



Muscat



Frankincense sellers and chic café culture sit side by side in the Gulf's most fascinating city

The ancient kingdom of Oman has come a long way in a very short time. The unruly medieval fiefdom famed for its dates, frankincense and fierce warrior tribes stayed unchanged for centuries until the current ruler Sultan Qaboos kicked his father off the throne in 1970. Now the modern Omani will whip out a mobile phone from beneath his flowing white dishdasha robe, and the trusty ship of the desert has been replaced by butch 4x4s.

There's nothing scary about holidaying in this part of the Gulf: English is spoken widely, tap water is drinkable and you don't need any jabs. Oman has even lifted its ban on drinking alcohol during Ramadan, allowing certain hotels to serve non-Muslims during the Islamic fasting period.

But don't be fooled by all the Pizza Huts and KFCs into thinking that Muscat is another theme-park Gulf state: sure, this is a fast-developing country, but Muscat harbours no ambition to build itself into a Gulf version of Hong Kong.

You'll spend most of your time in the harbourside pockets of Muttrah and Old Muscat, and the beachside hotel strip of Qurum. The top-end hotels here are second to none and dining out is top-notch.

In fact, you could spend a week in Muscat and never stray from your glitzy hotel, except to grill on the superb golden beach and give your credit cards a work-out. But that would be a missed opportunity for a taste of authentic Oman. Inland lies another world that's easy to explore.

GETTING THERE

Oman Air (www.omanair.aero) flies direct from Gatwick; BA (www.ba.com) from Heathrow via Abu Dhabi; Emirates (www.emirates.com) Gatwick via Dubai

GETTING AROUND

Muscat is a city that is designed around the car. Taxi fares can mount up (Qurum-Muttrah 4 OR), so hiring a car makes sense, particularly if you intend to travel out to the surrounding area.



GOOD THINGS TO SEE AND DO

1
A walk in Muttrah port
Start early at the fish market, then head around the harbour to the turquoise minaret, and plunge into the *souk* – for a one-stop shop to pick up gold, frankincense and myrrh and to hunt down that must-have clockwork camel or mosque alarm clock. If you're up for a sweaty couple of miles stroll, push on round the bay to Old Muscat.



2
Marvel at Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque
This mind-blowing building could only have been funded with pockets as deep as those of the Sultan. It's as if someone commissioned a modern St Paul's with a blank cheque: inside are the world's biggest Persian carpet and Swarovski crystal chandeliers. To avoid being turned away, don't turn up in shorts or revealing clothes.
Closed Thur and Fri (under 10s not allowed in main prayer hall). Admission free.

3
A crash course in Omani culture
Bait al Zubair is the place to come when you need to know your *saif* (a straight sword) from your *khanjar* (curved dagger). This fine museum of Omani traditions and culture is an essential port of call – and a useful guide to what to look for when you're sorting out the tat from the treasure in the *souk*.
Closed Thur and Fri. Admission 1 OR.

4
Experience the solitude of the desert
Whether you travel by camel or 4x4, spending a night beneath the stars among the sinuously wind-sculpted dunes of the Wahiba Sands is an essential part of the Oman experience. Day excursion 40 OR.

5
Get a taste of old Arabia
Ancient Nizwa offers the best *souk* experience in Oman and it's within easy reach of Muscat. Try to go on Friday when the livestock market is in full swing and the air heady with dung and the bleating of goats. Day excursion 24 OR.



ESSENTIAL INFORMATION



Time difference GMT +4 hours

International dialling code 00968

Exchange rate £1 = 0.796 OR (1 OR = £1.26)

Visas Obtain visa on arrival in Oman (6 OR/£10)

Day-to-day costs 1ltr petrol 120 BZ; bag of frankincense 1OR; 500g orange-flavoured dates 5.500 OR; glass wine 1.600 OR

When to go January to April is the ideal time for winter sun. Temperatures are perfect for exploring by day, and soothingly cool in the evening

Recommended guidebook *Bradt Oman*, £13.99 (ISBN 1-841621-68-4)

Further Information Make sure to check the Foreign & Commonwealth Office website for latest travel advice, www.fco.gov.uk. General tourism advice can be found on www.omantourism.gov.om





GOOD PLACES TO EAT

1

D'Arcy's Kitchen

*Jawharat A'Shatti
Tel 2460 0234*
When you fancy something quick, simple and familiar to eat, join the expats who flock to D'Arcy's for yummy sandwiches, burgers, soups and salads. Grab something to read from the well-stocked rack of English language newspapers and magazines and while away an hour over a cappuccino and cake. And their prices include all taxes – hooray! Most dishes are in the 1-3.500 OR range.

2

Kargeen Café

*Madinat Qaboos
Tel 2469 2269
www.kargeencaffe.com*
Atmospheric oasis setting to eat traditional Omani grills with Arabic bread. Kargeen is a taste of old Arabia where you sit outdoors on cushioned benches in the shade of tamarind trees to a backdrop of bubbling water-pipes and fragrant smoke. But if it's too hot for comfort, you can move indoors to a chic air-conditioned room with high-backed leather chairs and squishy sofas. Mains 3-4 OR.

3

Mumtaz Mahal

Tel 2460 5907
A large expat Indian community means that Indian food in Muscat is top-notch, and nowhere has a better reputation than Mumtaz Mahal. This is an upmarket place set on a hilltop among the mangroves of the Qurum National Park. Laid-back live music from a trio playing traditional tabla and harmonium accompanies a menu full of old favourites and excellent treats from the tandoor. For a bit of theatre at the table, don't miss the famous 'snake coffee'. Mains 3-7 OR.

4

O Sole Mio

*Jawharat A'Shatti
Tel 2460 1343*
Smart Italian place with a pleasantly authentic Mediterranean ambience, plus it is easily walkable from several of the big Qurum beach hotels. You'll find all the usual Italian favourites on the menu – Parma ham, seafood or wild mushroom risotto, pasta with lobster, seafood and meat sauces. Pasta dishes 4-6 OR.

5

Tuscany at the Grand Hyatt

Tel 2464 1234
Authentic Italian in a swanky romantic setting modelled on a Tuscan villa. Tuck into antipasti (5-8 OR) including duck prosciutto and pan-fried scallops with truffles, pasta dishes (8-10OR) such as lobster ravioli, and for secondi, fish stew or roast pork with wild fennel. Service from mainly European staff is polished and professional.

TIPS

■ **Menus may look cheap at first, but you have to add on 17% in taxes and service charges.**

■ You don't need to pay hotel rack rates – look online to find the best deals or consider a package.

■ **Haggling is normal in souks and most small shops. Shops in malls, department stores and supermarkets have fixed prices.**

■ Although Omani cuisine is meat-

oriented, a vast amount of Indian restaurants means vegetarians are well catered for.

■ **During the holy month of Ramadan and the subsequent Eid festival, normal life is disrupted. Some cafés and restaurants may open at different times or close altogether. Be sensitive to the fact that Muslims are fasting; avoid eating drinking and smoking in public. Ramadan in 2008 runs from 1-30 September.**

■ If you fly to Muscat via Dubai, use your stopover time to shop for electronic goods, cameras, clothes and jewellery.



SHOPPING

■ *Muttrah souk* is the place to haggle for treasure and tat in Aladdin's cave shops festooned with chunky ropes of coral, amber and jade. You'll have endless fun picking over dusty tarnished jumbles of Bedouin ankle bracelets and earrings – but bargain hard over prices.

■ For designer clothes and more orthodox fixed-price shopping, try Muscat city centre mall or the *Jawharat a Shatti* centre in Qurum.

DRIVING

■ You can drive on a UK licence. Most hire cars are automatic. Tarmac roads are generally in good condition. Omani drivers are good by regional standards, but many like to travel with one hand on the wheel, while the other holds a mobile phone permanently glued to the ear – although on-the-spot fines are given for this offence. Tailgating is a national pastime. It is illegal to carry alcohol in your car and drink-driving is a serious offence.

GOOD PLACES TO STAY

Prices are for a standard double including breakfast and taxes in Feb 2008.
The prices quoted here are rack rates – try tour operators or look online for cheaper deals

1

Chedi

Tel 2452 4400

www.ghmhotels.com

At the Chedi you'll find style slave paradise in a sleek designer hotel with a restaurant that has been voted Muscat's best for the last four years. It's a way west of the Qurum area, but if you're staying here you're probably not going to be too worried about a few extra quid for taxis. Inside, the public areas exude a Japanese-influenced Zen minimalism, with the hard edges softened by colonial touches such as cane furniture and velvety cushions. Bedrooms also blend colonial chic with all mod cons.

● £232

2

Coral

Tel 2469 2121

www.coral-international.com

The Coral is a rare commodity in Muscat – a pleasant hotel at the cheaper end of the spectrum. You don't get beachfront location for this money – its posh neighbour the Grand Hyatt hogs all of the beach – but the sand is just a few minutes walk away. The whole hotel has been recently renovated in a light and airy style with plenty of arabic feel. Many of the simple bedrooms have partial sea views through glass walls that open onto the balconies. All are faultlessly clean and staff are very welcoming.

● £82

3

Grand Hyatt

Tel 2464 1234

www.muscat.grand.hyatt.com

At the western end of the Qurum beach area, the Grand Hyatt is a palatial extravaganza with lashings of Arabic flavour and all the restraint of a Las Vegas showgirl. Centre stage in the marble acres of the lobby is a life-sized revolving statue of an Arab horseman, surrounded by some of the best restaurants – such as the Italian Tuscany – and swankiest bars in town. Tastefully restrained bedrooms offer an ambience that is surprisingly modern and minimal after the glitz of the public areas.

● £200

4

Intercontinental

Tel 2468 0000

www.ichotelsgroup.com

Ugly on the outside, but inside this is a slick polished hotel with a high feelgood factor. It sits in a plum location in 35 acres of lush gardens right on Qurum beachfront, and next to the Jawharat a Shatti shopping complex. Triangular black glass lifts glide up and down in a cavernous marble atrium where there are numerous restaurants and cafés. The bedrooms are as posh as you could ask for in an impressively plush style with opulent fabrics; bathrooms are all slinky tiles and chocolate marble.

● £175

5

Ramada Qurum Beach

Tel 2460 3555

www.ramadamuscat.com

In the peaceful embassy area just off Qurum beach, this sensibly-priced business-oriented hotel is run with efficient friendliness. Bedrooms are a touch bland, but you can't fault the price (by Muscat standards, anyway). Since we inspected in February 2007, the hotel has been completely renovated, so should represent even better value for money.

● £94

6

Shangri-La Barr al Jissah Resort

Tel 2477 6666

www.shangri-la.com

You're rather out on a limb in this classy self-contained resort village on a stunning stretch of coast 30 minutes outside Muscat. But that's no hardship as everything you need – a plethora of multinational dining options, shops, bars and cafés and a health and beauty spa – is here.

● £170

