

# 1 OMAN

As ever-shifting mountains of sand rise against crisp blue skies, **Lydia Bell** journeys to Oman, where you can linger in the chaos of a souq or find yourself in the serenity of the desert.

EVERYTHING is bigger in Dubai. The largest mall in the world. The only seven-star hotel. The biggest artificial island. Its neighbouring country, Oman, seems small and shy in comparison. It shirks any sense of flashiness; shies away from the showy.

Of course, that is precisely what makes it so exotic and so soulful. Oman isn't about nightlife or partying. It's about watching the slow and graceful movement of a camel caravan across the nothingness of the desert. It's in the silence of the Empty Quarter, the largest sand sea in the world, where the sculptured dunes appear to be endless. It's the joy of swimming in the *wadis* – those fertile, water-filled valleys that are clustered with lush, green palm oases. And it's in the effortless chic of the Omanis in their traditional *dishdaha* robes and *mussar* shawls worn turban-style.

While the desert of Oman will get deep into your soul – and probably your eyeballs – it's not the only show in town. There's also the epic Al Hajar mountain range, the turquoise waters of the Gulf of Oman and the romance of the wadis and date-palm groves, most within striking distance of the charming capital, Muscat.

Here are 10 ways to get beneath the skin of understated Oman...

Also known as the Rub' al Khali, Oman's Empty Quarter has sand dunes up to 250 metres high



## Get lost in the souq

Muscat's Mutrah Souq is a higgledy-piggledy, labyrinthine mix of spindly alleyways.

Here you can buy everything from antique silver Bedouin jewellery – and a lot of repro fakes – to *khanjars* (daggers), mussars and frankincense (southern Oman's history is bound up with the aromatic gum resin, which was prized throughout the ancient world).

Oman has a strong jewellery-making culture and produces fabulous, showy gold pieces. I went with a jeweller friend who understands the intricacies of labour costs and dropped \$2000 on a gold set.

However, if you don't have her intel and are looking to make a serious investment, I'd suggest requesting a shopping specialist to help you navigate the Ali Baba-style tat and Kashmiri imports.

Shop for handcrafted silver jewellery and other traditional Omani souvenirs at the Mutrah Souq



## 2

### Become a castaway

Jump on a boat and take to the ocean waves. But do it in style with Ocean Blue (oceanblueoman.com), run by Omani-Australian Clara Zawawi.

Her top boats are the *SY Azzura*, a state-of-the-art 23-metre Fountaine Pajot catamaran, and *MY Amara*, which is 43 metres of pure luxury.

I took a daytrip to the must-see Daymaniyat Islands, roughly an hour's sailing time from Muscat. These nine

rocky little islets scattered in clear, turquoise waters are a great spot for diving or snorkelling. Protected as a nature reserve since 1996, the area is a nesting place for hawksbill and green turtles and home to the rare sooty falcon.

Ocean Blue can whisk you there on a private charter. Or, on a Saturday, enjoy a cheaper daytrip for groups to Bandar Khayran Reserve aboard *SY Azzura*.

Zawawi once ran a restaurant in Kingscliff, NSW, and excels in splendid, apparently no-fuss dishes. For me, she

made barbecued hammour fillets marinated in saffron, garlic and labne and a grilled haloumi salad with local rocket and pomegranate molasses dressing.

If you're in Abu Dhabi or Dubai, Zawawi can pick you up on *MY Amara* and take you around the wilderness of the Musandam Peninsula, one of the most spectacular desert fjord routes in the world. She might stop at the Six Senses resort (sixsenses.com) in Zighy Bay for a spa treatment and dining before arriving in style in Muscat.

Six Senses resort in Zighy Bay is an oasis of luxury



## 3

### Be welcomed into a mosque

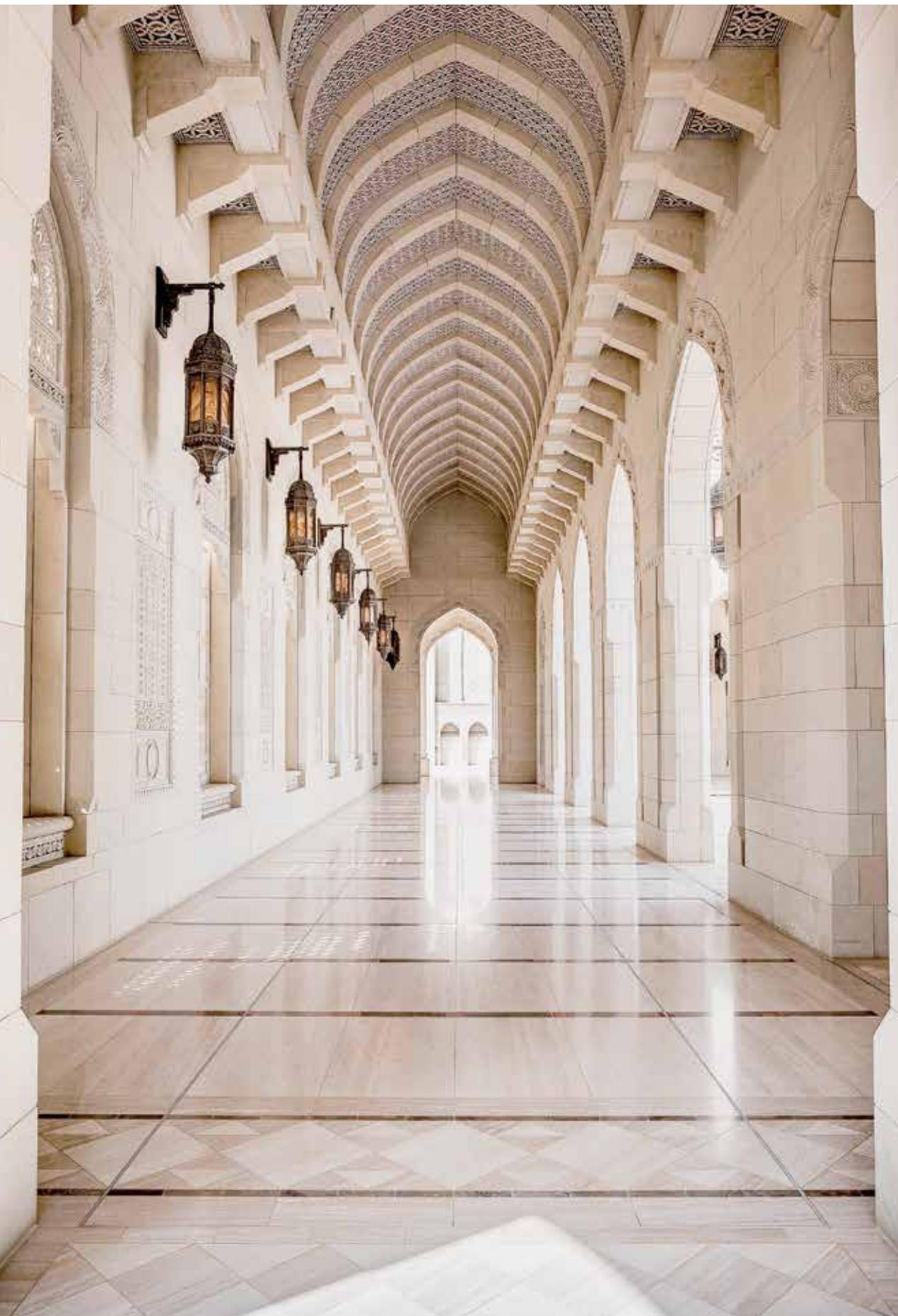
The blindingly enormous, contemporary-Islamic and minimalist Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque (sultanqaboosgrandmosque.com) opened in 2001 in Muscat. The only mosque in Oman open to non-Muslims, it's one of the largest in the Gulf and offers a warm welcome to visitors.

The mosque has room for around 20,000 worshippers in its two prayer halls – one has a golden dome and a vast Persian carpet that's said to have taken 600 weavers more than four years to complete. Outside, the compound is full of colourful, beautifully tended flowerbeds.

We were served Omani coffee and dates in a side room and later helped ourselves to free literature in English about Islam and CDs of the spoken Koran.

Almost as fascinating were the items of clothing Westerners found to cover their hair with; mine was a man's desert scarf. I thought I looked pretty suave. Then I saw the photos.

Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque's central building is bordered by arched *arwiqas*, or corridors (right); the turquoise, crystalline pools of Wadi Shab (far right)



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## 4

### Walk a wadi

Some of the most fetching aspects of the Omani landscape are its wadis: fertile mini valleys clustered with palm oases, into which water flows from the mountains. My favourite was the gorgeous Wadi Shab, a 90-minute drive from Muscat.



## 5

### See a big production

The grand-scale Royal Opera House Muscat ([rohmuscat.org.om](http://rohmuscat.org.om)) has spared no expense in bringing some of the best acts from overseas. Cultured residents of Muscat – and its visitors – needn't miss out on the likes of the Royal Danish Ballet, the Bavarian State Opera and the Bamberg Symphony.

# 6

## Jump into the longest pool in Arabia

Symmetrical, ordered and minimalist, The Chedi (ghmhotels.com/en/muscat) is Muscat's most chic hotel. Its aptly named Long Pool – the longest in the region at 103 metres – is one of the city's hotspots.

Framed by elegant palms and set in Zen-like gardens, the pool has day beds along its edges, spaced comfortably apart so you're not remotely sharing anyone else's space. An 800-square-metre spa also banks the side of the pool.

At dusk, the atmosphere takes on a party-like vibe, with groups of friends quaffing Champagne on the beds. Bliss.



The Chedi was designed by the same architects as Miami's renowned Setai hotel

# 7

## Run to the hills

When the mercury rises in Oman's sandier reaches, it's possible to retreat into the hills to a location where 10 years ago there wasn't even a paved road.

The remote Alila Jabal Akhdar resort (alilahotels.com/jabalakhdar) is two and a half

hours from Muscat and is perched 2000 metres above sea level, where the air is fresh and crisp. Two years ago, boutique Asian group Alila Hotels and Resorts opened the 86-suite-and-villa outpost built from the pink-purple rock in the environs.

It has views over a gorge and the Al Hajar mountain range, which defines the somewhat harsh beauty of

Oman's landscape. Alfresco eating is the done thing: picnics under palm trees and starlit suppers where you can enjoy locally grown produce from the area's abundant orchards.

By day, it's fun to trek the canyons, gorges and rock formations. The best month to visit is May, when sweet damask roses turn the hills pink.



Alila Jabal Akhdar overlooks the untouched landscape of the Al Hajar mountain range

# 8

## Discover a traditional Omani house

The Bait Al Zubair (baitalzubairmuseum.com), a museum in Old Muscat that's been converted from a private house, is a gift to anyone who wants to imbibe a bit of Omani culture.

Sheikh Al Zubair bin Ali (who served as a minister and adviser to three former sultans) founded it as a family home in 1914. There's a fantastic section where a series of rooms has been decorated as you'd find them in a traditional home.

I saw a curated collection of Omani artefacts that included swords, firearms, regional costumes and portraits of various royals, such as the current, Sandhurst-educated Sultan of Oman. (His image is seen throughout the country – which is no bad thing as he's something of a silver fox.)



Flight path

# MCT

Qantas flies to Dubai from Sydney and Melbourne, with connections to Muscat with partner Emirates. qantas.com



## 9 Escape to the desert

The ultimate Omani destination is the Empty Quarter, an ocean of sand that measures more than 583 square kilometres. You'll find sand in your bed, your eyes and all over your camera lens – it even manages to sneak into the air-conditioning systems of cars – but missing out on the experience is unthinkable.

To be amid nothingness offers a new perspective on life and the ultimate desert camping specialist is Hud Hud Travels ([hudhudtravels.com](http://hudhudtravels.com)). If you want to enjoy the desert alone and not with 80 snoring campers, you need to have the phone number of Hud Hud's Eric Walters tattooed on your arm. Mobile camping is his lifeblood – he rarely sets up a tent in the

same place twice and can move the camp with clients as they travel. "It's bloody hard work," says Walters. "But we specialise in putting together completely one-off journeys."

Bespoke is the keyword here – Hud Hud can fix anything from a two-night skip to Wahiba Sands for a couple to a two-week adventure covering northern Oman and the Dhofar region in the south for a larger group.

Depending on your interests, they can organise ornithology, geology, archaeology, climbing or hiking specialists to guide or give talks to guests.

They also offer extreme fun such as caving, canyoning and abseiling. Most extreme fix: getting a village to put on a horse show involving everyone from small boys to grandfathers in traditional dress, riding bareback, for just two guests.

## 10 Learn to cook, Omani-style

Clara Zawawi, the owner of Ocean Blue (see entry no. 2), lives at Qantab Beach, a fishing village to the east of Muscat that's surrounded by sea and mountains.

I met Clara at her beautifully restored village house, Bait Al Bilad, where she has persuaded local women to run cooking workshops in the courtyard.

We started with rokhhal (flatbread) and followed with a range of savoury

dishes: chicken kabuli cooked with rice and dozens of spices; marak samak (white fish in a tangy coconut-based sauce infused with dried limes and tomatoes); and beans and potatoes stewed with onion, tomato, black pepper, cinnamon and cardamom.

We ended with lokhaimat (sweet crispy dumplings), moulding the dough between thumb and forefinger before cooking them in boiling oil. The signature dish of Muscat housewives, these dumplings

are both delicious and aromatic. We ate them all... plus second and third helpings.

Afterwards, we raced to the local supermarket to buy all the spices we needed to replicate them. Needless to say, they're sitting, still unopened, in plastic bags in my cupboard. ●

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The writer travelled to Oman as part of a bespoke Original Travel experience. For details, visit [originaltravel.co.uk](http://originaltravel.co.uk).