

# SAVOR THE WORLD

## ...on holiday

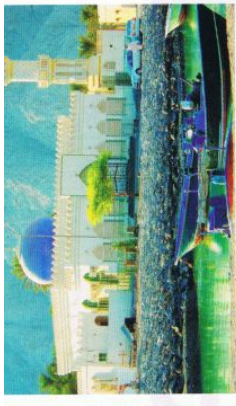
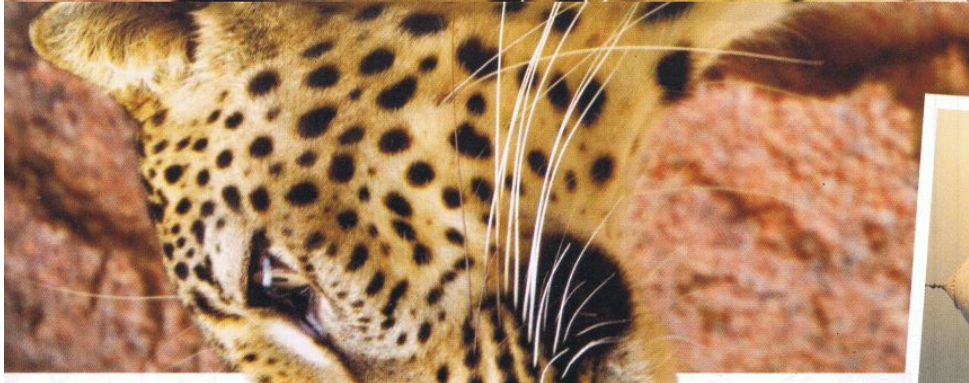
Want to do more on your trip than top up your tan? Then check out our round-up of feel-good breaks

### UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

#### COSMO'S AMANDA STATHAM TRIED TRACKING LEOPARDS IN OMAN

**A HELPING HAND** When a friend suggested a volunteer-group holiday, I nearly ran a mile – I'm more of a beach-break type. But my New Year's resolution was to get active and involved, so I checked out Biosphere Expeditions, a non-profit organisation, and was blown away by the exciting conservation work and amazing locations on offer. Tracking critically endangered Arabian leopards in the Musandam Peninsula in Oman

caught my eye; it would be hot and, even better, I didn't have to be mega-fit or experienced! **TEAM BUILDING** As soon as I landed in Dubai and met the rest of the 10-strong team, all in big boots and rucksacks, I knew I was in for an adventure. Then we met our team leaders – a scientist and a survival-skills instructor. Our aim, they explained, was to find out if Arabian leopards still existed in the



area. If they did, our findings would be given to the Sultan of Oman, so he could work out how to protect them. If not, the plan was to reintroduce the animals into the area.

**IN TRAINING** After a four-hour drive to Khasab, on the edge of the mountainous Musandam Peninsula, and our base for the next couple of days, we learnt skills such as recognising a leopard's paw marks and driving a Land Rover over rocky terrain. Evenings were spent hanging out by the hotel pool with friendly Aussie Robyn and dreaming about how much we'd love a drink (alcohol is hard to get hold of in Oman).

**INTO THE FIELD** To find out if leopards were still on the prowl, we had to go to seriously remote areas. From Khasab we journeyed through spectacular mountains and the Wadi Bih valley to an isolated base camp. Leopards were last spotted in this desert-like area in 1997, so the chance of seeing one was tiny, but it was still exciting. By day we split into groups and searched the region, scrambling up mountainsides to caves and ledges where leopards might live and setting camera traps. Musandam is known as the Norway of Arabia because of its picturesque fjords and we cruised

along them to explore isolated valleys, returning to camp to eat delicious dishes prepared by our chef, Poly. Nights were fun-filled, with singing, dancing and joke-telling in a communal tent.

**BACKTRACK** The trip ended without us seeing any leopards, but I realised I had the conservation bug. I kept a close watch on the journey organisers' website and, amazingly, the next group discovered a leopard paw print. Sadly, though, the scientists concluded that with so little evidence of big-cat activity, it's probable they've been wiped out in the area. But I feel proud to have been part of the conservation project and am already planning a similar trip. Beats two weeks sitting on a beach!

### Help yourself

Biosphere Expeditions ([www.biosphere-expeditions.org](http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org)) runs conservation volunteer expeditions around the world, including the Altai Republic (in Russia), Peru, the Azores, Honduras and Brazil. Leopards still exist in other parts of Oman and there will be trips to monitor them in Jan/Feb 2009. A two-week excursion costs £1,225, excluding flights. Virgin Atlantic ([www.virgin-atlantic.co.uk](http://www.virgin-atlantic.co.uk)) offers return flights from London to Dubai for £315.

Note that this article was written about conservation work on the Musandam peninsula of Oman, where the expedition worked in 2006 and 2007. It has since then moved to the Dhofar region of Oman where a sizeable population of Arabian leopards still exists, but needs to be protected.