



DANAE MERCER drives
from coast to mountain
to city in the Arabian
Gulf's friendliest, most
spectacular and (formerly)
most secretive land

Danae Mercer駕車穿越海岸、
山脈和城市，探索阿拉伯灣最
熱情好客、風光最秀麗，一度
披上神秘面紗的國土

THE OPENING OF
OMAN
打開阿曼的大門



It is 6pm in Oman. The sun has dipped behind the Al Hajar mountains and the moon, nearly full, is the brightest thing in sight.

We are inside a box room while a Liverpool football match blares from the TV on the wall.

'Halwa?' one of the officers asks, presenting a sticky sweet dish of ghee, flour and nuts. 'Coffee?'

I've been on the road for 10 hours, and we've just found the world's friendliest police checkpoint.

Oman is naturally extraordinary. Its geography ranges from the monsoon-kissed southern coast to a fair chunk of the Empty Quarter desert to the jagged mountains of the Musandam Peninsula. Oman is a world apart from neighbouring Dubai. Low-rise buildings meet huge expanses of emptiness. Red dunes merge into sharp mountains and goats wander along the quieter streets.

It's vast, empty, unprocessed – but changing. In the mid 1990s, this historic and conservative land began, very cautiously, to open

阿

曼時間下午6時。太陽已隱沒在Al Hajar山脈背後，眼前最明亮的景色是天際的一輪圓月。

我們置身斗室，牆上的電視正大聲播放著一場利物浦足球賽。

「要吃點哈爾瓦酥糖嗎？」其中一位警官遞來一碟以酥油、麵粉和果仁製成的甜糕。「要喝杯咖啡嗎？」

我們已在路上十個小時，剛剛走進了世上最親切友善的警察檢查站。

阿曼擁有與眾不同的天然景觀。其疆土從南部受季候風影響的海岸，延綿至大片空曠的Empty Quarter沙漠，至穆桑代姆半島的崎嶇山脈。阿曼的面貌與毗鄰的杜拜可謂天淵之別：大片曠野上點綴了低矮樓房，紅色沙丘與崇山峻嶺連成一氣，人煙稀少的街道上有山羊在遊蕩。

但這片空曠遼闊、未經開發的土地正在悄悄轉變。1990年代中期，這個歷史悠久而保守的國家小心翼翼地開放旅遊市場，現時步伐正不斷加快。阿曼旅遊部將在未來25年投資高達350億美元（2,730億港元），計劃將酒店客房數目增加四成。

up to tourism. Now the pace is quickening. The Ministry of Tourism is investing up to US\$35 billion (HK\$273 billion) over the next 25 years, with a 40 per cent increase in the number of hotel rooms planned. Already a handful of new hotels have popped up. The focus: premium properties, higher-spending guests, no mass tourism, not much for backpackers.

I want to see Oman of the present, not the future. And I want to do it from the road.

The actual driving in Oman is very easy as the road conditions are very good. They have big, open highways with a lot of long, straight stretches,' says Kieran Smith of Lightfoot Travel, a bespoke tour operator that helps me organise almost all my trip's logistics. Smith had recently finished a similar Oman journey. The roads are winding and may require a 4x4, he warns me. Mountains can be challenging and desert even tougher.

'But as long as you're a confident driver,' he adds, 'I think you should be fine.'

At noon on a Friday in Dubai, my friend Stacey Siebritz and I pile into her dusty 2007 4x4 Pajero.

We set off for Oman.

The roughly two-hour drive from Dubai to Six Senses Zighy Bay is pretty and simple. For 98 kilometres we travel along the E33.

Closer to Dibba, as Google Maps fails, we follow the hotel's own directions: 'Left at the dolphin roundabout,' 'Straight across lantern roundabout'. Roundabouts are rarely dull things in Oman.

Six Senses Zighy Bay is five-star, isolated and romantic, with dimly lit stone-and-wood villas inspired by traditional Omani architecture spread out between two pools and palm trees.

Stacey finds the private beach while I hike toward the valley of Wadi al Khamsi. It's steep and sharp but my guide keeps glancing at the sky. 'We just need to get over the mountain before the sun goes down,' he says, and so we push on. At the top there are views across the neighbouring village – flat, tan buildings – and a fisherman's cove. The guide beckons me to peer inside a squat house of heavy stone.

'People lived here until 20 years ago.' 'Still?'

He shakes his head. 'No water, no electricity? It was a different life.'

Google tells us the drive from coastal Zighy Bay to Alila Jabal Akhdar, perched some 2,000 metres above sea level, will take seven hours.

It takes closer to 10.

There are the Al Hajar mountains to cross. And there are multiple borders –

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MOUNTAINS CAN BE CHALLENGING AND DESERT EVEN TOUGHER

山路絕不輕鬆，在沙漠駕車更為艱辛

當地已有數家全新酒店陸續落成，以優質住宿招徠高消費旅客，把大型旅行團拒諸門外，更令背包客望而卻步。

我想欣賞阿曼的當下風光，而非發展後的面貌。而且我希望以公路旅行的方式進行。

專為旅客度身訂造行程的Lightfoot Travel旅行社為我安排這趟旅程的大小事宜，其職員Kieran Smith表示：「在阿曼市區駕車輕而易舉，因為道路狀況優良，寬闊的大型高速公路有許多長而筆直的路段。」Smith說他最近完成了類似的阿曼自駕遊，他提醒我穿越阿曼郊區的道路蜿蜒曲折，可能需要出動四驅車，駕馭山路的旅程絕不輕鬆，而在沙漠地帶駕車更為艱辛。

他補充道：「不過只要你對自己的駕駛技術有信心，就不會有問題。」

某個星期五中午，我和朋友Stacey Siebritz在杜拜爬進她那輛滿是灰塵的2007年三菱Pajero四驅車。

我們出發前往阿曼。

從杜拜前往Six Senses Zighy Bay酒店約需兩小時，一路車程輕鬆簡單、風光明媚。

我們在E33公路行駛了98公里，快到Dibba時卻連不上Google地圖，於是按照酒店提供的指示前進：「在海豚迴旋處左轉」，「過了燈籠迴旋處向前直駛」。阿曼的迴旋處往往充滿妙趣，一點也不沉悶。

Six Senses Zighy Bay是一家隱世而洋溢浪漫情懷的五星級酒店，別墅坐落在兩個泳池和棕櫚樹之間，採用傳統的阿曼建築風格，以石頭和木材建成，內部燈光柔和舒適。

Stacey前往酒店的私人海灘，我則朝著Wadi al Khamsi峽谷的方向遠足。路途陡峭險峻，可是導遊卻不斷抬頭望向天空：「我們得在日落前越過山峰。」因此我們加快了步伐。站在山巔，可以俯瞰毗鄰村莊的棕色平房，還有一個小漁灣。導遊示意我向一間由厚重石塊砌成的小屋內張望。

「直至20年前，還有人住在這裡。」「現在還有嗎？」

他搖搖頭。「沒有水和電力的生活，教人無法想像。」

Google地圖顯示，從海邊的Zighy Bay駕車前往盤踞海拔2,000多米山上的Alila Jabal Akhdar度假村需要七個小時。實際車程卻花了近十小時。



我們不但需要穿越Al Hajar山脈，途中更得不時進出阿聯酋的邊境，一共越過五個邊境關卡。

人煙阜盛的風景不時在我們眼前曇花一現，復又轉瞬即逝。我們在阿聯酋的沙迦市，經過水果攤檔林立的Maliha路；沿路前進約一個小時後，我們來到一個小鎮，那裡攤在陽光下的地毯和陶器顯得異常耀眼，吸引一車車遊客駐足細看。我們停在加油站午餐，以即溶咖啡和炸雞果腹。離開時，提示穆斯林禱告的鐘聲剛好響起。

我們再次進食已是多個小時後，那時太陽已下山，由於途中多次迷路，令我們感到煩躁不安。就在這個時候，我們兩個筋疲力盡而且風塵僕僕的人駕車駛進了世上最親切友善的警察檢查站，停車等待檢查。一名警衛從檢查站走出來。

「要喝杯咖啡嗎？」他笑著提議。對於那時的我們而言，他絕對是適時的救星。「要吃點哈爾瓦酥糖嗎？」

Alila Jabal Akhdar度假村以大自然美景為招徠，為賓客在四面環抱的壯麗美景之中，提供一處稍事歇息的奢華空間。客房建在高架木樑上，可飽覽Al Hajar山脈景致，低調的別色和灰色、大型陽台和獨立石砌浴室別具粗獷質樸的魅力。儘管歷史古城Nizwa近在咫尺，但置身於此卻恍如天涯之外。

某個早上，我們遠足途經一個乾河谷（只在雨季才會注滿水的乾涸河床），清涼的空氣寂靜無聲，周遭只聽見我倆的呼吸聲及山羊的叫聲。第二天，我首次嘗試鐵索攀岩，身體緊貼懸崖邊緣，兩位阿曼導遊守護兩側。隨著世界像是要



The big leap
The Jabal Akhdar range
(above) contains the Middle
East's deepest canyon

山高水遠
在Jabal Akhdar山脈(上圖)
下是中東最深邃的峽谷



Don't look down

Clockwise from top: cliff-face-clinging Alila Jabal Akhdar; Six Senses Ziggy Bay; dining at the Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar

居高臨下

上圖起順時針：Alila Jabal Akhdar度假村盤踞在懸崖峭壁之上；Six Senses Ziggy Bay酒店；在Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar度假村用餐

five in all – as we cross into, then back out of, the United Arab Emirates.

Impromptu scenes of bustling daily life play out in front of us, then disappear again. Along Maliha Road in the UAE city of Sharjah, fruit stalls line the street. In a small town about an hour down the road, rows of rugs and ceramics glint in the sun, pored over by bussed-in tourists. We pause at a petrol station for a lunch of instant coffee and fried chicken. A call to prayer sounds as we walk out.

We don't eat again until hours later, after the sun has set and our nerves – thanks to getting lost a few times – have long frayed. That's when we get to The World's Friendliest Police Checkpoint. As we pull up, exhausted and dusty, a guard walks out.

'Coffee?' He offers, smiling. He is everything we need in that moment. 'Halwa?'

The Alila Jabal Akhdar is one of those properties that lets nature speak while it sits back, ready to offer a luxurious respite from the all-round sublimeness whenever it's needed. Rooms on stilts look out across the Al Hajar mountain range. It's all rustic charm with understated browns and greys, huge balconies and stand-alone stone baths. The historical town of Nizwa is nearby, but the world feels thousands of miles away.

One morning we hike through a *wadi* (a dried stone riverbed that floods during the rainy season), the cool air silent save for our breathing and the call of goats. The

next day I'm harnessed to the cliff face, flanked by two Omani guides, for my first round of via ferrata climbing. As the world drops away beneath me, the guide looks over. 'Picture?' he suggests, telling me to lean back, let my hands go and practise the 'trust fall'. Later – there was a later – I looked back at the shots. Not my most natural camera face ever.

Roughly a 30-minute drive away, on the same protected mountain, is the newly opened Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar. The highest five-star resort in the Middle East, this spacious venue has large villas with private pools, a fort theme and a family feel. Stacey and I borrow bikes to cycle around the surrounding small town, dotted with tiered square houses glinting blue and gold in the sun.

'Just 30 years ago, you couldn't be a tourist. You couldn't enter Oman. There were still donkeys and no roads in Muscat,' Ekta Gandhi, a former public relations manager for the hotel and long-time Oman resident, tells us later that night over freshly grilled octopus. Behind her, the sun drips yolk down the mountain. 'It's changed in a quick amount of time and in the right way: art, culture, nature. Oman does see a future in tourism but they want to do it correctly.'

'How early is too early to go?' Stacey asks me as we pack for the fourth time. It is hard to leave Oman and our final bolthole, The Chedi Muscat. Set in 8.5 hectares of



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IT'S THE HIGHEST FIVE-STAR RESORT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

這所是中東地勢最高的
五星級度假酒店

在我的腳下流走，導遊轉頭問我：「要拍照嗎？」他建議我放開雙手、身體往後一縱，後來我回看那些相片（是的，我還活著），那絕非我拍照時最自然的表情。

新開幕的Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar 度假村距離該處約30分鐘車程，坐落在同一座受保護的山峰上。這所中東地勢最高的五星級度假酒店空間寬闊，以堡壘為設計主題，提供設有私家泳池的大型別墅，充滿溫馨的家庭格調。我和Stacey借來單車，騎到酒店外的小鎮逛逛，一排排方正的平房在陽光下閃耀著藍色和金色的光芒。



garden, with every palm tree lined up symmetrically, The Chedi has become our authentic Arabian oasis.

The road feels like a marathon: we want to finish, we know we must finish, but by the final stretch we are so tired. For our last leg, we will take Route 1 from Muscat to Dubai, branching inland toward the city of Al Ain to cross the border at Hatta.

'I stayed at that border once for six hours,' Stacey adds, stressing the importance of getting there early, while the world sleeps. In the end, we leave at 8am.

Halfway to Dubai, we pull into a petrol station for fuel and then just wander around, reluctant to drive again. I suggest lunch at the local teahouse. Inside, a young man offers us a plastic menu, all in Arabic. We point, order, and five minutes later receive thin crusty bread stuffed with egg and sauce, served alongside hot, sticky sweet chai.

'Bread Omani,' he explains when we ask. 'Bread Omani,' and he writes it down to clarify as we use our fingertips to grab the remaining crumbs.

We get back in the car, back on the road to Dubai. Sand, caught in the wind, gusts through the air. On the radio there are tunes from the '90s. As easily as we entered it, we leave Oman behind. But through all of it – through the petrol station food, the fruit stalls, the five-star hotels, the mountains, beach and desert – we sample just a bite of Oman's true flavour.

It tastes of sea, salt and sun, of history and change. It tastes delicious. ■

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NEED TO KNOW 有用資訊

Six Senses Zighy Bay 酒店
sixsenses.com

Alila Jabal Akhdar 度假村
alilahotels.com

Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar 度假村
jabal-akhdar.anantara.com

The Chedi Muscat 酒店
ghmhotels.com/en/muscat

晚上，我們與曾任酒店公關經理的 Ekta Gandhi 共晉晚餐。這位已在阿曼居住多年的女士一邊品嚐新鮮烤製的八爪魚，一邊告訴我們：「30年前這裡根本沒有遊客，外國人無法踏足阿曼。首都馬斯喀特仍然滿街驢子，沒有任何道路設施。」她的身後，漸落西山的太陽正綻放餘暉。她續說：「改變來得很快，幸好是朝著正確的方向發展，阿曼以藝術、文化和自然為賣點，旅遊業前景一片光明，政府希望穩步發展。」

我們第四次收拾行李時，Stacey 問我：「何時出發才算是太早？」阿曼和最後一個落腳點 The Chedi Muscat 酒店教我們感到依依不捨。這家度假酒店擁有面積達 8.5 公頃的花園，棕櫚樹整齊夾道，是我們真正的阿拉伯綠洲。

駕車猶如一趟馬拉松：我們希望完成旅程，也知道必須完成它，但在踏上最後一段路時，我們已疲憊不堪。最後一段路程，我們從馬斯喀特取道一號公路前往杜拜，然後選擇內陸支道前往艾因市，再在 Hatta 穿越邊境。

Stacey 強調必須於清晨時分，趁著眾人仍在夢鄉時抵達邊境：「我曾經在那裡等候了六小時才能過境。」結果我們還是到早上 8 時才離開。

前往杜拜的路途中段，我們停下來加油，然後就在附近遊蕩，不想返回車上。我提議在一家當地茶室午餐。茶室裡一位青年遞給我們一張膠製餐牌，上面寫的全是阿拉伯文，我們只好隨便亂點。五分鐘後送來的，是裡面夾了雞蛋和醬料的薄脆麵包，搭配溫熱甜膩的奶茶。

「這是阿曼麵包。」他向我們解釋。當我們用手指頭拈起盤內的麵包碎，他又寫下「阿曼麵包」，確保我們明白。

我們返回車上，再次上路，往杜拜的方向前進。大風將地上的沙刮起。電台播放著 90 年代的樂曲。如同來時那樣，我們很快將阿曼拋在身後。但在加油站的食物、水果攤檔、五星級酒店、山脈、海灘和沙漠等各種事物之中，我們體驗到點點阿曼的風味。

其中充滿著海洋、鹽和陽光，還有歷史和改變的滋味，而且令人回味無窮。■

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DISCOVER OMAN

Cathay Pacific flies to Dubai from Hong Kong seven times a week

探索阿曼

國泰航空設有由香港飛往杜拜的航班，每周有七班

HOW TO DRIVE IN OMAN 在阿曼駕車的秘訣

IF YOU ARE renting a car from Dubai to take to Oman, make sure that you get Oman insurance. You will be asked for this at the border.

There are numerous border crossings in and out of Oman, but the rules on which ones foreigners are allowed to take change quite frequently. Double check with the hotels before you go.

Book at least three nights at each property. The drives between them can be quite long.

If I did the trip again, I'd stop between Six Senses Zighy Bay and the Alila Jabal Akhdar for a few nights in Al Ain. This would split the epic 10-hour drive up into two shorter chunks.

It's best to do the trip with three or four people. Don't try it with one, as navigating the map requires active focus.

All the mountain properties offer some form of over-the-mountain transport. They just don't all advertise it the same way. Just ask when you book.

Most international driving licences, especially those with a photo, are valid for driving in Oman as a tourist. But, as with anything, check.

如果你在杜拜租車前往阿曼，須確保取得阿曼的汽車保險。邊境關卡將會要求你出示保險證明。

來往阿曼的路上有許多邊境關卡，但容許外國人使用的過境關卡的規例經常改變。出發前務必與酒店確認詳情。

在每個住宿地點逗留至少三晚，因為各個住宿地點之間的車程可能頗長。

如果再來一趟，我會在 Six Senses Zighy Bay 酒店至 Alila Jabal Akhdar 度假村途中的艾因市停留數晚。這樣可以把十小時的駕車時間分成兩段較短的車程。

最好三至四人同行。不要只與一名旅伴出發，因為查看地圖需要無比專注力。

所有位於山區住宿地點都提供某些登山交通工具，只不過宣傳的方式可能有所不同。可在訂房時查詢詳情。

大部分國際駕照（特別是附有相片的）均可在阿曼以遊客身份駕車。不過出發前最好再次確認。

