

A Guest's Guide to the UAE's Protected Natural Areas

Curated by The Retreat Palm Dubai

In keeping with The Retreat's commitment to wellness and mindful living, we are pleased to share this guide to the United Arab Emirates' protected natural areas — from mangrove wetlands and desert conservation reserves to mountain sanctuaries. Whether you seek a quiet morning of birdwatching, a desert safari, or a wellness walk in nature, our Concierge team is on hand to arrange permits, guides, and transport for any of the experiences below.

Areas closest to The Retreat Palm Dubai

Ras Al Khor Wildlife Sanctuary

Location: Dubai

Approx. distance from The Retreat: Approx. 30-35 minutes by car

Best time to visit: Early morning or late afternoon, October - March for peak flamingo season

Highlights

- A Ramsar-listed wetland at the heart of the city, home to flocks of greater flamingos, herons, and migratory waders
- Three free public hides overlooking the lagoon and mudflats

Suggested activities

- Guided birdwatching walk
- Photography session at sunrise

Concierge note: Free entry; the Flamingo Hide is the most reliable viewing point. Our Concierge can arrange a private guide and transport.

Al Marmoom Desert Conservation Reserve

محمية المرموم للحفظ على الصحراء

Location: Dubai

Approx. distance from The Retreat: Approx. 45 minutes by car

Best time to visit: November–March, for cooler daytime temperatures

Highlights

- The UAE's largest desert conservation reserve, protecting dunes, ghaf trees, and Al Qudra Lake's bird population
- Home to Arabian oryx and gazelle within managed conservation zones

Suggested activities

- Sunrise or sunset desert walk
- Cycling along the Al Qudra track
- Wellness focused desert meditation session

Concierge note: Several zones require a permit for vehicle access; our Concierge team can arrange a licensed guide.

Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve (DDCR)

Location: Dubai

Approx. distance from The Retreat: Approx. 50 minutes by car

Best time to visit: October-April

Highlights

- One of the region's earliest desert protected areas, established to safeguard native flora and reintroduced Arabian oryx
- Managed exclusively through partner eco-resorts and licensed tour operators

Suggested activities

- Guided wildlife drive
- Falconry demonstration (seasonal)

Concierge note: Access is by pre-booked guided experience only no independent entry. We are happy to arrange this in advance.

Hatta Nature Reserve & Hajar Mountains

محمية حتا

Location: Dubai (Hatta enclave)

Approx. distance from The Retreat: Approx. 1.5 hours by car

Best time to visit: October-April; mornings for hiking

Highlights

- Rugged Hajar Mountain scenery with wadis, the turquoise Hatta Dam lake, and heritage villages
- A cooler, high altitude escape from the coast

Suggested activities

- Kayaking on Hatta Dam
- Mountain hiking trails
- Visit to Hatta Heritage Village

Beyond Dubai — Worth the Journey

Sir Bani Yas Island

جزيرة صير بني ياس

Location: Abu Dhabi

Approx. distance from The Retreat: Approx. 2.5 - 3 hours by car, or short domestic flight

Best time to visit: October - April

Highlights

- A former private island turned wildlife reserve, home to free roaming Arabian oryx, gazelle, giraffe, and cheetah
- Coastal mangroves and Arabian Wildlife Park safari drives

Suggested activities

- Guided safari drive
- Mountain biking and archery
- Snorkelling off the island's coast

Concierge note: Best arranged as an overnight excursion; our Concierge can coordinate travel and reserve stays.

Al Wathba Wetland Reserve

Location: Abu Dhabi

Approx. distance from The Retreat: Approx. 1.5 hours by car

Best time to visit: November–March, for resident flamingo colonies

Highlights

- Man-made wetland reserve celebrated for its flamingo population and saline lakes
- Boardwalks and shaded hides for quiet observation

Suggested activities

- Birdwatching
- Nature photography

Wadi Wurayah National Park محمية وادي ورية

Location: Fujairah

Approx. distance from The Retreat: Approx. 2 hours by car

Best time to visit: November - March

Highlights

- The UAE's first protected mountain area, with perennial freshwater pools and waterfalls
- Rich biodiversity including the Arabian tahr and freshwater fish found nowhere else in the country

Suggested activities

- Guided wadi hike
- Wildlife spotting

Concierge note: Advance booking through an authorised operator is required. Access is permit controlled and limited to protect the ecosystem;

Khor Kalba Nature Reserve محمية خور كلبا

Location: Sharjah

Approx. distance from The Retreat: Approx. 1.5 - 2 hours by car

Best time to visit: Year-round; mornings recommended

Highlights

- One of the world's oldest mangrove forests, and home to the endemic Khor Kalba white collared kingfisher
- Kayak trails winding through the mangrove creeks

Suggested activities

- Guided kayak tour
- Birdwatching

Planning Your Visit

Good to know

- Several reserves (DDCR, Wadi Wurayah, and parts of Al Marmoom) require advance permits or licensed operator access — please allow at least 48 hours' notice.
- Warmer months (May - September) bring intense heat; early morning or late afternoon visits are strongly recommended.
- Please respect all signage, stay on marked trails, and avoid disturbing wildlife and nesting areas.
- Modest, breathable clothing, closed walking shoes, and reef safe sunscreen are advised for most excursions.

Arrange your excursion

Our Concierge team can arrange private transport, licensed guides, permits, and wellness led add-ons such as a guided meditation or a zero-proof picnic for any of the destinations in this guide. Please speak with Concierge or your Retreat host to begin planning.