

# Off the radar in Oman



Sun-drenched destinations in the Middle East are becoming more popular among visitors who are searching for the perfect remote escape. We visit Oman and discover why it should be next on your itinerary

WORDS: LEO BEAR

I'm weaving my way along a narrow winding street in an ancient, crumbling hilltop village. The air is heavy with the scent of frankincense and rosewater, and my head and heart are pounding in the 40-degree heat. As I plunge into the cool darkness of an alleyway, a young girl in a bright fuchsia hijab emerges and cuts a dash up some cobbled steps. Behind her, a loud squalling starts. Two men hurry past, one of them holding a chicken by its feet, the other a pocketknife – blade at the ready.

Most visitors to Oman won't experience scenes like this. They head straight to the bright lights of Muscat or to Wahiba Sands to hack up sand dunes. Neither of these are on my agenda though. I'm venturing into the heart of the country, where the mountains meet the sky, to search for an Oman of yesterday.

The Al Hajar mountain range runs for 500km and is the highest on the eastern Arabian Peninsula. It's here, perched on a ledge overlooking a vast dramatic gorge, that a breathtaking new hotel is blazing a trail for eco-luxury in the Middle East. Alila Jabal Akhdar is the brainchild of the Singapore-based hotel group Alila Hotels and Resorts, which specialises in slick Asian five-star hotels. This one, funded by Omran, a division of the Oman government, is Alila's first foray into the Middle East.

To reach the resort, one has to mission two and a half hours south east of Muscat to a height of 2,000m. Driving conditions are treacherous; it's steep, winding and not uncommon for goats to stray into the road. But the journey is worth it. Surrounding the hotel is an area of outstanding natural beauty. Spectacular canyons, gorges and rock formations make it a paradise for adventurers, nature-lovers and anyone seeking escape from the mind-scrambling desert heat – temperatures

are 10-15 degrees cooler in the mountains. The Sultan of Oman has several 'gardens' set up here, that supply his table with year-round fresh fruit and vegetables, and I'm told people drive all the way from Dubai for the local pomegranates, walnuts and olives. But, until now, there have been few European visitors. In fact, until 2005, there wasn't even a road. But the arrival of this progressive new resort is set to change all that.

My visit, a week before opening, meets with a warm Omani welcome. Qahwa (sweet coffee), and are laid on, while staff stand to attention in handsome cream-coloured dishdashas. For thousands of years, frankincense has played a

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significant role in these parts. The sight of the resin smoldering on charcoal with its pale grey perfume curling into the air, as you enter the lobby, immediately lends a sense of place.

Traditional Omani techniques have also been employed in the construction of the resort. The architecture, inspired by ancient forts, combined with an unlimited supply of local pink and purple-veined ophiolite rock, is arresting. Towering pillars of dark North African wood provide support for the main buildings, while interiors feature plenty of rattan (on the ceilings) and colourful woven furnishings, along with antique copper pans, rosewater tureens and Persian lanterns – all picked up locally. Two large villas come with their own lap pools, while the rest of the hotel's

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78 rooms have generous terraces, viewing platforms for that vast echoing canyon.

Spectacular it is. But it's also incredibly isolated. After two years on site, general manager Jork Bosselaar has just about come to terms with the remoteness. "When I first got here, I looked down and saw a goat nibbling at my toes and thought to myself "What on earth am I doing here?" he quips. But nowadays he has an almost prophet-like zeal about the place. One afternoon, I return to the hotel to find him and Guy Heywood, COO of the Alila Hotels and Resorts group, giddy as schoolboys. Just back from a hike, they are elated to have found an old weather station looking out over magnificent views just an hour from the gates of the property. This, they can add to a long list of hikes in the area which vary in length from 60 minutes to nine hours. Simple tracks will take you down into the wadi (valley), up to once-inhabited hillside caves or cross-country to remote herders' villages. I start with an early morning stroll around the hotel's backyard. The property is vast; its perimeter marked out by a simple wooden cattle fence. As the sun starts to rise, clouds gather, casting dramatic shadows across the canyon. But these, and a capricious crimson hummingbird, are the only things to distract from the stillness.

In 1688, Engelbert Kaempfer, a German doctor, wrote: 'The people hereabouts are brown, slim, long in the face and thin in the cheek. Men are of average stature and dress in long loose coats of linen with wide sleeves and a belt around the waist.' Salim, my guide, fits this description well. Having lived in the Al Hajar mountains all his life, he is an authority on everything from deadly plant species to Lady Diana's favourite lookout points (she visited with Dodi in 1986).

To explore this hostile territory requires a gung-ho attitude. There are no handrails or man-made steps to help you along your way. Salim has goat-like nimbleness, of course, but I make slow progress in my ankle-twisting anxiety, enlisting the help of anything I can grab hold of

– gnarled Juniper branches mostly.

About one fourth of the total flora of Oman is found in these parts. It's mainly small spiny trees and large shrubs but I spot buckthorn and sapodilla as well as a few dragon trees, endemic to dry areas of south west Arabia. As soon as we start to follow the narrow concrete channels of an ancient water system, the going gets easier. Harnessing gravity to transport water from sources at the base of the mountains over far-reaching distances, these 'falaj' networks are a remarkable feat of engineering. For more than 2,000 years they have been critical for sustaining life in Oman, supplying mosques, bathing areas and plantations. And today they are still in use.

Following another section of the falaj system,

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through a hilltop rose plantation this time, Salim shows me the location of a new Anantara hotel under construction high on a plateau. Cranes are busy at work, and judging by the scenery, the hotel will be nothing short of spectacular. It overlooks terraces of rose bushes as far as the eye can see, which, in spring, turn the valley a splendid shade of pink.

Later, we stop at a lookout point overlooking Saiq, the town where Salim was born. Here, he dispenses with his usual banter and stares solemnly into the distance. When I ask him about his family, he simply states: 'I lost my mother when I took my first breath, on the first day of my life.'

For a culture fix, Nizwa, the old capital of Oman is about a 90 minute drive from Alila Jabal Akhdar. A conservative yet bustling market town, it is home to a souk brimming with antique khanjars (curved daggers), finely sculpted horn walking sticks and nuggets of amber frankincense, bagged-up ready to take home. Visit on a Friday and you'll witness cattle traders proudly parading their livestock in the



shade of the main square. Nizwa Fort, at the heart of the city, is the only real landmark of note. Recently updated, it's hard to tell it dates all the way back to the ninth-century, but its circular rooftop lends itself to breathtaking 360-degree views of the city. A carpet of bright-green date palms – the source of 40 different varieties of dates – extends from the outskirts of the sand-coloured city all the way to the base of the mountains. Brought into focus like this, Nizwa is the epitome of a lush and fertile desert oasis. Standing there, shading my eyes from the raging midday sun, I longed for the cooler climes of the mountains. But Muscat's shout was louder. Or the call of The Chedi, more accurately.

A sleek beach retreat, the Chedi in Muscat provides the perfect antidote to the otherworldly thrills of an Omani mountain adventure. Just minutes from the city's mosques, shopping malls and opera house, it's a temple of modernist luxury comprising 23 acres of mazelike landscaping, beaches and pools. Mausoleum-like guestrooms carved from smooth black marble offer respite from the heat, with breezy wooden shutters and billowing soft bedlinen. The clientele is just as glamorous: bronzed baby-mamas, German tycoons and Parisians in block prints and broad-rimmed sunhats. The hotel's saltwater pool, the longest in the Middle East, is 103 metres of pure undistilled heaven, while its vast spa is one of Muscat's must-visits.

At night, the communal areas really come alive. Chandeliers are dimmed, flames leap from firepits and local scenesters flood in to sip cocktails and swap gossip. There's no doubt about it, The Chedi is the place to be. And, best of all, if you request a villa near to the spa, you'll be able to catch a glimpse of those majestic Al Hajar peaks every time you leave your room. [M.Cox & Kings](http://M.Cox&Kings) (020 7873 5000; [coxandkings.co.uk](http://coxandkings.co.uk)) offer four-night stays at the Alila Jabal Akhdar from £1,285 per person including flights, private transfers and breakfast ([alilahotels.com/jabalakhdar](http://alilahotels.com/jabalakhdar))

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