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The way to Oman's heart

Turtles, twinkly desert nights and talkative schoolkids... Getting lost is half the fun on a soft roadtrip into the Arabia of old

Tristan Rutherford Published: 4 March 2012

After a restful night, my wife Kathryn and I wake at dawn and peep out from the canvas flaps of our tent. The grand, mountain-crowded panorama of Oman's Jabal al Akhdar range is nowhere to be seen, even though we both swear it was there last night. Instead, a warm mist has crept up towards our camp's perimeters, erasing the distant vision of bleak canyons, lush palm plantations and faraway forts.

It's our third and final morning at The View camp, a Serengeti-style scattering of tents marooned in the middle of these barren mountains – and we're both a little smug at how well it's going. This year, determined to chase spring's first sun on an early holiday, we'd tied ourselves in knots looking for the perfect destination. We wanted somewhere classier than the Canaries, but less hectic than Morocco. Somewhere exotic, but not too exotic.

Dubai ticked boxes for geography and climate, but we fancied culture and adventure, not indoor ski resorts and mega-malls. Scouring a map of the Middle East, we zeroed in on Oman. Scanning brochures and websites, we found that this was the country for an easy dose of the exotic – and you could see it all on a lazy, week-long roadtrip looping from the capital, Muscat.

Oman's desert highways make driving a doddle – whizzing through empty scrub, nipping past jewel-like glimpses of sea and cutting through lonely mountains of sand. And when the going gets too tough – somewhere around the new batch of luxurious enclaves hidden in the dunes, for instance – you just abandon your hire car in a parking lot and swap to a chauffeur-driven 4WD.

This kind of self-drive for softies means you can tick off the country's amazing mix of desert camps, seaside hideaways and swanky resorts without once getting bored. And, we hoped, the Middle Eastern climate meant the sun would always shine. Sure enough, by the time we've dressed for breakfast after our foggy start at The View, that ominous mist has cleared – and our hilltop home is hotter than a British July.

Three days of drifting from tent to dream-like landscape in our own Arabian Nights fantasy makes it hard to leave, but we bid the resort a final farewell and begin our descent down the mountains towards our next stop. Just 10 minutes later, the scenery has morphed from desolate peaks to lush palms, and we find ourselves hopelessly lost. One downside of driving in Oman is the lack of road signs and discernible landmarks – we spend at least an hour every day parked up, with the windows rolled down, pondering maps that look like modern art.

Asking for directions soon turns out to be a great way to meet people, but on this hill there's not a soul to be seen. We're forced to abandon the car and wander off-road into a plantation in search of a friendly face. We tiptoe through a jumble of coconut, banana and papaya trees as mountain springs play lullabies, and soon we're at the edge of a mud-brick farm, where four lads in long white dishdashas are trying desperately to break in a young colt, performing acrobatic backward leaps when the young horse rears.

This vision of old Arabia isn't something you'd see on a coach tour or in a beachside resort – but it's these moments that make our holiday. Omanis are the antithesis of heads-down Londoners: after offering us warm, sweet tea, the boys are soon walking us back to our car, issuing clear directions to Nizwa, Oman's former capital.

We have to pass through the city on the way to our next hotel, and it seems foolish not to take a look.

There are officially three reasons to visit this sand-hued ancient fort city, 45 minutes south of The View camp: to see the ornate, traditional khanjar daggers, which the locals still wear, slung low across their hips; to buy the intricate copperware that fills its souk; and to inhale the religious fervour that lends the city its solemn, peaceful air. Each of these is highlighted on a succession of roundabouts outside town: a bronze knife on the first, a big pot on the second, and a giant pile of books on the intersection by the bazaar. If that's enough to make you want a souvenir, you can buy versions of all of them in the musk-scented souk, along with ceramic pots, scarves and veils, henna, spices and walking sticks with axe-like handles – perfect for giving enemies a quick whack or two in the days of yore.

These last keepsakes date from the time when now-laidback Nizwa was seriously edgy. For many years, its inhabitants were locked in violent oil wars and, when the current Sultan of Oman's father deemed it safe enough to visit in 1955, it was the first time that century that an Omani monarch had set foot in the area.

Surrounded by date palms and criss-crossed by streams, it's a stunning city, where the major manmade landmark is a towering fort with enough cannons, secret passages and man-traps to hold the canniest of civil dissidents – though they're long gone now. Instead, in its vast, sunbaked courtyard, a school party is noisily tucking into a picnic. I meet a fair few of them while standing at the urinal in the fort's bathroom: determined

to practise their English no matter what the circumstances, each young boy who files past greets me with a cheerful 'hello' or 'welcome, sir'.

Back outside, there's a gorgeously giddy view from the ramparts over endless green palms. When writer Jan Morris visited in the '50s, she fancied she could see the distant dunes of the almost impenetrable Empty Quarter, which fellow British explorer Wilfred Thesiger had crossed by camel a few years before.

In homage to them both, we return to the car and head onwards on our own desert expedition, making the two-hour journey south towards the swirling tumble of Wahiba Sands beneath a tangerine afternoon sun. It used to be a lonely sprawl, but a smattering of luxury campsites deep in Wahiba Sands' 250km expanse has swelled the population, enabling roadtrippers like us to try their hands at Oman's unique line in wilderness adventures.

Thesiger crossed the country's deserts sustained by little more than dried bread, dates and hides of water sullied by the urine of his camel train. If he had stumbled upon the opulence of Desert Nights Camp, I don't know whether he would have laughed or cried. The special treatment starts at a petrol station just outside the desert city of Ibra. As driving these shifting sands takes a lifetime of practice, we leave our Ford for an air-conditioned Land Cruiser (with cold towels and driver), which transports us to our huge tent.

Once there, we find it has not one but two glamorous rooms, connected by a cascade of silk beanbags, Persian rugs and twinkling storm lanterns. Outside, there's a breezy palm-shaded oasis where guests can drink in the desert silence with a frosted beer and a copy of Thesiger's Arabian Sands. We're exhausted and retreat to the loungers outside our tent to spot shooting stars.



Over the dune: you'll need a 4WD and a good driver to explore wild Wahiba Sands (Piers Golden)

stunt, racing the car up a nearby dune in a parabolic curve. But as we reach the apex, Ali bottles it – his face turns ashen-white, his cheeks puff out and his foot eases off the accelerator as we slowly skid sideways down the hill. The car performs a cringingly slow turn as its centre of gravity shifts to the front tyres. A sheepish Ali opens his window for a bit of air, and it's very quiet on the drive back to camp.

Remarkably, we still feel confident enough to speed eastwards along the desert highway under our own steam the next day. Reinvigorated by our five-star sojourn, we're embarking on our trip's longest leg: a meandering, 10-hour route along the coast, with an irresistible overnight visit to some turtles thrown in.

Back at home, we'd decided we had to devote a couple of days of our holiday to this mammoth expedition, reasoning that – with a population of just four million and more than 3,000km of stunning coastline – Oman deserves at least one sea-skimming epic drive. And this route takes us neatly on to the country's capital, Muscat, where we'll catch our flight home.

It's Friday morning and the road is empty, as is our tank. At the petrol station, we discuss Indian dating websites and Kevin Pietersen's cricketing skills with a lonely Kerala pump attendant. With fuel at just 20p per litre, we're midway through our tour of the country and have spent only £3 on petrol.

Our route rollercoasters between rocky bluffs and long arcs of white sand flecked with Bedouin fishing camps and skirted by the Indian Ocean. Brightly painted wooden boats – outboard engines tethered to the stern – are pulled up alongside the tents. On one empty stretch we slow to a dawdle as we follow a pair of sea eagles, wheeling around each other in a circular patrol of the sandy shore. The clutch of seaside villages in this part of the country rarely sees tourists. At one local store where we stop to buy provisions – ice creams, fresh buns and a slab of cheese wrapped in newspaper – the shopkeeper doubles his usual daily profit as half a dozen other patrons swiftly pack in, buying Bombay Mix in exchange for a good gape at the foreigners. They all wish us 'good afternoon' in English; then, at the edge of the village, a man on a building scaffold gasps as he sees Kathryn driving our car, before dropping a bucket of plaster to the ground in disbelief.

We arrive at our overnight stop – the Ras Al Jinz Turtle Reserve – just as a heavy sun is heading slowly towards bed. Having got used to our bijou desert camps, we'd expected something similarly boutique; instead we find one of Oman's new, luxurious Modernist mansions, a mini-UN building by the sea. It sits between two black basalt mountains, beyond which is the world's largest green sea turtle nesting ground. This place is home to more tourists than we've seen on our whole trip and, like us, they're here for one of its famed night-time turtle safaris. Ours tarts at 9pm that evening, and we've been on the beach for about two hours when – just as aching feet have us cursing our decision to leave the car – our guide beckons us silently to an unbelievable sight: a huge young turtle in labour. She seems completely oblivious to our presence.

The guide whispers that it might be her first time back on land since birth; our girl has only popped out about 60 eggs, compared with the 200

We're back in the Land Cruiser at dawn, beating out of camp towards a precipitous ridge of sand. Waves of dunes – still shadowy in the morning light – pan off into infinity, while the piste below is as silent as an Alpine black run. Desert Nights offers a volley of activities, from camel rides to quad-biking, but we're here for our first sandboarding lesson. We kick off our boots and slip our boards (which feel like snowboards, but lighter and more sledge-like) onto bare feet.

Beneath us, the landscape plummets chute-like to the valley floor, and there's nothing for it but to shut our eyes, cross our fingers and launch ourselves downwards. The descent is less whoosh, more slow-motion glide: as long as you lean back and keep your toes planted, you scud downhill, a mini-avalanche in your wake, before collapsing in a heap on your bottom. Our pants hold more sand than a builders' yard, but we hop back in the 4WD, which speeds us back up the dune again.

After a dozen runs we look back to see our driver, Ali, reversing the Land Cruiser backwards down the slope. He beckons us to jump in, his eyebrows flashing with every rev of the accelerator. He can't resist a boyish

expected from a mature mother. As the last of these soft white ping-pong balls falls to the sand, she collapses, exhausted but euphoric. Our moonlit faces are similarly giddy. Mother Nature has made it very hard to leave Ras Al Jinz, but luckily we have something extra-special planned before we wave goodbye to Oman. Prior to our flight home from Muscat (a three-hour drive north of the turtle reserve along hazy tarmac), we're checking in for a night in one of the city's splendid five-stars.

Many Oman-bound sunseekers never stray from Muscat's poshest sunloungers, reasoning that they needn't bother when they have early check-in, late check-out and swathes of Indian Ocean beachfront at their disposal. They never find out what lies beyond the capital city – and how easy it is to get to by car.

It's a real shame, but I'm fairly sure these lounge-lovers don't feel as though they're missing out. Muscat's hotels are way more sophisticated than their rural cousins: The Chedi, our home for the night, might just be the finest hotel I've ever laid eyes on.

A network of Zen-like streams, fountains and ponds lends an atmosphere of sophisticated Asian calm, and we bag a bungalow suite of film-star proportions, with its own whirlpool tub, and crystal decanters full of various complimentary spirits. Yet these are no ivory towers: instead of locking myself away for a dinner under the gleaming chandeliers of the hotel restaurant, I kick a ball around with posse of lads a little way up the beach and serve as a (very bad) fielder in a 20-a-side cricket match made up of assorted sunbathers and sand wanderers.

Eventually – after a final dose of spring sunshine and a blissful night in The Chedi's cloud-like bed – it's time for our final journey in what is now a very dusty car. We've almost covered the entire country in a week, without it once feeling like a chore – and we have the spectacular snaps of deserted road to prove it. Muscat is very clearly signposted, but that doesn't stop us getting lost one last time, whizzing dizzily round a roundabout, before pulling up and shouting at passers-by to show us the way. Perhaps we should invest in a GPS next time.

NEED TO KNOW

Go independent

Oman Air (0844 482 2309, www.omanair.com) flies from Heathrow to Muscat, from £476 return.

Qatar Airways (0870 389 8090, www.qatarairways.com) flies from Heathrow and Manchester to Muscat, via Doha, from £395.

Get around

A Ford Focus or similar from Muscat airport costs around £20 per day when booked in advance through Europcar (0871 384 1087, www.europcar.com) or Rental Car Group (0800 078 9054, www.rentalcargroup.com). A 4WD costs around £50 per day. Local travel agent Zahara Tours (00 968 2440 0844, www.zaharatours.com) can plan countrywide trips, desert safaris and 4WD hire with driver. Hud Hud Travels (00 968 9677 9099, www.hudhudtravels.com) arranges bespoke itineraries with an emphasis on desert luxury and soft adventure.

Where to stay

Hotels are best booked in advance, especially in the busy winter season. The website Booking.com has the best rates for Muscat's hotels, including The Chedi (00 968 2452 4400, www.ghmhotels.com; doubles from £200, B&B). The View camp (00 968 2440 0873, www.theviewoman.com) has doubles from £100, B&B, Desert Nights Camp (00 968 2470 2311, www.desertnightscamp.com) has doubles from £150, B&B, and Ras Al Jinz Turtle Reserve (00 968 9655 0606, www.rasaljinz-turtlereserve.com) has doubles from £135, B&B, including nesting-site tours.

Go packaged

Audley Travel (01993 838430, www.audleytravel.com) has nine-night self-drive tours taking in Nizwa, the desert, Ras Al Jinz and Muscat from £1,945pp, B&B, including flights from Heathrow. Shaw Travel (01635 47055, www.shawtravel.co.uk) runs a dozen itineraries around Oman, including self-drive tours, luxury desert camping and escorted safaris, from £1,900pp, including flights from Heathrow. Or try Kuoni (01306 747002, www.kuoni.co.uk).

Further information

See www.omantourism.gov.om. Temperatures can reach 38°C in May and June. The best time to go is between November and April, when it's balmy but not unbearable.

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