

Just like Lawrence of Arabia *(with room service)* Ingrid Seward swaps her camel for a quad bike and a luxury tent in Oman

JUST the name Oman conjures up romantic notions of sand dunes, oases and mountains – and for me the image of Peter O'Toole as Lawrence of Arabia. I know the movie wasn't filmed in Oman or even in Arabia, but in Jordan, Morocco and Spain. But the feel was and still is similar, especially when I travelled to the Dunes Hotel on the edge of the Wadi Al Abiyad sand dunes overlooked by the Al Hajar mountains.

The hotel – a 50-minute drive from the capital Muscat's airport, with its imposing marble arrivals hall, may be only a bumpy ten minutes from the main road, but when you reach the hilltop gates, you feel like you are Lawrence, admittedly not on a camel, and the ambience was just how I imagined it should be.

Dunes by Al Nahda is the epitome of boutique desert luxury. Thirty

sand-coloured tents nestle within the dramatic landscape, each with large bathrooms with baths and showers and large bedrooms, some linked by a tented hallway, perfect for families or friends travelling together.

Air con, TV and rapid room service are on tap and the main building, with its open-air restaurant and award-winning chef, is only a short uphill walk away – which was most welcome as it was the only legwork I did during my three-day stay.

As the camp is famed for its pristine dunes, it would have been madness not to try driving across them, although I turned down the offer of actual 'dune bashing'.

Instead, I took to the rather more sedate dune quad biking, which feels as though you are driving through a snow drift and might tip



over at any moment. The thrill of being a Jeremy Clarkson type roaring up and down the dunes was unbeatable.

There is a resident grumpy camel at Dunes who willingly gives rides. I choose the outdoor spa over the camel and dismissed the sand spa treatment (which involves lying in a pit of sand then being hosed down) in favour of a wonderful liquid gold aromatherapy massage in my open tent as I watched the sun sink slowly behind the dunes.

From the desert heat we headed to the Sahab Resort & Spa in the Jabal Al Akhdar mountains 6,000ft above sea level. Here the air was cool and the sun hot, and for me, the most inactive holidaymaker, it was perfect for what I like doing – sitting in the sun with a glass of wine and a book at hand.

As darkness fell, the stars provided a twinkling canopy unblighted by pollution. For dinner, in the open-air grill restaurant, we had specialities such as the Omani Shuwa, a slow-cooked meat in an earthen underground oven. After two days I longed to see Muscat and experience the souks. Unlike its neighbour Dubai, there are no high-rise buildings, so you can see the mountains from every point.

Go in the evening and breathe in the magnificence of the Opera House and the Al Mushrif Palace and start dreaming of Lawrence again...

■ *Luxury tents at Dunes by Al Nahda* cost from around €415 for two adults including breakfast and dinner. dunesbyalnahda.com.
Double rooms at Sahab Resort & Spa, Jabal Al Akhdar, cost from around €335 per night for two adults including breakfast and dinner. alnahdaresort.com.



DUNE WITH A VIEW: The luxury tents at the resort and, right, quad biking on the dunes