

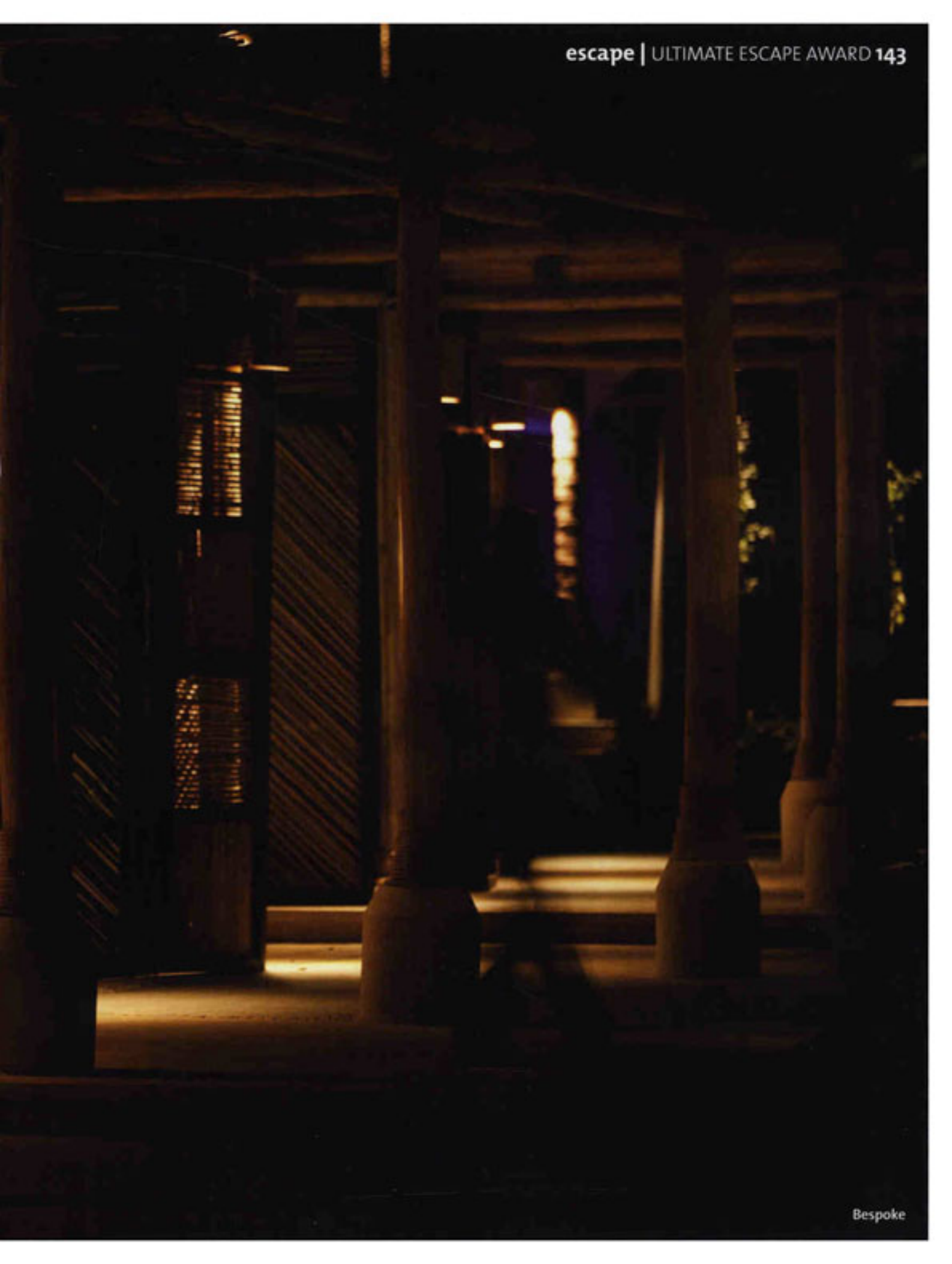
THE
DRESSING

BESPOKE

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SEA BORN

Designed by renowned Egyptian-Lebanese architect Galal Mahmoud, Jordan's O Beach is a unique attraction spread over 33,000 square metres of land with an exhilarating 250-metre stretch of Dead Sea shore.



This page : One of twelve private cabanas that feature dining and lounging areas, a Jacuzzi and even a flat screen television.

For a man of shapes and spaces and decisive lines, Galal Mahmoud is surprisingly fond of the flat, boundless sea. "You see, there is that magic of the sea," says the architect behind the award winning O Beach resort in Jordan. "It brings well-being to any human."

For Mahmoud, his native Lebanon is not a country historically defined by its mountain range, but a coastline - a land that is half sea already - whose exposure to the world and all its creativity has come sailing to and fro across the waves for centuries.

"We've had beach houses in Lebanon since my childhood and holidays were always by the sea. Now we have a beach house in Greece. The sea is part of our life, it runs in our blood. I lived in Paris for ten years and I was miserable," - at this Mahmoud checks himself, dearly at least some fond memories flooding back. "Well not entirely miserable, but I always felt there was something missing." If the architect has had the fortune to have enjoyed plenty of coastline recreation, his business partner in all things O Beach, Ralph Nader, has had the either elaborated or else entirely envy-inspiring good luck to have actually been, quote, "brought up in beach resorts."

And yet for all their time enjoying sun, sea and sand both men knew, in the Middle East at least, that there was something missing. "I don't think there are a lot of comprehensive beach resorts in the Middle East," says Mahmoud. "There are a lot of beaches and hotel beaches, a lot of access to the sea, but there wasn't a real beach resort with all the facilities and concept the way we laid it out."

For Nader the concept was to create that fully fledged day beach, catering to families, children and adults that could be developed as a chain across the region. "This kind of concept did not exist, yet there was a need for it," he says. And, as can often be the way in the process of creating something new, the first of the batch may be the most unusual. O Beach Jordan is a 20 million USD development by the sea. But here the Sea is Dead, a brine so salty it stings the eyes, a "harsh environment," says Mahmoud, "not very friendly in terms of destination." Yet magic a plenty all the same.

"First of all you are at 400 metres below sea level so you have a sense of well being which comes naturally because of the excess of oxygen. And there is a stillness about it, like time has stopped. And course it has this Biblical aspect - at night you can see the lights of Jerusalem and Jericho." Before night falls, sunsets burn the sea dark green to navy blue, vivid colours amid the dusky desert. How then could the architect and developer capture this magic in stone and steel on their sharply sloping, 33,000 square meter site? "The advantage of the slope is that you can have plateaus and everyone can benefit from a sea view," says Mahmoud. "Because it is quite high and terraced you have a sense of drama and connection to the sea. We've built gigantic infinity pools that connect the sea to the project."

The disadvantage, of course, is the distance up and down. Day>





beaches are generally not trekkers and the architects had to ensure guests could circulate through the development without feeling fatigued. The art, it seems, was keeping them interested. "You have these split levels and each level has something happening left and right," says Mahmoud. "You come in at the top of the project and you can see everything in front of you. As you gradually go down you start going sideways to whatever functions you want to go to, changing rooms, shops, restaurants, VIP pools and so on."

"With all the things going on you don't feel you are going up or down. This was the key challenge in the location: you are always looking at something, it's not just a staircase." Shapes in O Beach seek harmony with their surroundings, the "local vocabulary" as Mahmoud puts it - the geometry of salt crystals and the smooth curve of sand dunes defining buildings clad in local stone or colours washed to blend with the desert.


Within these terraces of attention are contained five pools, a kids' day care area, a shopping alley, 1,000 sun beds, a dozen cabanas with private Jacuzzis and LCD TVs, a hundred adults-only double size day beds, bars for the beach the beds and the pools, a nightclub, outdoor banqueting for 1,200, three restaurants, one cafe and, in case of a needed retreat from all such activities, an open air spa to enjoy massages and the Dead Sea's famous healing mud.

"Many have felt there was nowhere fun to go in Jordan compared to a place like Dubai," says Nader. "Within their week of visiting archaeological and cultural areas tourists also want to visit one fun place too." O Beach is geared toward day trips by locals and expatriates travelling from Amman, 45 minutes away. Visitors can't stay overnight - there is no sleeping accommodation - but with DJs, gigs and plenty of cocktail waiters, they can certainly stay late. "O Bar is a nightclub. In hotels you have to shut down music at 12 to allow guests to sleep - at O Beach you can go on for much longer," says Nader.

The success of O Beach Jordan, which opened in April this year and swiftly won an Arabian Property Award before this more significant

Bespoke Ultimate award, has given its creators confidence to expand the brand to a very different site, Egypt's Dahab, a treasured, unspoiled bay renowned for windsurfing and diving. The development, which is due for completion by the end of 2012, will be O Beach's first with accommodation, promising relaxed, open plan rooms with sea views, terraces and an attention to proportion - "ceilings just the right height, a well positioned bed" - which Mahmoud believes are today's mark of architectural quality, rather than the "fussy, over designed" hotels to be found 80km down the coast from Dahab at Sharm el-Sheikh.

Abu Dhabi and then Dubai look likely to be next in line for O Beach developments and then, naturally, the land of seafarers itself. "Is Lebanon ready for an O Beach?" asks Mahmoud, "Big time."

"Lebanon," says Nader, "is ready for two O Beaches, not one." But whether O Beach developments are for party starved Ammanis or tranquility seekers in a secluded bay, the philosophy behind their design appears to be that of a man who has stared at the horizon, wondering at the perspective that shows sky and sea meeting as one. "We work on virgin pieces of land and I take a very humble approach to the site," says Mahmoud. "It's not about showing my muscles. On the contrary, I try and be very discreet and very environmentally integrated. The end result for us is to have an architectural project that kind of disappears in the landscape." Perhaps that love of the flat, boundless brine wasn't as surprising after all. 

WHAT O Beach

ARCHITECT Galal Mahmoud

WHERE Dead Sea, Jordan

WHY It's the first holistically designed private beach destination in the region and by far the best place to enjoy the Dead Sea. It's open day and night and is set to become the first in a series of O resorts.

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