



Aventura offers a number of physical challenges Aventura

A green solution to couples therapy

► Dubai's Aventura nature and adventure park has reopened for its second season and this time around is offering something for every member of the family, writes **Veathika Jain**

Couples who need to reconnect can now forgo marriage counsellors and head straight to Dubai's Mushrif Park.

Mushrif's outdoor adventure park, Aventura, has just reopened for its second season, with some interesting new additions. Core activities include tree-surfing, rope-climbing, log-balancing and zip-lining among the park's 5,000-square-metre natural ghaf forest. The zip lines are split into six circuits – based on the age of participants and difficulty level – and the biggest is 160 metres long and 10 metres high.

Also new this year is the Aventura Foundation, which will host a series of events targeting various members of the family, including a yoga adventure day on Friday, and winter holiday camps. "As part of the foundation, we are also doing a couples programme, where experts in psychometric analysis will help couples understand each other and themselves better," says Lina Malas, co-founder of Aventura.

The couples programme is scheduled to take place on December 8 and 9 from 1pm to 9pm, and couples are encouraged to complete a survey before they arrive. "There will be a one-on-one with the experts to interpret their report, and they will enjoy these two days getting to know each other better amid nature," says Malas.

Also new for this season is a cafe, which offers "healthy and fun" food. "It will be like your grandma is spoiling you with milkshakes, salads, fruit drinks and burgers, but with great quality and ingredients," Malas explains.

A play area will be added in a few weeks for children between the ages of 3 and 5. Hadi Fakhoury, co-founder of Aventura explains: "This will be an area that will support young kids doing activities that have the same sensibility as the park, including climbing walls. It will be a small space that will enable parents to drop their little ones off and do their thing."

Hadi explains how the entire Aventura set-up is focused on fitness – both physical and mental. "The park has no doubt got the physical aspect, but it exercises everything – a bit of strength, balance, courage, there's an element of risk taking, and it's all reflected in our circuits. Both kids and adults have challenging obstacles and they elevate to the next level. It's all about learning, which is a core area in team building as well."

Aventura Park is offering free sessions on Mondays between 8am and 11am, as part of the Dubai Fitness Challenge. A 10 per cent discount for people taking part in the challenge is also offered. Three-hour tickets for the circuit cost from Dh60 for kids and Dh150 for adults.

Gordon Ramsay at Bread Street Kitchen
Victor Besa



A woven strap on all bags is the brand's signature
Halm

Back to the basics

► A trio of Dubai designers has launched a collection of minimalist bags that ticks all the right boxes. **Sarah Maisey** finds out more

Amid the froth and feathers of last month's Paris Fashion Week, a new company quietly launched a range of sleek, chic, pared-down bags. Crafted from leather in timeless tones such as linen, powder, periwinkle blue and moss green, the bags were notable in themselves. But what made the launch even more interesting, was the fact that the brand behind the bags, Halm, is based in Dubai.

Halm's debut collection, 1:1, features just five silhouettes: the Tote, for travel and work; the more casual Boxer bag, for daytime use; the slouchy shaped Chilluxe; Tutti, a neat wallet clutch; and the Allt, an envelope clutch that cleverly fits into the other bags.

They are the brainchild of a trio of Dubai-based designers, Swedes Hanna Ransjö and

Astrid Dando, and Brit Hannah Brewer. Drawing on a very Swedish aesthetic of considered minimalism, the bags are blissfully simple. Each is crafted to maximise the natural textures of the leathers and suedes, resulting in pieces that are chic yet tactile. Designed to be neat but practical, each features a tidy silhouette, hand-stitched seams and the company's trademark woven strap.

Ransjö, who has called Dubai home for over 25 years, explains why the trio set up in the UAE. "Dubai is tolerant, open-minded and accepting of various styles," she says. "One of the beautiful aspects of living here is you mingle with a variety of people. It's colourful, vibrant and culturally rich, so it's definitely an exciting place to be creative."

'LOYALTY MUST BE REPAID'

► **Kevin Hackett** chats with the notoriously outspoken Gordon Ramsay, who is in Dubai this week to celebrate the second anniversary of his Atlantis eatery

As far as on-screen villains go, a chef probably shouldn't feature on anyone's Top 10 list. But there he is, a seemingly permanent fixture on everyone's chart of celebrities they wouldn't want to cross swords with: Gordon Ramsay.

To the uninitiated, Ramsay no doubt comes across as Machiavellian, a schemer who has blunderbussed his way to the top by taking no prisoners, and doing an awful lot of shouting and swearing. The reality, though, as with many figures that reside in the darkest depths of our imaginations, is so different, that it's almost comical. Well-spoken, friendly, talkative and disarmingly open, Ramsay in real life (no doubt dependent on what side of the kitchen door you happen to be on) is almost disappointingly pleasant.

Talking with him is like having a coffee with Boris Karloff backstage – there's no horror, only joviality. And, to be fair, Ramsay has much to be joyful about. He's a living legend, and has created one of the world's most recognisable and successful brands. And then there's the fact that his Dubai eatery, Bread Street Kitchen at Atlantis, The Palm, is celebrating its second anniversary, for which Ramsay is heading to the UAE.

In an exclusive chat with *The National*, he says this is nothing short of a duty for him – not that it feels like one. "Loyalty must be repaid," he remarks. "And I don't get to do it very often, but hosting these nights, where people can come and meet-and-greet, is a really important way of doing that. There's no getting around the fact that famous chefs have their fans – ignoring them just isn't on."

What he's referring to is the special events he'll be hosting at Bread Street Kitchen this weekend, as part of November's Culinary Month at the Atlantis. For as little as Dh150, foodies can partake of a special menu Ramsay's had a hand in creating, during the Thursday Trivia Night and the Friday Family Brunch, where he will be around to meet guests, and roll up his sleeves – literally.

Ramsay's mentoring of Bread Street Kitchen's chef de cuisine, Cesar Bartolini, and his team, has resulted in a venue that perfectly captures the atmosphere of the London original. This isn't some overpriced and out-of-reach restaurant where it takes months to reserve a table – it's a family-oriented establishment that offers liveliness, exceptional food and prices that won't break the bank for most patrons.

"I'm a family man," Ramsay chirps. "When I opened my first restaurant in Dubai [Verre at Hilton Dubai Creek in 2001], I was a different kind of person, and it was a different kind of

city compared to where we're at today. So when the lease expired after 10 successful years, I decided it was time for a change of venue and approach. Bread Street Kitchen is, first and foremost, an all-day brasserie – a fun place for families to kick back, unwind and not have to exclude the kids. I'm a father of four, I know how important that is – to have somewhere to go that combines a lively atmosphere with accessibility and utmost quality."

Ramsay is an exceedingly busy man, in charge of an empire that has made him one of the world's highest paid television stars (just don't refer to him as a "celebrity chef"; he hates that). So the extent of his "hands-on" involvement in any of his restaurants is, understandably, limited. "To be a success in this game," he explains, "you need to have complete trust in your staff. I'm always there for guidance and advice, though."

He operates 10 restaurants in London alone, with a further 13 across North America, Europe and Asia. Combine that with his television duties and his work as a publisher, and you might wonder how the man has time to even sleep.

Bread Street Kitchen, he explains, was a way of bringing "some of the London magic to Dubai". Totally different in concept to Verre, it has been a remarkable success – but Ramsay says it's not as simple as putting his name above the door for it to remain relevant in a city that's not short on world-class restaurants.

"Some people say that running a place at Atlantis must be like shooting fish in a barrel," he remarks. "But there are loads of great places to eat in Dubai, even just at the Atlantis, so it's vital to keep reinventing, evolving, being different and fresh. As a location, Atlantis has been absolutely perfect for Bread Street Kitchen for many reasons, not least the fact that it's a destination that is family-oriented."

He does say, though, that he still harbours a desire to open another restaurant in Dubai, one more in keeping with the Michelin-starred history makers he made his name with in the British capital. "I'll be in Abu Dhabi for the grand prix in a couple of weeks, and I intend to hunt around for a good location there, too. The UAE's restaurant scene is incredible, and Abu Dhabi is rapidly becoming a very cosmopolitan destination." It's a case of "watch this space", then.

How about the shifting trends in human habits and consumption, though? Is he a man who moves with the times or does he still profess to be "allergic" to vegans?

"Vegans make me come out in a rash if they're within a few feet of me," Ramsay jests. "Look, I get that it's important

to cater to a wide range of preferences, but, for me, dining out is a big deal – it's supposed to be something fun that we get excited about doing. Getting worked up about the chairs you're sitting on being upholstered in leather shouldn't come into it."

He does, however, admit that sourcing ingredients responsibly is extremely important. "We're serving a thousand customers a day in Dubai," Ramsay explains, "and that gives us enormous clout when it comes to buying the very best quality ingredients. And that means buying responsibly from sustainable and ethical sources – I wouldn't have it any other way."

He does maintain, however, an absolute disdain for food critics (he once famously turfed AA Gill out of his restaurant while the writer was entertaining Joan Collins). When asked which one's worse – food critics or bloggers – he laughs and thinks about it for all of a nanosecond. "Critics, every single time. They're history, bloggers are the now."

Never far from controversial headlines, Ramsay has come in for plenty of criticism – even in the past few days – from his peers, who claim he has made working in kitchens extremely stressful. When asked about how he keeps his staff motivated, however, he paints a very different story to the one we're used to seeing on our television screens and social media memes.

"There's no point denying that what we do is stressful," he admits. "It's a high-pressure industry. But it's my responsibility and of everyone else in charge of businesses to monitor staff properly. Pressure and stress are two very different things, and you can manage stress if you know what you're looking at in your staff, looking for the telltale signs."

One thing he's particularly vocal about is training. "We have apprentices now, who are graduating and entering the workforce with the proper skills and attitudes. We never stop learning, and it's vital to train people properly and allow them the access to education they crave. The pressure will always be there in a restaurant, it's what we deal with all day every day. How we deal with it will affect how stressed we are, and it's no use expecting someone in their teens or early 20s to be able to run a kitchen – people need to develop naturally to that point."

You want to meet him, don't you? He's like that – a magnetic, almost mythical personality; a powerhouse who doesn't really care what you think of him.

And no doubt he will be on fine form if you pay a visit to Bread Street Kitchen while he's in Dubai. Either way, the food will be exquisite. Ramsay's name is over the door, after all.

"We felt that there was a gap in the market for design and quality that transcends just the one season, without being bland and boring. There are already so many fashion accessories that seem tied to temporary trends. I was also looking for a bag that was structured yet soft and malleable, a combination that is hard to find.

"So we designed the Halm collection for the multitasking and contemporary woman who appreciates the simple beauty of well-designed bags, made in luxurious materials and textures, exuding effortless, timeless style with a little *je ne sais quoi*," she says.

Steering clear of the safe ubiquitous colour choice of black, these pieces may seem like they are aimed at the fashion savvy – those who

Designed in Dubai, the bags call on the centuries-old skills of Italian craftsmen and their expertise in leatherwork

know how to make pistachio green and midnight blue work for them. However, the "macaron-like palette" also includes a summery blue and soft, buttery creams. And all of these tones are surprisingly easy to wear.

"It would have been very easy to be blinded by current trends and fashion, but we had to keep reminding ourselves to stay true to our core and vision," says Ransjö. "This collection is all about an appreciation of the beauty of the natural, valuing the skill of artisans and letting the sumptuous materials speak for themselves. Our focus is on top quality, whole leathers and

materials, including bull nubuck, which has a natural, smooth,

velvety touch. With use, the leather evolves, taking on different shades over time – this is a charming



Halm's Chilluxe bag Halm

characteristic of natural hide, and offers a bag that will age beautifully."

Designed in Dubai, the bags call on the centuries-old skills of Italian craftsmen and their expertise in leatherwork. Each piece is produced in Florence in a limited edition, but retains, at its heart, a sense of the UAE. "We had many conversations about launching elsewhere, but absolutely felt that the UAE was the right place. Having lived in Dubai for so many years, my love and loyalty to what feels like my adopted home country, made it only natural to develop the brand here, rather than in Italy, Paris, London or somewhere more traditionally known for fashion houses," Ransjö concludes.