

THE
Wanderlust[®]
EXPLORER'S GUIDE TO
Oman



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Welcome to the Pearl of Arabia

Nestled between the rugged mountains and the shores of the Arabian Peninsula, Oman's setting alone offers visitors plenty to conjure with. But the Sultanate of Oman's heart lies in its people. Visitors are famously welcomed with open arms – not to mention coffee and dates – to a land where upholding ancient traditions and embracing modern perspectives is second nature. There are incredible stories to be heard from those who have lived in Oman's mountains for generations, told first-hand over a traditional breakfast among the pomegranate trees and roses. You'll also have plenty of local help to discover Oman's hidden corners, culture and histories, from taking in the waters of remote lagoons and magical pink lakes to wandering 13th-century forts and Modernist museums. Spend the night in a desert camp with nothing but the stars and local people to guide you or grab a snorkel to swim silently alongside whale sharks. Whether you visit the souqs, sands or seas, you'll soon realise that Oman is more vibrant than you could have ever imagined. This enchanting corner of Arabia has much to say to those who take the time to listen. Come and explore it with us.

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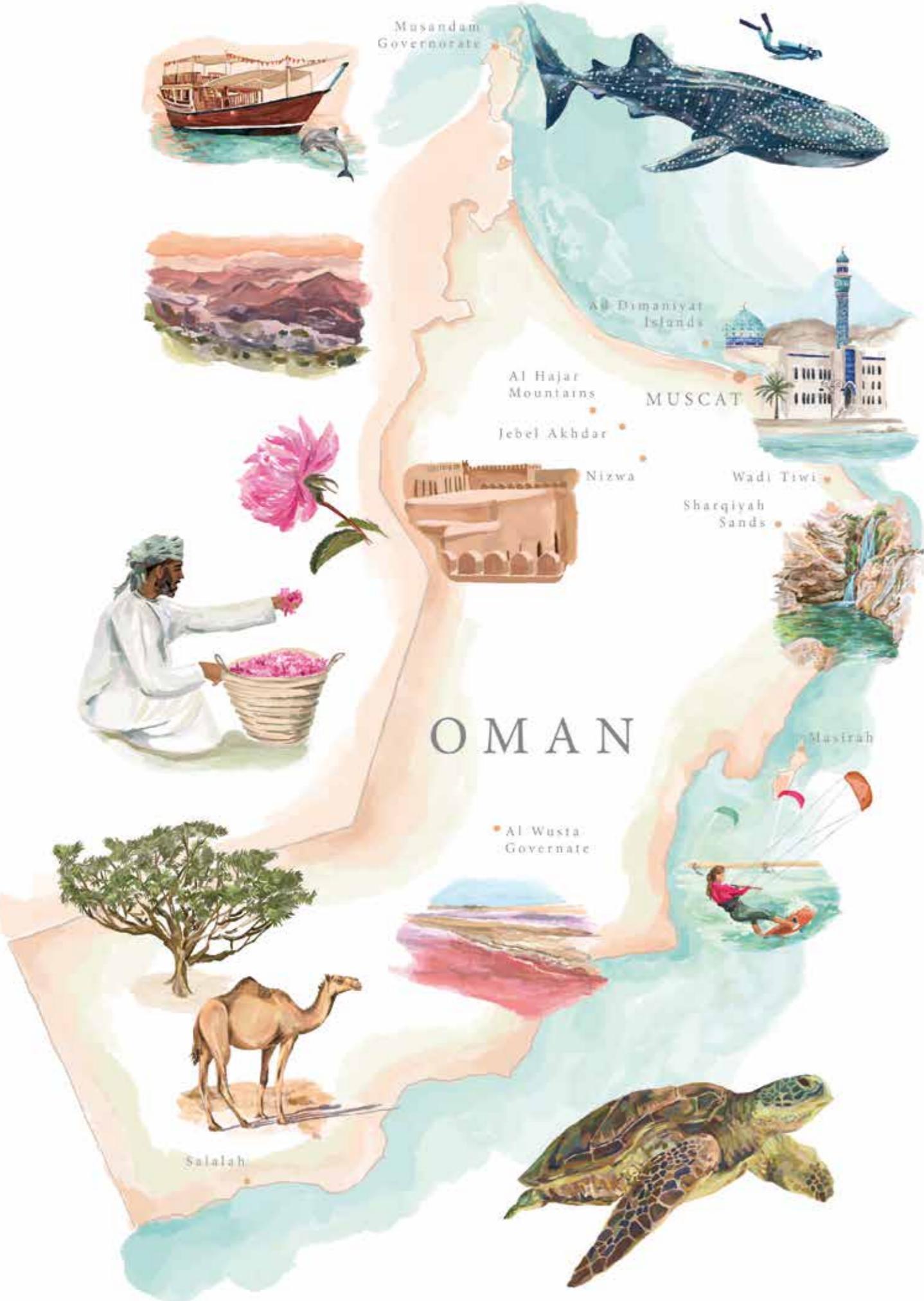
Wanderlust

In association with

Experience Oman



Land of plenty
 From desert oases and mountain hideaways to the pristine streets of modern capital Muscat, Oman has plenty of surprises to offer visitors



TRAVEL GUIDE

Uncover the hidden tales and untold stories of Oman

Discover a world where age-old tradition meets contemporary charm. Welcome to Oman – an unsung gem in the heart of Arabia

The concept of an 'authentic Arabian experience' is one that often blends into a hazy mirage of dates, camels and brightly coloured textiles being traded against a backdrop of desert dunes. But Oman is a place where the real Arabia – natural wonders, age-old traditions, warm hospitality – truly reveals itself.

Muscat, the capital, is the Sultanate of Oman's go-to destination, which means that visitors often overlook the fjords of Musandam, the mountains of Jebel Akhdar, the port city of Sur and the vibrant landscapes of Dhofar. Indeed, the lesser-known areas beyond Muscat promise everything from pink lakes, rugged mountain viewpoints and golden sand dunes to turquoise pools, ancient forts and hidden villages that are yet to be fully explored by travellers.

Sitting on the eastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula, Oman seems quiet in comparison to the bright beckoning lights of its noisier neighbours. Upon

Oman at a glance
(this page; clockwise from top)
Camels in Salalah are mostly Khawar or Dhofari breeds; harvesting frankincense is called 'tapping'; Wakan village is about 2,000m above sea level; in 1987, Bahla Fort became the country's first UNESCO-listed fort; Bandar Khayran offers more than 22 diving and snorkelling spots; Jebel Akhdar is known as the fruit bowl of Oman

arrival at the modern, calm Muscat International Airport, the gentle change of pace is immediately apparent. The horizon is empty of skyscrapers, with the vastness of the Indian Ocean to your left and the foothills of the Hajar Mountains to your right. Nestled between the two, low-rise Muscat promises a warm

welcome in every direction, with friendly locals and cheerful traders who will gladly stop to make sure you're confident and comfortable wherever you're going next.

Like other Gulf states, Oman has modernised greatly over recent decades, but it continues to uphold its history and heritage with a quiet pride. Oman has always been outward-looking; it was

Africa. Even then, it had a tradition of embracing others, regardless of their origins. Today, this welcoming culture endures undiminished. The Omani way of life presents a beautiful paradox: distinctly Arabian and yet effortlessly diverse. It's a place where guests can't help but feel like they belong. Oman doesn't offer a fleeting glimpse of an Arabian experience – it is the Arabian experience.

Illustration: Karen Kerton-Oprey; Images: Oman Ministry of Heritage and Tourism

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WELCOME TO OMAN

Uncovering the Arabian Peninsula's best-kept secret

A bounty of little-seen natural wonders, one-off moments and remote villages are to be found across Oman – making it all the more exciting when you stumble on one

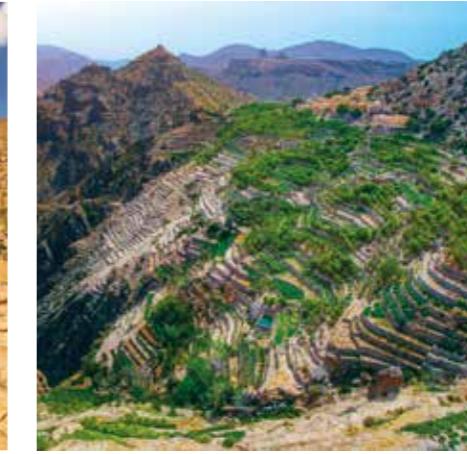
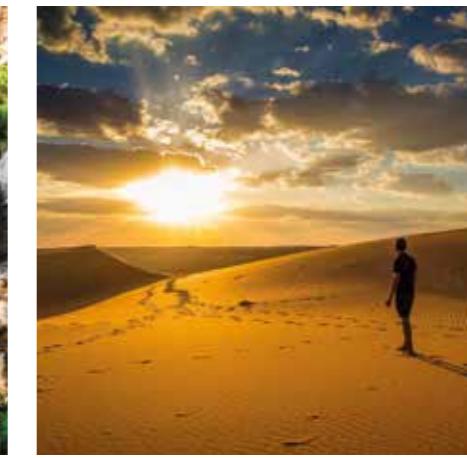
Hues of blue
(this page; top)
Perched serenely on Muscat's Mutrah Corniche, the Al Lawati Mosque has a powder-blue dome and minaret, both of which are adorned with scriptures from the Quran

For a country so rich in history, Oman has always been curiously low-key. It doesn't boast the tallest towers or the busiest airports. It doesn't clamour for attention. And yet the moment you arrive, you realise it doesn't need to. Sitting at the south-eastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula and bordering the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, Oman prides itself on its welcoming atmosphere. Conversations unfold over hot cups of strong, cardamom-laced *kahwa* (Omani coffee), offered to guests

without hesitation. Locals stop to chat and strangers quickly feel like friends. This attitude is a result of Oman's history, a past shaped not by walls and borders but by trade, exploration and seafaring ambition. For centuries, Omani sailors crossed the Indian Ocean, trading spices and dry dates as far as Zanzibar, India and China. This was once a maritime empire, a country whose influence stretched deep into Africa and across the Arabian Gulf.

Even today, that legacy lingers in the wooden *dhow*s (traditional sailing

boats) still moored in Muscat's Sultan Qaboos Port, and in the souqs where traders weigh frankincense as they have done for over 2,000 years. Oman's transformation into the modern nation you see today is remarkably recent. As late as the 1970s, many parts of the country had yet to see electricity, paved roads or modern healthcare. Then came His Late Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said, who turned a scattered network of villages into a unified nation; one that brought Oman up to date without losing sight of its



Five unforgettable Omani moments

1 Walking through the town of Al Hamra

Al Hamra is one of Oman's best-preserved mud-brick villages. Lined with centuries-old houses abandoned over time, its streets are best experienced come the golden hour. Wander them when the light catches the edges of its carved wooden doors to feel like you've stumbled into another era entirely.

2 Seeing the sun rise at Sharqiyah Sands

This rolling, endless sea of dunes shifts from gold to deep amber as the sun rises. Waking before dawn, climbing to the top of a dune and watching the world awaken in uninterrupted silence is the kind of magic you won't want to forget.

3 Oasis dreaming at Wadi Bani Khalid

A few hours' drive from Muscat, Wadi Bani Khalid is a mirage made real: emerald pools of water fringed with date palms and hidden deep within the cliffs. These lagoons are crystal clear, deep enough to dive into and so still that they reflect the sky.

4 Wandering the misty mountains of Jebel Akhdar

Drive up to Jebel Akhdar (Green Mountain) and you'll find both pomegranate and apricot orchards clinging to the cliffs, villages perched like eagles' nests and the scent of wild roses filling the air.

5 Taking it all in at Nizwa Fort

Take a seat in the courtyard of Nizwa Fort, one of Oman's most renowned strongholds. Built in the 17th century, its foundations date back even earlier, and it promises palm views for miles.

traditions. Today, the sultanate's cities are modern and its infrastructure seamless, yet its heritage remains firmly intact.

There are no glass high-rise buildings blocking the view of the mountains or souvenir shops clustered below them. Instead, you'll find fortresses that still stand guard, souqs that still hum with activity and mountain villages that flourish thanks to a UNESCO-listed irrigation system older than Islam.

From the vast silence of the Empty Quarter and the night sky of the

Sharqiyah Sands to the emerald *wadis* (ravines) in the mountains, Oman is a place of extremes. One moment, you're gently pushing palm leaves aside to explore the secretive oasis village of Bilad Sayt; the next, you're driving through sculpted desert dunes before finding yourself in a canyon so deep that it appears to swallow the sky.

Oman's natural beauty isn't packaged or polished, it merely exists, raw and untouched, waiting to welcome those who take the time to find it for themselves.

Green and gold
(this page; clockwise from top)
Nizwa Fort took 12 years to build; enjoy a thought-provoking sunrise at Sharqiyah Sands; Jebel Akhdar means 'Green Mountain'; Wadi Bani Khalid is home to palm and date groves; a *falaj* uses gravity to transport water

HISTORY AND HERITAGE

Ancient history in a modern world

Explore the forts that still stand guard, wander the cities time forgot and trace the ancient footsteps of maritime explorers to a 16th-century lighthouse

Oman's roots are buried deep in the ancient world, yet its storied past and proud heritage are tangible in every sight, scent and sound, from the carved *khanjars* (traditional Omani daggers) sold in souqs to the sweet, earthy notes of frankincense hanging in the air, to the soothing sound of the *adhan* – the call to prayer that echoes from the mosque to the mountains. Oman's history? It's all right here.

Muscat

The old towns of Muscat and Mutrah are both found in the capital city. Stop by Al Alam Palace and visit the adjacent National Museum of Oman (the first in the Middle East to incorporate Arabic braille script) for a



peek into the past. Take in some of the smaller museums if you have time; Bait Al Zubair is a few minutes' walk away and hosts exhibits on Omani heritage within a restored traditional house.

Next, wander Mutrah Souq and the neighbouring corniche for a first-hand look at Oman's history and how it is adapting to modern-day needs.



Old meets new
(this page; clockwise from top)
Al Alam Palace is the ceremonial palace of the Sultan of Oman; the ruins of Sumhuram date back to the 3rd century BC; The Oman Across Ages Museum traces the country's history from the very first settlers to its present-day people

Nizwa

A historical capital of the Omani interior, Nizwa provides a base for those visiting the mountains, taking part in outdoor activities or exploring the ancient city's renowned central souq. It is also home to one of the sultanate's most impressive ancient forts, a great rotunda in the centre of town, surrounded by a vibrant souq, making this city a dream for photographers. Visit the UNESCO sites of Falaj Daris and Falaj Al Katmeen while you're there.

Bahla

Another must-visit is the UNESCO heritage site at Bahla, a magnificent 13th-century fort built around remains that may be far older. The neighbouring Jabreen Castle features its very own 'sun and moon' room, complete with 14 strategically placed windows used to direct moonlight after dark and sunlight during the day. Stand in silence for a while, pondering whose ancient feet preceded yours.

Salalah

Explore the ancient city and UNESCO World Heritage site of Sumhuram and tour the origins of the Frankincense Trail. The mystical properties of this storied plant extract inspired civilisations and built great cities along its trade routes. Explore the area and consider how much of the ancient world was inspired by a small, crooked tree that is common in Dhofar. Breathe



in the lingering incense as you cross Salalah's white sands and take in the azure waters as you go, or embark on a mountain tour to discover wild, camels, baobab trees and sinkholes.

Manah

The Oman Across Ages Museum, an award-winning wonder of Modernist architecture, is situated in Manah and just a short drive from Nizwa. Here, you'll listen to tales of tradition, empires and leaders past, delivered with comprehensive automated commentary in several languages. Influenced by the sloping shapes of the Hajar Mountains, the museum's design upholds Oman's history, heritage and natural wonders while looking to the future.

Nakhal

Deep within the Al Batinah coastal plain, ancient channels carry clear water from the mountains into groves of dates and vegetables in what is the historical breadbasket of Oman. Nestled against the foothills lies the



Alamy/Oman Ministry of Heritage and Tourism; Shutterstock



beautiful *wilayah* (province) of Nakhal, complete with the stone walls of its ancient fort. Take tea at the top, gaze out from the mountain and relax while taking in the views of the rich land and distant sea.

Sur

A bridge between Oman, East Africa and India, Sur once played a leading role in Oman's trade exchanges by way of its port. Today, traditional dhows are still built in the shipyards of Sur, with expert craftspeople using age-old techniques and methods to preserve the city's maritime past.

Learn about Oman's shipbuilding history and naval influence by visiting the Fatah Al Khair Centre (a museum named after a restored ship sitting in its courtyard) then wander over to the Al Ayjah Lighthouse, a beacon of hope for sailors and explorers of long ago.

Al Wusta

Known for Oman's pink lakes and its untouched nature, Al Wusta is significant when it comes to unearthing Omani history. Wander the



Al Wusta Wildlife Reserve to encounter the elusive Arabian oryx and Nubian ibex, or head to the Barr al-Hikman Peninsula and discover a pink lake on the way. Due to lower amounts of oxygen, higher levels of salinity and the presence of algae, its water has a rose-coloured tint. Head to Al Duqm and wander its captivating Rock Garden – a 3km landscape adorned with limestone and sandstone rock formations. Shaped by the elements and carved by time, these sculptures are believed to be around 46 million years old. Excavations of the site have uncovered spearheads and flint stones from past civilisations too.

Endless heritage (this page; clockwise from top left) Harat al Bilad is a heritage village dating back to the 5th century AD; Sur still produces traditional dhows; the Arabian oryx was reintroduced to Oman in 1982; 'Dunaliella salina' algae causes lakes to turn pink



PRESERVING THE PAST

The oasis village of Misfat Al Abriyeen

Quietly thriving in its own oasis for hundreds of years, a hidden hamlet lies beyond the palms of Jebel Shams

As you reach Misfat al Abriyeen, around two hours' drive west of Muscat, the craggy peaks of Oman's Hajar Mountains give way to something completely unexpected: a dense cascade of lush, palm-fringed terraces, a maze of mud-brick houses and the twinkling glint of sunlight as it bounces off ancient water channels that still stand the test of time.

From a distance, the village – recognised by UN Tourism as one of the world's best places for sustainable tourism – looks as if it's been etched into the cliffs. Precariously stacked in layers that

High expectations (this page)
Perched some 1,000m above sea level on the highest peak in the Hajar Mountains, Misfat al Abriyeen was established by a nomadic tribe between 300 and 500 years ago

have held against the elements for centuries, it is a work of art. In its labyrinthine alleyways, the heat softens under the shade of the densely clustered date palms, and the scents of damp earth, citrus blossoms and smouldering frankincense linger in the air. Smooth stone paths thread narrow alleyways and bear the imprints of generations, worn down by the footfalls of villagers who have lived and laboured here for hundreds of years.

Meander along the village's pathways – some so narrow that you brush against sun-warmed stone walls on both sides – and you'll find yourself in a world of weathered doorways,

ancient staircases and the occasional hidden courtyard where vines tangle over carved wooden shutters.

At the village's highest point is a crumbling watchtower, once used by local people to defend against rival clans. During attacks, villagers would retreat here, sealing themselves behind heavy stone walls. While the battles are long over, the view from the top still offers a glimpse into history.

For a different kind of immersion, follow the Sunset Walk, a winding path that skirts the village's edge and spills out into the terraced fields beyond. Here, the mountains stretch wide and empty, their jagged silhouettes glowing gold in the evening light.

The route follows the *falaj*, a vital, single irrigation channel dating back thousands of years, which continues to sustain the village's fields of date palm, banana, fig and citrus trees.

These channels are so crucial to Oman's survival that they're UNESCO-protected and operate on a simple but fiercely regulated system. Each household is allocated a precise

Alamy/Oman Ministry of Heritage and Tourism

share of water, measured not by litres but by time; their minutes, or hours, of flow are determined by age-old agreements and local governance.

The *falaj* is the heartbeat of the village. Farmers rise before dawn to tend to their groves, guiding water to their plots with nothing more than the shift of a stone. Children grow up understanding its rules, and travellers – if lucky – can catch glimpses of villagers gathering at its edge, washing their feet or simply cooling their hands in the crystalline flow.

From Muscat, the drive to the village winds slowly through steep mountain passes and plunging gorges, opening up into a green oasis just before you arrive. While it's possible to visit for a day trip, the best way to absorb Misfat Al Abriyeen's quiet magic is to wake up to it.

The village's six guesthouses are all locally owned and run by families who have lived here for generations. Staying in a guesthouse is like stepping into the past: low *majlis* (sitting room) cushions, woven palm-frond ceilings, home-cooked meals served communal-style, just as they have been for centuries.



Ancient ways and new heights (this page; clockwise from top) Date palms provide Misfat Al Abriyeen's residents with shade and resources; Misfat Al Abriyeen remains mercifully unchanged even after welcoming in tourism; residents of Misfat Al Abriyeen are mostly of Bedouin descent; hiking trails around the ancient village include beginner-level routes of just over half an hour and more challenging routes that take around two hours



Five sustainable steps in Oman

1 Sleep somewhere with a story

Support local communities by staying somewhere with soul, such as a heritage guesthouse or traditional inn where rooms are tucked inside old mud-brick homes. Or make a stop at an eco-lodge on Jebel Akhdar.

2 Go slow, stay low-impact

Oman is best explored either on foot, by camel or in a kayak. Hike through Wadi Shab's emerald pools, snorkel over the coral reefs of the Ad Dimaniyat Islands or stargaze in the Empty Quarter where the only sounds are the shifting sands and the gentle crackle of the campfire.

3 Eat, browse and shop like a local

Oman's silver jewellery, woven baskets and hand-painted pottery offer more meaning than last-minute airport souvenirs. Buy straight from the souqs, village workshops or women's cooperatives, where your riyals go directly towards keeping these traditions alive.

4 Respect the rhythm of the place

Oman moves at its own pace, and you should too. Always ask for permission before taking photos of others, be mindful of your noise levels in quieter areas and dress modestly in public places.

5 Leave no trace behind

The wadis, deserts and mountains might seem endlessly vast, but they're more fragile than they look. When you depart, be sure to take away everything you brought with you – camping equipment, road-trip essentials, leftover food and drink – and leave only footprints behind.



THE SHORES OF OMAN

Beyond the waves

The vibrant, crystalline Sea of Oman is filled with maritime adventures and underwater exploration

oman is home to more than 3,000km of coastline. Harbou ring a spectrum of colourful coral reefs, shimmering tropical fish and dappled whale sharks just below its surface, these waters tempt every kind of traveller.



Watching dolphins, Bandar al Rowdha

Experience a playful, powerful show on the water and take a dolphin-watching trip from Bandar al Rowdha. Time might stand still here, but these aquatic acrobats certainly won't. Oman's waters are home to around 20 species of cetacean, including rare Arabian Sea humpback whales (best seen: Dec–Mar) and whale sharks (Sep–Nov). You can even swim alongside these gentle giants in



blissful silence should you choose to take the plunge.

Trekking with turtles, Ras al Jinz

Be sure to stop at the turtle reserve near Sur, tucked away in Ras al Jinz, for early morning or evening turtle viewing. One of the most important breeding grounds for endangered green turtles in the Indian Ocean, this shoreline invites nesting females to safely lay their eggs at night. Peak nesting activity usually occurs between July and September.

Snorkelling the reef, Ad Dimaniyat Islands

Head to the Ad Dimaniyat Islands by boat from Al Mouj to explore its

Into the blue
(this page; clockwise from top) The Sea of Oman offers the only entrance from the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean into the Persian Gulf; spot sharks, manta rays and seahorses when scuba diving in Oman; Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins and Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins visit Oman's shores between September and May; Oman is a nesting ground for green, loggerhead, hawksbill and olive ridley turtles



Alamy; Oman Ministry of Heritage and Tourism

Four more water wonders

1 Scuba courses

Available at the main marinas, scuba-diving courses provide training and equipment for budding divers to take a full PADI (Professional Association of Diving Instructors) course at any level.

2 Sailing sessions

Oman offers a sophisticated setup for competitive sailing at Al Mouj and Al Musana'a. Dinghy sailing courses can be booked for adults and children aged eight and older; these typically last from one to three days.

3 Motorboat skills

One- and two-day courses in Al Mouj will leave you with an alternative souvenir – an international certificate of competence in handling a motorboat.

4 Relaxing retreats

Charter a sailing catamaran and spend a blissful day at sea. Opt for an overnight nautical experience for a star-studded sky after dark. If you're looking to learn, why not enjoy an informal introduction to sailing along the way?

crystal-clear waters. You can bring your own snorkelling equipment or use the gear provided, then escape under the waves to explore the extensive coral reefs below.

Scuba-diving safaris, Muscat and Salalah

Enjoy underwater excursions to natural reefs and ancient wrecks. Look out for the artificial reef created around a 2,000-tonne Omani naval ship known as the *Al Munassir*, which was scuttled close to the shore, near the Shangri-La and Al Bustan hotels.

THE SANDS OF OMAN

An explorer's guide to the sea of sand

Omanis have spent millennia learning to live in the desert and take great delight in showing visitors how they continue to thrive on the dunes and shores



Whether you're planning a mission deep into the arid sprawl of the forbidding Empty Quarter or simply wandering the sugar sands of Al Khaluf beach, Oman's golden landscapes – and the adventures found within them – await.

Camping

Several sites lying within a couple of hours of Muscat offer tents, cabins and even geodesic domes for a more luxe take on a traditional desert escape. If you want a thought-provoking experience that's free of modern-day distractions, head to Sharqiyah Sands for a restorative reset. These rustic retreats offer greener takes on camping by using solar energy, and many invite local Bedouin women to showcase and sell hand-crafted jewellery and accessories.

Camel trekking

Head out with a camel caravan just before sunset to discover

a nomadic experience that's equal parts enchanting and educational. Listen to local Bedouin guides as they share their stories of the desert and their loyal camel companions while the sun sets.

Horseriding

With an array of coastal areas offering horseriding experiences, you'll be able to enjoy a gentle trot along the shore or race against the wind with experienced trainers by your side. An hour upon an elegant Arabian horse promises a genuinely moving experience for beginners and seasoned riders alike.



A restorative retreat
(this page; clockwise from top right) Lanterns symbolise hope and unity in Oman; hot air balloons climb 600m above the Sharqiyah Sands; Bedouin dining offers an authentic desert experience; luxury desert camps provide a quiet escape

The sound of silence: See the Sharqiyah Sands from the sky

For an ethereal experience that lets you explore the desert in a very different way, take a hot air balloon ride over the Sharqiyah Sands. Climbing to a height of around 600m, you'll find yourself given the perfect viewpoint over the 12,500 sq km landscape beneath you. This sky-high odyssey reveals the desert in all its sun-kissed glory and allows you to put the vastness of the sand sea below into perspective. The hot air balloon team will collect you from your desert accommodation early in the morning to ensure that you don't miss the sunrise. Remember: it can get quite chilly, so dress warm.





HIKING HANDBOOK

Foothills, fjords and forgotten trails

Spanning deep ravines, unexpected canyons, hidden lagoons and rocky mountain routes, Oman's outdoors promise an elevated experience in more ways than one

In Oman, you can roam desert dunes and dive deep into the seas, but there are always new heights to ascend to. The Eastern Hajar mountain range dominates the northern part of Oman, towering over ancient cities and tumbling down to the coastal plains. Fertile banana groves, seasonal *wadis* and rich oases abound in between, adding depth and colour to panoramic views enjoyed by adventurers among the peaks.

For an adrenaline-infused excursion, make your way to the mountains and discover the natural beauty and remarkable history that underpins this overlooked corner of Oman.

Musandam

If you're fortunate enough to visit Oman's northern tip, you don't have to go far to find spectacular scenery. Jebel Al Harim is a 2,000m-high point with craggy cliff faces and hidden fjords found along the way. Walk to the natural creek of Khor Najd by Khasab City for a shorter hike and a breathtaking view, or take a longer route around the mountain if you're looking for more of a challenge.

Good to know: If you're heading to Musandam for the day, pack for traditional *dhow* sailing trips, dolphin watching and snorkelling. Watch for giant oceanic manta rays if visiting between November and December.

Dhofar

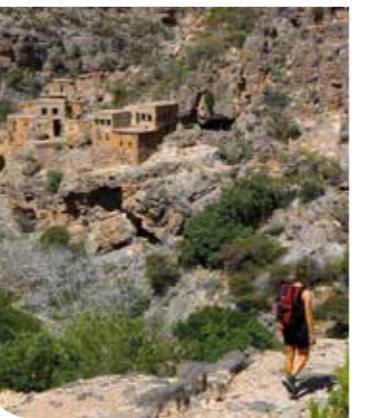
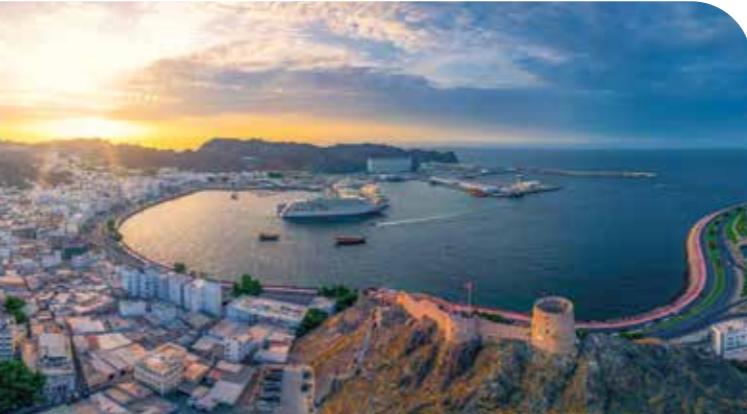
If you're staying close to the southern city of Salalah, head to the Jebel Samhan Nature Reserve. Enlist the help of a guide and stop at the Tawi Atair sinkhole (also known as the 'Well of Birds'). Here you can see prehistoric cave paintings, ancient ruins and the impressions left behind as a result of this region's anthropological history. This is a land of lost civilisations and stories that are as fantastic as they are familiar.

Good to know: The Jebel Samhan Nature Reserve is among the last places that the Arabian leopard, one of the smallest of the big cats, roams wild.



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On the edge
(this page; top to bottom) Jebel Shams translates to 'Mountain of the Sun' because its high peak is the first place to receive the sunrise in Oman; there are a number of viewpoints to pause at as you ascend Jebel Akhdar



Stairs to the sky
(this page; clockwise from top) Mutrah was once the centre of Oman's commerce; Snake Canyon is considered to be Oman's largest natural water park; the trail through Wadi Shab requires both walking and wading; hike through the ancient villages of Al Aqr, Al Ayn and Ash Sharqiyah in Jebel Akhdar

hike the Balcony Walk. It's a tough trek of about 5km each way, and along the way you'll visit the abandoned village of As Sab, whose stone houses have been built into the cliffs.

Good to know: Once you've explored the ancient village, continue a little further to discover a hidden lake.

Snake Canyon

Close to Jebel Shams and accessible by Wadi Bani Awf, Snake Canyon is a tight *wadi* that contains a small amount of water all year round.

Go with an experienced guide and proper equipment – some areas require a short descent by rope or a wild leap into the water below.

Good to know: The Royal Oman Police send updates and warnings when conditions aren't optimal.

Jebel Akhdar

Translating to 'the green mountain', Jebel Akhdar is known for its cultivated terraces and vast produce. Pomegranates, walnuts and the flowers that are processed into the region's legendary rose water have been growing here for centuries. For a short, moderate hike, try the Three Villages route along the plateau, crossing ancient canals and green plantations as you go.

Good to know: Expect a police checkpoint along the way; they'll ensure your 4WD is suitable.

Ash Sharqiyah

Easy to reach from nearby desert camps and a three-hour drive from Muscat, Wadi Shab lies near the ancient port of Sur. Here you'll have the chance to swim into a cave and discover a hidden waterfall. You will need to cross the water at times, so tread carefully and wear suitable footwear. The sheer cliffs surrounding the trail offer some welcome shade before you head back.

Good to know: A little less than 2km into the walk, you'll come across a canal. Follow this until you reach a pathway to continue your journey.

Muscat

Look up short hikes around the old towns of Mutrah or Sidab or take a longer route out to Bandar Al Khayran for the chance to swim in the sea, then bag a boat pick-up on your return. To immerse yourself in the culture and colours of Muscat, take a guided walking tour. These introduce you to some of the sultanate's must-see spots, including Al Alam Palace, Mutrah Souq and Al Jalali and Miran forts.

Good to know: A 5km walking history tour takes in forts, cemeteries, temples and old merchants' houses, as well as a palace and a number of museums.



COFFEE AND CONVERSATION

A warm welcome from Al Waleed

"We've always been a country of traders, sailors and travellers. We've always welcomed people from everywhere," explains Al Waleed

Walk through any souq in Oman, take a taxi across Muscat or pause at the foothills of a quiet mountain village and, within minutes, you'll experience it: the effortless warmth and quiet generosity that accompanies a dinner invitation from a sincere stranger.

Omanis have long been referred to as the friendliest people in the Gulf, but ask them why and you'll receive nothing more than the hint of a smile and a shrug. "It's just how we were raised," says Al Waleed Al Adawi, a 20-year-old student from the historic town of Al Rustaq, located south-west of Muscat, beneath the Hajar Mountains.

Once the capital of Oman, Al Rustaq is famous for its imposing 13th-century fort, natural hot springs and a long legacy of scholars and traders who shaped the country's history. "Our families grew up together, with their houses close and doors always open. If someone had a problem, the whole community helped," Al Waleed explains. "Maybe that's why, even today, we welcome everyone – especially visitors."

It's a hospitality so deeply ingrained that it crosses cultures, languages and even expectations. Taxi drivers invite you into their homes for coffee, shopkeepers reach out with dates and coffee before taking any payment, and strangers on the street ask where you're from not out of forced politeness but with genuine curiosity.

"I think, for us, it's normal," Al Waleed says. "When we see someone who's far from home, we want them to feel like they belong. In Islam, offering a smile or sharing food is something we're taught from childhood. It's part of our faith, but it's also part of being Omani."

It's not only Western tourists who notice. "Visitors from other Gulf countries – Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar – they all say the same thing: Omanis are different," Al Waleed



reveals with a laugh. "We've always been a country of traders, sailors and travellers. We've always welcomed people from everywhere."

For those fortunate enough to step inside an Omani home, the experience is both generous and deeply traditional. "If it's lunch, it's usually *shuwa*, which takes a long time to cook" Al Waleed says, referring to the country's famous slow-cooked lamb, buried deep underground with spices and left to roast for up to 48 hours. "For dinner, you'll probably have traditional Omani bread with beef."

The biggest surprise for international travellers isn't the aromatic flavours; it's the easy, open way in which these invitations are given. "If an Omani invites you into their home, they really mean it," Al Waleed explains. "They just want you to feel welcome, comfortable and at ease, however that looks for you."

A warm welcome
(this page; top)
Al Waleed Al Adawi upholds Omani tradition and his family heritage by wearing a traditional dishdash (robe), an intricately engraved khanjar (Omani dagger) and an embroidered mussar (turban)

Pocket guide: Easy Arabic phrases

Arabic is often conveyed as a difficult-to-understand language that's hard-sounding and even harder to learn. Walk among the local people of Oman and you'll soon appreciate its gentleness by way of soft-spoken sounds that roll off the tongue and the conversational poetry shared between friends. Here's how you can immerse yourself in a language that's more than 2,500 years old.

a'salaam alaykum peace be upon you (ah-sah-lam ah-lay-koom)

wa alaykum a'salaam and peace be upon you, too (wah ah-lay-koom ah-sah-lam)

marhaba/hala! hello/hi! (mar-hah-bah/ha-la!)

shukran thank you (shuh-kran)

afwan you're welcome (af-wan)

aywa/la yes/no (eye-wah/lah)

inta min wein? where are you from? (in-tah min when?)

kaifa haluka? how are you? (kayfa hah-luka?)

ana min... I am from... (an-nah min...)

ismek al kareem? what's your name? (iss-mek al kah-reem?)

hatha bi kam? how much is this? (hah-tha bi kam?)

wein dawrat al miyah? where is the bathroom? (when dow-rat al me-yeh?)

wajeed latheeth! very delicious! (k-theer lah-teeth!)

ma'as salama goodbye! (mah-as sa-lah-mah)



TIMELESS TRADITIONS

Slow down in Oman

Some 16 years ago, Alex Brown traded a fast-paced London lifestyle for slow living in Muscat. He shares here some of the customs that convinced him to stay

Offering refreshments to guests is an age-old Arabian tradition. Anyone who has visited Oman will instantly recognise the brass *dallah* (Arabian coffee pot), miniature cups and tray of dates that are presented to every guest. Formal welcomes also call for a true Omani tradition: *halwa* (sweet). The local version is a soft, perfumed accompaniment to coffee. It's traditionally made with ghee, wheat starch and sugar, then flavoured with rose, cardamom and saffron, and finished with walnuts.

How to eat halwa

Halwa will likely be passed to you in a bowl. Using your right hand, scoop out a piece with your index and middle fingers, then eat. If there's a spoon, scoop with the spoon in your right hand, then pass the spoon to your left hand, pick the *halwa* off the spoon with your right and then eat.

How to drink coffee

The coffee will be poured from a *dallah* into a *finjaan* (small cup). Take

the latter with your right hand. When you've finished, you'll be offered a refill. When satiated, gently shake your cup from side to side to show that you don't want any more and return it with thanks.

How to shop

Wander the souq at Nizwa to discover the intricate details of the Omani *khajar*. Here you'll likely encounter a young Omani salesperson with a deep knowledge and a love of haggling. Next, get lost in a maze of hand-painted jugs, pots and plates before taking in the traditional designs of Bedouin jewellery. These heavy, geometric pieces are still a sought-after style today, and are crafted with the historically preferred metal for Omani jewellery – silver.

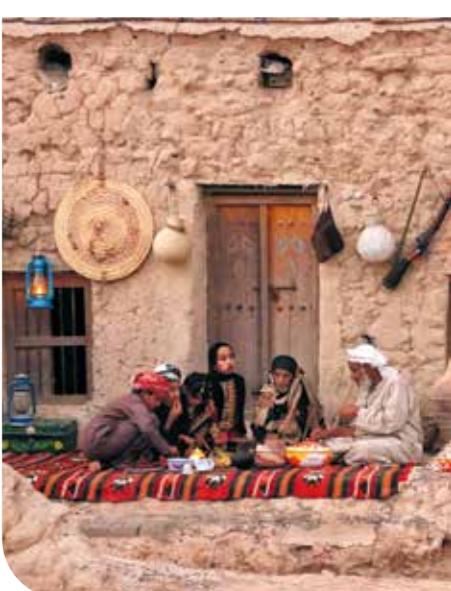
Look out for a *mukahel*, a finger-sized vessel complete with a tiny wand for applying kohl to the eyes. While kohl is used to emphasise the eyes of Omani women today, it was also carried by men in ancient times to protect their eyes from the glare of the sun.

Ramadan in Oman

By following the lunar cycle, the Islamic calendar constantly moves, meaning Ramadan can fall in different seasons each year. During the Holy Month, locals fast during daylight hours so you won't be able to eat in public before sunset. Restaurants will remain open, and you can still enjoy food deliveries from the comfort of your hotel.

Sleepy streets and quieter roads are to be expected, but that all changes after sunset. Once the sun has gone down, Omani people break their fast by way of *iftar* – the evening meal enjoyed upon hearing the soothing sound of the call to prayer. Later, households, restaurants and coffee shops stir from their slumber for late nights filled with energy.

For a real Ramadan experience after dark, head out for juice, ice cream or coffee in the early hours. Walk along the illuminated corniche before dawn. Enjoy a special *iftar* buffet or – if you're lucky – a homecooked feast with an Omani friend and their family at home. While the days are undoubtedly slower paced during the Holy Month, the evenings are something to be witnessed with wonder.



ON THE MENU

What and where to eat in Oman

Shaped by the heat of the desert and the abundance of the sea, Omani cuisine is the result of the patience of generations



Rozna Restaurant, Muscat

Rozna is the ultimate place for an authentic Omani feast. Start with *harees* (a silky, savoury wheat and meat porridge) before digging into a clay pot of *thareed*. Head there for a traditional Omani breakfast made up of lentils, eggs, *sawya* (vermicelle), honey and *quroos* (miniature pancakes) with a warming tea.

COO, Muscat

Traditional Omani flavours receive a playful twist at COO, Muscat's most creative artisanal ice cream spot. Inspired by the country's rich culinary heritage, it serves up scoops inspired by local ingredients – date-infused caramel, frankincense gelato, saffron-pistachio and even *halwa*-flavoured ice cream. The space itself is bright and airy; it's perfect for escaping the midday heat with a cool, creamy cone.

The Suwgra, Jebel Akhdar

Hidden high up in the cool, terraced farmlands of Jebel Akhdar lies an old village called Suwgra. At the top of the rock-carved steps you'll find The Suwgra Heritage Inn, a hidden retreat that offers authentic breakfast plates, light lunches and traditional dinners. Take a seat amongst pomegranate, apricot and walnut trees and relax.

Al Angham, Muscat

For a more refined take on local cuisine, Al Angham – inside Muscat's grand Royal Opera House – is elegant, appropriately theatrical and deeply traditional. The interior, all hand-carved wooden ceilings, gilded walls and brass lanterns, sets



For centuries, Oman was at the crossroads of trade across the Indian Ocean, where spices from Zanzibar, rice from India and coffee from Ethiopia made their way into the kitchens of Muscat's merchants and the desert encampments of Bedouin traders. Dishes are hearty, slow-cooked affairs that reflect Oman's desert resilience and coastal wealth.

Shuwa, the king of Omani cuisine, is a labour of love, while *maqboos* is a fragrant rice dish infused with saffron and layered with slow-cooked lamb or fish. For an authentic culinary experience with Bedouin origins, try a bowl of *thareed*. A spiced stew mixed with flat, baked bread, it's a popular choice for Omanis breaking their fast during Ramadan. Coastal towns like Al Seeb, Salalah and Sur are famous for grilled *hammour*, kingfish and lobster, served with a tamarind sauce and fragrant rice.



the tone for a luxurious evening of Omani flavours. The true stand-out dish is camel meat, slow-cooked in a fragrant coconut curry and paired with saffron rice and crispy Omani bread. If you've never tried camel before, this is the place to do it.

Fish market, Al Seeb

For the freshest seafood in Oman, skip the high-end restaurants and head straight to the fish markets in Al Seeb. The catch of the day – often *hammour*, snapper or prawns – is served with warm Arabic bread, tangy tamarind sauce and a side of aromatic rice in nearby restaurants. Try Omani lobster and kingfish in Salalah, where local seafood is known for being extra plump and flavourful due to cooler, monsoon-fed waters.

Al Mandoos, Muscat

A casual, fuss-free spot serving up family-style Omani dishes, Al Mandoos promises real Bedouin flavours. Order half a roast chicken accompanied by spice-infused rice with crispy *khubz rakhal* bread, or try the signature *mashuai*, kingfish marinated in turmeric and lemon, grilled and served with caramelised rice before enjoying a cup of rose water to finish.



Aliy, Oman Ministry of Heritage and Tourism



Secrets of the souq

Discover alleyways lined with hand-hammered silver, embroidered textiles and rows of copper coffee pots that gleam in the evening light

In Oman's souqs, beneath wood-beamed roofs and domed archways, traders haggle in low, measured tones over handwoven textiles, plump dates and frankincense.

The air hangs thick with the smoky sweetness of *bukhoor* (a traditional incense), curling from brass burners in slow, hypnotic wisps.

Here you'll encounter a spectrum of colour, every kind of texture and traditional Omani elements that tell stories of a time long ago. The souq is a bridge; one that connects Oman's ancient trade routes to its modern-day sheen.

Oman's markets pulse with a quiet, deliberate rhythm. Transactions here unfold with patience, hospitality and an unspoken understanding of tradition. Bargaining is a gentle back and forth, orchestrated by mutual respect and consideration rather than

theatrics. Don't be surprised if sellers offer you a cup of coffee and a date with a smile before discussing prices.

Keep an eye out for regional variations – in Muscat's

Mutrah Souq, you'll find traders selling pearl-studded *khanjars*, embroidered *mussar* turbans and heavy silver jewellery, all of which are remnants of Oman's long history as a maritime empire. In Nizwa, the capital of the interior, the

market leans more towards livestock, pottery and locally grown dates – but look out for bags of camel milk coffee and pomegranate tea.

Meanwhile, in Salalah, in the heart of the Dhofar region, souqs are perfumed with the unmistakable scent of frankincense, harvested from ancient groves that have supplied this sacred resin to the world for over 5,000 years.

Surprises of the souq (this page; clockwise from top) Nizwa is described as the cultural capital of Oman; *khanjars* recall the shape of the crescent moon associated with Islam; Omani dates are high in fibre; Dhofar in Oman is known as the "Land of Frankincense"



Four traditional treasures to find

1 Frankincense

The scent of Oman's 'white gold' drifts through homes, mosques and markets alike. Harvested from the *Boswellia sacra* trees of Dhofar, the highest-quality frankincense is pale, slightly sticky and sold in small, irregular chunks. Vendors will let you sample the scent – deep, resinous, with notes of citrus and spice – before you buy.

2 Silver jewellery and *khanjars*

Omani silver is like no other – heavy, intricately carved and full of meaning. Women's bracelets, rings and pendants often feature intricate details, while the *khanjar*, Oman's signature curved dagger, is a badge of honour and a symbol of heritage for Omani men. Keep an eye out for handmade pieces stamped with a hallmark, as this indicates their authenticity.



3 Handwoven textiles and *mussar* turbans

The *dishdashah* (robe) worn by Omani men is often paired with a *mussar*, a finely embroidered turban unique to Oman. Each region has its own embroidery style, passed down through the generations. If you want something truly special, look for handwoven wool shawls from Jebel Akhdar – a must-have for cooler nights, especially those in the desert.

4 Spices and dates

Omani dates are arguably the best in the world, ranging from sticky, honey-like *khalas* to rich, molasses-dark *fard*. In addition to these sweet treats, traders stock spices of all hues, from warm saffron and bright red chilli peppers to golden turmeric, green cardamom pods and deep brown cloves. Browse the souq's culinary staples, synonymous with Omani kitchens, to elevate your own cooking when you eventually return home.

WHERE TO STAY IN OMAN

Statement sleeps and relaxing retreats

Oman isn't the kind of place where one hotel fits all. Whether you want to wake up in a Bedouin tent deep in the dunes, a mountain lodge overlooking a canyon or a heritage inn full of history, it's easy to find a place that stays with you long after you leave



Magic Camp Oman, Sharqiyah Sands

Best for: Disconnecting from the world, sleeping under the stars and experiencing the desert in its purest form.



The St Regis Al Mouj Resort, Muscat

Best for: A luxurious, laid-back experience, comfortable rooms in a convenient location and an array of amenities.

Experience the vastness of the Sharqiyah Sands from a 20 square-metre cotton tent in the heart of the desert at Magic Camp. Designed to blend into the dunes, these camps offer an understated elegance and towering sand ridges that ripple in the wind. The camp's Bedouin-style tents are simple yet comfortable, with woven carpets and traditional Omani furnishings.

Sprawling a 360m beachfront, The St Regis Al Mouj Resort features 250 guest rooms, an award-winning golf club, an indulgent spa and a grand ballroom. Guests can enjoy paddleboarding, kayaking, dolphin watching, snorkelling and guided island exploration along the coastline before enjoying a Mediterranean-inspired dinner at Zorba or Peruvian cuisine at COYA.



Alila Jabal Akhdar, Jebel Akhdar

Best for: Digital nomads, exploring by foot or bike, unwinding in luxury and adventures across the mountains.



Sama Wakan Heritage Home, Wakan Village

Best for: Hikers, embracing nature and an authentic village experience away from the crowds.



Al Baleed Resort by Anantara, Salalah

Best for: Monsoon-season magic (June – September), nature conservation, beach bathing and a mix of history and relaxation.

Built from locally sourced stone and wood, this clifftop retreat feels as much a part of the mountains as the ancient juniper trees that surround it. The design is effortlessly minimal yet deeply Omani – a blend of earthy tones, handcrafted furnishings and panoramic windows that frame the vast canyon below. Sustainable and solar-powered, this hotel's eco-conscious architecture keeps it naturally cool.

Alamy; Magic Travels; Oman Ministry of Heritage and Tourism; Sama Wakan Heritage Home; Shutterstock



The sheer variety of experiences in Oman is undeniable, whether you're watching the sun disappear behind the dunes in Ash Sharqiyah, browsing traditional pottery in an incense-infused souq or wading through a turquoise wadi. With so much to take in, it's easy to overlook the little things. Here are five ways to live in the moment in Oman.

Visit the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque

Spend a morning at the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque in Muscat and gaze upon a beautiful, complex piece of spiritual architecture. Walk along the *riwaq* (arcade) cloisters and find elements that nod to Islamic architecture. Enter the main prayer hall to feel its reverent grandeur, from intricate calligraphy to the world's largest hand-knotted carpet.

Enjoy classical music at the Royal Opera House

As well as its classical and ballet schedule, you can see folk music and jazz here from time to time. The building itself is magnificent to look at, so be sure to drop by for a tour if tickets happen to be sold out.

Watch the sun go down at Qantab Beach

After a long day of exploring Oman's rugged terrain, head to Qantab



Elevated experiences

Oman isn't only defined by Arabian adventures. It is also about the little things; those moments that are easily missed but hard to forget. Here are just a few...

Beach. A lesser-known sunset spot that's just a 30-minute drive from Muscat, this beach is a natural playground surrounded by nothing but rock formations and the lapping waves of the sea. Its only neighbour is a small fishing village, so pack the essentials before you go.

Take a break at the Wadi Dayqah Dam

If you're planning a trip to Sur or Wadi Shab, stop at the Wadi Dayqah Dam on your way. With serene gardens, family picnic areas, a coffee shop and a visitor centre, this destination calls

for a detour. Enjoy the view offered by the Hajar Mountains as they plunge into the glistening teal water below.

Feel the rush while out on the waves

The exhilaration of kite-surfing off the wild beaches of Barr al-Hikmān or Masirah Island is something to be felt. If you're looking for less of an adrenaline rush, take a gentle, slow-paced walk along the beach at Shatt al Qurum in Muscat. If the tide is low, you can walk 5km in each direction, making for a relaxing way to wind down at the end of the day.

Feel the beat
(this page; clockwise from top left)
Muscat's Royal Opera House features shops, restaurants and cafés; Masirah Island offers opportunities to surf, sail and birdwatch; try your hand at kite-surfing on Oman's coast; Wadi Dayqah Dam can hold a million cubic metres of rain water; 20,000 worshippers can be accommodated within the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque





GETTING AROUND

On the move in Oman

With landscapes that seamlessly shift from silk-smooth highways to deep desert dunes, getting around Oman is part of the adventure. Here's what you need to know

Hiring a car

Best for: Road trips, exploring off-the-beaten-path destinations and total flexibility

If you want the freedom and flexibility to reach Oman's most remote landscapes, rent a car. Both international and local rental companies operate from Muscat International Airport and major cities, and driving is straightforward. The roads are well-maintained and signage is in both Arabic and English. A standard driver's licence from most Western countries is accepted.

Travel tip: Petrol is cheap, but fill up before heading into remote areas – gas stations can be sparse outside the main towns.

Taking a taxi

Best for: Short city trips and airport transfers

Taxis are widely available in Muscat but not all of them use meters; you'll sometimes need to agree on a fare before your trip. App-based ride-hailing

services like Otaxi and Mwasalat Taxi work in the capital and are more reliable for immediate pricing. Outside major cities, you may need to arrange one with your hotel.

Hopping on a bus

Best for: Budget travel between major cities

Oman's main bus service, Mwasalat, operates comfortable, air-conditioned coaches between Muscat, Nizwa, Sur, Salalah and other towns. It's the cheapest way to travel, but buses won't reach small villages, wadis or deserts.

Travel tip: Buy tickets at bus stations or on the Mwasalat app. Services fill up fast on weekends.

Driving a desert 4WD
Best for: Desert adventures, mountain drives and



going anywhere without paved roads

If you're visiting the Sharqiyah Sands, Jebel Akhdar or the Empty Quarter, you'll need a 4WD with high clearance.

Some areas legally require a 4WD to access mountain roads. **Travel tip:** Lower your tyre pressure before driving on sand.

Riding a camel
Best for: Slow travel, authentic experiences and desert immersion

For an old-school desert experience, embark on a camel trek through the dunes of Sharqiyah Sands or the Empty Quarter. Many Bedouin-run desert camps offer sunset or multi-day camel treks for you to enjoy a truly nomadic experience.

Travel tip: Dress comfortably. Opt for long sleeves, loose trousers and a scarf to protect

your eyes and skin from the sun and dust.

Go on foot

Best for: Hikers, photographers and anyone who wants to up their steps

Some of Oman's most breathtaking places can only be reached by walking. Wadi Shab's hidden waterfall cave, Jebel Shams' Balcony Walk along Oman's 'Grand Canyon' and the terraced village farms of Wakan all require proper hiking shoes, plenty of water and a sense of adventure.

Travel tip: Oman's sun shines year-round, so start early and carry at least two litres of water.

Hovering in a helicopter

Best for: Thrill seekers and videographers

Book a helicopter tour with Al Sharqiya Aviation to see Muscat from the skies. Taking off from Madinat Al Irfan seven days a week, these flights offer an alternative look at the city.

Alamy: Oman Ministry of Heritage and Tourism

Check visa requirements

Many international guests, including those from the US and most of Europe, can land on Omani soil without a visa. British passport holders can visit the country for up to 14 days without one. You can visit the visa page on the Royal Oman Police website for the latest updates.

Buy travel insurance

Be prepared for unfamiliar territory and take out a travel insurance policy that covers you while you're away.

Check your passport

To travel to Oman, your passport should have an expiry date that exceeds six months from your arrival.

Think about medicine

Carry your prescription with you if you are travelling with prescribed medication. Refer to Oman's Ministry of Health website for more guidance.

Save emergency numbers

Store the phone numbers for your hotel, your embassy in Oman and the customer support service of your airline. The Royal Oman Police emergency number is 9999; they also provide fire and ambulance services.

Book some experiences

Some desert camping sites and tour guides reach full capacity quickly, especially between the cooler months of October and February. Have one or two things booked in advance and build your visit around them once you arrive.

Wild at heart

(clockwise from opposite page, top left) Camels provide transportation to this day; some frankincense trees are thought to be 1,000 years old; roses bloom in Jebel Akhdar from March to May; hire a 4WD for off-road exploration

Plan for hot weather

The average temperature between June and August is around 35°C in Oman, but guests can escape to the mountains or the south for cooler retreats. Pack sun protection and a hydrating moisturiser.

Plan for cold weather, too

Oman's mountain terrain and high altitudes can cause the temperature to drop below freezing, and desert camps can be cold at night. Take a warm jacket or fleece if you're winter camping or staying at Jebel Akhdar or Jebel Shams.

Buy a local SIM card

Ensure you have data and a working phone line while on the move in Oman. Download an eSIM or pick up a local SIM card from a kiosk in the arrivals hall.

Download travel apps

Be ready for anything by installing the Otaxi app on your phone. Download it from the Apple or Google Play store to enjoy fuss-free and affordable rides across Oman.



Pack and prepare

While Oman calls for comfortable footwear, swimwear and sun protection, it also requires some attention to detail. Here's what you need to know before you go



Find local currency

Buy some local currency upon arrival at the airport or visit a Bureau de Change in local shopping areas for more competitive rates. Most places will accept card and contactless payments, and it's easy to find a nearby ATM, but having some Omani riyals to hand is always useful.

Be mindful of local customs

Oman offers a relaxed escape, whether you're unwinding indoors or exploring the coastline, but remember to be respectful. Dress modestly (but comfortably) and remove your shoes if you visit someone's home. While freshly squeezed juices and refreshing minted lemonade can be found all over the country, alcohol is reserved for hotels and a small number of restaurants.





Experience
عُمان
OMAN

