

Travel: My trip to Oman



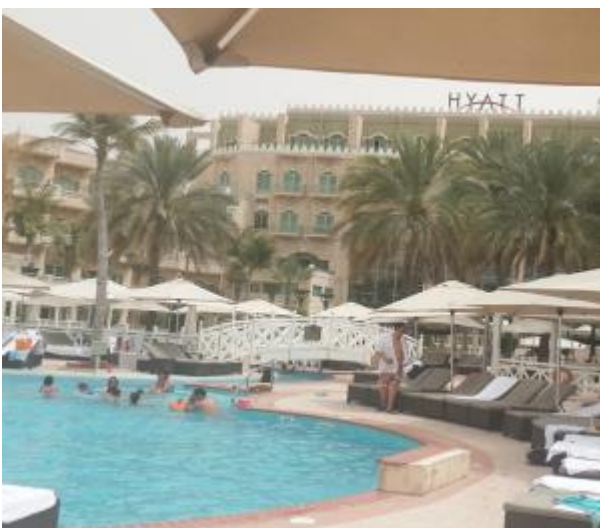
Muscat, Oman rarely features on many people's travel bucket-list. Most people confuse Oman with Amman in Jordan. And when it comes to Middle East leisure holidays, the United Arab Emirates takes the cake.

So cue the arched eyebrows when I announced that I will be travelling to Muscat, Oman. For me three things should intrigue me about a place before it gets on to my bucket list: history, culture and food. And Muscat checked those boxes for me.

So I set out for my week long adventure to Southwest Asia. (It is pretty easy travelling to Oman from Johannesburg. Your best option is via Abu Dhabi but there is also options via Qatar.)

Once I arrived in Muscat, I admired the desert landscape, rocky mountains in the distant, the palm-trees and the ocean nearby.

I was lucky enough to stay at the Grand Hyatt along the coast and it was as incredible as any five star hotel.



For someone who usually hustles it out while travelling, it was a treat and a half.

The hotel had a distinct Omani flavour which was quite different than other international hotel brands who have a more sanitised, mainstream look.

The hotel is perched along the beach so if sunbathing is your thing then you are in for an added bonus.

The food was... I am never lost for words but...



The wide range of traditional middle east cuisine was mind blowing. From the traditional breads to the rice and meat dishes everything I ate was on point.

For a coffee addict with a sweet tooth like me, I was in heaven as I experienced traditional Omani culture of a shot of strong kahwa (coffee) spiced with cardamon which is served alongside Omani Halwa. (Omanis offer it to you wherever you go).

On to history and culture (the exciting bit), I was first fascinated by the political and social structure of Oman.

I think it is very interesting that the Sultaan of Oman, Sultan Qaboos, is so widely loved and popular in the country that his picture is perched almost everywhere in Oman from the hotels to the local McDonalds.

Sultaan Qaboos has been in the ruler for the last 40 years after having toppled his father in a coup.

Omanis revere him tremendously for the role he played in developing Oman and placing the country on the international stage. I found it quite strange that his picture was even stuck on the back of cars.

Anyways, a mosque was built in his name; The Sultan Qaboos Grand mosque in Muscat which is open to tourists until 11am and has the second largest persian rug ever woven. It has a nice mix between Arab and Persian design.



Staying on the topic of religion, I was quite amazed at the type of religious/ political structure that plays out in Oman.

Unlike near by Saudi Arabia, in Oman religion is not enforced through government.

In most respects Omani Muslims are tolerant of all denominations.

Interestingly, Omanis neither fall in the Sunni or Shiatic subsections of Muslim.

The type of Islam they follow is called Ibadhism- the details of which is too intricate to fit in this post.

Nonetheless, Omani people pride themselves on a prayer the Prophet Muhammed (may peace be upon him) made for their land in the early days of Islam.

The Omani rulers have preserved Islamic artefacts and places- some of which even predate Islam.

I had the great opportunity to travel to the Bahla Fort which was built in the 13th century and is a Unesco heritage site.



I also explored the amazing Jibreen Castle which took me back in time, being surrounded by ancient drinking holes, palm-groves and the smell of sunbaked walls.

Oman has many of these heritage sites which are so rich in character and history.

The modern palaces of the incumbent Sultaan are also quite a sight. True to arab architecture, there is a lot of emphasis to detail.

Other interesting places to visit include the Baitul Bagh museum and nearby souks.

So far so good. Until you have to spend money. The Omani Riyal is absolutely strong- which is good for the Omanis and not so great for us coming from developing economies.

1 Omani Riyal is around R36. I wish I was kidding.

So heavy shopping cannot be on the agenda. Thankfully, a lot of the sights and places to explore are relatively cheap in comparison to other tourist hotspots across the world.

Interestingly, there are no poor people in Oman. I could not find a single person to give charity to in all of my time there. Even the expats who settle there say they have nothing to complain about. I loved that even with all of that wealth, the Omani culture was not flashy as seen in other Middle Eastern countries (*side eyes UAE).

The country has a deep and complicated effect on you which almost forces you to reflect on culture, tradition and history.

