

LOCAL *Escapes*

You can easily spend a long weekend at the property and not get even a sliver of cabin fever. There's so much ground to cover. On a sun-drenched afternoon, I decided to take the stretch of the mangrove promenade from the hotel all the way towards the city centre. It's like another version of the corniche with a long paved jogging track. It took me a solid hour and a half to go and come back. En route you see the skyline grow and bulge out at you from its far-distant appearance at the beginning. In tandem you see the strong architectural statement of the hotel do the same as you pace on. It really does stand out among Abu Dhabi's prosperous buildings. Along the route you've gazebos and pockets of grass with benches to rest and take in the changing views where you're likely to see locals and expats alike enjoying a spot of fishing.

Back in the hotel the dining options are promising and plentiful. On the first evening, we sampled the menu at the highly praised Pachaylen – authentic Thai cuisine – restaurant. The setting is intimate, elegant and lowly lit but not prohibitively so. The restaurant's palette is in rich gold and purple tones, while lavish curtains and gilded bronze screens provide private family dining spaces with a royal touch.

The menu boasts melodically named items – a surefire way of knowing this is the real deal. We started off with Miang Kham – a traditional street snack in Thailand which is served in a bamboo box with condiments. Our server demonstrated the technique of mixing and matching all the ingredients, including: some chilli, shallots, peanuts, lime, ginger, toasted coconut shavings, dried shrimp and a sweet dipping sauce, and she wrapped it all up in a mini lettuce parcel. Needless to say the explosion of flavour that comes with each bite is phenomenal and such a novelty. We dived straight into a shared selection of starters, Khong Wang Ruam, including green (green!) dumplings, chicken, beef satay and fried spring rolls. We decided to go for a stir-fried surf and turf gathering of mains: tofu (Tao-Hu Phad Bai Kra Prao Grob), beef (Neua Phad Naam Man Hot) and king



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prawns (Khung Yang Naam Ma- Kham) – lathered in oyster, sweet basil and sweet tamarind sauce with a selection of three types of rice. Desserts came in a hearty throng of coconut ice cream, fried banana with chocolate and a sticky rice with mango treat. Needless to say, we were stuffed and brimming with that post meal happy vibe.

The following day called for full retreat mode. Our brother publication, FACT, had previously reviewed the spa at Anantara last year and told us that we were in for something special. I have a real penchant for anything that has the word 'signature' in it. It's a way of addressing just how good a treatment is – there's a real certainty to it. Thus I went for the signature aromatherapy massage which lasted a glorious 90 minutes. The 10-strong treatment room spa is a labyrinth of swirly floral essences and candle level lighting. I was escorted to my treatment room where the therapist, speaking in baby soft tones, guided me through to the private changing area. Having a foot soak first, I chose the oil to be used during the treatment: an energising mix of heady and sharp peppermint notes. The massage table is anything but a table. It's a full-fledged mattress with a down duvet to keep you toasty warm. Comfort level: superbly high. The pressure, as per my request, was soft to medium (for those knotty areas) with beautiful strokes to put me in a slight slumber. I don't know about you but I love it when my head is dealt with vigorously – being a pressure cooker point on my body, it's essential. Finished off with a ting of a far eastern sounding bell, the treatment was over and I was still in a hazy buffer between sleep and serenity – what a place to be in, I tell you. The spa is an escape in the truest sense of the word.

The remaining hotel has some great areas to relax and have fun in: the pool deck has a host of amenities, Impressions, a rooftop lounge and nightlight destination overlooking the mangroves and Abu Dhabi's skyline, is a real hot spot for something cosmopolitan and for your daily dose of a full-set meal – breakfast, lunch and dinner, Ingredients is your go-to.

In all, this is a property we'd recommend even without thinking about it.





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It's often a statement that makes me blush. I feel smug but masquerade it by scrunching my face up like I've sucked on a lemon for too long and I can't bear it anymore. "You're so lucky you get to stay in amazing hotels," said by anyone who flicks through the dreamy spreads of Ohlala's travel/local escapes or tracks our Instagram album of idyllic posts.

"Oh it's part of the job," I proffer – eye contact at this point is rather jumpy- as a viable excuse. In truth, we are fortunate individuals who have to review hotels for you, dear reader, so that you are aware of the best of the best. We just do all the hard (heaven-sent) work for you.

In room 365, the sweeping space is instantly comfortable and impressive. The bed, distinctly wide, looks good enough to pull a movie-style dive stunt. The couch to the left is an equally plush surrogate bed – perfect for afternoon napping with a small hurn from the TV. On the desk near the window is a press pack that reads: 'Uniquely breathtaking, distinctly Anantara.' With the views of the lush mangroves in abundance from the balcony, the aforementioned is confirmed. The bathroom is made up of a rain shower, bathtub, separate toilet and a vast mirrored sink area where there's ample space for all your accoutrements. You'll find all you need placed in tasteful pots – anything from a vanity kit to Elemis products.

The grounds of Anantara are overtly majestic with an air of desert dreaming – where luxury is in touch with its indigenous surroundings. The Eastern Mangroves Hotel & Spa by Anantara features unique Arabic design elements throughout the property where you'd be hard pressed to miss the fabulous mosaics and solid timber – the mashrabiyyas, deep arches and touches of 18-carat gold with elegant Middle Eastern artwork adorning the walls.

As you walk into the main lobby area you get a full floor to ceiling picture window of the infinity pool. When we captured and lifted it onto Instagram (minus filters) it looked like something out of a coffee table scenes of paradise book. It's the never-ending mangroves that add a touch of otherworldliness that make it a proper getaway destination. It feels both Mediterranean and Far Eastern – inspired by the foundations of the Anantara hotels and resorts in Thailand. The word Anantara is taken from an ancient Sanskrit word that means 'without end' symbolising the sharing of water and the heartfelt hospitality that lies at the core of every Anantara experience.

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