

## OMAN – THE MODERATE FACE OF ARABIA

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Oman is probably the most moderate and accessible of all the States in the Arabian Peninsula. I have travelled there several times and always enjoy the warmth and hospitality of this tall gentle good-looking people. It is an absolute monarchy with an elected parliament and all Omani citizens, men and women, have equal voting rights. I am invited by my friend Professor Paul, an eminent Archaeologist from Germany specialising in the Middle East and India, who has been working in Oman off and on since the Eighties.

The first time I land in Muscat as I wait in the Visa queue, a tall young man wearing a long flowing white *dishdasha* and *kumma*, a small round embroidered cap, approaches me and bids me welcome to his country with a delightful smile. He is doing this to everyone in the line but it is an image that has stayed with me. And so it continued throughout my stay – everyone kindly, smiling and charming, often going far out of their way to be helpful. All Omani men wear the elegant and distinctive *dishdasha*, nearly always in brilliant white and on their heads either a *keffieh* which is the Omani turban or more commonly, a *kumma*.

Paul meets me at the airport. We drive the scenic route into the city to Ruwi – I see many smart new buildings, Banks, Ministries, Hotels but no sign of the old Arabia I have come hoping to seek out. I like the modern rather Italianate architecture – well designed low-level buildings

all creamily white against the deep blue sky. On one side of the road is the sparkling sea and on the other behind the narrow strip of the city rise fabulous rocky purple and red granite mountains.

The Sultan of Oman, Qaboosh bin Said al-Said, seems to be a remarkable man, kind and caring about his people and he is much revered. It is a cause of sadness and worry that he has no heir – although apparently he has written his sealed wishes about who is to take over the Sultanate. The Arab horses of Oman are renowned world-wide and the Omani are legendary horsemen. The Sultan breeds exquisite horses and keeps a string of over 200 on the outskirts of Paris, let alone at his Royal Stables in Oman. He is reputed to be good personal friends with Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth of England, another well-known horse lover and breeder, and when she celebrated her 90th birthday, he sent over 116 of his horses from Paris for her entertainment.

The country thrives by producing millions of barrels of crude oil every year though they are trying to promote Tourism as a major secondary industry. It has the most stable economy in the Arab states and is remarkably safe and crime free and there has never been a terrorist incident. Dissenters however are swiftly dealt with and the prisons are tough. The people are generally well off and pay no Income Tax. Tipping anywhere is not only not expected but refused with a smile. Qaboosh has built the only Public University in Oman and a magnificent Mosque as well as numerous other public buildings.

There is to be a free concert at the Royal Opera House. The Sultan is also an opera lover and has built a lovely Opera House in the heart of Muscat. The concert is free because it is his Anniversary concert – celebrating 45 years as Sultan – but unhappily he is too ill to attend. I like the Arabic songs and all the singers are greeted with

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\* The writer is British born and bred but has spent much of her adult life in France, the Loire Valley, the Deep South. She has now been living in Paris since 1999. Her passion is travelling, exploring the world and its people and experiencing their various and diverse cultures. For the last 17 years she has spent the winters travelling widely in India, a country she loves, always coming back to rest in Kolkata. These articles are random extracts from the travel notebooks she wrote to record her experiences around the world.

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wild enthusiasm. We are all given little Omani flags to wave! Afterwards we go to an authentic Omani restaurant and sit on cushions on the floor and the food is delicious.

We will go into the desert tomorrow. Paul is working at the Ministry of Culture and goes there most days. I go with him sometimes and meet his associates who all seem to value him highly – but he really is the original absent-minded Professor! We are meeting a colleague of his called Hillal who lives in Samaile (pronounced s-mile) and Paul cannot find the house. We wander around aimlessly until finally I make him stop and say Hillal will find us – which he does. Hillal is a cheerful Omani with a short trim beard gently greying, though his eyes are young and full of fun. We go to a couple of nearby sites and start picking through the stones and soon I get my eye in, finding pieces of glazed and unglazed pottery, some patterned. Paul's main interest is Early Iron Age forts roughly 1000 BC. It is still early morning but becoming murderously hot. After pottering around for a few hours amongst the Islamic gravestones and various hill sites, we are ready to drive back to Muscat for a swim.

One time we drive out to the Wasabi Sands for a couple of days. We pass Samaile where we were the other day and on past Bidbid and Ibra and Minatrib where there is a lovely old fort. Our Desert Camp is called Al Raha. The Omani owner comes to guide us in until our car can go no further and we transfer to the camp's 4-wheel drive vehicle. This is now real desert – miles and miles of pure undulating sand as far as the eye can see, a spectacular

landscape. Arriving at the Camp we settle in and relax with coffee in the comfortable *majlis*. Later we climb the Dune as the sun is setting and sit on an upturned old coconut-palm tree contemplating the wondrous view. At supper a band of singers come to perform and Paul says they are using beautifully articulated Arabic and singing in many different dialects. His Arabic is fluent of course and I am jealous!

On the way back to Muscat we visit Minatrib Fort which is charming. Built in the 7th century it is simple and has been well restored. I buy Laban, a spiced milky drink similar to the Indian lassi or Turkish Ayran, cool and delicious. We are returning by another route so that Paul can visit one of his Early Iron Age forts at Ishmaiya. Finding the way is difficult as there are no signs and we do not have an up-to-date map, and somehow we find ourselves in the Hagar Mountains which are stunningly beautiful. The colours of the rocks are so varied, layers of green, purple, red and white – apparently the white is Jurassic. And it is hard granite volcanic rock with little or no vegetation and the wildlife if any, is shy and elusive. This land was under water for millenia then it burst out in volcanic eruptions forming these huge mountain ranges. We go through several Wadis which are dry river beds sometimes given to flooding, and get thoroughly lost. We are on the verge of giving up finding this fort when Paul suddenly sees a sign for “Asmaya” and that's it! he cries and off we go again, finally achieving our objective.

Later we decide to go to The Chedi, the best hotel in Muscat, for dinner rather than the beach picnics we often indulge in. The moon is full over the waving palm trees and the night pitch black and thick with stars. The hotel is very beautiful – modern and well-appointed and the food is excellent. Grilled Halloumi with watermelon and Omani Fish Platter with Lobster, Crab, Tuna and Hammour for me, all locally caught, and Asian Tempura followed by Arabian Prawns and spinach for Paul – quite wonderful.

Paul wants to find the phenomenon known as “Coleman's Rock” so one morning we set off early for Nizwa, a couple of hours drive from Muscat. Nizwa was an important city and has an impressive Fort, a kind of castle



A Mosque in Muscat

with turrets built in the 17th century. We go into the bustling Souk and Fish market then sit eating dates and drinking tea with two kindly Date merchants, Hassim and Jacob. The Omani people are always friendly and welcoming, we are invited for tea wherever we go.

We find the Rock, which is simply a kind of obelisk or huge boulder, standing straight up out of a flat landscape with some “rock art” carved on the sides, no one knows how old, probably thousands of years. There is indeed a sort of bas-relief and one can make out the head of a man in a turban and several other figures. There is a large and varied wildlife in Oman but it is notoriously difficult to catch sight of. I never saw any wild creature while I was there but the mountains are home to leopards and wild goats and the desert has the Arabian Oryx, iconic symbol of the country, and herds of wild camels and gazelles.

One day we drive up the coast to visit Barka Fort and eventually after getting rather lost as usual, we find Bait Na’Aman, a beautiful old fortified house, well worth the detour. Built in the late 17th century, the house is particularly interesting as it has been lavishly furnished in the style of the period. It has a pleasantly domesticated air with lovely rugs and cushions and separate *majlis* for men and women. Most of the main living rooms are upstairs while downstairs there is a stone bathroom and loo and store rooms with a Date press and a deep black jail room for naughty ladies – the men’s jail is outside in a separate watch tower. The Imam had his own *majlis* with a secret escape passage and his opulent bedroom has a quaint four-poster bed. On the roof there is another tower supported by large beams made of Teak wood and the sides are etched with crude drawings of ships. The Tower was equipped with several cannons and there were more on the second tower – most unusual for a private residence to be so well fortified.

Paul is to give a lecture at the Ministry. I go over with him to help set it up in the Conference room. For a couple of hours I help categorise some of the artifacts found at various Omani sites. Every tiny fragment needs to be weighed and measured and recorded what it is and where exactly it was found. It is painstaking work but intriguing and I enjoy it, though I am not sure I would want to do it all the time – but this is the backbone of Archaeology. The Lecture is fine – Paul talks well about the early Omani people. Oman is one of the oldest consistently inhabited places on earth which is why it is so fascinating for archaeologists. Many peoples have come to settle here over

the years, even surprisingly the Portuguese who came during the 15th century and left a solid legacy of Portuguese influence.

Sur is an ancient city down the coast from Muscat, about a three-hour drive and one of the most historic settlements in the south. For centuries it was a major port and trading post with a flourishing ship building industry. The old city is charming and situated on what is almost an island with a large lagoon on one side and the sea on the other. Three forts and a string of watch towers ring the city, denoting its original importance as a trading centre plying goods back and forth between India and East Africa. After slavery was abolished and with the introduction of steam ships, trade diminished and prosperity fell. Today there is a narrow suspension bridge across the mouth of the pretty harbour linking Sur with Ayjah, the village on the other side, which has another impressive fort. Just above the bridge is an imposing lighthouse and below it the old Dhow-building yard. Sur was famous for hundreds of years for its maritime traditions and now has the last remaining Dhow-building yard in Oman. The expertise of the Omani sailors and the quality of their boats is legend.

Dhows are wooden boats constructed originally by sewing Teak planks together with coconut rope, though today they use nails. A large triangular sail on a long boom is secured at an angle to the mast, similar to the Egyptian felucca, enabling them to sail very close to the wind.

Back in Muscat we sample more culinary delights of Oman. I like the middle eastern cuisine and there are many great restaurants. Oman is yet undiscovered by the holiday-makers of the world although it is ideal – safe, warm, friendly, interesting and relaxed with great beaches and hotels.

I have often wondered where the Old Arabia went – the Arabia of Saladin, Burton, Thesiger and Lawrence. Nowadays the combined Arab States of Yemen, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, the Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and Oman covering the Arabian Peninsula seem in western eyes to stand for nothing but Black Gold – that is Oil – and money. We associate these countries with high rise buildings, seven-star cities in the desert bordered by the deep blue seas of the Gulf of Oman, but Oman is so much more. It is a huge and fascinating country and I feel I have just scraped the surface. Yes *Old Arabie* is here if you want to go looking for it, and I very much look forward to exploring and discovering more the next time I visit. □