

OMAN

Full Of Castles And Smiling People

> Derick McGroarty

A diverse new area for tourism-Derick McGroarty looks at Muscat and its surrounds.

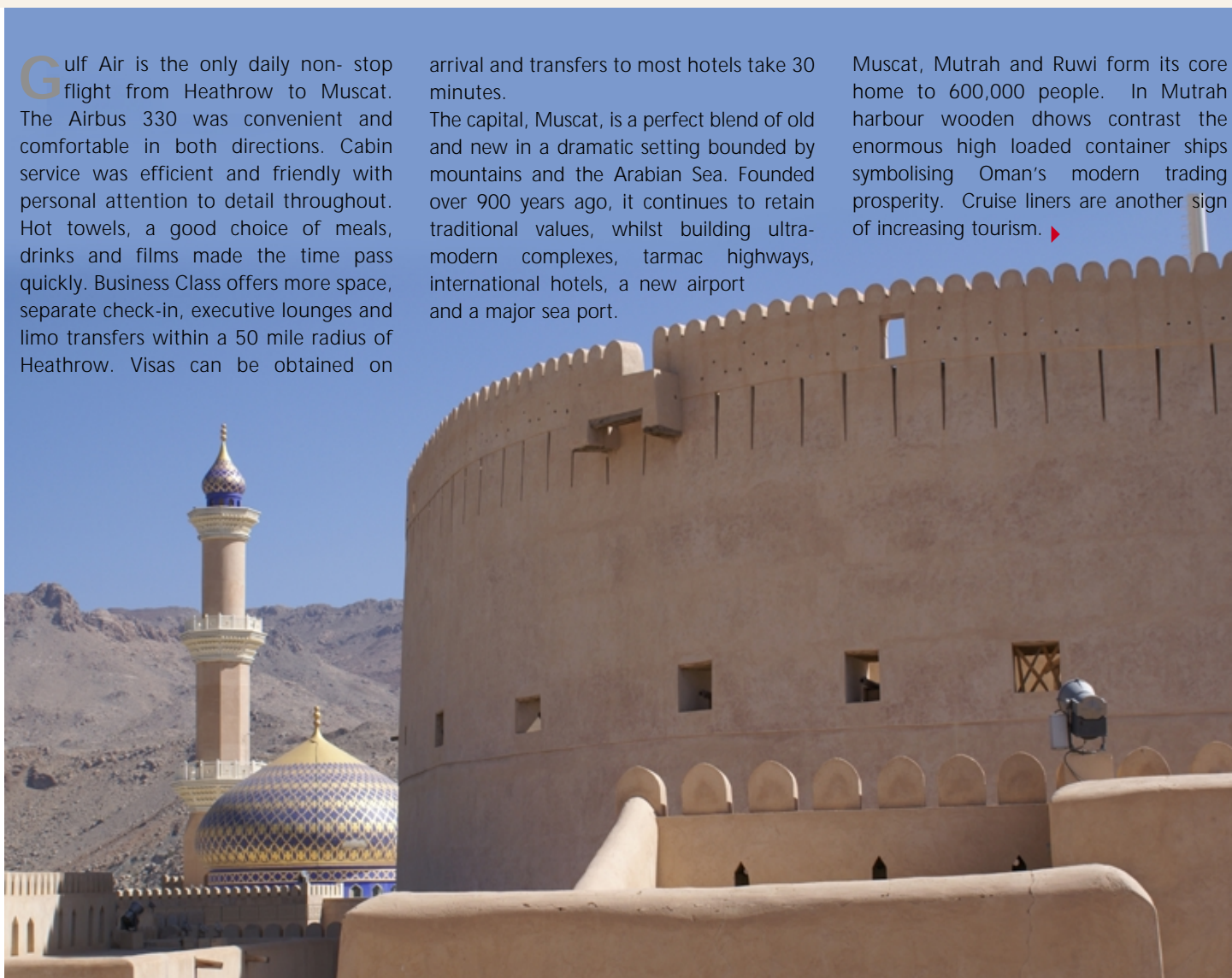
The Queen of Sheba lived there and many figures in history have visited Oman including Alexander the Great, Vasco da Gama and Marco Polo. Three decades ago it was not an easy country to visit, with hardly any surfaced roads and no police force, TV or radio stations. Since Sultan Qaboos's rule in the 1970s progress has been rapid and visitors welcomed. In January I explored the capital, Muscat, the sea shore and some castles and forts inland.

Gulf Air is the only daily non-stop flight from Heathrow to Muscat. The Airbus 330 was convenient and comfortable in both directions. Cabin service was efficient and friendly with personal attention to detail throughout. Hot towels, a good choice of meals, drinks and films made the time pass quickly. Business Class offers more space, separate check-in, executive lounges and limo transfers within a 50 mile radius of Heathrow. Visas can be obtained on

arrival and transfers to most hotels take 30 minutes.

The capital, Muscat, is a perfect blend of old and new in a dramatic setting bounded by mountains and the Arabian Sea. Founded over 900 years ago, it continues to retain traditional values, whilst building ultra-modern complexes, tarmac highways, international hotels, a new airport and a major sea port.

Muscat, Mutrah and Ruwi form its core home to 600,000 people. In Mutrah harbour wooden dhows contrast the enormous high loaded container ships symbolising Oman's modern trading prosperity. Cruise liners are another sign of increasing tourism. ▶



Nizwa Fort & Mosque

قلعة وجامع نزوى



Sultan Qaboos mosque/ Muscat

جامع السلطان قابوس في مسقط



Muscat Fort overlooking Harbour

قلعة مسقط المطلّة على الميناء

Award winning Mark Tours provide a very personal service with private car, driver and guide. Payment is for the car whether you are alone or a party of four. For larger groups coaches are available. My excursion to Muscat was exciting and comprehensive. Firstly, the colourful bustling fish market where fresh catches included barracuda, tuna, and red mullet which I looked forward to tasting at dinner.

In contrast the serenity and quiet of the Sultan Qaboos Mosque allowed me to take in the splendour of the golden dome, the simple white elegant arches and five minarets representing the pillars of Islam. Completed in 2001 it holds 15,000 worshippers and, leaving my shoes at the entrance, I stepped through high teak doors intricately carved by Iranian craftsmen to stand on the largest hand stitched carpet in the world. I appreciated the decorative interior dome from which hangs the breathtaking massive, 8 ton, Austrian crystal chandelier, surrounded by a kaleidoscope of colour and smaller chandeliers.

The Mutrah Souk is the oldest traditional market with its winding alleyways packed with shops, cottons from Egypt, spices and saffron from India and silks from China, alternating with local handicrafts and frankincense, the best of which is harvested in southern Oman. A local item which I admired was the curved Khanjar (dagger) worn as part of formal dress by Omani men. Khanjars handcrafted from silver, require the skills of three different artisans, one each for the dagger, the case and the special leather belt. There are cheaper souvenir khanjars, attractively framed for decoration, but the real thing can be very expensive. My overall impressions were of dazzling colours, the scent of spices and friendly haggling. Men only ever wear silver – never gold, ▶



Nizwah

نزوى



Old buildings/ Muscat

بيت تراثي في مسقط



Nizwah

نزوى

whereas Omani women wear ornate heavy necklaces and bracelets only in gold. The well lit, air- conditioned, separate gold souk shops were crowded with local people in traditional dress on the Thursday evening of my visit.

There are many museums. The extensive Oman Museum covers 5,000 years of history. There is a specialised Military Museum and I particularly enjoyed Bait Al Zubair in a traditional Omani house showing the lifestyle and traditions of ancient and modern Muscat. All artefacts are excellently labelled in Arabic and English. Anyone interested in Omani culture will find it here in a compact and understandable form.

Before returning to the hotel I took a spectacular drive, with photo stops, past the Sultan's palace in the old port area. Two forts, built by the Portuguese in the 16th century guard the entrance to Muscat serving as sentinels to the palace. The forts are on hills commanding a view of the city as well as overlooking the harbour. Perfect for defence of the city and now a scenic attraction.

Mark Tours full day trip to Nizwa was quite different. A three hour drive along a new dual carriageway took me through mountains overlooked by watch towers on many of the high peaks, which in the past guarded the precious oases so valuable to local inhabitants. A vast green oasis of date palms and the massive Nizwa Fort are reminders of

its position at the crossroads of ancient caravan routes. Standing 115 feet high with a colossal 150 feet diameter, the Fort with foundations as deep as its height, is complete with turrets, false doors and a labyrinth of passageways. Built in the 1650s it has been fully renovated and opened this year.

There are 500 Forts in Oman but I only managed two more. In Bahia a small town, within a 12 kilometre wall a short distance from Nizwa, the fort has 132 watchtowers and 15 gates. Restoration is not yet complete. The area has been designated as a World Heritage Site.

Finally to Jabrin Fort, which also served as a palace for the Sultans. Built in the mid-1600s and restored in 1962 it is a fine example of Islamic architecture and an ancient system of irrigation. The austere tomb of its founder, Sultan Al Ya'arubi is inside, marked with a simple headstone facing Mecca.

Dolphin watching from small boats is popular and best in early morning. Sunset cruises by dhow and exciting four wheel drive expeditions through wadies and over sand dunes can also be arranged. There are opportunities to snorkel and for deeper aqua diving.

Accommodation is available for all budgets. Space, comfort and facilities can be very welcome after sight seeing, exploring castles or shopping in crowded souks. The Shangri-La's Barr Al Jissah Resort comprises



An Omani man in traditional dress
عماني بزيه الشعبي وخنجره

three five star hotels along a long sandy beach with a mountain back drop. I chose the quietness of Al Husn, - a castle on the cliff - large, comfortable rooms with balconies overlooking the Gulf of Oman, exclusive, pampered luxury with its carpets from Iran, infinity pool and private, landscaped beach.

In the centre the Al Bandar is suitable for both leisure and business guests whilst the third hotel, Al Waha, is best for families, with a children's club and pools. ▶



Nizwah Castle Entrance

مدخل قلعة نزوى

The whole complex includes many restaurants, and fast food outlets. For a special occasion the Sultanah is a perfect setting for a memorable meal. All dishes are prepared to order and served with finesse. There is an outdoor amphitheatre, turtle cove, spa and gym. A heritage village has workshops of local artisans. I enjoyed the weekly "Arabian Evening" with dancing to the sound of swirling bagpipes and drum beat and a buffet meal which included lamb slowly cooked in a pit with herbs and banana leaves for 12 hours – delicious!

A complimentary shuttle bus four times a day from the hotel, allowed in depth exploring and enjoyment of Muscat, less than 30 minutes away. One early evening, sat on the cornice "people watching" I spotted a heron fishing on the sea shore of the receding tide. As the sun sets the illuminated blue tower of the Al-Lawatiya Mosque and the call of the faithful to prayer creates an Arabian Nights atmosphere.

This is a vast country of which I enjoyed only a small part of the North. Given longer or perhaps a return visit, dramatic scenery in the south - steep mountains, unexplored caves, frankincense trees and the ruins of the Palace of the Queen of Sheba sound attractive.

My strongest memories are of the welcoming, smiling, friendly Omani people and the feeling of safety everywhere I went. The Bradt Guide book (£13.99) on Oman is very informative and helpful. ■



Visitors to the Sultan Qaboos Mosque

سياح أمام جامع السلطان قابوس