

Snapshot from...



Located at the edge of the Arabian peninsula, the land of Oman was inhabited by one of the oldest civilisations in the Arab world. Traces of these civilisations can be found nearby to the city of Ibri in northern Oman, where there is the most complete collection of ancient settlements dating as far back as 3000 BC. The numerous 'beehive' tombs, known as Bat Necropolis, make up one of UNESCO's World Heritage sites.



Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque



Recently visited by Prince Harry, this mosque is one of the world's largest, with space for 20,000 worshippers. The 300,000 tonne Indian sandstone structure, which took more than 6 years to build, contains the world's second-largest carpet, hand-woven by 400 female weavers over 4 years, and an eight tonne chandelier hanging 45 feet. The mosque was given as a gift to the nation from the current ruler, Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said in order to mark 30 years of his reign.

Camel Racing

Camels have played a vital role in transportation across the Middle East for thousands of years. Over time, camel racing has evolved into a professional sport; camels are raised in specialised farms with intensive training programmes, and tracks have been purposefully built for the races. The camels can reach speeds of up to 64 km per hour.

The annual National Camel Races Festival is a two day competition, in which the best pure and authentic Arab camels compete. An agreement between the UN and the Omani government allows Bedouin children to participate in camel racing, as it forms a major part of their cultural heritage.



Dhows



A dhow is a traditional sailing vessel, believed to be invented by the Chinese, although some historians claim they were first built by Arabs or Indians. They are often used for trading heavy items like fruit or water. The term 'dhow' generically describes a wooden-hulled boat, although locals distinguish between a wide range of vessels of different sizes and styles. For example, the *sambuq* and *ghanjah* have a higher, square stem, whereas the *boom* is curved at both ends.

Although the art of dhow building is gradually fading out in the Arab world, it can still be seen at the Sur Boatyard in Oman, where they are made entirely by hand. Rather than basing constructions on drawings, hanging strings are used to achieve the correct proportions and to align each segment of the boat.

Omani Doors



Oman is famous for its uniquely ornamented doors, which are an important feature of any house. Even the simplest homes in the smallest villages will have beautifully carved and brightly coloured doors. They can be made from wood or metal, but the more elaborate are often constructed from large slices of mahogany wood and adorned with elephant spikes and huge studs.

The symmetrical forms stem from the traditional repertoire of Islamic floral and geometric motifs. Whilst the bulk of doors used to be produced locally, occasionally doors were produced in east Africa and brought to Oman by dhow and camel. Traditionally the doors were finished with handmade spigots, locks and wooden bolts.

Nizwa

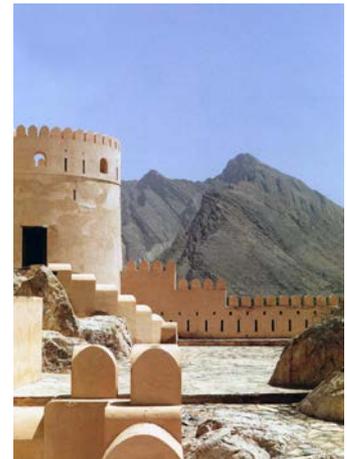
Nizwa is one of the oldest cities in Oman, and it was once the centre of trade, religion, education and art. Located about 140 km from Muscat, the former capital city acquired its importance because it acted as a meeting point at the base of the Western Hajar Mountains. Now, Nizwa is a centre for date growing. The date palm tree has a significant presence amongst Omani's and it is considered the most important crop in the country. Forty-five per cent of cultivated land in Oman produces dates.



Bahla Fort

Bahla Fort is one of four historic fortresses situated at the foot of the Djebel Akhdar highlands in Oman. The fort's mud brick walls tower 165 feet above the sandstone foundations. It is believed that the oldest parts of the fort were built as early as 500 BC. It became a World Heritage Site in 1987, and restoration works have since taken place to repair collapsing walls.

With typical military architecture, the fort and settlement were home to the Banu Nebhan tribe, who dominated the central Omani region, making Bahla their capital from the 12th to the end of the 15th century. Bahla was the centre for building relationships with other tribal groups and putting religious concepts into practice. The site is famous locally for its history of black and white magic, and witchcraft rituals were commonplace. A magic tree within the souq was believed to cause death when touched.



Anwar Sonya

Anwar Sonya is one of the founders of the modern art scene in Oman. In 1983 he received the Golden Prize from HM Sultan Qaboos as the best artist. His paintings often consist of figures, but it is the colour and movement that is the focus of the painting, rather than any particular subject. Common to many of his paintings is his favourite yellow and blue colour palette, to which he adds highlights of red and green.

His artwork can be viewed in various galleries in Oman, including the BaitMuzna Gallery in Muscat (<http://www.baitmuznagallery.com>). He is one of the artists participating in The Circle, an annual contemporary art exhibition within the Middle East, and his artwork has been showcased across various other international platforms.

Dilem Mehmet for the New Silk Road Forum

Sources

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