

Oman عمان

It's a curious observation about travelling in Oman that the moment you tuck behind a sand dune and begin erecting your tent, however discreetly, someone will park alongside and start camping too. Never mind that it is the only car you've seen all day; never mind that there are 2700km of beautiful, empty sandy beaches; never mind that the mountains are so lonesome in parts that only wolves and hedgehogs meander into the night; and never mind that memories of Thesiger are the only evocations of the living to issue from the dunes of the Empty Quarter – the one-car-per-day will find yours and camp alongside.

What makes this observation a particularly topical one is that it's only relatively recently that a network of roads and graded tracks, such as the coast road from Filim to Shwaymiyah, or the adventurous mountain track to the ancient tombs at Gaylah, has made it possible to penetrate Oman's pristine landscapes. Those who are sufficiently intrepid to get off the beaten track will find that they can have the desert to themselves quite easily without mounting a major expedition. Now that the secret of Oman's great untouched beauty is out, however, it surely can't be long before groups of visitors are a common sight and it will no longer be necessary to seek the company of strangers at the end of a day's exploration.

In the meantime, what should you say to the happy camper who parks in 'your space'? As every hospitable Omani you'll meet on your travels will tell you, there's only one answer: 'Ahlan wa salan! Welcome!'

FAST FACTS

- **Official name** Sultanate of Oman
- **Capital** Muscat
- **Area** 309,500 sq km
- **Population** 3.1 million
- **Country code** ☎ 968
- **Head of State** Sultan Qaboos bin Said
- **Annual number of tourists** 1.2 million
- **Stereotype** A country that has only relatively recently emerged from isolation
- **Surprise** An infrastructure that any country would be proud of



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Jebel Shams** (p234) Haggle with insouciant local carpet sellers for vertiginous rugs on a precipice above Wadi Ghul.
- **Nakhai Fort** (p238) Survey the flat panorama of the Al-Batinah Region from the battlements of Oman's most spectacular castle.
- **Sharqiya Sands** (p225) Put your driving and navigational skills to the test in an auburn sea of sand.
- **Ras al-Jinz** (p221) Attend the night-time drama of labour and delivery at the green turtle's favourite nesting site.
- **Dhofar Region** (p247) Explore the subtropical terrain of a region famed for gold, frankincense and myrrh.

ITINERARIES

Itineraries covering Oman and other parts of the Arabian Peninsula can be found starting on p25.

- **Muscat Stopover** Rise with the dawn to see fishermen bring in the weird and wonderful at Mutrah's fish market (p196). Join the ebb and flow of the city's residents by strolling along the corniche (p196), under the overhanging balconies of the harbour residences. Duck into Mutrah Souq (p197) to learn the art of good-natured argument and lose your way among the pink, plastic and implausible. Spare an hour for the sights of Muscat proper (p197), the walled heart of the capital, before a spot of R&R and an extravagant dinner at one of the city's whimsical hotels (p204).
- **Two weeks** Make the most of the mountains by circling the Western Hajar range and making your base the lively town of Nizwa (p231). Climb the beanstalk to Jebel Akhdar (p230), famed for giant pomegranates and hailstones. Hike the rim of Oman's Grand Canyon for a spot of carpet-buying on Jebel Shams (p234). Engage with *jinn* (spirits created by Allah) at the remarkable tombs and forts of Bat (p236), Bahla (p235) and Jabrin (p236). Finally, take the long way home to Muscat, via a dizzying mountain drive (p233) to Rustaq (p238), and wash the dust off in a sparkling sea at Sawadi (p240).
- **Three weeks** Go in search of wild places on an adventurous route from Muscat to Oman's second city, Salalah (p247), 1000km to the south. Follow the Qurayat-

Sur coast road to Sur (p214), home of the dhow, pausing to explore the celebrated wadis of Shab (p215) and Tiwi (p216). Learn about turtles at Ras al-Jinz before cutting inland to the sea of sand near Mintirib (p225). Acclimatise to nights under the stars before the camping journey to Salalah via Duqm, Ras Madrakah and Shwaymiyah (p250). Leave time to explore Salalah's beautiful beaches and go in search of frankincense.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

The best time to visit Oman is between November and mid-March, when the cooler air brings the mountain scenery sharply into focus and daytime temperatures average 25°C. For the rest of the year, much of Oman is oppressively hot and hazy, particularly between May and August.

The redeeming summertime feature is the *khareef*, the mid-June to late-August rainy season in southern Oman. Many Gulf visitors flock to this area to picnic under the drizzle on Dhofar's grassy hills. The rain (and the green) vanishes by mid-September.

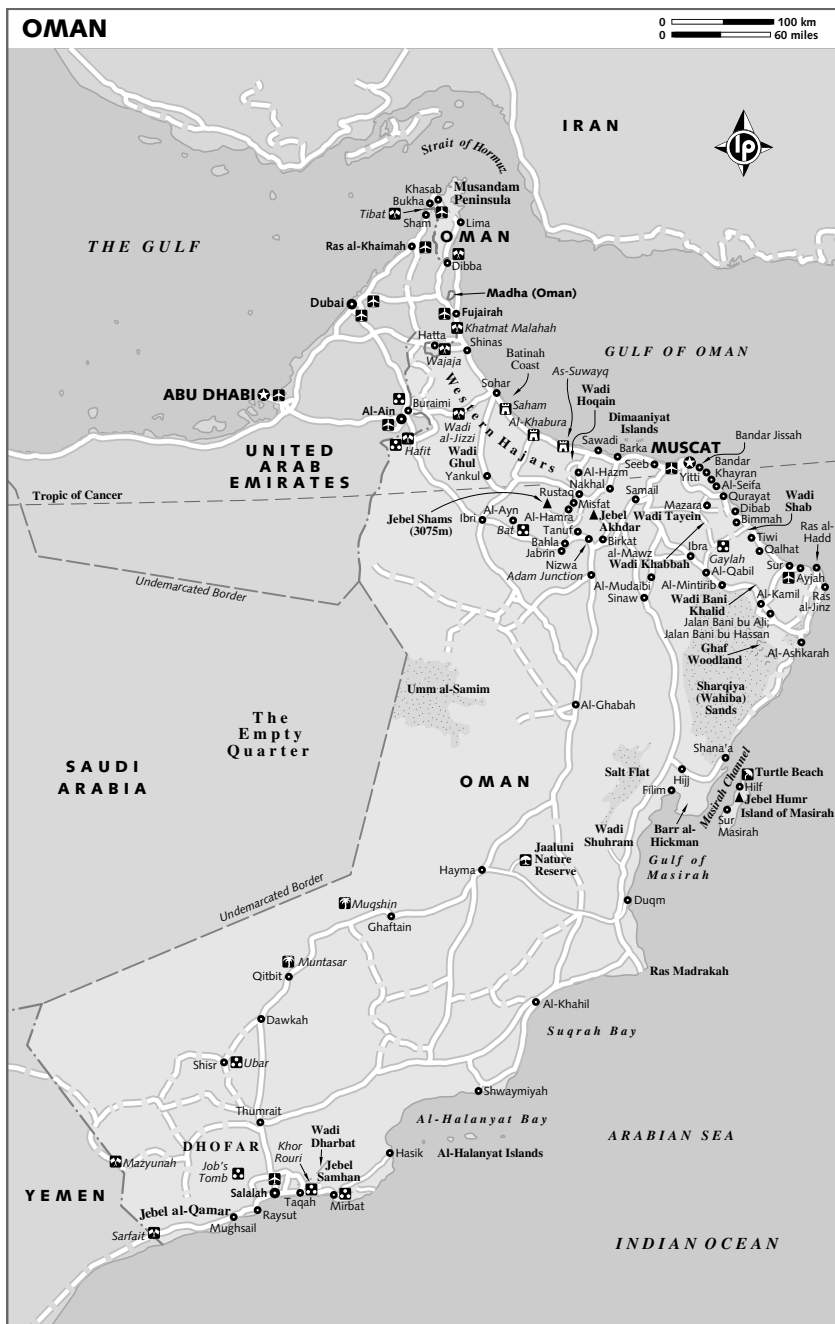
The peak tourist season in the north is from November to mid-March. See also p530 for a climate chart for Muscat.

HISTORY

'Renaissance' is a term any visitor to Oman will hear, as it refers to the current period under Sultan Qaboos, a leader held responsible by most of the population for easing the country into modernity. Before he came to the throne after a bloodless coup in 1970, Oman had no secondary and only two primary schools, two hospitals run by the American mission and a meagre 10km of sealed roads. In addition, the country was in a state of civil war. Oman has since caught up with its more affluent neighbours, and it boasts efficient, locally run hospitals, universities, electricity to remote villages and an ever-improving infrastructure of roads. Furthermore, Oman is peaceful and stable, with an enviable low crime rate and a well-trained local workforce.

Early Oman: Gold, Frankincense & Copper

The term 'renaissance' is an appropriate one, as it suggests equally rich periods through Oman's long history.



As far back as 5000 BC, southern Oman (now called Dhofar) was the centre of the lucrative frankincense trade. This highly prized commodity, produced from the aromatic sap of the frankincense tree, was traded for spices with India and carried by caravans across all of Arabia. While the trees grew in Yemen and one or other two locations, they grew best in the monsoon-swept hills of Dhofar, where they continue to be harvested to this day. So precious was the sap of these trees, that even the part-mythical Queen of Sheba hand-delivered Dhofari frankincense to King Solomon. Equally legendary, of course, are the gifts borne by the three wise men of biblical report.

The Bible also mentions the golden-pillared city of Ubar, built by the people of Ad. This fabled city, which has excited the curiosity of explorers for hundreds of years, grew out of the frankincense trade to become one of the most powerful cities in the region. The remains of the city were reputedly rediscovered in the 1990s by English explorer Ranulph Fiennes. Nonetheless, it is hard to believe this claim, looking at the virtually barren plot near Thumrait – much more persuasive is the fact that the presumed descendants of the remarkable civilisation of Ad still occupy the surrounding desert, speaking the distinct and ancient language of Jibbali, whimsically known as the ‘language of the birds’.

Oman enjoyed further prosperity in pre-Islamic times through the trading of copper. Indeed, Oman is referred to in some sources as ‘the Mountain of Copper’, and the Bahrain National Museum provides evidence of vigorous trading in copper between Oman and its Gulf neighbours. The country then slipped into a long period of isolation that prevailed until the 7th century AD when Islam was introduced by Amr ibn al-As, a disciple of the Prophet Mohammed. Oman was quick to embrace the new faith – it even gained a reputation for its proselytising zeal.

For about the next 500 years Oman came under the leadership of the Bani Nabhan dynasty (1154–1624).

Hostilities: the Portuguese

Frequent civil wars during the Bani Nabhan dynasty, between the sultan’s forces and tribal factions, left the country vulnerable

to outside hostilities that eventually came in the form of the Portuguese.

Alarmed by Oman’s naval strength and anxious to secure Indian Ocean trade routes, the Portuguese launched a succession of attacks against Omani ports; by 1507 they managed to occupy the major coastal cities of Qalhat (near Sur, and mentioned in the journals of Ibn Battuta and Marco Polo), Muscat and Sohar. Ironically, it was a talented sailor from Sohar, Ahmed bin Majid, who unwittingly helped Vasco da Gama navigate the Cape of Good Hope in 1498, leading to the Portuguese invasion a few years later.

Over the next 150 years Oman struggled to oust the occupying forces. Eventually, under the guidance of the enlightened Ya’aruba dynasty (1624–1743), Oman was able to build up a big enough fleet to succeed. The Portuguese were interested in Oman only as a sentry post for their maritime adventures and had barely ventured into the country’s interior. They were therefore easy to rout, given Oman’s newly established naval might. Other than Al-Jalali Fort, Al-Mirani Fort and Mutrah Fort, all of which dominate the centre of Muscat, the Portuguese left little behind, although their legacy of military architecture shaped fort construction in Oman.

Unified & Wealthy

By 1650 Oman became a settled, unified state of considerable wealth and cultural accomplishment, with influence extending as far as Asia and Africa. Many of Oman’s other great forts were built during this period, including the impressive, round-towered Nizwa Fort.

By the 19th century, under Sultan Said bin Sultan (r 1804–56), Oman had built up a sizable empire controlling strategic parts of the African coast, including Mombasa and Zanzibar, and parts of what are now India and Pakistan. Today it is easy to see the influence that Oman had on the coastal areas of those countries, and even more tangibly the extent to which its own culture and population was enriched by the contact. The Batinah coast, for example, is home to the Baluchi people originally from Pakistan; as a result, mosque design along the highway between Barka and Sohar bears more resemblance to the florid architecture

across the neck of the Gulf than it does to the more austere Ibadi tradition of Oman's interior.

When Sultan Said died, the empire was divided between two of his sons. One became the Sultan of Zanzibar and ruled the African colonies, while the other became the Sultan of Muscat and ruled Oman. The division of the empire cut Muscat off from its most lucrative domains, and by the end of the century, the country had stagnated economically, not helped by British pressure to end its slave and arms trading.

Coastal vs Interior: Isolation

The new century was marked by a rift between the coastal areas, ruled by the sultan, and the interior, which came to be controlled by a separate line of *imams* (religious teachers). In 1938 a new sultan, Said bin Taimur, tried to regain control of the interior, sparking off the Jebel Wars of the 1950s. Backed by the British, who had their own agenda, Said successfully reunited the country by 1959.

In all other respects, however, Said reversed Oman's fortunes with policies that opposed change and isolated Oman from the modern world. Under his rule, a country that a century earlier had rivalled the empire builders of Europe became a political and economic backwater. While neighbours such as Bahrain, Qatar and Kuwait were establishing enviable welfare states and sophisticated modern patterns of international trade, Oman slumped into poverty, with high rates of infant mortality and illiteracy. Even the communist insurgency in Dhofar during the 1960s failed to rouse Said from his reclusive palace existence in Salalah, and by the end of the decade his subjects, the most powerful of which had been either imprisoned or exiled, lost patience and rebellion broke out across the country.

The unrest led to a palace coup in July 1970 when Said's only son, Qaboos, covertly assisted by the British, seized the throne. With a face-saving shot in the foot, Said was spirited off to the Grosvenor Hotel in London, where he spent the remainder of his days. Some suggest that Said was not a greedy or malicious leader, just fiercely protective of his country's conservative traditions, which he feared would be eroded

by the rapid modernisation experienced in neighbouring countries. Perhaps the country's contemporary balance between old and new, so skilfully maintained by his son, owes something to Said's cautious approach to Western influence.

Present-Day Renaissance

As soon as Qaboos bin Said was enthroned, the young sultan began to modernise Oman's economy, and set in motion the social, educational and cultural renaissance that prevails to this day. With the help of British forces, he also resolved the Dhofari skirmishes, though they simmered on until 1982 when the Yemeni government in Aden cut off its assistance to the communist insurgents.

Each year, the anniversary of Sultan Qaboos' reign is celebrated with due pomp and ceremony, including the Sultan's 'meet the people' tour where he and his ministers camp in different regions of the country to listen to local requests. Any visiting dignitaries are obliged to go camping too. A royal camp can be a spectacular affair of pennant-carrying camel riders bringing their petitions across the desert with gifts of goats for His Majesty. Requesting lighting in their village on day two of the sultan's visit, petitioners may well expect to see the pylons delivered by day four of the same trip. It is this accessibility on the part of the Sultan, together with his reputation for delivering promises, that makes him such an effective and beloved leader. Anyone from a Western country who has waited a year to get a street light mended, may well wonder exactly what democracy means.

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

The sultan is the ultimate authority, with jurisdiction over even minor policy decisions. In January 1992 an elected Majlis ash-Shura (Consultative Council) was convened as a first step towards broader participation in government. Female representation on the council is growing and there are currently three women holding high office in government, including the ministers of higher education, tourism and social development.

Sultan Qaboos is not married and has no children. The constitution stipulates that an heir to the throne must be chosen by

the royal family within three days of the throne falling vacant, an event that most people in Oman hope will be delayed for many a year yet.

In foreign affairs, Sultan Qaboos has shown himself to be a distinguished peacemaker. In 1998 he was awarded the International Peace Award from the National Council on US-Arab Relations in recognition of his role in maintaining stability in the region. During the invasion of Kuwait, his government was unequivocally behind the Allies. After 11 September 2001, it skilfully navigated the path between Allied support against terrorism (expressed with practical assistance) and a strong identity with pan-Arab issues, particularly with regard to Palestine. Oman opposed the Allied invasion of Iraq in 2003, however, and many Omanis share the regional suspicion that the Allies have a hidden agenda for remaining in Iraq. For decades, Oman received help from Iraq's professional bodies in building a modern infrastructure. Now the tables are turned and Oman is stretching out a helping hand in rebuilding Iraq's broken institutions.

ECONOMY

In building a modern state, Sultan Qaboos' chief strategy has been to create a highly trained local workforce through intensive investment in education. Schooling is free, even at tertiary level, and provision is made (until recently by helicopter) for children of even the remotest villages.

With limited oil revenues, Oman cannot sustain costly expatriate labour, so a policy of 'Omanisation' in every aspect of the workforce is rigorously pursued. In contrast to the rest of the region, it is refreshing to find locals – often of both sexes – working in all sections of society, from petrol pump attendants to senior consultants.

Two central planks of the economy are self-sufficiency in food production, realised through intensive agriculture along the Batinah coast, and diversification of the economy. These schemes include the export of natural gas from a successful plant near Sur; an enormous port project in Salalah, the first phase of which is now complete; and the Sohar port project. The latter has already helped turn Sohar into a city reminiscent of its illustrious past with a university

and large hospital complex. The decision to disperse new economic initiatives across the regions has helped keep local communities buoyant and helped slow the exodus of villagers migrating to the capital.

A third central plank of the economy is tourism, which is growing rapidly. A large resort complex, Bandar Jissah, opened in the capital area in 2005, and in 2006 the Wave, a seafront residential and tourism development, started offering expats the opportunity to own property in Oman for the first time. In addition, one of the largest development projects on the Arabian Peninsula, called Blue City, is underway, with plans for an entire new town, canals and marinas, luxury hotels and recreational facilities, carved out of the desert around Sawadi.

Much investment continues to be made in Oman's infrastructure – no mean feat given the challenges presented by the country's size, remoteness and terrain. It is now possible to drive on sealed roads to most towns and villages across the country.

PEOPLE The National Psyche

Since the sultan came to power in 1970, Oman has trodden a careful path, limiting outside influence while enjoying some of the benefits that it brings. The result has been a successful adoption of the best parts of the Gulf philosophy, marked by a tolerance of outside 'customs and manners', without the sacrifice of national identity that often characterises rapid modernisation. Oman takes pride in its long history, consciously maintaining tribal customs, dress, architecture and rules of hospitality, as well as meticulously restoring historical monuments.

Omani people have had to work hard to make their country what it is today, and perhaps that is why the arrogance that may be seen in neighbouring countries is conspicuously absent here – indeed, Omanis are some of the most gracious, friendly and hospitable people in the region.

Lifestyle

It would be hard to imagine any country that has changed so dramatically in such a short space of time. Within the living memory of most middle-aged people outside

Muscat, travelling to the next village used to mean hopping on a donkey or bicycle, education meant reciting the Quran under a tree and medication comprised of a few herbs (very effective ones) from the mountainsides. Modern farmers contemplate GMC crop rotations, yet also look at the cloudless sky and realise that their grandmothers and children haven't been praying loud enough. Little wonder that some families have buckled under the pressure of such an extraordinary pace of change; divorce, alcoholism, drug abuse and manic driving are all social ills that have increased proportionately.

On the whole, however, Oman is a success story; it has embraced the new world with just enough scepticism to allow people to return to their villages on the weekend, park their Toyotas at the end of the tarmac and walk the rest of the way to see grandfather.

It's possible to recognise people's ethnic origins, even the regions from which they hail, by observing women's clothing. Heads, arms and legs are always covered, but costumes range from a patterned cotton cloth to a transparent *abeyya* (woman's full-length black robe), worn with a peaked face mask. In the capital, the silk *abeyya*, often worn over Western clothing, has become a fashion item. During festivals, sisters and even friends often wear clothes cut from the same cloth with elaborately embroidered trouser cuffs. Men wear a *dishdasha* (shirt-dress, usually white) and a white hat, traditionally embroidered by a loved one. On official occasions, they wear a turban (made of pashmina and usually imported from Kashmir) and tuck a silver *khanjar* (ceremonial dagger) into their belt. For an especially formal occasion, they may wear a silk outer garment with gold trim and carry a short, simple camel stick.

A BETTER PILL TO SWALLOW

Omanis have had to work especially hard to achieve a modern economy. Unlike in wealthy neighbouring countries with enormous oil revenues, the government of Oman was not in a position to lavish money on extravagant public welfare provision, or spend unlimited resources on higher education. The population of Oman has had to share in the burden of paying towards their health and education.

The result has had an effect on the size of the population. Encouraged by active community health campaigns, many modern parents realise that small is beautiful when it comes to the number of children they choose to nurture and educate, especially when the younger generation, beneficiaries of a universal secondary schooling, now aspire to costly tertiary education.

In turn, smaller families are beginning to reshape the socioeconomic profile of the country. There are the obvious improvements to the general health of women who are spared the dangers and inconveniences of multiple pregnancies, but there are also subtle knock-on effects on the extended family too. With a good education behind them, higher combined incomes, and less mouths to feed, parents of the new generation are able to invest in the wider community. Large modern villas are springing up not just in the suburbs of Muscat but also in the heart of regional towns. Even small villages are given a make-over as prosperous city-earners return to their roots at weekends to spend their disposable income to the common good. While many have migrated to the capital never to return, an equal number are planning for the day they will retire to the homes they have invested in.

If the days of producing seven sons and seven daughters are now numbered, the method by which the size of a family is controlled has not been quite so uniformly embraced. While contraception is catching on in the towns – 'something for the weekend' can now be bought even at Al-Maha petrol stations – not everyone is so quick to adopt modern methods in the *willayats* (villages). On a helicopter visit with a paramedical team to a remote mountain village, I saw local ladies gather up precious medicine – talismans from His Majesty – and stock them in their cave dwellings, together with the unopened medicine boxes from last month. The population of this village had not grown in a decade. Asked how they achieved this, the women replied with collusive grins: 'It's easy, see that *jebel* (mountain) over there? See this *jebel* over here? When I don't want another baby, I sleep behind that one and my husband sleeps behind this one.' If only all of life's solutions were that simple!

Population

Attracted by work and modern amenities, many people are moving to the capital, with the result that Muscat is spreading along the coast towards Seeb. In an effort to stem this flow, graded roads and water have been supplied to even the smallest *willayat* (village), and electricity cables can be seen travelling as resolutely as a camel caravan hundreds of kilometres across the desert.

Other centres of population at Sohar, Nizwa, Sur and Oman's second city of Salalah rank more as large towns than cities, although this is beginning to change with the expansion of various industrial projects in or near each of these regional centres.

Omani people have a strong sense of tribe and their tribal names (for example, al-Nabhani, al-Wahaybi, al-Balushi) indicate very clearly to which area they belong. Some families, such as the Al-Abris from Wadi Sahten, can be pinpointed to specific wadis in the Hajar Mountains.

Multiculturalism

Oman's population is predominantly Arab, although the country's imperial history has resulted in intermarriage with other groups, particularly from East Africa. As such, some Omanis speak Swahili better than Arabic. An Indian merchant community has existed in Muscat for at least 200 years, and people of Persian or Baluchi ancestry inhabit the Batinah coast. The Jibbali people form a separate group in Dhofar. Many of them live a mostly nomadic life with their own distinct customs; their language, completely distinct from any other, is dubbed 'the Language of the Birds'. Kumzari, the compound language spoken in parts of the Musandam Peninsula, is a mixture of Portuguese, Arabic and Farsi.

SPORT

Omani people are, on the whole, athletic. Campaigns by the Ministry of Health even send text messages to encourage people to walk more and avoid fast food. Obesity, however, is beginning to affect the new generation in the Muscat area. Traditionally energy was channelled into working the land or walking from village to village. Today it often takes the form of organised sport, particularly basketball, table tennis and rally driving. And, of course, football (soccer).

Ever since an Omani footballer Hani Adhabet was named top goal scorer in the world in 2001, football has become a national obsession – as anyone can see at 5pm on a Friday when the beaches of Oman are turned into ad hoc pitches (see the boxed text, p58). The **Bawshar Stadium** (☎ 24 592197) in Muscat hosts regular games.

A variety of traditional Omani sports are being actively encouraged by the Sultan, consisting of long jumps, strength and endurance activities. Two more comprehensible traditional sports are camel racing and bull-butting. Camel races are held on Friday mornings at tracks around the country from mid-October until mid-April, but particularly around National Day in November. The very young age of the camel jockeys has for some time been a source of consternation and plans are afoot to replace the child riders with light-weight adults. Until this is accomplished, there is a strong sense that judgmental foreigners are not welcome at these events. If you are determined to watch a race, however, contact one of the tour companies – or check with the **Directorate-General of Camel Affairs** (☎ 26 893804; fax 26 893802).

Perhaps surprisingly, bull-butting is altogether a less controversial affair. These unscheduled events involve pitting Brahmin bulls in a push-and-shove around a dirt arena. It doesn't involve blood or injury and the bulls are much beloved by their owners. The best place to see bull-butting is between November and March at Barka (p237), 45km west of Muscat, on a Friday from 4pm to 6pm (but timings are erratic).

RELIGION

About 75% of Omanis follow the Ibadi sect of Islam, an austere form of Islam that eschews decadence of any kind, even in mosque architecture. That said, modern Omanis tend to be pragmatic in their interpretation of religion, are tolerant of other forms of Islamic worship, and allow expats to express their own religions in and around Muscat.

Magic plays a tangible role in the spiritual life of many Omanis. The 'evil eye' is not mere superstition; it is regarded as a hazard of everyday life. Amulets containing verses from the Quran, or hung around the

necks of infants, are considered an effective way of warding off such problems. An expat member of the Magic Circle (an exclusive and international society of professional magicians who vow never to reveal to the public the tricks of their trade) was invited to do a magic show in a nearby village: when he conjured a white rabbit from his hat, his entire audience ran away.

ARTS

In a village between Dibab and Tiwi on the Qurayat–Sur coast road, the porches of several houses sport splendid pink or lime-green bathroom tiles, complete with fern motif. Next door to one of these houses, the remains of an intricately, hand-carved door lay disintegrating for years until weather, or an entrepreneur from Muscat, or both, put paid to it. It's not a case of out with the old and in with the new, but a demonstration of Oman's commercial relationship with art: a job lot of Indian tiles for a camel-bag of incense (or the modern-day equivalent) is the kind of international exchange that has characterised the pragmatic nature of Omani arts and crafts for centuries. It's not unusual, for example, to find the family silver (particularly grandmother's jewellery) making the journey to Muscat, because wife No 2 prefers gold. Before they became items of tourist value, exquisite pieces of silver were readily melted down and returned in kind from the gold souq. In fact, for centuries most silver jewellery was fashioned from Oman's old currency (smelted Maria Theresa dollars, or *thalla*), prized for its 80%-plus silver content.

Oman's arts and crafts are all the more wonderful for being about the living rather than the dead, the practical rather than the purely decorative. Whether this heritage can withstand rapid modernisation is another matter.

Traditional Crafts

There are many wonderful crafts in Oman, all of which have been meticulously documented through the Omani Craft Heritage Documentation Project, under the auspices of His Highness Seyyid Shibah bin Tariq al-Said and endorsed by Unesco.

Each region of Oman is associated with a different craft – Bahla is famous for pottery, Nizwa for silver jewellery, Jebel Shams

for rug-weaving, Sur for boat-building, Shwaymiyah for basket-making. For a definitive survey of Omani crafts, the twin-volume *The Craft Heritage of Oman*, by Neil Richardson and Marcia Dorr (OR49), makes a superb souvenir. Avelyn Forster's book, *Disappearing Treasures of Oman* (OR14.300), focuses on the silver Bedouin jewellery of Oman.

Music & Dance

There are dozens of traditional song and dance forms in Oman, over 130 of which have been documented by the **Oman Centre for Traditional Music** (☎ 24 601317; www.ocfm-folk.gov.om), which was set up in 1984 to preserve the country's musical heritage. Oman was the first Arab country to become part of the International Council for Traditional Music, under Unesco.

Oman's music is diverse, due to the country's seafaring and imperial heritage. The *naham* is a particularly famous call to crewmembers to pull together during a long sea voyage.

Sultan Qaboos is a Western classical-music lover. The Royal Oman Symphony Orchestra set up in his honour has been a surprising success, given the difficulties involved in learning a completely different musical idiom. Concerts are regularly given at the Al-Bustan Palace Hotel (see p199) and are listed in the What's On columns of the English-language newspapers.

Each branch of the armed forces has a band of international calibre, including the highly popular bagpipe contingent – no official ceremony in Oman would be the same without the pipes and drums. The massed bands perform annual tattoos, giving lavish horse- and camel-back displays. Some of the military bands have regularly participated in the Edinburgh Tattoo.

Architecture

Oman may no longer boast pillars of gold like the fabled city of Ubar, but it does have another architectural trump card: its forts – there is barely a village without one (see boxed text, opposite).

Oman has mercifully largely escaped the skyscraping obsession of its neighbours, settling for more restrained public buildings in keeping with a more modest budget. However, what the buildings lack in multiple

floors, they make up for in imaginative design. Muscat, in particular, abounds with serene and elegant examples, such as the ministry buildings and embassy buildings in Al-Khuwair. The Grand Mosque (p201) in Al-Ghubrah, completed in 2001, is the ultimate expression of restraint, with the simplicity of its exterior masking an exuberantly rich interior.

Not all of Muscat's buildings are grave, however; take the whimsical Grand Hyatt Muscat (p206), with its confection of arabesques and crenulations, or the venerable but distinctly quirky Al-Bustan Palace Hotel (p199). Whatever individual flights of fancy are indulged in by the architect, the result is a remarkably harmonious affair of whitewashed or sand-coloured buildings that illustrate a respect for traditional architectural values.

Outside the towns are a variety of homesteads, including marbled villas with pillars and domes, and more modest houses made from local materials. *Barasti* (palm-leaf) and other palm-constructed housing is still common along the coast from Duqm to Shwaymiyah. In Masirah, 'tin-can housing' is made out of flattened oil drums. In the Sharqiya Sands, Bedu use goat-hair tents, and many people on the mountains live in caves with an improvised front door. Most interesting of all are the round houses made from constructed, interlocking sticks that cling to the hills of Dhofar. They were once thatched but these days are more likely to be covered in bright plastic.

Painting & Sculpture

Set up to provide a forum for contemporary arts, the **Oman Fine Arts Society** (Map pp194-5;

FORTS OF OMAN

You don't have to be terribly observant while travelling around Oman to notice the number of forts and castles that dot the countryside; once you start to look, you realise that there is barely a hilltop without some kind of stronghold or watchtower.

It is telling that at a time when you'd imagine there were higher priorities to worry about than the replastering of a pile of crumbling mud and splintering wood, the Ministry of National Culture & Heritage invested in an extensive fort restoration project. This act of historical preservation, begun in the 1970s when there were only a handful of schools and hospitals, was more than just a whim and it certainly had nothing to do with the embryonic tourist industry; rather it was a central plank of the renaissance – a shoring up of the country's identity, the securing of a foundation upon which to build the new image of Oman.

Fortifications, be it a simple walled enclosure, or a grand edifice such as the fort at Nakhal (p238), have a longer lineage than the country itself. Some, such as Rustaq Fort (p238), partly predate Islam. Erected by local tribes to protect trade routes, or, like the fort at Barka (p237), built to withstand marauding forces from the sea, they have been part and parcel of the birth of a nation. Fort-building may be a dying skill in Oman (most of the specialists involved in the restoration projects are from overseas), but the need to save these landmarks for posterity is very much alive. Take the on-going Bahla project, a Unesco world heritage site: this is the fort's fourth makeover, following restoration in the 9th, 17th and 19th centuries.

So what is a fort? A fort is a military structure designed, such as the imposing Al-Hazm Fort (p239), to protect a community. A castle, on the other hand, such as Bait Na'aman in Barka (p237), is primarily a large fortified private residence. As such, the fort is a piece of civic pride. It is a symbol of a community's independence and interdependence – something the Portuguese failed to appreciate when they conquered Muscat with Forts Mirani, Jalali (p198) and Mutrah (p197) but failed to conquer the people within.

It would be easy to conclude by looking at the splendidly spruced up little fort in Ajyah (p219), a village that has yet to be touched by much of the modern world, that Oman is retrospective in its outlook. But then you notice that the bus stop, the payphone, the brand new ministry buildings in Muscat all echo some feature of fort architecture; the fort has been reinvented for a new age. When you consider how completely other countries in the region have eschewed their past, this expression of, and respect for the continuity between history and heritage, is part of what makes Oman unique.

☎ 24 694969; Shatti al-Qurm, Muscat) has a regular programme of exhibitions that showcase local painters and sculptors. Omani artists are engaged in international debate and some established artists show their work across the region.

Another venue for contemporary painting, much of which is inspired by the landscape, is the **Bait Muzna Gallery** (Map p199; ☎ 24 739204; www.omanart.com; Old Muscat), which also stocks some fine pieces of Omani craft.

ENVIRONMENT

Oman is blessed with a remarkable environment of spectacular landscapes and a wealth of flora and fauna. However, it doesn't render up its treasures easily and a 4WD is required to visit many of the places of natural beauty and interest. Accommodation near these places is often restricted to ad hoc camping, but many regard this as a joy in its own right. Indeed, waking up to the sound of a turtle retreating down the beach, or falling asleep to the croak of toads, is an unforgettable experience. To help explore these places, *Off Road in the Sultanate of Oman*, by Lonely Planet author Jenny Walker, and Sam Owen, describes how to reach just about every corner of the country.

If hiring a vehicle is not an appealing option, there are plenty of tours available from Muscat and Salalah that will reveal the country to the visitor (see p260).

The Land

Geographically, Oman is large and diverse, with an untrammelled coastline, rugged mountains, a share of the Empty Quarter and a unique monsoon catchment. It extends from the fjords of the Musandam Peninsula to the intermittently green Dhofar Region of southern Oman. Most of the country's population is concentrated on the Batinah coast, a semifertile plain that runs from the border with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to Muscat, and is separated from the rest of Arabia by the Hajar Mountains. These mountains are internationally famed for their geological heritage (see the boxed text, p239) and even the layperson will enjoy the candy-striped rocks. The highest peak is Jebel Shams (Mountain of the Sun) at 3075m, alongside which runs Wadi Ghul, dubbed the Grand Canyon of

Arabia. On the slopes of nearby Jebel Akhdar (Green Mountain), temperate fruits are grown.

Much of the country between the Hajar Mountains and Dhofar is flat and rocky desert, but there are also areas of sand dunes. Most notable are the Sharqiya (Eastern) Sands, formerly known as Wahiba Sands, and the lesser-accessible sands of the Rub al-Khali (Empty Quarter). Oman is not as rich in oil as its neighbours, but it does have some extensive fields in the gravel plains around Mumul in Al-Wusta Region and Fahood in Al-Dakhiliyah Region.

Thriving and diverse marine life exists off Oman's long coastline and there are many islands, the chief of which is the desert island of Masirah.

Wildlife

ANIMALS

Oman's isolated mountains and wadis provide a haven for a variety of animals. These include over 50 types of mammals, such as wolves, foxes, hedgehogs, jerboas and hares. The largest land mammal that a visitor is likely to see is the gazelle, a herd of which lives in a protected area along the Qurayat-Sur coast road (see p216).

There are 13 different species of whale and dolphin in Omani waters, and Oman has an important biodiversity of molluscs (see p106). Indeed, the rich variety of shells adds to the pleasure of visiting the coast.

The *Oman Bird List* is updated regularly and published by the Oman Bird Records Committee (OR1, available in Muscat bookshops); there are over 400 recorded species. Spoonbills and flamingos frequent salt lagoons, even in Muscat, but the country is internationally renowned for its migrating raptors. For more information, it's worth buying *Birdlife in Oman* (OR12), by Hanne and Jens Eriksen. Keen ornithologists should contact the **Oman Bird Group** (☎ 24 695498; www.birdsoman.com).

There is a thrilling diversity of insects in Oman – from the mighty minotaur beetle to the fig tree blue, orange pansy and other butterflies – attracted to Oman's fertile wadis or desert acacias.

Endangered Species

Oman is of global importance to the survival of the endangered green turtle and

has one of the largest nesting sites in the world at Ras al Jinz (p221). There are five endangered species of turtle supported by the coasts of Oman, all protected by royal decree.

Oman's varied terrain is home to a large number of endangered species, including houbara bustard, ibex, *tahr* (an Omani species of the goat-like animal) and Arabian leopard. The latter frequents Jebel Samhan in Dhofar and has even been known to stroll onto the runway at Salalah. There are also declining numbers of sand cat, caracal, honey badger and mongoose.

The Arabian Oryx Sanctuary (p246), a Unesco World Heritage Site in Jiddat al-Harasi, continues to protect a herd of wild oryx.

PLANTS

Oman built an empire on the frankincense trees that grow in Dhofar. The trees are still bled for the aromatic sap, but dates, covering 49% of cultivated land, have overtaken them in economic importance. Oman has a very rich plant life thanks to its fertile wadis, many irrigated year-round by spring water. It is common to see tall stands of pink oleander flowering in the wadis throughout the year.

A government-sponsored herbal clinic in Muscat uses many locally occurring plants and shrubs to treat a wide range of illnesses, most commonly diabetes and hypertension. Sultan Qaboos University has a small botanical garden of local plants and is building a new, extensive collection.

National Parks

While there are several reserves, such as the Qurm Nature Reserve in Muscat, set up to protect the endangered mangrove, and the Arabian Oryx Sanctuary, a Unesco World Heritage Site, there are no formal national parks as such.

Environmental Issues

Oman has an enviable record with regard to its protection of the environment – a subject in which the sultan has a passionate interest. His efforts have been acknowledged by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which awarded him the John C Philips Prize in 1996, and cited Oman as a country with

one of the best records in environmental conservation and pollution control. Oman is still the only Arab country with membership of IUCN. The sultanate's first environmental legislation was enacted in 1974, and in 1984 Oman was the first Arab country to set up a ministry exclusively concerned with the environment. The prestigious Sultan Qaboos Prize for Environmental Conservation, first awarded in 1991, is awarded every two years to a conservation body or individual chosen by Unesco for environmental performance.

On 8 January each year the sultanate celebrates Environment Day, during which children learn about habitat erosion, rubbish dumping and depletion of freshwater reserves. One of the environmental problems that visitors will most readily notice is the amount of oil washed up on Oman's beaches, dumped illegally from container ships. Despite heavy penalties if caught, offenders often get away with it, as it's almost impossible for Oman's military services to police such a long and exposed coastline.

Until recently, Oman's shores were otherwise pristine. Unfortunately, the sudden influx of tourists has led to previously unknown problems including dirty beaches where people insist on leaving their litter behind. Plastic bags are fast becoming a serious environmental hazard, mistaken by land and marine animals for food.

By far the most upsetting issue, however, has been the insensitivity of tourists towards the turtle population at Ras al-Jinz (see p221). The government is clearly going to have to employ more staff in the area to minimise the disruption of the celebrated nesting sites.

FOOD & DRINK

While local cuisine outside the Omani home tends to be of Lebanese origin, home cooking is nutritious and varied, reflecting Oman's ethnic diversity. Cardamom, saffron and turmeric are essential ingredients, but Omani cooking is not exceptionally spicy.

With access to a long coastline, Omanis are particularly fond of fish – sardines can be seen drying in noisome piles from Sohar to Salalah. Until recently, however, shellfish, including the local lobster (actually a large, clawless crayfish), were not considered fit for eating.

A SWEET TOOTH

Omanis have a decidedly sweet tooth which they indulge during every important social occasion. At official ceremonies, such as graduations and National Day celebrations, *halwa* is offered to guests. Lumps of the sticky, glutinous confection are pinched out of a communal dish between right finger and thumb, much to the chagrin of those who forgot to bring a hanky. This sweetmeat is made of sugar or dates, saffron, cardamom, almonds, nutmeg and rosewater in huge copper vats heated over the fire and stirred for many hours by men *wielding* long, wooden pestles; it's hard and hot work and is displayed as an entertainment during *eids* and festivals. Every region thinks it produces the best *halwa* but Barka is generally understood to have the edge and many outlets around the town sell it piled up in colourful plastic dishes.

If no-one quite got round to making the *halwa* for a party, then dates will suffice. Dates are not only an indispensable part of a meal, but also of Omani hospitality. Dates are always served with one or two cups of strong *qahwa* (Arabic coffee laced with cardamom) and it is impolite to refuse to share at least two cups with a host (but not too many more).

The other sop to a sweet tooth is honey, dubbed by some as the 'liquid gold' of the region. At OR10 to OR70 a kilo, it's easy to see why apiculture is on the increase. It's not a new trend, however: boiling honey was used in Oman as a weapon against enemies – just look for the holes above fort doors. The most expensive honey is still collected in the traditional way from wild beehives in the upper reaches of the Hajar Mountains. Pale, golden honey indicates the bees were raised on date-palm pollen; deep amber suggests sumar-tree blossom; while *sidr*, a mountain shrub, produces a molasses-coloured honey.

With so many sugar-laden temptations in the Omani heritage, it's little surprise that Oman has a particularly high incidence of diabetes. What is more surprising is that most Omanis have a fine set of teeth.

Perhaps the most typical Omani dish is *harees*, made of steamed wheat and boiled meat to form a glutinous concoction. It is often garnished *ma owaal* (with dried shark) and laced with lime, chilli and onions, and is a popular dish used to break the fast in Ramadan.

Visitors should try *shuwa* (marinated meat cooked in an earth oven) if given the chance. It is the dish of parties and festivals, and comprises goat, mutton, calf or camel meat, prepared with a potpourri of date juice and spices, and wrapped in banana leaves. The result, at least 12 hours later, is a mouth-wateringly tenderised piece of meat, aromatically flavoured with wood smoke and spices. It is served with *rukhal* (wafer-thin Omani bread) and rice on a *fadhl* (giant, communal eating tray), and eaten, of course, with the right hand only. Guests traditionally eat first, followed by men, who are expected to reserve the best pieces for women.

A surprisingly delicious traditional dish from southern Oman is *rabees*. It is made from boiled baby shark, stripped and washed of the gritty skin, and then fried with the liver.

Fruit is a very important part of an Omani meal, usually served before the meat course. Oman grows its own prize pomegranates, bananas, apricots and citrus fruit on the terraced gardens of Jebel Akhdar.

Camels' milk is available fresh and warm from the udder in Bedouin encampments. Like mares' milk, it's an experience many prefer to miss! Alcohol cannot be purchased 'over the counter' in Oman without a residents permit. It is available, however, in most of the more expensive hotels and restaurants.

MUSCAT

مسقط

📍 24 / pop 1 million

'Muscat is a port the like of which cannot be found in the whole world where there is business and good things that cannot be found elsewhere.'

As the great Arab navigator Ahmed bin Majid al-Najdi recognised in AD 1490 Muscat, even to this day, has a character quite different from neighbouring capitals.

There are few high-rise blocks, and even the most functional building is required to reflect tradition with a dome or an arabesque window. The result of these strict building policies is an attractive, spotlessly clean and whimsically uniform city – not much different in essence from the 'very elegant town with very fine houses' that the Portuguese admiral Alfonso de Alburquerque observed as he sailed towards Muscat in the 16th century.

Muscat means 'anchorage', and the sea continues to constitute a major part of the city: it brings people on cruise ships and goods in containers to the historic ports of Old Muscat and Mutrah. It contributes to the city's economy through the onshore refinery near Qurum, and provides a livelihood for fishermen along the beaches of Shatti al-Qurm and Athaiba. More recently, it has also become a source of recreation at Al-Bustan and Bandar Jissah, and along the sandy beach that stretches almost without interruption from Muscat to the border with UAE, over 200km to the northwest.

Muscat is a forward-thinking, progressive city much loved by its citizens, and a beacon for those who live in the interior. In 2006 a new museum, Bait al-Baranda (see p196), was opened in the city's honour. Its inauguration coincided with the choice of Muscat as Arab Cultural Capital – a fitting celebration of Muscat's renaissance.

HISTORY

The 2nd-century geographer Ptolemy mentioned a 'concealed harbour', perhaps the first documented reference to Muscat, but the settlement's location, surrounded on three sides by mountains, made it all but inaccessible from the land. Indeed, the supposed original settlers, Arab tribes from Yemen, almost certainly approached from the sea.

Little is known about the early days of Muscat, except that it grew into a small port in the 14th and 15th centuries. Although it gained importance as a freshwater staging post, it was eclipsed by the busier port of Sohar. By the beginning of the 16th century, however, Muscat gathered momentum as a trading port in its own right, used by merchant ships bound for India. Inevitably it attracted the attention of the Portuguese who conquered the town in 1507. The city

walls were constructed at this time (a refurbished set remains in the same positions), but neither they nor the two Portuguese forts of Mirani and Jalali could prevent the Omani reconquest of the town in 1650 – an event that effectively ended the Portuguese era in the Gulf.

Muscat became the capital of Oman in 1793, and the focus of the country's great seafaring empire of the 18th and 19th centuries. Having been party to the control of much of the coast of East Africa, Muscat's 20th-century descent into international oblivion, under Sultan Said bin Taimur, was all the more poignant.

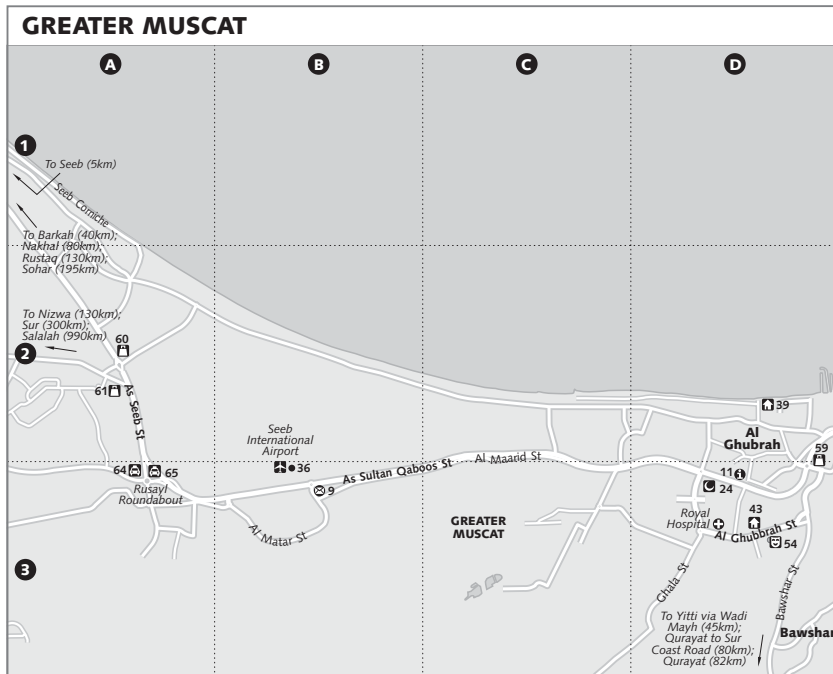
The city gates remained resolutely locked and bolted against the inevitable encroachments of the outside world until 1970. Under the auspices of a progressive leader, Sultan Qaboos, the city reawakened. To facilitate the growing number of cars needing access to the city, a hole was driven through the city walls. Goods and services flooded in and Muscat flooded out to occupy the surrounding coastline. Touchingly, the city gates continued to be locked at a specific time every evening, despite the adjacent hole in the wall, until the gates were replaced with an archway. In many respects, that little act of remembrance is a fitting metaphor for a city that has given access to modern conveniences while it continues to keep the integrity of its character.

ORIENTATION

Wedged into a relatively narrow strip of land between mountains and sea, Muscat comprises a long string of suburbs. The city spans a distance of 50km or so by road from the airport to Al-Bustan, serviced by plenty of public transport.

Muscat is sometimes referred to as the 'three cities': Muscat, Mutrah and Ruwi. Muscat proper, a small area with few shops and no hotels, comprises the *diwan* (palace administration and reception). The neighbouring port of Mutrah has most budget accommodation, while shopping centres and transport terminals are located in the commercial district of Ruwi.

It's best to navigate by reference to landmarks (eg the HSBC in Qurum, the Clock Tower roundabout in Rusayl) rather than street addresses, especially when asking for directions or speaking with taxi drivers.



Maps

The *Apex Map of Oman* (OR3; Apex Publishing, 1998) has some excellent city maps, as well as a large road map of Oman and is available from good bookshops and hotel flyers.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Most large hotels stock a wide range of coffee-table books, specialist guides and a selection of Lonely Planet guides. Try the following:

Family Bookshop (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 604245; Qurm commercial district) Stocks a good selection of English-language titles on Oman and a few bestsellers.

House of Prose (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 564356; Al-Wadi Centre, Qurm) Stocks second-hand paperbacks with a great buy-back scheme.

Turtles (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 793590; www.turtlesoman.com; Terminal Bldg, Seeb International Airport; ☎ 24hr) Includes a wide range of topical publications.

Cultural Centres

British Council (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 681000; www.britishcouncil.org; Al-Inshirah St) Runs English-language

courses and offers advice on studying in the UK. It has a small library and stocks a selection of English newspapers and magazines.

USA Information Service (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 698989 ext 201; www.muscat.usembassy.gov; US embassy, Jameat ad Duwal al-Arabiyyah St; ☎ 10am-noon & 1-3pm Sat-Wed) Maintains a comprehensive resource centre for studying, working and travelling in the USA.

Emergency

Ambulance, Fire & Police (☎ 9999)

Royal Oman Police (☎ 24 560021) Organises emergency care at the scene of an accident.

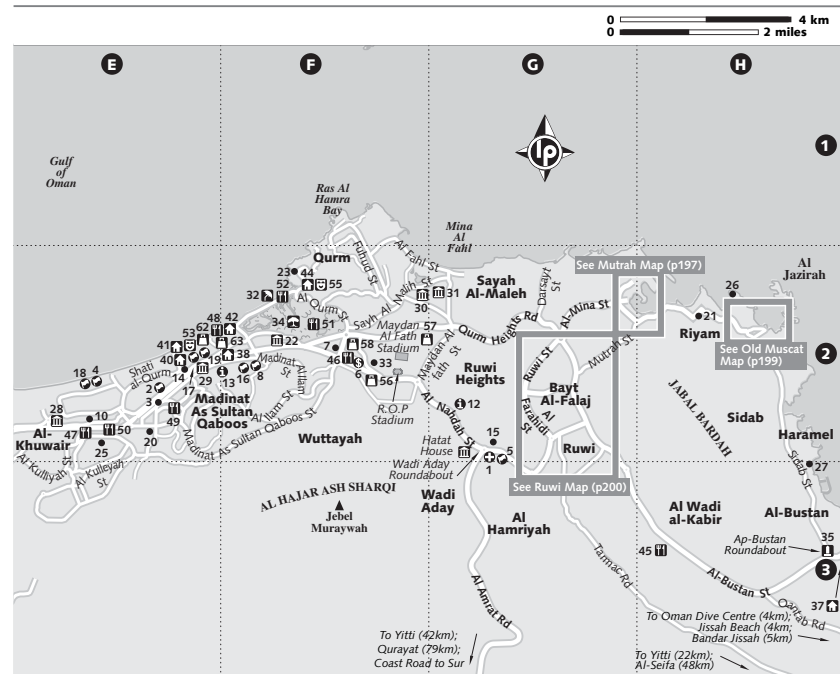
Internet Access

Internet cafés can be found all over Muscat. The standard rate is 500 baisa per hour.

Fastline Internet (Map p200; ONTC bus station, Al-Jaame St, Ruwi; per hr 500 baisa; ☎ 10am-midnight Sat-Thu, 2pm-midnight Fri)

First Internet Café (Map pp194-5; CCC Shopping Centre, Qurm; per hr 800 baisa; ☎ 9.30am-1.30pm & 5-10pm Sat-Thu, 5-10pm Fri)

Internet Café (Map p197; Corniche, Mutrah; per hr 400 baisa; ☎ 9.30am-noon & 4.30-midnight Sat-Thu, 4.30-10pm Fri)



Left Luggage

Seeb International Airport (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 510385; per piece per day OR1; ☎ 24hr) Located in the departures side of the building.

Medical Services

International-standard health care is available at the main city hospitals. An ambulance service, under the auspices of the police, was introduced in April 2004. Initial emergency treatment may be free, but all other health care is charged. English is spoken in all hospitals and clinics in Muscat.

Pharmacies rotate to provide 24-hour coverage in all regions; check *Oman Observer* to learn which ones are on duty on a given day. Pharmacies can advise which local doctors or dentists are on duty.

Al-Nahdha Hospital (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 831255; Al-Nahdha St, Wattiyyah) Emergency cases are generally brought here.

Money

The big banks are centred in Ruwi's Central Business District (CBD), but there are numerous branches with ATM facilities

throughout Muscat. Most are able to give cash advances on international credit cards and will exchange travellers cheques (though they charge a large commission).

The most convenient moneychangers are in Qurm, along Souq Ruwi St in Ruwi and on the Mutrah Corniche at the entrance to the Mutrah Souq. Most are open 8am to 1pm, and some from 5pm to 7pm; all are open Saturday to Thursday.

Amex (Map pp194-5; Dawhat al-Adab St, Madinat as-Sultan Qaboos; ☎ 8am-1pm & 4-6.30pm Sat-Thu) Inside Zahara Tours, behind the large City Plaza department store.

HSBC (Map p197; Markaz Mutrah al-Tijari St; ☎ 8am-1pm Sat-Wed, 8am-1pm Thu)

Post

Branch Post Office (Map p200; Markaz Mutrah al-Tijari St, CBD Ruwi; ☎ 8am-2pm & 4-6pm)

Main Post Office (Map pp194-5; Al-Matar St; ☎ 8am-2pm & 4-6pm) Located off the airport roundabout. There are also branches in Old Muscat and Mutrah.

Telephone

There are numerous cardphones around the city for making local and international

INFORMATION		SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES			
Al-Nahda Hospital.....	1 G2	Al-Riyam Park.....	21 H2	Bin Atique.....	47 E2
Amex.....(see 20)		Bait Al-Bahar.....(see 42)		D'Arcy's Kitchen.....	48 E2
Bahrain Embassy.....	2 E2	Children's Museum.....	22 F2	Khargeen Café.....	49 E2
British Council.....	3 E2	Crowne Plaza Hotel.....	23 F2	Mkreges Restaurant.....	50 E2
British Embassy.....	4 E2	DivEco.....(see 41)		Mumtaz Mahal.....	51 F2
Egypt Embassy.....(see 18)		Grand Mosque.....	24 D3	Restaurant.....(see 39)	
Family Bookshop.....(see 33)		Icskating Rink.....	25 E2	Tche Café.....	52 F2
First Internet Café.....(see 58)		Kalbuḥ Bay Park.....	26 H2		
France Embassy.....(see 18)		Marina Bandar al-Rowdha.....	27 H3	DRINKING ☑ ☑	
German Embassy.....	5 G2	Muscat Sport.....(see 60)		Al-Ghazal Bar.....(see 42)	
House of Prose Bookshop.....(see 57)		Natural History Museum.....	28 E2	John Barry Bar.....(see 41)	
HSBC.....	6 F2	Oman Museum.....	29 E2	Trader Vic's.....(see 42)	
Immigration & Passport		PDO Oil & Gas Exhibition.....	30 F2		
Directorate.....	7 F2	Planetarium.....	31 G2	ENTERTAINMENT ☑	
Iran Embassy.....(see 18)		Qurm Beach.....	32 F2	Al-Shaḥti Plaza (Cinema).....	53 E2
Iraqi Embassy.....	8 F2	Qurm Commercial District.....	33 F2	Bawsher Stadium.....	54 D3
Jordan Embassy.....(see 18)		Qurm Nature Reserve.....	34 F2	Rockland.....	55 F2
Kuwait Embassy.....(see 18)		Qurm Park.....(see 34)			
Lebanon Embassy.....(see 2)		Sohar (Boat).....	35 H3	SHOPPING ☑	
Main Post Office.....	9 B3	Turtles Bookshop.....	36 B3	Al-Harthy Shopping Centre.....	56 F2
Ministries Area.....	10 E2			Al-Wadi Centre.....	57 F2
Ministry of Tourism.....	11 D3	SLEEPING ☑		Amouage.....(see 33)	
National Travel & Tourism.....	12 G2	Al-Bustan Palace Hotel.....	37 H3	Bateel.....(see 63)	
Netherlands Embassy.....(see 2)		Beach Hotel.....	38 F2	CCC Shopping Centre.....	58 F2
Office of Advisor for		Chedi.....	39 D2	Lulu's.....	59 D2
Conservation.....	13 F2	Coral Hotel.....	40 E2	Markaz al-Bahja Shopping Mall.....	60 A2
Oman Fine Arts Society.....	14 E2	Grand Hyatt, Muscat.....	41 E2	Muscat City Center.....	61 A2
Polygot.....	15 G2	Hotel Intercontinental,		Muscat Sports.....(see 60)	
Qatar Embassy.....(see 18)		Muscat.....	42 F2	Oasis by the Sea.....	62 E2
Saudi Arabia Embassy.....(see 18)		Majan Continental Hotel.....	43 D3	Omani Craftman's House.....(see 33)	
Syria Embassy.....	16 F2	Qurm Beach House.....	44 F2	Omani Heritage Gallery.....	63 F2
Turkey Embassy.....	17 E2			Sabco Centre.....(see 33)	
UAE Embassy.....(see 18)		EATING ☑			
US Embassy.....	18 E2	Al-Daleh Restaurant.....	45 H3	TRANSPORT	
USA Information Service.....(see 18)		Al-Fair Supermarket.....(see 49)		Main Taxi & Minibuses to Nizwa,	
Yemen Embassy.....	19 E2	Al-Kiran Terrace.....(see 37)		Sur & Muscat.....	64 A3
Zahara Tours.....	20 E2	Automatic Restaurant.....	46 F2	Taxi & Microbuses to Seeb, Barka,	
				Barka, Nakhal, Rustaq & Sohar.	65 A3

calls. Hayyak cards, for making international and local calls from a mobile phone, can be bought at the airport and most corner shops and supermarkets.

Telephone Office (Map p200; Al-Burj St, CBD Ruwi; ☎ 8am-2pm & 4-6pm) Faxes can be sent from here.

Tourist Information

Brochures and maps are available from foyers in larger hotels.

Ministry of Tourism (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 588831; www.omantourism.gov.om) Staff can answer limited telephone inquiries.

National Travel & Tourism (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 566046; nttoman@omantel.net.om; Ar-Rumaylah St, Wattayah; ☎ 8am-1pm & 4-7pm Sat-Thu) Next to the Kia showroom in Wattayah, this is one of the best places to ask for information. Staff are experienced and helpful.

SIGHTS

Many of Muscat's sights are in and around Mutrah and the neighbouring Old Muscat. There are a number of things to see in the suburbs, including some lovely beaches.

Mutrah CORNICHE

Mutrah stretches along an attractive cornice of latticed buildings and mosques; it looks spectacular at sunset when the light casts shadows across a serrated crescent of mountains, while new pavements, lights and fountains invite an evening stroll. Despite being the capital's main port area, Mutrah feels like a fishing village. The daily catch is delivered to the **fish market** (Map p197; ☎ 6-10am), by the Marina Hotel, from sunrise everday.

BAIT AL-BARANDA

This new **museum** (Map p197; ☎ 24 714262; Al-Mina St, Mutrah; adult/child OR1/500 baisa; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4-6pm Sat-Wed, 9am-1pm Thu) in a renovated 1930s house, traces the history – and prehistory – of Muscat through imaginative, interactive displays and exhibits. A 'cut-and-paste' dinosaur, using bones found in the Al-Khoud area of Muscat and topped up with borrowed bones from international collec-

tions, is one of many striking exhibits in this excellent museum. The ethnographical displays help set not just Muscat but the whole of Oman in a regional, commercial and cultural context.

MUTRAH SOUQ

Many people come to Mutrah Corniche just to visit the **souq** (Map p197; ☎ 8am-1pm & around 5-9pm Sat-Thu; 5-9pm Fri), which retains the chaotic interest of a traditional Arab market albeit housed under modern timber roofing. There are some good antique shops selling a mixture of Indian and Omani artefacts among the usual textile, hardware and gold shops. Bargaining is expected but the rewards are not great, any discount will be small. Entrance to the souq is via the corniche, opposite the pedestrian traffic lights. Take care not to wander into the historic, Shiite district of Al-Lawataya by mistake, as the settlement is walled for a good purpose. A sign under the archway politely requests visitors to keep out. Turn right immediately inside the entrance and follow your nose along to the **gold souq**; or walk straight ahead, fork right at the first junction and left at Muscat Pharmacy for Al-Ahli Coffeeshop (see p208).

MUTRAH FORT

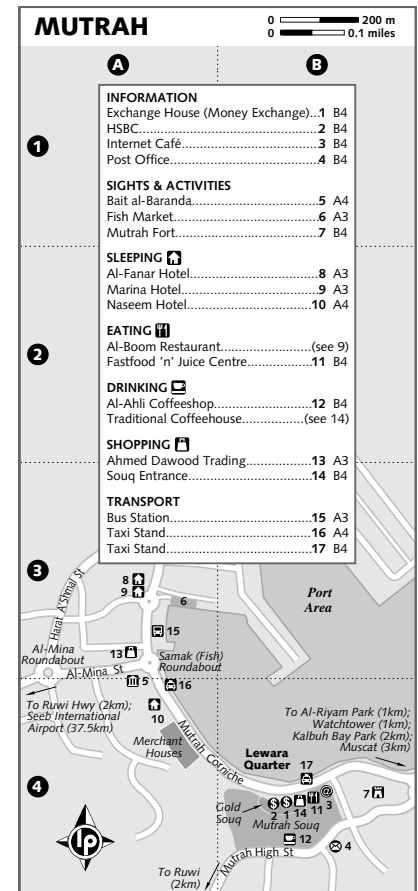
Built by the Portuguese in the 1580s, this **fort** (Map p197) dominates the eastern end of the harbour. Used for military purposes, it is generally closed to visitors although you can scale the flank of the fort for a good view of the ocean.

AL-RIYAM & KALBUH BAY PARKS

Beyond the fort, the cornice leads to the leafy **Al-Riyam Park** (Map pp194-5; ☎ 4-11pm Sat-Wed, 9am-midnight Thu & Fri), with fine views of the harbour from the giant, ornamental incense burner and small fun fair. Further along the cornice, **Kalbuḥ Bay Park** (Map pp194-5), juts into a sea that's boiling with sardines – a good place for an evening stroll from Mutrah.

WATCHTOWER

The restored Portuguese **watchtower** (Map p203) on a promontory out to sea, half way along the cornice, affords a lovely view of the water. Access to the staircase is from



behind the Al-Inshirah Restaurant. The area is a popular place to catch the evening breeze and is decorated with colourful fountains at night.

Old Muscat

The main road leads via the cornice to the tiny, open-gated city of Muscat, home now to the palace and *diwan*. It sits cradled in a natural harbour surrounded by a jagged spine of hills.

MUSCAT GATE MUSEUM

Straddling the road between the cornice and the old walled city, this **museum** (Map p199; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 4.30-7pm Sat-Thu), with the original gates used until the 1970s to

MUTRAH'S 'SOUQ-OR-MARKET'

Describing Mutrah's attractions, a local said 'you must visit the souq-or-market'. Thinking he said 'supermarket', it was a surprise to find a warren of alleyways with no checkouts – but there are some similarities. For a start, just when you thought you'd fathomed where to find the frankincense, you find that alleyway now stocks Thai clothing. Secondly, though you fully intended to look for a present for Aunt Alice, you came out with a toy helicopter, two melamine trays and an armful of fairy lights instead. Thirdly, even though you definitely didn't want to buy a *dishdasha* (man's shirt-dress), there was a special offer for three. And finally, although all alleyways seem to be heading for the exit, you can't actually get out.

Mind you, getting a little lost is part of the fun of the souq, as that is the most likely time you'll stumble on the 'special offers' – the ones unique to 'that place' at 'this time'. And Mutrah Souq has plenty of those – like the old picture frames, complete with woodworm, from the wood-crafting town of Ibra; antique *mandoos* (wedding chests) with brand-new thumbtacks brought down from the Hajar Mountains; a *khanjar* (traditional curved dagger) shop selling off the family silver; rope-twined muskets that saw action in the Dhofar wars of the 1970s; an alleyway of sandals that complete the men's smart Omani costume; and another of aluminium serving dishes for the traditional Omani *shuwa*; a fruit-juice shop serving pomegranates from Jebel Akhdar, with wafts of frankincense from Salalah outside the door; and a tea palace whose host sprinkles rosewater made in the tiny terraced village of Al-Ayn.

From a camel with an illuminated hump to that favourite, the kitsch mosque alarm clock, all the things you never wanted but can afford to buy (plus a few you did and can't) are available in Mutrah Souq.

keep land-bound marauders out, marks the position of the old city wall and introduces Muscat proper. It is also a vantage point for the Sultan's Palace. A quick climb up to the aerial mast on the neighbouring hill gives an even better view of Mutrah and Muscat.

SULTAN'S PALACE

If you stand by the harbour wall on Mirani St, the building to the right with the delightful mushroom pillars in blue and gold is the **Sultan's Palace** (Al-Alam; Map p199). It was recently extended over the site of the former British embassy. In the grounds, there used to be the stump of a flagpole: the story goes that any slave (Oman was infamous for its slave trade from East Africa) who touched the flagpole was granted freedom. There's a fine view of the palace from the roundabout on the inland side; some streets of houses have recently been cleared (to the chagrin of some) to make a new colonnade befitting of a royal residence and more appropriate to officially 'meet and greet' – particularly spectacular when the mounted guard is in attendance.

AL-JALALI FORT

Guarding the entrance to the harbour to the east, **Al-Jalali Fort** (Map p199) was built

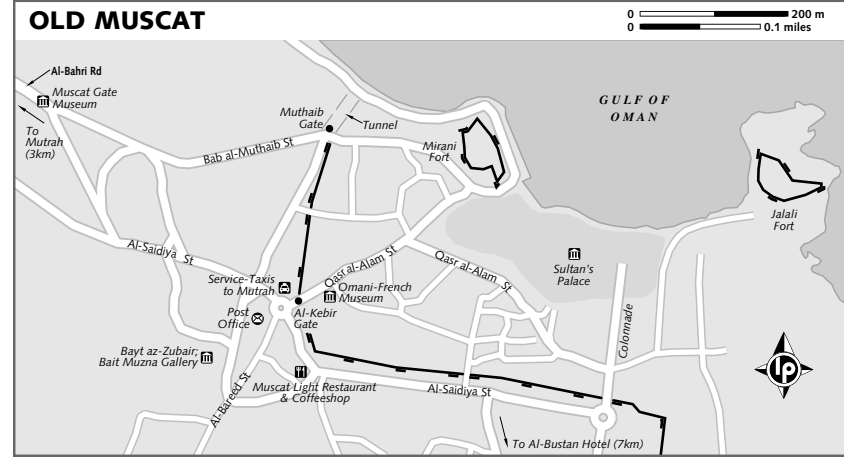
during the Portuguese occupation in the 1580s on Arab foundations.

The fort is accessible only via a steep flight of steps. As such, it made the perfect prison for a number of years, but now it is a museum of Omani heritage, open only to visiting dignitaries and heads of state.

Neither this fort nor Al-Mirani (below) is open to the public, but photographs are permitted. During palace military occasions, bands of bagpipers perform from the fort battlements, and the royal dhow and yacht are sailed in full regalia into the harbour. With fireworks reflected in the water, it makes a spectacular sight.

AL-MIRANI FORT

To the west, **Al-Mirani Fort** (Map p199) was built at the same time as Al-Jalali Fort. It contributed to the fall of the Portuguese through a curious affair of the heart: legend has it that the Portuguese commander fell for the daughter of a Hindu supplier, who refused the match on religious grounds. On being threatened with ruin, he spent a year apparently preparing for the wedding, but in fact convincing the commander that the fort's supplies needed a complete overhaul. Instead of replacing the removed gunpowder and grain, he gave the nod to



Imam Sultan bin Saif, who succeeded in retaking the defenceless fort in 1649. The Portuguese were ousted from Muscat soon after.

BAYT AZ-ZUBAIR

In a beautifully restored house, this **museum** (Map p199; ☎ 24 736688; Al-Saidiya St; admission OR1; ☎ 9.30am-1pm & 4-7pm Sat-Thu) exhibits Omani heritage in photographs and displays of traditional handicrafts and furniture.

OMANI-FRENCH MUSEUM

With galleries detailing relations between the two countries, this **museum** (Map p199; ☎ 24 736613; Qasr al-Alam St; admission 500 baisa; ☎ 9am-1pm Sat-Thu) provides an interesting snapshot of mostly 19th-century colonial life in Muscat. From October until March, the museum is also open from 4pm to 7pm Saturday to Thursday.

Al-Bustan

AL-BUSTAN PALACE HOTEL

Set in lush gardens, this sumptuous **hotel** (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 799666; ☎ closed until January 2008) was built as a venue for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit in 1985. Remarkable for its enormous domed atrium, the hotel has won numerous awards as the best hotel in the Middle East. It's worth coming just to look at the building's interior and the location. It was being refurbished at the time of research and is scheduled to re-open in 2008.

البيستان

AL-BUSTAN ROUNDABOUT

Just outside the Al-Bustan Palace Hotel, a small roundabout is home to the *Sohar* (Map pp194-5), a boat named after the hometown of the famous Omani seafarer, Ahmed bin Majid. The boat is a replica of one sailed by Abdullah bin Gasm in the mid-8th century to Guangzhou in China. It was built in the dhow yards of Sur from the bark of over 75,000 palm trees and four tonnes of rope. Not a single nail was used in the construction. Tim Severin and a crew of Omani sailors undertook a famous voyage to Guangzhou in this boat in 1980 – a journey of 6000 nautical miles that took eight months to complete.

Ruwi

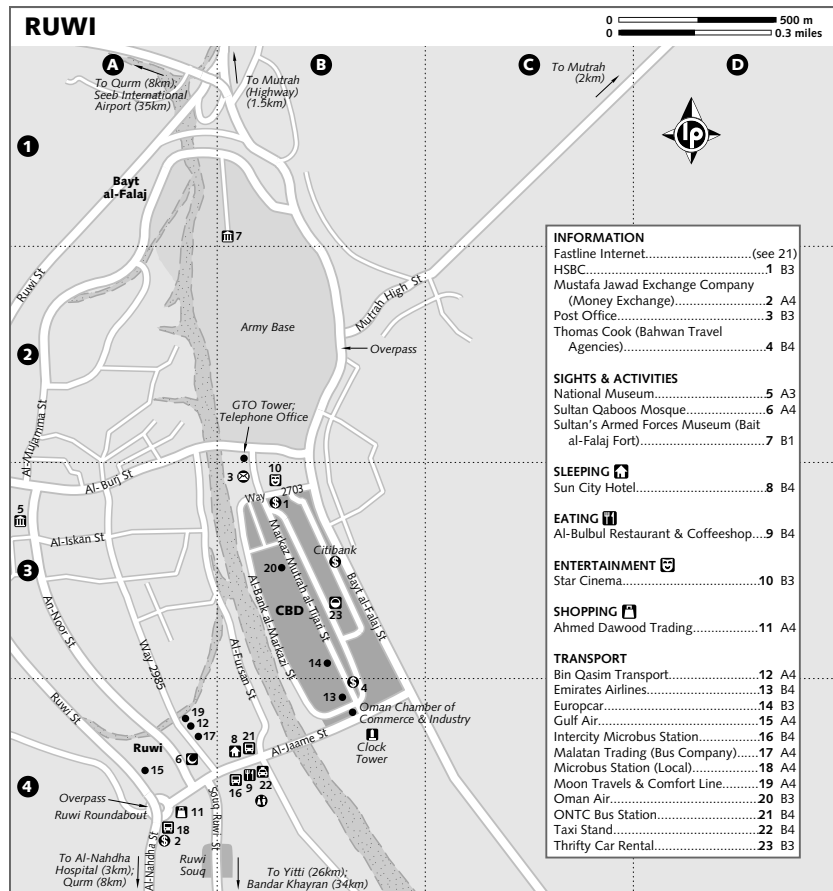
Oman's 'Little India' is the commercial and transport hub of the capital, with plenty of budget-priced places to eat, shop (especially along Souq Ruwi St) and socialise.

NATIONAL MUSEUM

With displays of jewellery, costumes and dowry chests, this **museum** (Map p200; ☎ 24 701289; An-Noor St; admission 500 baisa; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4-6pm Oct-Mar) has its moments. A mural and collection of boats celebrating Oman's seafaring heritage are probably the best part of a tired collection.

SULTAN'S ARMED FORCES MUSEUM

Despite the less than appealing name, this excellent **museum** (Map p200; ☎ 24 312642;



admission OR1; ☎ 8am-1pm) is far more than just a display of military hardware. The museum is housed in Bayt al-Falaj, built in 1845 as a royal summer home but used mostly as the headquarters of the sultan's armed forces. The lower rooms give a comprehensive outline of Oman's history, and the upper rooms explore Oman's international relations and military prowess. The museum is on the itinerary of visiting dignitaries and you'll be given a mandatory military escort. There's a *falaj* (irrigation channel) in the grounds outside.

Qurm

Most of this area comprises modern shopping centres and residences, but there are

several places to visit. Surprisingly, one of the best places to buy Omani silver and handicrafts is inside a modern mall called the **Sabco Centre** (see p209).

In addition to the small displays of artefacts and interesting rooms on Omani architecture, the **Oman Museum** (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 600946; admission 500 baiza; ☎ 8.30am-1.30pm Sat-Wed, 9.30am-12.30pm Thu) is worth trying to find for its view over dazzlingly white suburbs and sea, though it's not always open as stated. A taxi from Qurm up the steep 1.3km climb costs OR1. From October to March, the museum is also open from 4pm to 6pm, Saturday to Wednesday.

Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) is responsible for much of the rapid growth of

infrastructure throughout the country, as outlined in the **PDO Oil & Gas Exhibition** (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 677834; Sayh al-Malih St; admission free; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Sat-Wed, 8am-noon Thu). The neighbouring **Planetarium** (☎ 24 675542) is open for two shows per week in English (at 7pm Wednesday and 10am Thursday) but book one day ahead.

To reach both from Qurm, follow the signs for the Crowne Plaza Hotel and turn at the first right along Sayh al-Malih St.

A popular venue during the annual Muscat Festival in January, **Qurm Park** makes a good place for a picnic even in the hot summer months; the adjacent **Qurm Nature Reserve** (closed to visitors) protects a rare stretch of mangrove. A road runs along the edge of the reserve towards the Crowne Plaza Hotel, giving access to a long, sandy **beach**. Women bathing on their own have been accosted here, so avoid skimpy swimwear.

There are two pleasant cafés along the beachfront with a view out to sea above the palm trees.

Shatti al-Qurm & Al-Khuwair

شاطي القرم و الخوير
Near the Hotel InterContinental Muscat, along Way 2817, there is a small shopping complex where you will find the **Omani Heritage Gallery** (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 696974; www.omanheritage.com), which sells local handicrafts (see p209).

The Ministry of National Heritage houses the small but lovely **Natural History Museum** (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 641510; Way 3413; admission 500 baiza; ☎ 9am-1pm Sat-Thu). The museum is a must for anyone interested in the local flora and fauna, and there are also some excellent displays on Oman's geography and geology.

It's worth driving around the elaborate **ministry and embassy buildings** bunched in this area. Make time to stop at the beachside **Grand Hyatt Muscat** to enjoy a Yemeni prince's flight of fancy; love it or hate it, tea in the foyer is a delight.

Ghala & Al-Ghubrah

الغبيرة و غلا
Also known as the **Grand Mosque** (Map pp194-5; Sultan Qaboos St; ☎ 8-11am Sat-Wed for non-Muslims), this glorious piece of modern Islamic architecture was a gift to the nation from

Sultan Qaboos to mark the 30th year of his reign. Quietly imposing from the outside, the main prayer hall is breathtakingly rich. The Persian carpet alone measures 70m by 60m wide, making it the largest carpet in the world; it took 600 women four years to weave.

When visiting the mosque, long sleeves and trousers (not jeans) or long skirts should be worn, and women should cover their hair. As when entering all mosques, you should remove your shoes and take care not to touch the Quran. If you sit on the carpet, make sure your feet are tucked behind you – it is offensive to Muslims if you point the soles of your feet at them.

Al-Ghubrah and Ghala lie some 8km west of Al-Khuwair. If you are visiting the mosque from Muscat in the summer, it's easier to take a taxi (OR5) rather than catch the bus: it is a hot walk crossing the highway via the overpass. Plenty of buses bound for Ruwi stop outside the mosque.

ACTIVITIES

The sea and the mountains dominate Muscat, giving plenty of amenities for water-related sports and some independent hiking. **Muscat Diving & Adventure Centre** (☎ 24 485663; www.holiday-in-oman.com) can help with activity-based trips in the capital area and beyond.

For other companies offering much the same, see p260.

4WD Trips

Muscat's rocky mountains and soft-sand dunes offer some exciting and challenging 4WD driving. Close to the city there are plenty of places to explore, especially near Yitti and en route to Al-Seifa (see p213). Many routes further afield are covered in this book (such as the mountain road from Al-Hamra to Wadi Bani Awf, p233. For more adventurous routes, pick up a copy of *Off-Road in the Sultanate of Oman*, by Lonely Planet author Jenny Walker, and Sam Owen; see p255.

Many people refer to this activity as 'wadi-bashing' – taking a 4WD into remote terrain can lead, through careless or insensitive driving, to irreparable degradation of the environment. For information on limiting the negative effects of this activity, see p554.

It's also possible to take 4WD tours to many off-road destinations (see p260).

Beaches

Many of the big hotels have attractive beachside facilities open to nonguests for a fee. Women may feel more comfortable here than on public beaches. The Crowne Plaza Hotel is at the head of a beautiful, sandy bay and has its own private scrap of beach. Admission costs OR6 per day. A taxi from Mutrah should cost OR3. At present, all beaches in Muscat are 'public', so there's nothing to stop a keen walker starting at Qurum Nature Reserve and walking all the way to Seeb, a distance of some 20km or so.

Bird-Watching

With your own transport, it's easy to access a number of places in Muscat for bird-watching opportunities, including the reed beds and mangroves at Qurum Nature Reserve, where a number of waders can be seen year-round. Contact the **Oman Bird Group** (☎ 24 695498) for specialist information.

Hiking

There are some rewarding mountain walks in the Muscat area. Several two- to three-hour walks in and around Mutrah and Old Muscat afford excellent views of the two port areas and take the rambler up past ruined villages. These walks are covered in Anne Dale and Jerry Hadwin's *Adventure Trekking in Oman*, with good maps, directions and safety precautions. Their Muscat-Sidab route is a one-hour walk that could be added, for energetic walkers, onto our walking tour (see right).

The **Ministry of Tourism** (☎ 24 588831; www.omantourism.gov.om) has developed a set of walking tours and a booklet describing these routes. Brown information signs mark the trailheads of some routes. One, the C38 from Al-Riyam Park to Mutrah (a walk of 2km taking about 1½ hours), is an option on our walking tour. Be prepared for rough conditions in remote territory on all trails: stout walking shoes, water and a hat are essential at any time of year, even on the shortest route.

Horse-Riding

There are two horse-riding schools in Muscat that are open to the public:

Al-Sawahil Horse Riding (☎ 24 590061)
Qurum Equestrian School (☎ 99832199)

Water Sports

Water sports in Muscat include diving and snorkelling. There are also boat trips around scenic Bandar Khayran (and nearby rock arch), and dolphin and whale watching. The following centres offer a full range of water sports and activities, and run diving courses.

DiveCo (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 602101; diveco@omantel.net.om; beachside, Grand Hyatt Muscat, Shatti al-Qurum), a well-established centre, is situated on a long, sandy beach.

The **Marina Bander al-Rowdha** (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 737288; www.marinaoman.com; Sidab St) offers a full range of boating amenities. (Also see p211 for the Oman Dive Centre.)

Bait Al-Bahar (☎ 24 693223; Hotel InterContinental Muscat; Shatti al-Qurum) is one of the newest additions to the water-sports scene.

MUSCAT WALKING TOUR: A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE ARABIAN SEA

Start Fish Market, Muscat
Finish Al-Bahri Rd, Old Muscat
Distance 8km
Duration 4 to 5 hours

This walking tour follows the sea through the ancient ports of Mutrah and Muscat. Pack a snack and take water. The walk can be segmented if time, energy or summer heat forbids the whole circuit.

Begin where the morning tide beaches fishermen and their catch at the **Fish Market** (1; p196). Stop for breakfast at nearby **Al-Boom Restaurant** (p207).

Turning right at fishy **Al-Samak roundabout** (2), visit nearby **Bait al-Baranda** (3; p196) and learn about the history of Muscat's relationship with the sea. Return to the **corniche** (p196) and head towards 16th-century **Mutrah Fort** (p197). Look left at dhows and right at the merchants' houses of the Lawataya people, who built their fortunes on the sea-faring trade.

Just before the fort, turn into **Mutrah Souq** (4; p197) where items such as handmade silver dhows and ship chandlery are on sale; this souq grew from seaborne cargo. Ward



off the scurvy with a mixed fruit juice at **Al-Ahli Coffeeshop** (p208) in the heart of the souq. Return to the corniche and turn right.

At the **goldfish monument and fountains** (5), a heron often snacks in view of the royal dhow and the visiting navy. Continue towards the giant incense burner; Oman's former prosperity was built on Dhofar frankincense.

On reaching **Al-Riyam Park** (6; p197), you could, with stout shoes, head back to Mutrah on the Ministry of Tourism's walking route C38, past panoramic views. Alternatively, continue along the corniche to the **watchtower** (7; p197) and scan for dolphins: some real and some carved from marble.

After **Kalbuh Bay Park** (8; p197) cut inland via Al-Bahri Rd and enter the 'city proper' via **Muscat Gate Museum** (9; p197).

Turn right towards Sidab on Al-Saidiya St and visit **Bait az-Zubair** (10; p199) for photographs showing the sea's influence on Muscat and buy a souvenir of your tour in **Bait Muzna Gallery** (11; p209) opposite.

Continue along Al-Saidiya St, still heading for Sidab. Pause for fried fish at **Muscat Light Restaurant & Coffeeshop** (12; p208) on the corner before turning right along an elegant avenue of date palms.

At the roundabout, march left through the colonnade towards the grand front entrance of the **Sultan's Palace** (13; p198). Follow the palace walls left, past beautiful gardens and mature trees (favourite roost of minar birds) on Qasr al-Alam St.

At the junction, turn left for the **Omani-French Museum** (14; p199) and a display on shipbuilding, or right for **Muscat Harbour**. The Portuguese built forts, such as **Al-Mirani** (15; p198), towering to the left, and **Al-Jalali** (across the bay), to protect their maritime interests. Look across the harbour for a graffiti log book left by maritime visitors.

Turn left at the harbour wall, and duck under the tunnel before the naval base. Turn right under the **old city gate** onto Bab Muthaib St. This soon runs into Al-Bahri Rd – and from here, it's an easy taxi ride back to Mutrah.

COURSES Language

Muscat isn't a great place to learn Arabic, as many people speak English proficiently and relish the chance to practise.

For the determined, however, **Polyglot** (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 835777; www.polyglot.org; off Wadi Aday roundabout, Ruwi; per course OR105) runs 10-week courses in six different levels of Arabic proficiency, from beginners to advanced. The teachers are usually from Sudan and the courses concentrate on classical Arabic rather than the Omani dialect.

MUSCAT FOR CHILDREN

Muscat is a safe and friendly city with a few attractions for children, including the following:

Children's Museum (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 605368; off Sultan Qaboos St, Qurum; admission 500 baisa;

DESERT ON ICE

What is it about the ice-skating rink that holds such a special attraction for Gulf countries, including Oman? No country in the region can take itself seriously without one. Clearly opposites attract, but why the determination to ice-skate when temperatures outside are hot enough to poach an egg? Perhaps the rinks are a 'we do because we can' kind of status symbol? Perhaps they have a deeper psychological satisfaction in terms of human mastery of the environment? Perhaps it is simply that floating around a frozen surface is much more fun than roasting on the dunes? Whatever the reasons, most visitors will find it a unique experience to watch men in their white *dishdashas* and women in their black *abeyyas* take to the ice with a surprising (given the lack of facilities) competence.

Indeed, one young Omani skating sensation is more than just competent, she's set to become a star. At the age of nine, Amani Samir Fancy won four gold medals at Skate Asia 2006, held in China. When asked how it is that Amani's talent has bloomed in the desert, her mother points out that every professional rink in the world is manmade, so who cares what the outside temperature is.

Amani's ambition is now to win an Olympic gold medal for Oman. Having won praise from the top (Ted Wilson, President of the international Ice Arena, said that Amani had brought an unforgettable 'sparkle' to Skate Asia), she is now being trained by a Russian coach in Dubai. Her father is on a mission 'to create the environment that gives her the freedom to succeed'. As such, Muscat could be looking forward to a bigger, better rink in the near future.

☞ 9am-1pm Sat-Thu Well-signposted, domed building with lots of hands-on science displays.

Ice skating (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 489492; Al-Khuwair St, Al-Khuwair; admission OR2.500 incl skate hire; ☞ 9am-10pm) A good way to beat the summer heat (see above).

Markaz al-Bahja (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 540200; Ma-waila) A fair way out of town, this covered play area with themed rides is in the new shopping mall, 5km northwest of Seeb Airport on the highway towards Seeb.

Qurm Park (Map pp194-5; admission free; ☞ 4-11pm Sat-Wed, 9am-midnight Thu & Fri) Attractively landscaped park, with ponds, shade for picnics, a model village (active during Muscat Festival) and a funfair with Ferris wheel.

TOURS

As Muscat's attractions are so spread out, a tour is recommended. Generally, tours can be organised on a bespoke basis from any of the main tour operators (see p260).

National Travel & Tourism (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 660376; www.nttoman.com; Ar-Rumaylah St, Wattayah; ☞ 8am-1pm & 4-7pm Sat-Thu) can arrange half-day city tours for OR40 for a car of up to four people with an English-speaking driver.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Muscat Festival

Lasting for a month from around the beginning of January, Muscat Festival has become a highlight of the capital's year. The event is organised around two main venues; one in Qurm Park and the other at a semi-

permanent site along the seafront between Athaiba and Seeb.

In Qurm Park, there are nightly fireworks at about 8pm, a 'living' replica of an Omani village with *halwa*-making and craft displays, exhibitions from regional countries and events such as laser shows and traditional dancing. At the beachside venue, there is a funfair, international pavilions selling crafts, bargain clothing and bedding and a range of items from cheap imports to inlaid furniture from Pakistan. International dance troupes perform on the open-air stage and fashion shows take place nightly; other acts, such as highwire acrobatics, occupy the periphery. In addition, many shops offer grand draws and discounts. Check the English-language newspapers and FM radio for the festival programme.

National Day

On 18 November, National Day is marked with fireworks, city buildings are draped with strings of colourful lights, and Sultan Qaboos St is spectacularly lit and adorned with flags and framed images of the Sultan.

SLEEPING

Muscat is not a cheap city to sleep in, but it does have some splendid hotels. Some of these are almost holidays in their own

right. The hotels of Qurm, Shatti al-Qurm and Al-Khuwair are all located on or near the same stretch of sandy beach. For a location within walking distance of the capital's main attractions, however, the less expensive hotels in Mutrah are the best bet.

Budget

Al-Fanar Hotel (Map p197; ☎ 24 712385; fax 24 714994; Mutrah Corniche, Mutrah; s/d OR8/15) Near the fish market and neighbouring the Marina Hotel, this is a familiar travellers' haunt, but is in dire need of a face-lift. If you can ignore the down-at-heel interior, the basic rooms are clean and the cheapest in town. Breakfast is not included.

Naseem Hotel (Map p197; ☎ 24 712418; fax 24 711728; Mutrah Corniche, Mutrah; s/d OR12/16.500) In need of a make-over, this tired old Mutrah favourite has large, clean, comfortable rooms, some with stunning views of the harbour. Given its location, plum in the middle of the city's finest row of merchant houses, it's remarkable that this hotel has survived in the budget category – or survived at all for that matter. What it lacks in décor and sophistication, however, it makes up for in friendly, helpful service and of course, its prime location.

Sun City Hotel (Map p200; ☎ 24 789801; fax 24 789804; Al-Jaame St; s/d OR15/20) Beside Ruwi bus station, this new hotel, with its bright and cheerful lobby, large rooms with shiny floor tiles and big windows, is recommended if you have an early bus to catch. Friendly staff can help you navigate the vagaries of the bus station.

Qurm Beach House (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 564070; qbhotel@omantel.net.om; Way 1622, Qurm; s/d OR14/32) In a quiet location and within walking distance of the beach, this hotel is on the approach to the Crowne Plaza Hotel. Don't be put off by the appearance of the lobby; the rooms are clean and appealingly quirky with an ill assortment of furniture. Right next door is Rocklands, one of the hottest nightclubs in town.

Midrange

Marina Hotel (Map p197; ☎ 24 713100; irfansyed1@yahoo.com; Mutrah Corniche, Mutrah; s/d OR15/35) For those who have come to Muscat to discover its soul, then the Marina Hotel, overlooking the fish market and participating in the character of the corniche, offers a

very good vantage point. In fact, you can see what the city is all about over breakfast: the comings and goings of the ancient port of Mutrah can all be enjoyed from the restaurant window. The rooms are on the cramped side but the staff are interested and the clientele interesting, making for an enjoyable rag-bag atmosphere in the foyer.

Majan Continental Hotel (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 592900; www.majanhotel.com; s/d OR40/46; ☎) Perched on top of a hill overlooking the pearly white suburbs of Muscat, this comfortable, Arabic-style hotel is hugely popular with Omani and regional visitors. If you think of Muscat as a prudish city, then think again: quiet and decorous by day, with a dome fit for an Italian palazzo, the hotel reinvents itself at night into the city's liveliest hotspot. With a pleasant pool area, coffee shop and large, chintzy rooms, this hotel best suits male travellers wanting to feel the pulse of local life.

Beach Hotel (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 696601; beachhtl@omantel.net.om; Way 2818, Shatti al-Qurm; s/d OR48/52; ☎) In a pristine white building with tiled blue trim, big rooms with armchairs, balconies with sun shades and a lobby with sky blue domes, this is a rare residential-style hotel. There's no alcohol on the premises and the breakfast menu includes *fuul medamas* (beans) and *khoubs* (Arabic flat bread). With hospitable, helpful staff, an Arabic restaurant with live music on Monday, Wednesday and Thursday, an easy walk to the beach, and plenty of options for local exploration, this hotel offers a genuine Omani experience.

Coral Hotel (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 692121; www.coralinternational.com; Shatti al-Qurm; s/d OR65/76) Fun and quirky, and with a nautical theme, this ship's bow-shaped hotel is only a seagull's glide from the sea. With sailor-suited staff and compass carpets, ships' wheel banisters and a dhow-shaped reception, guests will be glad to learn that rooms bear little resemblance to cabins. The bathrooms are particularly attractive with swan-shaped fixtures and fittings. All in all, this fun, well-priced option is a sail short of a fleet but a boom more than a tanker.

Top End

Prices quoted here are rack rates and you can almost certainly arrange a discount of

some sort. Disconcertingly, rates literally change by 20% or more from one day to the next. Nonsmoking rooms are available.

Hotel InterContinental Muscat (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 680000; muscat@interconti.com; Shatti al-Qurm; s/d from OR110/120; 📍 📞) If anything is 'happening' in Muscat, chances are it is doing so at the 'InterCon'. From Scottish balls and bagpipes to the latest cover show, regular entertainment is featured under the swaying coconut palms or in the hotel's English-style pub. While not the prettiest building in town, this hotel has a fine interior, quality rooms, shady gardens and access to the beach, making it a popular resort-style hotel. A handy shopping complex, including coffee shops and restaurants, is within walking distance.

Grand Hyatt Muscat (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 641234; www.muscat.grand.hyatt.com; Shatti al-Qurm; s/d OR155/165; 📍 📞) This hotel is pure kitsch! The exterior owes much to Disney, while its stained-glassed and marbled interior is a cross between Art Deco and a royal Bedouin tent. Apparently a Yemeni prince designed the hotel and, like it or loathe it, it has an interior to be experienced. While traditionally more focused on the well-heeled business community, there is much in this majestic, marble-clad hotel to appeal to the sophisticated holiday-maker too, including luxurious, balconied rooms and Muscat's best Italian restaurant, Tuscany. With watersports offered on the beach and limitless walks along the sand, this is a hotel with more than one angle.

our pick **Chedi** (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 505035; www.gmhhotels.com; Al-Ghubrah North; s/d OR165/205; 📍 📞) With a hint of the *kasbah* (desert castle) combined with Oriental minimalism, the Chedi has been designed to make the best of its mini sand-dune location. Don't let the occasional groan of aircraft lowering into Seeb airport put you off: for most of the day, the only audible sound from the pool-side of one of Muscat's most stylish hotels, is the whisper of crickets and the odd chink of wine glasses. The gardens, rhythmically punctuated by Zen ponds, raked pebbles and an infinity pool virtually contiguous with the sea, are satisfying to the soul. Satisfying to the palette, the Restaurant (p207) for once lives up to a rather presumptuous name. Chocolates, or should we say, 'Les Chocolates', are handmade on site by a

French chef. Hanging suits and accommodating the etceteras of working life may be difficult in the minimally furnished rooms, but if all you brought is a swimsuit and a good book, then very little will intrude on your sense of getting away from it all.

Al-Bustan Palace Hotel (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 799666; albustan@interconti.com; Al-Bustan; 📍 📞) In a secluded bay ringed by spectacular mountains, the Al-Bustan is more palace than hotel. It has an atmosphere and class of its own, partly engendered through the impeccable service, exceptional Arabian-style interior and some top-quality restaurants. It's closed for refurbishment until 2008.

EATING

There are plenty of opportunities for fine dining in Muscat, particularly at the top-end hotels. Equally, it's hard to go 10 paces without tripping over a *shawarma* (meat sliced off the spit and stuffed in pita-type bread with chopped tomatoes and garnish) stand.

Dozens of cafés around Muscat sell a variety of largely Indian snacks, such as samosas and curried potatoes. It is more difficult to eat typical Omani food – the best option is Bin Atique. For a comprehensive roundup of Muscat's restaurants and cafés, it's worth buying a copy of *Oman Today* (OR1). Below is a selection of restaurants that give a flavour of the region, either in menu or venue.

Restaurants

Automatic Restaurant (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 487200; behind the Sabco Centre, Qurm; mains OR2) There is nothing automatic about the Lebanese fare from this chain of Lebanese restaurants: they serve uniformly good-quality food with friendly service in cheap and cheerful surroundings. Whatever you order, a dish of leaves (lettuce, radish and mint) is provided free and makes a good garnish for the kebabs, felafla and hummus staples.

Al-Daleh Restaurant (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 813141; National Hospitality Institute, An-Nuzha St, Al-Wadi al-Kabir; 3-course lunch OR2; 📞 1-2.30pm Sat-Wed, 7-8.30pm Tue) Nervous Omani hospitality students practise their culinary and waiting skills at this exceptionally good-value restaurant. Menus comprise mostly top-notch international dishes. Ring to book a table as it gets busy.

Al-Boom (Map p197; ☎ 24 713100; Marina Hotel, Mutrah Corniche, Mutrah; dishes OR5, breakfast OR1.800) This small restaurant, with large windows overlooking the harbour, is a good place to get a feel of Muscat's age-old relationship with the sea. It is in an ideal location for breakfast (from 7.30am to 10.30am) after visiting the Fish Market opposite.

Bin Atique (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 478225; Al-Khuwair; meals OR4) One of the few places in town to serve a variety of local Omani dishes. As the restaurant caters mainly for homesick Omani traders, you'll be seated on an old carpet in a private room. If you can put up with the unglamorous surroundings, however, the food is generally good quality and authentic. Try *harees*, a ghouss, Omani dish often mixed with chicken (OR2).

Meknes Restaurant (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 475497; Al-Khuwair Slip Rd, Al-Kuwair; meals OR5) If Bin Atique didn't appeal, try nearby and newly opened Meknes for a more comfortable Arabian ambience. Serving excellent Moroccan dishes in a tiled interior with brocade armchairs, this is a good place to sample *tajine* (lamb stew) with potatoes and green olives (OR2.950) and mint tea poured with relish from silver kettles.

our pick **Mumtaz Mahal** (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 605907; Way 2601, Qurm; meals from OR8) The Mumtaz Mahal is more than just the best Indian restaurant in town, it is part of the landscape of Muscat. Perched on a hill overlooking Qurm Nature Reserve, and with an intimate atmosphere created by live sitar performances, traditional seating at low tables, and lantern-light, it is little surprise that this restaurant, specialising in Northern Indian Mughlai cuisine, is a local legend. Try the snake coffee, which the head waiter prepares by setting fire to an orange peel.

Al-Kiran Terrace (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 799666; Al-Bustan Palace Hotel, Al-Bustan; brunch buffet OR11) For Muscat's best Friday brunch, in gorgeous surroundings and with a bar licence after 2pm, this is more of a day out than just an excellent dining experience. Walk off that extra slither of smoked salmon under the coconut palms, or snooze away the rest of the afternoon on the beach lounge chairs – if the management sees sense and allows its customers out after lunch! The restaurant is closed until early 2008 due to hotel renovation.

Restaurant (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 524400; Chedi Hotel, Al-Ghubrah North; meals from OR15) Repeated winner of awards for the best ambient dining in Muscat, this restaurant, with Arabian chandeliers and modern open kitchens, serves delicate international fare but includes melt-in-the-mouth *hamour* (a succulent local white fish), and some truly wonderful regional dishes such as *harira* (a thick soup with beef, lentils and chickpeas spiked with coriander). The French pastry chef makes wicked confections, including handmade chocolates. A walk under the stars in the hotel's gorgeous grounds is a good way to conclude an evening.

Cafés

A new café culture is blossoming in Muscat. These are a few of the city's favourite venues.

D'Arcy's Kitchen (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 600234; Way 2817, Shatti al-Qurm; dishes from OR2) Next to the Omani Heritage Gallery, this friendly and award-winning establishment serves Western favourites at reasonable prices and is open when most other cafés are taking a siesta. An English breakfast for OR3.500 will set you up well for a 'constitutional' along the nearby beach.

The Café (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 602757; Shatti Beach, Shatti al-Qurm; dishes from OR3) This modern venue, near to Starbucks, has one of the few sea-front views in Muscat. It is on the pricy side but the locally caught fish on the menu will probably tempt you to savour the ocean for longer than the intended iced latte.

Khargeen Café (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 692269; Medinat Qaboos complex; mains from OR4) With a choice of open-air, *majlis*-style dining or a cosy, indoor coffee-and-a-chat, this café-cum-coffeehouse has spilt into a courtyard of lighted trees to make a wonderfully relaxed, atmospheric and Arabian experience. With hubbly-bubbly croaking, fountains splashing, kebabs sizzling and people propped on a variety of cushions and throws, this could almost be part of a Bedouin caravan. Try the hibiscus or cacao drinks or the avocado milkshake.

Quick Eats

Fastfood 'n' Juice Centre (Map p197; Mutrah Corniche, Mutrah; sandwiches 200 baisa) Left of the entrance to the Mutrah Souq, with tables on the pavement, this thoroughly typical, local-style

restaurant is an ideal place to people-watch over a *shwarma* and a 'chi lipton' (tea-bag tea with sweet condensed milk).

Muscat Light Restaurant & Coffeeshop (Map p199; Al-Saidiya St, Old Muscat; shwarma 250 baisa) Have an egg roll up in view of Fort Al-Mirani in this corner-street café, ideal as a rest-stop on a walking tour of Muscat (p202).

Al-Bulbul Restaurant & Coffeeshop (Map p200; Al-Jaame St, Ruwi; snacks 200 baisa) Just across the road from Ruwi bus station, this 'Arab and Turkish' street-side café is a good place for a quick *shwarma* before catching the bus.

Self-Catering

The ubiquitous Al-Fair supermarket chain is the perfect shop for picnic ingredients with good fruit and vegetable counters and items to suit Western palettes; the one in Medinat Qaboos makes excellent bread. Another good place to buy bread and savoury pastries is the Al-Bustan Bakery in the Qurm Commercial District.

Lulu's is the region's favourite supermarket chain and its food halls include many Middle Eastern favourites such as *hummus* (ground chickpea dip) and *mut-tabel* (smoked aubergine dip). There is a convenient branch off Sultan Qaboos St in Al-Khuwair. You can pick up a coolbox and freezer packs while you're at it to keep the picnic edible in the searing summer temperatures.

DRINKING

Arabic coffee is surprisingly hard to find in Muscat outside an Omani home or a hotel lobby. The coffeehouses all over town are oriented more to snacking than sipping coffee.

The best place for delicious, layered fruit juices of pomegranate, custard apple and mango is **Al-Ahli Coffeeshop** (Map p197; ☎ 24 713469; Mutrah Souq; large mixed juice 800 baisa) in the middle of Mutrah Souq. There is a traditional coffeehouse, on the left, just inside the souq, where Omani elders (men) trade news.

Each of the top hotels has an elegant café and a bar where alcohol is expensive but unrestricted.

Grand Hyatt Muscat (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 641234; Shatti al-Qurm; afternoon tea OR8) If you sit sipping tea long enough in the extravagant foyer of this sumptuous hotel, chances are you'll

worry that the tea was laced: the statue of the Arab on Horseback that graces the central podium moves just slowly enough to make you suspect you've joined the flight of fancy that inspired the architects.

John Barry Bar (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 641234; Grand Hyatt Muscat, Shatti al-Qurm) Named after the raised ship and its booty of silver treasure that made the fortunes of the Hyatt's owner, this bar is a sophisticated setting for some live piano music and a cocktail.

Trader Vic's (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 680880; Hotel Inter-Continental Muscat, Shatti al-Qurm) When it comes to cocktails (try the Samoan fogcutter), nowhere competes with this fun and lively Polynesian-style venue. With live Latin music and wafts of Mongolian barbecued lamb chops, you'll probably be seduced into staying for dinner.

Al-Ghazal Bar (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 680000; Hotel Inter-Continental Muscat, Shatti al-Qurm) More of a pub than a bar, this is a popular expat meeting place, with live music, a quiz night, televised sport and excellent Western-style bar food.

ENTERTAINMENT

Muscat is rather thin on entertainment options, although the five-star hotels and some of the smaller ones have bars and nightclubs, usually with live acts. *Oman Today* is the best source for information. For Muscat's latest hotspot, try **Rocklands** (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 564443; Ramee Guestline Hotel, Way 1622, Qurm), which stays open until 3am.

The **Star Cinema** (Map p200; ☎ 24 792360; Way 2703; tickets OR2.500) screens both Western and Indian films. It occupies the unmistakable round building with flashing lights near the telephone office in Ruwi.

There is a newer cinema, **Al-Shatti Plaza** (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 692656; tickets OR2.500), in Shatti al-Qurm and another one at Markaz al-Bahja mall.

You can take in a football (soccer) game at Bawshar Stadium.

SHOPPING

Muscat doesn't have the exhaustive range of shopping options on offer in other parts of the region, nor is it particularly cheap. However, with one of the most characterful old souqs in the region and a few new malls in the suburbs (Muscat City Centre near Rusayl roundabout and nearby Markaz al-

Bahja), there's enough to keep a dedicated shopper happy.

Souq Ruwi St is worth highlighting for all manner of cheap and cheerful from souvenir T-shirts to don't-ask DVDs and gold from India.

Crafts, Souvenirs & Gifts

Some popular Omani-produced items include highly worked, silver *khanjars* (curved daggers) that start at OR30 for a tourist replica to OR500 for an exquisite genuine item; baskets worked with pieces of camel or goat hide (from OR5); *kuma* (Omani hats), which start at OR2 for a machine-made one to OR50 for a highly crafted handmade piece; hand-loomed, goat-hair rugs (from OR15); frankincense (from 500 baisa) and a range of local and imitation perfumes; and dates (from 600 baisa per 500g).

Mutrah Souq (Map p197; Mutrah Corniche, Mutrah; ☎ 9am-10pm & 5-10pm Sat-Wed, 5-10pm Fri) From *khanjars* to framed silverwork, gold and spices, this labyrinth of alleyways under a *barasti* (palm leaf) roof is the top spot in town for crafts and souvenirs.

Sabco Centre (Map pp194-5; Qurm shopping complex) A surprisingly comprehensive little souq inside the Sabco Centre sells crafts (mostly from India and Iran), *pashmina* shawls and Omani headdresses. Bargaining is recommended, although prices are reasonable. The souq's excellent cobbler can repair any leather item.

Bateel (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 601572; www.bateel.com.sa; Oasis by the Sea complex, Shatti al-Qurm) For a regional gift-with-a-difference, the chocolate dates from Bateel are utterly world class.

Amouage (Map pp194-5; Sabco Centre; Qurm shopping complex) It sells the most expensive (and exquisite) perfume in the world, produced from frankincense, musk and other exotic ingredients in premises near Rusayl. You'll find the ultimate Arabian gift here.

Bait Muzna Gallery (Map p199; ☎ 24 739204; www.omanart.com; Al-Saidiya St; Old Muscat) Beautiful collectors' pieces, such as *mandoos* (wooden, brass-fitted dowry chests), Omani doors, Bedouin jewellery and contemporary paintings are sold in this gallery opposite Bayt Az-Zubair. Prices are high, but the quality is assured.

For guaranteed 'Made in Oman' crafts, try the **Omani Heritage Gallery** (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 696974; www.omanheritage.com; Way 2817, Shatti

al-Qurm), a nonprofit organisation set up to encourage cottage industries through the sale of handicrafts. Prices are high, but so is the quality. See also **Omani Craftsman's House** (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 568553; Qurm shopping complex) opposite the Sabco Centre in Qurm.

Camping Equipment

Most of what you will need for a night under the stars is sold at Al-Fair supermarkets. For more specialised equipment, try **Ahmed Dawood Trading** (Map p197; ☎ 24 703295; Al-Mina St, Mutrah) or Muscat Sports in Markaz al-Bahja.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Situated 37km west of Mutrah is **Seeb International Airport** (☎ 24 519223, 24 519456). See p261 for details of international flights. The only domestic flights currently available are with **Oman Air** (☎ 24 707222) between Muscat and Salalah (one way/return OR36/72, 1½ hours, twice daily at variable times), and Muscat and Khasab (one way/return OR24/48, one hour, variable times on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday).

Bus

The national bus company **ONTC** (☎ 24 490046; www.ontcoman.com) provides comfortable inter-city services throughout Oman. Its main depot is the **ONTC bus station** (Map p200; ☎ 24 701294) in Ruwi. Timetables in English are available on the website (with fares); a summary is printed in the *Oman Observer*.

ONTC buses run to Salalah (one way/return OR6/11, 12 hours, twice daily at 6am and 7pm). However, there is some competition on this route from **Malatan Trading** (Map p200; ☎ 24 702091; Way 2985), which has a daily bus at 4.30pm (one way/return OR6/11), and **Bin Qasim Transport** (Map p200; ☎ 24 785059; Way 2985), which has a daily bus at 3.30pm (one way/return OR6/11), but note that arrival in Salalah is before dawn. Both companies are located around the corner from the bus station, near Moon Travels.

For buses to the UAE, see p262.

Car

Car hire can be arranged with several agencies in the area around the Ruwi roundabout, as well as at the usual desks in hotels and at the airport. See p262 for details.

Taxi & Microbus

Taxis and minibuses leave for all destinations from Al-Jaame St, opposite the main (ONTC) bus station in Ruwi. There is an additional departure point at Rusayl roundabout (also known as Burj al-Sahwa – the Clock Tower), the next roundabout west of the airport roundabout.

Some sample taxi/microbus fares are:

To	Contract (OR)	Shared (OR)	Microbus (OR)
Barka	5	1	0.300
Buraimi	30	n/a	n/a
Nakhal	10	2	1
Nizwa	15	1.500	1
Rustaq	15	2	2
Samail	10	1	0.500
Sohar	15	2.500	1.700
Sur	16	4	3

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

Taxis running between the airport and Qurum, Al-Khuwair and Ruwi cost OR5, and OR6 for Mutrah and Muscat. Alternatively, you can walk 300m to the roundabout outside the airport and wait for a microbus. Microbuses pass the airport fairly frequently between 7am and 10pm, and cost 500 baisa to Ruwi, Mutrah or Muscat. There is no regular direct bus service to/from the airport, despite the bus stop located there.

Microbus & Taxi

In Mutrah, local minibuses cruise the corniche and congregate around the Mutrah bus station. In Ruwi they park en masse along Al-Jaame St, opposite the main bus station. Trips from one suburb to the next cost 200 baisa to 300 baisa. No microbus journey within greater Muscat should cost more than 500 baisa.

Muscat's taxis, like all others in Oman, are orange and white and do not have meters. Even if you bargain you will inevitably pay two or three times the going rate for locals – fix the rate before you get in. A taxi between suburbs in Muscat should cost no more than OR5 engaged or OR1 shared (getting to/from the airport excepted). Expect to be charged double the going rate to/from hotels.

A shared taxi from Ruwi to Rusayl roundabout costs 500 baisa. Microbuses charge 300 baisa for the same trip. From Mutrah Corniche to Rusayl roundabout, the taxi/microbus fare should be 700/400 baisa.

AROUND MUSCAT

For an easy and rewarding day-trip from Muscat, a trip to the *khors* (rocky inlets) is recommended. The area, southeast of the city, is a popular snorkelling spot for weekend boat trips but it's also possible to reach many of the *khors* by car.

If you are looking for peaceful alternatives to staying in Muscat, the traditional town of Seeb, located to the west of Muscat, and the spectacular resort of Bandar Jissah, to the east of Muscat, are well worth considering.

SEEB

☎ 24 / pop 252,864

If you are looking to experience a typical Omani town close to Muscat that barely sees a tourist, you can't do better than a trip to Seeb. A 20-minute drive northwest of the airport, this thriving coastal town has much to offer: there's a watchtower, a lively souq with a colourful textiles market, a gold souq with competitive prices, a magnificent stretch of sandy beach and some of the best squid kebabs in Oman.

Orientation

It's easy to find your way around Seeb. The high street (it's a one-way road) runs in a circle through the heart of the town, with banks, the gold souq, supermarkets and tailors either side of the road. The main souq is on the right in a purpose-built sandy-coloured complex of buildings before you reach the main mosque; it includes a fruit and vegetable area and a fish market. The road loops back to the entrance of the town. Lying to the other side of the fish market is the corniche.

Sights & Activities

There are no 'tourist' sights as such but Seeb is a great place to experience everyday Omani life. The wonderful 8km corniche has a landscaped area for walking, enjoy-

ing sea views, sniffing drying sardines and watching the fishermen net-mending.

One place to get a feel for the culture is on the main loop road as it returns to the entrance to the town. Along this section of the high street, there are many **shops** selling Omani-style **traditional ladies' clothing** with colourful anklets and embroidered smocking. Interspersed with the tailors are 'Wedding Services' shops selling strings of lights and outrageous bridal thrones. Towards the end of the street, there are many **carpentry workshops** selling *mandoos* (bridal chests). Usually black or terracotta-red and decorated with brass-tacks, these make a fun souvenir. A small box costs OR5 or a larger trunk OR16.

Seeb is an excellent place to find a tailor. Bring a favourite shirt or skirt, buy some material in neighbouring textile shops and take both into **MAS Tailoring** (☎ 95037004; nr High St & Street 3850). For between OR3 to OR10, the Bangladeshi tailors will make you a replica in half a day. If you've been invited to a special 'do' in Muscat and forgot to pack the dinner jacket, this is the place to get one made for a bargain OR50, including material.

The other drawcard in Seeb is the beach. For shell-collectors, the long flat sands at low-tide make a great place to see horn, turret and auger shells.

Sleeping & Eating

There are a couple of pleasant places to stay in Seeb.

Al-Bahjah Hotel (☎ 24 424400; www.ramee-group.com; Seeb High St; s/d OR20/25) It's right in the heart of town (turn towards the sea by Oman International Bank). With a dhow and a giant coffee pot in the foyer, this is a traditional Omani hotel. It has a good Indian restaurant with a license. Try *palak paneer* (spinach and cottage cheese), which comes with rice, roti and pickles for a give-away OR1.800.

Dream Resort (☎ 24 453399; drmuscat@omantel.net.om; Dama St; s/d OR40/50; 📶) This place is as close to a beach holiday that a bargain tariff can buy around Muscat. Though not literally on the sands, the beach is a five-minute walk along the hotel's own private *khor* (inlet) and guests can watch great grey herons parachute in to the hotel's tidal pools. The rooms, all with sea views, are

comfortable and spacious, with split-level 'duplex' options for families. There is also an atmospheric nightclub, featuring live music from Africa. The resort is located 1km west along the corniche from Seeb fish market.

There are several other places to eat in town such as the beachside **Seeb Waves Restaurant** (☎ 24 425556; Corniche; mains OR2) with tasty chilli chicken (OR1), but the best option is to buy squid kebabs (500 baisa for three sticks) from the vendors on the corniche (opposite the souq) and eat them sitting on the sea wall.

A taxi from the highway near Seeb International Airport takes 20 minutes along Sultan Qaboos Hwy (OR5). Frequent minibuses connect Muscat with Seeb; to reach Muscat from Seeb it's easy to take one that plies the streets of Seeb (300 baisa).

BANDAR JISSAH

بندر الجصة

☎ 24

Until recently, Bandar Jissah was no more than a rocky promontory with a small, inaccessible beach. It now offers activities to suit most budgets and is home to Muscat's most prestigious resort development.

Picturesque **Jissah beach** (sometimes referred to as Qantab Beach) offers perfect bathing on weekdays (it gets too crowded on Thursday and Friday). For OR5 per boat (five people), entrepreneurial fishermen will take visitors on a 10-minute tour to see the famous **sea arch** that is now almost incorporated into the resort.

Lying just over the next headland to the resort, is the friendly **Oman Dive Center** (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 824240; www.omandivecenter.com; Bandar Jissah; cabin s/d OR46/57). It makes a good place for lunch (try the carpaccio) and there are even a few (expensive) *barasti* huts on the beach if you fancy a dawn view of the bay. Camping is possible at the discretion of the management for a small charge. Perhaps one of the most easy-going places to enjoy some water sports, the centre offers half-day snorkelling trips (OR9, including equipment hire), and dolphin and whale-watching trips (OR15). You can enjoy its peaceful, secluded beach (and club facilities) for the day for a nominal OR1.300 (OR3 on Thursday and Friday). You'll need your own transport or a taxi to get here (about OR5 from Mutrah).

The **Shangri-La's Barr Al-Jissah Resort & Spa** (☎ 24 776666; www.shagri-la.com; Barr Al-Jissah; ☑ ☒), comprised of three kasbah-style hotels around a shared beach and garden, has brought modern tourism and a first-class holiday experience to Muscat – even for those staying at **Al-Bandar** (s/d OR170/180), the more business-oriented of the three hotels. The sophisticated six-star **Al-Husn Hotel** (s/d OR260/270) was toned down on instructions of the Sultan and is now less pink, but it's still majestic on its perch above the high tide. **Al-Waha** (s/d OR130/140), the easy-going, family hotel, accessed via a tunnel through the cliff, has luxurious rooms overlooking the pool.

Meandering between hotels, a lazy river offers a fun way of getting from one watering hole to another. The richly carpeted foyers, marble corridors and designer bedrooms and bathrooms in all three hotels make choosing one over the other a matter of whim. There is a complimentary bus service from Seeb airport, or it is a 15-minute drive by car from Mutrah. The resort includes some of the country's top restaurants: the Bait al-Bahr (nouvelle cuisine), Samba (international buffet) and Al-Tanoor (Middle Eastern fare).

If you have your own transport, pause at the spectacular **viewing point** between Bandar Jissah and the long descent into Al-Bustan. On the opposite side of the road, those after serious exercise can ascend to Muscat's hidden **40km cycle and walking track** that snakes above Bandar Jissah. A new road is being cut spectacularly through the mountains to link Bandar Jissah with Yitti, due to open in 2008.

YITTI

☎ 24

About 25km from Muscat, Yitti boasts a beautiful, sandy **beach** surrounded by craggy, mountain scenery. The beach is at the end of a large, muddy inlet that is regularly picked over by wading waterbirds.

If the tide is low, walk past a clump of serrated rocks at the end of the inlet. It was believed these rocks were inhabited by *jinn* and offerings used to be left at their base. Alas, the spirits have gone somewhere more private, according to the local fishermen, due to the scandalous behaviour of visitors from Muscat. Wade to a sandbar and

look left for a great view of Bandar Jissah's famous **sea arch**.

It is possible to stay on Yitti beach at **Al-Moosa Beach Resthouse** (☎ 24 886119; anosh@omantel.net.om; apt OR25). It has eight furnished apartments that each sleeps five people, with satellite TV, kitchen, dining room and the most glorious views out to sea. A small shop has minimal provisions, but it's better to bring a few kebabs from Al-Fair supermarket and cook them on the barbecue in the courtyard.

A resort is planned for Yitti, and development is expected to start in 2008. For now, however, it's a peaceful backwater.

There is no public transport here. There are currently two routes to Yitti (a third is being built from Al-Jissah). The shortest way (26km, about 30 minutes) is to take the winding sealed road from Souq Ruwi St in Muscat. Follow signs for Yitti (a right turn at 700m from Hamriya roundabout) through a maze of houses to a steep hill. Yitti is signposted again after 15.7km, soon after the road runs out of the hills. The route is easier to find going from Yitti to Muscat. The longer way (about 45km), via Wadi Mayh, is easier to find and takes about an hour.

WADI MAYH

For a taste of a typical Omani wadi within an afternoon's drive of Muscat, look no further than Wadi Mayh. With towering limestone cliffs, sand-coloured villages, back-garden date plantations, straying goats and feral donkeys – not to mention a compulsory watchtower or two – Wadi Mayh has it all. Look out for a pair of stout *falaj* that have been shored into either side of the wadi, and which carry water from one village plantation to the next (see the boxed text, p216).

The wadi has areas where multi-coloured layers of rock have been forced into a vertical wall. The rocks of the wadi are smooth, round and strikingly colourful, making them a valuable building commodity, hence the piles ready for collection near the villages.

The entrance to the wadi is about 24km from Wadi Aday roundabout in Muscat. To reach the wadi, follow the Quryat road from the roundabout. After 16km, turn left at the roundabout with the gold eagle. Turn

left at the sign for Yitti (at 24km) and the road leads directly into the wadi. The wadi can be negotiated by car although the last section of road (about 10km) is not sealed. There is no public transport.

BANDAR KHAYRAN & AL-SEIFA

Even if you don't manage to reach Al-Seifa, with its wonderful camping beaches, it's worth driving for 30 minutes in that direction from Yitti to get a flavour of the *khors*.

The first *khor* is popular with fishermen, but the second *khor* (at 4.8km) is one of those rare entities – a tidal football pitch, giving a new meaning to the term Mexican wave, perhaps, especially as the spectators of this busy pitch include crabs and mud creepers.

Thereafter (at 6km), the road hugs the side of **Bandar Khayran**, a large, mangrove-fringed lagoon, more usually visited by boat from Muscat. It is a beautiful spectacle late in the afternoon when the sandstone, and its reflection in the water, seem to vibrate with colour. Be sure to turn right at the mosque in the middle of the village, taking care to dodge the goats and the small boys selling seashells. Turn left at the junction for Al-Shaiikh (at 12.5km) and some excellent **snorkelling** (watch out for seahorses), or continue to Al-Seifa.

There's not much to the scenically appointed village of Al-Seifa, resting in the shadow of the Hajar Mountains. Nearby beaches to the east, however, offer protected camping for those who bring equipment and provisions. The beaches are worth a closer look as they are a lapidary's dream: in between the sandy bays, pebbles of yellow ochre, burnt sienna and olive green beg to be picked up. For those interested in bugs, the giant-skipper butterfly frequents the surrounding wadis in spring.

To reach Al-Seifa by car, head to the power sub-station near Yitti and follow the sign. The latter is touchingly precise about it being '25.5km': it's not, but near enough. Although the road to Al-Seifa is now sealed, allow 40 minutes to reach Al-Seifa village beach and beware some steep descents. You will need 10 minutes more and preferably a 4WD to find your own beach beyond Al-Seifa along unpaved tracks.

QURAYAT

☎ 24 / pop 43,356

There are a number of features to enjoy in this attractive fishing village an hour's drive east of Muscat. It includes the 19th-century **fort** (admission 500 baisa; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sun-Thu) and a unique triangular **watchtower** overlooking the corniche. The sandy **beach** to the east of the tower extends for many kilometres with only the occasional football team to interrupt it.

The town was once an important port, famous for exporting horses that were reared on the surrounding plains. Sacked by the Portuguese in the 16th century, the town never regained its importance, although it retains a lively fishing industry and is celebrated for its basket makers. The large, porous baskets are made from local mangrove, and are used for keeping bait fresh aboard the small boats that pack the harbour.

Qurayat is well signposted from the Wadi Aday roundabout in Muscat, a pretty and at times spectacular 82km drive through the Eastern Hajar foothills. Look out for Indian rollers (blue-winged birds) in the palm trees lining the avenue into town. Shared taxi cost OR2 and minibuses OR1 from the Wadi Aday roundabout. A taxi costs OR8.

There are no places to stay in Qurayat, but it makes a pleasant day trip from Muscat or a good stop off before heading along the Qurayat-Sur coast road.

SHARQIYA REGION

المنطقة الشرقية

This eastern-most corner of the Arabian Peninsula holds some of Oman's main attractions, including beautiful beaches, spectacular wadis, turtle-nesting sites and the strawberry-blond Sharqiya sand dunes. As many of the sites of interest lie en route rather than in the towns, it's worth having your own vehicle, although tours cover the whole area (see p260).

A great introduction to this region is to follow the Qurayat-Sur coast road. This route ideally forms the first day of a two- or three-day circular tour, returning to Muscat via the sealed road through Al-Mintirib. When the new motorway linking Qurayat

قريات

with Sur is complete (2008) it will be possible to use a saloon car. For now, a 4WD is needed to complete the circuit.

A trip to Sharqiya can easily be combined with a visit to the Dakhliyah Region without having to return to Muscat. It's not possible, however, to get along the coast from Sur to Hijj (also known as Hay) in Al-Wusta Region without expert knowledge of sand-driving and navigation. Even tour company drivers regularly get stuck in the soft sand and unexpected high tides south of Al-Ashkara.

QURAYAT–SUR COAST ROAD

The four- to five-hour drive from Muscat to Sur, running along the northern base of the Eastern Hajar Mountains, is rugged and scenic. The new dual carriageway that will eventually link Muscat with Sur via Qurayāt is still under construction so the following section describes the graded, off-road route. Don't be fooled by the odd saloon car you may pass on this route: 4WD is necessary to negotiate rough wadi bottoms and several sharp descents, especially after rain. There are no hotels between Muscat and Sur, but plenty of beaches for camping and for those with equipment and supplies.

To reach the graded Qurayāt–Sur coast road, follow the sealed road from Muscat to Qurayāt, but turn right onto Daghmar Street by the Toyota showroom at the roundabout before you reach the town centre. After 6km, turn right for Fans, Tiwi and Sur (113km to the southeast). (Note that there's no public transport east from Qurayāt.)

The tarmac soon runs out and the route continues along the bottom of Wadi Dayqah (one of the longest wadis in the Sharqiya Region) before meandering across a dusty and desolate moonscape for 30km. A small watchtower signals a sharp descent into **Dibab** and arrival at the Qurayāt–Sur coast road. Some sections of the old coast road are now sealed, but there are no petrol stations between Qurayāt and Sur.

Mazara

مزارع

A longer but rewarding way of reaching the Qurayāt–Sur coast road is to take a more inland route via the small village of Mazara. Positioned half way along Wadi Dayqah, protected by a fort perched on a rocky outcrop, surrounded by copper-toned moun-

tains and half-buried in thick plantations, the village is one of the most attractive in the region.

There is a picnic site by the side of the wadi, on the outskirts of the village. Popular with Omani day-trippers from Muscat at weekends, it's left to a loose assemblage of toads, kingfishers and goats at most other times. The picnic site marks the beginning of the Wadi Dayqah Walk, an impressive six-hour hike through the chiselled heart of the Eastern Hajar Mountains (see the boxed text, opposite).

The *barasti* hut accommodation near the picnic site is not recommended; camping is a better bet although it's hard to find a discreet spot.

To reach Mazara, turn off the Muscat to Qurayāt road at the Omanoil petrol station (1km before you reach Qurayāt roundabout) onto Hail al-Ghaf St and follow the signs for 21km through the foothills. The picnic site is signposted as a 'Rest Site', 500m off the sealed road, just before reaching the centre of the village. There is no public transport, but it is possible to engage a return taxi from Wadi Aday roundabout in Muscat (OR15, 1½ hours). The fare includes a 90-minute wait while you explore the pools at the neck of the wadi.

You can reach Mazara from Muscat in a saloon car but a 4WD is necessary if you want to continue on from Mazara to Dibab and the old Qurayāt–Sur coast road.

Desert Mushrooms

Near to Mazara, on the graded track that leads to the Qurayāt–Sur coast road, are two wonderful examples of a sandstone formation known as 'desert mushrooms'. These form when the wind sculpts away the softer sedimentary rock, leaving a cap of harder rock on top of the eroded column.

To reach the mushrooms from Mazara, follow the road through the village, over the wadi and past the fort. The road climbs steeply through the plantation towards a school. Turn left before the school, veer left over two *falaj* bridges and join the main graded road. From here it is about 8km to the mushrooms.

Turn left at the following junction and next right to join the graded Qurayāt–Sur coast road 12km before the watchtower that marks the descent into Dibab.

A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

Described by a 19th-century explorer as the 'most singular piece of earth sculpture in Arabia', the upper reaches of Wadi Dayqah are spectacularly chipped out of the Eastern Hajar Mountains to create a steep-sided, narrow gorge. For many centuries this gorge, otherwise known as the 'Devil's Gap', was an important thoroughfare from the interior to the coast, and an ancient pathway still picks a cautious route past obstructive boulders and irritable streams.

Tracing this route through the wadi bottom into neighbouring Wadi Tayein, on the other side of the Eastern Hajar Mountains, makes an exciting if strenuous six- to seven-hour hike, past polished wadi walls, and aquamarine pools fringed with bright-green algae and maiden hair fern. To avoid having to make the return journey, you can arrange for friends to tackle the walk in the opposite direction – a particularly large boulder in the middle of the main bend in the wadi marks the midway point and a good place to exchange car keys.

As the way follows the wadi bottom for much of the route, be prepared to wade or even swim through large pools of water. You may have to scramble over large boulders at the Wadi Tayein end of the route; if these are not passable because of recent rains, then follow a donkey track higher up the sides of the wadi for the last part of the walk.

Strong walking boots, a set of dry clothes and a bag for your camera are helpful. In addition, bring plenty of water and a hat as the route is unremittingly hot for most of the year. The hike is not suitable for young children and should not be attempted after heavy rains or on a cloudy day: occasional flash floods rip through the narrow channel with great ferocity, and near the Mazara end of the walk, the vertical wadi walls make escape to higher ground impossible.

To reach the beginning of the walk, park at the picnic site in Mazara and walk upstream, past the reservoir, and aim for the gap in the mountains. For directions on how to reach the other end of the walk, see Wadi Tayein (p224).

Bimmah Sinkhole

بمّا سنخول

The blue-green, brackish water at the bottom of this peculiar 40m by 20m limestone hole invites a swim and a snorkel. Known locally as Bayt al-Afreet (House of the Demon), you could come face to face with more than you bargain for in the water, the depth of which is still unknown. If the demon eludes you, look out for the equally elusive, blind cavefish instead.

The sinkhole is 1km inland, 6km east of Dibab, right by the new dual carriageway. It's not signposted, but look for a ring of *barasti* shelters on your right that is currently being developed into a picnic site.

Mountain Road to Gaylah

Making your way southeast along the Qurayāt–Sur coast road, you'll notice several roads zigzagging up the mountainside into the clouds that often top the Eastern Hajar range. They mostly connect with small villages, such as Umq, in the heart of the mountains from where there is no onward route except by foot.

One exception, however, is the new graded track that has just been carved out of the rock face that leads to the cliff-hugging

village of **Qaran**. The route is strictly 4WD and is not for the faint-hearted as the last part of the ascent is a near-vertical climb with sharp hairpin bends. The road is not on official maps yet but it is worth making the ascent for a panoramic view of the coast and an idea of the arid plateau that characterises the top of the Eastern Hajar range. If you're feeling brave, have a good sense of direction and spare petrol, you can follow the road across the plateau to the tombs at Gaylah (see p224).

The mountain road begins 35km south-east of Dibab (5km northwest of Wadi Shab) and is signposted 'Qaran'. Beware, there are no facilities whatsoever on top of this desolate plateau and the nearest petrol station is in Sur (or Hwy 23 on the Ibra side of the mountains).

Wadi Shab

وادي شعب

Aptly named in Arabic the 'Gorge Between Cliffs', Wadi Shab is still one of the most lovely destinations in Oman – despite the new dual carriageway being slung across the entrance. The wadi rewards even the most reluctant walker, with turquoise pools, waterfalls, and terraced plantations;

kingfishers add glorious splashes of colour and all year-round trusses of pink oleander bloom by the water's edge. There is an opportunity for (discreet) swimming during a visit to a partially submerged cave in the upper reaches of the wadi.

To begin the walk, cross the footbridge at the entrance of the wadi and follow the path through plantations, crossing and recrossing the wadi several times before reaching a small pumping station. Be prepared to wade up to your knees in places and beware of slipping on algae-covered rocks. After heavy rains, it may even be necessary to swim across some of the pools, so bring a bag for your camera and some dry clothes just in case. The path has been concreted (not very sympathetically) for part of the way and passes close to several villages, hidden in the plantations. At times the path follows an impressive *falaj* (see the boxed text, right) complete with underground sections and laced with ferns. The wadi eventually broadens into an area of large boulders and wild fig trees with many pools of deep water. Look for a ladder descending into one of these pools as Wadi Shab bends to the left. If you duck through a short underwater channel in this pool, you will find the partially submerged cavern. Allow up to two hours of walking to reach this pool.

Unfortunately, some visitors have caused offence to the local residents of the wadi by swimming and behaving inappropriately. It may look as though you are on your own but shepherds roam the cliffs and farmers tend their crops invariably unseen by the passer-by. As such it's better for both men and women to wear shorts and a T-shirt over swimwear and to confine swimming and sunbathing to the upper reaches of the wadi, beyond the plantation areas.

It's possible to walk beyond the pools to other small villages clustered along the wadi floor but the paths are not so well-trodden and they follow, sometimes steeply, goat tracks over the wadi cliffs. Walking shoes are necessary and plenty of drinking water. The wadi becomes drier the higher you climb into the mountains.

From Dibab, Wadi Shab is 40km southeast along the Qurayāt–Sur coast road. Watch for grazing **gazelle** along the route. You can't miss Wadi Shab: the vista of mountains opening into a pea-green lake

WATER ON TAP

It may not have pipes and U-bends, but Oman's ancient *falaj* system is as sophisticated as any Western water mains. The channels, cut into mountainsides, running across miniature aqueducts and double-deckering through tunnels, are responsible for most of the oases in Oman. The precious water is diverted firstly into drinking wells, then into mosque washing areas and at length to the plantations, where it is siphoned proportionately among the village farms. Traditionally, a *falaj* clock like a sun dial was used to meter the time given to each farm; nowadays, some *falaj* are controlled by automatic pumps. There are over 4000 of these channels in Oman, some of which were built more than 1500 years ago. The longest channel is said to run for 120km under Sharqiya Sands. Although they can be seen throughout the mountains, the best, most easily accessible examples are in Wadi Dayqah, Wadi Shab and Wadi Bani Awf.

is sublime after the barren plain. Vehicles, thankfully, cannot navigate the wadi beyond a small parking area – even if they are shortly to cruise high over the wadi entrance on the new road.

Tiwi

There's not much to the little fishing village of Tiwi, but being flanked by two of Oman's beauty spots, Wadi Shab and Wadi Tiwi, it has found itself very much on the tourist map. Not that it has made many concessions to tourism – there's no hotel and no public transport, either to Muscat or to Sur. The locals are nonetheless forbearing of the convoys of passing 4WDs and are delighted when a driver bothers to stop for a chat. If you do stop, ask about Ibn Mukarab. The story goes that this Saudi fugitive paved the steps from his house (the ruins are still visible on the hill) to his tomb in gold. As anticipated, the locals dug the steps up for the booty, making the tomb inaccessible. Ibn Mukarab has since been able to enjoy the peace in death that he couldn't find in life.

The new dual carriageway is due to pass the very doorstep of the town, no doubt

bringing with it considerable change. For now, the only access to Tiwi is via the old Qurayāt–Sur coast road, 42km southeast of Dibab and 2km up a very sharp incline from Wadi Shab.

Tiwi also makes an easy day trip from Sur, 48km southeast. You might be able to persuade a taxi driver from Sur to take you to Tiwi (OR8) and wait for an hour or so while you explore either Wadi Shab or Wadi Tiwi. Occasional private minibuses ply the Qurayāt–Sur coast road, but there is no regular service and this option shouldn't be relied upon.

There is plenty of ad hoc camping along nearby beaches. The most popular is Tiwi Beach (White Beach), a large sandy bay 9km northwest of Tiwi towards Dibab.

Wadi Tiwi

With its string of emerald pools and thick plantations, Wadi Tiwi almost rivals Wadi Shab in beauty, especially in the spring when the meadows turn a vivid green. Known as the 'Wadi of Nine Villages', there are excellent walking opportunities through the small villages that line the road. For the more ambitious hiker, there is a strenuous but rewarding two-day hike that begins at Sooe, the last of the nine settlements. Indeed, the route over the mountain to Wadi Bani Khalid (p223) has become a popular camping excursion with walking groups.

Wadi Tiwi can be accessed by 4WD but villagers prefer visitors to approach on foot. The road is narrow and steep in parts towards the upper reaches and it is easy to get a large vehicle stuck between the plantation walls.

Tours to the area, including Wadi Tiwi and Wadi Shab, can be arranged through all the hotels in Sur. To reach the wadi by car, drive through the village of Tiwi. Turn right at a small roundabout by the block factory at the Sur end of the village. If coming from Sur, you'll spot the donkeys and herons knee-deep in the grass at the mouth of the wadi before you reach Tiwi. Unfortunately, you will also now spot the giant pylons that are striding across the once picturesque entrance of the wadi, in preparation for the new dual carriageway. There is no reason why, however, the new road should disturb the peace of the wadi beyond the first couple of bends.

Qalhat

The 2nd-century AD settlement of Qalhat is one of the most ancient sites in Oman. Although there's not much left to see, it's worth pausing to have a photo taken under the picturesque **Tomb of Bibi Miriam**. You'll be in excellent company: both Marco Polo in the 13th century and Ibn Battuta in the 14th century stopped here on their travels. You'll also have the satisfaction of knowing that your journey to Qalhat was a lot more adventurous than theirs. In their day, Qalhat was a 'very good port, much frequented by merchant ships from India' and a hub for the trade in horses from the interior. Today only the tomb and water cistern (both of which were being renovated at the time of writing), and the remnants of city walls, are visible, and in place of barques and dhows, all that the sea brings to the shore are sharks, sardines and rays. If you camp nearby, the water is often spangled at night with green phosphorous.

Qalhat is 22km southeast along the Qurayāt–Sur coast road from Tiwi and 26km from Sur. The unsealed part of Qurayāt–Sur coast road runs out near the gas works and a sealed road leads to the centre of Sur. A return taxi from Sur, if you can find a driver willing to take you, should cost around OR5.

SUR

📍 25 / pop 73,423

With an attractive corniche, two forts, excellent beaches nearby and a long history of dhow-building, there is much to commend Sur to the visitor. In addition to its attractions, Sur is a convenient base for day trips to Wadi Tiwi and Wadi Shab, the turtle reserve at Ras al-Jinz and the desert camps of the Sharqiya Sands.

History

Watching the boat-builders at work in the dhow yards in Sur, hand-planing a plank of wood, it is easy to recognise a skill inherited from master craftsmen. Sur has long been famed for its boat-building industry and even in the 19th century – when the Portuguese invasion and the division of Oman into two separate sultanates had delivered a heavy blow to the port town's trading capability – Sur still boasted an ocean-going fleet of 100 or more vessels. Demand for ocean-going boats declined once the British India

Steamer Navigation Company became pre-eminent in the Gulf and the town's fortunes declined correspondingly. Sur is currently enjoying a resurgence, however, thanks to the state-of-the-art liquid gas plant, which has generated lots of new jobs locally, and the newly opened fertiliser factory.

Orientation

The sealed road from Muscat (via Ibra) lies a few kilometres inland and ends at a clock tower roundabout with a marine mural. The Qurayat-Sur coast road also ends at this roundabout. Main St, running parallel with the coast and punctuated by five roundabouts, begins at this clock tower (Roundabout 1) and ends at the souqs and

Sur Hotel. Sur Plaza Hotel, the forts, banks, museum and restaurants lie on or just off this road.

Information

There are numerous banks, most with ATMs, along Main St and Souq St.

The **Internet Café** (Souq St; per hr 400 baisa; ☎ 8am-1pm & 4-10pm Sat-Thu; 4-10pm Fri) occupies the upper floor of the Digital Photo Express shop.

Sights

BILAD SUR CASTLE

Built to defend the town against marauding tribes from the interior, 200-year-old **Bilad Sur Castle** (admission 500 baisa; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sun-

Thu) is the more interesting of the town's two fortresses. Look out for the unusually shaped towers. To reach the castle, turn left off Main St, 1.3km from Roundabout 1, at an elaborately kitsch residence.

SUNAYSILAH CASTLE

Perched on a rocky eminence, this 300-year-old **castle** (Main St; admission 500 baisa; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sun-Thu) is built on a classic square plan with four round watchtowers. It was the most important part of the defensive system of Sur, a town that was greatly fortified to protect its illustrious overseas trade. The entrance is a few metres off Roundabout 3, but access is via Roundabout 4.

CORNICHE & DHOW YARDS

The corniche affords a wonderful view across to the picturesque village of **Ayjah**. Dhows used to be led to safe haven by Ayjah's three **watchtowers**, which mark the passage into the lagoon. It is still possible to see the boats being made by hand alongside this passage.

To reach the dhow yards, turn left at the T-intersection at the end of the main road and follow the road in a semicircle past the corniche to the great lagoon. The road circles back eventually to the new souq, passing by **Fatah al-Khair**, a beautifully restored dhow built in Sur 70 years ago and brought back from retirement in Yemen. A new maritime museum is being constructed in the grounds. Look out for a small workshop opposite the dhow: Sur is famous for carpentry and some finely crafted model dhows are on sale here (opening hours at the whim of the owner).

AYJAH

Now that renovations to **Al-Hamooda Fort** (admission 500 baisa; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sun-Thu) are complete it is worth hopping on the ferry to the pretty, white-washed village of Ayjah, where the fort seems to have been built as part and parcel of the surrounding merchant houses with their elaborately carved doors and lotus-pillared porches. If you wander over to the old **lighthouse**, there is a fine view of Sur.

To reach Ayjah, you can either drive around the lagoon or, for a much quicker option, take the small ferry that leaves intermittently from a jetty on the corniche,

next to the dhow yards. It costs only a few baisa and takes about five minutes.

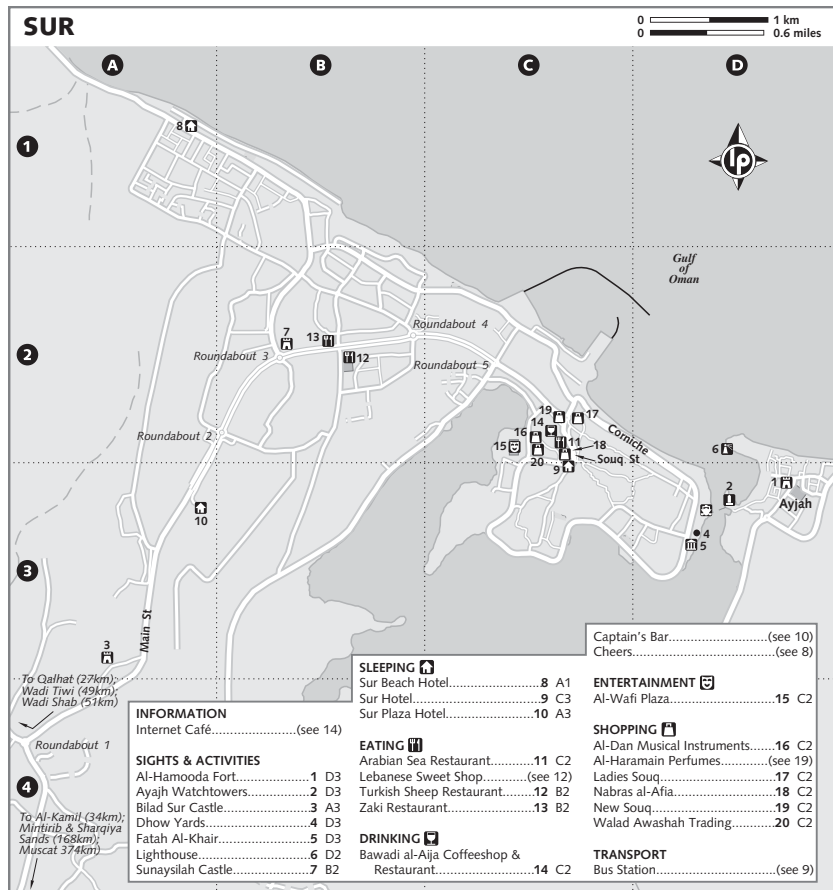
Sleeping

There are only three places to stay in Sur. The two more comfortable options publish a 'rack rate' at greatly inflated prices; the following prices should be available if you ask, however, with some seasonal variation.

Sur Hotel (☎ 25 540090; fax 25 543798; off Souq St; s/d OR13/16 excl breakfast) In the middle of the new souq area, the location of the Sur Hotel is both a bother and a boon. On the downside, the rooms are noisy and the views from the window distinctly 'urban'. On the upside, this is a very convenient hotel within walking distance of the bus stop, cinema and corniche. Rooms are clean and adequate and meals are catered for in the good-value Arabian Sea Restaurant (p220) next door. Turtle-watching trips to Ras al-Jinz can be arranged through the hotel (OR25 for up to four persons) as well as trips further afield to Wadi Tiwi, or Wadi Bani Khalid and even Sharqiya Sands (OR30 per person for transport and one night's full-board accommodation).

Sur Beach Hotel (☎ 25 542031; surbhtl@omantel.net.om; s/d OR30/35; 📺) This three-star, beachside hotel benefits from its location at the start of a 2km path along the shore. It receives a large number of visitors at weekends during the winter season and is beginning to look weary under the strain. It's probably going to take more than a lick of paint to bring this hotel back to its former high standard but it's still good value. The rooms have balconies overlooking the sea from which you can watch for phosphorescent waves at night. Try the excellent Indian chicken dishes and fresh *japathi* in the restaurant. The hotel offers free transport to a sister hotel at Ras al-Hadd (p222), near the turtle reserve.

Sur Plaza Hotel (☎ 25 543777; resvsur@omantel.net.om; s/d OR30/35; 📺) With the Captain's Bar open from 6pm to 3am offering live entertainment (usually a Filipino band), this hotel is popular with tour groups despite being several kilometres inland. Rooms are grand and bathrooms have magnificent marble basins – ideal for arranging the ill-gotten-gains of a day's beachcombing. Some rooms have fine views across the



mountains. Oyster's Restaurant has a good choice of international dishes but the king-fish (OR2.500) steals the show.

Eating

For international-style food, the restaurants inside the Sur Beach Hotel and Sur Plaza Hotel offer the best choices, and there is a Pizza Hut. For something more local, the following are recommended:

Zaki Restaurant (Main St; mains OR1) Located between Roundabouts 3 and 4, next to the BP petrol station, this place serves the best rotisserie chickens in town, complete with Arabic bread, chopped salad and tasty dhal. If the road-side location doesn't appeal, then ask for a 'take-away' and park at one of the picnic shelters near the Sur Beach Hotel.

Arabian Sea Restaurant (☎ 99746423; off Souq St; mains OR1-1.500; ☎ 11.30am-1.30pm & 5pm-midnight Sat-Thu, 5pm-midnight Fri) On the ground floor of the Sur Hotel (the entrance faces the other side of the block), this is a popular and lively local restaurant. It serves tasty bean dishes and kebabs.

Turkish Sheep Restaurant (Main St; mains OR2) Between Roundabouts 3 and 4, this popular venue offers sizzling kebabs, marinated in the chef's best spices, reputedly from Ottoman origin, and naughty triple-decker fruit juices. If these aren't hitting the spot, then the fresh-baked baklavas right next door from the Lebanese sweet shop surely will.

There are many small grocery shops in the New Souq area of town. Nabras al-Afia shopping centre, opposite Sur Hotel, sells everything needed for a picnic.

Drinking

For the outdoor seating area of **Bawadi al-Aija Coffeeshop and Restaurant** (☎ 25 360 1030; Souq St; ☎ 1pm-3am), it is fun to watch the residents of Sur amble along the brightly lit shops of Sur's liveliest street over a cup of mint tea or a mixed fruit juice.

The best place to meet other tourists or Western expats is the cosy **Captain's Bar** (☎ 25 543777; Main St; ☎ 6pm-3am) in the Sur Plaza Hotel, which has live entertainment, usually in the form of a Filipino band. The East African entertainment in **Cheers** (☎ 25 542031; ☎ 6pm-3am) in the Sur Beach Hotel features an odd 'on all-fours' dance routine

performed by heavily clad women. It raises polite applause from bemused Omani men but is definitely not the place to take your granny. Indian expats prefer the bingo on the beach next door: a cast of thousands regularly assemble on a Thursday evening hoping to strike the jackpot.

Entertainment

You can't miss the **Al-Wafi Plaza** (☎ 25 540666; www.filmcityoman.com; English/Hindi film OR2/1.500) cinema complex, next to the Friday market, as it is a tall, new building decorated with lights. It screens some films in English (though most are in Hindi) and is a non-smoking establishment.

Shopping

Sur has grown considerably in the last few years, largely as a result of the nearby gas and fertiliser plants. The souqs of Sur reflect the town's greater prosperity and there are some interesting shops to explore. In the **Ladies' Souq** (Main St) there are many textile shops, some selling braided ankle parts for women's trousers.

In the adjacent **New Souq** (Souq St) look out for Al-Haramain Perfumes. The elaborate bottles alone are temptation enough to enter the shop, and being daubed in exotic musk and ambergris is one of Arabia's great experiences.

Near to the livestock, fruit and vegetable souqs, **Al-Dan Musical Instruments** (☎ 99475588) has some beautifully crafted wooden ouds on sale.

For camping equipment, try **Walad Awashah Trading** (☎ 92262265), next to the musical instrument shop. It has tents for rent and for purchase and an assortment of camping gear.

Getting There & Around

Public transport leaves from or near the Sur Hotel. Buses to Muscat (OR3.400, 4¼ hours, twice daily) depart at 6am and 2.30pm. Shared taxis to the Rusayl roundabout in Muscat cost OR5 (engaged cost OR25). Microbuses make the same trip for OR3 and leave early in the morning. All public transport takes the inland route via Ibra. There is no public transport along the graded Qurayat-Sur coast road.

Taxis cost 150 baisa per ride anywhere in Sur.

RAS AL-JINZ

رأس الجنز

Ras al-Jinz (Ras al-Junayz), the easternmost point of the Arabian Peninsula, is an important **turtle-nesting site** for the endangered green turtle. Over 20,000 females return annually to the beach where they hatched in order to lay eggs.

Oman has an important role to play in the conservation of these endangered species and takes the responsibility seriously, with strict penalties for harming turtles or their eggs. The area is under government protection and the only way to visit the site is by booking through the **Directorate General of Nature Reserves** (☎ 24 602285; fax 24 602283) and joining an escorted tour at around 9.30pm every evening.

While the tour is intended for the wellbeing of the turtle, the sudden influx of tourists has overwhelmed resources and the wardens at Ras al-Jinz simply aren't able to cope at peak holiday times with the number of people flocking to the reserve. There is something immensely intrusive about large, noisy groups gawping at such an intimate act, especially when flippers are lifted out of the way for better viewing and the frightened turtles are chased down the beach by mobile-phone wielding individuals.

A new museum and scientific centre is being built on the approach to the site (due

for completion by the end of 2007) and tourist numbers are being restricted. Perhaps this will help ease the pressure on the beach itself; if not, you may wish to avoid the area. For further information about the conservation measures in place to protect Oman's turtles, contact the **Ministry of Regional Municipalities, Environment & Water Resources** (☎ 24 692550 ext351; aid@mrmewr.gov.om).

For a more rewarding experience, you could get up at dawn in the hope of seeing the last of the late-comers. At this time of day, you are permitted to go to the beaches alone and can set your own limits of discretion around the few remaining laying turtles. If the turtles have already departed, then don't be too disappointed: at dawn the sandstone cliffs are burnished rose-red by the rising sun, and the turtle tracks of last night's heavy traffic inscribe the sand like ancient calligraphy. At this time, you'll most likely, except at weekends and during holidays, have the magical bay to yourself.

July is the peak laying season for the greens when over 100 turtles come ashore each night. September to November, however, is the best time to witness both laying and hatching at Ras al-Jinz. At least one turtle arrives on the beach every night of the year. Full-moon nights make it easier to walk and to witness the spectacle but

TURTLE-WATCHING ETIQUETTE

Watching labour and delivery on Oman's sandy beaches can be an awe-inspiring sight. Serene and patient, the female turtles that quietly lumber up the beach are sure to win the hearts of anyone lucky enough to see the spectacle of egg-laying on one of Oman's sandy beaches. Witnessing these gentle giants slip back into the darkness of the returning tide is one those unforgettable wildlife experiences – at least, that is, if the turtle is permitted to make her exit *after* rather than *before* the job is done and without the disheartening spectacle of bullish tourists trying to take a photograph at any cost.

Turtles are no land-lovers, and they are very easily dissuaded from making the journey up the beach. In fact, any disturbance during the turtle's approach to the shore will most probably result in a U-turn and it may be days before the turtle plucks up courage to try again. Once the digging of pits is over and the laying begun, however, the process cannot be interrupted. Nonetheless the following points should be avoided:

- touching or approaching a moving turtle
- standing in front of a nesting turtle
- riding or sitting on a turtle (it happens!)
- lighting a fire or using a torch near a turtle beach
- taking a photograph with a flash or a mobile phone
- leaving litter – turtles often mistake plastic bags for jellyfish

turtles prefer dark nights so as not to attract the unwanted attentions of predators which often dig up the eggs as soon as they are laid. The beach is about a 10-minute walk from the car park across soft sand.

A permit (per person OR1) is purchased at the park entrance and includes the guided tour to the beach.

Sleeping & Eating

There is a small, noisy and not very attractive camp site of basic wooden huts and shared washrooms that can be reserved through the **Directorate General of Nature Reserves** (☎ 24 602285; fax 24 602283; huts OR4). Food is not available so you need to bring all your own supplies. Apart from the price, the only advantage of the camp site is the instant access to the beach.

Offering more comfortable accommodation, **Desert Discovery Tours** (☎ 24 493232; www.desert.discovery.com; per person OR16) has a number of *barasti* huts with beds and reasonable shared bathrooms at A'Naseem Tourism Camp. The communal meals are healthy and sociable and the location, 4km outside the reserve on the approach road to Ras al-Jinz, is handy for a dawn visit to the beach.

Getting There & Around

Ras al-Jinz can be visited as an evening trip from Sur (organised through Sur Hotel, and with a one-hour journey time each way, costing OR25 for a car and driver with up to four passengers). There is no public transport.

If you have your own vehicle (4WD is no longer necessary), at Sur follow the signs to Ajyah. From Ajyah, follow the coast road. You'll eventually reach a T-junction where you can turn left for Ras al-Hadd or right for Ras al-Jinz. Ras al-Jinz can also be reached in a saloon car via a new sealed road from Al-Kamil on the Muscat-Sur Hwy (about an hour's drive) via Al-Ashkarah.

RAS AL-HADD

راس الحد

☎ 25

A **castle** (admission 500 baises; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sun-Thu), some shops and attractive lagoon scenery nearby make this fishing village a useful supply point or alternative stopover to camping at Ras al-Jinz.

For a comfortable night's sleep in a room with sea views, **Ra's al-Hadd Beach Hotel**

(☎ 99376989; fax 25 542228; s/d OR25/30; 🚗) offers good-value accommodation on the edge of a flat-calm lagoon. In the early morning and late afternoon you can spot a variety of wading birds on the lagoon, dodging the outgoing or incoming dhows. If you walk along the beach at dusk, the water bobs with the backs and heads of turtles, queuing up to come ashore in the dark. For their protection, it's not permitted to camp or picnic at night on this beach. The hotel restaurant offers simple Indian fare or a buffet of international-style dishes. To reach the hotel, turn off the main road, by the castle in Ras al-Hadd, and follow the signs.

Offering *barasti* huts with reasonable shared bathroom and meals included, **Turtle Beach Resort** (☎ 25 543400; fax 25 543900; per person OR18) offers alternative accommodation in a camp situated on another glorious lagoon. The location is picture perfect and the sea gentle enough for the whole family to enjoy. The only drawback is that the huts are so close together you are at the mercy of noisy neighbours. The open-air dining area, in the shape of a wooden dhow, is a sociable spot, particularly with families of Indian expats from Muscat. Turn left immediately after entering Ras al-Hadd; the resort is 7km along a bumpy road.

To reach Ras al-Hadd, follow the signs for Ras al-Jinz but veer left after Khor Garami. It is clearly signposted. There is no public transport to this area.

AL-ASHKARAH

الأشخرة

Wedge between two glorious sandy beaches, Al-Ashkarah is a lively fishing village and important supply point for the Bedouin communities of the Sharqiya Sands. It looks particularly attractive at sunset when it could well be called the 'pink city of the east coast' as the local cement has a pinkish hue. There is nothing to see or do, and nowhere to stay in Al-Ashkarah, but it does have a few picnic umbrellas on the beaches on the southern side of the town, and some camping opportunities. The sea here is much rougher and more characterful than on the beaches north of town and if you choose to break your journey here from Ras al-Jinz to Al-Kamil, you can look forward to large waves and flocks of gulls itching to join your picnic.

A major road is under construction between Al-Ashkarah and Shana'a, the ferry terminal for Masirah, but as it has to cross some of the most inhospitable terrain in the country, it's likely to be several years in the making. For now, the only way to reach points south of Khuwaymah (a supply town with hand-pumped petrol, about 70km south of Al-Ashkarah), is by 4WD and expert knowledge of sand-driving.

JALAN BANI BU HASSAN & JALAN BANI BU ALI

جعلان بني بو حسن
جعلان بني بو علي

☎ 25 / pop 82,383

These towns comprise a conglomeration of watchtowers, old fortified houses, forts and ancient plantation walls, all of which lie crumbling in various states of beloved dereliction. There's been little attempt to court the modern world and none at all to woo the visitor, making a visit all the more rewarding. It's worth trying to stumble on **Jami al-Hamoda Mosque** in the middle of Jalan Bani Bu Ali, with its unique structure of 52 domes and a *falaj* used for ablutions running through the courtyard. To get to the mosque, turn off the Al-Kamil to Al-Ashkarah road at the sign for Jalan Bani Bu Ali and drive towards the fort (closed to the public but obvious above the palm trees). Take the small road behind the fort and look around for the mosque, 300m away. To get a good view of the multidomed roof, climb the ramparts of a derelict house nearby. Tracks lead from here into the Sharqiya Sands but should not be attempted without a 4WD, and preferably a guide (or off-road guidebook) as these routes are seldom explored by visitors.

If the quiet authenticity of the two towns attract, or their gateway location on the fringe of the Sharqiya Sands invites further exploration, then consider staying at **Al-Dabi Jalan Bani Bu Ali Tourist Motel** (☎ 25 553307; s/d OR12). If you can ignore the sleeping bodies in the foyer (guests are not very common and staff may well be surprised to see you), you'll find the rooms are simple, a bit dusty, but perfectly serviceable. There's a small restaurant next door for rice and dhal.

The towns are signposted 17km from Al-Kamil on the Al-Ashkarah road. They make a good diversion en route to/from Ras al-Jinz.

AL-KAMIL

الكامل

☎ 25 / pop 21,160

Despite some interesting old architecture, including a **fort** and **watchtowers**, this small town is more commonly known as an important junction with Al-Ashkarah road and the Muscat-Sur Hwy, punctuated by local-style cafés. It is something of a rarity in Oman, however, for being one of the few towns in the country surrounded by trees. The low-lying **acacia** and **ghaf woodland** is a special feature of the area, much prized by the Bedouin who use the wood for shade, shelter (as props for their tents) and firewood. Their camels nibble the nutritious new shoots and livestock lick the moisture from the small leaves in the early morning.

Al-Kamil, as an importance staging post between Muscat, Ibra and the Sharqiya Sands, and Wadi Bani Khalid, Sur, Al-Ashkarah and Ras al-Jinz, is a good place to break a long journey. There are no hotels in the town of Al-Kamil but the **Oriental Nights Rest House** (☎ 99354816; www.onrh.net; s/d OR14/16), on the Muscat-Sur Hwy near the Al-Ashkarah junction, offers very friendly, simple accommodation in clean but basic rooms. The hotel has a dining room that offers a familiar choice of home-cooked Indian curries, dhal and spicy soups in large portions. The hot bird satellite channel is a surprising addition to in-room entertainment.

There is public transport to Al-Kamil from Sur (OR1, 45 minutes) and Muscat (OR3.500), but note that there is no public transport to Ras al-Jinz from Al-Kamil.

WADI BANI KHALID

وادي بني خالد

Justly famed for its natural beauty, this wadi just north of the town of Al-Kamil, makes a rewarding diversion off the Muscat-Sur Hwy. The approach road, which climbs high into the Eastern Hajar Mountains, zig-zags through some spectacularly colourful rock formations, green with copper oxide and rust-red with iron ore, and passes by a natural spring or *'ayn'*, which is signposted by the side of the road.

Wadi Bani Khalid comprises a long series of plantations and villages that lie in or close to the wadi floor. All year-round, water flows from a natural spring in the upper reaches of the wadi, supporting the

abundant vegetation that makes it such a beautiful spot. Most people visiting Wadi Bani Khalid head for the source of this water, which collects in a series of deep pools in the narrow end of the wadi, and **Moqal Cave**. Both are well signposted from the Muscat–Sur Hwy.

The pools have been developed into a tourist destination with a small (too small) car park, a concrete pathway and a series of picnic huts. Swimming is possible here but only if clothed in shorts and T-shirt over the top of a swimming costume. The site is rather unattractive or crude but at least efforts have at last been made to enhance access to this beauty spot. It is heavily crowded at weekends and during public holidays but it is possible to escape the visitors relatively easily by going in search of the cave or by climbing above the wadi on the marked path. The path eventually leads to Tiwi by the coast. It takes three days to walk (with donkeys carrying camping equipment) and is a popular hike organised by tour agents in Muscat (p260).

To reach the cave, look for a lower path above the picnic area and walk along the bottom of the wadi. You will have to scramble over and squeeze under boulders and ford the water several times. For precise directions, ask the goatherds. If they don't tell you the right place, it's because they don't like tourists swimming deeper into the wadi. Then again, they may just be worried you'll be lured into the land of gardens and cool streams revealed to all who strike the rocks of Moqal Cave and utter the magic words '*Salim bin Saliym Salam*'. The cave, however, is more likely to reveal evidence of bats and previous visitors. The narrow entrance is finally accessed by a concrete stairway. A torch is needed to see anything and to find the underground pools, you will need to be prepared to scramble and slither through the mud.

GAYLAH

الجبيلة

This exciting destination on top of the Eastern Hajar Mountains is worth the effort as much for the journey through crumbling cliffs and past remote, mountain villages as for the reward of ancient tombs on the summit.

The route, which can only be negotiated in 4WD, begins at a right turn for Souqah,

just before the town of Ash-Shariq (also known as Simayiah – located at the entrance of Wadi Khabbah). Make sure you have water, map, compass and a full tank of petrol. At 3.1km after you leave the sealed road, take the right fork for Gaylah (often pronounced 'Jaylah' and sometimes spelt Al-Gailah). The track traces a precarious route through walls of unhinged black shale, waiting for a good storm to collapse. The last 6km of the ascent to the plateau, past shepherd enclosures, is currently poorly graded and progress is slow. At 21.4km, turn steep left by the water filling 'station' and follow the road to the top of the plateau.

A myriad of car tracks thread from village to village on the top of the plateau and numerous little communities survive on very little on the more or less barren plain. Until recently, the only access to many of these villages was by foot with an occasional helicopter visit landing supplies and/or health officials.

The numerous tombs (there are 90 or so) scattered across the hilltops date back to the Umm an Nar culture of 2000 to 2700 BC and, if you've been to Bat (see p236) you'll recognise the meticulous stone towers, carefully tracing the ridges of the high ground. Local belief has it that they were built by the spirit Kebir Keb, which is as good a way as any of describing the collective consciousness of the ancients.

If you are feeling adventurous, you can continue over the unmapped plateau to the village of Qaran and drop down to the Qurayat–Sur coast road, 5km northwest of Wadi Shab (see p215).

WADI KHABBAH & WADI TAYEIN

وادي كبة وادي الطائين

These two wide and luscious wadis meander along the western base of the Eastern Hajar Mountains and provide a fascinating alternative route between Muscat and Sur. A 4WD is needed to navigate the off-road sections, which invariably involve fording water. The picture of rural wadi life that unfolds as you meander through the spectacular mountain scenery is a highlight. There are numerous plantations and small villages in these wadis and it's much appreciated if you travel through the wadis with sensitivity.

To find the start of the western end of the Wadi Dayqah Walk (see p215), head for the village of Tool, some 10km east of the town of Mehlah. Mehlah is at the end of the sealed road through Wadi Tayein. You can park outside Tool and wade across the wadi entrance. Deep pools invite a swim but don't for a minute think you're alone: the steep ravine is a favourite with silent-walking shepherds.

AL-MINTIRIB

المنترب

This small village on the edge of the dunes is an important navigational landmark for visits to the Sharqiya Sands. Camp representatives often meet their guests here and help them navigate (in 4WD only) the route to their site – usually impossible to find independently unless you've been before. Al-Mintirib has a small fort and a picturesque **old quarter** of passing interest for those breaking the drive from Muscat, 220km to the northeast. The village is 10km southeast of Al-Qabil Rest House (p226) on the Muscat–Sur Hwy.

SHARQIYA (WAHIBA) SANDS

رمال وهيبه (الشرقية)

A destination in their own right, or a diversion between Muscat and Sur, these beautiful dunes, formerly known as Wahiba Sands, could keep the visitor occupied for days. Home to the Bedu (Bedouin), the sands offer the visitor a glimpse of a traditional way of life that is fast disappearing as modern conveniences limit the need for a nomadic existence. The Bedu specialise in

raising camels for racing and regular **camel races** take place throughout the region from mid-October to mid-April. Contact the **Ministry for Camel Affairs** (☎ 26 893804) for details.

The sands are a good place to interact with Omani women whose Bedouin lifestyle affords them a more visible social role. They wear distinctive, brightly coloured costume with peaked masks and an *abeyya* (outer garment) of gauze and are accomplished drivers, often coming to the rescue of tourists stuck in the sand. They are also skilful craft-makers and may well approach you with colourful woollen key rings and camel bags for sale.

It is possible, but highly challenging, to drive right through the sands from north to south, camping under the seams of native *ghaf* trees or tucking behind a sand dune. There are, however, no provisions available, petrol stations or any other help at hand in the sands, beyond the desert camps at the northern periphery. As such, it is imperative that you go with a guide, or at least with another vehicle, driven by someone who knows the route. Off-road guidebooks describe this route but all will advise you not to venture through the sands alone. In the summer the sands don't take prisoners so avoid exploring too far off-the-beaten track between April and October.

For the casual visitor, the best way to explore the sands is by staying at one of the desert camps (p226). The owners of the camp will meet you at the Muscat–Sur Hwy, and guide you, usually in convoy across the sands. Needless to say, it is essential to have

SAND OF THE LIVING

If you drive through the sands in the spring, when a green tinge settles over the dunes, you'll notice that they are not the static and lifeless heap of gold-coloured dust that they might at first appear. Not only do they move at quite a pace (up to 10m a year) but they are also home to a surprising number of mobile inhabitants.

The Royal Geographical Society of London, in cooperation with the Omani government, conducted a survey in 1986 and concluded that among the 180 species of plants, there were 200 mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians in the sands. The best way to spot these inhabitants is to look for the prints that slither, wriggle and otherwise punctuate the sand early in the evening and then lie in wait above the point where the tracks end. Sooner or later, the animal will burrow to the surface and scuttle off for twilight foraging.

While each animal has its place in the delicate ecosystem of the sands, the health of the environment as a whole is largely due to one six-legged, black-boxed insect called a dung beetle. Rolling its prize up and down the dunes, it can cover many acres of land and in so doing helps fertilise the fragile plants in its path.

4WD and prior knowledge of off-road driving is very helpful!

If you don't fancy the prospect of getting your vehicle stuck in the sand, there are plenty of tours available (see below) and some camps will come and collect their nondriving guests for an extra fee.

Sleeping

DESERT CAMPS

Accommodation in the sands takes the form of tented or *barasti* camps that offer the full desert experience, including camel rides (from OR5 per hour), camel-racing, dune-driving, sand-skiing and trips to Bedouin settlements. Don't confuse camping here with budget. The camps are often quite expensive for what they offer. The best value camps are as follows:

Al-Raha Tourism Camp (☎ 99343851; per person OR15) Located deep in the dunes, this friendly and efficient camp offers *barasti*-style huts at the end of a long corridor of orange sand. It can be rather noisy during holidays but at other times is a magical retreat and one that makes exploration deeper into the sands feasible.

Desert Discovery Tours (☎ 99317874; www.desert.discovery.com; r incl meals OR20) This company runs a spectacular camp, called Al-Areesh, on the edge of a silver sand dune with local Bedouin villages nearby. Staff can organise transport (OR20 per person) from Al-Qabil Rest House to the camp. Accommodation is in tents with shared bathroom.

Nomadic Desert Camp (☎ 99336273; www.nomadic.desertcamp.com; r incl meals OR28) This experienced, intimate camp, run by a Bedouin family, offers a personal service in the heart of the dunes. Accommodation is in *barasti*-style huts with clean, shared bathrooms. Included in the price is transport to and from Al-Wasil on the Muscat-Sur Hwy, a camel ride and a visit to a Bedouin village.

HOTEL

For those wanting to experience the dunes as a day trip rather than an overnight experience, the following hotel offers easy, escorted access to the dunes.

Al-Qabil Rest House (☎ 25 581243; fax 25 581119; s/d OR13.100/17.500) On the Muscat-Sur Hwy 10km northwest of Al-Mintirib, this small and friendly guesthouse offers comfortable rooms around a courtyard and a range of sand dune explorations.

Getting There & Around

To get to the edge of the Sharqiya Sands by public transport, take a Muscat-Sur bus

(from Muscat/Sur OR2/1.400) and ask to be dropped off at the Al-Qabil Rest House. It takes three hours from Muscat and 1½ hours from Sur. There are two buses per day in either direction.

The sands run parallel to the Muscat-Sur Hwy and the easiest access into the sands (with your own vehicle) is at Al-Mintirib.

IBRA

☎ 25 / pop 26,072

Ibra, the gateway to the Sharqiya Region, enjoyed great prosperity during Oman's colonial period as the aristocratic locals set sail for Zanzibar and sent money home for plantations and luxury residences, still in evidence in the old quarter of town. The tradition of farming is continued today, with rich plots producing vegetables, bananas, mangos, and, of course, dates. It makes a pleasant stop off for those heading to Sharqiya Sands.

Sights & Activities

Ibra has a lively souq that is at its most active early on a Thursday morning. Arranged around a double courtyard, the greengrocery takes pride of place in the centre, with local melons and aubergines making colourful seasonal displays. A working silver souq, where *khanjars* and veil pins are crafted, occupies several of the shops around the outer courtyard, muscling in between carpentry shops where elaborately carved doors are still made. Look out for a shop called 'Sale and Maintenance of Traditional Firearms & Rifle Making': there's always an energetic huddle of old men engaged in comparing ancient weaponry around the tables outside. You will probably notice piles of flattened and dried fish – a local delicacy, still prized despite the modern road system that has brought fresh fish to Ibra via the neighbouring wet fish market.

To reach the souq by car, turn right off the Muscat-Sur Hwy (if coming from Muscat) at the Omanoil station and turn immediately left, parallel to the main road. A watchtower punctuates the top of each surrounding hill, indicating the prior importance of the town. Pass the office of the local *wali* (governor) and the souq is on the right about 3.5km from the main road. Alternatively, take the first right off

the Muscat-Sur Hwy, after Sultan Qaboos Mosque at the signpost for Al-Yamadi. If coming by bus, say you're heading for the souq and ask to be set down near the Al-Yamadi turning.

Women may be tempted to make a special visit on a Wednesday morning when the nearby **women's souq** attracts women-only buyers and sellers from all over the region, selling a variety of handicrafts (such as baskets, woven cushions and camel bags). Men, however, are not welcome.

If you continue past the souq area and turn right at the T-junction toward Al-Yamadi, you'll come to one of the old parts of Ibra with plenty of crumbling **mud-built houses** of two or three storeys. One or two houses across the wadi have been restored by local residents and it makes an intriguing place to take a discreet stroll.

Sleeping & Eating

There is adequate accommodation in Ibra to suit all pockets.

Ibra Motel (☎ 25 571777; ibramtl@omantel.net.om; Naseeb Rd; s/d OR9/10.500) It's cheap and it's central and for the price, not much more can be expected of it. Nonetheless, this modest hotel has clean rooms with wildly painted wardrobes and a job lot of 1970s-style patterned carpets. The tiny bathtubs have built-in seats for some reason. Breakfast is provided (OR2) in the adjoining restaurant, **Fahad bin Saleh Al-Hooti Restaurant** (☎ 92 416105; Naseeb Rd; mains 300 baisa), which cooks fresh food on the premises; the prawns in ginger sauce are a tasty option. The hotel is just off the Muscat-Sur Hwy, behind the Omanoil station.

Nahar Tourism Camp Oasis (☎ 99387654; www.emptyquartertours.com; s/d OR20/26, ste incl dinner & breakfast OR28/32) A very pleasant place to get a feel of the surrounding rock desert, this camp has a rural and remote atmosphere despite being only 3km from Ibra. With a pretty garden of vincas, a *barasti*-roofed dining area and its own camel race track, the camp is popular with European tour groups. Accommodation is in traditional mud-built rooms with decorative wind-towers, although a generator supplies air-con during the sweltering summer months. It's worth paying the extra for a suite: traditionally decorated, with painted ceilings and mosquito-netted beds, they are charm-

ing enough to persuade you to stay an extra night. For the rare visitor who enters Ibra by bus, the owners of this camp will pick you up from the town centre. Ask to be set down at the Omanoil station so at least you have shade while you wait or you can pop into the neighbouring cafes for a bit of air conditioning.

The owners have another camp deep in the Sharqiya Sands called the **1000 Nites** (s/d incl dinner and breakfast OR25/50) and can arrange 4WD transport at extra cost.

Al-Sharqiya Sands Hotel (☎ 99205112; fax 99207012; s/d OR22/28; 📍) On the Muscat-Sur Hwy just south of Ibra, this attractive hotel is arranged around a central courtyard with a swimming pool and heaps of colourful lanterns. The rooms are spacious, comfortable and have polished floors and large bathrooms. There is a rather loud 'local' bar and a more family-oriented restaurant with a very large international menu.

Eating in Ibra outside the hotels and camp is confined to small coffee shops. Opposite the souq is a large supermarket called Al-Najah shopping centre and there are lots of small groceries, *shwarma* stands and ro-tisseries dotted along the high street.

Getting There & Around

The Muscat-Sur Hwy passes through the modern town centre. The Muscat to Sur bus stops in Ibra (from Muscat OR2, about 2¼ hours, three times daily both ways).

SINAW

The reason most people pay a visit to Sinaw is to see its rather wonderful **souq**, which, like most other souqs in the country, is at its most active early on a Thursday morning. What makes this particular souq such fun to visit is that it attracts large numbers of Bedouin from nearby Sharqiya Sands who bring to the town to trade livestock for modern commodities. Local ladies wearing bronze peaked masks and transparent gauzy *abeyyas* add to the exoticism of the spectacle. Just before Eid the centre of town comes to a virtual standstill as camels are loaded (with inordinate difficulty) onto pick-up trucks and goats are bartered across the street. Spirals of smoke emanating from almost every house in the vicinity over the holiday period indicate that the livestock are not traded in vain.

The souq is on the edge of the town, on the Sinaw to Hijj (also known as Hay) road. It is arranged around a central courtyard and the souq gates are decorated with a green car for some reason. If you pass this gate on your left and veer around to the right, a left turn after about 500m takes you up the hill towards a **cemetery**. After a couple of kilometres more, you'll come to the old town of Sinaw. Well-preserved multistorey **mud houses** make this a fascinating place to wander around and give an idea of how this town has always been an important trading post.

Sinaw is 65km west of Ibra. Although you can catch a bus from Muscat (OR2, three hours), it's not very useful as it leaves late in the afternoon and there's nowhere to stay.

MASIRAH

📍 25

With its rocky interior of palm oases and gorgeous rim of sandy beaches, Masirah is the typical desert island. Flamingos, herons and oyster-catchers patrol the coast by day, and armies of ghost crabs march ashore at night. Home to a rare shell, the Eloise, and large turtle-nesting sites, the island is justly fabled as a naturalist's paradise. Expats stationed here affectionately termed Masirah 'Fantasy Island' – not because of wildlife, but because anything they wanted during the long months of internment was the subject of fantasy only.

Masirah is still remote, with minimal facilities, but the island's splendid isolation is under threat with hotel chains negotiating for a portion of the eastern shore. For now, though, Masirah continues to offer a rare chance to see nature in the raw: if you can get there it promises a rare trip on the wild side.

History

Little is known about the island, except through hearsay. At one point it was inhabited by Bahriya tribes people, shipwrecked from Salalah. Wiped out by an epidemic 300 years ago, their unusual tombstones can still be seen at Safa'iq. The island has been used variously as a staging post for trade in the Indian Ocean, and as home to a floating population of fishermen attracted by the rich catch of kingfish, lobster and prawn.

FANCY A SNACK?

Masirah must be the only place in Oman without a fort – unless the air base counts. The local population tolerates the overseas militia with good grace, but outsiders have not always been welcome. In 1904 a British ship called the *Baron Inverdale* was wrecked off the rugged eastern coast. Her crew struggled ashore expecting Arab hospitality, but found a very different reception. A monument to their massacre in the shape of a concessionary Christian cross is all that remains of the luckless crew.

There were rumours of cannibalism and as a result the Sultan decreed the destruction of all local houses – there are surprisingly few permanent settlements, even for the tiny population of 6000. You'll be glad to know that nowadays the only meat on the kebabs is likely to be camel or goat.

Orientation

Masirah is 63km long, 18km wide and lies 15km off the Barr al-Hickman coast near the southern end of the Sharqiya Sands. The rough Indian Ocean contrasts with the calm and shallow Masirah Channel. Jebel Humr (274m) is the highest point of Masirah's hilly backbone. Hilf, a 3km string of shops and fish factories in the northwest, is home to most of the native population. There are no shops or petrol stations beyond the town, but Hilf caters for most basic needs from food stuff to simple camping gear.

Sights

There are few attractions to draw the visitor away from the beach, but it is worth visiting the 300-year-old **grave sites** at Safa'iq, just inland from the island road (look for a red flag 6km north of Sur Masirah). Two rocks are usually the only indication of a grave for men, three rocks for women, but some of the Safa'iq graves have surprisingly elaborate headstones.

The **Baron Inverdale Monument** (see the boxed text, above) is next to the old BERS camp at the far northwest of the island. A climb up **Jebel Humr**, the flat-topped mountain, is recommended, but wear good shoes as the scree can be quite dangerous towards the top. The effort is rewarded by a wonderful view of the island, especially

at sunset, and the plateau is strewn with fossils. To get there, head out of Hilf in the direction of Sur Masirah, turn left at the sign for A'Samar and scout around the wadi until the mountain comes into view. It takes about 30 minutes to hike up the left rump of the mountain and scramble over the rim.

Masirah is internationally renowned for its turtles: four species frequent the island, including the hawksbill, olive ridley and green, but the most numerous are the loggerheads. Thirty thousand come ashore each year, making Masirah the largest **loggerhead turtle-nesting site** in the world – the favourite nesting beach is by the old BERS camp. To reach 'Turtle Beach', drive towards the northwestern tip of the island.

For their sheer diversity, the shells of the island are hard to beat. Spiny whelks (murex) used to be harvested here for their purple dye, and ancient shell middens near Sur Masirah indicate that clams were an important food source for early settlers. Lately, the island has become famous for the 'Eloise', a beautiful, rare shell unique to Masirah. Needless to say, the collection of live specimens of molluscs and corals is strictly prohibited.

Activities

Nightlife on Masirah is limited to 'labour and delivery' among the turtle population – all other entertainment is left to the imagination. High tide on the southwestern shore offers idyllic swimming, but the other coast should be treated with caution due to strong currents.

Bait is available from the fish factories – during winter you can expect to catch something using the simplest hand line.

Sleeping

With a 4WD, camping in any of the deserted bays on the west coast or at the southern tip is recommended. If you choose the east coast, don't forget you cannot light fires on a turtle beach. Without a car, hitch to Sur Masirah and walk 10 minutes southwest to secluded beaches.

Currently the only hotel on the island, **Masirah Hotel** (📞 25 504401; fax 25 504035; r OR15) is in Hilf, to the immediate left of the main jetty on the main street. It has six rooms with multiple beds, commodious bath-

rooms and a lot of Arabic chintz, but no other facilities. It receives so few visitors there is no resident staff – if you fax them your dates, someone will switch the air-con on before your arrival. A Golden Tulip hotel is under construction on the north eastern side of the island. It should be completed by 2008.

If you get stuck at the ferry in Shana'a on the mainland, the grubby **Shanah Hotel** (📞 99034216; s/d OR8/10) will do if you're desperate and haven't got camping gear.

Eating & Drinking

Dining options used to be limited to kebabs along the main road. Now, under the guise of the ubiquitous coffeehouse, you can find Indian (Timah Trading Restaurant), Chinese (Suhol Adam) and seafood (Ibn Al-Quramshi Restaurant), in addition to the usual Arabic fare.

Basic provisions can be found in the souq in Hilf. The bakery on the main road sells good samosas from 9.30am to 10.30am daily. Abu Sanidah is the most comprehensive supermarket in town but if you require any 'must-haves', bring them with you.

Getting There & Away

Getting to the ferry terminal at Shana'a is theoretically feasible by public transport but not very practical as there is no direct service from Muscat. If you are determined to try, however, take the Route 52 bus from Muscat to Sinaw, leaving at 5.30pm (3½ hours, OR2.800). The bus stops in Sinaw and there is no place to stay. You will then have to try to find a shared taxi to Shana'a (2½ hours, OR5) – not that easy late at night. You will arrive around midnight at the earliest. If you're lucky you can catch a ferry before morning but then the hotel in Hilf will not be open (it's not manned 24 hours – in fact, it's barely manned at all!). You may have better luck in reverse (from Shana'a to Muscat) as taxis often wait at the jetty for passengers to disembark. It's better to drive.

A left turn off the Sinaw-Duqm road leads, after 18km, to Hijj (also known as Hay). Shana'a is a further 45km away along a sealed road. Turn right across the salt flats (which turn a stunning red when the algae is in bloom) at the bus stop. Muscat to Shana'a takes about five or six hours by car.

The trip by **ferry** (☎ 25 5040134) from Shana'a, near the desolate salt flats of Barr al-Hickman, is certainly characterful. The journey to Hilf, the main town on Masirah, usually takes 1½ hours – a lot longer when the boat gets beached on a sand bar, and the cost is OR15 each way per car; foot passengers travel free. Ferries run from morning until evening, but only during high tide.

Getting Around

There is a limited bus service in Hilf, but the only way to explore the island is to hike or rely on the few cars per day using the road.

There is no car-hire service on Masirah so the most feasible option for getting around is to bring your own 4WD. A sealed road circumnavigates the island but if you want to camp you'll need 4WD to get close to the water.

AL-DAKHILIYAH REGION

منطقة الداخلية

This dramatic, mountainous region is one of the biggest tourist destinations in Oman, and for good reason. The area has spectacular scenery, including Jebel Shams (Oman's highest mountain), Wadi Ghul (the Grand Canyon of Arabia) and Jebel Akhdar (the fruit bowl of Oman). In addition, some of the country's best forts can be seen in Nizwa, Bahla and Jabrin.

Many of the sights from Nizwa to Jabrin can be managed on a long day trip from Muscat, and all tour companies in the capital (p260) organise such trips. The region deserves more than just a fleeting visit, however, especially if adding 4WD trips into the *jebel*.

With a 4WD, an exciting three-day round trip from Muscat can be made via Nizwa, taking in the sights of Al-Dakhiliyah Region, before crossing over the mountains from nearby Al-Hamra and descending to the Al-Batinah Region near Rustaq.

BIRKAT AL-MAWZ

بركة الموز

☎ 25

The name of this pretty village roughly translates as 'Banana Pool' – a suitable name, as a quick drive through the village

plantation will reveal. Although there is a restored fort, **Bait-al-Radidah** (admission 500 baisa; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sun-Thu), on the edge of the village, most people only venture into Birkat al-Mawz to begin the drive (or strenuous day hike) up Wadi Muaydin to the Saiq Plateau on Jebel Akhdar.

Birkat al-Mawz lies on the Muscat-Nizwa Hwy, 111km from the Rusayl roundabout in Muscat and 24km from the *khanjar* roundabout in Nizwa.

JEBEL AKHDAR

الجبل الأخضر

☎ 25

Without a guide or some inside information Jebel Akhdar (Green Mountain) may seem something of a misnomer to the first-time visitor. Firstly, Jebel Akhdar refers not to a mountain as such, but to an area that encompasses the great **Saiq Plateau**, at 2000m above sea level. Secondly, the *jebel* keeps its fecundity well hidden in a labyrinth of wadis and terraces where the cooler mountain air (temperatures during December to March can drop to -5°C) and greater rainfall (hailstones even) encourage prize pomegranates, apricots and other fruit.

With a day or two to explore this 'top of the beanstalk', the determined visitor will soon stumble across the gardens and **orchards** that make this region so justly prized. If you stay at the hotel in Saiq, collect a hand-drawn map picking out some of the highlights of the area. It helps to think of Jebel Akhdar as two separate areas – an upper plateau, and a lower plateau on which the main town of **Saiq** is located. On the edge of the lower plateau, in a south-facing crescent, high above Wadi al-Muaydin, are spectacularly arranged terraced villages, where most of the market-gardening takes place.

In a weekend, you could spend one day exploring the upper plateau by car (turn first right after the hotel), picnic among magnificent mature juniper trees (in a perfect camp site about 2km after the Sultan's experimental farm) and hike through wild olive and fig trees to sunset point (a right turn before the school). The following day, explore the lower plateau by dangling over Diana's Viewpoint – named after the late Lady Diana of Britain who visited this vertiginous vista, with its natural pavement of fossils and dizzying view of the terraces

IN THE PINK

If you are lucky enough to find yourself in the small village of Al-Ayn on Jebel Akhdar in April, then you will be sure to have your nose assailed by the redolent Jebel Akhdar rose. Each rose has a maximum of 35 petals, but if you spend time counting them, you may well be missing the point. The point in cultivating these beautiful briars is not for the flower but for the aroma. For hundreds of years, the rose petals have been harvested here to produce rosewater (*attar* in Arabic) – that all-important post-dinner courtesy, sprinkled on the hands of guests from slender, silver vessels.

The yellowing bottles lined up in the sticky shed of a rosewater workshop suggest the petals have been boiled and discarded. This in fact is not the case. While the exact production of the precious perfume is kept a family secret, anyone on Jebel Akhdar will tell you the petals are not boiled but steamed over a fire with an arrangement of apparatus that brings to mind home chemistry sets. But the alchemy, according to Nasser 'bin Jebel' whose father's hands are ironically blackened each spring with rosewater production, is not so much in the process of evaporation but in the process of picking. If you see people dancing through the roses before dawn, chances are they are not calling on the genies of the *jebel* to assist the blooms, but plucking petals when the dew still lies on the bushes and the oil is at its most intense.

below. Then, allowing extra time to adjust to the thin, high-altitude air, hike from Al-Aqor to Seeq around the edge of the crescent. This is particularly rewarding during spring when the fragrant, pink roses from which rosewater is made are in bloom.

Jebel Akhdar was the centre of fierce fighting during the Jebel Wars (see p184), and until recently access was restricted to residents and the military. Although a permit is no longer necessary to make the ascent, you are only permitted to approach the area in 4WD. There have been many accidents caused by people trying to make the long descent in a saloon car, using their brakes with disastrous consequences rather than changing gears.

The only alternative to 4WD is a walking trail through the terraced villages of Wadi al-Muaydin to the Saiq Plateau. You'll need a guide and you should allow six hours from Birkat al-Mawz at the bottom of the wadi to reach the plateau (12 hours return). Beware: it's an unrelenting uphill slog!

Sleeping

Perched like an eyrie on the edge of Saiq Plateau, for most of the year **Jebel al-Akhdar Hotel** (☎ 25 429909; jakhotel@omantel.net.om; s/d OR26.200/36) is as empty as the land it sits upon. Even the open fire in the lobby in winter doesn't manage to make it cosy. But with a wind howling around the wacky stained-glass domes, and chilling the corridor, the hotel has at least character. There's

no bar but you can bring a bottle to drink with dinner.

Getting There & Around

Access to Jebel Akhdar is via the town of Birkat al-Mawz. Following the signs for Wadi al-Muaydin, off the Muscat-Nizwa Hwy, turn left in Birkat al-Mawz and pass the fort on your right. After 6km you will reach the second of two checkpoints, where you will have to satisfy the police that your car has 4WD. The hotel is 28km beyond the checkpoint – keep to the main road and you shouldn't have difficulty finding it.

As yet there is no public transport to the area, but several tour companies, including **National Travel & Tourism** (☎ 24 660376), offer day trips for OR110 per person. It may be cheaper (and possibly more rewarding) to hire a 4WD and stay at the hotel.

NIZWA

نزوى

☎ 25 / pop 75,459

Nizwa lies on a plain surrounded by a thick palm oasis and some of Oman's highest mountains. About two hours from Muscat along a new highway, the town is a gateway to the historic sites of Bahla and Jabrin, and for excursions up Jebel Akhdar and Jebel Shams.

Only half a century ago, the British explorer Wilfred Thesiger was forced to steer clear of Nizwa: his Bedouin companions were convinced that he wouldn't survive the ferocious conservatism of the town and

refused to let him enter. He'd have been amazed to find that Nizwa is now the second-biggest tourist destination in Oman. The seat of factional imams until the 1950s, Nizwa, or the 'Pearl of Islam' as it's sometimes called, is still a conservative town, however, and appreciates a bit of decorum from its visitors.

Orientation

Nizwa's fort dominates the town centre and all of Nizwa's sights are either inside or within walking distance of the fort. The hotels, however, lie along the Muscat-Nizwa Hwy, a few kilometres (100 *baisa* by microbus) from the town centre.

Coming from Muscat, the bus stop and taxi stand are situated in the middle of the wadi in front of the fort complex, 800m past the *khanjar* roundabout. When the wadi is flowing, the road is impassable at this point, hence the bridge further upstream that leads to the book roundabout. Buses for Ibri leave from the book roundabout.

Information

Banks and moneychangers are along the main street that runs from the fort complex to the book roundabout. The post office is inside the souq.

For those with a special interest in Nizwa, a website (www.nizwa.net) offers interesting insider information.

Sights

NIZWA FORT

Built in the 17th century by Sultan bin Saif al-Yaruba, the first imam of the Ya'aruba dynasty, the **fort** (admission 500 *baisa*; ☎ 9am-4pm Sat-Thu, 8-11am Fri), which took 12 years to build, is famed for its 40m-tall, round tower. It's worth climbing to the top of the tower to see the date plantations encircling the town and the view of the Hajar Mountains.

NIZWA SOUQ

The fruit and vegetable, meat and fish markets are housed in new buildings, behind the great, crenulated piece of city wall that overlooks the wadi. If you're not put off by the smell of heaving bulls and irritable goats, the **livestock souq** (in full swing between 7am and 9am on Thursday) is worth a look. It occupies a small plot of land beyond the souq walls, left of the entrance.

You will have to try hard to find a bargain for antiques and silver at the other end of the souq (nearest the fort), but local craftsmanship is good. Nizwa is particularly famous for crafting silver *khanjars*. Today Indian or Pakistani silversmiths often work under an Omani master craftsman, especially for pieces designed for tourists, but the workmanship is exquisite. Prices range from OR30 for a tourist piece to well over OR100 for an authentic piece.

Sleeping

All the following hotels are on the road between Birkat al-Mawz and Nizwa.

Tanuf Residency (☎ 25 411601; fax 25 411059; s/d OR10/12) With huge rooms and even bigger beds, scenic views across the foothills and a competent restaurant, this is a good-value hotel that welcomes individual travellers – although English is limited. It is next door to the Arab World restaurant, 4.5km from the *khanjar* roundabout.

Majan Hotel (☎ 25 431910; fax 25 431911; s/d OR14/18) There is nothing memorable or charming about this hotel but if all you are looking for is a bed for the night, this hotel, which caters mostly for local business clientele, is clean and serviceable. Single women may feel uncomfortable in the all-male environment. It is 5km from the *khanjar* roundabout.

Falaj Daris Hotel (☎ 25 410500; fdhnizwa@omantel.net.om; s/d OR29.500/37.500; 📺) This delightful hotel, wrapped around two swimming pools and a bar and with a vista of toothy mountains beyond, is the most characterful hotel in Nizwa. The low-ceilinged, marble foyer is a good place to sit on divans and discuss route plans over Omani coffee and dates. The rooms are more pleasant in the new block, but the older courtyard and pool have some welcome shade under which is arrayed the evening buffet – a friendly, tasty affair with long tables for tour groups. The hotel is 4km from the *khanjar* roundabout.

Golden Tulip Nizwa Hotel (☎ 25 431616; www.goldentulip.com; s/d OR59/64; 📺) This rather pretentious, marble-clad hotel has a vast foyer and large pool but somehow misses the feeling of hospitality that is so prevalent elsewhere in Oman. It has plush rooms, however, with an arena of mountains visible in the garden, a bar and a good restaurant. It is situated some way out of town,

near the turning for Jebel Akhdar, 18km from the *khanjar* roundabout.

Eating

Al-Zuhul Restaurant (meals OR2) This is a simple venue with outdoor seating on the pavement but it has one of the best night-time views in Oman. Situated opposite the souq, the café overlooks the fort and mosque, both of which are lit up spectacularly at night. It sells *shwarma* and kebabs, and is always busy with locals who generally pull up in the car and toot for a take-away.

Arab World Restaurant (meals OR2.500) Located on the Muscat-Nizwa Hwy, next to Tanuf Residency, this Lebanese-style restaurant has indoor seating, welcome in the summer after a dusty day's drive in the *jebel*. Kebabs and mezze are the most popular fare.

Bin Atique Restaurant (☎ 25 410466; meals OR3) Part of a small chain of Omani-style restaurants, this is one of the few places where you have the opportunity to sample local dishes. It is just a pity that the restaurant hasn't risen to the challenge of increased tourists looking for an authentic experience because the rather grubby private rooms are not the best ambience for dinner on the ground. Still it's worth a try – especially the cuttlefish with tomato.

Getting There & Away

ONTC buses run from Muscat to Nizwa (OR1.800, two hours 20 minutes, 8am and 2.30pm daily). Buses for Muscat from Nizwa (OR1.800) leave at 8.30am and 5.30pm.

You can catch the southbound bus from Muscat to Salalah at the roundabout at the end of the Muscat-Nizwa road (or 5km from the *khanjar* roundabout if coming from Nizwa). The fare from Nizwa to Salalah is OR5, and the journey takes 10 hours. Telephone the **Ruwi bus station** (☎ 24 701294) in Muscat to reserve a seat and check times.

Shared-taxi/microbus fares from Nizwa to Rusayl roundabout in Muscat are OR2/1 (to Ruwi add 500 *baisa*). Nizwa to Ibri costs OR2.500/1.500 by taxi/microbus.

AL-HOOTA CAVE

Having announced the opening of this **cave** (☎ 24 490060; www.alhottacave.com; admission OR5; ☎ 9am-2pm & 3-6pm Tue-Thu & Sun, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Fri Sep-Jun) in December 2006, the

كهف الهوتة

Ministry of Tourism was surprised to find half the population of Muscat queuing up outside. Such is the newly awakened spirit of tourism here that everyone is hungry for something to do at the weekend. Unfortunately, this cave, which is richly embellished with stalactites and stalagmites only has room for 750 visitors per day. As such, you should ring first to make a reservation. If you do manage to gain access, a train takes you into the cave and a 40-minute walking tour passes by an underground lake with blind cave-fish.

MOUNTAIN ROAD VIA HATT & WADI BANI AWF

الحمراء الروادي بني عوف
This truly spectacular road over the Western Hajar Mountains affords some of the best views in Oman. It can be accomplished as a long round-trip from Muscat or as a more leisurely outing from Nizwa to Rustaq. Although the mountain part of the route is only 70km long, it takes about four hours to drive and a 4WD is essential to negotiate the sustained, off-road descent into Wadi Bani Awf. This route passes through remote, rugged country and you should take the necessary precautions (spare tyre, jack, water, warm clothing, walking shoes and basic provisions).

From the book roundabout in Nizwa, take the road towards Bahla and turn right to Al-Hamra after 30.6km. After 3.5km turn right again for Al-Hoota Cave (Hoti Cave) and head for Bilad Sayt (Balad Seet).

The mountain road, zigzagging up the mountain in front of you, is well-signposted and sealed for much of the ascent. Look out for wild palms and clumps of aloe. At 23.9km you will come to the Sharfat Al-Alamayn viewpoint, on the saddle of the ridge: this is the highest point in the road. It's worth spending time here to enjoy the scenery and to look for wolf traps (piles of stone with a slate trap door) before the long descent into the village of **Hatt**.

After Hatt, the road continues for another 6km, skirting past **Bilad Sayt**, which is off the road to the left. The village is well-worth a detour. With its picture-postcard perfection of terraced fields and sun-baked houses, it's one of the prettiest villages in the area. The villagers prefer visitors to park outside and walk in or simply view the village from a distance.

At 43.8km, the road passes the entrance to aptly named **Snake Gorge**, a popular destination for adventure hikers and climbers (see the boxed text, opposite), and through the middle of a football pitch. From here the main track meanders around the mountain to the exit of Snake Gorge at 49.6km, signalled by a neat row of trees. If you're here in the spring, look out for a beautiful yellow-flowering tree (*Tecomella Al-Zamah*) that some say is indigenous to the area. Continue along the main track into **Wadi Bani Awf** (see p238) ignoring the left fork at 57.2km. At 59.4km you will pass through the small wadi village of Al-Teekah and eventually arrive at Hwy 13 at 69.7km. Turn left for Rustaq, or right for Nakhal and Muscat.

AL-HAMRA

الحمراء

📍 25

This venerable village at the foot of the Hajar Mountains is one of the oldest in Oman, and is interesting for a wonderfully well preserved row of two- and three-storey **mud-brick houses** built in the Yemeni style. It's best to park in the new part of Al-Hamra and walk through the old city gates to explore. There are many abandoned houses in the upper parts of the village and it's easy to gain an idea of a life that has only changed in the past three decades.

Al-Hamra can be reached by turning right off the Nizwa-Bahla road, 30.6km from Nizwa, past the junction for Jebel Shams. At the second roundabout in Al-Hamra, turn left to reach the old part of the village.

MISFAT

مسفاه

There is a sealed road from Al-Hamra up to this mountain-hugging village, making it one of the few mountain villages that is easily accessible by saloon car. The mountain flank draped in date plantations and a terraced sequence of stone houses in the foreground make a picturesque landscape. For the best view of the village, turn right just before reaching the houses. The road ends after some modern villas, a viewpoint ideal for a photograph.

JEBEL SHAMS

جبل شمس

Oman's highest mountain, Jebel Shams (Mountain of the Sun; 3075m), is best known not for its peak but for the view

into the spectacularly deep **Wadi Ghul** lying alongside it. The straight-sided Wadi Ghul is known locally as the Grand Canyon of Arabia as it fissures abruptly between the flat canyon rims, exposing vertical cliffs of 1000m and more. Until recently, there was nothing between the nervous driver and a plunge into the abyss but now an iron railing at least indicates the most precipitous points along the track and a couple of rough car parks along the rim pick out some of the best viewpoints into the canyon.

While there is nothing 'to do' exactly at the top, the area makes a wonderful place to take photographs, have a picnic (there are no shops or facilities so bring your own), enjoy a hike (see the boxed text, opposite)... or buy a carpet.

You need only step from your vehicle and you'll find **carpet sellers** appear from nowhere across the barren landscape clutching piles of striped, red-and-black goat-hair rugs. Weaving is a profitable local industry, but don't expect a bargain. A large, striped rug can cost anything from OR30 to OR50, depending on the colours used and the complexity of the pattern. Weaving is men's work on Jebel Shams: spinning the wool is women's work. If you can't find room for a carpet, a spindle made from juniper wood makes a more portable souvenir.

Jebel Shams is a feasible day trip from Nizwa (or a long day-trip from Muscat), but to savour its eerie beauty, consider camping at the plateau near the canyon rim (no facilities or supplies nearby). Alternatively, **Jebel Shams Hotel** (📞 99382639; s/d OR12/24; breakfast OR2) has attractive and cosy stone cabins with bathroom, veranda and heater. The hotel is situated close to the canyon rim, 39km from the start of the road. Another hotel is sprouting up nearby. Be warned, it is freezing in winter.

The junction for Jebel Shams is clearly signposted off the Nizwa-Bahla road, 30.6km from the book roundabout in Nizwa. Turn right at the BP petrol station then left after 11.8km at a Shell petrol station and follow the sealed road along the bottom of the wadi. At 9.1km after the Shell petrol station, the road passes the vacant village of Ghul at the entrance of the Wadi Ghul canyon (you can access the canyon for a short distance only), providing a wonderful photo opportunity.

ON EDGE IN THE HAJAR MOUNTAINS

Most people would be content with peering gingerly over the rim of Wadi Ghul (Oman's Grand Canyon) but there are those for whom this isn't close enough. If you are the kind who likes to edge to the ledge, then try the hike from the rim village of Al-Khateem to the well-named hanging village of Sap Bani Khamis. Abandoned over 30 years ago, it is reached along the popular but vertiginous **Balcony Walk**: one false step in this five-hour 'moderate hike' will send you sailing (without the 'ab') 500m into the void.

If you're comfortable with this angle of dangle, then you might like **Snake Gorge** – the upper reaches, that is, where expat enthusiasts have thrown up 'via ferrata' lines allowing those with a head for heights to pirouette on a tightrope 60m above certain death.

Mind you, this experience palls in comparison with the descent into Hades: the 158m drop into the **Majlis al-Jinn**, is the stuff of legend. Fabled as the second-largest cavern in the world – bigger than St Peter's Cathedral in Rome, bigger than Cheop's pyramid in Giza – this is one mighty hole. Don't count on *jinn* for company; the only spirit you're likely to feel is your own – petering out with the rope as you reach for rock bottom. Named after the first person to descend into the shaft of sunlight at the bottom of the cavern, Cheryl's Drop is the deepest free-fall rappel in Oman.

With dozens of challenging hikes, 200 bolted climbing routes, and an almost uncharted cave system, Oman is one adrenaline rush still pretty much waiting to happen. If you want to be in with the pioneers, contact **Muscat Diving and Adventure Center** (📞 24 485663; www.holiday-in-oman.com), which can tailor-make trips for the extremely edgy.

The road continues past a recharge dam and climbs through a series of sharp hair-pin bends to the top of Jebel Shams. The road then gives way to a well-graded track that climbs eventually to the military radar site on the summit (closed to visitors). There's a right turn just before the summit that leads, after 10 minutes' drive or so, to the canyon rim, 28km from the Shell station.

It is possible but foolhardy to attempt the drive without a 4WD and car-hire agencies won't thank you for the uninsurable abuse of their car. There is no public transport here.

BAHLA

بهلا

📍 25/pop 57,539

Ask anyone in Oman what Bahla means to them and historians will single it out for its fort, expats for its potteries; but any Omani not resident in the town will be sure to respond with 'jinn'. These devilishly difficult spirits are blamed for all manner of evil-eye activities, but you're unlikely to encounter them unless you understand Arabic, as they are considered a living legend in the folklore of the country.

A remarkable set of **battlements** are noticeable at every turn in the road, running impressively along the wadi and making

Bahla one of the finest walled cities in the world. These walls extend for 7km and are said to have been designed 600 years ago by a woman. Part and parcel of the battlements is the 12th-century fort, built by the Bani Nebhan tribe. It has been under restoration as a Unesco World Heritage site since 1987 and is still closed to the public.

Bahla has a traditional **souq** (🕒 6-10am), with homemade ropes and *fadl* (large metal platters used for feeding the whole family) for sale, and a beautiful tree shading the tiny, central courtyard. To find the souq, turn off Hwy 21, the main Nizwa-Ibri road, opposite the fort; the souq entrance is 100m on the right.

To find Bahla's famous **potteries**, follow the main road through town towards the plantations. After 500m you will come to a number of potteries; the traditional unglazed water pots cost a couple of rials.

Microbuses to/from Nizwa cost 300 baisa and shared taxis 500 baisa. A taxi should be OR2.500 – if you can haggle like a local! The trip takes about 45 minutes. There is an excellent branch of the Nizwa-based **Al-Huzaily Travel** (📞 25 419313; fax 25 419009) opposite the bus stop on the corner of the road that leads to the souq. It acts as an ad hoc information centre.

JABRIN

جبرين

Rising without competition from the surrounding plain, **Jabrin Castle** (admission 500 baisa; ☎ 9am-4pm Sat-Thu, 8-11am Fri) is an impressive sight. Even if you have seen a surfeit of forts at Nizwa and Bahla, Jabrin is one of the best preserved and most whimsical of them all.

Built in 1675 by Imam Bil-arab bin Sultan, it was an important centre of learning for astrology, medicine and Islamic Law. Look out for the **date store**, to the right of the main entrance on the left-hand side. The juice of the fruit would have run along the channels into storage vats, ready for cooking or to assist women in labour. Note the elaborately painted ceilings with original floral motifs in many of the rooms.

Head for the flagpole for a bird's-eye view of the latticed-window courtyard at the heart of the keep. Finding these hidden rooms is part of the fun, and the defensive mechanism, of Jabrin. Try to locate the **burial chambers**, remarkable for the carved vaults. The **falaj** was not used for water but as an early air-con system. There is even a room earmarked for the Sultan's favourite horse.

From Bahla, turn left off the Bahla-Ibri road after 7km and Jabrin is clearly signposted from there. Beware of hitching from the junction, as it is an exposed 4km walk if you're out of luck. It may be better to engage a return taxi (OR2) from Bahla.

AL-DHAHIRAH REGION

منطقة الظاهرة

A region of flat plains, copper-bearing hills and edged by the orange sands of the UAE, it's fair to say that this region has the least attractions for the visitor. That said, there is one big drawback: the Unesco-protected tombs of Bat. If you have plenty of time to explore Oman, a loop can be made from Muscat via Nizwa, Bat and Ibri, through the mountains along the newly sealed Hwy 8 to Sohar and back along the coast to Muscat – a trip of at least three days.

IBRI

إبرى

☎ 25 / pop 105,926

Ibri, the capital of Al-Dhahirah Region is a modern town with a major highway, Hwy 21, linking it to the border town of Buraimi

in the north. There are not too many sights to keep a visitor busy, though there is a well-preserved **fort** (admission 500 baisa; ☎ 8.30-2.30 Sun-Thu) and a lively shopping area.

The only place to stay in town is the delightful and elegant **Ibri Oasis Hotel** (☎ 25 689955; fax 25 492442; Hwy 21; s/d OR21.800/29.500) on the Buraimi side of town. It has a glorious polished marble staircase and stained-glass windows, the rooms are large and well-furnished and the restaurant makes a fine chicken curry. You will be sure of a hearty welcome as it sees so few tourists.

There are plenty of *shwarma* and rotisserie-chicken restaurants in town if you want to get a feel for local life.

To reach Ibri by public transport, minibuses cost OR1.500 from Nizwa and take two hours. Buses from Muscat cost OR3.200 and take five hours. It has to be said, however, that without your own transport, it would be hard to make much of the trip.

BAT & AL-AYN

بات والعين

Unlike the discreet modern cemeteries of Oman, where a simple, unmarked stone indicates the head and feet of the buried corpse, the ancient tombs of Bat rise defiantly from the tops of the surrounding hills, as in a bid for immortality. Not much is known about the tombs except that they were constructed between 2000 BC to 3000 BC, during the Hafit and the Umm al Nar cultures.

Known as 'beehive tombs' (on account of their shape) these free-standing structures of piled stones were designed to protect the remains of up to 200 people. There is barely a hilltop without one, and because of the extent of the site, which lies on an ancient caravan route, the whole area has been declared a Unesco World Heritage Site.

While Bat has the largest concentration of tombs, the best preserved tombs are another 30km away, near Al-Ayn. If you time your visit for an hour or so before sunset, **Jebel Misht** (Comb Mountain) makes the most stunning backdrop for the highly charged site.

To reach Bat, take the road signposted for Ad Dariz off Hwy 21 in Ibri. After 16km or so, turn right for Bat. The sealed road soon runs out but there's a good graded road that tends southeast through russet-

coloured foothills. It takes a while to recognise the tombs, but once you've spotted one, you will see them on almost every hilltop either side of the track.

To reach Al-Ayn from Bat, you need to skirt around to the west of Jebel Misht (one of the Oman 'Exotics' – a limestone mass that is out of sequence with the surrounding geology), following signs for Sint (Sant on some maps). The *jebel* forms a sharp spine but if you want to be sure of the roads, take an off-road guidebook with you or ask the helpful staff in the Ibri Hotel if they can find you a guide. A 4WD is preferable but you can get by without. There is no public transport.

BURAIMI

البريمي

☎ 25 / pop 79,917

For many years the inseparable twin of Al-Ain, in the UAE, Buraimi has just been divided from its alter-ego by a large barbed wire fence. This shouldn't be interpreted as a cooling of relations between Oman and its neighbour, just an attempt to sort out a border that leaked in both directions.

Although Buraimi has an interesting renovated fort, noisy camel market and places to stay, there's not much reason to make a special visit other than if you're using the UAE border for Al-Ain and Abu Dhabi. At the time of writing, the border post (which is in Wadi Jizzi – uniquely 50km *before* the border) was closed to non-GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) citizens.

If you are determined to go, however, **Al-Buraimi Hotel** (☎ 25 642010; fax 25 642011; s/d OR25/27; ☎) offers comfortable rooms near the camel market. Two daily buses run a service between Buraimi and Muscat (OR3.600, 4½ hours) and an engaged taxi makes the trip for OR30.

AL-BATINAH REGION

منطقة الباطنة

This flat and fertile strip of land between the Hajar Mountains and the Gulf of Oman is the country's breadbasket and most populous area. Interesting sites include the old castle towns of Nakhal and Rustaq, exhilarating off-road destinations such as Wadi Bani Awf and Wadi Hoqain, the fishing

towns of Barka and Sohar, and an attractive resort at Sawadi.

Many of the sights can be managed on day trips from Muscat, with a tour company or even by public transport. A more enjoyable way of visiting, however, is to hire a saloon car and visit Nakhal and Rustaq en route to Sohar, returning via Sawadi and Barka on a three-day trip. This is difficult to accomplish if relying only on public transport, particularly as there is limited accommodation. With a 4WD (even better with camping equipment), side trips into Wadi Bani Awf or Wadi Hoqain open the door to some of the most dramatic landscapes in the country.

It's also possible to combine the above route with a visit to (or preferably *from*) the Western Hajar Mountain region by using the 4WD mountain road via Hatt and Wadi Bani Awf (see p233).

On the Muscat-Sohar Hwy, elaborately decorated mosques reflect the Persian influence of the Farsi people who have settled in the region. Also look out for forts guarding the coastal strip at As-Suwayq, Al-Khabura and Saham. None particularly warrant getting off a bus for, but they may be worth a leg stretch from your own vehicle.

BARKA

برقع

☎ 26 / pop 88,274

The main reason for visiting Barka, 80km west of Muscat, is to see **bull-butting**. This is where great Brahmin bulls, specially raised by local farmers, are set nose-to-nose in a push-and-shove that supposedly hurts neither party. To get to the bullring by car take the turning for Barka off the Muscat-Sohar Hwy and turn left at the T-intersection in the centre of town. After 3.4km you will see the shallow, concrete ring on your right. Bull-butting rotates from village to village along the Batinah coast on selected weekends. Ask locally to find out when and where, or chance your luck on a Friday between November and March from 4pm to 6pm. There's no admission charge.

Barka's **fort** (admission 500 baisa; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sun-Thu) has an unusual octagonal tower. To get there, turn right at the T-intersection and it's 300m on the left.

Barka's other point of interest is the 18th-century **Bayt Nua'man** (admission 500 baisa; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sun-Thu), a restored merchant

house. The turn-off for the house is signposted off the Muscat–Sohar Hwy, 7km west of Barka roundabout. There's no public transport to the house.

Barka is famous for its **halwa**, a unique, laboriously made Omani confection (see the boxed text, p192), as distinct from the sesame confection known as *halvah*, found across the rest of the region. A pot from dedicated *halwa* shops in town costs from OR3.

There's nowhere to stay in Barka, but the town makes an easy diversion en route for Sawadi or Sohar.

Getting There & Away

ONTC buses run between the Barka roundabout and Muscat's Ruwi bus station (OR1.300, four times daily). Taxis and minibuses can be found both around the T-intersection in town and at the Barka roundabout. A shared taxi from Rusayl roundabout to Barka costs OR1 per person and around OR5 engaged. Minibuses charge 300 baisa.

NAKHAL

📍 26

Nakhal is a picturesque town dominated both by the Hajar Mountains and one of Oman's most dramatic forts. Built on the foundations of a pre-Islamic structure, the towers and entrance way of this **fort** (admission 500 baisa; 🕒 9am–4pm Sat–Thu, 8am–11pm Fri) were constructed during the reign of Imam Said bin Sultan in 1834. There are excellent views of the Batinah plain from the ramparts and the *majlis* (seating area) on the top 'storey' of the fort makes a cool place to enjoy the tranquillity. The windows are perfectly aligned to catch the breeze, even in summer.

There are many features to look for: gaps where boiling cauldrons of honey would have been hinged over doorways; spiked doors to repel battering; round towers to deflect cannon balls; *falaj* in case of a siege. The entire structure is built around a rock – a common feature of Omani forts, which saves the problem of having to construct sound foundations.

Continue past Nakhal Fort through date plantations for a couple of kilometres to find the hot spring of **Ath-Thowra**. The spring emerges from the wadi walls and is channelled into a *falaj* for the irrigation of the

surrounding plantations. There are usually children and goats splashing in the over-spill. Look out for the flash of turquoise-winged Indian rollers, among other birds, attracted to the oasis. Picnic tables with shelters make it a popular place on Thursday and Friday.

Minibuses and taxis are the only viable transport to Nakhal and leave from the junction with the main road and in the area below the fort. Minibuses charge OR1 for the trip to Rusayl roundabout (a journey of about an hour), and 300 baisa to/from the Barka roundabout (30 minutes). A taxi charges about OR3 for the same trip if you can find one that doesn't only travel locally.

WADI BANI AWF

وادي بني عوف

This spectacular wadi often flows year-round and looks particularly gorgeous when mountain rain causes the *falaj* to cascade over its walls. That said, the trip (4WD only) should be avoided if there is any hint of stormy weather. It is possible to reach the **rock arch** (a fissure in the cliff, through which the graded road passes en route to neighbouring Wadi Sahten, about 17km into the wadi) as a day trip from Muscat or Sawadi. If treating the wadi as a side trip en route from Muscat to Sohar, you probably won't have time to penetrate the wadi for more than 5km or 6km.

To reach Wadi Bani Awf, turn left 43km from Nakhal, off the Nakhal–Rustaq road. There is no access by public transport. Discreet wild camping is possible in the upper reaches of the wadi.

Wadi Bani Awf can also be reached via the mountain pass from Al-Hamra on the other side of the Western Hajar Mountains. For details of this spectacular route, see p233.

RUSTAQ

الrustaq

📍 26 / pop 84,870

Some 175km southwest of Muscat, Rustaq is best known today for its imposing **fort**, though it enjoyed a spell as Oman's capital in the 17th century. The small **souq** near the entrance to the fort has a few antiques and souvenirs, but the smart **new souq** on the main street, about 1.5km from the highway, has left the old one for dead. If you've time to spare, you could visit the **hot springs**,

ROCK & ORE IN BATINAH'S WADIS

If geology seems like a frankly 'anorak' pursuit, then a trip through the wadis of the Western Hajar Mountains might change your mind. Seams of iridescent copper minerals; perfect quartz crystals glinting in the sun; stone pencils and writing slates loose in the tumbling cliff; walls of fetid limestone that smell outrageously flatulent when struck; pavements of marine fossils, beautiful for their abstract design and the pattern of history they reveal – these are just a few of the many stone treasures of Batinah's wild wadis.

Although many of these features can be spotted in Wadi Bani Awf, it is neighbouring Wadi Bani Kharus that excites geologists. They go in search of the **classic unconformity** that is revealed half way up the canyon walls a few kilometres into the wadi. At this point, the upper half of the cliff is a mere 250 million years old while the lower half is over 600 million years old. What created this hiatus, and what it reveals about tectonic forces, is the subject of speculation in numerous international papers. For the layperson, what makes Wadi Bani Kharus remarkable is that it appears to have been opened up as if for scientific study: the opening of the wadi is comprised of the youngest rocks, but as you progress deeper into the 'dissection', some of the oldest rocks in Oman are revealed, naked and without the obscuring skin of topsoil and shrubs. While you're inspecting the rocks, look out for **petroglyphs** – the ancient images of men on horseback is a common feature of all the local wadis.

All the main wadis in the area – Mistal, Bani Kharus, Bani Awf and Sahten – have their share of geological masterpieces and can be easily accessed with 4WD, a map and an off-road guidebook. Take along Samir Hanna's *Field Guide to the Geology of Oman* too, to help identify some key features.

signposted through the plantation off the high street.

The only place to stay in the area is the simple but friendly **Shimook Guesthouse** (📍 26 877071; r OR15), at the start of the road from Rustaq to Ibri. The rooms are basic to say the least and the taps drip irrepressibly in the bathrooms, but the waft of extravagant incense makes up for these shortcomings. You can ask for dinner (freshly cooked and tasty) in the front yard or go for kebabs at one of the small restaurants on the corner (a two-minute walk towards the great mosque).

Minibuses can be found a few hundred metres from the fort on the main road to Nakhal (500 baisa), the Barka roundabout (400 baisa) and Muscat (OR1). A taxi to Muscat costs OR2. Alternatively, you can head for Sohar by taxi for OR3.

WADI HOQAIN

وادي الحوقين

This fertile wadi, accessible only by 4WD, offers one of the easiest and most rewarding off-road experiences of the region. A reasonable graded road meanders through wadi-side **plantations** and **villages**, bustling with activity in the late afternoon. Add copper-coloured cliffs and a stunning **castle** to the rural mix, and it's a wonder that this wadi has remained a secret for so long.

To reach the wadi from the Rustaq roundabout at the entrance of town, turn left after 3.4km at the big mosque roundabout, on the road towards Al-Hazm, and turn right after 9km for Wadi Bani Ghafir and Ibri. Despite being a rough, graded road at this point, this is the major thoroughfare from Rustaq to Ibri and is therefore busy and dangerous: use headlights in the fog of dust thrown up by speeding vehicles. At 15.5km, turn right into Wadi Hoqain. It is not signposted, but the track follows the wadi bottom. After 17km, you reach the fortified 'castle' in the middle of the wadi. On closer inspection, you'll find the castle is better described as a walled settlement. The best view of the fortification is the approach, with watchtowers and date plantations in the foreground and the wadi escarpment behind.

The track continues past an abandoned settlement for 24.5km, and eventually comes out in a plantation and block-making village at 35km. If you get lost in the village, locals will steer you to the other side of town, which eventually meets up with a sealed road at about 60km. Turn right for **Al-Hazm** (where there is yet another magnificent fort), 20km from Rustaq and left to reach the Muscat–Sohar Hwy.

The whole route from Rustaq to Al-Hazm takes about three hours.

SAWADI

📍 26

A sandy spit of land and some **islands** scattered off the shore make Sawadi a popular day trip, an hour or so drive west of Muscat. At low tide, you can walk to a **watchtower** on one of the islands, but beware: the tide returns very quickly. There's good **snorkelling** off the islands and local fishermen will take you around for OR5.

There is an abundance of **shells** at Sawadi. The resort shop sells a handy volume called *Collectable Eastern Arabian Seashells*, by Donald Bosch, if you want help identifying the booty on the beach.

Al-Sawadi Beach Resort (☎ 26 795545; www.alsawadibeach.com; s/d OR90) Forty minutes west of Seeb International Airport, Sawadi Resort makes a pleasant alternative to city accommodation. This may soon change once The Blue City development, one of the largest in the Middle East, starts transforming the surrounding desert into a visionary housing and tourist complex. In the meantime, with a limitless beach peppered with pink top-shells, and bungalow-style rooms set in landscaped gardens of jasmine and Rangoon creeper, the hotel is almost worth the high tariff. A variety of water sports, snorkelling and diving is on offer, including boat trips to the nearby Damanayat Islands and 4WD excursions into the nearby wadis. Beware, it gets noisy at weekends with holiday-makers from Muscat.

From the turn-off to Sawadi off the Sohar-Muscat Hwy, it's a further 12km to the coast. The resort is for most of the year 1km before the end of the headland. A microbus from Muscat or Rustaq to the junction costs 700 baisa or 500 baisa respectively, but hitching is the only option to reach the coast – unless you can hail a passing taxi (OR2).

DAMANAYAT ISLANDS

جزيرة الدمنيات

These government-protected, rocky islands about an hour's boat ride off the coast of Sawadi are rich in marine life and make an exciting destination for snorkelling and diving. Turtles feed off the coral gardens

السوادي

here and at certain times of the year can be seen congregating in large numbers. Angel and parrot fish are commonly seen and colourful sea snakes are another feature of the area, though be warned, the latter are highly dangerous if disturbed. Day trips (OR26 for two dives) can either be arranged through Al-Sawadi Beach Resort (see left) or through one of the dive centres in Muscat (see p202).

SOHAR

📍 26 / pop 112,286

Rumoured home of two famous sailors, the historical Ahmed bin Majid (see p183) and the semfictional Sinbad, Sohar is one of those places where history casts a shadow over modern reality. A thousand years ago it was the largest town in the country: it was even referred to as Omana, though its ancient name was Majan (seafaring). As early as the 3rd century BC, the town's prosperity was built on copper that was mined locally and then shipped to Mesopotamia and Dilmun (modern-day Bahrain).

Now it is one of the prettiest and best-kept towns in the country, but with little more than legend – and a triumphal arch over the Muscat–Sohar Hwy – marking its place in history. A new port-side industrial area is helping to change that.

Orientation

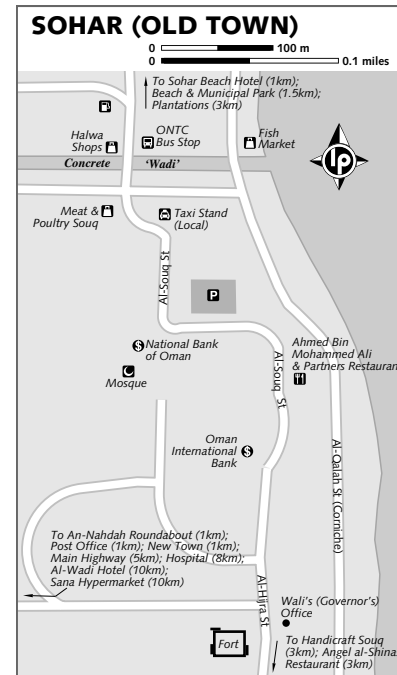
Most of Sohar's sites of interest lie along or near the corniche. To get there, take the town centre exit off the highway, turn right at the An-Nahdah roundabout and head for the fort. A brand-new road linking Sohar to Ibri via Yankul was completed in December 2006 and makes a pleasant and easy drive across the mountains.

Sights

Sohar's glorious **beach** runs for kilometres, with glossy-smooth strands of sand. Access to the beach is easiest from a car park next to Sohar's **municipal park** (admission free; ☀ sunrise-sunset). Look under the hedges for the mighty minotaur, the largest beetle in Arabia. The park is next to Sohar Beach Hotel, west along the sea front.

The **fish market** next to the corniche is fun early in the morning. Also worth a visit is the **traditional handicraft souq** (☎ 8am-noon & 4-9pm Sat-Thu). Only half the workshops

صحر



in this modern arcade are open but there's a few mat-weaving establishments and an apothecary, where you can pick up some *bukhorr hassad*, a mixture of natural ingredients to ward off the evil eye. Try sage for sore throats, frankincense for constipation and myrrh for joint pains. The souq is signposted after the An-Nahdah roundabout.

Built in the 13th century, Sohar's distinctive white **fort** (admission 500 baisa; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sun-Thu) apparently boasts a 10km tunnel intended as an escape route during a siege. Easier to find is the small **museum** in the fort's tower, which outlines local history, and the **tomb** of one of Oman's 19th-century rulers, namely, Sayyid Thuwaini bin Sultan al-Busaid, the ruler of Oman from 1856 to 1866.

Sohar is in the heart of a fertile **oasis**, and a pleasant hour can be spent wandering through the local plantations and farms. To reach the plantations, drive beyond Sohar Beach Hotel on Al-Nuz'ha St and turn right for fishing settlements or left for the Muscat–Sohar Hwy.

Sleeping & Eating

If you're looking for somewhere plain and simple just to have a night's rest, then look no further than **Al-Wadi Hotel** (☎ 26 840058; fax 26 841997; s/d OR41/52; 📍). With a distinctly local atmosphere (due partly to the enormously popular taxi bar – decidedly men-only in character), it caters mostly for travelling businessmen. Its ground-floor rooms are nothing special but they are clean and quiet and the small restaurant serves excellent Indian dishes. It is on a service road off the main Muscat–Sohar Hwy, 10km from the town centre.

If, on the other hand, you're looking for a holiday experience in Sohar, then the more-luxurious, fort-shaped **Sohar Beach Hotel** (☎ 26 841111; www.soharbeach.com; s/d OR45/50; 📍) is a far better bet. Situated northwest of the corniche, on a long sandy beach, the good restaurant, coffee shop, pretty gardens and pools make this a peaceful retreat. The rooms are palatial with big balconies.

There are a number of good biryani restaurants within easy walking distance of the fort and along the corniche, including Ahmed Bin Mohammed Ali's, a sea-fronting café popular with locals. For an evening of *sheesha* (water pipe used to smoke tobacco) and Hindi pop videos try **Angel Al-Shinas** (mixed fruit juice OR1.500) inside the handicraft souq. The huge Sana hypermarket is virtually next door to Al-Wadi Hotel, selling everything you might need for tomorrow's journey and a Lulu's Hypermarket is planned.

Getting There & Away

ONTC buses from Muscat (OR2.500, three hours, four times daily) drop passengers off at the small hospital near the centre of town and then continue to Buraimi or Dubai. Check with **Ruwi bus station** (☎ 24 701294) for accurate times.

Microbuses and taxis come and go from a car park across the street from the hospital. Microbuses charge OR1.700 for the trip to Rusayl roundabout in Muscat and OR2 to Ruwi. Shared taxis charge OR2.500 to Rusayl roundabout and OR3 to Ruwi. You can expect to pay around OR15 for an engaged taxi to Rusayl roundabout. An engaged taxi from Sohar to Rustaq or Nakhal costs OR15.

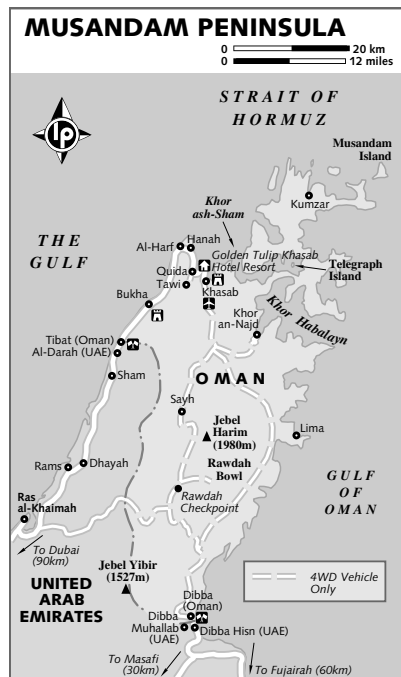
WAJAJA & KHATMAT MILAHAH

الوجاجة و خظمة الملاحة

These two border crossings are the most common entry and exit points for the UAE. Wajaja is the post that buses use (it takes about an hour for a full bus to clear customs) while Khatmat Milahah is more useful for those with their own transport wanting to explore the eastern coast of the UAE. See p261 for more on border crossings.

MUSANDAM المسندم

Separated from the rest of Oman by the east coast of the UAE, and guarding the southern side of the strategically important Strait of Hormuz, the Musandam Peninsula is a land of beautiful *khors*, small villages and dramatic, mountain-hugging roads. No longer difficult to reach, this beautiful peninsula with its cultural eccentricities is well worth a visit if you're on an extended tour of Oman, or if you're after a taste of the wilderness from Dubai. A boat trip is a must, as this is the only way to see the best of the area.



KHASAB

📞 26 / pop 38,370

خصب

The capital of the province is small but far from sleepy. Its souq resounds to a babble of different languages, including Kumzari (see p187), and its harbour bursts with activity, much of it involving the smuggling of US cigarettes to Iran in return for goats. The smugglers are mostly Iranian and are distinguished by their souped-up fibreglass boats with outboard motors and their lusty moustaches. They bring money and character into town, so no-one seems in a hurry to get rid of them; besides, piracy has been a tradition in these parts for well over 200 years and locals respect a good piece of tradition.

Orientation

The port occupies the western end of the bay. The old souq, comprising dozens of dubious shipping offices packaging cigarettes, is 1.5km to the east. The town's new souq, consisting of restaurants and grocery stores, the post office, banks and the Oman Air office, is 1.5km inland from the centre of the bay. Khasab Hotel and the airport are a further 3km to 6km, respectively, inland.

Sights & Activities

With a command of the mud flats on the edge of the bay, **Khasab Fort** (admission free; 🕒 8.30am-2.30pm Sun-Thu) cuts quite a dash from a distance. A new levee in front of the fort means the sea no longer washes up to the walls – a good thing from a preservation point of view, a disappointment aesthetically. If you continue past the fort and turn right at the T-junction, you'll circuit some fine modern villas with nautical themes: one house has a scaled model of a dhow over the entrance while another sports fine Iranian tiles with a sea-faring theme.

There is a small **beach** with palm umbrellas just outside Khasab. Follow the road from the port towards Bukha for 2km or so. Don't be alarmed by the 1.8m sharks that often circle in the shallow bays near Khasab – apparently they're not interested in human flesh.

The Musandam Peninsula offers fine coral-reef diving at over 20 dive sites within an hour's boat ride of the harbour. The conditions are suitable only for experienced divers with a minimum of a PADI Open Water Certificate and 50 logged dives. Lo-

cated at the Golden Tulip Khasab Hotel Resort, **Extra Divers** (📞 99877957) organises full-day dive trips for OR55, including permits and hire of all equipment.

Tours

For friendly and personal service, **Musandam Sea Adventure Tourism** (📞 26 730069; www.msaoman.com) comes highly recommended. The owner is proud of being local and employs knowledgeable Omani guides who speak a variety of languages. The company offers a range of services, including full-day dhow trips around the *khors* for OR40, or OR60 to Kumzar. If you share the boat, the price is OR20 per person. If you have a specific interest (such as bird-watching) the guides will be happy to tailor a trip for you.

Situated in the old souq, **Khasab Travel & Tours** (📞 26 730464; www.khasabtours.com) have a somewhat variable reputation for being curt and inefficient, but can offer a two-night B&B package at any of the Khasab hotels, with a full-day dhow trip, a half-day 4WD visit to the mountains and a city tour for OR180 per person, or OR140 per person for two or more people.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping is not officially permitted in Musandam (there are security issues) but authorities usually turn a blind eye if you're discreet. Khor an-Najd is the best place to head for but as there are no facilities, you'll need to bring all your own equipment.

The hotels listed here organise half-/full-day dhow trips (OR15/20).

Al-Kaddar Hotel (📞 26 731664; fax 26 731676; r OR20) Within walking distance of the fort and the old souq, this friendly, Omani-run hotel offers comfortable rooms with views over the town. At sunset the cliffs on the opposite side of the bay dissolve like liquid gold.

Khasab Hotel (📞 26 730267; fax 26 730989; s/d OR23/35; 📺) A kilometre south of the new souq roundabout, this long-established hotel recently expanded to include a rather stark new block. Nonetheless, the new rooms are bright and fresh and some have excellent views of the mountains.

Golden Tulip Khasab Hotel Resort (📞 26 730777; www.goldentulip.com; s/d OR75/88; 📺) Perched on a headland, just outside Khasab, this modish resort has transformed tourism in the Musandam Peninsula. Surrounded on

three sides by water and with a terrace overlooking the sea, you can enjoy the crystal clear water and mountain scenery over a glass of wine. There are a variety of stylish rooms, some with split level, windows for walls and balconies aligned to the sunset. The terraced restaurant offers a comprehensive buffet with a Lebanese twist for OR13.500. As this hotel is highly popular as a weekend getaway from the UAE, it's worth booking ahead.

Bukha Restaurant (old souq; meals 600 baisa) Biryani are available at lunchtime, and roast chicken and kebabs are added to the menu in the evening. Expect to keep company with a smuggler or two.

Shopping

Walking sticks (OR3) make an unusual buy from the old souq. With their axe-tops, used traditionally for cutting wood, killing snakes and keeping children in order (at least according to one local), these sticks are the emblem of the Shihuh tribespeople – the main ethnic group in the Musandam Peninsula. They carry them in place of the camel stick on formal occasions.

Getting There & Away

Despite the fact that the Musandam Peninsula belongs to Oman, it's easier to visit the area from the UAE, not least because the flights from Muscat preclude a weekend excursion. With a car, driving to and from Muscat (eight hours in either direction) involves getting a road permit (for residents), insurance for two countries, and passing through checkpoints no less than eight times. On an Omani visit visa, this makes a trip to the area something of a challenge.

AIR

Oman Air (📞 in Muscat 24 707222, Khasab 26 730543) has flights between Khasab and Muscat (one way/return OR24/48, 1¼ hours) every Thursday (10.30am) and Friday (4.05pm). The office in Khasab is on the new souq roundabout, and flights depart and arrive from the military air base.

CAR

The only border post currently allowing access to the Musandam Peninsula is at Al-Darah/Tibat, on the western coast of the

UAE. There is a Dh20 road tax to leave the UAE and Dh60 visa charge to enter Musandam Peninsula. A 4WD is only necessary to explore the mountainous area around Jebel Harim.

Residents driving from Muscat must have a road permit and insurance for UAE. Currently the best border crossing to use is Wajaja (see p261 for more border crossing information).

LONG-DISTANCE TAXI

Public transport is erratic at best, if not nonexistent. You can try to engage a taxi in Khasab's old souq to Bukha (OR5), Tibat or Khor an-Najd (OR10) and Muscat (OR75).

Although it's only about 70km from Ras al-Khaimah in the UAE to Khasab, there are no shared taxis making the run on a regular basis. Khasab drivers in pick-ups charge OR15 for the trip to Ras al-Khaimah, but you may get marooned at the border in the opposite direction.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

It's best to arrange transfers with your hotel in advance as there are no taxis near the airport.

TAXI

The orange-and-white taxis in town are almost permanently booked by locals. If they stop for you, shared trips around town cost 200 baisa to 300 baisa.

CAR

Car hire (2WD/4WD OR12/40) is available from **Khasab Rent-a-Car** (☎ 99447400). A 4WD with a driver costs OR80 per day from **Khasab Travel & Tours** (☎ 26 730464; khasatour@omantel.net.om).

KHASAB-TIBAT ROAD

طريق خصب - طبيبات

The cliff-hugging 90-minute drive from Khasab to Tibat is a highlight of a trip to Musandam. The sealed road is a feat of engineering and affords spectacular views across the Strait of Hormuz. There are a few sites of interest along the way and you could spend a day pottering along the road, enjoying a swim – and watching very large sharks basking in the shallows.

About 8km from Khasab harbour lies the village of Tawi, site of a few **prehistoric rock carvings** of boats, houses and warriors on horseback. To reach the carvings, follow a track up Wadi Quida, just before Quida village, for 2.3km. The carvings are etched into two rocks on the left, just before a large white house.

Scenically positioned **Bukha Fort** commands a good view of the bay. Prisoners used to be pegged to the lower courtyard and drowned by the incoming tide.

The road ends in Tibat at the Al-Darah border with UAE; the post is open 24 hours and passing through customs on either side is quick and efficient.

THE MUSANDAM KHORS

أخوار المسندم

A dhow trip around the *khors* of Musandam, flanked by dolphins, is a must and well worth the expense. Trail a fishing line from the back of the boat, and your skipper will cook your catch for lunch. So remote are some of these *khors* that people still have their water delivered by boat and speak a dialect almost unrecognisable to Arabic speakers from Muscat.

Khor Ash-sham

خور الشام

This beautiful inlet is interesting for its stone **fishing villages**, accessible only by boat, and for **Telegraph Island**, which you can cruise past but not land upon as it used for military exercises. You are free, however, to snorkel and swim in the pristine surrounding waters.

It makes a good day tour from Khasab or you can try your luck renting a fishing boat for OR20.

Khor An-najd

خور نجد

At 24.5km southeast of Khasab, this is the only *khor* accessible by car, but beware the steep approach. You can camp on the rim of this wild bay although it's often too shallow and muddy for a good swim. The view from the top of the road is stunning.

From Khasab head towards the mountains for 15km and follow the sign for 'Khor an-Najd 10km'. After 5.6km turn left and head for the road that winds up the mountain. After 2.3km there's a great outlook, from where a steep 2.8km descent brings you to the water's edge.

GOING ROUND THE BEND

Ever wondered where the term 'Going round the bend' comes from? If you take a trip to Khor ash-Sham, you'll learn first-hand what the saying means. In the middle of the *khor*, a tiny island, not much bigger than a postcard and considerably less attractive, was home to a British telegraphic relay station in the 19th century. The utter isolation of the island, tucked around the bend of this remote inlet, with no diversions other than sleeping and swimming, drove many of the workers stationed there to madness. The saying 'going round the bend' persists to this day... and so perhaps does the associated implication of being 'driven round the bend'. From time to time, the military set up camp on the rocks and see how long it takes to run out of things to do. Personnel stationed there run straw polls estimating the number of days endurable at a stretch. 'We get very good at counting cormorants', said Captain Ahmed Saif. Another volunteered the improvement of their fishing skills. They could tell us what they were really doing being driven round the bend, but then of course they'd have to shoot us.

Kumzar

كمذار

☎ 26

Set on an isolated *khor* at the northern edge of the peninsula, the surprisingly modern town of Kumzar is accessible only by boat. The villagers speak their own language, known as Kumzari – a combination of Farsi, Hindi, English, Portuguese and Arabic. There is nowhere to stay in Kumzar, and there are no sights of special interest in the town. It is nonetheless fascinating to wander around the **old stone houses** and the **souq** area to see how this outpost has developed its own unique character.

Water taxis travel between Khasab and Kumzar most days, charging OR5 per person. This can be a pretty harrowing trip, however. Most of the speedboats used as water taxis have no seats and boast maximum clearance between deck and gunwale of 15cm. Consider hiring your own boat and skipper through **Musandam Sea Adventure Tourism** (☎ 26 730069; www.msaoman.com) in Khasab.

JEBEL HARIM

جبل حارم

If you have a 4WD, the mountain scenery around **Jebel Harim** (Mountain of Women) makes a rewarding day-trip, especially in spring when the mountains are full of delicate blooms such as wild geraniums and miniature iris.

The graded road switchbacks through limestone formations until it reaches the **Sayh plateau**, a startling patchwork of fields and grazing donkeys, surrounded by stone settlements. The road climbs a further 8km to a pass below the telecommunica-

tions tower (off-limits to the public) that marks the top of the mountain. Even if you don't intend to make the descent to Rawdah Bowl, it's well worth unravelling the helter-skelter of road for a few kilometres beyond the pass: the views of improbable homesteads, clinging to the crescent-shaped canyons, with terraces in various states of livid green or grey abandonment are spectacular.

RAWDAH BOWL

مَرَج الروضة

From Jebel Harim, the descent towards the Omani checkpoint (currently only open to Omani nationals) is via a narrow ridge with remarkable views of striated sedimentary rock.

At the bottom of the descent, a right turn leads to the checkpoint while a left turn crosses the wadi bottom and meanders into the Rawdah Bowl – a beautiful depression of mature acacia and *ghaf* trees. The bowl has several interesting features including the local stone-built houses known as the **'house of locks'**. So called on account of the elaborate locking mechanism, the homes (which are left empty during the summer months) are built low to the ground and the floor is excavated to about 1m below the door with beds and eating area raised on platforms.

The area has a long history of settlement, as can be seen from the **pre-Islamic tombstones** (lying close to the road), made either from luminous yellow sandstone, or from grey limestone and etched with script or pictographs. The entire area, with its diagonal slants of sandstone takes on a surreal quality at sunset.

AL-WUSTA REGION

منطقة الوسطى

Stretched between a wild and empty coast and the uncharted sands of the Empty Quarter, the flat, desolate oil-bearing plains of Al-Wusta comprise the remotest and least-populated part of the country. Too far to explore thoroughly on a visit visa and not the first choice for expats on leave, the region sees few visitors and tends to be written off as a joyless transit between the mountains of the north and the subtropical south. For those with a 4WD, camping equipment and time on their hands, however, the region has some surprising wonders – not least the oryx reserve near Hayma and a superb coastline of traditional fishing villages, stunning rock formations and gulls in their thousands. There is only space here to highlight a few of these attractions.

HAYMA

📍 23

This is the chief town of the region and an important transit point between the interior and the coast. Although there is little to commend the town itself, it does have basic accommodation and makes a good base for visiting the oryx reserve in Jaaluni.

The **Hayma Motel** (☎ 92189784; fax 23 436061; Hwy 31; r OR15), on the highway opposite the main turning into town, primarily caters for Asian businessmen and has the worst beds in the country with springs that sprung years ago. You're better off sleeping on the floor. The hotel does have air-con, though, and this makes it a useful stopping-off point after the five-hour drive from Muscat.

There are a number of unremarkable chicken-and-rice restaurants dotted around the petrol station opposite the motel.

JAALUNI

The return of the oryx is one of the great wildlife success stories of the region and watching these magnificent animals paw the dust in the summer heat, or slip gracefully through the dawn mists in winter, makes the long journey to the desolate Jiddat al-Harasis plain worthwhile.

A WILDLIFE SUCCESS STORY

In 1962 the Fauna Preservation Society captured the last remaining oryx close to the border with Yemen and sent them to a zoo in the USA. By 1982, protected by new laws banning the hunting of wild animals, a herd of 40 Arabian oryx was returned to Jiddat al-Harasis. Despite intermittent bouts of poaching the programme has met with success, in part due to the commitment of the Harasis tribe designated to look after them.

The return of the oryx to Oman was the occasion of great rejoicing, which prompts the question: what it is about this antelope that provokes such emotion? Perhaps it's the uncanny resemblance of a mature bull, with rapier-like antlers, to the mythical unicorn. This is not as far-fetched as it seems. The ancient Egyptians used to bind the antlers of young oryx so they would fuse into one. Seeing a white, summer-coated herd-bull level up to a rival in profile, it's easy to confuse fact with fiction.

A permit is needed to visit the reserve, easily organised through the **Office of the Advisor for Conservation of the Environment** (☎ 24 693536, 24 593537; acedrc@omantel.net.om; OR20 per party) in Muscat. The permit covers the cost of a mandatory guide, usually a member of the Harsusi tribe, who will show you the excellent on-site portacabin **museum**, show you the resident, captive breeding herd and help you spot a wild oryx. You will also more than likely see gazelle. If you ask, the guide will also show you the remarkable, windblown formations of the Huqf Escarpment, an hour deeper into the reserve. Unfortunately most guides don't speak English. Most tour operators can arrange trips for you.

You can camp in the reserve at a designated site but you will have to bring your own food. Keep your clothes under canvas as there is always a heavy dew by the morning – indeed this is how the animals survive in the absence of surface water.

Additional information on the reserve can be found through the website of the **Arabian Oryx Project** (www.oryxoman.com).

The reserve is 50km off the Hayma-Duqm road (Hwy 37) on a well-graded

track, marked by a brown nature reserve sign. It takes about an hour to drive from Hayma to the reserve.

DHO FAR

ظفار

The southernmost province of Oman is a world away from the industrious north and separated geographically by an interminable gravel desert. With its historic frankincense trade, great beaches, a laid-back atmosphere and an interesting ethnic mix, it's a fascinating place to visit, particularly during or just after the *khareef*.

There are many intriguing sites to visit as day trips from Salalah, including Job's Tomb; the heroic town of Mirbat with its beautiful beaches; and Mughsail, famed for the violent blowholes in the undercliff and for nearby groves of wild frankincense.

If you are travelling during the *khareef* and can put up with the unremittingly tedious journey from Muscat or Nizwa, it is worth going overland to Salalah across the largely featureless Al-Wusta Region (see the boxed text, p250) and returning by plane. This is the best way to sense the full spectacle of the *khareef* across the top of the *jebel*; after eight hours of gravel plains, Dhofar seems like a little miracle.

SALALAH

📍 23/pop 169,881

Salalah, the capital of Dhofar, is a colourful, subtropical city that owes much of its character to Oman's former territories in East Africa. Flying into Salalah from Muscat, especially during the *khareef*, it is hard to imagine that Oman's first and second cities share the same continent. From mid-June to mid-September, monsoon clouds from India bring a constant drizzle to the area and, as a result, the stubble of Salalah's surrounding *jebel* is transformed into an oasis of misty pastures. Year-round, Salalah's coconut-fringed beaches and plantations of bananas and papayas offer a flavour of Zanzibar in the heart of the Arabian desert.

Orientation

The intersection of An-Nahdah and As-Salam Sts forms the commercial hub of Salalah. The ONTC bus station is a 15-minute walk northeast of this intersection.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

There are numerous internet cafés, particularly along 23 July St, charging between 500 baisa and 800 baisa per hour.

MONEY

There are several banks and a few exchange houses around the intersection of An-Nahdah and As-Salam Sts.

Amex (lobby, Crowne Plaza Resort Salalah) Zubair Travel represents Amex in Salalah. It cannot cash cheques for clients, but it will hold mail, which should be addressed to: American Express (Clients' Mail), c/o Zubair Travel & Services Bureau, Salalah Branch Office, PO Box 809, Postal Code 211, Oman.

HSBC (As-Salam St) Cash advances are available from the ATM.

POST & TELEPHONE

Main Post Office (An-Nahdah St; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Wed, 9-11am Thu) The entrance is at the rear of the building.

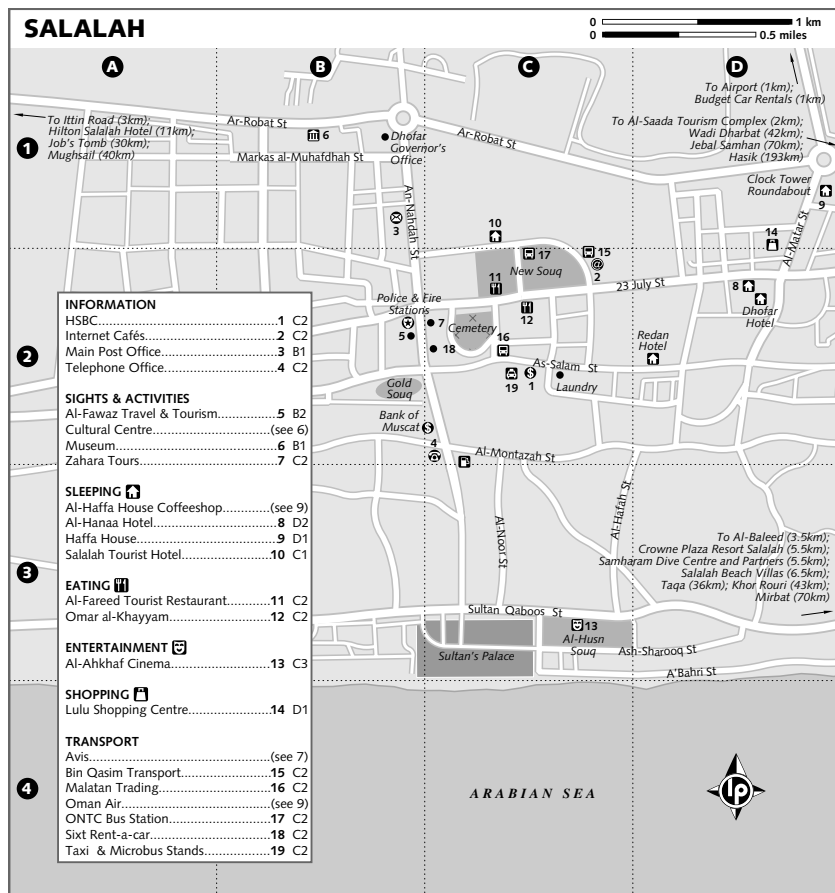
Telephone Office (cnr An-Nahdah & Al-Montazah Sts; ☎ 8am-2.30pm & 4-10pm) Offers fax and telex facilities.

Sights & Activities

Part of the Cultural Centre, Salalah's **museum** (Ar-Robat St; admission free; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Wed) is housed in the large white building (access is from the back, via Markaz al-Muhafdhah St). Although there's not much to see, the exhibit on Khor Rouri (see p252) is interesting, and don't miss Wilfred Thesiger's 1940s and '50s photographs of Arabia in the lobby.

For the best place to buy genuine Dhofari frankincense and be daubed with locally made perfumes, head for **Al-Husn Souq** (Sultan Qaboos St). Quality silver *khanjars*, swords and jewellery are also on sale here. *Halwa* shops selling Oman's traditional confection monopolise the corner of Al-Hafah and Sultan Qaboos Sts. For a distinctive local souvenir, look out for the intricately beaded perfume bottles (OR2 for a small one) in African bands of colour.

The main sight of interest in Salalah is the ancient site of **Al-Baleed** (admission free; ☎ variable). The comprehensive set of ruins, which are open on an ad hoc basis, and are atmospherically lit at night, belong to the 12th-century trading port of Zafar. From here, frankincense was shipped across the sea to India in exchange for spices. The surrounding plantations of coconut, papaya,



sugar cane and banana illustrate the fecundity of the region and it is little wonder that the port was a prosperous one. Little is known, however, about the port's demise. You can buy fruit from the many colourful stands by the roadside nearby.

For diving and snorkelling opportunities in the region, contact **Samharam Dive Centre & Partners** (Crowne Plaza Resort Salalah; ☎ 99099002; www.divesalah.com). A day trip (two dives) including transport and equipment costs OR45.

It's great to visit Salalah during the Khareef Festival (p250).

Tours

Local agents **Zahara Tours** (☎ 23 235581; www.zaharatours.com; An-Nahdah St, Salalah; ☎ 8am-1pm

& 4-6pm Sat-Thu) offer city tours for OR36 for one to four people.

Also available is a half-day tour to Job's Tomb and Mughsail blowholes, or to Taqa and Mirbat, for OR36. For the romantic, there is a backbreaking day trip in a 4WD to the lost city of Ubar, 175km from Salalah (OR105), but be warned, you'll need a lively imagination or Ranulph Fiennes' book *Atlantis of the Sands* (see p255) to make any sort of sense of the site. All prices quoted are for a vehicle with an English-speaking driver and a maximum of four people.

Similar tours for similar prices are offered by **Al-Fawaz Travel & Tourism** (☎ 23 294324; alfawaz_tours@yahoo.com; An-Nahdah St.

Sleeping

During the *khareef*, all accommodation in Salalah is heavily booked, so you will need to organise your stay in advance to be sure of a room. Prices during the *khareef* may be significantly greater than those quoted here. Camping is possible around Mirbat, but you'll need to bring your own equipment. Alternatively, you can buy supplies in any of the major shopping centres in Salalah.

BUDGET

Al-Hanaa Hotel (☎ 23 298305; 23 July St; s/d incl breakfast OR10/13) This characterful, Arabic-style hotel with tiled foyer is recommended for its bright, clean rooms. It is conveniently situated in the middle of town, in walking distance of the main shopping areas.

Salalah Tourist Hotel (☎ 23 295332; fax 23 292145; off 23 July St; s/d incl breakfast OR10/12) Opposite the ONTC bus station, this good-value hotel has large, comfortable rooms and friendly staff. It is close to the new souq area and attracts an interesting mixture of Omani salesmen and regional travellers. It's often full in the summer.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Haffa House (☎ 23 295444; haffa@omantel.net.om; cnr Al-Matar & Ar-Robat Sts; s/d OR25/28; ☎) Located within a small commercial complex near the clocktower roundabout, the hotel is one of the city's main landmarks. Don't be put off by the rather cavernous, gloomy foyer: the rooms are old-fashioned but comfortable, the staff helpful and there is a pool. The restaurant, with city views, serves tasty Asian-style fare among less appealing international dishes.

Salalah Beach Villas (☎ 23 235999; www.geocities.com/sllbeachspa; s/d OR20/28) On the beach one block east of the Crowne Plaza Resort Salalah, this family-style and welcoming hotel has lovely views: the sea is so close you can taste it through the window. Walk off breakfast (included in the room rate) along the magnificent white sand beach and hazard a splash in the surf on calmer days. Car hire (2WD/4WD OR14/35, including 200km free mileage) is available.

Hilton Salalah Hotel (☎ 23 211234; www.salalah.hilton.com; s/d OR60/66; ☎) It was a surprise when the Hilton skipped Muscat and plumped for Salalah instead. It was an even greater surprise they located the

hotel, 12km from the city centre along the highway to Mughsail, within view of the enormous Raysut Port. Despite the cargo boats queuing up on the horizon, the hotel still has a fine situation on a smooth sand beach of scurrying ghost crabs, touched by angel-wings (delicate bivalve shell). The hotel, with its chic interior, designer bar, marbled foyer and beautiful gardens, provides a welcome piece of glamour to this otherwise casual city. The excellent, beach-side Palm Grove Restaurant (try the lobster for OR11.500) is an added attraction.

Crowne Plaza Resort Salalah (☎ 23 235333; www.cpsalah.com; s/d OR70/80; ☎) The main rendezvous for expats, the Crowne Plaza, with its marble foyer and terraced restaurants, has pleasantly landscaped gardens and a good water-sports facility. A fine sandy beach, stretching for kilometres in either direction, is an additional bonus of this sociable hotel.

Eating

Al-Haffa House Coffee Shop (☎ 23 295444; snacks from 500 baisa; ☎ 7-11am & 4-8pm) Located on the ground floor of Haffa House, this a central place to enjoy a coffee and a bun.

Omar al-Khayyam (☎ 23 293004; 23 July St; mains OR1.500-2; ☎ 6pm-midnight) This no-frills restaurant serves a wide range of Chinese and Indian food. It is a popular place in the evening when it attracts a lively local crowd.

Al-Fareed Tourist Restaurant (☎ 23 292382; 23 July St; mains OR1.200-2; ☎ 6pm-12.30am) Across the road from Omar al-Khayyam, this atmospheric venue serves excellent Indian meals and an Arabic-Indian buffet dinner on Thursday. It also has private dining areas for Omani-style food. Needless to say it is always abuzz with locals and is a great place to gain a flavour of cultural exchange – such as has been occurring in Dhofar for centuries.

There are plenty of small Indian restaurants along As-Salam St. Both the top-end hotels have good restaurants and cafés, with Western menus and prices to match.

Entertainment

Check *Oman Today* to see what bands or dancers are performing at the Crowne Plaza Resort Salalah or at the Hilton Salalah Hotel.

ROADS ACROSS NOWHERE

It comes as some surprise to see a sign off the Rusayl roundabout in Muscat that says 'Salalah 998km'. There are other such signs in Ibbi, Sohar and Nizwa. Salalah may be Oman's second city, but it would be inconceivable to see a sign pointing to Edinburgh from the outskirts of London, or Washington from New York. The signs are partly to help Emirati visitors in their annual migration during the *khareef* (rainy season in Oman's southern-most province of Dhofar). More tellingly, however, there's the implication that there is precious little in between – that once on the lonely Hwy 31 from Nizwa, there is nothing between you and Salalah.

And that's pretty much the case! The eight-hour journey between Nizwa and Thumrait across Al-Wusta Region is punctuated by one lone limestone hump near Adam, the excitement of a small town at Hayma and precious little else. One Thorn Tree correspondent called it 'the least memorable journey in the world' and as you gaze across the big sky, midpoint along Hwy 31, without a rock, without a bush, without any kind of interruption of the level plain, it's hard not to agree.

With your own 4WD, however, there are a few points of interest en route: excellent bird-watching spots at the oases of **Muqshin** and **Muntasar** (near Qitbit), famous for the daily fly-by of thousands of sandgrouse; relatively easy access to the magnificent ghaf woodlands and seams of soddom's apple that decorate the edge of the **Empty Quarter**; the chance to exercise the imagination at Shisr, the supposed site of the fabled gold-pillared **Ubar** (p254), a relatively short detour along Hwy 43. If the prospect of exploring this 'Road Across Nowhere' appeals, you can make this 10-hour, 1047km journey more bearable by stopping off at the friendly, simple, courtyard guesthouses of **Al-Ghabah Hotel**, **Al-Ghaftain Hotel** and **Qitbit Resthouse** – all run by the same management, and all of which provide simple Asian-style meals. There's no need to book ahead!

During the *khareef*, the Ittin road comes alive with the **Khareef Festival**. There is usually a fun fair, clothes stalls and lots of small stands selling kebabs and *shwarma*. Check *Oman Today* for a programme of traditional dancing and music, among other activities.

The **Al-Akhkaf Cinema** (☎ 23 291318; Sultan Qaboos St; 1st-class/balcony seats 700/900 baisa) adjoining the Al-Husn Souq screens films in English (unlike the two modern cinemas in town).

Shopping

Among Dhofar's most distinctive souvenirs are small, bead-covered *kohl* (black eye-liner) bottles (OR3 to OR5 from the new souq). Baskets made of rush and camel's leather from the fishing village of Shwaymiyah make another good souvenir (OR5 to OR30 at the new souq).

Don't visit Dhofar without treading in the paths of ancient traders! A small bag of locally harvested frankincense from Al-Husn Souq costs 500 baisa, and a decorative pottery incense burner costs ORI.500 to ORI.0.

Salalah has some master silversmiths. Ash-Sharooq St, behind Al-Husn Souq, is one of the best places in Oman to buy a

new silver *khanjar*. They are beautifully crafted and cost OR100 to OR250. Visit the gold souq for Salalah's distinctive silver necklaces and bracelets, which cost OR4 to OR20.

For camping equipment and supplies, try Lulu Shopping Centre, south of Haffa House.

Getting There & Away

AIR

National carrier **Oman Air** (☎ 23 295747; Haffa House) flies to Muscat (one way/return OR36/72, 1½ hours, twice daily) at variable times.

BUS

To Muscat, **ONTC** (☎ 23 292773) buses (one way/return OR6/11, 12 hours, four daily) leave from the bus station in the new souq. You can store luggage in the adjoining ticket office free of charge. There are also services to Nizwa and Buraimi.

Also try **Malatan Trading** (☎ 23 211299; As-Salam St), which has a 4.30pm service (OR6/11, 12 hours, daily) that leaves from near the cemetery, or **Bin Qasim Transport** (☎ 23 291786), which has a 4pm service (one

There is an altogether more scenic way of getting to Dhofar along the shores of the beautiful Arabian Sea but it is not for those in a hurry. The coastal trip from Muscat to Salalah takes at least three days and the beauty of the coast will make you wish you'd allowed more time. There are no hotels along this route and, despite the new sealed road that at last extends from Hijj to Thumrait, if you want to explore the best of the route, you'll need a 4WD. There are also precious few amenities so you need to take all your provisions with you. Stop each time you see a garage – they frequently run out of petrol.

Some of the highlights of this route include the traditional **barasti fishing villages** at Filim; **ancient rock formations** such as blue-green algae (the Earth's original animate form) in the laminations of Wadi Shuhram (near Shital); wind-eroded sandstone in the **rock garden** at Duqm; superb shells and cosy camping in the coves of Ras Madrakah; **pink lagoons and flamingos** near Al-Kahil, and **basket-weaving** in Shwaymiyah. Shwaymiyah's long bay, under the looming presence of Jebel Samhan, lair of the leopard, is one of the most beautiful sights in Oman. For full descriptions of how to make the best of this area, refer to an off-road guide.

So is it worth the effort – the heat, the flies, the prospect of getting stuck, dust-storms and mirages, lonesomeness, and a constant battle to stay awake on unremitting roads? Perhaps it's better to fly or take the magic carpet (nickname for the overnight-bus)? If you choose to drive, either inland or along the coast, you will most likely enter Salalah on Hwy 31. If you attempt the journey in summer (between July and mid-September), there is a point along that road, just after Thumrait, where you will notice something quite remarkable: the *jebel*, suddenly, unexpectedly and with ruler-like precision, turns green. After 10 hours or three days of hard desert driving, it is an unforgettable, almost Zen-like experience that can only be fully experienced through the force of contrast. Worth it? In the words of the Bedu, 'There's nothing sweeter than water after drought.'

way/return OR6/11, 12 hours, daily) that leaves from near the new souq.

For buses to Yemen, see p262.

TAXI & MICROBUS

Salalah's taxis and minibuses hang out in front of HSBC on As-Salam St. Microbus fares from Salalah include Mirbat (500 baisa) and Mughsail (OR1). Taxis will generally only make intercity trips on an engaged basis, which is invariably expensive (OR10 to Taqa, for example).

Getting Around

There is no public transport from the airport. Taxis charge a fixed price of OR3 from the airport to anywhere in Salalah. A microbus ride within the city costs around 300 baisa and a taxi about 800 baisa. Expect to pay OR3 to the Crown Plaza Resort Salalah and OR3.500 to Hilton Salalah Hotel from the city centre.

Hiring a car in Salalah is recommended for exploring, especially during the *khareef*. You don't strictly need a 4WD unless you want to enjoy some of the country's best camping, or explore the more rugged roads, but beware of the soft sand on the beaches.

Sixt Rent-a-Car (☎ 23 297125; An-Nahdah St) has 2WD cars for OR12, including insurance and 200km free, per day. **Salalah Beach Villas** (☎ 23 235999) hires 2WD/4WD for OR14/35, with 200km free. **Budget** (☎ 23 235581) has a desk at the airport and **Avis** (☎ 23 202582) is on An-Nahdah St.

During the *khareef* the roads into the *jebel* are notoriously dangerous. They are slippery and local drivers fail to make allowances for the fog. Camels often cause accidents by wandering onto the road – if you hit one, you can be sure it will be an extremely expensive female, prize-winning, racing camel.

AROUND SALALAH

Salalah is sandwiched on the plain beneath the mountains. As such, it makes a good base for a day trip or overnight camping trip east towards Mirbat, with side trips to Khor Rouri and Wadi Dhabat en route, followed by a trip out west exploring Mughsail and the Sarfait road.

Beaches

There are very good beaches along the entire coastal plain of Salalah. For the most

beautiful, head beyond Mirbat (4WD advisable) and follow any graded road going east. After 5km to 10km there is a string of glorious bays of striking red rock and white sand suitable for protected camping. Beware of strong currents anywhere along the coast during the *khareef*, which makes swimming ill-advised.

Khor Rouri

خور روري

Looking across the estuary at grazing camels and flocks of flamingos, it's hard to imagine that 2000 years ago Khor Rouri was the trading post of the frankincense route and one of the most important ports on earth. Today little remains of the city except some non-descript ruins, currently closed to visitors. It is worth making the trip to Khor Rouri, however, to enjoy the bird-watching and to take a cautious swim (beware strong currents) in one of the coast's prettiest bays.

Khor Rouri is about 35km east of Salalah. Take the Mirbat road and turn right 5km beyond the Taqa roundabout at the signpost. The site is 2.5km along a graded road and the beach is a further 3km to 4km. A microbus to the junction on the highway is 400 baisa.

Wadi Dharbat

وادي دربات

A popular picnic site during the *khareef* and a great place to enjoy the *jebel* in any season, Wadi Dharbat is the source of the estuary that flows into Khor Rouri. During a good *khareef*, an impressive waterfall spills over the cliff face, 300m to the plain below. Above the falls, water collects in limestone pools ideal for a swim. In the dry months, October to May, the Jibbali tribespeople set up their camps in this area. The caves in this area were used by the Sultan's forces, together with the British SAS, to infiltrate areas of communist insurgency in the mid 1970s. Now the most surreptitious activity you are likely to see is the scuttling away of a small, fur-clad rock hyrax (an unlikely relative of the elephant) that lives among the rocks. Chameleons share the same territory and are equally clandestine, changing colour when abashed.

To get to Wadi Dharbat, take the turn-off for Tawi Attair 4km after the Taqa roundabout and climb 3km to the Wadi Dhabat junction (a small coffeeshop marks the entrance). A sealed road leads to the top of the waterfall and a semipermanent lake. Don't be tempted to swim in this lake as Bilharzia is present here.

PICNICKING IN PARADISE

It came as some surprise recently when a group of Omani military officers, all trained at Sandhurst in England and perfectly at ease with the regimental silver, opted to enjoy their annual dinner, not in the HQ mess, but in a makeshift car park on the edge of the desert. Such is the desire to eat 'en plein air' in Oman that considerable logistic manoeuvres are undertaken to make it happen.

While Western expats sidle off to remote corners of the country for an apologetic lunch of wilted sandwiches from a Tupperware box, Omanis prefer to wait for night and for company and to dine on a picnic fit for kings. Under the stars, in caravans of up to a dozen cars, they bring chairs and divans, coolboxes and barbeques. Most surprising to Western onlookers, they often choose not the glorious coast, but the brightest spot on a well-lit motorway, unfurling their rice mats in family groups of loosely assorted siblings and cousins.

The most bizarre and most celebrated picnic spot in the country is at Wadi Dhabat in Dhofar. During summer, on a humid, damp and drizzling day in conditions that all Omanis would describe as 'beautiful weather', the luminous green pastureland is turned into a sticky mud slide of buzzing flies and blood-suckers. Omanis, Emiratis, Kuwaitis and just about anyone else with a week off in the region come here to spread their carpets in the rain, seemingly oblivious to the welter of insect-life around them.

Asked why they put up with such inconveniences, Omar bin Alawi, looks surprised: 'Need you ask?' he replied, 'For eight weeks of the year a piece of the *jebel* turns green and we get to live the life of our fathers. Who of us doesn't want that...?' He trailed off mid-sentence to answer his mobile. As he did, a clutch of expats huddled under the plastic awning of the candy floss vendor: this may not be the tale of Arabian nights they were looking for, but for the locals, this is picnicking in paradise.

MIRBAT

ميربات

The town of Mirbat, just over 70km east of Salalah, has seen better days, but it has considerable historical significance. The town's main fort (admission 500 baisa; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sun-Thu) was the site of the well-documented Battle of Mirbat during the Dhofari insurrection of the 1970s.

Notice the old **merchant houses** with their wooden, latticed windows. The onion-domed **Bin Ali Tomb**, 1km off the main road, marks the entrance to the town. Glorious beaches stretch east and west of Mirbat, though 4WD is necessary if you want to get close enough to the sea for wild camping (there are no facilities). Snorkelling and diving is possible around this coast and equipment can be hired from the Samharam Dive Centre & Partners in the Crowne Plaza in Salalah for OR4 per day.

A new resort (not yet open) in Mirbat will make a good base for further exploration along the coast towards Hasik.

Microbuses charge 500 baisa for the trip from Salalah.

JEBEL SAMHAN

جبل سمحان

Although you need a permit and a good reason to visit the leopard sanctuary at Jebel Samhan, the sealed road up to the reserve entrance makes a rewarding day trip from Salalah. The road passes the entrance to Tawi Attair, a deep sink hole known as the 'Well of Birds' (accessible only with a guide), and climbs up through a variety of different flora, including rocky fields of desert roses. Sometimes known as elephant plants, they have huge bulbous trunks and beautiful pink flowers in the spring. As you near the summit, you can drive towards the cliff edge for a panoramic view of the coast. There are many exceptional vistas in Oman and this is one of them. If you're wondering about the odd spiky tree on the plateau, it's called a dragon tree and is confined to high, semi-arid elevations.

To reach Jebel Samhan, take the Tawi Attair road after the fishing town of Taqah, and follow the signs.

HASIK

حاسك

Positioned at the most eastern end of the Dhofar coast before the cliffs of Jebel Samhan interrupt, Hasik is worth the two-hour

drive from Salalah for the journey more than the destination. The road is sealed and not particularly exceptional in winter, but in summer, luminous clouds billow down from the *jebel* and high winds whip across the water, sending the surf backwards as the waves roll inexorably forwards. Glossy cormorants cluster like oil slicks in the coves and waders shelter from the seasonal fury amid the drifts of pink top shells.

There is not much to see in Hasik itself, but if you continue along the road towards Hadraban, look out for a spectacular limestone waterfall overhanging the sandstone cliffs. A small car park marks the spot.

Hasik is clearly signposted from Hwy 47, just before the town of Mirbat.

JOB'S TOMB

قبر النبي أيوب

In religious terms, Job's Tomb is probably the most important site in Dhofar. Regardless of your religious convictions, the tomb, situated on an isolated hilltop overlooking Salalah, is a must-see for the beautiful drive, especially during the *khareef* and for the excellent view over the Salalah plain on a clear day.

The tomb is just over 30km northwest of Salalah. Take the main westbound road towards Mughsail and turn right along the Ittin road, after passing the Hamilton Plaza Hotel. Turn left at the signpost for An-Nabi Ayyub after 22km. A small restaurant below the tomb has wonderful views. There is no public transport.

If you are visiting Job's Tomb during the *khareef*, return to the main road and turn left for another 10km or so to reach the end of the monsoon catchment. The contrast between the green slopes and the desert floor beyond is remarkable. Continue along this road until you meet the Thumrait road and turn right for Salalah.

MUGHSAIL

مغسيل

Mughsail is 48km west of Salalah on a spectacular bay, ending in a set of sheer cliffs that reach towards the Yemeni border. Immediately below the start of the cliffs the rock pavement is potholed with **blowholes** that are active year-round, but particularly volatile during the high seas of the *khareef*.

Camping on the beach here is not permitted, but **Al-Mughsail Beach Tourist Resthouse**

(☎ 99584039; fax 23 290643; chalets OR16.300) has a few simple chalets on the beach, with bathroom, TV and sitting room, and a small restaurant from which to enjoy the superb views.

Microbuses charge OR1 for the trip between Salalah and Mughsail.

SARFAIT ROAD طريق صرفيت

If you have your own transport, it's worth continuing from Mughsail towards the Yemeni border. The road is an impressive feat of engineering, zigzagging 1000m to the top of the cliff. Look out for a wadi full of **frankincense trees**, 8km from Mughsail (see p34). Three or four kilometres after the top of the road, there are stunning views back towards Mughsail and inland across some of the wildest wadis in Arabia. The vegetation in this area is entirely different from that on the Salalah plain, with yuccas and succulents clinging to the limestone ledges.

The Sarfait road continues to the Yemeni border, a two-hour drive from Salalah along a sealed road. There is no accommodation between Salalah and the border crossing and no facilities at the border itself. If entering Oman this way you won't find much if any onward transport to Salalah. As such, it is better, unless you have your own vehicle, to travel on a through-bus. See p262 for details and p521 for onward travel in Yemen.

UBAR أوبار

Ubar, near the town of Shisr, is an archaeological site of potentially great importance. Lost to history for over a thousand years, the rediscovery of the remains of this once

mighty city caused great archaeological excitement in the 1990s. It may be hard for the ordinary mortal to appreciate what all the fuss is about: there is almost nothing to see at present, except a small, dusty museum, and the fabled golden pillars of antiquity are still only the stuff of dreams.

If legend gets the better of you, however, then take the main Salalah-Thumrait Hwy. At just over 10km north of Thumrait, turn left to Shisr (72km) on a graded road (4WD necessary). On entering Shisr, the site is on the right.

OMAN DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Accommodation in Oman is limited and expensive though discounts can often be negotiated out of season (May to September, except in Salalah where peak season is June to August). In many places, there's no alternative to the single mid- to top-end hotel, and smaller towns often have no hotels at all. Room rates quoted in this chapter include the mandatory 17% tax and include breakfast unless otherwise stated. In this chapter, we have defined budget hotels as being those that charge less than OR35 for a double room, midrange hotels as those that charge less than OR80 for a double room and top-end hotels as those that charge OR80 and above for a double room.

The only official camp sites in Oman are at Ras al-Jinz, and some expensive 'camping experience' resorts in Ras al-Hadd and Sharqiya Sands. That said, wild camping is one of the highlights of this country, and

providing you are discreet, outside urban areas and don't require creature comforts, a beach of your own, a dune or wadi cave is yours for the taking. Finding somewhere suitable to camp, however, can be difficult without a 4WD vehicle.

ACTIVITIES

Oman is a large country with a sparse population. There are still vast tracts of land without a road that are virtually unmapped. This is excellent news for anyone interested in the outdoors, as you have the chance of coming across an unmapped wadi or hidden cave system; finding a bed of undisturbed fossils; or discovering a species unnamed by science – the possibilities are endless.

However, there is a responsibility, firstly, to avoid getting into a dangerous situation (rescue services are either not available or stretched to the maximum in taking care of road traffic accidents) and, secondly, to limit the negative impact of each activity on the environment. To see what this entails in practical terms, see p554).

Off-Road Exploration

One of the highlights of visiting Oman is off-road exploration of its mountains, wadis, sand dunes and coastline, particularly in a 4WD with some camping equipment. An essential guide for this activity is *Off-Road in the Sultanate of Oman* (see p256). Hiring a 4WD can be expensive, but tour companies (see p260) offer all the destinations mentioned in this chapter as day trips or on overnight tours. For details regarding vehicle hire, see p262.

Hiking, Rock Climbing & Caving

With a pair of stout boots, a map, water and *Adventure Trekking in Oman*, by Anne Dale and Jerry Hadwin, you can access superb walking territory all over the country. Unless you are an accustomed outbacker, however, it is advisable to take a tour (see p260 for details of companies) that can help tailor a trip to suit your interests.

Hiking, rock climbing and caving (see the boxed texts, p235 and p215) are increasingly popular activities, but they tend to be conducted on a 'go-it-alone' basis. *Rock Climbing in Oman*, by RA McDonald, lists some exciting routes, but you need a climbing partner and equipment.

Oman has some rich cave systems, of which many have never been explored. *Caves of Oman*, by Samir Hanna and Mohamed al-Belushi, gives an excellent account of speleology in Oman and points out some local safety advice.

Fishing

A line cast from the shore (try the jetty on Athaiba beach in Muscat) almost invariably lands a fish of some description but for a big catch (marlin, swordfish and barracuda), call **Muscat Game Fishing Club** (☎ 99322779; www.mfga-oman.com), which organises deep-sea outings. Game fish is tag and release but tuna you can bring home for supper! The competitive angler might like to try a line in the three-day Sinbad Classic in Muscat each winter.

Snorkelling & Diving

There are some excellent snorkelling and diving opportunities in Oman, and the vast coastline is virtually unexplored in many places. Diving courses are available in Muscat (see p202) and Al-Sawadi Beach Resort (see p240).

Wildlife Watching

Oman is a great country for naturalists, with dolphins and whales found in large numbers off the coast; important turtle-nesting sites (see p221); a great diversity of sea shells (p106); migration routes ferrying unusual birds across the territory (see p190) and relatively easy sightings of gazelle (see p190). A pair of binoculars and a set of wheels is all that's necessary, although tour companies can arrange specialist tours (p260).

BOOKS

Oman – a Comprehensive Guide (OR12), published under the auspices of the Directorate General of Tourism, includes interesting anecdotal information. Other specialist guides and coffee-table books are available from hotel or city bookshops and cover diverse subjects from caving to camels.

An interesting account of life before the 'renaissance' is included in *The Doctor and the Teacher: Oman 1955-1970*, by Donald Bosch. Philip Ward combines modern travel narrative with the accounts of earlier travellers in *On the Track of the Early Explorers*.

LOST CITY OF UBAR

In early 1992 the British explorer Ranulph Fiennes, together with a group of US researchers, announced that they had found (with the use of satellite imagery) the remains of Ubar, one of the great lost cities of Arabia. According to legend, Ubar, otherwise known as the Atlantis of the Sands, was the crossroads of the ancient frankincense trail. Scholars are fairly certain that the place existed, that it controlled the frankincense trade and was highly prosperous as a result, but therein lies the end of the certainties. The Quran states that God destroyed Ubar because the people were decadent and had turned away from religion, but archaeologists are more inclined to believe that it fell into a collapsed limestone cavern. Ongoing studies are hopeful of a more definitive reason for the city's demise.

Predictably, there are many who dispute the rediscovery of Ubar. At the time of writing, excavations at the site were proceeding slowly and nothing of sufficient age had surfaced to verify the claims.

The final part of Wilfred Thesiger's 1959 classic, *Arabian Sands*, describes Oman's interior. *Atlantis of the Sands*, by Ranulph Fiennes, gives an account of the Dhofar insurgency in the 1960s, while describing the search for the lost city of Ubar. On the same subject, *The Road to Ubar*, by Nicholas Clapp, is worth a read.

More practically, *Off-Road in the Sultanate of Oman*, by Lonely Planet author Jenny Walker and Sam Owen, is a must for 4WD exploration in Oman. It covers the entire country, highlights special interests and provides a useful set of maps. *Adventure Trekking in Oman*, by Anne Dale and Jerry Hadwin, lists some great hikes.

Books on specialist subjects (such as crafts, jewellery, shells, caving etc) in Oman are mentioned in the relevant sections of this chapter.

More general Middle Eastern titles, some of which contain coverage of Oman, are listed p23.

BUSINESS HOURS

Oman is rumoured to change its weekend to Friday and Saturday (see p529 for further details). For now, the following hours apply:

Banks 8am to noon Saturday to Wednesday and 8am to 11am Thursday.

Government departments & ministries 7.30am to 2.30pm Saturday to Wednesday, closing 1.30pm during Ramadan.

Post offices 8am to 1.30pm Saturday to Wednesday and 8am to 11am Thursday.

Restaurants 11.30am to 2pm and 5pm to midnight Saturday to Thursday, and 5pm to midnight Friday.

Shops 8am to 1pm and 4pm to 7pm Saturday to Wednesday, and 8am to 1pm Thursday (Mutrah Souq and upmarket Muscat shopping centres to 9pm or 9.30pm).

CHILDREN

Oman is a friendly and welcoming place for children. For younger children, beachcombing, sandcastle building and paddling make Oman a dream destination. That said, there are few specifically designed amenities for children, except for a park with swings in most town centres. See also p203.

CUSTOMS

Non-Muslims travelling by air can bring in one bottle of alcohol, but beware that it is illegal to cross by land from Oman into

the UAE and vice versa carrying alcohol. A 'reasonable quantity' of cigars, cigarettes and tobacco can be imported.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Oman is a very safe country and even the driving isn't that bad. Two dangers that may escape the attention of visitors, however, are flash floods and the isolation of many off-road destinations. See Road Hazards (p556) for more information.

DISABLED TRAVELLERS

Other than a few disabled car-parking spots, few other facilities exist in Oman. The **Oman Association for the Disabled** (☎ 24 605566; www.oadisabled.org.om) is set up primarily to assist nationals, but you can email with inquiries.

ELECTRICITY

The mains electricity in Oman is 220V to 240V. Adaptors are widely available at hotel shops and from supermarkets such as Al-Fair.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Omani Embassies & Consulates

Canadian travellers should contact the Omani embassy in the USA. Australian or New Zealand travellers should contact the Omani embassy in Japan. For Omani embassies in neighbouring Middle Eastern countries, see the relevant country chapter. Other Omani embassies:

France (☎ 01 47 23 01 63; fax 01 47 23 77 10; 50 ave de Lena, 75116 Paris)

Germany (☎ 228-35 70 31; fax 35 70 40; Lindenallee 11, D-53173 Bonn)

Japan (☎ 3340-20877; fax 3340-41334; 2-28-11 Sendagaya, Shibuya-Ku, Tokyo, 151-0051)

Netherlands (☎ 070-361 5800; fax 360 7277; Koninginnegracht 27, 2514 AB The Hague)

UK (☎ 020-7225 0001; fax 7589 2505; 167 Queen's Gate, London SW7 5HE)

USA (☎ 202-387 1980; www.oman.info; 2535 Belmont Rd NW, Washington DC 20008)

Embassies & Consulates in Oman

Unless indicated otherwise, all the embassies listed are on Jameat ad Duwal al-Arabiyyah St in the district of Shatti al-Qurm, Muscat. The British embassy looks after Irish nationals, processes visas and handles emergencies for Canadian citizens. Austral-

ians should contact the Australian embassy in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (see p363).

Consular sections of the embassy often close an hour or two earlier than the rest of the embassy, so try to go as early in the day as possible or ring first to check. Embassies include the following:

Bahrain (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 605133; bahrain@omantel.net.om; Way No 3017, Shatti al-Qurm; ☎ 8am-2.30pm Sat-Wed)

Egypt (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 600411; fax 24 603626; ☎ 9am-12.30pm Sat-Wed)

France (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 681800; www.amba-france-om.org; ☎ 9am-2.30pm Sat-Wed)

Germany (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 7732482; diplofug@omantel.net.om; An-Nahdah St, Ruwi; ☎ 9am-noon Sat-Wed)

Iran (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 696944; fax 24 696888; ☎ 7.30am-4pm Sat-Wed)

Iraq (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 604178; fax 24 605112; near Al-Fair supermarket, Madinat as-Sultan Qaboos; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Wed)

Jordan (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 692760; fax 24 692762; ☎ 8am-noon Sat-Wed)

Kuwait (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 6996267; fax 24 699628; ☎ 8am-12.30pm Sat-Wed)

Lebanon (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 695844; fax 24 695633; Way No 3019, Shatti al-Qurm; ☎ 8am-2.30pm Sat-Wed)

Netherlands (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 603719; nethmnus@omantel.net.om; Villa 1366, Way 3017, Shatti al-Qurm; ☎ 9am-noon Sat-Wed)

Qatar (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 691152; fax 24 691156; ☎ 8am-2.30pm Sat-Wed)

Saudi Arabia (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 601744; fax 24 603540; ☎ 8.30am-2pm Sat-Wed)

Syria (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 697904; fax 24 603895; Al-Inshirah St, Madinat as-Sultan Qaboos; ☎ 9am-2pm Sat-Wed)

Turkey (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 697050; www.turkishembassyomscat.org; Way No 3047, Shatti al-Qurm; ☎ 8am-noon Sat-Wed)

UAE (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 600988; uaeoman@omantel.net.om; ☎ 8am-1.30pm Sat-Wed)

UK (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 609000; www.britishembassy.gov.uk; ☎ 7.30am-2.30pm Sat-Wed)

USA (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 698989; www.muscat.usembassy.gov; ☎ 8am-4pm Sat & Mon-Wed)

Yemen (Map pp194-5; ☎ 24 600815; fax 24 609172; Bldg No 2981, Way No 2840, Shatti al-Qurm; ☎ 9am-1.30pm Sat-Wed)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

When the Sultan is on his Meet the People Tour (no fixed time of year), his ministers camp with him in a spectacular pageant of camel-giving, pennant-waving and sup-

plication from his subjects – combined with state-of-the-art military protection of course.

JANUARY & FEBRUARY

Muscat Festival Around mid-January to mid-February each year, this festival has developed into a fun occasion, with fireworks displays, funfairs, concerts, dance performances, sports events and shopping opportunities.

JUNE-AUGUST

Khareef Festival Check a June, July or August edition of *Oman Today* for a programme of this Salalah festival's cultural activities, which include craft sales, traditional singing and dancing, and an FM radio roadshow.

NOVEMBER

National Day Celebrated on 18 November all over Oman, with feasting, camel-racing, a spectacular military tattoo, shopping bargains, fireworks, gun-toting in the villages, and the draping of lights over buildings.

HOLIDAYS

In addition to the main Islamic holidays described, p535, Oman observes the following public holidays:

Lailat al-Mi'raj (Ascension of the Prophet) The exact date is dependent on the sighting of the moon – the date is never given until the last minute.

Renaissance Day (23 July) A day's holiday is given to mark the beginning of the reign of Sultan Qaboos, generally credited for the modern rebirth of the country.

National Day (18 November) Marked by at least two days of holiday and flags decorating the highway (see also above).

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet access is now available throughout Oman and many of the larger towns have at least one internet café. If you have an account with Omantel, the countrywide access number is ☎ 1311. For dialling without an account, the number is ☎ 1312 and the service is paid for through the cost of the call. The homepage of **Omantel** (www.omantel.net.om) provides up-to-date details and instructions for using the service. A prepaid Al-Ufuq card (OR6) gives 20 hours of access.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Some Oman-specific websites include the following:

Destination Oman (www.destinationoman.com) This thorough resource gives practical information about hotels, restaurants and car hire.

Ministry of Information (www.omanet.om/english/home.asp) This official website provides a useful handbook of facts and figures about the Sultanate. It covers politics, economics, foreign affairs and media, and provides links to other websites on Oman.

Oman Tourism (www.omantourism.gov.om) The official website of the Ministry of Tourism gives useful information about sites and forthcoming events.

MAPS

The *Apex Map of Oman* (OR3; Apex Publishing), available from bookshops and hotel foyers, has city maps, as well as a large road map of Oman. Hildebrand's *Oman* road map has been recommended by travellers, but is not available in Oman.

MEDIA

Magazines

Oman Today is a monthly pocket-sized handbook, with listings and interesting features of interest to the tourist. It is widely available throughout the Sultanate for OR1.

Newspapers

The *Times of Oman* and *Oman Daily Observer* are the local English-language newspapers. Foreign newspapers and magazines, available only in top-end hotels in Muscat and Salalah and in Muscat's shopping centres, are usually three days old.

Radio

The local English-language radio station broadcasts on 90.4FM (94.3FM from Salalah) from 6.30am to midnight daily, and you can hear news bulletins at 7am, 2.30pm and 6.30pm.

TV

Oman TV broadcasts the news in English nightly at 8pm and shows English-language films two or three nights a week (usually around 11pm). Satellite TV is also widely available.

MONEY

ATMs & Credit Cards

ATMs are widespread in Oman and many of them, particularly those belonging to HSBC, are tied into international systems. The most popular credit card in Oman is Visa, but MasterCard is also widely accepted. Amex is not accepted in many

shops, and you may incur a fee of 5% for using it in some restaurants and hotels.

Costs

The cost of living is high in the capital and a budget of OR20 (about US\$52) per day is the minimum required, staying in a small hotel in Muttrah, eating from local cafés and using public transport. While general living expenses are lower outside Muscat, high accommodation costs and getting to off-road destinations limit the ability to see much of Oman for less than OR35 (US\$90) per day.

Currency

The official currency is the Omani rial (OR but widely spelt RO). One rial is divided into 1000 baisa (also spelt baiza and shortened to bz). There are coins of five, 10, 25, 50 and 100 baisa, and notes of 100 and 200 baisa. There are notes of a half, one, five, 10, 20 and 50 rials.

UAE dirhams can be used in some towns at an exchange rate of about Dh10 to OR1.100.

Exchanging Money

Most banks will change US-dollar travellers cheques for a commission. Moneychangers keep similar hours to banks, but are often open from around 4pm to 7pm as well. They usually offer a slightly more competitive rate than the banks, and most charge only a nominal commission of 500 baisa per cash transaction.

Exchange Rates

The following exchange rates were correct at the time of printing:

Country	Unit		Omani rial
Australia	A\$10	=	OR3.14
Canada	C\$10	=	OR3.34
euro zone	€10	=	OR5.16
Japan	¥1000	=	OR3.26
Kuwait	KD1	=	OR1.34
New Zealand	NZ\$10	=	OR2.78
Qatar	QR10	=	OR1.06
Saudi Arabia	SR10	=	OR1.03
UAE	Dh10	=	OR1.05
UK	UK£10	=	OR7.63
USA	US\$10	=	OR3.86
Yemen	YR1000	=	OR2.16

Tippling & Bargaining

A tip of 10% is customary only in large hotels and restaurants if a service fee hasn't been included in the bill. It is not the custom to tip taxi drivers or smaller establishments.

Discounts are available for most items in all shops other than supermarkets and Western-style chain stores. Haggle hard for taxi fares and souvenirs but don't expect too much of a bargain!

PHOTOGRAPHY

Shops selling memory cards and batteries, as well as print film are plentiful in Muscat. Most studios can print digital photos from a memory card. They can also transfer photos to a CD from a memory card or film. Slide film is hard to find so bring your own.

POST

Sending a postcard to any destination outside the GCC costs 150 baisa. Postage for letters is 200 baisa for the first 10g and 350 baisa for 11g to 20g. Mailing small packets to countries outside the GCC costs OR2 to OR4. For parcels of 1kg it costs OR4 to OR6.

Poste restante service is available at the post office in Ruwi. Mail should be addressed to: (Your Name), Poste Restante, Ruwi Central Post Office, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman. Parcels received in Oman incur a 250 baisa customs charge.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Westerners are often seen wandering around supermarkets or hotel foyers in shorts, dressed in bikinis on public beaches and skinny-dipping in wadis. These practices are highly resented, though Omanis are too polite to say as much. In order to respect local customs, knees, cleavage and shoulders should be covered in public.

It's tempting when exploring off-road destinations to drive straight through the middle of villages. This is about as sensitive as taking a lorry through a neighbour's garden back home. If you want to see the village, it's better to park outside and walk in, preferably with permission from a village elder.

In addition, Oman's wild environment requires special consideration. Tyre tracks leave marks on the desert floor, often for-

ever, and litter does not biodegrade in the hot, dry climate (see p104). See also Responsible Travel, p24.

SHOPPING

Oman is a great centre for handicrafts with expertise in silversmithing. Exquisitely crafted *khanjars* can cost up to OR500 but tourist versions are available from OR30. Genuine Bedouin silver is becoming scarce (read *Disappearing Treasures of Oman*, by Avelyn Foster). Silver Maria Theresa dollars, used as Oman's unit of currency for many years, make a good buy from OR2. Wooden *mandoos* studded with brass tacks cost OR15 for a new one and start at OR70 for an antique.

Other items commonly for sale include coffeepots (not always made in Oman), baskets woven with leather, camel bags, rice mats and cushion covers. Many items are imported, as per centuries of tradition, from India and Iran.

Frankincense is a 'must buy' from Salalah, together with a pottery incense burner (both available in Muscat). Amouage (OR50), currently the most valuable perfume in the world, is made in Muscat partially from frankincense. Omani dates make another excellent gift.

SOLO TRAVELLERS

Travelling beyond Muscat and the main towns of Nizwa, Sohar, Sur and Salalah can be a lonely experience. The interior is sparsely populated, and with no established circuit of travellers' meeting places, bumping into other foreigners is rare outside the holiday period. While Omani people are very friendly and hospitable, they are also private and you are unlikely to be invited to stay for longer than the customary bread and salt. If you hitchhike to somewhere remote, you may have a very long wait before you find a ride out again. On the whole, as with any country with large expanses of remote territory, it's better to have backup in the form of a vehicle, a companion, or at least water, map and compass.

TELEPHONE & FAX

There are central public telephone offices, also offering fax services, in both Muscat and Salalah, though the latter only has cardphones. Phonecards are available from

grocery stores and petrol stations. International phone calls can be made with a phonecard by dialling direct from most public phone booths throughout Oman. The cost of a two-minute call to Europe and the USA is approximately OR1.

Each area of Oman has its own code (for example, 24 is the prefix for Muscat). Note that you need to use this code even if calling from within the same area.

Mobile Phones

Temporary local GSM connections can be made through the purchase of an **Omantel** (www.omantel.net.om) Hayyak SIM card (OR10), which includes OR5 worth of call time. Alternatively, **Nawras** (www.nawras.com.om) offer a similar service for OR9, including OR2.500 worth of call time. These cards can be purchased on arrival at the airport and from shopping centres in Muscat.

TOURS

Tours in Oman are generally tailor-made for the customer in private vehicles with an English-speaking driver-guide. This is great for your itinerary, but painful on the pocket unless you can muster a group of four to share.

The following are average all-inclusive prices for a full-day tour from Muscat:

Tour	Cost
Nizwa, Bahla & Jabrin	OR70
Nakhal & Rustaq	OR70
Jebel Shams	OR110
Wadi Shab & Wadi Tiwi	OR110
Sharqiya Sands	OR120
Dolphin & other boat trips	with local fisherman OR5; all-day dhow cruise OR90

Tour companies abound in Muscat and Salalah; they offer camel safaris, 4WD touring, camping, city tours, caving, rock climbing and combinations thereof. *Oman Today* has a complete listing of tour operators. Some recommended agencies are as follows:

Arabian Sea Safaris (☎ 24 693223; www.arabianseasafaris.com) Specialises in boat trips.

Desert Discovery Tours (☎ 24 493232; www.desertdiscovery.com) For trips to the Sharqiya Sands.

Explore Oman (www.exploreoman.com) An experienced UK-based company.

Mark Tours (☎ 24 565869; www.marktours.com) A popular and experienced company that can tailor-make study tours and adventure trips.

Muscat Diving and Adventure Center (☎ 24 485663; www.holiday-in-oman.com) The best company through which to organise activities such as caving, hiking and other outward-bound activities.

National Travel & Tourism (☎ 24 660376; www.nttoman.com) Offers an excellent, friendly and comprehensive tour service, including trips to the Oryx Sanctuary at Jaaluni National Reserve.

VISAS

A one-month visit visa, required by all nationalities except for citizens of Gulf countries, can be obtained by many foreign nationals (including those from the EEC, the Americas, Australia and New Zealand) at Seeb International Airport in Muscat for OR6. You may be refused admission if you have an Israeli stamp in your passport.

It is also possible to obtain a visa at those border crossings that are open to foreigners. If you have a UAE visa, it is possible to cross into Oman by land without paying a further fee.

Multiple-entry visas cost OR10. They are valid for one year with maximum stays of three weeks.

Visa Extensions

One-month extensions (OR6) are available for visit visas from the Immigration & Passports Directorate in Qurum, Muscat. Overstaying a visa will incur charges on departure (OR10 per day).

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Women travelling alone are a novelty in Oman and you may feel uncomfortable, particularly on public transport, eating in restaurants, and when visiting public beaches. Omani men mostly ignore women (out of respect) and it's hard to meet Omani women. Many of the country's attractions lie off-road where travelling solo (for either sex) is inadvisable unless you are highly resourceful and, if driving, strong enough to change a tyre.

Harassment is not a big problem, except near hotels where attitudes are, rightly or wrongly, influenced by the sight of women in bikinis. Outside hotels, it helps (in addition to being more culturally sensitive) to be discreetly dressed in loose-fitting cloth-

ing, and to wear shorts and a T-shirt for swimming. See also p542.

WORK

To work in Oman you have to be sponsored by an Omani company before you enter the country (ie you have to have a job). Although it is illegal to work on a tourist visa, some expats take a short-term contract and hope their employer will arrange a labour card for them. The reality is a fretful experience best avoided.

TRANSPORT IN OMAN

GETTING THERE & AWAY

See also the Arabian Peninsula Transport chapter (p545) for more information on the following.

Entering Oman

Entering Oman at **Seeb International Airport** (☎ 24 519223) is straight-forward. The small airport is surprisingly efficient, queues are kept to a minimum (outside holiday periods), staff are friendly and your luggage is often waiting on the carousel before immigration is complete. Most visitors require a visa upon arrival. This is easily expedited by filling in a form (in the immigration hall) and taking it to the clearly marked visa-collection counter before queuing up to have your passport stamped.

Air

AIRPORTS & AIRLINES

There is only one truly international airport in Oman, and that is **Seeb International Airport** (☎ 24 519223) in Muscat. That said, Oman Air sometimes runs direct flights between Dubai and Salalah Airport, but you need to have a visa for Oman *before* arrival. At the time of writing, these flights were suspended due to lack of demand. Preparations for a second runway and a new terminal building are currently in progress.

DEPARTURE TAX

The departure tax is OR5 (US\$13). This is invariably included in the cost of your ticket.

OTHER AIRLINES FLYING TO/FROM OMAN

British Airways (BA; ☎ 24 568777; www.ba.com; hub: Heathrow Airport, London)

Emirates (EK; ☎ 24 792222; www.emirates.com; hub: Dubai) Has an office in Ruwi (Map p200).

Gulf Air (GF; ☎ 800 72424; www.gulfairco.com; hub: Bahrain) Office in Ruwi (Map p200).

Oman Air (WY; ☎ 24 707222; www.omanair.com; hub: Muscat) Office in Ruwi (Map p200).

Qatar Airways (QR; ☎ 24 787070; www.qatarairways.com; hub: Doha)

Saudi Arabian Airlines (SV; ☎ 24 789485; www.saudiarabianairlines.com; hub: Jeddah)

Sri Lankan Airlines (UL; ☎ 24 784545; www.srilankan.lk; hub: Colombo, Sri Lanka)

Flight Destination	Price	Frequency
Abu Dhabi (UAE)	OR98	3 per day
Doha (Qatar)	OR129	3 per day
Kuwait City (Kuwait)	OR190	2 per day
Manama (Bahrain)	OR145	3 per day
Riyadh (Saudi Arabia)	OR218	1 per day
San'a (Yemen)	OR265	2 per week

Land

Oman borders the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Current practicalities mean, however, that you can only enter UAE and Yemen, and only through certain borderposts (see below). The situation changes frequently, however, and it's worth checking with the **Royal Oman Police** (☎ 24 4569603) before planning your trip to see which crossings are open to non-GCC visitors. Visas are obtainable at all Oman border posts.

BORDER CROSSINGS

UAE

Currently there are three border posts open 24 hours to foreigners; these are at Wajaja (for Dubai), Khatmat Milahah (for Dibba) – see p242 for details on both, and Al-Darah–Tibat (for Musandam Peninsula – see p244). It is likely that the Buraimi border (for Abu Dhabi – see p237) will open again shortly.

Yemen

There are two border posts with Yemen at Sarfait (see p254) and Mazyunah. Both are open 24 hours. Sarfait is by far the best option as new roads lead to the post on either side. Mazyunah leads into unsafe territory on the Yemeni side.

Note that you cannot re-enter Oman on a tourist visa and, as a tourist in Oman, you cannot obtain a visa for Yemen from the embassy in Muscat. Most nationalities, however, can obtain one at the border (see p517 in the Yemen chapter).

BUS UAE

The **Oman National Transport Company** (ONTC; ☎ 24 708522; www.ontcoman.com) has buses to Dubai (OR5, six hours, daily) departing from **Ruwi bus station** (☎ 24 701294) in Muscat at 6am, 7am and 4.30pm.

Comfort Line (☎ 24 702191), has a similarly comfortable service to Dubai at 6.30am and 4.30pm (OR5, five hours, daily). The bus leaves from a parking lot outside Moon Travels, two blocks behind the bus station on Way 2985 in Muscat.

The ONTC service from Muscat to Abu Dhabi (OR5, six hours, daily) leaves at 6.30am but check the status of the border in Buraimi first.

Yemen

The **Gulf Transport Company** (☎ 23 293303) has three buses daily per week to Mukhalla in Yemen (OR12, six hours) departing from Salalah bus station at 9.30am Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

CAR

It's possible to drive through any of the borders in your own vehicle if you obtain insurance to cover both countries.

You need extra insurance if you wish to take a hired car over the border to/from UAE and you must return the car to the country in which you hired it (unless you're willing to pay a huge premium).

Sea

There are currently no passenger services to/from Oman, although Muscat is a port of call for cruise liners.

GETTING AROUND Air

Besides Seeb International Airport in Muscat, the only functioning airports are at opposite ends of the country in Salalah and Khasab; both these handle domestic flights only. Four new airports have been approved, however, at Sur, Sohar, Adam

and Duqm, which will help open up the country for visitors.

The national carrier is **Oman Air** (☎ 24 707222). It services the domestic airports, as well as a selection of Middle Eastern and subcontinental destinations. Oman has a 50% share in Gulf Air, which services all Middle Eastern cities and many long-haul destinations.

The only domestic flights currently available in the country are on Oman Air between Muscat and Salalah (one way/return OR36/72, 1½ hours, twice daily at variable times), and between Muscat and Khasab (one way/return, OR24/48, 1¼ hours, on Thursday at 8.55am and Friday at 2.30pm). Tickets can be booked through any travel agent.

Bus

The intercity buses are operated by **ONTC** (☎ 24 490046; www.ontcoman.com), which has daily services to/from most of the main provincial towns for OR5 or less, with the exception of Salalah, which costs one way/return OR6/11 from Muscat. Buses are usually on time, comfortable and safe. It is worth making reservations for longer journeys. Tickets are available from the bus driver.

Car

Road signs are written in English (albeit with inconsistent spelling), as well as in Arabic, throughout Oman. Helpful brown tourist signs signal many sites of interest. Petrol, all of which is now unleaded, is widely available. Al-Maha petrol stations usually have modern, well-stocked shops and clean toilets.

DRIVING LICENCE

Most foreign driving licences are accepted in Oman but an International Driving Permit is preferable. Foreign residents of Oman need a road permit to leave or re-enter the country by land. This regulation does not apply to tourists.

HIRE

International car-hire chains in Oman include Avis, Budget, Europcar and Thrifty, but dozens of local agencies offer a slightly reduced rate. Rates for 2WD cars start at about OR14 and 4WD vehicles at OR35.

Always carry water with you (a box of a dozen 1.5L bottles costs OR1.500 from petrol stations) and a towrope (OR4 from any large supermarket). If you buy three 'freezer packs' at the same time (600 baisa each), they will keep your cool box cold for a day, even in summer, and you can ask hotels to defreeze the packs at night.

INSURANCE

Check the small print on all car-hire documents to see if you are covered for taking the vehicle off-road.

ROAD CONDITIONS

Travellers comment that some roads indicated in this book as '4WD only' are passable in a 2WD. Often they are right, until something goes wrong – 2WDs are not built to withstand potholes, washboard surfaces and steep, loose-gravel inclines, let alone long distances to the next petrol station.

If travellers' letters are anything to go by, who knows over what terrain the previous driver dragged your hire car! Bear in mind, you'll get no sympathy from hire companies if your 2WD breaks down off-road (and don't forget you're not insured to be off-road in a 2WD). With virtually zero traffic on some routes you are very vulnerable, especially in extreme summer temperatures.

In short, saving on the expense of a 4WD might cost more than you bargained for.

ROAD HAZARDS

Aggressive tailgating and fast, inappropriate driving is a hazard of the capital area in particular. Camels and goats often wander onto the road – with disastrous consequences in Dhofar during the *khareef*, when locals continue to drive at the same speed regardless of the fog. After rain, the roads are exceptionally slippery.

Failing brakes on mountain roads, be-guiling soft sand and a salty crust called *sabkha* (that looks and feels hard until you drive on it) are further common hazards. As a rule, always stick to the tracks: if they suddenly stop, it's time to reverse! See also p556 for further information (particularly on the danger of flash flooding in wadis).

ROAD RULES

Traffic laws are strictly enforced, especially in Muscat. Seatbelt use is mandatory for passengers and there is a fine of OR10 for not wearing one. Drink-driving is completely forbidden and so is the use of mobile phones while driving. Most vehicles are fitted with a beeping device for Oman's maximum speed limit of 120km per hour.

Note that it's illegal to drive a dirty car – the fine is OR5!

RESPONSIBLE DRIVING

Before heading off over uncharted territory, it's worth asking if you really need to be the person who scars this piece of desert. It's better, generally, for your safety and for the environment if you stick to previous tracks (see the boxed text, p554).

Hitching

Hitching is possible but inadvisable as most roads outside the capital area have low volumes of traffic. Bear in mind that you may often get left between towns while the driver turns off piste to his or her village. You therefore need to be self-sufficient enough to survive the hottest part of a day – even a night or more in some parts of the interior – without any prospect of an onward or return ride.

Always carry water and avoiding hitching off-road. It is the custom to offer the driver some remuneration. If you're driving, you will often be asked to give a ride to locals but see p557 for some words of caution!

Local Transport

TAXI & MICROBUSES

Oman has a comprehensive system of cheap but slow long-distance shared taxis (painted orange and white) and minibuses. Oman's shared taxis and minibuses do not wait until they are full to leave. Instead, drivers pick up and drop off extra passengers along the way.

To visit certain places of interest, you'll often have to take an 'engaged' taxi (ie private, not shared) – generally four times the price of a shared taxi as you have to pay for all the seats. Bargain hard before you get in and try to avoid hailing a taxi from a hotel. Fares quoted in this chapter are for shared taxis unless otherwise stated.

© Lonely Planet Publications. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above - 'Do the right thing with our content.'