

SPECIAL
DOUBLE
ISSUE

Condé Nast Traveler

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THE GOLD LIST 2020

THE EDITORS' ALL-TIME FAVOURITE PLACES TO STAY

EXCEPTIONAL TRAVEL EXPERIENCES
EVERYTHING CLASSIC. EVERYTHING OUTSTANDING

THE DESERT INTRIGUE THE MIDDLE EAST

THIS REGION HAS EXERTED A FASCINATION OVER WESTERN WANDERERS SINCE THE DAYS OF THE GRAND TOUR. NOW FRESH EXPERIENCES AMID ITS SHIFTING SANDS ARE REFRAMING THE DIALOGUE. EDITED BY RICK JORDAN



THE NEW FRONTIER SAUDI ARABIA

Back in the 1940s, wily British explorer Wilfred Thesiger snuck into Saudi Arabia unannounced, mapping out its quicksands, nearly starving to death on a dune, then writing up his journey as casually as one would a weekend walk in Dorset. 'From Mukalla I went to the Hajaz, and travelled there for three months, going as far as Najran in the country of the Yam, on the north-western edge of the Empty Quarter. Then I returned to London.' Some of the place names were unfamiliar then, and remain so, because after all, Saudi Arabia has never been a holiday destination; most of the millions who visit each year go there for the *hajj*, the arduous Mecca pilgrimage. But that is changing. In September 2019 the kingdom started issuing visas, and relaxed public dress ➤

Sandstone ruins at Madain Saleh, built by the Nabataean people two millennia ago

PHOTOGRAPH: UDO TITZ



PHOTOGRAPHS: VIA TOLULA

Mobile camping in Oman with Hud Hud Travels. Above, the Damani Lodges in Hatta, Dubai

THE WIDE-OPEN ADVENTURES

Semi-nomadic Bedouin culture is a key part of the Gulf's identity – so it makes sense that its untamed corners often look to its traditional campsites for inspiration. At the **Sedr Trailers Resort and Damani Lodges in Hatta**, an adventure-focused Dubai enclave in the Hajar Mountains, guests stay in cabins with fire pits and converted Airstreams with thatched porches. There's a similar ethos but very different style at the new **Al Badayer Oasis**, styled like an Arabian castle deep in the Sharjah desert, where the best rooms are the Silk Road-worthy tents with unbroken views across the largest sand dunes in the Emirates. But the wildest camping is still in Oman, and particularly the south, which is slowly opening up to visitors.

Sean Nelson, an ex-Marine whose long affair with the country dates back to a stint with the Omani army in the 1990s and organising mobile camps with Hud Hud Travels, leads tours to the south with his new Oman Expeditions outfit. 'It has a bit more of a frontier feel, with richer nature, from Arabian leopards to hyenas, whales and superpods of dolphins,' he says. One of his latest partnerships is with **Anantara's Al Baleed Resort Salalah**, typically taking guests for two nights and setting up impressively comfortable bell tents on a white-sand beach, on dunes in the **Empty Quarter**, the world's largest sand desert, or high in the Biblical **Dhofar** mountains. 'We don't see many other people,' says Nelson. 'But, in a way, camping out there makes a true connection with an ancient culture.' **TOBY SKINNER**