

= 2015 Tour of Oman =

The 2015 Tour of Oman was the sixth edition of the Tour of Oman cycling stage race . It was rated as a 2.HC event on the UCI Asia Tour , and was held from 17 to 22 February 2015 , in Oman . The race was organised by the municipality of Muscat , in collaboration with ASO ( the organisers of the Tour de France ) and Paumer . Chris Froome , the defending champion from 2013 and 2014 , was not present to defend his title .

The decisive stage in this as in past editions was the climb of Jebel Akhdar . That stage was won by Rafael Valls of Lampre ? Merida , who went on to defend his overall race lead to the finish in Muscat . This was aided by the controversial events of stage 5 , which was eventually cancelled due to extreme weather conditions . Tejay van Garderen ( BMC Racing Team ) finished second ( as he had in 2014 ) and Alejandro Valverde ( Movistar Team ) finished third .

The points competition was won by Andrea Guardini ( Astana ) , who won the first stage of the race . Louis Meintjes ( MTN ? Qhubeka ) was the best young rider , while Jef Van Meirhaeghe ( Topsport Vlaanderen ? Baloise ) won the combativity prize after participating in the breakaway on every stage of the race . BMC Racing Team was the winner of the teams classification .

= = Teams = =

18 teams were selected to take part in the event , including 12 UCI Pro Tour teams .

= = Pre @-@ race favourites = =

The Tour of Oman is the third of a trio of stage races in the Middle East that come early in the road cycling season , following the Dubai Tour and the Tour of Qatar , in 2015 won by Mark Cavendish and Niki Terpstra respectively . The distinctive feature of the Tour of Oman is the annual inclusion of the climb of Jebel Akhdar , the Green Mountain , which means the general classification is generally won by climbers . Many Grand Tour contenders start their seasons racing in Oman for this reason .

In 2013 and 2014 , the race was won by Chris Froome ( Team Sky ) as the beginning of his preparation for the Tour de France . In 2015 , however , Froome opted to begin his season at the Vuelta a Andalucía and so missed the Tour of Oman . The race was therefore expected to be contested between other Grand Tour riders , such as Tour de France champion Vincenzo Nibali ( Astana ) , Tejay van Garderen ( BMC Racing Team ) , Thibault Pinot ( FDJ ) , Rafa? Majka ( Tinkoff ? Saxo ) , Joaquim Rodríguez ( Team Katusha ) , Rigoberto Urán ( Etixx ? Quick @-@ Step ) and Leopold König ( Team Sky ) .

Although the general classification was expected to be contested by climbers , many riders ride the Tour of Oman with other aims . Spring classics riders use them as a last block of racing before the European classics season starts with the Omloop Het Nieuwsblad , while sprinters aim to win stages . Notable sprinters at the 2015 race included Alexander Kristoff ( Team Katusha ) , who won three stages in the 2014 Tour of Qatar , Nacer Bouhanni ( Cofidis ) and Peter Sagan ( Tinkoff ? Saxo ) . Stages 1 , 3 and 6 were predicted to be suited for the pure sprinters , while stages 2 and 5 were expected to suit riders who could cope with some climbing .

= = Route = =

The 2015 event was scheduled to have six stages , including four flat stages , one medium @-@ mountain stage and one mountain stage .

= = Stages = =

= = = Stage 1 = = =

The first stage was a 161 km ( 100 mi ) route from Bayt al Naman Castle to Al Wuttayah on the outskirts of Muscat . It was a fairly flat course , with an uphill finish . Temperatures exceeded 30 ° C ( 86 ° F ) .

The early breakaway was formed by Johan van Zyl ( MTN ? Qhubeka ) , Patrick Konrad ( Bora ? Argon 18 ) , Simone Andreetta ( Bardiani ? CSF ) and Jef van Meirhaeghe ( Topsport Vlaanderen ? Baloise ) , who built a lead of up to five minutes . The chasing peloton was led for most of the day by Team Katusha , in support of their leader Alexander Kristoff , for whom the uphill finish was ideal . Movistar Team and Trek Factory Racing aided in the chase .

Van Zyl put in an attack with 85 km ( 53 mi ) remaining , leaving his breakaway companions behind . This group was soon caught by the peloton after Konrad suffered a puncture ; Van Zyl was caught with 32 km ( 20 mi ) remaining . Team Katusha continued to lead the peloton until the final kilometres . At this point , Etixx ? Quick @-@ Step led out the sprint in support of Tom Boonen . However , they misjudged the difficulty towards the finish line : there was a 2 @-@ 3 % incline and a headwind . This caused the team to mistime the sprint : Boonen 's lead @-@ out man Matteo Trentin was only able to support him until there were 200 m ( 660 ft ) remaining . Andrea Guardini ( Astana ) was supported by his teammate Borut Božič and was then able to follow Boonen and come past him in the final 50 m ( 160 ft ) to take his first victory of 2015 . Matteo Pelucchi ( Lampre ? Merida ) took third place .

Guardini therefore took over the red jersey of overall leader . Van Zyl , Konrad and Andreeta all finished on the same time as Guardini and so moved into the top ten thanks to bonus seconds won at intermediate sprints .

## === Stage 2 ===

Stage 2 was a 195 km ( 121 mi ) route ( the longest of the race ) from Al Hazm Castle to Al Bustan . It was classified as a flat stage , but there were two notable climbs within the last 25 km ( 16 mi ) , presenting the opportunity for riders to attack close to the finish .

The early breakaway was formed by Gatis Smukulis ( Team Katusha ) , Preben Van Hecke , Jef Van Meirhaeghe ( both Topsport Vlaanderen ? Baloise ) , and Enrico Barbin ( Bardiani ? CSF ) . The chase was led by Astana , defending the red jersey of Andrea Guardini . After about 50 km ( 31 mi ) , Barbin suffered a puncture ; he was dropped by the remaining three riders and was then caught by the peloton . As the stage progressed , Tinkoff ? Saxo took control of the peloton in support of Peter Sagan . Their strong pace meant that the main group was soon catching the breakaway , but the peloton itself began to split , with riders including Edvald Boasson Hagen ( MTN ? Qhubeka ) and Arnaud Démare ( FDJ ) among the riders temporarily distanced from the front of the race .

The breakaway had a two @-@ minute lead with 25 km ( 16 mi ) remaining , as they approached the climbs at the end of the stage . Smukulis attacked on the first climb , Al Hamriyah , and had a 30 @-@ second lead at the summit , with the peloton a little over a minute behind . Guardini was among the riders who were dropped from the peloton , with Joaquim Rodríguez ( Team Katusha ) and Thibault Pinot ( FDJ ) also in difficulty . Smukulis was caught soon afterwards , with 16 @-@ 5 km ( 10 mi ) remaining , under continued impetus from Tinkoff ? Saxo .

On the second climb , Al Jissah , there was an attack from Jakob Fuglsang ( Astana ) , Ben Hermans ( BMC Racing Team ) , Julián Arredondo ( Trek Factory Racing ) , and Louis Meintjes ( MTN ? Qhubeka ) . Pinot , Rodriguez and Vincenzo Nibali ( Astana ) were all dropped by the peloton , now reduced to a small group . This group , made up of 14 riders , was able to catch the breakaway soon after the climb . Tejay van Garderen ( BMC Racing Team ) , Rafał Majka ( Tinkoff ? Saxo ) and Alejandro Valverde ( Movistar Team ) all made attacks in the final 5 kilometres ( 3 mi ) , but were unable to stay away and the race came down to a sprint .

Movistar Team did much of the pace @-@ setting in support of Valverde , before BMC Racing Team attempted to set up Greg Van Avermaet for the uphill sprint at the finish . Despite these efforts , Fabian Cancellara ( Trek Factory Racing ) was able to sprint to victory . Valverde was second , with Van Avermaet in third place . This victory meant that Cancellara took over the lead of both the general classification and the points competition . It was his first race victory since the 2014 Tour of

Flanders the previous spring .

### == Stage 3 ==

Stage 3 was a 158 @. @ 5 km ( 98 mi ) route that started and ended at Al Mussanah Sports City . The route was mostly flat with no significant climbs and the roads at the finish were wide and straight , so the stage was likely to end in a bunch sprint .

Jef Van Meirhaeghe ( Topsport Vlaanderen ? Baloise ) was again in the breakaway , along with his teammate Preben Van Hecke and Alessandro Tonelli ( Bardiani ? CSF ) . Initially there was a lack of agreement in the peloton about who should lead the chase . Trek Factory Racing were supporting race leader Fabian Cancellara , but they wanted the sprinters ' teams to support the chase . The breakaway was therefore allowed a lead that reached nine minutes , but eventually agreement between the chasing teams brought control and the lead was reduced to six minutes . The breakaway was eventually caught with 15 km ( 9 mi ) remaining .

In the final 10 km ( 6 mi ) many teams , including Astana , Movistar Team , MTN ? Qhubeka and Tinkoff ? Saxo , sought to lead out their sprinters . In the confusion , Matteo Trentin ( Etixx ? Quick @-@ Step ) crashed and was forced to abandon the race . Team Katusha moved up in the final 5 km ( 3 mi ) in support of Alexander Kristoff . Kristoff 's lead out train was strong and positioned him well for the final sprint .

In the finishing straight , there was a significant headwind , and , when Danny van Poppel ( Trek Factory Racing ) opened his sprint too early , Kristoff was able to follow him and come round to take his fourth victory of the season , just ahead of Andrea Guardini ( Astana ) . Cancellara retained his overall lead in the race .

### == Stage 4 ==

Stage 4 was the queen stage of the race , with a summit finish at the climb of Jabal al Akhdar ( the Green Mountain ) . The stage was a 189 km ( 117 mi ) route from the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque to Jabal al Akhdar . There were no significant climbs in the route until the final 5 @. @ 7 km ( 4 mi ) , which had an average gradient of 10 @. @ 5 % .

An early breakaway was formed of Jef Van Meirhaeghe ( Topsport Vlaanderen ? Baloise ) ( the leader of the combativity award and in the breakaway for the fourth consecutive stage ) , his teammate Gijs Van Hoecke , Stijn Vandenbergh ( Etixx ? Quick @-@ Step ) and points classification leader Andrea Guardini ( Astana ) . Guardini and Van Meirhaeghe contested the intermediate sprint after 18 @. @ 5 km ( 11 mi ) , taking points for their respective classifications , then sat up and were caught by the peloton . Vandenbergh and Van Hoecke were allowed to build a lead of nearly 15 minutes , before the peloton increased its speed . The breakaway was caught with less than 10 km ( 10 mi ) to go .

BMC Racing Team led the peloton hard into the early slopes of Jabal al Akhdar . This caused many riders , including race leader Fabian Cancellara , to be dropped , and a group of 20 riders formed . Vincenzo Nibali ( Astana ) put in two attacks , causing the group to be reduced further , in support of Jakob Fuglsang . More riders , including Alejandro Valverde ( Movistar Team ) were dropped , leaving a group of three riders in the lead with 1 km ( 0 @. @ 6 mi ) to go : Rafa? Majka ( Tinkoff ? Saxo ) , Tejay van Garderen ( BMC Racing Team ) and Rafael Valls ( Lampre ? Merida ) . Majka unable to follow Van Garderen 's attacks , but Valls was able to stay in his wheel . Valls was then able to put in his own attack and pass Van Garderen in the final part of the stage , going on to win by five seconds . It was his first victory in five years and gave him a 19 @-@ second lead in the overall standings . Van Garderen was frustrated after the stage , having also finished second on the same stage in the 2014 race behind Chris Froome . He said afterwards that he had " underestimated " Valls , who had not been considered among the favourites for stage victory .

Louis Meintjes ( MTN ? Qhubeka ) was eighth on the stage and moved into the white jersey as the best young rider .

## == Stage 5 ==

Stage 5 was scheduled to be a 151 @. @ 5 km ( 94 mi ) route , beginning at Al Sawadi Beach . The planned route then went along the coast and included four laps of a circuit before finishing at the Ministry of Housing . Each lap of the circuit included the climb of Bousher al Amerat , a difficult climb . Equivalent stages in the 2013 and 2014 editions had been highly selective , and the stage was considered an opportunity for Tejay van Garderen ( BMC Racing Team ) to attempt to attack race leader Rafael Valls ( Lampre ? Merida ) .

Extreme weather conditions , however , made the stage impossible . There was a sandstorm at the starting point on Al Sawadi Beach , so the decision was taken to transport the riders to the finishing circuit , shortening the stage to 95 km ( 59 mi ) . When the riders arrived at the finishing circuit , however , they were now faced with very high temperatures , approximately 41 ° C ( 106 ° F ) . They started racing , but found themselves with problems due to the extreme heat . Several riders suffered punctures , especially during the fast descents , and problems with their brakes and the riders took the decision to neutralise the stage and took shelter under a bridge . The race organisers , led by race director Eddy Merckx , tried to persuade the riders to carry on , and at one point it was suggested that the cancellation of the stage could mean the end of the Tour of Oman altogether . It was eventually agreed , however , that the riders would take a short flat route to the stage finish .

With the stage cancelled , the standings in all the classifications remained unchanged .

## == Stage 6 ==

Stage 6 was a 133 @. @ 5 km ( 83 @. @ 0 mi ) route starting at the headquarters of Oman Air on the edge of Muscat International Airport . The route first followed the coast west , before turning inland and heading east . The race crossed two classified climbs on the edge of Muscat , before finishing on the corniche at Muttrah with three laps of a finishing circuit . The weather conditions were much more suitable for racing , with grey skies and the temperature approximately 20 ° C ( 68 ° F ) lower than the previous day .

The first riders to break away , were Iljo Kisse ( Etixx ? Quick @-@ Step ) and Jef Van Meirhaeghe ( Topsport Vlaanderen ? Baloise ) . Van Meirhaeghe was in the breakaway for the fifth time in the race : he had participated in the breakaway on every stage except the aborted stage 5 . After his efforts earlier in the week , he struggled initially to stay with Kisse . The pair were joined , however , by Danny Pate ( Team Sky ) and Matthias Brändle ( IAM Cycling ) , and Van Meirhaeghe was able to stay with the group . Jelle Wallays , Van Meirhaeghe 's team mate , attempted to bridge across to the leading riders , but he was not able to make it across in the crosswinds and was caught by the main peloton . Lampre ? Merida were happy to allow the breakaway a large lead as none of the riders posed any threat to Rafael Valls in the general classification , and they had a nine @-@ minute lead with approximately 65 km ( 40 mi ) remaining .

The sprinters ' teams attempted to chase the breakaway down . Principally this was led by Cofidis , who were hoping to set up Nacer Bouhanni for the stage win . However , the hills close to the finish made this difficult , as the breakaway were able to maintain their advantage on the technical descents . Andrea Guardini ( Astana ) was dropped on the last of these climbs .

In the leading group , Pate made the first attack on the unclassified climb on the finishing circuit , but Brändle covered the move and passed him . Brändle was then able to hold off the chase of Kisse ? the faster sprinter ? and finished the stage with a four @-@ second advantage . Van Meirhaeghe finished third with Pate fourth . In the peloton , Peter Sagan won the bunch sprint , over a minute behind Brändle .

Rafael Valls was therefore able to secure the overall win , nine seconds ahead of Van Garderen , to take the first professional stage race win of his career .

## == Classification leadership ==

There were five principal classifications in the 2015 Tour of Oman .

The first and most important was the general classification ; the winner of this is considered the overall winner of the race . It is calculated by adding together each rider 's times on each stage , then applying bonuses . Bonuses are awarded for coming in the top three on a stage ( 10 seconds for the winner , 6 seconds for the second placed rider and 4 seconds for the rider in third ) or at intermediate sprints ( 3 seconds , 2 seconds and 1 second for the top three riders ) . The rider in the lead of the general classification wears a red jersey .

The second competition is the points classification . This is calculated by awarding points for the top 10 riders at the finish of each stage ( 15 points to the winner down to 1 point for the rider in tenth place ) and to the top three at intermediate sprints ( 3 points , 2 points and 1 point ) . The rider with the highest points total is the leader of the classification and wears a green jersey .

The young rider classification is open to those born on or after 1 January 1990 . The young rider ranked highest in the general classification is the leader of the young rider classification and wears a white jersey .

The combativity classification is based on points won at intermediate sprints and classified climbs along the route . Points are awarded to the top three riders across each sprint or climb ( 3 points , 2 points and 1 point ) . The rider with the most accumulated points is the leader of the classification and wears a white jersey with red and green sections .

The final competition is the team classification . On each stage , each team is awarded a time based on the cumulative time of its top three riders . The times for each stage are then added together and the team with the lowest total time is the leader of the team classification . There is no jersey awarded for this classification .

= = Classification standings = =

= = = Team classification = = =

= = Controversy over stage 5 = =

The 2015 race included one significant controversy : the conditions on stage 5 that led to the stage 's cancellation . After a sandstorm had caused the start of the race to be relocated , very high temperatures ( somewhere between 38 ° C ( 100 ° F ) and 49 ° C ( 120 ° F ) ) caused several riders ' tyres to puncture . This was especially the case on the neutralised descents , as the slow speeds and consequent frequent braking led to higher tyre temperatures and more punctures . Many riders had concerns for their safety on the descents , and a rider protest brought the race to a halt .

Riders engaged in a lengthy discussion with the race organisers , who were represented by Eddy Merckx , considered one of the greatest cyclists ever , who was part @-@ owner of the race . The Omani organisers , led by Salim bin Mubarak Al Hassani , put pressure on the riders to continue racing , but they refused to do so . The riders were led by Tom Boonen ( Etixx ? Quick @-@ Step ) and Fabian Cancellara ( Trek Factory Racing ) , who cited the danger of continuing to race in the conditions , suggesting that their lives were at risk . The stage was eventually neutralised and the riders returned to the finish line by a flat route .

After the race , Merckx publicly dismissed the riders ' complaints . In particular , he made comparisons with the dangers that are accepted by the riders , such as those faced when riding Paris ? Roubaix or descending on wet days in the Tour de France . Merckx also said that he was worried about the future of the race , as the local organisers were angry at the cancellation of the stage and had wanted to cancel stage 6 as well . He was also concerned about the renewal of the contract to run the Tour of Oman , after it expired in 2016 . Before the final stage ? which did go ahead ? he had agreed with the local authorities that the race would continue in 2016 . It was suggested , however , that the local organisers may refuse to invite certain teams back to future editions of the race . These teams possibly included Etixx ? Quick @-@ Step and Trek Factory Racing since their riders were central to the rider protest .

