotels & Resorts

6

The Serai, India

Sujan Luxury's latest property doesn't launch until later in the summer, but already there's a growing sense of anticipation. This high-end desert camp is promising to offer 21 stylish tents on 12 hectares of the Thar desert set in Rajasthan's famously wild scenery. In fact, the spacious and airy tents look somewhat like mini-marquees, with cushioned lantern-lit verandas, drawing rooms, stone bathrooms with walk-in showers, some have a sunken pool. The main pool is inspired by a traditional Indian step-well, and the grounds also include an in-tent spa. A restaurant serves local and western treats – and you can choose to be served at a table anywhere on the estate. Though it might be a shame to leave this kind of pampering, the dunes beckon. Explore the nearby 10th-century desert kingdom of Jaisalmer, or take a desert safari on a camel. Rates will be published on the camp's website in April. Go to www.the-serai.com for more information, or call 00 91 11 2374 3194.



Courtesy: Sujan Luxury Hotels

7

Little Kulala Lodge, Namibia

Little Kulala Lodge is set in the Namib Desert on the Kulala Wilderness Reserve, surrounded by red dunes to the west and rugged Namib mountains lying beyond grassy plains to the north and east. Eight thatch-and-canvas chalets, or *kulalas*, a word that means to sleep, are set on wooden decks with a wraparound veranda and small plunge pool. An internal staircase leads to the flat rooftop ideal for viewing the starriest of desert skies. Activities include early morning and night-time nature drives, as well as a trip to Namib Naukluft Park to see the highest sand dunes in the world, some of which tower up to 360m. From the lodge, visitors can also enjoy watching oryx, springbok and jackals gather at a nearby waterhole. Or they might want to try a 60-minute balloon trip floating over Sossusvlei at first light. Double rooms cost from \$563 (Dh2,069) per person, per night, with meals and activities included (00 264 61 256580). For more information, visit www.namibian.org.



Piers L'estrangé / Wilderness Safaris

8

Wadi Feynan Eco Lodge, Jordan

In 2005, Jordan's Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature established this 26-room, solar-powered lodge to raise funds for the Dana Biosphere Reserve it borders. The reserve already protects rare wildlife like the sand cat and the Syrian wolf and is looking to increase its mission. Built with local materials in a traditional style, it blends in easily with the rocky, ochre-coloured landscape. Rooms are simple but have private bathrooms, and at night hundreds of candles are set on the high walls, illuminating the area's surrounding emptiness. The lodge is operated by local Bedouin who give guided tours through the area's stark landscapes. Days might be spent exploring the Byzantine archaeology of Feynan or hiking through stunning mountain scenery to desert oases in Wadi Araba. There's also a network of mountain-bike trails. Double rooms cost from \$105 (Dh388), per night, including breakfast and entrance fees to the reserve (www.rscn.org.jo; 00 962 6 461 6483).



Courtesy: Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature

9

Desert Nights Camp, Oman

Set in the Wahiba Sands, this is Oman's first and only luxury desert camp. Situated two hours away from Muscat, it opened in Dec 2007. Sprawling across four hectares of sand, the camp includes 30 Omani-style tents, each with a private bathroom, big bed, and a cosy outdoor sitting area. They're also outfitted with antiques, handcrafted furniture and decorative carpets. Outside of the camp, visitors can take sunset dune bashing trips, go quad biking, trekking on a camel or make an excursion to the oasis at Wadi bani Khalid. As far as dining goes, guests can enjoy a shuwa, or traditional style of lamb barbecue, as they sit around a campfire listening to a band of Bedouin musicians beneath a dome of stars. A tent for two costs from \$454 (Dh1,669), per night, including breakfast and dinner but excluding a 17 per cent fee for taxes and service charges (www.desertnightscamp.com; 00 968 9281 8388).



Courtesy: Aitken Spence Hotels

10

Three Camel Lodge, Mongolia

Even as breathtaking locations go, this one is pretty awe-inspiring. The Three Camel Lodge is situated in the Gobi Desert in southern Mongolia, amid a 54-million-year-old volcanic outcrop surrounded by sandy plains. While visitors stay at the camp, their neighbours will be limited to camels and, perhaps, a solitary nomadic herder passing by. A cluster of 45 traditional style of Mongolian tents, known as yurts and made from felt and wood, have been built and feature wood-burning stoves and beautifully painted wooden-frame beds. Showers, however, are shared between the rooms. After hiking in the Gobi-Altai mountain range, wildlife spotting and listening to performances of Hoomi singers, guests often gather to relax on the large wooden porch outside the main lodge, which features a lounge. A yurt sleeping two people costs from \$160 (Dh587), per night, including meals (www.threecamellodge.com; 00 976 11 313 396).



Courtesy: Three Camel Lodge