



Amazing Oman



By Rhona Wells



THE INTOXICATING SCENERY AND BEWITCHING ENVIRONMENT OFFER THE DISCERNING TRAVELLER A DESTINATION WITH A DIFFERENCE

ornithologist's heaven - rock climbing, caving, golfing and sailing. Boat trips to see dolphins, close encounters with nesting turtles or browsing the souks for frankincense will ensure that a stay in Oman is unforgettable.

The capital, Muscat, is a prime example of intelligent and aesthetic development, blending the ancient and modern. There are no skyscrapers here and none are in the planning pipeline. The Corniche has retained its elegant character, with former merchants' houses having undergone full restoration, while in the nearby newly modernised Muttrah Souq, the forefathers of the same Omanis who shop here today, did their own trading.

Muscat has also become a prime cruise destination in the Middle East, as well as offering fast ferries to Musandam which, with its majestic fjords and breathtaking rock formations which soar above the world's busiest shipping lane - the Straits of Hormuz - is well worth a visit.

Of particular interest in Muscat are the Jalali and Mirani forts which flank the Al Alam Palace of Sultan Qaboos bin Said. Close by, the Bait Al Zubair is a museum in a traditional Omani house giving amazing

glimpses of the lifestyle and traditions of ancient and modern Muscat. The Natural History Museum features the geological ages, the varied wildlife including whales and other sea creatures. Bait Al Baranda, located in a historic building on Muttrah seafront, is a new museum tracing the story of Muscat from over 100 million years ago to the present day through innovative, interactive exhibits.

Oman has taken its culture into the 21st century by creating a stunning Royal Opera House, which has already attracted much interest and has an eclectic programme, designed to appeal to a variety of tastes for the 2013-2014 season.

Muscat is also home to the largest mosque in Oman. The Sultan Qaboos mosque, which boasts one of the most spectacular chandeliers in the world, offers visitors a true insight into Islam with its detailed and fascinating guided tours.

Nizwa Fort, which was completed in the 1650s, is among Oman's largest and oldest forts as well as one of the most visited national monuments. This historical edifice is an example of the ingenuity of Omani architecture. Set amid plantations of date palms, it was built by Imam Sultan bin Saif Al Yaarubi. It took 12 years to build, intended to prevent marauders from looting Nizwa's abundant natural wealth, as well as to protect its strategic location on the crossroads of vital caravan routes. The most striking feature of the ramparts is the central tower, soaring 35 metres above the rest of the

home of Sinbad the Sailor, Oman retains much of its ancient atmosphere, despite its luxurious hotels, strikingly beautiful beaches and fascinating markets.

Oman's rich cultural and archaeological heritage reflects hundreds of years of international trade and foreign influences, evidence of which is spread across the country, including more than 500 forts, castles, watchtowers, four UNESCO heritage sites and rock paintings. The range of activities available is equally varied - from experiencing the uniquely beautiful marine life to be discovered by diving in the Indian Ocean, to canoeing the fjords, bird watching - the country is an

Above: Muscat is becoming a prime cruise destination

Left: Traditional dhow building carries on in Sur

Right: the waters abound with dolphins

fortification, which allows stunning views of Nizwa and the surrounding areas.

Another landmark nearby is the recently refurbished Nizwa Souk, famous for its silver jewellery. The weekly (Friday) markets with goat and cattle auctions are traditional Omani events that have been part of the local landscape over many generations.

The Al Jebel Al Akhdar, or 'Green Mountains', which at 2,980 metres are the highest in Oman, enhance Al Dakhliyah's natural beauty. The mountain range acquired its name as the slopes are covered with vegetation throughout the year. With its many sheer rock faces, trekking trails, wadis and cave systems, it is the perfect destination for outdoor enthusiasts. It is also home to the roses of Oman, which are harvested each April by the locals for the famed rosewater.

Sur, on the Indian Ocean, is famous for its dhow-building yard, where traditional fishing vessels are built. This is becoming a popular attraction for visitors along with the city's two forts and small Maritime Museum, which charts the history of shipbuilding in the town.

The beaches of Ras Al Hadd and Ras Al Jinz are the nesting grounds for green turtles and are part of Oman's preservation scheme for eco-tourism. Nothing compares to the experience of seeing turtles lay their eggs and the little ones emerge and make a dash for the sea.

In absolute contrast lie the great Wahiba Sands, where longitudinal dunes, which are 200 kilometres long and 100 kilometres wide soar up to 150 metres and appear in a variety of hues from orange to deep amber. This provides a great outdoor experience and is best explored in 4x4 vehicles, with many desert camps offering overnight camping, under the starry canopy – a taste of authentic desert life.

Dhofar, in the south, covers a third of the country and has a varied terrain. The high dunes of the Empty Quarter are found here as well as unexplored caves and numerous sinkholes in the steep mountain vales. Situated on the coast is Salalah, Oman's second largest city.

The ruins at Khawr Rawri are reputed to be that of the palace of the Queen of Sheba. And the region is home to frankincense trees. In the souk, the women of Salalah create their own bokhur, a blended incense using various ingredients, such as rosewater, sugar, ambergris, crushed seashells, sandalwood, frankincense and myrrh.

For most of the year, the unspoiled beaches of Salalah are ideal for scuba diving, canoeing, sailing, jet skiing and diving. Hotels such as the Hilton Salalah and Crowne Plaza Salalah offer access to watersports. Mughshayl, an immaculate stretch of beach, features a blowhole that displays dramatic bursts of water and foam sometimes reaching 15 metres in the air.

Segregated from the rest of Oman by the east coast of the UAE, Musandam, known as the Norway of Arabia, is accessible by internal flights operated by Oman Air, by road and the new fast passenger ferry.

The natural beauty of this region is breathtaking, with the cliffs of the Hajar Mountains falling steeply into the sea from a height of almost 2,000 metres. Because of its geological history, there are fossils at 3,000 metres above seawater – a sight to be treasured. Khasab is the principal



Left: the magnificent Sultan Qaboos mosque

Below: one of Oman's natural wonders, baby turtles rushing to the sea

The Wave's PGA golf course designed by Greg Norman

Religious tolerance, key to Oman's stability

The Omani culture has its roots firmly in the Islamic religion. Oman developed its own particular form of Islam, Ibadhism, named after its founder, Abdullah ibn Ibadh, who lived during the 7th century AD. Not all Omanis are Ibadhis, there are also Sunni and Shia Muslims but all live in harmony together. Omanis are not only tolerant of the beliefs of different Muslim divisions, they are also tolerant towards believers of other faiths, who are allowed to practise their religion in churches and temples. This attitude has allowed the Sultanate to develop and flourish without any of the sectarian problems that have plagued its near neighbours. 'Live and let live' is more than a mantra, it is a lifestyle in Oman.

In Muscat, the Sultan Qaboos Mosque visitor centre volunteers lead guided tours of the mosque as well as detailed workshops on Islam, enabling lay visitors to understand the local culture.

During Ramadan, they also organise Iftar events, which visitors of all religious denominations are welcome to join, a truly fascinating experience. I was lucky enough to share and enjoy during Ramadan in July.

Oman has also, for several years now, held multi-cultural conferences aimed at spreading an all inclusive religious message. Held under the patronage of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the 12th International Conference on the Evolution of Islamic Jurisprudence (6-9 April 2013, Muscat) addressed the jurisprudence of living together and featured more than 60 papers presented by participants from all over the world.

The next conference is scheduled for April 2014.

town in the region. The Khasab Fort is a picturesque stronghold built in the 17th century by Portuguese seeking dominion over regional maritime trade. Other places of interest include the Bukha Fort, which was built by the Portuguese in the 16th century; dhow trips go to Telegraph Island, allowing for dolphin spotting, snorkelling and enjoying the peaceful waters; another highlight of the region are the prehistoric drawings of Tawi.

Almost all renowned hotel chains, including Shangri-La, InterContinental, Crowne Plaza, Radisson SAS, Hyatt

International, The Chedi and Sheraton have a presence in the country, with the showcase property, recently refurbished, being the Al Bustan Palace Hotel, the venue for many regional heads-of-state meetings.

Golf in Oman has been developing over the past three years on grass; it was previously played on sand golf courses.

The Wave's residential development is enhanced by Oman's first 18-hole PGA golf course designed by Greg Norman; Muscat Hills rivals it with an 18-hole PGA-certified green golf course with tremendous views over the Al Hajar Mountains with the sea in the distance. Both these developments are part of the potential for relocation to the Sultanate. These residential developments offer foreigners 100% ownership of their property as well as indefinite visas.

Through its sustainable development, the country remains firmly rooted in tradition and culture, which is most of its charm. A trip to Oman affords the chance to enjoy the natural beauty of a country that only recently began to attract tourism and is taking steps to protect its heritage.

Relocation, relocation, relocation

Oman has proved a huge hit with those seeking to relocate, or to purchase second homes, in the region. Its obvious attractions, together with a relaxation of laws allowing foreigners to own property in the Sultanate, together with a secure and stable political climate look set to see impressive growth in this sector over the next few years.

Work & leisure at the Sultanate's rising star

Oman has made formidable progress in tourism and hospitality development and remains one of the Gulf's most promising destinations for leisure and business. With this progress, led by HM Sultan Qaboos' vision for sustainable economic development, the country has seen

consistent growth over the last five years. The next five years will see several major residential and commercial developments completed, further contributing to GDP growth in the non-oil sectors.

Leading the pack

The Sultanate's Integrated Tourism Complexes (ITCs) are integral to Oman's tourism growth, and The Wave, Muscat is leading the pack.

Known as Oman's lifestyle destination, it is a first of its kind world-class development allowing Omanis and non-Omanis to own freehold properties. Spread along a stunning 6 km stretch of Muscat's coastline, this mixed-use development comprises 4000 luxury residential properties, retail and dining facilities and Oman's only signature PGA Standard 18-hole links golf course, designed by Greg Norman. The Wave, Muscat is also home to Oman's largest private yachting hub, the 400 berth Almouj Marina, as well as four luxury hotels which will be developed at the project.

There is a growing community of more than 2500 residents from 52 different nationalities living in the more than 1400 properties sold to date.

Work hard, play hard

With strong backing from the Government of Oman and regional developer Majid Al Futtaim, The Wave, Muscat is a success story in the commercial and tourism development vision for Oman. Set to open in 2014, the Marsa Retail and Commercial Village Centre will lease office space to businesses and provide meetings and conferences facilities. After a hard day's work, the four-star Marina Plaza Hotel or the five-star Kempinski Hotel will offer peace and relaxation close to the Marsa Village Centre. The Village Plaza and Golf resort hotels are now in an advanced stage of planning.

Business travellers can also tee off on Almouj Golf's championship or floodlit par 3 courses, and take advantage of The Wave, Muscat's private Almouj Marina, which takes yachts up to 65m.

Solid contribution

The Wave, Muscat is a key contributor to tourism in Oman, using property sales to fund the development of tourism infrastructure. And properties are selling in droves. Local market demand is reverting to pre-recession levels: the last four sales releases, from one bedroom marina-front apartments to seven bedroom villas, have all reached 80% or more in sales.

The Wave, Muscat has proven its credentials since its doors were first opened in 2006. Most recently, The Wave Muscat won two prestigious awards at the International Property Awards 2012 – World's Best Leisure Development and Golf Development.

The Wave, Muscat is bringing an exciting new real estate development concept to Muscat and, indeed, to Oman. Combining world-class facilities with the natural beauty of Oman, The Wave, Muscat plays a key role in promoting investment, tourism, leisure, real estate and sport in Oman, and stands unrivalled in the market. ■

