





## OMAN: DESERT, OASIS, AND SEA

RICHARD KENNEDY

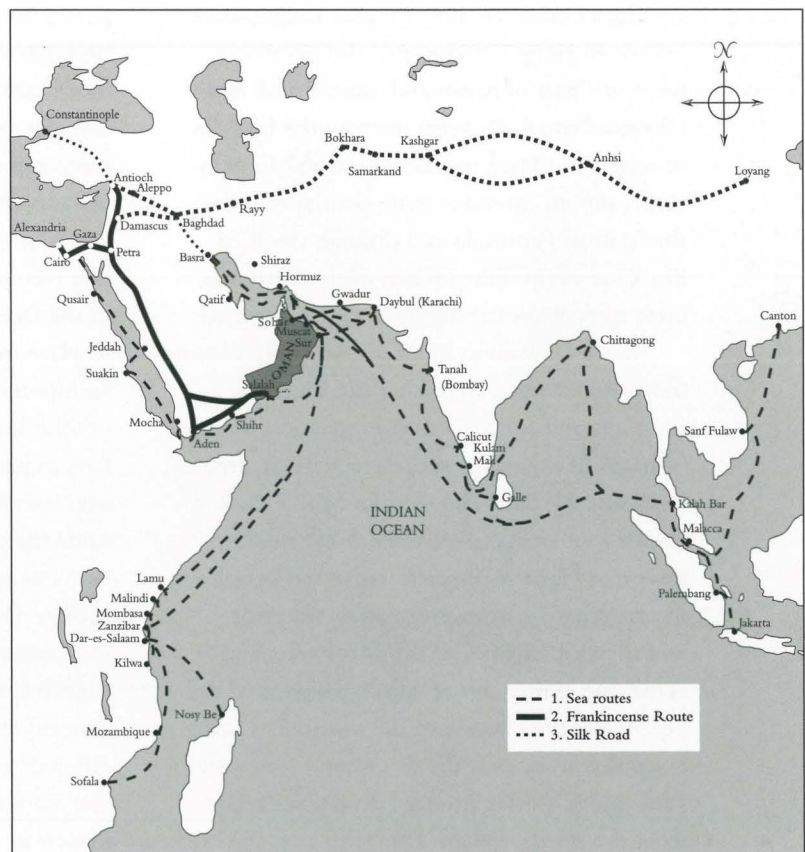
**T**he Sultanate of Oman lies on the east coast of the Arabian Peninsula, facing the Arabian Sea. Living at this crossroads between Asia, Africa, and the Mediterranean, Omanis have developed a complex culture that draws on the country's Arab roots as well as its long-standing contacts with India, East Africa, and the Middle East. For 5,000 years Oman has traded throughout the region. Its ships have sailed to Asia and Africa, and its caravans have traveled overland to the shores of the Mediterranean, contributing to the country's surprisingly cosmopolitan history.

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Western geographical regions often separate lands that share boundaries or whose histories are closely aligned. The Middle East and South Asia may seem worlds apart, but the flight from Muscat, the Omani capital, to Mumbai (Bombay), India, is just a little over two hours. Oman is not, as it sometimes appears, only a country on the edge of the Arabian Peninsula, but rather a land at the center of an ancient and modern cultural and economic exchange. Omanis are proud of but reserved about their important role in world history.

Historically, its geography has posed both challenges and opportunities for Oman. Omani culture has been molded by the struggle to master the desert and seacoast both for settlement and for trade of the rare products found there. Throughout history, Oman's copper, frankincense, dates, and petroleum have been prized outside the country, and, although often difficult to extract and transport, these products have reached ancient markets in the Mediterranean and India and modern markets throughout the world. Omanis have been master mariners of the seas and skillful nomadic traders of the desert.

In the third millennium BCE, copper mines in what is now Oman, likely the ancient trading center called Magan, provided this flexible and important metal to the civilizations of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in the Middle East and the



(Left) Bait Al Ras, an oasis town.  
The map on the right shows Oman's trade routes throughout history.



PHOTO BY/COURTESY MOHAMMED AL ZUBAIR

Muscat, modern capital of Oman, has welcomed travelers for centuries.

Indus River on the Indian subcontinent. Historical evidence suggests a regular trade by ship and caravan. In the first millennium CE, particularly during the Roman and Byzantine Empires, the aromatic resin frankincense, like silk from China, became a highly sought-after luxury. Burning frankincense also became a necessary part of pagan and, later, Jewish and Christian ritual. *Boswellia* trees on the hillsides of southern Oman produce the finest frankincense, and an extensive trade developed across the Arabian Peninsula and through the Red Sea. One of the Three Kings of the Christian birth story was carrying this valuable aromatic.

Early settlement by Arabs, probably coming from modern Yemen during the first millennium CE, and the arrival and rapid acceptance of Islam in the 7th century created a degree of unification among the peoples of the eastern end of the Arabian Peninsula. Nevertheless, the great Hajar Mountains separated people on the seacoast from those in the interior, and the vast expanse of uninhabitable land across the center of the country separated the peoples of the north and the south. As Oman expanded its trade, outside cultural influences were added to this internal diversity. Persians from the north, Indians from the east, and

Africans from the south all had profound influences on the development of Oman.

Oman entered a long period of isolation in the 19th century and has only recently reopened its borders and reestablished its cosmopolitan perspective. Until 1970, there were few roads, hospitals, or schools anywhere in the country. Since 1970, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said has specifically committed his government and its resources to education, health, infrastructure, and the environment. He has also sponsored cultural preservation projects that recognize the fragility of local traditions in the face of globalization. Oman knows that its place in world history has created a unique culture that deserves support. Encouragement of traditional music and crafts coupled with laws to preserve local architecture and historic sites have been the hallmark of policies that value the past and also anticipate the future.

The accession of Sultan Qaboos bin Said and the Omani people's firm belief in Islam have united a people with broadly different experiences and histories. This cultural diversity is reflected in Oman's three vastly different environments—the desert, the oasis, and the sea. The country's complex culture reflects its people's responses to each.



## DESERT

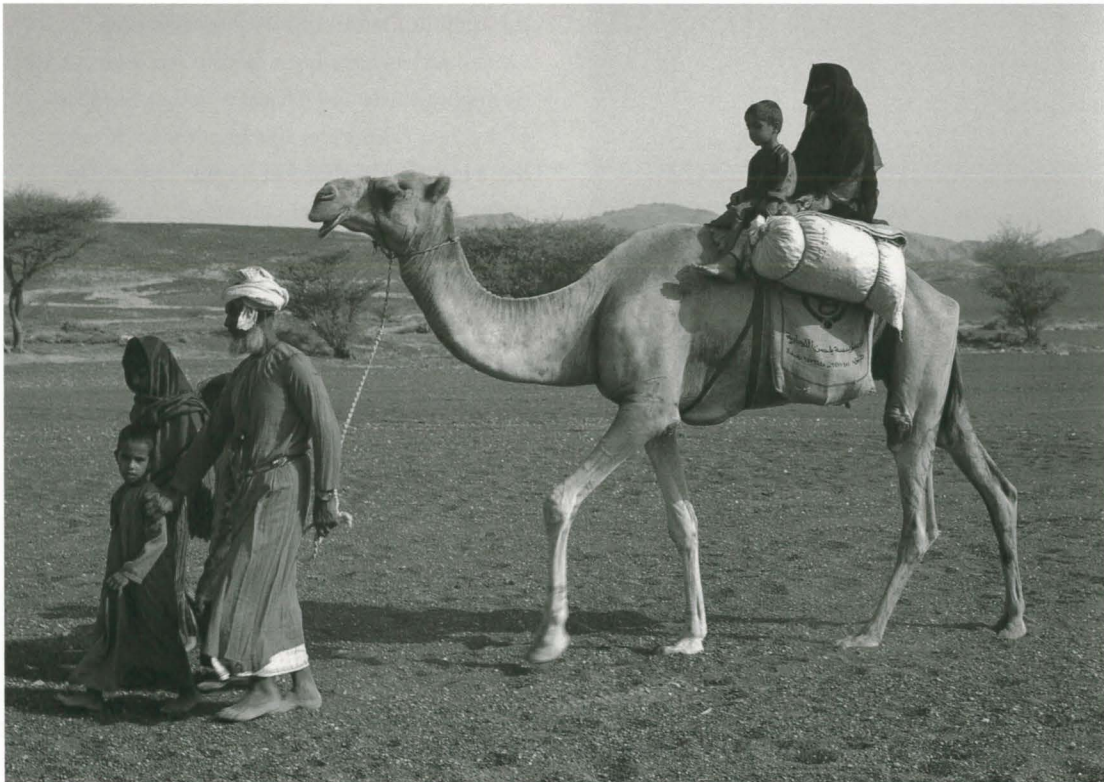
The deserts of the Arabian Peninsula would be a hostile environment for a settled people. But ancient traders of frankincense flourished in these dry lands by mastering the secrets of their constantly changing topography, and contemporary nomadic pastoralists have retained that mastery. Bedouin people have lived alongside their animals and have learned to move them as weather and their need for water demand. Goats, sheep, camels, and horses provide meat, milk, hide, hair, and transportation for the nomads and are the focus of their economy. In Oman the paths of some Bedouins also pass the coasts, particularly in the Sharqiyah region of east-central Oman. Here they fish and dry their catch to carry inland for trade at oasis towns and to provide feed for their animals. But whether they are trading animal products or fish, Bedouins of the Omani desert use their culture to maintain mobility and responsiveness to change. Bedouins make crafts that are lightweight yet sturdy. They weave clothes, camel trappings, and tents of

goat and sheep's hair and dye them with local minerals and plants. Their weaving designs are distinctive and may signal tribal identity. They also weave containers of date palm leaves reinforced with leather. They make all products for easy transport and mainly for personal use; in the past these items were rarely sold. Bedouins have always exchanged their animals for products available at the oases—jewelry, weapons, tools, and cotton or silk thread.

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Bedouin celebrations that support the cycles of nomadic life are accompanied primarily by singing and have borrowed little from oasis culture. However, many nomadic people have become settled and have been profoundly influenced by oasis and even global culture. Today the nomadic population of Oman is very small due to the attraction of employment in the cities and oil fields. The influence of the oil industry, which began in the Omani interior in the late 1960s, has been dramatic. But some Omani nomads still travel with their animals, trade in the oasis towns, and produce their crafts—now as often as not for trade to interested city dwellers.

Some Omani Bedouin families still travel by camel; however, most use trucks.



MOHAMMED AL MAWALI

## OASIS

The oases of Oman have always been centers where farmers and merchants from the coast meet and trade with nomadic Bedouins from the interior desert. Many oasis towns arose near passes on either side of the Hajar Mountains in the north. Built next to the wadis, or river valleys that seasonally bring water from the mountains, these oases were able to support cultivation, particularly of dates. Their wealth and strategic location enabled oases to become mercantile centers that brought together settled people, nomads, and visiting traders. These fortified towns, where copper vessels, fish, dates, indigo cloth, and camels are traded, remain centers for contact between the desert and the sea.

Crafts of the oases use local and imported materials and represent influences from throughout the region. Foreign traders brought gold, silver, and iron to oasis towns to supplement local copper in the production of jewelry, weapons, and tools. They sold silk and cotton that enabled local weavers to make finer cloth, and wood for more elaborate architectural construction. Ideas also transformed the oases. Persians, for example, brought knowledge of irrigation that developed the elaborate falaj system to funnel water to settlements. Today the oasis town provides access to the products of the 21st century—cars, TVs, cell phones, and computers. And as in

the past, it continues to be a place to exchange ideas through both formal institutions like universities and informal meetings of individuals.

## SEA

The seacoast has also been a meeting place throughout Omani history. For millennia Omani sailors have been famous for their travels throughout Asia and Africa. Whether Sindbad of the *1001 Nights* was an Omani is irrelevant; the widespread belief that he was reflects the reality of many Omani sailors and merchants in the Middle East and the Indian Ocean. Omani merchants sailed to China in the 8th century,

and it was an Omani who led the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama to India in 1498. The Omani seas continue to provide fishermen with their livelihood, and, although most new ships now come from outside Oman, an effort is being made to revive its great shipbuilding traditions. On the shores of the city of Sur, a visitor can see the reconstruction of ancient dhows, and in Musandam, along the Straits of Hormuz, traditional boats still actively fish in the local waters.

Through this great maritime tradition, Oman has absorbed Indian, European, and African cultural influences. Many Omani communities have their roots in Persia, India, or Africa; Baluch, Gujarati, and Swahili can still be heard in homes throughout the Sultanate. And, not surprisingly, coastal music and dance are creative amalgams of Arab, African, and Indian traditions—vital elements of Omani national identity.

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NEIL RICHARDSON

Qurayat fishermen cast their net from a traditional wooden *huri*, an inshore fishing activity that is repeated daily along much of Oman's coastline.



## THE FESTIVAL PROGRAM

The 2005 Smithsonian Folklife Festival program on Oman features over 100 musicians, dancers, craftspeople, and cooks representing cultural traditions from the desert, oasis, and sea. The date-leaf baskets and decorative wool carpets made for easy transport by nomadic desert peoples provide a striking contrast to the heavy copper vessels and elaborate silverwork produced by craftsmen in the oases, while proud shipbuilders demonstrate skills that have made Omani ships renowned throughout the Indian Ocean. The fabled frankincense that in some ways represented to the ancient Mediterranean world what oil does to modern economies is still grown in the south and used throughout Oman. A section of the program features a variety of Omani adornments including aromatics such as frankincense, as well as textiles and jewelry.

Most Omani music accompanies dance and is present at celebrations of all kinds around the

country. People rejoice with music and dance at births and weddings, use them sometimes for healing, and celebrate with them at times of victory. Men's and women's dance is accompanied by musical instruments that display the cultural influences of the region—stringed instruments from India, wind instruments from Persia, drums from Africa, and even bagpipes (originally from Egypt but more recently played by British military troops in residence in Oman) are all part of the sounds of Omani music.

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The 2005 program is the first to feature an Arab nation at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Arabs and Arab Americans have participated in past Festivals, but this program provides an opportunity to focus on an Arab culture at a time when the Arab world is unfortunately much misunderstood here. We hope the Oman program will dispel some myths about the region and even include a few pleasant surprises for those knowledgeable of the region.

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## NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

Arabic words that have been incorporated into English, including place names found in *Webster's Dictionary*, are primarily written in their English form. Transliterations of other words from the Arabic to the Roman alphabet are usually guided by Library of Congress usage. In most cases, transliterations are made from Modern Standard Arabic words, not from words in Omani dialect(s). Diacritical marks are omitted unless they are an integral part of the language. Readers will notice the following two marks:

(<sup>ˈ</sup>) An apostrophe to indicate the break in sound that occurs in the middle of some Arabic words

(<sup>˘</sup>) A single, inward-facing quote to represent the *`ayn* consonant which does not occur in English

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*All photographs courtesy of the Omani Craft Heritage Documentation Project unless noted otherwise.*