

arabian nights



1: Muscat by night, the 900-year-old city combines the traditions of the past with a bustling metropolis.

2: Beautiful beaches are found throughout Oman.

3: The Grand Mosque is a place of great beauty and architectural achievement.

4: The carved khanjar, a traditional curved dagger are part of the traditional dress.

5: Fishing at historic Muttrah.

6: Jalali Fort is one of the country's historic fortresses.

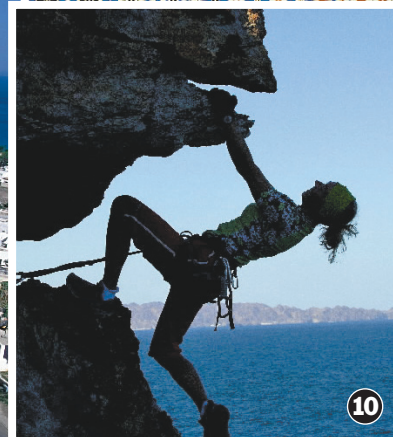
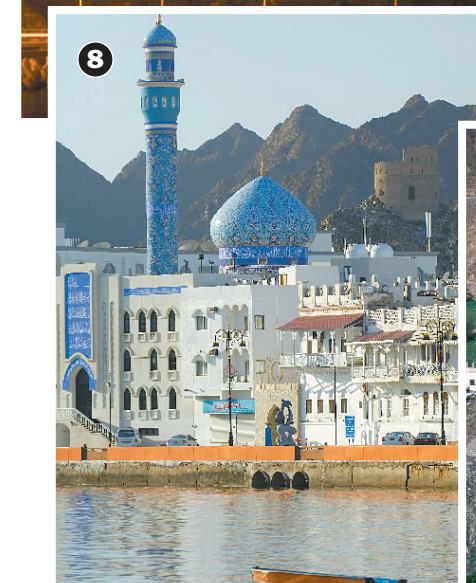
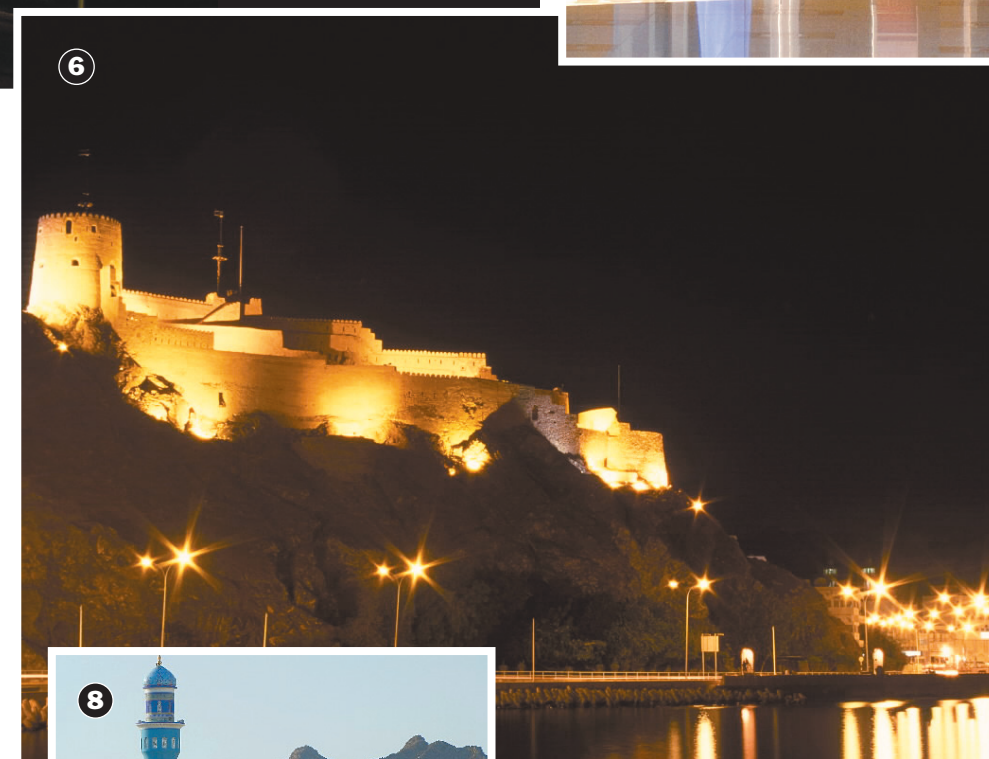
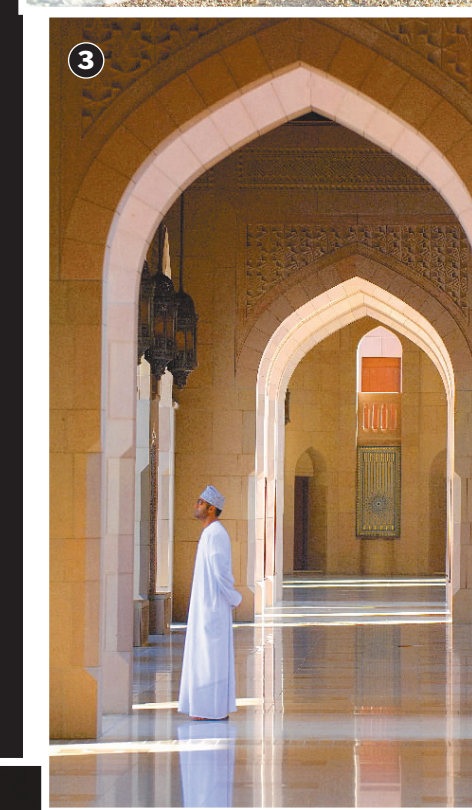
7: Colourful mosques are found throughout Oman.

8: Muttrah is home to a busy traditional souq or market

9: The Muscat Gate welcomes you to the city.

10: Rock climbing is one of the many attractions of Oman's rugged mountains

Pictures: OMAN TOURISM



Monsoonal coastlines, mountain ranges, arid deserts and fertile plains help make Oman a hot travel destination.

FRANKINCENSE burns in small brass braziers and spices perfume the air as we wander through the ancient alleyways of the Muttrah souk in Oman's capital of Muscat.

It's a traditional Omani market with stallholders selling everything from beautiful silverware and jewellery to the softest cashmere scarves and pashminas as well as the cutest beaded Persian shoes and even kitchenware for locals.

Nuggets of frankincense nestle against rows of fragrant oils, hessian sacks of sandalwood and small tins of red saffron, while rose petals and spices emit perfumed airs as you pass.

"Here feel this pashmina," a merchant says thrusting a pile of soft scarves in every colour imaginable in front of me.

"What about this beautifully carved khanjar, a traditional curved dagger?"

Another invites me to see his range of traditional Omani dress for men; an embroidered kimah or cap and the stark white robes or dishdasha, which is perfect for the heat and complete with a small tassel at the neck that's for dipping in perfume.

There's also a slight touch of kitsch — singing stuffed camels and Grand Mosque Temple clocks but they are on the cute side.

Bargain hard we'd been told, but the jovial stallholders don't budge much however we do manage to reduce the price a little before we hand over the Omani Riyal currency and it's a lot of fun.

Muttrah is part of the old town area and also the capital's main port.

Located on a picturesque cornice, it is a great spot for photographs with its latticed buildings and many mosques.

A visit to the colourful daily fish market also provides an interesting glimpse of daily life in Oman and is perfect for people watching.

There's also a great museum Bait Al



sue wallace

Baranda that traces the history of Muscat explaining dress codes and the numerous types of historical weapons, which is an excellent grounding for a visit to Oman.

Now one of the hottest travel destinations, the country is rated by the 2007 Global Peace Index as the 22nd most peaceful country in the world — ahead of Australia.

Situated in the heart of the Arabian Gulf it borders the United Arab Emirates countries of Dubai and Abu Dhabi as well as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Republic of Yemen.

Ruled by the Sultan Qaboos bin Said, the popular leader has since 1970 presided over an unprecedented period of modernisation and national renaissance, while retaining a strong sense of heritage and culture. It is a country of diverse character and landscape ranging from monsoonal coastlines, steep mountain ranges, arid deserts and fertile plains.

It is also a land of contrasts with rocky deep water fjords in the north, the spectacular dunes of Wahiba Sands and two large salt flats in the centre of the country and the lush green hills of Dhofar region in the south. Rugged coasts and beautiful beaches stretch along the 1700km coastline.

Muscat, known as a legendary city of mystery and romance, is located on a narrow strip of land between the sea and the rugged mountains. The city is a perfect blend of old and new where the traditional values of a 900-year-old city co-exist with a bustling metropolis.

There's plenty to see and do in the city with the jewel in the crown, the amazing Grand Mosque.

A gift to the nation from ruler Sultan Qaboos bin Said to mark his 30th anniversary, this is a must visit.

True to its name, it is the grandest of monuments in the region and is an amazing construction that accommodates 20,000 worshippers.

The main prayer hall has the largest silk carpet in the world that took 600 women four years to weave. The prayer hall dazzles you with its 35 Swarovski crystal chandeliers and magnificent tiles — think grandeur Omani style.

Women must cover their heads and shoulders with a scarf to enter.

Muscat has some great beaches if you venture on a dolphin watching tour and don't be surprised to run into large pods diving through the waves.

Oman is home to hundreds of forts and watchtowers and there are some close by to Muscat built during the Portuguese period of 1501 to 1650.

Spend a few days in the capital soaking up the history and culture of Oman then head out to discover the countries many charms. You won't be disappointed.

It's a land of red desert and green wadis, where camels and goats roam freely and a nature lover's paradise.

Visitors are very welcome in Oman and you soon get used to traditional hospitality — a plate of fresh dates and a strong cup of qahwa Arabic coffee laced with cardamom is offered to guests in homes, offices and shops.

Remember to shake your coffee cup from side to side to indicate that you have enjoyed the hospitality which always results in warm smiles, even if English isn't spoken.

● Next week: Camels, goats and the desert in Oman.

the frankincense trail:

FRANKINCENSE from Oman's Boswellia tree was once as highly prized as gold 2000 years ago. In Oman's Dhofar region the Frankincense Trail created vast fortunes and lured adventurers from afar including the Venetian explorer Marco Polo and T E Lawrence, known as Lawrence of Arabia.

Legend has it the Queen of Sheba built a palace near the ancient port of Samhuran near today's Salalah, along the ancient trade route so she could hoard quantities for her own personal use.

Today, Oman is world famous for perfumes and fragrances and the country is permeated with frankincense — the government buildings are perfumed daily, even the elevators. Frankincense is burned today throughout Oman to welcome guests and its aromatic oil is one of the primary ingredients used in Oman's legendary perfume, Amouage, one of the most valuable scents in the world.

FAST FACTS:

Getting there: British Airways flies daily to Bangkok from Sydney www.britishairways.com and connects with Oman Air, which flies to Muscat five times a week, www.omanair.aero

Tours: Muscat Desert Adventures Tourism www.desertadventures.com

For more information:

Phone Ministry of Tourism Sultanate of Oman (02) 9113 5959.

Website: www.omantourism.gov.om

Tips: Visit during the cooler months from mid-October to mid-March. The hottest months are June to August. Visas are needed to visit Oman and can be purchased in Australia, at Muscat's Seeb International Airport for \$18 or when entering any UAE gateway city on arrival.

Did you know: Oman is 22nd on the list of most peaceful countries in the world — ahead of Australia. It is also one of the cleanest countries in the world, littering is forbidden.

The country has a rigorous green environment policy and sanctuaries have been set aside for rare Arabian oryx, giant sea turtles, the Arabian tahr, Arabian wolf and leopard, striped hyena and sooty falcons.

Language: Arabic is the official language but English is widely spoken.

Population: 2.9 million

Currency: Omani Riyal

Alcohol: Most hotel bars and restaurants are licensed to sell alcohol.



WHERE TO STAY

Overlooking the Gulf of Oman, The Chedi Muscat is set amid lush gardens with pools and a private beach.

Timeless Omani tradition combined with contemporary Arabian design is reflected in the stunning architecture, restaurants and accommodation.

Omani artwork and photography decorate the resort that is well located only 15 minutes from the Muscat International Airport.

Enter the lobby lounge and you are engulfed by an Arabian experience complete with burning frankincense.

Accommodation includes 156 superior rooms, deluxe rooms and beautiful private villas with luxurious marble bathrooms and every comfort including your own IPOD for use during your stay.

The Restaurant is one of the hot dining venues of Muscat with four open kitchens catering for a variety of cuisines from Asian to Middle Eastern, Indian to European.

For delicious seafood head to the Beach Restaurant, that offers an eclectic seafood a la carte menu. For wine lovers there's an impressive collection of wine housed in a floor to ceiling collection.

Feel like a little pampering? The Chedi Spa offers a variety of treatments from seven treatment rooms including amazing massages and facials. There's also two swimming pools, a 42m infinity pool near the beach and the huge Serai Pool. It is a romantic and peaceful haven and a great place for a break before venturing out to discover more of Oman. A member of the Leading Hotels of the World, phone (02) 9377 8400. www.lhw.com www.chedimuscat.com