

# SUSTAINABLE AND GREEN

THE RESPONSIBLE TOURISM BANDWAGON IS SWIFTLY SIGNING UP NEW MEMBERS ACROSS THE MIDDLE EAST, WITH OMAN A PIONEER OF SUSTAINABLE INITIATIVES FOR THE MEETING AND INCENTIVE MARKET



**W**ith global tourism industry awareness buoyed by significant events such as the introduction of a Responsible Tourism Day by the World Travel Market organisers in 2007, and a similar initiative at ITB Berlin in 2009, opportunities abound for Oman to cement its position as a responsible tourism leader in the region.

"Responsible tourism is an approach which intends to minimise negative economic, environmental and social impact; generate greater economic benefits for local people and enhance the wellbeing of host communities; involve local people in decisions that affect their lives; make positive contributions to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage; provide more enjoyable experiences for tourists through meaningful connections with local people; imbue a greater understanding of local cultural, social and environmental issues; and build local pride and confidence," says Robby George, manager, tours and MICE for Eihab Travels.

## Community initiatives

Corporate groups can get involved in a variety of sustainable projects in Oman. Eihab Travels, for example, runs a specialised honey tour to visit local beekeepers in northern Oman, and according to George, the programme is proving to be a 'highlight'.

"Beekeeping has been practiced since ancient times and the specialist beekeepers of northern Oman have developed great skill in obtaining honey and propagating bee colonies in a sustainable manner. In this region, larger honey bees are traditionally kept in the hollowed-out trunks of date palms, locally known as tubl. Apart from just visiting the farm, we provide our visitors with the opportunity to chat with the farmer and his family which enables them to learn about their lifestyle, traditions and about bee keeping over a cup of coffee or a traditional Omani lunch," George explains.

In addition to the successful honey tour package, Eihab Travels is planning to follow

up with a programme aimed at supporting the weaving community of the Wadi Ghul area.

"Even though these traditional weavers are part of many operators' itineraries, there has not been any coordinated effort to ensure that they benefit economically," says George.

## Turtle tracking

An exceptionally high number of turtles nest in Oman each year and this natural phenomenon has become a popular tourism attraction with both leisure travellers and corporate incentive groups. However, visitors must ensure that they enjoy this natural spectacle responsibly, and the easiest way to ensure this is to go through an established turtle watching centre.

Positioned on the very eastern tip of Oman, about four hours drive south of Muscat, is the isolated bay of Ras Al Jinz. Its beaches are the largest nesting site for green turtles on the Indian Ocean, with an average of 30,000 nesting animals.



## THE RAS AL JINZ SCIENTIFIC AND VISITORS CENTRE IS PIONEERING THE CONCEPT OF ECO TOURISM IN OMAN

The Ras Al Jinz Scientific and Visitors Centre, located within a 120-square-kilometre nature reserve, is pioneering the concept of eco tourism in Oman, offering meetings and incentives groups a chance to get up close and personal with green sea turtles as they lay their eggs, and watch the life or death struggle of young hatchlings who make a desperate journey across the sands to reach the relative safety of the seas.

A state-of-the-art eco-tourism facility, it offers exclusive opportunities to experience turtle nesting first hand as well as teaching groups about the animals and their nesting habits, and all funds raised go straight back into the project to fund research and conservation activities.

The centre also offers nomadic dining options, enabling corporate groups and tour operators to request outdoor catering or picnics at many of the scenic landscapes of Al Sharqiyah.

"Incentive groups can take advantage of our nomadic dining formula, where they can eat inside or on the rocks, in the desert or beside a wadi. No matter where, we will still provide five-star services," says Pierre Abi-Aoun, the centre's director.

Conference facilities are also available onsite for groups of up to 40, while team building instructors can provide activities in the area, including trips to Sur and Al Hadd.

### Camping in style

For small corporate groups wanting to leave the hustle and bustle of the boardroom behind and encounter a true Arabian experience a night under the stars is a must.

Nestled in the golden sands of the Wahiba, just outside Al Wasil, Desert Nights Camp is an initiative from the OHI Group of Companies. The resort offers 32 bespoke units, including 25 tented accommodation units complete with air-conditioning, en-suite bathroom and cosy terrace area. The camp has been designed so that all the tents open out to panoramic vistas across the golden sands. Facilities include a restaurant, bar and recreational area.

While the tents are air-conditioned and the beds made up with the finest cotton, Desert Nights Camp is still a simple lodging option, in keeping with its Bedouin theme. This is not an international five-star hotel in the desert, and therein lies its charm. Accommodation is fully air-conditioned although there is no spa or swimming pool.

But who needs man-made leisure facilities when you have the desert to hand? Groups can enjoy camel safaris, desert driving in 4X4s, visits to local Bedouin houses, trips to take in the beauty of Wadi Bani Khalid and souvenir hunting at the local souk.

Most groups arrive at Muscat International Airport. From there, they are transferred by air conditioned coach to Desert Nights Camp, but even the transfer is noteworthy. The road from Muscat takes in the villages of Bid Bid and Ibra and the small town of Al Wasil. From Al Wasil the road becomes a dirt track, but the journey is short – only 11 kilometres – before finding the campsite, nestled in the Wahiba sands.

### Wahiba Sands

The Wahiba Sands are 100 kilometres wide and 200 kilometres long, running south from the Eastern Hajjar Mountains to the Arabian Sea. Dunes can tower up to 100 metres tall, and their rich mineral content creates a landscape rich in orange, amber, golds and earthy browns.

Bedouin camps abound, and it is estimated that some 3,000 Bedouins have made Wahiba their home.

Woodland areas dot the desert, providing shade and nourishment to a host of desert animals, while mudflats and lagoons around Barr Al Hikman are home to a large migrant bird population in the winter.

For groups wanting to add a CSR or sustainability element to their incentive, Oman offers a host of options guaranteed to provide memories that last a lifetime as well as having a longlasting positive impact on the country. ●

### Responsible turtle watching

Visitors to turtle nesting sites should be aware that the following can harm the turtles or cause them to stop laying their eggs and return to the sea:

- Shining flashlights on the turtles or taking photographs with a flash or other unnatural light
- Standing in front of the turtles – always watch them from behind
- Handling eggs or putting foreign objects into the nest
- Touching or riding the turtles
- Disturbing turtle tracks – researchers use these to identify the types of turtle and locate and mark their nest
- Making loud noises and moving around while turtles are laying their eggs
- Forming a circle around a turtle – this can be very distressing. Step away as soon as the turtle finishes laying her eggs so she has space to return to the sea
- Touching hatchlings
- Helping a turtle or hatchling reach the ocean. If a hatchling is trapped, inform a reserve ranger

