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off the beaten path
Paolo Rossetti

On the rocks and into the wadi

The wide variety of terrain and activities and the friendly people within the Nizwa region make for an extraordinary outdoor adventure

Whenever I get the chance, Oman is my destination.

Because of the long driving distances, a weekend is too short; but the terrain is so spectacular and the people so friendly that a trip to the Nizwa area is well worth cashing in on a couple of vacation days.

Within one region, we will find a peaceful and secluded camping spot deep in Wadi Tanuf; several historical forts (one housing the busy Nizwa souq); abandoned mud villages ready to be explored; a plateau higher than 2,000 metres (a four-hour hike along a trail off Jebel Shams, also known as the Omani Grand Canyon); underground formations at Al Hoota cave, a major tourist attraction; and, of course, Omani people – from my experience, some of the most hospitable on the planet.

We're in a 2010 Audi Q7, which makes the 1,200km round trip very comfortable. Start from the Mezyad border post at waypoint 1, south of Al Ain, where you will need to present your passport, car registration card and Omani car insurance papers.

Once in Oman, in the town of Bahla, we first stop for some fresh fruit juice and a leg-stretching walk around the fort and town at waypoint 3. The fort, which has been undergoing renovation for years, is impressively built atop a hill overlooking the town.

The motorway lanes are shared for overtaking in most parts of Oman, so you need to be careful of speeding and passing vehicles.

As you approach Nizwa, keeping a mountain range to the right, look for the turn-off left signposted Wadi Tanuf (waypoint 4), which will take you to the mouth of the wadi at waypoint 5, where you will come across a large abandoned mud village.

Circling the village to its right will take you to the entrance to the wadi proper, and the popular picnicking spot behind it. There is water in the falaj and the area is full of shady trees.

To reach a more private camping spot, where we put up our tents for several days, continue down the track, which becomes rather bumpy as it penetrates the wadi. There, the cliff walls get closer as well.

We choose to camp at waypoint 6, on the sand just under the cliff face, above the last flood mark that is clearly visible on the rocks. It is a shaded spot and off the track, and if tents are set up carefully, they will not be easily spotted from the track.

A word of warning about camping in wadis: they flood if it rains. We check the weather forecast, talk with local people and, as a final measure, place our tents far enough from the main water path so as to be able to scramble for high ground in case of an emergency.

The campsite is in a stunning location, and we spend the rest of the day there, preparing the camp, getting ready for a barbecue feast at night, chatting and walking around observing our surroundings.

The next day, we drive out of the wadi the same way we came in and onto the same tarmac. On our way back, we drive past a petrol station at waypoint 7 and take a turn towards Jebel Shams and the Hoota cave. The way leads to a roundabout. We take a left turn and the road leads us to our destination at waypoint 8.

As you approach the bottom of Jebel Shams, be on the lookout for an abandoned village camouflaged in the wadi at waypoint 9. It is well worth stopping and doing a little exploration, despite the litter left behind by visitors.

The climb up Jebel Shams starts soon after, and you'll be happy if you have a few extra horses in your engine. The Audi Q7 is impressive, easily pulling up and hugging the tarmac on switchbacks. It's a route that necessitates care in driving, no matter what car.

At the top, after you turn right at the fork at waypoint 10 as the plateau flattens out, follow the track around the commercial camping areas until you reach a solitary hamlet at waypoint 11, where the few inhabitants seem to think you will want to buy a rock from them. I don't quite understand why they sell rocks – it must be a kind of begging.

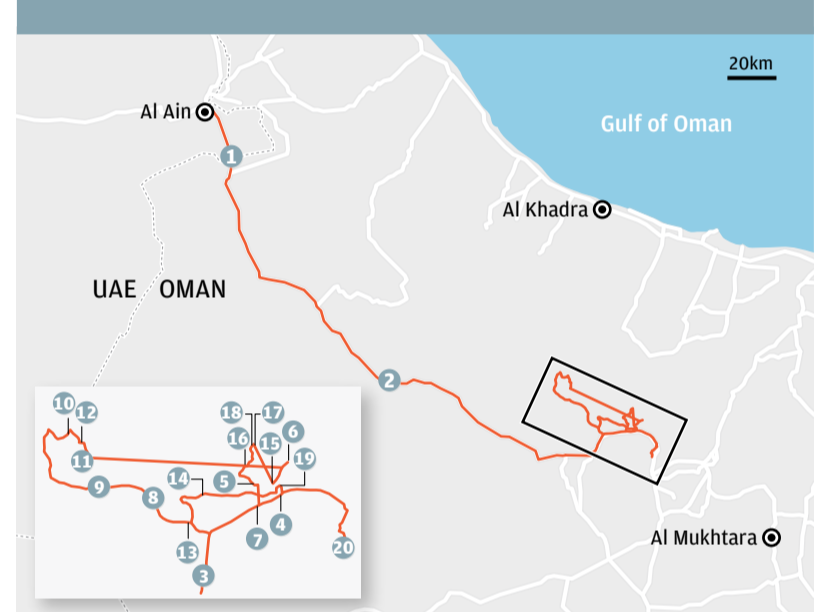
The hiking trail is well marked, and it starts at waypoint 11. Our youngest



The cliffs of Wadi Tanuf, left and bottom right, are awe-inspiring, while the Nizwa souq, top, is a traditional Arabic marketplace worth a visit. Paolo Rossetti for The National



Nizwa



Source: Google



hiker is six years old, the oldest being about 60, and it takes us just under four hours round-trip, so the trail is not particularly difficult or dangerous. It does pass by spectacular viewpoints, with drops deep enough to parachute off.

And at the end of the trail we come for a surprise. I won't spoil it for you lest it serves as a motivation for you to reach waypoint 12 at the end. The return is along the same track, although I have heard there is a rock-climbing route up and over the escarpment. You can try it if you happen to carry climbing ropes and equipment.

After spending two nights at the campsite, we head to Al Hoota cave in the morning.

The tourism development is state-of-the-art and the walk is pleasant, with bilingual guides present at strategic locations, and the buffet is excellent. The cave formations are intriguing, too.

To reach Al Hoota cave at waypoint 14, return towards Jebel Shams, but follow the Hoota cave directions at the roundabout at waypoint 13.

On the way back to our campsite, we take an adventurous detour up a dirt track, towards the village of Qyoot. The track zig-zagging up the mountain is so alluring, we can't resist the

temptation to drive. The Audi again impresses with its sure-footedness of a mountain goat.

From the track at waypoint 15, it takes you through a little village at waypoint 17, past a cemetery, after which there is an impromptu football field. This is waypoint 18 from where you can hike to an outcrop on the eastern top of Wadi Tanuf.

Coming downhill, this time through a palm plantation, we reach our campsite and get ready for our trip to Nizwa next morning, which happens to be Friday when the souq closes for prayers about 11 am.

A short drive to Nizwa at waypoint 20 and we are enveloped by a bustling fort that has barely changed over the past century.

Here traditional wares are traded with enthusiasm and good-natured bantering, men wear their traditional rifles and daggers (locally known as the khanjar) and Omani silverware and pottery are visitors' favourites. The fort itself is actually a separate edifice, also worth a visit.

From there a brisk 300km drive takes us back to the UAE border, with memories of a fabulous excursion off the beaten path, and an appetite whetted for our adventure next month – a peaceful mangrove beach just west of Abu Dhabi.

how to: camp

Comfort is your first priority

Camping can range from carrying a backpack and lightweight tent to full-blown luxury overnight stays with electricity generator, air conditioning and satellite TV. Here, I'd like to share a few points on how to make the most of your camping, so that the whole family can enjoy the experience.

When packing the gear into the vehicle, my motto is "first in, last out; top light, bottom heavy." This formula ensures that the heaviest items do not sit on top creating a hazard for passengers in case of hard braking or, even worse, an impact. It also takes into account which items may be needed along the way, such as a shovel to dig yourself out, so that you do not have to pull out cool boxes and half a tonne of gear to reach it.

Comfort is an important aspect of my family's camping – we have a large tent with four big windows, which are necessary

for when the weather warms up. Obviously, do not buy those tents built for cold and rainy weather.

We also use foot-long tent pegs made from bent rebar, commissioned for a few dirhams at a construction site, fantastic inflatable mattresses and bed pillows from home.

Waste management is an important part of our camping. We have a Dh35 tent without floor, which is used as a "toilet tent" for privacy, where we keep the waste in disposable bags. We also take

large, black trash bags to collect all of our rubbish – it's important to leave the place as spotless as when we got there.

Food is an important aspect of camping. We tend to prepare one complex gourmet meal and go light on the others. Fish, chicken or meat is prepared from home, usually in a marinade, and then grilled on coals.

Showers and washing are easy. We make small holes in a water bottle cap and then hold the bottle up to have the water stream down. Activities we have a bagful of, and we always bring along plenty of our own wood for beautiful campfires at night, which we also use for cooking.

We find being creative in our organisation and preparation to be a fun part of our camping, and in that vein, it is one of our favourite family activities.

★ Paolo Rossetti