

An Introduction to Oman

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Sultanate of Oman fact sheet

[Picture: Omani flag]

Form of government:	Monarchy (Sultanate)
Head of State (Sultan):	Qaboos bin Said al Said
Capital:	Muscat (650,000 inhabitants in the Capital Area)
Official languages:	Arabic
Area:	309,500 km ² (70th)
Population (July 2005) / population density:	2,567,000 (140th) / 8.3/km ² (211th)
Independence:	1650 (Portuguese expelled)
Currency:	1 Omani Rial (1000 Baizas) = € 2.15
Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (2005) Total / per capita:	US\$ 40.923 billion (85th) / US\$ 16,86 (41st)
Human Development Index (HDI) (2004):	0.810 (high) (56th)
Literacy Rate (2003):	male: 83.1% / female: 67.2%
Time Zone:	CET + 3 (Central European Time) CEST + 2 (Central European Summer Time)
National Holiday:	18 th November (birthday of Sultan Qaboos bin Said)
Member of International Organisations:	UN (since 07.10.1971) Arab League (since 29.09.1971) Gulf Cooperation Council (since 25.05.1981) WTO (since 09.11.2000)

History

In the Bronze Age, about 2300 BC, the northern part of Oman was already known by the Sumerians under the name Magan. It was rich in resources like copper or diorite and traded them by ship from Sohar, a town 230 km north-west of Muscat, with the Sumerians. Later Oman constituted one of the "Satrapies", the provinces of the ancient Achaemenid Persian Empire (648 BC - 330 BC). It was incorporated into that empire around 563 BC. This earlier empire was succeeded by the Sassanian Empire in the third century AD (226 – 651 AD). In the 6th century BC the Persians introduced the aflaaj (singular: falaj), a water management system used to provide a reliable supply of water to human settlements or for irrigation in hot, arid climates. Some sources, however, believe that the ancient Persians adopted this technology from Oman because there were settlements from around 1000 BC found close to aflaaj, while the Persian irrigation canals were first known in the 6th century BC.

By the beginning of the first century of the Common Era, Arab tribes began to settle in Oman. In 632, the Sassanids lost power and Arab dominance in Oman was established. In the 7th century the Islam was adopted in Oman and the area became part of the caliphate of the Umayyads (661 – 750) and the Abbasids (750 – 1258), which were both Sunni dynasties. In Oman, however, Ibadi Islam, a form of Islam distinct from Shia and Sunni Islam, became the

dominant religion in the 8th century. The Ibadi Muslims established an Imamate, where the Imams exercised spiritual leadership and secular power over the country. Sohar grew in this time to one of the most important trading places in the Islamic world with maritime trade to India, China and East Africa and was said to be the birthplace of Sindbad the Sailor. It was destroyed in 965 by the Buwayhids, a Persian-Shiitic dynasty and Persian conquerors occupied the country several times before the Portuguese captured Muscat in 1508, which was then the main port. They held control over the coastal cities and the maritime trade for over a century before they were expelled in 1650, after Nasir bin Murshid (1624-1649) had unified the tribes of Oman in the fight against the Portuguese. He was elected as Imam and transformed this office into a hereditary title, which was the beginning of the Yaruba-Dynasty (1624 -1743). In this time Oman began to become a powerful seafarer and trading nation and frankincense, gold, ivory, spices and slaves were shipped to India, China and East Africa. During the struggling for power after the last Yaruba-Imam Oman was again occupied by Persia between 1743 and 1746. Ahmad bin Said unified all tribes and drove away the Persians in 1746. He was the originator of the Said-Dynasty which still governs Oman.

In the early nineteenth century, Muscat and Oman grew to be a major power, having possessions in East Africa, mainly the island Zanzibar and in Pakistan. In 1861 the empire was divided in the Sultanate Oman and the Sultanate Zanzibar. Muscat and Oman became a British protectorate and with the loss of the East African possessions and the ban of slave trade the fast economic decline began.

During 1970, while Oman was still a protectorate, Sultan Said bin Taymur was ousted by his son, Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said, who has reigned since then. Sultan Qaboos has greatly improved the economic situation of the country with the help of the money from oil production, which began in 1967. He modernised the country, which was plagued by endemic disease, illiteracy and poverty and transformed it into a modern industrial nation within a few decades. In 1996, the sultan presented the "Basic Statutes of the State", Oman's first written "constitution", that clarifies the royal succession, provides for a bicameral advisory council with some limited legislative powers and a prime minister and guarantees basic civil liberties for Omani citizens. Military bases in Oman were used in 2001 by US forces involved in ground raids against Taliban forces in Afghanistan. In 2003, the lower house of the advisory council was freely elected for the first time. Oman's moderate, independent foreign policy has sought to maintain good relations with all Middle Eastern countries.

Geography

Oman is located in the southeastern quarter of the Arabian Peninsula. The sultanate is flanked by the Gulf of Oman in the northeast, the Arabian Sea in the southeast and south, the Rub al Khali (Empty Quarter) of Saudi Arabia in the west and Yemen in the southwest. The border to Saudi-Arabia was not determined until 1999. These geographical factors contributed to the isolation of the inner Oman. Historically, the country's contacts with the rest of the world were by sea, which not only provided access to foreign lands but also linked the coastal towns of Oman. The Rub al Khali, difficult to cross even with modern desert transport, formed a barrier between the sultanate and the Arabian interior. The Al-Hajar Mountains with the highest peak Jabal al-Akhdar (Green Mountain, 3,074 m) form a barrier between the fertile coastal plain Al-Batinah and the desert from the Musandam Peninsula to the city of Sur at Oman's easternmost point. The most important cities of Oman Muscat, Sohar and Sur are located on Al-Batinah. In the southwest part of the country is another fertile coast region with the city Salalah, the province capital of the province Dhofar.

The land area of Oman shows varying topographic features: valleys and desert account for 82 % of the land mass; mountain ranges for 15 %; and the coastal plain for 3 %. Natural features divide the country into seven distinct areas: The peninsula Musandam, the Al-Batinah

coastal plain, the Muscat-Matrah coastal area, the Al-Hajar Mountains, the inner Oman, the eastern coastline including the island of Masirah and the Dhofar region.

The exclave Musandam is an extension of the Al-Hajar Mountains and borders the Strait of Hormuz, which links the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman. It is separated from the rest of the sultanate by a strip of territory belonging to the UAE. This area consists of low mountains and two inlets, Elphinstone (Khawr ash Shamm) and Malcom (Ghubbat al Ghazirah). The coastline is extremely rugged, and the inlet, 16 km long and surrounded by cliffs have frequently been compared with fjords in Norway. The capital of this region is Khasab.

The narrow, well-populated coastal plain Al-Batinah runs 140 km from the northern border of the sultanate southeast to the town of As Sib, which is about 50 km west of Muscat. Across the plains, a number of wadis descend from the Al-Hajar Mountains, conducting enough water to enable fruit and vegetable growth.

South of As Sib, the coast changes character. For about 175 km, from As Sib to Ras al Hadd, it is barren and bounded by cliffs almost its entire length. There is no cultivation and little habitation. Although the deep water off this coast renders navigation relatively easy, there are few natural harbours or safe anchorages. The two best are at Muscat and Matrah, where natural harbours facilitated the growth of cities centuries ago.

The Al-Hajar Mountains form two ranges, the Al-Hajar al Gharbi Mountains (western part) and the Al-Hajar ash Sharqi Mountains (eastern part). They are divided by the Wadi Samail, the largest wadi in the mountain zone, which forms the traditional route between Muscat and the interior. The general elevation is about 1,200 meters, but the peaks of the high ridge Jabal al-Akhdar (Green Mountain) rise to more than 3,000 meters. A part of Jabal al-Akhdar was declared as national park.

South of the coastal plain on the other side of the Al-Hajar Mountains lies the inner Oman with parts of rocky desert and sand dunes leading west into the Rub al Khali, the largest sand desert in the world. The eastern coastline, where low hills and wastelands meet the Arabian Sea for long distances is desolate. Midway along this coast and about 15 km offshore lies the barren Masirah Island. It is about 70 km long and sparsely populated.

The Dhofar region forms the south-western part of the sultanate and borders to Yemen. Its exact northern limit has never been defined. From the coast the land rises to the highest peaks about 1,000 meters a.s.l. Located on the fertile coastline is the province capital Salalah, which was the permanent residence of Sultan Said bin Taimur Al Said and the birthplace of the present sultan, Qaboos bin Said.

Climate

The climate of Oman has two basic specifications: desert climate and subtropical climate. In most parts of the country it is extremely hot and dry throughout the year. Four climatic regions can be distinguished:

The northern coast:

In this area, the climate is subtropical with warm winters (22-25 °C) and hot summers (36-39 °C and peak values of 45 °C). There is no great variation between day and night temperatures, so that summer night temperatures are rarely below 30 °C. Humidity is throughout the whole year very high (60-80 %), but the annual precipitation is only about 100 mm (10-20 days with rain). Most rain falls in form of downpours between December and March with high flooding risk, because of the slow uptake of the dry dusty ground. The water temperature in the sea is between 24 °C in the winter and 31 °C in the summer.

The Al-Hajar Mountains:

In this area the winters are cool and the night temperature can drop below 0 °C in January and February, sometimes with snow. Precipitation can be up to several hundred mm, but the mountains are bare without vegetation. During the summer there is no precipitation and the day temperatures can climb up to 30 °C and more. The nights can be very chilly though.

The inner Oman:

This area has a typical desert climate with cool to warm winters and extremely hot summers. In January the day temperatures are about 25 °C but in the night they can drop to 10-12 °C. The rare rainfalls occur also during this period. The day temperatures in the summer can be as high as 52 °C with mean values of 41-44 °C. In spite of considerable day-night fluctuations, the night temperatures drop rarely below 25 °C. Humidity is very low throughout the year with summer values of about 20 %.

The South / Dhofar:

This region has a completely different climate. The air is warm and humid during the whole year. The winter temperatures are about 27-28 °C during the day and 20-22 °C at night. In this period there is only little rainfall and humidity is about 50-60 %. The early summer is the hottest period with day temperatures of 31-33 °C and similar night temperatures. Peak values of over 40 °C can occur when hot winds are blowing from the inner Oman. In July, August and September the monsoon brings about 22 days with rain each month, mostly drizzle associated with low clouds and fog. Humidity is about 80-90 % in this time and the temperatures drop to an average of 25 °C. There are no day-night fluctuations during this period. The water temperature in the sea is between 24 °C in the winter, 29 °C in early summer and about 25 °C during the monsoon period.

Flora and Fauna

Due to low rainfalls the vegetation in Oman without irrigation is sparsely and dominated by resistant date palms. In the mountains, however, trees like cedars and olives are growing. In Dhofar, dependent on the monsoon, a lot of different and for the Arabian Peninsula untypical plants are growing. This region is also the source of frankincense, which is a resin from the *Boswellia sacra* tree.

Oman has about 85 indigenous bird species, but also migratory birds can be watched. In total more than 450 bird species have been sighted. The coastal waters are the home of many fish and whales and dolphins can be watched there. Sea turtles lay their eggs on the beaches of Oman and there are several sanctuaries to protect them. The Arabian Oryx, an antelope species of the deserts, which was extinct in the wild in 1972, was resettled in the 1980s in a sanctuary. This Arabian Oryx Sanctuary became a UNESCO world heritage site in 1994.

Population

In Oman, about 50% of the population lives in Muscat and the Al-Batinah coastal plain. Some 600,000 expatriates live in Oman, most of whom are guest workers from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, Jordan, and the Philippines. Some demographic estimates from 2005 are shown below:

Age structure	0-14 years:	42.6%
	15-64 years:	54.9%
	65 years and over:	2.5%

Birth rate:	36.73 births/1,000 population	
Death rate:	3.86 deaths/1,000 population	
Infant mortality rate:	19.51 deaths/1,000 live births	
Life expectancy at birth:	male:	70.92 years
	female:	75.46 years
Urbanisation:	About 78% of the population is urban.	

Religion

Ibadi Islam is a form of Islam distinct from Shia or Sunni Islam and is one of the oldest schools, founded less than 50 years after the death of Muhammad. Oman is the only country in the world, where the Ibadis form with 75 % the majority of the population. The school derives its name from Abdullah ibn-Ibad at-Tamimi. The followers, however, claim its true founder was Jabir ibn-Zaid al-Azdi from Nizwa. Ibadi communities are generally regarded as conservative. They believe that the attitude of a true believer to others is expressed in three religious obligations:

walayah: friendship and unity with the practicing true believers, and with the Ibadi Imams.

barah: dissociation and hostility towards unbelievers and sinners, and those destined for hell.

wuquf: reservation towards those whose status is unclear.

Ibadis regard other Muslims not as kuffar, "unbelievers", but as kuffar an-nima, "those who deny God's grace" and they deny walayah to those other Muslims. Ibadis also have several doctrinal differences with orthodox Sunni Islam, chief among them:

Muslims will not see Allah on the Day of Judgement. This is contrary to the mainstream Sunni belief that indeed Muslims will see Allah with their eyes on the day of Judgement.

Whosoever enters the hellfire, will live therein forever. This is contrary to the Sunni belief that those Muslims who enter the hellfire will live therein for a fixed amount of time, to purify them of their shortcomings, after which they will enter Paradise. Sunnis also believe that unbelievers will remain in hell forever.

Ibadis have also a different belief about the legitimate succession of Muhammad than other Islamic schools. They keep extremely close to the Holy Scripture, but are today a very pluralistic and tolerant group. Ibadi Muslims are also found in East Africa (especially Zanzibar), Libya, Algeria and Djerba Island in Tunisia.

Politics

Since Oman is an absolute monarchy, the hereditary sultan is not only head of state but also head of the government. He rules the sultanate with the help of ministers. As a kind of constitution serves the "Basic Law of the State", which was presented by Sultan Qaboos in 1996. The sultan does not designate a successor when alive. Instead, the ruling family tries to unanimously designate a new sultan after his death. If they do not designate a new ruler after three days, then they open a letter left to them by the deceased sultan, containing a recommendation for a new sultan. It is assumed that the ruling family will agree on this person as the successor.

The Sultanate has neither political parties nor legislature, although the representatives in the bicameral parliament provide the government with advice. Universal suffrage for those over 21 was instituted on 04.10.2003. Over 190,000 people (74% of those registered) voted to elect the

83 seats, amongst them two women, of the Consultative Assembly (Majlis al-Shura) for three years. However, the monarch makes the final selections and can negate election results. The other chamber, the Council of State (Majlis al-Dawla) has 41 members, who are directly appointed by the sultan. Oman's judicial system traditionally has been based on the Shari'a, the Koran laws and the oral teachings of the Islamic Prophet Muhammad. Recent royal decrees have placed the entire court system under the control of the Ministry of Justice and a supreme court is under formation.

Oman is divided into five regions (mintaqah) and four governorates (muhafazah). The regions/governorates are further subdivided into 59 districts (wilayats), presided over by governors (walis) who are responsible for settling local disputes, collecting taxes, and maintaining peace.

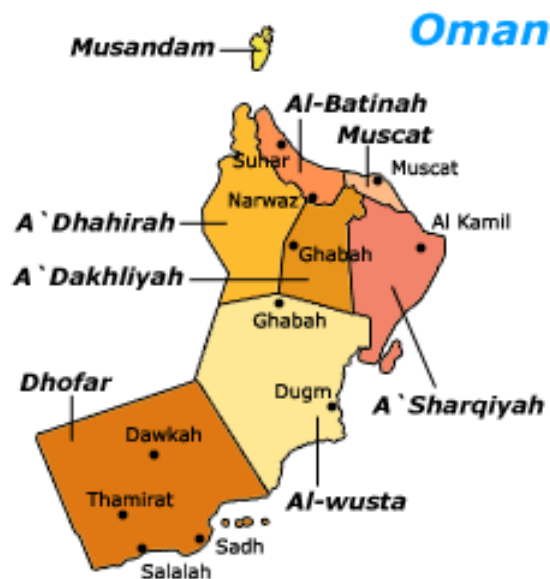
Regions:

Al-Batinah
Ad Dakhiliyah
Al-Wusta
Ash Sharqiyah
Ad Dhahirah

Governorates

Muscat
Musandam
Dhofar
Al Buraymi

(split in 10/2006 from Ad Dhahirah; located in the north west corner of Oman, adjacent to the border with UAE)



Economy

Since 1967 the economy of Oman has been dominated by its dependence on crude oil. Today oil represents about 90% of Oman's exports. In addition natural gas has been produced since 1978. The income generated was quickly deployed into building infrastructures of roads, schools, hospitals, water and electricity generating plants. All of this activity has made Oman a major success story for economic growth despite being the only oil-producing nation in the Middle East that is not a member of OPEC. Other exports are fish, metals and textiles.

Agriculture and fishing are the traditional way of life in Oman and 42 % of the population is still working in this sector. Dates, limes, pomegranates and tobacco are grown, mostly in the Al-Batinah coastal plain and in the region around Salalah. Coconut palms, wheat, and bananas also are grown, and cattle are raised in Dhofar. Other areas grow cereals and forage crops. Poultry production is steadily rising. The coastal waters around Oman have large fish populations. The main fish exports are tuna, swordfish and shark.

Education

Although there is no compulsory education, 90 % of the children go to school which is free of charge. Education is a main responsibility of the government but private initiatives are supported as well. When Sultan Qaboos began his reign in 1970, only three boy schools existed in the whole Sultanate and there only the Koran was taught. In 2004, there existed by contrast 1,038 schools, of which 430 were primary schools, 608 secondary schools, 142 private schools and 3 schools for handicapped children. Almost 600,000 children of both sexes went in

2004/2005 to school. This reflects, at a total population of 2.6 million, the young age structure of Omani society.

The system of higher education in Oman is quite recent. The first state university, the Sultan Qaboos University in Muscat, was founded in 1986. The system is binary with universities and colleges. There is one state university, three private universities, six state colleges and twelve private colleges. The colleges educate only at undergraduate-levels and no research is carried out there. The language in all institutions is mainly English. The demand for places in the higher education is bigger than the supply and the selection of students is highly competitive.