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# OMAN

## PHYSICAL AND HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

### The Land.

**Relief.** Northern Oman is dominated by three physiographic zones. The long, narrow coastal plain of Al-Batinah stretches along the Gulf of Oman. The high, rugged Al-Hajar Mountains extend southeastward, parallel to the gulf coast, from the Musandam Peninsula to a point near Ra's Al-Hadd at the easternmost tip of the Arabian Peninsula. Much of the range exceeds 4,800 feet (1,463 metres), with the highest elevation at Al-Jabal Al-Akhdar, more than 10,000 feet (3,000 metres). The great central divide of Wadi Sama'il separates the Al-Hajar into a western and an eastern range. An inland plateau falls away to the southwest of the Al-Hajar Mountains into the great Rub' al-Khali (Empty Quarter) desert, which the sultanate shares with Saudi Arabia and Yemen. These zones can be further subdivided into several unofficial regions: Al-Batinah; the mountains and associated valleys of the Eastern Al-Hajar and Western Al-Hajar; the Oman interior area, or Al-Jaww (the central foothills and valleys on the inland side of the Al-Hajar Mountains and the historic heartland of Oman); Az-Zahirah (the semidesert plain west of the interior Oman area, next to the United Arab Emirates, and including Al-Buraymi oasis); Ash-Sharqiyah (sandy plains lying east of interior Oman behind the Al-Hajar Mountains); and Ja'lan (fronting the Arabian Sea south of Ra's Al-Hadd).

The southern region of Dhufar (Zufar) is separated from the rest of Oman by several hundred miles of open desert. Dhufar's coastal plain is fertile alluvial soil, well watered by the southwest monsoon. Wooded mountain ranges, rising to about 5,000 feet (1,524 metres), form a crescent in Dhufar behind a long, narrow coastal plain on which is located the provincial capital of Salalah. Behind the mountains, gravel plains gradually merge northward into the Rub' al-Khali.

**Climate and plant and animal life.** Generally, the climate is hot and dry in the interior and hot and humid along the coast. Summer temperatures in the capital of Muscat and other coastal locations often reach 113F (45C), with high humidity; winters are mild, with lows around 59 F (19C). Temperatures are similar in the interior, although they are more moderate at higher altitudes. Dhufar is dominated by the summer monsoon, making Salalah's climate more moderate than that of northern Oman. Rainfall throughout the country is minimal, averaging only about 4

inches (104 millimetres) a year, although precipitation in the mountains is heavier. There are no permanent bodies of fresh water in the sultanate.

Because of the low rainfall, vegetation is sparse except where irrigated. Irrigation is provided by an ancient system of water channels known as *aflaj* (singular: *falaj*). The channels, which often run underground, originate in wells near the bases of the mountains.

Acacia trees form most of what little natural vegetation exists, and the soil is extremely rocky. The government protects rare species, such as the Arabian oryx, mountain goat, and the loggerhead turtle.

**Settlement patterns.** Oman is fundamentally a rural country. Settlements are typically located near the foothills of the Al-Hajar Mountains, where the *aflaj* provide irrigation. In addition to small villages, a number of sizable towns, including Nizwa, Bahla', Izki, and 'Ibri, are found on the inland, or southwestern, side of the Western Al-Hajar. The Al-Batinah coast provides opportunities for fishing, as well as irrigated cultivation. As a consequence, it is rather more densely populated, with major towns at Shinas, Suhar, Al-Khaburah, Al-Masna'ah, and Barka'. Approximately one-third of the population lives in the Al-Batinah region. Traditional housing in the Al-Batinah often consists of palm-frond huts, in contrast to the mud-brick structures of the interior. Ar-Rustaq, 'Awabi, and Nakhl are principal settlements on the Al-Batinah side of the Western Al-Hajar.

At the eastern end of the Al-Batinah lie the twin cities of Muscat and Matrah; both are ancient ports, but they have merged to become an important metropolitan centre. Al-Batinah is the most densely populated area. To the east, the only major town is Sur, a well-protected port that is still a major centre for the fishing and boatbuilding industries. Interior Oman, the central region of irrigated valleys between the mountains and the desert, is one of the more densely populated areas. Some of Dhufar's residents are concentrated in towns along the coast, and some are seminomadic cattle herders in the mountains. A small nomadic population inhabits the inland plateaus along the Rub' al-Khali. Khasab is the only significant town in the sparsely populated Musandam Peninsula.

## The People

Oman's population is principally Arab, although large numbers of ethnic Balochi live along the Al-Batinah; both groups are exclusively Muslim. The Ibadite branch of Islam, a moderate variant of the Kharijite sect, claims the majority of adherents. In belief and ritual, Ibadism is close to Sunnite Islam (the major or orthodox body of Muslims), differing in its emphasis on an elected imam as the spiritual and temporal leader of the Ibadite community. Non-Ibadite Arabs and the Balochi, who have migrated to Oman from Iran and Pakistan over the last several centuries, are Sunnites.

The Muscat-Matrah conurbation has long been home to significant numbers of merchants of Indian origin, some of whom also live along the Al-Batinah. Notable among these are the Liwadiyah, who are originally from Sindh but have lived in Oman for centuries. The Indian communities are mainly Shi'ite, the most widespread Islamic sect after the Sunnite, with a few

Hindus. There is also a small Persian community, and a number of Swahili-speaking Omanis born in Zanzibar and elsewhere in East Africa returned to Oman after 1970.

Several large Arab tribes predominate along Dhufar's coastal plain. The inhabitants of the Dhufar mountains are known as *jibalis*, or "people of the mountains." They are ethnically distinct from the coastal Arabs and are thought to be descended from the inhabitants of the Yemen highlands. They speak South Arabic languages, which are largely unintelligible to speakers of modern standard (North) Arabic.

Since the influx of oil income and the palace coup of 1970, increasing numbers of foreigners have come to reside in the country, particularly in the capital area. These include Western businessmen, government advisers, and army officers, as well as skilled and unskilled labourers from the Indian subcontinent, the Philippines, and elsewhere in Asia. A policy of Omanization has been in force since the 1980s to reduce the number of expatriates in the labour force.

## **The Economy**

Oman is a rural, agricultural country, with fishing and overseas trading important for the coastal populations. Before 1970, thousands of Omanis left the country to find work in nearby oil-producing states. Oil in commercial quantities was discovered in Oman in 1964, however, and was first exported in 1967. Subsequently, the production of oil rapidly came to dominate the country's economy. By the early 1990s, oil represented one-third of the gross domestic product and provided about 80 percent of the government's income.

Serious development planning began in 1976 with the first five-year plan (1976-80), followed by a second (1981-85). The plans included development of necessary social amenities, additional investment in the petroleum industry, and further economic diversification. The third (1986-90) and fourth (1991-95) plans especially emphasized economic diversification. A stock exchange was opened in Muscat in 1989.

**Natural resources.** Several copper mines and a smelter were opened in the early 1980s at an ancient mining site near Suhar, but copper reserves were not expected to last beyond the mid-1990s. Chromite also is mined in small quantities. Coal deposits are being explored for potential exploitation and use. Other mineral resources are considered insignificant.

**Agriculture and fishing.** Agriculture is mainly subsistence in nature and employs about one-half of the population. The *falaj* irrigation system has long supported a three-tiered crop approach (three crops raised at different levels on the same plot), with date palms above; limes, bananas, or mangoes in the middle; and alfalfa, wheat, and sorghum on the ground. Dates are the country's most significant crop, and limes that are grown in the interior oases are traded for fish from the coast as well as exported abroad. In addition, grapes, walnuts, peaches, and other fruits are cultivated on the high mountain plateaus. Dhufar also produces coconuts and papayas. Most rural families keep goats, and Oman is well known for camel breeding. Cattle are raised throughout the Dhufar mountains.

Labour migration has left fields to lie fallow and the irrigation systems to decay. Partly in an attempt to reduce dependence on food imports, the government has sought to stimulate agricultural production with the establishment of research stations and model farms along the Al-Baṭinah coast and in Dhufar, as well as date-processing plants at Ar-Rustaq and Nizwa. The government has also sought to encourage the development of commercial fishing by providing boats and motors, cold stores, and transportation; and fisheries production in the Gulf of Oman and Arabian Sea has great potential.

**Industry.** Crude oil production averaged about 300,000 barrels per day through the 1970s. The government's response to declining oil prices in the 1980s was to increase production, but this was reversed in 1986 to sustain OPEC price levels. By the early 1990s, production had climbed to more than 700,000 barrels per day, a larger figure than some OPEC countries produced but still far behind the ranks of the world's largest oil exporters.

Industrial development began only with the change of government in 1970 and is oriented to such infrastructural projects as electric generators, desalinization complexes, and the cement plants outside Muscat and Salalah, as well as to import substitution. The five-year plans have stressed private-sector development as well as joint ventures with the government. Traditional handicrafts, such as weaving, pottery, boatbuilding, and gold and silver work, are declining.

**Finance and trade.** After registering annual economic growth rates of more than 10 percent in the early 1980s, the country began to suffer balance-of-payment deficits in 1986 as a result of declining oil prices. The low level of foreign reserves forced the government to introduce regular budget cuts, devalue the Omani riyal by 10 percent in 1986, and issue treasury bills for the first time. Defense spending, which had averaged more than one-third of the total budget since the 1970s, was trimmed somewhat, and expensive arms purchases were postponed.

Crude oil accounts for most exports, while imports consist of consumer goods, foodstuffs, and industrial equipment. Among the country's major trading partners are Japan, the United Arab Emirates, South Korea, and the United Kingdom. Most businesses are family-owned.

**Transportation.** There are two modern ports, Port Qabus in Matrah and Raysut near Salalah, both built in the early 1970s. Significant intercoastal trade is carried on by traditional wooden dhows. The two principal airports are located at As-Sib, about 30 miles from Muscat, and at Salalah. The government is a major stockholder in the international carrier Gulf Air and also operates Oman Air domestically and on several international routes. Since 1970 a modern road network of asphalt and gravel roads linking all the country's main settlements has been built up from virtually nothing, and a 625-mile (1,000-kilometre) highway between Muscat and Salalah was completed in 1984.

## **Administration and Social Conditions**

**Government.** Oman's government is a monarchy (sultanate). Cabinet ministers are typically appointed from among Muscat merchants, informal representatives of interior tribes, and Dhufaris. The country has no written constitution, and there are no political parties or elections. The State Consultative Council, formed by the sultan in 1981, was replaced in 1991 by a new Consultative Council (Majlis al-Shura), whose 59 appointed members represent the *wilayat*

(provinces) of the country. Local government is carried out by a combination of traditional *walis* (representatives of the sultan) and more recently established municipal councils.

Oman's judicial system is based on the Ibadite interpretation of the Shari'ah, or Islamic religious laws, and is administered through regional courts.

The Sultan's Armed Forces, formed in 1958 from several smaller regiments, has grown since 1970 to more than 30,000 personnel, spurred in part by the rebellion in Dhufar in 1964-75.

**Education.** Education has expanded dramatically since 1970, when only three primary schools existed. By the early 1990s there were more than 350,000 students in 800 schools. Sultan Qabus University was opened in September 1986.

**Health and welfare.** The post-1970 government also improved health care throughout the country, and Oman now has a free national health service. The new regime built hospitals, health centres, and dispensaries and equipped mobile medical teams to serve remote areas. The government also provides generous housing loans.

## Cultural Life

Oman is a tribal society, and the individual Omani typically identifies foremost with his tribe, although tribal influence is gradually declining. Women have been relatively freer in Oman than elsewhere in the Arab world. Attempts have been made to preserve much of the heavily traditional society in the midst of development. For example, traditional elements of architecture are incorporated in new buildings, and Oman passed a law (1986; since revised) forbidding Omani nationals to marry foreigners. The Ministry of National Heritage and Culture is charged with preserving historic buildings, excavating archaeological sites, and supporting traditional crafts.

Several Arabic-language newspapers are published on a daily and weekly basis, and there are two English-language dailies. A colour television system began operating in 1974-75, and radio stations broadcast in Arabic and English.

## HISTORY

There are three principal themes in Omani history: the tribal nature of its society, the traditional Ibadite imamate form of government, and its maritime tradition. Archaeological evidence of civilization in Oman dates to the 3rd millennium BC, but Persian colonization in the centuries prior to the Christian era seems to have been responsible for the creation of the *falaj* irrigation system, which has sustained Omani agriculture and civilization ever since.

The history of Dhufar followed a separate path. Ancient South Arabian kingdoms controlled the production of frankincense in Dhufar from the 1st century AD, and the province remained culturally and politically oriented toward South Arabia until it was absorbed into the Al Bu Sa'id state in the 19th century.

***The Omani tribal system.*** The origins of the Omani tribal system can be traced back to the immigration of Arab tribes from South Arabia into the Ja‘lan region during the 2nd century AD. The tribes subsequently moved northward into the Persian-controlled area of Mazun in Oman, where they confronted tribes moving into Oman from the northwest. Arab dominance over the country began with the introduction of Islam in the 7th century.

***The Ibadite imamate.*** A semblance of national political unity emerged only with the introduction of the Ibadite imamate in the mid-8th century. Oman's mountains and geographic isolation provided a refuge for then-extremist Ibadites, who proceeded to convert the leading tribal clans to their sect. The new Ibadite state was headed by an elected imam who served as both temporal and secular leader of the community. In actuality, selection of a new imam depended on agreement among the religious leaders and the heads of the major tribes, particularly the leaders of the two major tribal confederations, which came to be known as the Ghafirīs and the Hinawīs.

A recurring pattern took hold during the decline of the First Imamate, which had reached its zenith during the 9th century. Elected imams tended to give way to hereditary dynasties, which then collapsed as a result of family disputes and the resurgence of Ibadite ideals.

***The maritime tradition.*** Maritime trade, the third principal theme in Omani history, also contributed to dynastic decline. Virtually cut off from the rest of the Arabian Peninsula by vast deserts, Omani sailors plied the waters of the Indian Ocean, ranging as far as China in the medieval period. This maritime tendency was strongest when dynasties moved their capitals from the Ibadite heartland to the coast and focused their attention on acquiring territory elsewhere in the gulf, along the Arabian Sea, and on the East African littoral.

***Portuguese and Persian invasions.*** The Portuguese sacked Muscat in 1507 and soon controlled the entire coast. A century later the Ya‘rubid dynasty drove the Portuguese from the Omani coast, recapturing Muscat in 1650, and then took over Portuguese settlements along the Persian and East African coasts. Their empire eventually crumbled in a civil war over succession in the early 18th century, enabling the Persian ruler Nadir Shah to invade the country in 1737.

***Restoration of Omani rule.*** Ahmad ibn Sa‘id, the governor of Suhar, drove out the Persian invaders and was subsequently elected imam in 1749, thus establishing the Al Bu Sa‘id dynasty, which has ruled Oman ever since. His grandson, Sa‘id ibn Sultan (ruled 1806/07-56), reasserted Omani control over Zanzibar and eventually moved his residence there. Upon his death the Al Bu Sa‘id empire was split between two sons, with one receiving Zanzibar, which remained under Al Bu Sa‘id rule until 1964, and the other ruling Oman.

The fortunes of the Al Bu Sa‘id state in Oman declined through the second half of the 19th century. The Al Bu Sa‘id dynasty might very well have collapsed if it had not been for the presence of the British, who supported the Al Bu Sa‘id sultans in Muscat against periodic revivals of the Ibadite imamate in the interior.

***Periodic civil unrest.*** Tribal attacks in the name of the imam were made on Muscat and Matrah in 1895 and 1915. The Agreement of Al-Sib was negotiated by the British between the tribal leaders and Sultan Taymur ibn Faysal (reigned 1913-32) in 1920. By its terms, the sultan recognized the autonomy, but not the sovereignty, of the Omani interior.

This situation lasted until 1954, when Muhammad al-Khaliji, imam since 1920, died. His weak successor, Ghalib, was influenced by his brother Talib and a prominent tribal leader,

Sulayman ibn Himyar, and the three set out to create an independent state, enlisting Saudi Arabia's support against Sultan Sa'id ibn Taymur (ruled 1932-70). The Saudis had occupied part of Al-Buraymi oasis, jointly administered by Oman and neighbouring Abu Dhabi (now part of the United Arab Emirates), in 1952. In 1955 an international tribunal of arbitration on Al-Buraymi broke down, and the British engineered the ouster of the Saudi garrison.

At the same time, a regiment led by British officers moved into the Omani interior and suppressed an imamate rebellion. Remnants of the imamate's supporters, however, held strongholds in the Al-Jabal Al-Akhdar massif of the Western Al-Hajar until they were forced to surrender in early 1959.

In the early 1960s another threat to the sultanate emerged in Dhufar. Sultan Sa'id ibn Taymur had moved to Salalah permanently in 1958. The mountain *jibalis* began to rebel openly against Sultan Sa'id's petty restrictions in the mid-1960s. The Marxist Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arab Gulf (later called the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman; PFLO) gained control of the growing rebellion in 1968 with the help of neighbouring Marxist South Yemen (which had achieved independence from the British in late 1967) as well as with at first Chinese and then Soviet assistance.

***Move toward modernization.*** The seriousness of the Dhufar rebellion was a principal factor in the palace coup of July 23, 1970, which saw Sultan Sa'id overthrown by his son, Qabus ibn Sa'id. Qabus, who had been trained in Britain at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, quickly reversed his father's policy of isolation and set about to develop Oman. Additional British personnel and equipment were brought into the Sultan's Armed Forces to help put down the rebellion in Dhufar, and these efforts were aided by Jordanian and Iranian troops. The rebellion was crushed by late 1975.

In late 1970 Sultan Qabus appointed the country's first true cabinet and took steps toward building a modern government structure. Qabus first appointed his uncle Tariq ibn Taymur as prime minister, but the latter resigned and Qabus subsequently served as his own prime minister and as minister of defense and foreign affairs as well.

Oman joined the Arab League and the United Nations in 1971; however, it is not a member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) or the smaller Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC). Oman was one of six founding members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, established in 1981 to promote cooperation in economic, political, and security matters among its members. It has been closely linked to Britain since the early 19th century, and relations with the United States, established in 1833, have grown close since the early 1970s.

Oman's location makes it pivotal in maintaining the security of traffic through the Strait of Hormuz, and Oman attempted to maintain neutrality in the Iran-Iraq War. The sultanate permitted Western military units to use its facilities after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and an Omani regiment participated in the liberation of Kuwait in February 1991.