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Al Bustan Palace InterContinental



The Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque



A ceiling at Jabrin Castle



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Dates on sale at the vegetable market in Mutrah

Book a date for an Omani welcome

By Stu Freeman

When an Omani invites you to Fwala, you've got a date – quite literally.

The traditional greeting, *as-salaam alaykum*, will have been exchanged and the question asked: 'kayf halek?' (how are you?). Then it would not be unusual to hear that you are 'welcome to Fwala'.

'It's all about being welcome, you can't say no if you are invited,' says Kamil Al Raisi, tour guide with Eihab Travels.

Central to Fwala is the rich, usually cardoman spiced coffee known as *kafwa*. It is taken in small bowl-like cups – with a refill offered from a traditional Omani coffee pot as soon as the cup is empty.

With the coffee will be served dates (*tamur*), possibly fresh fruit and, most likely, the famous sticky sweet known as *halwa*.

'Let's say today I take my dates and coffee to my nephew's house and there are other

people there who invite me to Fwala tomorrow, and then I invite people to my house. It is like a programme.'

Just how often the invite is made became evident to me while walking through the fish and vegetable market of Mutrah (Muscat's twin city, now regarded as an extension or suburb of the capital, just a couple of kilometres from the CBD.)

Almost every second person we met in the market knew Kamil (he did warn me) and most of them seemed intent on organising a future catch up.

Kafwa

For the visitor to Oman the main ingredients of Fwala will be constant offerings at hotels, around markets, in peoples' shops or homes. I

purchased *kafwa* in the famous Mutrah souk, from a seller who sat in the middle of the market clinking cups together to attract attention. The man is a regular sight in the souk and (according to Kamil) was following in his father's footsteps and his father's before that.

On first glance it may not be much of a career choice, but Omanis being Omanis he was never short of a greeting or conversation with passers by.

It was a couple of days before I tasted the sticky sweet *halwa*, this time at the souk in the old capital Nizwa, where seller Muktah explained the difference between the colourings (darker sweets tended to use brown sugar, lighter white sugar), prices and ingredients.

Dates, possibly more than any other food and beverage item cannot be avoided. They are offered at hotel receptions, date palms line the streets of Muscat, (the dates were just forming

and were still green during my visit early April), and the fruit is an integral part of the nation's history.

Weapon

The ancient forts and castles that form much of the tourist trail in Oman tend to have date cellars and storage rooms. While the fruit is obviously a nutritious food, it had many other uses and benefits in history.

'They used the juice as honey and as a weapon,' Kamil explained at Nizwar Fort and Castle.

'A weapon?'

'Yes, they heated up the date oil and poured on enemies. Being sweet, it stuck to the skin and burned.'

The palm tree leaves also had their uses, being woven into mats, baskets, coverings for food, brooms, ropes and hats for agricultural workers .



Kamil Al Raisi, tour guide with Eihab Travels under one of Oman's ubiquitous date palms

CSR sewn up by group

Visiting the Sidab Women's Sewing Group in Oman is an option for incentive organisers and delegates who want to put a corporate social responsibility (CSR) component into their programme and see a side of Muscat which eludes many people.

Sidab is a small fishing village near Muscat and purchasing goods from the sewing group helps support the families who are involved in this cottage industry. Tour operator and destination management company Eihab Travels supports the sewing initiative and can arrange visits for incentive groups.

Eihab Travels guide Kamil Al Raisi says corporate groups can sit in the group's premises at Sidab and enjoy a welcome with traditional foods and can also head upstairs onto the rooftop balcony for a fantastic view of the village. Bags, purses, dolls, clothes and other handicrafts are available for purchase from a small shop (I bought a bag with an Omani turban design but there are many other patterns available).

'The group started with two or three women and there are now 35 women involved,' says Kamil. 'Some work from here (the sewing group house) and others work from home – many have a family.'

The income gained from sales and activities with corporate groups is divided among the women in the group.

'Western people come to the house and teach the women English as well as give them ideas. So there are a lot of benefits.'

Robby George, manager tours and MICE with Eihab Tours, is also enthusiastic. 'We encourage people to buy corporate gifts and souvenirs from Sidab. Small groups can have meals on the rooftop terrace, where girls cook for them and serve them. It is a chance to meet the women in their house and see where they work. We have done this for the American ambassador and his family.'

He says the company also involves local bee keepers and honey producers in the mountain crossing tour programmes. Customers receive a small bottle of honey and they experience real interaction with the local community.

'We are trying to revive the industry.'



A selection of product at Sidab Women's Sewing Group

Modern face, rich history

By Stu Freeman



The Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, Muscat

Oman is a new country with an ancient history. Unlike some places around the gulf, Oman has signs of occupation that date back thousands of years – the 4500 year old remains of a reed boat used for trading with India were found here. There are many other accounts of trade, warfare and cultural achievements that pre-date the arrival of Islam. (A messenger from the Prophet Muhammed visited Oman in 630 and invited the people there to accept Islam. The Omanis welcomed the faith peacefully.)

That said, the country's modern face only dates back 40 years, when the current ruler – His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said – took the reins. The new Sultan gave the country a unified name – Sultanate of Oman. Before that it was Sultanate of Oman (the interior) and Muscat (the coastal area). But the changes were in much more than a name.

'I was born in 1970,' my guide Kamil Al Raisi of Eihab Travels told me. 'The changes have been in front of my eyes.'

Before that, there was some 10 kilometres of good road. Now a high standard of highway runs through and around the country. 'Before

1970 we did not have a radio station, the new Sultan opened one in a week. We had only three schools and one university. The Sultan told the people it is important to study 'even if it is under the shade of a tree while I build the schools.' Forty five schools were built between 1970 and 1972 - now we have more than 1700 government schools.'

Kamil says that before 1970 those who could afford it would send their sons to be educated offshore. 'The Sultan realised that to develop the country, he needed to educate the country first – education is now extremely important in Oman.'

There are also many private schools and colleges and a large number of universities. Kamil says boys and girls are co-educated until what is known as 'level six', they are then segregated for a few years and join up again at college. Some conservative people did not agree with the co-ed approach but the Sultan feels that competition between girls and boys is important.

The pride Kamil and other Omanis have in their leader is palpable. 'I am proud of our ruler as a leader and as a big father to us.'

Grand Mosque

Visitors to Muscat are likely to start their experience in the city with a visit to a place of worship that bears his name. The Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque is a magnificent structure that was completed in March 2001. Its place in education is important too – a library there is free and open to everyone (Muslims and non-Muslims alike) and is set up with computers, internet and other modern learning tools, as would be expected in a public library in 2010. The library holds up to 20,000 books.

The site of the Grand Mosque, including grounds, covers 416,000 square metres and the mosque complex itself covers 40,000 square metres.

More than 20,000 people can worship in the Grand Mosque – the main prayer hall alone has a capacity of 6600 and the women's prayer area can take 750 worshippers. There are several other areas for prayer around the mosque.

Kalim says visitors from the west often ask why men have more room to pray than

women. 'A woman does not necessarily have to pray in a mosque. She often has children to care for and it is more convenient to pray at home. Men have to pray five times a day and in a mosque if possible.'

Anyone interested in the finer details of the mosque should purchase the small book which is on sale in several languages (English obviously included). However, in this briefer context, notable highlights include the grand central chandelier, which hangs in the main prayer room. It is eight metres in diameter and 14 metres in length, contains 1,122 lamps and, with a stainless steel structure, weighs eight tonnes.

Museum in Mutrah

Another must see for visitors to Muscat is the Mutrah souk, among the best of its kind in Arabia. But people should not confine their Mutrah visit to the souk.

The Bait Al Baranda is a marvellous museum, with plenty of interactive and informative displays about the colourful history of Oman. Anyone with time should watch the video on the Al Bu Said Dynasty, established in 1744AD and continuing today with the current Sultan. The information helps visitors understand the major happenings which shaped the country up until 1970 – the life, times and achievements of Sayyid Said bin Sultan in the early 1800s are particularly interesting.

However, the museum also details history from more ancient times, when the country was known as Magan. Much of this history is linked to the frankincense trade between Oman, the Kingdom of Sheeba, India, Egypt, Rome and China.

Markets

Trading, though not confined to frankincense, is certainly behind the growth of Mutrah – and one look at the famous souk, as well as the fish and fruit and vegetable markets will convince you that trade continues to thrive here.

Guide Kamil Al Raisi says Mutrah means 'place to keep'. He says before the Portuguese occupation of the country, men traded on dhows with India and Zanzibar. They would return to Mutrah, store their goods and products there, then head up to Iran and other places to load up with more.

The main entrance to Mutrah Souk is on Mutrah Corniche, the harbour area and if a visitor ever gets lost in the rambling alleyways (of which there are many) they just need to ask shop owners or other locals to point in the



A shop in the famous Mutrah Souk

direction of the corniche.

Anyone looking for modern goods will find them here – electronic products, T-shirts with Oman logo (been there, bought the T-shirt), toys and fashion accessories are all here, but so too are traditional perfumes, the famous frankincense, spices, dates and other traditional foodstuffs and antiques.

Michael Jackson

I visited Ali Baba Gift Town. As most people would gather from the name, this is a touch on the touristy side, but its selection of antiques and curios is hard to rival. Apparently the late Michael Jackson visited the shop and liked the look of the kanja (traditional knife) that one of the owners was wearing. He wanted that particular kanja and was not prepared to take any other as a substitute.

As well as knives, Ali Baba's stocks beads and semi-precious stones, bullets and guns (including those from the first and second world wars), framed scorpions and other insects, traditional Omani copper coffee pots, and silver chains with inscriptions of the Qur'an worn by

girls and women to ward off evil.

Kalim pointed out lanterns which people were compelled to use after sun down before 1970. 'The country was dark and you were arrested if you were walking around without a lantern – you would be suspected of being up to no good.'

In one area of the main souk is the Gold Souk – foreigners might not find it without a guide or detailed and accurate directions. It contains not only gold but also pearls and precious and semi-precious stones. Visitors can mix and match to make their own jewellery or choose from already made jewellery in modern or traditional styles.

Before 1970 people travelled by camel to Mutrah Souk from villages far and wide, sometimes taking days to get there. Omanis still visit from other parts of the country, but obviously they now arrive by car.

While in the mood for markets, it is worth visiting the Mutrah vegetable market and (right next door) the fish market. At the latter visitors can buy a fish, then head to one of the grill outlets across the road and have it cooked. Both are busy and worth spending a bit of time in to see locals going about their daily business.

Shangri-La's three in one

With three different hotels in one complex, Shangri-La's Barr Al Jissah Resort & Spa is well positioned for the corporate and group market – reflected in the fact that 35% of its market is from the meetings and incentive sector.

Vina Rasmu, director of business development – MICE, says that while the majority of business comes from Europe (UK, Germany, France and Switzerland feature prominently) and the Gulf region, Asia-Pacific has considerable potential. 'That's a new market and one we are trying to tap.'

She says Barr Al Jissah is a regular at the AsiaPacific Incentives and Meetings Expo (AIME) in Melbourne and took part in an Oman Ministry of Tourism roadshow this year to both Australia and New Zealand. 'Etihad flies from Australia and Emirates flies from Australia and New Zealand, so that all helps. We have a few leisure groups from Australia here and we had an incentive from there last year.'



The lawn and beach area at Shangri-La's Barr Al Jissah Resort & Spa

Rasmu says a number of destination management companies have groups coming through on charter this year.

Having the three different hotels in one means Shangri-La can cater for guests with different requirements and budgets, from the exclusive Al Husn (The Castle), to Al Bandar (the Town) where the dedicated conference and meeting facilities can be found, and the family orientated Al Waha (The Oasis). All 638 rooms and suites overlook the gulf of Oman, and the resort has 500 metres of beachfront and 124 acres of grounds.

The complex has six main restaurants, seven casual dining outlets and pool bars, three lobby lounges, two bars and a nightclub. Cuisine styles available include South American, Middle Eastern, Italian, Spanish, Moroccan, international and seafood. Of interest to event organisers, an open-air amphitheatre seats up to 1000 people and can be used for product launches, team building and fun sports events, concerts and award ceremonies. An Omani Heritage Village and souk provide options for shopping nights, Arabian theme evenings etc.

CHI, the Spa at Shangri La, offers a range of specialised body, water, massage and facial therapies based on the ancient healing traditions of China and the Himalayas. In addition to the signature CHI treatments, the spa offers a range of treatments using natural, local Omani ingredients combined with local health and beauty treatments.

Locally grown frankincense (a fragrance visitors to Oman will also experience in the souks) is incorporated into specially developed clays and oils, providing a Middle Eastern slant to facials, body wraps, scrubs, bath oils and soap.



The Al Husn Hotel's entrance (top) and courtyard



Jabrin, sometimes spelt Jabreen, is famous for its intricately painted ceilings.

Beauty influenced by mistrust

Jabrin Castle, 220 kilometres from Muscat, has a conference room with features you will hopefully not find in modern meeting rooms.

The ruler who had the castle built, Bil'arab bin Sultan Al Ya'arubi, would sit in the middle of the room with his guests to his left. On the right were three trap doors – if things got nasty in conference, hidden guards would leap from out from under the floor and quickly deal to the trouble makers.

Jabrin, in Al Dakhiliyah, is noted as one of the most beautiful castles in Oman and is particularly famous for its intricately painted

ceilings - sometimes with carpet designs.

However, the ruler's (Imam's) obsession with his challenger and deadly enemy (who was also his cousin) is evident in many of its features.

The castle is isolated from villages with a clear view of anyone who may approach, and there is plenty of room in the prisons (one for men and the other for women).

The castle includes a court – the Imam was the judge and once found guilty, a prisoner was made to duck very low, thus in a bowed and cowered position, to get through a small

door.

Near the courtroom, high in the castle, is a stable. The Imam would ride his horse all the way up via a ramp, which has been converted to stairs. Explanations are varied – perhaps the leader just wanted to be close to his horse or maybe he was thinking about a quick getaway.

Another famous aspect of Jabrin is the sun and moon room, the Imam's sitting room. Its windows and vents are situated in such a way that the room is lit by both sunlight and daylight. The eye decoration on the ceiling is designed to deflect evil.

Sense of arrival

Six Senses Hideaway Zighi Bay is set on the Musandam Peninsula, a region of the Sultanate of Oman, which is separated from the rest of the country by the United Arab Emirates.

'We are four and a half hours from Muscat and one and a half hours from Dubai,' says director of sales and marketing Demeiter Vaubell. 'You can drive in, paraglide in or come by speedboat from Dibba.'

She is not joking. Guests can arrive via a scenic 15 minute speed boat trip, come on a four wheel

drive down from the hill overlooking the bay or travel as a companion passenger with the Six Senses Hideaway's professional paraglider.

The site of Six Senses Hideaway Zinghi Bay (the first property operated by Six Senses Resorts & Spas in the Middle East) is a secluded fishing village. It has all-villa accommodation and a private marina, located between the mountains and the beach.

Food and beverage facilities include Dining on the Sand, which includes a private Chef's

Table and offers specialities of Arabia along with a variety of pan Asian and Continental dishes. Sense on the Edge is perched high atop the mountains overlooking Zighi Bay, while the Delhi is an open air outlet where people can enjoy lunch, tea or a flavoured drink. There is also the Chill-Mood Bar and Wine Cellar – Vintothèque, while in-villa dining is available 24 hours.

The Six Senses Spa offers nine treatment rooms.

Call me Sur

By Stu Freeman

Coastal landscapes, a selection of hotels, ancient archaeological sites nearby and rich history in dhow building all make Sur an essential stop on any itinerary. It would be a nice place to chill out after a business event in Muscat, or a place to explore in its own right.

Seafaring achievements, either in warfare or trade, have been a hallmark of Oman through the centuries. So it is little wonder the dhow has a special place in the hearts of the Omani people.

The seaside town of Sur is one of the best places to find out more about the vessels and it is easy to visit a dhow builder and see how they are still built today.

My trip to Sur started with a visit to Fatah Al Khaer, a famous and preserved dhow in a small park on the seafront. My guide Kamil Al Raisi of Eihab Travels explained that the dhow had been travelling widely for about 75 years but had ended its days (almost) in Yemen. The current Sultan heard about the 300 tonne ship (which could carry 25 to 30 people) and ordered that it be returned to Sur, where it was built. There are some smaller dhows in the park as well and a building next door will soon open as a dhow

museum.

For people who want to get even closer to the industry, it is easy to visit a current day dhow builder (though it is definitely best to make arrangements).

The workshop I visited was working on three large dhows at the time – one for the tourist industry in Oman and two for Qatar.

'Dhows are still used for racing, fishing, trading and tourism,' says Kamil, 'and there are still small ones built for show.'

Qalhat

One of the 'must dos' from Sur is to take the short drive to the ancient city of Qalhat. Even the 'new' centre feels like something out of medieval times, with its narrow streets and traditional housing.



Dhow building is still a thriving occupation in Sur, Oman

However, the historical site is a couple of hundred metres away on a cliff overlooking the sea.

These days there is not a huge amount to see, but it is fascinating all the same. The main structure left standing is the tomb of the noblewoman BB Miriam and there are also remnants of the city walls.

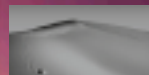
In the 13th century, Qalhat was the main port for trading with the interior of the country. It was also used to export horses to India and to import spices.

Later, the Portuguese made Qalhat their outermost stronghold. These days it is simply regarded as an outpost of the much larger Sur.

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Nizwa cattle markets

Markets and a famous fort

Nizwa is one of those places that travellers could spend days in, discovering nooks and crannies and soaking up the atmosphere. Business travellers taking a side trip from Muscat, incentive delegates and people on a group tour may have to be content with cramming in a few highlights – the famous fort and castle and the bustling, ancient souk are top of the list.

It is best to visit on Friday, when the goat and cattle market gets the day off to a noisy and lively start. Waking up there is best; otherwise an early start (7am at the latest) is required from Muscat to see the market in full swing.

Animals are paraded around a ring while

auctioneers shout prices, buyers respond with bids and negotiators run in and out of the circle relaying prices. All this is over the din of the animals themselves.

Anyone can walk the circle as long as they are careful not to get in the way of business, and there are plenty of opportunities for photographs.

Visitors who have been put in the mood for trading by the animal market should head to the nearby souk.

The fringes of the souk are modern and fairly touristy, but for a more interesting angle head into the older section, with its narrow alleys, traditional archways and wooden windows.

Silver jewellery, kanjars (ceremonial daggers), woven items and copper goods can all be found here.

I spent time at Al-Emal Al-Thahbiyah Trading talking to Ishaq, one of the owners. A speciality at the store is Sultan's Saffron, the 'real thing – the best there is' according to Ishaq. The mix of spices and dried foods at the store makes a colourful sight and Ishaq will proudly talk about his wares and pose for a photo.

Nizwa souk is also a good place (among others) to find Mandoos boxes, the attractive cases in which men and their families store jewellery, clothes, perfumes and other items for a dowry to give to their future wife.



View from Nizwa fort



Nizwa goat markets



Sultan's Saffron and other spices can be purchased from Ishaq

Portuguese problems

Nizwa Fort dates back to 1649 and the completion by Imam Sultan bin Saif Al Ya'ruha took over 12 years. It was financed by the spoils of war, when the Imam defeated the Portuguese in the battle of Diu in India.

(The Portuguese paid dearly for their occupation of Oman between 1506 and 1650. My guide Kamil Al Raisi told me that once driven out of the country, they set up a colony in India. But the Omanis did not feel safe so they sought them out (hence the battle of Diu) and dealt to them there

as well. Next stop for the Portuguese was Zanzibar. However, the locals had heard of Oman's great leader and his triumphs over the European power in India. They enlisted his help and again the Portuguese came out on the wrong side of the battle. Instead, it was the Omanis who established a long lasting presence in Zanzibar. The Portuguese had only themselves to blame – their tenure in Oman was marked by foul deeds such as cutting the ears and noses off the local people, not exactly a way to endear yourself to the locals. Though Portuguese structures can still be found in Oman today, the Omanis have not adopted a single word

or accent from their European invaders.)

Visitors to Nizwa Fort can climb to the top of the massive cylindrical tower, the fort's most impressive feature, for panoramic views of the city, the oasis and surrounding mountains.

The stairs to the top of the tower are divided by doors and 'murder holes' to slow down intruders. Murder holes were shafts from where defenders could fire arrows, hot oil or anything else to beat back the enemy.

Despite its history of war, Nizwa is renowned as a place for scientific and Islamic scholarship (it was one of the first centres in Oman to embrace Islam).



Desert Nights Camp

Nights (and days) in desert

As a luxury tented camp in the desert, Desert Nights Camp offers something new in Oman's interior.

'There has been none of this style of camp in the desert here before,' says camp manager Carina Lowe so we don't have competition in this market.'

The Desert Nights Camp attracts a wide range of clientele, from corporate incentive, conference and team building events through to couples (honeymooners are a big market) and families. Geographically, the market tends to be European, led by Germany, Switzerland UK, and France. Australians are less prominent but are definitely discovering the property - Desert Nights Camp has received publicity in the Australian media and hosted some familiarisation trips which are paying off.

The room rate includes dinner and breakfast as well as two complimentary activities - a drive up to the sand dunes to watch the sunset and a short camel ride in the morning. Supplementary activities are many and varied - half and full day camel treks, dune boarding,

dune bashing (four wheel driving in the sand dunes), and desert trekking.

The resort also takes guests to Wadi Bani Khalid, where they can enjoy a picnic lunch and swim in the waterhole.

Carina says the usual length of stay is one night - something she and husband and maintenance manager Danny - would like to see change.

'We are getting some two and three night stays already but we think when we add a swimming pool (this summer) and gain a liquor licence those things will definitely encourage people to stay longer.'

Dinner at the resort is a barbecue outside (if the weather permits) but optional extras include the traditional lamb shua or a private barbecue at the guests' tent.

The resort has a recreation room where guests will find board games, books (on Oman and a selection of novels), and DVDs to view.

The Desert Nights Camp is a two hour drive from Muscat and has 30 luxurious Bedouin styled tents.



Desert Nights Camp Lobby and the dunes at night



China Mood

Infinity pool at Al Bustan Palace InterContinental

Palace at the sea

Jeremy Canivet, director of event sales at Al Bustan Palace InterContinental is an enthusiast – not only for the property he represents but also for the country he has just spent a few months in. ‘Oman is one of the places you need to see and experience,’ he says. ‘I would say within the next three to five years is the time to do it, because it still has an exclusive, off the beaten track feeling.’

The palace itself was built in 1985, but was closed for two years and reopened in 2008 after a complete renovation put at \$200 million. ‘Al Bustan Palace was known as the jewel of the Sultanate and we are now back to that category,’ says Canivet. A tennis club, infinity pool and beach pavilion restaurant were all added and a Six Senses Spa is being built. Existing facilities, including the 250 rooms and suites, were all refurbished.

Canivet sees the appeal of the rooms coming from their incorporation of Arabic architecture, while another plus is that all

rooms have balconies (the majority having sea views, the others boasting mountain vistas).

At the recent Oman Today Restaurant Awards five of the winning titles went to restaurants at the hotel, - Vue by Shannon Bennett was best ‘newcomer’, Al Khiran best buffet and China Mood, best eastern restaurant and ambience.

Another dining experience – which has extra applications for groups – is Seblat Al Bustan, which offers a traditional Omani night each Wednesday and Saturday. Groups can have Seblat for exclusive use (150 person max, 80 minimum) or can hire one or two of the tents for 20 or 40 people on one of the regular Omani nights.

Dedicated meeting spaces at Al Bustan Palace InterContinental include the Oman Auditorium, which can seat 628 theatre style, the Majan Ballroom (1200) and a number of smaller meeting and function rooms.

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What's that? A wadi

A popular brochure image of Oman, and one which defies many people's preconceptions of Arabia, is that of a sparkling natural water hole surrounded by vegetation.

These are wadis, formed by the waterways flowing from Oman's mountains. One of the most famous is Wadi Bani Khalid, popular with both locals (especially on weekends) and tourists – but virtually deserted on a normal week day.

About 200 kilometres from Muscat, the wadi's stream has a constant flow of water all year and large pools of water can be found along its course.

In recent times, a small café – restaurant,



Wadi Bani Khalid

toilets, some viewing platforms and signage have been added to make the wadi visitor friendly but the natural scenery doesn't need any enhancement – it is like someone has painted their idea of Eden on canvas.

For adventurous travellers with a bit of time, there is a popular trek from Wadi Bani

Khalid to Wadi Tiwi. The 28 kilometre trek takes walkers from 'the land of waterfalls to the coast'.

It is also possible to explore caves such as the large underground chamber of Kahf Maqal, but some of these take a bit of effort to get to and a guide is recommended.

Bedouin ways

Life is changing for Oman's famous desert wanderers, the Bedouins. Many of the traditions, including the grazing of animals, remain but for a lot of Bedouins a tent has been replaced by a house.

It is little wonder the change has come, as the current Sultan's modernisation programme since 1970 has been designed to touch the whole population.

That said, visitors can still easily visit a Bedouin family, talk about their lives, buy handicrafts and spend an hour or two in their company.

My guide Kamil Al Raisi took me to the home of Bedouin woman Jameela, a widow with five daughters. Another option was to visit a family dwelling, but this would probably have meant sharing the experience with other tourists and not necessarily talking to the local family.

Jameela lives in a house but retains traditions such as the Bedouin style burka (which Kamil says is related to culture rather than religion). She also makes small handicrafts to sell for a couple of Oman rial a piece (I bought a traditional bracelet and was also given a key ring).

I sat with Jameela for about 40 minutes and conversed, albeit with Kamil interpreting. Part of the conversation involved Kamil encouraging Jameela to visit the Sidab Women's Sewing Group and exchange skills (see page 4), something Jameela said she would do when she had time.

A number of expats and Western tourists visit Jameela to have the traditional heena 'tattoos' applied on their hands and/or pick up a few handicrafts.

The selection of items was limited when I was there because of a fire which had destroyed part of Jameela's building and all the goods that were in it. (One of her daughters had inadvertently tipped out still hot charcoal after a burning of frankincense).

I was served coffee and dates, the official Fwala welcome, at Jameela's. Traditionally, when visiting a Bedouin the host would put coffee in a cup and drink it himself first, indicating that he could be trusted. Then guests would share the offering.

It is important to always give with the right hand and take with the right hand. When finished, shake the cup and hand it back to the host.



Houses may have replaced tents in many cases, but Bedouin tradition lives on in Oman

It's in the detail

Getting there

Travellers to Oman have several easy ways to get there from New Zealand.

Etihaad code shares with Qantas across the Tasman, Auckland to Sydney and the fare structure allows the use of the EY or JQ/QF flight number from Auckland, Wellington or Christchurch. The EY fares are common rated to Muscat from Auckland, Wellington, or Christchurch. The fares allow travel via Sydney, Melbourne or Brisbane to give the best connections.



Etihad provides a convenient way to reach Muscat

Another easy connection to Oman is with Emirates, which flies between Dubai and Muscat. The flight takes about an hour.

Thai Airways has a one-stop connection (via Bangkok) to Muscat, with three weekly flights between the cities. Schedules do not allow a same day connection northbound, but many travellers will be happy to combine Thailand and Oman on an itinerary.

Oman Air has services between Muscat and several Asian cities, including Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok.

Getting around

Taxis are a good way to get around Muscat and beyond, but agree on a fare first as most are not metered. Taxi fares between the airports and hotels are regulated and the rates are displayed. Oman's roads and highways are modern and, in the most part, in good condition. Driving is on the right hand side of the road and on the open highway speed limits are as high as 120 kmh. The locals push up to 130, knowing they will not be pulled over until they exceed that.

Money

The currency used is Omani Rial (OR), comprising 1000 baizas. The OR is equivalent to about \$US2.6.



Automated teller machines are found in many hotel lobbies, and they are also in supermarkets and various other places around the city. Travellers need cash in traditional souks, but in major hotels, large stores and shops, all major credit cards are accepted. There are money changing facilities in the airport.

Electricity

New Zealanders will need to take an adaptor – the three straight - square pin British plug types are used.

Alcohol

Drinking in public places is not permitted, but alcohol is served in hotel and club restaurants and bars.

Ramadan

Check the dates of Ramadan – it is something to consider when organising a holiday, incentive or conference. During this holy month, Muslims abstain from eating, drinking and smoking during daylight hours. As a sign of respect visitors are asked to

refrain from these activities in public between sunrise and sunset.

Dress code

The dress code in Oman is fairly relaxed, but anything particularly revealing will be considered offensive. Shorts and sun tops are fine mucking around in the desert or by the pool or at a hotel beach, but dress more conservatively in cities, towns and villages. Follow the rules in mosques.

Photography

Taking photographs of people is generally fine, but it's best to ask. Be careful not to offend if intending to take a photo of a Muslim woman – it is ok in tourist settings (still ask) but will be frowned upon in public settings.

Business hours

Shops and malls are generally open 9am to 1pm and 4pm to 9pm. Thursday and Friday are the weekend, but you will be able to shop at souks and other places on those days. Government offices are closed then, and you may find banks closed on Saturday.

Oman. Come together.

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