

# A MAGIC CARPET RIDE

Join **Elaine Kim** as she sweeps over the safe zones in the Middle East with her husband John Kim to discover the luxury that lies beneath.

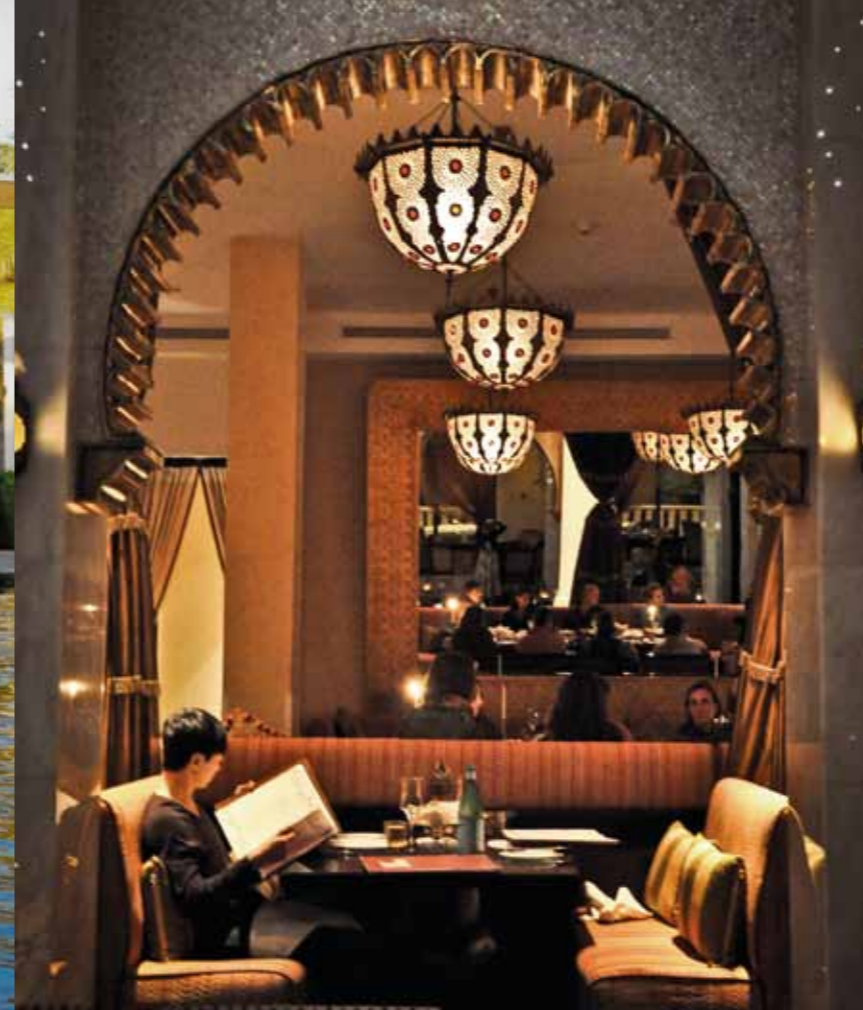
**AFTER MILES OF BARREN DESERT LANDSCAPE CONSISTING OF DUNE AFTER LOFTY SAND DUNE,** the car pulled up to the entrance of the first resort we'd be staying at on our two-week holiday in the Middle East. Like a mirage from the Arabian Nights, a turreted palatial city appeared in the landscape before us. Right then, with that magical vista, we felt immensely blessed, and were glad for the turn of events that had resulted in this desert vacation.

John and I had gazetted some leave at the beginning of the year, and made exciting plans to venture on a journey to Machu Picchu and Lake Titicaca, but a delightful but slightly unexpected turn of events placed this trip on an indefinite hold – I was found to be expecting our baby boy!

We went back to the drawing board to choose a new destination that was closer by (the Americas, the Arctic and Antarctica out), ideal to visit in January (Europe out), within easy reach of trustworthy medical facilities in case of an emergency (much of Asia and Africa out!), and still a good prospect for an exotic holiday adventure. This led us to the serendipitous idea of going to the Middle East.



Doctor **ELAINE KIM** is an avid traveller who has recently visited Italy, Turkey, South Korea and Beijing. She is daughter of Member of Parliament Dr Lily Neo and married to Korean-American oil trader John Kim. Her holiday plans for 2012 include a long trip through South America, with highlights being an Estancia stay, a Silversea cruise to magical places like the Falkland Islands and the Patagonian glaciers in Chile, and possibly even an Antarctica landing.



*As we drove, the scenery proved as captivating as the pictures promised, with its craggy mountains, desert sands and empty shores.*

## LEG 1: THE SULTANATE OF OMAN

The idea of visiting the Sultanate of Oman had intrigued me since a few years back when I'd chanced upon a striking photograph of an Omani landscape – a secluded white sand beach, juxtaposed against a backdrop of sheer rocky mountain jutting out of an emerald Arabian sea.

As such, Oman's capital Muscat was designated as the first stop of our journey. Lesser known than its bustling Emirate neighbours like Dubai and Abu Dhabi, Oman had remained in cloistered obscurity until a few decades ago, when its current ruler set about bringing the country up to date with the rest of the world. Hence, while modern infrastructure made travelling in Oman a breeze, Muscat retained an old-world patina, with its mosques and minarets and ancient architecture. Being a sultanate, too, lent to Oman's air of Arabian nights mystique.

We were fascinated by the ruler of this monarchy. Everyone we polled – taxi-drivers, tour guides and storekeepers – unanimously declared: "Sultan Qaboos very good king!". Indeed, Sultan Qaboos had, in a span of four decades, built roads and schools and modernised Oman, raising the standard of living of his subjects and creating a relatively prosperous and permissive society. Other interesting facts gleaned through the trip added to our fascination with this figure: Sultan Qaboos had come to the throne by overthrowing his own father in a coup ("father bad king!" chorused the taxi drivers), but no one seemed to know what became of the old Sultan. Also, after a divorce several decades back, the Sultan mysteriously remains unmarried and without children, and somehow the Omanis became tight-lipped when we broached the subject.

Anyhow, Oman held other sources for fascination other than its Sultan, not least its enthralling landscape. As we drove from the airport to the Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah Resort & Spa, the scenery proved as captivating as the pictures promised, with its craggy mountains, desert sands and empty shores.



*Visiting the Middle East was a serendipitous idea farther discovering I was pregnant*

### AL HUSN AT THE SHANGRI-LA BARR AL JISSAH

The Shangri-La sits by the Al-Jissah Bay, and is a sprawling property comprising three hotels, including the family-friendly Al Waha and business-centred Al Bandar. We headed for the most exclusive of the three, the Al Husn, which promised balconied rooms with sweeping views over the bay, butler service and a private beach.

It was indeed a handsome hotel. We entered its grand pillared lobby, breezed through a fountain courtyard, and passed a tall archway to find a secluded pool with an edge that disappeared into the Arabian sea. And the view from our room was beautiful – the bay below

#### Omani Allure

A stunning seascape, fabulous international cuisine, an old-world elegance – Oman has it all.

curved towards a rugged cliff jutting into the sparkling sea. It was quite marvellous to be able to step out of bed and onto the balcony to watch this view at sunrise.

The Al Husn provided a good place from which to explore Muscat. There are forts and palaces to see, hikes to wadis in the desert, boat tours to see dolphins. There is a small but fairly charming Muttrah souk full of carpets and trinkets and spices like frankincense and myrrh. In one shop, we concocted our own perfumes, which were poured into beautiful crystal bottles that we had picked out. Upon returning to the Al Husn, we would sit by the fountain in the courtyard, where a complimentary high tea was served every afternoon, and cocktails every evening.

The food was excellent too, especially since I delight in breakfasts, by the sea, of hummus and olives, ful medames and fried haloumi. There were more than 10 F&B venues throughout the Shangri-La, of which two were particularly memorable. At Shahrazad, we had delicious mezze and lamb tagine, in a beautiful Moroccan-style setting, dimly lit by candles under a ceiling of twinkling lights. At Al Tanoor, we sat in a courtyard under an Arabian tent and feasted on different cuisines from the Arabian Gulf region. The buffet was laid out in pottery-strewn open kitchens, including an Indian tandoor, a Lebanese kebab station, and an extensive counter of Arabian sweets.

When we did venture out for lunch, it was at the restaurant Vue, helmed by the acclaimed Australian chef Shannon Bennett. Vue is located in the beautiful Al Bustan Palace, where the lobby's soaring ceiling is held by pillars inlaid with gold-leaf and mother of pearl. (Since our visit, Al Bustan Palace has become a Ritz-Carlton hotel). Vue serves contemporary French cuisine with inventive touches, like a delightful hibiscus juice served in test tubes with mist rising from its surface. While you might find better fine-dining French cuisine elsewhere in the world, it was a pleasant surprise to experience it in an unexpected location like Oman.

### THE CHEDI MUSCAT

For our last two nights in Oman, we checked into the stylish, minimalist Arabian-design hotel, The Chedi. The rooms and suites are spread out over expansive grounds, interspersed by tidy lawns and gardens, courtyards with ponds and stone fountains, and two beautiful pools.

There aren't many guest activities here, which is the point really. Our itinerary read something like this: wake up late for a sumptuous breakfast buffet; do some reading in our villa's sitting room; laze by the pool; stroll by the beach; then laze by the other pool. At tea time, head to the library for free oysters and champagne; play tennis; then at sunset, sip cocktails by an outdoor fire in the courtyard lounge. Later, run the water for a soak in our sunken terrazzo bath. And suddenly it is dinner time.

The first night we dined at The Restaurant, a chandeliered space with four kitchens serving up Mediterranean and Arabian cuisine fused with Asian notes. The second night we had a candle-lit dinner at The Beach. The meal was a degustation that included delightful dishes like caviar vichyssoise, Omani lobster agnolotti with shaved truffle, warm caramelised sticky date pudding with spiced crème fraiche, and ended off with a selection of petit-fours. That meal marked a lovely end to our sojourn in Oman.

The next morning, we headed to The Chedi's lobby for our "complimentary shuttle", and were pleasantly surprised to see a silver Mercedes-Benz pull up to take us to the airport for our short flight to Abu Dhabi.



Hitting the bull's eye was such a thrill!

## LEG 2: ABU DHABI

For us two who had come from Singapore, with its modern skyline of skyscrapers, more shopping malls than shoppers, and its own F1 race, the cosmopolitan city of Abu Dhabi sounded too familiar to hold much allure for a visit, and was merely the gateway to our destination in its desert outskirts. We did make a brief stop enroute at the Sheikh Zayed Mosque, to marvel at the grandeur and architecture of this newly erected edifice, the sixth largest mosque in the world. Then out into the desert sands of Liwa we went.

### QASR AL SARAB

We read and chatted as we traversed the empty road lined by dune after dusty sand dune stretching into an infinite horizon. An hour and a half's journey later, a gated archway appeared, and following a quick check, a guard waved us through into the ethereal desert oasis that is the Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort. Out on the edge of the Empty Quarter, or in other words, the middle of nowhere, the hoteliers of the Anantara group had recruited a team of architects to conjure up a palatial fortress-like luxury resort, rising up from a barren sandscape.

The helicopters and land cruisers lined up outside the entrance indicated that a sheikh or two, entourage in tow, was already checked into this favourite getaway of Sheikh Khalifa. At the entrance of the lobby, we were greeted by a seven-foot-tall doorman, dressed in an ivory robe with a dagger on his belt – quite the imposing figure! Stepping into the lobby, a golden light was streaming in through double-storeyed glass windows from the open desert beyond, illuminating a gleaming fountain in the centre of the beautiful and richly decorated entrance lounge.

We felt like we had stepped into a magical Arabian Nights realm. Scattered around this treasure trove of a hotel lay scattered trade-route artefacts, Bedouin jars and hammered brass vessels, glinting rugs adorning the stone walls, jewel-encrusted round wooden tables and large armchairs upholstered in soft embroidered fabrics. The souk had woven baskets of spices lining the corridors. The library held old tomes of One Thousand and One Nights.



The magic continued as we were led to our room, hidden behind the doors of an ochre villa with a trickling fountain at its entrance. We found ourselves in a spacious room, elegantly appointed in earthy tones accented by Bedouin rugs, coloured silk cushions and golden lamps. Behind a carved mahogany desk, golden light poured in from windows that presented a picturesque view of the desert. An armchair and antique table formed an inviting reading nook. In the centre of the large marble bathroom was a huge mosaic-tiled bathtub.

The butler then opened the glass sliding doors and led us out onto our terrace. Here we looked out onto the breathtaking view of the desert valley. Over the next few days, this is where we would recline on the day bed, have a mezze spread and saffron tea brought in, look out into the desert horizon, and watch the sunset.

### ARCHERY AND AFTERNOON TEA

While we loved our lazy teas on the terrace, Qasr Al Sarab also offered a wide range of activities, many of which I would have loved to participate in were it not for the baby in my belly.

Mountain-biking across the desert! Camel-trekking! Dune-bashing in a 4x4! "Please?" I asked, to which the staff (and my husband) politely, apologetically, but firmly replied, "No." And my dear John declined to go without me.

Nonetheless, we relished in the activities that were allowed. I was deemed too fragile for a vigorous scrub-down in the hammam, but I enjoyed an indulgent massage treatment at the excellent spa. We went for archery lessons, and jumped in delight when we hit a bullseye. We took a walk in the desert, which is not something you get to do everyday. And we ate... a lot.

### FEAST IN THE DESERT

Our favourite restaurant in the resort was the fine-dining restaurant Suhail, named after a star and perched on the rooftop. Here, it's a tough choice between the beautiful indoor dining room setting, and the lantern-lit rooftop terrace with its vista over the desert. And a tough choice between dishes like duck-liver ravioli with mushroom duxelle and truffle foam, versus diver scallops trilogie with yuzu, caviar and foie gras.

But undoubtedly more wonderful was the Bedouin dinner we had on our last night in the desert. When night fell, we were picked up at the lobby and driven out into the empty desert. Out there the air was cool and still, and pitch black save the faint illumination from glass lamps in the sand. We walked a short distance, the cool powdery sand slipping over our sandals, and then, a Bedouin tent appeared, glowing warmly from the inside. Four waiters and a chef warmly greeted and ushered us into the tent, which had been laid out with Persian rugs and cushions, and a marvellous spread of food placed on low wooden tables. The waiters explained every dish as they were presented: labneh with olives, hummus, baba

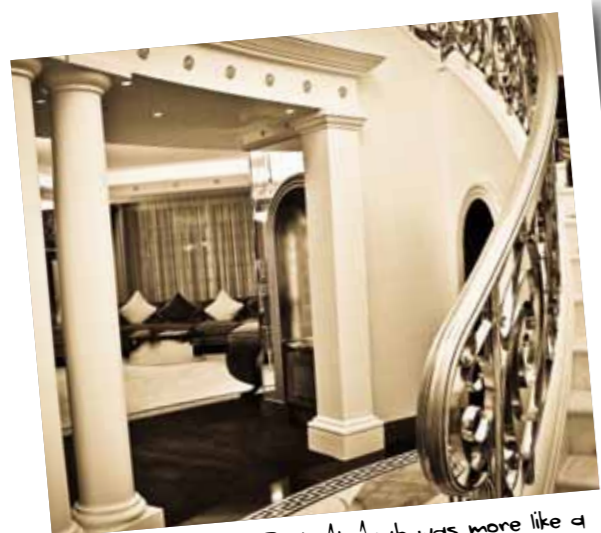


ghanoush and falafel, lamb mansaf, shish taouk and beef biryani, and so on. When we were so full we had to decline another helping of baklava from the tier of Arabian sweets, we were invited out of the tent. While we were dining, the staff had set up a roaring log fire in the desert sand outside. Here we sat on cushions by the fire, John smoking flavoured shisha, and me enjoying tea and a bowl of heavenly Umm Ali, a milky Arabic bread pudding.

This Aladdin-magical evening was surely one of the highlights of our trip.

### Astounding Abu Dhabi

Staying at the gorgeous Qasr Al Sarab resort by Anantara, dining in a Bedouin tent, and trying out archery will make you feel like you're living out a tale from Arabian Nights.



Our suite at the Burj Al Arab was more like a duplex apartment!

### LEG 3: DUBAI

We had experienced beach, and the desert, and now for the last leg of our trip, we were headed to the city.

We zoomed down the wide expressway leading into the centre of Dubai, passing soaring skyscrapers and colossal shopping malls, but noting also the prevalence of construction sites with half completed towers. (Many will remain construction sites indefinitely, early victims of an overleveraged economy-meets-global financial crisis). Just that drive down the freeway gave us a taste of the economic boom engineered by the emirate's sheikhs, who recognised oil money would not last forever. With a recipe of real-estate development, finance and tourism, they had lured in billions in foreign investment and created the cosmopolitan Disneyland that is Dubai, home to over 70 shopping malls including one with its own indoor ski resort (Mall of the Emirates), the tallest building in the world (the Burj Khalifa), entirely man-made archipelagos (the Palm Islands), and the only "seven-star" hotel in the world (the Burj Al Arab).

#### BURJ AL ARAB

It was to the Burj Al Arab on Jumeirah Beach that we were headed, figuring that this famous icon of Dubai, a hotel defined by so many superlative accolades ("world's tallest hotel!", "world's most luxurious!"), was worth trying for one night.

We crossed a bridge onto a man-made island on which the 321-metre-high sail-shaped structure stood, and stepped into a lobby with a 600-foot-tall atrium. Then, we were led to a suite that, at over 2,000 square foot, was the largest hotel room we'd ever stayed in (and one of the smallest the hotel offers!).

Certainly, everything at the Burj Al Arab was done in a larger-than-life scale. When making a reservation, the receptionist enquires if you'll prefer to arrive by Rolls-Royce limousine or private helicopter. There is no reception desk, check-in is done in-suite by your personal concierge (ours was Henry) and private



*The most memorable, and certainly most romantic, dining experience to be had at the Burj was at ground level – dinner on the beach at Majlis Al Bahar.*

butler (Robert). The "suite" was really more like a grand, liberally gold-leafed, duplex apartment. On the first storey, an entrance lobby led to a large living room, with two sitting areas, a large dining table, bar, powder room and business centre equipped with laptop, ipod dock, printer, scanner, copier and fax machine. A grand carpeted staircase with ornate gold-wrought railings curved upwards to the second floor, featuring a large bedroom and sitting room, walk-in wardrobe and opulent marble bathroom with a range of full-sized Hermès toiletries for him and her.

Sure, the lavishness of the whole experience at the Burj was exciting, but to be honest, we

couldn't help but find the gilded opulence just a tad tacky for our sensibilities. The décor, with its blue suede, red velvet and gilded gold, a little too ostentatious to the point of gawdy. And while we were pleased and impressed with the excellent service, we couldn't help feeling mildly bemused by the whole OTT-ness of it. For example, when the butler Robert requested, for a third time, to prepare our baths (he runs an aromatic bubble bath with scattered rose petals and surrounding candles), we relented, thinking it was very sweet but vaguely embarrassing. Likewise, when Robert offered us a pillow menu, we thanked him and selected goosedown and lavender-scented husk pillows, but were amused when he then proffered a mattress menu, and assured him that we were suitably pleased with ours.

In all this garish extravagance, one thing that did take our breath away was the view. Both floors of the suite had floor-to-ceiling glass windows with a stunning panorama of the sea, way down below.

#### AL-MUNTAHA ABOVE AND AL-MAHARA BELOW

Dining at the Burj Al Arab is an equally over-the-top experience. We started at the top, with afternoon high tea at the Skyview bar in Al Muntaha, suspended 200 metres up on the highest level of the Burj. High tea here is something of a Dubai institution, and quite deserving of its place on many a "Things to do in Dubai" list. It's an affair that starts with champagne (or sparkling date juice if you are teetotal-ing like I was) with wild berries and cream, followed by a serving of roast beef from the carvery, after which you are served a decadent tiered tray of sandwiches, mini patisseries, vol-au-vents, gingerbread and other delights, all of which can be refilled. Then out come hot scones with an assortment of homemade jams and Devonshire clotted cream, at which time you might want to refill your teapot with another

selection from the wide assortment of exotic teas. Finally they bring out a platter of hand-dipped chocolates and mignardises, accompanied by a mixologist-concocted molecular cocktail of fruit-infused pearls.

On the other end of the building, presumably below sea-level, is Al Mahara, a contemporary seafood fine-dining restaurant. Taking a "submarine" (a glorified elevator with a simulator) down to the restaurant was a cheap thrill. Once below, a gold-leafed tunnel leads to a dining room with tables surrounding a gigantic aquarium. We sat watching the sharks glide by, pointing at a particularly hideous-looking eel and being mesmerised by a certain giant eagle-ray. We watched little clown fish dart by next to us while we ate their undersea friends, like turbot with langoustine crust, off our blown-glass plates.

#### MAJLIS AL BAHAR

But the most memorable, and certainly most romantic, dining experience at the Burj was at ground level – dinner on the beach at Majlis Al Bahar. A special dinner had been included in our stay, so after dusk, in the coolness of the desert night, we made our way to the stretch of beach across the Burj Al Arab Bridge. There was a collective gasp when the maitre d'hotel led us out to our table. On the beach by the water, they had laid out a table lit by candles and tiki-torches planted in the sand, and forming the backdrop was the Burj Al Arab, its magnificent dhow-

**Simply Over-The-Top**  
The Burj Al Arab hotel is the epitome of lavish extravagance.





shaped structure illuminated in a gradually transitioning spectrum of colours. This was the impossibly romantic setting in which we enjoyed a four-course dinner. To top off the experience, a fireworks display exploded across the water towards the end of the meal, and sitting at a solitary, candle-lit table on the beach, it was easy to pretend that the display had been set off especially for us!

The next morning, waking to the soft light coming through the blinds of our floor-to-ceiling windows, we were still blissfully satiated. We padded downstairs and only then remembered that we had ordered a room-service breakfast the day before, and accordingly, Robert had laid the dining table with starched linen and china, and our breakfast spread covered the table from end to end. A complimentary bottle of champagne to accompany our breakfast cooled in a bucket of ice, and next to that, was a bouquet of roses that the hotel had placed there for me.

It was on that note, another incredible meal later, and feeling thoroughly pampered and sated to the brink, that we left the gilded palace that is the Burj Al Arab to explore the rest of Dubai.

### ARMANI HOTEL DUBAI

We first headed to the soaring Burj Khalifa, a beautiful glass-clad skyscraper more than twice the height of the Empire State Building, which housed our abode for the remainder of our stay. Stepping into the Armani Hotel Dubai was a breath of fresh air after the garish red, blue and gold that had dominated our stay at the Burj.

Almost an antithesis to the Burj, the Armani Hotel exudes an air of elegant, sophisticated calm. In characteristically Giorgio

Armani style, the interior design is sleek and beautiful, with floors laid with polished Eramosa stone and walls clad in Zebrawood paneling, softened by centrepieces of fresh flowers in elegant glass vases. We were greeted by a “lifestyle manager”, a stylish and articulate woman, sleekly suited in Armani (obviously),



*We love the sleek interiors and understated ambience of Armani Hotel Dubai*



who led us to our room for check-in, and described her role as our personalised concierge during our stay.

Our room was far smaller than that at the Burj, but we loved it! We loved the understated elegance; the restrained palette of taupe and beige, slate and ebony; the streamlined furniture in black lacquer, ebonised wood and shagreen; the hardwood floors and beige carpet; and the fabric-panelled walls. A stylish Eramosa limestone-clad bathroom and walk-in-wardrobe are sleekly hidden behind a sensuously curved wall, and sliding panels part to reveal a concealed flatscreen TV and in-room bar. John particularly liked the Vertu-like control panel that adjusts the lighting, pulls up email on the LCD TV, summons housekeeping, and parts mechanised window blinds to reveal a view of the cityscape.

### SKI SLOPES AND SHOPPING

The city of Dubai appeared on the horizon a mere generation ago, built on the wealth that poured in when oil was struck in 1966. As to be expected of a city with a brief history and a population of over 80 per cent expats, Dubai lacks a clear indigenous culture – most of it borrowed wholesale, brought in by the westerners working in the financial district, or the largely South Asian population of workers who physically built them.

As such, almost all of the attractions in Dubai are man-made and modern: Wadi-wadi the giant water theme park; the pistes of the indoor Ski-Dubai; the Dubai Fountain in the man-made Burj Khalifa Lake; the extensively irrigated golf courses; and the completely reclaimed Palm Islands (all of which lack much novelty to a Singaporean). And resultingly, much like in Singapore, one of the main attractions of Dubai's tourism repertoire is the shopping.

Coming from a city full of malls, we were searching for a shopping experience that is more unique, and so we ventured into Souk Madinat Jumeirah. It was newly built as well of course, but in the style of a traditional Arabian souk, with stands hawking trinkets and jewellery, and shops selling colourful pashminas and kaftans. You can take a boat ride down the narrow waterway along the promenade, and have Arabic coffee and shisha on the alfresco balcony overlooking the water.

In the end, we did end up with a wonderful shopping experience in a mall. The Dubai Mall, to be exact, an ambitious development next to Burj Khalifa, with over 1,200 shops representing every luxury brand, a cinema, an aquarium, an ice-skating rink and a gold souk. Perhaps because of the recent financial climate, everything seemed to be on sale, and within a half hour, John had stepped out of Zegna with a new pair of shoes. I was thrilled to see, lined up

side-by-side: Oscar de la Renta, Alice Temperley, Stella McCartney and Alexandra McQueen – boutiques of four of my favourite designers, three of which have yet to open a flagship store in Singapore. And Dubai Mall was also home to a sprawling Bloomingdales, from which I left with a Little Brown Bag holding a box of Magnolia Cupcakes, a treat which I usually had to travel to New York to enjoy.

The Dubai Mall also enjoys a location by the Dubai Fountain, and from the alfresco terrace of Al Hallab restaurant, over casual Arabian cuisine, you can watch the spectacular dancing fountain show with coloured lights and jets of fire and sprays of water shooting 50 storeys high.

At the end of a day at Dubai Mall, it's nice to be able to cross the entrance foyer and find yourself within the respite of the Armani Hotel. And yet lovelier is a pampering finale at the gorgeous Armani Spa, or a dip in the grey-green cantilevered swimming pool adjacent to the spa, deamily illuminated by the bright city lights.

### HEADING HOME, EMIRATES-STYLE

On the last day, our complimentary airports transfers were arranged by our lifestyle manager, and even as we left Dubai, we appreciated the sheer luxury that visitors experience. We were ushered into a Bentley, fitted with flatscreens showing Armani runway shows. The airport was yet another example of how everything in Dubai had to be built on an epic scale. Emirates boasts an exclusive terminal, incidentally the largest building in the world, and it flaunts an entire concourse dedicated to its business-class travellers. As we boarded our flight, a picture of a smiling Emirates flight attendant flashed on our screens, then the line, “Emirates, enjoy the journey as much as the destination.” Certainly we would have an enjoyable flight, but we were about to leave a mesmerising destination, and you'd be hard-pressed to match the experience of a lifetime that we'd just had on our Middle Eastern sojourn. **T**

### Style Central

The elegant and sophisticated Armani Hotel and the sprawling Dubai Mall give the city a leg up in the style stakes.