

travel

Arabian days

NICOLA SHIPWAY enjoys the rich natural and cultural diversity of the Sultanate of Oman, and samples several of its luxurious hotels



In the mid-nineteenth century, Oman was the most powerful state in Arabia. Islamic since the seventh century, the country was for over 100 years subject to Portuguese control; and, from the late nineteenth century until its independence in 1971, was a British protectorate. It is a land of camels and Bedouins, of lush, flower-fringed oases and dry, stony riverbeds (wadis) that flood during the monsoon. It has lagoons colonized by flamingos and waters richly populated by sea life that attracts divers from round the world. The northern coastline, overlooking the Gulf of Oman, is strung with forts, each like a giant sandcastle, and some – that at Nizwa, for example – complete with gory histories of prisoners cast into insufferably hot dungeons, and tales of boiling date syrup poured down chutes to cascade over marauders.

The country borders the United Arab Emirates to the northwest, Saudi Arabia to

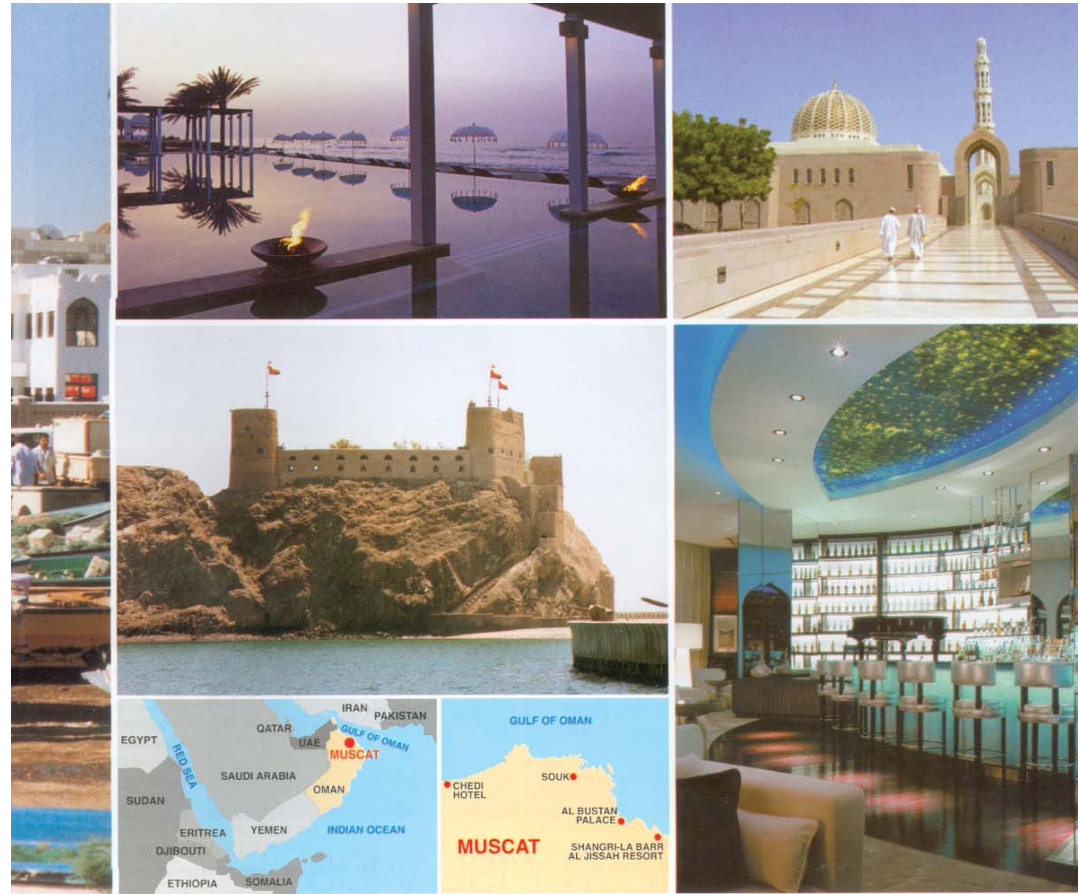
the west, and Yemen to the southwest. The east coast slides into the Arabian Sea. Much of central Oman is a desert, but the capital, Muscat, is for the most part a modern city. In the old town, however, are architectural fragments that recall the graceful buildings typical of Stone Town in Zanzibar, which has long been associated with Oman – in 1840, the Sultan of Muscat relocated his court to the island.

The current Sultan has an extraordinary, Disney-esque palace on the coast near the old town of Muscat, not far from the main souk, which is a labyrinthine place, cloudy with aromatic frankincense harvested in the south of the country. Gold, silver and semiprecious jewellery, curved Omani tribal daggers (*khanjars*) and cashmere shawls – all are arrayed for sale, while coffee sellers congregate to advertise their bitter drink by clicking together cups in the manner of castanets. Here, as throughout Oman, you

see men wearing dishdashas – ankle-length white robes – and embroidered hats; the women typically dress in ebony-coloured burkas, although in rural districts their clothes are sometimes brightly coloured.

At the opposite end of the city from the souk is Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, which non-Muslims can visit early in the morning. It is vast: the pale marble façade contains serene, arched walkways and a highly embellished prayer hall furnished with a carpet consisting of 1,700 million knots.

Visitors to Muscat can choose from several excellent hotels. Largest among these is the Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah Resort, a luxurious leviathan situated beyond the reaches of the city, flanked on either side by fissured, shortbread-coloured mountains. It comprises three hotels, each of which differs in character: Al Waha, at one end of the resort, is aimed particularly at families; Al Bandar, in the middle, is more glamorous; and Al



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Fishing boats crowd the beach in the port at Mutrah, the old town of Muscat, near the main souk. The Chedi hotel has two inky swimming pools, one of which overlooks the beach. The main prayer hall of Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque is surmounted by a dome. The Piano Bar is a focal point at Al Bandar hotel, part of the Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah Resort. Forts line the coastline of Oman

Husn, at the opposite end of the stretch, is the most exclusive – a coral-pink building with its own private beach and a beautiful, infinity-edge pool. Both Al Waha and Al Bandar overlook wide terraces laid out with a series of swimming pools. Meandering between them is a 'lazy river' that requires swimmers to do nothing more than lie on rubber rings and be carried gently in the current along the 'river' and back again. There are six main restaurants serving various sorts of food, as well as several bars and the elegant Piano Bar.

Not far from the Shangri-La is the lavish Al Bustan Palace, built in the Eighties for a summit of Arab states, and notable for its soaring atrium. It is currently closed for a major refurbishment, but promises to be spectacular when it reopens at the end of the

year. On the other side of the city, near the airport, is the intimate, beautifully designed Chedi hotel, which has ravishing gardens: a regimental grove of palm trees; still pools of water linked by rills and interspersed with tall, glazed urns; and two inky swimming pools (one, overlooking the narrow beach, barred to children). Everything here is stylish and considered. And there is another hotel to bear in mind, too: the new Evason Hideaway is scheduled to open this summer in a picture-perfect bay in the Musandam peninsula, an exclave of Oman, north of Muscat.

It would be a pity to travel the seven-and-a-half-odd hours from London to Muscat and not to take in more than the beach. The mountainous, desert landscape of the interior begs exploration and most hotels offer excursions for Jeep 'safaris' or 4x4

'wadi bashing'. Specialist tour operators, however, can arrange extended desert trips. The best time to visit is from mid-October to mid-March, when Britain is grey and the Sultanate of Oman, freed from the brutal heat of summer, is balmy and beautiful □

ways & means

Oman travel specialist **Shaw Travel** (tel: 01635-47055, website: www.shawtravel.co.uk) arranges tailor-made holidays to all of the hotels mentioned; seven nights at Shangri-La Al Bandar Hotel (website: www.shangri-la.com) cost from £1,368 per person, based on two people sharing, including flights to Muscat with Gulf Air; transfers, breakfast, and a private two-day trip into the desert in a 4x4 with an English-speaking guide.

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