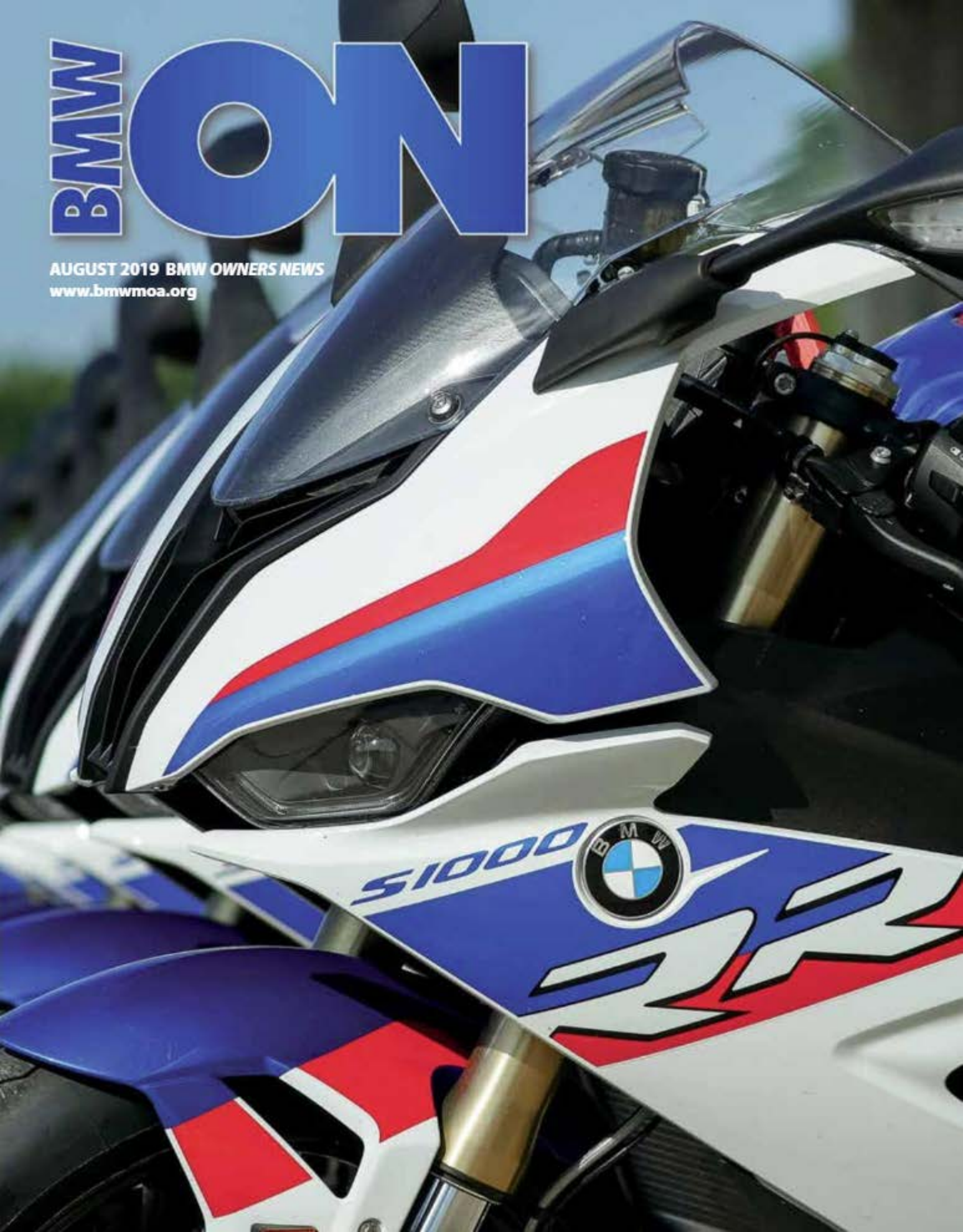


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With spectacular motorcycling,
mesmerizing landscapes and a warm and welcoming culture,
Oman proves as magical as the Arabian Nights

By Christopher Baker #126077

Hitting a camel would seriously ruin my day, I mused, as I soberly scrutinized the recumbent beast at the side of the road. Blood was splattered across the asphalt, and flies buzzed around some still-fresh meat matter. Fifty yards away, a smashed Nissan Pathfinder lay as inert as the ship of the desert. I'd passed several red triangular hazard signs warning of open-range camels. Yet five days into my solo trip through Oman, the long-necked beasts had proven elusive. Then, as I hauled down the lonesome Al Mundaybi-Ibra highway, a huge dromedary suddenly emerged from the dun desert backdrop and lolloped across my path as if from a mirage.

Wildly unpredictable and weighing more than a ton, it was a speed bump guaranteed to make me sit erect in the saddle. My awareness heightened, I began to notice *lots* of camels sauntering across the burning flats or munching at roadside shrubs. I ran south for the Sharqiya Sands, feeling elated. To have ridden Oman without seeing camels would have been like touring France without tasting the wine.



BMW 1200GSA and camel roadside, Oman

"Oman? Where? Why?" many of my American friends responded. As a guidebook author and photo-tour leader, I'm always seeking unknown destinations leap-frogging up the bucket lists. I'd read that the mysterious and slow-paced sultanate of Oman is "old" Arabia, harking back to the days before the distorting lens of gaudy wealth turned much of the Arabian Peninsula into glitz and glamor. Peaceful, too, and with astonishing topographies, each more impressive than the last. Reasons enough to visit.

I started out in Dubai—an audaciously futuristic artifice whose

overreach struck me as exceeding Las Vegas proportions. What to make of a country that issues its traffic cops a Ferrari FF, Bentley Continental GT, Lamborghini Aventador, or an Aston Martin One-77 costing \$1.87 million? Not much use in the bumper-to-bumper traffic on the infuriating inner-city spaghetti freeways! I de-stressed at the divine Shangri-La Hotel, with its buzzy iKandy Ultralounge pool bar and killer views of the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building, soaring 2,723 feet. After two nights of OTT indulgence, however, I craved the soul-satisfying simplicity of laid-back Oman.

Road Trip Motorcycle Rental (roadtripmr.com), which shares space with Touratech at the Dubai Autodrome, kitted me with a 2016 BMW R 1200 GSA with top case and panniers. Owner Saleh Jamal al Sharif began riding dirt bikes on the dunes at five years old. He founded RTMR to offer tours in 2017 after he and three pals shipped their bikes to Cape Town and rode home to the UAE (United Arab Emirates).

"Your route looks great. Just remember to send me some pictures I can use on social media,"

said Saleh, as he smiled and handed me the keys and a letter authorizing temporary export of the bike into Oman.

I departed Dubai with the pinnacle of Burj Khalifa scratching at thunderous clouds. Rain pursued me into the Hajar Mountains. Then, as I dropped to Hatta and the Omani border, the slate-gray skies thankfully cleared.

Omani border proceedings were friendly and fluid: a 10-minute process, including purchasing obligatory motorcycle insurance at an office adjoining Immigration. From here, the state-of-the-art,



Frankincense burning in Mutrah souq, Muscat, Oman.

four-lane (each direction) Batinah Expressway cut through the desert like a steel blade. Dust devils (older Omanis believe them to be *jinn*—evil spirits—traveling across the desert) raced across the freeway, which ran parallel to the coast and eventually scythed down through a canyon that spilled me into Muscat, the Omani capital.

An anti-Dubai, this low-slung, laid-back city of 1.7 million is breathtakingly situated along the wave-washed scimitar shoreline of the Arabian Sea. Divided into ancient and modern zones by a series of mountainous tentacles that add to the visual charm, the place was spotless, easy-going and utterly charming. I rode down to the harbor front Corniche promenade, immaculately lined with date palms and manicured lawns, and pinned by the Mutrah mosque's turquoise dome and minaret. Traditional *dhow*s bobbed at anchor in a scalloped bay wrapped by mountains colored burnt henna and topped by 16th-century Portuguese forts. Omani men in white ankle-length *dishdasha* robes and traditional embroidered *kuma* caps were taking the airs. Women dressed in *abayas* were walking their children in strollers. Families were throwing bread to the seagulls.

The air was redolent with faint scents of spices, incense and *dokha* tobacco...and the ululations of Imans calling the faithful to prayer. The next day I departed Muscat, stopping first at Muscat's Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque. Completed in 2001, this astonishing architectural sandstone glory can accommodate 20,000

worshippers in the main prayer hall, where 50-foot-tall chandeliers sparkle above the world's second-largest hand-loomed Persian carpet.

Five decades ago, Oman was one of the region's most backward countries. It had less than ten miles of sealed road and no television, nor even electricity in most places. All things Western were banned. In 1970, Sandhurst-educated Qaboos bin Said overthrew his rigidly medievalist and xenophobic father in a bloodless palace coup with the help of the British. The visionary new Sultan harnessed the oil wealth, pacified and united the warring tribes, established a modern government, and launched a major development program that has extended free health care and education for all to every part of the country. The literacy rate has doubled. There's freedom of religious expression (Omanis belong to a sect of Islam called Ibadhi, more tolerant than either Shia or Sunni). Alcohol isn't banned. And women, who have gender equality under the law, drive Uber taxis on 30,000 miles of new highways that today link every city, town, and village.

The roads were world-class. Signs are in both Arabic and English (which is widely spoken). Gas stations are numerous. And apart from a bad tailgating habit and loose concept of lane discipline, compared to neighboring countries Omani drivers are paragons of responsible driving. But as I continued west for Jebel Sham, I was run off the road by a daredevil driver in a SUV attempting, impossibly, to overtake a convoy of cars. Devout Muslims define their lives by the will of God. Personal responsibility is often subjugated to fatalism. "It is written in the sand. If we crash, it is God's will!"

At Birkat al Mouz, I turned north for Jabal Al Akhdar (9,843 feet), in the Hajar Mountains. The well-paved road at its base rose via a delectation of sweepers. But my grin disappeared as I arrived at a police checkpoint and barrier where a sign read, "DANGER! Steep



Sultan Qaboos' palace, Muscat, Oman.

ascent. Series of bends. Engage low gear now with 4WD." It sounded insanely appealing. Except...Motorcycles aren't allowed! The mountain highway was closed to all but 4WD traffic (apparently after a series of vehicles crashed on the descent).

Instead, I rode in a chauffeured Toyota Land Cruiser sent by the five-star Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar resort. I didn't know whether



The Arabian Sea as seen from the Crowne Plaza Hotel, Muscat, Oman.

to scream or cry as the flawless, 25-mile two-lane highway snaked uphill in a non-stop orgasm of sublime curves and twisties. The stuff of motorcyclists' dreams, the military-built road deserves to be ranked as one of the world's most magnificent mountain drives.

"We had *Top Gear* here in 2017," Ali Jani, Anantara's Marketing & PR Executive, told me as I tucked into a niçoise salad and tiramisu. "It took three months for us to get permission for them to bring a Bugatti Chiron and Ducati 1299 Superleggera. It's very bureaucratic here."

"If I bring a motorcycle tour group, can you get me permission also?" I asked.

"Sure, with plenty of notice!" he replied.

Anantara is perched a stone's throw from a yawning chasm at the edge of the Saiq Plateau amid a spectacular geological pileup of stark, contoured rock resembling the surface of Mars. The climate is brisk. Snow falls in

winter! The cool clime is perfect for growing walnuts, pomegranates, apricots and, in springtime, damask roses—the raw ingredient of the rosewater that every Omani male wears like cologne. With a guide, I followed a skinny rock-hewn path augering down the rugged mountainside to Wadi Al Bawaarid, an abandoned village tucked in a canyon still farmed in tidy orchards fed water by an ancient *falaj* system. Sun-drunk bees buzzed among the pale-pink blossoms of almond trees.

My frustration multiplied with each passing mile of the divine Jabal Al Akdhar descent. I was thrilled to be back on the bike. After two days of modern highways and the frustration of not being permitted to ride to Anantara, I was ready for some off-the-beaten-track, off-road adventure.

The road to the summit of neighboring Jebel Sham (10,089 feet),

Oman's highest mountain, began in a thrilling hairpin ascent. Then the paving gave out. I stood on the pegs as the sand-and-dirt washboard track coiled sharply uphill another five miles through a harsh, wind-scoured Martian landscape and topped out at the rim of the country's "Grand Canyon." Mountain goats appeared, begging food, as I stared into the sheer abyss of Wadi Guhl. Far-off to the east, I could make out the curvature of the earth on the hazy horizon of the Gulf of Oman. This was no beginner terrain. I used a judicious first- and second-gear descent with my foot dragging the rear brake on steeper inclines.

The flank of the spectacularly chaotic, sun-baked mountain was slashed with irresistibly tempting ravines (wadis). A sharp zigzag climb led to Misfat Al Abriyeen, an end-of-the-road oasis village clinging to a cliff-face above terraces of dark-green palms. I parked



Mountain goat with BMW 1200GSA atop Jebel Shams, Oman.



Sharquiya Sands at sunset, Oman.



Right: Dirt road up Jebel Shams, Oman.

the bike and wandered its labyrinth of winding cobbled lanes, tiered with mud-and-stone houses built atop hulking boulders. Men and women alike scurried into hiding at the sight of my camera. This was old-world, traditional Islam, where photography of people is haram (prohibited).

Otherwise, thus far, I'd found the Omanis to be a generous and gregarious people with a wonderful sense of humor, eager to engage and assist. In Muscat, even many younger women seemed eager to chat; some agreed to pose for a photograph. I sensed a calm integrity. A pride in traditional culture. And something of a long-gone innocence lingering in the psyche of the modern Omani. Unlike Dubai, they seemed free from the pressures of materialism merely for the sake of possession.

"Salaam alaikum!" was their standard greeting. "Peace be with you!" I eventually learned to reply in kind: "Alaikum salaam."

Nonetheless, nearby Nizwa—Oman's erstwhile capital—was an Islamic center so ferociously conservative that in the late 1940s (when it was still a duty to kill Christian infidels) even fearless British explorer Wilfred Thesiger was forced to avoid it. As a jovial black Omani guide in gold-edged dishdash and elegant massar turban showed me around the crenellated fort, I was struck by how much has changed... And by how the country is a veritable melting pot, reflecting the golden age when Oman ruled a trading empire of slaves, ivory, pearls and, above all, frankincense, extending to Bangladesh and Mozambique.

Used for 6,000 years as incense, perfume and a panacea once prized more than gold, frankincense (which is harvested from the aromatic resin of scraggly trees that grow exclusively in the southern Arabian deserts) was traded throughout the ancient world as far as China. The stalls of Nizwa souk—with their handwoven rugs, gold and silver jewelry, and mountains of dates and halvah (nougat)—were piled high with frankincense nodules resembling small semi-translucent stones. And the gift shop in Nizwa fort offered a profusion of frankincense perfumes, lotions and essential oils. I was never far from the alluringly musky aroma of smoldering frankincense wafting over traditional souks and hotel lobbies. I can still



Boy with author's helmet in Khasab, Oman.



Gold-gilt monument in Nizwa, Oman.



Mohammad shows his khanjar dagger after repair at Sinaw souq, Oman.



Silks in Mutrah souq, Muscat, Oman.

Misfat Al Abriyeen, Oman



conjure its intoxicating, intense woody smell.

I loved exploring the souks. Arriving at Sinaw (gateway to the Sharqiya Sands), I was amazed to find a fish market teeming with fresh-caught mackerel, rays, squid and tuna the size of my Beemer. Then I spotted a shop specializing in repairing khanjar daggers. A traditional symbol of Omani heritage and masculine pride, these intricately designed, curved silver daggers are still every-day wear for many Omanis. Inside, a middle-age man—Mohammed—with full lips and a long wispy beard was dressed the part. He sat serenely as the shopkeeper meticulously tinkered with one of his daggers and its ornately adorned silver sheath. Proud and dignified, he graciously posed for my camera.

The Sharqiya Sands—the "Empty Quarter" immortalized by Thesiger's *Arabian Sands*—cover about 4,800 square miles of eastern Oman. Viewed from Google Earth, the vast sand sea is corduroyed in immense seif dunes that rise 1,000 feet from the desert floor and extend unbroken for hundreds of miles, parallel to the prevailing wind. Superimposed upon them are smaller, ever-shifting dunes that themselves soar hundreds of feet. It's one of the world's most daunting, and starkly beautiful, places. "More inaccessible than Tibet," thought Thesiger who, disguised as an Arab, famously traversed the forbidden quarter in 1948 by camel.

Saleh checked in on WhatsApp.

"I'm heading south to 100 Nights Desert Camp," I replied.

"Don't try riding the bike in Sharqiya!!!!!"

Hahaha!

I'm no Cyril Despres (see "Breaking Bones in Baja," *BMW ON*, April 2018). I parked the bike in a tire shop in Al Mintarib, at the edge of the copper-colored sands, and hired a Bedu guide and 4WD for the 30-mile run south to the desert encampment via a convoluted route with a thousand permutations of tracks. We fish-tailed at 40 miles per hour, ploughing over dunes and switching from one track to another to avoid softer patches. That evening, I clambered the dunes and sat in reverential silence as the setting sun threw in high relief a rippled landscape of swooping parabolas and sensuous silhouettes stretching as far as the eye could see.

I hit the coast again at Ras al Jinz Turtle Reserve, a superb government-run hotel and marine turtle sanctuary where that night I watched a mother loggerhead turtle sigh and groan as she lay her eggs, validating Oman's reputation for world-class wildlife preservation. Further north, at Sur Al Ayish, I watched artisans hand-crafting traditional wooden dhows in age-old fashion in Arabia's only remaining such boatyard. After two days following the shore of the Arabian Sea, I reached Shinas, departure point for the high-speed ferries that connect the Omani mainland with Musandam—a tiny peninsula separated from the rest of the sultanate by the UAE. Jutting like a ship's prow into the Strait of Hormuz, Musandam pierces the narrowest part of the Arabian Gulf, facing Iran.

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Dolphins and dhow in a Musandam knor, Oman.

As the ferry prepared to cast off, a trio of Omanis on large Hondas spun their wheels up the slick ramp. (Oman has no motorcycling culture; the only other big-bike I'd seen was a Harley-Davidson in Muscat.) We passed oil-tankers so numerous the scene resembled the D-Day invasion. Off to port, the surging Musandam coastline was seamed with countless rock layers in eggplant, bitter chocolate, and a kaleidoscope of more muted colors. Scoured, too, with a thousand fjord-like inlets called khor, teeming with dolphin. Only one—Khor Nadj—can be reached by road. The next day, ashore in Khasab, I negotiated a treacherous gravelly piste to the mountaintop Khor Nadj lookout, hoping for a postcard-perfect view of the talcum-white beach dissolving into the bay painted in turquoise and teal. Alas, the day (my last in Oman) was colorless: both cloudy and hazy. I corkscrewed cautiously back down the mountain and signed up for a dolphin-watching “safari” by dhow.

The traffic-free Khasab Coastal Road dipped and twined along the shore of the Arabian Gulf beneath mountains plunging a thousand feet to the ocean's edge. Sensational! Then came the UAE border and, beyond, a dismaying shift to a less orderly, less traditional, and less clean place. With each mile, the level of modernity multiplied, along with the traffic, until once again I was tangled in the coleoidae-like Dubai freeways.

“Any trouble with camels?” asked Saleh, checking over the GSA for damage.

“I steered clear!” I replied. “This was one trip I didn't want to end...I figured they might ruin my day.”



Camel in Sharqiya Sands, Oman.