

# OMAN



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ABOVE Oman is a land steeped in history. Here we see the ruins of Al Baleed, a major Omani trading port for export of frankincense, which flourished from the 8th to 16th centuries AD.

## Frankincense and more

The fragrant land of Oman, tucked away in the south-eastern corner of Arabia, is rich with glorious archaeology. But what are its highlights? **David Millar** is our guide.

Imagine a country with a near-complete archaeological record from the time that humans first came ‘out of Africa’, with settlements and monuments as old as Stonehenge, mines that kick-started the Bronze Age as global suppliers of copper, trading ports from the golden age of Arab navigation in the 8th to 13th centuries, and magnificent forts to defend against Persian, Portuguese, and British invaders. Then imagine that all of this is well preserved, set against a backdrop of colourful deserts and magnificent mountains, and with a warm and hospitable people.

Welcome to Oman, quite frankly one of the most interesting and rewarding destinations the archaeological traveller could wish for. Nestled in the south-eastern corner of the Arabian Peninsula, it is bordered to its north and west by the immense Rub al Khali desert (the Empty Quarter), and faces Iran on one coast and the Arabian Sea with India beyond on the other.

For archaeologists, there are two main regions of interest – Dhofar with its capital Salalah in the south, and Muscat and the Hajar Mountains bordering the UAE in the north. These regions are separated by 500 miles of desert, traversed

by a single-lane road with few petrol stations, no towns, and a reputation for head-on collisions with trucks. Fortunately, it is also served by a very safe airline, Oman Air, so it is easy to make a triangular trip from Dubai to Salalah, Salalah to Muscat, and back to Dubai. Take a window seat on the right-hand side of the plane and you will get great views out across the endless expanse of the Rub al Khali on the way. If you are coming direct from Europe and don’t want to bother with the bright lights of Dubai, you can also fly direct to Muscat, and then make the 1 hour 45 minute trip to Salalah as a side trip. Now for a taster of the Arabian delights that await you.



### The land of frankincense

Before the oil boom redefined life and politics in the Middle East forever, the most-famous export from the southern Arabian Peninsula had been frankincense, and the centre of the world frankincense trade was Dhofar. Thanks to the cool climate, Dhofar’s valleys are perfect for the scraggly *Boswellia sacra* tree whose dried resin forms this precious incense. For millennia, this quiet corner of Oman was a key supplier to the civilised world of one of its most important luxury items.

ALL IMAGES: David Millar, unless otherwise stated

ABOVE Frankincense, one of the most valuable commodities of the ancient world, is the dried resin of the rather nondescript *Boswellia sacra*.

LEFT At Salalah in the south of Oman, the beach faces the Indian Ocean, and one feels a million miles from anywhere.





**LEFT** For over 1,000 years Sumhuram was both a fortified frankincense-processing centre and frankincense-exporting port.

Two superb sites near Salalah tell the story. Thirty minutes east of Salalah is a natural harbour called Khor Rori, above which sits the site of ancient Sumhuram. From 400 BC to 500 AD, Sumhuram was a heavily fortified port built to control the production and trade of frankincense. It is well preserved and still being actively excavated by a team from the University of Pisa, and has thick walls up to 20ft high, with dressed faces and rubble cores. It is a fascinating site in an enchanting location – you can clearly see its massive fortifications with successive gateways through which convoluted passes lead inside, designed to slow and confuse intruders. Wandering around the site it is clear this was no ordinary port: it was a factory dedicated to the collection and processing of frankincense resin, then loading it onto ships heading to the east and camel trains headed north across the sands.

After a thousand years, Sumhuram finally went into decline, and in the 5th century AD was replaced as the hub of the frankincense trade by Al Baleed, whose sprawling ruins can be found near the centre of modern Salalah, which clearly developed out of it. Then called Zahar (from which Dhofar gets its name) and now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, sand-covered bumps and crumbling walls stretching for over a mile along the coast are all that remain of this great trading city of the 8th to 16th centuries. Less than 10 per cent of the ruins have been excavated, but several of the key buildings have been restored, including a 60ft-high citadel and a grand mosque whose great roof was supported by 144 columns.

Artefacts have been found at Al Baleed from as far afield as China and Rome, and it is documented that in 1285 no less a trader than Marco Polo visited here, demonstrating the global nature of its trade, all created around frankincense. Today the Omanis view Al Baleed as a model for how to develop archaeological tourism, with guided tours, a museum, gift shops, and coffee bars. You can even buy a bag of frankincense, which due to the decline in demand sadly now fetches only a few rials per kilo.

## The 'Atlantis of the Sands'

Frankincense was also shipped north across the desert to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome by camel train, and one of the staging posts through which they would have passed has a curious history. Shisr lies on the edge of the Rub al Khali, about a hundred miles north of Salalah, and is thought to have been a small fortified watering station for the camels before

they entered the Empty Quarter proper. It was destroyed around 300 AD, when a sinkhole opened beneath it, swallowing about two-thirds of it. This unusual fate has been interpreted by some as linking Shisr with the mythical lost city of Ubar, mentioned in the Quran as having been destroyed by Allah in a similar fashion, due to the wickedness of its inhabitants. Ubar was dubbed by T E Lawrence the 'Atlantis of the Sands'.

In 1992, NASA announced with much fanfare that they had conclusively identified Shisr as Ubar, on the basis of tracing ancient camel tracks across the desert, using radar mounted on the Space Shuttle, to find the tracks converged on Shisr. Such enthusiasm was short-lived, however, as subsequent excavations soon showed that Shisr was much too small and too recent to have been the city fitting Ubar's description, with its thousands of inhabitants and majestic towers. Nevertheless, it is a tantalising part of the story of the 'land of frankincense', and for the sake of a bumpy two-hour journey you can tell your friends you have been to what was once the site of the lost city of Ubar, the Atlantis of the Sands.

East of Shisr lies the Nejd Plateau, location of one of the most remarkable archaeological discoveries of the last few years. It was here in 2010 that a team led by Dr Jeff Rose discovered dozens of stone-tool manufacturing sites, whole landscapes littered with stone flakes and broken tools discarded during the process of knapping stone axes. What was most remarkable about them was that they were identical to stone tools found in Nubia, east Africa, ▶

**BELOW** These ruins at Shisr were once believed to be the lost city of Ubar, the Atlantis of the Sands. Shisr collapsed into a sinkhole around 300 AD.





**ABOVE** Nizwa was the capital of Oman in the 6th and 7th century, and makes an excellent base for exploring archaeological sites in the interior.  
**BELOW** The fort at Nizwa dates from the 17th century. It is one of the largest and best preserved in the country.



and also that they were dated to over 100,000 years old. Taken together, these provide strong evidence that when our ancestors migrated 'out of Africa', they did so via the river valleys of the Dhofar region (at that time wetter and greener than today), and not following the coastline as had previously been assumed.

This means southern Oman played a key role in the story of human development – it was one of the very first places that our forebears came to as we began our migration across the planet, and hence is also one of the places with the longest record of human habitation in the world. Unfortunately, the sites are difficult to reach and not open to the public.

### Seeking storybook castles

Unlike the flight from Dubai, which crosses the red dunes of the great Rub al Khali, the trip to Muscat follows the coastal gravel plains, and then rises over the Hajar mountain chain, before descending towards the Gulf of Oman. The antiquities to be seen on this side of the country are generally more recent, but reward the visitor with several magnificent fortresses in the best tradition of the *Arabian Nights*. You can see them best by making a 600-mile, four-day loop over the mountains, up to the UAE border, and back again, which – thanks to an excellent yet underused road network – is relatively easy, especially for Brits who have the added convenience of being able to drive on the left.

Although the earliest traces of settlement around Muscat date from around 8,000 years ago, thanks to the Portuguese (who rather clumsily commenced their attempts to establish trade relations with Oman in 1507 by burning Muscat to the ground) most of the buildings one can see today date from the 16th and 17th centuries. Nonetheless, Muscat itself has some beautiful palaces and two outstanding museums, the Museum of Omani



**LEFT** A characteristically shaped Arabian doorway from a quiet corner in the fortress at Nizwa.  
**ABOVE** The magnificent fortress at Bahla mostly dates from the 12th century AD, though parts extend back to at least 500 BC.

Heritage and the recently refurbished National Museum of Oman, but the most interesting sites are to be found further inland.

Nizwa, ancient capital of Oman during the 6th and 7th centuries, is an hour and a half's drive from Muscat and an excellent base for exploring the fortresses of the interior, all the more impressive due to the backdrop of high peaks. Nizwa fort was itself built in 1668 by Sultan bin Saif Al Yarubi to defend the town after he had ousted the Portuguese. Constructed of stone and mud-brick, it has an unusual large circular tower and numerous stairways, reminiscent of an Escher drawing, plus the added distinction of being Oman's most-visited antiquity. The associated town and its souks also make for a pleasant evening's stroll, their twisting passageways and aromatic spice and textile stalls being very evocative of old Arabia.

Within an hour of Nizwa are numerous other major sites. At Bahla is an outstanding example of a fortified oasis settlement from the medieval period, a sprawling fortress built mainly in the 12th century, although parts date to 500 BC. It was recently reopened after an astonishing 24 years of renovation. You can also explore its surrounding ruined houses and walk its eight-mile long perimeter wall. Ten minutes away is the superb castle at Jabrin (also spelled Jibreen, Gabrin, Gibreen, and so forth, to confuse the unwary), reminiscent of Windsor Castle in its battlements and towers, standing alone on a flat gravel plain. Built in the late 17th century, during the same castle-building boom as Nizwa, it has beautifully painted wooden ceilings and decor, as well as matching ladies' and gents' dungeons for miscreants.

## Beehives and stupendous secrets

The drive north from Nizwa along the western edge of the Hajar mountains is a spectacular one, with rugged peaks on your right and gravel plains and desert on your left – but make sure you fill your tank before you start, as petrol stations are few and far between, and prone to being closed when you need them most. The most unmissable site in this area is the beehive stone tombs at Bat, dating from 3000-2000 BC and described by UNESCO as 'the most complete collection of settlements and necropolises from the 3rd millennium in the world'. Thanks in no small part to their ochre and white colour, they are beautiful tombs in a beautiful setting.

A couple more hours' travel brings you to the twin oasis towns of Buraimi and Al Ain, divided by the Oman/UAE border, and surrounded by an expanse of green thanks to their thousands of date palms. Crossing into the Emirates here you can explore Hili Archaeological Park, famous for its ornate circular tomb dating from the same period as the Bat tombs, as well as its excellent examples of *falaj*, the irrigation channels that provided the water essential for the development of agriculture in the region, which marked the end of the nomadic hunter-gatherer period. Al Ain is another good spot to spend the night, especially the Mercure ➤



**TOP** Bahla's evocative mud-brick walls do not do well in the rainy season, and have been renovated continuously for a quarter of a century.

**ABOVE** The quiet back-streets of the town surrounding Bahra fort.



PHOTO: Alfred Weidinger

Grand hotel on the summit of Jebel Hafeet, a 4,000ft-high monolith very much like Ayers Rock and with spectacular views out across the Rub al Khali.

In terms of raw archaeology, we've saved the best for last, however. The drive back to Muscat takes us through Wadi Jizzi, a valley that literally changed the world, yet whose very existence was a closely guarded secret for thousands of years. Between 2500 and 1900 BC it was known as the 'Land of Magan', and was the world's largest producer of copper, fuelling a global revolution and helping catalyse the world's first civilisations in Mesopotamia by supplying the Sumerians with copper and bronze for superior tools and weapons, heralding the Bronze Age. Copper is still mined there today, and about halfway through Wadi Jizzi you come across an active copper-production facility. Turn left at the mine and follow the track towards the village of Arja, and you will see that the surrounding hills are dotted with prehistoric mining shafts and slag heaps. Desolate now, back in the day this must have been a (very productive) industrial landscape.

The drive back to Muscat takes us past the elegant whitewashed town of Sohar (another former capital of Oman, and the supposed home port of the mythical Sinbad the sailor of *Arabian Nights* fame), and then down the coastal highway. We have only scratched the surface in terms of antiquities to see – and, apart from the archaeology, Oman has much to offer visitors,

**ABOVE** UNESCO World Heritage Site: the beehive tombs of Qubur Juhhal at Al Ain near Bat, with the 6,857ft-high Jebel Misht in the background.

including magnificent mosques, dolphins and nesting turtles, the verdant greenery of the Batinah coast, mountain-climbing, desert adventures in the Wahiba Sands, the immense Majlis al Jinn (the second-largest cave chamber in the world), and the extraordinary fjords of Musandam, to name but a few. Oman is a very archaeologically rewarding destination – you'll need at least one week and preferably two! ■

#### TRAVEL TIPS FOR OMAN

- Oman is a moderate Muslim country – Westerners can drink alcohol in hotels, and women are allowed to drive. But be respectful: in particular, photographing local women can cause offence. English is widely spoken.
- Best time to visit is November-April: bright and warm, but not overly hot.
- Driving is easy – it's right-hand drive, and there are plenty of rental cars.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr David Millar is a science journalist focusing on past climate change and archaeology. He lived in Dubai for ten years, and is the author of *Beyond Dubai: Seeking Lost Cities in the Emirates*, which describes the sites visited both here and in the UAE in more detail.



## Musandam: travel further

One of the best bits of Oman isn't found in the Oman we've been visiting at all: it's an 'exclave' separated from the rest of the country by 40 miles of United Arab Emirates. Musandam forms the 'finger' prodding Iran across the Strait of Hormuz, a dramatic region of steep mountains and fjords often referred to by the travel guides as the 'Norway of Arabia'.

A simple two and a half hour drive from Dubai, it is an excursion well worth making if you have a spare couple of days. There are a few modern hotels in the capital of Khasab, which is also the starting point for boat trips to the fjords themselves.

Archaeologically, there is a well-preserved Portuguese castle in Khasab, dating from the early 17th century, built near the end of their occupation of the region from 1515 to 1622. Much older and more extensive are the many rock art sites in the region, mostly dating to the Iron Age between 1300-300 BC. Some of the most obvious are above the village of Tawi, just a few miles from Khasab along the coastal road back to Dubai.

Musandam is home to a tribe called the Shihuh, who speak their own dialect and have separate traditions from either Omani or Emirati, and who were not particularly welcoming to visitors until as recently as the 1980s. For the adventurous, there is a spectacular road leading up to the Sayh Plateau,

where you can find the Shihuh mountain villages and their field systems built on flat terraces, unique to the region.

For the less adventurous, try the daily dhow trips from Khasab which take in the spectacular fjords and their dolphins, and pass Telegraph Island, originally a British telegraph relay station, operating in the 1860s. It is said to have been the origin of the phrase 'going round the bend', thanks to its location around a bend in the main fjord – its isolation and the heat took a heavy toll on the mental health of those stationed here.



**ABOVE** On Telegraph Island, Musandam, one can still see the remains of the British telegraph station, abandoned in the 1860s.