



IN THE LAND OF FRANKINCENSE

OMAN ENCHANTS TRAVELERS WITH ITS BLEND OF TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY ARABIAN CULTURE

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARY AND CHARLES LOVE

We’re standing on a bluff among the ruins of the former port of Samharam, a center of the frankincense trade in antiquity.

Overlooking the Arabian Sea, we take in panoramic views of the coastline. The best frankincense in the world is grown in and around the mountains behind us in Dhofar, Oman’s larg-

est and southernmost province. Ships from here once took the aromatic resin to every corner of the known world, then returned with spices, ceramics, textiles, exotic animals and more.

In those days, the narrow streets must have been abuzz with bargaining merchants. Now, all we hear are the calls of seabirds and the rush of a

south wind.

We’d wanted to visit Oman (officially the Sultanate of Oman) for years, particularly after our 1999 visit to Yemen, which piqued our interest in southern Arabia. Apart from learning about the country’s history and culture, we hoped to bring home exotic, frankincense-infused perfumes. What better

place to find unusual fragrances than the land of frankincense, where the resin has been traded for over 6,000 years?

A Brief Overview

Oman surprises us. Neither glitzy with glass and steel skyscrapers, like the Emirates, nor primitive, like neighboring Yemen, it offers a fascinating



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blend of old and new.

Archaeological sites, hundreds of historic forts and castles, and traditional villages provide glimpses into the past. Low-rise towns and souks (markets) retain their traditional charm. In contrast, we found ultramodern airports (Muscat International Airport was just voted by World Travel Awards “the world’s leading new airport”), excellent roads, five-star hotels and resorts, new mosques and a world-class opera house. Restaurants, restrooms and streets are clean and tidy, evidence of a people who take pride in their country.

Outside urban areas, rugged mountains, deserts and pristine coastlines with uncrowded beaches provide dramatic backdrops for recreation: hiking, horseback riding, birdwatching, snorkeling, scuba diving and more.

Our driver/guide, Ibrahim, tells us that the country is safe and has little poverty and crime. (In fact, we’d read recently that it’s the safest and most culturally stimulating getaway in the Middle East.)

Favorite Omani pastimes, we learn, include camel and horse racing and purebred Arabian horse breeding. A craft industry, once more important to the economy, has been passed on from one generation to the next. Artisans still produce products

1. The Empty Quarter at dawn.
2. Bedouin girl.
3. A gentleman from Salalah.

such as gold and silver jewelry; pottery; incense burners; and *mandoos*, wooden chests and boxes inlaid with brass, gold or silver.

His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said, arguably one of the world’s most loved and successful heads of state, has ruled the country since 1970. He has transformed the country into a prosperous and tolerant society of nearly 5 million people—roughly 55 percent native Omanis, the remainder mostly foreign workers.

Because of his policy of neutrality on the world stage, Oman has been called the “Switzerland of the Middle East.” The dominant religion is Ibadiism, one of Islam’s earliest sects and Oman’s official state religion, which is tolerant of other faiths.

A two-week fall itinerary—prepared by U.S.-based Experience It Tours—took us to many areas of the country with a private driver/guide. We’ll mention a few highlights.

The North

Our journey started in Muscat, the country’s capital. Here, we marveled at the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, a white marble spectacle with graceful



minarets, columned prayer hall, courtyards and walkways, bordered with topiary, gardens and fountains. When completed in 2001, it became one of the largest mosques in the world (with a capacity of up to 20,000 worshippers). The world's largest chandelier and second largest handwoven Persian carpet embellish the prayer hall.

The Royal Opera House, Oman's premier venue for the performing arts, hosts performances by companies worldwide, including the London Phil-

harmonic and American Ballet Theatre. A gift from the sultan to his people, it opened in 2011 with acclaimed Italian tenor Placido Domingo conducting a performance of Puccini's *Turandot*.

Southwest of Muscat lies the historic town of Nizwa, just a two-hour drive on a smooth, two-lane highway. Nizwa has a 17th-century fort with views of the surrounding Hajar Mountains and one of the oldest souks in the country. Vendors hawk a variety of products,

ranging from vegetables, fruits and other staples to fine crafts—antique gold and silver jewelry, khanjars (Oman's iconic daggers), curvaceous Bedouin coffee pots and more.

The region around Nizwa has spectacular scenery: Jebel Shams, Oman's highest peak (nearly 10,000 feet); Wadi Ghul, the "Grand Canyon" of Arabia; and Jebel Akhdar, where pomegranates, grapes, walnuts, apricots and more grow on terraced slopes that cascade into a deep valley.

5. Nakhal fort.

6. Omani coffee and dates.

7. Wakan village.

The highlight of a visit to Nizwa is the Friday morning goat market, which draws people from far and wide. Scores of Omani men in *dishdashas* (long, white robes) arrive in early morning. They race around a central platform, showing off their goats to buyers, who stand on both sides of a narrow dirt

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Courtesy Royal Opera House Muscat



pathway. The animals, tugged along on leashes or cradled under arms, bleat loudly as the sellers show off their best features: coats, hooves, ears and teeth.

The men, and a few Bedouin women wearing traditional black face masks, shout offers and counteroffers. Incredibly, both traders and goats seem oblivious to us as we move in close to film the excitement. After two hours, the goat trading winds down and a similar market for

cattle follows. Eventually, the crowd dwindles as traders head for coffee and dates with friends before returning home.

South of Muscat, we spend a night in Wahiba Sands, a desert region where Bedouin tribes still live. At the stylish Thousand Nights camp, an evening in a luxury tent among the dunes relaxes us after miles of off-road travel. Our air-conditioned tent has the space and amenities of a hotel suite: a sturdy, striped fabric that converges tent-style

over a king bed, a wall of picture windows and even a walk-in shower. Camping? More like “glamping”!

Dinner—an Arabian “mixed grill” of chicken, lamb and beef—is served on a terrace open to cool desert breezes as Bedouin musicians and dancers entertain us. Previous guests, we are told, include Charles, Prince of Wales, and former French President Nicolas Sarkozy and his family. We bet they enjoyed a camel ride and made use of

8. The Royal Opera House.

9. Nizwa’s goat market.

10. Muscat’s waterfront.

the camp’s small helipad!

In contrast to Oman’s deserts are green *wadis* (valleys or ravines that are mostly dry, except in rainy seasons), which attract Omanis to socialize and swim. Wadi Tiwi, whose streams and pools are overlooked by mountains and bordered by groves

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of date palms, was our favorite. Our guide, Ibrahim, confessed it was his family's choice place to visit nearly every month.

To the South

A one-hour flight takes us from Muscat to Salalah, capital of Dhofar. Whereas northern Oman is known for its high mountains and date plantations, sub-tropical Dhofar features miles of uncrowded, palm-fringed beaches backed by mountains; banana, papaya and coconut plantations; frankincense trees; and the Rub Al-Khali (or Empty Quarter), the world's largest continuous desert.

We shop in Salalah for incense and incense-infused perfumes. The city's souks offer many choices—several varieties of raw frankincense are sold in bags as well as *bakhoor*, a blend of frankincense resins, perfumed oils, flowers and other aromatics. Omanis burn *bakhoor* in their homes to welcome guests, cover cooking odors and bring good luck.

We also find Amouage, a luxury perfumery established by the sultan in 1983. The company markets dozens of scents, each with a dizzying number of ingredients. Found in Oman and in fancy boutiques worldwide, the brand features elegant packaging. Bottle caps resemble khanjars (for men) or the dome of Muscat's Grand Mosque (for women). The names and descriptions of fragrances add to their mystique. For example, Fate, a woman's perfume, has "a rich floral heart resonating with the tumultuous unknown."

While sampling these exotic scents is a pleasure, sensory overload and a lack of time prevents us from making a purchase.

What's the highlight of our stay in Dhofar? Without a doubt, an overnight camping trip in the Empty Quarter. Our second driver/guide, Khalid, takes us 100 miles north of Salalah, then 50 miles off-road to the desert. Equipped with tents, sleeping bags and cooking gear, he sets up camp behind a dune that provides shelter from desert winds.

Beyond us, countless dunes, tinted rose by the late afternoon sun, spread to the horizon. The raw beauty and tranquility—like the calm of a cathedral's interior—is absolute. We think of Anglo-Italian explorer and writer Freya Stark's words, "The true call of the desert is its silence."

We climb to the crest of the nearest dune to watch the sunset, then enjoy dinner prepared by Khalid on a small gas stove: sautéed chicken mixed with peppers, onions and vegetables, followed by tea and dates.

Brilliant stars and a quarter moon brighten the night sky. Just before dawn, the call to prayer of a *muezzin* in a nearby Bedouin community awakens us. Emerging from our cozy two-person tent, we see Khalid praying, head bowed, some 50 yards from the campsite. The sky, now shades of red, orange and purple, creates a splendid backdrop for a herd of camels loping across the desert just yards away.

In that moment, we decide our long journey to Oman was worth the camping experience alone. But the many other charms of this country will surely draw us back. Who knows, next time we might bring home our essence fragrance! ♡

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