

Where legend COMES TO LIFE

Scott Armstrong finds his lost horizon at a luxurious resort in Oman

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“The English regard slackness as a vice. We, on the other hand, should vastly prefer it to tension. Is there not too much tension in the world at present, and might it not be better if more people were slackers?” Like fine wine, time has only made the words of author James Hilton, penned 80 years ago, the richer. In the frenetic chaos of 2013 who could argue with the logic contained in his 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*, or indeed with the quest of his war-weary traveller Robert Conway to find Shangri-La, a hidden valley in which time almost seems to stand still. In this place of legend its inhabitant finds such peace that the very process of ageing slows drastically. Eight decades on, amid the 24-hours-a-day coverage of the world’s woes, one can understand the appeal of that Utopia, and see why marketeers would use the fable to reflect their luxury hotel brand, just as thousands of hotels worldwide are named ‘Paradise’ this or that.

I could be cynical, but as I sit by the pool at the Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah resort in Muscat in the Sultanate of Oman, in a hidden cove cut off by mountains from the outside world, I must confess the hotel hasn’t done a bad job. In fact, as I stare across the aquamarine infinity pool, watching its colour melt into the deeper grey of the ocean beyond, which then lightens as it reaches the sky, I begin to think that the people who designed this place really were inspired by Hilton’s vision of tranquillity. My chain of thought is broken by a much more compelling view, I’m not sure exactly how long I watch the condensation running down the outside of my frosted beer glass, with loungers and palms trees in soft focus behind, but it doesn’t really matter.



Indeed, nothing really matters, the only urgency the glorious Gulf sunshine that demands I reach for the glass and take a long, satisfying gulp. Then it’s back to seriously contemplating nothing. There are some stark physical differences between the literary Shangri-La and this resort spa in Oman, some five hours’ drive or 50-minute flight from Abu Dhabi or Dubai in nearby UAE. Lost Horizon’s paradise was a lush Oriental valley carpeted with greenery and punctuated with waterfalls, whereas Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah sits where the sea meets stark granite mountains. But the resort achieves Shangri-La status partly by being three hotels in one. The Al Husn Hotel, an adult-only, child-free haven of peace, is set back from its child-friendlier sisters, the Al Waha and Al Bandar hotels. Clever this, for the couples, no screaming kids, just luxury, fine dining and peace and quiet. But even the most churlish of the child-free might raise a smile if they venture into family-friendly territory, where there’s carefree laughter as youngsters enjoy the lazy river ride. You don’t really notice until you leave but there are lots of these ‘freeze frame’ moments in a stay at Barr Al Jissah. Sitting on a balcony as you take high tea at the Al Husn, staring across the bay, you watch a single boat slowly make

its way to shore. You can’t really say when you become aware of the man walking out to meet it, but he enters the scene and you watch a silent transaction takes place. Finally, after what must be careful deliberation and negotiation, the fisherman hands his fresh catch to the man you later learn is the chef of Bait al Bahr, the traditional Omani seafood restaurant. Later, sitting outside on the upper-wooden deck of this restaurant, you’re eating the fruits of that negotiation as the sky darkens and the sun disappears from view. The lack of light pollution means a stunning display of stars as you feast on mouthwatering lobster. This being a travel review, I should devote some space to the size of the monsoon shower head, or the depth and comfort of the huge white bed. I should perhaps note that deep rich woods in the rooms have been used to instil a sense of comfort, elegance without extravagance. Maybe I should too mention that clean marble and the soft lighting evoke a spa-esque feeling in the bathrooms. I could say all that, and every word would be true, but this is a five-star resort and you’d expect nothing less. What is remarkable about the Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah is that for the time you are there you might as well be on the moon, for that’s how far away your mortgage payments, your annoying boss or any of the oh-so-important issues of daily life seem.



Scott stayed courtesy of Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah. For more details, visit shangri-la.com/muscat/barraljissahresort/

