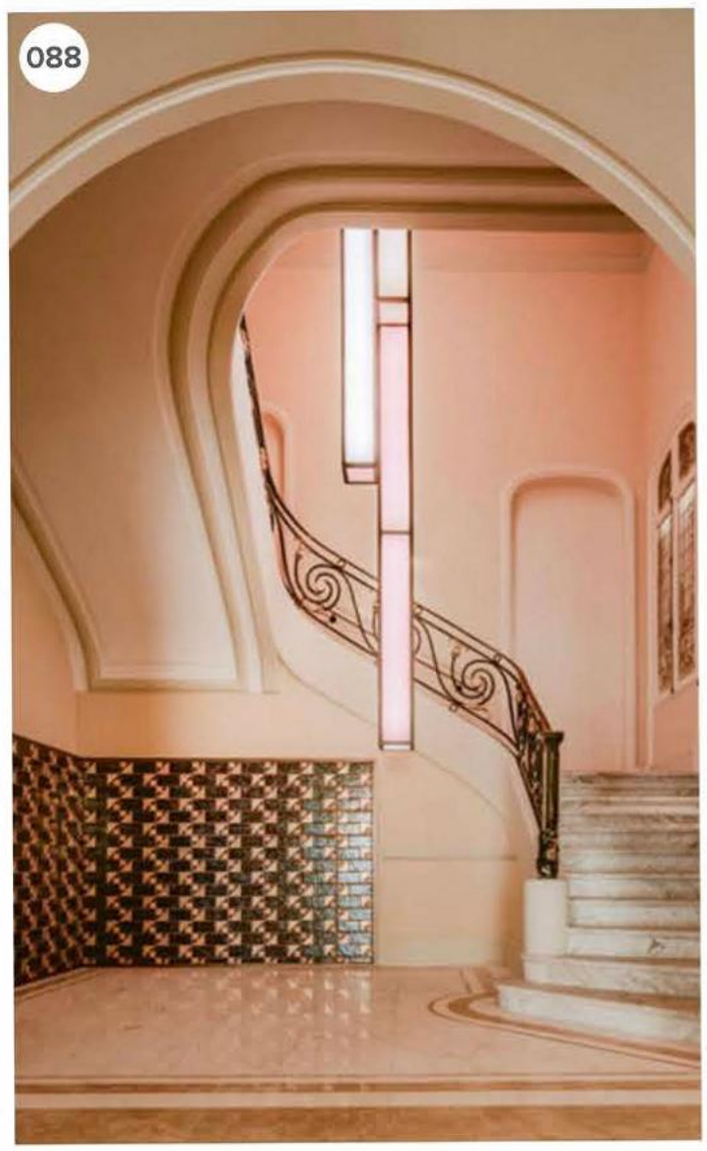
SLEEPER

HOSPITALITY EXPERIENCE & DESIGN



VERMELHO – MELIDES • SONU SHIVDASANI AND EVA MALMSTRÖM SHIVDASANI • BAB AL SHAMS – DUBAI

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Bab Al Shams

UAE

A desert oasis enters a new age, with transformed interiors that balance heritage and glamour to capture the beguiling essence of modern-day Arabia.

Words: Neena Dhillon • Photography: © Natalee Cocks

To reinvent an iconic destination takes sensitivity, vision and gumption. First opened in 2004 as one of the few heritage properties to be found in the United Arab Emirates, Bab Al Shams' architecture is unmistakable, informed by the sand-hued construction of the historic Al Bastakiya district and modelled after Arabian fortified villages. Spanning a resort area of 56,000m², clustered adobe blocks – some terraced, others punctuated by arches – open up through narrow pathways to courtyards of palm and ghaf trees as well as reflective water pools adding allure to landscaped pockets of shade.

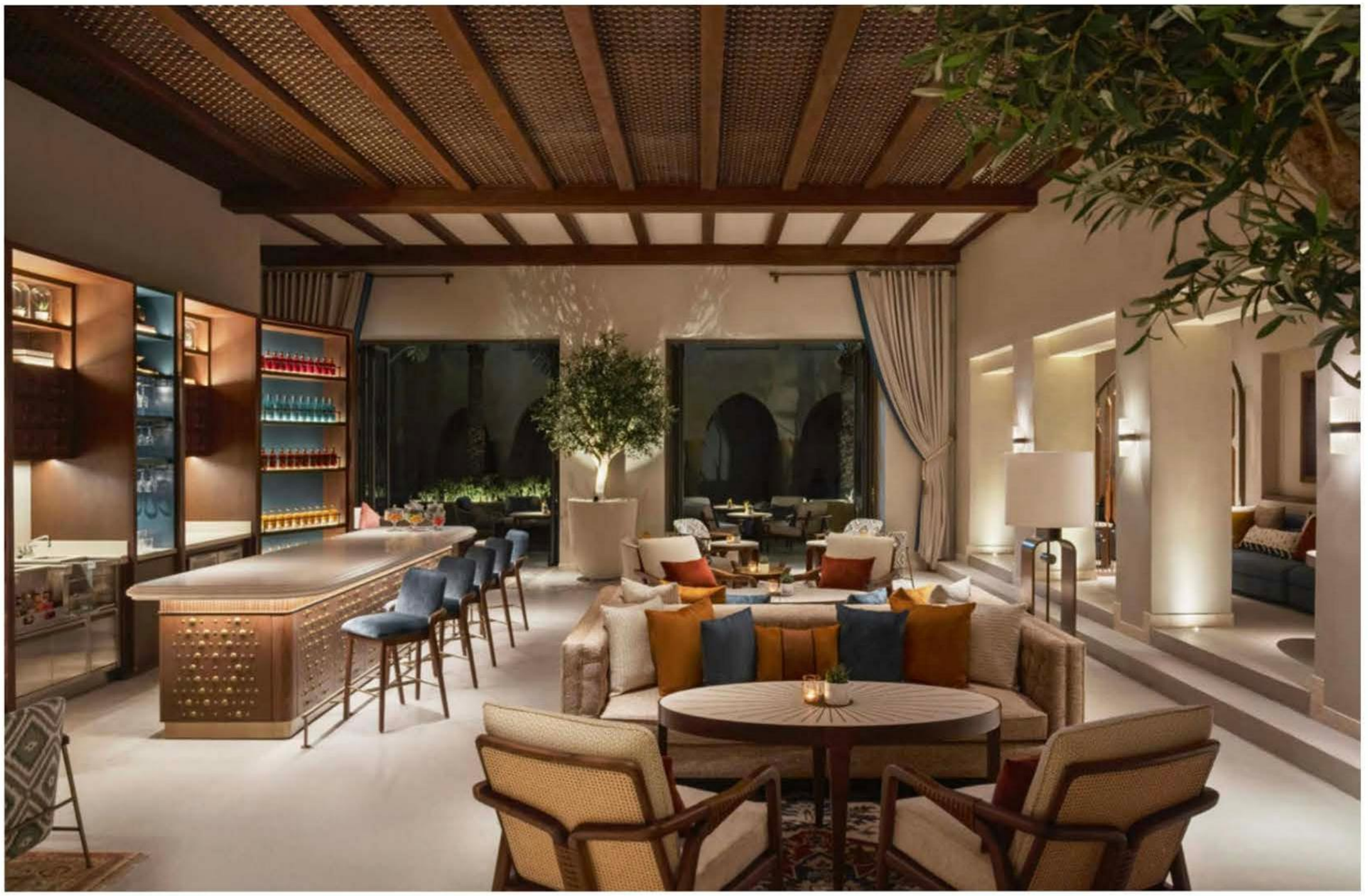
It is not surprising then that since its original launch, Bab Al Shams has become a Dubai institution, the much-loved backdrop to family celebrations, anniversaries and weddings. Having closed down entirely for nine months to enable a comprehensive interior transformation, the desert resort reopened in 2023 as the first in Kerzner International's Rare Finds collection – a portfolio of hospitality addresses promising to encapsulate the essence of a place.

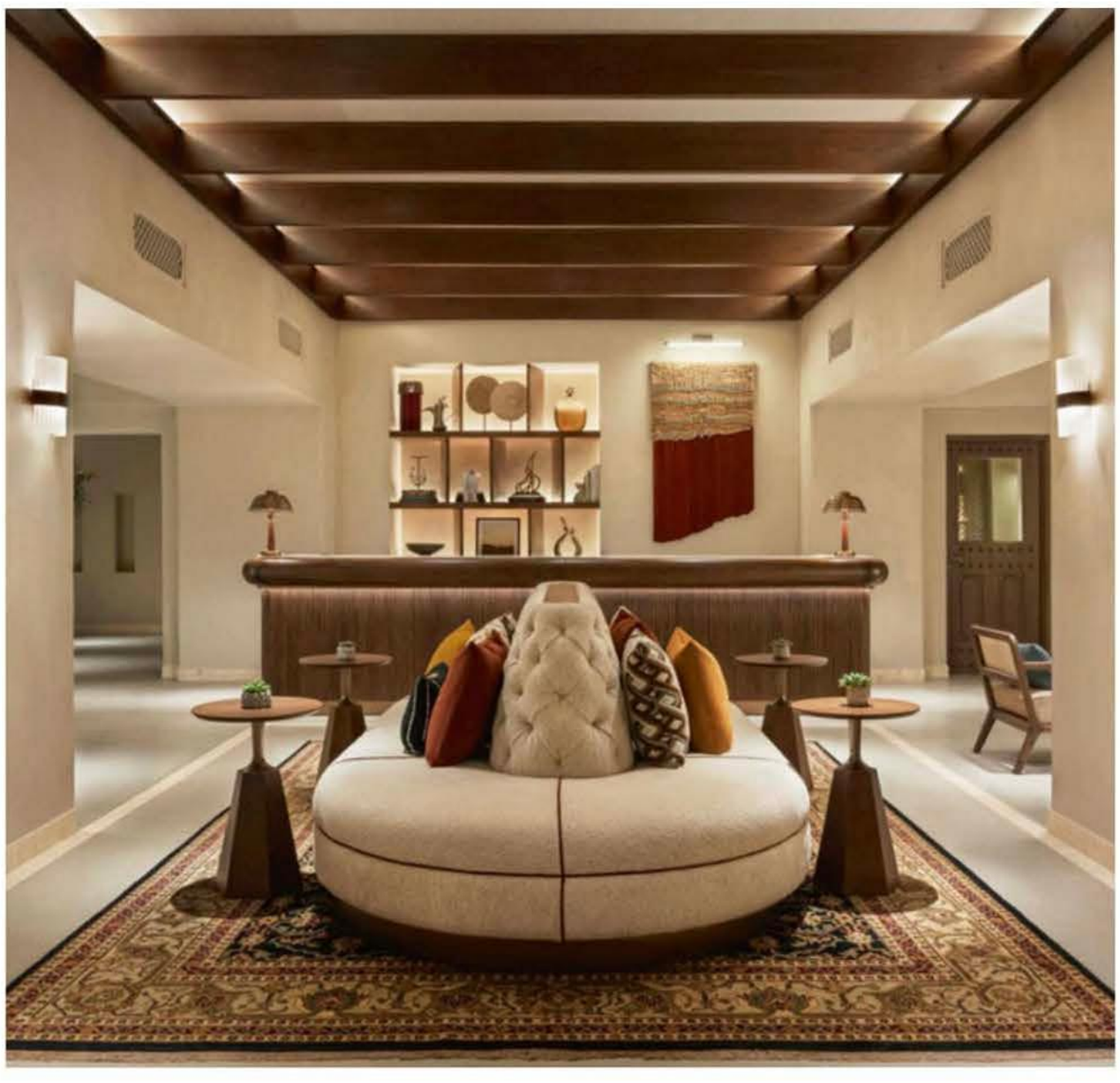
In translating the brief, to retain the desert escape's history and authenticity yet reimagine it for a contemporary age, Dubai-based LW Design turned to a storytelling narrative around which it has balanced refinement and extravagance in equal measure. Of the immersive destination, LW's Partner and Design Director Pooja Shah-Mulani says: "In the UAE, there are few and far between properties that have as much history as this. So, we wanted to personify Bab Al Shams by giving the property a story that would return it to its former glory. With the brief revolving around Arabian glamour, it made sense to introduce the narrative of a lost princess that had previously discovered the palace on her travels. We picked eclectic elements that relate back to her travels, unifying them as a central part of the redesign."

These elements have become the repeating motifs of the resort. A notable example is the







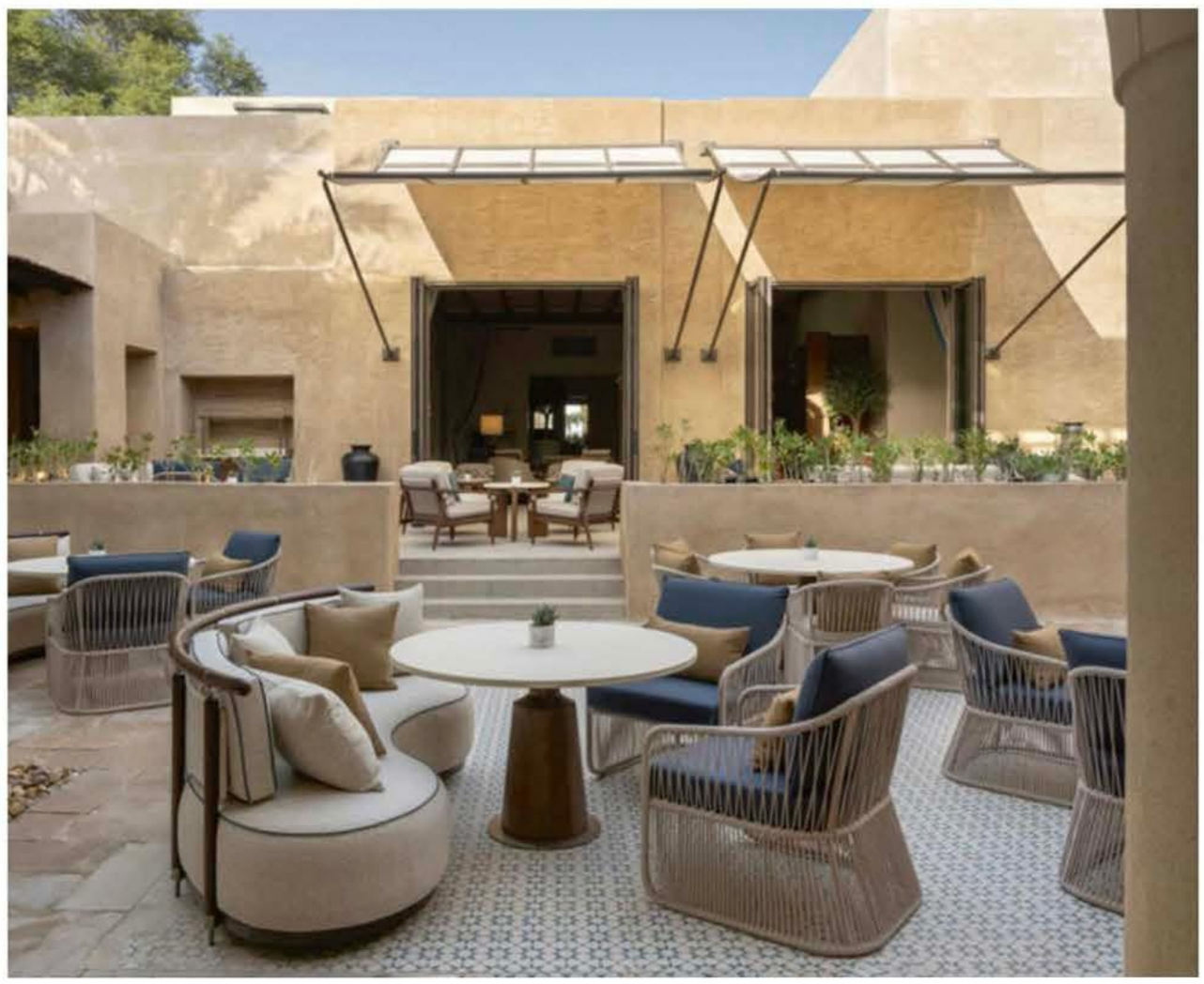


traveller's chest, which influences spaces large and small, public and private. Indeed, one of the most striking features of the lobby lounge is the unfolding back bar – reminiscent of a grand travel trunk – complete with backlit compartments housing botanical spirits, herb drawers and handcut crystal glasses. Meanwhile, in guestrooms, minibars are rendered in the style of luxurious leather luggage complete with stitched handles and stud detailing.

Another unifying element is the jewellery of the lost princess, with some original resort pieces retained yet reframed to be presented in a contemporary way. Appropriately, one of the first artworks to catch the eye upon arrival to the lobby is a textile piece by Iranian artist Mahsa Baraghani, who took her inspiration from the Bedouin jewellery and headdresses worn by Emirati women. This alluring representation of traditional Emirati culture acts as a focal point to the rest of the lobby, in which other textile and cultural art – think embroidered cloaks or local musical instruments – anchor



Clustered adobe blocks – some terraced, others punctuated by arches – open up through narrow pathways to courtyards of palm trees and reflective water pools



a scheme that invites discovery, whether in the mashrabiya screens that hide inviting seating niches or the entrance loveseat that beckons visitors with its gentle sway.

The jewellery references don't stop in the public areas. Indeed, a special piece adorning guestrooms is a backlit etched-mirror artwork that showcases ornate necklaces belonging to the princess, the fringed pieces captured at the centre of the frame, which is also layered with glimpses of her veil set against a sand-filled desert landscape.

To continue building the narrative, Shah-Mulani explains how colour and texture play into the scheme: "We chose vibrant shades inspired by jewel tones to provide a reference to Arabian glamour, while artisanal patterns and tactile textures for the furniture and fixtures are an eclectic mix." As the team wanted to ensure that sustainable heritage was married seamlessly with the more contemporary elements, they took care to repurpose items of furniture and accessories, and worked with consultant Capsule Arts to curate artefacts and artworks that support the narrative of a palace of lost treasures. Lending a contemporary



East Mediterranean eatery Zala is distinguished by its Appiani tile mosaics, Moorish-style lanterns and potted olive trees

depiction of the surrounding landscape, desert photography of Mohammed Ahli also weaves its way around the destination.

Of course, to truly follow a sustainable approach, it was important to enhance the resort's existing architectural aspects, an achievement perhaps no better exemplified than by the resort's entrance. Bal Al Shams means 'gateway to the sun', so it is fitting that guests arrive through a monumental pair of etched wooden doors.

It is here that they are greeted with a lush oasis of palms, pools, planters and barasti-style canopies, through which dappled sunshine dances. "Entering the giant doors is the first big arrival moment that needed to be maintained," says Shah-Mulani. "However, the entire drop-off layout was enhanced by raising the floor level to match the hotel, creating a more ceremonial and grand arrival experience."

While many of the room layouts had to be retained too, the design team has succeeded in renewing guest accommodation through an understated colour palette, with accents of teal and mustard complementing exposed wooden beams and double-stacked tactile headboards. While the majlis-style window seating remains, upholstery is undeniably modern, the geometric patterns and jewel hues giving a contemporary twist. In the modest-sized bathrooms, now unrecognisable, sand-coloured marble mosaics, hand-carved vanities with mother-of-pearl inlays and chic valet stands complement sleek Kohler fittings. Lighting consultant Lumen Studio has also paid extra attention to the rooms to enhance the feeling of space.

Signature suites ramp up the luxury, their palettes richer and deeper with tones of burgundy and teal. Here, the interiors are characterised by handcrafted furniture with rope, tassel and intricate inlay details, as well as polished metal accents and metal-studded doors that open to sybaritic bathrooms. All together, these features blend harmoniously to evoke the decadence of a bygone era.

As a popular destination with locals and



travellers alike, F&B is integral to Bab Al Shams. With the exception of refurbished Al Hadheerah, a multi-sensory Arabic experience that pairs entertainment displays of local heritage with outdoor dining, all the other outlets are new. They include the East Mediterranean signature eatery Zala, distinguished by its ceramics, Appiani tile mosaics, terracotta colour scheme, olive trees and curved seating booths that complement the immersive cooking stations and open-flame oven. Its outdoor terrace, punctuated with attractive Moorish lanterns, provides optimum views over the edge of the sands that signal the start of the Al Marmoom Desert Conservation Reserve.

Open only in the evenings for glorious views of the Arabian sunset meanwhile, rooftop restaurant Anwā benefits from a new central bar alongside rattan-style seating sheltering under barasti roofs. Here, Pan-Asian cuisine is served in a panoramic setting conceived around the idea of the pre-Islamic Arabs, who would use the stars in the night sky as a means of navigation. Meanwhile, lobby lounge Ya Hala exudes old-world elegance, with club seating atop handknotted rugs offset by Ottoman coffee tables. Other highlights include wooden screen dividers that brings to mind an abacus and an apothecary-style marble counter floating above a metal-studded walnut wood base.

While relaunching the interiors in such a tight timeframe threw up obstacles for the team at LW Design, there have also been unexpected surprises, as Shah-Mulani explains: "There are always skeletons that come out of the closet with an existing building, not to mention one that had not been touched for at least 15 years. We met myriad structural and mechanical challenges during the rapid construction phase, with most of the mechanical, electrical and plumbing systems replaced to allow the property to be fully upgraded."

With a standalone spa building soon to be unveiled, Bab Al Shams has been elevated to new heights, transformed into a decadent desert hideaway with newfound contemporary appeal.

EXPRESS CHECK-OUT
Owner: Meydan City Corporation
Developer: Nakheel
Operator: Kerzner International
Architecture and Interior Design: LW Design
Art Consultant: Capsule Arts
Lighting Design: Lumen Studio
Landscaping: Square M
Main Contractor: Khansaheb
Project Manager: Mirage
www.babalshams.com

View the full gallery on SLEEPIFIER