

Arabian heights

Go beyond glitzy skyscrapers to find out why the Middle East is becoming a magnet for adventurers, writes Katie McGonagle

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The countries that make up the Middle East have got certain holidays down to a tee. In search of shopping? Try Dubai. Need to tag on a quick stopover? Spend a day in Doha. How about a little ancient culture and a lot of luxury hotels? Aim for Oman.

Yet some of the latest news to come out of the region has nothing to do with lavish hotels or multimillion-dollar developments – it's about new walking trails in Jordan, the chance to zipline through the mountains in Ras Al Khaimah, and soaring demand for Iran.

The region is starting to make a name on the adventure scene, with more active product on offer and small-group touring operators setting up to satisfy their customers' desire to explore beyond big-name hotels and man-made tourist hubs.

Whether travellers merely want to dip a toe in the water with an active day trip, or go the whole hog with a hardy adventure tour, now's the time to take another look at the Middle East.

▶ JORDAN

The Jordan Trail is a 402-mile walking route that extends from

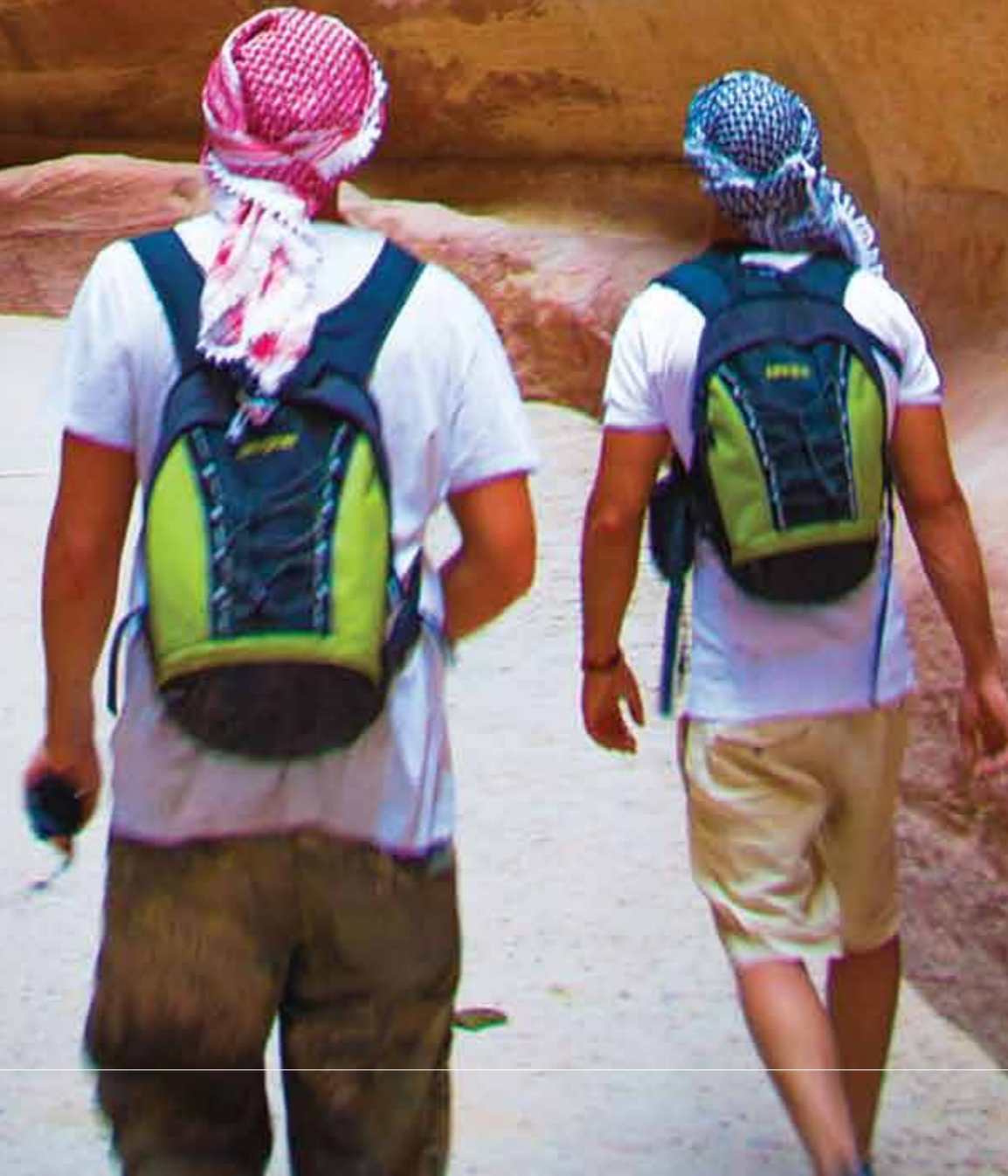
Umm Qais in the north to Aqaba in the south, passing through 52 villages en route. While the full trail takes about 40 days, it can be split into eight sections, crossing through the Dana Nature Reserve, the ancient city of Petra, and Unesco World Heritage-listed Wadi Rum desert.

While the walking trail can be done independently, several adventure operators are tapping into the upsurge in interest for Jordan, which saw a 6% jump in UK visitors last year. G Adventures added an Israel and Jordan Adventure this year, combining Roman ruins and

Dead Sea swimming with a 4x4 drive through the desert and a night in a Bedouin camp (15 days from £2,099 land-only).

The new Active range of walking, trekking and cycling trips from On The Go Tours also features Jordan: its eight-day Dana to Petra Trek includes five days of trekking and sleeping in a Bedouin camp, bookended by hotel nights (from £1,175).

The going is a little easier on Explore's Spice Trails of Petra trip, which is graded moderate, with two days' hiking and camping in the ancient city, plus visits to the Wadi Rum and [→](#)





LEFT:
Ramon
Crater,
Israel

RIGHT:
Dune-
bashing in
Qatar

BELOW:
Parachuting
in Dubai



➔ **Dead Sea.** It follows the spice trails of the ancient Nabataean people linking Petra to the Mediterranean, stopping at Roman city Jerash and the Crusader castle at Shobak (from £1,199 including flights).

▶ **ISRAEL**

It might have a reputation for winter sun and wellbeing breaks, but adventurous types will find plenty to keep them occupied in Israel. Try hiking up the rugged ancient fortress of Masada at sunrise, taking a four-wheel drive through the Ramon Crater, sleeping under the stars in the desert or swimming with dolphins.

For an even more comprehensive introduction to the country, Cyplon offers an eight-day Israel Highlights Tour that sees passengers take a cable car up to the Masada fortress, float in the salty waters of the Dead Sea, journey through the Jordan Valley and stay in a kibbutz overnight.

▶ **QATAR**

Dune-bashing isn't unique to Qatar, but this desert region gives the adrenaline-pumping activity a twist: not only do you zip up and down across the undulating dunes in a 4x4, but you do so with a sea view.

After the heart-racing adventure ends, most desert safaris include a chance to see camels up-close, go sandboarding or drive a quad bike, finishing at Khor Al Adaid, the Inland Sea. Falcon Tours Qatar offers a half-day desert safari from £83, or an overnight option with a barbecue by the water's edge from £284.

▶ **DUBAI**

Dubai is ideal territory for those who want to test the water without committing to an all-out adventure. Attraction World's

top-selling add-on in the emirate is its Sunset Safari & BBQ Dinner – think dune-bashing, sunset on the sand dunes, belly-dancing and henna tattoos (£64/adult, £45/child) – though if you're booking for a family, a private tour is better value, from £193 per vehicle seating up to six.

Intrepid Travel's new Dubai Discovery – a three-day stopover break – includes a Bedouin dinner and desert safari alongside guided tours of the spice and gold souks and a trip across Dubai Creek in a traditional abra boat (from £240). In fact, Intrepid has seen such strong sales of its Dubai and Abu Dhabi short breaks it is planning longer UAE tours for 2018.

However, if your clients have 'been there, done that' with dune-bashing, up the adventure ante with a hot-air balloon flight – local operator Balloon



Travel2 offers three nights at the five-star Anantara Desert Islands Resort & Spa from £789 based on two sharing a Deluxe Sea View Room including breakfast, private transfers and Etihad flights. Valid from September 1-26. travel2.com

Cyplon offers a seven-night Israel Highlights group tour with Luton-Tel Aviv flights and B&B accommodation from £1,345, based on an October 22 departure. cyplon.co.uk



→ Adventures can even throw in a mid-air falconry display for added excitement (from £253) – or book a shark dive at Dubai Aquarium to come face-to-face with the world's largest collection of sand tiger sharks.

“Perhaps the biggest surprise is Iran, popular with people who set trends rather than follow them

▶ **ABU DHABI**

“For those wanting adventure, I would recommend the theme parks for an adrenaline rush,” says Travel 2 senior product manager Deborah Wadhams. “As well as thrilling rides at Ferrari World, there are other attractions such as a karting academy and entertaining shows featuring acrobats, gravity-defying stunts and more. The world's fastest rollercoaster, the Formula Rossa, is at the park and reaches speeds of 150mph. Then Yas Waterworld is the perfect place to cool down after an adventurous day.”

Travel 2 offers a one-day, two-park ticket (£74/adult, £66/child).

If that's not your client's idea of an adventure, how about spotting Arabian oryx, gazelles, giraffes, ostriches and even cheetahs amid a 1,400-hectare wildlife park? Sir Bani Yas Island's Arabian Wildlife Park offers game-viewing drives plus horse-riding, hiking and more.



RIGHT: Kayaking in Mangrove National Park, Abu Dhabi

And if clients think the Middle East is pure desert, send them to Abu Dhabi's Mangrove National Park, a seven-square-mile forest just minutes from Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, where visitors can go kayaking and stand-up paddleboarding, looking out for

herons and flamingos among the mangroves (from £40 with Hala Abu Dhabi).

▶ **RAS AL KHAIMAH**

This lesser-known emirate boasts enough rugged landscapes to attract adventurers, and Jebel

Jais – the highest mountain in the UAE – is at the core. Its via ferrata is being renovated over the summer, completing in October, to increase capacity from 16 people per day to 200, adding new hiking and mountain-biking routes and glass-bottomed observation decks for those who prefer viewing to doing.

Divers can also look for green turtles in winter – the UAE is home to four species of turtles and more than a third of the world's whale and dolphin species – while stargazers will find its desert camps free of light pollution to admire the night sky.

▶ **OMAN**

The scenery is no less exciting across the border in Oman – which shares the Al Hajar mountains – lending itself to adventurous activities. The Alila Jabal Akhdar has introduced excursions capitalising on its mountain location, from a gentle walk through traditional villages Al Aqr and Al Ayn, to a level-five-graded trek across a via ferrata, where daredevils cross the mouth of a cave by way of 20m-high ropes.

If budgets don't allow for luxury hotels, Intrepid Travel has a new Discover Oman tour, priced from £1,720 land-only.

This eight-day adventure starts and ends in Muscat, journeying through Islamic forts, the remote landscape of Wahiba Sands and a breathtaking canyon at Jebel Shams in between.

▶ **IRAN**

If these sound like unexpected hits for the region, perhaps the biggest surprise is Iran, which has proven popular with people who like to set trends rather than follow them. It is now easier to reach thanks to BA's reintroduction of services to Tehran.

G Adventures' Discover Persia tour visits everything from mosques to mountain villages, with the safety net of its 'CEO' tour leader for those nervous of venturing through the country alone (14 days, from £2,129).

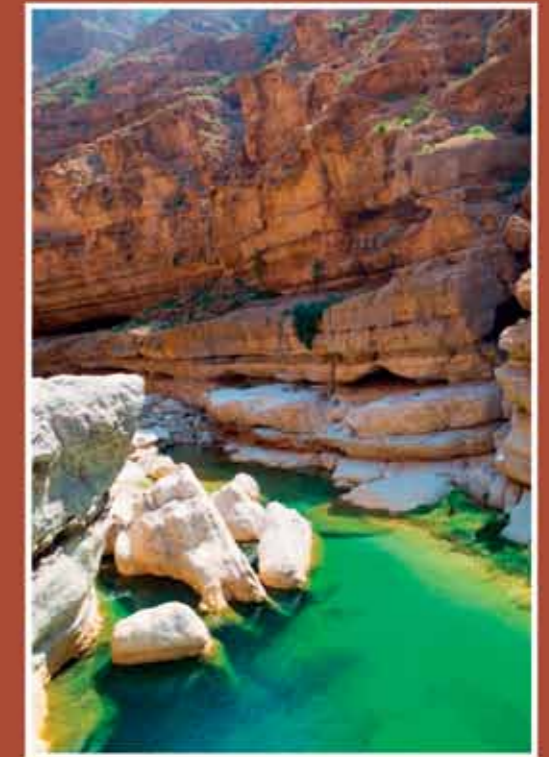
Iran was one of Intrepid's fastest-growing destinations last year, prompting the operator to increase departures of its Iran Adventure this year and add an eight-day Northern Iran Explorer for next year. Explore also ventures into northwest Iran on its 21-day Iran in Depth trip (from £2,799 with flights, departing April-May and September-December).

Who needs skyscrapers when you have all that to explore? **TW**

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ABOVE: Ras Al Khaimah's via ferrata is being renovated this summer