

LIFE IN SOHAR



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SOHAR; ITS HISTORY AND TODAY



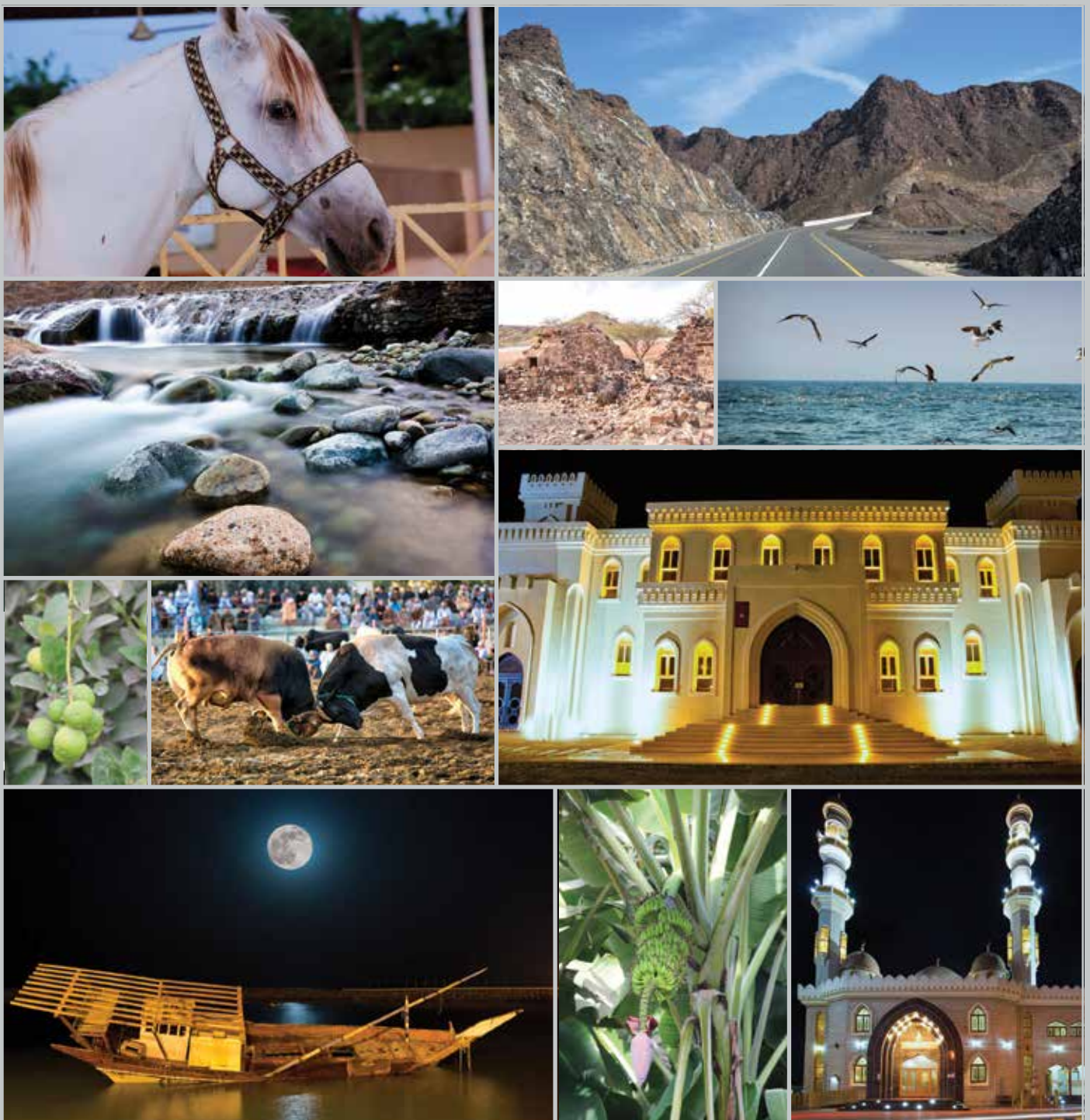
Sohar is believed to be the location of Omana, described, two thousand years ago, by the Roman historian, Pliny the Elder. While there are different versions offered for the origins of the name of Oman, this ancient reference at least points to the long history of Sohar and its significance in the development of the region, of Muscat and the Trucial States and of the modern Sultanate of Oman. Sohar served as the capital of the region while under Portuguese rule and remains the centre of Oman's copper mining, an industry which, today, is second only to oil in export values. And, for those who enjoy a sense of the sea-faring adventures of Oman, both real and mythical, Sohar was also the port-of-call of the legendary Sinbad.

Sohar is located on the Gulf of Oman and is around 240 kilometers north of the capital city, Muscat, and a similar distance from Dubai, in the neighbouring United Arab Emirates. The city is noted, still, for its tradition of fishing and for its date, mango and banana plantations, which lend the environment its extraordinary depth of greenery. Sohar also boasts modern port facilities, a rapidly growing industrial facility and the newly-opened Sohar International Airport. The success of modern Sohar as an industrial and commercial hub, equipped to serve Oman and its partners in the Middle East and beyond, remains a primary focus of Oman 2020, the government's plan to boost industrialisation, enhance the national logistical infrastructure and support local and offshore investment in the private sector.

FOR THE RESIDENT AND VISITOR

Sohar offers a lengthy coastline with clean, sandy beaches and, of course, the turquoise waters of the Gulf of Oman. The local hotels also provide swimming pools, gyms, spa amenities and restaurants. Beyond the city, there are mountains for the hill walker or dedicated climber and, for the rambler or adventurous off-road driver, wadis with all-year spring water. The town centre features an array of modern attractions, including a shopping mall and a gold souq. Traditional attractions can be found in the beautiful architecture of the many mosques in Sohar which, by 2017, will be enhanced further by the magnificent Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque. This shall be the jewel in the crown of Sohar's extraordinary architectural heritage, old and new, traditional and modern.

Finally, the very history of the city can be seen and explored in the newly-restored, late thirteenth century fort, which is located in a particularly leafy area, overlooking the sea and opposite the beautiful Corniche, a favourite location of the keen, evening walker.



CLIMATE

In Sohar, the locals recognize two seasons: summer and winter. Summers are long, hot and, because Sohar is a coastal city, humid. Temperatures will exceed 40C every day and will do so for months. Winter brings rain, which brings floods and, while a considerable amount of construction work has been undertaken to ensure that main roads pass over areas where flooding occurs, you may sometimes find that smaller, local roads become impassable. This is the season when many students cannot get to University in the morning. Day time temperatures hover around the low twenties while the temperature at night can drop to 10C. For the most part, though, the Sohar winter is like a European spring and is a delight to experience.

SHOPPING



Carrefour and Lulu, the biggest hypermarket chains in the region, are represented in Sohar. There is also a huge variety of hypermarkets, supermarkets and local shops which sell prepared and fresh foods and a host of consumer goods, including large, domestic appliances. There are plenty of clothing outlets that stock western fashions for both men and women and these will include sports clothes manufactured by the major brand names.

University staff will also be pleased to find a branch of the Al Qurtoba bookshop on the campus and a branch alongside the University, just a few metres from the main entrance. Both branches stock a small selection of English language books, but this selection is notable for the rarity of the titles, and your purchase might be made only because you have found something that you would not find in a larger book store. Other than this, the stock of books will not keep an avid reader happy. However, the Al Qurtoba branch by the University entrance stocks an extraordinary variety of artists' materials of a quality that you might expect to find only in a dedicated arts supplier in a capital city.

The Borders bookshop chain retains a very small outlet in the Qurm Mall, in Muscat, but a true bookstore experience can be found only in Dubai or Abu Dhabi. You can, of course, order books online, and if you do so via Amazon.co.uk, they can be delivered for just 1 OMR per item to the Al Manahil Bookshop in Muscat. Visit www.almanahil-books.com for further information.

Generally, for newcomers seeking a complete shopping experience, the initial impulse might be to travel to Muscat or to Dubai. While both these cities offer a greater variety of consumer items of all types and, of course, the excitement of the visit itself, by and large, resident consumers of Sohar find almost everything they need right here, on their doorsteps.

BUSINESS HOURS



Shops in the souq and the mall operate on a two shift system. Morning shift hours are usually from 9am to 1pm and the evening shift hours from about 4.30pm to 10pm. Elsewhere, Carrefour and Lulu remain open all day, including on Friday, as do most other shops.

Government offices and banks are generally open from 8am to around 2 or 2.30 pm and are closed on Friday and Saturday. The University maintains an account with Sohar Bank, so you might choose to open an account with this bank, as to do so means that there will be only the minimal time taken to transfer salary payments to your account. Omani banks, as are most Gulf banks, are stable, reliable and safe places to keep your savings. Staff members coming from western countries might ask themselves if their own banks can boast such stability.

CUSTOMS AND VALUES

Sohar is a regional city and, while it hosts a huge community of people who come from other countries, some far away and very different to Oman, it is not quite the same as a regional capital city, such as Dubai. Omanis are welcoming and friendly (this is not a politeness; they are welcoming and friendly) but they want to maintain their customs and values and norms of behavior in public, and visitors should remember this.

Omanis don't shout in public, they don't play loud music, and they are unfailingly polite. Replicate their behavior and you will be appreciated.

Visitors who are unfamiliar with a conservative, Islamic country can help themselves and their Omani hosts by dressing respectfully. If in doubt, cover up. You can relax the rules while you are at one of the local gyms or sports clubs and while on the beach but, again, if in doubt, look at what other people are doing.

For most people, life goes on during the call to prayer. They continue driving, eating, shopping – and teaching. Friday morning, though, is when Sohar changes. While the supermarkets remain open, the streets are mostly deserted and there is an air of peace in this normally busy city. The midday or Zuhr call to prayer sees the mosques full and you will find many worshippers on the pavements outside the mosques. If you are out and about, this is a time to show discretion, even though none of the worshippers will be troubled by your presence as you pass by.

SOCIAL LIFE AND MEETING PLACES



Your University colleagues are members of communities of people who come from countries far from the shores of Oman and each community has its favourite meeting places. While you are likely to be invited to different gatherings by your colleagues, the coffee shop remains the principle focus of most social gatherings outside the home. Essentially, coffee shops are available in two types. The most common is the small coffee shop that caters to local gentlemen who sit and chat and eat servings of traditional Indian and Arabian snacks. Then, there are the western-style coffee shops, such as Costa. These are frequented by everyone - locals, visitors, men and women - and you'll find them in the Safeer Mall (often simply called Carrefour) and in Lulu, and in the Sohar Beach, the Peacock and the Crown Plaza Hotels. There are also coffee shops at the fast food outlets at the Shell 'pump', a petrol or gas station, mid-way between the university and the souq. You will soon get to know the location. Sohar also has Penny's Café, a bright, colourful meeting place with an all-day menu of meals, snacks and beverages.

The Crown Plaza and Sohar beach hotels have bars where alcohol can be purchased. Residents who choose to drink alcohol at home can obtain a liquor licence. Ask the Human Resource Department for information about how to do this and for the location of the alcohol outlet. In any case, remember that Oman is an Islamic country and, while it allows people to purchase or drink alcohol, misbehavior occasioned by the consumption of alcohol is not tolerated. It is always better to demonstrate a proper respect for local values, especially when the locals are happy to try to accommodate your lifestyle.

DRESS CODE AT THE UNIVERSITY

The University sets a standard of propriety in dress. Our male Omani colleagues wear the traditional dishdasha and kuma or musa, but most male teachers, even if they come from countries where traditional thobes or other local garments are worn, wear the standard, western-style shirt, tie and trousers. The tie is optional and sandals can be worn rather than shoes. Our female Omani colleagues wear beautiful, colourful dresses but these are covered by abayas and, of course, cover their hair. You will find that our Omani students follow the same dress codes. Many of our female colleagues, who come from outside Oman, wear clothing which is traditional to their home countries. Otherwise, female teachers are required to dress in a manner that shows respect for the local customs and values. No female teacher has to cover her hair, but long sleeves and long skirts will be required. If in doubt, look at what your colleagues are doing.

ACCOMMODATION

The University will accommodate you in a hotel for your first week in Sohar. During that time, you will need to find accommodation. Advertisements for rented accommodation can be seen everywhere, which will be villas or apartments, but, even if you speak Arabic, you are likely to need the help of an agent, a colleague or a local person.

Almost all accommodation is unfurnished and is not equipped with air conditioning units - which you will need. This initial expense can be covered by a 1,000 OR University loan. Ask at the Human Resources Department about this, if you need an advance.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND INTERNET SERVICE PROVIDERS

Omantel is the national telecommunications service provider of the Sultanate of Oman. Omantel has offices in every town and city in the country and there are two in Sohar, one of which is in the easy-to-find Safer Mall, while the main customer service office is in the souq. Ooreedo, previously and still sometimes referred to as Nawras, is a private service provider and, similarly, is represented throughout the country. Ooreedo also has offices in the Safer Mall and in the souq. Ask your colleagues which service they think is the best and you will receive a variety of opinions. Your decision might be determined on the quality of the customer service that you experience when visiting the respective companies' offices. Both of these service providers will install home internet access.

SATELLITE TV

Shops offering satellite installation are everywhere. Both the equipment and the installation service are cheap. If you are seeking only free-to-air channels, then you would be advised to choose the satellite installer closest to your home. Pay-to-view services broadcast a wide range of English language programmes and you can choose Orbit Showtime Network (OSN), Pehla, or Beln Sports, which broadcasts football (soccer) and almost every sports event that you can imagine. To obtain satellite installation for pay-to-view channels, you will need to go to the souq. Currently, there are three, pay-to-view satellite installers in the souq; two of the outlets are run by Space Star Trading while the other is Sohar Al Arabiya. Ask a University colleague to direct you to them.

TRANSPORT

There is no public transport in Sohar other than taxis. Taxis are ordinary family sedans painted orange and white. They will stop to pick you up if you signal them. Taxis are not fitted with meters and it is the custom to simply give the driver what is accepted as an appropriate fee. Standardised fees, which are not high, are detailed below. If you want to travel to Muscat or to the outlying towns of Shinas, Liwa, Al Buraimi - or to the UAE - you can go to the taxi ranks, which are located at the flyover between Lulu Hypermarket and the Oman Gift Market, and take a taxi from there.

The regular fare, when traveling with other passengers, is 200 baiza per kilometer. Fares for passengers who choose not to share are not as cheap, but are usually negotiable. In 2016, the taxi fare to Muscat, some 240 kilometres away, is just 10 riyals.

Taxis might also be mini buses and you will learn to recognize them. They, too, will stop to pick you up if you signal them.

CAR HIRE

You can hire a car to suit your needs by visiting any of the car rental offices in Sohar. These will offer a range of vehicles, from small, family sedans to purpose-built, off-road vehicles for desert exploration.

CAR BUYING

Almost all of the major car manufacturers are represented at sales rooms in Sohar. There is also a lively, used car market and you will soon learn where private vendors park cars that they are offering for sale. A colleague or local resident can advise you on this.

We do not want to show favouritism, especially as car buying can be guided by personal preference, but it should be noted that Japanese cars do well in Oman's extremely hot climate, their air conditioning units are efficient and reliable (and you will need them to be) and they tend to command higher resale prices. In addition, local mechanics are adept at repairing them and can source a vast supply of cheap, good quality used spare parts to help you keep service and repair costs down.

Whatever you choose to buy, you will find that new car prices are lower than they are in countries beyond the Gulf region, as are prices for second-hand cars. You will even find car models that are largely unknown to your home market. An example of this is the range of high-end Japanese sedans that are almost unheard of in Europe but which are sought after locally.

CAR INSURANCE

Unlike in most countries, insurance covers the car, not the driver, and you will find that car insurance costs are low – even while accident rates are high. You will need to ensure that you specify UAE insurance for your car if you intend to travel to there. It's worth the small, extra cost. Don't go to the UAE without insurance.

VISAS AND RESIDENT CARDS

New staff members should present themselves at the Human Resources Department at the University within two days of their date of arrival in Oman. This will allow the Department to complete the procedures related to employment contracts, medical examinations and resident cards, in addition to issuing health and life insurance coverage.

The Human Resources Department will assist you in obtaining a variety of visas types but, in the first instance, new members of staff will need to be issued with their own visas and resident cards. The process for obtaining these has been streamlined and completing the necessary documentation is very much an electronic system these days. But, do remember to bring photographs.

PHOTOGRAPHS

For official purposes, you are likely to need quite a few passport-sized photographs, and these must feature a blue background. You can have them taken, at very low cost, at any of the many photography shops found in Sohar.

YOUR EMBASSY

You might want to register at your embassy or consular section. This will give them a record of your presence in Oman. From time to time, some embassies routinely contact the University to see if there are any new members of staff who would like to register with them.

CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

There are two 'international' or English medium schools in the area at the time of writing. The Sohar International School, which is owned by Sohar University, and the Al Batinah International School, which is owned by Sohar Aluminium, a major local employer. There is also The Indian School, Sohar, one of many branches found throughout Oman. University staff members can apply for a discount on fees at each of these schools. Elsewhere, there are schools to suit all nationalities and language speakers, some of which offer a very high standard of education. The best step in securing a quality education for your children is to consult your colleagues, and, although we have included two contact numbers below, you will almost certainly find that, in the first instance, you should visit the school to establish contact.

*Sohar International School.

Tel: 26836434

e-mail: sischool@omantel.net.om

*Al Batinah International School.

Tel: 99442625 (this is a mobile phone number)

e-mail: info@albatinahis.com

SOME USEFUL WEBSITES

* (Oman National Tourism Company)

www.ontcoman.com/

www.omantourism.gov.om

www.lonelyplanet.com/worldguide/oman/muscat/getting-there-and-around

* (Oman information portal; cinema, events, restaurant guides)

www.isurf.co.om/isurf2/index.jsp

* (Royal Oman Police; ROP rules, contacts, fees and paying speeding fines)

www.rop.gov.om

* An excellent site for current information and you will also find the labor laws described here.

www.omanet.om/english/home.asp

*<http://www.soharmusicfestival.com/>

* (for information further concerning visas into the UAE)

<http://www.dubaitourism.ae/travel/default.asp?SubCatID=43>

*(for information about Islam - you may also get information from the Grand Mosque in Muscat)

www.islamway.com