

Katherine Goodsell explores one of the Gulf's lesser-known regions

# Oman

## Beyond Muscat!



The Dhofar coast



Beehive Tombs in the Jebel Akhdar mountains

### FACT FILE

A ten-day classic tailor-made trip to Oman including return flights, transfers, four-star hotel accommodation and an English-speaking guide costs from £1,845 per person. For further details please call Katherine on 01869 276 278.



### The Wahiba Sands

The golden sands of the Wahiba desert are believed to have existed for about 6,000 years. This fascinating and beautiful place, with dramatic dunes up to 80 metres high, boasts 150 species of plants and 200 species of mammals, birds and reptiles. The sands are also home to a nomadic tribal people, the Bedu, whose traditional lifestyle in one of the world's harshest environments has always been supported by strong tribal and family identity. A sunset over these shifting sands, with an extravagant mixture of honey-coloured hues and deepening crimson, is a mesmerising experience.

### Nizwa Livestock Market

An early morning visit to Nizwa livestock market provides an excellent insight into an important element of Bedu culture. Tribal people from remote mountain villages travel to the town every Friday and gather in the main square with their livestock. Interestingly, business here is as much a woman's affair as a man's, and the smooth white lines of the men's traditional attire (the dishdash) are interspersed with the bright splashes of colour of the women's traditional dress.

### Jebel Akhdar mountains and Forts of the Interior

As the white buildings and glistening turquoise waters of Muscat faded into the distance, our journey inland entered the rugged and imposing world of the Jebel Akhdar mountain range. This formidable and isolating barrier between the fertile coastal plains and the sparsely inhabited Empty Quarter is a dramatic land of castle forts and watch towers, dry wadis and lush oases. Under the reign of the Sultan Qaboos, and following an impressive restoration programme, many forts have opened their dungeons, secret passageways and traditional Omani artwork to visitors.

The heights of the Jabal Akhdar or Green Mountains now beckon. The highest peak, Jebel Shams, rises to 3,075 metres but the 'Mountain of



Naklar Fort

the Sun' is justly famed for its exhilarating views of the deep Wadi Ghul, fittingly known as the Grand Canyon of Arabia. Our next stop, the Saiq Plateau, was formerly a restricted zone but is now accessible with a permit and 4WD vehicle. Here the air is clear, the climate cool and the cultivated natural spring-fed land a swathe of green. In the spring, fruit and almond orchards are awash with blossom and our stroll through the farmed terraces rewarded us with the sweet scent of locally-produced rose water.

### Salalah in the South

Departing Muscat, the short flight south traverses the seemingly deserted landscape of the Empty Quarter to enter the enchanting region of the Dhofar, home to Oman's second city, Salalah. During the summer months the mountains, watered by the light khareef (southwest monsoon), transform into a vivid carpet of green whilst on the farms of the coastal plain coconut palms, banana and papaw trees flourish all year round. The ambience is distinctly tropical. My exploration of the beautiful coastline was enhanced by the ruins of the ancient city of



View of the creek from Sumhuram



Nizwa cattle market

Sumhuram nearby. Created for the export of frankincense (the trees still grow in abundance in the region) the site enjoys magnificent views across the peaceful creek below and out to the dazzling ocean beyond. Camels and cows graze, birds fish and goats are shepherded in an environment seemingly untouched by modernity.

There is so much to discover in Oman, but don't forget to save a little time for rest and relaxation beside the emerald waters and white sands of the Arabian Sea.

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Al Hanura village near Nizwa

