



Tours

W&O



Sur

Oman

Oman, where desert and mountain meet the sea. The largest country on the Arabian Peninsula, it has a landscape of breathtaking mountains, boundless desert, vast sand dunes, and empty beaches lining a 1700 kilometre coastline.

Her desert oases, ancient forts, and hill villages bear witness to a 5000-year-old culture, which has only recently begun to engage with the modern world.

Unused to tourism, the Omanis are generally friendly and go out of their way to make visitors feel welcome.

Rainbow Tours is offering a programme of guided and self-drive tours, which take you to the heart of the country, its landscape and culture. These are short tours that combine well with a beach holiday at one of Muscat's luxury hotels.

Oman is very different from Dubai. Omanis have a deep respect for their country and its customs, and have gone to great lengths to preserve their Arabian culture with its rich heritage of art, dress and music. There are strict limits on the height of buildings, and all new buildings have to display elements of traditional Omani architecture.

Oman has been ruled by the All-Said family since Abdul All-Said became the first ruler in 1744. Sultan Qaboos has ruled since 1970 when he overthrew his own

father in a bloodless coup with the intention of modernising the country. He has pursued this goal in a remarkably sustainable and beneficial way, which has earned him the affection of all Omanis.

The Sultan is well-respected in the region as a peacemaker and has excellent relations with Britain. There has been a close relationship with the British for 150 years, and English is Oman's second language. There is a tolerant attitude to foreigners and all the international hotels serve alcohol. Omani women enjoy equal rights. Many choose not to wear the burqa, or even cover their heads, and you will find them in the restaurants, bars and shopping malls of modern Muscat.

Oman has only recently opened its doors to tourism, and is pursuing quality rather than quantity. There is still only a handful of luxury hotels in Muscat, although two major luxury hotel complexes will open over the next five years. Tourism inland is almost non-existent. Historic Nizwa, the former capital and main focus for cultural tourism, has only two small 4-star hotels.

To aid the development of tourism inland, 14 historic forts and castles have been restored. These were built in the seventeenth century to protect the valuable date plantations in oases nestling at the foot of the Hajar mountains. Most are within reach of a day-tour from Muscat, although we recommend two- or three-night inland tours.



WHEN TO GO

Oman offers year-round sunshine. Most people travel over the British winter, between October and April, when the temperature in Muscat and northern Oman ranges between approx 24° and 35°C; January and February are the coolest months.

In the summer months, May to September, the temperature can climb to the high 40°C's, and become stifling. However, many people still enjoy Oman in May and June; it is in July that high humidity kicks in and it becomes less of a pleasure.

GMT +4

GETTING THERE

Oman Air has a direct daily flight from Heathrow, overnight out, daytime return. Flying time 7h30.

Gulf Air, also from Heathrow, have two or more daily flights to Muscat via Bahrain. Flight time eight hours, plus time on ground.

British Airways also fly daily, departing in the morning, with a brief stop in Abu Dhabi en route. The eight-hour flight arrives in Muscat late evening and departs around midnight.

For those departing from regional UK airports, connections are possible via London or Dubai on Emirates.

Muscat

Muscat, Oman's capital, is a relaxed coastal city with a dramatic mountain backdrop, and an attractive blend of tradition and modernity. For holiday-makers, the favourite feature is its beach – miles of soft sand lapped by the warm waters of the Gulf of Oman.

Muscat is a great holiday base: you can take day tours inland to the main sights of the region. Or you can combine a few days at the beach with a stay in the interior.

At the city's historic heart and retaining the feeling of old Arabia is the crescent-shaped harbour full of small dhows bringing their catch to the fish market, at one end, whilst at the other the Muttrah souq is still primarily focused towards local people. There are spices from India, silks from China and cottons from Egypt. Charcoal burners with little pots of locally produced frankincense, sandalwood and myrrh, make popular gifts, and the silver shops have a good range of modern and antique jewellery.

Old Muscat and Muttrah retain their old-Arabia feeling, but modern Muscat is a rapidly developing city, its wide roads lined with date palms, and low-rise buildings in spotless white. There are spacious parks and shopping malls.

The Chedi

This sublime hotel is testament to the power of design to create an atmosphere of blissful tranquillity and a perfect environment in which to relax and enjoy. Its mixture of Omani architecture and clean cubic lines offer an antidote to the opulent style of most Gulf hotels. This is a hotel for romantics, especially honeymooners, but also any couple seeking to spend some quality time together.

The 36 Chedi Club suites are models of Zen perfection; the centrepiece is a sunken black granite bath. There is a separate shower room which can simulate a monsoon with both overhead and removable jet shower heads. The sitting room has low level couches and every modern convenience. There are also 52 spacious Deluxe rooms, and 55 slightly smaller

Serai Superior rooms. Rooms either look out on to the ocean, the water gardens, or across to the Hajar mountains.

You can spend the day on a lounge on the hotel's private beach, or relaxing by the infinity swimming pool, reserved for adults; the larger Serai pool is for families. The Spa is a haven for luxurious pampering. The hotel restaurant is one of the best in Muscat with four menus: Thai, Indian, Arabic and Mediterranean. All are equally delicious and prepared in front of your eyes in separate kitchens dotted around the dining room. Snack bars are adjacent to both swimming pools. The hotel is located on the coast to the north of Muscat – about 20 minutes drive into the old town and 15 minutes from the airport.

FROM £145 B/B



Above left: Muscat harbour

Above: The Chedi

Top right: The Chedi

Above right: Sultan Quaboos Grand Mosque

Left: The Chedi watergarden

VISAS

Visas are required for all visitors. British passport holders can obtain a single entry visa on arrival for approx £9 sterling.

HEALTH

There are no specific health requirements.

Tap water is considered safe to drink, although bottled mineral water is widely available in hotels and restaurants.

The Intercontinental

From the outside the 265-room Intercontinental looks rather unappealing, but its brutalist look belies a stylish white interior with an airy seven-storey atrium. It is a good choice for families as it has 35 acres of landscaped gardens leading down to the beach which stretches for miles in both directions, and good leisure facilities: two massive swimming pools, six tennis courts, two air-conditioned squash courts. The Health Centre includes a gym, jacuzzi, sauna, steam bath and plunge pool. The hotel can arrange waterskiing, scuba diving, windsurfing and fishing offshore. There is a purpose-built adventure playground and children's pool. Five restaurants offer Polynesian, Mexican, Mediterranean, and Arabic cuisine.

FROM £109 B/B

Grand Hyatt

One of Muscat's largest luxury hotels, the Grand Hyatt is located in the heart of the diplomatic and government quarter, on a prime beach facing the Gulf of Oman. The style is Arab opulent – Arabian Nights meets Sun City. It's designed to impress, with huge lobby areas, stained-glass, chandeliers, and antique as well as modern artworks, with the accent on bronze sculpture.

The wings of the hotel form a U-shape to create an interior courtyard which contains the leisure area with a lawn leading to the pools, and the beach beyond. The grounds are landscaped to the last centimetre to make space for a feature swimming pool, complete with lazy river, geysers, waterfalls and jacuzzi. Club Olympus, the hotel's health club, has a fitness

centre with a gym, tennis courts, squash court, spa, sauna, steam bath and whirlpool bath. There is direct access to the beach and a watersports centre provides equipment for snorkelling, windsurfing, sailing, boating, etc. Scuba diving can be arranged.

There is a restaurant serving Middle Eastern and international cuisine; another serves Tuscan food. In addition, there is a poolside Asian restaurant, a tea-lounge, a bar and the Copacabana nightclub featuring live entertainment.

This hotel serves both the business and the leisure market. For the leisure traveller, there are 240 spacious luxury rooms and suites, finished to a very high standard, and with all modern conveniences. FROM £115 B/B

Al Bustan Palace

With its striking Islamic architecture, this is one of the Gulf's best-known hotels. Built in 1983 as a private palace to host a Gulf summit, this is a resort fit for kings. In 2008 it was extensively refurbished. The hotel is set in 200 acres of landscaped gardens in a prime location just south of Old Muscat, between the jagged Hajar Mountains and the Gulf of Oman. It has a one-kilometre private beach, spacious swimming pool, a Wellness Centre, tennis complex, putting green, children's playground and pool. The three main restaurants serve superb French, Chinese and International cuisine, and seafood specialties. The luxurious rooms and suites all have private balconies looking out at the mountains, the gardens or the sea.

FROM £180 B/B



DIVING & WATER-BASED ACTIVITIES

The Gulf of Muscat offers excellent scuba diving, and this can be organised by most of the hotels. There are also independent dive centres – the Omani Dive Centre and Bluzone in particular.

One of the most popular dive sites is Fahal Island, about 30 minutes by boat. There are ten dive sites here, which vary in depth from 10m to 42m.

Stingrays, Honeycomb eels, angelfish, sea turtles and Black-tip sharks (harmless) are commonly sighted.

Other boat trips can be arranged for snorkelling, dolphin watching, whale watching and game fishing. Or you can simply take a scenic dhow cruise at sunset.



Top left: Grand Hyatt

Above left: Al Bustan Palace

Above right: Intercontinental

Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah Resort

This is Muscat's newest resort: three sister hotels set on a bay at Barr Al Jissah, about 15 minutes drive south of the old town. The hotels are on a 450-metre private beach with 124 acres of landscaped gardens and a spectacular mountain backdrop. Whichever of the hotels you choose, all rooms are fitted to luxuriously high standards, have private balconies or terraces and are sea-facing.

AL WAHA is the largest hotel, with 302 rooms. It is designed to appeal to families and has the most facilities, including a Children's Club, an entertainment centre, and five restaurants. The **AL BANDAR**, in the centre of the resort, has 198 rooms and is a great choice for

couples or families. Facilities include eight restaurants and bars, and a nightclub. **AL HUSN** is an exclusive, ultra-luxurious boutique-style hotel. Situated atop a cliff at one end of the resort, the 180 bedrooms have panoramic views. It has two excellent restaurants, three bars and its own private 100-metre beach.

The resort as a whole has 6000 square metres of swimming pools, a 500-metre 'lazy river' connecting the Al Waha and Al Bandar pools, tennis courts, watersports, gyms, a signature Shangri-La CHI Spa and a PADI dive centre. The extensive private beach and manicured grounds provide a sense of tranquillity and privacy that is unexpected in a resort of this size.
AL WAHA FROM £118 B/B
AL BANDAR FROM £145 B/B
AL HUSN FROM £217 B/B



Nizwa

The town of Nizwa is set in a date palm oasis at the foot of the Hajar Mountains, about 140 kms from Muscat. Occupying a strategic crossroads on the caravan routes, it became the capital of Oman in the 6th century.

Nizwa's famous souk is especially busy on Friday morning, market day. It has been extensively rebuilt with different halls for various foodstuffs – fruit and vegetables, meat and fish. The craft souk has shops and stalls selling silverware, antiques, leather and woven goods, pottery and copper.

Next to the souk is Nizwa fort and the new Sultan Qaboos mosque. The giant round tower of Nizwa fort was completed in 1668. Restored in the 1980s, it is open to the public. There is far more to see than you might imagine, and the

views from the top, over the town and oasis, are stupendous.

The **FALAJ DARIS HOTEL** is an inexpensive, modern hotel just 4 km outside Nizwa, with restaurant, bar, a shady courtyard and two swimming pools. It makes an ideal base for touring the area. The rooms have air-conditioning and satellite television. An overnight stay would enable you to see the main sights and then drive back over one of the Hajar mountain passes, but even a day trip is rewarding.



TOURING OMAN

Private guided tours are an excellent way to explore Oman. You travel in a 4WD, usually a Toyota Landcruiser, with a driver guide. New roads are being built almost as fast as you can drive down them, so you should go whilst the picturesque mountain tracks are still there.

Our two short tours, of Nizwa and the mountains, and of Sur and Wahiba Sands can be combined into one

'Best of Oman' tour, of four to six days duration, depending on itinerary. Ask for details.

These tours can also be done as self-drive, but this is for experienced off-road drivers as the routes involve steep mountain tracks and driving across sand.

Jebel Akhdar, the Hajar Mountains

Jebel Akhdar (meaning 'green mountain') is misleading since it refers to a large part of the Hajar mountain range north of Nizwa, including Jebel Shams, Wadi Bani Awf and the Saiq Plateau.

However, it is also used to refer to a collection of villages on the Saiq Plateau, where the cooler climate allows all manner of crops to grow which thrive nowhere else, including peaches, pomegranates, apricots, figs, grapes, apples, plums, pears, almonds and walnuts.

Saiq Plateau

Orchards are laid out in terraces along the mountain slopes and irrigated by a traditional system of open water channels, invented by the Persians in 1000BC. Picturesque villages including Saiq, Al Ain, and abandoned Wadi Bani Habib, dot the landscape and overlook spectacular gorges and wadis. The roses of Jebel al Akhdar fill the air with fragrance in March and April when they are in full bloom and rose water is distilled in the homes of the villagers.

This is a good area for walking – best between March and June and in September and October. There is a hotel on the plateau, the **AL JEBEL AL AKHDAR HOTEL**.

Jebel Shams

The mountain passes make an exciting alternative route between Nizwa and Muscat. One takes you up to Jebel Shams, 'mountain of the sun', the highest peak in Oman and more than 3000m above sea level. It is a popular route because of the spectacular views across gorges, ravines and canyons.

There is a place to stay overnight, the **JEBEL SHAMS CAMP**, which has some rooms but is primarily a campsite. It can be cold up here, even in mid-summer. This is a popular area for trekking and off-road driving. Even in this remote area one comes across tiny villages clinging to the hillside. On this drive, you can also visit the splendidly restored fort at Nakhl.

Wadi Bani Awf

The route across Wadi Bani Awf is Oman's most spectacular mountain drive. It can be done in either direction, and will take about four hours. A 4WD is essential. It is a track rather than a graded road; part is along the floor of the gorge, part takes you high up into the mountains. There you find the mountain oasis of Bilad Said, which must be Oman's most picturesque village.



GUIDED TOUR MOUNTAINS AND FORTS

This three-day tour includes the Jebel Akhdar Plateau, the restored forts at Nizwa, Jabrin (perhaps the finest castle in Oman) and Nakhl, the spectacular Jebel Shams mountain range and numerous tiny villages, wadis and oases.

Enjoy stunning scenery including breathtaking views over Oman's equivalent of the Grand Canyon; the beautiful terraced mountain oasis of

Bilad Said; and explore the ancient town at Nizwa, Oman's former capital, taking time to visit the Souk.

FROM £670 INCLUDING ALL MEALS AND ACCOMMODATION WHILE ON TOUR, ALL TRANSPORT, ENTRANCE FEES AND SERVICES OF PRIVATE DRIVER/GUIDE



Opposite page

Above left: Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah

Above right: Nizwa Souk

Left: Al Husn Hotel pool

This page

Above left: Jebel Shams

Above right: Bilad Said

Left: Nakhal Fort

Sur & Wahiba Sands

Southeast of Muscat, the rugged, beautiful and virtually deserted coast road leads to the ancient town of Sur. Now a quiet coastal town, Sur was once an important base for trade with Africa, especially through Zanzibar, formerly under the same sultanate as Oman.

Sur has been an important dhow-building centre for many centuries, and you can visit the boatyards today and see dhows being built in the traditional way. In the 19th century, Sur had an ocean-going fleet of more than a hundred dhows.

Ras Al Jinz

Just beyond Sur is Ras Al Jinz, where Green Turtles come to nest on the beaches from about 11 pm and the hatchlings often come out just before dawn. The best time of year is between June and October, but the turtles come pretty much all year round. In the past, visiting has been rather chaotic, but now comfortable accommodation, **CARAPACE LODGE** has been built at the site.

The Ras Al Jinz Scientific Centre and viewing is much more controlled for the benefit of the turtles.

Wahiba Sands

The Wahiba Sands, about three hours from Muscat, is a vast mass of red and white sand, 140 km by 80 km, with dunes rising up to 150 metres. There is a scattering of Bedouin camps, as Bedouin herders still wander from waterhole to waterhole, and the sands actually contain quite a variety of terrain and vegetation. The changing colours of the dunes in the evening and at dawn are a photographer's delight.

The **THOUSAND NIGHTS CAMP** in the Wahiba Sands is a Bedouin encampment built for tourists about 20km into the sands. The tents are the genuine article – made of stout branches and camel hair cloth, held together by what look like giant knitting needles. No matter how hot outside, these tents somehow

remain cool, restful spaces. Concessions to the modern world include proper bedframes, and a private shower and toilet under the stars and adjacent to your tent. In the evening you are served a traditional Bedouin feast as you sit cross-legged on the carpet in the main meal tent.

By contrast, the relatively new **DESERT NIGHTS CAMP**, also in the Wahiba Sands, is one of the smartest places to stay in inland Oman, with 27 air-conditioned tented rooms featuring en suite showers, and mini fridges.



GUIDED TOUR SUR & WAHIBA SANDS

Our two-night guided tour takes you along the coast road to visit the ancient town of Sur, then on to the comfortable Carapace Lodge to overnight and see turtles nesting.

Next day head from Wahiba Sands to overnight at the Bedouin Thousand Nights Camp. Along the way, visit the oasis of Wadi Bani Khalid and if you

wish, take a refreshing dip in the deep blue-green waters.

FROM £590 INCLUDING ALL MEALS & ACCOMMODATION WHILE ON TOUR, ALL TRANSPORT, & SERVICES OF PRIVATE DRIVER/GUIDE



Above left: Sur

Top right & above left: Thousand Nights Camp

Above right: Dhow-building at Sur

Right: Wadi Bani Khalid oasis



Musandam Peninsula

The towering rocks of Musandam form the apex of an ancient elbow, the southern side of the Straits of Hormuz, a 65km-wide strip of water separating the Arabian land mass from Asia Minor. On the far horizon, tankers and container ships stream in and out of the Persian Gulf ports; closer to land, there are fishing dhows and tiny speedboats carrying goats from Iran. The main port of Khasab has some 21st century features, but elsewhere on this sparsely-populated rocky peninsula little has changed.

The mountains of Musandam plunge straight down to the sea, and many of the villages are only accessible by boat. Fishing and limited cultivation sustain the few inhabitants. Before the 1980s, there were no roads, just mountain paths. The fissures between the mountains resemble Norwegian fjords.

Travellers are attracted by the scenery, the sense of isolation, the snorkelling and the diving. The main town of Khasab, where most inhabitants live, sits on a wide bay and overlooks both the Gulf of Arabia and the Gulf of Oman. The main hotel here, the **GOLDEN TULIP RESORT HOTEL**, is adequate and has an excellent location. It has a respected PADI dive centre, which provides access to over 25 dive sites. The area is closed to commercial fishing and

the waters teem with large shoals of fish. Divers can explore drop-offs and caves, and there is plenty of wreck-diving. Equally attractive is the low number of divers.

A dhow cruise is the highlight of a stay in Khasab. The dhows journey along the coast, sailing down one of the main inlets, past tiny fishing villages. En route you stop for swimming and snorkelling. Large pods of dolphins often follow these dhows. A traditional lunch is served on board.

The mountains are sparsely populated by the semi-nomadic Shihuh people. In the winter, they tend tiny fields on the high plateaux, coming down to coastal settlements to fish and tend date palms for the summer months. Visit on a mountain safari and see the fields on the mountain-top

plains of the Sayh Plateau, the cave-like dwellings and the cultivated terraces carved into the barren limestone.

The luxurious **SIX SENSES HIDEAWAY** has a dramatic setting with mountains behind and a 1.6km sandy beach in front on the south-east of the peninsula at Zighy Bay. It has 82 extremely luxurious private villas, each with a pool. Although somewhat isolated, it has every facility, including a Six Senses Spa, gym, souk and choice of restaurants. The fastest access is by road (approx 2 hours) from Dubai airport. If you wish, you can paraglide down the cliff to the hotel – a unique way to arrive!
FROM £295 B/B



MUSANDAM ADVENTURE

Although part of Oman, the Musandam Peninsula is isolated from the rest of the country. You can drive up from Muscat – it takes four hours on tarmac from Muscat to the border at Dibba, then three hours on steep tracks to Khasab. It's far easier to take the short Oman Air flight from Muscat to Khasab, though if you have the time there is also a ferry.

Our Musandam Adventure tour uses the Oman Air flights and includes 2 nights at the Golden Tulip, Khasab, dinner and breakfast, a full-day dhow cruise with lunch, a city tour of Khasab and a half-day mountain safari. These are not private tours.

FROM £395, FULLY INCLUSIVE



Above left: Musandam
Top centre: The Golden Tulip
Top right: Six Senses Hideaway
Above & left: Dhow cruise from Khasab