

Oman

عمان

It's a curious observation about travelling in Oman that the moment you tuck behind a sand dune and begin erecting your tent, however discreetly, someone will park alongside and start camping too. Never mind that it is the only car you've seen all day; never mind that there are 2700km of beautiful, empty sandy beaches; never mind that the mountains are so lonesome in parts that only wolves and hedgehogs meander into the night; and never mind that memories of Wilfred Thesiger are the only evocations of the living to issue from the dunes of the Empty Quarter – the one-car-per-day will find yours and camp alongside.

What makes this observation a particularly topical one is that it's only relatively recently that a network of roads and graded tracks, such as the coast road from Filim to Shwaymiyah, or the adventurous mountain track to the ancient tombs at Gaylah, has made it possible to penetrate Oman's pristine landscapes. Those who are sufficiently intrepid to get off the beaten track will find that they can have the desert to themselves quite easily without mounting a major expedition. Now that the secret of Oman's great untouched beauty is out, however, it surely can't be long before groups of visitors are a common sight and it will no longer be necessary to seek the company of strangers at the end of a day's exploration.

In the meantime, what should you say to the happy camper who parks in 'your space'? As every hospitable Omani you'll meet on your travels will tell you, there's only one answer: *'Ahlan wa salan! Welcome!'*

FAST FACTS

- **Official name** Sultanate of Oman
- **Capital** Muscat
- **Area** 309,500 sq km
- **Population** 3.42 million
- **Country code** ☎ 968
- **Head of State** Sultan Qaboos bin Said
- **Annual number of tourists** 1.43 million
- **Stereotypes** A country that has only relatively recently emerged from isolation
- **Surprises** An infrastructure that any country would be proud of



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Jebel Shams** (p226) Haggle with insouciant local carpet sellers for vertiginous rugs on a precipice above Wadi Ghul.
- **Nakhal Fort** (p230) Survey the flat panorama of Al-Batinah Region from the battlements of Oman's most spectacular castle.
- **Sharqiya Sands** (p216) Put your driving and navigational skills to the test in an auburn sea of sand.
- **Ras al-Jinz** (p211) Attend the night-time drama of labour and delivery at the green turtle's favourite nesting site.
- **Dhofar Region** (p239) Explore the subtropical terrain of a region famed for gold, frankincense and myrrh.

ITINERARIES

- **Muscat Stopover** Rise with the dawn to see fishermen bring in the weird and wonderful at Mutrah's fish market (p188). Join the ebb and flow of the city's residents by strolling along the corniche (p188), under the overhanging balconies of the harbour residences. Duck into Mutrah Souq (p189) to learn the art of good-natured argument and lose your way among the pink, plastic and implausible. Spare an hour for the sights of Muscat proper (p190), the walled heart of the capital, before a spot of R & R and an extravagant dinner at one of the city's whimsical hotels (p196).
- **Two weeks** Make the most of the mountains by circling the Western Hajar range and making your base the lively town of Nizwa (p223). Climb the beanstalk to Jebel Akhdar (p222), famed for giant pomegranates and hailstones. Hike the rim of Oman's Grand Canyon for a spot of carpet-buying on Jebel Shams (p226). Engage with *jinn* (spirits created by Allah) at the remarkable tombs and forts of Bat (p228), Bahla (p227) and Jabrin (p227). Finally, take the long way home to Muscat via a dizzying mountain drive (p225) to Rustaq (p231), and wash the dust off in a sparkling sea at Sawadi (p232).
- **Three weeks** Go in search of wild places on an adventurous route from Muscat to Oman's second city, Salalah (p239), 1000km to the south. Follow the Qurayat-Sur coast road to Sur (p205), home of the dhow, pausing to explore the celebrated

wadis of Shab (p206) and Tiwi (p207). Learn about turtles at Ras al-Jinz before cutting inland to the sea of sand near Mintirib (p216). Acclimatise to nights under the stars before the camping journey to Salalah via Duqm, Ras Madrakah and Shwaymiyah (p240). Leave time to explore Salalah's beautiful beaches and go in search of frankincense.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

The best time to visit Oman is between November and mid-March, when the cooler air brings the mountain scenery sharply into focus and daytime temperatures average 25°C. For the rest of the year, much of Oman is oppressively hot and hazy, particularly between May and August.

The redeeming summertime feature is the *khareef*, the mid-June to late-August rainy season in southern Oman. Many Gulf visitors flock to this area to picnic under the drizzle on Dhofar's grassy hills. The rain (and the green) vanishes by mid-September.

The peak tourist season in the north is from November to mid-March. See also p514 for a Muscat climate chart.

HISTORY

'Renaissance' is a term any visitor to Oman will hear, as it refers to the current period under Sultan Qaboos, a leader held responsible by most of the population for easing the country into modernity. Before he came to the throne in a bloodless coup in 1970, Oman had no secondary and only two primary schools, two hospitals run by the American mission and a meagre 10km of sealed roads. In addition, the country was in a state of civil war. Oman has since caught up with its more affluent neighbours, and it boasts efficient, locally run hospitals, universities, electricity to remote villages and an ever-improving infrastructure of roads. Furthermore, Oman is peaceful and stable, with an enviably low crime rate and a well-trained local workforce. The 40th anniversary of the sultan's great achievements was celebrated in 2010 and marked with pomp and circumstance.

Early Oman: Gold, Frankincense & Copper

The term 'renaissance' is an appropriate one, as it suggests equally rich periods through Oman's long history.