



DESTINATION OMAN

Brett Atkinson finds a cure for jetlag at two opulent and beguiling resorts beside the Arabian Gulf.

The Chedi, Muscat

Sometimes it's hard to switch off, but with 156 rooms and private villas set amid nine hectares of date palms and water gardens, The Chedi in Oman is infused with a coolly sophisticated and relaxed informality that redeems the longest of flights. We've flown 23 hours via Brisbane and Dubai to get here and with two swimming pools, three bars, four restaurants and nearly 400 metres of prime Arabian Gulf beach front, The Chedi's reputation as Muscat's most relaxing resort is under no threat. Miraculously, our jetlag is jettisoned soon after we check in at the resort's stunning Arabian-themed lobby

Guarded by indigo mountains and trimmed by sea and a cobalt-blue sky, Muscat stretches out with row upon row of whitewashed villas. By decree of the Sultan Qaboos, no building can stand taller than four stories, and residents are forbidden to paint their homes in bright colours. Muscat looks impossibly modern and charmingly traditional at the same time, and the Sultan's design edict flows effortlessly to The Chedi, Oman's premier boutique resort. Perched beside the turquoise waters of the Gulf, The Chedi's relaxed and pampering mix of Asian minimalism and Middle Eastern dignity is the perfect antidote to the wannabe California-on-steroids that near neighbour Dubai can be.

In earlier centuries Muscat was an important trading port, and the Sultanate's hand-crafted dhows transported goods as far away as India and Zanzibar. Now the world is coming to Oman, and The Chedi is the latest haunt for visitors seeking an exotic escape. That's if you can get a reservation. We overheard a rumour that British supermodel Kate Moss had also requested a few rooms, but the hotel was already full so poor Kate was sent packing down the road to the equally impressive Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah Resort and Spa. Armed with the slightly disarming knowledge that we may technically be sleeping in Kate Moss's bed tonight we go exploring.

With The Chedi's sparkling white exterior fulfilling the Sultan's pristine building code, the resort's super-comfortable rooms introduce natural warmth with wooden floors, and Balinese-style furniture. Think "natural" with a 21st-century spin straight out of *wallpaper** magazine, as The Chedi's Club Suites incorporate wireless internet, Bose stereos and pre-programmed iPods. Rain forest shower heads combine with Bulgari toiletries, and, secreted within the resort's water gardens, the Chedi Club Lounge provides a traditional balance, with a stunning library showcasing Arabian history

The Chedi Muscat is an exclusive beach resort that offers world-class facilities for the discerning traveller.



Perched beside the turquoise waters of the Gulf, The Chedi offers a relaxed and pampering mix of Asian minimalism and Middle Eastern dignity.

Opposite page: A country of diversity and natural beauty, Oman has plenty to attract tourists seeking something a little out of the ordinary.



and culture. When you consider Oman's heritage as a fulcrum of trade to and from India and Africa, the subtle collage of influences makes perfect sense.

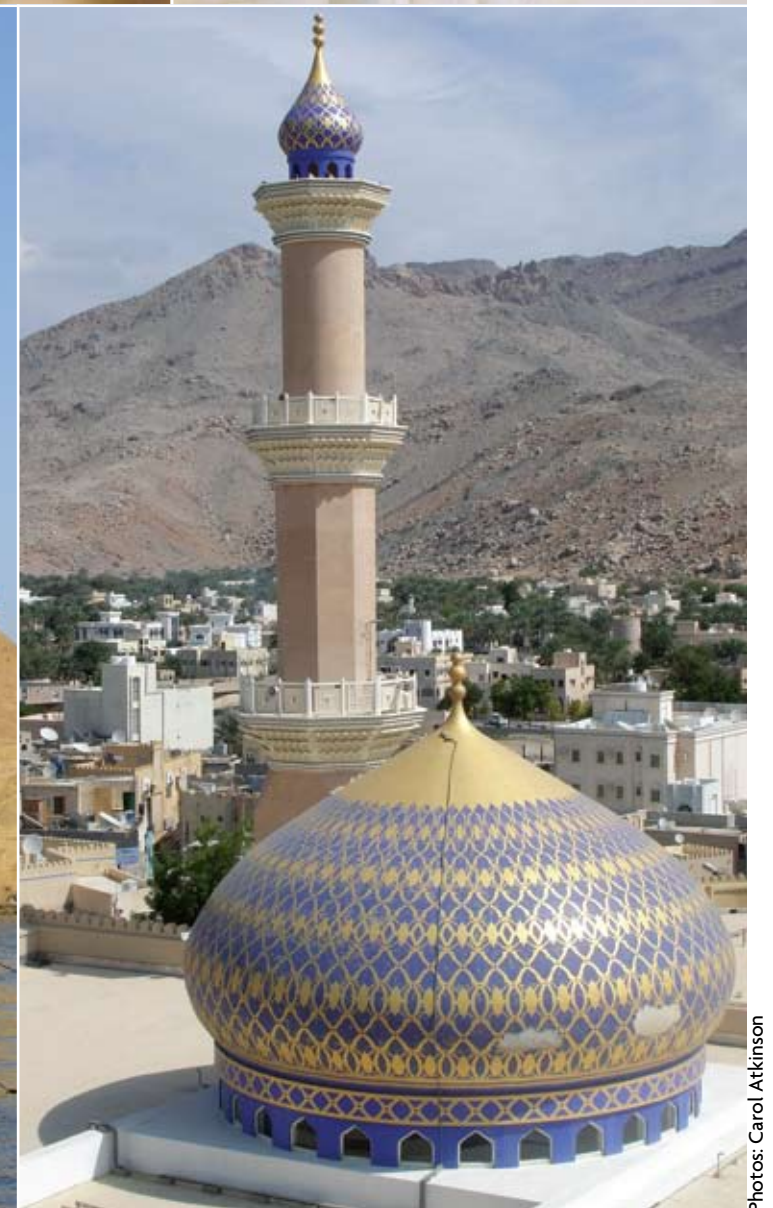
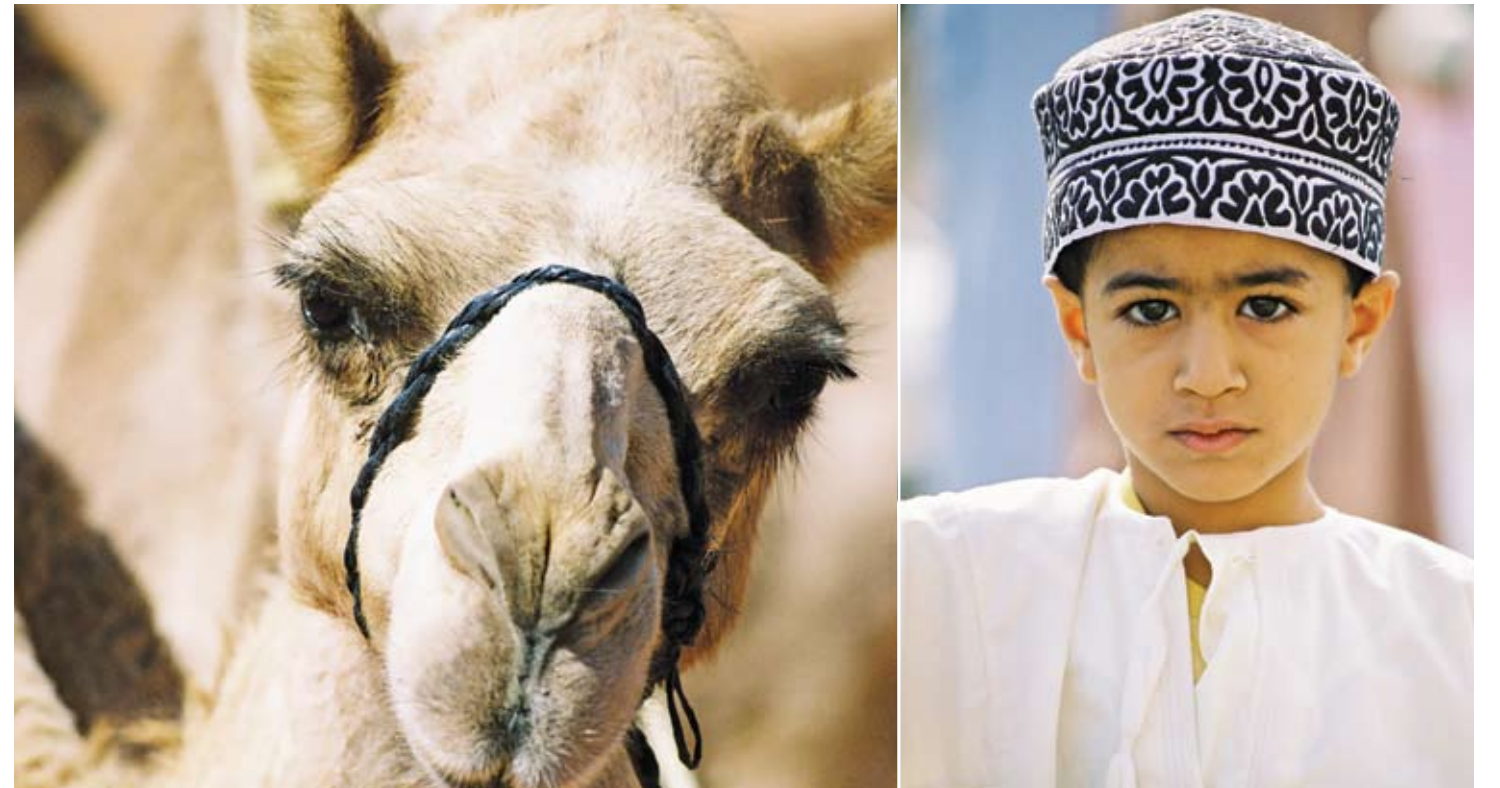
Oman's history as a trading nation also inspires The Chedi's eclectic approach to food, and the resort's four restaurants are served by open kitchens preparing Arabic, Indian, Mediterranean and Asian cuisine. Indian tandoor chefs work alongside Omanis grilling perfect kebabs, while Thai chefs deliver defiantly authentic curries. Breakfast creates a dilemma with still-warm fresh bread and home made jams going head to head with creamy moutabel eggplant dip, fresh pita bread and sharp local feta. In the middle of the main restaurant, an entire wall incorporates Oman's best wine cellar, even including a few bottles of Villa Maria's finest.

Even having a swim is a big decision. The Chedi Pool is nicely intimate, nestled beside the resort's 370m private beach, while The Serai Pool is more central with easier access to a cold Heineken and wood-fired pizza for lunch. After lunch we have a very soothing treatment at the Balinese-style spa, where our jetlag is further deferred with a 90-minute session involving body wraps, massage and natural herbs and spices – like turmeric and galangal – I'm more used to seeing in a Thai curry. Who knew relaxing could be such hard (and fragrant) work?

After making tough decisions involving relaxation all afternoon, we make it easy on ourselves and dine at The Beach Restaurant as an indigo Omani dusk settles. The restaurant's slightly more-than-obvious name is never going to win any prizes for originality, but the seafood-inspired menu is terrific. Once again, a delicate Asian tinge infuses the food with dishes like Tempura swordfish and Teriyaki smoked salmon.

Later at night we dismiss the Middle East's reputation as a destination for teetotalers with zingy cocktails in the restaurant's bar, all served up in decor that could have been transplanted from London or New York.

We've barely been in Oman 12 hours, and already our 23-hour flight seems a distant memory; proof that switching off is sometimes really rather easy.



Photos: Carol Atkinson



Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah Resort and Spa



When a team of resort architects are given 50 pristine hectares of absolute waterfront on the Gulf of Oman to play with, you can forgive them for stretching out just a little and building three different hotels. And when visitors like Tom Cruise and Kate Moss drop by a few weeks after the grand opening, you know the design team at Oman's Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah Resort and Spa must have done something right.

Perched at the far end of the beach, Al Waha ("The Oasis") is a relaxed five-star hotel, and growing in popularity as an Arabian escape from European winters. Beside it lies Al Bandar, ("The Town on the Sea"), with a sophisticated business focus, and then, high on the hill looking over the whole complex, is the exceptionally private Al Husn ("The Castle"), one of the Middle East's ritziest six-star offerings.

The Shangri-La Al Jissah is just 20-minutes by chauffeured Bentley from Oman's capital, Muscat, but don't expect to make the journey back to town too often. Make sure you've already had a good look around Muscat's forts, castles and souks, because with the Shangri-La's 13 different restaurants and six bars, the resort's array of rocky coves will probably be all you need.

All we need is quickly revealed in our room at Al Husn, built high on the cliffs and with views to a scattering of idiosyncratic wind-eroded islands. The team at Al Husn has many qualities, but absolute discretion obviously isn't one of them. It's quietly, but excitedly, revealed that Mr



Cruise is currently kicking back in the Al Gibran suite just down the hall, and Ms Moss is reading about herself at the bookshop downstairs. But with three swimming pools and Al Husn's private beach to explore, (complete with a "suntan butler" to advise you when to turn over), star spotting is the last thing on our minds. That's once we can tear ourselves away from our luscious Arab-themed room that somehow avoids overflowing into overt garishness. It can be a fine line between kitsch and class, but Al Husn gets it exactly right.

Dubai and Oman are just an hour's flight apart but very different. Oman is more subtle, discreet and traditional, with just a few luxury destinations almost getting lost in the country's expansive geography of cobalt-trimmed coastline, mountains and deserts. While Dubai tends to more flashy and man-made, Oman is more low-key, and determinations need to be made between desert camping and exploring hidden, palm-fringed oases.

Al Jissah's 13 restaurants also provide plenty of scope for making our own decisions. The options include the formal Shahrazad at Al Husn, an authentic Moroccan eatery run by a husband-and-wife team from Casablanca and staffed only by Moroccans. Al Tanoor is a classy twist on the traditional food court with eight different open kitchens presenting the best of Middle Eastern, Indian and Asian cuisine. Great tastes include grilled chicken shwarma and an array of Arabic desserts that are not for the indecisive. A Spanish tapas bar,

an Argentinian steak house, and wood-fired pizzas served alfresco poolside ensure we've got the chance to eat a different cuisine for every meal. Sunset cocktails and chilled international beats in the oceanside Long Bar quickly become a nightly routine. Apparently there's a lot more to see in the Sultanate of Oman, but we're really not in any hurry.

We balance this gentle hedonism by kayaking around Al Jissah's stunning seascape and with a half day session at Chi, the resort's spa, housed in a private villa. Chi's signature Five Elements Treatment balances our negative yin and positive yang energies. It's really Far East meets Middle East as Chi's Thai team leads us gently through the routine of a Grand Hammam, Private Rain Sauna, Ice Fountains and Tropical Showers. Heady frankincense, harvested from Oman's verdant Salalah region bordering Yemen in the south, adds a local spin to the Oriental ambience.

During three days at the Al Jissah Resort and Spa, we never do share an awkward moment reaching for the fresh avocado juice at the breakfast buffet at the same time as Tom, but who cares? We've been treated like stars at what must be the Middle East's most spectacular escape? ●

Al Jissah Resort and Spa has no fewer than 13 restaurants, including a poolside eatery serving tapas, steaks and pizzas.