



Oman

Introduction

Official name: Sultanate of Oman

Nationality: Omani

Area: 212,460 square kilometers (82,030 square miles)

Languages: Arabic (official), English, Baluchi, Urdu, Indian dialects

Currency: Omani riyal (OMR)

Location: Middle East; borders Yemen, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia; also has coastline on the Gulf of Oman, the Persian Gulf, and the Arabian Sea

Statistical Information

Population	3.2 million
0-14 years	42.7 percent
15-64 years	54.6 percent
65+ years	2.7 percent
Birth rate	36 births/1,000
Death rate	4 deaths/1,000
Fertility rate	5.7 children/woman
Pop. growth rate	3.23 percent
Life expectancy	74 years
Literacy	81.4 percent
HIV/AIDS rate	0.1 percent
Ethnic groups	Arab Baluchi (Indo-Iranian) South Asian African
Religion	65 percent Ibadhi Muslim 35 percent other (includes Sunni Muslim, Shi'a Muslim, Hindu, Christian)

Economy

Oman has a middle-range economy. The country has significant oil and natural gas resources, with a substantial trade surplus and a low inflation rate. Sustained high oil prices over the past few years have helped increase Oman's trade surplus and foreign reserves. Since 2000, Oman has been a part of the World Trade Organization and has been working to

liberalize its markets. It ratified a free trade agreement with the U.S. in 2006 and seeks similar agreements with the European Union, China, and Japan. To provide jobs for a burgeoning youth population, the government is encouraging a greater number of Omanis to work in sectors previously staffed by expatriates.

Government

Capital: Muscat

Oman is a monarchy. The Sultan is both chief of state and head of government and is selected by a process outlined in the country's constitution. The country is divided into five administrative regions and four governorates. Oman has a legislature called the Majlis Oman, which consists of two houses. The 58-seat Majlis Al-Dawla, or upper house, has advisory powers only and members are appointed by the Sultan; the 84-seat Majlis Al-Shura, or lower house, has limited power to propose legislation; its members are elected by popular vote to serve four-year terms.

Climate

Although situated in the tropics, Oman is subject to climate changes like temperate regions. During the winter the weather is cool, but during the summer it is hot and humid near the coast and hot and dry in the interior. In the mountains the temperature drops drastically at night. Oman's hottest months are June through August. The southern coast is touched by summer monsoons during this period, bringing light rain and resulting in a cool and wet summer. Rainfall varies but in general is sparse and irregular. In northern Oman, most of the precipitation comes from winter storms out of the Mediterranean from January through March. In the south, the majority of rainfall comes during the summer monsoon months.

History

Oman was known as Magan to ancient Persian and Mesopotamian civilizations, and it was an important

producer of copper and ornamental stone. The country was settled when Arab tribes migrated eastward to Oman, resisting encroachments from Iranian tribes.

In the 7th century A.D., during the lifetime of the Prophet Mohammed, Arab tribes in Oman adopted Islam. The country became an imamate when ibn Masoud was elected as the first Imam, or Islamic religious leader. Oman remained an imamate for centuries.

In 1508, the Portuguese began to colonize the coastal areas of Oman. In 1515, Oman became a Portuguese colony when the Portuguese conquered Muscat. The fifth imamate of Oman, the Yarubid Imamate, recaptured Muscat and pushed the Portuguese out of Oman in 1650. The Yarubid dynasty expanded the country's borders, capturing Portuguese colonies along the coast of Africa and engaging in the slave trade. The nomination in 1719 of Saif ibn Sultan II as imam led to a civil war between two major tribes, the Hinawi and the Ghafiri. After the leaders of both factions had been killed, Saif ibn Sultan II took power, but the infighting gave the Iranians an opening to occupy Muscat and Suhar.

The Omanis revolted, and in 1744 they pushed the Iranians out of Muscat. Following the expulsion of the Iranians, Ahmad ibn Said al Said was elected Sultan of Muscat. From this point, the Sultanate became a hereditary position, ending the complete control of the Imam. The al Said dynasty is still in power.

The new Sultan faced challenges from the independent tribes of the interior, who would not accept the Sultan's rule and considered the Imam the only legitimate ruler of Oman. Due to disagreements, the royal family was split: the Sultan ibn Ahmad al Said line controlled the coastal regions, also exercising token authority over the entire country, and the Qais line controlled the Al Batinah and Ar Rustaq regions.

During the rule of Sultan Said ibn Sultan Al Said, from 1806 to 1856, Oman cultivated its east African colonies, profiting from the slave trade. When the British declared slavery illegal in the mid-1800s, demand for slaves dropped and Oman's economy declined. Many Omani families migrated to Zanzibar. Throughout the 18th century, Oman was the subject of rivalry between the French and British. In the 19th century, Oman and Britain negotiated a series of friendship agreements that led to strong British ties to Oman in the years to come.

The death of Sultan Said ibn Sultan Al Said in 1856 led to further divisions within the royal family. The descendants of the late Sultan ruled Oman and

Zanzibar, while the Qais branch allied itself with the interior tribes and supported a return to imamate rule. In 1868 Azzam ibn Qais Al Said proclaimed himself Imam of Oman, and although many Hinawi tribes recognized him as such, he was never elected Imam by the public. Imam Azzam realized that in order to unify Oman, a strong, central government was needed to exercise control over the interior tribes. Imam Azzam alienated the Ghafiri tribes with his military attempts at unification, inciting them to revolt in 1870.

The British stepped in and backed Imam Azzam's rival, Turki ibn Said Al Said, who succeeded in defeating the forces of Imam Azzam. The Imam was killed in battle outside of Matrah in January 1871.

Through the mediation of the British government, the empire was divided into two principalities: Zanzibar, along with other East African colonies, and Muscat and Oman. Zanzibar paid an annual subsidy to Muscat and Oman until its independence in 1964.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Sultan in Muscat continued to face problems from interior tribes centered around the town of Nizwa, who still wanted to be ruled by the Imam of Oman. In 1920, the Sultan and the Imam reached an agreement in the Treaty of Seeb, which allowed the Imam to rule the interior of the country, called the Imamate of Oman, while the Sultan retained control over the rest of Oman.

In 1954 conflict flared up again when a new Imam led a rebellion against efforts by the Sultan to extend his control into the interior of Oman. The British stepped in and helped the Sultan put down the rebellion by 1959. The Sultan terminated the Treaty of Seeb, eliminating the office of Imam and exiling the current Imam. Despite efforts to gain support during his exile in Saudi Arabia, the Imam failed to return to power in Oman.

A separatist revolt in Dhofar Province began in 1964. The rebels, aided by Communist and leftist governments, desired to see the overthrow of all traditional Persian Gulf regimes such as the Sultanate of Oman.

In 1970, Qaboos bin Said Al Said deposed his father, Sa'id bin Taymur. Sultan Qaboos inherited a host of problems in Oman, including insurgency, illiteracy, and widespread poverty. The new Sultan abolished many of his father's harsh restrictions, which had driven many Omanis to leave the country. He also offered amnesty to exiled opponents of his father's regime. He launched programs to upgrade health and educational systems and to build a modern infrastructure.

Sultan Qaboos expanded the military and vigorously fought to curb the rebellion in Dhofar. He also offered amnesty to any surrendering rebels and obtained military support from Britain, Jordan, and Iran. The guerrillas were defeated by 1975. At the end of the war, Sultan Qaboos prioritized civil action programs in Dhofar, winning the support of the people.

Sultan Qaboos's modernizations have opened the country to the outside world. Oman maintains diplomatic relations with Eastern and Western countries, and it cooperates to prevent sectarian or fanatical elements from jeopardizing the safety and security of the region.

Ethnic Groups

The vast majority of Omanis are Arabs, although there are Omanis of African descent. Oman also has a significant population of non-nationals, many of whom are guest workers from Pakistan, the Philippines, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and other Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian countries.

Religion

Oman is the only country in the Islamic world with a majority Ibadhi population. Ibadhi is a form of Islam related to but distinct from both the Sunni and Shi'a sects; it is also one of the earliest schools of Muslim thought, founded only 50 years after the death of Mohammed. Ibadhi Muslims are considered a traditional and moderate school.

There are several doctrinal differences between Ibadhi Muslims and Sunni Muslims. Ibadhi Muslims believe that Muslims cannot see Allah in this life or in the life to come, while Sunnis believe that they will see Allah on the Day of Judgment. Ibadhis also believe that one's fate after death is eternal. In contrast, some Sunni thought suggests that it is possible that those who enter hell may not remain there for eternity. Ibadhis, along with much of the Shi'a community, also hold that the Qu'ran is a created book. Sunnis believe that the Qu'ran is uncreated.

Outside of Oman, small populations of Ibadhi Muslims can be found in East Africa (especially Zanzibar), Libya, Algeria, and Tunisia.

The Ibadhis of Oman have lived with people of other faiths for centuries. Although the state religion is Islam, other religions are not forbidden. Non-Muslims are free to worship at churches and temples built on lands donated by the Sultan.

Dress

Although some Western styles of dress are becoming more common as Oman modernizes, most Omanis continue to wear traditional clothing.

Omani men wear a simple, ankle-length, white gown with long sleeves called a *dishdasha*. A tassel of entwined thread rests on the chest; traditionally this would be soaked in a perfume or frankincense. Omani men wear one of two different head coverings: the *mussar*, a square piece of finely woven fabric that is wrapped around the head like a turban, or the *kummah*. The mussar is worn for official engagements and celebrations. A kummah is more like a cap and is used for everyday wear.

Many Omani women wear a loose-fitting black cloak known as an *abaya* over the clothing of their choice. There is a colorful array of traditional regional dress throughout Oman. Many women wear intricately designed gold jewelry, often containing elaborate patterns, symbols, and sometimes Quranic calligraphy. The eyes are often enhanced with *kohl*, eyeliner made of frankincense. Many Omani women use henna to decorate their skin, especially before major holidays and celebrations. Henna is a paste that is used to draw intricate designs on one's hands and feet.

Visitors to Oman are asked to be sensitive to Islamic culture and wear modest dress.

Travel/Transportation

Road conditions, traffic safety, and lighting in major cities and on highways are very good. Thoroughfares connecting major cities are excellent and well-lit. Road conditions vary from good to poor on rural roads, depending upon the location.

The safety of public transportation is generally very good, although buses, vans, and taxis are prone to erratic paths to pick up passengers.

Traffic laws in Oman are strictly enforced. Seat belts are required, and the use of cellular phones while driving is prohibited unless you have a hands-free cellular device.

Americans involved in accidents in Oman are advised not to move their vehicles from the scene until given permission from the Royal Oman Police.

Many parts of Oman employ European-style traffic circles. Unlike European traffic circles, however, the driver on the inside always has the right-of-way in Oman. Turning right on a red light is prohibited.

A visitor to Oman may drive a rental car with a valid American driver's license, but residents must have an Omani driver's license. To obtain an Omani driver's license, you must either have a valid American license or pass a driving test in Oman.

Illness/Injury

Healthcare in Oman's major cities is very modern. Basic treatment outside cities can be obtained from regional clinics. Hospital emergency treatment is available. Most doctors and hospitals expect cash payment for their services.

Crime

Street crime is nearly nonexistent in Oman. Visitors are advised to use normal precautions, such as avoiding traveling after dark or in deserted or unfamiliar areas. Currency and valuables should not be left unsecured in hotel rooms.

Entry/Exit Requirements

A valid passport and visa are required for entry into Oman. U.S. citizens may obtain a 30-day visa by presenting their valid U.S. passport on arrival at any Oman land, air, or sea port. This visa may only be extended for an additional 30 days. The fee is Riyals Omani 6.00 (\$16.00 US). Other types of visit/business/work visas are available for longer stays, but these must be arranged through an Omani sponsor before arrival.

For more information or to obtain a visa, contact the Embassy of the Sultanate of Oman, 2535 Belmont Road NW, Washington, DC 20008; (202) 387-1980.

Immunizations

In most cases, immunizations are not required for entrance into Oman. Travelers entering Oman from a country at risk for yellow fever must present proof of immunization.

There is limited risk of malaria in remote areas of Musandam Province, but the risk is so slight that a course of antimalarial drugs is not recommended. Travelers should take precautions to protect themselves from mosquito bites.

Special Circumstances

During the holy month of Ramadan, Muslims are required to refrain from smoking, eating, and drinking during the hours of fasting (sunrise to sunset). If you visit Oman during Ramadan, you are expected to follow the same rules in public out of respect for the culture. The timing of Ramadan varies each year, since Muslim holidays are based on the lunar calendar.

Electricity

Power converters are necessary to use any American appliance in Oman. Voltage in Oman varies from 220 to 240 volts, with a 50-hertz frequency. This is within the tolerance range of European appliances, so a power converter designed to convert American appliances to European outlets will suffice in Oman. Travelers wishing to use American appliances will also need a set of adapter plugs, as most outlets in Oman accept type G plugs, which have three rectangular blades, as opposed to American flat-bladed plugs, types A and B.