

FIFTY SHADES OF BLUE

EVOKING ARABIAN NIGHTS-THEMED NOSTALGIA FILLED WITH SAND DUNES, SOUKS, AND STARRY SKIES, OMAN SURPRISES VISITORS WITH CHARMING WATERFRONT VISTAS THAT OFFER A WHOLE NEW TAKE ON ITS NATURAL BEAUTY.

BY ANANYA BAHL

Oman, owing to its location in the Middle East, has for long been viewed as a destination marked by hot, sunny days, desert safaris, camels, and Bedouins — and all these elements do find a home here. But when Oman decides to break free from the shackles of stereotypes, it does so in style — with its waterfronts providing a pleasant break in the undulating sandy scenery. Oman is a Middle-eastern country that is still quite untouched by commercial construction and it retains its natural charm. With each place offering not just hues of blue but also unique experiences, the country's aquatic attractions are absolute must-dos on every Oman itinerary.

When in search of the sea in Oman, the best place to begin with is its capital,

Muscat. The city is quieter than its counterparts in the region and gives you a chance to soak in its still-very-much-intact culture at a laidback pace. Muscat is located on the Gulf of Oman and sees a lot of trade due to its bustling port. A walk down its vibrant Mutrah Corniche is mandatory. It's a gorgeous boulevard that runs along the seafront of the old commercial hub of the city. White-washed buildings filled with restaurants, cafes, and shops line this walkway, and several yachts, including the Sultan's private cruise ship, dot the waters of the harbour. This is a charming place for an evening stroll during sunset.

Alternatively, you may choose to recline at the alfresco balconies of the many restaurants located here. Try Bait Al Luban for authentic Omani fare



Turtle hatching at Ras Al Jinz

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comprising makbus made with fragrant rice, the coconut milk-rice-and-chicken stew called manshab, and khobose rakhhal which is a very thin Omani bread. Make sure to sip your coffee while enjoying the sweeping views of the gulf. A short walk down the waterfront will bring you to the Mutrah Souq where you can buy everything from traditional khanjars, paintings, and jewellery to clothing, souvenirs, and Omani halwa. You may choose to enjoy the rest of the corniche in the form of a drive that will pass the Mutrah Fort and National Museum of Oman to finally end at the Al Alam Palace of the Sultan of Oman.

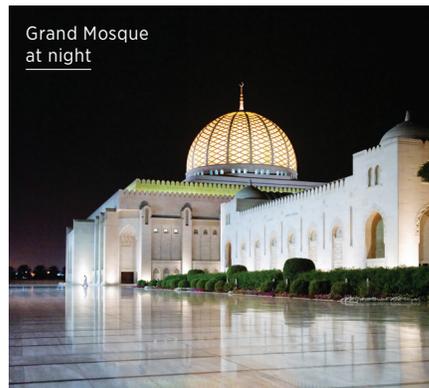
Providing a dramatic twist to this tale is the Musandam Peninsula. A short 40-minute flight from Muscat brings you to Khasab, the capital of this region. Tall mountains envelop this place and there's a certain aridness in the landscape that is immediately sensed. Fret not, this sensation will last a few minutes as its beaches soon appear and a drive up the Hajar range reveals surreal panoramas of craggy fjords, giving this place the

moniker, "the Norway of Arabia". The Atana Musandam Resort is a great seaside place to check into as it is close to points of interest like the Portuguese-built Khasab Fort, beaches, and the dhow pier.

There are two ways to experience the fjords of Musandam. First is to drive through the Hajar mountains, including Jebel Harim which is the highest peak in the region, and get a bird's-eye view of the gorgeous azure inlets and jagged landscape. While on the mountain, you can catch a glimpse of ancient fossils of underwater creatures like fish and clam



Musandam
Khasab Castle



Grand Mosque
at night

**A SHORT WALK
DOWN THE
WATERFRONT WILL
BRING YOU TO THE
MUTRAH SOUQ
WHERE YOU CAN
BUY EVERYTHING
FROM KHANJARS TO
OMANI HALWA**



Mutrah



Dhow cruise



Khanjar

that have been etched with time on stone. Second, you can embark on a half-day dhow cruise to get up close and personal with the fjords as you sail past them. Not only this, you can dive straight from your dhow into the turquoise waters of the Strait of Hormuz to swim and snorkel.

As if this weren't enough, as you whizz past the fjords, delightful dolphins spring forth for company. Initially, you will be excited by the first few that you sight and, before you know it, dozens of friendly dolphins will be swimming around your dhow — and they will stay for long! Several local travel companies also organize overnight beach camping trips here.

The dolphins aren't the only creatures of the sea that you will happily meet in Oman. Ras Al Jinz, the easternmost point on the Arabian Peninsula, is home to a turtle reserve. It is the place where the endangered green turtles come for nesting, offering visitors a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to witness this spectacle in the natural, unchanged habitat of these creatures.

The beach of the fishing village of Ras Al Jinz is widely considered to be the only official place in the world where this phenomenon can be seen first-hand. The reserve, established by a royal decree in 1996, is one of the best examples of eco-



Dolphin spotting



**RAS AL JINZ, THE
EASTERNMOST POINT
OF THE ARABIAN
PENINSULA, IS HOME
TO A TURTLE RESERVE**



WADIS ARE RAVINES THAT ARE DRY EXCEPT DURING THE RAINY SEASON, THE WADI BANI KHALID BOASTS SOME OF THE MOST SHIMMERING WATERS IN THE WHOLE OF OMAN

tourism initiatives in Oman. The best time to view this hatching process is from May to September and daily night-time and dawn tours are conducted. The reserve also houses an interactive museum and accommodation facilities.

Last, but not the least, on this Oman itinerary are the various wadis and sinkholes that dot the country's landscape. Wadis are ravines that are dry except during the rainy season. The Wadi Bani Khalid is unmissable as it is spread across different levels and boasts some of the most shimmering azure waters in all of Oman. When you are here, do as the locals do and dive right in. This wadi gives you

the feeling of being in an oasis replete with swaying palm trees and indigenous plants. To reach the uncrowded parts of the pools, it may take a little climbing, but it is worth all the effort! Sinkholes are cavities in the ground and in Oman, the Bimmah sinkhole is one of the most popular places to go swimming. Locals believe that a falling star created this depression in the Earth and this celestial story complements the utter bliss you feel as soon as you take a dip. When you walk along the rim of this sinkhole, the water changes colours depending on the angle of the sunrays, providing views that are coloured by what look like more than fifty shades of blue!