

DESTINATIONS

DESERT SAFARI DUBAI

UNITED ARAB
EMIRATES



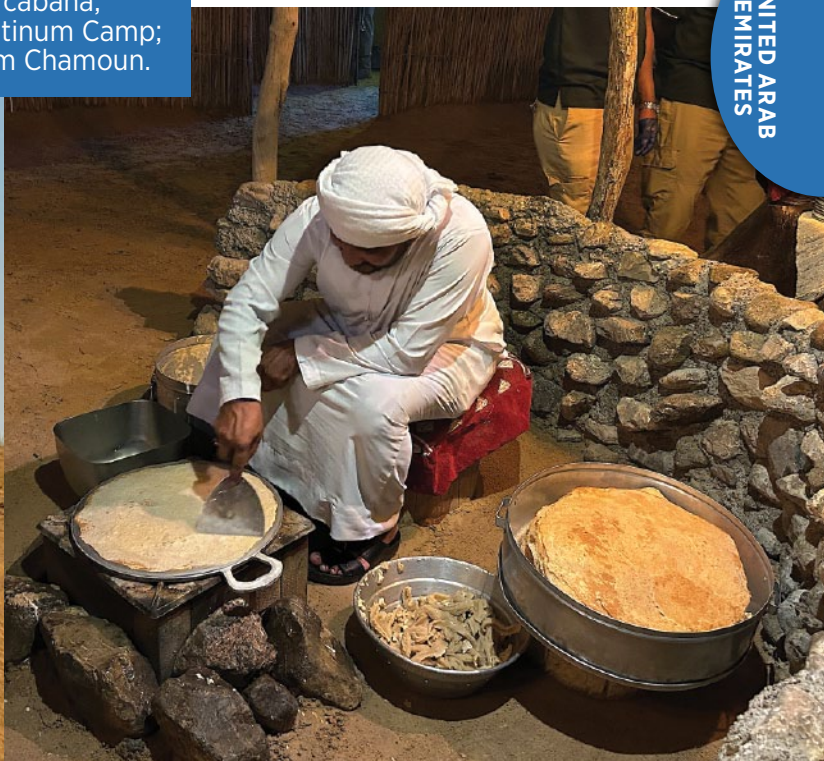
→ Dubai

WHERE ON EARTH

Desert Safari Dubai

by ELYSE GLICKMAN

PHOTOS THIS SPREAD CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT
Breakfast in a desert cabana;
Camels approach Platinum Camp;
Baking bread; Bassam Chamoun.



DUBAI IS THE EMBODIMENT of modernity, futurism and luxury on a grand international scale. Just set foot inside the massive Dubai Mall or any five-star hotel and every kind of food from around the

world is yours for the choosing. Five-star dining abounds on luxury hotel rooftops across the city, and there's always going to be a destination restaurant trendsetters will flock to for the perfect business lunch, marriage proposal or splashy friends' gathering. Look no further than the commercials playing aboard Emirates Airlines to show you what's in store once you arrive.»





PHOTOS THIS SPREAD
FROM LEFT Falconry
from a balloon; Tea
and vimto; Grilling
meats at Heritage
Camp; Shakshuka.



«Adam McEwan and Bassam Chamoun, the CEO and COO of Hero Experiences Group, knew there was life beyond the skyscrapers of the 53-year-old city. The former Destination Manager for Oceania Cruises and Emirates Airlines safari operation supervisor (respectively) were inspired to put their professional experience to good use and establish the Hero Experiences Group in 2012 and from there, Platinum Heritage Safaris. They envisioned reinventing desert safari ecotourism in the region to transcend the definition of ecologically friendly while spotlighting the culture of the indigenous groups that predate Dubai's glamour by centuries.

“Our mission shapes everything we do, from being the only camp to run completely on solar power to donating over \$1 million US to the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve,” said McEwan as brimming glasses of lime-mint juice and coffee were being passed around the elegant “Platinum” glamping site (poised for expansion in the coming year). “We offer authentic food and entertainment, avoid dune bashing (destroying sand dunes), and use some of the profits to give back to the community. Our goal is to sustainably support, protect and showcase Dubai's cultural heritage and natural environment through educational and entertaining desert experiences. Food is a big part of this equation.”

Cuisine at the more rustic “Heritage” site is rooted in Bedouin and other Emirati recipes dating back generations. “Throughout the experience, guests are introduced to the cultural significance of the dishes,” says Chamoun, as share platters arrive at our covered table.

"We intend this to be a culinary journey where guests get to learn and savour delicious food from the region."

The focus on culinary culture is not just reserved for meals. A breathtaking afternoon journey around the desert in vintage 1950s Land Rovers is followed by sipping Arabic chai and *vimto* during an entertaining falconry demonstration. The chai is made from black tea with cinnamon, cloves and cardamom. *Vimto* is a viscous soft drink introduced by the British over a century ago blending grapes, raspberries, and blackcurrants, herbs and spices. Invigorating Gahwa Arabic Coffee is offered before morning hot air balloon journeys that launch with a drone show just before sunrise.

At dusk, a crowd of 200 adventurers of all ages descends onto the Heritage Camp, which becomes increasingly smoky and aromatic as the skies grow dimmer. At this camp, all dishes are served family style, and second helpings are encouraged. The guides escort guests to different cooking stations to see paper-thin *ragag* bread being made on a hotplate, preparation of rice dishes, and chicken and lamb being seasoned and grilled over charcoal. There are also less familiar staples such as camel stew, *harees* (a slow simmered chicken stew with whole wheat grains), different green salads and side dishes being prepared.

The feast at the Heritage Camp begins with *shorbat adas*, a flavourful lentil soup that could be a meal in itself. Following this, a large mezze platter combining familiar favourites (baba ganoush; hummus) and items specific to different parts of the Middle East arrives at each table of four. It's easy to overindulge in dishes that vibrate with freshness and nuanced flavours not captured in their North American versions. However, guests are encouraged to save room for the main courses and sides, which have a similar mix of what we know and what is worth discovering.

Dinner at the Platinum Camp site, engineered under the guidance of Michelin Star Chef Claudio Filippone, is a more refined and customized affair. There's a choice of three different six-course menus where local ingredients are crafted into original dishes with a more international approach and artistic plating. The meals are served in private cabanas in a manner bridging a fine dining restaurant with earthy natural surroundings. The presentation echoes the elevated tone of the safari and activities, which involve transportation in brand-new Land Rover Defenders and elevated overnight accommodations. Limeade with mint, watermelon juice, *vitmo*, and water are available at both dinners to wash things down.

"While a good number of our guests are from North America, we have to cater to an international crowd," explains Chamoun. "We have guests who come from Saudi Arabia who want to eat one particular cuisine, and guests from Asia, Russia and Africa who have their preferences. This is why we have set menus in our Platinum packages. People who book private Platinum packages, however, »

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MAKES 4

Arabic Pancakes

Chabab

ARABIC PANCAKES are larger than their American cousins. The batter is made with yeast and allowed to ferment for a short period. Saffron and cardamom add subtle flavour notes.

Milk ½ cup
Egg 1
Sugar 1 Tbs
Salt a pinch
Yeast 1 tsp
Saffron
 a few threads
Powdered Cardamom
 ¼ tsp
Melted Butter
 3 Tbs, divided
All Purpose Flour
 ¾ cup
Wholewheat Flour
 ¾ cup
Date Syrup or Honey
 for serving

- 1 IN** a mixing bowl, whisk together the milk, egg, sugar, salt, spices and yeast.
- 2 ADD** 2 Tbs melted butter and stir to combine.
- 3 GRADUALLY** add the flour, stirring well to make a smooth batter.
- 4 COVER** the bowl and allow to stand for 30 minutes.
- 5 HEAT** a non-stick skillet and pour in ⅓ cup of batter. Swirl the pan to help spread the batter. Cook until bubbles form all over the pancake and the underside is golden. Flip and cook the other side. Brush the pancake with melted butter and keep warm while you cook the rest of the pancakes.
- 6 REPEAT** with the remaining batter.
- 7 SERVE** the pancakes date syrup or honey, and add a pat of extra butter if you like.

Cook
&

SERVES 6-8

Emirati Lentil Soup

Shortbat Adas

LENTIL SOUP is a staple of the Arabian countries, especially during Ramadan.

Vegetable Oil 1 Tbs

Onion 1 medium, chopped

Garlic 2 cloves, minced

Cumin Powder 1 tsp

Turmeric Powder ½ tsp

Red Pepper Flakes ½ tsp

Split Red Lentils ½ cups

Chicken Stock or Water 6 cups

Lemon 1, juiced

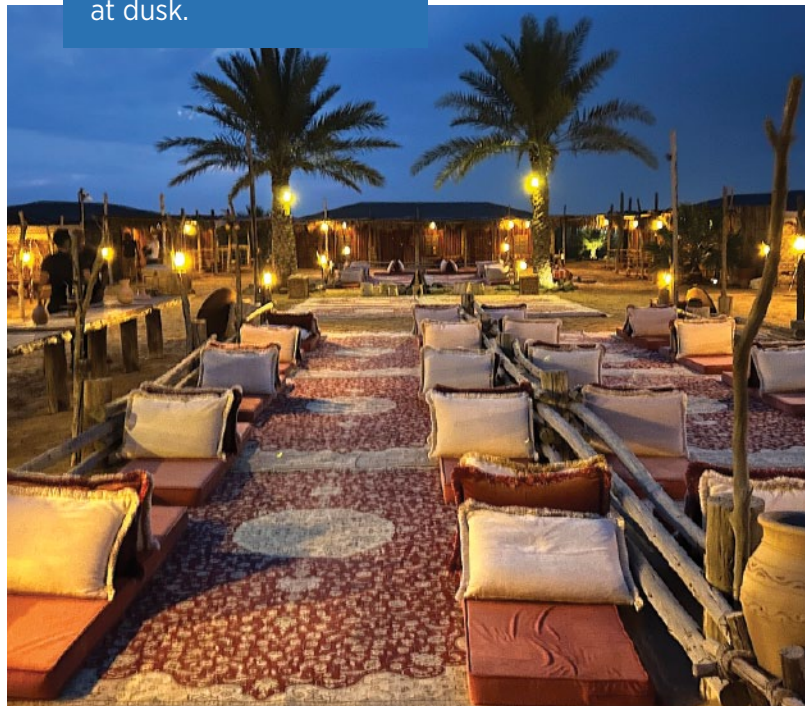
Salt and **Freshly Ground Black Pepper**

Fresh Coriander to garnish

- 1 HEAT** the oil in a large pot. Sauté the onions over medium heat until they are soft and translucent and just starting to brown. Add the garlic and sauté for 30 more seconds. Add the cumin powder, turmeric and pepper flakes and sauté briefly until fragrant. Add the lentils and stock or water and simmer for around 20 minutes, until the lentils have softened.
- 2 REMOVE** from the heat and allow the soup to cool a bit, then blend to a smooth consistency.
- 3 SEASON** with the lemon juice, salt and pepper. Garnish with fresh coriander.



PHOTOS THIS SPREAD Platinum Camp; Heritage Camp at dusk.






«have the freedom to choose something tailor-made for them and our chefs can deliver.”

At the Platinum Camp site the next morning, following an otherworldly balloon safari — accompanied by a falcon — just after sunrise, we are served a Bedouin breakfast starting with freshly squeezed juices, locally sourced fruit and traditional breads, augmented with a choice of omelets or shakshuka and a non-alcoholic champagne alternative that registers on the palate with rich French sauterne flavours. The breakfast spread includes *baleet* (sweet and savoury noodles with eggs) flavoured with cardamom and saffron, *bajela* beans gently spiced with olive oil and lime, *chami* (Emirati cottage cheese served with sweet dates), ragag and *chabab* (Arabic pancakes topped with date syrup and honey).

“One of my duties is to test out the food to make sure the flavours, cleanliness and presentation meet the high expectations of the guests,” details Chamoun as we watch one of the cooks prepare omelets and shakshuka. “While I’m not a chef myself, when we launched our catering company, we interviewed our prospective chefs, cooks, and staff and had cooks prepare a few dishes in our kitchen. The interview process is not only designed for

candidates to reveal their personality, but also to be sure they are the people who can create the full experience our guests are looking for. We also do a lot of dry runs the summer before our next season begins to test new dishes and changes in existing recipes.”

With the goal of introducing people around the world to the foundational Dubai, getting the food right is critical, whether the guests prefer things Heritage style (traditional and true to its origins) or Platinum (pushing local ingredients, spices, and recipes to new heights). Together the HERO “Desert-to-Table” experience provides an oasis of flavour and discovery. 

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Platinum Heritage Desert Safaris
www.platinum-heritage.com

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