



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Oman covers 119,498 square miles (309,500 square kilometers) of the Arabian Peninsula. Its terrain includes mountains, deserts, fertile coastal strips, and gravel plains. The Jabal Akhdar (“Green Mountain”) reaches 10,000 feet (3,048 meters) in elevation. The Rub’ al-Khali Desert is part of the vast Empty Quarter shared with Saudi Arabia. Each of Oman’s eight regions is characterized by distinct geography. The Musandam Peninsula is separated from the rest of Oman by the United Arab Emirates.

Winter temperatures are pleasant; lows average 60°F (16°C) and highs average 81°F (27°C). It occasionally snows on the highest point of Jabal Akhdar. Summer temperatures are hot and humid; highs reach 120°F (50°C) and lows average 84°F (29°C) from June to August. The southernmost area, Dhofar, has cooler summers and warmer winters; it experiences mist and light monsoon rains each summer. Northern rainfall amounts vary, but storms can cause flash floods along dry riverbeds (*wadis*). Oman’s rare plants and animals include frankincense trees in Dhofar, green sea turtles along the Ras al-Hadd coast, and the Arabian oryx in Jiddat al-Harasis.

History

Oman has long been a nation of seafaring merchants. Around 2000 BC, it boasted advanced housing, pottery, crop irrigation, and copper smelting. Omani traders were famous for copper and frankincense, the latter being crucial to

religious rites in most ancient cultures and therefore extremely valuable. Due to its location and prosperity, Oman attracted various invaders over time. Portugal’s Albuquerque the Great conquered Muscat and Sohar in 1507. After Imam Sultan bin Seif expelled the Portuguese in 1650, Oman began to expand. Within a century it had territories in Africa, including Zanzibar (1730–1890).

Ahmed bin Said founded the current al-Said dynasty in 1741 when he was elected *imam* (religious leader). His grandson Sayyid Said bin Sultan increased Oman’s influence and territorial holdings in East Africa, Baluchistan, and South Persia. After Said bin Sultan died in 1856, one son, Thuwaini, ruled Oman and the other son, Majid, ruled Zanzibar and other African possessions. Britain took control of Zanzibar in 1890.

Oman declined in importance as it lost overseas possessions and suffered from tribal warfare (1915–57) and political disputes. In the 1950s, Imam Ghalib bin Ali al-Hinai tried to usurp power from Sultan Said bin Taimur. The rebellion eventually led to Ghalib’s defeat in the Jabal Akhdar War of 1959. Ghalib was the last national *imam*. Subsequent national religious leaders, called Grand Muftis, were appointed by the sultan. Today’s *imams* have only local authority.

From 1965 to 1976, war with Dhofari guerrillas supported by South Yemen drained the nation’s resources. Sultan Said bin Taimur was removed from office in 1970 by his son Sultan Qaboos bin Said. Sultan Qaboos negotiated an end to the war, offered amnesty to dissidents, unified the sultanate, and began exporting oil (discovered in 1967) to raise Oman from poverty.

In 1970, Oman had only three schools, two hospitals, and essentially no paved roads. Sultan Qaboos built roads, schools, and hospitals, and extended fresh water and electricity to nearly every village. Today, citizens have access to adequate health care, and more than 75 percent enjoy clean water and sanitation. In 1996, the sultan introduced political reforms to guarantee civil rights and maintain stability. Women were allowed to run for office and vote in 1997 elections for the Consultative Council, an advisory legislative body formed six years earlier. In 2002, Sultan Qaboos granted the right to vote to all Omanis over age 21. Prior to this decision, the government selected all voters, limiting eligibility to one-fourth of the adult population. The sultan has also sought economic reform and growth by privatizing and diversifying the economy to reduce Oman's dependence on oil.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Oman's population of 3 million is growing by 2 percent annually. This figure includes more than 577,000 expatriates who live and work in Oman. The population is concentrated in cities; only about 28 percent of Oman's inhabitants live in rural areas. Muscat has more than a half million residents. Omanis are not ethnically homogenous. They descend from Arabic, Baluchi, Persian, South Indian, and East African peoples. Expatriates mainly come from the Indian subcontinent, the Philippines, Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, Europe, and North America.

Language

Omani citizens speak Arabic, Oman's official language. Pronunciation differs by region and generation. Many Omanis also speak English, Baluchi, Swahili, Urdu, or various Indian dialects. The Jabali people of Dhofar speak Jabeli. Shihi is spoken on Musandam. English is taught in school beginning in the fourth grade and often is the language of commerce. Urban signs are in English and Arabic. Most instruction at Sultan Qaboos University is in English.

Religion

Islam became established in AD 630. Official estimates report that 75 percent of Omanis are Ibadi Muslims, while the remainder are either Sunni or Shi'i Muslims. The Ibadi share with other Muslims basic Islamic values that center on the *Qur'an* (Islam's book of scripture) and *Hadith* (Muhammad's compiled sayings), although Ibadi have different interpretations for certain passages. They also maintain their own elected *imams*. Islamic worship is based on the Five Pillars of Faith: professing the name of *Allah* (God) and his prophet Muhammad, praying five times daily while facing Makkah (in present-day Saudi Arabia), giving a portion of one's income to the poor, making a pilgrimage to Makkah, and fasting each day during the holy month of *Ramadan*. Devout Muslims do not drink alcohol or eat pork.

Expatriates dress conservatively in public, do not eat, drink, or smoke in public during the day during *Ramadan*,

and honor other Islamic traditions. At the same time, they are free to practice their own religions. Oman has Christian churches and Hindu temples, and Omanis are tolerant of others' beliefs.

General Attitudes

Omanis are friendly, open, and tolerant. They are proud of their country and its progress. Sultan Qaboos insists "there is no evolution without roots" and has crafted social policy to balance modernization with Oman's cultural and Islamic heritage. People are pleased with this approach and greatly respect the sultan for his leadership. Omanis also value their families. Most adults desire a good education for their children, a nice home, a good job, and the ability to purchase consumer goods. Education and training are allowing Omanis to replace skilled expatriates in many fields. Still, citizens might respect others as much for their social position as their professional achievements.

Personal Appearance

Clothing styles vary by region, but men usually wear a white *dishdasha* (ankle-length robe with long sleeves and collarless neck) with a *farakha* or *kashkusha* (wavy knotted tassel worn at the neck) and a *kumma* (a brimless, round embroidered cap) in public. For some formal occasions, such as work at a government job, a man might wear a *mussar* (turban) on top of his *kumma*. The *mussar* is wrapped in different ways, depending on regional origin. Schoolboys wear a *dishdasha* and *kumma*. For very formal events, men may wear a *bisht* (camel-hair robe) over their *dishdasha* and a *khanjar* (handmade silver dagger) around their waist. They may also carry a thin, ornamental cane.

Women's clothing also varies but traditionally contains three main pieces: a loosely fitted dress that extends below the knees, baggy trousers, and a *lahaf* (embroidered headdress). Each piece may be in a different pattern or color, and very bright colors are the most popular. In public, Omani women often wear an *'abaya* (thin black cloak) over their clothing to cover all but the hands and face. Some women, especially among the desert Bedouin, cover their faces with a *burqa* (mask or veil). In Muscat, female workers or university students might wear more Western clothing but still cover their arms, heads, and legs. Omani schoolgirls wear long white pants, brown or blue tunics, and white headscarves. Throughout Oman, women are often adorned with jewelry. Rings, bracelets, necklaces, anklets, and nose rings are common.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Omanis greet with the phrase *Al-salām 'alaykum* (Peace be upon you) and reply *Wa 'alaykum al-salām* (And on you be peace). This is accompanied by a handshake. Men from certain regions may also kiss on both cheeks and rub noses. Women greet each other with kisses on the cheeks and handshakes. Men and women who are not related seldom socialize or publicly greet each other.

Initial greetings may continue with *Kayf halak?* (How are you?), to which one replies *Al-hamdu lillah, zayn* (Praise to Allah, well). People then exchange inquiries about each other's health and family. Omanis address friends and acquaintances by first name. Titles are reserved for formal situations. Relatives use first names, but older relatives are addressed as "aunt," "uncle," "grandfather," and so on. Omani names are formed by adding one's father's and grandfather's names to one's given name, followed by a tribal or family name: *Abdullah bin Muhammad bin Sayf al-Hinai*. *Bin* (son of) and *bint* (daughter of) can be omitted: *Fatma Muhammad Sayif al-Hinai*.

Gestures

Omanis use the right hand for greeting, eating, and passing items. They often use both hands to emphasize speech. Public displays of affection between members of the opposite sex are not appropriate. It is impolite to allow the bottom of one's foot to show toward another's face. A person sits and kneels in such a way as to not expose the feet, but this is not always possible during prayer times. Conservative Muslim men avoid eye contact with women during conversation, as this would suggest a lack of respect.

Visiting

Generally, men and women visit separately. Relatives visit as often as possible—at least once a week. Neighbors visit when there is a special reason (e.g., birth or death) but may also drop by briefly on a daily basis to make sure all is well. Guests remove their shoes upon entering a home.

Women seat their guests in a *majlis* (sitting room) according to status and age. The hostess offers coffee or tea, along with dates, other fruits (fresh or canned), and sweets. The coffee, flavored with cardamom, is served in a tiny cup. The cup is refilled until the person asks to stop by returning it while shaking it from side to side. It is impolite to drink more than three cups. The cup is rinsed and offered to the next person. After this, women apply saffron and *mahleb* (a paste of crushed black seeds) to their faces, scent their clothing with incense, and sample perfumes.

Men also sit, drink, and eat in patterns similar to women. In traditional households, the youngest son or a servant serves the refreshments. In Westernized or urban homes, wives bring their husbands the refreshments and he serves his guests.

Eating

Omani families eat from a large communal tray placed on the ground. Each person washes hands before and after a meal. One eats with the right hand only and selects food that is nearby. Hosts might offer guests the choicest pieces of food. More Westernized families eat at a table and use either their hands or sometimes a spoon and fork. Small families eat together. In a polygamous family, co-wives may eat separately with their children. When guests are present, men and women might eat separately. Urban Omanis occasionally eat together as a family at restaurants, but it is more common for men to dine together while their families eat at home. Women occasionally take their children out for fast food.

LIFESTYLE

Family

The extended family is a vital unit of society. Each nuclear family is headed by a father, who makes rules and final decisions. In the case of divorce, a woman returns to the home of her father or brother(s). A widow might be cared for by her sons, as they inherit most of the father's property. In the past, women remained at home. Gradually, more educated women are entering the workforce and leaving child and home care to expatriate nannies, maids, and houseboys.

A man may have up to four wives; all wives must be treated equally. As this is expensive in modern society, polygamy is becoming rare. Rural relatives tend to live near each other or in the same compound, while urban families are more likely to live in single-family households. Unmarried adults live at home. Even a single career-woman lives with her parents, a brother, or other relatives. A married woman whose husband is away lives with her own family, not alone with her children.

Housing

Older houses were often built using natural materials such as mud bricks, while newer houses are almost always concrete villas with tile and sometimes marble floors. However, the basic layout of the house has remained the same. The home has a courtyard and is surrounded by a high wall. A men's *majlis* is usually found near the main door so that male guests will not have to walk through female-dominated areas of the house. The *majlis* may contain a bathroom, television, and either traditional (cushions on the floor) or Western (sofas) seating. A family sitting room sometimes doubles as the women's *majlis* if the house does not contain a separate *majlis* for female visitors. The number of bedrooms can range from two to more than ten. Often a small room for servants is off the kitchen or on the roof. Most homes, except the very poorest, have electricity and indoor plumbing, even in remote villages.

Dating and Marriage

Omanis do not date casually. By tradition, marriages are arranged between families and occur within the same tribe or family cluster. The law requires Omani citizens to marry other Omani citizens unless they receive permission from the sultan to marry someone else (like an expatriate). Some urban Omanis might meet at school, but they would still not date (unless secretly) until engaged.

To become engaged, a man asks permission of a woman's father to marry her. If consent is given, the couple is allowed to date with a chaperone. If both find each other agreeable (either can reject the union), a marriage date is set. The marriage then takes place in two stages. First, the groom signs a marriage contract with the bride's father at a mosque in the presence of an *imam* and each party's male relatives. Afterward, the men eat and celebrate while the bride and her female guests have a separate party at home. The second stage, which can occur the same day or even years later, is when the groom goes to the bride's home to take her away.

As part of the marriage agreement, the groom gives a negotiated amount of money to the bride's father, who nearly always gives it to the bride. Although the government has set a ceiling of 2,000 *Rial Omani* (about US\$5,200) for the bridal payment, some families have demanded as much as 10,000 *Rial Omani*. If a couple divorces, the woman keeps the bridal payment and returns to her family.

Life Cycle

Traditionally, after a woman gives birth, she and the baby move in with her mother, who cares for her over the next 40 days. This practice is no longer strictly followed in urban areas, as many households have domestic servants who can help. Female friends and relatives and close male family members bring gifts to the mother and baby. No special celebration occurs at this time, but some families have a celebratory party on the baby's first birthday. Graduation from school, obtaining a driver's license (for boys), and marriage are important milestones to adulthood.

Muslim customs are followed when a person dies. The body is washed and wrapped in clean white cloth. Male relatives wash a male body; females wash a female body. The men then take the body to a graveyard in the desert and bury it before the sun sets. It is placed in a shallow grave, which is marked with a stone without inscription. No memorial service is held, but the men say a prayer for the deceased in the mosque. The women pray at home. After the burial, family, friends, and neighbors visit the family. They bring food and read from the *Qur'an*. Mourning officially lasts for 40 days.

Diet

Imported rice, eaten each day for lunch, is served on a large platter with fish or meat (chicken, lamb, goat, beef), sauce, salad, onions, and limes. Dishes are flavored with such spices as cardamom, turmeric, cinnamon, and saffron. Curried dishes are also very popular. At breakfast, Omanis typically have round flat bread with honey and *laban* (a yogurt drink). They may add vermicelli and meat. Dinner is a light meal that includes rice or bread. Coffee, tea, soft drinks, dates, and fruits are common snacks.

While rice, beef, lamb, and canned goods are imported, many other foods are produced locally. Fresh seafood is trucked daily to the interior. A number of farms produce dates, limes, mangoes, papayas, bananas, coconuts (in the south), and melons. Modern farming techniques and irrigation are allowing farmers to grow tomatoes, potatoes, cabbages, cauliflower, and even mushrooms and strawberries. Chickens, eggs, and bakery and dairy products are plentiful. Young urban people like such Western foods as hamburgers and pizza.

Recreation

Soccer is Oman's favorite sport. Even the remotest village has a soccer field for young men and boys. Towns have soccer teams that play competitively, and major games are played at the Sultan Qaboos Stadium. Women may attend but are seated separately from men. Women are more likely to watch soccer on television. Urban women and girls are somewhat restricted when it comes to playing sports because they must

be fully covered in mixed company. Some have access to separate facilities. Rural women rarely engage in sports.

Popular spectator sports include camel racing, horse racing, and a type of bullfighting where two bulls push and battle each other until one backs down. Private clubs offer the wealthy access to tennis, squash, cycling, rugby, softball, and water sports. Golfers putt on "browns" (oiled sand) instead of greens. Omanis enjoy picnics and camping, watching television, reading, socializing, and playing cards.

The Arts

The Ministry of National Heritage and Culture fosters the preservation of traditional arts. Sultan Qaboos has directed the restoration of almost one hundred historic forts, castles, watchtowers, and houses. Pottery, woodworking, and shipbuilding are encouraged, and the making of *khanjars* (ornamental daggers) and silver jewelry is highly prized. Popular literature and music enjoy a strong following. Dances reflect the geography and traditional livelihood of each region. They are most often accompanied by drums. The *Razha* is a national dance characterized by sword throwing and an exchange of poetry. Military bands are very popular, especially on National Day. Oman has the world's only camel-back bagpipe military band.

Holidays

Secular events are set according to the Western calendar, but religious holidays follow the Islamic (lunar) calendar. National Day (18 Nov.) celebrates both Sultan Qaboos's birthday and his taking control of the government. The sultan observes this day in a different town each year. The festivities include parades, tea parties, camel races, and other events. The main religious holiday is *Eid al-Fitr*, a feast held at the end of *Ramadan*. Families exchange gifts and buy new clothing. Friends and relatives give children sweets or money. Children may also go door-to-door to collect 200 *baiza* banknotes (1,000 *baiza* equal one *Rial Omani*). Extended families feast on goat or lamb. About 10 weeks later, Muslims celebrate *Eid al-Adha* (Feast of Sacrifice), which marks the end of the *Haj* (pilgrimage) season and also honors Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son. Families sacrifice a goat or lamb, then they eat one-third, give one-third to neighbors, and donate one-third to the poor. Muslims also celebrate the Islamic New Year and the prophet Muhammad's birthday. The month-long Muscat Festival, one of the year's largest cultural events, begins a week before *Eid al-Adha*. Expatriates celebrate their own religious holidays. Christians may receive Christmas Day off.

SOCIETY

Government

Oman is a hereditary monarchy. Sultan Qaboos bin Said also serves as prime minister and is head of state and head of government. While there is no constitution, the 1996 royal decree from Sultan Qaboos functions as a basic law. It clarifies issues of royal succession and guarantees basic civil liberties. It also establishes a bicameral Omani Council. The

lower body, *Majlis al-Shura* (Consultative Council), advises the sultan and has some voice in government. Its 84 members are directly elected. The upper body, *Majlis al-Dawla* (Council of State), consists of appointed senior dignitaries. The sultan conducts a semiannual tour to meet with the people and local leaders; the trips help him assess local needs and develop policy. The sultan's cabinet handles day-to-day administration.

The country is divided into 8 administrative regions, which are subdivided into 59 districts (*wilayat*). Each district is governed by an appointed *wali* (governor). In addition, a *shaykh* elected by his tribe implements instructions from the *wali*. A hereditary *shaykh* makes certain decisions for the tribe.

Economy

The economy is based primarily on oil, which accounts for 80 percent of the nation's income. Oman is not a member of OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries). High oil prices have helped the economy recover from large deficits, but the economy is vulnerable to price fluctuations. To lessen dependency on limited oil supplies, Oman is diversifying. Fishing, copper mining and processing, farming, and light industry supply additional revenue. Oman is opening up to tourists by building hotels, offering tours, and making visas easier to obtain. The nation's real gross domestic product per capita has grown dramatically in the past generation, and improvements in education, infrastructure, and health care have increased opportunities for most Omanis. However, disparities between men and women remain, and women earn little of the nation's income. The currency is the *Rial Omani* (OMR).

Transportation and Communications

Oman's roads are in good repair. Private automobiles are preferred by those who can afford them. Although not prohibited, Omani women are rarely seen driving outside of Muscat. Most rural women do not know how to drive. Public buses, licensed taxis, and minibus taxis operate throughout the country. There is no railway. Muscat and Salalah have international airports. Cellular phone use is widespread in urban and rural areas. Most urban homes have landline telephones. The government owns and controls the country's several radio stations and one television station. Many homes have satellite dishes that receive international and regional broadcasts. Internet access is widely available.

Education

The government provides free, separate education to all boys and girls in primary and secondary schools. Since 1970, the number of schools has risen from three to more than one thousand, and literacy has correspondingly risen. The number of boys and girls in school is nearly equal. Private schools also exist. Omani children must learn Arabic and study the *Qur'an*. After secondary school, students must pass an exam to enter the university, technical or teacher-training colleges, or other programs. Schooling at this level is also free to citizens. Sultan Qaboos University offers undergraduate degrees in a wide variety of fields. Some students pursue

postgraduate studies abroad.

Health

Oman's national health system provides free high-quality care to all citizens and to expatriates employed by the government. For others, health insurance is available and fees are moderate. Each major city hosts a regional hospital, and Muscat has four. Towns and villages have health centers. Numerous private clinics operate throughout Oman. Nearly all births are in a hospital and nearly all children are immunized.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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POPULATION & AREA

Population	2,967,717 (rank=137)
Area, sq. mi.	119,498 (rank=71)
Area, sq. km.	309,500

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	NA
Gender inequality rank	NA
Real GDP per capita	\$25,000
Adult literacy rate	87% (male); 74% (female)
Infant mortality rate	16 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	72 (male); 76 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).