*Oman*

**Introduction**

Facing eastward towards the Arabian Sea, Oman is a Middle Eastern destination that has only recently been discovered as a beautiful tourist destination. In fact, many people did not know that Oman even existed until the 1970’s, when the country slowly and discreetly began opening its doors to tourists from around the world. Bordered by Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and the United Arab Emirates, Oman has been a large trade center for hundreds of years; however, at the insistence of a succession of conservative sultans, the country remained isolated and unwelcoming to travelers until recent years. Sultan Qaboos bin Sa’id, who has ruled Oman for over 40 years, has now pushed his country into what can be described as a “renaissance”, opening the doors to cultural exploration.

With a wide range of geographical features and cultural attractions, this Middle Eastern gem has something to interest nearly any traveler. Muscat, the capital city of Oman, offers visitors both breathtaking mountain views as well as sun-baked beaches. From there, travelers can witness a spectacular view of smooth desert sands from a hot air balloon. Meticulously restored forts lie alongside the villages outside of Muscat, waiting to be discovered by visiting history buffs. Shopping enthusiasts can scan the stalls of traditional marketplaces, where the practice of haggling ensures fair prices.

Compared to many Middle Eastern countries, Oman is very open to Western ideas and practices. Its people place a very high value on education and cultural enrichment. However, it is important for visitors to remember that Omani people are very pious and follow traditional Islamic values very closely. While it is considered acceptable to wear Western bathing suit styles at the beach or at hotel pools, it is advisable to err on the conservative side in order to show respect to the country’s ways.

**History**

Religion plays a large role in Oman’s history. Like most countries in its region, Oman was deeply shaped by the presence of Islam in the seventh century. Unlike most Islamic countries, however, Oman is the only country that predominantly practices Ibadhism. This form of the Islamic religion is very distinct from Sunnism and Shiaism because it allows the community to select its own leaders.

The Omani resisted Persian forces for much of history until the 1600’s, and were only briefly conquered in certain regions. Oman came into contact with Europeans for the first time in 1508, when Portuguese troops occupied the country’s coastline. Since 1650, when the Omani expelled the Portuguese, Oman has remained an independent country.

Shortly after gaining complete independence from the Portuguese, Oman shifted its political power from the traditional religious leaders (called imams) to hereditary sultans. With this shift in power, the Sultan of Oman went on to conquer parts of the southern Arabian Peninsula as well as parts of the eastern African coast. This era of conquest boosted wealth due to extensive amounts of trade, and Oman became one of the most powerful countries in the Middle East.

Oman was an object of interest in Europe for much of the 18th century. In the 19th century, Oman conducted several peace treaties with Great Britain. This became very beneficial to the people of Oman; during the struggle for succession following the death of Sultan Sa'id bin Sultan Al-Busaid in 1856, the British helped to mediate. In 1861, the empire that the Omani had built was split into two entities. Oman and Muscat remained as one, while Zanzibar and the other African territories separated and paid annual subsidies to Oman. The African territories gained their independence from Oman in 1964, leaving the country as it is today.

The current sultan, Qaboos bin Sa’id, took power in 1970 when he overthrew his father, Sa’id bin Taymur. Confronted with the issues of disease, illiteracy, and poverty that plagued his country, Qaboos bin Sa’id was determined to better Oman. He abolished many of his father’s harsh, conservative laws while promoting a more modern structure of government. Since gaining power, he has improved the state of healthcare, education, and transportation in Oman. Because of his efforts, the country has been continuously undergoing a reformation; now, Oman is a center of beauty and culture rivaled by few in the Middle East.

**Climate**

Oman encompasses many different geographical features, such as mountains, desert, and seaside. The center of the country consists mostly of desert plains, bordered by mountains in the north and south. The coastline, which touches the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Oman, and the Persian Gulf, spans 2,092 kilometers.

Like any desert region, the center of the country is typically very dry and hot. The coastline also experiences high temperatures, but is high in humidity. The summer season can be very volatile in Oman, and travelers should take note of the summer monsoons and sand storms that are likely to occur between May and September. The prime time to visit Oman lies between November and March, when the average temperature is a moderate 70-80 degrees F.

Except for the Southern region of the country (where the summer monsoons occur), Oman does not experience much rainfall annually.

**Government**

Oman is a monarchy ruled by hereditary sultans, the current sultan being Qaboos bin Sa’id. The sultan rules with the help of 30 ministers, who are hold responsibilities in 28 different ministries. The ministers are chosen by the sultan himself, and their main function is to provide the sultan with political advice. Every final decision, however, is ultimately made by the sultan.

In 1991, Qaboos formed the Majlis al-Shura, or Consultative Council. This council was formed in order to allow the people of Oman to participate more in their country’s government. Each of the 59 districts of Oman sends three candidates to be reviewed by the sultan and his ministers; one representative is chosen from each district to become part of the Consultative Council. Oman has enjoyed universal suffrage for all individuals 21 and older since 2003.

Like many other Islamic countries, Oman’s judicial system is heavily based on the principles of Quaranic laws. The Ministry of Justice has been in charge of the entire Omani court system since 1999.

**Economy**

Oman’s economy is heavily dependent on its oil reserves, which have begun to dwindle over the years. Although it is not considered as wealthy a country as it used to be, Oman still holds a middle-income economy. Its GDP as of 2010 was $70.53 billion. 1.4% of Oman’s GDP comes from agriculture, with 50.3% coming from services and 48.2% coming from industry. The GDP per capita, as of 2010, was calculated at $25,800.

Because its oil resources are slowly running out, the Omani government has been working to diversify economically. Oman plans to put more energy into agriculture and the travel industry in order to keep its economy strong.

**People**

The people of Oman are known for being incredibly generous and friendly. Visitors will always feel a sense of warmth and welcome while travelling throughout the country.

Oman has a population of 2,967,717. 55% of the population lives in or near the capital city, Muscat. About 215,000 citizens live in the southern regions of the country, with the last 30,000 living in the Musandam Peninsula. 72% of Oman’s population lives in cities rather than rural areas.

Education has always been of high importance of the people of Oman. 81.4% of the population is literate. Although there is only one major public university in Oman (Sultan Qaboos University), the country has about 20 institutions for higher education. These institutions provide training for teachers, technical jobs, and careers in the healthcare industry. The Omani are also very healthy people, with a fairly low infant mortality rate (16 out of every 1000 live births) and a life expectancy of almost 74 years.

**Safety**

Crime rates are very low in Oman, making it a very safe destination for travelers. However, visitors are advised to take standard precautions and use common sense at all times. Visitors should always protect their valuables from theft and avoid unfamiliar areas after dark.

Also, while there has been no recorded incidence of terrorist attacks against U.S. citizens or facilities in Oman, visitors are advised to remain alert. It is recommended that travelers from the U.S. keep their travel times and routes varied and keep their schedules from becoming predictable. Also, treat all mail and packages from unfamiliar sources with caution.

**Things to Do**

* Visit the Grand Hyatt hotel in Muscat for a cup of tea and an eyeful of beautiful architecture.
* Visit the Al-Jalali fort in the East or the Al-Mirani fort in the West. These forts were built at the same time in an effort to ward off Portuguese invaders in the sixteenth century.
* To experience the deep-rooted religious culture of Oman, visit the Grand Mosque in Muscat.
* Shop at the Mutrah Souq, a traditional market in Muscat.

**Other Information:**

* Languages: Arabic (official), English, Baluchi, Urdu, Swahili, Hindi, some Indian dialects.
* Telephone Code: 968
* Predominant Religion: Islamic
* Valid passport and visa are required for entry.