

Roadbook extract by Oman Self Drive Tours

DAY 4 - Sunday 15/11/2020 - Exploring the Jebel Shams

Day dedicated to the discovery of the Jebel Shams massif.

From Al Hamra, you can go to the nearby village of Misfat al Abriyeen and its superb palm grove in the mountain or to the famous "Grand Canyon of Arabia". The latter can be explored from the bottom, by car, starting at the beautiful village of Ghul then following the Wadi Nakhr, or from the top, by foot along the famous "Balcony Walk".

Then you drive back to your hotel.

Possible activity

 10km-15min

   **Village and palm grove of Misfat al Abriyeen | 30min-2h |**

 
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The old stone village of Misfat al Abriyeen, invisible from the plain, is one of the most photogenic in Oman, with its terraced palm groves on both sides of a narrow valley. Don't miss its superb viewpoint, take a stroll in the village or a walk in the palm grove.

This village is certainly the most visited in Oman, by reason of its beauty and easy access. This sometimes creates tensions with the inhabitants, so it is highly recommended to show still more respect than usually, notably by wearing trousers (men and women).

To avoid the crowds of tourists, try to be on the spot early, especially on weekends, and consider spending time in the palm grove, far from the village where most visitors gather (as described below).

The short uphill drive above Al Hamra offers nice views of the town (tarred spaces provided in some bends allow to make halts).

Up in the distance, you can see the modern houses of the new village, but it is not until you reach it that you discover the palm grove and then the old village.

To enjoy a sweeping view of the complex, first go to the viewpoint in the new village (cf. GPS and map). The palm grove, down below, extends into a small canyon and then up to the old stone houses on the opposite slope. Note the partly crumbled down watchtower a bit higher.

When arriving at the old village, park your car before the first houses - the end of the road is reserved for locals. A small car park is on the right-hand side of the road and, if it is full, make a U-turn and park on the road side.

By foot, enter the village. You will soon arrive at the end of the road, at the gate of the old town which is partly ruined (cf. map, point 1). Note the remains of a house on top of the rock to the left of the door and the watchtower, above to the left. Also note the steps going down to the right, with a red-white-yellow marking of a hiking path. As an option, you can go this way to reach the palm grove.

Otherwise, go through the door and discover the old houses, some of which are still inhabited. If you continue straight on in the rough street, you will pass below a house (the terra cotta pots served for keeping and cooling water) and then go down stone steps worn out by the repeated passage of the villagers (2). On the way down, there is a reservoir, supplied by the main falaj coming down from the mountain. When water is abundant, the reservoir is filled up, to provide for drier times. Note the very simple bung system (a stick driven into a hole in the bottom). Below the reservoir, along a falaj, there is a small public bath facility.

At the bottom of the steps (3), on your left, the mosque (mind the old man claiming he will show you a superb viewpoint and then will ask money!) and other public bath facilities. Then the street turns into a path going up the neighboring wadi in the shade of the palm trees (4).

On the right of the steps, the village continues. If you proceed downwards, you will go past the Misfah Old House guesthouse and then (to the right on arriving at the guesthouse), you will enter the palm grove (5) (20 min from the village gate).

If you wish to push on, continue into the palm grove, down to a long stone flight of steps with a recently installed

hand rail (there are also red-white-yellow markings) (6). The steps will lead you to the bottom of the small canyon (7), where other steps go up the other side. At the top of these steps, you find a wide path, recently covered with concrete. Take it to the right (8) (45 min from the village gate).

The concrete path, about level, offers very nice views of the old village; it then goes down until at the level of the beginning of the canyon (9). On the left, amidst the rocks, a source springs out, channeled, maybe for centuries, into a small falaj built on the face of the cliff.

The path rises a little, turning right along the canyon. 50 meters further, it veers to the left. Again 50 meters further, you reach an intersection (10): you can either go down to the right or go up to the left (1h from the village gate).

If you turn right, walk about 100 meters and go up the steps on your left. It will take you back to the village.

If you turn left, walk up to the fringe of the palm grove and follow the falaj on your right (11). It is another pleasant way to cross the palm grove. After walking along the falaj over some 300 m, you reach the same steps leading to the village (12).

When at the steps, no need to return to the old village: continue on your left uphill and you will reach the road and the car park (1h30 from the village gate).

Transfer



Al Hamra to Al Khitaym : Up the Jebel Shams |45km-1h15|4x4|



From Al Hamra, the Jebel Shams road first follows the Wadi Ghul, passing through a few villages. It continues past the entrance of the Wadi Nakhr, the "Grand Canyon of Arabia", guarded by an old village clinging to the side of the mountain. Then the ascent on the steep slopes of the massif offers ever more plunging views over the surrounding mountains and wadis. The dirt road comes to an end, at an altitude greater than 1800 m, on the rim of the spectacular Grand Canyon.

The Wadi Ghul, that you follow first, stretches between the Jebel Shams (on your right) and the Jebel Waalah with its characteristic peaks (on your left). You go past some villages and a recharge dam, intended to retain water during the floods, so it has more time to infiltrate to the water table (partly exhausted by pumping), and not get lost in the desert. It also protects the town of Al Hamra from "flash floods", sudden floods that can cause much damage.

You then drive past the village of Ghul, at the mouth of the Wadi Nakhr, a.k.a. the "Grand Canyon of Arabia" (10 min).

The road still continues a few kilometers along the Wadi Ghul before going up towards the Jebel Shams, at the base of the immense cliffs of the Jebel Misfah (on your left) (20 min). The slope is particularly steep in some places and you quickly gain altitude. After a flat area with a brand new school for the children of the villages around, the tar road is replaced by a dirt road which runs over large black limestone slabs, a mineral and arid landscape (40 min). A bit further, you pass the junction of the Sunrise Resort road (keep on the right side).

To the west, on the right of the Jebel Misfah, the Wadi Dam valley and its villages are ever more clearly visible, at the foot of the pointed outline of the Jebel Misht: a superb panorama at sunrise or sunset.

You end up leaving the dirt road, which continues towards some villages and the summit (military base with no access to the public), and take a tarmac road (55 min), which passes next to the Sama Heights Resort (start of the hiking path going to the summit), and continues to the Jebel Shams Resort.

From this point, you are back on a dirt road, over only a few kilometers, up to the hamlet of Al Khitaym, starting point for the "Balcony Walk", the spectacular hike along the Grand Canyon.

Slightly ahead of the Jebel Shams Resort, and all the way from there, the road follows along the Grand Canyon, and affords various breath-taking views. The first viewpoint is protected by a rail allowing you to reach the rim of the cliffs more than 1000 m high, at no risk. Several hundred metres down, you can distinguish the "Balcony Walk" path. Behind the canyon is the rounded summit of the Jebel Shams, highest point of the country (3009 m), (some 1000 m higher than the viewpoints), on which you can spot the huge green dome protecting the military radar.

🏠 🚶 🧭 Old village of Ghul & Grand Canyon of Arabia |05min-1h30|4x4|



The Wadi Nakhr has cut an incredible valley in the heart of the Jebel Shams, the "Grand Canyon of Arabia". Make a photo stop in front of the old stone village of Ghul, clinging to the base of the mountain, discover the ruins by foot up to a fine viewpoint or follow the wadi by car between the spectacular cliffs.

The village of Ghul is at the junction of 2 wadis: the Wadi Nakhr, that cut through the Jebel Shams, opens into the Wadi Ghul that follows the mountain at its base towards Al Hamra.

Along millions of years, the Wadi Nakhr has dug into the mountain and formed the famous "Grand Canyon of Arabia", which can compare with the Grand Canyon in the USA, although the context is quite different.

A wide road shoulder gives you ample space to stop by the left bend in front of the old village and the palm grove. There, locals often sell traditional red-black-beige carpets and children key rings they made with goat hairs. The road which goes up the Wadi Nakhr starts from here: it descends to cross the Wadi Ghul, passing at the foot of the old village, before threading into the Grand Canyon.

On either side of the confluence, you can see the new (on the right) and the old (on the left) village of Ghul. The latter, particularly photogenic early and late in the day is built with stones and blends into the surrounding mountain. Note the protection wall which rises from the main village up to a second district.

The palm grove, just below, is still taken care of by the villagers, who moved into the new village, on the other bank of the Wadi Nakhr mouth, in the 80s.

If you want a closer look, you can drive down from the viewpoint and follow the dirt road across the Wadi Ghul, towards the entrance of the Wadi Nakhr. Go along the palm grove (on your left) and about 150 m after the football field (on your right), you will see a few stairs leading, through a small gate, to the palm grove. From there, you can walk through the palm grove and then up to the village (take right just after the gate – and keep it closed). This is the start of a marked hiking trail that goes up along the Grand Canyon to the hamlet of Al Khitaym, 1100 m higher (yellow-white-red paint markings).

After climbing on some rocks up to the first houses, you can walk uphill along the "main street" of the village, partly strewn with stones fallen down from the ruins (hiking shoes advised). Once on the other side of the village, the marked path continues until you reach a fence that prevents goats from going into the palm grove. Find the gate and continue on the other side.

Further up is the protection wall and some more ruins (400 m away from the palm grove). Or, if you leave the marked path and climb up to the right, you quickly get to the edge of the cliffs of the Wadi Nakhr, offering very fine views over the Grand Canyon and the old village behind you.

The Wadi Nakhr can be travelled by car over the first 7 kilometres (from the start of the dirt road), up to the abandoned village of Nakhr (30 min drive). The reason for the existence of this road is to give access to the Nakhr palm grove, still maintained by the villagers, themselves rehoused in the new Ghul (difficult to build modern houses at the bottom of the Grand Canyon!).

The dirt road runs along the wadi bed. Depending on the magnitude of the last flood and the following repair work, it can be in a more or less good condition. 800 m after the gate giving access to the old Ghul, it passes next to a hamlet and a small palm grove (on the right side). The most impressive section lies some 2 to 3 km further: the bottom of the canyon is hardly 30 meters wide while the top of the walls is 1000 m above. Feel free to walk around to better appreciate the immensity of the place.

The first palm trees of Nakhr are 1 km after this narrow section and the abandoned village about 2 km. It is not possible to go further by car.

Villagers sometimes sell goat hair carpets next to the village.



The Balcony Walk : Hike above the Grand Canyon |1h-4h|



A wonderful hike along an old donkey track down to an abandoned village. This mid-cliff path follows the Wadi Nakhr several hundred meters above the bottom and provides breathtaking views on the "Grand Canyon of Arabia". This easy walk path, with a few rocky stretches, gently slopes down to the village nested at mid-height of immense cliffs.

This hike starts at the village of Al Khitaym, at the end of the Jebel Shams dirt road (1880 m). From the "parking area" at the entrance of the village, proceed on foot past the stands where women sell stones and bracelets and make your way down, along the houses to your right, to the brim of the canyon. Its bottom is 1000 m below!

A few stones, arranged as a makeshift stairway, give access, further down, to the path which is quite easy to follow from now on (quite visible most of the time, with yellow-white-red markings - path n°W6).

From the starting point, you can see the confluence of the Wadis Nakhr and Ghul, where passes the tarmac road, and the town of Al Hamra far away in the plain. Viewed from this point, the canyon is already very impressive, but it will be still more thrilling after a few minutes' walk.

Two shelters with table and benches, quite fit for a picnic, have been set up at some 5- and 20-minutes' walking distances.

Along the path, two large overhangs (corresponding to meanders of the wadi right at the bottom) offer panoramic sights. The first one, with a number of cairns erected over time by hikers, is some 40 minutes away.

From the second one, after a 1h15 walk, you can see the village of Nakhr, down at the bottom of the wadi (look back down, to the SE). Houses are no longer inhabited, but villagers, coming from Ghul at the exit of the wadi, still take care of the palm grove (there is a dirt road).

In the opposite direction (to the North), you can also catch sight of the abandoned village of Saab bani Khamis, the objective of the hike: above the big arch-shaped overhang, you can spot the abandoned terraces of the village. They abut, to the left, against a flow area with grey rocks and trees (where water flows when it rains). At the level of the highest terrace, not far away from the left side of this flow area, you can distinguish a beige overhang, under which two houses are visible (viewed from where you stand, you will see not much more than two beige squares).

You will arrive at the village of Saab bani Khamis after some 1h45 walking time (and 200 m of vertical drop). Not only its location is unbelievable (for protection against rival tribes), but the most extraordinary is that it was still inhabited until 1985 and the villagers and their descendants now live in modern houses on the plateau above!

When arriving at the village entrance, you will get a general view of these rudimentary stone houses, huddled against each other against the cliff. The path slopes down sometime before you reach the first house and follows the foot of the village, up to the watch tower on its rocky spur, and, further, to the culture terraces. Walking along the houses, you may see the antique stone and wood grindstone that is still lying between two of them. Please don't touch it and don't lean against or climb up the ruins, for preservation and safety reasons.

Access to the terraces is a bit more awkward, you have to go down on stones made slippery by water running off the cliff above. As terraces are no longer irrigated, only a few pomegranates are surviving, but villagers used to grow wheat, watermelons and vegetables.

For the more adventurous, it is possible to reach a small permanent pool above the terraces, the water source making life possible in this exceptional environment. From the highest terrace, small paint marks indicate the trail. It first crosses a scree to access the top of a little cliff, then goes along its edge towards the left (careful not to slip). Then the walk is easier, you go up among the rocks and then down to the pool (an unreal sight), partly protected by a deep overhang with stalactites.

You will return by the same way you came, so it is up to you to decide when it is time to go back. However, do remember that if you came going down, you will return going up!