

TOP END

Travel writer LEO BEAR discovers new heights of eco-luxury in Oman's exclusive wilderness resort.



Alila Jabal Akhdar

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 scale the towering sand dunes. Neither of these is on my agenda. I'm venturing into the heart of the country, where the mountains meet the sky, to an Oman of yesteryear.

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 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 5-star hotels. Alila Jabal Akhdar – funded by Omran, a division of the Oman government – is their first foray into the Middle East.

“The air is heavy with the scent of frankincense and rosewater”

To reach the resort, it's a two-and-a-half-hour mission south-east of Muscat up to a height of 2,000 metres. 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 to escape from the mind-scrambling desert heat (temperatures are 10 to 15 degrees cooler in the mountains). Thanks to the climate, the sultan of Oman has several 'gardens' set up here to supply his table with year-round fresh fruit and vegetables, and I'm told people drive over from neighbouring 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.

My visit, a week before opening, meets with a warm Omani welcome. Qahwa (sweet coffee) and dates are laid on, while handsome staff stand to attention in sand-coloured dishdashas. Frankincense has played a role in these parts for thousands of years, and the sight in the lobby of resin smouldering on charcoal, pale grey perfume curling into the air, immediately lends a sense of place.

< **The** architecture, inspired by ancient forts, combined with an unlimited supply of local pink and purple-veined ophiolite rock, is arresting. Two large villas come with their own lap pools, while the rest of the hotel's 78 rooms have generous terraces – viewing platforms for a vast echoing canyon.

Spectacular it is. But it's also incredibly isolated. Attempt one of an impressive list of hikes, which vary in length from 60 minutes to nine hours, and you're unlikely to see another soul. Simple tracks take you down into wadis (valleys), up to once-inhabited hillside caves, or cross-country to remote herders' villages. But to explore this hostile territory requires a gung-ho attitude; there are no handrails or man-made steps to help you along your way.

However Salim, my guide, is as nimble as a goat. 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.

"I spot buckthorn and sapodilla as well as a few dragon trees"

About a quarter 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. The going gets easier as soon as we start to follow the narrow concrete channels of an ancient water system. These 'falaj' networks harness gravity to transport water over far-reaching distances, and are a remarkable feat of engineering. For more than 2,000 years they have been critical for sustaining life, supplying mosques, bathing areas and plantations. And today they are still in use.

Following another section of the falaj system, through a hilltop rose plantation this time, a new Anantara hotel currently under construction comes into view. 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 scene a splendid shade of blush-pink.



Omani caps



Fort, Nizwa



Mosque, Nizwa



Alila Jabal Akhdar



Village, Al Hajar



Alila Jabal Akhdar



Al Hajar

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."

His village sits up in the mountains above Nizwa, the former capital of Oman, about 90 minutes' drive from the Alila Jabal Akhdar. A conservative yet bustling market town, there's 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 parading their livestock in the shade of the main square. Nizwa fort, at the heart

"Souks brimming with finely sculpted walking sticks and nuggets of amber frankincense"

of the city, is the only real landmark of note. Recently updated, it's hard to tell that it dates all the way back to the ninth century, but its circular rooftop delivers breathtaking 360-degree views of the city, and its macabre 'murder holes' – once used for pouring boiling date syrup on to incoming marauders – are definitely worth a visit. A carpet of bright-green date palms – the source of 40 different varieties of the fruit – extends from the outskirts of the sand-coloured city walls

all the way to the base of the mountains. Brought into focus like this, Nizwa is the epitome of a fertile desert oasis. But standing there, shading my eyes from the raging midday sun, all I longed for was the cool quiet climes of the majestic Al Hajar mountains. •

This is an extract from an article published in *The Mayfair Magazine*. Follow Leo Bear on Twitter @leobear

Cox & Kings (020 7873 5000 www.coxandkings.co.uk) offers 4-night stays at the Alila Jabal Akhdar from £1,285pp including flights, private transfers and breakfast. www.alilahotels.com/jabalakhdar



TAKING LUXURY TO NEW HEIGHTS

Perched on a plateau two thousand metres above sea level facing the plunging gorges and dramatic rock formations of Oman's Green Mountain, Alila Jabal Akhdar has been designed to sit in perfect harmony with its breathtaking location. This unique destination is a sanctuary dedicated to the peace and splendour of the mountain and the serenity it has to offer.



As temperatures drop the summer haze clears and immaculate blue sky days are followed by crystal clear nights awash with the brightest stars. Take advantage of the perfect winter climate and make a luxuriously spacious suite your home from which to explore the beautiful and fascinating interior regions of the Sultanate. Or simply unwind in the elegant haven of Spa Alila and indulge in a culinary experience which embraces the best of Omani and international cuisine.

For reservations email: jabalakhdar@alilahotels.com

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< ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW: OMAN

by Cox & Kings Middle East expert – Michael Fleetwood

THE BACKGROUND

LOCATION Oman, officially called the Sultanate of Oman, sits on the south-east tip of the Arabian Peninsula, overlooking the Arabian Sea, the Sea of Oman and the Arabian Gulf. It also controls the Strait of Hormuz, which links the Sea of Oman and the Arabian Gulf, and is a gateway to all ships entering from the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea.

LANGUAGES Arabic, but English is widely spoken.

POPULATION 2.9 million.

TIME ZONE GMT +4 hours.

CURRENCY Omani rial (OMR) £1 = 0.6 OMR.

VISAS British nationals require a tourist visa, which can be obtained on arrival. The cost for up to 10 days is 5 rials per person; the cost for up to 30 days is 20 rials per person.

POTTED HISTORY Oman's first kingdom was established in the third century AD, lasting until the arrival of Islam in the seventh century. The Portuguese were the first Europeans to arrive, in the early 16th century, conquering what was then known as Muscat and Oman – but, they were driven out in 1650. More recently, Sultan Qaboos bin Said became the new ruler in 1970, changing the country's name to Oman, so as to represent the country's unity.



TOP TIP Ras Al Junaiz beach, an hour's drive outside of Sur, offers a rare opportunity to see giant turtles laying their eggs at night. Under the careful supervision of qualified rangers, visitors can witness each turtle laying up to 100 eggs.

BEFORE YOU TRAVEL

WHEN TO GO

Between October and May are the ideal times to travel climate-wise, as summer temperatures on the coast frequently hit 40 degrees celsius.

WHAT TO READ

Arabian Sands by Wilfred Thesiger
The British author and adventurer's riveting account of his journey across the desert in the company of local Bedus.

SAS Secret War by Tony Jeapes

In the early 1970s, while the world's eyes were on the war in Vietnam, communist guerrillas were waging a savage campaign in Oman that could have given them control of the Gulf and threatened western oil supplies. This is the account of an SAS spearheaded counter-insurgency operation, one of the most successful in recent history.

Sultan in Oman by Jan Morris

In 1955, when the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman was a truly medieval Islamic state, rumours of subversion and the intrigues of foreign powers coupled with the prospects of oil propelled the then sultan across the hinterland on what was a historic first crossing of the Omani desert by motorcar.

FIND OUT MORE

www.omantourism.gov.om

The Oman tourist board's website offers information on the latest news and events in Oman, as well as suggestions on where to eat and visit.

BEING THERE



WHERE TO STAY

Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah

Set in 20 hectares of beachfronted landscaped gardens in a private bay, the resort comprises three separate hotels, numerous restaurants, shops and an award-winning spa.

The View

At 1,400 metres above sea level, in the Jebel Shams mountains near Nizwa. The View affords spectacular panoramas over the surrounding landscape. Its 15 tent-style rooms each have their own terrace.



SET YOUR COMPASS

Turtle sanctuary Watch giant turtles lay up to 100 eggs at a time.

Nizwa fort One of the oldest castles in Oman.

Jebel Shams Ascend Oman's highest mountain peak.

Wahiba Sands A chance to camp out beneath desert skies amid spectacular scenery.

Muscat Explore the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, an example of stunning Islamic modern architecture.

Desert Nights

More than just a desert camp, Desert Nights offers luxurious Bedouin-style tents, the perfect base from which to explore the terrain and sleep beneath the stars of Wahiba Sands.

WHAT TO EAT

Oman's cuisine is a mixture of several staples of Asian food, with chicken, lamb and fish the prime ingredients, served with rice. Two of the more popular dishes are *maqboos*, a rice dish flavoured with saffron and cooked over spicy meat, and *mashuai*, consisting of a whole spit-roasted kingfish served with a side of lemon rice.

TRAVEL WITH COX & KINGS

RECOMMENDED TOURS

Discover Oman – Self-Drive Journey – 9 Days / 7 Nights from £1,595 per person. This 9-day itinerary visits many of the major highlights of Oman.

Oman: Land of Frankiscense – 9 Days / 7 Nights from £2,095 per person. Fascinating cultural tour of the country.