

TRAVEL

Could Middle Eastern wisdom be the answer to modern ill health?

Lisa Kjellsson

checks into Qatar's royally appointed new spa resort to find out

IT'S NOT every day you come face to face with royalty, but at Qatar's new uber-luxurious spa retreat, I'm shocked to see the queen sweep past with her small entourage, instantly recognisable even draped in a black abaya.

I'm at the Zula Wellness Resort by Chiva-Som, in one particularly grand space that is at once a library, tearoom, apothecary and art gallery.

In her sixties and rather glamorous, Sheika Moza bint Nasser Al-Missned is the mother of Qatar's current emir and wife of its former ruler, and often described as the behind-the-scenes matriarch of an ultra-conservative regime. She has long been a passionate campaigner for education and public health, and the ruling family's decision to build a sprawling wellness resort on the secluded northern coast of Qatar, appointing the Thai detox retreat experts Chiva-Som to run it, was partly prompted by the increase in health problems such as obesity, diabetes and heart disease in the Gulf nations.

Well, if it's good enough for the queen...

What interested me was the resort's approach to helping guests tackle modern conditions such as anxiety by using the ancient practices of Traditional Arabic Islamic Medicine (TAIM). We see so many wellness ideas banded around, but Arabic medicine was new to me, not something I hear about in London every day.

"TAIM has existed for thousands of years, but hasn't really been exposed to the wider world in the same way as Traditional Chinese Medicine or Ayurveda from India," says Zula's director of health and wellness, Sandie Johannessen. "So it made sense to draw on the region's own traditions and expertise."

With roots in Greek medicine and influences from the East, TAIM is a holistic healing system recorded in The Canon of Medicine, a medical encyclopedia written in 1025 by the Persian physician-philosopher Ibn Sina, known in the West as Avicenna, which for a few centuries was one of the main texts taught in medical schools in various parts of the world, including Europe.

Like other holistic traditions, it rests on the philosophy that health is a balanced mind, body and spirit. Curious to see whether millennia-old Middle Eastern wellness wisdom could help me achieve balance, I sit down with Bibi Lockhat, a resident TAIM expert, for a health assessment. She is sympathetic as I tell her about my struggles with digestive issues, insomnia and anxiety. "The hustle and bustle of city life takes its toll," she says in a softly spoken South African accent.

Soon Bibi has devised my personalised treatment plan, prescribed a daily probiotic plus herbal blend of black cumin, caraway and fennel seed to aid my digestion; chamomile and lavender to help me sleep. She also puts me on a 'gut-healing' diet rich in fibrous vegetables

and fermented foods like miso soup and sauerkraut, washed down with a turmeric shot or ginger tea, and for dessert there is spirulina sorbet or dairy-free charcoal ice cream.

It's health food, but far from worthy – everything is delicious and beautifully presented. The only issue is the bijou portions – I'm not a big eater but have to ask to double the set menu and add a few sides. Even so, I notice the calming effect on my digestion almost immediately as I don't feel bloated after meals. I am especially grateful for this later in the spa when it's time for an abdominal massage. Normally I don't like having my stomach prodded, but the treatment turns out to be rather magical.

My lovely therapist, brought over from the original Chiva-Som resort in Thailand, explains that aches and tension in this part of the body are often linked to our emotions. Using her hands and then hot stones, she gently and methodically works her way around my stomach, instinctively adjusting the pressure. It is deeply relaxing, almost trance inducing. Afterwards I feel lighter both in body and spirit.

The spa is an ode to pampering with aqua therapy pools, sauna, steam room, even a snow room, not to mention the calming Himalayan salt therapy area where the warmly lit pink walls emit health-inducing negative ions. The ultimate decadence, however, is a session in the mosaic-tiled hammam where I am scrubbed from head to toe and literally slathered in gold.

Can an Arabic wellness retreat cure me?



There is a cultural difference to be aware of – the spa's strict separation of women and men. This, according to a young Danish couple I get chatting to, is the only downside to the resort, which they're otherwise very impressed with, as am I, especially with the team of wellness practitioners. By the end of my stay I have been seen by everyone from the resident naturopath to the physio and reiki master, all clearly passionate about helping people feel better.

And I do. After just five nights I notice that I am sleeping more soundly, waking up free from anxiety, and my gut seems happier. The question is whether I'll be able to stick to my newfound healthy habits once I'm back home. I know it will take some effort, but I've also learnt that a holistic approach to wellbeing means aiming for a sustainable routine. "It's not a quick fix," explains Bibi, the TAIM expert, referring to the list of lifestyle recommendations I've been given, "but even small and gradual changes help correct imbalances, and over time we see the benefits."

Healing Holidays (healingholidays.com; 020 7843 3597) can arrange a five-night Taste Of Zula retreat from £4,239 per person based on two sharing full-board accommodation in the adults-only section of the resort, including flights and transfers, daily massages as well as prescribed treatments, access to all water and spa facilities, classes and activities. See also: zula.com; visitqatar.com