

SLEEPOVER » AN ART-FRIENDLY SMALL HOTEL » BY CHARLOTTE FRANCIS

Welcome to the other Dubai

XVA GALLERY AND ART HOTEL
Bastakiya, Dubai; 971 (4) 35 35 383; www.xvagallery.com.

ROOMS AND RATES
Six rooms from single to deluxe from \$180 to \$220. Breakfast is included.

Set among the narrow, labyrinthine streets of the Bastakiya district, XVA combines a contemporary art space and an intimate boutique hotel in a 100-year-old house. Owned by American-born Mona Hauser, it boasts the largest exhibition space in Dubai and hosts the Creek Art Fair, a fringe event held in March.

LOCATION On the more historic Bur Dubai side of Dubai Creek, Bastakiya was home to Iranian expatriates (many from the Bastak region) for generations. The small, well-preserved precinct is characterized by mosques and low-lying 19th-century houses. Today, it's a cultural hub with museums and galleries; XVA is a short walk from the Majlis Gallery and Basta Art Café.

DESIGN XVA's home is a traditional Arabian house designed around wind towers and courtyards.

A local device to generate natural air conditioning, wind towers are built to pull hot air up and out of the house. Right underneath the tower is the guest lounge, with low cushioned benches. (The lounge is equipped with TV, CD player and DVD player.) During my visit, a colour-themed exhibition with works by emerging and established artists from the region was showing in three galleries, with photographic works in a fourth room. International artists – some well-known – are also represented: In the spring, XVA was showing works by American abstract painter Cy Twombly.

With their pillared arches, stone latticework, wooden beams, lanterns, shuttered doors and windows, the



The hotel occupies a traditional house built around courtyards. CHARLOTTE FRANCIS FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Hotel vitals

TOP DRAW

A lively art space with original work on display.

NEEDS WORK

With no exact street address, XVA is hard to find. An airport pickup helps, but the service isn't very welcoming.

BOTTOM LINE

An affordable and quirky oasis away from the bustle of Dubai.

courtyards extend the gallery space and are dotted with paintings and clay sculptures – here a bright pink composition, there an arrangement of blue-tinted firewood or a string of shells hanging from a tree. Much of this outdoor art is by resident Iraqi artist Halim Al Karim.

AMBIENCE Away from the soaring glass towers, construction cranes and congested traffic of downtown Dubai, the soundtrack is likely to be chirping birds and the muezzin's call to prayer. The quirky blend of modern art and traditional architecture make it both mellow and groovy. Even the gift shop is funky and original; you can buy trendy camel-hair smocks stitched by XVA's own tailor.

CLIENTELE Mainly art-loving tourists, but XVA also hosts corporate events, and a launch party for Paulo Coel-

ho's book *The Witches of Portobello* was held here in 2007.

ROOMS The six rooms are more guest house than hotel: They're on the small side and the shuttered doors are secured with padlocked wooden bars. Mod cons, excluding TV but including refrigerator, mini-bar, air conditioning and WiFi, are kept to an unobtrusive minimum.

The six individually designed rooms showcase the work of local designers and artists. My single room was a glorious combination of kitsch and girlie glitz with framed purple sunglasses, hair rollers, dolls and glittering collages adorning the walls. The bed was on the firm side, though, and had no bedside lamp.

The deluxe room has two private balconies and is desert chic, with camel-hair drapes framing the crisp white linen of the queen-sized bed. One of the standard rooms is done

up in yellow and red with a tasselled canopy above the bed, a kilim rug on the floor and a pair of buffalo horns on the wall. Bathrooms are clean and simple, with a hot tub and shower but no designer fittings or monogrammed robes.

FOOD AND DRINK XVA's fresh mint lemonade is wonderfully refreshing, as is the mint tea. The café earns its Time Out Highly Commended Award with a small but excellent range of vegetarian Middle Eastern dishes: tabouleh and fatoush salads; charred eggplant with sharp feta on a bed of sweet tomato sauce; a mix of rice and lentils flavoured with cinnamon, mint and cumin; and plenty of flatbread to mop up the ultra-creamy moutabel dip (eggplant, tahini and garlic). You can eat at marble-topped tables in the main courtyard, or in a small room to the side with low benches, cushions, wall hangings and striking art.

SERVICE Staff are friendly and willing but can be invisible. With no clear reception area, the service is sometimes a bit too discreet.

THINGS TO DO Once you've checked out the art at XVA, wander around the other art galleries in Bastakiya or stroll up to the museum – the archaeological findings from the region's early settlers are particularly interesting. Bastakiya is pin-drop quiet at night, but the textile souk alongside Dubai Creek is abuzz with activity. Alternatively, catch an *abra* (a small boat) for one dirham and cross the creek to explore the spice and gold souks.

For serious retail therapy, check out the Deira City Centre shopping mall just across the Maktoum Bridge, or head west past the World Trade Centre to the Mall of the Emirates. Billed as one of the world's largest, it is also home to the indoor slope of Ski Dubai.

» Special to The Globe and Mail

DUBAI » TWO-HUMPED TEAM-BUILDING

Polo is a bit easier when your ride doesn't sit down in the middle of a match. And getting that killer shot can be tricky – not to mention slow – when you need at least one jockey to lead you around the field.

But then this isn't exactly the sport of kings. The latest game to hit Dubai is camel polo – and while organizers are pitching it as a team-building activity for corporate travellers, it hinges on some notoriously stubborn animals.

Launched last week by Dnata Travel Services, a government-owned travel management company in Dubai, the newest twist on this elite game should take just two players per camel. Sitting in a double-seated saddle, one player is supposed to wield the mallet and the other is supposed to "drive" the animal.

For now, the camels need a little more encouragement (apparently, feeding them dates can help). But the goal is to train the animals to canter and make sharp turns like polo horses without the help of on-field jockeys.

In the meantime, says Dnata's business development manager, Adrian Sime, "fun is the name of the game."

Riders are trained on-site before every match. And as long as they don't mind some jostling up and down on top of their camel, people of any fitness level can play.

» Games are staged at the Dubai Polo & Equestrian Club at Arabian Ranches. Sessions can be arranged for groups from eight up to 100 players. For more information, contact Dnata at 971 (4) 404 5861 or e-mail camelpolo@dnata.com.

» Julie Traves

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