

DESTINATION OMAN

The Sultan opens his kingdom

The Southeast Asian Times 13.8.06

By CHRIS RAY

A haunting call to prayer floats from a minaret as the sun begins its ascent over the Arabian Sea. On the waterfront the only movement is the gentle rocking of a dhow at anchor.

Gradually, men dressed in the *dishdasha*, the loose floor-length tunic typical of the Gulf, gather to exercise along the crescent-shaped corniche. Sharing the communion of early-morning walkers everywhere, they acknowledge you – an obvious foreigner – with a nod or a smile.

Oman's ancient port of Muttrah, on the eastern fringe of Arabia, looks its best in the dawn light. Beneath the turquoise dome of a mosque, graceful pastel-shaded houses with latticed balconies and carved wooden doors line the corniche. A mud-brown fort and circular

watchtowers overlook the bay from the ridges of dramatic saw-tooth mountains.

Despite its location in the troubled Middle East, Oman is building a reputation as a safe and appealing destination and is an easy side trip from Dubai, itself an increasingly popular stopover on the long haul between Australia and Europe.

The port of Muttrah is a suburb of the capital Muscat, just a 30-minute flight from Dubai. If Dubai's grandiose skyscrapers, extravagant theme parks and traffic jams leave you cold, then Oman is the perfect antidote.

The sultanate offers all the exotic imagery of storybook Arabia plus excellent roads, good hotels and widespread use of English. By edict of absolute ruler Sultan Qaboos bin Said, high-rise towers are banned and significant buildings must be constructed in traditional Omani styles.

The sultan, now in the 36th year of his reign, has overseen a major effort to preserve and restore the country's

historic defensive architecture including magnificent castles.

With an eye to the potential of nature tourism, conservation is high on the agenda. Specialist tour groups come for bird watching, scuba diving and wildlife sanctuaries aimed at re-establishing in the wild some of the rarest mammals on earth, such as the Arabian Oryx, a long-horned white antelope.

Sultan Qaboos enjoys the opulent lifestyle of an Arab potentate - a fleet of ocean-going yachts, a fabulous private art collection, and several palaces. The material gains for ordinary Omanis have been sufficient to keep a lid on overt social discontent.

Electricity, hospitals and schools were unknown to the vast majority of Omanis before 1970 when Qaboos staged a coup against his father, the austere and socially conservative Sultan Said who forbade overseas travel and such vices as the wearing of dark glasses. His Muscat was a gated city with a night-time curfew.

Following his son's coup the old sultan spent the rest of his life in exile, rarely venturing from his suite at London's Dorchester Hotel. Father and son never spoke again.

Qaboos set about modernising the country with a sense of discipline instilled by his alma mater, the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst. Britain has maintained a close relationship with the sultanate for two centuries. A Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath, Sultan Qaboos boasts the only army pipe band in the Middle East and even designed his own tartan for the troops.

Qaboos' seat of government, Muscat, will be the starting point for most tourists who arrive by air. The city is a series of settlements strung across a chain of natural harbours. Highlights are the palace and museum district of Muscat proper with its two imposing 16th Century Portuguese forts, and the port and merchant quarter of Muttrah, with a lively souk or covered market running off the cornice.

The Muttrah souk is renowned for its silver jewellery, especially the celebrated Omani khunjar or curved silver dagger, and the frankincense which pervades the air. This aromatic resin from a tree that grows almost exclusively in southern Oman was prized by all the great ancient civilizations. Egyptians, Romans and others traded with Oman for this precious substance to be burnt in their temples.

Muscat and other towns along the 1700km coastline present Oman's cosmopolitan, outward-looking face to the world. Their multiracial populations - Indians, Baluchis, Persians and Africans, as well as Arabs - testify to Oman's long history as the dominant maritime power of the Indian Ocean until the British ascendancy in the 19th Century.

A different aspect of Oman can be found among the Arabs of the interior, historically independent from Muscat and isolated from the coast with its foreign trade and conquests. Inner Oman is a string of oasis towns and villages on the western side of the Hajar mountain range,

which curves like a scimitar 400 kilometres across the northern half of the country.

These imposing mountains rise more than 3000 metres but can be crossed through the Sumail Gap, less than two hours from Muscat by expressway over a dusty gravel plain.

Beyond the Gap the road follows an ancient caravan route past villages of mud brick and stone. Simple homes are decorated by windows of brightly coloured glass and intricately carved wooden doors. Sustained by the date palm, citrus orchards, sheep and goats, the settlements could not survive without the falaj, an ancient irrigation system unchanged for centuries.

The highlights of inner Oman are its stately castles mostly dating from the 16th and 17th centuries. Built as impregnable residences for wealthy rulers and to house troops, they were also centres of Islamic scholarship in science and religion.

The pick of them may be Jabrin castle. Its massive sandy-coloured bulk dominates the surrounding plain and gives no hint of the refined luxury to be glimpsed within.

Behind two-metre-thick walls built to withstand cannon shot are spacious rooms painted in floral motifs with ceilings of finely carved timber. Recessed and screened with lattice, the windows banish the heat of the day while allowing moonlight to enter at night. Graceful archways enter onto rose-coloured courtyards overlooked by high balconies with slender wooden railings.

Grand castles, hillside villages and oasis springs can all be accessed by self-drive rental car or organised tour. Traffic is light and local drivers are almost sedate by the standards of the region.

Oman seems set to receive increasing numbers of tourists if the policies of Qaboos are maintained. The sultan is 64 and childless – an unenviable condition for a hereditary monarch. He has refused to name a crown prince but is rumoured to have deposited the name of his preferred successor at secret locations around the country.