



WELL DONE

Be refreshed and renewed at Qatar's top spa resort

DENISE CULLEN

Im lying, fully clothed, on a towel overlooking a pale blue lagoon. It would be relaxing if not for a personal trainer called Bader whose torso is wedged between my bent legs, twisting with all her might, as she tries to unlock my tight hips. "Try to relax and go floppy," she urges. "I do all the work in here."

I take a long, deep breath and feel us slowly crank, like a rusted bit of machinery, a millimetre further forward. Then another, and another. After this "super stretch" session at Zual Wellness Resort by Chiva-Som, I'm surprised to find I can sit cross-legged on the floor without discomfort for the first time since third grade.

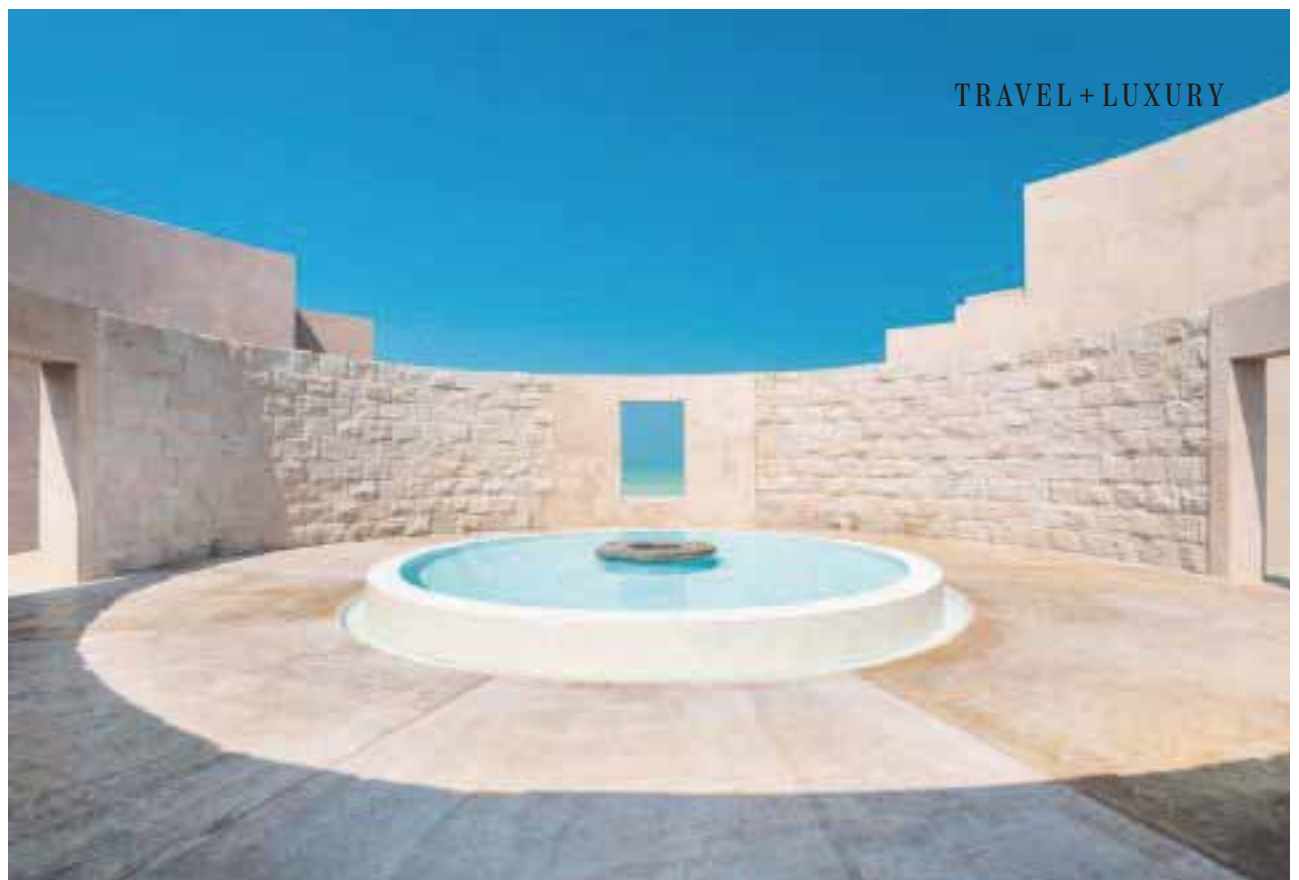
Sprawled across 18ha and lapped by the calm waters of the Arabian Gulf on Qatar's northern tip, Zual is the Middle East's first and largest immersive wellness retreat. In Arabic, Zual means "pure natural water" and it fulfils this promise by offering meandering lagoons, tumbling waterfalls and lush courtyard gardens with tinkling fountains. From its design to its programs, the resort is based upon Traditional Arabic and Islamic Medicine, a holistic healing concept that stretches back as far as the 11th century, when Muslim philosopher and physician Ibn Sina compiled the influential Canon of Medicine. First up during my five-night stay, I'm whisked away to a consultation room where Dr Mubaris Ahamed, a lean, determined-looking TAIM specialist, checks my pulse.

He then asks a series of probing questions covering everything from my sleep habits and seasonal preferences to bowel movements and stress levels. He asks me to poke out my tongue. Ahamed reveals that my dominant element is "air" and my dominant humour "sanguine", from which flows a three-page list of food, herbal, exercise and other recommendations. He nods knowingly when I confess that one of my goals while I'm here is to shed some kilograms, and he prescribes a "weight loss blend" from the onsite apothecary to assist.

I learn, too late, that my prescription is shared with all restaurant staff. From then on, before every breakfast and after every dinner, I'm presented with a steaming cup of pungent medicinal tea, containing flaxseed, fennel seed, ajwain (carom seeds), cumin seeds, cinnamon and lemon. One waiter catches me in a grimace. "It's not good for the taste, but it's good for the body," he says, consolingly.

Except for the herbal medicine, the food and drinks that flow from the kitchens are superb, particularly considering they're free of dairy products, gluten, alcohol and refined sugar. One lunch starts with tom yum soup, a spicy broth in which bob prawns, several translucent shiitake mushrooms, and fragrant slivers of makrut lime leaf. Next comes a carefully constructed ball of pomelo salad with tomato and coconut, followed by beef satays with baby vegetables and cashew nut sauce, and finally a single scoop of banana and spirulina ice cream. Portion sizes are so small that my first reaction is to panic, plus menus spell out exactly how many kilojoules are in each dish. This approach makes it easy to remain in a kilojoule deficit, but does it feel restrictive?

With a choice of four restaurants, multicourse menus at each, and an atmosphere in which the use of mobile phones is discouraged, I'm not once tempted to reach for the snacks smuggled in via the hidden compartment in my suitcase. It also helps



Entrance to Zual Wellness Resort by Chiva-Som, above; Himalayan salt room, left; lagoon pool, top left; Serenity junior suite and resort logo on the sands of the Arabian Gulf, below

that the minibar in my junior suite on the Serenity (child-free) side of the resort is replenished daily with fresh fruit, dates and herbal teas.

I still recall sliding into the private plunge pool on my deck one afternoon as the temperature hit a desiccating 35C. Overlooking the vast sand flats left behind by a retreating ocean tide, I peel and devour a handful of sweet, juicy longans, before climbing out and changing into the white pyjamas that guests are encouraged to wear around the resort. And could there be a more rock-solid reason to remain in PJs all day?

Zual is an intriguing blend of Middle East and Far East, owned by Msheireb Properties, a subsidiary of the Qatar Foundation, but managed by Chiva-Som, which has its flagship property in Hua Hin, Thailand. This dual heritage is best reflected in the extensive spa menu, which offers TAIM-derived therapies



and ingredients such as full body tadelak (massage) with sweet almond oil alongside traditional Thai treatments such as Oriental scalp massage. Then there's the classic Qatari hamiz (deep tissue) massage. In a warm, dark room, as a therapist performs circular massage strokes and hot stones skim like quicksilver over the surface of my skin, I sink into a blissful state of somnolence.

The gender-segregated spas are the perfect spot to prepare for or unwind after a treatment. I stretch out on the heated mosaic beds in the Himalayan salt room, float in the warm hydrotherapy pools, swim laps in the outdoor pool and venture into the Arctic (snow) cave. I even step into an "experiential shower", which dials up a Caribbean storm, complete with flashing lights to simulate lightning, sound effects such as thunderclaps and chirping birds, and variable water flow and temperature.

After dinner on my final night, I try to slip out before the weight loss blend arrives, but staff ask me to stay until they can prepare it. Seeing my face, a different waiter takes pity on me. "Shall I serve it in a takeaway cup, madam?" he asks. "That way you can take a few sips and then ..." He mimes tipping the rest away. If I hadn't been so relaxed all week, I'd have thought of that on night one.

Denise Cullen was a guest Zual Wellness Resort by Chiva-Som.

IN THE KNOW

Zual Wellness Resort by Chiva-Som is located just over an hour by road from Qatar's Hamad International Airport. The resort's 180 rooms and suites are divided into Serenity (child-free) and Discovery (family) sections. Serenity rates start at QAR 2500 (\$1020) for single occupancy and QAR 3950 for double occupancy; three-night minimum stays. Packages include accommodation, spa cuisine, wellness consultations, a personalised program of spa, fitness and physiotherapy treatments, a daily schedule of classes, and access to all facilities.

zual.com