



OMAN TOURISM

## OMAN

A drive through Northern Oman reveals ever-changing landscapes and offers a thrilling experience. **BY MALAVIKA BHATTACHARYA**



### Day 1

The barren Al Hajar Mountains hem in Oman from the north. The stark brown range of limestone and lava rock runs for 600km from Musandam in the northwest to Sur in the northeast. Standing tall at 3,075m is the highest mountain in this range and also in the country, the Jebel Shams. Arabic for 'Mountain of the Sun', it's the first peak to get the sun's rays each morning. Lithe mountain goats and shepherders roam the stark land, and locals make a living spinning sheep's hair into woollen carpets. Drive up the hairpin bends and steep climbs of Jebel Shams to reach the Grand Canyon of the Middle East—believed to be the second largest canyon in the world. From atop, a chasm looks down into a pocket 1,950m below at Wadi Nakhar, a village at the base of the canyon. Skirting the edge of the canyon is a marked trail going down to the village. The hike takes around six hours, but guarantees stunning views.

### Day 2

Just beyond the Al Hajar Mountains to the east lie the Wahiba Sands—an expansive, 15,000 sq km desert. Rippling 100m high sand dunes stretch out to infinity, changing hues from pink to gold to orange through the day. The sand is the texture of fine silk, made up of coral and sea-shells that were blown in from nearby coastal areas thousands of years ago. With a four-wheel drive and an expert driver, dune bashing on these undulating sands is guaranteed to make any thrill-seeker's day.

This region, now also known as the Sharqiya sands, is home to many nomadic tribes. For a glimpse at colourful Bedouin culture visit Saeed House, a traditional Bedouin home in the midst of the desert. Three generations live in a tent of date palm spines, selling rugs, tending to their camels, and entertaining tourists with coffee, dates and stories of their lifestyle. End the day atop a sand dune, watching a golden sunset on the horizon.



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### Day 3

Head on to Oman's capital Muscat for a relaxing end to your driving holiday. Two and a half hours away from the Wahiba Sands, Muscat is a laid back, modern city along the coast. Traditional houses sit alongside towering, modernist malls, office buildings and hotels. This is a city ideal to shop, eat and indulge in traditional Omani hospitality. Take a bit of Omani culture back home—stock up on Arabic *kahwa* (coffee) and dates, available at supermarkets or the local souks. Make pit stops at the local chain of Muscat Bakeries found through the city to pick up platefuls of crusty *baklava* and crumbly Omani *halwa*. To

witness true opulence and unwind in style, visit the Al Bustan Palace hotel's in-house restaurant, Al Khiran. The tender Hamour fish is a local specialty and standard favourites such as tangy hummus and pita bread are always on the menu.



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