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# a road far less travelled

On a road trip across northern Oman, the Arabia of your imagination can run riot. One of the world's last great adventure destinations, the Al-Dakhiliyah boasts caves, canyons, crazy roads and even the odd magic carpet.

**SHOULD HAVE KNOWN BETTER. I HAVE travelled with my big brother Steven on numerous occasions and – by and large – most trips have gone without a hitch. By definition, however, I knew that our trip to northern Oman would be special. Before us lay more than 1,000 kilometres of jack-in-the-box potholes, camouflaged speed humps made from Baghdadi bomb craters, stray camels, herds of goats and several solitary Omanis wandering at the roadside miles from anywhere.**

"I hope you've sorted out a decent car for us?" I ask, shaking hands with Steven at Dubai International Airport. "Don't worry little brother," he jests, prodding me in the ribcage. "We'll have a road trip we'll never forget." For some reason, I've never trusted that smile. "Can't wait," I reply, a jumble of pre-trip excitement and schoolboy nerves. "Excellent," he grins. "I've got us the cheapest car I could get."

When looking at a map the previous week we had planned to spend the majority of our trip off-road in terrain fit only for a reliable SUV, 4x4 Land Cruiser or – if luck would have it – a fully operational military tank. We'd be high-tailing it through abandoned Wadis – dried-up river beds – climbing across the Hajar Mountains to Jebel Shams, the highest mountain on the Gulf Peninsula, caving the depths of the unexplored Al Hoota caverns and then skimming the vast endless canvas of Oman's Empty Quarter, which stretches to the terrorist hill tribes of Yemen and the 'no go' zones of Saudi Arabia.

Despite my pre-trip warnings to Steven, there is no Land Rover, Hummer or extra-terrestrial moon roamer in sight. On our off-road tour of Oman, on tracks so basic they may have been drawn by a child with an Etch-a-sketch, we're going to be driving a silver rent-a-car Volkswagen saloon.

Steven and I are as close as brothers get: we've been to Buenos Aires on a riotous stag weekend, which ended up with us both on live television; we've skied throughout the Scottish Highlands, toured the comedy clubs of London and abused our bodies and minds at Spanish music festivals. But that

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would all be a breath of fresh air compared to this. For starters, Steven's last experience behind the wheel was driving a golf cart down a motorway in Montevideo. He was sober at the time.

Twenty-four hours later and the VW is packed with sleeping bags and a cool box sparingly filled with water and Coca Cola – our Heineken failing the UAE-Oman customs checkpoint. We take the sealed road south of Hafit to Ibrī in Al-Dhahirah. Flanked by rolling sand dunes, the car temperature gauge begins to hit 40 degrees and windblown sand scatters across the road before us like spilt marmalade. The GPS is set to 23° 14' 13" North, 57° 15' 50" East and I begin to relax behind the wheel. It's 190 kilometres to Jebel Shams, we have a full tank of gas. It's getting dark but we're both wearing sunglasses.

The Al-Dakhiliyah region in northern Oman is one of the world's most inspirational adventure destinations. As the construction and tourism booms have fuelled the 'Las Vegas by the sea' spin-offs of Dubai, Abu Dhabi and to a lesser extent Muscat, the Gulf Peninsula has seen an unprecedented arrival of tourists keen to experience an exotic slice of Scheherazade's 1,001



Arabian nights. Today, 4x4 tours gracing the sands are as common a sight as a dehydrated camel but, due in part to its wafer-thin infrastructure, northern Oman has remained relatively off the beaten track. Over the past decade, adventurous trail-setters have begun following the original Frankincense Trail through

southern Oman, in the sandy footprints of great explorers like Ibn Battuta and Wilfred Thesiger, but the northern region is still waiting to happen. Vertigo-inducing climbs guaranteed to fill your underpants with more than just sand wait to be discovered; adrenalin-rushing canyon rim hikes suited to those without a nervous disposition are only just being mapped; some of the world's largest cave systems remain open for underground exploration; and there is a maze of dust tracks and ungraded roads that are enough to get even an F1 champion's knickers in a twist. Amidst this, the Omanis remain as laidback and indifferent as ever: they're in no rush to give away their best kept secret.

As we turn left off the main highway past the village of Bahla and the mud-brick ruins of Al Hamra and Ghul, I slow to second gear. The first main obstacle on our journey to Jebel Shams is the road. Or at least that's what it is labelled as on the map. Straining my neck, I look out the window to see what can only be described as a broken Scalextric track, which has been pieced back together by a spatially challenged orangutan. From this angle, it looks like it has been designed by MC Escher, perhaps after having one too many strong gins, and it is less a road and more an experiment in suicidal physics. It goes up, up, then – if it had failed to deceive us before – veers straight up again. "Shit," murmurs Steven. "That's not so good." Rising 3,000 metres in an armpit-soaking 60-minute, twenty-kilometre drive, and presumably made from the dust and bones of several dead goats, it is an extraordinary series of 180-degree bends and roller-coaster dips. "Shit," Steven repeats. I am certainly no rally champion.

Spotting our hesitance from the comfort of a dust-splattered Land Rover, a local Omani pulls up behind us, winds down his window, grins a toothless decayed smile and offers his assistance to guide us through the mountains. "Your car; big problem. Me be guide, happy to help; no problem. My car; no problem." We learn – through his eager persistence – that it will cost in excess of A\$1,400 for a pick up truck should our two-wheel drive break down on the road. Yet his disjointed English is spattered with "no problems" every few mumbles, which somehow instils a misguided sense of optimism in us. Steven is confident. "We've come this far," he claims, wiping the sweat from his brow. He looks at me and goads me on. Besides, despite the guide's pessimism, his seemingly charitable offer comes with a price tag.

Yanking the gear stick into first, I flatten my foot and the car lurches forward at a near vertical degree; dust spews, gravel spits and our stomachs turn. Steven rolls up the window, tightens his seatbelt and our rickety car toils upwards. "Here goes

nothing," he pitches in. Looking in the rear-view mirror for a split second, I see we both have a look of sheer terror on our faces.

Until then, I had always travelled for the destination rather than for the journey. Fourteen hours stuck on a train in Rajasthan? I would rather be sitting by a pool with a cold Kingfisher beer. Night bus through southern China? Give me a one hour flight and a comfy duvet and pillow at the Mandarin Oriental in Hong Kong. But on the sustained off-road Jebel Shams trail, be it driving vertically up, vertically down or around its series of switchbacks, gravel ruts and Cannonball Run comedic obstacles, I feel an exhilaration that I had never felt before. We travel for adventure and something out of the ordinary: the road up Jebel Shams is a bona fide bone tickler. Turning to Steven, we both catch a glint of either madness or muscle from behind our sunglasses and grin. The smiles on our face are bigger than the crescent-shaped 1,000-metre deep Wadi Ghul canyon that drops off right in front of us. Our foolhardy approach has paid off.

Though the car rental company certainly won't thank us, we feel like two Mohammeds that have just conquered the mountains. The road levels off to reveal a gorgeous plateau with a view that is to die for. With a bleeding red sunset burning in our eyes, we forsake our sleeping bags, pull up to the stone cabins of the sparse Jabal Shams Hotel and switch off the engine for the night.

The next morning I am once again taken by Oman's ability to surprise and exhilarate. Above me, Jebel Shams looms and its infamously vertiginous five-hour hike around the gorge sets my lips trembling before I've even finished breakfast. Peering over the edge of Wadi Ghul, I can't help but notice the safety precautions – or lack thereof – to prevent a car, man or deranged lunatic from plummeting off the hairline cliff into the chasm below us. Strung like a piece of worn out dental floss along the rim edge, it strikes the fear of death in me and connects the rim villages of Al Khateem and Sap Bani Khamis, as part of the challenging Balcony Walk. Steven grabs hold of it and the entire rail shudders

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under his weight. Apparently it was only installed within the last year or two. Covering ourselves in plastic bubble wrap would have been a much safer idea. As we peer over the edge, two traditional Omani rug weavers appear from a nearby village, asking if we want to buy a newly made carpet.

Following our sunburnt morning exploring the cliffs and summit hiking path, we build up enough courage to descend back down to the canyon floor to the Al Hoota Caves, one of the region's recently discovered star attractions. Home to hundreds of stalactites and stalagmites, a kilometre-long subterranean lake and a unique breed of blind, transparent pink skinned fish, the Al Hoota Caves are the perfect hunting ground for Lara Croft adventurers or – in our case – Abbot and Costello pretenders. Under the glare of his torch, our guide Ahmed leads us through the tunnels, where the humidity reaches a stifling 45 per cent. "In the summer, it can reach 70 per cent," he says. "Today, you're lucky."

The Al Hoota Caves are a world away from the canyon and traditional farming communities above us. Despite the recent investment by the Omani Government in marketing campaigns, we only have bats and lonely genies for company during our

visit. To the northeast, the 158-metre-deep Majlis Al Jinn – rumoured to be one of the largest caverns in the world – tempts both brave and delusional adventure hunters to rappel into it, offering the deepest freefall abseil in the Gulf. Today, however, the thought of throwing myself into the depths of Hades has me running for the bathroom. The nearby Wadi Bani Awf, with its via ferrata lines, which dangle from the aptly named Snake Gorge, will also have to wait for our return trip. We've had enough excitement for one day.

Back on the asphalt, once again flanked by the bitter extremes of Oman's seemingly never-ending Empty Quarter, our final destination comes into view. Nizwa, capital of the north and home to more magic carpet fantasies than any other Arabic city I have visited, shimmers like a mirage. Crowned by mosque onion domes and a sandcastle fort, worthy of any Sultan or Aladdin, it's time for a refreshing cold shower and a rewarding hunt for a cold beer: we're sweaty, sandy and salt-dipped.

As for our now sultana-coloured VW, it looks like its come last in a V8 Supercar rally. "We'll just take it to the car wash," Steven muses with a twinkle in his eye. "They'll never find out." As I said, I really should have known better. ☹



## GET PLANNING

### Getting There

Etihad Airways flies from Australia to Dubai in the UAE from A\$2,113. [www.etihadairways.com](http://www.etihadairways.com)

### When To Go

The best time to visit Jebel Shams and the surrounding area is from September to November, and February to April.

### Where To Stay

#### Jabal Shams Hotel

Perched perilously on the edge of the Wadi Ghul canyon, the Jabal Shams Resort is the only real alternative to camping with the sheep, goats and biblical shepherds on the mountain's precarious plateau. With sunset chalets and traditional Arabic style tents from A\$150 per room it's worth the splurge to avoid the mountain chill. [www.jabalshams.com](http://www.jabalshams.com)

#### Shangri-La's Barr Al Jissah Resort

Set amidst rugged mountains and pristine private beaches, this three-pronged hotel (one a six star, one for families and one for business) is the closest that Oman gets to emulating the five-star tourist hotels of Dubai. Complete with all you can eat buffets and an onsite CHI Spa, it could be the perfect place to recharge your batteries after your northern adventures. [www.shangri-la.com](http://www.shangri-la.com)

### More Information

Oman is a surprisingly expensive country to visit and cash machines are few and far between outside the capital. Take plenty of Omani Rials and be aware that only the five-star tourist hotels tend to accept credit cards.

