

Extract of your travel guide by Oman Self Drive Tours

DAY 1 - Tuesday 12/12/2017 - From Muscat to the Wadi bani Awf

Day dedicated to the discovery of the north-eastern side of the Western Hajar and beginning of this mountain range crossing. At the foot of the mountains lies the small town of Nakhl and its beautiful fort, as well as the town of Al Awabi. The Wadi Mistal, where sits the picturesque village of Wakan, flows out of the range between the 2 towns, whereas the Wadi bani Kharus arrives at Al Awabi itself. From Al Awabi, the road follows the Wadi bani Awf, the only valley allowing the complete crossing of the mountains. There lies the "Little Snake Canyon", the actual Snake Canyon and your accommodation. The Wadi bani Awf can also be reached by a dirt road from the Wadi bani Kharus.

Transfer



Transfer from Muscat International Airport to Nakhl |75km-1h10|



Leave Muscat by the motorway and then take the small roads at the foot of the mountains until you arrive at the town of Nakhl.

The Muscat Expressway allows you to quickly exit the capital. From the village of Halban, the road travels alongside the piedmont of the north-eastern end of the Western Hajar range. Little detours offer you the opportunity to discover villages and palm groves nestled at the foot of mountains.

You then hook up with the main road between Barka, a big town on the coastline, and Nakhl, at the foot of the Jebel with the same name.

Possible activity



Nakhl fort |1h|



|9:00-16:00, Fri 8:00-11:00| ★ ★ ★

The Nakhl fort, one of the most beautiful forts in Oman on account of its architecture and setting, overlooks the town and the palm grove from a rocky prominence. The residence of the wali (province governor), it protected commercial routes between the wadis and the coast. Thoroughly restored in 1990, it offers nice sweeping views of the surrounding landscape, the Batinah plain and the first massifs of the nearby Western Hajar.

It would have been founded during the pre-islamic period (i. e. before the 7th century), but it has been restored or rebuilt several times over the following centuries and the current architecture dates back to the mid 17th century (early Yaruba dynasty). The entrance gateway and towers were constructed in 1834 (Imam Said bin Sultan reign).

To enter the fort, go through a first gateway, the ticket booth is there, climb a few steps and go through a second gateway to your left. Note the enormous decorative spikes that stud the doors ; originally, they were used in India, with which Omanis have century-long commercial relationship, to prevent doors being battered in by war elephants.

A few further steps take you to the inner courtyard, protected by 30 m high limestone and wood walls, plastered with clay and mortar. On your left, the barzah, a building with 2 identical storeys: the 2 majlis of the fort, the meeting rooms for the wali. The bottom majlis was used in winter and the top majlis in summer, to make the most of the sea breeze.

Beyond the barzah, the kitchen and a little watchtower and, a bit further, the stairway leading to the eastern tower.

Opposite the barzah, the beautiful door opens onto two date cellars (note the clever system of gutters to collect the date juice oozing through the braided palm-leaf sacks). Cross the jail and walk up a narrow flight of stairs leading to the floor above (mind your head!), and enjoy particularly fine views out over the Batinah plain, the town of Nakhl and its vast palm grove, the Jebel Nakhl (to the east and south), and, in clear days, the Jebel Akhdar (to the south-west).

The upper part of the fort include, to your left, a courtyard and towers, and, to your right, past a further flight of steps, the living quarters, with the rooms for the wali and his family, renovated more or less true to the original in

1990.

The steps going down from the guest room bring you back to the date cellars. Half-way, you will go past the whisper room, where the wali could withdraw to learn sensitive information from messengers.

To get nice views of the exterior of the fort, drive up to the watchtower on the rocky hill to the south-west of the fort.

Transfer



Transfer from Nakhl to Al Awabi |30km-40min|



The road follows along the northern slopes of the Jebel Akhdar and its immense towering limestone slabs, goes past the Wadi Mistal cut and then winds its way between the low ophiolite hills along the Wadi bani Kharus.

Shortly after leaving Nakhl, you pass the road leading to the Wadi Mistal and the picturesque village of Wakan (10 min).

Continuing towards Al Awabi, you discover pretty palm groves on the banks of the Wadi bani Kharus, in the middle of a truly lunar panorama. Then the landscape opens up on the small town of Al Awabi, squeezed between these small rocky hills and the high mountains of the Western Hajar, at the mouth of the canyon formed by the Wadi bani Kharus.

Possible activity along the transfer

30km-45min

Village of Wakan (Wadi Mistal) |1h-5h|



Located at the far end of the Ghubrah Bowl, large cirque formed by the Wadi Mistal and its tributaries, on the slopes of the Jebel Akhdar, the tiny village of Wakan is a real jewel with its orchards - especially in February, when the almond and apricot trees blossom (at an altitude of 1500 m!).

The viewpoint upon the cirque is already exceptional from the parking at the village entrance, but the panorama from the gardens is well worth the 20 minutes of walking.

If you want to go further up, a donkey trail climbs up to a pass of the Jebel Akhdar (2300 m high).

The road enters the mountains through a narrow gorge dug into the hard slabs of dark limestone. Then the landscape opens up on a large cirque, that you have to cross to get to the village of Wakan.

At the village of Al Hijar, the tarmac gives way to a dirt road and the ascent starts. You pass near the palm grove of the village, then the slope becomes very steep on the last part (4 wheel drive necessary, low gear maybe useful). When arriving at Wakan, stop at the small parking area on the right side, below the first houses of the village (further up, it is tricky to U-turn).

Note that it may be difficult to park at weekends from mid morning.

From the car park, walk up the rest of the road (3 tight bends), passing next to a renovated watch tower and enter the village in the continuity of the road. Cross the village and then some cultivated terraces before entering the orchards. Continue on the path (recently paved in anticipation of the coming of tourists) going uphill steadily among the gardens.

15-20 minutes later (500 m from the car park and 75 m elevation gain), you reach an open area (close to an isolated recently built building) which probably affords the best view of the village and the cirque.

This paved path continues some 500 metres further (100 m elevation gain) up to out of order toilets. Nice view from there too.

From this point, a good mule path (starting just above the toilets) leads up to the pass and, further, to the village of Al Manakher on the Jebel Akhdar. It is well marked with yellow-white-red marks (path No W25) but it is occasionally steep with a few exposed passages. As it rises along the south-western slopes of the Ghubrah Bowl, it affords superb views all along the way (total elevation gain: 800 m).