

LAT / LONG: 23.2375° N, 57.2648° E

DESTINATION
OMAN, I FEL LIKE A WOMAN

GRIPPING
STUFF

Lisa Harvey
crossing a
tightrope
cable bridge
on Alila Jabal
Akhdar's *vita*
ferrata, 6,500
feet above
sea level



FLYING SOLO

Forget the tired
Eat Pray Love
trope, female
travellers in
2018 are looking
for adventure
– and they're
doing it on their
own terms.
LISA HARVEY,
a cautious
acrophobic,
travels to Oman
to experience the
transformative
effect of single-
minded travel

Photography: Nishant Shukla

DO NOT
CLOSE
YOUR EYES,

of sun. Did I mention I don't like heights? I force myself to focus on the scenery: turquoise ocean waters, sun-baked islands – one with a historical fort crowing a crag – and shadowy mountains.

Then we hit turbulence and panic floods through me. The wind picks up, the trike oscillates, and I think back to the safety briefing I was given seconds before the motor roared into action. “Number one: don't pull that lever – it's the ejector seat,” my pilot, Zebur Mercan from Sky School Oman, tells me. “Number two: have fun!”

The turbulence stops but, then, so does the motor.

I say to myself, as we speed along an empty beach in an open two-seater trike connected to a paraglider wing before taking off into the Arabian sky. Soon, I'm 2,000 feet above Oman's northern coast in a vehicle that looks like a kite – complete with hand-held ropes – with a motor attached to the back. The warm wind is whipping my hair, my heart is racing and my mouth is drier than Jebel Shams, the country's own mountain

My heart drops, but Mercan calmly takes hold of the ropes. “Do you like roller-coasters?” he shouts. “Not really!” I call back. He laughs and swoops us through the pristine sky, my ears popping. I lean in to the experience, my fear segueing into adrenaline-pumping delight. Just before we land, Mercan shoots us back into the air for a few stomach-lurching para-tricks but by that point, I'm having too much fun to be frightened.

“You're the worst person to do something like that!” my sister said when I told her I'd be paramotoring in Oman. She's right: not that long ago, I used to have to hold someone's hand during take-off on a plane, but that's the reason I'm doing it – and I'm not alone.

According to global travel site booking.com, 2018 is the year to 'dream big', with 45 per cent of us having a bucket-list adventure in mind, while travel specialist Skift says that 65 per cent of travellers want new experiences, rather than rest, from their travel. Adventure travel isn't new, but what is new is that women are leading the charge, and travel companies are catering specifically for quest-seeking women such as me.

Wix Squared, which creates bespoke worldwide adventure itineraries, has seen the number of solo female bookings double over the past year. “They're after something that gets them out of their comfort zone,” says director Alex Wix.

“Solo travel is booming, and women are at the forefront,” agrees Radha Vyas, co-founder of adventure travel company Flash Pack. “We've seen a 200 per cent growth in the past year, and 70 per cent of our customers are women. Those who travel with us have demanding careers, and beach holidays aren't exciting enough to offset the 9-5 grind, nor to provide the escapism they crave. When you're

jungle trekking through Colombia or learning to surf in South Africa, you don't have time to think about work: you're immersed in the moment,” she says.

Many female travellers are also at a crossroads, according to Allison Fleece and Danielle Thornton, who were inspired to quit their jobs and launch WHOA (Women High on Adventure) after climbing Mount Kilimanjaro together. “Whether they want to start a new venture, ask for a raise, or follow a dream, we see women learning so much about themselves – and their potential,” says Fleece. “There's something about pushing yourself mentally and physically outside your normal path, which bucket-list experiences do, that allows you to gain inner strength.”

Her words strike a chord. Aged 29, I was engaged – until my fiancé, who I'd been with for 12 years, called off our wedding with 12 weeks' notice. I never saw him again. Three years on, the healing has come through pushing myself on to new paths, and saying “yes” to more adventures. Last year, having never travelled alone, I sold my engagement ring and moved to New York for three months by myself. It was a transformative experience and I returned home even more committed to taking risks and getting back into the control seat of my life. Or, in this case, a paratriking seat in Oman.

But why Oman? Situated between India and East Africa, the Sultanate of Oman is known as the jewel of the Arabian Peninsula and offers up a soul-stirring landscape of mountains, deserts and beaches. In other words, it's the perfect place to see from the sky, the sea and, as I would soon find out, a precariously swaying rope.

“Omanis have enormous pride for their country and warmly welcome those who want to discover its uniquely diverse terrain and attractions,” says

Wix. “Crime levels are reassuringly low and the country is becoming increasingly accessible thanks to more flights and routes operating through its new airport in Muscat, and new online visa services.” And this small nation packs an almighty punch for adrenaline junkies.

My own adventure didn't end with paratriking. After a three-hour drive, stopping off to explore the abandoned village ruins of Birkat al Mouz, and its Unesco World Heritage Site-listed ancient water channels, we corkscrew to the top of the Alila Jabal Akhdar hotel. At 2,000 metres above sea level, it sits right at the edge of the Al Hajar Mountains, cradled by dramatic peaks and canyons, and can only be accessed by four-wheel drive vehicle.

Beyond the stone-clad clusters of luxury suites and the most seductive infinity pool I've ever seen, a wooden fence signals the gorge's precipitous drop, which reminds me: I'm not here for a swim. On the other side of that fence is Alila's *via ferrata* (Italian for 'iron path'), the highest protected climbing path in the Middle East, and my next challenge. It snakes down cliffs, through rocky caves, and up vertical mountain faces before a tightrope-style bridge – suspended above the valley – leads to a final incline back to the hotel. It's *really* high but, despite this, there's no training required: you attach yourself to iron cables using carabiner clips and a waist harness, then use your hands to grip the cable and trace the rock face.

The wind is deafening and I struggle to lean away from the mountain in order to walk sideways across it. I make the mistake of looking down: it's a gut-wrenching, never-ending drop. I freeze, petrified.

“You don't have to do this – we can turn back!” my guide, Mahmoud Mohammed Ahmed Al-mri, shouts over to me. “Yes, I do!” I tell him. In that moment, something fires up inside me. ‘Moving ©



British Airways flies daily to Muscat from London Heathrow. Flight time: just over seven hours



Watch Amazing Hotels: Life Beyond The Lobby at Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar, Oman, on board (selected flights)



OVER THE HUMP
Left: paratriking on Al Sawadi Beach.
Above: camels near Wahiba Sands



LEARNING THE ROPES
Clockwise from left: a date palm oasis in Birkat al Mouz; Nizwa Fort; getting to grips with *via ferrata*



DESTINATION

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forward; not looking back' has been crucial for me these past few years. I keep going.

I summon a deep breath and start clipping, reclipping and climbing with extreme focus. In half an hour, I've settled into a comfortable pace and I'm buzzing from the rush. "My knuckles are bleeding," I say to Al-mri. "You're too close to the mountain," he replies. "You need to trust the equipment – and yourself!"

He stops and tells me to stretch my hands in the air while leaning back completely, so that the strap of my harness is the only thing stopping me from plummeting. I do it (sorry Dad) and find myself whooping and giving Al-mri a high five.

As we reach the path's steepest rock face, leading up to the suspension bridge, Al-mri warns me that from here we can't turn back. I'm not planning to, but it suddenly feels serious. By the time we get to the mouth of the cave where the bridge begins, we're both practically hugging the mountain. I clip to the top wire, step on to the one below, while holding the two side ones for balance – and the entire bridge shakes under my weight. "I don't think I can do this," my trembling voice echoes through the valley. "But you are already doing it!" Al-mri says, as he watches me put one foot in front of the other. About halfway across, I stop to take in the view of Oman's Grand Canyon from this otherwise inaccessible angle.

The bridge sways and it's a fragile dance of balance, but the mountains bring a comforting stillness. The mind-blowing moment is broken by Al-mri jokingly humming the James Bond theme tune. I may not have reached world-saving levels of bravery, but this has been a pretty defining mind-over-matter experience.

STILL STANDING

Clockwise from above: luxury respite in a desert camp; a giant incense burner overlooking Al Riyam Park; our writer tries her hand at freestyle dune boarding



The next day brings a change of gear. I visit the traditional souks and 17th-century fort in nearby Nizwa, before heading to Desert Nights Camp in the highest dunes of Oman's Wahiba Sands. On the drive, the landscape changes from villages with pastel-painted houses, parapets and ornately arched windows to Mars-like mountains and vast gravel wilderness. Then I spot the flame-coloured dunescape receding into the distance. My driver, Abdullah Hashim Alramadhani, takes

me to a local Bedouin family's tent, who kindly welcome me in – with a customary *qahwa* (cardamom-flavoured coffee) served with dates.

Once I've checked in to my blissfully air-conditioned, traditionally decked-out Bedouin tent-slash-villa, I set off deeper into the desert for a late afternoon session of sand-boarding. After slaloming down 200-metre dunes, watching the sunset is an unbelievable sight, with ridges of sand shifting and changing in the wind.

This serene moment is punctured by an unscheduled adventure: our four-wheel drive gets stuck in a dune. Alramadhani has a shovel and starts digging but, as darkness descends, the wind really picks up, and a sand blizzard starts swirling. We're stranded in the Wahiba Desert at night, with no reception. Luckily, we're rescued by Alramadhani's colleagues, who spot headlights while heading back to camp. After a lot of digging, heaving and good humour, we make our way back for meze under a blanket of stars.

My trip ends in Oman's capital, Muscat, staying at the recently opened Kempinski Hotel Muscat. After a traditional dinner at Kargeen, I join a sunset cruise and, as we sail past grand palaces and twinkling harbour towns, I reflect on my Arabian quest. Travelling to a place by yourself, and challenging yourself, leaves a unique stamp on your passport, but also on your soul. This trip has been an empowering reminder that chasing new experiences will always inspire, support and surprise me. Perhaps it will even be the making of me. ■

✉ @lisajourno

Wix Squared offers three-night tours in Oman from £1,700pp (based on two people travelling), including the activities and accommodation specified in the feature and private car transfers. British Airways flies to Muscat daily from London Heathrow. wixsquared.com

