

# Still Waters Run Deep

On a quiet stretch of Qatar's northern coast, the new Zulal Wellness Resort gives ancient Arabian healing traditions a contemporary touch. **Sarah Khan** checks in for a restorative journey

The sound of water seems to follow you at Zulal. There's the fountain in the alfresco lobby – an ivory ring named Circle of Life – that bubbles quietly in the background when I disembark from a 90-minute drive from Doha. The cascades that glide over the stepped walls at Aizoon as I settle in for lunch on the terrace. The gentle waves from a man-made lagoon that quietly lap the sands in front of my suite's plunge pool. The gushing springs that anchor courtyards throughout the Serenity pavilion, which I pass on my way to wellness consultations, yoga classes and massages.

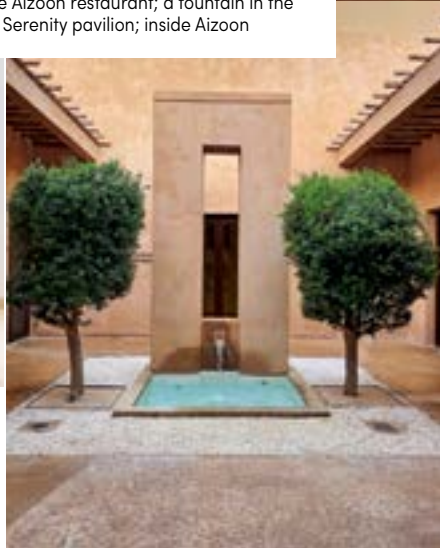
Zulal, it turns out, means "pure water," so it's fitting that the soothing cadence of coursing water sets the soundtrack for my stay at Zulal Wellness Resort, an ambitious new retreat that's the first of its kind for Qatar – and indeed, for the Middle East. A partnership with the trailblazing Thai wellness brand Chiva-Som, Zulal is the kind of place you check in to for a week or two for a full reset, falling into a rejuvenating routine of spa treatments, customised fitness regimens, wholesome cuisine and device-free contemplation. It's an approach familiar to anyone who's taken a healing holiday in Indonesia, the Swiss Alps, India or Arizona, but at Zulal, the wellness philosophy is guided by Traditional Arabic and Islamic Medicine (TAIM), a collection of age-old medical practices of which little seems to be known outside of the region.

The story goes that Qatar's Royal Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser was at Chiva-Som in Hua Hin enjoying the resort's focus on Oriental medicines, and lamented that traditional Arabic healing →

The Circle of Life fountain welcomes guests to Zulal's lobby



**Clockwise from top left:** The library at the House of Wisdom; gluten-free waffles with fresh maple syrup; cascades feed a pool by the Aizoon restaurant; a fountain in the Serenity pavilion; inside Aizoon



remedies weren't celebrated in similar ways in contemporary wellness retreats. "She thought, if they are having traditional Thai treatments, where are our roots?" Dr. Aashly Jayan recounts. Zual evolved from the Sheikha's desire to showcase TAIM practices alongside Ayurveda and Chinese medicine; today, the resort has a roster of specialists in TAIM, Ayurveda, acupuncture, Thai medicine and naturopathy, and a nine-person medical team of internists, nurses and dermatologists.

One afternoon, Dr. Jayan takes me on a stroll through Zual's many gardens, which double as an open-air pharmacy: we amble past clusters of flowering Spanish jasmine (they're good for psoriasis, he tells me), Arabic rose bushes (a natural astringent), a peepul tree (the buds reduce acidity), papaya trees ("It's the best skin food – it leaves your skin with a nice glow"), hibiscus (improves iron levels in the blood), and vivid violet bougainvillea ("We didn't find any medicinal qualities, they're just pretty – it relaxes the eyes," he says with a mischievous smile).

Many of these herbs, which find their way into Zual's sugar-free, dairy-free, gluten-free – and yet, delicious – menus in innovative combinations, were mentioned in the Qur'an, described for their healing potential for everything from skin disease to organ failure. The roots of TAIM – which is centred on balancing the

four temperaments of hot, cold, dry and moist through herbs – lie in the Qur'an and in the Sunnah, the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). "TAIM, as it was practiced in the Middle East, evolved because of trade," says Dr. Jayan. "There are traces of Ayurveda, European herbal medicine, ancient Chinese medicine." But while these traditional therapies have been a staple in homes throughout the Arab world, they haven't been as well codified or studied as more widely known practices like Ayurveda or Traditional Chinese Medicine. Zual aims to change that, educating guests by crafting a wellness programme shaped by TAIM traditions: "Zual is a humble struggle to remind people of their glorious tradition," Dr. Jayan tells me.

Many of Zual's spa treatments have TAIM touches woven in. Of nigella sativa, or black seed, the Prophet (PBUH) once said, "Use this black seed regularly, because it is a cure for every disease, except death." One afternoon I surrender to a full-body tadleek massage, which incorporates black-seed oil to soothe and take heat from the skin. I follow it with an oriental scalp massage, a common Qatari ritual after a

hammam or a haircut, infused with black seed and castor oil. After a consultation with a TAIM specialist, I'm sent home with a list of herbs to add to my daily routine. Guests can fill these "prescriptions" at Zual's apothecary, a tranquil space clad in black marble and stocked with glass jars brimming with za'atar leaf, turmeric root, camel thorn, frankincense honey, milk thirst seed and pomegranate peels.

Zual comprises two sections: Discovery, geared toward families, has 120 rooms, while Serenity, which is only for adults, has 60; the apothecary is part of the House of Wisdom, the great hall that leads the way to Serenity. The cavernous space is anchored by a library – inspired by Baghdad's medieval House of Wisdom – with 4,000 books. Works from the royal family's art collection also adorn the halls, including a 12th-century Korean vase, a Neolithic whetstone dating back from 6,000 to 4,500 BC from Denmark or British Isles and a massive Anish Kapoor sculpture installed in a specially-designed structure hewn from Qatari stone.

Devices are frowned upon at Zual, and on my last morning, I watch a woman flick through prayer beads with a hand that might otherwise have been scrolling aimlessly on a phone. That's the magic of Zual. A fleeting three-day journey has grounded me in ways I didn't even realise I needed, leaving me more mindful, more present and more relaxed than I have in years. "TAIM is a spark of reminding the past, how healthy we can be naturally," says Dr. Jayan. "Something that is lost in the world we live in today." *Doubles from AED 2,010 per night, three-night minimum; zual.com* 🌱