



Escape to the country

Look beyond the skyscrapers of the glitzy Gulf cities, says Kerry Webb

It's the bright lights, the jaw-dropping architecture of the world's tallest towers, and the desire to have a taste of a luxury lifestyle that draw many to the cities of the Gulf.

Ensnared among the desert dunes, the cities of Doha in Qatar, Abu Dhabi and Dubai in the United Arab Emirates and Muscat in Oman are each thriving, bustling, financial hubs where the pace is fast. However, there are lots of opportunities to escape these metropolises, either on a day trip or overnight stays. We explore some of the options – either adventurous or relaxing – for a getaway from the big city.

ESCAPE FROM DUBAI

Just half an hour's drive from the mighty Burj Khalifa, guests can easily find themselves among Dubai's desert dunes.

Numerous local excursion operators offer the ever-popular

adrenaline-fuelled dune bashing experience; however, Platinum Heritage focuses more on providing ecological and cultural experiences. It also transports guests across the dunes in 1950s vintage Land Rovers.

For those wanting to stay overnight at its desert camps – complete with the finer touches of mattresses, linen and hot showers – Platinum charges around £167 for its Overnight Safari and Bedouin Breakfast.

Alternatively, for a night in the desert check into one of Dubai's luxurious desert resorts – either Bab Al Shams Desert Resort & Spa or the adult-only Al Maha Resort & Spa, where guests take up residence in a standalone pool suite and it's not unusual to see grazing oryx come right to the door. Prices for a five-night stay at Al Maha, including flights, start from £1,099 with Gold Medal for travel between May 29 and



LEFT:
Rixos Bab Al Bahr, Ras Al Khaimah

RIGHT:
Al Boom Diving

BELOW:
Desert Island Resort & Spa by Anantara



➔ June 19 next year, based on a full-board stay in a Bedouin suite.

Alternatively, swap the desert for the mountains and take the winding road that cuts through the Hajar Mountains to Dubai's sister emirates, Fujairah or Ras Al Khaimah – each about a two-hour drive. Nestled between the beach and the mountains, hotels include the Waldorf Astoria, The Cove Rotana and the all-inclusive Rixos Bab Al Bahr in Ras Al Khaimah.

As well as being popular with mountain bikers and trekkers, this area also draws divers. Al Boom Diving is the dominant Padi dive school in the UAE, with a permanent centre in Le Méridien Al Aqah Beach Resort in Fujairah. One dive costs from £51.

Meanwhile, Banyan Tree offers guests the best of both worlds with its two sister properties – the desert resort of Banyan Tree Al Wadi and, 20 minutes away by car, Banyan Tree Ras Al Khaimah Beach.



Swap the desert for the mountains and take the winding road that cuts through the Hajar Mountains

▶ ESCAPE FROM ABU DHABI

Although just minutes from the city centre, a few strokes of a paddle will see guests lose themselves amid the mangroves that lie just off the coast from the Eastern Mangroves Hotel & Spa by Anantara. Join a guided kayak tour via the hotel's resident watersports operator, Sea Hawk, and weave along the labyrinth of hidden paths that cut through this floating carpet of dense foliage.

Farther afield is Sir Bani Yas

Island, a private island three miles off the coast – although it's a 150-mile drive from downtown Abu Dhabi to the harbour where guests meet for the boat transfer.

This nature reserve is home to an eyebrow-raising array of free-roaming wildlife, thanks to the Abu Dhabi ruling family having introduced a number of non-indigenous breeds, giraffes and cheetahs among them. Activities include wildlife safaris, kayaking, horse riding and mountain biking.

For those that want to stay overnight, check into the island's Desert Island Resort & Spa by Anantara.

If time is tight (and money isn't) then guests can also travel to the island via seaplane. Operated by Seawings, the scenic flight takes 55 minutes from Abu Dhabi's Yas Island or an hour and 10 minutes from Dubai Creek. Day trips include return flights, a nature drive and lunch at the hotel (£560).

From an island to a resort hidden among the region's highest sand dunes is Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort by Anantara. Like something out of the Arabian Nights, this luxurious oasis is a two-hour drive from the city in the vast Rub' Al Khali, the largest uninterrupted sand desert in the world, and feels like an authentic Arabian fort.

Western & Oriental offers a five-night stay from £1,305 departing in January 2017, with Etihad flights from Heathrow and transfers, staying B&B in a deluxe garden room.

▶ ESCAPE FROM MUSCAT

Muscat has a slower feel to it than the other Gulf capitals, but with the cruise terminal being just a short walk from the centre and the constant yet exhilarating chaos of the Mutrah Souk, guests may want to escape. They don't have to look too far.

Just a couple of miles down ➔



→ the coast is Shangri-La's Barr Al Jissah, a three-hotel resort. Al Waha, complete with its lazy river, is the obvious family choice; gourmands will love Al Bandar; while those looking for luxury should opt for the palatial Al Husn. The resort offers daily dolphin-watching cruises, while the inner sanctum of Chi, The Spa, is the perfect haven to let the mind and body drift away.

Travel 2 offers five nights' B&B in a superior pool view room at Al Waha from £779 including return flights and transfers, based on travel between May 1 and June 30, 2017.

Farther afield, about a two and a half hour drive southwest of Muscat, is eco-resort Alila Jabal Akhdar near the village of Nizwa. Perched some 2,000m above sea level, it's the ideal base for exploring the region's magnificent landscape, surrounding villages and heritage

RIGHT:
Shangri-La's
Barr Al Jissah
Resort & Spa

FAR RIGHT:
Alila Jabal
Akhdar



“
The rugged landscape is what distinguishes Oman from its neighbours

sites – most notably Nizwa Fort, Oman's most historic monument.

Indeed, the rugged landscape is what distinguishes Oman from its neighbours. To explore the country, local tour operator Gulf Leisure has all the adventure pursuits covered, from caving and canyoning to desert safaris over Wahiba Sands and dolphin watching in its glass-bottomed boat.

Nature lovers should also make a beeline for the bay of Ras Al Jinz, a popular stomping ground for turtles, or head out to sea to visit the Damaniyat Islands, the perfect spot for diving and snorkelling.

▶ ESCAPE FROM DOHA

While all eyes will be on Doha when it hosts the World Cup in 2022, shining a light on the rest of the country are local tour operators including Qatar International Adventures (QIA), Gulf Adventures and Arabian Adventures Qatar. All offer similar tours, including the obligatory desert safari. But what makes Qatar's safaris so different is that the dunes are right beside the coast. Khor Al Adaid, also known as the Inland Sea, is one of few places in the world where the sea encroaches deep into the desert. The only way to take a dip in this stretch of water is to deflate the tyres and cross the monstrously high dunes in a 4WD. After sand boarding and dune bashing, be

sure to have a cooling swim. An Inland Sea Safari with Gulf Adventures starts from £85.

In the other direction, north of Doha, tours take in the former pearl-diving village of Al Khor, the Unesco World Heritage Site of Al Zubarah Fort, Al Jassasiya Carvings and birdwatching in the Al Takhira Mangroves. This tour with Arabian Adventures Qatar costs from £75. **TW**

Cyplon
HOLIDAYS

LUXURY HOLIDAYS IN
JORDAN

- ★ FLIGHTS FROM REGIONAL UK AIRPORTS
- ★ TAILORMADE HOLIDAYS & EXCURSIONS
- ★ VISIT THE DEAD SEA, AMMAN, AQABA & PETRA
- ★ PRIVATE TAXI TRANSFERS INCLUDED

CONTACT US ON FREEPHONE
0800 074 8888
or visit www.cyplon.co.uk

ABTA
IATA
AITO
www.visitjordan.gov.jo

Musandam Peninsula

It's part of Oman, but Musandam is separated from the main part of Oman by the eastern coastline of the UAE – so technically, it's an easier escape from Dubai (just a two-hour drive) than it is Muscat. The highlight is undoubtedly the rugged scenery viewed from a dhow as you cruise the fjords – normally accompanied by dolphins.

The most luxurious bed for the night can be found at the Six Senses Ziggy Bay Resort – renowned for guests being able to arrive there by paraglider. Carrier offers five nights with breakfast in a pool villa, with Emirates flights and private transfers, from £2,180, departing May 1, 2017.