



Oman, Landscapes & Peoples

Desert, coast and mountains

22 October–1 November 2022 (MI 557)

11 days/10 nights • £ 6,340

Lecturer: Dr Peter Webb

Remarkable landscape, hill forts, traditional souqs, archaeological sites.

The toehold of Arabia, with a diverse population reflecting its mercantile past.

A night in a desert camp and two nights in a luxury hotel in the mountains of the Jabal Akhdar.

Wilfred Thesiger was motivated to cross the Empty Quarter by the hope that he would find peace and solitude in the remote desert landscapes. He also yearned to gain the friendship of the Bedu who journeyed with him and whom he encountered during his traverse. The opportunities for travelling to little-visited locations, relaxing in inspiring surroundings and encountering new peoples is no less possible in Oman in 2021 than it was in 1946.

The country provides a diverse range of extraordinary natural beauty: deserts, mountains, wadis, beaches. Visitors also experience the kindness and friendliness of the Omanis. With relatively low – although gradually increasing – numbers of visitors, Oman is still not over-developed, unlike some of its neighbouring Gulf states.

Evidence of settlement dates back to the fourth millennium BC with early indications of dependence on trade. First copper and then 'sacred frankincense' (southern Oman is one of the few places in the world where it still grows) played a key role in the country's history. Desire to control the supply of frankincense led to incorporation in the Achaemenid and Sassanian empires until the Persians were forced out in the seventh century.

Omanis readily embraced Islam and submitted to the Umayyad and the Abbasid Caliphate. Trade and naval power continued to expand. Occupied by the Portuguese from 1507 to 1650, Oman flourished again after their departure with an empire reaching into East Africa, particularly Zanzibar, and the Indian Ocean. Treaties agreed with the British to protect communications with India marked the beginning of a special relationship which continued beyond the formal termination of the protectorate in 1971.

Meanwhile, the division of the Omani empire between the sultan of Zanzibar and the sultan of Muscat in 1856 resulted in economic



Left: 16th-century woodcut.

decline for both and internal conflicts in the latter. Successive sultans failed to tackle the problems and Oman stagnated.

The coming to power of Sultan Qaboos bin Said in 1970 heralded a new era. Though its oil revenues are relatively small, they have been used wisely to the benefit of the Omani people, for infrastructure, employment and education. Development has been rapid but controlled, guided by a determination to preserve Omani traditions.

Our comprehensive itinerary includes the highlights of this vast country: from the inland forts of Nizwa and Jabrin to the little-visited archaeological sites of Al-Balid and Khor Rori, from the mountain scenery in the Western Hajar to the remoteness of the Wahiba Sands, from the bustling capital Muscat to the contrasting landscapes of the southern region of Dhofar.

Other features of this tour are the opportunity to camp overnight in the Wahiba Sands, bathe in the Indian Ocean, stay high in the mountains of the Jabal Akhdar and shop in souqs suffused with the scent of frankincense.

Itinerary

Day 1. Fly at c. 8.00pm from London Heathrow (Oman Air) for the seven-hour overnight flight to Muscat.

Day 2: Muscat. Land at c. 7.15am. Hotel rooms are at your disposal for the morning. Greater Muscat is spread out along the coast with a dramatic mountain backdrop. Afternoon visit to the recently opened Omani National Museum, the Sultanate's flagship cultural institution. First of two nights in Muscat.

Day 3: Barka, Nakhl. By 4-wheel-drive to the traditionally furnished 17th-century fortified house Bait Na'aman. Continue onto the impressive Rustaq Fort, an early 18th-century construction, built to defend the former Omani capital.

Day 4: Muscat, Jabrin. With seven minarets, the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque is impressively ornate. Leave Muscat by 4-wheel-drive. The most impressive fort in Oman is at Jabrin; sensitively restored, the plasterwork, wood carvings and painted ceilings are magnificent. Ascend the Al Hajar mountains for the first of three nights in the Jabal Akhdar.

Day 5: Nizwa area. Visit to the 17th-century Nizwa Fort, palace, seat of government and prison. Some time to explore the fascinating souqs and markets. The rarely-visited archaeological site of Al Ayn is a collection of Bronze Age beehive tombs sitting atop a rugged ridge with the Jebel Misht as a backdrop.

Day 6: Nizwa area. Spend the morning in Al Hamra, a traditional Omani town at the foot of the Hajar mountain range; the original irrigation system (*falaj*) remains in use. A free afternoon to enjoy the mountain scenery from the hotel.

Day 7: Nizwa, Wahiba. Set off early for Ibra, the once opulent market town that stood on the trade route linking the interior to the coast. Arrive at Wahiba Sands, a sea of high rolling dunes. Watch the sunset and camp overnight in the desert.

Day 8: Wahiba, Salalah. 4-wheel-drive to Muscat to catch an afternoon flight to Salalah,

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continued

which despite its size is considered Oman's second city and capital of the Dhofar region. First of three nights in Salalah.

Day 9: Al Balid. Ancient Zafar flourished in the 11th and 12th centuries and was visited by Marco Polo. The museum exhibits finds from the ruins of Al Balid and other artefacts from the area. Some free time before dinner to relax by the Indian Ocean.

Day 10: Khor Rori. Spend the morning at Mirbat, scene of the well-documented battle in 1972, which saw Pakistani and Omani British soldiers defend the town during the Dhofar Rebellion. The impressive archaeological site at Khor Rori, formerly known as Sumhuraman, preserves the remains of an important frankincense trading port from where, 2000 years ago, this precious commodity commenced its transportation to Damascus and Rome.

Day 11. A mid-morning flight to Muscat connects with the early afternoon flight to London, arriving Heathrow c. 6.30pm.

For those not taking the group flights, the tour ends in Salalah.

Lecturer

Dr Peter Webb. Arabist and historian, specialising in early and medieval Islam. He has travelled extensively in the Middle East and Central Asia and has taught at SOAS and the American University of Paris. He is now a lecturer in Arabic at Leiden University.

Practicalities

Price, per person. **Two sharing:** £6,340 or £5,530 without flights on days 1 and 11. **Single occupancy:** £7,460 or £6,650 without flights on days 1 and 11.

Included: flights (economy class) with Oman Air (aircraft: A330-300 & Boeing 737); travel by private air-conditioned coach and

4-wheel-drive vehicles; hotel accommodation; breakfasts, 8 lunches (3 picnics) and 8 dinners with a glass of wine or two, water and coffee (not all restaurants serve alcohol and none is served at picnics); all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer, tour manager and local guides.

Internal flights: the flight from Muscat to Salalah on day 8 is included in the price if you take our 'no flights' option. However, please note that the tour ends in Salalah and therefore the internal flight from Salalah to Muscat on day 11 is **not** included.

Visas. British citizens and most foreign nationals require a tourist visa. You apply individually for an E-visa through the Royal Oman Police portal (www.rop.gov.om/english), which costs 20,000 OMR (c. £40). This is not included in the price of the tour because you have to procure it yourself. Visa applications can only begin three months before the tour ends. Passports must be valid for at least 6 months after your return from the tour.

Accommodation. **Grand Hyatt, Muscat** (hyatt.com): ornate 5-star hotel in the diplomatic district. **Anantara, Jabal Akhdar** (jabal-akhdar.anantara.com): located in the Al Hajar mountains with spectacular views. **Desert Nights Camp, Wahiba Sands** (desertnightscamp.com): luxury camp; individual tents with private facilities. **Hotel Crowne Plaza, Salalah** (crowneplaza.com): 5-star hotel, high standards of comfort and service. *Single rooms are doubles for sole occupancy throughout.*

How strenuous? This is a busy and active tour and participants need stamina and fitness. There are some long journeys by 4x4 vehicles or coach (average distance per day: 102 miles), at least one internal flight and 3 changes of accommodation. Walking is often on uneven terrain at archaeological sites, hill forts and in the desert.

Group size: between 10 and 18 participants.