

ECOLODGES IN THE MIDDLE EAST: THE NEW BIG THING



While global interest in ecotourism has been growing at a rapid pace, inflation has also started to shape travel choices. **Nagi Morkos**, founder and managing partner at Hodema consulting services, guides us around the ecolodges in the region which are increasingly attracting environmentally conscious travelers from around the world.

Green travel trends have been benefiting from a whole range of accommodation types, from camping to eco-resorts and eco-hotels. Although these properties pay an extra degree of attention to their ecological footprints, they still follow traditional hospitality rules. However, this is not the case when it comes to eco-lodges. Often associated with safaris, exotic forests or secluded islands, ecolodges are usually small-sized structures that are nestled in remote – and pristine – environments. They attract travelers who are seeking peace and untouched nature, and those who are ready to step out of their hotel comfort zone.

However, ecolodges are not for everyone; reaching these off-the-beaten-path properties usually requires a sizeable budget, so operators tend to deter mid-budget visitors, by setting high prices to maintain a status of luxury and exclusivity.

Oman

With its varied and vast unspoiled landscapes, the Middle East is a haven for ecolodges. Oman is a leader in this market, with its breathtaking coastlines, deserts and mountains. Indeed, developers have created hotels that have been designed in harmony with their surroundings, with architecture merging with nature.

Six Senses Zighy Bay on the Musandam Peninsula is the most famous, although it falls into the resort category as it features 82 rooms. There, visitors can learn how local plants are grown. The 84-room Alila in Jabal Akhdar is its mountain equivalent, where local materials have been used and solar power has been implemented. A number of hiking trails can be found a stone's throw from the property.

Meanwhile, on the Salalah coastline, the Souly Ecolodge is a great spot for bird-watching enthusiasts and those who want to see dolphins in the wild.

UAE

Across the border in the UAE, developers have started to follow this lucrative trend after years of focusing on luxury hotels and resorts. Indeed, out-of-the-box lodging options are on the rise. For instance, campers can now stay at the Sedr Trailers

Resort Hotel in Dubai which provides 13 airstream caravans, allowing guests to spend the night under the stars in the desert. Similarly, those seeking a Bedouin experience can opt for the Al Maha Desert Resort, which provides luxury tented villas and camel rides for adventurous types.

In Sharjah, the Kingfisher Lodge is a beach paradise that can only be accessed by private boat. Guests can learn about the local fauna at the Al Hefaiyah Mountain Conservation Centre and see protected species, such as Arabian wolves and desert lynxes.

KSA

In Saudi Arabia, the world-renowned Al Ula site has its very own ecolodge. Habitas AlUla has made a name for itself thanks to its unique take on sustainability; it uses 3D printing for some of its amenities, thereby reducing its carbon footprint and energy consumption.

Egypt

Egypt is also well positioned to develop this market segment, with its varied nature that includes the desert, the Nile valley and other natural beauty spots. In Siwa Oasis, the Taziry ecolodge features Bedouin tents with

Siwan touches. Further west in the Al Dakhla Oasis, Al Tarfa has also made its mark, winning multiple awards for its climate-friendly architecture and community-oriented management.

Jordan

Further north, Jordan has developed a few ecolodges of its own, which are ideally positioned in the country's protected natural reserves. The Feynan Eco Lodge, located in the Dana Biosphere Reserve, has become internationally known thanks to its vegetarian menu – a rarity in the region – and its electricity-free ethos. Guests can look forward to candle-lit experiences on the roof of the property, where telescopes provide unrivaled stargazing opportunities.

Lebanon

Similarly, Lebanon has jumped onto the green project bandwagon. One of the first ecolodges was Bkerzay, which is surrounded by olive groves offering pottery classes. In Taanayel, a beautiful haven in the Bekaa Valley, guests might not find luxury, but they'll definitely enjoy memorable experiences. The Taanayel Eco Lodge is part of Arcenciel, a non-profit organization. Brimming with rural charm, the unusual property introduces visitors to farming.

Turkey

And last but certainly not least, Turkey continues to attract a large number of travelers seeking more than just sea and sun. On the UNESCO World Heritage List, Cappadocia has seen ecolodge projects flourish in recent years, such as Ariana Lodge near Uchisar. At the other end of the country, on the Gemile Peninsula, the three houses of Gökçe, Elmali and Gemile have been built with sustainability in mind. One has even kept the carob tree which stood there before construction began.

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