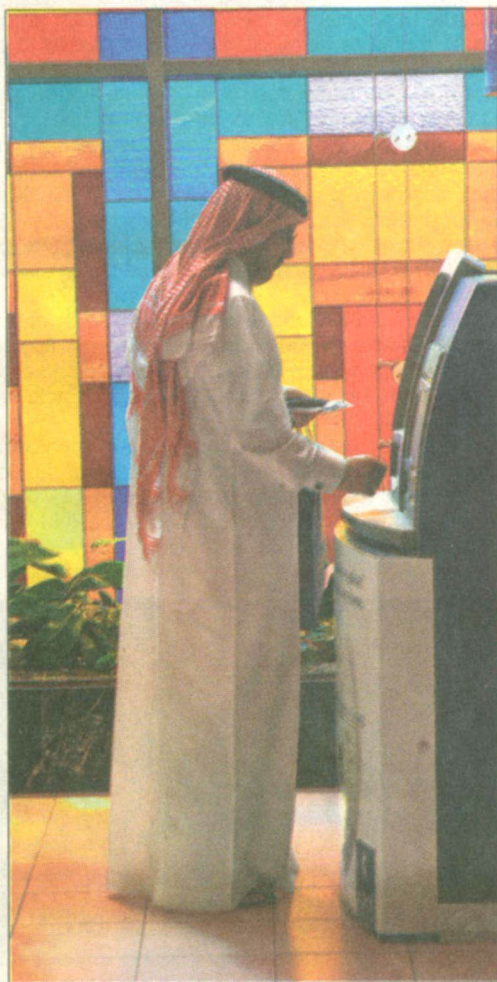
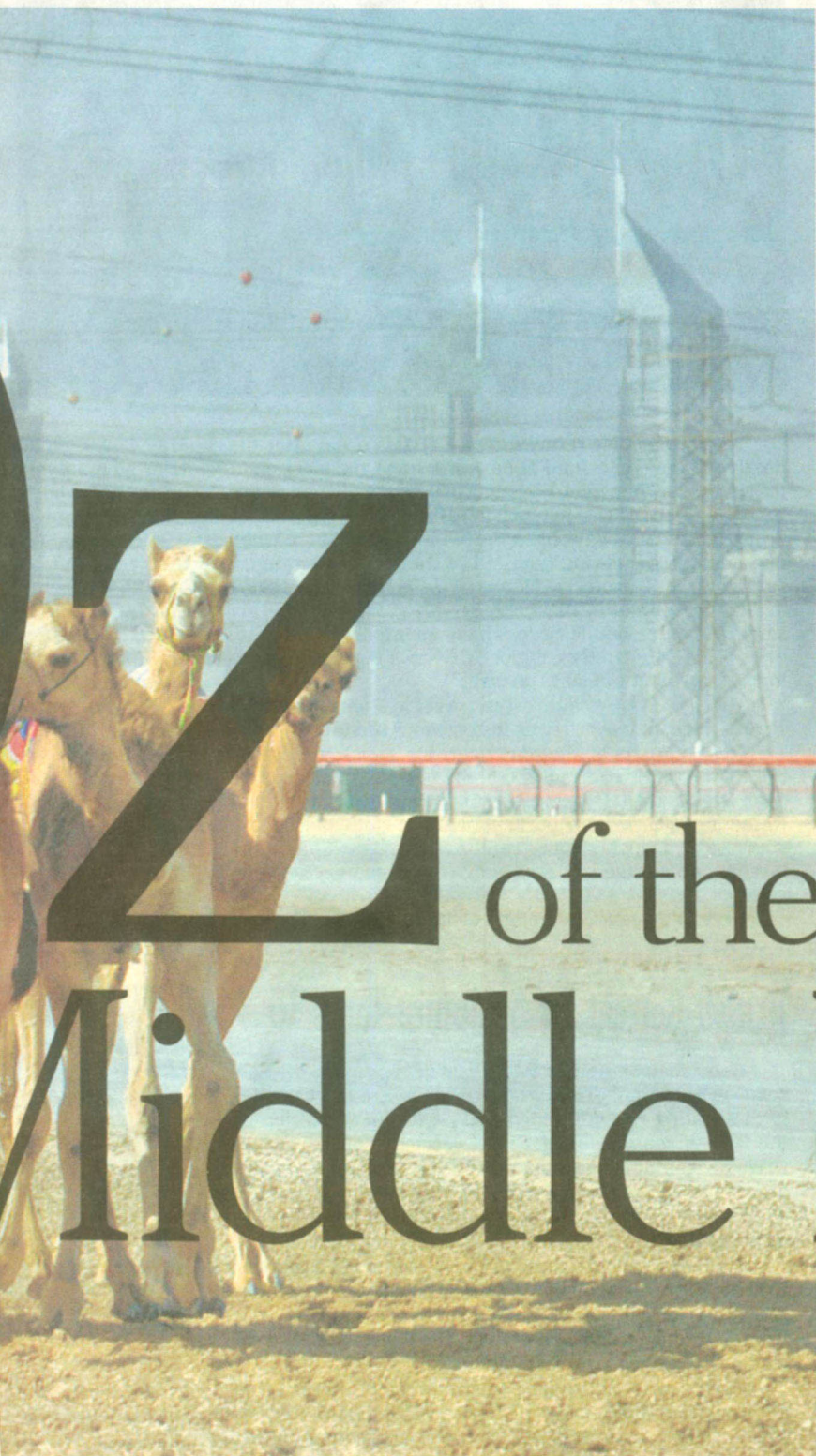


Travel



of the Middle East



Photographs by Chris Warde-Jones for The New York Times

*water restaurants and colossal shopping
over the top.* **BY SETH SHERWOOD**



the Muscle



Butterfield & Robinson

ance.

now offers an optional day when participants can bike 63 miles rather than the normal 25; and Backroads offers a day where cyclists can bike up to 100 miles, or on a route with mountain elevations.

"We want to make sure that anyone that goes on a classic trip can go on a 100-mile tour as well as a 10-mile one," said Allyson Quibell, a spokeswoman for Backroads.

To complement the more challenging terrain, tour companies are simultaneously reworking their five-star hotel offerings and reconfiguring them instead with hotels that are slightly more modest but more conveniently located for biking. Similarly, meals that used to require their own kind of endurance (even courses over three hours) have been replaced by lighter (and more athletically conducive) fare.

"We were hearing from guests that they didn't need the over-the-top luxury, they just wanted to get dressed up every night," said Ms. Quibell. Instead, Backroads has created a new category of family-style "casu-nnys" that are comfortable rather than over-the-top.

Industry professionals say that the trend might signify a return to the origins of European bike touring, which back in the 1970's was a pursuit enjoyed more by backpackers on wheels than gastrobikers in search of Michelin stars. "It's more back to the roots of what Butterfield & Robinson are all about," said Ms. Gray. "More than just a pampered

al."

CHECK IN/CHECK OUT

LAS VEGAS:
THEHOTEL

THE BASICS Putting aside its pretentious name, THEhotel at Mandalay Bay has plenty to woo the urban sophisticate: artworks by Richard Serra, handsome valets and a restaurant by Alain Ducasse. But the swankiest element of all is actually what's missing: slot machines. Unlike the typical resort on the Las Vegas Strip, where you must charge through the one-armed bandits to check in, the black-marble-and-chrome lobby is as serene as a futuristic wedding chapel.

Opened in December 2003 by the Mandalay Resort Group, which has since become part of MGM Mirage, it is the city's first stab at a boutique hotel. But this being Vegas, "boutique" here means 1,118 suites stacked 43 stories high. Still, guests can hole themselves up in this Art Deco tower and never have to dodge blackjack tables and buffet lines. As for THEhotel's name, it is pronounced as it is written, as if no other hotel mattered. For casino-phobic design snobs, that might be the case.

LOCATION Rising from the southern tip of the Strip, behind the golden wings of the Mandalay Bay casino, THEhotel is far enough from all the neon to project a relatively rarified air.

THE ROOMS At 725 square feet, with floor-to-ceiling views of the twinkling lights, the standard suites are bigger than most Manhattan bachelor pads. The interior is pure Art Deco, from the chrome wastebaskets and doorknobs to the beveled mirrors and black lacquer tabletops. The living room, wrapped in a bamboo-grain foil wallpaper, is dominated by a 42-inch LCD television (the largest of three in the suite) and a gray chesterfield sofa. An ergonomic swivel chair encourages work, while the granite wet bar invites play. The bedroom is spacious enough for two club chairs, dual closets and a king-sized bed or two queens. But the tranquility can be pierced by the thin soundproofing, especially if you're near the humming elevators.

THE BATHROOMS Bigger than some off-Strip motel rooms, the marble bathrooms have double sinks, a 13-inch LCD television, a glass-enclosed shower and a sleek garden tub that is deep enough for scuba lessons. A half-bath is tucked in the foyer. The towels are thick, the lighting is

flattering and the toiletries — a private collection by Gilchrist & Soames — are packaged in apothecary-style jars with labels like "hair masque" (conditioner) and "body balm" (moisturizer).

THE CROWD The lobby bar offers a good vantage point to watch the parade of Hollywood-agent types in open-collared striped shirts and ripped jeans, sometimes accompanied by rail-thin girlfriends in high heels and low-neckline blouses. There are few retirees in motorized scooters, and even fewer toddlers in strollers.



Peter DaSilva for The New York Times

The lobby of THEhotel on the Las Vegas Strip.

ROOM SERVICE The staff is cheery and solicitous, although it took a good 40 minutes to get a pot of coffee. The in-room menu, while not connected to Mr. Ducasse's rooftop kitchen, offers tasty Continental fare, including "hand-packed cheeseburgers" for \$13.50 and beluga caviar for \$100 an ounce. The wine selection draws from popular California chardonnays and cabernets sauvignon.

SPA The Bathhouse spa, located on the second floor, is a minimalist study in gray slate and pebbled waterfalls. A 44-page menu describes the treatments, which range from a 25-minute green tea bath to a 5-hour stone massage, facial and pedicure.

BOTTOM LINE A design oasis in the Las Vegas desert. Standard one-bedroom suites run between \$179 and \$599 a night, depending on demand. The suites on two floors near the top of the hotel, which are 1,500 to 2,600 square feet, are reserved for high-rollers and convention V.I.P.'s. Information: (877) 632-7800; on the Web at www.thehotelatmandalaybay.com.

DENNY LEE