

Explore.

Eat, drink, shop, relax

EXTRA DAY

Muscat

WORDS ALLY WYBREW

Explore incense-infused souks, ancient forts and mesmerising architecture in Oman's capital

SPRAWLING LANGUIDLY ALONG the Gulf of Oman, modest-sized Muscat has found an equilibrium between historic tradition and fast-paced modernity. Unlike several Arab cities, construction restrictions forbid skyscrapers and promote classical Omani design. The capital is a city proud of both its heritage and its wealth – let's discover some of the highlights.

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Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque

Capable of accommodating 20,000 worshippers at once, this opulent piece of architecture blends regional elements with international influences. Walls, windows and doorways echo Andalusian and Moroccan stylings, while materials hail from all over – the carpet in the men's prayer room is the second largest in the world, hand-stitched by 600 Iranian women, while its towering marble columns originate from Italy and its dense doors are constructed from Myanmar teak. The defining piece is an 8.5-tonne, 600,000 Swarovski crystal chandelier. Tourist hours are 8-11am daily (except Friday), and tour guides are mandatory.

Mutrah

Hugging the harbour to the west of Old Muscat is Mutrah, historically the city's centre of commerce. Stop outside the fish market, then duck inside to the sights and scents of fishers hawking their wares. Watch as cleaver-wielding workers expertly slice and dice



customers' purchases. The adjacent vegetable market sells locally grown onions, melons, and tomatoes alongside Khalas Saudi dates – a local favourite. Then stroll along the picturesque cornice to the incense-infused Mutrah Souk. The alleyways of this 200-year-old market are packed with everything from gold and silver jewellery to kumas and abayas. It's a great spot to barter for Hojari frankincense, one of the finest varieties of Oman's prized export. Visit between 4.30pm and 10pm for the liveliest experience.

Al Mirani Fort

Forts are big business in Oman (it's rumoured to have around 500) and many provide a fascinating insight into the country's centuries-old Portuguese occupation. To the east of Mutrah, two 16th-century strongholds cling to craggy outcroppings. On the eastern protrusion, Al Jalali Fort is kept for the sultan's exclusive use but Al Mirani Fort on the west is open to the public. A weapons room houses ancient muskets, canons and swords, while



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staggered battlements offer elevated views of Old Muscat and Al Alam Palace. Built in 1972 by Indian architects Shapoorji Pallonji, the palace blends traditional Omani design elements (symmetrical layout, archways and geometric patterns) with contemporary bright blue and gold-embossed columns.

Nizwa

Don't miss Nizwa, 160 km south of Muscat. Its souk (one of Oman's oldest) is a great place to sample sweet dates, cardamom-

infused coffee and tahini. On Friday mornings, the cattle market rolls into town, often sporting long-haired Jebel Akhdar goats. Nizwa Castle and Fort is also worth a look; the renovated, 17th-century stronghold reveals curious defensive secrets, such as slits above the stairwell where hot honey was once poured onto attackers. While there, taste *ragag*, a traditional breakfast. In the courtyard, women heat thick dough on a flat, circular pan to create crêpe-like bread, then slather it with egg, date syrup, oil, honey or cheese.

ABOVE: Souvenirs on sale in the market in Nizwa
LEFT: Night view of Al Mirani Fort

WADI GHUL AND WADI SHAB

If an extra day means escaping the city, there are fantastic options just a few hours away from Muscat. Don your walking boots and tackle the 3.5km (one way) 'Balcony Walk' of Wadi Ghul,

the Middle East's deepest canyon. This scenic trek follows a ledge-like trail half-way up a cliffside dotted with mountain goats and breathtaking views, before ending in the ruins of the old As Shab village.



Alternatively, make a beeline for Wadi Shab (left). This lush rocky canyon is filled with palm trees, turquoise water pools and funky geological formations. Take a refreshing dip or tackle the slowly

ascending gorge-edge path to be rewarded with cinematic views. Visitors can number in the hundreds, so head here early. Stop at Bimmah Sinkhole on return for another quick dip and photo op.