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## Oman The New Pearl Of The Arabian Peninsula

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H-CC&M

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Usama Bin Karim Al Haremi, Head of Corporate Communications And Media of Oman Air notified that The Australian, the biggest-selling national broadsheet newspaper in Australia has greatly treasured Oman's beauty through its article titled "Of souks and sultans" which was published in July 12, 2008. Al Haremi said that Oman, the oldest independent, peaceful, and stable state in the Arab world, is a place of unrivalled natural beauty and cultural richness. Even in its modernity, Oman remains distinctly Arabic and offers many unique old-world wonders. He further added that the secret of Oman's great-untouched beauty is out, and Robin Ingram suggests 10 reasons to make tracks to the new pearl of the Arabian Peninsula Oman, as he describes in his article.

The writer said that Oman as a destination, takes away the breath with its carefully conserved Arabian heritage and an unspoiled natural environment that ranges from beaches to mountains. Its vision for the future is as commendable as its respect for the past and, where elsewhere these two would provide a dramatic contrast, in Oman it is a seamless progression.

Why don't we know more about this fascinating place that is bigger than France? Dubai, Bahrain and even Qatar have pulled out all stops to become the flashy cultured pearls of the Arabian Peninsula. But as recently as man walking on the moon, Oman closed its doors to the world, literally and figuratively. Until 1970, the great wooden gates to its capital, Muscat, would shut each evening at dusk as a symbolic defence against anything that might corrupt Islamic and Arabic traditions. Today's Oman, however, is both progressive and impressive. The vision and benevolence of the current Sultan Qaboos bin Said are qualities that can give absolute authority a good name. Change is no longer feared in Oman but nor is it embraced for no good reason.



Oman is dramatically mountainous and its landscape impossibly diverse. Oman is a destination that rewards the traveller more than the tourist. It may take 20 or even 100 experiences to come to

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terms with the character, the appeal and the spirit of the place. But, for a start, here are my top 10 choices:

## 1. MUSCAT AND MUTTRAH

MUSCAT is a cluster of white buildings and gold minarets sparkling against a backdrop of jagged brown mountains that fold around it like the pleated robes of a protective parent. It has defiantly maintained its old-world character and charm, but pampered parks, gardens, and nature strips contradict its desert heritage. Muscat and the commercial centre of Muttrah are twin towns separated by 2km of sweeping coast road. The Corniche, with its promenade, makes it possible to walk from Muscat to Muttrah with its famous souk (market) and vibrant trading activity. The Sultan of Oman is an avid environmentalist with a particular aversion to visual pollution. As a result, buildings in the capital are limited to nine storeys, which keeps historic forts, castles, mosques, and towers prominent on the skyline. Muscat, its port and its palace, are guarded by two forts built during Portuguese occupation in the 16th century.

## 2. BAIT AZ-ZUBAIR MUSEUM

AS early as 3000BC, Oman was exporting copper to Mesopotamia (much of which is now Iraq and Syria) and by 1000BC was an important link in the spice trade with India. The Omanis' excellent navigational skills made them great maritime traders and by 740AD they had opened a major trading route with China. This strategic importance made them a target for foreign invaders and, in the 16th century, the Portuguese occupied much of Oman in their bid to control trade between Europe and the East. The thriving commercial centre has been a meeting place of many cultures and races over the years and, in a quiet corner of Muscat, Bait Az-Zubair displays the magic and mystique of Omani heritage. Here is the most comprehensive collection of artefacts from the Sultanate--traditional weapons, jewellery, costumes, ceramics and art--which convey a rich perspective of Arab life and culture. A visit here immediately instils the respect Oman deserves.

## 3. MUTTRAH SOUK

MUSCAT'S Muttrah Souk is generally regarded as the most atmospheric of any on the Arabian Peninsula. Its labyrinth of alleyways exudes deep mystery as well as a heady aroma of exotic perfumes and aromatic spices. Dusty shafts of light also reveal the usual cheap market tat ranging from daggy to Disney. Think: vinyl shoes, fluorescent T-shirts, American baseball caps and cutesy toys. But a mystique and authenticity is protected by the traditional (decorative khanjar daggers, colourful kaftans, intricate jewellery and frankincense), which have forever been the mainstays of the souk. Good-natured haggling is an intrinsic element of the experience, as are theatrical performances of outrage and agony. But an unexpected code of honour exists here, too, and if the price you settle on is generous, the trader will often include a small free gift.

## 4. NIZWA

IN all fairness to Nizwa, it was probably dubbed "the pearl of Islam" centuries before the "pearl" cliché became the principal gem in the crown jewels of tourism prose. So forgive it for that, and just accept that historically and spiritually Nizwa has special significance for Omanis. A comfortable two hours' drive from Muscat, Nizwa was the capital of Oman during the sixth and seventh centuries and has traditionally been the home of writers, poets, intellectuals, and political leaders. Today's main attractions for the visitor are the dramatic 17th-century fort--considered the most important historic site in Oman--and the fascinating souk, which, on Fridays, extends its trading activities to include a goat and cattle market. Nizwa's souk is great theatre, not the least for its colourful cast of Bedouin traders and their exotically attired women, but for the walled setting and giddy array of fabrics, leather goods, weapons, silverware, jewellery, and pottery.

## 5. JABEL SHAMS

WHEN the temperature creeps into the mid-40s on the coast, Omanis head for Jabal Shams (Mountain of the Sun) where it never gets above the low-20s. Visitors to Oman head for the Sultanate's highest peak at any time for its spectacular scenery and to trek the Jabal Shams Rim, a

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track that teeters around the edge of a sheer 1500m canyon wall. It is still possible to see the remains of ancient cliff dwellings. The real name of the canyon (unfortunately billed as Grand Canyon by tourist operators) is Wadi Ghul gorge, and its residents are skilled weavers who sell hand-woven rugs to visitors.

### 6. SUR

SUR is an ancient seaport on the east coast about four hours by road from Muscat. The drive to the interior climbs through the eerie moonscape of the Hajar Mountains but, down on the coast, the road follows the beautiful coastline past Fins and Tiwi dotted with exotic wadis (waterholes) such as Wadi Al Shab, a lush oasis of palm, mango and banana trees. Traditionally built wooden dhows still ride at anchor in Sur's sheltered harbour and, for less than 50 cents, the traveller can be ferried across the lagoon to Al Ayja, a village isolated for centuries and protected by imposing watchtowers and forts. Al Ayja remains as shy and mysterious as a hermit crab in a beautiful shell and approaching it by ferry is one of the truly magic moments still on offer in global travel. There's drama, too, in the 300-year-old Sunaysilah Castle, which dominates the skyline above Sur.

### 7. WAHIBA SANDS

MOST of the desert areas of Oman are flat sand and gravel plains, but Wahiba Sands is desert in the romantic sense of the word. Ranging in colour from amber to ochre, the sands stretch 180km north to south and 80km east to west. The Wahibas extend from the eastern Hajars to the Arabian Sea and comprise dunes up to 130m high plus surprisingly extensive woodlands on the eastern fringe and a spectacular unspoiled coastline. The Wahibas are the traditional home of the nomadic Bedouin and the adopted home of the dune-bashing fraternity in their bucking and sliding four-wheel drives. A number of adventure travel operators offer desert tours with overnight accommodation in comfortable "Bedouin-style" tents.

### 8. KHASAB

KHASAB and the Musandam Peninsula are almost one and the same, because Musandam is the smallest, and most northerly, region of Oman. It is separated from the rest of the country by the United Arab Emirates but its population of about 35,000 is defiantly and proudly Omani. Khasab, the main town, is about a 350km drive from Muscat. The iconic attraction here is Khasab Fort overlooking the harbour and representing the town's eastern line of defence. Within its walls is a massive central tower that predates both the fort and the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th century. Khasab's souk offers many imported Iranian goods, and its picturesque harbour is an attraction in itself. Another standout Musandam attraction is Daba at the southeast end of the peninsula and the gateway to the region, which has a harbour full of traditional fishing and trading vessels plus a beautiful white-sand beach.

### 9. SALALAH

SALALAH is the capital of Dhofar in the extreme south of Oman, a region that shares borders with Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Twelve hours by road or a one-hour flight from Muscat, it is popular for its climate, environment, and historic interest. A summer monsoon season from June to September transforms the region into something of a rainforest with lagoons, waterfalls, and exotic gardens. This is also where the olibanum tree, which produces frankincense, grows and, for those who subscribe to The Bible's account of ancient history, would have been the source of the Magis' gift. The mountain of Jabal Qara boasts a site believed to be the tomb of the Prophet Ayoub, known to Christians as Job of the Old Testament. During most of the year, Salalah serves as Oman's resort playground, a place for scuba diving, sailing, jet skiing and beach activities.

### 10. THE SULTAN QABOOS GRAND MOSQUE

SUITABLY attired visitors are welcome at Muscat's Grand Mosque, and a vast library and hall of computers perpetuate a key role of mosques. They have existed throughout the Islamic world and throughout the various golden eras of Islam as centres for learning and thinking. The mosque is not only a place of worship but a place for the dissemination of information and culture. You may dwell

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on that truth at length, but the immediate impact will be the beauty of the epic 416,000sqm complex and a prayer hall with a capacity for more than 6500. Four hundred women worked for more than three years to produce the magnificent prayer hall carpet. How alien and aloof is this mysterious faith? Our guide Saleh answers the big question. "This carpet is in the Guinness Book of Records," he tells me, proudly.