

Muscat

CAPITAL ATTRACTION Muscat, the capital city is a perfect blend of old and new. The city enjoys a dramatic setting with mountains on one side and the Indian Ocean (Arabian Sea) on the other. Founded over 900 years ago, Muscat continues to retain traditional values, while also boasting ultra-modern shopping complexes, world-class highways, a host of international hotels, an international airport and a major seaport. Muscat, Muttrah and Ruwi form its core districts home to 500,000 people, the grand mosque and many forts, castles, souks, traditional houses, museums and watchtowers.

With its many hotels and solid tourism infrastructure, Muscat can cater to both the adventurous thrill seeker and those seeking rest and relaxation. The city's long coastline and temperate waters are ideal for almost every type of water sport, while the bustling souks never fail to fascinate with mind-boggling displays of fine silver jewellery, antiques, frankincense, carpets, rugs and other Omani souvenirs. Muscat, the old port area, is the site of the Sultan's palace. Two forts, Jalali and Mirani, which were built by the Portuguese in 1587 and 1588 respectively, dramatically guard the entrance to Muscat and serve as sentinels to the Sultan's palace. The forts were constructed on hills commanding a view of the city from the seaward side, as well as overlooking the old harbour. They were once vital points of defence for the city. Fort Jalali, also known as the East Fort, was built to strengthen the Portuguese defences and sits on the foundations of an earlier construction. History recounts that Fort Jalali provided a safe refuge in a period of strife for Sultan Faisal bin Turki. Both forts are still used by the police and the military, and therefore are not open to visitors. Fort Mirani, known as the Western Fort, lies at the end of the west wall overlooking the sea. It was built as a command headquarters and straddles a rocky elevation accessible by steps carved into the mountainside. **History & Culture - Heritage on display** Oman's rich cultural heritage is well preserved in Muscat's many museums. The Oman Museum in the Madinat Sultan Qaboos covers the entire sweep of Oman's 5,000-year history with displays on shipbuilding, Islam and fort architecture. Situated in Old Muscat, Bait Al Zubair is a museum in a traditional Omani house giving amazing glimpses of the lifestyle and traditions of ancient and modern Muscat. It is also available for private hire and provides a unique venue for cocktail parties or diners. The Natural History Museum in Muscat has four main exhibit sections. These are: Oman, a country of varied physical features; Oman through geological ages; diversified wildlife of Oman; and whales and other sea creatures. Muscat's third Portuguese fort, the Muttrah Fort, is located on a hill and was also built in the sixteenth century. To the east is a restored watchtower that overlooks Muttrah and the 100-step climb to the top is steep but well worth the effort for breathtaking views. Ruwi is a more modern and commercial suburb and predominantly a residential area. The National Museum in Ruwi charts the ruling dynasty and has amazing displays of Omani silverwork. It contains valuable collections of Omani heritage treasures such as silver ornaments, copper crafts and samples of known Omani ships. In addition, it is also home to a holy relic in the form of a letter dating back to the 8th century, sent by Prophet Mohammed to the rulers of Oman, A'bd and Jaifer, sons of Al Julanda, inviting the people of Oman to Islam. There is also a special section displaying the belongings of the Al Busaidi dynasty, rulers of Zanzibar. The Sultan's Armed Forces Museum in the Bait Al Falaj Fort has an excellent outline of Omani military history. Muttrah is a suburb of the capital city and is home to the traditional souk. Despite modern shopping centres in the capital, the old market of Muttrah is still an important supply centre for Omanis. Here, visitors can find everything from spices to houseware, fabrics, toys, antiques, gold and silver. Muttrah's mercantile importance is highlighted by the fact that even in past centuries the port was a starting point for commercial caravans into the interior. The Sur Al Lawatiya district in Muttrah offers an authentic view of Oman, as it was featuring a labyrinth of tightly packed traditional houses surrounding the Al Jam! Mosque, the district is marked by a network of narrow lanes that can only be accessed by one of the main gates through the old city wall.**SEE ALSO: Doha City Guide**