

Homes & Property Homes abroad

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WHEN Dubai was chosen to host Expo 2020, a global trade exhibition held every five years that attracts millions of visitors and billions of pounds, it was a first for the Middle East. The news was celebrated with fireworks cascading from the 2,723ft Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building.

Dubai's outrageous skyscrapers, bright lights and increasingly flamboyant construction are the stuff of urban legend. The International Airport recently eclipsed Heathrow as the world's busiest, handling 60 million passengers a year. A second airport, Al Maktoum International, is being built and will be able to handle 160 million.

In the Eighties, before the Emirate became a holiday haven, the population was 370,000 and there was just a handful of hotels. Today over two million people call Dubai home, more than 85 per cent of them foreigners, and there are 634 hotels. The Four Seasons at Jumeirah Beach is latest to open in the car-obsessed, often gridlocked city.

YOUR PIECE OF XANADU

Fifteen minutes from the city centre, Al Barari is a green oasis – 365 acres of former desert sands where businessman Zaal Mohammed Zaal has created a landscaped parkland full of flowering plants and flowing streams.

Hidden among the palms are handsome, low-level homes in large gardens overflowing with oleander, bougainvillea and tamarind, while ducks, cranes and herons populate nine miles of ponds and lakes.

Careful, dense planting of ground-cover, then shrubs and trees keeps the temperature 4C below central Dubai. No chemicals are used and costly desalination is rejected as unsustainable. Instead water from the resort and local community is recycled through its treatment plants so effectively that Al Barari now produces excess water.

Al Barari – it translates as wilderness – is a family project. Zaal, his British-born wife Lesley, who was an air hostess from Manchester when they met 35 years ago on a flight, and their four adult children all live at the resort, which has become a family passion.

Lesley runs a busy interior design company called Etcetera Living, which she set up in 2003. Current projects



Cathy Hawker finds spacious, contemporary homes in a green, serene desert retreat

Can this really be Dubai?



include homes at Al Barari. Daughter Kamelia is Al Barari's main landscape designer. Zaal's family were local Bedouin, and he recalls his childhood in the desert fondly. He was once uncomfortable with Dubai's staggering change but began developing his own plans when he went house hunting.

Says Kamelia: "Dubai was becoming all about high-rise blocks and residents going from their air-conditioned apart-

ment to a car to the office. He wanted something different, he wanted to build a community."

Zaal has a complex on his estate called The Farm, which is open to the public and is a favourite retreat with expats and locals leaving the city behind. It offers sunshine and serenity in a cool white, outdoor restaurant built around waterfalls and ponds. Freehold homes already sold and occupied at Al Barari



IN CHARGE OF MAKING THE DESERT BLOOM

Kamelia Zaal, above, eldest daughter of entrepreneur Zaal Mohammed Zaal and wife Lesley, runs the plant nursery at Al Barari, where she keenly oversees the nurturing of their stock. Her success there has been recognised with an invitation to be the first woman from the Emirates to show at RHS Chelsea Flower Show this summer.



From £538,000: flats and villas at Al Barari, left; a six-bedroom Acacia villa with pool, below left; top, a two-bedroom apartment in Oceana Baltic Palm Jumeirah with private beach access, for sale through savills.com at £826,000; above, the Dubai skyline's skyscraper forest beyond the beach

include 189 Residences, large four- and six-bedroom homes and 28 Reserve Homes. Newly for sale are 157 one- to four-bedroom off-plan apartments of between 1,500 and 9,000 square feet at Seventh Heaven, and 300 apartments in small buildings among the trees at Ashjar.

CONTEMPORARY STYLE

These will be spacious, contemporary flats with full-height windows and uncluttered interiors. Prices start from £538,000 with annual service charges from £2,000. Completion is expected by December 2017. Initial sales are strong to buyers from across the Middle East, Europe and the Far East.

Facilities at Al Barari include a spa, large gym and The Farm. There are future plans for a boutique hotel and more themed gardens. Zaal says: "I owned land in Jumeirah which was becoming a concrete jungle filled with identical tall hotels. We created Al Barari with a passion, believing people prefer this way of life."

■ albarari.com

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