

## This week's dream: Oman, the Middle East's hidden oasis

"Oman isn't exactly an obvious destination for Americans," said Hanya Yanagihara in *Condé Nast Traveler*. But don't make any assumptions about this Arab country of 5 million based on its neighbors Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Iran. Oman is "not just a literal oasis but also a geopolitical one," maintaining friendly relations with the U.S. and welcoming tourists from around the world. I visited the country earlier this year, and it proved a revelation: "a safe, secure patch of the Middle East that's not only an antidote to the glittery artifice of Dubai but also a series of astonishing topographies"—beaches, mountain ranges, and broad desert among them.

Muscat, the capital, is not much to look at, beyond its main attraction, the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque. Built in honor of Oman's 75-year-old ruler, the building houses the world's second-largest carpet, as well as a 46-foot-tall chandelier, and the



*The Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque in Muscat*

mood among the many visitors is "festive, even joyful." It was only a two-hour drive to my luxury hotel in Jabal Akhdar, a beautiful mountain region where a vista here and there "looks as if the Grand Canyon and the Rockies have been photoshopped into one extravagant image." I was too early for the region's rose harvest, but apricot trees were budding, and "sun-drunk

bees" wobbled from blossom to blossom. As I breathed in the smell of hot, dry earth, the world of skyscrapers felt very far away.

I needed to see the desert, so I arranged to spend a night in a tent on the Wahiba Sands. Standing in that majestic landscape, amid its "swooping parabolas of apricot-colored sand," I found the silence almost overwhelming. A ferocious dust storm forced us into our tents that night, but when the storm died, the air was cool, and I could see camels in the far distance. Even I can't believe that I was swimming alone two days later just off a white-sand beach on the Persian Gulf. At the Musandam Peninsula resort I'd chosen, the sea was "the kind of blue you find only in children's drawings." Sometimes, "I wonder if I dreamed the whole episode."

*At Alila Jabal Akhdar (alilahotels.com), villas start at \$415.*

### Hotel of the week



*A corner suite near sea level*

#### Inn Above Tide Sausalito, Calif.

Looking out over San Francisco Bay from a guest room here, "you feel like you're on a cruise, not in a hotel," said Laurie Werner in *Forbes.com*. The city is just a ferry ride away, and the nearby streets of Sausalito are "packed with galleries and shops," but "quite a few guests" choose in the end to "spend hours just reclining on their terraces staring out." There's no restaurant on site, but you can count on a lovely continental breakfast in the morning. And if the view leaves you too bedazzled to remember to order in, you can sustain yourself on complimentary wine and cheese. [innabovetide.com](http://innabovetide.com); doubles from \$385

### Getting the flavor of...

#### North Carolina's other mountain hub

Sylva, N.C., is "a kind of Asheville lite," said John Bordsen in *The Washington Post*. Fans of that Blue Ridge Mountains mecca who are tired of the crowds should check out this small college town an hour away. As in Asheville, the main street in Sylva is lined with bookstores, cafés, galleries, and antique shops. You can break for barbecue, mango-pork tacos, or a tahini-kale salad at one of the many local restaurants, and "there's not a franchise outlet among them." Sylva's best quality, though, is its laid-back air, evident in the bookstore owner who works barefoot and in the long braided beards of the food truck cooks. The town, which nestles between the Great Balsam and Plott Balsam mountains, is also an outdoor-recreation haven. Without leaving the town itself, my son and I enjoyed a strenuous hike to a 5,000-foot peak, and at the summit picked our way through blossoming rhododendron to take in a stunning view. Honestly, "we may be hooked."

#### Sailing Maine's rocky coast

When you take a berth on a Maine Windjammer, you're "at the whim of wind and tide," said Dale Leatherman in the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*. The old-fashioned sailing ships—nine in all—have been offering cruises along the Maine coast for years, but none of the multiday adventures is charted precisely beforehand, because each is "an affable dance with Mother Nature." I chose the *Angelique* (sailangelique.com), a beautiful 95-foot schooner with eye-catching red sails. As we left Camden Harbor, even novices were invited to help with the lines, and our captain happily handed the helm to a thrilled amateur sailor. Weaving between islands, we all chatted on deck while watching for seals and bald eagles. Our nights were spent in quiet harbors, and before we retired to our cabins, the crew fed us well. One evening, we rowed dinghies to a small island where our dinner was cooked over a driftwood fire. "Lobster never tasted so good."

### Last-minute travel deals

#### Quiet time on Block Island

Through Oct. 6, get away to quaint Block Island, off the Rhode Island coast, and pay just \$369 a couple for a two-night weekday stay at the Harborside Inn. Offer includes ferry tickets, bike rentals, and \$100 in dinner vouchers. [blockislandreservations.com](http://blockislandreservations.com)

#### Turks and Caicos

Escape to Turks and Caicos this November or December and save 40 percent on ocean-view suites at the Seven Stars Resort & Spa. Rates are \$570 a night if you book by Sept. 30, and you get a \$75 resort credit when booking five nights. [sevenstarsgracebay.com](http://sevenstarsgracebay.com)

#### Galápagos getaway

Save 20 percent on select seven-night cruises in the Galápagos. A round-trip excursion from San Cristóbal on the 20-passenger *M/V Origin* starts at \$5,040 per person, double occupancy. Includes departures on Sept. 25, Oct. 9, and Oct. 23. [adventure-life.com](http://adventure-life.com)