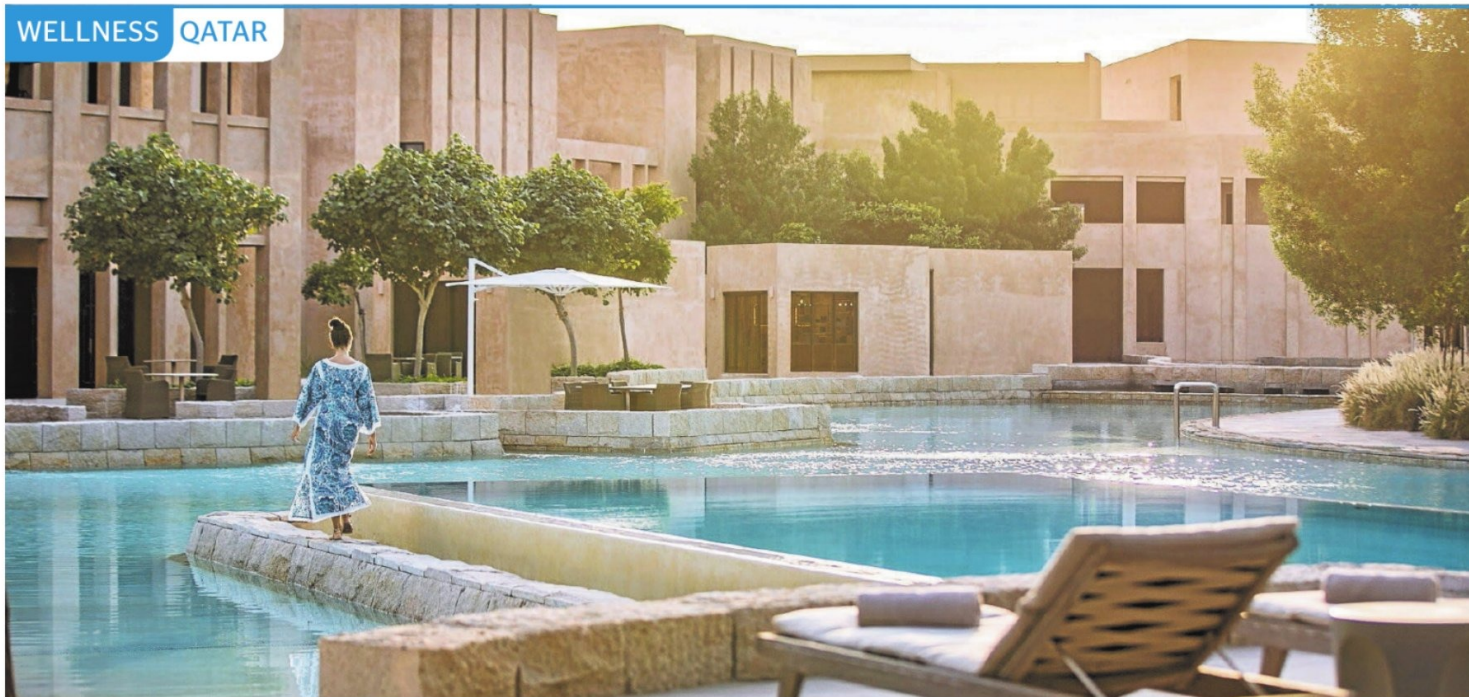


## WELLNESS QATAR



# Healing touch of a desert oasis

DENISE CULLEN road tests some ancient wisdom.

**M**Y YOGA instructor slaps at a fly as I edge my way into a shoulder stand. It's 38 degrees outside - the sort of searing desert heat that silences birds and curls the pages of paperbacks. Outside this air-conditioned studio on the edge of a lagoon, squat aloe vera plants glower in a thirsty clump at one corner of the garden, while trussed snake plants hunker in another. At the end of this session, I'll walk slowly back to my room and, like the plants and the animals, wait for the refreshing breeze that rises at dusk.

I'm at Zual Wellness Resort by Chiva-Som. Positioned on the northern tip of Qatar, Zual opened my eyes to a health tradition that, unlike traditional Chinese medicine or Ayurveda, is little known in Western countries. This Middle Eastern retreat is the first in the world to blend the holistic wisdom of traditional Arabic and Islamic medicine (TAIM) with modern therapies and health practices. Here's what I learned about TAIM during a five-night stay.

## 1. TAIM is one of the world's oldest medical traditions

After checking into a luxury suite overlooking the gritty white sands of the Arabian Gulf, I drag my jetlagged body and three kilos of retained fluid to a consultation with TAIM practitioner Dr Mubaris Ahamed. The principles of TAIM were first captured in the *Canon of Medicine*, written in the 11th century by Persian polymath Avicenna. It became the most influential medical textbook in the West until the 17th

century, introducing the germ theory of disease, a framework for clinical trials and related health concepts still in use today.

## 2. Humoral theory forms TAIM's foundation

Ahamed explains that TAIM is based on humoral theory - the need for balance between the body's four humours (blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile). It posits that temperament is determined by a person's dominant humour, and that temperament influences a person's physical, mental and emotional health. After checking my pulse, inspecting my tongue and asking a series of questions, Ahamed assesses my dominant humour to be "sanguine" (blood). He prescribes herbal medicines, and writes a three-page list of dietary, movement and lifestyle recommendations.

## 3. Herbal medicine is a fundamental component

Afterwards, a sachet of "sleep and stress management" herbs arrives at my door. The handwriting on the packet says it contains lavender, chamomile and asgard. I mix two teaspoons with a glass of boiled water before bed. The next day, I explore Zual's apothecary, which contains rows of mason jars brimming with dried rose buds, crushed olive leaves, turmeric roots and more. Two jars filled with herbal medicine blends bear the labels "weight loss" and "sleep".

## 4. Manuka honey, step aside for sidr honey

Like most health retreats, Zual shuns all forms of refined

sugar. Instead, drinks and desserts contain alternative sweeteners, such as dates, coconut sugar and sidr honey. The latter is also used to make herbal medicines, like my morning black seed oil shot, more palatable. Believed to have healing properties, sidr honey comes from bees that have feasted on the flowers of the sidr tree - one of the plants of paradise, according to the Quran. This deep-rooted tree thrives in Qatar's arid climate and, for Qataris, represents nourishment, strength and courage.

## 5. Cupping therapy is a time-honoured practice

Cupping therapy is usually associated with traditional Chinese medicine. But it has a long history of use in the Middle East as well. Another ancient medical text, the *Ebers Papyrus*, describes how the Egyptians used cupping therapy as far back as 1550 BCE. Cupping, or *hijama* in Arabic, uses suction cups on the body to draw out toxins, boost blood flow and restore the body's natural balance. Some credit it with alleviating ailments, including chronic pain and migraines.

## 6. Massage therapy is believed to enhance emotional wellbeing

Different forms of *tadleek* (massage) are an integral part of the program. On my second day, I'm led into a cool, dark room for a traditional Qatari *hamiz* (deep tissue) full body massage with sweet almond oil. I sigh deeply as the therapist wields hot quartz stones, which gently clink and clack as they trace a fevered path across the surface of my skin. Other forms of massage include Al-Batin (abdominal), Al-Ra (head) and Al-Qadam (foot reflexology). Zual is managed by Thai-based Chiva-Som, so traditional Thai massages are also on the treatment menu.

## 7. Sacred geometry and biophilic design can amplify wellbeing

Entranced by the play of light and shadow on a wall as a sidr tree shifts in the breeze, I wonder whether Zual's architecture also promotes healing. The buildings here rear

out of the landscape, with a palette meandering between salmon and sand. Geometric shapes holding symbolic and spiritual significance are seen in intricate courtyard gardens and windows carved with *mashrabiya* (latticework) patterns. Natural materials aim to strengthen guests' connections to nature, reducing stress, blood pressure and heart rates, while increasing creativity and overall wellbeing.

## 8. Water holds immense healing potential

Many spiritual traditions equate water with physical rejuvenation and spiritual purification; the Islamic world is no different. In Arabic, Zual means "pure natural water", and the resort's role as a desert oasis is reflected in its sprawling lagoons, waterfalls, tranquil ponds and other water features. Zual's gender-segregated spas contain extensive hydrothermal facilities. I return repeatedly to the indoor and outdoor pools, hot spa, steam room, sauna and Himalayan salt therapy room. The cold plunge and the snow cave? They'll have to wait until the temperature tips 40 degrees.

The writer was a guest of Zual Wellness Resort



From top: Zual resort; cupping therapy; a beach walk at the retreat.



## TRIP NOTES

**Getting there:** Qatar Airways has direct flights to Doha from all mainland state capitals.

**Staying there:** Zual Wellness Resort's 180 rooms and suites are divided into Serenity (child-free) and Discovery (family) sections. Nightly Serenity rates start at QAR2500 (\$1042) for single occupancy and QAR3950 for double occupancy, with a three-night minimum. Nightly Discovery rates start from QAR2220 for single occupancy and QAR3,650 for double occupancy, with a two-night minimum. Full retreat packages include accommodation, spa cuisine, wellness consultations, a personalised program of treatments and a daily program of classes.

Explore more: [zual.com](http://zual.com)