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# Desert treasures

Combining incredible natural beauty with rich historical sites, Oman has long been admired by in-the-know travellers. Author and Oman resident, Tony Walsh shares its unique appeal

Skirting the coast on the Sea of Oman, Muscat occupies a stunning location enhanced by sympathetic low rise whitewashed buildings which are overlooked by the soaring Al-Hajar Mountains beyond the city. The sublime scene, pretty much unchanged for centuries, makes a striking impression. So whenever I welcome first-time visitors to this part of the world – such

as friends Jon and Sarah who I recently invited over from England – I always begin right here in the capital.

We set off in the early morning for, arguably, the jewel amongst Muscat's buildings, the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque. From a distance it's a plain simple monotone structure, on closer inspection, the walls morph with beautifully carved calligraphy decorating

the exterior walls. It's only when walking through the classic Persian garden of Paradise that the tone also changes into a kaleidoscope of colour and, as we found, this is an introduction to the interior of the men's mosque. Massive Burmese teak doors form the entrance into this prayer room which is flooded with light from chandeliers glittering with Swarovski crystals. Sarah was only half

The Muttrah corniche, Muscat's attractive promenade, stretches for three kilometres along the capital's waterfront



Right, from top: One of the largest chandeliers in the world hangs in Muscat's Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque. Trimmed with Swarovski crystals and gold plated metalwork, it hangs a total of 14 metres from the ornate ceiling and weighs some 8.5 tons; jewellery shop in Muscat's Mutrah Souk. Facing page: Splendid sandy beaches are found on Oman's coastal fringe.



joking when she said the enormous central chandelier was larger than her London apartment. We found the room full of decoration with classic Persian style designs made from what must be millions of individual cut tiles that covered the interior walls and giant dome.

Leaving the mosque, it's a drive of about 40 minutes across town to the National Museum. This treasure house is a spacious, airy building devoted entirely to exhibits directly connected with

Oman and therefore a "must see" on a first visit to the sultanate. I was especially interested in seeing the original *mihrab* (the niche directing worshippers in a mosque to the direction of Mecca) from an old mosque in a remote valley in Oman, as I had seen it in its original location. Displayed in a different room are prehistoric tools, some beautifully created and one, found in southern Oman, made by our ancestors two million years ago. How extraordinary

to gaze upon an object that spanned the entire history of man. In the centre of a hall, we came across the full-sized replica of a 5,000-year-old sailing boat, the *Majan*. Constructed simply from reeds, leather and date palm fibre, vessels such as this are thought to have once sailed between Oman and India during the Bronze Age.

We could have stayed much longer among the ancient exhibits, but we needed to press on to the mountains of Al Jabal Al Akhdar. However,



I was determined to show as much variety in a short visit to Muscat as possible, so we made a quick souvenir stop at Mutrah Souk, one of the oldest markets in Oman. The souk's name in Arabic is *Suq Ad Dhaham*, Market of Darkness, which is precisely what the labyrinth of covered alleys make it. Despite the attractions of all the antique shops and very persuasive shopkeepers, Frankincense – the fragrant sap of a tree from southern Oman – was our goal. Added to hot coals on an incense burner, it emits a

rich pine and lemony perfume. We tracked down the sweetest smelling shop and stocked up on bags of Frankincense, before leaving for our drive that would take us high into the mountains behind Muscat.

An immaculate road stretches from Muscat for 170km straight towards the mountains peaks. The final 17km is a stupendous ascent snaking 1,400 metres from the plain to the plateau of Al Jabal Al Akhdar, the Green Mountain.

I had arranged that we would meet a young friend,

**Any later and the heat of the day means the flowers lose their fragrance to the air and any fortunate passers-by**

Nasser, at the luxurious Alila Jabal Akhdar hotel to help us discover the secrets behind one of Oman's most venerated craft industries, rose-water production.

The roses of Al Jabal Al Akhdar are Damask rose (*Rosa x Damascena*), with the flowers reaching full bloom from March to April each year. Early morning, around sunrise, is the best time for picking. Any later and the heat of the day means the flowers lose their fragrance to the air and any fortunate passers-by. Nasser took us

to a vast crescent of small terraced fields that cling to the mountain slopes. Each plot shares the water from an extraordinarily complex system of man-made water channels, a *Falaj*, that brings the water from a spring. Following meandering paths between the small fields, we clambered up stones artfully arranged as steps in the retaining walls of the minuscule terraced plots before finally reaching the rose gardens.

The work of picking the rose flowers is a labour-

intensive task, carried out by the family who will produce the rose-water. The flowers themselves are a graduated shade of pink, which fades towards the centre into a pale cream. The scent of each flower, an intense, honey-like fragrance, is boosted by the aroma of fruit and a hint of something else entirely, perhaps cinnamon.

Nasser introduced us to one of the harvesters, Abdullah, who invited us to visit his rose-water factory. With its intense heat and soot-covered walls, this



Main photo: The Al Jabal Al Akhdar range extends some 300km in Oman. Above: Harvesting the Damask rose, renowned for its heady fragrance



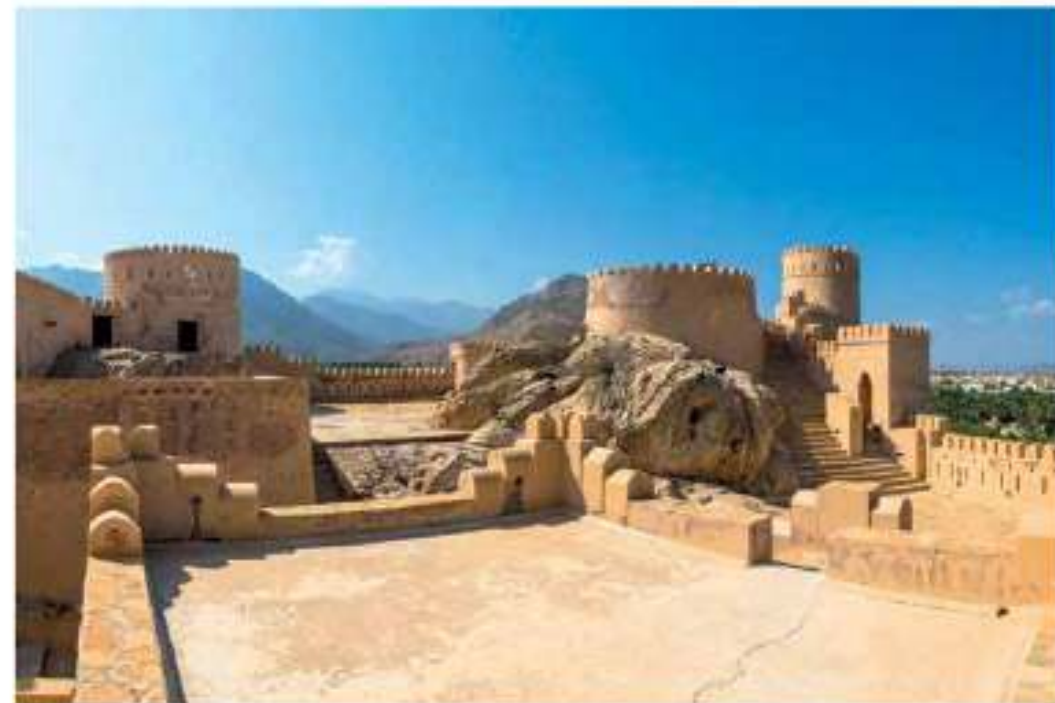
Fortunately, the upper part of the route is a rough stone track, so our pace was about the same as a lazy camel's. This made it a little easier to avoid the treacherous drop at the edge of the road



Facing page: The remote mountain village of Bilad Sayt is one of the highlights of a 4x4 trip along Wadi Bani Awf. Above: Nakhal Fort stands 120km from the capital Muscat

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

## [ EXPERIENCE ]



distillation plant was as diminutive as the fields in which the roses grew. The heat came from an oven in which the rose flowers were steamed while suspended in a clay pot. Cleverly placed copper bowls caught the steam and, after distilling, this became Oman's much sought after smoke infused rose-water. Commonly used to add its distinctive flavour to food, it's also valued for various medicinal uses.

We left these cool mountains the following morning for an adventurous drive down through Wadi Bani Awf. Unlike many valleys in Oman, the spectacular Wadi Bani Awf is remarkable for being entirely driveable, albeit at times with heart-stopping drops on the side of the road. Fortunately, the upper part of the route is a rough stone track, so our pace was about

the same as a lazy camel's. This made it a little easier to avoid the treacherous drop at the edge of the road.

Although the route through the valley with its steep towering cliffs is reason enough to make this drive, there are several small villages which add to its attraction, one of which is Bilad Sayt which I especially wanted us to visit. This village, set in a vast bowl within the mountains, is a tight mass of houses overlooking small fields and shaded pathways under date palms. The local community also grows papaya, banana and so much more beneath the palms. At the edge of the orchards, we stopped near the village school and enjoyed cold drinks at a small shop. It's hard to imagine a more tranquil oasis.

Despite the bucolic charms of Bilad Sayt we pulled ourselves away

for our final destination, Nakhal Fort, where it was good to meet its custodian Adil, who not only looks after one of Oman's most attractive forts but is an acclaimed poet. As we were probably the final visitors of the day, we had the fort to ourselves. Surrounding the slopes and peak of a rugged hill, the fort dominates the landscape. We climbed up to the living accommodation, peeking into its ancient bare rooms overlooking a lush date oasis at the base of the mountains. Looking out to the other direction, a vast plain extended towards our terminus, Muscat – a few hour's drive from our Oman! mountain escapade and a world away from the English homes my fellow explorers would soon return to. ■

*Singapore Airlines flies daily to Dubai, with connecting flights available to Muscat*