



OVER TO OMAN

The Bear discovers a land of cheap gas, rugged mountains and wonderful roads with nice people

WORDS & IMAGES *The Bear*



“The world is like a belly-dancer; it dances a little while for everyone.” Arab proverb.

Set out across the low, flat desert from Dubai to the Al Hajar mountain range to the west, and it is hard to disagree with British explorer Sir Wilfred Thesiger who, on a visit to the Buraimi Oasis back in 1948, made no secret of his disapproval of the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC)'s exploratory drilling. He believed that the discovery of oil would destroy the Bedouin way of life; it did even more than that, turning the desert into a vast construction zone where six-lane highways connect random collections of three, four or perhaps as many as a dozen houses, and power lines undulate over the gravel flats. The effect of the towers and many rarely used flyovers and roundabouts is disconcerting. The look is . . . Martian.

I had asked an expatriate friend about this. Why did oil-rich states indulge in this apparently pointless construction overkill? “Because they can,” he said. Well, okay.

Not that I entirely agree with Thesiger and his “resentment towards Western innovations in other lands.” A few days later, in Oman, the access roads for those power lines destroying the desert scenery provided us with some brilliant gravel riding. Selfish? Sure, but even Thesiger accepted funding from IPC in exchange for providing information gathered on his travels because he needed to finance his expeditions. And while he loathed anything mechanical and modern, the man he idolized above all, T. E. Lawrence, loved motorcycles. As do I, and, I suspect, you.

I was on the Edelweiss Bike Tour “Adventure Dubai & Oman” along with a bunch of other bike lovers: Uli, Martin and Thomas from Switzerland, Joern from Germany, Maria Bernadete and Joao from Brazil, Johann and guide Angela from Austria, Mark from the U.S. and Rahul from India. Our van driver was Ibrahim, who lives in Dubai. Despite a preponderance of German-speakers on the tour, the lingua franca was, as usual, English.

Dubai is a standard stop for anyone flying from Australia to Europe, 14.5 hours from Sydney aboard an A380, so I

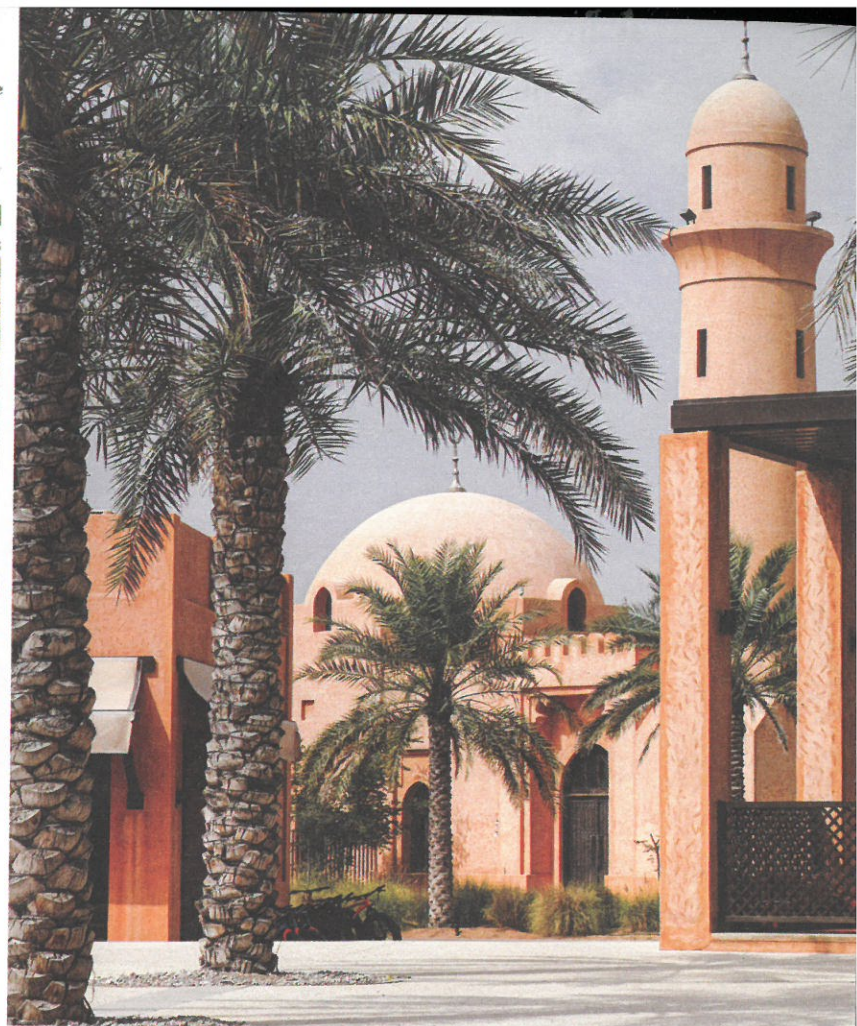
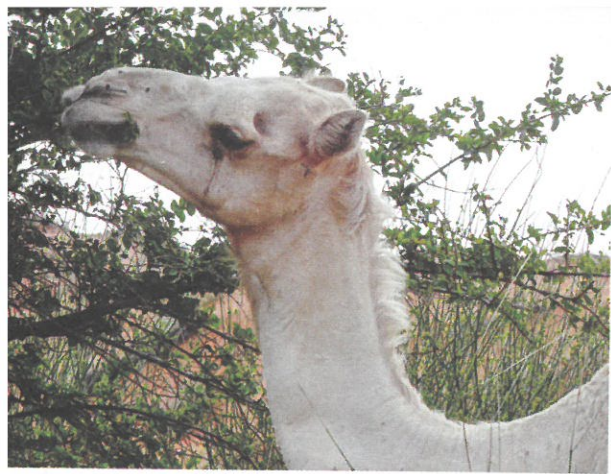
am used to arriving there at 5 a.m. But I am also used to wandering around aimlessly and mindlessly for an hour or two and then getting onto another plane for five or six more hours of confinement to Europe.

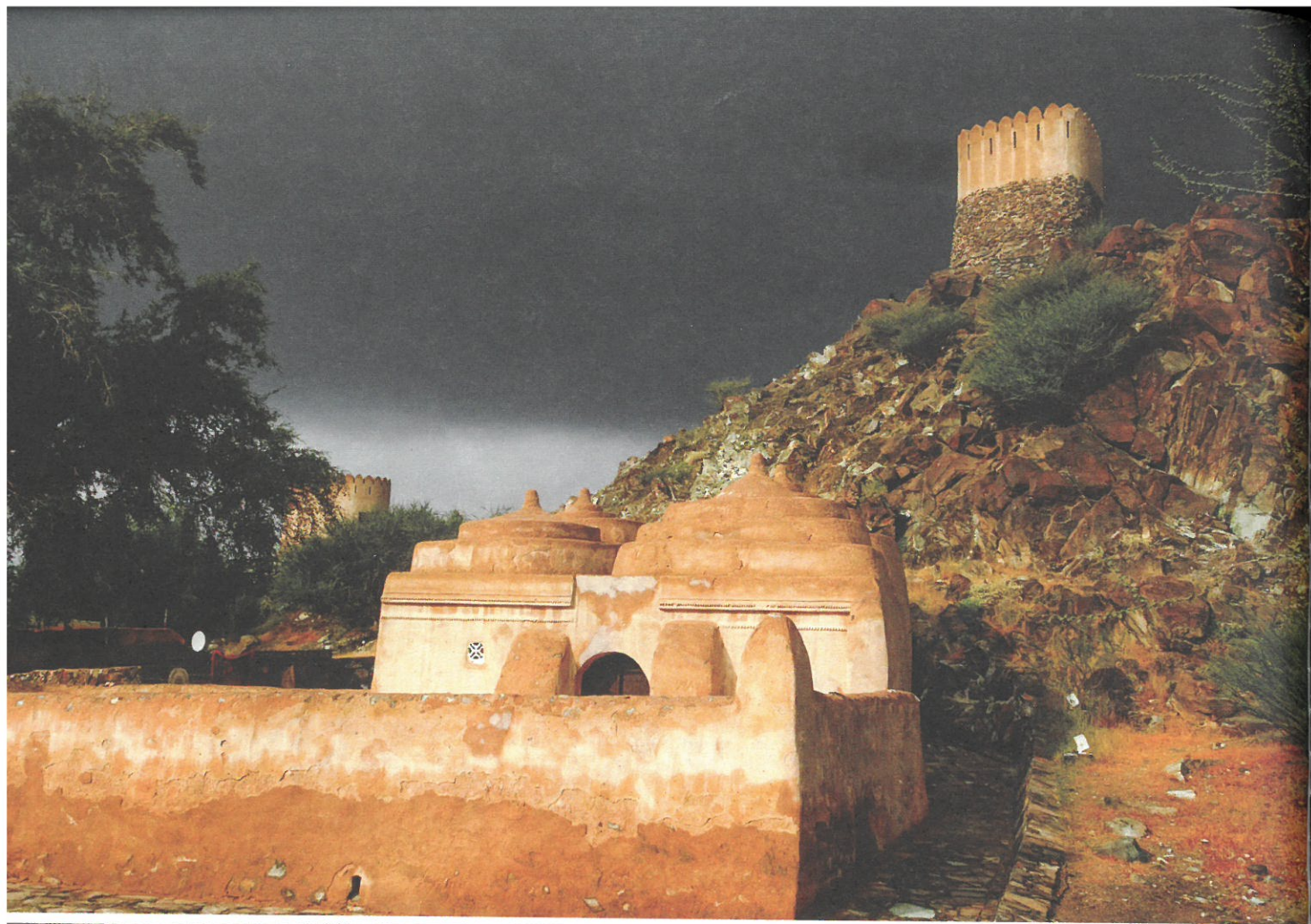
This time I stood blinking owlishly in arrivals until I found the sign with my name on it. I had booked a cab with Welcome Pickups for the 50-kilometer ride out to Al Badayer Retreat, a desert resort where the tour was to start. I recommend Welcome; the “cab” was a luxury four-wheel drive van, my driver Amin Rasool was polite and followed his satnav faultlessly – and the whole exercise cost just 50 euros. They knew at the resort when I was arriving (or when someone was) and had a room ready, where I scored a few hours of genuine (not airplane) sleep before the welcome meeting and dinner.

Edelweiss Tours has a simple and effective standard format to start tours: you meet your guides and fellow tourers in the afternoon of the first day, are introduced to the bikes, complete paperwork and then head to dinner where you can deepen your acquaintanceships. Seven of the nine bikes were variations on the BMW R nineT Urban G/S, with only Angela, the guide, and me on Yamaha Ténéré 700s. I usually ride a BMW F750 GS on Edelweiss tours, but because the bikes were locally sourced – normally Edelweiss sends its own bikes – there weren't any. Not that I minded; the Yamaha turned out to be an excellent alternative. For a start the suspension coped quite well with the innumerable road bumps which the authorities here use to slow down the Lamborghinis and, sadly, also the bikes. Edelweiss tour guides will usually arrange a petrol kitty before a ride to speed up refueling, but I soon discovered that this wouldn't work here. You can't just pay the total amount at fuel stops, and individual payments are really quick and simple. They're also low at about US60 cents a liter.

The Edelweiss morning format is standard too. You need to finish breakfast, check out, deliver your luggage to the van and be ready for the day's briefing by 8:30 a.m. Most people split their luggage between the bike, equipped with panniers and a top box/bag, and the one additional bag that the van carries for you.

(From top left, clockwise) The gravel roads following the power lines are highly enjoyable to ride. Camels always have a superior smug look. But isn't this one cute. The resort we started from was stylish, with buildings that looked original. Familiarizing ourselves with the bikes, most of which were BMW R nineTs.





The van could arrive late in the evening, so it's good to have basics with you. This almost never happens – once in some 20 tours in my case. That time was fun, actually: unwilling to wander around in my riding suit before dinner I defaulted to a t-shirt and a white towel. I told everyone I was an unaffiliated Scotsman, and hence had no tartan for my kilt.

Just a quick word here for Edelweiss regulars (I know there are quite a few among you) about something that is not standard with this tour. It largely uses five-star international chain hotels, which I guess is unavoidable because there aren't really any local ones that would serve. This means that while the rooms, service and facilities are excellent, the food is somewhat standardized. Usually on a tour you'd find yourself eating in good, interesting and above all local restaurants chosen for that by Edelweiss. That's not really possible here. So while the food is good, it does tend to be much the same from night to night.

To maintain the illusion of variety I ate the chicken biryani one night, the fish in lemon sauce the next and so on, rather than trying a bit of everything every night. Oh, and I pretended that the non-alcoholic "beer" was the real thing. That's a bit more difficult. Some places do offer the hard stuff, fortunately. I must get on with my campaign to convince the world that a beer after a day on the road is part of Australia's state religion.

After all, while "clean water to drink; meat to eat; a warm fire on a cold night; shelter from rain; above all, tired surrender to sleep" might have been all that Sir Wilfred Thesiger required on his travels, we live in a softer age.

"Choose your neighbors before you choose your home." Arab proverb.

In the morning, I take one last photo of the resort's resident camel in case I don't get another chance (yeah, right) and climb aboard my Yamaha Ténéré 700.

We start off heading west, but our day's ride soon turns north towards Ras-al-Khaima. Flat country, unbelievably empty multi-lane highways and scattered walled complexes with new-looking houses await us. Building style is surprisingly like current Australian suburbia's – the Lego School of Architecture. And more roundabouts per kilometer than I have ever seen anywhere else. A bunch of cement works provides variety, looking uncannily like missile launchers. But any tour has some transport stages, and this was as good a

way as any to get used to the bikes and the traffic. We would still be in the UAE until we crossed into Oman the next day, where roads and traffic would turn out to be much the same.

The fun really started when we turned off towards Jebel Jais. This is a kind of road that makes me think that traffic planning jobs in Arabia are reserved for serious petrolheads. Oh, sure there are lots of those flat, straight roads. But all those roundabouts do supply curves, and whenever there is anything even vaguely interesting atop a mountain – or something can be built there – someone has immediately designed a brilliant riding road.

I know this for a fact in the case of the Jebel Hafect access road, which was commissioned by the Emir himself – a keen driver – from German company Strabag as essentially a race track up the mountain. He then had a palace built up there so he'd have somewhere to stay after a fun drive. Mel Brooks said that it's good to be the King, but it's obviously good to be the Emir as well.

Meanwhile the Jebel Jais road is a revelation. Clearly designed by and for petrolheads, built recently when the UAE picked up all that oil money and maintained impeccably, this is a motorcyclist's dream. And at the top there isn't only the world's longest (at 2.83 kilometers) and highest zip line which reaches up to 100 mph, but also the Sledder, a one-person trip that hurtles down the almost vertical mountainside before hitting some serious loops. Oh, rats, the wind means that both are closed. Never mind, the road back down is probably just as much fun as any zip line.

We double back for a while and then head west to Dibba where the Fairmont Beach Resort awaits. The next day's route book initially reads as fairly uninspiring. Highlights are possibly the world's smallest (!) and oldest mosque and a dam – but as so often, that's misleading. So is the route book's claim that the Al Bidya mosque was built sometime between 1446 BCE and 640 CE. The Prophet lived from 570 to 622 CE, so that didn't seem right. A signboard credits researchers from my alma mater, the University of Sydney, with establishing that the date is actually 1446 CE.

While the initial stretch along the coast is another – admittedly quite interesting – transport stage, that changes dramatically

(At left, from top) The oldest and smallest mosque in the UAE dates back to the 15th century. Angela briefs the riders before an interesting piece of gravel road.

once we turn inland. Over a combination of roads ranging from dirt to six-lane freeway, we get our first real impression of the amazing variety and pure power of the rocky world that makes up the spine of this country. These are the bones of the Earth near the beginning of the erosion process that will one day turn them into the flat, exhausted country that I know from home in Australia, without softening by vegetation.

A huge mural of the founders of the UAE, Sheik Zayed and Sheik Rashid, decorates the face of the Hatta dam. This is as far as we get because roadworks are blocking access to the other dams. Our guide Angela tries arguing, but the front-end loader is mightier than the Ténéré 700. We retreat and tackle the UAE/Oman border instead. It is surprising how thoroughly fortified this is, with walls and razor wire stretching for quite a distance. I had thought that there would be little reason for a strong border here, but I'm obviously wrong.

Perhaps the reason lies in the common history of the two countries. Once upon a time they were one, powerful because of the sultanate's location on the Strait of Hormuz. Between 1507 and 1650, the heavy cannons of the Portuguese allowed them to take and hold much of Oman. They were displaced by the Ottomans, but by the middle of the 18th century the Imam of Oman, Saif bin Sultan, had driven out the foreigners.

In 1798, Oman and Great Britain signed a Treaty of Friendship. A succession crisis in 1856, however, splintered Oman although eventually, when Britain decided to withdraw from what was then called the Trucial States, they federated to become the already oil-rich United Arab Emirates without Oman. Oman came into oil money more recently. Today, the primary difference apart from wealth is probably religion.

In the weird world of Arabia, only 11 percent of the UAE's population are citizens – locals; the rest are foreign workers. Of the citizens, 85 percent are Sunni Muslims. Seventy-five percent of Omanis, on the other hand, are locals and they are overwhelmingly Ibadi Muslims, a relatively tolerant sect that belongs to neither side of the great global divide between Sunni and Shia.

Is there still resentment about that split? It's complicated, as they say. Both Emiratis and Omanis tend to lose their command of

English when the subject comes up, and my Arabic is limited to a couple of dozen words. And if you think the above is too much history, it's only a tiny fragment of the whole.

“It is good to know the truth and to speak the truth. It is even better to know the truth and speak about palm trees.” Arab proverb.

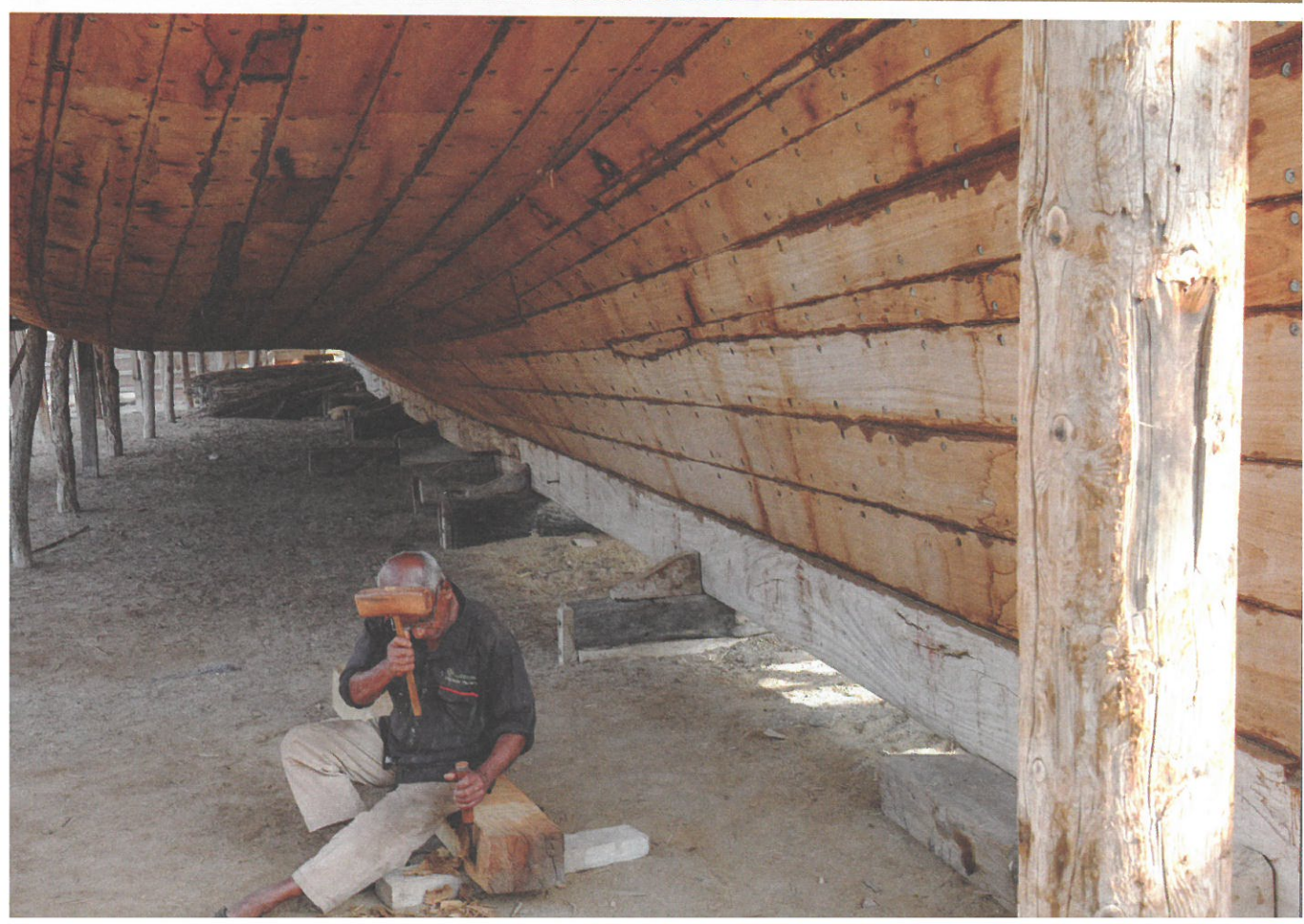
Even in this digital day and electronic age, border crossings can be a pain. Not that slipping into Oman from the UAE is as difficult as the heavily fortified border makes it look. The Immigration checkpoint wasn't interested in visas and Customs didn't want to know us at all. A jaunty wave and we were through.

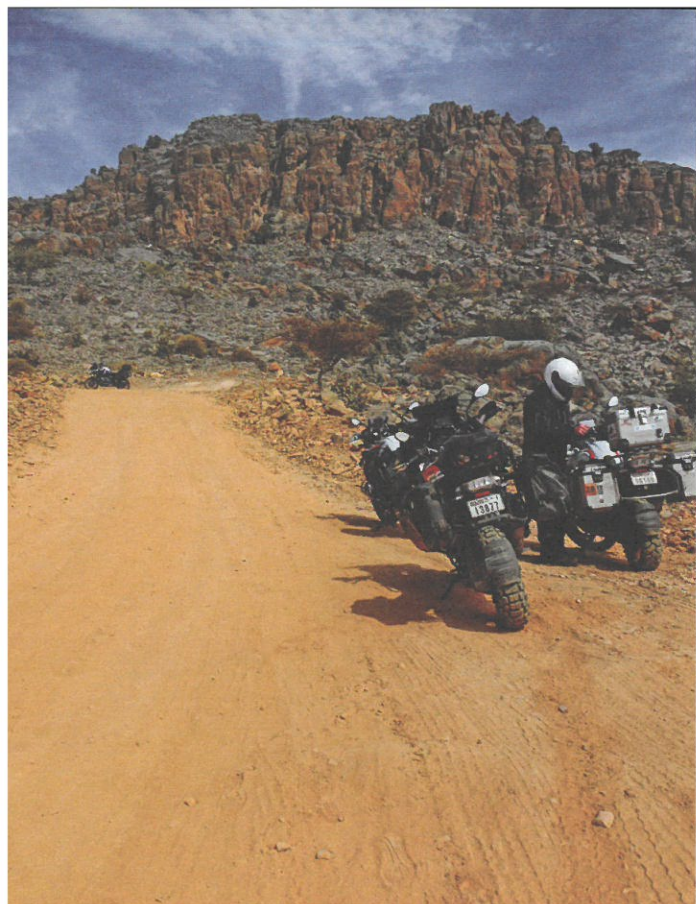
The road down along the coast to Sohar runs mainly through commercial areas – everything from car yards to camel food – and provides an interesting summary of Oman's retail world. Top marks for the care with which the roadside bushes are watered; they really are evergreen bushes rather than the ubiquitous palms in the UAE, and I suspect it takes more to keep them alive. Whatever it is, they're getting it and make for a pleasant green outline to the road. As well, the grass is real – unlike the synthetic imitation across the border in the UAE.

The next day began to show us what makes Oman such a spectacular destination. After a dull but relatively fast early run down the coast, made interesting by a Hilux that nearly wiped out one of our number, we turned right at Al-Khaburah. We were now headed for the foothills of Oman's mountainous spine. For the rest of the day, until we reached the coast again, we played on good, tarred roads with remarkably well-surveyed curves. Ideal motorcycling.

Well, almost. Despite the near-new and carefully marked roads – fresh white and yellow stripes made them look smart indeed – there were a couple of water crossings. When I came up to the first, most of the rest of the party was already on the other side, stopped and looking back in obvious anticipation. That's usually a sign that there is a chance you'll be going down, so I took it easy but still went sideways a little before reaching the other side. No harm to me or my bike, and no harm to anyone else or their machines, although we weren't all fortunate enough to make it through the crossing upright.

The power line tracks provided a lot of hairpin bends for our enjoyment. (Below) A craftsman works on a dhow. Look at the size of that hull.





I couldn't get enough of the wonderful and varied rock formations.

This is a remarkably young landscape with a variety of often tortuously twisted geological layers and frequent intrusions of aggregate which is being eroded again after clearly being laid down fairly recently. I'm not a geologist, but I know spectacular mountains when I see them – even when they're only 1,000 meters high. The tallest mountain in the 700-kilometer-long Al Hajar range, Jebel Shams, tops out at all of 3,000 meters but Oman's scenery makes the most of the elevation it has.

Our hotel, the Radisson Blu in Sohar, occupies an odd location: it sits all alone on the beachfront well away from the town. This initially creates a bit of a Dracula's Castle impression against the lowering sky but that faded as we turned into the driveway. I'd gotten to the point of leaving my helmet on the bike, comfortable with reassurances that the Omani locals are generally honest – as they proved to be throughout the trip.

The next day's ride, to Muscat, was a repetition of the remarkable scenery and roads, but ended in a huge web of freeways before we reached the hotel.

Muscat's old town offers a fairly short corniche, a small souk and the Qasr Al Alam Palace, which holds the Sultan's office

and was designed by Fisher Price*. There are also a couple of forts along with the Ice Cream Memorial** overlooking a well-kept park. The Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, which can hold 20,000 worshippers, really is grand in a suitably reserved style, although it does also hold the world's second-largest chandelier, covered in Swarovski crystals and weighing eight tons. All in all, Muscat is a nice place to visit with its restrained atmosphere matching that of the rest of Oman. Don't get lost in the motorway tangle.

After Muscat, it was pretty much motorcycle paradise, leavened with unique stops like a look at the impressive boatyard of possibly the last dhow builder in the world, a turtle reserve where the stars of the show were (sadly) having a break on the night of our visit, and the 1000-meter limestone walls of Wadi Gul, the world's second deepest canyon after the Grand Canyon. And riding, lots of riding on gravel and immaculate tar with carefully surveyed curves.

We rode both of the roads most famous with drivers and riders – one in Oman and the other in the UAE. The former leads up Jebel Hafeet road, which I have considered the best motorcycle road in the world since I first rode it 15 years ago; the latter is the Jebel Alk Akhdar road which I first tackled on this trip and would consider as the second best, if not even better than Jebel Hafeet. Oh, and then there's the Jebel Jais road, of course. These roads are seriously good by world standards.

There were some pretty spectacular gravel – and dust! – roads on this trip as well, and while it is much harder to assign ratings to these I'd say that the "track" to the top of Wadi Ghul would rate pretty highly. Tackling gravel is potentially a problem for tour operators because the likelihood of crashing is rather higher, as is that of serious injury. Your guide needs to be aware of difficult stretches and coax riders through them, as Angela did on one particular corner which claimed one of our party. No damage, no injury because he had been briefed.

If you're getting the idea that this is very much a pure riding tour despite the various cultural and scenic attractions, you're correct. At a time when simply riding a motorcycle for enjoyment is becoming less and less acceptable, I'm happy to recommend the Adventure Dubai and Oman tour to you. Oh, and as for water: it did rain steadily for the last day.

**Not true, but it sure looks like it.*

***Also not true, but should be.*