

Oman عمان

It's a curious observation about travelling in Oman that the moment you tuck behind a sand dune and begin erecting your tent, however discreetly, someone will park alongside and start camping too. Never mind that it is the only car you've seen all day; never mind that there are 2700km of beautiful, empty sandy beaches; never mind that the mountains are so lonesome in parts that only wolves and hedgehogs meander into the night; and never mind that memories of Thesiger are the only evocations of the living to issue from the dunes of the Empty Quarter – the one-car-per-day will find yours and camp alongside.

What makes this observation a particularly topical one is that it's only relatively recently that a network of roads and graded tracks, such as the coast road from Filim to Shwaymiyah, or the adventurous mountain track to the ancient tombs at Gaylah, has made it possible to penetrate Oman's pristine landscapes. Those who are sufficiently intrepid to get off the beaten track will find that they can have the desert to themselves quite easily without mounting a major expedition. Now that the secret of Oman's great untouched beauty is out, however, it surely can't be long before groups of visitors are a common sight and it will no longer be necessary to seek the company of strangers at the end of a day's exploration.

In the meantime, what should you say to the happy camper who parks in 'your space'? As every hospitable Omani you'll meet on your travels will tell you, there's only one answer: *'Ahlan wa salan! Welcome!'*

FAST FACTS

- **Official name** Sultanate of Oman
- **Capital** Muscat
- **Area** 309,500 sq km
- **Population** 3.1 million
- **Country code** ☎ 968
- **Head of State** Sultan Qaboos bin Said
- **Annual number of tourists** 1.2 million
- **Stereotype** A country that has only relatively recently emerged from isolation
- **Surprise** An infrastructure that any country would be proud of



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Jebel Shams** (p234) Haggle with insouciant local carpet sellers for vertiginous rugs on a precipice above Wadi Ghul.
- **Nakhla Fort** (p238) Survey the flat panorama of the Al-Batinah Region from the battlements of Oman's most spectacular castle.
- **Sharqiya Sands** (p225) Put your driving and navigational skills to the test in an auburn sea of sand.
- **Ras al-Jinz** (p221) Attend the night-time drama of labour and delivery at the green turtle's favourite nesting site.
- **Dhofar Region** (p247) Explore the subtropical terrain of a region famed for gold, frankincense and myrrh.

ITINERARIES

Itineraries covering Oman and other parts of the Arabian Peninsula can be found starting on p25.

- **Muscat Stopover** Rise with the dawn to see fishermen bring in the weird and wonderful at Mutrah's fish market (p196). Join the ebb and flow of the city's residents by strolling along the corniche (p196), under the overhanging balconies of the harbour residences. Duck into Mutrah Souq (p197) to learn the art of good-natured argument and lose your way among the pink, plastic and implausible. Spare an hour for the sights of Muscat proper (p197), the walled heart of the capital, before a spot of R&R and an extravagant dinner at one of the city's whimsical hotels (p204).
- **Two weeks** Make the most of the mountains by circling the Western Hajar range and making your base the lively town of Nizwa (p231). Climb the beanstalk to Jebel Akhdar (p230), famed for giant pomegranates and hailstones. Hike the rim of Oman's Grand Canyon for a spot of carpet-buying on Jebel Shams (p234). Engage with *jinn* (spirits created by Allah) at the remarkable tombs and forts of Bat (p236), Bahla (p235) and Jabrin (p236). Finally, take the long way home to Muscat, via a dizzying mountain drive (p233) to Rustaq (p238), and wash the dust off in a sparkling sea at Sawadi (p240).
- **Three weeks** Go in search of wild places on an adventurous route from Muscat to Oman's second city, Salalah (p247), 1000km to the south. Follow the Qurayat-

Sur coast road to Sur (p214), home of the dhow, pausing to explore the celebrated wadis of Shab (p215) and Tiwi (p216). Learn about turtles at Ras al-Jinz before cutting inland to the sea of sand near Mintirib (p225). Acclimatise to nights under the stars before the camping journey to Salalah via Duqm, Ras Madrakah and Shwaymiyah (p250). Leave time to explore Salalah's beautiful beaches and go in search of frankincense.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

The best time to visit Oman is between November and mid-March, when the cooler air brings the mountain scenery sharply into focus and daytime temperatures average 25°C. For the rest of the year, much of Oman is oppressively hot and hazy, particularly between May and August.

The redeeming summertime feature is the *khareef*, the mid-June to late-August rainy season in southern Oman. Many Gulf visitors flock to this area to picnic under the drizzle on Dhofar's grassy hills. The rain (and the green) vanishes by mid-September.

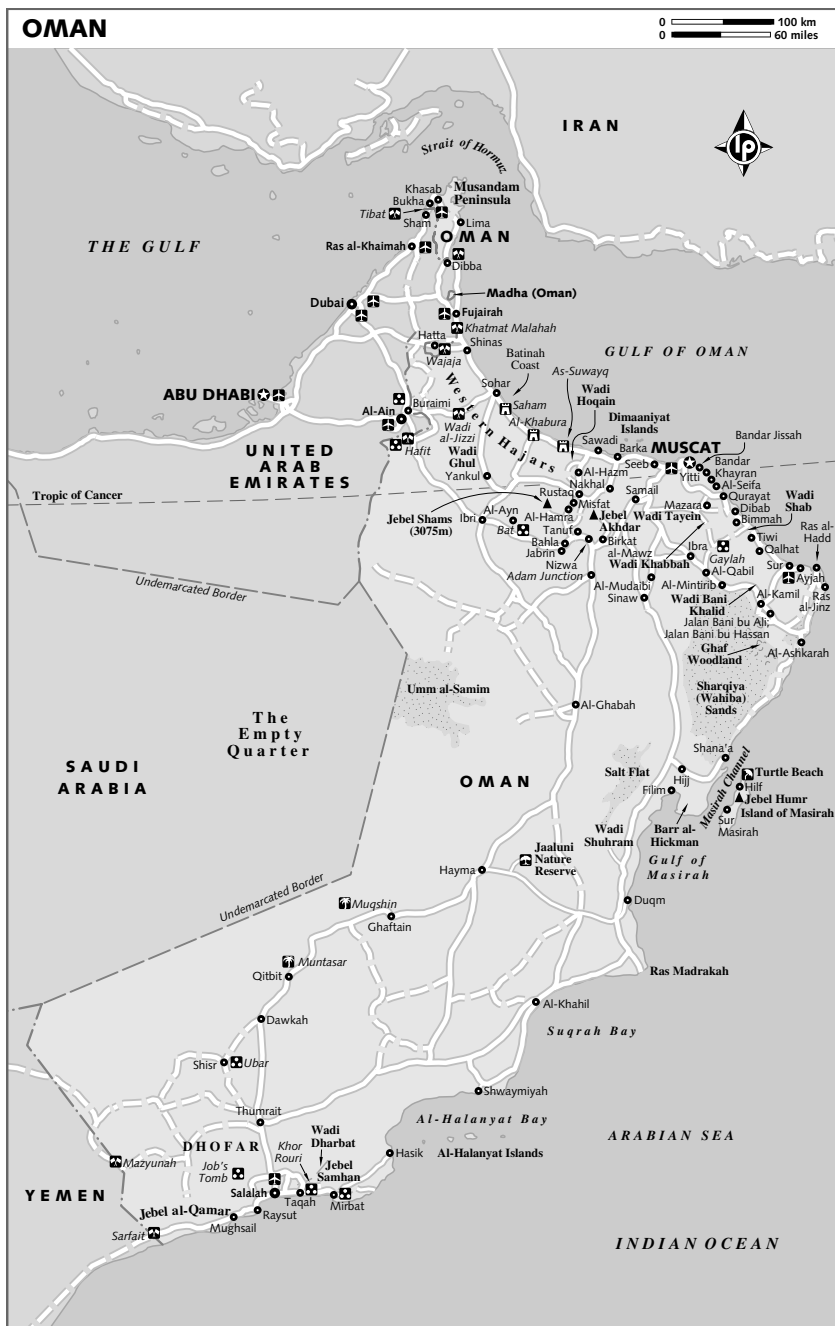
The peak tourist season in the north is from November to mid-March. See also p530 for a climate chart for Muscat.

HISTORY

'Renaissance' is a term any visitor to Oman will hear, as it refers to the current period under Sultan Qaboos, a leader held responsible by most of the population for easing the country into modernity. Before he came to the throne after a bloodless coup in 1970, Oman had no secondary and only two primary schools, two hospitals run by the American mission and a meagre 10km of sealed roads. In addition, the country was in a state of civil war. Oman has since caught up with its more affluent neighbours, and it boasts efficient, locally run hospitals, universities, electricity to remote villages and an ever-improving infrastructure of roads. Furthermore, Oman is peaceful and stable, with an enviable low crime rate and a well-trained local workforce.

Early Oman: Gold, Frankincense & Copper

The term 'renaissance' is an appropriate one, as it suggests equally rich periods through Oman's long history.



As far back as 5000 BC, southern Oman (now called Dhofar) was the centre of the lucrative frankincense trade. This highly prized commodity, produced from the aromatic sap of the frankincense tree, was traded for spices with India and carried by caravans across all of Arabia. While the trees grew in Yemen and one or other two locations, they grew best in the monsoon-swept hills of Dhofar, where they continue to be harvested to this day. So precious was the sap of these trees, that even the part-mythical Queen of Sheba hand-delivered Dhofari frankincense to King Solomon. Equally legendary, of course, are the gifts borne by the three wise men of biblical report.

The Bible also mentions the golden-pillared city of Ubar, built by the people of Ad. This fabled city, which has excited the curiosity of explorers for hundreds of years, grew out of the frankincense trade to become one of the most powerful cities in the region. The remains of the city were reputedly rediscovered in the 1990s by English explorer Ranulph Fiennes. Nonetheless, it is hard to believe this claim, looking at the virtually barren plot near Thumrait – much more persuasive is the fact that the presumed descendants of the remarkable civilisation of Ad still occupy the surrounding desert, speaking the distinct and ancient language of Jibbali, whimsically known as the ‘language of the birds’.

Oman enjoyed further prosperity in pre-Islamic times through the trading of copper. Indeed, Oman is referred to in some sources as ‘the Mountain of Copper’, and the Bahrain National Museum provides evidence of vigorous trading in copper between Oman and its Gulf neighbours. The country then slipped into a long period of isolation that prevailed until the 7th century AD when Islam was introduced by Amr ibn al-As, a disciple of the Prophet Mohammed. Oman was quick to embrace the new faith – it even gained a reputation for its proselytising zeal.

For about the next 500 years Oman came under the leadership of the Bani Nabhan dynasty (1154–1624).

Hostilities: the Portuguese

Frequent civil wars during the Bani Nabhan dynasty, between the sultan’s forces and tribal factions, left the country vulnerable

to outside hostilities that eventually came in the form of the Portuguese.

Alarmed by Oman’s naval strength and anxious to secure Indian Ocean trade routes, the Portuguese launched a succession of attacks against Omani ports; by 1507 they managed to occupy the major coastal cities of Qalhat (near Sur, and mentioned in the journals of Ibn Battuta and Marco Polo), Muscat and Sohar. Ironically, it was a talented sailor from Sohar, Ahmed bin Majid, who unwittingly helped Vasco da Gama navigate the Cape of Good Hope in 1498, leading to the Portuguese invasion a few years later.

Over the next 150 years Oman struggled to oust the occupying forces. Eventually, under the guidance of the enlightened Ya’aruba dynasty (1624–1743), Oman was able to build up a big enough fleet to succeed. The Portuguese were interested in Oman only as a sentry post for their maritime adventures and had barely ventured into the country’s interior. They were therefore easy to rout, given Oman’s newly established naval might. Other than Al-Jalali Fort, Al-Mirani Fort and Mutrah Fort, all of which dominate the centre of Muscat, the Portuguese left little behind, although their legacy of military architecture shaped fort construction in Oman.

Unified & Wealthy

By 1650 Oman became a settled, unified state of considerable wealth and cultural accomplishment, with influence extending as far as Asia and Africa. Many of Oman’s other great forts were built during this period, including the impressive, round-towered Nizwa Fort.

By the 19th century, under Sultan Said bin Sultan (r 1804–56), Oman had built up a sizable empire controlling strategic parts of the African coast, including Mombasa and Zanzibar, and parts of what are now India and Pakistan. Today it is easy to see the influence that Oman had on the coastal areas of those countries, and even more tangibly the extent to which its own culture and population was enriched by the contact. The Batinah coast, for example, is home to the Baluchi people originally from Pakistan; as a result, mosque design along the highway between Barka and Sohar bears more resemblance to the florid architecture