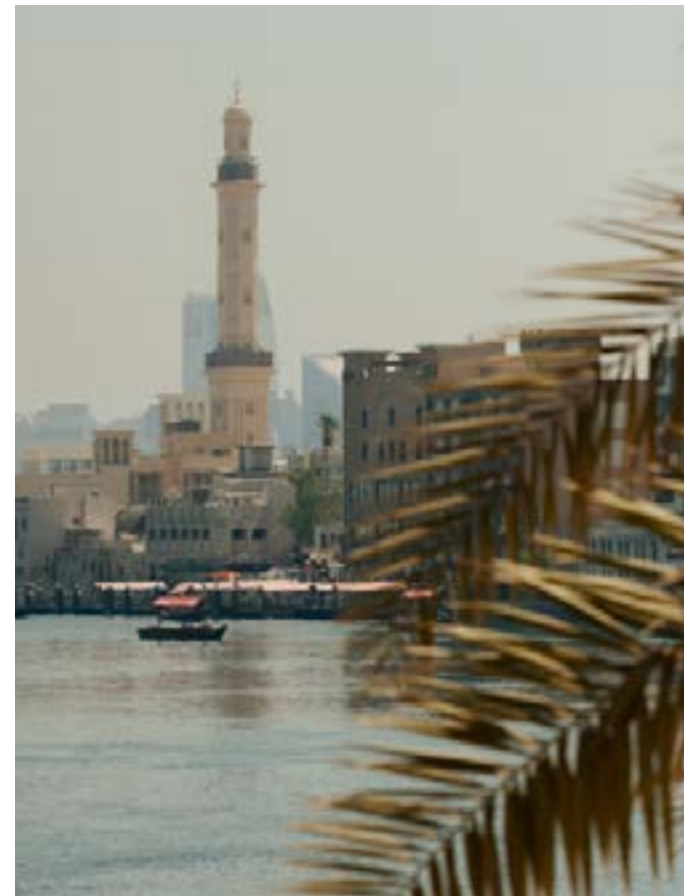




# Food for thought

With a new generation mining local flavours, Dubai's dining scene is no longer defined

by superstar global chefs. By Samantha Wood. Photographs by Edvinas Bruzas





**I**NSIDE BOCA, A BREEZY, biophilic tapas restaurant in the heart of Dubai's financial district, the after-work crowd is drinking at the bar. Downstairs I've joined friends for dinner in the private dining room located in the restaurant's wine cellar. Many bottles in the collection are from Morocco, Lebanon and elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa. We start with oysters harvested from Dibba Bay in Fujairah, the easternmost of the United Arab Emirates, on the Gulf of Oman. Opened a decade ago, Boca has become a pioneer in using ingredients sourced from across all seven emirates. The oysters share a menu with khansour, a mountain plant often used in salads, and kingfish from the Arabian Gulf, served ceviche-style. Technically Boca is a Spanish restaurant, but its Dubai roots and commitment to local ingredients make it uniquely Emirati.

Not long ago Boca's approach was atypical for Dubai. Since 2001, when Gordon Ramsay flew in to raise the curtain on Verre, inside the Hilton Dubai Creek, the city's culinary circuit has been dominated by celebrity chefs opening glitzy restaurants at equally glitzy hotels. In the years to follow, Michel Rostang, Nobu Matsuhisa and Massimo Bottura all lent their names to restaurants in the UAE, creating a food scene with a global reputation for glamour, excess and exorbitant prices. Certainly the restaurants were buzzy – Ramsay's caramelised apple tarte Tatin, served straight from the oven in a copper pan, would sell out each night. But the names and concepts were all imports, detached from anything truly local. For years this meant that Dubai's only real dining options were big-name, white-tablecloth restaurants or unassuming eateries in neighbourhoods without skyscraper hotels, which served shawarmas, pani puri and cheese-laden manakeesh flatbread.

Now there is a third way. Chefs and restaurateurs from the UAE and around the world recognised a gap in the market that would allow them to showcase their own culinary ambitions while adding regional twists. With the Covid pandemic prompting a desire to support local restaurants, the past few years have seen the rapid growth of a high-quality homegrown scene.

Take Boca. It's the brainchild of Omar Shihab, a Jordanian national born and bred in Dubai, who has become one of the UAE's leading sustainability champions, working with local and international government bodies. "It didn't matter what cuisine we served," he says. "We wanted to feature quality ingredients we could get locally."

This mindset is shared by Shaw Lash, a jovial Texan with a background in Mexican cooking. At the end of 2022, she and her Dutch Syrian husband, Tarek Islam, opened Lila Taqueria on Jumeirah Beach Road, next to a small shawarma spot. They followed with Lila Molino + Café in trendy Alserkal Avenue, a warehouse complex. "Homegrown, chef-driven wasn't nearly what it is now, so I always thought Dubai had potential for the Mexican food that I made," says Lash. She and her team grow most of their ingredients and work with local farmers to source



*From above: chef Patricia Roig at Boca; buildings in Dubai. Opposite: watermelon and feta salad and other dishes at Mythos Kouzina & Grill. Previous pages, clockwise from top left: tomato salad at Boca; Rania Saied serving lady fish at Arabian Fish House; za'atar manakish being prepared there; Lila Molino + Café; fried cauliflower at Sufret Maryam; Dubai waterfront; Tom & Serg café; Gerbou chef Ionel Catau*







“There’s always a misconception that only Emiratis should be cooking and pioneering Emirati food”



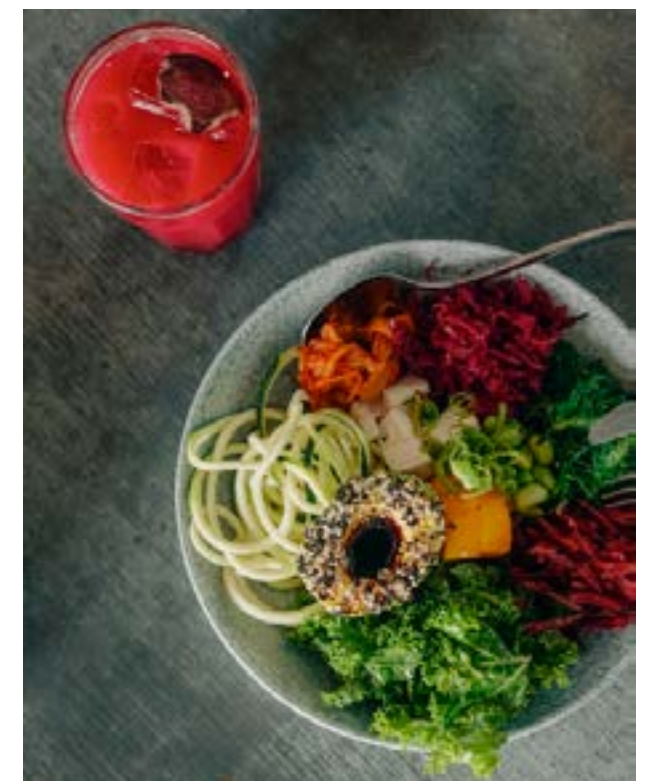
the tomatoes, tomatillos, chillies, squash and more that brighten up her plates. They also make tortillas fresh every morning. Lila Taqueria’s pièce de resistance is a local red snapper, served in two butterflied halves with guajillo chilli paste and coriander.

**F**URTHER INLAND, AMONG THE unassuming maze of Jumeirah Lakes Towers, or JLT, a stack of skyscrapers rising from a series of artificial lakes, a panoply of global cuisines can now be found, at places including Peruvian gem Fusión Ceviche and Greek taverna Mythos Kouzina & Grill. This is also where, in 2017, Palestinian chef Salam Daqqaq opened her casual Levantine restaurant Bait Maryam, which is Arabic for “the home of her mama, Maryam”. International accolades ranging from *The Michelin Guide* to the World’s 50 Best Restaurants prompted her to expand next door. This past summer she opened the more upmarket restaurant Sufret Maryam across town in the plush Jumeirah complex of Wasl 51. Its centrepiece is a sufret – a communal dining table – that can seat 20 people. The star of the menu is habra niyeh, a tartare dish of raw minced beef mixed with spices that has a silky pâté-like texture, making it perfect for spreading on freshly baked saj flatbread. These are the kinds of places – rather than swanky hotel restaurants – that many of us Dubai locals began seeking out during the pandemic. They don’t all have liquor licences like the big-ticket spots tend to do, but they’re sure to have a heap of soul.

Soul is what the Serbian restaurateur Stasha Toncev brings to the table. She relocated to Dubai in 2010 to work for Armani Ristorante and later Hakkasan, but found her path in 2018, when she launched 21grams. The tiny 25-seat Balkan bistro’s original location was in the residential Umm Suqeim neighbourhood,



Clockwise from top left: kitchen in 21grams; Kooya Filipino Eatery chef Migi Afurong; buddha bowl at Tom & Serg. Opposite: The Maine Land Brasserie







Above, from left: jute mallow, lemon caviar, garlic and olive oil at Sufret Maryam; chefs Mahmoud Alqam and Salam Daqqaq there. Opposite, from top: courtyard of Arabian Fish House; Tom & Serg's Aussie Benedict with braised Wagyu beef



steps away from a popular public beach in the shadow of the iconic sail-shaped Burj Al Arab hotel. After 21grams opened, I would often wrap up my weekends with a sunset beach stroll and a laid-back dinner there. Four years later, when lockdown restrictions were lifted, Toncev transplanted the venue to a larger space nearby. She and head chef Milan Jurkovic serve what she describes as “honest, wholesome soul food, inspired by the mountains, pastures and seas of the Balkan peninsula, with centuries-old recipes, modern cuisine and seasonal ingredients”. Weekends are busy, so the no-reservations policy means lines for a table and all-day breakfast dishes such as scrambled eggs in a tomato, pepper and onion relish with beef chorizo and soft cow’s cheese, a favourite of Emiratis and expats alike.

Tom Arnel knows a thing or two about brunch and coffee. The Australian native, who formerly worked at various Michelin-starred hotspots including Arzak, is a master of growing local businesses here. Over a dozen years he has opened 12 only-in-Dubai restaurant brands, across 22 sites. At his first Australian café, Tom & Serg, in Al Quoz, a neighbourhood best known for its warehouses, the immediate daily queues proved that a great menu will be popular no matter what the location. “Australia has an amazing café culture that comes with gourmet food for breakfast and lunch,” he says, “and I thought I would bring that to the UAE because the place at the time was full of franchises and international brands that were

spitting out very mechanical food that I didn’t like.” The expat community lapped it up. My multicultural foodie friends and I were more than happy to line up for Arnel’s pop-up Rule the Roast deal: 150-day Angus ribeye beef and Western Australian lamb leg complete with all the trimmings. The boisterous vibe only added to the fun.

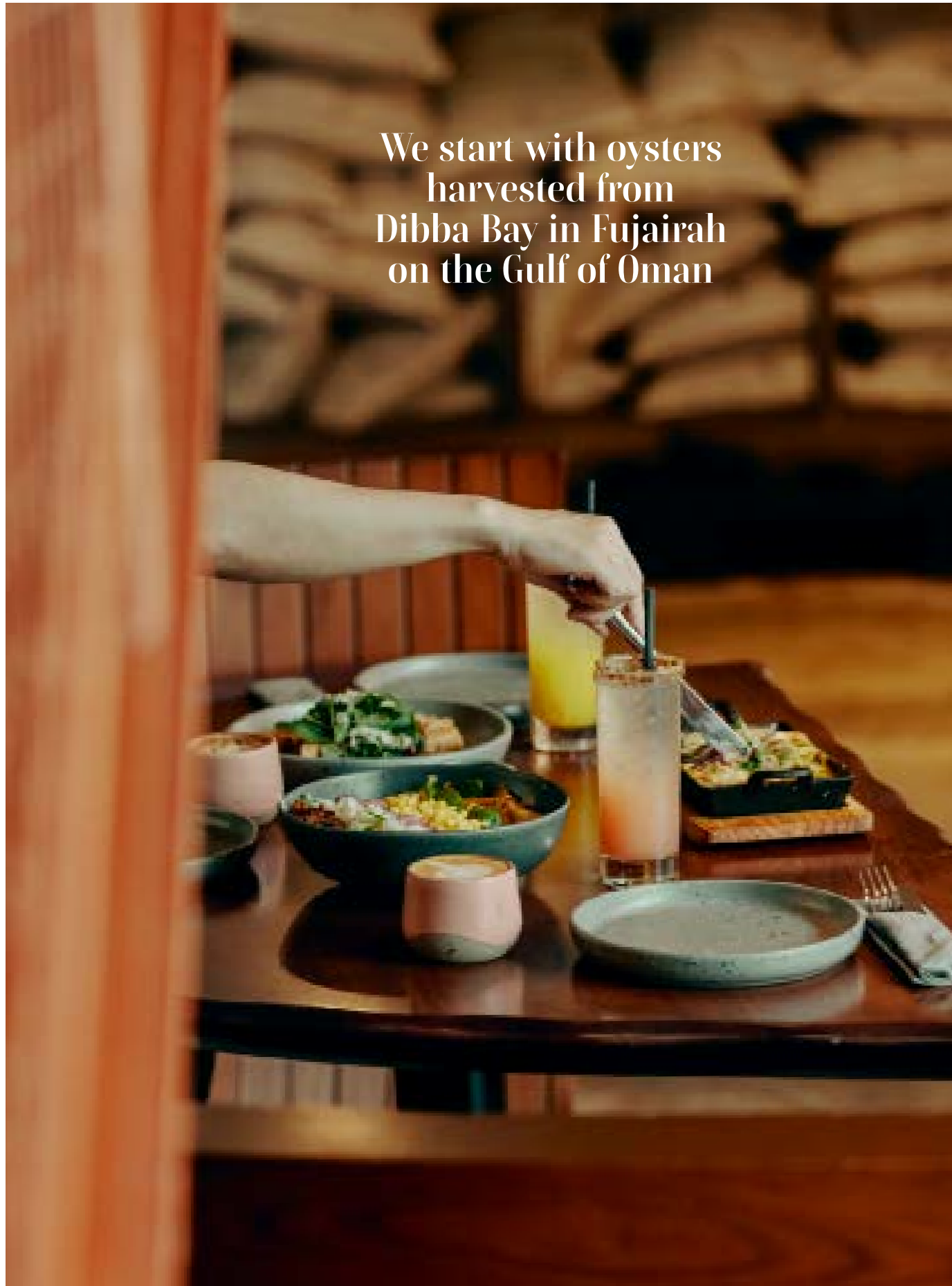
**B**UT NO CONVERSATION ABOUT the wave of new homegrown global cuisine in Dubai would be complete without a mention of Filipino food, which, until recently, was underrepresented in the city despite the large local population. That changed in 2022 when JP Anglo, a globetrotting chef and social media star who moved to Dubai four years ago, opened Kooya Filipino Eatery after a string of successful pop-up dinners during the pandemic. The menu at his charming bistro is centred around the Philippines’ signature stews and deep-fried dishes, always served with a dipping sauce. He makes generous use of vinegars and souring agents such as calamansi, a lime native to the country. A bestseller at Kooya is the chicken inasal, a dish that originated in Anglo’s hometown of Bacolod. Grilled and marinated in coconut vinegar, lemongrass and garlic, it is served with sides of papaya salad and garlic rice. For a sweet ending, there’s the pistachio-coated buttercream “sandwich”. “I’d like to be one of the Filipino chefs to help elevate

our cuisine,” says Anglo, “and, hopefully one day, to bring it to the level of other cuisines like Chinese, Thai and Indian.”

One cuisine does remain chronically underrepresented in Dubai: Emirati food. Few visitors to Dubai would seek out dishes such as machboos, a signature concoction of spiced chicken rice, because Emirati cuisine outside the home remains relatively uncommon. Sahar Parham Al Awadhi is looking to change that. The poster child for Emirati cooks, she won best pastry chef at the inaugural World’s 50 Best Middle East & North Africa awards in 2022, and became the first Emirati chef to work at Burj Al Arab. She’s a consultant for Gerbou, which opens in November as one of the year’s most important new places to eat in Dubai. The restaurant, whose name translates to “welcome to our humble abode”, is a modern Emirati spot housed in a renovated 1987 building. Located in Nad Al Sheba, near the city’s famous race course, it is surrounded by historic ghafl trees, a symbol of Emirati culture. The menu includes machboos with local chicken and tomato pickles, and other Emirati dishes interwoven with the Indian, Levantine and Mediterranean flavours that Al Awadhi experienced growing up in this relatively young nation. “There’s always a misconception that only Emiratis should be cooking and pioneering Emirati food,” she says. “I disagree. Especially when we see Indians cooking Japanese and Singaporeans cooking Italian. Everyone should be cooking what they are passionate about.” 📍



We start with oysters  
harvested from  
Dibba Bay in Fujairah  
on the Gulf of Oman



From above: Rania Saied serving a beetroot salad at Arabian Fish House; waterfront view there. Opposite: Mexican dishes and drinks at Lila Molino + Café



## Where to eat

- 21grams** This Balkan bistro has a legendary all-day breakfast and a wide selection of burek filled pastries. [21grams.me](http://21grams.me)
- Arabian Fish House** A creekside favourite for Levantine lunch spreads and meze-style sustainable seafood. [arabianfishhouse.com](http://arabianfishhouse.com)
- Boca** Much of the produce at this Spanish restaurant in the financial district, overseen by Seville-born chef Patricia Roig, comes from partnerships with nearby farms. The mammoth wine list is dedicated to natural, organic and biodynamic bottles. [boca.ae](http://boca.ae)
- Fusión Ceviche** The crowds come to this tiny gem in the Jumeirah Lakes Towers for authentic ceviche by Peruvian chef-owner Penelope Diaz, as well as her grandma's beef empanadas. [@fusioncevichedxb22](https://www.instagram.com/fusioncevichedxb22)
- Gerbou** Star chef Sahar Parham Al Awadhi consulted on the modern Emirati menu of this new restaurant in a historical building in the Nad Al Sheba district. Interiors feature pieces by local designers including Wafa Al Falahi and Lina Ghalib. [gerbou.com](http://gerbou.com)
- Kooya Filipino Eatery** This casual spot in Dubai Marina serves much-loved Filipino favourites such as fried lumpia (spring rolls) and pancit (noodle dishes). [kooyafilipinoeatery.com](http://kooyafilipinoeatery.com)
- Lila Molino + Café** In the hipster warehouse complex of Alserkal Avenue, this sister restaurant to the beloved Lila Taqueria offers honest Mexican dishes that make generous use of heirloom corn. [lilamolino.com](http://lilamolino.com)
- The Maine Land Brasserie** This steak-and-oysters joint is one of three smart brasseries around town operated by Canadian restaurateur Joey Ghazal, who was raised in Dubai. [themaine.ae](http://themaine.ae)
- Moonrise** Chef-owner Solemann Haddad, a Syrian French national who grew up in the UAE, developed this tasting menu concept, which brings Japanese technique to Middle Eastern dishes. [moon-rise.xyz](http://moon-rise.xyz)
- Mythos Kouzina & Grill** A whitewashed Greek taverna in the heart of the Jumeirah Lake Towers that serves traditional meze and delicious pork dishes alongside a well-priced Hellenic wine list. [mythosdubai.com](http://mythosdubai.com)
- Odeon** An Aladdin's cave of French deli fare, this gleaming villa on Jumeirah Beach Road has a restaurant with a rooftop terrace as well as a comprehensive grocery. [odeondubai.ae](http://odeondubai.ae)
- Orfali Bros Bistro** Chef-owner Mohamad Orfali and his two pastry chef brothers are on the pass daily at their bijou bistro, which has topped the World's 50 Best Restaurants' regional list two years in a row. The playful Middle Eastern fare nods to the brothers' Syrian heritage. [orfalibros.com](http://orfalibros.com)
- Sufret Maryam** Palestinian chef-owner Salam Daqqaq's second restaurant pays tribute to the Levant with a menu of elevated meze plates. [sufretmaryam.com](http://sufretmaryam.com)
- Tom & Serg** With healthy Australian breakfasts and serious coffee, this Al Quoz café is still going strong after a decade. [eatx.com](http://eatx.com)

## Where to stay

- Burj Al Arab** This stalwart of Dubai's seven-star hotel scene has a nine-option pillow menu and private butler service. *Doubles from about £975; [jumeirah.com](http://jumeirah.com)*
- The Lana** At once grand and subtly elegant, this instant classic from the Dorchester Collection offers modest luxury in a city that likes to glitter. *Doubles from about £707; [dorchestercollection.com](http://dorchestercollection.com)*
- One&Only One Za'abeel** A high-rise urban resort in the affluent Za'abeel area that's off the beaten path without being too far from the places to be. *Doubles from about £352; [oneandonlyresorts.com](http://oneandonlyresorts.com)*