

# Oman : Sunsets and Cycling in the Switzerland of the Middle East

We all remember that time when COVID-19 was developing, it may feel like an eternity ago but it was just the beginning of March. There were many cycling events which people attended including Bathurst, Three Peaks and there was also another event, the Haute Route Oman. Those could be considered the last golden days, at least for some time, when we could ride with our friends on new and challenging roads. Those days will return. If someone has a crystal ball, please let us know, but we cannot wait to get back to cycling with friends and getting back to cycling events.



On 11 March we returned back from our fourth trip to the amazingly beautiful country of Oman, the 'Switzerland of the Middle East'. While there, *twowheeltours* hosted Australian, Dutch, Welsh, Irish and riders from the UK.

For those coming from the Northern Hemisphere they were greeted with beautiful blue skies, quite different to those from Wales where they have not had more than two days of sunshine in any week since September!

Our first few days on tour, pre Haute Route Oman, saw us spend time in the Capital of Oman, Muscat. There the temperature was the same each day, a cut-copy-past of sunny and 28C. We had three rides which included pedalling alongside the Gulf of Oman, past the beautiful gardens which surround the impressive monuments Opera House and the Qurum Natural Park. For a desert country, there sure is a lot of green grass and trees.

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During our welcome dinner at the hotel we talk more about the 10 days ahead which includes the second edition of the Haute Route (HR) Oman; but we are not just here for this three day event. We cannot wait to explore this spectacular country.

Come the next day, the sun is just about to rise as we head out on one of the classic Muscat rides, the Hotel Loop. Riding has become a big thing in Muscat, there are many expats living here and there is also a National Team which hosts regular crit training a few times a week out near the airport. There are even two bike shops and one boutique bike-friendly coffee shop in town.

On the ~64km ride with ~850m ascent, we ride past the major hotels plus along the Corniche, past the Souk and into the wilds including the ultra impressive Yeti Road. This perfect stretch of road is just under 10km in length. It is one of the best stretches of road in the world. Each year that the Tour of Oman has been held, this road showcases the great divide between the city and 'nothing', as they roll away from Muscat into the mountains and then back toward the Gulf which surrounds Muscat.

On the way back to the hotel, we stop in Ruwi for some local street food including, lentils and paratha (local bread) which is made fresh while you wait. It goes down as an absolute treat before cruising back to the hotel for coffee by the Gulf and then massages.

That evening we head to a local restaurant to sample more traditional cuisine plus try some refreshing lemon and mint drinks, all while sitting outside and enjoying the aroma of burning Frankincense.

Day three is a tourist day, we check off some of the major attractions in Muscat including the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque which is one of the 10 largest Mosques in the world - its carpet weighs in at 21 tonnes! The craftsmanship is truly outstanding. We also visit the Bazar Mutrah Souk & Fish Market before settling down to another top level meal overlooking the Corniche.

That afternoon there are more massages on offer from our staff masseur and mandatory relaxing time by the pool and beach.



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Day four and we get back on the bikes to ride the Alpe d'Huez of Muscat, the road over Al Amarat and into the 'nothingness' to complete a ~80km with ~1,000m ascent loop. The switchbacks and engineering of this monster is nothing short of impressive. The main details are 3.6km in length with an average of 10%, the KOM and QOM are 10:30 and 16:29 respectively.

After lunch at the hotel we get into our private 4WD's and journey out towards the desert, where we spend the night. During the drive out we stop in at the old fortified village of Minsfah before letting some air out of our tires, ready for the dunes of the mighty Sharqiyah Desert. There is some mandatory dune bashing before checking into our desert oasis. Here we are staying in Sultan's tents, which come with plumbing and air conditioning, not to mention a fantastic dinner.

Then it was getting close to sunset so we got back into our 4WD's and our local drivers took us up to the top of a dune to watch the stunning sunset, where is everyone!?

Day five, if you get up early enough, there is an option to pull yourself up a rope to the top of another dune to watch the sun rise, highly recommended yet it is more of a workout than climbing Al Amarat. Then it is time to saying good morning to a camel or two followed by a sumptuous breakfast.

Before leaving the desert we visited a bedouin family. It is hard to image that people having been living in these deserts for 1,000's of years, through sand-storms, little to no water, freezing temperatures and then the heat – up to 50°C in July and August.

On our way to Nizwa, with the tires now re-inflated, we stopped for another local hearty meal. Then before checking-in at the event hotel, we go for a short drive up to the check-point of Jebel al Akhdar which is Stage 1 of HR. There is good reason why after 1km there is a police check-point, beyond that, the road gets so steep they only allow 4WD vehicles to pass. They usually forbid bikes from going up but during the Haute Route it is allowed.

Registration for HR at our hotel is seamless. We collect our jerseys, race bag and rider numbers to put on our bikes. Then there are more massages for our *twowheeltours* riders before being welcomed by the event organisers at the Rider Briefing followed by a large riders meal. There is no doubting that there are some nerves over dinner as we think about Stage 1 which starts at 7:30am the next day.



In the past few years, I have been lucky enough to ride Jebel al Akhdar twice. It is something that I actually look forward to, trying to tame a beast is never easy but these are the things that we remember.

Details of HR Stage One:

Nizwa > Jebel al Akhdar

Distance : 84.1 KM (+33 KM of non-timed descent)

Climb : Jebel Akhdar

Max Elevation : 2,345M

Start Elevation : 532M

Total Ascent : 2,869M+

NOTE : to start 14km with average of 10.3%

Rest Stops : Four

<https://www.strava.com/activities/3158461745>

There are always younger, skinner and faster people at events such as this, then there are the rest. With +120 riders in the event you are never really riding alone. Yet, there is little need or want to chat when you are riding up something which at times is +20%.

The stage itself did not disappoint, tough and brutal yet beautiful made for another epic Haute Route day. The sun was out all day and for those who did not apply sunscreen, they will remember this mountain for at least two reasons.

This area is also known as the Green Mountain, it receives an annual rainfall and is considered the food bowl of Oman. Up at +2,000m, there are many villages and the total population is ~3,000 people who live on this massive limestone mountain.



*Eating bottomless salads, pasta, hummus plus desserts go down a treat as we eat and recant stories from our favourite sections of the climb, or the descent.*

Once back at the hotel, and after each stage, is a meal which does not disappoint. Eating bottomless salads, pasta, hummus plus desserts go down a treat as we eat and recant stories from our favourite sections of the climb, or the descent. Then time to hit the pool or enjoy a massage in preparation for Saturday's Stage Two.

HR Stage Two:

Nizwa > Nizwa

Distance : 140.7 KM

Climb : Jebel Haat

Max Elevation : 2,000M

Start Elevation : 532M

Total Ascent : 2,058M

NOTE : Climb 23km at 6%

Rest Stops : Five

<https://www.strava.com/activities/3160927715>

Once again, the beauty of cyclo-sportive events is that you do not have to ride solo and before we knew it, we were at the base of Jebel Haat.

The climb is very different from Stage 1 but very similar to one which you may find in Europe, gentle gradient and 20km long. There is also the benefit of the road surface being billiard table smooth and the endless views. Once you reach the top your reward is the vista into one of the world's top 10 largest canyons, and then there are the local wild goat mascots who also come to say hello.

That finishers meal and massage cannot come soon enough. Even though there is just *one* stage left we are all feeling suitably tired and want an early night.

During all HR three day races, Stage Three is always a Time Trial. Our riders are driven 30 minutes in our private vehicles to the Tanuf Castle Ruins. It is quite the sight to see a start ramp with centuries old ruins behind and every 30 seconds another rider rolls out to begin their individual time trail.



HR Stage Three:

Tanuf > Misfat Al Abriyinn

Distance : 28.1 KM

Climb : Misfat Al Abriyinn Majilis

Max Elevation : 950M

Start Elevation : 645M

Total Ascent : 438M

<https://www.strava.com/activities/3163998426>

The village of Misfat Al Abriyinn is like a mirage. The ride up has some very steep sections which keep us all 'honest' but once riders are at the top they are greeted with a village which still exists the way it did centuries ago. The crystal clear water channels which go through the village feed the date palms and keep the desert community green. Residents get their equal share of water each week so that they can tend to their farms. They live as a village and it is breathtaking to see century old traditions still living to this day.

Then there is reason to celebrate. Back at the event hotel, *twowheeltours* riders feature heavily on the podium. Eimear, one of our hill climbing champions, won Stage 2 and 3 Female races, Jon our mechanic won the Time Trial and Steven won his age category. Well done to all riders on completing another superb event.

Our tour does not end there, we have one more night to relax in Nizwa before heading back to Muscat. On the way home we stop in Fanja for a traditional meal and to visit the Souk, famous for its pottery. That evening our riders enjoy a swim in the hotel pool or down at the

beach. We also visit some local shops to marvel at the gold, frankincense and myrrh, plus many other local specialities, before having our final farewell meal at the hotel.

Day 10 is here before we know it and we cannot wait to get back to Oman for our fifth visit in 2021. This country is really like no other. Mountains, sea, desert, food, culture, history, great roads, generous people and of course the Haute Route.



Story: Will Levy – *twowheeltours*

Images: Antony Jones, Oman Sail, PhotoRunnings and Will Levy

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