

WONDERS
AWAIT WHERE
BRUTAL
DESERT
MEETS
SOOTHING
SEAS IN THE
SULTANATE
OF OMAN



OASIS

BY AARON GULLEY • PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROGER HORROCKS



The vibrant underwater hues of the Daymaniyat Islands mirror a young Bedouin girl's dress.

WE'VE LOST THE WRECK — TWO OF THEM, ACTUALLY.

A 30-foot tug and a larger barge, connected by a guideline for divers, are somewhere in the sapphire water below. But in spite of GPS coordinates and our dive guide, Sarah Davies, splashing in from time to time for a look, we can't seem to pinpoint the crafts.

That we can't find two stationary objects the size of small mosques seems odd. That we can't find them on Fahal Island, one of Oman's premier dive sites, strikes me as comical. I briefly consider a quip (maybe they've sailed away), but decide against it. "I've never dived this site," Davies announces. Tor Peebles, captain of the boat and a divemaster, shrugs: It's his first time here too. "If you knew where to look, you could spend months — longer — diving new sites on this coast," he says.

Blessed with 1,300 miles of all-but-untouched Indian Ocean coastline on the southeast toe of the Arabian Peninsula, the Sultanate of Oman is arguably the most promising saltwater escape this side of Indonesia. If you want to loll on lonely gypsum-white strands, swilling sugary lemon and mint juice and nibbling plump dates while contemplating wooden *dhow*s

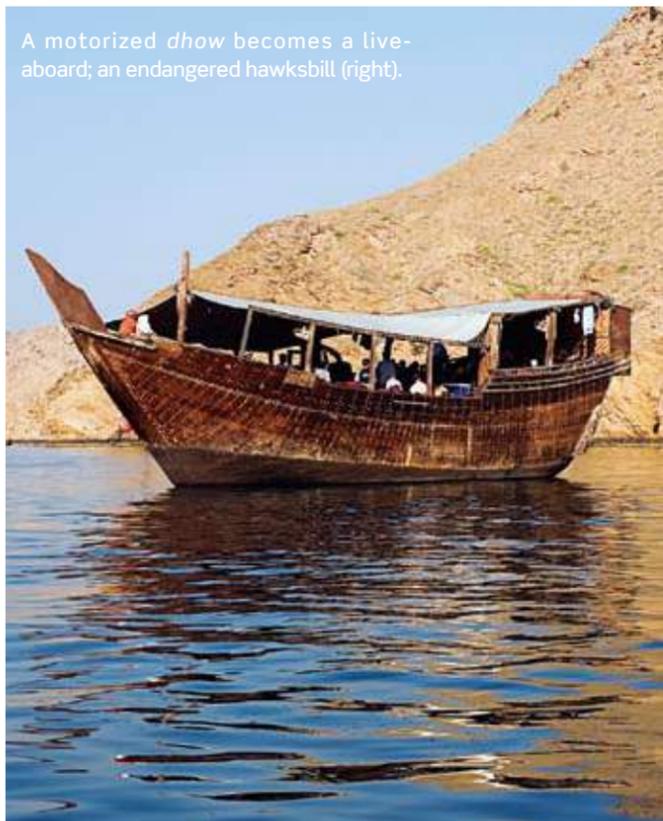
offshore, you could hardly find a better spot. And if it's marine life you're after, you'll get your fill: manta rays, Malabar grouper, spinner dolphins, schools of jack and loggerhead and green turtles, all swimming in Gatorade-blue seas.

What you won't find are other divers because, let's face it, with neighbors like Yemen and Saudi Arabia, Oman doesn't exactly have the allure of a place like Fiji — at least not yet.

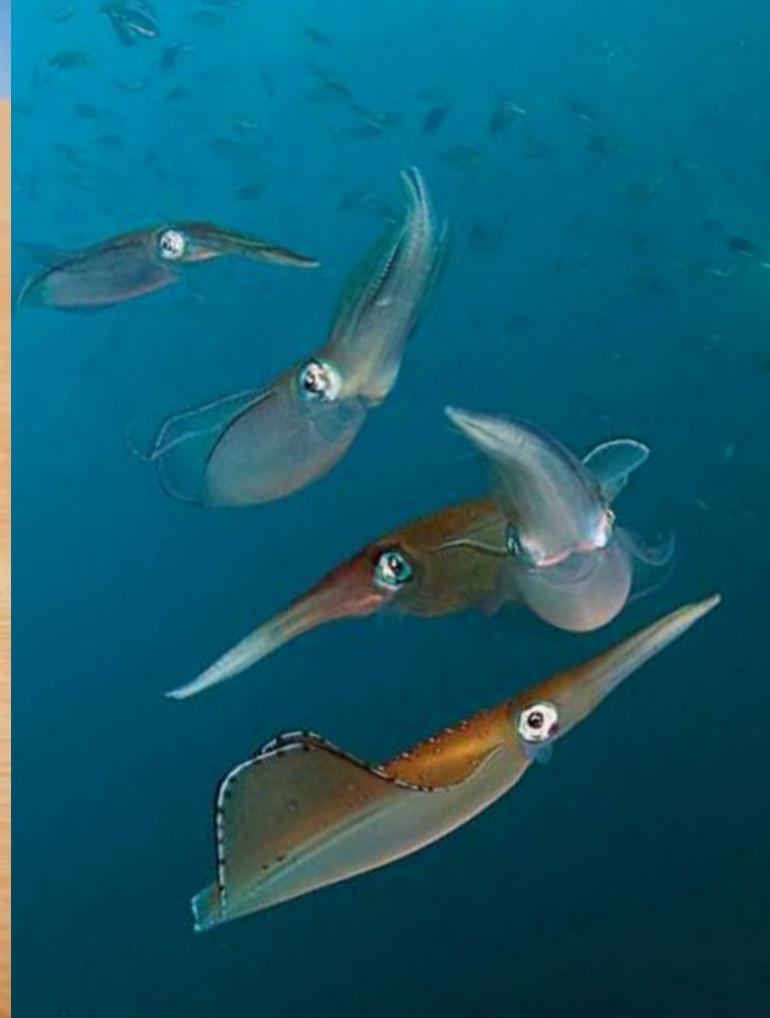
We eventually give up on the wrecks and head for the curiously named Shallow Reef. Cresting at just 55 feet, this pair of seamounts plummets to a sandy bottom more than twice as deep. We sink down through a lustrous school of three-spot kingfish and find the channel between the two rocky hummocks trembling with lavender sea whips and pale dead man's fingers. I almost land on a bearded scorpionfish; once I've had my fill of spying on him, I bump into a devil ray resting in a shadowy cleft. Davies taps her tank, and I look up to find a coffee-table-size green turtle swooping past. It's one of those dives where there's something shiny or irresistible in every direction. Before long, the vanished wrecks are forgotten.

Until we're topside and flying westward in a flash of sunset gold, that is. "We'll come back," Peebles assures me. Fifty tons of metal can't simply go missing — you just have to know where to look.

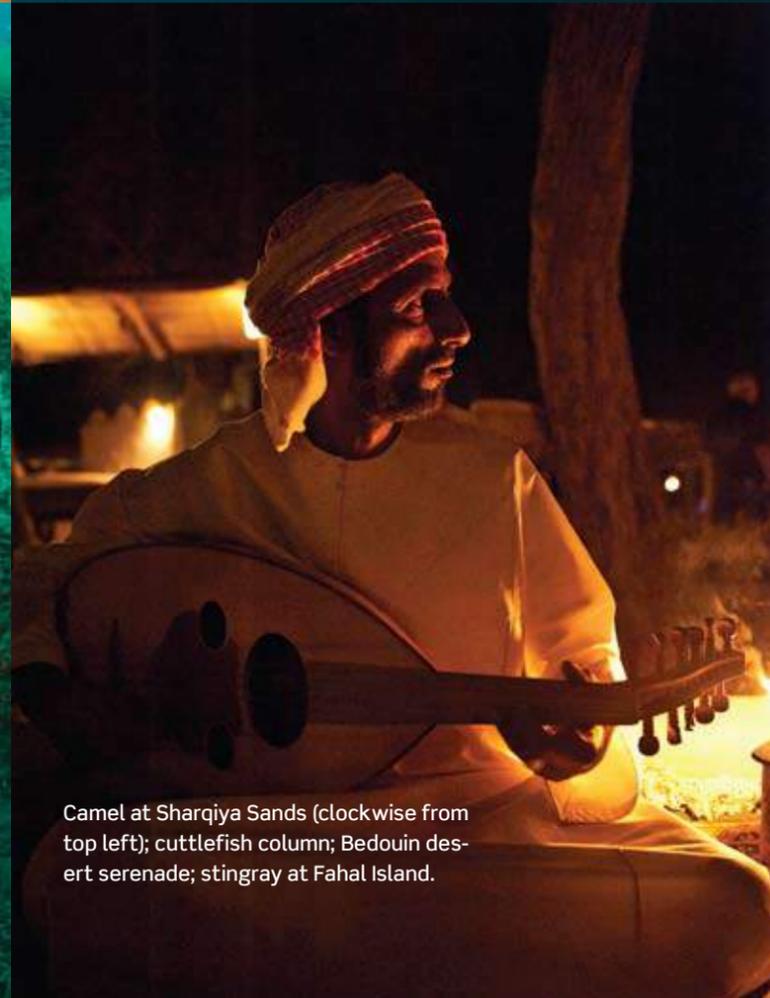
A motorized *dhow* becomes a live-aboard; an endangered hawksbill (right).



Wind, water and the occasional tremor have shaped Oman's landscape.



Just west of Muscat, the capital, a fishing village nestles into craggy foothills.



Camel at Sharqiya Sands (clockwise from top left); cuttlefish column; Bedouin desert serenade; stingray at Fahal Island.

UNLIMITED POTENTIAL

Not long ago, the Sultanate of Oman attracted about as many tourists as the Bahamas during a hurricane — most divers can't even place the country on a map. Given that until the 1990s foreigners couldn't enter Oman without a local sponsor, the current annual tally of 3.2 million international visitors — mostly from neighboring Persian Gulf states, Britain and Europe — is impressive. That growth is largely the work of the sultan, His Majesty Qaboos bin Sa'id Al Sa'id, who wrested the country from his backward father in 1970 and has strived ever since to make it a tolerant, modern place. Top on his agenda has been unbuttoning the country's fate from its dwindling oil revenues — tourism is one solution. Diving hasn't so far been a concerted part of that plan, but that's changing. "The scuba and snorkeling segment is a real opportunity for our tourism industry," Peter Keage, a consultant for the Omani Ministry of Tourism, told me prior to my late-winter visit.

I discovered why on my first day in the water. Early that morning, I headed for the marina to meet Peebles, whose Viking-orange beard and pale complexion look better suited to his native Scotland than sun-saturated Oman. He came off as a typical Brit,

A FUSILLADE OF DOLPHINS 100 STRONG ERUPTS OFF THE BOW.

quick-witted and sardonic. "With all your experience, you're no doubt a ninja diver," he said, seemingly serious, then checked my credentials and setup anyway. Peebles came here two-and-a-half years ago for what he figured would be a short stay. Then he "caught the Oman bug." He opened Oman Charters a few months later. "There was almost no one offering sailing or diving at the time," he told me. "You couldn't ignore the potential."

That hasn't much changed. On the 45-minute boat ride to Bandar Khayran, a maze of serrated rock islets and channels that are favored both for their fish life and their proximity to Oman's capital, Muscat, Peebles asked what I'd like to see. Hmm, lots of pelagics, big feeding schools, truck-size fish? "No problem," he replied, and for once he was serious. As if scripted, a fusillade of spinner dolphins a hundred or so strong erupted off the boat's bow, bursting like a string of firecrackers on the water. We slipped in with masks and fins for a look.

It was just as dynamic at depth when we strapped

Deco Stops Fulfill your *Lawrence of Arabia* fantasies with a night in the Sharqiya Sands. The **1,000 Nights Camp** provides comfortable Bedouin-style tents for rooms, while **Desert Night Camp** a few valleys over offers a luxury experience fit for a sheikh — with prices to match. Loop south to the **Ras al Jinz turtle sanctuary** to watch mother turtles lay their eggs and, if you're lucky, see hatchlings make for the waves. On your return to Muscat, spend a half-day hiking up **Wadi Shab**, where an hour-long walk leads to a 10-foot waterfall cascading into a crystal swimming hole. Don't miss a day trip to ancient **Nizwa** for a gander at the centuries-old **goat market**, where locals gather every Friday to barter for livestock, and explore the fully restored 17th-century **fort and castle**. For a full day, continue on to **Wadi Ghul**, Oman's answer to the Grand Canyon.

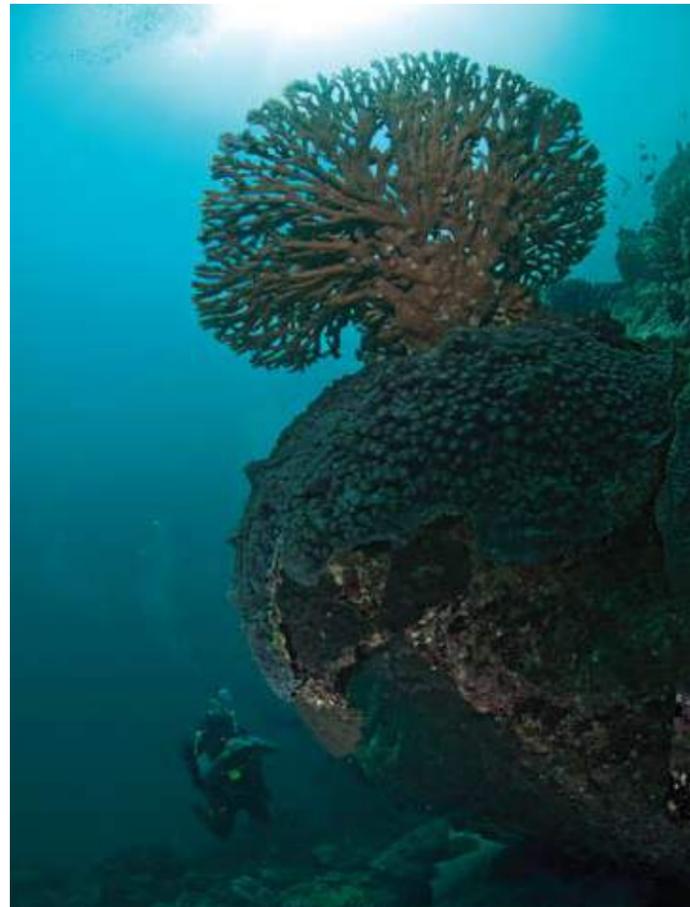
“WE’RE ON THE FRONT EDGE OF THE DIVING. THIS IS A FRONTIER.”

on our tanks, though a red tide a few weeks earlier had narrowed visibility to 50 feet. On the *Al Munassir* wreck — a 280-foot tank-landing craft purposely sunk seven years ago for the nascent dive industry— throngs of rainbow runners and fusiliers darted in and out of disintegrating doors and portholes. Tree-trunk-thick honeycomb morays patrolled the lower decks, moving up and down the passages like cruise goers in search of the buffet. Then there were the endemic creatures that I almost recognized, but not quite. With paler markings than other varieties I’ve seen, the Arabian picassofish would blend well in the halls of one of the many whitewashed palaces on shore. I found myself wishing I had a bit more air at the end of every dive. Though lounging on the boat wasn’t bad either. We were little more than a giant stride from the Muscat waterfront, but we saw no one all day except a local fisherman setting nets from a battered skiff. “And this is a busy day,” Peebles said wryly.

Next up were two tanks at Fahal Island, fruitful in spite of the elusive wrecks. Today we’re headed for the Daymaniyat Islands, a chain of low, orange sandy rocks that dribble eastward from the mainland an hour or so north of the Grand Hyatt Muscat. Sarah Davies is on board again, and she’s brought along André Ramsay. The two are co-managers at another dive op, Amphibia, and they’ve agreed to spend their day with us. As we skip along the mirror-flat surface, the water turns splotchy with bursts of fish beneath. Suddenly, a sulfurous, briny stench hits me like a punch in the gut, and everyone begins scrabbling for gear. “Whale breath,” Ramsay says as he wiggles into his wetsuit. Moments later, two Bryde’s whales surface a few hundred feet left of the boat. Then two more, this time to the right. And one behind us. We zigzag after the creatures, which seem to be circling, likely feeding on whatever’s below. Each time we think we’re close enough to slip in for a glimpse, they emerge in the other direction, just as far away.

After a half-hour of chasing, we dive in anyway, hoping we’ll get lucky. Just below the surface, a school of fin-length bonito smashes into swirls of panicked sardines. We dip a bit deeper, where pick-handled mackerel surge after the baitfish, flashing around like silvery missiles in pursuit. It’s a baitball, the bigger fish having corralled the smaller ones into a manageable bunch and taking turns firing through the disarray in hopes of a bite. It’s what attracted the whales. Even some sharks are in on the action, a black-tip stalking at the fringes and a brawny 10-foot bull shark lurking in the deep.

We eventually clamber out of the melee and point the boat toward the Daymaniyats. There’s still great diving ahead.



Continuing Education

Underwater Navigator



For more info on diver specialties, go to padi.com



Muscat’s Grand Mosque; Daymaniyat Islands (opposite, top); pool at Wadi Shab.

The wreck of *Al Munassir*, at Bandar Khayran off Muscat, is ideal for diving.



But everyone is humming from the last experience. “We’re on the front edge of the diving. This is a frontier,” Ramsay says, taking long drags off a cigarette. “We’re so lucky to be here at this moment.” Peebles and Davies nod, and the Daymaniyats materialize on the horizon like puffs of reddish smoke.

OMAN’S DESERT HEART

As broad and pristine as are Oman’s seas, its deserts — which stretch from brutal, black-stone plains to scorched, 10,000-foot peaks — are reputed to be just as monumental. Though the ocean shaped Oman by the trade it brought, the country is a desert culture at its heart. You haven’t really experienced Oman until you’ve taken in its vast crackling dunes, crumbling stone forts, whitewashed lattice palaces and date-palm-choked oases, I’m told. So I dump my dive bag at the Hyatt — a creamy white stone waterfront alcazar — and set off for the interior.

The first thing I notice as we tear across the Omani countryside isn’t the IMAX reel of big, rough mountains unfolding around us — it’s the roads. Hacked from the jagged landscape, the broad, smooth mega-highways that cut through the empty desert feel as out of place as an Armani tie around a Bedouin herder’s neck. My driver, Nabhan al-Nabhani, is exultant when I mention it. “When the Sultan came to power, there were only 10 kilometers of paved roads in the country,” he beams. “Now look!”

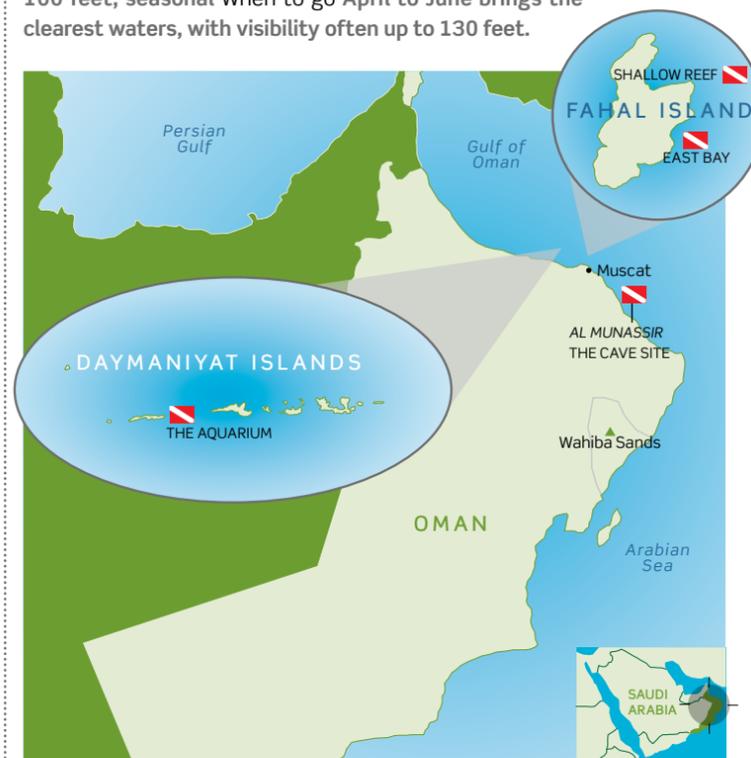
Indeed, Sultan Qaboos has been a busy man. He inherited a country approximately the size of New Mexico with few diplomatic ties, a dearth of services and a population of isolated, mostly illiterate tribes who periodically skirmished over land. The Sultan has since united the place, tapping Oman’s petroleum receipts to create a modern infrastructure and 4,000 miles of paved highways. He also has transformed the country socially, instituting a parliamentary system for his advisory council, providing universal suffrage and affording women equal status with men.

Al-Nabhani is a product of this tolerance, having traded his traditional white *dishdasha* robe for baggy cargo shorts, American T-shirts and snazzy black sunglasses. He has friends from Switzerland to California, talks incessantly on his cell phone and tells me that his favorite pastime is four-wheeling. But he also says there’s nowhere he’d rather be than in the desert, and he seems to relax as we barrel south. Commanding desert vistas, the likes of which you’d see only in a national park back home, sweep out in every direction. Stolid black mountains rise up to the east. Moldering stone towers and gangly camels freckle the milk-chocolate plains. Vibrant, palm-choked watercourses called *wadis* slash the barren hills like shafts of emerald lightning.

After a couple of hours, al-Nabhani veers off the highway onto a dusty track that leads into the Sharqiya Sands. Flowing 120 miles south to the coast like tumbled bolts of fabric, these tawny dunes have become something of a destination (Continued on page 88)

The Guide to Oman

Average water temperature 78°F What to wear 3 mm fullsuit Average viz 100 feet, seasonal When to go April to June brings the clearest waters, with visibility often up to 130 feet.



Must Dive Al Munassir, Bandar Khayran

This spooky site has tight swim-throughs and dark corridors but lots of safe entries and exits. The tattooed morays are so big, it’s clear they’ve been here for ages.

The Cave, Bandar Khayran

Named for the large grotto above — not under — the sea, this site presents an interesting topography of tumbled boulders for poking around in. Look carefully for octopuses, giant red lionfish and seahorses so large, it took me a minute to recognize them.

Shallow Reef, Fahal Island

These side-by-side seamounts northeast of the island are a good bet for spotting bigger fish, including tuna, mackerel, barracuda and, if you’re lucky, whale sharks and mantas.

East Bay, Fahal Island

If you just want to swim around and be awed by the sights, you won’t do better than this shallow dive. Cuttlefish and turtles abound, as do whitetip reef sharks on sunny days. The 300-foot-long swim-through adds drama, especially if you take the time to

surface in the cave system and explore a bit.

The Aquarium, Daymaniyat Islands

Lots of dive sites around the world get this moniker, but few deserve it more than this one. Rising from about 90 feet to its crest at 40, this rocky protrusion is drenched in tabletop and boulder corals, the latter resembling brightly painted sand castles. Fish are everywhere, including herds of cuttlefish and one of the biggest shoals of blue-line snapper you’re ever likely to see.

(OMAN continued from page 61)



of late, with low-key tented camps popping up to accommodate visitors. Many of the encampments though are

those of Bedouin herders who eke out an existence tending goats and camels. We stop at one such bivouac; Salma, the matron of the family, invites us into a low, rectangular burlap tent where she offers us Omani coffee and *halwa*, a saffron-infused date confection that's sickly sweet and addictive.

It feels good to sprawl in the shade, but with a few miles still to go, we eventually rouse ourselves back into the 4x4. Humming with caffeine and sugar, al-Nabhani reverts from tour guide to rally racer, his previous occupation. We

hurtle across banks of sand at 80 miles an hour, plunging off shifting ridges and kicking up a two-story rooster tail of sand. He floats the wheels through wide, sandy S-turns and lets out shrill cheers with every maneuver. "They say the Bedouin are the craziest drivers, and they used to count me among them," he yells. It's heady stuff, riding the sharp edge between adrenaline and disaster in the depths of this great wilderness, and I'm wobbly with exhilaration by the time we skid to a halt.

We spend the night at a camp 15 miles farther into the dunes, where my room is a stout brown Bedouin tent appointed with a fluffy king-size bed. After dark, al-Nabhani summons me to a larger tent, where we recline on brightly stitched throw pillows and Persian rugs and eat slow-roasted lamb and rice pilaf. "People come to Oman with bad impressions of Arabs based on a few extremists in places like Palestine and Iraq," al-Nabhani says. Like many savvy Omanis, he emphasizes that this is "Arabia," with its more romantic connotations than "the Middle East." Omanis recognize that the unrest in places like Israel and the West Bank isn't good for business, and they want to avoid any stereotypes. "They think we're all terrorists. But we're an open and welcoming people with one of the most modern infrastructures in all of Arabia."

The highways, hotels and schools are indeed impressive. And most Omanis raised under the Sultan's regime speak English. Because all of these developments are so new, they lie in stark and alluring contrast to traditional life, where nomads still welcome you into their tents with singing and food, and there are no city lights to sully the onyx night. It's doubtful that old and new will endure side by side for long, which makes the still darkness and the buttery lamb before me even more precious. When the demitasses of Omani coffee go around, I can't resist another few cloying scoops of *halwa*.

A WELCOMING LAND

Back in Muscat, I'm beginning to realize that contrasts — ocean and desert, ancient and modern, pious yet secular — are the very essence of Oman. Nowhere is this more evident than at the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque.

It's worth (Continued on page 93)

Live it Oman

Getting There Since no carrier provides nonstop service to Oman from the U.S., your best bet is Qatar Airways or Emirates. Qatar has direct flights from New York, Washington and Houston to Doha, beyond which it's a one-hour hop to Muscat. Emirates flies to Muscat through Dubai from New York, San Francisco and a range of major cities. Prices start around \$1,100.

Diving For Peebles of the PADI-certified Oman Charter (omancharter.com) will craft the perfect experience for you, be it four tanks a day for a week, a sailing-and-diving camp trip up the coast or an exploration of the fjords and canyons of the Musandam Peninsula in the north. Another good option is the Five-Star Dive Resort Amphibia (diveamphibia.com). If you plan to see some of the topside



attractions in addition to diving, contact Muscat Diving & Adventure Center (omandiving.com), which offers all-inclusive visits. Its dive package gives you five days' diving, eight nights' accommodations and topside tours from \$1,390.

Accommodations Rooms at the Grand Hyatt Muscat (muscat.grand.hyatt.com) look out on a lavish garden and sweeping pool, which front a quiet, flat beach. The hotel's three nightclubs and four restaurants are reputed as some of the city's best, but don't miss the colossal breakfast buffet, which really does look as if it's set for a sultan. Doubles from \$255.

Sustenance There's no place to better enjoy the bounty of the sea than on the breezy verandah at Bait Al Bahi, a beachfront seafood house at the elegant Shangri-La Barr al Jissah Resort & Spa (shangri-la.com). If it's in season, order the Omani lobster, which comes with a little surprise. For a real Arabian feast, book a cushion at Sebiat al Bustan, the posh, tented restaurant of Al Bustan Palace Hotel (hotelsgroup.com/intercontinental). You'll feast on two-dozen authentic dishes, including slow-roasted lamb and *halwa*, served on silver platters laid on the richly carpeted tent floors.

(continued from page 88)

a few hours to see this astonishing edifice. Manicured gardens gird a sprawling complex of bleached marble and stone, with five delicate minarets shoring up a gold-lattice dome. The central chandelier has 600,000 Swarovski crystals and the intricate Persian prayer rug takes up 46,000 square feet. More than 6,000 worshipers can pray in the main hall at once, but to my Western eye it looks like a palace lifted from some fantastical time of proud kings, devious *djinn* and honey-skinned beauties.

It's a vision that comes back to me a few days later when we return to Fahal Island, the scratch of bleached sedimentary rock jutting from the sea northeast of Muscat. First order of business is finding those missing wrecks, which we accomplish after a bit of swimming at depth. Swathed in crimson and periwinkle soft coral and fluttering with reef fish, the rusted-out carcasses look like vibrant bouquets against the gray-sand floor. On the second tank of the day, we retreat to the shallows in a pretty bay close to shore. We startle a pair of whitetip reef sharks resting beneath a swell of limestone, then fin into a dark tunnel that leads through a series of stalactite-filled caves and, eventually, another bright cove. Chalky cliffs reflect dappled sunlight through the clear waters; when I swim around one large boulder I bump into a Koran angel blue with swirls every bit as elaborate as a Persian rug. I doubt the Sultan has ever dived, but the sumptuous scene makes me wonder. Then a bright cluster of gold and blue goatfish passes overhead, turning the seabed into a shifting pane of stained glass, and the thought drifts away on the crystalline Arabian current. 

Oman Listings

Amphibia
diveamphibia.com

Blu Zone Watersports
bluzonediving.com

Dimaniyat Diving
dimaniyat.com

Global Scuba LLC
global-scuba.com

Knight Divers
knight-divers.com

Moon Light Dive Centre
moonlightdive.com

Oman Charter
omancharter.com