



The promenade along the three-kilometre Muttrah Corniche exemplifies Muscat's charm. The walkway has stunning ocean views, traditional architecture, plenty of souk shopping, and chic restaurants to unwind at after a hard day of exploring.

Star of the Middle East

IN MUSCAT, EXTRAVAGANCE AND STYLE COEXIST WITH A DELICIOUSLY SLOW PACE OF LIFE

By MALAVIKA BHATTACHARYA

Muscat is all dressed up in monochromes. Low-lying whitewashed houses are nestled between the craggy brown rocks of the Al Hajar Mountains. Sepia-toned arches and gold-plated minarets of mosques and ministry buildings poke up at the sky. Robed men in starched white dishdashas and women in embroidered black abayas zip around the wide streets in gleaming SUVs. The only break in the colour palate is the stunning azure water of the Gulf of Oman, framing the northwestern edge of the city.

The capital of the Sultanate of Oman is a thriving cultural centre with startlingly different pockets: A centuries-old souk

bustles with seekers of what's local and distinctly Omani, a glitzy Opera House is packed with glam locals and trendy expats, and the city's centrepiece is an opulent mosque that accommodates 20,000 people. All at once, Muscat manages to hold on to its history, embrace the latest trends, and splurge on life's luxuries.

Everywhere you go, there's a cup of *kahwa* (Arabic coffee) and a plate of dates with your name on it. In Muscat, that famous Omani hospitality is not hard to find.

DAY 1

MORNING *A Dance of Dolphins*

Kick-start the morning by cruising the Arabian Sea with wild dolphins in their

natural habitat. The waters off Old Muscat are home to large numbers of bottlenose, common, and elusive spinner dolphins. Board a covered boat at Marina Bunder and head into the blue waters of the **Gulf of Oman**, bordered in the distance by the silvery-grey Hajar Mountains. Jagged rocks with unique names like "Cat Rock" rise out of the water forming natural coves.

On a good day, shoals of dolphins swim along the boat, gracefully leaping in and out of the water in pairs. Every now and then, a lone spinner dolphin surfaces and twirls around mid-air, showing off a perfect pirouette quicker than you can whip out your camera (*For cruises, book with Zahara Tours; +968-2440 0844;*



www.zaharatours.com; tours are conducted through the year, twice a day at 8 a.m. and 10 a.m. and last around two hours).

AFTERNOON *Courting Culture*

Take in Muscat's main sights in an afternoon to get up to speed on Omani culture. Start at the city's most defining landmark, the **Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque**. Spread across 4,16,000 square metres, this expansive mosque made of Indian sandstone fuses Islamic architecture with aesthetic influences from around the world. The main hall is done up with Turkish mosaic, Italian marble, French stained-glass windows, and has a glittery 1,200-lamp chandelier (*Open Sat-Thur, 8.30-11 a.m.; wear modest clothes; women have to keep their heads covered*).

Head over to the **Bait Al Zubair Museum** (about half an hour away from the mosque) for a peek into Oman's rich heritage. "The house that became a museum" originally belonged to the family of Sheikh Al Zubair bin Ali, an advisor to the former Sultans. On display is a fine collection of Omani artefacts including weaponry, silver jewellery, and a particularly interesting section on traditional attire. Stylish pieces from eight regions highlight Oman's diverse fashion sensibilities, from the knee-length Muscati tunic worn over *sarwal* pants to the ankle-length *al kandora* embroidered with gold and silver (*Open Sat-Thur 9.30 a.m.-6 p.m.; baitalzubairmuseum.com*).

A few minutes away, **Al Alam Palace's** blue



Topping Muscat's tourist hotspots is the Sultan Qaboos Mosque (top left), which has a capacity of 20,000; The Royal Opera House (top right) puts cultural traditions in the spotlight and has shown renditions of classics like Puccini's *Turandot*; Muttrah Souk (bottom) is a swirl of spice shops, frankincense stores, and stalls selling jewellery, ittar, and rose-scented Omani *halwa*.

and gold facade is a bright splash of colour against Muscat's stark white backdrop. Sultan Qaboos's official palace isn't open to the public but it's worth a visit for a peek at the frontage (*Al Alam Palace, Old Muscat*).

EVENING *At the Opera*

Oman's signature style is over-the-top flamboyance. Keeping up with this trend is the 80,000-square-metre, marble **Royal Opera House**. This world-class performance centre regularly hosts both

local and internationally renowned troupes, including Russian ballets, Polish operas, and American jazz orchestras. I recently watched a stunning rendition of *I Capuleti E I Montecchi* (Romeo & Juliet) by Italy's Arena di Verona, complete with a full orchestra, elaborate sets, and a particularly quaky-voiced Juliet. Bring out your blingiest best on a performance night. Touchscreens behind the plush velvet seats offer subtitles in languages including English and Arabic. With its opulent interiors, glittery crystal



Squabbles of inquisitive seagulls (top) are a common sight along Muscat's seaside boulevards; Farther out at sea, dolphin-watching tours (bottom) are popular with tourists.

chandeliers, and gold-plated banisters, the venue belongs in a period movie set (+968-2440 3300; www.rohmuscato.org.om; prices vary according to performance; daily house tours 8.30-10.30 a.m.; wear modest clothes).

DAY 2

MORNING *Arabian Scents*

Hotels, shops, and restaurants in Muscat are often enveloped in clouds of perfume. Frankincense lies at the heart of Omani culture and the Sultanate's tradition of perfumery is on display at the **House of Amouage**. Head to the luxury shop to pick

up handcrafted Omani scents made with ingredients like saffron and myrrh. During the factory tour, you can sip kahwa and see vats of materials, including jasmine, lavender, oak tree moss, and even leather. Rows and rows of little white and gold vials lie on tables behind glass doors, while women in bright make-up and colourful headscarves pore over them, mixing, bottling, and packaging the fragrances (+968-2453 4800; amouage.com).

AFTERNOON *Shopping at the Souk*
Muttrah Souk is a tangle of dimly lit

alleyways adorned with glittering paraphernalia. Housed between two towering, sandstone gates, the streets of this traditional market are sheltered from the sun with carved timber roofs and stained-glass domes. Locals loudly haggle over heaps of spices. The smell of saffron, cardamom, and dried lime imbues the air. Frankincense stores and silver shops line the lanes of this nearly 200-year-old market. Much of what is sold is sourced from India—tabletops are piled with boxes of Noor Indian Kohl, and calls of “the finest Pashmina only for you madam!” punctuate the chatter of tourists and locals. Wander the streets and shop for scarves, silver, and Omani halwa, a wobbly, jelly-like sweet flecked with nuts and flavoured with rose (*Sat-Thur 8 a.m.-1 p.m. and 5 p.m.-9 p.m.; Fri 4 p.m.-9 p.m.*).

Rejuvenate with little veggie samosas and cups of piping hot kahwa at one of the many street-side coffee shops, patronised by locals. For a more substantive lunch, step out to **Gulf Fast Food**, which offers shawarmas under brightly coloured umbrellas and an uninterrupted view of the bustling Muttrah Corniche area (*Outside the main gate of Muttrah Souk*).

EVENING *Laid-back Local*

Just across Muttrah Souk is the picturesque **Muttrah Corniche** area of Old Muscat. The impossibly blue Gulf of Oman runs along one edge, while the other side is bordered by sepia-coloured buildings with arched doorways and old Gujarati homes with latticed windows. Walk along the waterfront to people-watch and see the sun go down.

Wind up your tour with a traditional Omani dinner at **Kargeen**. This al fresco restaurant set in a leafy garden and decorated with pretty fairy lights, is popular with Omanis as well as tourists. Diners sit at tables piled with kebabs, hummus, meats, and salads. Kargeen's speciality is a dish called *shuwa*, tender, succulent meat that's wrapped in a banana leaf and cooked underground for more than 10 hours. The portions are massive and the courses never end—hospitality is serious business for the Omanis. Like every other experience in this city, dinner too is a long-drawn-out, extravagant affair. Only this time, it's under clouds of heavily scented *sheesha* smoke (+968-2469 9055; www.kargeencaffe.com; *Sat-Thu 7.30 a.m. to midnight, Fri 5 p.m. to midnight*). ■

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