



Focus on Tourism to Oman

A freewheeling talk with Lady Sonia Shaw who specialises on Oman as a tourist destination

By Viju James

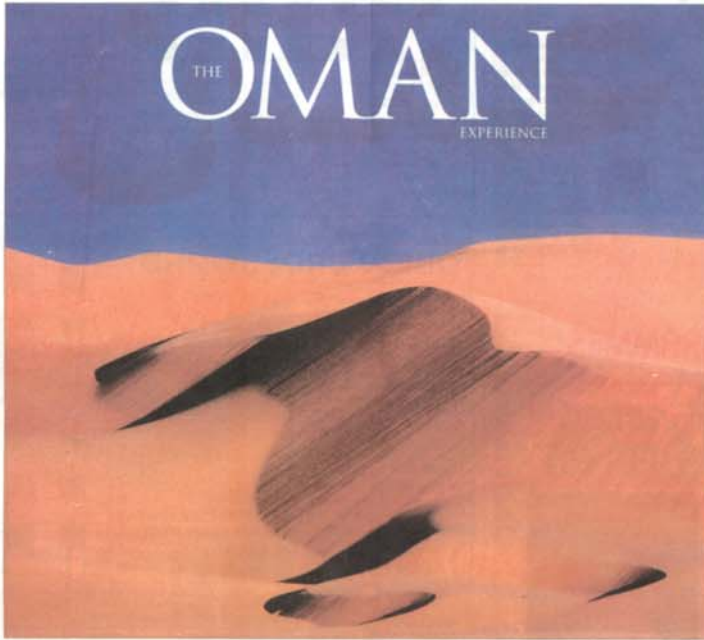
LADY Sonia Shaw lived in Oman in the eighties when the entire country was working to create the basic infrastructure of the state. She met her husband in Oman and left the country to marry and settle down in Britain. Oman left an enduring mark on her mind and besides falling in love with her husband she also fell in love with the country. A few years later, she worked on her love for Oman and set up a business to bring tourists from Britain to Oman. During the current tourist season, Lady Shaw sent 180 top-of-the-range tourists to the Sultanate.

Lady Shaw has just returned from her second visit to Khasab. "I couldn't recognise the place," she says speaking of all the changes that have taken place in and around Khasab since her last visit. The Golden Tulip provides stunning views and in her opinion is an ideal get away for a two to three days. "It was full of holidaymakers at the weekend," she says. Khasab has changed quite a bit since she went there first. The makeover at the museum, the facilities for cruising and the increased accommodation means that she can send her clients there with confidence.

Lady Shaw has also made a familiarisation visit to Salalah. She is pleased with the renovated Crowne Plaza and the golf course that is just nearing completion. "The beaches are pristine, unspoilt and have proper sand," she adds. While at Salalah, she was introduced to an Omani family and has now tied up with them to give her tourists a fuller experience of the place. "They will take them into the desert, visit their farm, chat with them, watch the milking of camels and enjoy of whole lot of new experiences that they would never get anywhere else."

"I want to promote Oman and specialise on Oman," says Lady Shaw. The Shaw Travel Company's tours to Oman are tailor-made for a very special group of customers. In her brochure The Oman Experience, she adds a P.S. "If you want to do something that doesn't appear in this brochure — call us, because if it's in Oman, we can organise it for you." Customers have made requests for babysitter's services and little touches like arranging a children's birthday party while on holiday in Muscat.

As she explains she has divided the



Oman destination into three — the northern peninsula, Muscat, Nizwa and the Sharqiyah region and Dhofar. What she recommends to her customers is what she has experienced first hand. She provides them with all the inputs that will make for a complete experience without the visitors having to thumb through the Yellow Pages for a restaurant serving local food or an Omani gift shop. Her clients receive a list of restaurants, souvenir shops and other advice essential in a new environment different from their own.

Lady Shaw has done a fair amount of marketing of Oman as a destination. She has pointed out the place on the map to those who confuse the pace with the capital of the Kingdom of Jordan and cleared perceptions about the whole of the Middle East being an area to be avoided. She explains that people have different apprehensions about the place — some will not touch the idea; others have been to neighbouring countries and are fine with exploring a place on the eastern most part of the Middle East. And there are yet others who have read up about the

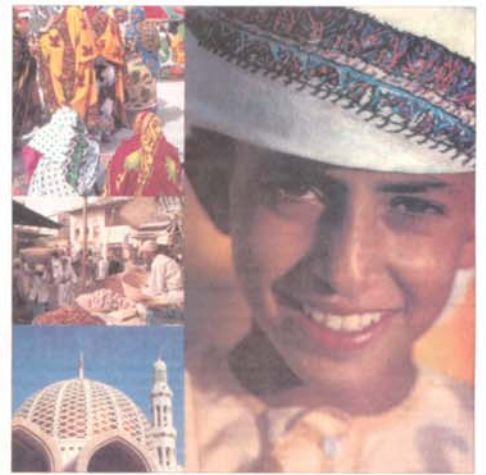
place and come fully armed with questions on what they can expect on a holiday in Oman. Those who are receptive fall for the charm of going to an unspoilt destination that is totally different. She also mentions customers who have read about the Al Bustan Palace Hotel or are familiar with The Chedi chain of hotels. "These hotels have done their bit of marketing and this makes it easier to sell the place," she advises her clients to go anywhere else for activities like shopping or horse racing but to come to Oman for the authentic experience of Arabia.

"There has been a marked difference in the awareness about Oman during the past year," she says. Of late Oman has received immense coverage in the London papers. There's an article every week and people are talking about the place at dinner parties and get-togethers. She is all praise for the efforts of the Ministry of Tourism that has made this possible and is confident that a firm beginning has been made in the right direction. She is also pleased that the Ministry has Rajha bin Abdulameer bin Ali at the helm.

On the back page of her brochure she quotes, Maqbool bin Ali Sultan, Minister of Commerce and Industry, "Oman's rich cultural, historical and geological backdrop, its pristine beaches washed by the waters of the Gulf of Oman, the Arabian Sea and the Arabian Gulf, offer an unparalleled canvas of potential".

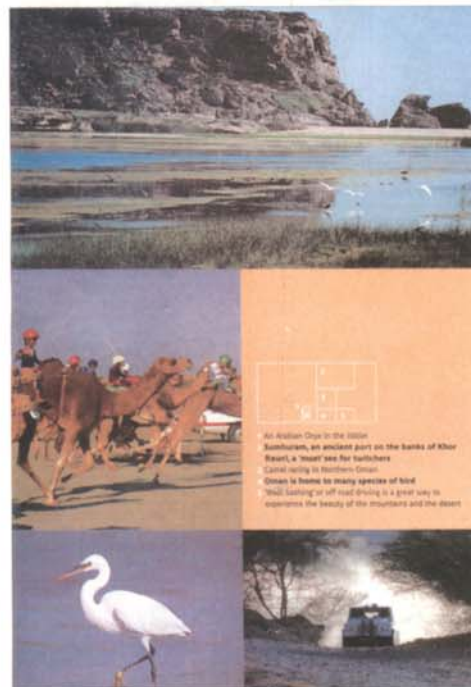
Lady Sonia plans to visit the hotel of the Shangri-La chain; a new hotel will mean more rooms for her clients to visit Oman. In Oman, the well-known Zahara Tours looks after the tailor-made requirements of her clients. "It is a great experience to work with a professional company" she says.

Lady Shaw has a method for follow-up. She e-mails, calls or writes to her clients when they are back from Oman. "99.9 per cent of them return mesmerised with the Oman holiday; the experience has gone above their expectations and if they have done just one part of the country they are ready to plan the next. The truth is that the country leaves an impression — there is charm, diversity, the element of discovery and lots to do!"



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- As a tour operator specialising on Oman, Lady Shaw speaks out about what will enhance the experience for visitors coming to Oman
- Few more authentic facilities
- Arrangements to enable visitors to ride a camel in the desert
- Facilities to allow visitors to experience riding an Arabian horse on the beach
- Good restroom facilities on the roads with cafeterias selling dates and kahwa manned by Omanis of the area
- Better camping sites on the Sharqiyah sands for up-market visitors who may not enjoy a sleeping bag



At Hadram City in the Sultanate of Hadramaut, an ancient port on the banks of Khayr Bay, a 'meat' see for tourists
Camel riding in Southern Oman
Oman is home to many species of bird
"Bird" looking at off road driving is a good way to experience the beauty of the mountains and the desert

