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Escape

TRAVEL SECTION OF THE YEAR

HAIR TODAY



Graffiti rulez at Bali's new party hotel

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OMAN

Oh man!

From rust-coloured deserts to palm-fringed wadis, Oman is the down-to-earth antidote to flashy Dubai. Lizzie Pook buckles up to drive the length of the country

SWEAR we've passed that mountain already,' I say to my boyfriend, who is currently trying to mesh together two pieces of a disintegrating paper map. We are winding our way through Oman's wild Al Hajar Mountains in a tank-sized Land Cruiser on a hot and distinctly quirky five-day

road trip. In total we will cover 1,000km, starting in the souk-filled capital Muscat in the north and ending at beachy Salalah in the south, taking in Mars-like deserts, sea turtle sanctuaries and Bedouin camps on the way.

Oman, bordered by the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, is a calm and dreamy country filled

with sweeping desert dunes, date palms, starry skies and mysterious nomadic Bedouins. It's currently enjoying a well-deserved tourism boom thanks to new twice-daily flights from Oman Air and an enticing slew of luxury hotel openings, including two new luxury Anantara hotels. The Sultanate's carefully cultivated

holiday industry also means it's safe for tourists, many of whom are expats from nearby Dubai, just a four-hour road-trip away.

So far we've already ticked turtles off our list with a stay at the blustery Ras al Jinz reserve

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Wild abandon: Discover green sea turtles (left), Arabian oryx (inset below) and explore Oman's many wadis

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hotel (from £147 per night, rasaljinz-turtlesreserve.com) on the east coast of the country, the only place in the world where you can see green sea turtles return night after night to nest.

We've also ticked off the new Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar resort (from £369, jabal-akhdar.anantara.com), which, at a nosebleed-worthy 3,000 feet above sea level, is the Middle East's highest luxury hotel. Our Bond-style cliff-top villa had

I feel that familiar sense of accomplishment that comes with knowing you've seen the very heart of a country

floor-to-ceiling windows, a vast marble bath for wallowing in, white stone and dark wood furnishings, and an unfeasibly picturesque terrace complete with rolling mountain views and an infinity pool sprawling across the lip of the canyon.

Then it's back in the Land Cruiser to wind our way through twisted mountain paths with eagles soaring above us. After one particularly hot



Refreshing: A spot of wild swimming



Imposing: The Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque in Muscat

GETTING THERE

Return flights from London Heathrow to Muscat from £400, omanair.com. Scott Dunn has ten-night Oman itineraries from £2,600 per person, scottdunn.com. Car hire from £70 a day, touroman.om



Exhilarating: Try desert sandboarding

An oasis of calm – but not for long

day, it's a relief to arrive at the Desert Nights Camp (from £337 per night, omanhotels.com/desertnightscamp), an oasis formed of cosy tented rooms tucked away in sand dunes and decorated with storm lanterns, vibrant textiles and ornate wooden shutters. We immediately cool off by heading to a nearby jelly-green wadi – valleys that fill every nook and cranny of the country – for a spot of swimming.

Rested and refreshed, I have a go at sandboarding (offered at the camp for £30), which is very similar to snowboarding. I hurl myself enthusiastically down the blazing hot dunes with varying degrees of success, inevitably ending up on my behind with a throat-full of sand. Still, at least it was a soft landing.

We eat under a canopy of stars and fill up on a feast of grilled meats, pillowy baba ganoush, aromatic dhals, kebabs, lots of fresh kingfish and hearty curries.

Afterwards, we relax on the sofa with shishas and muse on how low-key Oman is compared to its flashy neighbours. It really is about its glorious natural offerings: wild-

swimming spots, Mad Max sand dunes and a surprising variety of wildlife. We see ghostly long-horned oryx antelopes and are told about the endangered Arabian leopard, small numbers of which shelter in the craggy Dhofar mountain region

just outside Salalah. And as the government ploughs funds into its infrastructure – including a new coastal highway – it's becoming an ideal, if slightly surprising, road-trip destination.

Our quickest route, however, is

highway 31, a high-octane, truck-peppered road that cleaves through the centre of the country. And so we end up barrelling through Oman's famous hot, dusty Empty Quarter, a vast landscape featuring nothing but 250,000 miles of desert.

Some visitors stay here with a tent or sleeping bag and visit the archaeological site of the lost city of Ubar (you'll need a 4x4 and an experienced guide who knows the area well). We stop to crack open stones like eggs, hold the halves to the sun and see the mineral fragments inside glitter like diamonds.

Eventually, when we do reach Salalah, dust-covered and fatigued, I feel that familiar sense of accomplishment that comes with knowing you've seen the very heart of a country. From Salalah we drive for around 20 minutes to the nearby fishing village of Taqah to enjoy its wonderful empty white sand beach and spend the morning watching a pod of dolphins lazily picking off sardines in the shallow waters.

Oman still feels fairly untrampled but the hordes will inevitably flock here soon. For now, though, it's a place of mysterious caves, endless deserts and great adventures – especially for those with far superior map-reading skills to ours. But sometimes it's fun to get a little bit lost.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR OMAN?

Plans are in place to spend \$35billion on tourism over the next 20 years – but what can we expect this year?



Palm Mall Muscat
The upscale complex will offer Oman's first snow village (yup), an aquarium and a new DusitD2 hotel, where exclusive rooms will look directly into the water.



Manchester flights
From April 1, Oman Air will start running daily direct flights from Manchester to Muscat, becoming the first carrier to do so.



Kempinski hotel
The luxury hotel group is opening its first Oman outpost as part of The Wave development, a mix of homes, shops, restaurants and hotels along the Muscat coastline.