

# Paradise FOUND

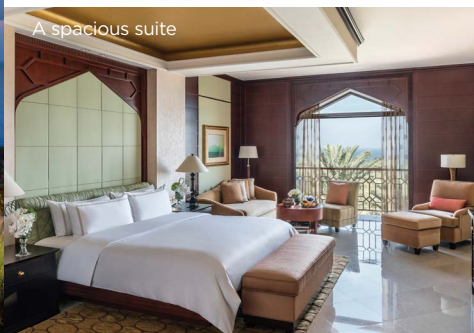
Y&YW's commissioning editor Hannah Davies travels to Oman to find out why it's climbing up the honeymoon hot list



Bimmah Sinkhole



Bait al Bahr seafood restaurant



A spacious suite

I'll be honest: one of the things I enjoy about visiting less obvious destinations is a bit of light pre-trip boasting. A visit to Oman seems an excellent opportunity to indulge this not-so-attractive aspect of my character. But it turns out I'm wrong. I've been expecting friends to marvel at my unexpected choice of destination; to bombard me with questions about this place they know so little about; to admire my originality when it comes to travel. Instead, I'm met with puzzlement that I haven't already been there. The word that crops up most frequently is "special" – as in, "I can't believe you haven't already visited, it's such a special place," as one friend puts it. A little Googling reveals that the number of visitors to this Middle Eastern nation has more than doubled over the past 10 years\*. And so I set off to Oman wondering what exactly I've been missing out on.

## LANDSCAPE OF DREAMS

One of the more common getting-to-know-you questions on dating apps is "Mountains or beach?" If I thought that was a stupid question before, this is confirmed by Shangri-La Al Husn Resort & Spa, my home for the next few days. The setting is a harmonious marriage of rugged mountain and pristine coastline. Looking out from the balcony of my beautiful



The hotel's magnificent lobby



room – more on that later – I take in dramatic cliffs fringing inviting golden sands. That's just the beginning of the beauty. My first trip is to the Bimmah Sinkhole, which doesn't sound entirely promising – but which turns out to be a spectacular body of bright turquoise water. Surrounded by desert-like landscape, it's clearly a popular spot for a swim. Unfortunately, I'm too busy taking pictures on my phone to walk down the concrete steps for a dip. That's the thing with Oman – the landscape is so stunning that I feel the urge to capture it from every angle, to marvel over when I am back in my everyday life.

## WHERE'S WADI?

The next stop is Wadi Al Arbaeen. This is an idyllic rocky valley with a network of freshwater pools. Oman is known for its beautiful wadis, but what gives Al Arbaeen its particular charm is its remoteness – there isn't another tourist in sight. I learn my lesson from the sinkhole, put down my phone, and wade into the water. While I'm splashing around happily (and letting out the occasional shriek when I stand on a sharp stone – bring swimming shoes), my guides assemble an Arabic tent and create an Omani feast. I flop down on a cushion and tuck into fresh flatbreads and delicious dips. It's one of the loveliest and most scenic picnics I've ever had.

## CULTURAL GEMS

Delightful as these outdoor experiences are, it's also worth spending some time in Muscat,

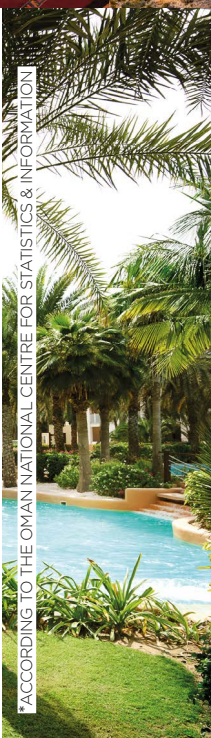
\*ACCORDING TO THE OMAN NATIONAL CENTRE FOR STATISTICS & INFORMATION



Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque



Beautiful Muscat Old Town



Mahhara Private Beach



the capital, a short drive from the resort. Oman has a rich history, and I found the best introduction to this was the National Museum, a vast space filled with treasures from the earliest human settlement to the more recent past. Make sure you visit the impressive Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque – you can go inside and marvel at the main prayer hall, with its 14ft Swarovski chandelier, provided you're appropriately dressed. Architecture fans will want to tour the outside of the Al Alam Palace and the Royal Opera House. My personal favourite spot was the Mutrah Souq, a warren of shops and stalls selling everything from textiles to jewellery.

## FOOD, GLORIOUS FOOD

Of course, I need proper fuel for all the wadi- and city-exploration. Shangri-La Al Husn has four characterful dining options. Poolside Al Muheet and beachfront Mahhara are perfect for a laid-back lunch with a view, serving up fresh, light dishes. In the evenings, I head to the exquisite courtyard for pre-dinner cocktail and canapé hour. This is included in the room rate for every guest, and the atmosphere is magical as the sun sets and live music plays. On the first evening, I follow my G&Ts with dinner at Shahrazad. Styled like a Moroccan palace, with twinkling lanterns, curved arches, and black and gold interiors, this is a romantic spot – and the perfectly spiced dishes live up to the setting. My second night's feast is at fine-dining Sultanah, designed to look like a sophisticated cruise liner from a bygone age. Food is taken seriously here, and I'm fortunate that my stay coincides with a visit from Michelin-starred chef Rohit Ghai, who puts together a special menu of innovative Indian-inflected delights. I'm only here for three nights, but if you choose a longer visit, you certainly won't run out of dining options – there are a further 18 spread across this and



Shahrazad restaurant



## NATURAL BEAUTY

My first visit to the Middle East was to Dubai, and on some level I was expecting a similar style of resort. In a word: glitzy. However, it seems the prevailing aesthetic at Omani resorts is to reflect and harmonise with the natural surroundings. This is very much so at Shangri-La Al Husn, which is all earth tones and an abundance of palm trees. What's more, the resort has one of Oman's five nesting sites for turtles, and there's a full-time "turtle ranger" dedicated to their welfare, as well as an eco centre where you can learn about the overall conservation projects.

This natural approach doesn't mean there isn't luxury and indulgence aplenty – they're just of the more refined variety. The Hareer Spa by L'Occitane, for example, is a hushed haven. You must try the Omani Honey Heaven, a scrub and massage based around this traditional local ingredient; both my skin and my stress levels were thoroughly smoothed



Middle East

out by the experience. My room is spacious and welcoming, with a natural colour palette and huge bed, and a generously sized bath from which I can see the sea. There's a private beach, but my favourite spot is the infinity pool. As the resort is adults-only, there is no tranquillity-bothering running, shouting and splashing – well, only from me, when I first catch sight of the mesmerising views, but eventually I calm down. I understand, now, why people love it here. I've found the perfect blend of culture, outdoor adventure, foodie indulgence and serene relaxation. And that's something worth boasting about.

**Go there**  
From £190 per room per night at Shangri-La Al Husn Resort & Spa, [shangri-la.com](http://shangri-la.com). Economy flights with Oman Air, from £270pp, [omanair.com](http://omanair.com)



The stunning courtyard looks out to the ocean