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Grass Routes

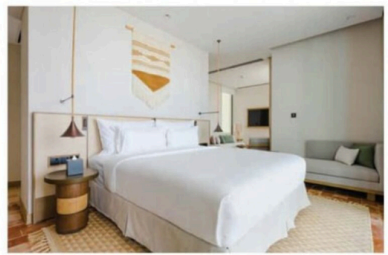
HAWAR ISLAND

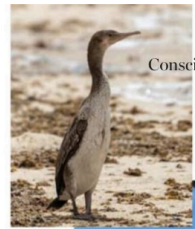
Hawar Resort by Mantis may sit on a small ISLAND in Bahrain, but its *WILDLIFE*-filled environment and ECOTOURISM ethos is mighty, writes **Monique Ceccato.**



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: *Bahrain boasts a rich tradition of weaving; Hawar Island is one of Bahrain's last wilderness areas; Dining at the resort.* **OPPOSITE** (clockwise from top left): *A studio beach villa at Hawar Resort by Mantis; Cormorants are endemic to the region; Overwater villas come complete with a private pool; Hawar Island is surrounded by the Persian Gulf.*

PHOTOGRAPHY MONIQUE CECCATO (PATTERN DETAIL)





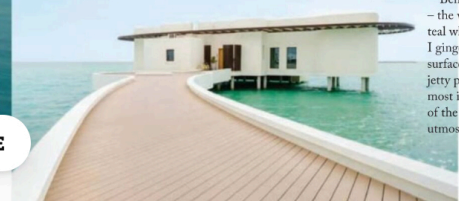


There's not the slightest breath of wind. The Persian Gulf beyond my villa deck is so motionless its cerulean surface bleeds seamlessly into the dust-hazed sky. A streak of black shatters the calm. With a splash, a Socotra cormorant dive-bombs for a reef fish and disappears, darting along the seabed in hot pursuit of dinner. Endangered and endemic to this part of the Middle East, the cormorants are regular visitors to Hawar Resort by Mantis, a luxury resort on a protected wildlife sanctuary on Hawar Island, 20 kilometres south of Bahrain's mainland.

About 20 to 25 per cent of the world's population of Socotra cormorants resides within the 16-islet Hawar archipelago. Tens of thousands nest and rest on Rubud Island, saturating the seemingly desolate sandy patch in black. They outnumber the gulf's dugong population by a long stretch, whose herd is by no means insignificant; at 700-strong it's the world's second-largest congregation, only to be outdone by a flock off the coast of Western Australia. The significance of these populations is not lost on the resort, with their conservation paramount to the Mantis Collection's ecotourism ethos.

"I was fortunate enough to come and film a show where we ran around the circumference of the island, and we captured all the wildlife. It just blew me away," says Paul Gardiner, director of the Mantis Collection and son of South Africa's 'rewilding' pioneer, Adrian Gardiner. Hawar Island is one of the few places in Bahrain that still harbours true wilderness, largely due to the unintentional protection the island's inaccessible military and coastguard bases provide – remnants of the now-settled border dispute with Qatar.

It would have been easy for the Bahraini government to do a Dubai on Hawar, selling its beaches and paradisiacal seclusion with glitz and luxury; the model has proven successful in the Middle East. But the opening of the mainland's new 'Pearling Path', which traces the legacy of Bahrain's pearling era, is an indication of the kingdom's alternative approach to tourism, one that is anything but superficial.



Luxury still plays an important role on Hawar Island, and with the resort flying that flag proudly now complete, the next meaningful phases of the Mantis Collections' project can begin. "The idea is the military will eventually move off the island and then we have access to this 4000-hectare piece of land that we can fix up. So, we'll do watering holes, we'll bring game in – all indigenous to Arabia – and then start protecting the birds and the dugongs," says Gardiner.

As I'm cycling through the property, it's apparent just how much preliminary work has been done to bring life back to the island. Dense crimson fountain grass lines the biking trails and towering Mexican fan palms, now naturalised in Bahrain, rustle in the breeze. The latter are relics from the resort's past life as a more locally focused hotel, the original structure of which, now unrecognisable since its upgrade, forms the lobby, main hotel and Bahri restaurant. I take a seat on the al fresco terrace, in the company of hardy frangipani, magenta bougainvillea and a chorus of singing house sparrows. The karak tea is robust and sweet, and my traditional Bahraini breakfast of shakshuka, *balaleet* (sweet rice vermicelli with egg) and *baid tamat* (spiced scrambled eggs with tomato) is a no-fail 'choose-your-own-adventure'.

Walking negates some of the morning's indulgence, and I stroll barefoot along the beachfront back to my room. Under my feet, the sand is compact and gritty, a blend of sandy limestone formed over thousands of years by sea abrasion and whipping sandstorms. A blustery night has left a fine layer of dust over the deck and outdoor furniture. It's not much use to me, but it's a vital component of Hawar Island's ecosystem, carrying nutrients from the Arabian Peninsula and feeding the aquatic microorganisms of the Gulf.

Beneath my overwater villa – new additions to the resort's blueprint – the water mottles, gin-clear where the seabed is sand and dark teal where the seagrass and corals remain untouched and flourish. I gingerly lower myself into the water, ducking my head beneath the surface to wash away the day's heat. A crab sidesteps between the jetty pylons, sand-coloured and slow-moving. It's hardly the island's most impressive inhabitant. Still, its presence is important, a reminder of the fragile ecosystems that Hawar Resort by Mantis is doing its utmost to understand and protect. *all.com* IT

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