

Sun, sand and prayer
Muscat's Grand Mosque
can accommodate up to
20,000 worshippers at
a time, including 6500
in the main prayer hall.
Opposite: Muscat is now
home to many five-star
hotels, but The Chedi
was one of the first.



Arabian Sights

The sultanate of Oman combines a vast turquoise coastline
and a desert heart with ancient legends and
new-age luxury. Jennifer Byrne reports.

Photography Andrew Rowat





The sultanate of Oman possesses a talent for self-effacement to the point of genius. A rare thing in our hyped-up world, but what else can explain why a country so exotic and wildly beautiful is so little known? "Ah, Jordan", is a common reaction. Or, "it's one of those little Arab emirates isn't it? Like Dubai?" That it has a vague connection to Zanzibar sometimes rings a bell, so maybe the Horn of Africa?

You, of course, would know it's actually part of the Arabian Peninsula, bordering Yemen, Saudi Arabia and several emirates. This independent country combines a vast turquoise coastline with a desert heart. The Empty Quarter, as the world's largest sand desert is fabulously known, has its eastern corner in Oman; it was twice crossed by the British explorer Wilfred Thesiger, although as I barrel above it by plane I wonder how Mr Intrepid, even with camels, emerged alive.

That was in the 1940s. Nowadays the desert can be experienced in luxe safari camps with private tents and sheets of stratospheric thread-counts. Hotels along the shining coastline boast pools the size of inland seas. They've even opened a splendid opera house. Oman has launched itself into world of dreams that is high-end tourism.

Or rather, re-launched itself. Things were building nicely in the years before the GFC hit, followed by the recent Arab Spring uprisings, which made travellers nervous and were bad news for Oman's bookings.

One doesn't like to dance on the difficulties of others but what's been tough for Oman is great for visitors. In the southern region of Dhofar, for instance, I went to the ancient city of Sumhuram, which stands high on a hill overlooking the Arabian Sea. It was the hub of Oman's

thriving trade in frankincense, once one of the world's prime currencies. I could see the road leading down to the port where the dhows loaded their precious cargo, and around me on the summit were the ruins of a grand settlement, which includes, so the story goes, a palace built by the Queen of Sheba some 3000 years ago. Italian archeologists have been working here for ages but the dig is open so I just wandered about, following signs and maps, taking time to stop and dazzle my eyes by looking out to sea. To my right there was a wide river running into the sea, with bright wading birds, flamingos I think, fussing over food on the shore. The point is, I was the only one there. Not a soul, not a sound except a light whistle of wind.

The south is the least-travelled area of Oman and very much a world unto itself. Starting in June, the *khareef*, or seasonal monsoon, blows in bearing mists and heavy rain which for three months turn the whole Dhofar region a brilliant shade of green, like a vast tropical oasis. The contrast to the searing desert beyond could not be stronger.

British adventurer Sir Ranulph Fiennes described Dhofar's capital, Salalah, as "simply the most beautiful place on earth". I arrived as it started to heat up again, though it was still lush, the sides of the road lined with little stalls selling bananas and coconuts which the stallholders crack open so you can drink the sweet, cooling liquid with a straw.

Most of the sellers are not native-born Omanis but Indians from the southern state of Kerala. Why Kerala? Because it was on the old sailing routes. Oman has been a trading nation for centuries, and that means it also traded and swapped people, either as slaves, shipped >



Shifting sands
Above: low-rise buildings are the norm in Oman's capital. Opposite: shopping and eating in Salalah's souq (top left and bottom right); ruins at Al-Baleed, which was founded in the 11th century (top right); Omani road hazards in the form of camels (bottom left).



I canoed out from the private beach

and remembered stories of Sinbad, who sailed these warm blue waters on his mythical voyages.

across from East Africa, or as subjects of an antique empire which extended beyond today's Oman to the United Arab Emirates, Iran, the southern Pakistan province of Baluchistan, and Zanzibar, off the East African coast. The three million citizens of Oman today have come from everywhere, which helps explain why the south, especially, is such a mix of faces and languages. Most men, though, wear the long white robe called a dishdasha with an embroidered cap, and most women, the flowing black abaya, which cloaks the body and frames the face. When couples promenade together of an evening through the streets and souks they strike me as looking like living pieces in a giant chess game.

Those coconut stalls were not our only source of roadside refreshment in Salalah. Another came when, on the main road out of the city, a herd of camels forced our car to a stop. They were ambling across the road to a water trough, and while they drank, a small rag-tag group of locals squeezed milk from the camels' bulging teats while jealous, leggy babies tried to butt them away. We pulled out the camera to use their herd as the foreground for some spectacular mountain shots. And rather than beat us off – or, the more common and depressing thing, ask for money – they indicated

we should take our photos, then sit down and share. They handed me the communal bowl of foaming camel's milk. Germs, funny tummy... I shut my eyes and quaffed it down, still warm from the udder. A good amount, I thought, though clearly not enough to satisfy honour, so the old man of the group, with one tooth in his wizened face, hacked the top off cola bottles and filled them too, before sending us off with milk and a warm wave.

We ate that night at a restaurant at the entrance to Al Husn souk. The food was simple and good: creamy hummus, meat kebabs, tabbouleh and large circles of dough sprinkled with seeds then slapped onto the sides of a deep circular oven until crisp at the edges, with a soft chewy centre. The air was smoky and dizzyingly fragrant from dozens of frankincense burners smouldering in the souk. Frankincense smells like nothing when you pick it up, and it looks like a silvery, semi-transparent gemstone, but it's actually hardened resin tapped from the tree *Boswellia sacra*; burning it over charcoal releases the aromatic smoke.

I was with my guide Mussallem, a tribal nomad who only recently, reluctantly, settled into his first house for his children's sake. He suggested I sit at the end of a long table, opposite an elegant old man who spoke no

Pleasure craft
Dolphins and whales make their home in the Gulf of Oman, and viewing trips depart regularly from Barr al Jissah Resort and Spa near Muscat.



and Zanzibar and Mozambique. Reading the names, imagining the journeys, is part of the magic.

Further north is the lost city of Ubar, a magical title itself, although insufficient for TE Lawrence, who dubbed it the Atlantis of the Sands. It lay buried beneath the dunes of the Empty Quarter until researchers identified it using images taken by NASA. The surrounding frankincense trees made ancient Ubar so rich, legend has it, that the streets were paved with gold. No news on myrrh.

And then there's An-Nabi Ayyub, also known as Job's Tomb, where the prophet – or a body that might be the prophet's – lies beneath a green satin sheet, revered by Muslims and Christians alike. Ever the dutiful guide, Mussallem drove me there, narrating the story that Job was born in Oman, went to Jerusalem, and returned to his beloved homeland when he was 80 to die. When we get to the mausoleum, on an isolated hilltop with a glorious view over the Salalah plain, he drops the act. "It's one of six or seven Job's tombs in the world," he whispers. "He must have died many times."

On our last morning in the south we drove out of the city before dawn, snaking 100km or so east along the coast. The abalone season had just started and we were searching for the divers who'd be living in temporary camps – meaning circles of 4WDs and blankets spread on the sand – for the next two months.

The sea was like glass and it was silent, except for the soft pop of turtles poking their heads up for air. The sun

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English but did everything with his hands and his hat to show how welcome I was.

"His wife died recently, he's always here", Mussallem said. "I don't know his name but his son is Nasr so I call him Abu Nasr. He won't stay long." He didn't, leaving with a courtly bow soon after.

When we went back the next night, Abu Nasr was there again so I sat beside him. Mussallem started to laugh. "How happy he is, a lonely man, and a woman sits next to him. You'll see, he will never go now." And the widower stayed until the very end of the meal, sharing our sweet black tea, saying nothing except with his sad tired eyes.

Beyond the monsoon verdancy and endless white beaches, the south is also where you feel Oman's antiquity most powerfully. The city of Salalah is built on the site of the previous capital, Al-Baleed, founded in the 11th century. Beneath Al-Baleed lies the remains of a large Iron Age settlement dating back to pre-Islamic times. You can investigate all this at Salalah's impressive archaeological museum and park, a site so large they zip you around the excavations in a golf buggy. It does feel a little strange, checking out centuries of history through a plastic window frame, but that's time travel. A separate arm of the museum traces Oman's maritime history, including a life-size model of one of long-distance sailing boats which plied the routes of trade between Oman

threw long pink rays along the ridges. We saw a wisp of smoke and found the divers crouched around a small fire, packing up breakfast and strapping on masks and snorkels for the day's work. They don't need to go far from shore or dive deeper than six metres to pick from the rocks handfuls of fat shellfish which they then sell for export, the abalone being too valuable for locals to eat themselves. A shame, one mimed, grinning and pointing his finger sharply upwards to indicate what abalone supposedly does for sexual performance.

A strong diver can harvest 10kg of abalone a day; the best can earn more than \$6000 a month. So it was very generous when the youngest, a cheery plump fellow called Ali, prised one open, revealing a glint of pearlised shell, and thrust the creature into my hand. Eat, he unmistakably indicated. It was salty, meaty and so raw, I noticed after a big bite, that it was still actually moving. I was horrified, I wanted to spit it out – my first food of the day, and it was alive – but Ali was looking thrilled and I just had to swallow. I buried the rest when he wasn't looking.

Close encounters with seafood are a big part of the Oman experience, one way or another. It's inevitable, given both the country's history and the simple fact of it having 2000-plus kilometres of coast, with most of the major cities fronting the sea. In the capital, Muscat, I went to the lively fish market with our hotel chef, Azza.>

Fertile land and sea
Oman's abundant seafood includes abalone (middle row, left and centre) and the fish sold at the fish market in Muscat (top right), where chef Azza (above) of the Barr al Jissah resort (middle of top row) can accompany hotel guests on shopping trips. Oman also produces bananas (top left), coconuts (bottom right) and even frankincense from *Boswellia sacra* (middle right). The beach at Salalah (bottom left) is popular for cooling off.



Water views
Barr al Jissah Resort and Spa is three hotels in one, all backed by honey-coloured cliffs (opposite), and its traditional style of architecture (below) frames views of the Arabian Sea.

She picked around the spotted shark and the two-metre-long swordfish and the buckets of pipies (they were still moving too) and chose the local delicacy, a vibrant red fish called Sultan Ibrahim, which she seasoned with turmeric and served for lunch just two hours after we bought it. Deliciously fresh, thoroughly – blessedly – cooked.

Pretty much all visits to Oman start in Muscat, where the international airport is currently being upgraded and vastly expanded as part of the national plan to boost tourism. Omanis are grand planners. In fact they've been on a rolling series of five-year plans for the past 36 years.

Which is a good moment to introduce the sultan, whose plan the Plan was. His name – which even Gilbert and Sullivan might have blushed to invent – is Sultan Qaboos (pronounced “caboose”). I counted four different explanations of how this graduate of Britain's Sandhurst military academy succeeded his father in 1970, including that Queen Elizabeth fixed it for him, but the important thing is, it happened soon after the yee-ha moment when Oman struck oil, and he has used the money on schools, roads, hospitals. The sultan has hauled antique Oman into the modern

world while respecting its culture and preserving its traditions – high-rise building, for instance, is still broadly discouraged in Muscat.

The wheels wobbled in February when Oman joined the regional trend and had its own Arab Spring uprising in Sohar, a major port and industrial centre. Protesters set fires and blocked roads; several died. But their demands were specific rather than revolutionary – a boost to the minimum wage, the sacking of cabinet members – and the sultan accepted them, acted and quietened the country within days. The following month, thousands marched on Muscat's towering Grand Mosque chanting slogans of patriotism and support. Among the placards: “We salute His Majesty's wise leadership”.

The mosque is indeed astonishingly grand, the world's largest outside Saudi Arabia. It's blindingly white by day, but at night it lights up blue and green like a Fabergé egg crossed with a sea urchin. Feeling faint from the outpouring of statistics (600,000 crystals in the Swarovski chandelier, 1.7 million knots in the Iranian carpet) I refreshed myself with a turn in the heavenly gardens, its trees hanging heavy with fragrant white flowers.

The mosque stands at the western end of a long necklace of former coastal villages which have effectively merged to form modern Muscat. The standout hotel here is the Chedi, one of Oman's earliest five-star offerings, which has just opened its third pool – twice the length of a standard Olympic – and has a spa and gym occupying one entire wing. The luxury zone, then. It's fabulous, using every shade of that word, as is the food, the chef still buzzing from having served Plácido Domingo, who'd come straight from the opera house the night before.

At the other end of the necklace, past the central souk and at the very tip of its own peninsula, is the Barr al Jissah Resort, a Shangri-La property. I'd planned to sign up for the dolphin trip but the boat was bung so I made do with canoeing out from the private beach and remembering stories of Sinbad, who sailed these warm blue waters on his mythical voyages.

I think it's this mix of fable and fabrication, Eastern romance styled up for Westerners, that prompted a hard-travelling friend of mine to describe Oman as a bit of an Arab Disneyland. Having loved the place, I was stung – what's wrong with clean, safe *and* exotic? Not everyone wants to rough it in the middle of the Niger desert. But there is a grain of truth to the comment. Star British architect Norman Foster is designing along the Muscat beachfront now; fashion house Missoni has its own hotel opening in the next year or two.

Happily, the bigger truth is that behind the four decades of oil wealth and the shiny new developments they afford is the wear and tear and custom and pride of centuries. “So good you have come”, was a common greeting. “Now it is your country”.

Beneath the veneer of Oman is an old, true soul. Ask the people you meet. They'll help you find it.*

THE FINE PRINT

Getting there

Emirates operates 70 flights a week to Dubai from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth, with connecting flights to Muscat, Oman. Return economy class fares to Oman from Australia from \$1662. 1300 303 777, emirates.com/au

Stay

MUSCAT

Barr al Jissah Resort and Spa On a beachfront peninsula, three hotels in one cater for families, businesspeople and lovers of luxury. The complex is backed by towering honey-coloured cliffs and has excellent facilities, including private butlers, three cooled swimming pools and a

dive centre. Rooms from \$490. +968 2477 6666, shangri-la.com/muscat
The Chedi Muscat Backed by rugged mountains, and facing the serene waters of the Gulf of Oman, the Chedi blends Japanese minimalism with Arabian flair. The landscaped grounds feature water gardens, tennis courts and three swimming pools. Rooms from \$590. +968 2452 4400, ghmluxuryhotels.com/ChediMuscat.htm

SALALAH

Crowne Plaza Resort

Once a Holiday Inn, now upgraded, with sliding doors opening out to gardens and a patrolled beach. Comfortable rather than luxurious, perfect for families and

well located. Rooms from \$190. +968 2323 5333, crownplaza.com/salalah
Salalah Marriott Resort The Marriott stands in splendid isolation on the white sandy beach of Mirbat Cove, about 80km from Salalah airport. All suites and rooms offer sea or mountain views. Rooms from \$165. +968 2326 8245, marriottsalalahresort.com

Eat & Drink

The Chedi Muscat

At The Beach Restaurant on the water's edge, executive chef Richard Wilson offers such diverse fruits of the sea as smoked haddock chowder and blue-eye trevalla carpaccio.
Barr al Jissah Resort and Spa, Muscat Shahrazad, one of the resort's several themed restaurants, focuses on Moroccan food

with an excellent range of tagines, while those pining for such international staples as a hamburger or a Caesar salad will find them at the Surf Café.

See

Grand Mosque A vast spiritual and architectural landmark with an elegant main prayer hall accommodating more than 6500 worshippers. *Sultan Qaboos St, Muscat*
Old Muttrah souk A busy shaded market on the Muscat corniche selling handicrafts, cloth and scents. Plenty of souvenirs, but most of the customers are locals.
Al Baleed Archaeological Museum and Park An exploration of the early southern settlement near Salalah.

