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**WHERE:** The United Arab Emirates and Oman  
**START/FINISH:** Dubai/Muscat  
**DISTANCE:** 300 miles, riding 40 per day  
**PICTURES:** Main photo by Alamy. Others Laura & Tim Moss

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## GREAT RIDES

# ARABIAN DELIGHTS

*Winter is an ideal time to visit the United Arab Emirates. World tourers **Laura** and **Tim Moss** rode through the desert from Dubai to Muscat*

**T**he sky overhead is pure blue. Bright white sun beats down. Heat radiates from the sand either side of the black road. A camel stops to watch me spin by. I am in the desert, pedalling through a land once famous for its spices and frankincense, now for its vast reserves of oil. It's a fascinating place to travel.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE), of which Dubai is part, is a neighbour to Oman, and both countries largely escaped the turmoil of the Arab Spring, so they are relatively safe areas to explore. With sunshine virtually guaranteed, decent roads, ancient cultures and friendly people, there is much to commend them to the cyclist – particularly those looking to escape northern winters.

The region has become a popular choice for those cycling across Europe and Asia who don't want to go through Pakistan or Central Asia. This is why my husband and I were there in February 2014, having caught a ferry from Iran to the UAE after cycling overland from London. Our route took us from Dubai to Muscat, the capital of Oman.

## Deserted bike path

Dubai, of course, is best known for its mega malls, fancy restaurants and skyscrapers. This may not sound like a cyclists' paradise – and it does have its fair share of flyovers and fast traffic – but decent bicycle lanes do exist, particularly along the coast. We followed one such bike path heading south out of the city. In two hours, we were at the edge of the city, where it meets the desert.

We were in for a pleasant surprise. Just

outside Dubai, we found a pristine bike path snaking into the dunes. There was nothing else to be seen: no cars, no people, no buildings. It was just us, an endless sea of dunes, and a perfect stretch of tarmac. We raced along for 20 miles until we had another pleasant surprise: a bike shop and café in the middle of nowhere. We chatted to a couple of off-duty Emirates pilots who told us the bike path was constructed on the orders of one of the sheikhs who has an interest in cycling. It is hugely popular with expats, who come out on their carbon road bikes to race around the desert track.

We left the oasis behind and, as we traced our quiet road through the dunes, we passed a number of training grounds where camels and race horses were being put through their paces. Finally, it was beginning to feel like real Arabia. We pedalled on through the afternoon heat.

Spending time in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, it is easy to assume that all Emiratis are wealthy oil barons. Yet we found a group of locals living in traditional tents just off the main road. Since the sun was beginning to sink, we joined them. We pitched our own tent a few yards away, and were then subject to a stream of visitors, bringing gifts of tea, curry and cake. We shared a memorable evening under the stars.



## DO IT YOURSELF

› Flights to Dubai are more frequent and cheaper than flying to Oman, although it is possible to fly directly to Oman from the UK. We flew from Muscat on to India, but you could pick up a cheap flight back to Dubai (sometimes for less than £50) to connect with your return flight home. British nationals don't need a visa for the United Arab Emirates and can get a visa for Oman on arrival at the border. In February 2014, a 10-day visa for Oman cost £8, which can be extended in-country.

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**“JUST OUTSIDE DUBAI WE FOUND A PRISTINE BIKE PATH SNAKING INTO THE DUNES. THERE WAS NOTHING ELSE TO BE SEEN”**

● **Near right** Laura in an Omani village. As well as camping, Laura and Tim were twice invited to stay in people's homes

● **Far right** Tim at a roadside water dispenser in Oman. It pays to set off early in the morning to avoid the midday heat

## Fact File: DUBAI TO MUSCAT

**DISTANCE:** 300 miles, 40 miles per day. The non-coastal route through Nizwa would be 400 miles.

**ROUTE:** From Dubai, pick up the start of the desert cycle path. Head out towards the border with Oman at Hatta and then follow the coast to Muscat.

**CONDITIONS:** Low to mid 30s. Traffic can be heavy on the coastal highway in Oman, but the inland alternative would be quieter.

**ACCOMMODATION:** Wild camping is easy (there are no official campsites), although we were invited in to stay with locals twice. You could do the whole trip staying in hotels.

**COSTS:** Hotels and restaurants can be expensive, but small local cafés are cheap enough. There are plenty of supermarkets for self-catering.

**BIKES USED:** Ridgeback World Panorama

**MAPS/GUIDES:** Google Maps on a tablet computer

**I'M GLAD I HAD:** Spare water bottle and a swimming costume

**I WISH I HAD:** Taken the inland route, crossing into Oman at Al Ain and heading through the Omani towns of Bahla and Nizwa. Maybe have timed the trip to coincide with the Tour of Oman bike race, which attracts big international teams.

## THE ARABIAN PENINSULA



» In the morning, after traditional coffee with our new friends, we left the camp. By now, we had joined the main road heading to the border with Oman. It was blessed with a wide hard shoulder for cycling.

### Into Oman

Oman is a wonderful country for outdoorsy people, with superb mountains, beaches and deserts. Like the UAE, it is a predominantly Muslim culture, so I paid more attention to what I wore on the bike: leggings that covered my knees and a baggy shirt that covered my shoulders. Saying that, cycling is hugely popular; shorts and T-shirts are generally accepted among expats doing exercise. The main issue for a thirsty cyclist is the lack of booze, which is only really found in hotels and bars in the big cities. Without a cold beer to finish the day, we had to resort to iced lemon and mint juice, available for pennies at juice bars.

After a couple of hours cycling from the border, we found a quiet wadi to pitch our tent in for the night. Wadis are river valleys, and although most are dry, some conceal freshwater pools – perfect for cooling off in, and one of the best things about Oman. We made our home for the night among the date palms and acacia trees, with the clear skies making for a starry ceiling.

Waking early to the sound of a cockerel, we set off in the cool of the morning to reach the coast. In the winter months, the temperatures tend to range from 30-40° Celsius. It pays to beat the heat by getting an early start, which is much easier when juice replaces beer at the end of the day.

The most interesting route from Dubai to Muscat would be through Nizwa, the old capital. Unfortunately, we were short on time so followed the main coastal road through Sohar and Barka, which is busier and more

built-up. We did at least find an unopened, brand new highway to use. It was like something from a post-apocalyptic film.

With our route choice, the cycling was now flat and easy and we cruised along the coast towards Muscat, stopping for lunch at one of the many cafés that line the main road. Food in this part of the world is one of the joys of visiting, with plenty of falafel, hummus and flat bread.

As the call to prayer announced the onset of nightfall, we ducked down a minor road to the coast. The buildings glowed orange in the setting sun as we washed off the day's dust in the sea. We cooked dinner on the beach, and several local men wearing the long white 'dish dash' robe approached us with curiosity, questioning us about our trip in broken English. One took us under his wing, trying to find the key-holder of the local community centre so we could sleep there. When this search proved fruitless, he invited us home for the night, so we pushed our bikes over the sand to his compound.

After introducing us to a stream of children, he informed us proudly that he had a total of 14, born to his three wives, who all lived together in the house. We gave our usual response to his enquiries – 'no children, just two bicycles' – and he patted my husband on the shoulder with a clucking noise, as if in sympathy.

It took us two more days to reach Muscat, a small city, strung out on a narrow piece of land between ocean and mountains. It offers a more authentic Arabian experience than Dubai, but the pace of change is rapid: the ancient souks now rub shoulders with modern global chains. It's a good reason to visit now, before things change further. ●

**Laura and Tim Moss are cycling from London to Australia. Their website is [thenextchallenge.org](http://thenextchallenge.org)**