

Oman:

Natural Splendours And Magnificent Markets

> Charles Stirling

There are a lot of reasons to travel. I visited Oman in late January partly as it has simply fascinated me for some years, partly as I knew little about it, but also to dive some of its coral covered islands which had been damaged by an earlier cyclone and reported as now recovering. January also avoided the hottest months.

Flying into Muscat's Seeb airport direct from London Gatwick with Oman Air was an easy way to arrive. Then being immediately whisked off along a great new

highway by my temporary hosts, Muscat Diving and Adventure Centre, to Al Nahda Resort & Spa made life even easier. This easy life of travel doesn't put you in contact

with the local people and a main reason to visit a destination, so, after settling, a resorts car dropped my partner, Jenny, and I into Barka the nearby small town. ▶



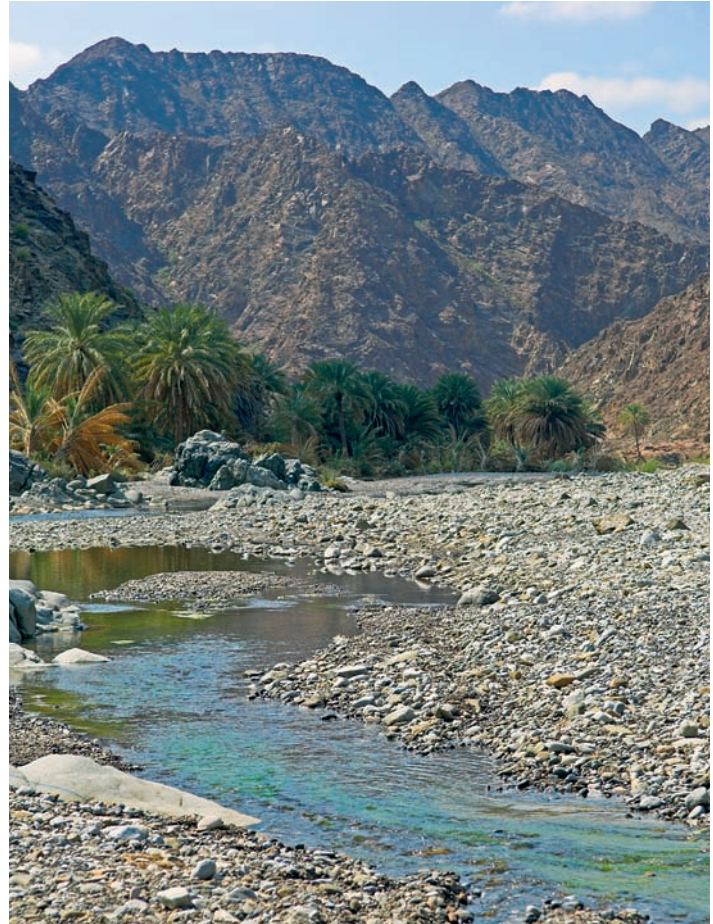
Nakhal Fort

قلعة النخيل



View of the sea

منظر البحر



Wadi al-Abyad

الوادي الأبيض

Wandering the main street, the little side alleys with camera in hand tripod slung over shoulder we started seeing the local life, meeting the people. The shops were small, often specialising in one product range and stopping to look brought the owner out chatting on where we were from, what we thought of the country, our thoughts on some news story or other. He would pose for photos, call friends from along the street who joined in. Everyone wanted to practice their English, or just say hello. Cups of tea were offered. We pressed on with a repeat encounter two doors further on. Our presence seemed to precede us with men waving hello, the occasional family pulling the boys out of their car to be put in front of our cameras.

Stopping to eat at a café the local lads immediately organized the plastic chairs around the plastic table to bring us into their midst. How much had we seen of Oman? What was England like? Who did we support in cricket? Conversations

were light, easy going. Time to pay the bill and they insisted on paying ours, offering a lift back to our resort if we wanted it, but pressing on now with tripods out there was more to explore. The dark of night rather rushes the twilight condensing it into minutes but shop lights and those few along the streets allowed the cameras to stay out and the people kept saying hello, wanting to pose for photos and talk. Ten thirty pm, the prearranged resort car pickup at eleven, some shops beginning to close, it was time for another quick snack and tea at another café. We had started to encounter Oman.

Our stay at Al Nahda Resort was only going to be for a couple of nights before a week of scuba diving organized at Al Sawadi Beach Resort. We needed more freedom of movement so took the hour long drive back to Muscat by taxi to talk with the tourist board then hire a car. A 4X4 is the ideal car to hire in Oman, much of the desert and

mountains is accessible on unpaved roads, but the hire cost of 4X4's was over our budget so we settled on the smallest sedan car. Real off road driving does need the 4X4, the off road kit to go with it, and experience. Road building has been impressive in the country. In the early 1970's only a few miles of tarmac existed, now both good and really excellent surfaced ones connect almost everything habitable, more are being built. The frustration sets in when a well graded dirt road leads off somewhere which looks interesting, hired sedan cars are supposed to stay on the pavement, but we did chance a few of these little excursions without problem by staying only on good dirt roads.

Going local

Over the next weeks the car did allow many more small villages to be visited with similar greetings of Barka. In one we wound our way through narrow little lanes up a hill to its outskirts for an overview and look at the ▶

spring fed water system. Here a bunch of children greeted us, first running to pose then shyly running away only to return minutes later to pose some more. Young girls seemed to want the center of attention, showing off dresses or hair ribbons, while young boys would boss them about demanding they not be photographed.

In all of these small towns and villages as well as in Muscat we tended to eat at small cafés. They almost seem an institution in themselves, they are everywhere, normally serving local customers. Tourist visitors seemed a novelty to most, so prices are low. The food was generally good though in one particularly cheap one, under a £1 for a meal each, the meat was a bit tough. The Indian paratta wrapped around chicken tended to be the most reliable, mutton was more variable but worth a try. Add to this a fresh salad of tasty tomatoes and cucumber and you have a meal. Nearly all the chefs are Indians from the state of Kerala who take pride in what they produce. One that we visited, more than once, did their delicately spicy chicken shredded much as Chinese restaurants in this country do roast duck. This was accompanied with a stack of freshly cooked paratta and the ubiquitous herb seasoned tomato salad. The cafés are a stronghold of male patronage, virtually never a women was seen. If women ▶



A camel crossing the road

جمال يعبر الطريق



Wadi

وادي



Graded Dirt Road in Wadi near Ar Rustaq

طريق ترابي في وادي قرب الرستاق

wanted food they would drive up, stay in the car and the café would send someone out to collect then deliver the order to the car. This in car approach was also used by some Omani men, sometimes with a master / servant attitude..

For a more upmarket local meal in Omani, instead of Indian, tradition try the local shuwa in a restaurant, meat slowly cooked in an underground clay oven. These restaurants will serve families, so within have separate eating chambers allowing woman to eat along with the men of the family. As a western couple my partner, dressed conservatively, never had a problem even if she was the only female in an otherwise all male environment.

Out in the desert

Oman really is very much a hot and dry desert country, a small part of the Arabian Desert which covers most of the peninsula. We were only sampling a small part of this yet found it is easy to see both some of the adaptations people make to live in this environment and aspects of the environment itself which make it fascinating.

It is also a country with much tribal and foreign hostility in its history and old forts are prominent on hilltops near any settlement, over 3000 of them. The Tourist Board and tour companies place great emphasis on them, a non-historian can be overwhelmed but its worth seeing at least a few. Many are in use as



Nakhla Fort

قلعة النخيل



New water pipe

أنابيب مياه



Road building

طريق في طور الإنشاء

mosques or religious training centers with restricted access for non-Muslims: some can be visited, more are interesting just as objects on skylines. The fort at Nizwa, as mentioned by Derick McGroarty in Islamic Tourism, issue 29, is a particularly fine example of one restored and developed for tourism.

Water to drink

Rain does fall here, mostly in the mountains, often in a heavy short burst beyond the holding capacity of the soil so flash floods result. Water is such an essential ingredient for survival. Small villages are often located near the bottom of mountain valleys just where the land flattens out to use springs and rivers percolating down. This does result in picturesque scenes but as it's so essential I wanted to explore the formative factor of the country. It can also get you away from the sparse but normal tourist routes. Some of this exploration was with the aid of Muscat Diving and Adventure Centre and a Land Cruiser, some was with our little hire car.

Traveling up Wadi Al Abyad on a tour with a 4X4 the kids in just such a small village again came out to greet and follow us about. The women stopped washing clothes in the stream, others came out of houses to meekly wave. It was a pleasant break to the drive. Tourists here were obviously not a frequent sight. Heading further toward the top of the wadi the permanently flowing water that supplies the village became evident, even with little fish in one pool. Over much of its course

this water flows underground but is supplied by aqueduct to the village. In another location on the way to Nizwa, just off the main road on one of the graded dirt roads, we found a wadi with miles of old well maintained working aqueduct. This was built well above the wadi bed to protect it from flash floods. These canals are part of the 2000+ year old Falaj water collective distribution system which aims to fairly distribute this scarce resource in levels of priority from drinking, to public baths, to washing to farming. Other countries (Italy, Afghanistan, Latin America, China, Japan, Korea, Morocco and more) have similar systems, here more than 3000 are still in use and some are World Heritage Sites. To add to this supply new desalination plants are being built at the coast and an extensive network of new water pipes are being installed.

Wadis

The rush of rain water leaves behind a terrain of rocks and pebbles with much of the finer soil washed away or exposed for winds to pick up. It's a harsh environment to survive in, the diversity of plants and animals that can live here is low with adaptations for moisture retention essential. The winds can leave the air saturated with dust but also produces stunning sand dunes. A "must do" activity is at least a little "dune bashing" with a 4X4 driving over the ever changing steep high ridges of sand. We headed into the heart of the Wahiba sands. We met Reinheld Thaumuller the owner of Al Areesh Desert Camp. This is a traditional Omani Bedouin temporary thatched camp, set up for the cooler months completely dismantled for the hottest summer months, it's then over 50C, with individual palm thatched sleeping tents and a large communal eating and socializing tent. From here a driver ▶



Wadi al-Abyad

الوادي الأبيض



Plants growing through the sand نباتات نمت في الرمال



Wahiba Sand

رمال الوهبة

took us out exploring the 200 metre high dunes and safely driving the roller coaster rides that you never thought a vehicle could do. Some Arabian-style entertainment, excellent local Omani food, a good comfortable night on proper beds then returning to our car the next day gave a taste of desert life.

More desert dunes west of Muscat in the Wadi Al Abyad region were also explored, not as large as in the extensive area of Ramlat Al Wahiba, but still impressive. The pervasive presence of sand must be nearly as formative a factor in culture as water. On the lee side of little hills, small walls, and even lone rocks sand accumulates. In the large dune areas plants do take root and shoot up green sprouts. It was great fun driving over dunes and across the

empty spaces of wadis. With relatively low numbers of people doing this not a lot of lasting damage is likely to be done, but if tourism goes on increasing it could become an issue. In some desert areas in the USA problems of erosion and habitat destruction have led to restrictions.

Following the course of rivers ultimately leads to the sea and one of my reasons for visiting. Oman has scuba diving that some have compared to the Red Sea without the hordes of divers. My specific interest was coral damaged by cyclone Gonu in June 2007 which was reported as regenerating so the Daymaniyat Islands Nature Reserve some way off Al Sawadi was on the itinerary. This isn't an article to go into coral or even diving other than to confirm it was regenerating, the diving and also snorkeling

was good. If you like the underwater world it is a location at least worth considering.

BOman offers a lot to see and experience for both Muslim and non-Muslim visitors, male or female. It has natural splendours, an interesting environment but also shopping in Muscat's Mutrah souks (for a more local and less expensive souk try the one in Seeb) and various modern malls, the great architecture of the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, quaint small villages. Yes, I'd go back. A useful book, even if not driving off road, is: Off-Road in the Sultanate of Oman by Jenny Walker and Sam Owen.

I had arrived in Oman fascinated but with only limited knowledge of the country. My weeks there upheld the fascination and taught me much. ■



The minaret of a mosque in Khasab

منارة مسجد الخصاب



Minaret at Muttrah in Muscat

منارة في مطرح بمسقط