



– OH MAN! WHAT A HOLIDAY RIDING AND EXPLORING OMAN –

The Middle East now has a strong association with cycling. The original race in the region, the Tour of Qatar, may no longer be part of the calendar but there are other events that have been contested there early in 2017... including a new cyclo-tourism event.



RIDE THE SAME ROADS AS THE RACE... Just being a spectator is... well, so last century. These days it's more about the experience: watch the race by all means but even the Tour of Oman has opened up the roads for the fans. This year was the first time the event organised by Eddy Merckx (opposite page, below) also catered for cyclo-tourists, albeit with a 'race' rather than a 'gran fondo' (far left). Ben Hermans (left) won stages two and five of the elite competition and claimed the title for his BMC Racing team ahead of a quality field that included Romain Bardet (below).



Eddy Merckx is one of the all-time cycling greats and the Belgian is the current race director for the Tour of Oman (14-19 February). Famously, he begrudgingly cancelled stage five of the race in 2015 due to temperatures of 43.5 degrees. Beyond the problems with heat there was another inconvenience, a sandstorm which reduced visibility to mere metres.

After visiting the Tour Down Under for many years and experiencing high temperatures during my cycling holidays I was confident I knew about riding in the heat. So when an offer was made to visit Oman and watch the race Eddy and his cohort organise, I eagerly accepted the invitation. The itinerary allowed me to be a spectator of the Tour of Oman, as well as to participate in the inaugural amateur event that preceded stage four.

As I had ridden in Sydney during the infamous three-day heatwave of early February, I figured I'd be able to cope with the dry desert heat of the Middle East. But, I confess, the conditions filled my thoughts and I was curious how it would be in a country I'd never visited before. The first of many surprises greeted me as I left the airport in the capital, Muscat, and enjoyed a mild 23 degrees at 11.00am.

The first Tour of Oman was held in 2010. It is currently rated by the UCI as a 2.HC event for the Asia Tour and it is held in February when the weather is mild.

Oman has superb roads, mountains exceeding 2,000m, and so provides the professional teams with excellent early season training for the upcoming Classics. The main focus of the race is centred around Muscat (pronounced 'Masgat') and the event has seen some big names take the title over the years including Fabian Cancellara (2010), Chris Froome (2013 and 2014) and Vincenzo Nibali (2016).

Like the race, the country of Oman has an interesting history. The leader, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, came to rule in 1970 after a bloodless coup to take over from his father. At this time, the country was in strife.

There was an infant mortality rate of 75 percent and education was not a priority; there were only three schools throughout the country. From a road cyclist's point of view it was far from ideal, hardly the place to consider a riding holiday: there was only 10km of paved road.

Things have changed dramatically in Oman. Gone is the high infant mortality rate, there are now over 30 universities and higher education institutions and over 30,000km of beautiful tarmac throughout the country!

The 2017 Tour of Oman was 885km long and included six stages. Ben Hermans from BMC Racing won the title. The Belgian dominated the highly stacked field which included top level riders such as Romain Bardet, Fabio Aru, Rui Costa and team-mate Greg Van Avermaet.

Hermans took two stage victories including stages two and five, the Queen Stage, up the brutal Jabal Al Akhdhar (Green Mountain). This final climb is considered "the Alpe d'Huez of the Middle East". The professional riders tackle under half of Green Mountain, riding 5.7km of the way up the windy road – still no easy task with an average gradient of 10.5 percent. Maybe one day the riders will go all the way to the top of the paved section which tops out at over 2,000m above sea level.

Alexander Kristoff was the other standout riding in Oman this February. The Norwegian won three bunch sprints which included stages one, four and six, showing good form in the lead-up to the Classics.

This year, in conjunction with the Tour of Oman, there was a one-day amateur race; starting early and following the route used for stage four, from Yiti (Jebel Sifah) and ending in downtown Muscat at the Ministry of Tourism. The forecast was once again bang on average: 23 degrees with very little wind – perfect conditions for cycling.

Our statistics for the day's journey were simple: 92km with 1,475m of climbing. Very quickly the idea of a flat day at the office were banished on the hour drive from Muscat

to Sifah, a recent development/oasis of a seaside resort on the Gulf of Oman. Over the first 30km riders would face three very tough short, steep climbs. My first surprise was just six kilometres into our 'amateur' ride when we were presented with a tough 1.1km of 13% followed very quickly by another 600m of 12%; then, before a rest stop, was an "easy climb" – so they told us: 1.2km of just seven percent.

It was a challenging ride but it led us to paradise, a glorious stretch of nine kilometres. Although it was covered by chasing countless attacks of our peloton of cyclo-tourists, it was some of the best road I've experienced anywhere in the world.

By then our racers had started to sort themselves out a little. Riders could now actually see what was around them, and there was a chance to look at something other than the stems and seeing if they had one more gear on their cassette. The terrain resembled something like what you would imagine as moonscape: jagged cliffs, huge mountains off in the distance, a certain grey haze, little to no greenery and one black ribbon of a road cut through the limestone.

There were no more roaming goats, donkeys, wild cats or harsh dirt football pitches. Now we were in remote countryside, yet still just 15km from Muscat.

This section of road was like no other, it was so different to riding through the Pyrenees, Alps or Dolomites which we do every year during the Haute Route adventures and other events I have done since 2009. This was just amazing!

There was a small truce in the race as we rode through an outer 'suburb' of Muscat, Ruwi. It was short lived. We soon began to ride on the freeway, on the hard shoulder (breakdown lane), along a long false flat. We were all pleased to know that the law of Oman states riding bikes in the hard shoulder on the freeway is legal and any driver caught with their car there can be punished by prison time. After a long right-hander a breakaway was formed by a small group of UK riders 'The Arctic A/C Riders'.

Later I learned that two of the riders from this club were of top amateur standard. Jon Schubert, an ex-pat teacher who appears a mild mannered science teacher, is far from mild on a bike. He was the overall winner of the amateur race – by over four minutes! Jon is also the 2014 British 24 hour time trial champion, after clocking up 830km. His colleague, Michael Broadwith, who came second, was the 2015 and 2016 24 hour TT champ; he clocked up 860km and 850km, respectively. Amateurs... but only just.

That left the rest of us to search our souls to enjoy what was the double ascent of the mountain range called Amerat. The first side boasting an easy 2.3km with an average of eight percent followed by a very fast descent and straight back up the 3.6km winding mountain road to the finish at an average of 10%.

Once at the timed finish, the organisers were there to look after us. Sandwiches, massage, biscuits, Coke and beanbags were provided. Our next task was to watch the professional peloton go by three times, all at a much faster pace. One key advantage of being at the Tour of Oman is that there are little to no crowds, you have amazing access at stage starts, feed zones and finishes, allowing you to gain up close and personal access to all the pros.

The adventure to Oman was not just about the race or even cycling alone; there was also time to experience the city, the Gulf and surrounds of Muscat. A day with Zahara Tours saw time spent at the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque which was opened in 2001. It can comfortably fit 20,000 people at the one time to pray. We also visited the traditional fish market where refrigeration is nowhere to be seen but colour abounds from both the fish and the characters who are there to buy and sell their stock.

Soon after was a visit to the souk, the city's bazaar in the old town. Never will I forget the smell of frankincense – the dried sap of trees, and something that Oman is famous for. It wafts through the air, creating a dense cloud of scent throughout the market. The stall holders kindly encouraged you into their stores to buy candles, incense, silver, gold, frankincense and, funnily enough, myrrh.

It's a haven for cycling and, evidently, it is also ideally suited should any wise men want to go shopping there.

One of the adventures not to be missed is a trip in a Toyota Landcruiser (known in Oman as a Japanese Camel) to visit one of the wadis – think a natural river bed. Our driver, Mohammed, engaged low range 4WD and, in true WRC mode, took off driving through the water holes seeking larger and deeper pools to test the car's suspension. Maybe not the most environmentally friendly activity but like a kid jumping in puddles we were all having fun.

Will I go back? Next year, in combination with the Tour of Oman, they are planning a three day amateur stage race. This is expected to be confirmed later in 2017. On the flight home as I relived the photos, sights, tastes, smells and uniqueness that is Oman, I quickly made the decision that, yes, I'll be returning... with pleasure.

Attending any UCI event is an experience and to do this in Oman is something so far from the ordinary that it is not to be missed, especially when you can actually rub shoulders with true legends like Eddy Merckx.

'As-Salaam-Alaikum' – peace to be upon you. ■ WILL LEVY  
Will Levy travelled courtesy of Oman Sail.

