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A makeshift stall selling different varieties of dates and fruits

Situated on the very tip of the Arabian Peninsula, Oman is by far the most hospitable Middle Eastern country to visit and its capital, Muscat, is unlike anything found in the cities of its neighbouring countries, as Scott Snowden discovers.

MIDDLE EASTERN SURPRISE



The Al Jalali Fort is yet another example of the city's ancient defences



Many come to relax each evening along the corniche that faces the harbour bay

The small city of Muscat maintains a relatively low profile compared to its more flamboyant Arab neighbours; there are few high-rise blocks and even the most functional building is required to reflect tradition with its architecture. The result of these strict building policies is an

elegant, clean and aesthetically enchanting skyline.

"Muscat" means "anchorage" and the sea continues to constitute a major part of life in the city. It brings people on cruise ships and goods in containers to the historic ports of Old Muscat and Mutrah. It contributes to the city's

economy through the onshore refinery near Qurm and provides a livelihood for fishermen along the beaches of Shatti a-Qurm and Athaiba. More recently, it has also become a source of recreation at Al-Bustan and Bandar Jissah and along the sandy beach that stretches almost without interruption from



The Sultan's Palace with its mushroom pillars in blue and gold is a stunning national landmark



The Shangri-La Hotel in Muscat offers a beautiful sandy beach and luxurious accommodation

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Muscat to the border with the UAE, over 200km to the northwest.

Almost everywhere you go, there's something that will make you want to stop and have a closer inspection. The Omani capital is what you'd think the Middle East looks like. There are no massive museums in Muscat because there's no real need, it's almost as if time has stood still here. Aside from a number of organised activities that are on offer, the most pleasurable way to see the city and soak up the culture is to simply wander about.

MEANDERING THROUGH MUTRAH

As good a place as any to start exploring the capital is Mutrah; a district about 3km east of the Old Town. This is actually the city's main port area, but it feels more like a quaint

fishing village and it stretches along an attractive corniche of latticed buildings and mosques, which looks quite spectacular when seen with the setting sun behind it.

Many come to Mutrah Corniche just to visit the souq, which retains the chaotic interest of a traditional Arabian market albeit housed under modern timber roofing – much like those in Tunis or Marrakech. There are some good antique shops selling a mixture of Indian and Omani artifacts among the usual textile, hardware, gold and spice shops. Bargaining is expected, but the discounts won't be particularly big.

Other sites that are worth a look in this area include Mutrah Fort; built by the Portuguese in the late 1580s, it dominates the eastern end of the harbour. The restored watchtower, also built by the Portuguese, offers



The Omani capital is unlike any other big, Arab city in the Middle East



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a stunning view of the water and is a popular place to relax a little in the early evening.

OLD MUSCAT

Straddling the road between the corniche and the old, walled city is the Muscat Gate Museum, with the original gates that were used right up until the 1970s to keep land-bound marauders out. This is a good vantage point to look over the Sultan's Palace, with its mushroom pillars in blue and gold.

The Al-Jalali Fort is yet another antique example of the city's ancient defences. Like many of the other, old Portuguese encampments that punctuate the Old Town, this isn't open to the public, but photographs are permitted and during special occasions, bands of bagpipers perform from the battlements and the royal

dhow and yacht are sailed in full regalia into the harbour.

The three museums worth a visit should you find yourself in the neighbourhood are themselves quite small. The Bayt Az-Zubair is, in essence, a restored house that exhibits Omani heritage in photographs and displays of traditional handicrafts and furniture. The Omani-French Museum has two galleries that detail the relations between the two countries and provides an interesting snapshot of 19th-century colonial life in Muscat. Finally, the National Museum, features displays of jewellery, costumes and dowry chests; however, a series of paintings depicting Oman's seafaring heritage is by far the main draw.

ENJOY YOURSELF

Oman offers some stunning, unspoilt beaches, many of which

are around the capital. Most are free to access, although one or two form part of the grounds of a hotel. The Crowne Plaza hotel is situated a stone's throw from the centre of Muscat and offers a stunning view. You can also visit the Shangri-La Hotel, just a little further down the same stretch of coastline.

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ROCKY MOUNTAINS AND SOFT-SAND DUNES OFFER SOME EXCITING AND CHALLENGING 4-W DRIVING.



Mutrah is home to the busy fish market, where tons of freshly-caught fish are sold each day

Kayaks are available for hire here and this is a great way to exercise and explore further up the coast at a very pleasant pace. Or of course, you can just lie back and soak up some sun.

The scuba diving in Oman is renowned the world over and on the outskirts of Muscat is the Oman Dive Centre. It offers dolphin and whale watching trips, snorkeling and full days of diving. There's not much in the way of public transport anywhere in Oman so taxi rides are the alternative. Hiring a car is much better and provides complete personal freedom.

Another option is to combine car hire with something a little more interesting – off-road driving. Muscat's rocky mountains and soft-sand dunes offer some exciting and challenging four wheel driving. Many refer to off-road driving here as "wadi-bashing" and close

to the city there are plenty of places to explore. It's worth doing a little research however, before you embark on an off-road adventure. Not only is it infinitely more sensible to be aware of any particularly tricky locations, but some areas have recently been designated "no go" due to their overwhelming popularity and subsequent damage to the local environment.

Regardless of whether a visit to the Oman capital is simply a stopover, a long weekend break or part of a mammoth Middle East expedition, there's plenty to see and do. Aside from the bustling fish market or souq, most of Muscat conducts itself at a more civilised pace. The mountains and scattered lush greenery break up the desert scenery and have helped make this city a popular – newly discovered – holiday destination. ☺