8 Things you need to do in Oman

For some time Oman's Sultan, Qaboos Bin Said Al Said thought about what to do when the country's oil money runs out. Whilst he used its revenues to develop the country's infrastructure, rather than focusing on generating income from the sort of luxury travel more associated with the United Arab Emirates, Sultan Qaboos had a different plan.

KATY DARTFORD finds out more.



Keen to maintain the country's identity, its unique culture, traditions and heritage, he decided adventure travel was the way forward, as generally, it's all about respecting the environment and discovering a country authentically. And Oman is ideally placed for adventure.

Situated at the mouth of the Gulf, in the south-east corner of the Arabian Peninsula, the capital Muscat has sailing, scuba diving, running and cycling all on its doorstep. And head out to the Western Hajar mountains or the desert plains of Rub' al Khali and you can find more of the latter - in the extreme.

So after visiting the obligatory souks, mosques and wadis, a trip to Oman, which has been ranked as 3rd in the world for "safety and security" by the World Economic Forum in 2019, you should definitely throw 'adventure' into the mix.

SEE THE CALL TO PRAYER AFTER A HIKE

You might be just outside the city, but it feels like you're on the moon. Head out in the late afternoon from Riyam Park, and scramble across the copper streaked volcanic rocks, and you'll be rewarded with great views across Muscat.

After an hour you'll arrive on a hilltop overlooking Muttrah Fort just in time for Maghrib, the evening call to prayer. It's a magical experience.





BUY FRANKINCENSE AT A SOUK

The hike ends at Muscat's Mutrah Souk, a labyrinth of open air shops packed with spices, colourful textiles and a variety of dates, which hold a place of honour in the national culture and cuisine. And you must eat an odd number of them, according to the Koran.

Frankincense smoulders from every corner. Here you can buy this aromatic resin as well as gold and myrrh, all three of the precious gifts that the three wise men gave to baby Jesus in Christian tradition. You can barter a bit, but you won't feel as hassled as places like Marrakesh.



SEE ONE OF THE LARGEST CHANDELIERS AND CARPETS IN THE WORLD

Completed in 2001 the impressive Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque was a gift to the nation to mark the 30th year of Sultan Qaboos reign. It contains a 14 metre high Swarovski crystal chandelier and a 60m x 70m Persian carpet which took 600 women four years to weave. Both are said to be the second largest in the world.

The mosque has enough room for 6500 men (and 800 women) inside. It also has 5 minarets, representing the 5 pillars of Islam, the highest being 92 metres. You can visit everyday except Friday mornings - just remember to cover up.

At Friday prayers, the Imam speaks about social cases as well as religion, with a subject prepared by the minister of Islamic affairs.

WADE IN A WADI

Escape the heat by taking a dip in the tepid pools of Wadi al Shab, home of the 2012 Red Bull Cliff diving contest. The Wadi is located in the Al Sharqiyah Region about 87 miles from Muscat on the Qurayat – Sur Coastal Road.

After an easy 40 minute hike through the palm lined gorge, along a meandering river, you reach its source. Here its ok to strip off to your bikini and wade through its tepid fresh water streams until you reach a waterfall inside a cave, with clear turquoise water pools you can slide or jump into. Remember your jelly shoes, though as there are a few sharp rocky sections!





WATCH THE SUNSET AND STARS IN THE MOUNTAINS

Perched 2,000 meters on the edge of a ravine overlooking a dramatic gorge, in the centre of the Al Hajar Mountains, is the Alila Jabal Akhdar hotel. Built from local rock it blends into the limestone surroundings, so that you barely notice it amongst the vast dry landscape, until you are there.

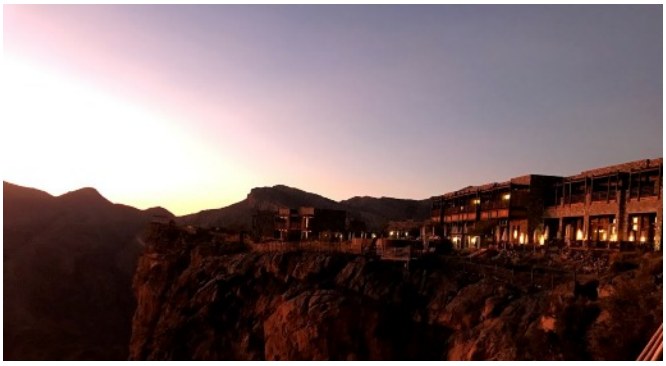
This boutique hotel, which is close to achieving its next environmental target – zero waste to landfill - is focused on combining destination and discovery in an active way. From here you can hike, cycle or try out the country's highest *via ferrata* (iron way) along Jabal Akhdar – the Green Mountain - that leads to the hotel. Then watch the sun set behind the mountains, before stargazing under the clear night sky.

As one of the highest places in the Sultanate its an ideal spot for this, and all types of lights have been banned in these parts of the Al Dakhiliyah Governorate to create the region's first nature reserve for stargazing.

TAKE PART IN AN ULTRA MARATHON

Last year there was only the 130km edition. This year Oman by UTMB has added the 170km - arguably the toughest race on planet, the 50km and four shorter races designed to introduce people to the sport of trail running.





All three major races pass through the limestone peaks of the Al Hajar Mountain range, along long exposed ridges, date palm filled wadis and abandoned ancient villages. It touches places where farmers have lived for centuries, producing rose water, pomegranates, and walnuts. And they've done a great job in getting Omani people involved. Around 900 Omanis took part, including children in the new kids' races. Along the route at check points, around 200 volunteers - many from the local area - hand out food and drink to runners, from sticky dates to bouillon soup.

SPOT TUTLES AT THE DESERTED DIMANIYAT ISLANDS

Take a 1 hour boat ride from Muscat to the small Daymaniyat Islands archipelago, a nature reserve where you can snorkel at two different spots amongst its coral reefs. If you're lucky you can spot green sea turtles nibbling on the seagrass beds, whale sharks, and coloured fish such as Sohal surgeonfish, Red Sea clownfish, Arabian butterflyfish, black spotted rubberlip and Arabian Picasso triggerfish.

Landing is not allowed between May and October, but outside that time its fine to take a picnic, BBQ, swim and walk along its barren coast.

GO CAMEL SPOTTING.

It's perfectly normal to see Camels being transported in the back of trucks down the motorway apparently, so you'll have ample opportunity to spot one. It's still an amusing sight however.







Information and Contacts

Arabic is the Official Language, but English is widely spoken in the main tourist regions.

Alila Jabal Akhdar Hotel: www.alilahotels.com

Tourist Information: www.omantourism.gov.om

Currency: Omani Rial

Time Difference to UK: GMT + 4 hours

