



**New brand.** A view of the Mleiha Desert Resort accommodations and swimming pool.

(Courtesy of Shurooq)

## Sharjah embarks on major ecotourism projects

N.P. Krishna Kumar

### Sharjah

After years of steadily laying the foundations for cultural and family tourism, Sharjah has embarked on several ambitious ecotourism projects aimed at reinforcing the sector, which has proved to be vital for its economy. The projects unveiled at the Arabian Travel Market in Dubai emphasised the policy of boosting community development, sustainability and environmental awareness while showcasing the emirate's diversity. They offer a variety of accommodation options for visitors, combining the experience of a five-star hotel with the serenity of a traditional lodge.

Sharjah is rich with cultural sites and is a popular destination, especially among tourists from Gulf Cooperation Council countries. The main policy had been to attract Arab families and to promote Sharjah's cultural assets, by building up a portfolio of luxury ecotourism, the emirate is positioning itself for a new

wave of tourism and different class of visitors, said Marwan bin Jassim al-Sarkal, CEO of Sharjah's economic development agency Shurooq.

"Sharjah presently has a strong advantage in leading the authentic tourism and hospitality sector," Sarkal said. "Shurooq has established a new world-class hospitality entity, which will introduce a plethora of brand new authentic and cultural experiences and facilities in the emirate and work towards attracting both unique investments and tourism experiences into this vital sector."

The new projects mainly cater to visitors who desire luxury hospitality facilities in natural settings, he added.

Since 2009, Shurooq has been a strong force behind Sharjah's burgeoning tourism sector. As part of its strategy to promote the emirate as one of the region's leading luxury and authentic tourist destinations, it has worked with multiple government entities and private players to build up the tourism infrastructure as well as attract investment into the sector.

Hotel revenues have been grow-

ing 12% a year and they are expected to reach \$227 million by the end of 2019, the latest government figures indicate.

Among the new projects is the five-star Mleiha Desert Resort in central Sharjah, connecting the emirate's east and west coasts. It is at the heart of the Mleiha Archaeological and Ecotourism Project on natural landscape between the area's dunes and the famous Fossil Rock.

■ Hotel revenues are growing 12% a year and are expected to reach \$227 million by the end of 2019.

The project, whose area encompasses 300,000 sq.metres, is scheduled for completion towards the end of 2019. It will have 45 exclusively designed vacation villas, modelled on classical desert marquees, each with its own deck and private swimming pool. The Royal Suite, which is one of four living options at the resort, encompasses 167 sq.metres and includes two uniquely designed

rooms and a private swimming pool.

Additional options include the 155-sq.metre King Suite; Junior Suite, with a space of 90 sq.metres; and the Standard Suite, which offers a unique living covering 85 sq.metres. Guests are promised a full range of hotel services, restaurants, cafés, a health club, a swimming pool and many other amenities.

A new brand of hotels, the Sharjah Collection, with a focus on luxurious lodge and B&B-style properties, constitutes the second major project. The hotels will be in Sharjah's ecotourism and heritage sites, which are being developed by Shurooq.

Nestled within the Kalba Ecotourism Project will be the Kingfisher Lodge, a collection of tented lodge-style accommodations surrounded by mangroves and diverse ecological zones, allowing guests to live in an environmentally friendly way.

Kalba is an enclave of Sharjah on the east coast 5km south of Fujairah city on the Omani border and has beautiful mangroves that are home to the critically endangered Arabian collared kingfisher.

Another development, Al Badayer

Lodge, is to be built against the backdrop of a prominent natural feature of the Arabian Peninsula, its sweeping deserts of Al Badayer Oasis in Sharjah. The property is planned to serve the tastes of adventure lovers. Guests will enjoy urban amenities amid authentic Bedouin surroundings.

The final project in the first phase, the \$27 million Al Bait Hotel, will include two five-star B&B villas in the Heart of Sharjah, the region's largest historical preservation and restoration project. Converted from old Emirati homes, the boutique hotel, will be managed by Singapore's GHM Hotels, and will open this year with 53 luxury suites aiming to provide visitors unique insights into traditional UAE living.

The high-end ecotourism projects, which are hoped to make the emirate a major player in the luxury eco-resort sector, are considered a strategic approach to elevate the standards of Sharjah's hospitality sector.

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## Bkerzay village, a green sanctuary in Lebanon for art and authentic living

Samar Kadi

### Bkerzay, Lebanon

Preserving nature and anchoring the people in their land, reviving traditional crafts and ensuring sustainability is the three-way goal of Bkerzay. The eco-village project – situated within lush green lands covered with old olive trees and wild pine forests in the heart of Lebanon's Chouf Mountains – is meant to set a precedent in a country that is quickly losing its green areas to concrete blocks and modernisation.

"It is a reaction to what is going on in the country, a positive one," said founder Ramzi Salman. "We have grown up in this country and saw the beauty of it but we are also seeing the ugly things... It is an attempt to remind people of authentic beauty.

"Also, what you do (properly) is usually copied and I wanted to do a positive thing to be copied."

When Salman started the project in 2010, the idea was to set up a hub for craftsmen and artisans starting with pottery, a millennia-old craft that was dying.

He explained he wanted to create a platform of exchange between the underprivileged rural regions and city people and to stem migration to urban areas. "We wanted to

reverse the trend (migration)," he said. "To do that, you have to highlight local talents and know-how and establish this financial interaction with the city."

Built on an area of 200,000 sq. metres, Bkerzay has evolved into a preservation project of both the environment and the rural communities. It was expanded to include eco-lodges and artisans' workshops

"There are a lot of local capabilities in crafts but they lacked artistic guidance of what markets and customers wanted. Bkerzay pottery combined art and artisan know-how becoming a well-recognised hub for all potters to exhibit. It has definitely revived the craft," said project manager Lara Moutin.

■ At least 150 pieces of pottery are produced in Bkerzay every week.

The ceramic bowls, plates, cups and decorative pieces with contemporary colourful designs of various patterns made with traditional techniques have become a Bkerzay trademark and are sold in shops around Beirut. In addition to a permanent exhibition by its own master potters, a yearly pottery festival takes place in Bkerzay with craftsmen gathering from all over Lebanon.

Visitors can see Bkerzay's two resident potters working on site and

can take pottery lessons themselves

Ahmad Deif works with 20 types of sand and clay, using different recipes and moulding various shapes and colours before tucking them in ovens at Bkerzay pottery. The 27-year-old Egyptian master potter has spent half of his life exercising the craft. He arrived in Lebanon six years ago and is sharing his knowledge with local craftsmen to produce more sophisticated and artistic potteries.

At least 150 pieces of pottery are produced in Bkerzay every week. "The art of pottery is very large," Deif explained. "One can use different raw materials in different ways and combinations. Also, different oven temperatures are applied depending on the end product that you want."

Bkerzay is also a green village dedicated to preserving the natural surroundings and encouraging production of honey, olive oil, soap and herbs. Plantations are being developed to produce organic fruit and vegetables, guest houses and lodges are built around trees to avoid having to cut a single one.

The dwellings, boasting rural and vernacular architectural styles and powered by solar energy, were built using local and recycled construction materials. The project includes ten basic small rooms suitable for hikers and backpackers and artisan residences in which artists can spend time to produce artworks, of



**Reversing a trend.** Guest houses in Bkerzay.

(Courtesy of Bkerzay)

which one at least will be dedicated to Bkerzay.

Additional amenities include a main restaurant and a café offering traditional dishes, a swimming pool, a Turkish bath, a massage room and hiking paths.

Moutin said the place caters to a wide variety of clients, including young urban professionals, retired middle-aged couples, young families with young children and students, all seeking an authentic lifestyle with a connection with nature, in a preserved environment away from digital and noise pollution.

Bkerzay is also vying for a Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) rating, a highly demanding certification that applies to green constructions, Moutin said.

"The aim is to shift completely

away from fossil fuel use," she said. "We are acquiring capabilities to get our energy only if not mainly from solar. We are triggering a waste management project through recycling and producing compost from organic waste to be used in bio plantation, while wastewater will be collected for irrigation."

Bkerzay is not a hotel, nor a resort, Salman stressed. "It is an idealistic project to remind people about the ingredients of happiness and beauty. It is a call back to authentic and genuine living."

With numerous initiatives in the works, Bkerzay sets a perfect example of ecotourism philosophy. It is also fast becoming a springboard for developing the country's artisan crafts and promoting the products of the Chouf region.

The site is to be fully operational by end of August.