

OMAN

A marvellous journey to the mountains, desert and coast

(The Irish Times)

To anyone used to swimming from an English beach, or even in the Mediterranean, the sea at Muscat will come as a shock. It isn't cold, it isn't warm, it's hot – as in a bath you might run without any thought for your fuel bill. To cool off, thank goodness, we the choice of three pools at our beachside hotel, the Chedi – one of them the longest in Asia, measuring 103 metres. Just swimming to the far end at dusk was enough to give you an appetite for supper, ordered from a torchlit menu and served in the balmy open air, with the lights of the tropical gardens stretching away like the set of a Busby Berkeley musical.

With temperatures in the capital rarely falling below 25 degrees Centigrade, Oman is becoming an increasingly popular destination for those who crave winter warmth. Muscat is a seven-hour flight from London, and many visitors are content just to flop for a week at one of the city's very comfortable hotels. But anyone feeling a bit more energetic can experience three very different aspects of the country – sea, mountains and desert – in the space of a few days.

If you're not sure where Oman is, you needn't feel embarrassed: up until the 1950s, even the Sultan was uncertain of his borders. About the size of the UK, it runs along the south-east coast of the Arabian peninsula, with Saudi Arabia, Yemen and the UAE to the west of it. It has an efficient infrastructure, and is liberal by Middle Eastern standards, though alcohol is only served in hotels (and not all of those), and both men and women are expected to cover up when they're out and about: shorts and T-shirts are unacceptable. Politically, it's friendly to the West and has enjoyed long stability under its autocratic but popular modernising Sultan, though his age and health are now a cause for concern.

Our first stop was Nizwa, the country's former capital, two hours south-west of Muscat. The road took us past rugged mountains of grey rock with touches of pink, through a dry landscape so littered with stones that you couldn't imagine what act of seismic vandalism had produced them all. Occasionally a building materialises, as if at random, in this semi-desert – a house in a walled compound, a police station, a football stadium. With a population of three million, the Omanis have room to spread out.

Nizwa's main attraction is its seventeenth-century fort, with a hundred-foot-high round tower which dominates the neighbouring souk and the city beyond. The smooth, sand-coloured complex is perhaps over-restored, but looks splendid against a vivid blue sky, and it's worth climbing to the battlements to gaze over the surrounding terrain like a garrison commander preparing his

boiling oil. A range of nearby hills looms like the silhouetted spine of a stegosaurus.

These, however, were nothing to what lay ahead. '4x4s only; engage low gear,' said a road sign, and the warning was well placed. The Jabal Akhdar mountains rise to 3,000 metres, and though the road is a good one, it is not for the faint-hearted as it zig-zags up through enormous angular masses of striated limestone, as if between the knuckles of a Titan.

We were staying at a luxurious new hotel, the Alila Jabal Akhdar. Built of local stone and African wood, and surrounded by a stockade fence, it looks somewhere between a fortress and a Texan ranch. Its position is extraordinary, perched on the edge of a gorge whose walls plunge vertiginously down and far out of sight. At the end of the day we watched the landscape darken and soften as the sun slipped swiftly down behind the mountainside – and then the crescent moon, slender as a silver fingernail, rise above the last blur of colour.

Though the mountains are a good deal cooler than the coast, any exploring still requires an early start if you are to avoid wilting in the heat of the day. The next morning we did an exhilarating three-hour walk, following our guide down a steep path through small, neat terraced fields and up again past groves of pomegranate trees to a rocky plateau with panoramic views over the valley and the twisting roads etched on the sides of the dusty hills. On the way back we stopped at one of the abandoned villages which dot the mountains, on the verdant slopes of a wadi: some of the mud-and-stone houses were still remarkably intact, others half-collapsed, revealing the bleached skeletons of their construction.

From Jabal Akhdar we headed south-east to Wahiba Sands, where we hoped to see the sun set over the desert. It was a three-hour journey, part of it through a minor sandstorm, and as the sun began to sink we wondered whether we were going to make it in time. 'Would you like to stop for the toilet?' asked our obliging driver. 'No!' we chorused. 'Keep going! Keep going!'

We reached our camp with minutes to spare. A truck was standing by to drive us straight to the top of a towering dune. We sat on warm sand the colour of cayenne pepper, watching in awe as the pale sun faded away into the sky over the equally tall range of sandhills opposite. The tents below us were dwarfed by the great expanse of desert – and yet we had scarcely penetrated its 5,000 square miles of emptiness.

Wilfred Thesiger, whose account of living with the Bedouin in his book *Arabian Sands* makes extraordinary reading, famously called his fellow travel writer Eric Newby a cissy for travelling with an air bed. What he would have made of the Desert Nights camp doesn't bear thinking about. The 'tents' may have canvas roofs, but they also have walls and floors, bedrooms and shower rooms. The food, served in the dining-room or the open air, is excellent; there is also a large menu of activities, including quad-biking and sand-boarding. One

surprise was waking to a dawn chorus: the desert supports more life than you would guess, from birds to small bands of goats.

The last leg of our journey took us to Muscat. At first the landscape was flat and unremarkable, apart from the occasional grazing camel; but when we reached the Eastern Hajar Mountains it changed dramatically, with the road forcing its serpentine way down to the coastal town of Sur. As for the highway between Sur and Muscat, it was one of the most magnificent I have ever travelled, with reddish-brown mountains on one side and a turquoise sea edged by sandy beach on the other. The final stretch was a geologist's dream – a road through sheer rock, flanked by rank upon rank of sharp outcrops, which finally opened up to reveal the whole of Muscat below us with its white, flat-topped buildings nestling against the sea.

The city has mercifully few high-rises – a deliberate policy – but is in most other respects a thoroughly modern capital, busy with gleaming cars. (You can be fined for having a dirty one.) The main sights may be visited in half a day, the most impressive being the Grand Mosque, which boasts acres of white marble, an eight-ton Swarovski chandelier big enough for a man to climb inside, and (it is claimed) the world's largest carpet. The Muttrah souk, where Britain's Prince Harry did his Christmas shopping, is an orderly indoor affair, with silver jewellery and frankincense among its specialities. But if you want to get a sense of Oman's history you need to visit the small Bait Al Zubar museum, whose exhibits included a great many daggers and some ingenious tweezers for removing desert thorns from the soles of your feet. By the end of your city tour, you should be more than ready for a dip in a cool pool – or perhaps a hot sea.