

# Ecotourism in the sultanate of oman: showcasing musandam, dhofar, and sharqiyah e...

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It is difficult to see the Middle-East other than a war zone. For hundreds of years wars had been fought inside this region. Foreigners, from the outside looking in, consider it routine to hear about conflict, violence, and suffering. In other words the ugly side of the human race is in plain sight in this region. But just as there can be good things that one can discover with humans there are also regions in the Middle-East that are not embroiled in war.

In the Sultanate of Oman, one can be made to realize that the deadly reputation of the Middle East turned out to become some kind of a blessing in disguise. Since capitalists are reluctant to enter in to set shop and exploit the resources of the region, the end result is an area untouched by human development. When foreign businessmen hesitated in the past, the ensuing effect worked unexpectedly in Oman's favor. The detrimental effects of urbanization and intense capitalism were negated.

But the respite from the maddening roar of capitalistic endeavor is temporary. Talk about significant infusion of capital in Middle-Eastern nations such as the Sultanate of Oman is already becoming more and more a reality rather than simply an idea. More and more people are beginning to see that the tourism potential of the country is beyond belief. It is now a common fact that the government, in partnership with interest groups are working feverishly to bring about an Oman open for ecotourism business.

This paper will look into the ecotourism potential in the Sultanate of Oman. After a general description of the country in terms of natural resources suited for the tourism business, the discussion will then focus on the three growth areas. These are Musandam, Dhofar, and Sharqiya. Musandam and

Dhofar are governorates of Oman, while Sharqiyah is one of the prominent regions of the country in terms of natural beauty and other environmental attributes that will surely draw the crowd in.

## 1.0 Oman

### 1.1 Introduction

The strategic location of the Sultanate of Oman is already a plus factor in its campaign to attract a significant number of visitors and tourists. It is facing the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Gulf to the North. And in the Southward end there is an estimated 1,700 kilometers of sheer coast-line, a delight for all beach aficionados (see Nizwa.net *Eco-Friendly Marine Expeditions*). And those who are not merely content in observing from afar, they can dive in – literally – and take a much closer look at the living wonders under the sea.

Aside from the water, one can find interesting sites never before seen in most travel catalogues. An example would be sand formation in the desert such as the Sharqiyah Sands and the Empty Quarter. Both rarities can deliver breathtaking panoramas that would surely make an impression on guests (Al Haremi, 2007).

Now, after visiting the outer fringes of the territory one can find enjoyment and exhilaration from visiting mountains and caves. High mountains and intriguing caves can be a treat for seasoned climbers and spelunkers. For the weekend naturalists, they can venture deeper inland and find an odd variety of wildlife still present in modern day Oman (see Al-Said, 2007). For the history buff there are a few number of forts and castles that can reveal more

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about the country's past without having to go through the drudgery of reading history books.

Before going any further it is important to know that the Sultanate of Oman is embarking on an ecotourism journey never before experienced in the long history of Oman. Instead of the usual tourism industry built on the idea that if a region will just provide hotels, transportation, and decent restaurants and then tourists will come. Oman wanted to go through a more difficult route. The government has an eye for sustainability and not just be content with getting a quick buck (see Cossali, 2002).

This new mindset will entail a lot of hard work, planning, and determined implementation. The whole country has to develop its human capital in order to create an eco-friendly tourism industry (see Mclachlan & Brown, 2006, p. 288). Although it is a very difficult job, the Sultanate of Oman is heavily invested on the idea simply because the whole enterprise can be made sustainable. In other words people will keep coming back because they know that the environment is well preserved and will not slowly disintegrate through time.

Furthermore, there is another major source of incentive that is pushing Oman to think far ahead. The United States of America and its government has made their intentions very clear. The U. S. is a leading advocate of sustainable practices in conjunction with doing business. In simpler terms the U. S. will encourage the flow of foreign-direct-investments to Oman if the Middle-East nation will show willingness to implement tough environmentally related laws. Just recently the U. S government and the Sultanate of Oman

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inked a deal, "...recognizing the importance of protecting the environment while promoting sustainable development in concert with the expanded bilateral trade and investment times accompanying the U. S-Oman Free Trade Agreement..." (see U. S. Department of State, 2007). The agreement is good news for the Omani government and the environment.

The sultanate is divided into nine (9) administrative governorates and regions. It is the interest of this paper to focus on two governorates and one sub-region as centers of significant growth when it comes to ecotourism. A detailed description of the said key areas will be discussed below.

## 2. 0 Musandam

### 2. 1 Introduction

Musandam is situated at the extreme north of Oman and it is surrounded by the United Arab Emirates (" U. A. E."). The nearest country are Ras-Al-Khaima and Fujeirah both are part of UAE. The natives of Musandam seem to look alike - they have similar facial features and their names seem to sound alike. It is very probable that they belong to one major tribe and therefore descended from common ancestors. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century many of the people are still living in the mountains and still observing the old customary life (see Gould, 2007). But there are also a significant number living near the shore and the plains.

The government has built sea-ports which are now harbingers of commercial success. Aside from the commercial goods that could now be transported to and from Musandam, the same facilities can be used by tourists and other

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tourist related agencies to increase the inflow of more holiday-makers in the area. Ships carrying passengers from afar can now dock here and they can tour the area around Musandam (see Al Marsa Musandam, 2007).

The main town of Musandam is called Khassab. In line with the preservation of the environment the Omani Government since 1944 had spearheaded the drive to revive the Arabian Oryx and then went on to established the Arabian Oryx sanctuary. The Arabian Oryx is a medium-sized, white antelope. It is about one meter tall and has two gently curving horns, which are about 50 cms. in length. The Oryx belong to the Hippotragini, the family of horse-like antelope (Al Haremi, 2007).

The Arabian Oryx covers approximately 27500 sq kilometers of central Oman and lies between Muscat and Salalah. The sanctuary also has geological formations and landscapes that are of excellent scientific and aesthetic value. It is the region's first UNESCO World Natural Heritage Site (Al Haremi, 2007).

Musandam attracts many local and foreigners who are residing in U. A. E. because of its magnificent rock formation and beautiful forges that can be compared to those found in Norway. Aside from the great vistas formed by the mountains and the forges, Musandam is also a good place for water sports activities such as snorkeling, diving, fishing, and kayaking. One can add to that more fun activities such as dolphin watching (see Nizwa. net *Dolphins and Whales* ).

## 2. 2 Environmental education

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Cutting-edge tourism policies are ensuring that ecotourism will not be allowed to simply run the environment aground. This is because the usual consequence of high-volume human traffic eager to see, touch, and interact with the ecosystem of a given area, is an environment badly degraded. Humans are the only creatures in this planet that seems to have a very low level of satiety. For instance, when a snake eats its prey it will lie down and digest the recently ingested food. The snake will not gorge itself eating and eating and consuming food stuff that it does not need. But humans do not have this built-in capability to understand natural laws and phenomenon. It is a fact that a human being requires extensive education to fully grasp what is right and wrong. In this regard the Sultanate of Oman made sure that for ecotourism to be sustainable, everyone involved will have to be educated as to how Mother Nature behaves (see McLachlan & Brown, 2006).

### 2. 3 Ecotourism sustainability

The citizens of Oman are blessed with a forward thinking government that will not sacrifice temporary gain for future catastrophes. In other regions in the world their thinking is on the quick profit that could be had without laying plans for a sustainable future. In Musandam and in Oman in general, the government is two steps ahead of increasing tourism activity (see Nizwa. net *Environment and Biodiversity Protection in Oman* ).

### 2. 4 Tourism and nature

The main draw for Musandam according to *AL MARSA Musandam* is the water. Diving in Musandam is an altogether different experience. And the

reason is linked to the fact that this region's climate is very much different from diving sites that could be found in temperate countries.

*AL MARSA Musandam* explains why it is a whole new world of experience out here, " It is here, surrounded by the warm waters of the Indian ocean and the Gulf of Oman, that one of the widest biodiversities of marine species can be found anywhere in the world" (see [mussandamdiving.com](http://mussandamdiving.com), 2007).

- Benefiting the Community

The government's drive to establish sustainable practices will ensure that the tourism industry will continue to thrive in Musandam. Aside from the income that could be realized in the continuous stream of foreigners, there is also the added benefit of having the resources of the government behind the preservation of the region (see [Omanent.com](http://Omanent.com), 2007).

An indirect effect of sustainable practices would be the assurance that the ecosystem stays intact benefiting the farmers and the fishermen who also rely on Musandam's natural resources for their source of livelihood (see Prabhu, 2007).

- Activities & Attractions

As mentioned earlier it is the water that is the main attraction in the region of Musandam. The various water sports activities can be complemented by dolphin watching which has received rave reviews from first time tourists. But aside from diving, snorkeling, water sports and serious fishing the region has its famous rock formations and magnificent forges. The latter is reputed



to be so beautiful that visitors from Europe are comparing it to similar rock formations that can be found in Norway (see Jeffreys, 2006).

- Access, Accommodations & Amenities

Musandam is readily accessible by land, sea, and water transporter, visitors can come in by airplane, bus, yachts, boats and cars. Being in the northernmost part of Oman it is very near the United Arab Emirates. This is another plus for this region for it is the doorway to other rich neighbors who no doubt can make up a significant part of the tourists that comes in every year (see Jeffreys, 2006).

With regards to accommodations and amenities there are many hotels to choose from. The best choice would be four star hotels that would mean a more cost-efficient travel to this part of Oman. According to an online publication the Golden Tulip Resort is probably the best option, “ This four-star hotel is nestled within a cove in the mountains of Khassab with spectacular views of the sea and mountains from all 60 rooms. The rooms are fully equipped with all the amenities one would need including cable television but who needs that when you can look out of your window and get a view to die for” (see Travel & Tourism News Middle East).

### 3.0 Sharqiyah

#### 3.1 Introduction

The main town of Sharqiyah is called Sur. In this town one can find traditional builders of dhows. Dhows are ancient ocean going vessels. The relatively small wooden boats are made without the use of modern materials such as

nails and other synthetic materials. The boat is one hundred percent manufactured from the ground up using only indigenous materials. This is one of the reasons why this area can be a major tourist attraction especially for the likes of adventurers and maritime history buffs (see Cossali, 2002).

Dhows are traditional boats that are built long time ago. The ancient technology used to build boats without nails and other sophisticated modern day materials is fascinating to behold. The thrill in having a dhow close by is in seeing a link to the past. The second one is generated by an actual boarding of the dhows and one could feel the excitement coupled by fear in not knowing if the boat will really hold up and do its job of transporting (see Nizwa. net *Eco-Friendly Marine Expeditions* ).

To increase awareness of this ancient boat making method, the government sponsored an event wherein dhows, created by hand without the aid of sophisticated technology was launched and made to sail to East Africa, India, Pakistan and even as far as China. The incident not only provided positive buzz concerning Sharqiya's dhows but it also provided confirmation that these dhows were once used by ancient seafarers to conduct trade. This fact alone provides a great deal of inspiration for the locals, a strong sense of identity for its people and provide for a major tourist attraction in Sharqiyah. But it is an amazing fact that the dhows are simply the tip of the iceberg as far as ecotourism in Sharqiyah is concern (see Shackley, 2006).

Aside from the much vaunted dhows and turtles, Sharqiya can also boast of other marine attractions such as water sports and fishing. For children and adults both can be entertained by dolphins and whale sightings (see Nizwa.

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net *Dolphins and Whales* ). Since whales are not a common sight then there is no doubt that the tourism industry in Sharqiya will reach stratosphere levels in the next few years.

### 3. 2 Environmental education

As mentioned earlier the exhibition of the dhows as interesting ancient ship model design plus the demonstration of how it can be replicated in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is an amazing educational tool for the tourists and neighboring inhabitants to get to understand a bit of ancient Oman history (see Cossali, 2002). For the more serious sea travel student and connoisseur the building and launching of dhows will be such an irresistible attraction that will surely be made popular by word of mouth advertising.

### 3. 3 Tourism and nature

Aside from the technological marvel of building boats from scratch using indigenous materials and know how, another major attraction is turtle watching. The turtles lay their eggs near a village situated a few kilometers away. The turtles never failed to bring amusement to foreigners who come to observe the little amphibious animals come lay their eggs at night and more importantly the egg hatching that occurs a short while after egg laying (see McLachlan & Brown, 2006).

### 3. 4 Ecotourism Sustainability

Sustainability is a heavy burden carried by the inhabitants of Sharqiyah and the Sultanate of Oman. But based on the limited information that was shown

above one can see the great effort exerted to make the business of ecotourism to last for many years to come. For instance, in the ship building attraction of the wooden dhows, the strain to the environment is very minimal. Due to the indigenous method of building the boats the surrounding sand, sea, and even forest is minimally impacted (see Gould, 2007).

With regards to turtle watching one can observed that the location is being managed carefully as not to destroy the environs in which the turtles will lay their eggs. The presence of the hotel and sentries are indicators that the local government is serious in protecting the turtles and ensuring that this phenomenon of turtle egg laying and hatching will continue for a long time to come. Furthermore, the government is instituting strict measures like the need for a permit before accessing turtle grounds (see Nizwa. net *Environment and Biodiversity Protection in Oman* ).

With regards to the whales and dolphins, the Sultanate of Oman is the only country in the Arabian-peninsula to be a member of the International Whaling Commission. And as a pioneering member Oman strictly enforces non-hunting of whales. Since, Oman is also a member of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources there is a ban in killing rare marine mammals (see Dolphins and Whales, Nizwa. net, 2007).

In 2001 this part of Oman decided to start eco-friendly cruises. Experts are brought in to accompany cruises. Thus, while tourists are enjoying the view and the marine animals they come in close contact with they also get a free lecture on how to take care of nature. This means that if the tourists would decide to go fishing then they will have to pay particular attention to actions

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that can harm the environment. Spear fishing is not allowed simply because having a spear gun can mean indiscriminate killing of rare fishes beneath the ocean (see Nizwa. net *Eco-Friendly Marine Expeditions* ).

- Benefiting the Community

Aside from the income that can be generated from the various activities and tourist attractions available, the residents benefit indirectly by receiving government attention in terms of improved services. It will be too hard for the central government not to array resources to improve the area.

The tourism industry will no doubt spawn other industries such as the hospitality sector as well as industries related to food etc. Transportation will also be greatly improved to increase the traffic of tourists especially those coming from abroad. The said area will also benefit from the pouring of resources that will vastly improve infrastructure including those that concern the internet and telecommunication (see Jeffreys, 2006).

Unemployment will surely decrease as more and more people are needed to fill various positions that are needed to make the guests more comfortable and to make their stay more enjoyable so that they will come back. The quality of life of all people residing in the Oman will also benefit from the influx of tourists. More money means more investors and more investors means more activities that will surely keep Oman and Sharqiyah humming for many years to come (see Shackley, 2006).

- Activities & Attractions

As already mentioned one of the major attractions in this part of Oman is the ancient method of building Dhows. A Dhow is a boat that was used since ancient times to transport people and goods. In the coastal areas one can also experience turtle watching but the most popular attraction in this part of Oman are the magnificent Sharqiyah sand dunes (see Al Haremi, 2007).

For those who would like to stay dry and still enjoy the sights there is the guarantee of a great time when hitting the sand dunes. Using 4×4 vehicles tourists can go at it with abandon, satisfying speed freaks and thrill seekers in large numbers. For those who love the extreme outdoors, there are camping grounds and modern tents ready for occupancy. Fear of primitive living is easily doused with the presence of toilets and proper dining areas (see Al Haremi, 2007).

In the evening the campers are treated with cool weather and spectacular star gazing activities. But for those who are more adventurous there are mountains to climb and caves to enter. This is truly a treat for jaded travelers who no longer get excited in the usual hotel room stay and comfort of modern amenities but for the first time visitors who want to take it easy hotels are nearby for them to cool their heels so to speak (see Surfers of Dubai, 2007).

- Access, Accommodations & Amenities

Due to the rough terrain in most parts of Sharqiyah the best way to access the different attractions is through 4×4 vehicles that can take the punishing terrain. To access one of the best hotels in the region a car is also a necessity because some of them are located an hour from the coast. An

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example of such hotel accommodations is the Al Sharqiya Sands hotel which boasts of 21 beautifully decorated rooms, 3 luxurious suites, banqueting facilities, a conference room, restaurant and pub. Each of the rooms has its own air conditioner, international dialing facility, colour TV with satellite channels. But for the more extreme travelers they can experience traditional Arabian lifestyle by sleeping outdoors and staying in tents (see Surfers of Dubai, 2007).

#### 4. 0 Dhofar

##### 4. 1 Introduction

The governorate of Dhofar can be found south of Oman. The area unlike its Northern counterpart is bathed in tropical weather. The great weather, in itself it can be a major attraction in a region dominated by desert-like environment. The presence of tropical trees and tropical fruits will always be a treat. Moreover, foreigners who are looking for an alternative to their usual tropical getaway can go check this tropical paradise that boasts of bananas, coconuts, paw-paw trees and even frankincense (Al-Said, 2007).

In the monsoon months where the rainy weather brings in more rain, the region is turned into lush green and encourages the growth of much vegetation. This is also the reason why the region is a lot cooler than its neighbors. This unique characteristic can be the reason why tourists will be coming back for more (see Jeffreys, 2006).

To the north of its main town Salalah there is an international airport. The said airport can accommodate aircrafts of all sizes ranging from single

engine crafts to jumbo jets carrying foreigners from the Western world. In fact, European tourists are coming through here in droves and not only in peak season but even in the off season they seem to find good reasons to keep coming back (see Shackley, 2006).

#### 4. 2 Environmental education

The aforementioned high diversity when it comes to coral reefs can be a focal point for teaching the tourists on how to fully appreciate the underwater world. It is very possible that most of the foreigners and even local tourists are unaware that diversity exists even when it comes to corals.

They will be made to understand that it is not only enough to have corals for increasing the fish stock, but the more important goal is to have diversity under the ocean. This point will be brought home more convincingly if the tourists will be able to observe first hand of the major contrast between having limited kinds of corals as compared to the wondrously diverse number found under the Dhofar waters (see Nizwa. net *Oman's Coral Diversity* ).

#### 4. 3 Tourism and nature

Musandam can boast of their magnificent forges and Sharqiya can be proud of its sand formation. Dhofar on the other hand will not be left behind. Hooni Bay in Dhofar will surely attract the attention of ecotourists eager to have a more varied and diverse diving experience. This is because “ Coral areas of Dhofar, including Marbadh, Sadh and sheltered bays of Raaha, put up a beautiful spectacle. Dhofar is known for the highest coral diversity in the

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Sultanate” (see coral diversity, Nizwa. net, 2007). This fact alone will attract those who are very interested in different coral species.

#### 4. 4 Ecotourism Sustainability

As mentioned earlier the tropical climate of Dhofar made it possible for the proliferation of unique flora and fauna. An example of which is the discovery of a rare tree species called *Cordia perrottetii* (see Nizwa. net, *Environment and Biodiversity Protection in Oman* ). In this regard Dhofar is not only beneficial as a source of income from tourists who frequent the area. It is also an important resource for local as well as international scientists interested in studying a not so common environment in the Middle East. Thus, the government of Oman is doing its best to protect the environment.

For instance industrial construction projects will have to undergo a strict process before they can get the necessary permits. The agency responsible for the issuance of permits is required to conduct extensive study on how the said construction project can possibly damage the environment.

- Benefiting the Community

It was mentioned in the beginning that one of the major source of incentive to be more eco-friendly and to adopt more sustainable practices comes from the U. S.-Oman trade agreement. more money and investments will flow to the Omani government if the U. S. stipulated terms are met. An example of the said conditions will be the pursuance of the following plans (see U. S. Department of State, 2007):

- Integrated Water Resource Management

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- Coastal Protection and Preservation of Marine resources
- Protected Area Management and Conservation of flora and fauna

The community will surely benefit from the stipulations of the agreement. A simple analysis will reveal that the community will be assured of clean potable water even if the government will continue its bid to become one of the more significant tourist destinations in the Middle East. The community is also assured that natural resources will not be depleted because there is a third-party (the U. S. government) always on the lookout for signs of complacency and non-compliance (see U. S. Department of State, 2007).

Furthermore, as part of the U. S.-Oman agreement, U. S. professionals and experts in environmental protection will come visit the country and share their vast experience when it comes to eco-tourism. The success of some U. S. parks and nature enclaves is a testament to the fact that the Americans know a thing or two about sustaining the environment in the context of eco-tourism (see U. S. Department of State, 2007).

- Activities & Attractions

The main attraction for this region is its climate. The cooler region of Dhofar has so far produced exotic tree species and also underwater species such as the diverse corals that divers are raving about. Aside from the scuba divers and the nature trekkers that frequent this area while escaping the heat of the desert there are others who come for the Khareef Festival held in Dhofar during the late summer when the southern part of Oman receives the cool rains of the Indian Ocean (Jeffreys, 2006).

- Access, Accommodations, & Amenities

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The most convenient way to access the famed diving spots and the cool mountain air is through the international airport. Flying in is easy as a breeze. Oman Air will be the best choice to fly in local travelers and those that are coming in from neighboring states. On the other hand those who have fear of flying can still enjoy Dhofar by land as there is an extensive network of road and highways that were already in place since the last decade or so (see Jeffreys, 2006).

According to the 2006 report of the Oxford Business Group more and more money are being poured in to develop Dhofar and one can expect five star hotels sprouting from all over the place (see Jeffrey, 2006, p. 104-105).

These hotels no doubt will have the best amenities for the Omani Government had already set in motion the upgrading of telecommunication facilities in this region (see Cossali, 2002, p. 876).

## 5.0 Conclusions

The Sultanate of Oman is in a serious bid to promote the country as a major player in the eco-tourism business. The government made clever promotions and plans to highlight the strength of each region. For instance Musandam is being touted as a wildlife enclave, while Dhofar is a very good diving site.

The region of Sharqiya is also being marketed as a must see destination for those who love water sports and other adventures.

It has been made clear why the Omani government is serious in their eco-friendly plans and policies when it comes to opening their doors for local and foreign tourists. The reason is simple sustainable practices is a long-term plan that would ensure continuity. There is no wisdom in making quick  
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money in the present and then sacrificing everything for the future. It is better to start small and grow gradually but enjoying success all throughout rather experience a flash-in-a-pan scenario where huge profits could not be sustained.

Another key in understanding the current state of Oman's tourism industry can only be achieved by realizing that the United States of America is a major factor in the country's desire to go the more difficult route of sustainable tourism. The U. S-Oman trade agreement looms large as a very important driving force for the Omani government to muster the political will and serious intent in pushing for changes and for setting a new mindset, that together with its people they will build a better future for all that are living in their nation whether it be human, animal, or vegetation.

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