

# THE OMAN EXPERIENCE

THESE ARE EXCITING TIMES FOR OMAN AS IT EMERGES AS TOP HOLIDAY DESTINATION.  
LADY SONIA SHAW LOOKS AT RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

I set up the Shaw Travel Company in 2000 when tourist travel to Oman was still relatively limited and unknown. How things have changed since then. 'It's the capital of Jordan isn't it?' was a common misconception! Now Oman is firmly established as a top holiday destination and is recommended by some 100 UK travel operators.

In 2002, Oman set up its own tourist board and with this came a resolve to show the world what the Sultanate has to offer. At the same time Gulf Air extended its service to Muscat with daily flights. Since then there has been a measured construction programme which has taken advantage of Oman's magnificent coastline while avoiding the excessive development that has happened in some other Arab states. All building must incorporate an Arab element in its design thus creating a more seamless transition between old and new.

Oman now has several world class hotels, mostly in the Muscat area, which offer the traveller a fantastic base from which to explore the rest of the country or to simply relax and enjoy the excellent beaches. The Al Bustan Palace is probably considered by many to be the jewel in the Sultanate's hotel crown; the chic, minimalist Chedi has attracted an international following; and this year saw the completion of the Shangri La resort at Barr al Jissah which has provided an impressive further 700 rooms amidst 124 acres of landscaped gardens.

Shaw Travel offers luxury, tailor-made itineraries for each individual client and is effectively able to organise a wide range of activities and sight-seeing opportunities that offer both culture and adventure. Whilst living and working in Oman I made many useful contacts which have allowed me to develop unique and interesting trips for clients, accompanied by hand-picked guides who can really take them off the beaten track and give them a chance to see aspects of the country that others might miss.

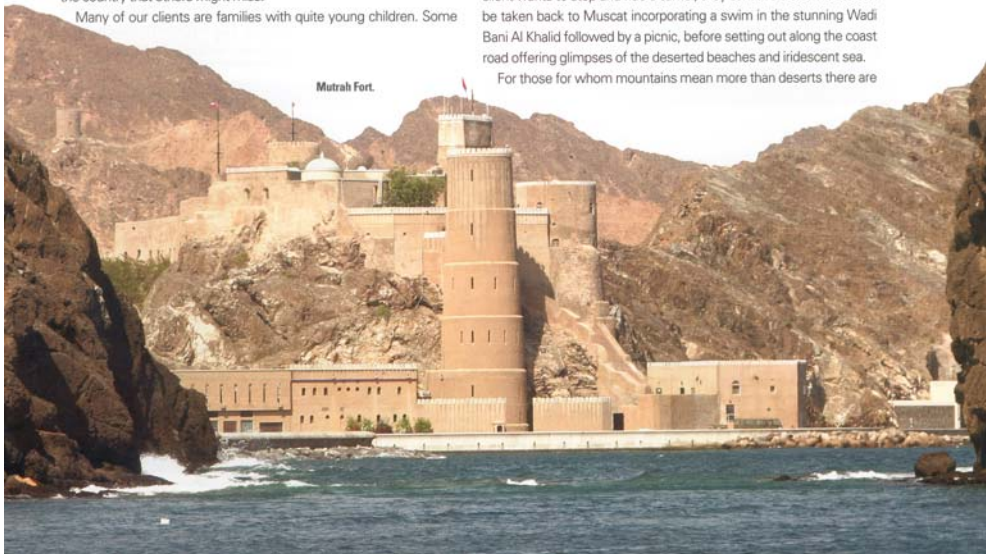
Many of our clients are families with quite young children. Some



Nakhl Fort.

simply want to come and enjoy the fantastic facilities at the hotels. However, those with a wish for adventure can take themselves off with an English-speaking Omani guide in a 4wd vehicle and head for a night under the stars in the Wahiba sands. The journey to the desert normally incorporates a stop in Nizwa where the spectacular 17th century fort is one of the most visited national monuments. The camp is reached just before sunset giving those brave enough a chance to enjoy the exhilaration of dune bashing! Dinner is taken al fresco and the night spent in a Bedouin-style tent. The trip is structured around the client and the guides are completely flexible so if the client wants to stop and ride a camel, they can! A different route can be taken back to Muscat incorporating a swim in the stunning Wadi Bani Al Khalid followed by a picnic, before setting out along the coast road offering glimpses of the deserted beaches and iridescent sea.

For those for whom mountains mean more than deserts there are

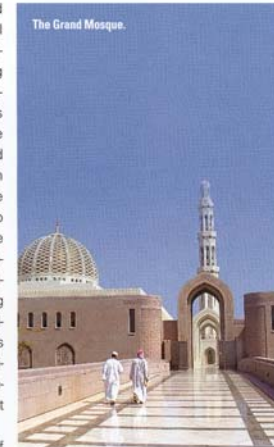


Mutrah Fort.

the same opportunities to take off in a 4wd car again and head up into the amazing Jebel Akhdar. Expeditions can take the form of serious hiking and climbing or gentler walking and driving, depending on fitness and expertise. The rugged scenery of the Musandam is also increasingly proving an attraction where clients come to enjoy a dhow cruise around the Arabian 'fjords' or the incredible diving in the immaculate waters. However trips here have become slightly more difficult to arrange since Oman Air has decreased the number of flights to Khasab. The region's isolation is obviously its appeal and there is a balance to be maintained between allowing people in and the virgin nature of the landscape. News of a new spa hotel which is opening at Ziggy Bay in May 2007 will obviously attract more people but I feel the inaccessible character of the Musandam will limit any massive development.

This equilibrium between development of tourist sites and Oman's natural environment is a sensitive one. The new road recently built from Muscat to Sur will bring greater accessibility to this pretty fishing town and further on down the coast to Ras al Hadd to the turtle nesting beaches. The sight of these extraordinary sea creatures clambering up the beaches to lay their dozens of eggs in the middle of the night is one of nature's wonders and certainly the highlight of a tour to this area. However, care will be needed to control the numbers of tourists so as not to disturb the habitat of these endangered animals.

Another area which is also proving of interest is the Dhofar, as people become more aware of the great scenic contrasts in Oman. I send an increasing number of clients to stay in Salalah. Travellers from the Gulf are more likely to visit the Dhofar during the 'khareef' for the cooling summer rains and lush green landscape but most tourist travel takes place during the winter months when the sands have dried out. I have been lucky enough to collaborate with an Omani family in the area which takes clients out to see the Empty



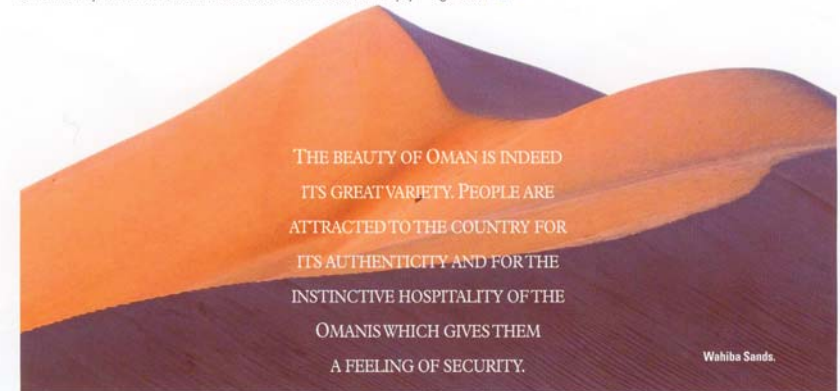
The Grand Mosque.

Quarter, the frankincense markets and the many historical sites around Salalah and give them the benefit of its local knowledge.

There is of course plenty to do in Muscat. The spectacular Grand Mosque is an obvious magnet, as is Mutrah with its atmospheric souk, elegant corniche and historic fish market. Early morning boat trips off the Muscat coast can be organized to go in search of the common, spinner and bottlenose dolphins, as well as whales and game fish, which thrive in the Arabian Sea. Diving in Omani waters is some of the best in the world, suitable for both beginners and advanced divers around Muscat and for more experienced divers in the pristine seas off the Musandam. We can also arrange game fishing for yellow fin tuna, kingfish among others or a relaxing sundown cruise while surveying the celebrated Muscat harbour and coastline.

The beauty of Oman is indeed its great variety. People are attracted to the country

for its authenticity and for the instinctive hospitality of the Omanis which gives them a feeling of security. My aim at Shaw Travel is to keep it as a specialist niche for the discerning traveller. I like to share my passion for the Sultanate so that my clients really do benefit not just from the well known areas of interest but some hidden treasures as well. This is what hopefully makes for a special and memorable holiday. I also feel my role is to promote the country with its situation in the Middle East. This makes some people apprehensive while others have already read up on the area and are fully prepared with what to expect. I also like to work alongside the hotels to be constantly aware of improvements for clients and have also advised on the setting up a new camp in the desert. What has amazed me is the number of people who want to go back, sometimes for a third time. As author Anthony Horowitz wrote, after travelling to Oman with Shaw Travel 'The more time you spend in Oman, the more it sneaks up on you and draws you in. Even as we were leaving, we were planning to go back.' ■



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