

## Land and Water Adventure

The variety of terrain in the sultanate makes for stimulating outdoor experiences. Featuring more than 1,700 kilometres of coastline, sun, sea and sand are in ample supply. Watersports of every variety from diving, snorkelling and windsurfing to sailing and deep-sea fishing can easily be arranged. Bullfighting and camel races are other events not to be missed.

The starkly beautiful ancient fjords of the Musandam Peninsula, with its dramatic mountain-hugging roads, provide spectacular vistas and feature some excellent diving sites. The Hajjar Mountains and Oman's highest peak, Jebel Akhdar or Green Mountain, provide some thrilling rock climbing experiences. Wahiba Sands, with its endless stretches of desert extending to the Rub Al Khali or the Empty Quarter is a good place to experience the Bedouin way of life, while the many wadis, or dry river beds, provide the unique thrill of "wadi-bashing" in rugged four-wheel drives. Oman's many underground caves are an explorer's delight and the high point is undoubtedly the Majlis al Jinn, the second largest cave chamber in the world, complete with a subterranean lake. In complete contrast to other regions, Salalah in the Dhofar province can be considered as the ultimate resort destination in Oman as it enjoys the annual monsoon, which makes it much cooler, with perennial waterfalls, rivulets and a year-round verdant landscape. Ancient sites On the cultural side, Oman's rich cultural heritage yields a number of ancient sites, many of which have now been granted protected status by Unesco and are listed as World Heritage Sites. These include the Bahla Fort, the archaeological sites of Bat with tombs dating back 3,000 years, Al-Khutm and Al-Ayn or Al Maha Arabian Oryx Sanctuary and The Frankincense Trail. Then there is Ubar, a lost city that was buried in the sand of Dhofar for nearly 2,000 years and recorded by Marco Polo during his travel to Oman in 1260 AD. Among the protected areas are Al Baleed, the site of the ancient city of Zafar, Khor Rori, Shisr Bilad and Wadi Daika. Oman's rich seafaring tradition is apparent in the museums and galleries in the historic harbours of Muscat and Muttrah, which highlight the importance of the sea throughout Oman's 5,000-year history. The country's landscape is punctuated by over 500 hilltop forts and castles, which display distinctive regional architecture and are monuments to a turbulent and fascinating past. Most of these have been painstakingly restored, or are under process of restoration, each offering an insight into the lifestyles of their original inhabitants and traditional Omani crafts and arts. The friendly Omani people add to the welcoming ambience of the country and the authentic souks or traditional markets provide an excellent experience of the local way of life and allow close interaction with residents. For adventure seekers and outdoor enthusiasts, Oman has become the regional destination of choice. The Sultanate's mountains, valleys and beaches are excellent for rock-climbing, exploring dry riverbeds, desert safaris, diving and watching exotic bird and animal life. Local destination management companies organise trips for groups that take in tours to historical sites, the coast and the interior of the country, allowing visitors to gain a full appreciation of Oman's unique attractions.

Surmountable obstacles As a destination for rock-climbers, Oman is unmatched in the region for its appeal and many outdoor activities take place around the mountain ranges. More than 160 climbs have been pioneered, and graded from easy to extremely difficult. Jebel Ghul in the Al Dakhiliyah region towers 300 metres and offers Alpine-style climbing at its best. The Jebel Misfah, which is part of the Jebel Akhdar range, features climbs varying from 120 metres to 500 metres. The best-known site is Jebel Misht in Nizwa, which has the largest rock face in the Arabian Peninsula. It's essential to be in good physical condition in order to negotiate the climb and it's also advisable to engage a local guide familiar with the terrain. The mountains provide excellent conditions for trekking. Trips to Jebel Akhdar and Jebel Shams in Nizwa can be arranged easily through local tour operators. The Eastern Hajar mountains enable you to combine trekking in the mountains and camping on the beaches. In addition to enjoyable trekking, these spots provide breathtaking views of surrounding areas. Jebel Shams (Jabal Shams), or "mountain of the sun", is the highest point in Oman at over 3,000 metres. The trek to the Wadi Nakhr Gorge, also known as the Grand Canyon of Oman, is an unforgettable experience. The trek to reach the cliff dwellings in the canyon begins at the village of Al Khateem and the path is littered with rocky rubble. Deep bends, overhanging rocks and panoramic views of the canyon all add to the exhilarating experience. Situated 145 kilometres southwest of Muscat at the far end of Wadi Bani Awf in the Wilayat of Rustaq is Snake Canyon, which offers once-in-a-lifetime experiences for adventure-seekers. At 1,000 metres, the canyon is a 200-metre deep fissure, approximately three kilometres long, providing an idyllic location where visitors can walk, swim, or climb rocks. Call of the wadis Another popular activity in Oman, and one indigenous to the region, is "wadi-bashing". Wadis are dry riverbeds that run through the mountains to form a narrow valley that can often be negotiated in a four-wheel-drive vehicle to discover lush greenery, sparkling pools and waterfalls. The more popular wadis include Ghul and Misfah near Al Hamra, which contain water throughout the year. The falaj -the ancient method of natural irrigation -in Misfah is a fascinating sight as it weaves along the mountainside. The road leading to the many wadis dotting the Jebel Akhdar (Jebel Shams is the one you get the view of the Grand Canyon) Mountains offers a dramatic bird's eye view of the Grand Canyon of Oman. Wadi Abiyadh, or "white valley" is about 75 kilometres from Barka and is so called because of the white calcite mineralised pools. It has year-round flowing water and is enclosed by mountains and sand dunes that make the route even more exciting. Wadi Bani Khalid is a lush valley oasis with date palms and pools surrounded by steep cliffs. Wadi Shab is another breathtaking spot surrounding a lake with the path winding through craggy hills. Wadis nestling within Jebel Shams in Nizwa offer spectacular views of the mountains and rugged landscapes with abandoned mountain villages providing the perfect venue for an overnight camp and barbecue. Exploring the Caves Professional guidance combined with a reasonable level of fitness makes cave exploration a thrilling experience in the mountains of Oman. Many caves feature stalactites and stalagmites as well as underground pools. One of the most famous caves in Oman is the Majlis al Jinn, the second largest cave chamber in the world. This is one of the most difficult caves to negotiate and involves two drops, one of 160 metres and the second of 120 metres. The find at the end of these drops is well worth the effort as the Majlis Al Jinn is a half-domed cave measuring 60,000 square metres, dwarfed only by the Sarawak Chamber in Malaysia's Borneo region. To get a better idea of its size, imagine that the Majlis al Jinn could easily accommodate the Great Pyramid of Giza. A popular cave for the less intrepid is the Hoti Cave in the Hajjar

Mountains, which comprises an underground cavern and subterranean lake system. The main lake is about 800 metres long and is home to some unusual species of aquatic animals such as the pink-coloured blindfish. Its main chamber contains some magnificent cave formations that have evolved over millions of years and are coloured in delicate shades of pink, yellow, gold, beige and grey. The Teyq Cave, located between Taqa and Mirbat, is possibly the largest sinkhole in the world and features two wadis that replenish the pool when it rains. Al-Hotta Cave (Al Hoota cave)

The Al Hotta Cave (Al Hoota cave), opened in July 2006, is located at the foot of Jabal Shams, in the vicinity of the Tanuf Valley in Al Hamra district. The lower part of the cave has been developed into an environmentally sound tourist attraction following 3 years of planning and implementation, enabling visitor's access to an important underground ecosystem. The guided tour takes visitors along pathways illuminated by a special lighting system during which themed music is played. stalactites, stalagmites, rimstones and other crystals which garnish the walls, ceiling and cave floor are evidence of the pluvial era. Visitors will also witness the presence of a rare phenomenon blind transparent fish 'garra bareimiae' which exist in the underground lake and are nourished by organic materials brought by floods inside the cave. Al-Hotta show-cave is outfitted with a standard of tourist facilities including a visitor centre, natural history museum, restaurants, Children's area and heritage shops. Oman rally Rallying in Oman goes back to the last seventies and early eighties. At that time, the first Middle East rally series was called The Middle East Rally challenge, and was sponsored by the Tobacco Company, Rothmans with the backing of then leading automotive manufacturer Datsun. In the first year of the challenge three rounds were featured, Qatar, Bahrain and ultimately Kuwait. It was only during the second year of the rally's inception that Oman entered the picture. During the 1979/1980 championship Oman was the first of three rounds, with Bahrain and Kuwait following. The first winner of the first Oman international rally was Swede, Hari Karlstrom who won the rally in a Datsun 160 J. His teammate, Shekhar Mehta driving a similar car, came second with his wife Yvonne as co-driver. The couple won both the second and third round and therefore, won the title challenge that year. The Sultanate of Oman is thundering back to the championship, with sight aimed at a candidate round of the world rally championship by 2008. Rallying in Oman has a great future inviting media, competitors, officials, and fans to experience the rally Oman. <http://www.omanrally.com/>