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Culture, sand and sun: a day in Oman just isn't enough

With a 24-hour stopover in Muscat, **Rowena Carr-Allinson** finds too-short bliss in a true slice of Arabia

MUSCAT in the Sultanate of Oman is set on the edge of rough desert landscapes overlooking sparkling emerald seas. Today it's a sought-after holiday spot for those in search of pristine diving waters, year-round sunshine and an authentic Arabian experience. Nothing like its glitzy neighbour, Dubai.

It's my third visit in a decade and is something of a pilgrimage. Muscat will always hold a special place in my heart as it's the place my husband chose to spring a surprise proposal on me, one knee in the sand, on our tenth anniversary – although neither of us noted the date at the time. Trust me, “Waity-Katy” hasn't done too badly.

It was a sleepless flight

on Oman Air, but on the upside, it's been a long time since I felt so nicely treated in economy, making the most of the socket for my laptop, trying to figure out the Wifi and watching the odd movie. What most impressed me though, was the great service from the smiling stewardesses in their lovely, glamorous veiled pillbox style hats. Elegant air travel, like in the good old days.

The heat in Muscat is a knock-out: it envelops you and races down your throat. Luckily we'd booked a car and before we knew it, we were ensconced in air-conditioned comfort. Our driver, who cut a dashing figure in his traditional Omani dish-dash robe and sharp sunglasses, obviously had a penchant for rock ballads. And so, exhausted, we watched the scenery flash by to Bryan Adams. Without a doubt, the best part of travelling is the surreal moments in familiar places in unfamiliar circumstances.

Speeding through the vast ochre countryside dotted with white blocky buildings and the odd blue minaret, all blanketed in a hot wobbly haze, we eventually reach the



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Sultan's Al Alam Palace. A vision in turquoise mosaic and gold leaf – hidden behind impressive black gates adorned with the Sultan's coat of arms bearing a traditional Omani dagger, it was built in 1972, and apparently has a bowling alley in the basement.

The Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said, or the king, as his people refer to him, appears to be incredibly popular. From our last visit we hear he reinvests a substantial part of his oil income back into the country, which explains the happy Omanis and sleek infrastructure including giant roundabouts featuring huge golden coffee pots, dolphins and other assorted national icons.

We're soon in the perfectly manicured wonderland that is the Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah resort. Whitewashed buildings sit beyond a row of palm trees, wedged

between the azure sea and the jagged toast-coloured mountains. The resort is made up of three properties, including Al Waha (the oasis), geared towards families, Al Bandar (the town), with several bars and restaurants, a glorious beach, giant swimming pools and a lazy river, and the smartest of the three properties, Al Husn (the castle) where, rumour has it, Kate Moss and Tom Cruise have stayed (separately).

The six-star plush palace sits high on the cliff side and oozes luxury. The all-Arabian golden décor is pure opulence, especially the vast lobby's water features, complete with gold mosaic flooring and flamingos.

The room, overlooking the beach, is sumptuous. Rich damson silks, marble and latticed mahogany panels set off the gold and bronze colour scheme. The perfect place for a much-needed power nap.

It's frustrating, but our 24-hour stopover means we have to be very selective. We could laze in the sun, go diving, dolphin watching or hit the zen Chi spa, but we plump for a memory lane "best of" dash with a stop at Qantab beach, a visit to the souk and a drink at the Chedi.

Qantab, just a couple of miles from the hotel, has a beautiful tourist-free beach. It's Friday so it's busy with families out play-

ing cricket, swimming fully clothed and picnicking. We're the only Europeans there and get a few inquisitive stares. Sitting a while, under the sun, we take it all in, sipping a Seven Up from a can with the old fashioned ring-pull. It's lovely to be back, and see it's not changed.

Next is the Muttrah souq, the perfect place to pick up a souvenir or two. A maze of tiny winding streets, the heat, hustle and bustle and exotic aromas are dizzying. It's a sea of black and white. Women are swathed in black abayas, while men wear white dish-dash robes and embroidered Krum hats. Small enough not to get lost in, it's worth venturing off the main drag for better prices and more authentic experience. Haggling is part of the fun. Shopkeepers are extremely friendly and a smile and joke goes a long way. As does reverse psychology. The best buys include spices like saffron, kohl makeup, silver charms and the aromatic frankincense which, to me, has become synonymous with this country.

Another Muscat must is a visit to the Chedi. The all-white Moorish architecture and killer attention to detail make it one of the region's most luxurious hotels. Each piece of furniture, each bit of greenery is pristine. The glamorous restaurant with its crystal chandeliers over food stations encased in glass is a mouth-watering odyssey – from sushi to patisserie. The desserts look especially scrumptious today, from colourful rainbow layered cakes to delicious looking macarons, but for now we'll stick to a quick drink on the terrace, despite the still stifling heat at sundown.

For dinner, the idea is to push the boat out. Literally. Well, almost. La Sultanah, one of Muscat's finest restaurants is a kick back to the glory days of cruising. Set up in a chic ocean liner style with 30s inspired décor and views over the bay below, it feels plush and elegant. Details like the metallic banisters and swirling carpets in greys and blues only add to the ambiance, never mind the menu which "sails to a different city" every night stopping in Sydney, New Orleans or Tokyo.

I go local with braised Omani kingfish

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with a red pepper confit, while my husband travels to Japan with a sampling menu of tuna tartar, tender beef terriyaki and miso soup in cute china coffee cups. The food is just as good as the staff, who are grinning from ear to ear.

To really
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most of our jetlag, we head out into Muscat to explore the nightlife. Apparently the Park Inn's rooftop bar is hot but shut due to a recent typhoon, so we head to the new Zouk at the Crowne Plaza. It's a cosmopolitan crowd, and the décor is Miami cutting-edge cool. The girls have left their abayas behind, and it's hard to compute the no PDA rule. Just like in London, smokers congregate outside, groups of lads queue in hope, and the wealthiest hang by their white Porsches to impress the ladies.

Twenty-four hours is just long enough to whet the appetite, and convince us we'll have to come back and "do" Oman properly. On our Omani wish-list is a visit to the Musandam peninsula up North, a trip to Salalah, the capital of the Frankincense trade with a few days in the desert and more of those Omani breakfast pancakes.

Although Oman is moving forward, it's a relief to see that they are going about it in a very different way to their neighbours. Unspoiled and traditional, this is one Arabian enclave keen to protect its heritage and take it slowly. A wise choice.

Oman Air is the only airline to offer daily direct flights from London Heathrow to Muscat, with prices starting from £317 return, including all taxes. Book at omanair.com 08444 822309. Tel: (968) 2477 6666, www.shangri-la.com See www.shangri-la.com for the Shangri La Barr Al Jissah Resort's numerous packages and offers.



The sleek infrastructure includes giant roundabouts with huge golden coffee pots, dolphins and other national icons

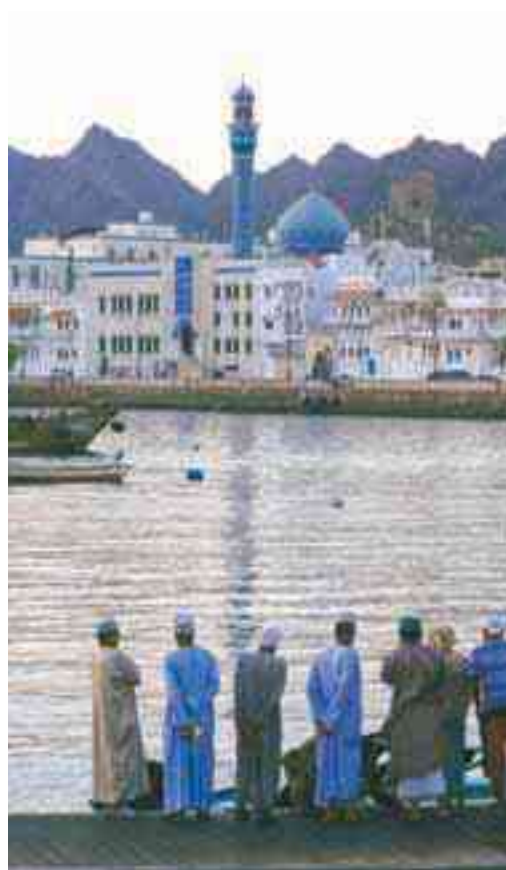
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Above: the cove where the the Shangri La lies.
Above right: the La Sultanah restaurant.



Left: a traditional view of the harbour with Omani fishermen. Below: a room at the Shangri La.

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