

by Ihab Zaki

It was a long-standing dream of mine to see the last remaining destination in the Arab world on my bucket list: Oman. I have technically finished with the Middle East aside from Kuwait, which I have no desire to see at this time but one never knows. The opportunity arose for me to accompany one of our groups that would be visiting for a very short 6 days. The group was comprised of 20 travelers that had signed up for the tour through the San Francisco Museum of Asian Art. They first visited Dubai and Qatar and I joined them in the later for the border crossing into Oman. Our group lamented that we only had a brief period of time to



explore the country and that would barely be enough for a quick glimpse! Bruce Wannell a writer and linguist with an encyclopedic knowledge was the lecturer for our tour. A graduate of Oriel College Oxford, he speaks 8 languages including Arabic, Farsi, Pashtun and Urdu. He spoke on subjects ranging from Oman's maritime legacy, to the imperial presence of colonial Portugal in the region, and the Omani contributions to the development of medieval poetry, the world of Islamic art and architecture.

Our land crossing from the UAE into Oman proceeded without incident and we were greeted upon arrival into the country by our guide Salem and driver Abdullah, 2 proud Omanis. They were dressed in traditional garb consisting of an elegant, crisp white robe (dishdasha) and a massar, a typical head covering that is an embroidered wool turban tied onto the head.

We set out towards our first stop near the western town of Ibri at wadi Al Ayn. This prehistoric burial site on top of a hill has a line of 21 conical mounds referred to as beehive style tombs. This necropolis of aligned rocky crests that date back to 3000 BC is in a remarkably good state of preservation. It required some climbing on volcanic rock and uneven terrain to reach this UNESCO World Heritage Site but it was worth the effort.

From here we traveled to our first of Oman's 500 forts and castles and no we were not going to visit all 500! The Fort of Jabreen, built in the 17th century was once the Omani seat of knowledge and learning. The fortification differs from the others as it was built in a time of peace as a palace. It has been restored and now houses a vast collection of furniture, kitchen utensils, arms and pottery. The highlight is the breathtakingly beautiful ceiling artwork that includes intricate woodcarvings. This is considered to be one of the highest achievements in Omani painting.

We stayed at the Golden Tulip Hotel in the historic town of Nizwa, an ideal spot as it was just a few kms from the city center. The hotel is in a superb location near the mountains that surround the city. It was a treat to return here after a full day of sightseeing. The public areas have high ceilings painted in Omani style, impressive chandeliers, colorful hand carved furniture and glowing brass lamps that enhance the mood. Our group would meet to discuss the day's events while

partaking in light refreshments. Bruce chose to give one of his lectures here, as it was easy to transport oneself to a different period of time in these settings. We would then enjoy a candlelit dinner by the pool, a perfect ending to an exciting day of discovery and adventure.



The following day everyone was eagerly looking forward to visiting “old” Nizwa and its fort. This well preserved, 17th century town is bisected by alleys and winding streets that feature arches and an old souk. The imposing fort of Nizwa was built on a huge solid rock and has 24 cannon openings. The view from the top was superbly panoramic. From this vantage point one could look out at the older section of town with its homes built out of mud brick. Your eye would be drawn to the lush oasis dotted with thousands of palm trees spreading from the fort to the foothills of the nearby mountains that surround the town. A picture-perfect view and photographer’s dream setting.

Our group was “set free” to explore the souk and we immediately scattered to all corners all hoping to find that one treasured item. While some headed straight to the jewelers in a quest to discover silver inlaid beads and antique pieces, others left in search of pottery, incense burners and frankincense.

I was not immune to the shopping bug as I was on a mission to find my long-coveted Khangar, a typical Omani dagger. It took a bit of bargaining but I am now the proud owner of an exquisite, handmade, silver dagger framed in a beautiful, wooden box. My mind is filled with thoughts of where I will display it in my home!

We then headed to the nearby town of Bahla, to explore the country’s oldest fort whose foundation dates back to the pre-Islamic era. It is a large complex with its own mosque surrounded by 7 miles of monumental walls that rise above both the old and the new town. The fort is listed by UNESCO and will undergo reconstruction to preserve this historic site. After a full morning of touring we took a break to partake in a nourishing lunch. Leaving the restaurant refreshed and well sated, we walked to the nearby cottage industry where they weave articles of clothing. We saw how they use the indigo plant to produce the intensely rich purple color that they use to dye the shawls. Next we visited a small pottery factory and were able to observe the process used to create pieces. The potter began by mixing the earth and water to produce the clay. The clay was placed on a wheel and the potter spins it, controlling it with a foot pedal while nimble fingers move quickly to shape the piece. It is then transferred to a kiln to be fired. We did not have time to wait around to see the finished product but there were many other items on display for purchase.

Having spent a busy morning exploring on foot, we boarded the vehicle and drove to a typical Omani town situated on the fringe of a palm oasis. We left the vehicle and strolled in the shade of the palm trees until we reached the small village. Once we arrived, we entered one of the oldest mud brick homes (400 years) that had been converted into a place for tourists to get a glimpse of how Omani villagers lived through the centuries. We watched the women baking bread, making henna and grinding coffee and afterwards we were invited into the guestroom to sit cross-legged on the carpets. Here we were served the fruits of their labor as we sipped the delicious Omani coffee mixed with cardamom and ate moist, delicious dates. The young girl who hosted us gave a detailed explanation of how the structure of Omani clans, tribes and families is formed. She showed us a copy



of her family tree that represented over 1000 years of lineage accurately recorded to the present, which included her father. Females are not listed on the tree as this is a patriarchal society and lineage follows the male members. We retraced our steps, taking a slight detour to pass through Tanuf, a deserted town that was destroyed in the 1970's. It had been the seat of a separatist imam who was aiming to split the country in 2 and thus was bombed into submission. We arrived here around sunset and the thin light of the gloaming hours coupled with the eeriness of the empty setting provided an excellent photo opportunity. From this desolate spot we returned to the lavishness of our resort for another sumptuous meal.

After breakfast we headed out to begin our next great adventure and what an amazing expedition it turned out to be! Our group divided into 8 comfortable Land Cruisers taking along our luggage and a picnic lunch as we set out to cross the mountain range separating Nizwa and the central desert from Muscat and the valley near the Gulf of Oman. We climbed (in our vehicles) to the top of a 2100-meter summit from where we could see both sides of the valley. We stopped in the village of Misfat el Ibriyin, perched on a mountain that overlooks a stunning gorge. This quaint almost deserted town was lush with a variety of flora that surrounds one of the ancient falajs or water canals. These canals used to bring water through tunnels from the source to the village. We continued on our way, still climbing on a paved road to a point where the temperature dropped about 20 degrees and the asphalt ended. Our vehicles continued driving off-road on rugged terrain heading down all the way from the peak to the coastal capital of Muscat. The drive proved to be spectacular as we convoyed slowly to admire the rock formations, the mineral layers in the mountainside, the vegetation and the climbing goats eating the thorny acacias. We passed small creeks, deep gorges and rugged canyons. We had our picnic at one of the smaller oasis at the mouth of the canyon before proceeding to our last fort to visit in Oman. The fort of Nakhal has been refurbished and is filled with traditional handicrafts and historical artifacts. It has richly decorated ceilings, doors and windows. Once again we were rewarded by an amazing view from the top of the surrounding oasis and mountains. We had one last stop before we would reach Muscat the largest city and capital of Oman. We visited a hot spring where we took off our shoes and soaked our tired feet in the relaxing waters. There were many tiny fishes (*Garra rufa*) that nibbled on our feet reminiscent of Thai foot pedicures. To some of us it was a very weird sensation but we all had a good laugh about it. We rested a bit here by the spring, before continuing on to the stunning resort where we would be spending the night. Nestled amidst high rocky cliffs overlooking a pristine bay on the Oman Gulf the setting was magical and the perfect place to end an exhausting but pleasurable day.

The last 2 days of our tour would have been dedicated to exploring the museums and monuments of Muscat. But at dinner the night before we were to depart for the city, our guide Salem shared news of Sultan Qaboos return. The sultan had spent the last eight months in Germany undergoing cancer treatment and the average Omani had no idea of how serious his illness was, of how he had been progressing or if he would ever come home. His arrival had surprised this country of 3.2 million and the jubilation was obvious to us just watching Salem's emotion as he shared his news. The sultan is much loved, viewed as a benevolent ruler and a breath of fresh air after the turmoil that was the reign of terror of his father. He has done much to modernize his country and move it towards the future. Spontaneous celebrations and hastily planned events welcoming him home would be taking place over the next few days and so we were forced to make some schedule adjustments and managed after all to visit 3 of the most beautiful small museums of the city, such as Beit Al-Zubair exhibiting fine examples of traditional jewelry, weapons, costume and household equipment part of a very extensive collection housed in a 1902 built elegant home. Then Beit Adam, where we met the curator: Sheikh Latif Al



Balushi, who has a passion for collecting antiques. We marvelled at the eclectic display including rare Islamic coins, paintings, maps and documents illuminating Muscat's history then enjoyed a home made lunch in his garden.

We then explored the museums of Beit Baranda and Beit Mozna, 2 quaint small establishments; one displaying modern arts created by contemporary Omani artists and the other depicted the geology of Oman and its development as well as Oman's maritime legacy. In between the drives from museum to another we couldn't help but get caught up in all of the festivities. School children and government workers enjoyed unexpected vacation days, streets were closed off to traffic for parades and marches, and we were surrounded by joyful chaos and just went along with it. The Omanis wore pins with the image of the sultan and scarves displaying the country colors as they waved flags, danced and sang throughout the day and night.

By the day of our departure the city had settled down and was returning to normal. We were able to observe the true face of Muscat and it turned out to be the antithesis of most large metropolitan cities of the Arab world. It was quieter (now that the festivities were ending). The traffic moved in an orderly fashion I suspect due to the very well organized large lanes, the excellent paved streets and a population that strictly adheres to the rules of the road. The city is pleasing to the eye from an architectural standpoint as the buildings (homes, museums, mosques, ministries and all other edifices) comply to strict regulations that dictate how high they can be and what color (all are a spotless white reminiscent of a Greek island). The corniche (promenade along the sea) is very inviting as it leads to parks, rest areas, green zones, and beautiful domed gazebos all looking out over the marina. The old port that was once used for commercial transport now welcomes passenger cruise ships and luxury yachts. The only deviation is an older vessel belonging to the sultan. One section of the city is dedicated to larger structures such as the sultan's palace, the new historical museum of Muscat set to open in a few months and immaculate gardens. The lampposts in this area are replicas of 19th century European ones, an elegant touch. Our group lamented that we had had only 6 short days to explore the country and that it was barely enough time for a quick glimpse!



We were treated to some of the most delectable cuisine the Middle East has to offer, a flavorful amalgam of spices mixing the Indian with the Arabian and the East African. Every meal that we partook in whether in the smaller restaurant along the roadside or the more elegant resort was a pleasurable culinary experience. We feasted on buffets serving fresh fish from the nearby sea, lobster, shrimp and oysters. This sort of lavish spread is just one of the reasons why would be worth extending your stay at the end of your tour!

We did not get to the Rub al Khali (Empty Quarter) see the frankincense trees in Dhofar or the blowholes on the beach at Salalah. Only proving my point that 6 days was not enough time to get the full measure of this country. Not as oil rich and relatively peaceful compared to some of its neighbors, Oman manages to fly under the radar. The government recently awarded a contract to a Spanish consulting team to develop a strategy to promote tourism, which is considered a major source of income for both the government and the local inhabitants. The people are welcoming and eager to share their country with visitors. They take great pride in the beauty of its geological wonders and topographic marvels. From what I have seen and experienced the country is well on its way to becoming a choice destination for discerning travelers.