

## Geography, History and Culture

**Facelift of cultural sites**The Sultanate's cultural heritage is evident in its 500 or more forts, castles and towers depicting its rich past. These have also proved to be a major attraction to international tourists and efforts are being made to renovate and restore the forts and other historical monuments to their former glory.

Notable among these are the Bait Al Nad Fort, Ibri Castle, Nizwa Fort and Bahla Fort, which has been listed on the Unesco World Heritage Site list.

**Forts and castles**Nizwa Castle - opened in January 2007 - is a powerful reminder of the town of Nizwa's invincibility through turbulent periods in Oman's long history.

The town of Nizwa has a strategic location at the crossroads of vital caravan routes linking interior, Muscat and Dhofar regions. The most striking feature of the castle is the central tower - a colossal 150-foot diameter circular tower soaring 115 feet above the rest of the fortification, complete with battlements, turrets, secret shafts, false doors and wells...

**Al Batinah - Ancient Capitals -** And home of Sinbad the Sailor! Forts, castles and long sandy beaches are the main attractions of this coastal region. Sohar is a maritime town, said to be the home of the legendary Sinbad the Sailor. Due to its maritime importance, Sohar, or Majan as it was known, was also the capital of Oman centuries ago. After the destruction of the city in the 10th century it never regained its former glory, living a shadowy existence through the centuries. However, in the past 30 years it has developed again to become one of the most important economic centres in Oman. It is still sometimes referred to as the Gateway to China as it was the port from where traders embarked on their journeys to China. The Sohar Fort is a landmark with historic significance, built on a hilltop with five impressive towers. Today, it houses a museum with collections of artifacts representing different periods of Omani history. The Sohar Fort Museum was opened in February 1993. Displays include artifacts from the ancient copper trade in Sohar, exhibits demonstrating the historical importance of the city, its history of navigation and overseas trade with China, as well as other archaeological items of interest. Suwaiq, Rustaq and Nakhl are particularly interesting for their forts, old, well-preserved houses and magnificent mountains. The Nakhl Fort is an exceptional example of the historical grandeur of the area and has been classified as pre-Islamic. Restoration was carried out in the 9th and 16th centuries. The fort is built over three levels, with winding routes leading from one level to another. From the summit, visitors can enjoy spectacular views of the countryside and the mountains. The hot springs of Ayn A' Thowarah are located close to the fort and it is also the location of a picturesque oasis. Rustaq was once the capital of Oman and is home to the Rustaq Fort, which was built four centuries prior to the dawn of Islam in Oman. It is an imposing structure built on three levels, containing separate houses, an armoury, a mosque and four towers with the tallest measuring over 18.5 metres. Hazm Fort, also in Rustaq, is an outstanding example of Omani Islamic architecture and was built in AD 1711. An outstanding feature of this fort is that the roof is built on columns, and contains no wooden supports.

Rustaq is also an area of healing and warm springs with the most notable being Ain al Kasafa. Its water runs at 45°C and is often regaled for providing relief for rheumatism and skin diseases due to its high sulphur content. There are three popular wadis to visit in the area; Wadi Bani Ghafar; Wadi al Sahtan and Wadi Bani Auf. The mountains are pitted with caves such as Al Sanaqha Cave with its own subterranean springs. Al Dakhliya - from Forts to rock climbing Mountains, handicrafts, wadis and places of historical interest are the main features of Al Dakhliya, which is famous as a trading region between the coast and the interiors and for Nizwa, its administrative capital, which is a verdant oasis. Nizwa Fort, which was completed in the 1650s, is among Oman's largest and oldest forts as well as one of the most visited national monuments. This historical edifice is an example of the ingenuity of Omani architecture. Set amid plantations of date palms, was built by Imam Sultan bin Saif Al Yaarubi. It took 12 years to build and to prevent marauders from looting Nizwa's abundant natural wealth, as well as to protect its strategic location on the crossroads of vital caravan routes. Nizwa Fort is characterised by its height, solid fortification and unique location in the middle of Nizwa town. Its walls are rounded and robust to withstand barrages of mortar fire and feature a maze of rooms, high-ceiling walls, doorways, terraces, narrow staircases and corridors. The most striking feature of the ramparts is the central tower, soaring 35 metres above the rest of the fortification, which allows stunning views of Nizwa and the surrounding areas. Given its pivotal place in Nizwa's history, this majestic edifice was among the first to be renovated by the Ministry of National Heritage and Culture as part of its far-reaching drive to preserve the Sultanate's rich heritage. Used as a seat of government in its time, it is still used for meetings between the people and the Ruler's representative each month. The Nizwa Fort has undergone new site interpretation programme. Another landmark nearby is the recently refurbished Nizwa souk. Browse shops and stalls to appreciate Nizwa's well-known silver jewellery or watch expert craftsmen in action as they fashion khanjars and a range of other artifacts. The weekly (Friday) markets with goat and cattle auctions are much like traditional auctions that take place elsewhere in Oman, especially on the eve of Eid festivities. Bahla is a small town situated a few kilometres from Nizwa and is shrouded in mystery and superstition. Surrounded by a 12-kilometre wall, the historic Bahla Fort with 15 gates and 132 watchtowers is one of the oldest forts in the country, with some parts dating back to the pre-Islamic period. The fort and the surrounding area is on UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites and is currently undergoing major restoration. The other famous landmark in this region is the Jabrin Fort, which is considered one of the finest and most picturesque structures of its kind. Built in the mid-1600s the castle was not conceived as a fortification, but as a palace for the imams and is an example of Islamic architecture with wooden inscriptions and paintings on the ceiling. Consisting of three floors and 55 rooms, one of the most interesting features of Jabrin Fort is the Falaj Jabrin, the ancient system of irrigation, which flows through it ramparts. The Jebel Akhdar or

"Green Mountains" enhance Al Dakhliya's natural beauty, which at 2,980 metres is the highest in Oman. The mountain range acquired its name as the slopes are covered with vegetation throughout the year. With its many sheer rock faces, trekking trails, wadis and cave systems, it is the perfect destination for outdoor enthusiasts. Al Dhahirah - A desert plain with UNESCO World heritage archaeological Site - The Bat Tombs (4000 BC) The Dhahirah region is a desert plain, which extends from the foothills of the Western Hajjar Mountains towards the Empty Quarter. Jebel al Khawr, a mountain peak in Yanqui, separates it from the Dakhliya region. This region is definitely more low-key than the others, but with its many wadis or oases, it provides for a good camping site. Ibri is one of the main towns in the region and is famous for its historic forts as well as archaeological findings, which are now on the Unesco World Heritage Site list. Ibri is one of the oldest inhabited areas in Oman. Ibri Castle, a remnant of the original walled city, is a robust structure built to withstand time and a harsh environment. Within its walls is the beautifully restored Friday Mosque, which continues to be used by townspeople to this day. Other important forts include the Jebel al Shahshah Fort and the Al Aswad Fort. In 1976 a team of Danish archaeologists discovered what has come to be known as the Bat Tombs, an ancient burial ground believed to date back to 4,000 BC. This is the second site in Oman to be listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The southern section of the site consists of "beehive" tombs, which contain up to five graves in each, while another section contains tombs, which appear to have been communal graves. In both types of tombs, red pottery similar to the "Jumdat Nasr" from Iraq was found. The Bat Tombs constitute one of the most complete collections of settlements and necropolises of the third millennium BC. Buraimi was once a quiet town bordering Al Ain in the UAE and Oman, but has now developed into a thriving industrial centre and its old fort stands witness to this change. In addition to its many forts and historic ruins including Al Araqi, Al Ghabi and Al Khandaq, the high point of this region is the Wednesday Souk, which is run entirely by women. The area's handicrafts include pottery, leatherwork, saddlebags, palm weaving and wickerwork. Al Sharqiyah - Azure seas and virgin beaches, resting turtles and dramatic gorges and serene wadis There are three distinct areas to Al Sharqiyah including the coastal area on the Indian Ocean, the desert dunes and oases, the urban city of Sur and its suburbs. Sur is a placid coastal town, which has played an important role throughout history, particularly in overseas trade with East Africa. The city is situated on a large lagoon, which is used today as a natural port. Sur is famous for its dhow yard where traditional fishing vessels such as dhows and sambuks are built. This is becoming a popular attraction for visitors along with the city's two forts and small Maritime Museum, which charts the history of shipbuilding in the town. Ferry trips across the narrow khawr or inlet transports visitors to the small and traditional fishing village of Ayega. Wadi Shaab is a perennial water spring and one of the most beautiful places in the region. There are many springs, caves and falaj or irrigation canals in the Al Sharqiyah region. In Ibra, the hot springs of Ain al Milah are famous for relieving skin complaints, while in Al Mudaibi, the springs of Ain al Harid are also known for their therapeutic value. The second largest cave chamber in the world was discovered in Wadi Bani Jabir in the Al Sharqiyah region. The Majlis al Jinn (Home of the Genie) is estimated to be about the size of seven aircraft hangars and more intrepid visitors can explore the cave with experienced climbing guides. Inside the cave are colourful stalactites and stalagmites. There is another cave system close-by with over 5 kilometres of passages to explore for the experienced cavers. Massirah and Alexander the Great Massirah, Oman's largest island is said to be Alexander the Great's base, referring to it as "Serepsis", today, it is a quiet island with the main occupation of the islanders being weaving and making fishing nets. Massirah is accessed by a daily ferry service and by Oman Air's domestic flights. The beaches of Ras Al Hadd and Ras Al Junayz are not only famous nesting grounds for green turtles but Ras Al Hadd has historic importance as a hidden air base was built here during World War II, and traces of its presence still remain. In absolute contrast lie the great Wahiba Sands, where longitudinal dunes which are 200 kilometres long and 100 kilometres wide soar up to 150 metres and appear in a variety of hues from orange to deep amber. This provides a great outdoor experience and is best explored in 4x4 vehicles. Most tours include a stop at a Bedouin campsite where guests can share a meal with the locals and gain a taste of authentic desert life. Al Wusta -The heart of Oman's wildlife Dolphins, migratory birds and sea birds to Oryx, gazelle and Lynx. In Ras Darah and Ras Duqm it is possible to see the various natural rock formations caused by centuries of erosion. The desert region in the area is home to indigenous animals such as the Arabian oryx, Nubian Ibex, Arabian gazelle, caracal Lynx desert rabbits, foxes, mountain goats and over 130 different species of birds. The Arabian Oryx Project in Jiddat al-Harasis was established by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos in 1974 and has been added to the UNESCO World Heritage Site list. The reserve has succeeded in reintroducing the endangered Arabian oryx to their natural habitat, as well as protecting other species of animals, such as the Nubian ibex, sand foxes, and birds like the bustard and sand grouse. Al Wusta's 170-kilometre coastline is unique in that each beach is different. While some are rocky and shingled, others feature clean, white sand. All coastal areas receive light summer rains and benefit from moderate temperatures with cool breezes. Dhofar - An Indian Monsoon climate and lush vegetation former Palace of The Queen Sheba Situated at the extreme south of the country, Dhofar is dramatically different from the rest of Oman, or for that matter anywhere in the Gulf, mainly because it benefits from the annual Indian monsoon, locally known as Khareef. With the abundance of water, the landscape features lush greenery, cascades, streams and an ethereal misty ambience. Dhofar covers a third of the country and has a varied terrain. The high dunes of the Empty Quarter are found here as well as unexplored caves and numerous sinkholes in the steep mountain vales. Situated on the coast is Salalah, Oman's second largest city. Salalah, the administrative capital, has its own international airport and seaport, and is definitely an attraction to feature on the "must visit" list while in Oman. In July and August, the monsoon is at its peak and the temperatures are at their lowest. The ruins at Khawr Rawri are reputed to be that of the palace of the Queen of Sheba. After a bout of heavy rains the water cascades through the cliffs and flows to the sea through Khawr Rawri offering unparalleled views of the sea and the cliffs. Another distinct connection of the region to biblical times is the presence of frankincense trees in Dhofar. Known locally as luban. For most of the year, the unspoiled beaches of Salalah are ideal for scuba diving, canoeing, sailing, jet skiing and diving. Hotels such as the Hilton Salalah and Crowne Plaza Salalah offer access to watersports. Mughshayl, an immaculate stretch of beach, features a blowhole that displays dramatic bursts of water and foam

sometimes reaching 15 metres in the air.

Taqah on the Dhofari coastline was once a prosperous port and has been a significant trading centre of the ancient world, remains are found at Samhuran, an ancient city, which is thought to date back to 3,000 BC. Inscriptions are still visible on the walls and columns of the citadel. Modern day Taqah has silver-white beaches, fresh water springs, caves and grottos.

Mirbat has a spectacular landscape, from its coastline to the impressive peaks of Jebel Samhan, the highest of which stands at 1,450 metres. The Citadel of Mirbat was built in the traditional Omani style of defensive architecture, which is typical of many of the structures built in the area. Marbat is rich in natural springs, caves and grottos.