

SECRET MIDDLE EAST

THE DESERT: OMAN

Lucinda Baring explores the beauty of the empty desert, the rugged coastline and the capital Muscat.



The Al Bustan Palace has a lagoon-like pool with fountains and palm trees.

The face of Oman is changing. The country has been opening up gradually since 1970, when the Sultan, Qaboos bin Said Al Said, overthrew his father and took power. Before his reign, Oman was a backwater. In the last 39 years, Sultan Qaboos has turned the country around.

Any trip to Oman should combine a visit to its beautiful beaches with a stint in the desert but the best place to start the journey is in Muscat. Modern Muscat has become a vast city, divided into six counties and home to 700,000 people. But unlike Dubai, it is a city keen to maintain its cultural heritage and any new buildings adhere to the traditional style of architecture.

Old Muscat, cradled by its harbour, and the neighbouring bay of Muttrah epitomise the historic charm and cultural heritage the Omani people are so keen to preserve. A visit to the Mirani and Jalali forts, a reminder of the country's turbulent maritime history, and the Muttrah Souk are a must. There are a handful of ultra-

luxurious, five-star hotels to choose from but the Al Bustan Palace, with its own private beach, lagoon-like pool with fountains and palm trees in its midst and majestic central atrium (big enough to house a Boeing 747) is the best base from which to explore. The service is impeccable and the lush garden and pool are like an oasis, providing the perfect tonic to an afternoon's sightseeing.

After a few days' restful indulgence and cultural acclimatisation, venture further afield. We headed southeast along the rugged coastline. This stretch of coastline boasts one of the world's largest populations of green turtles, which come ashore at night to lay their eggs in the sand. Although most tourists head to Ras al Junayz to see this, we took advantage of the deserted beach at Fins where our guide had arranged a night of luxury camping. Our carpeted tent had a comfortable bed with sheets and blankets and an en suite 'bathroom' (a ceramic bowl for washing our faces, a shower and a toilet). Everything was lit by

lanterns and after a swim in the clear, warm sea, we had dinner by the campfire under the stars. The food was exceptional – tabbouleh with tuna and Arabic flatbread followed by huge tandoori prawns and smoked pomfret – and while we ate, a turtle clambered up the beach to make her nest.

Oman's interior offers an entirely different sort of landscape. Heading into the Wahiba Sands, via a swim in one of the country's many wadis, the desert starts to envelop you, punctuated only by acacia trees and camels. Our destination was a new Bedouin camp called Safari in the midst of the dunes. En route, we stopped to visit a Bedouin family, whose nomadic lifestyle remains a strong part of Omani culture. With the mother and father out in the dunes, it was the family's two daughters who welcomed us, covering their faces as soon as our male guide approached. They gave us sweet coffee and dates in their tent.

The camp itself, which opened

last September, is small and exclusive, accepting no more than 20 guests. The tents are yurts, with good beds, dressing tables and carpets, with a little bathroom next door, open to the stars. Before dinner the camp's hospitable owner, Ali, gave us a demonstration in Bedouin living. He roasted coffee beans and made coffee and cooked delicious bread under the hot coals.

Dinner, eaten sitting on cushions at low tables, was delectable – hummus and aubergine dips with Arabic bread, barbecued kebabs and chicken followed by fresh mint tea and skhana, a perfumed pudding made from red sugar, rosewater, cardamom and saffron. Afterwards, a Bedouin family came to sing for us and we were encouraged to dance – before I knew it, I was leading everyone around the camp in a conga, deep in the Arabian desert.

Stay at: The Al Bustan Palace, Muttrah, Muscat.

Tel: 00 968 799 666 and

www.al-bustan.inter-continental.com

Original Travel (originaltravel.co.uk; +44 20 7978 7333) offers a 7 night tailor-made trip from £3,100 per person. The price includes a 3 night safari, 3 nights staying at the Al Bustan and 1 night on a private luxury Dhow with transfers and return flights with Oman Air direct from Heathrow. For more information on Oman please contact the Oman Tourist Office (T: +44 20 8877 4524, E: oman@representationplus.co.uk) or visit www.omantourism.gov.om

MUSCAT: FIVE PLACES FOR YOUR ITINERARY

Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque. This is most famous perhaps for its carpet inside the main prayer hall, which is the largest single-piece carpet in the world, covering 4,343 square metres and weighing 21 tonnes.

Muttrah Souq. As bustling as any big bazaar but in a particularly scenic part of town - opposite the harbour in Old Muscat – not to be missed. The embroidered Indian pashminas are especially lovely.

Left Bank. A fun bar (which can be fairly hard to find in Muscat) up on a hill in the Madinat Qaboos area of town with a great view of the beach.

Fish Market. This is wonderful to see in action and is open every day until 1pm.

The Chedi. Go and have an early evening cocktail and admire the fountain-filled walkways and immaculate gardens.

THE CITY: DAMASCUS

Christopher Kanal visits the ancient city of Damascus and is dazzled by its vibrancy and openness.

The flight arrived in Damascus at night. A crescent moon and a sky filled with stars provided a suitably impressive canopy above the oldest continually inhabited city in the world. Our driver whizzed us through the busy highway into the city and our destination, the imposing Four Seasons Hotel. On arrival we were greeted with great warmth that characterised the rest of our stay in the country. Syrians are very hospitable. The city of St Paul, Saladin and Lawrence of Arabia, has always welcomed outsiders.

We began our exploration of Damascus the next day by heading straight into the Old City, a Unesco World Heritage Site. Entering at Souq al Hamidiyya next to the old citadel will bring you into the heart of old Damascus. The bustling souk is intensely atmospheric. All manner of goods and wares are on sale from clothes and spices to beautiful olive soap. Be sure to stop at Bakdash. Syria's oldest ice cream parlour, which has been selling thick Turkish-style coffee and ice cream since 1890.

Continuing down Souq al Hamidiyya will bring you to the Umayyad Mosque. Worship on the

site goes back 3,000 years to when the Arameans built a temple to their god. After removing your shoes you enter into a stunning white limestone courtyard surrounded by walls covered in shimmering golden mosaics. Inside is a shrine of John the Baptist, whose head was said to be contained in a casket here.

Outside in the spring sunshine in the small archaeological garden that sits along the north wall, you will find the modest but beautiful Mausoleum of Saladin, the revered adversary of the Crusaders who died in the city in 1193. Afterwards we headed to the Azem Palace, a must for any itinerary. It is comprised of a complex of stunning buildings, courtyards and gardens built between 1749 and 1752 as a private residence for the then governor of Damascus.

The real delights of the Old City are the beautiful, old Ottoman houses - Beit Nizam and Beit as-Sibai - are ones to look out for. You will find others south of the western end of Straight Street - also known as Souk Madhat Pasha Street. Built by the Greeks and updated by the Romans, Straight Street was the main thoroughfare in ancient times - St

DAMASCUS: FIVE PLACES FOR YOUR ITINERARY

Bakdash. Syria's oldest ice cream parlour Bakdash has been selling thick Turkish-style coffee and ice cream since 1890.

Jebel Qassioun. Gaze down at an extraordinary view of Damascus from Jebel Qassioun. Be sure to go at dusk when the city lights up.

Tishreen War Panorama. Built with the help of the North Koreans, this is a dramatic memorial to the 1973 war with Israel and includes moving panoramic paintings and a room filled with portraits of former president Hafez al-Assad.

National Museum. 8,000 years of Syrian history in a wonderful museum with treasures from some 4,000 archaeological sites across the country.

Al-Khawali. In a beautiful house in an alleyway, built in 1368 and restored in 1867 is Al-Khawali - a favourite restaurant of President Assad and his British-born wife, Asma.

Paul used to take his morning walk along here. North east of Straight Street is Bab Touma and the beautiful winding streets and hidden alleys of the Christian Quarter, where there is a lively café scene. In the far north east corner is the secret cellar Chapel of Ananias, an early Christian disciple.

Our base at the Four Seasons sits across the road from the magnificent National Museum, filled with the treasures from Syria's 4,000 archaeological sites including the oldest tablet with the world's first recorded alphabet and the world's first recorded musical notation, and a short taxi ride from the stunning, lively Old City. This vibrant and cosmopolitan hotel opened in 2005 and remains the finest in the country. It's popular with wealthy European and Gulf visitors, diplomats and the government elite.

Rooms and suites have dramatic views across the city and are decked out traditionally in western style fabrics and furniture - rich gold and white fabrics and dark wood. The hotel is home to the best Syrian restaurant in town - Al Halabi. We were served by President Bashar al-Assad's favourite chef.

On our last evening we took a taxi up to Jebel Qassioun, the mountain above Damascus to take in the view



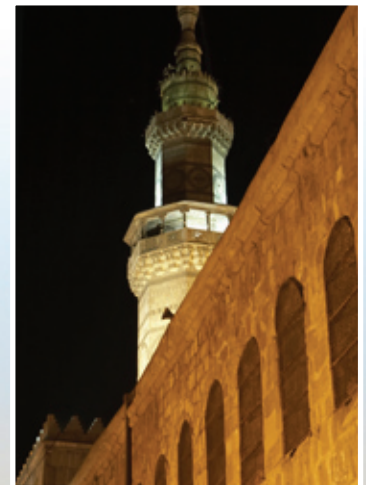
of the city and the countryside beyond. Legend has it that Mohammed reputedly cast his gaze on Damascus from here and refused to enter the city because he wanted to enter paradise only once - when he died. We settled for sitting and watching dusk fall on Damascus and marvelled at this ravishing city below as it began to flicker with thousands of points of light.

Stay at: Four Seasons Hotel Damascus, Shukri Al Quatil Street, Damascus.

Tel: 00 963 11 339 1000 and www.fourseasons.com/damascus



Worship at the Umayyad Mosque goes back 3,000 years.



The Umayyad Mosque at night.

THE EMIRATE: ABU DHABI

Phin Foster examines the breathtaking cultural ambitions of Abu Dhabi.

The Abu Dhabi government is pulling out all the stops to make UAE's capital the cultural tourist hub of the Middle East. The cornerstone of this project is Saadiyat Island, which will house some of the world's leading architects and best known artistic brands.

Even in a land unafraid of excess, this is a project on an unimaginable scale. Nestled 700m off the coast of Abu Dhabi and due for completion in 2018, Saadiyat Island will eventually house some 150,000 residents across seven districts, as well as major cultural, sporting, tourism and business landmarks.

Initially budgeted to cost \$24 billion – developers have become increasingly coy about discussing figures – this will be showpiece in Abu Dhabi's efforts to move beyond oil revenues and become a tourist hub akin to its Dubai neighbour.

However, not even Dubai can boast architecture designed, commissioned and constructed almost simultaneously by five individual Pritzker Prize winners. The names are certainly familiar – Foster, Gehry, Nouvel, Ando and Hadid – but then so too are the institutions: why choose between a Louvre and a Guggenheim

when you can have both? The entire notion is more akin to Sim City fantasy than serious architectural endeavour.

In any other city on Earth, Foster + Partners' Zayed National Museum, Zaha Hadid's Performing Arts Centre or Tadao Ando's Maritime Museum would each engender countless column inches. Here, however, popular focus has been predominantly directed towards the two cultural behemoths set to make their desert landings in 2012.

With approximately 13,000 square metres of permanent and temporary exhibition space, Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Abu Dhabi will be by far the largest of the groups' nine museums. Four levels of central galleries will enclose a central courtyard, with two further rings of galleries encircling this core. The galleries of the outer ring will be industrial in scale; capable of housing vast installation projects.

The Guggenheim may long have been a multinational brand, but Abu Dhabi had to sign an intergovernmental agreement with France – and pay a rumoured \$548m licensing fee – before plans for the first Louvre outside of Paris got the go ahead. Construction on the project Jean Nouvel describes as 'an island on an island' began back in late-May. A micro-city of small buildings, ponds and landscaping, the 24,000 square meter complex will be topped by a 'floating' 180m-diameter dome covering a large part of the site.

The figures necessary for realising these undertakings are mind-boggling, but Saadiyat Island goes well beyond being a mere vanity project. 'They are very conscious here that this can change the cultural climate in the region,' explains Barry Lord, president of Lord Cultural Resources, a

key partner on the development. 'Cultural tourists are wealthier, older, more educated, and they spend more. From an economic view, this makes sense'

While such 'culture vultures' have traditionally adopted a rather haughty attitude towards the perceived *nouveau riche* aspirations of the Emirates, Abu Dhabi may turn an old maxim on its head and demonstrate to the world that you can actually buy taste.

As the seventeenth and final race of the 2009 season got underway, Jenson Button had already been confirmed world champion and Brawn GP held an insurmountable lead in the constructors championship. A vast global television audience was left with little in the way of tension.

However, as Sebastian Vettel roared to victory in the sport's first ever race held under lights, a new star was born: the Yas Hotel, an iconic centrepiece for F1's newest circuit, had stolen the show.

Designed by Hani Rashida and featuring a colour changing 'Gridshell' which drapes the building in a vibrant shroud of lights, the largest colour LED display on Earth, this 500-room, 85,000-square-meter complex sweeping across the track had become THE destination for discerning petrol heads across the globe.

Occupancy rates have been sky high ever since, but for those looking for the ultimate experience in motor racing, the penthouse suite comprises 28 bedrooms spanning across 2,531 square metres and features world class art collection and furniture designed by MoMA.

Stay at: The Yas Hotel, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.
Tel: 00 971 2 656 0000 and www.theyashotel.com



Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum will be the largest in the group.



The Yas Hotel is the centrepiece for Abu Dhabi's F1 circuit.