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Feature Sample

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Travel feature written for a UK lifestyle magazine following a visit to the Sultanate of Oman.

Although this trip was arranged by Ian Bennett, it was specially supported by the Omani Government following previous experiences in the country.

For this visit the government arranged special access to government ministers and extensive additional travel across the Sultanate.

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Oman - Long Haul Bliss

Ian Bennett samples Arabian hospitality in the Sultanate of Oman

Sun, sand and clear blue skies might spell your favourite European resort, but add luxury hotels, magnificent mountains, sun kissed deserts, forts, palaces, sparkling gold domed mosques, mysterious souks with aromatic spices and glittering gold, and a spotlessly clean environment to the equation and you've really got something special.

Like a Disney theme park - but for real - the Sultanate of Oman is spotlessly clean, brimming with sights to see, places to go and things to do. And with world class hotels the Omani's are waking up to tourism.

Built to accommodate visiting Heads of State, the Al Bustan Palace Hotel was the most expensive in the world to build. Even so, the likes of you and I can wander in for tea and scones on the terrace - all wonderfully English but in delightfully impressive Arabic surroundings. But for my money Qurum's Gulf Hotel commands the most magnificent position in the whole of the Arabian Gulf. Its manicured lawns and spotless pool beckon from sunrise to sunset, when casting its glorious glow over everything in sight, the big orange disc slips quietly into the sea. Could dinner have a more romantic backdrop?

Elsewhere there's everything from fast food to slow cuisine, and being so close to the Orient these are real Arabian, Indian, Thai and other oriental restaurants. After eating the real McCoy and paying so little for it, dining out at home will never seem the same again. Alcohol is available within the hotels but it's not allowed outside or on the beaches, so that great European affliction of package holidays - the lager lout - just doesn't exist. Hurrah for sanity.

For major sightseeing a British license is valid and driving up into the magnificent Hajar mountain range is breathtaking. From ophiolitic rocks looking for all the world like some earthbound lunar landscape to land locked fjords where the water is deep azure blue and as still as a water colour painting, truly, the scenery is awesome.

The beaches in Oman are some of the best in the world. A handful have been developed with sun shades and refreshment bars, yet still don't have even a fraction of the people on them you would have at a European resort. Most remain completely unspoilt and in two weeks you might hardly ever share a beach with more than two people.

Many Omani villages remain as they were years ago with houses reminiscent of biblical times. But the niceties of the twentieth century are all there too, living side by side with tradition.

A shoppers delight, everything from designer clothes to hand made gold jewellery can be found in the modern shopping centres, each resplendent in polished marble, gleaming chrome and magnificent stained glass, and usually flanked by the inevitable fast food purveyors.

But the true flavour of the Middle East lives in the old souks where you'll find feverish activity, bartering and banter, and an atmosphere as highly charged as you can imagine. Bartering is the rule, and it's fun.

Oman is a country of contrasts. The old walled city of Muscat has its palace, forts and Government buildings. Shopping centres, major hotels and activity centres like the Scuba diving club and boating marina are mainly in or around the capital area, but venture into the interior or take an internal flight down to Salalah and the delights of frankincense trees, Job's tomb or the old capital of Nizwa will be all around.

Travel to the Arabian Peninsula has become relatively easy, although shopping around for good deals can pay dividends. As for when to visit, Oman is an ideal haven during our chilly months of October to April, and even during Oman's coolest months of December to February maximum temperatures are similar to our high summer. However, beware the hot months when they are regularly well over the 100F mark, and 130F in June and July.

Visas

Visa are required and can be obtained from the Oman Embassy
Tel 0171-584-3700
Fax 0171-225-0339.
Destination hotels can also obtain visas.

On the Internet

Oman Ministry of Information site at www.omanet.com
Some detail & photographs of Oman on www.cybase.co.uk/media/man
Independent travel to Oman soon to be featured on www.autoworks.co.uk

Hotels

Al Bustan Palace Hotel
From £180 excl
Tel 00-968-799666 Fax 00-968-799600

Sheraton Oman Hotel
From £92 excl
Tel 00-968-799899 Fax 00-968-795791

Gulf Hotel
From £64 excl
Tel 00-968-560700 Fax 00-968-560650

Holiday Inn Salalah
From £52 excl
Tel 00-968-235333 Fax 00-968-235137

Activities

Marina Bander Al-Rowdha Boating, Chandlery, Scuba diving, Swimming.
Tel 00-968-737288 Fax 00-968-737285

Airlink
Light aircraft sightseeing
Tel 00-968-597152 Fax 00-968-597471

Arabian Sea Safaris
Game fishing, Beach adventure, Boat tours
Tel 00-968-782112 Fax 00-968-782113

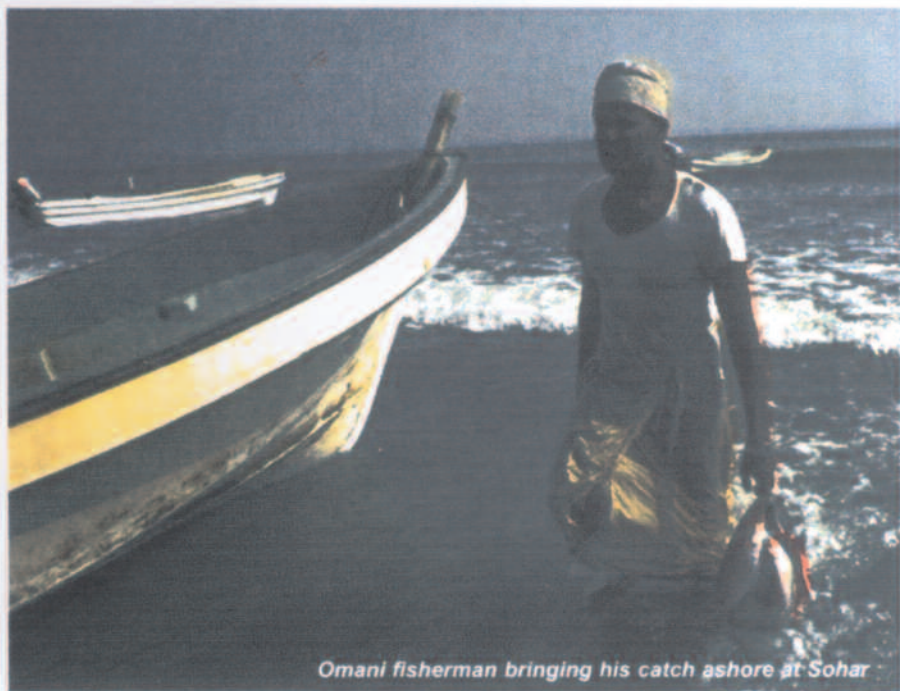
Gulf Explorers
Hot air balloon sightseeing
Tel 00-968-704719 Fax 00-968-704719

Zubair Tours
City tours, Dhow trips, 4wd Safaris, Scuba diving, Camel safaris
Tel 00-968-701487 Fax 00-968-794980

Car Hire

Mark Rent-a-Car
Tel 00-968-562444 Fax 00-968-565434

Rent-a-Car
Tel 00-968-561427 Fax 00-968-601056



Omani fisherman bringing his catch ashore at Sohar