

Destination  
FABULOUS!



SHARON STEPHENSON FINDS HERSELF INTOXICATED BY THE SIGHTS AND DELIGHTS OF OMAN

# ARABIAN



The exotic and heady fragrance of frankincense scents the air.

It's always a good feeling when we get one up on the Aussies and flying into Muscat, the capital of Oman, I enjoy such a moment. While the handful of Australians on my flight queue to pay for visas, I'm whisked straight through passport control.

"We love New Zealanders," says the immigration officer, striking in his crisp white dishdasha (traditional floor-length robe). "Kiwis don't have to pay to enter our country. We hope you enjoy it."

And so it goes throughout my stay. The Middle East is often portrayed as a hot-bed of conflict and suicide bombers, and while it can't be much fun being sandwiched between Yemen and Saudi Arabia, Oman is peaceful, safe and a delight to visit. In fact, the only danger you're likely to encounter

here is extreme kindness: the Omanis are friendly, generous and so laid-back they could almost be horizontal.

It's a 45-minute flight from Dubai to Muscat, Oman's charming capital. Voted the Arab Tourist Capital of 2012, Muscat is certainly visually stunning, framed by the dramatic Hajar Mountains on one side and the warm waters of the Arabian Sea on the other.

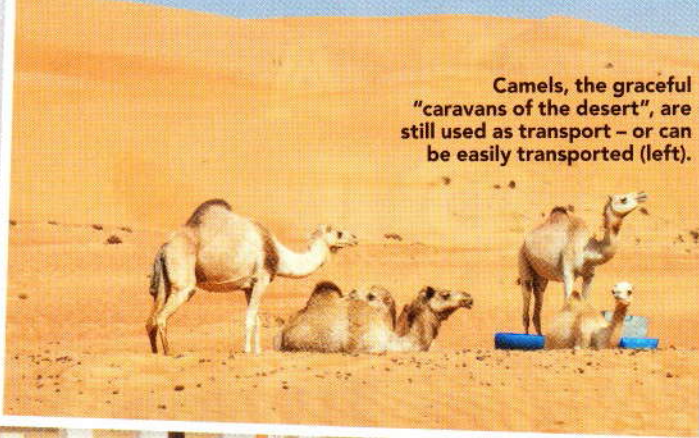
My first port of call is the capital's biggest attraction, the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque. Built in 1995 from marble, sandstone and gold, the mosque can fit 20,000 worshippers and boasts the second largest hand-loomed Persian carpet in the world (pipped only by Abu Dhabi), which took 600 Iranian weavers four years to make, as well as the world's largest chandelier,

an Italian-made monster pimped with more than 600,000 Swarovski crystals.

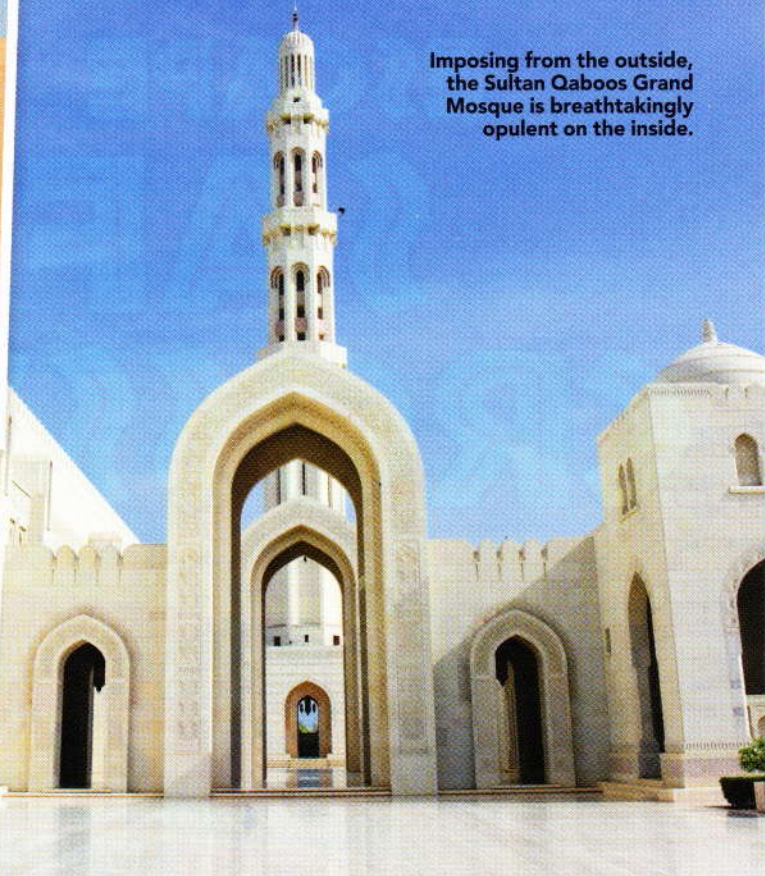
Muscat is also the site of the Muttrah Souk, a covered collection of alleyways, where Omanis have been coming to buy and sell for more than 200 years. Individual shops are piled high with everything from jewellery to pashminas and antiques. Haggling is required here and my guide Suliman helps me get a good deal on gifts for family and friends.

"One thing you should buy in Oman is frankincense," says Suliman. So I do, getting a small bag of the white resin for about \$20. Before I visited Oman, the only thing I knew about frankincense was that it was gifted by the three wise men to the baby Jesus. But Suliman tells me in ancient times this fragrance was Oman's most





Camels, the graceful "caravans of the desert", are still used as transport – or can be easily transported (left).



Imposing from the outside, the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque is breathtakingly opulent on the inside.



# tales

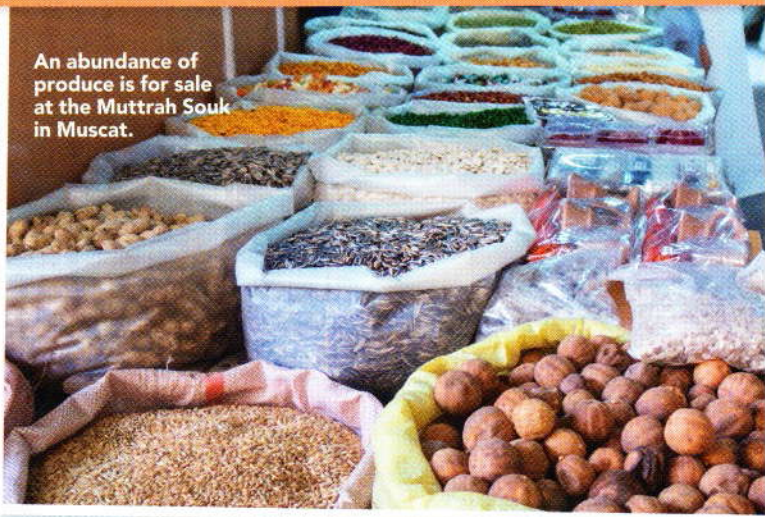
valuable commodity. In Southern Oman, I watch it being extracted from the ancient Boswellia tree and everywhere I go in the Arabian Peninsula's second largest country (only Saudi Arabia is larger), I smell the exotic aroma of burning frankincense.

**'Camels arise from a kneeling position with a sudden forwards then backwards lurch'**

You can't come to Oman and not spend a night in the desert. We drive inland to Wahiba Sands, which is about two hours from Nizwa, Oman's former capital. Desert Nights Camp is one of three in Wahiba Sands, although it's wildly incorrect to call my accommodation a tent.

This is "glamping" (glamorous camping) at its best with air conditioning and Persian carpets. We drive into the desert for a spot of "desert bashing", which sees us swoop up and down the sand dunes, eventually arriving at a Bedouin house where we're served two Omani staples – dried dates and khawa coffee.

But the best is yet to come: I am given the opportunity to ride a camel – a graceful "caravan of the desert" – and I don't hesitate. It doesn't start well (camels arise from a kneeling position with a sudden forwards then backwards lurch, which I'm not expecting), but my half-hour ride across the desert's sandy carpet is slow, relaxing and the cherry on the top of this exotic location. ■



An abundance of produce is for sale at the Muttrah Souk in Muscat.

## Insider's guide to... Oman

**LOCAL FLAVOUR:** Don't expect the high rises of neighbouring Dubai. Oman jealously guards its traditional culture and heritage, so you'll get a more authentic Arabian experience. Also, as a Muslim country, Oman is strictly "dry", although most of the larger hotels offer alcoholic drinks. Alternatively, you could bring your own duty-free.

**BEST PHOTO OPPORTUNITY:** The camels. One of the most surreal sights of my life was driving along next to a pick-up

truck, only to see a camel strapped down in the back, travelling backwards.

**STAY AT:** The five-star Shangri-La Al Jissah Resort & Spa in Muscat. This hotel has its own private beach where the resident turtle ranger will take you to watch rare green and hawksbill sea turtles hatching on the sand.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:** Visit the Sultanate of Oman Tourism and Emirates websites – [tourismoman.co.nz](http://tourismoman.co.nz) and [emirates.com](http://emirates.com).