Sultanate of Oman
Tourist Guide

SULTANATE OF oman
Ministry of Tourism
Discover the secret of Arabia
AHLAN! Welcome to Oman!

As-salaamu alaykum, and welcome to the enchanting Sultanate of Oman. Safe and inviting, Oman will hypnotise you with its fragrant ancient souks, mesmerise with dramatic landscapes and leave you spellbound with its stories. Home to numerous UNESCO World Heritage Sites, Oman is steeped in history and has inspired some of literature’s most famous tales.

Muscat, the vibrant capital, is full of memorable sites and experiences. Visitors can take in extraordinary museum exhibits, visit ancient houses and wander the fishing port, home to traditional dhows. Evenings offer the chance to eat at one of the city’s cafes and restaurants or even experience the first Opera House on the Arabian Peninsula – the Royal Opera House of Muscat.

Head out of the city, and Oman becomes even more captivating. Explore the small towns nestled between the mountains. Visit the Bedouin villages. Drive the incense route. You’ll do it all under the constant gaze of ancient forts dotted throughout the landscape like imposing sand castles.

Stop by the date farms and witness the harvesting of the roses, that cover the hills with delicate hues of pink and fill the air with an enchanting fragrance. Spend the night under the stars in a desert camp then swim in the wadis, stunning natural pools offering respite from the heat. Marvel at Oman’s magnificent beaches, pristine diving sites and nature reserves. There aren’t many places in the world where you can observe rare species of turtles up close and swim with dolphins in the wild, but you can here.

All of this, as well as a colourful annual events calendar and a wide range of international sports events, ensures a travel experience unlike any other. A journey of discovery awaits you in this welcoming land at the crossroads between Asia, Africa and Western civilisation. Enjoy all of the marvels of this unique setting, the ideal gateway to Southern Arabia.
MUSCAT

The capital of the country – where traditional architecture sits beside stunning beaches and bustling souks – reflects Oman’s past and its present. Set between the sea and rugged mountain ranges, Muscat, with its melting pot of cultures, is the perfect starting point for an Omani adventure.

Located at the foot of the Hajar Mountains, Oman’s major mountain range, Muscat faces the Arabian Sea. Architecturally, the city is characterised by a typical oriental Arabesque style with its low-standing white and sand-coloured houses. The skyline is dotted with the minarets and domes of the city’s mosques. Archaeological remains suggest this was the site of an early fishing settlement as far back as the fifth millennium BC, making Muscat one of the oldest cities in the Middle East.

As a trading port, Muscat experienced continual growth and attracted sailors and merchants from all over the world. In 1507 it was conquered by the Portuguese, who occupied the city until 1650 when it was freed by Sultan bin Saif, who founded an empire that stretched from Pakistan to Zanzibar. In 1832 a second capital city was settled on the African island of Zanzibar. This marked the beginning of a period of decline for Muscat, which only regained its former glory after the current sultan, His Majesty Qaboos bin Said, rose to power in the 1970s.

Today, there is plenty to captivate the visitor. Start with a stroll along the Mascat corniche (seafront). First thing in the morning, this busy port is the site of a fish market, while in the early evening locals flock here to take in the sea air. Looking out over the seafront are some of the city’s oldest and most beautiful houses, as well as the Lawati mosque, with its blue minaret and majestic dome decorated with mosaics. The same area is also home to the best-stocked souk in the Arabian Peninsula. Here, in its maze of alleyways, it is possible to find traditional clothes, jewellery, spices, antiques, hand-woven Bedouin carpets and craft workshops. Look for the craftsmen making traditional sculpted silver and ivory daggers known as Khunjars.

Within walking distance of Mascat is a magnificent private home called Bait al Baranda, or “House of the Porch”, now a museum dedicated to the history of Muscat from prehistory to the present day, with a section focusing on the current ruling dynasty. The museum is open from Saturday to Thursday, 9am to 1pm and 4pm to 6pm.

The breathtaking Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, opened in 2001, is a must for anyone visiting the country. Its elegantly carved arches lead to the courtyard and from there you can enter the huge main prayer hall, entirely decorated in white, blue and gold. An opulent Swarovski chandelier hangs from the dome and the floor is covered with a Persian carpet handcrafted by 600 weavers and spanning 4,263 square metres.

One of the first nations to embrace Islam in a peaceful manner, Oman converted to Islam peacefully, making Muscat one of the oldest cities in the Middle East. As a trading port, Muscat experienced continual growth and attracted sailors and merchants from all over the world. In 1907 it was conquered by the
Ibadi Islam in 190 AD. This denomination – also called Ibadîyya – is believed to be a division of the Khatmiyah school of Islam. Formed some 50 years after the death of Mohammed, Ibadi is the dominant form of Islam in Oman and Zanzibar, although there are also Ibadi in the Nafus mountains in Libya, the Mzabi valley in Algeria, the island of Jérba in Tunisia and in East Africa. The Grand Mosque is open from Monday to Thursday, 9am to 11am. You may not be able to venture inside the Al Alam Royal Palace in the Old Muscat area, but it is still worth a visit. Built by Sultan Qaboos in 1972, it elaborately decorated façades and the impressive courtyard give visitors a good idea of the opulence within the palace, which is used for high-profile public ceremonies and meetings. Opposite the Palace, the imposing forms of the palace, which is used for high-profile visitors a good idea of the opulence within the city and ocean. The museum is open from Sunday to Thursday, 9am to midday. You will get great pleasure in discovering the flora and fauna of the Sultanate – including some in fossilised form – at the fantastic Natural History Museum in the Ministry of Heritage and Culture Building in the Al Khawar area. The star exhibit, a panoramic view of the city and ocean. The beautiful home of Bait al Zubair is a complex of private buildings transformed into an ethnographic museum. It has a collection of traditional clothes, objects and jewellery helps paint a picture of daily life in the Sultanate over the centuries. The museum also has a collection of local and contemporary art and organises temporary exhibitions, concerts and events to support young and up-and-coming artists. It is open from Friday to Thursday, 9am to 6pm. The old French consulate – Bait Pansa – has also been renovated and converted into a delightful museum. Focusing on the building of ties between Oman and France, it also has a cool, luxuriant inner garden. It is open from Sunday to Thursday, 9am to midday. Nature lovers will take great pleasure in discovering the flora and fauna of the Sultanate – including some in fossilised form – at the fantastic Natural History Museum in the Ministry of Heritage and Culture Building in the Al Khawar area. The star exhibit, dominating an entire room, is an enormous skeleton of a whale. The museum is open from Sunday to Thursday, 9am to midday. exceptional structures make these two of the most beautiful forts in the country. The fortress-style Old Town gates now house a magnificent museum that allows you to explore how the city appeared – from its ancient wells to sprawling souks – in days past. From its highest windows, there is also a panoramic view of the city and ocean. The beautiful home of Bait al Zubair is a complex of private buildings transformed into an ethnographic museum. It has a collection of traditional clothes, objects and jewellery helps paint a picture of daily life in the Sultanate over the centuries. The museum also has a collection of local and contemporary art and organises temporary exhibitions, concerts and events to support young and up-and-coming artists. It is open from Friday to Thursday, 9am to 6pm. The old French consulate – Bait Pansa – has also been renovated and converted into a delightful museum. Focusing on the building of ties between Oman and France, it also has a cool, luxuriant inner garden. It is open from Sunday to Thursday, 9am to midday. Nature lovers will take great pleasure in discovering the flora and fauna of the Sultanate – including some in fossilised form – at the fantastic Natural History Museum in the Ministry of Heritage and Culture Building in the Al Khawar area. The star exhibit, dominating an entire room, is an enormous skeleton of a whale. The museum is open from Sunday to Thursday, 9am to midday.
THE DESERT AND NIZWA

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With its seemingly endless expanses steeped in silence, the desert has a unique appeal. The landscape is rich and varied, ranging from classic high sand dunes to rocky surfaces with stones in countless different shades. Whatever form it takes, it is always spellbinding and offers unparalleled experiences for anyone who loves adventure and getting back to nature.

Seventy per cent of Oman is desert and there are many ways to explore it. Accommodation options range from complete comfort and luxury to more low-key options for adventure lovers and the budget-conscious. It also offers a great experience for families: imagine camel riding during the day and camping under the stars at night.

A journey into the desert allows visitors to witness the daily lives of the exceptionally hospitable Bedouins who still live on its outskirts.

The vast Sharqiya desert – also known as the Wahiba Sands, since this is the name of the local tribe – lies at the heart of Oman. Throughout the day, its dunes change colour from white to yellow to red. Just a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Muscat or Sur, it is the most easily accessible desert area in the country. Using either of these two cities as a base means you can experience the desert in a day trip. Although tours lasting just a few hours are available, it is worth remembering nothing compares to the magic of a night spent under star-studded skies in the bewitching silence of the desert. There are lots of opportunities for overnight camping and, with more days at your disposal, you'll be able to take longer trips to see truly remarkable views.

For an unforgettable experience, visitors can spend up to two days crossing the entire Sharqiya desert from north to south, ending the journey with the sight of golden dunes descending into the Arabian Sea. To extend the tour, continue along the coast once you reach the sea, following a well-maintained road through the wild, entrancing region that lies between the dunes of the Sharqiya Sands and the blue sea.

Any Omani desert experience should be led by a licensed tour guide as they have the best local knowledge on traversing the wide plains.

The vast Rub’ al-Khali, the largest expanse of sand in the world. This Arabic phrase means "the Empty Quarter," and this desert stretches over a quarter of the entire Arabian Peninsula, its enormous surface area (twice the size of Victoria) lies partly in the Sultanate and partly in neighbouring Saudi Arabia and Yemen. One of the few areas on Earth not to have been fully explored, it was nicknamed the Desert of the Deserts by the explorer Wilfred Thesiger. As it covers the northern region of Dhofar, the southern part of the Sultanate, it is accessible from the city of Salalah. A number of tour operators organise trips lasting several days in the area.

Another way to explore the coastal plains is to drive from Muscat to Salalah, visiting Rub’ al Khali on the way. The 12-hour journey along a route of approximately 1,000 kilometres provides a great opportunity to admire the vast desert plains known as hamadas in the heart of the country. It is also an excellent chance to see the elusive Arabian oryx and the giant volcanic rock formations called the Mushroom Rocks in the provinces of Dhofar and Al Wusta.
Nizwa: gateway to the desert

The enchanting city of Nizwa lies in the middle of a breathtaking mountainous region and is an excellent starting point for trips into Oman’s deserts from the north of the country. During the 6th and 7th centuries, it was the capital and has managed to preserve the flavour and richness of its quintessential Omani-styled buildings.

The ancient city developed around a lush, green oasis where the caravan routes from the north met those from the south. Its importance as a trading site is still demonstrated today by its outstanding souk, one of the most beautiful and bountiful in the country, showcasing a selection of items made from wood, clay and precious metals, as well as meat, fish, fruit, vegetables and spices. It is the perfect place to buy beautiful, original souvenirs.

From dawn until 9am on fridays, there is the unmissable sight of a large cattle market. Bedouins from a number of different tribes flock here to buy and sell camels and other animals. Viewing the Friday markets in Nizwa transports visitors back in time and is a great addition to an Oman experience.

Nizwa is renowned for its beautiful architecture and the mighty fort that stands tall over the city. Built in the mid-1600s on top of the remains of a previous castle dating back to the 9th century, it is the biggest fort in the Arabian Peninsula.

Famous for its round guard tower – it has a diameter of 45 metres and is 34 metres taller than any of the other fortifications – the fort is now home to an interesting museum that presents Omani history and traditions.

OASIS AND AFLAJ

Arabian ingenuity has allowed even barren, arid land to become lush and fertile thanks to an intelligent network of canals known as aflaj (or falaj in the singular). First introduced in Oman by the Persians in 2500BC, the system of about 10,000 channels is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The falaj diverts water from its source through underground tunnels to open above-ground channels that supply water to many of the villages and towns dispersed throughout Oman.

Aflaj are often the focal point of the villages they irrigate, and are often a popular way to spend an afternoon with family and friends. Visitors can take a walk along the canals, learn about the history and significance of the falaj, and enjoy a picnic in the lush greenery surrounding the waterways. Some falaj can be reached on foot, while others require a short drive or hike through the surrounding mountains.

Imagine seeing lush orchards tucked into mountain terraces at heights of more than 1,000 metres. Nizwa is a great base for side trips, including to old villages like Tanuf and Birkat Al Mawz. Al Hajar is considered the most authentic and unspoilt village in Oman, with picturesque buildings reminiscent of the beautiful ochre houses of bygone days.

Bahla is a well-known ancient town famous for Bahla Fort, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and the exceptional craftsmanship of its potters. You can discover this longstanding tradition by visiting the workshops.

A short drive away is Jabrin Castle, built in 1670 as the summer palace of the ruling Imam. The castle has been fully restored and now houses a museum as well as a special Sun and moon Chamber said to be blessed with magical powers.

DESSERT CAMPS IN SHARQIYA SANDS

Safari Desert Camp Traditional Omani style is the cornerstone of this site in Bidiyah, which has tents with typical Arabian decorations. It also offers its guests trips through the dunes by 4WD or camel. More information: www.safaridesert.com.

Arabian Oryx Camp This camp combines modern and traditional elements with 37 air-conditioned cabins surrounded by breathtaking sand dunes. More information: www.oryx-camp.com.

1000 Nights Camp Thanks to its isolated location this site offers unparalleled delights. As night falls, hundreds of candles are lit to create a magical atmosphere. There are several Bedouin tents with carpets, candles, bathrooms and private showers. More information: www.1000nightscamp.com.
With its long, quiet beaches, tropical bays in the shade of palm trees, towering cliffs that drop into the ocean and 3,165 kilometres of coast, Oman is the ideal destination for anyone who loves to spend time by the shore.

From Muscat, the coast is sandy, with a calm sea and long stretches of beach boasting a wealth of facilities and water sports opportunities. To the north, the Musandam Peninsula is famous for its dramatic fjords plunging into the sea to create spectacular inlets and coves. To the south, the Salalah region is full of banana plantations and tropical beaches with turquoise water and palm trees bordering the golden sands.

With 3,165 kilometres of coast, the Sultanate of Oman is an ode to the sea. From November to April and a limited number of diving permits are issued. Trips to the reserve must be carried out by licensed operators.

Enjoying the coast in Muscat

The vibrant capital city of Muscat is blessed with many beaches and a calm sea suitable for year-round swimming. A large number of outstanding tourist facilities makes it an ideal base for visitors who want to combine relaxation by the sea with exploration of the country’s inland regions.

The most popular public beach is Qurum, just a short distance from the city centre. It is the ideal place to relax after a day visiting the sights or to experience local life, admiring families strolling along and football matches on the beach. Anyone who is not staying in a hotel with a private beach can use the ones at the Capital Yacht Club and the Oman Dive Centre for a fee.

Muscat has a busy port that offers plenty of opportunities to explore the coastline from the sea. Visitors can hire a boat, or go snorkelling, diving, game fishing, kayaking, sailing or kitesurfing. Youngsters will be excited to see large numbers of dolphins in the local area. Boat trips are organised every morning from Muscat marinas, notably to Bandar Khayran, a bay that is a popular snorkelling spot.

A trip to the Omaniyat B Downs Nature Reserve is another must-do experience, particularly for diving enthusiasts. These nine uninhabited islets, an important breeding site for visiting marine life including turtles and whales, are a nature-lover’s paradise. Due to weather conditions, the archipelago can only be visited from November to April and a limited number of diving permits are issued. Trips to the reserve must be carried out by licensed operators.

Finally, south-east of Muscat is the beautiful Fins Beach, famous for its beckoning turquoise
waters that provide a refreshing stop for those exploring Wadi Shab and Wadi Tiwi along the coast of Sur while also enticing snorkellers and divers.

Sur and Ras Al Hadd

The picturesque seaside town of Sur, with its local fishing boats, souks and museums, is a great base for exploring Oman’s rich maritime history. Even today it is one of the most important hubs for the construction and preservation of dhows, the distinctive boats from the Sultanate. A unique museum tells the tale of the longstanding naval tradition in the local area and provides an excellent introduction to the history of the great Omani sailors, including Sinbad. Visit some of the doha-shipyards in Sur to marvel at the craftsmanship and reflect on modern innovation and development.

After a day enjoying the sea or exploring the coastal fish produce and markets, an excellent way to pass the time is to wait for the dhows to serenely glide into the ocean. For a few rials, the port is the ideal spot for a stopover while in Oman. The new marina complex The Wave – Muscat Complex and Muscat Marina. Through its charter subsidiary, the company also offers the chance to rent a sailboat or catamaran, with or without skipper, for a day to a week. More information: www.ocenablueoman.com

KITESURFING IN MASIRAH

The island of Masirah in the south-east of the country is a haven of calm with a gentle Indian Ocean sea breeze blowing through it, making it very popular with kitesurfing enthusiasts, especially between May and September due to the excellent winds that at that time of the year. The natural environment is unspoilt, and it’s not uncommon to see flamingos, frigate birds, and loggerhead sea turtles side by side. Access to Masirah Island is by a short ferry trip from Shannah, a five-hour drive from Muscat. Kiteboarding Oman is the only registered facility at Masirah and operates a Bedouin camp and kite station directly on the beach. More information: www.kiteboarding-oman.com

Around the bay and port before dropping them off in the Al Jabal district, whose narrow streets are lined with white houses with magnificient wooden or wrought-iron doors, bearing witness to the ties between Oman and Zanzibar. At the end of the day, the souk district offers a range of restaurants specialising in seafood.

SAILING

Oman is home of the legendary Sinbad the Sailor and has nautical traditions dating back 5,000 years, making it the perfect destination for sea lovers of all kinds. With its spectcular coastline, a sea dotted with islands and islets, bays that are perfect for mooring and a 360 days of sunshine, there are many reasons to explore the Sultanate from the water. Even today, some villages, such as the picturesque village of Kuminar in the Musandam Peninsula, can only be reached by boat.

From the Mussanah Marina in the north to the south of Jebel Shams, the 150 kilometres of coastline around Muscat offers beautiful spaces to navigate. Discover the deserted beaches of the Sawadi islands, the unspoilt Dimaniyat Islands Nature Reserve and the sheltered bays of Bandar Khayran.

Muscat’s marinas are the main centres for sailing activities. Oman Sail runs three sailing schools: at Marina Bandar Al Rowdah, The Wave – Muscat Complex and Muscat Marina. Through its charter subsidiary, the company also offers the chance to rent a sailboat or catamaran, with or without skipper, for a day to a week. More information: www.ocenablueoman.com

Ocean Blue Oman offers an unparalleled experience on a luxury 75-foot catamaran, the SY Azzurra. It is available for private charter for small groups of up to 60 people. More information: www.oceanblueoman.com

The new marina complex The Almouq (The Wave) is another ideal spot for a stopover while in Muscat. More information: www.seaoman.com

Ras Al Jinz, the Scientific Center, which studies and protects turtles, recently opened a Turtle Visitor Center that offers information about the life cycle of these fascinating creatures. The Scientific Center also organises guided turtle-watching sessions and has a restaurant and a few bedrooms available for visitors. The reserve is a popular destination, so it’s advisable to book in advance.
well in advance if you want to stay in the vicinity overnight. Alternatively accommodation options are available at Ras Al Hadd or Sur.

Salalah and Dhofar

A completely different side to Oman can be found in the far south of the country. Looking out over the Arabian Sea is a real tropical haven, where gorgeous sandy bays lie between crystal clear water and lush green palm groves. In the town of Salalah you can see tropical fruit plantations and stalls loaded with coconuts, bananas and mangos. It is the perfect place to sit back and relax.

Dhofar’s coastal landscape also features a large stretch of coral, many of which remain largely unexplored, allowing diving enthusiasts to engage in a continual discovery process. Although diving can be done year round, the best period is between April and July when visibility is good and the temperature of the water is pleasant. Diving in the southern region of Dhofar is not recommended during the Aalur (monsoon season) – June to September – due to poor visibility.

The Musandam Peninsula

The best way to appreciate the rugged, fjord-like terrain of the Musandam Peninsula is to view it from the sea. In Khasab, half- or full-day trips that include dolphin watching, snorkelling and kayaking can be organised on a traditional Omani dhow. Visitors can journey through the fjords, sheltered bays and inlets to Khor Sham or Khor Musarak, the extraordinary marine reserve of the Dimayt Islands, in the Musandam Peninsula and in Salalah.

DIVING

The waters of Oman are home to countless species of fish and vast stretches of coral, many of which remain largely unexplored, allowing diving enthusiasts to engage in a continual discovery process. Although diving can be done year round, the best period is between April and July when visibility is good and the temperature of the water is pleasant. Diving in the southern region of Dhofar is not recommended during the Aalur (monsoon season) – June to September – due to poor visibility.

The main dive spots are off the coast of Muscat at Bandar Khayran, including the Al Musarir wreck, the extraordinary marine reserve of the Dimayt Islands, in the Musandam Peninsula and in Salalah.

DIVE CENTRES IN AND AROUND MUSCAT

Dive Adventures Australia www.diveadventures.com.au
Oman Dive Centre www.omandivecentre.com
Euro Divers Oman www.euro-divers.com
Blu Zone Diving www.bluonediving.com
Global Scuba www.global-scuba.com
Moonlight Dive Centre www.moonlightdive.com
Muscat Diving & Adventure Centre www.holiday-in-oman.com
Arabian Sea Divers www.arabianseadivers.com
Extra Divers Qantab www.extradiversinfo.com
Sun Diving Tourism www.sundiving-tourism.com
Oman Scuba Diving Academy www.omanascuba.com
Extra Divers Al Sawadi www.extradivers worldwide.com
Alwais Dives Expeditions www.alwaisdive.com.au

DIVE CENTRES IN THE MUSANDAM AREA

Musandam Diving www.musandamdiving.com
Extra Divers Musandam www.extradiversinfo.com
Extra Divers at Six Senses Zighy Bay www.extradivers worldwide.com
Nomadi Ocean Adventures www.discovernomad.com
Al Muttaq Tours Travel & Tourism www.amuttaktravel.com

DIVE CENTRES IN THE DHOFAR AREA

Extra Divers (Crown Plaza) www.extradivers worldwide.com
Sub Aqua Dive Centre (Hilton) www.subaqua-divecenter.com
Extra Divers Mirbat (Hotel Mussafah Beach Resort) www.extradiversinfo.com

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THE WAQIS AND THE MOUNTAIN OF SUN

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THE WAJDIS AND THE MOUNTAIN OF SUN

Postcard villages sitting between rock faces and breathtaking canyons with fertile, lush orchards bearing almonds, apricots and pomegranates can be found in Oman’s mountain ranges, the largest in the Arabian Peninsula with peaks rising more than 3,000 metres. They start at the well-known Arabian fjords in Musandam and stretch through to the Hajjar Mountains and the peaks of Dhofar in the far south. Oman’s mountains offer spectacular views, each with a unique landscape and a broad selection of outdoor activities.

The list of adventures on mountain trails and in the wadis is practically endless: you can go swimming in natural pools, canyoning, go hiking in steep mountain slopes, is considered a regional highlight. Translated from the Arabic for “green mountains”, it is an incredibly fertile area that is pleasantly cool with a large number of traditional villages. The ideal place to visit Jabal Akhdar is from the Saiq Plateau, which lies at an altitude of 1,950 metres at the site known simply as the “plateau” by the locals.

Jabal Akhdar, with its terraced agricultural land on steep mountain slopes, is considered a regional highlight. Translated from the Arabic for “green mountains”, it is an incredibly fertile area that is pleasantly cool with a large number of traditional villages. The ideal place to view Jabal Akhdar is from the Saiq Plateau, which lies at an altitude of 1,950 metres. Spend days exploring its countless walking paths (not all of which are signposted), discovering spellbinding spots and photographing the striking landscape. Access to the plateau is by 4WD only. From the plateau, another road leads to the peaks of Jabal Akhdar.

Jabal Shams – Arabic for “Mountain of Sun” – are the first peaks to feel the rays of sunshine each day. At 3,075 metres they are the highest points in the Sultanate and some of the most beautiful locations in the country. Another natural wonder not to be missed in the area is Wadi Alkhuwair" better known as the Grand Canyon of Oman due to its majestic, breathtaking views. It can be admired from an altitude of 1,950 metres at the site known simply as the “plateau” by the locals.

A visit to the area also provides a chance to head underground at the Al Hoota Cave. Thought to be more than two million years old, Al Hoota is a 4.5 kilometres long and home to a rich ecosystem including two lakes and more than a hundred animal species. However, it’s the spectacular array of stalagmites and stalactites that is the real drawcard.

The western Hajjar area has an equally impressive array of wadis and villages surrounded by attractive palm groves. The most beautiful valleys include the spectacular Wadi Bani Aww and Wadi Al Sahtan, which has many riverbeds leading to nearby picturesque villages.

The Hajar Mountains

The Hajar Mountains, Oman’s major stretch of peaks, are 660 kilometres long from the far north in Musandam to the south of Sur. They are divided into two canyons: the lower Jabal Akhdar and the higher Jabal Shams. Outdoor activities for people of all ages and levels of fitness are available, all with a stunning backdrop.

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Musandam

The Musandam Peninsula is an enclave of Oman separated from the rest of the country by the United Arab Emirates. The northernmost part of the country, it is known for its Arabian fjords – tall cliffs plunging into the sea and creating marvellous views. A short scenic mountain road that can be travelled along by vehicle or on foot winds its way from its capital, Khasab, to the heart of the peninsula. Wadi Bih also offers good hiking opportunities. Hikes through the mountainous areas of the peninsula can be combined with trips through the fjords in kayaks or traditional dhows.

Dhofar

At approximately 800 metres above sea level, the southern area of the Sultanate is particularly deserving of a visit right after the monsoon rains. In the summer months, from July to September, the peaks are covered in a carpet of lush, emerald-green vegetation and shrouded in a pearly grey mist. The summer monsoon, known as the Khareef, means there is an amazing contrast between this region and the rest of the country – as well as neighbouring countries – when temperatures often top 40°C. The landscape is unique and stunning, with cows and camels intermingling in the fields along the valleys.

The city of Salalah is a great starting point for people travelling around the region. To the east is Wadi Darbat, one of the most beautiful wadis in the area with ample opportunities for hiking. See the sparkling waterfalls of Jabal Samhan and stop at little stalls selling barbecued camel meat and goat shish kebabs. Bedouins in the area
most beautiful and popular natural sites in the area, the blowholes of AlMusayh where the
sea rises through natural cavities and sprays up high in the air like a geyser. Even further to the
west, at Dalkut, is a scenic road that zigzags up through one of the most stunning landscapes
in the country.
Wadis
With spectacular oases and natural jade-green pools scattered along their lengths, the
wadis are valleys formed by flowing streams. These watercourses are also used in the aflaj
process that forms the traditional irrigation system throughout the Sultanate. They create extremely
striking landscapes and are among the main attractions in the Sultanate. There are especially large numbers of them in the
Hajar Mountains and at Nizwa.
It takes just a few hours to drive from Muscat to the interconnected Wadi Dayqah and Wadi
As Suwayh. Explore more than 60 kilometres of tracks here in an off-road vehicle, stopping occasionally for a break to plunge into crystal-clear freshwater pools.
WHERE TO STAY
In addition to camping, which is highly enjoyable, safe and possibly anywhere you like in Oman, there are plenty of other accommodation options in the mountains. It is always best to book in advance. Recently opened near the sea, Wadi Shab Resort offers an authentic experience close to nature. More information: www.wadishabresort.com
Approximately 15 kilometres from the centre of Nizwa is the four-star Golden Tulip Nizwa with 102 bedrooms, three suites, a garden, pool and gym. More information: www.goldentulipnizwa.com
In the centre of Nizwa, Dalai Dam is a classic, practical three-star hotel with 55 spacious rooms, two pools and a fitness club. More information: www.falajdalihotel.com
In the mountains, the Saiq Plateau offers three accommodation options. Jabal Al Akhdar Resort is a traditional chalet with 24 rooms and excursions and hiking trips in the surrounding area. More information: +968 25 42 90 09. Jabal Al Akhdar Resort offers a variety of activities, such as caving, hiking and archaeology excursions, as well as visits to local farms to milk goats or harvest rose petals. More information: www.sahab-hotel.com
The luxurious Alila Jabal Akhdar resort consists of 86 villas, a spa and swimming pool. The resort has been built to blend with the natural environment and has breathtaking vistas of Green Mountain and the ranges. More information: www.alilahotels.com
For those looking for a close connection with nature, tented The View (Al Hamra) epitomises the idea of eco-luxury, combining environmental friendliness with deluxe facilities. Its respect for the ecosystem, magnificent views of the valley below and attention to detail make this a truly special, welcoming place. More information: www.theviewoman.com
Jabal Akhdar rock rose harvest
From March to May, the slopes of Jabal Akhdar are covered with vast patches of pink and the air is filled with a delicate fragrance as the roses bloom. The indigenous Jabal Akhdar Rock Rose has been cultivated by the inhabitants of the mountain villages for generations and their flowers are gathered to produce one of the Sultanate’s most quintessential products: attar (rose oil). It is a multi-purpose ingredient included in fragrances and flavourings for local confectionery and coffee. The long, fascinating distillation process is still carried out in the traditional manner in many areas, with the petals being heated over a fire in large containers called bormas. A visit during this time of the year really is breathtaking.
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Wadi Bani Khalid lies in the Shariya region, approximately 200 kilometres from the capital. Its pools are always full of water and are perfect for combining an excursion in the mountains with a camping holiday on the beach. Adventure lovers can follow the riverbed on a journey lasting three days and two nights all the way to Wadi Tiwi, which opens up among lush palm groves. Another less commonly followed route passes gigantic rocks to the villages of Bidah and Saqib. The wadis that weave their way through the western part of the Hajar Mountains – Wadi Shab and Wadi Tiwi – stretch down to the sea, so are perfect for combining an excursion in the mountains with a camping holiday on the beach.
With its 3,165 kilometres of coast, two great deserts, mountain chains and rich natural environment, the Sultanate of Oman is perfect for people who love the great outdoors.

Nature lovers
Starting from Muscat, head out on a two-week journey of discovery. There are numerous amazing beaches, such as Bandar Al Jissah, Qantab, Yiti and As Sifah, spread along the coastal road to the east of the capital. They’re perfect for a relaxed day at the seaside, but you can also camp on them at night and look directly up at the stars before falling asleep. The same applies to Fins Beach, an ideal starting point for exploration of Wadi Bani Khalid, with its natural pools – great for a cooling swim – and perfect picnic spots in the shade of palm trees. You can make it to Nakhur, Ike, Hijar Mountains, and return to Muscat, before spending the final few days in the Musandam Peninsula, a one-hour flight from the capital. At least three days are needed to take in the beauty of the fjords that drop sharply into the crystal-clear waters of the gulf.

A little more action
If you like active holidays and adrenaline rushes, spend two weeks trying out everything the Sultanate has to offer. As soon as you arrive in Muscat, book a diving trip for the next

Hiking or Biking in the Hajar Mountains
There are at least 30 trails covering several hundred kilometres in total in the Hajar Mountains. Serious trekkers can take the 12-day tour from Jabal Shams and Jabal Akhdar, covering the western part of the Hajar massif. The Al Hamra area offers the opportunity for mountain biking led by a guide. Many professional tour operators are on hand to offer you the best experience.

The dunes of Sharqiya Sands by sunset and spend the night in one of the campsites. The next few days can be devoted to the Hajar Mountains. Three days should be enough to see the main wonders of the region: Jabal Shams, Jabal Akhdar, the Saiq Plateau, the huge Al Hoota Cave and Wadi Nakhar, also known as the Grand Canyon of Oman. It is a very good idea to travel around this area with a guide who has expert knowledge of the region. The ninth day can be used to return to Muscat, before spending the final few days in the Musandam Peninsula, a one-hour flight from the capital. At least three days are needed to take in the beauty of the fjords that drop sharply into the crystal-clear waters of the gulf.

Camping
There are no official campsites in the Sultanate, but lovers of the natural environment and outdoor life can choose to camp in some truly remarkable locations. The laws of the country impose no restrictions in this respect, so you can camp wherever you like near wadis, in the mountains, on the beach or in the desert. The only requirement is to show respect for the environment and local people. The ideal period for camping is between October and April, but even in the summer pleasant temperatures and astounding views can be found on high ground, such as the Saiq Plateau and the peaks of Jabal Shams.
day, or consider the option of a night dive. You can spend the third day game fishing, before heading off to Barka and Rustaq by car. From there, venture into Wadi Bani Auf and sleep overnight under shelter. The following morning, go to Little Snake Canyon and enjoy its marvellous views. Those with sufficient expertise might like to put themselves to the test in Big Snake Canyon, where you can go hiking, climbing and swimming across natural pools. The following two days should be devoted to Jabal Shams, with the Al Hoota Cave and hiking excursions along Wadi Nakhar, the stunning Grand Canyon of Oman. The Al Hajar region offers guided mountain bike excursions. On the seventh day, recover from the exertion by experiencing the charms of the old capital, Nizwa. It is the gateway to Shariyya Sands, where you can go dune bashing before seeing the full moon or the sun rise during a ride on a camel. If you are adventurous, you might decide to go on a three-day hike between Wadi Bani Khalid and Wadi Tiwi on the eastern slopes of the Hajar Mountains. As you head back to Muscat stop off for a swim at somewhere like Fin’s Beach. From there, in the direction of Suwaiq, the road leads to the Musandam Peninsula. Try to spend three days

**CANYONING AND KAYAKING**

Some of Oman’s canyoning sites – Wadi Dayqah and Wadi Bani Khalid – include stretches where it’s necessary to travel through water. In Wadi Bani Auf, there is an adrenaline-inducing canyoning route through the narrow Snake Canyon (Wadi Bimmah) that involves scaling aerial runways and leaping into natural pools. It’s not for the faint hearted. Trips of this kind should be organised with the help of expert guides. The Musandam fjords have peaks and beaches that are only accessible from the sea, so are perfect for scenic kayaking among the waves.

**CLIMBING**

With more than 160 registered sites, Oman is a very popular destination for rock climbers. The most famous is Jabal Mishi, in the western Hajar Mountains, although its 100-metre cliffs are for experts only. The two protected climbing routes in Snake Canyon (Wadi Bani Auf) and the Bandar Al Khayran cliffs, overlooking the sea, are more suitable for amateurs following a guide. Here enjoying all of the natural wonders and opportunities for camping in the wild, as well as hiking, climbing, kayaking and sailing in dhows.

**TRIPS OUT TO SEA**

Whether you are away for just a few hours or spend the night at anchor in a bay, a trip out to sea from Muscat is a must. A number of unique excursions are on offer in the capital city: dolphin watching, tours of Muscat from the sea along the maritime perimeter of the city, with views of Mutrah, the old town, the Sultan’s palace and the small fishing villages in the surrounding area, snorkelling in Bandar Khayran and dinner cruises. A number of trips to the Arabian fjords are offered in the ports of Khasab and Dibba in Musandam. They normally involve a tour of the islands, coasting by the cliffs, dolphin watching, swimming and snorkelling. From October to May, a number of trips to sea with dolphin-watching experiences also set out from Salalah, the capital of Dhofar.
For thousands of years Oman has been a place of trading and encounters between the East and West, ensuring a country with a rich and fascinating culture. Since ancient times it has absorbed and given its own twist to traits and influences from India, Persia, Zanzibar, Portugal and the UK. Its conversion to Islam in the 7th century – in the moderate, tolerant form of Ibadism – was a strong unifying factor and has helped to hold together a blend of traditions and an acceptance of modernity.

Traces of the country’s extraordinary heritage can be found in its archaeological sites, historical buildings, craftsmanship, clothing and cuisine. Visitors will find countless pleasant surprises – big and small – making a holiday in the Sultanate incredibly special.

Incense is still produced in the region today and it can be bought all over Oman and at the Al Husn souk in Salalah. Once a year, in September, a big market trading solely in resin and its essential oil is held in Salalah.

The culture of Oman

CULTURE OF OMAN

For thousands of years Oman has been a place of trading and encounters between the East and West, ensuring a country with a rich and fascinating culture. Since ancient times it has absorbed and given its own twist to traits and influences from India, Persia, Zanzibar, Portugal and the UK. Its conversion to Islam in the 7th century – in the moderate, tolerant form of Ibadism – was a strong unifying factor and has helped to hold together a blend of traditions and an acceptance of modernity.

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The Land of Frankincense

From ancient times, the cultivation and export of incense helped to establish Oman on the major trading routes that were capable of making cities and places of commerce both flourish and decline. Oman has always been one of the largest exporters of the resin that comes from the local Boswellia sacra tree.

The Dhofar region is the starting point for the famous incense route that first connected the Arabian Peninsula with the Mediterranean in Roman times. The great historical and cultural value of the area has been acknowledged by UNESCO, which added four sites that make up the Land of Frankincense to its World Heritage List in 2000. They include the frankincense trees of Wadi Dawkhah, the remains of the caravan oasis of Shisr, the port of Al Batinah and the archaeological site of Al-Balid, dating back to the 4th century BC (although it was rebuilt during the Middle Islamic period). In Salalah, the Al-Balid Maritime Museum displays 5,000 years of the Sultanate of Oman’s history, from naval construction to navigation and maritime routes over the Indian Ocean.

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UNESCO World Heritage Sites

A number of sites and cultural features in Oman have been added to the UNESCO World Heritage List. As well as the Land of Frankincense sites, they include the ingenious, multi-branched canals of the traditional irrigation systems known as aflaj. Then there are the historic sites of Bat, Al Khutum and Al Ain,

RAMADAN AND THE FEAST OF EID AL-FITR

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar and a time when Muslims do not eat between sunrise and sunset. Many businesses are closed during Ramadan and, out of respect for the local customs, it is best to avoid eating, drinking and smoking in public during the day. The month ends with Eid al-Adha, a week of festivities during which the community comes together to eat traditional food and celebrate with folk dances and songs. Omanis across the country serve an array of dishes. In Dhofar and Wusta, the festivities start with ruz al mudhroub, a dish made of cooked rice and served with fried fish, and maqdeed, special dried meat. In the Muscat, Al Batinah, Dhakhrah and Shargiyah regions, musulak, a tripe dish cooked with ground spices (cinnamon, cardamom, clove, black pepper, ginger, garlic and nutmeg), dominates the menu. Other dishes served during Eid festivities include arais, a dish of lamb cooked with rice, and muskak, skewered meat grilled on charcoal.

Eid is a particularly great time to visit the country and embrace its rich cultural traditions in a joyful atmosphere. Ramadan’s timing is based on the lunar calendar, so its date in the Western calendar is variable each year.

The month ends with Eid al-Fitr, a feast which celebrates the end of the month of Ramadan. It is a particularly great time to visit the country and embrace its rich cultural traditions in a joyful atmosphere.
which form the largest and best preserved collection of settlements and necropolises from the 3rd millennium BC in the world. Finally, there is the immense fort in Bahla, capital of the Banu Nebhan tribe from the 12th to the 14th centuries. Standing on top of a rocky plateau that juts out of an endless green plain of date palms, the fort is truly majestic. The Bait Naif Fort is one of the most important and impressive forts. As a matter of fact, the fort route is the most impressive part of the Sultanate.

The fort route
Looking like enormous sandcastles, magnificent, immense forts can be found on high ground and rocky outcrops throughout the Sultanate. More than 500 forts, castles and watchtowers – each with its own special charms or distinctive features – have been built over the course of Oman's long history. The term Bedouin comes from the Arabic bedu meaning "desert dweller". There are many nomadic tribes in Oman who live not only in the deserts but also in the mountaneous areas and along the coast. They make a living by fishing, raising livestock and taking part in seasonal work such as growing date palms and harvesting crops. Bedouins are very hospitable people who are faithful to their traditions but also show a cautious openness to the modern world.

THE BEDOUIN
The term Bedouin comes from the Arabic Bedouin meaning “desert dweller”. There are many nomadic tribes in Oman who live not only in the deserts but also in the mountaneous areas and along the coast. They make a living by fishing, raising livestock and taking part in seasonal work such as growing date palms and harvesting crops. Bedouins are very hospitable people who are faithful to their traditions but also show a cautious openness to the modern world.

The Be’ahna Fort is truly majestic. The Bait Naim and Al Hobe forts are two more unmissable sights. Jabrin Castle is also spellbinding, with its majestic secret passages, painted ceilings and courtyards enclosed by delicately carved wooden panels. From the highest point of the building, the views of the Hajar Mountains are breathtaking. Dhofar’s Taqah Castle, the birthplace of Oman’s current ruler, Sultan Qaboos, has been fully restored.

EVENTS
Oman’s citizens have a very healthy appetite for culture and the arts, and there are numerous events, from fashion festivals to sporting contests, held throughout the year.

From September until May, the Royal Opera House in Muscat, the first classical music structure of its kind in the Arabian Peninsula, offers a prestigious program featuring the biggest names – both local and international – in classical music, jazz, opera and ballet. More information: www.rohmuscat.org

From the end of January to the end of February the Muscat Festival takes place, enlivening the already magical city as it presents the best of Oman’s culture. There are craft displays, light shows, concerts, sporting events and the city’s celebrity chefs cooking top traditional dishes for everyone to sample. More information: www.muscatfestival.com

In February, the Tour of Oman attracts the top cyclists from all over the world, including Australia’s Cadel Evans. More information: www.tourofoman.com

For fashionistas, Muscat Fashion Week is a must-see, as designers from Oman, Asia, Africa and the Middle East showcase their latest creations. More information: www.muscatfashionweek.com

From March until October, camel races are organised almost every week, mainly in Al Batinah and Sharqiya regions. Wintertime is also the season of bullfights in Seeb and Barka.

The Salalah Festival held during July and August, celebrates the Khareef (monsoon season), which brings cool temperatures and sees vegetation burst into life. There is a full schedule of concerts, traditional cultural shows and activities for families with children, including the fantastic kite festival. More information: www.salalafestivals.com

The Sultanate’s ancient sailing tradition continues thanks to a number of high-profile international competitions. Sailing Arabia: The Tour, held in February, has legs throughout the north of the Arabian Peninsula (www.sailingarabiatourtour.com). High-speed catamarans are the drawcard during March’s Extreme Sailing Series (www.extremesailingseries.com). In March, Mussanah Race Week, an international dinghy regatta, is held (www.mussanahraceweek.com/en/).
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The Sultanate of Oman is at the south-eastern end of the Arabian Peninsula. It is the third-biggest country in the region after the neighbouring nations of Saudi Arabia and Yemen. The Tropic of Cancer runs across Oman, passing just below Muscat, its capital city.

It has a population of 2,773,479 and a land area of 309,500 square kilometres, making it double the size of the state of Victoria in Australia. The population is concentrated in the north and in the Dhofar area in the south. Widely open to the sea (3,165 kilometres of coastline), Oman is partly occupied by two major mountain ranges rising to 3,075 metres. The country also has two sandy deserts including the famous Rub‘ al Khali.

Economy Oman’s economy is largely based on exports of oil and natural gas. More than 60 per cent of the oil consumed worldwide passes through the Strait of Hormuz, where the Sultanate and Iran both have strategically positioned territory. Other significant contributions to trade are made by maritime commerce, fishing, agriculture and tourism, which is developing and expanding rapidly to cater to the growing numbers of international visitors to the country. The Sultanate of Oman’s sustainable and responsible growth and development of its local tourism has attracted a wide audience in Australia and New Zealand.

Political system Oman is a constitutional monarchy and the head of state is His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said. The capital city is Muscat.

Religion The state religion is the less widespread form of Islam known as Ibadism. The doctrine places great importance on pacifism, tolerance and leniency. Ibadism is only found in Oman, Zanzibar and some smaller enclaves in Tunisia and Algeria.

English is widely spoken in the main cities and in all tourist establishments.

Clothing Summer clothes can be worn throughout the year, even if evenings in December and January are a bit chilly. It is advisable to take warm clothing to wear at night in the desert or the mountains, in premises with air conditioning and in Dhofar if you plan to visit during the monsoon season. Avoid wearing short pairs of shorts and skirts, sleeveless tops, and clothes that are very tight or low-cut.

Climate Oman can be visited all year round. There are two seasons: summer lasts from May until September, and winter lasts from October until April. During winter, daytime temperatures range between 23°C and 30°C on the coast and on the plains, but they drop to between 15°C and 25°C above 1,800 metres. In December and January are a bit chilly. It is advisable to take warm clothing to wear at night in the desert or the mountains, in premises with air conditioning and in Dhofar if you plan to visit during the monsoon season. Avoid wearing short pairs of shorts and skirts, sleeveless tops, and clothes that are very tight or low-cut.

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GETTING TO OMAN

AIRLINES

Currently there are no direct flights from Australia and New Zealand. However, Emirates, Etihad Airways and Qatar Airways offer regular air services with daily connecting flights from Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Doha. Oman Air does not fly into Australia but visitors can connect with Malaysian Airways at Kuala Lumpur and Thai Airways at Bangkok into Muscat International Airport.

GETTING AROUND OMAN

Oman Air operates a number of domestic flights that connect Muscat to Salalah (five to seven flights a day) and Khasab (one flight a day).

It takes five hours to travel from Muscat to Khasab by high-speed catamaran (on a weekly basis). The service is provided by the National Ferry Company, which also connects Khasab to Shinas (four-hour trip, on a weekly basis). More information: www.nfc.om

Visitors can travel by car on Oman’s main long-distance roads and in off-road vehicles on smaller roads and tracks. Driving takes place on the right-hand side of the road. Visitors can drive by themselves on the main road links, but for more demanding trips in the desert or the mountains, it is much better to have a local guide and driver. Taxis are available in Oman, including in the mountains and on the beaches under a canopy of stars.

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WHERE TO STAY

The Sultanate of Oman offers a wide range of hotels – from three-star to luxury five-star – to suit all budgets and tastes, and visitors can expect exceptional service. The recent development of tourism in the country has encouraged expansion into natural areas with fewer visitors, such as the regions around the mountains of Nizwa and the coast along Sur where striking, unique desert and mountain camps are available. Even today it is possible to camp freely anywhere in Oman, including in the mountains and on the beaches under a canopy of stars.

VOCABULARY

Omanis are always very happy to come across a visitor to their country who speaks Arabic. It is a good idea to learn a few simple greetings and introductory words.

Unlike certain other languages, there are no distinct formal and informal versions of the word “you” in Arabic. The most formal greeting is as-salaamu alaykum (peace be with you), to which the response is wa alaykum assalaam (and with you).

More information: www.ontcoman.com

A more informal greeting is sabab al khayr (good day), to which the response is sabab annur (which literally means “day of light”).

In the evening: masà al khayr (good evening), to which the response is masà annur.

Welcome: āthān wa sahlān.

Goodbye: maaṣaṣalāma.

How are you?: kif halah?

If you are asking a man) or kif khallah? (if you are asking a woman).

Well: ana mabsout (man), ana mabsouta (woman).

Thank you: shukran.

What’s your name?: ismi...? (if you are asking a man) and aysh ismik? (if you are asking a woman).

Yes, please: naam, shukran.

No, thank you: lāa, shukran.

Information
USEFUL CONTACTS

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The Consulate General of the Sultanate of Oman
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SOURCE: TOURISM OFFICE OF THE SULTANATE OF OMAN