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Protection of heritage in Oman

While traveling in the Sultanate of Oman during Ramadan, writer **Frédéric Jarry** took the opportunity of meeting with advisor to the Minister of Culture and Heritage, Hassan Mohammed Ali Al Lawati.

The Minister's advisor proudly introduced his Omani homeland as a destination where, although luxury and ecological tourism are encouraged, it is never at the expense of the rich archaeological heritage or the natural environment of this former maritime empire, which are always keenly respected.

There is a clear link between governmental ethos and the tolerance of the third path of Islam, Ibadism, which is widely practised in Oman. Ibadism, a minority sect in comparison to Sunnism and Shiasm, promotes the idea of not discrimination between the Islamic and the non-Islamic heritage of Oman.

Indeed, the entire archaeological heritage of this ancient land, which, down through the centuries, has enjoyed an exciting history at



Oman has gone to great lengths to ensure that its cultural heritage is not lost beneath the sands of time

the crossroads of many cultures, is defended and protected with a passion unparalleled elsewhere in the Arabian Gulf.

“The strategic position of Oman, between Iran, India, Africa and the Sunni monarchies has historically been an opportunity for openness to all these civilisations. If we go back to the 5th millennium BC, we can see that our country has been a target of the different powers of the east and west, as from north to south. Italians, English, Portuguese, Indians left traces of their passages. This has created openness and tolerance within this formidable maritime crossroads. A heritage that extends on the land and the sea,” explained Hassan Mohammed Ali Al Lawati.

Throughout Oman’s landscapes and territories, there is an archaeological diversity rich in discoveries, across an area stretching from Khantab in the north, to Dhofar, in Salalah, the country’s southern most region. More than a hundred forts, towers and ancient stone mosques define the iconic singularities of the sultanate. Some are well preserved; others have suffered the effects of the harsh climatic conditions in the heart of the country.



While much has been achieved by the Ministry of Culture & Heritage, there is still much to be done in the Sultanate’s ongoing battle against time and the elements

This presents a real challenge for the government, especially for exploration of those sites below ground. An ancient and fabulous world remains to be brought to light from the depths of this earth, according to the findings of Tunisian, Moroccan and Italian researchers, as well as French missions, who have brought their valuable expertise to the Ministry of Culture and Heritage, which recognises the sheer scale of archaeological work yet to be conducted, as its main challenge in the future.

“However, this archaeological wealth creates covetousness throughout the country,” Al Lawati confirms.

“We are constantly fighting against the illegal trafficking of pottery, old weapons, vases and jewellery, which is our second biggest challenge.

We have created workshops with specialists to follow our heritage in the art markets and in international sales houses. So our authorities are watching. Not a piece of archaeology can leave the country without an investigation.

“Also, a law prohibits the digging of land for any project, such as oil or the construction of a sports infrastructure, without having received a positive opinion from our Ministry, which works to protect any sensitive archaeological area – such as immense areas hiding graves for example – and then transforms them into an official site. Not to mention the marine soils.”

A set of conventions and major plans has been signed for this purpose.

What also helps to protect the national heritage is the nurturing of a particular form of selective tourism, as opposed to the mass enterprises encouraged by many global tourist destinations. In this way, the old stones and various historical layers of Oman are preserved and respected. The government happily approved an increase in hotel prices in order to attract only a well-to-do and cultivated clientele. “Those potentially interested in our heritage, from old Muscat and the forts of Muttrah, through the treasures of our National Museum to the Harat site.”

A real collaboration with the Ministry of Tourism (which promotes the arrival of two million high-end tourists a year) has been put in place, with sufficient investment to attract tourists from all over the world to enjoy not only Oman’s fascinating and beautiful archaeological sites but also its many diverse attractions, such as sailing, climbing and deep sea diving to its varied exciting destinations and wild life safaris.

The aim is to preserve the authenticity of historic sites while also investing in modern facilities such as hotels, restaurants, shops, museums and craft workshops, to present the foreign tourist with a rounded experience of the Sultanate both then and now.

The five main museums in Oman (overseen and managed by the Ministry of Culture and Heritage) are particularly well cared for to attract quality tourism. An effort has been made to



Mr Hassan Mohammed Ali Al Lawati
serves as advisor to the Minister of
Culture & Heritage

ensure
the



Royal Opera House Muscat is a shining example of how Oman continues to develop its 21st century cultural experience

availability of information in these places of culture. Not to mention museums with private collections. There are also many UNESCO hot spots (conventions have been signed) and intangible heritage such as music (Royal Opera House Muscat, above), or local cuisine. The Omani heritage is national but also international, inscribed on World Heritage."Quality tourism helps us to preserve all this cultural richness of our country," concluded Mr. Al Lawati.

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