

A thriving tourist destination

By PAMELA GOODMAN

TRAVEL WRITER AND EDITOR

His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos was quick to understand the value of Oman's abundance of natural beauty... recognising that tourism would become a key economic driver in powering Oman into the modern world

Tourism in Oman, prior to the reign of His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos, was an alien concept and it is a well-known fact that, at the point of His late Majesty's accession in 1970, the country had no more than 10km of paved roads within a surface area of some 300,000km². His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos was quick to understand the value of Oman's abundance of natural beauty – its spectacular mountains, its wind-blown deserts, its pristine coastline – recognising that tourism would become a key economic driver in powering Oman into the modern world.

Unlike neighbouring countries in the region, however, which have appeared bent on excessive grandstanding in the development of their tourism models, Oman has taken a softly, softly approach, always mindful of preserving a strong sense of identity. Now, fifty years on, the country's rich heritage and ancient soul, rooted in its role as an historically important trading route, remain intact and Bedouin values continue to form the core of an Omani welcome.

First-time visitors to the country will almost certainly spend their days in and around Muscat, a city blessed with multiple cultural assets, a fine strip of coastline

and a climate perfectly suited to those international tourists searching for a winter escape. Highlights of the city include the Grand Mosque, a modern Islamic architectural masterpiece boasting a 50-metre gold dome and the second largest Persian carpet in the world; the Bait Al Zubair Museum for tracing Oman's past; the Opera House - the first of its kind in the region; and the Muttrah Souk which retains the chaotic interest of a traditional Arab market in bringing together Omani and Indian arts and crafts.

Though closed to the public, Muscat's two distinctive 16th-century forts of Al-Mirani and Al-Jelani act as precursors to the forts in and near the historic town of Nizwa, an hour and a half's drive from the capital - along new roads of the smoothest tarmac. Set on a plain surrounded by a thick palm oasis and some of the country's highest mountains, Nizwa acquired its importance as an ancient centre of trade, religion, education and art, transforming in modern times to become the second-biggest tourist destination in Oman – due, in part, to its souk and popular Friday livestock market and in part to its role as the natural access point for the impressive castles of Bahla and Jabreen. The latter, in particular, has a brooding



magnificence, well-preserved both inside and out with numerous distinctive painted ceilings still intact.

From Nizwa the obvious route, aside from returning to Muscat, is to drive the impressive switchback road into the mountains, the heat of the plains receding, the temperature dropping with each metre climbed. The Jabal Al Akhdar range is one of Oman's most admired geological features forming a huge plateau, some 2,000m above sea level, split with chasms and canyons that plunge to obscurity. These rugged mountains, with a semi-Mediterranean climate, have been cultivated for at least 1000 years, producing a wide range of flowers and fruits. So much so that in 2011, His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos declared Jabal Al Akhdar a nature reserve in a bid to conserve its fragile bio-diversity.

But these mountains are more than just a fruit basket; this is Oman's adventure playground - for hikers and bikers, for rock climbers and star gazers - as well as the country's scenic show stopper. Lying alongside Jebal Shams, the highest peak in both the Al Akhdar range and Oman as a whole, is the spectacularly deep Wadi Ghul, a straight-sided fissure with 1,000m cliffs known colloquially as the Grand Canyon of Arabia. The 5km Balcony Walk, just below the canyon rim, is one of the highlights of the region.

The mountains of northern Oman maybe the highest and the most frequently visited, but Southern Oman has impressive mountains, too, not least Jabal Samhan - more plateau than peak - which forms the eastern flank of the Dhofar range. Riddled with limestone caves and sinkholes Jabal Samhan is a protected nature reserve and home to the elusive and

critically endangered Arabian leopard. The sanctuary itself is closed to the general public but visitors can drive to the 1,300m-high viewing point on the edge of the plateau, which offers a sweeping coastal panorama over the plains of Salalah.

This, too, is the region of the khareef, the cool, wet south eastern monsoon that sweeps through Salalah and southern Oman between June and September, cloaking the hillsides in green, replenishing the dry wadis and providing a welcome respite from the intense heat of the rest of the region. Domestic visitors, and those from many neighbouring Gulf and Arab countries, flood to the area at this time to enjoy the Salalah Festival, laid on to celebrate the mist and the rain of these cooler months.

By autumn, once the fierce summer temperatures of northern Oman and the khareef of southern Oman have both receded, international travellers from further afield are drawn back by the country's perfect winter climate. November to April are the best months for desert adventures and, again, Salalah comes into its own - firstly as a superb beach destination in its own right, and secondly as the gateway to Rub al Khali, otherwise known as the Empty Quarter, one of the world's most fabled wildernesses covering 250,000 square miles of southern Arabia in a sea of sand. This is a wasteland of towering dunes, endless horizons and star-studded skies, of shifting shadows, silence and peace. Day trips by 4x4 are possible from Salalah, but far better is to arrange a camping trip for a night or two under canvas.

Salalah is currently reached via an onward flight from Muscat (direct flights from Europe - allegedly under

November to April are the best months for desert adventures and, again, Salalah comes into its own - firstly as a superb beach destination in its own right, and secondly as the gateway to Rub al Khali, otherwise known as the Empty Quarter



Salalah, Oman

discussion - would be a huge boost for the region) but staying within a comfortable radius of the capital does not preclude a desert experience. Wahiba Sands, an area of rolling, golden sand dunes with a small selection of fixed camps for overnight stays, is a mere three hours' drive from Muscat and closer still to Nizwa and the coastal town of Sur, one of the most important trading and fishing ports on the Gulf and the centre of construction for traditional Arab sailing boats or dhows.

No overview of Oman would be complete without reference to the Musandam Peninsula, Oman's most northerly region that is geographically separated from the rest of the country by a corner of the UAE. This remote area of high, jagged cliffs and fjord-like inlets juts out into the Strait of Hormuz, a strategically important choke point for global oil supplies linking the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. For tourists, the peninsula feels thoroughly off the beaten track, the harsh terrain limiting overland travel by road, but dhow cruising, diving and snorkelling are truly spectacular. And, surprising as it may seem, there's luxury to be had too, at one of Oman's most iconic hotels (see sidebar) which, for the well-heeled, international traveller in particular, has been a game-changer in putting this beautiful country firmly on the tourist map.

Where to stay:

Muscat: Oman's capital has a continually expanding choice of hotels on offer. Those suited best to the international leisure market include The Chedi (www.ghmhotels.com), well-located on the sea yet within easy access of all Muscat's main sites. The hotel's most distinctive feature is the 100-metre Long Pool – one of the most famous swimming pools in the world. *The Kempinski* (www.kempinski.com), a relatively new arrival to the sea shore, works well for both the business and leisure markets, conveniently close to the airport in a new residential area of the city, known as The Wave. Twenty minutes from downtown Muscat, *The Shangri-La Al Husn Resort & Spa* (www.shangri-la.com) is an adult-oriented hotel with a spectacular headland setting that forms one part of a three-hotel resort (the other two, Al Waha and Al Bandar are geared more for the family market). The seclusion and large private beach make it perfect for holidaymakers. *The Al Bustan Palace* (www.ritzcarlton.com) originally built as a palace for His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, is the grande dame of Muscat hotels boasting an exquisite setting on the beach, large gardens and every sporting and spa facility imaginable. The show-stealer is its cavernous, domed atrium.


Jabal Al Akhdar: At 2,000m high, *Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar Resort* (www.anantara.com) has a sublime plateau location with sensational views of the canyon. There's a cliff-edge infinity pool and a viewing platform

Information

Oman Air (www.omanair.com), the national carrier, flies between Muscat and several major international destinations, as well as between Muscat and Salalah. For bespoke luxury adventure travel within Oman go to: www.omanexpeditions.com and for more information about the country as a whole visit: www.omantourism.gov.om

named after the late Princess of Wales, who visited this site in 1986. A wide range of activities and cultural experiences are on offer. The views from *Alila Jabal Akhdar* (www.alilahotels.com) are even more impressive - principally due to the hotel's remote location. Here stone-clad clusters of luxurious suites are scattered on the edge of a clifftop, blending seamlessly into rugged desert beyond.

Salalah: *The Anantara Al Baleed Resort & Spa* (www.anantara.com) has a sophisticated setting on a vast stretch of exquisite sandy beach. Amongst the accommodation options are 96 supremely private, low-rise villas with private pools, the best of which open directly onto the sand. Salalah's fascinating frankincense museum is a short bike ride away (hotel bikes are available to guests).

Musandam Peninsula: Guests can choose to arrive by car at *Six Sense Zigby Bay* (www.sixsenses.com) or by paraglider from the mountains which cradle the picture-perfect bay. Rooms are laid out like a traditional Omani village of individual stone-walled houses. Each comes with a private pool and is only steps away from a stunning beach. The hotel has won countless awards and continues to rank amongst the most desirable hotel destinations in the world. 

Wahiba Sands, an area of rolling, golden sand dunes, is a mere three hours' drive from Muscat and closer still to Nizwa and the coastal town of Sur

Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar resort

