

WATCHTOWER AT BUKHA, MUSANDAM

SULTANATE SUBLIME

Oman offers a more traditional take on Arabia than its Gulf neighbours, as ANGELA SHAH *discovers*

PHOTOGRAPHY / **GRAHAM UDEN**



SULTAN QABOOS' ROYAL PALACE IN OLD MUSCAT



ABOVE: DHOW IN KHOR ASH-SHAM LAGOON. BELOW: VILLAGERS AT WADI GHUL

THE WOODEN DHOW GLIDES SILENTLY through the Gulf of Oman, hugging the coast just close enough for a full-screen view of the Hajar Mountains, some of which soar to nearly 2,000 metres, rising straight out of the sea.

We lounge lazily on the rectangular red-white-and-black embroidered cushions arranged Majlis-style along the boat's exposed flatbed and gaze at these fjords of the Arabian Peninsula.

The silence is broken only by a startled exclamation: Did you see that? A dolphin has shot out of the water, forming a graceful curve in the air, power and grace in a flash. But before we can hold up our cameras and focus the lenses, it's gone, gliding just under the water's surface, off to jolt other boats' passengers out of their morning reverie.



The protective cover of the landscape is enjoyed not only by visitors. From time to time, smugglers can be seen darting in and out of the rocky outcrops, their boats loaded with electronics, jewellery and other items bound for Iran.

On shore, goats scramble along the stony landscape, their yellow eyes glinting in the sun. Tightly clustered fishing villages are the only break from the isolation of the austere landscape. At a time when you can get anything anywhere, these villages are rare solitary outposts, largely untouched by modern migration.

Take the village of Kumzar at the Musandam Peninsula's northernmost point. Accessible only by boat, it was connected to the electric grid just 20 years ago (a weekly helicopter service to the provincial capital is now available on Mondays.) Its isolation has helped protect the local dialect, a mixture of Arabic and Farsi that's inflected with the Portuguese brought in by sailors nearly 500 years ago.

On the mountainous back roads, abandoned stone houses with terraced gardens dating back to the 14th and 15th centuries are not uncommon, a tangible example of Oman's 5,000 years of history.

Indeed, Musandam's high cliffs are dotted with thousands of medieval stone forts, their tiny windows and turrets serving as vantage points for generations of tribesman who battled invaders. At its closest point, the peninsula is just 38 kilometres from Iran, across the Straits of Hormuz.

Musadam's strategic position also led to the establishment of Telegraph Island in 1864, which lies on the route of an undersea cable laid by the British to speed communications between London and India. There's not much to see on the island itself, but it's interesting to note that this patch of rock once played such an important role in world communications.

The close connection between Oman and its past is due

A WALK ALONG THE CORNICHE, MUSCAT



TIDAL LAGOON AT KHOR AN-NAJD, MUSANDAM



ABOVE: LOCAL CATCH ON SALE AT THE QUAY IN MUSCAT. BELOW: MUSCAT'S MUTTRAH SOUK

largely to the fact that until 40 years ago, the sultanate was cut off from the world until Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id al Sa'id overthrew his father, a leader who had the large wooden gates on the walls of Muscat closed each evening, and who banned radios and other modern devices.

Under the direction of the son, Oman has blossomed into a more traditional version of Arabia. While Dubai razes older neighbourhoods to erect sail-shaped hotels, and Abu Dhabi's Emirates Palace hotel boasts an ATM machine that dispenses gold, Oman issues decrees that forbid the construction of buildings higher than nine stories and employs a greater percentage of its nationals in industry than any other Gulf nation. When you visit Oman, you visit Omanis.

The seas around Oman, which has nearly 3,000 kilometres of coastline, have always played a crucial role in its development, making it an important commercial hub between Europe and Asia. Trade between Oman and the subcontinent was already well developed by the time European explorers came through Hormuz in search of a passage to India.

The dhows that troll the waters today are much the same as those operated in the 15th century by the famous Arab navigator Ibn Majid. It's believed that he helped Vasco de Gama navigate the Indian Ocean by use of an Arab map. There is still evidence of Portugal's presence in Arabia: the Omani capital of Muscat is where they established their main naval base in the 15th century and built the twin forts of Mirani and Jalali. Fortified with cannons, then a new technology, the Portuguese controlled movement along the strait until Sultan Turki Bin Sa'id recaptured the enclave.

The capital is more than a museum to military glories. Old Muscat is where one can stroll through the maze-like lanes of the Muttrah Souk to buy copper incense burners or silver *khanjars*, the traditional dagger worn by Omani men.

Aromas of frankincense and sandalwood fill the nose as buyers and sellers bargain in Arabic and broken English for handmade textiles, silverware or pottery. (A word to the wise: the best deal for frankincense comes in the shops at the back of the souk, so it pays to wander deeply.)

Sadly, machine-made products are creeping into traditional markets as the younger generation eschews learning handicrafts in favour of modern ways of making a living. The observation makes the exhibits at Muscat's Bait Al Zubair museum all the more poignant, since they highlight a traditional life that may be on the decline in the sultanate.

A little over 1,000 kilometres away from Muscat is Oman's most southern province of Dhofar, home to lagoons and a cloud-forest ecosystem that exists only in a handful of places across the globe.

Hemmed in between the Arabian Sea and the Al Qara



MOSQUE IN MUSCAT



ABOVE: NIZWA FORT DATES BACK TO THE 12TH CENTURY. BELOW: BEDOUIN WOMAN AT AL AREESH DESERT CAMP

Mountains inland, Dhofar benefits from the annual monsoon that washes over the Indian subcontinent. The *khareef*, as it is known in Arabic, creates thick mists that are trapped in the mountains as high as 1,000 metres. A recent government programme placed nets 700 metres up to trap the fog and channel it into a reservoir, an environmentally friendly approach to irrigating the arid farmland below.

Salalah, the Dhofari capital and Oman's second largest city, is off the beaten track but its buildings and artefacts illustrate the area's connection to Christianity, Islam and Judaism.

Outside of Salalah, into the Qara Mountains, is An-Nabi Ayyub, reputed to be Job's Tomb. The site is part of Oman's Frankincense Trail, listed as a Unesco World Heritage site.

Frankincense trees dot the Salalah landscape, one of the few places in the world where they grow. The white sap, which hardens into fragrant crystals, was the economic foundation for the villages along the coast. The Land of Frankincense Museum in the Al Baleed district details the stops along the ancient incense trail, most of which are now in ruins. The most fabled among them is the lost city of Ubar, the hub of the frankincense trade, and the place TE Lawrence christened the "Atlantis of the Sands." According to the Qu'ran, the town was inhabited by the Ad tribe in pre-Islamic times. As Islam spread, they insisted on keeping their pagan idols, displeasing Allah, and ignoring the Prophet Hud's pleas to redeem their ways. Allah then smote the town until there was nothing but sand.

Today, Shisr – the modern-day village some think is the Ubar of old – is little more than a handful of government-built villas and stone ruins. Even though NASA satellite imagery has confirmed the area was a significant trading post, the jury's still out as to whether this is, in fact, the Atlantis of the Sands.





SHANGRI-LA BARR AL JISSAH

Arabian Nights

For all of its attractions, Oman has a fraction of the hotel rooms of neighbouring Dubai. The Ministry of Tourism is overseeing a programme to construct 15,000 hotel rooms over the next five years. In the meantime, what Oman lacks in quantity is not a reflection of quality.

SHANGRI-LA BARR AL JISSAH

The Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah resort and spa is a sprawling complex comprising three hotels set against Muscat's rugged mountains. The Al Husn hotel doesn't admit children under 12. Standard service includes an iPod provided by the hotel and complimentary cocktails and canapés at sundown. Each of the resort's 680 rooms and suites face the sea.

The resort's other two hotels are family friendly with a lazy river ride that runs through the property and a programme that brings guests to the beach to watch sea turtles lay their eggs at different times of the year.

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SIX SENSES ZIGHY BAY

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In Musandam, Zighy Bay is the sultanate's newest resort, opened in 2008. Owned and managed by Six Senses, the resort places a special emphasis on reconnecting with the natural world. The villas are built using native stone and palm thatched roofs on the outside, with all the modern comforts inside. A private butler is on call 24/7. On arrival, you're encouraged to go barefoot; there are clay pots of water at villa entrances to rinse one's feet.

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sixsenses.com/SixSensesZighyBay

THE CHEDI, MUSCAT

The Chedi, also in Muscat, adopts a fusion of Arabian and Asian architecture, but stays true to traditional hospitality. Smaller than the Shangri-La, it has 160 rooms and suites and a handful of restaurants, and is in close proximity to Old Muscat.

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RIGHT: HERBERT YPMA