

# Global Geotourism Perspectives



**Edited by**

**Ross K. Dowling, Edith Cowan University, Australia**

**David Newsome, Murdoch University, Australia**

## **Geotourism in the Sultanate of Oman**

*Andrew Lawrence*

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## Geotourism in the Sultanate of Oman

Andrew Lawrence

### Introduction

Of all the Gulf countries in the Middle East, the Sultanate of Oman offers the richest blend of nature-based and cultural attractions. Features, such as the traditions and lifestyle of its people, ancient history, villages and forts, traditional souks, and activities, such as mountain treks, desert safaris and scuba diving, are set within a natural, aesthetically pleasing and well conserved environment. This is a major selling point and therefore a key competitive advantage of Oman that sets it apart from its neighbours as a tourism attraction.

The Sultanate of Oman displays an outstanding array of geological phenomena, many of which are of international significance. These phenomena play an important role in diversifying tourism products in the Sultanate, not only through promoting geotourism as an appreciation of geology and landforms as defined by Newsome and Dowling (2006) but also by simply providing a dramatic environment for other tourism experiences. It is also important to note that Oman's landscape and climate is closely linked with its social and cultural development. Interpretation of these relationships invariably enhances the tourism experience.

Oman has a population of over 2.5 million people, of which nearly 700,000 are expatriate residents (Ministry of National Economy). The country's largest city and capital, Muscat, lies to the north east. Salalah is in the south and the second largest city. Currently, oil is by far the Sultanate's most important economic resource, accounting for 44 per cent of the country's GDP (Ministry of Information, 2008a). In line with Oman's long-term development strategy (1996–2020), increasing tourism activities is cited in the government's Seventh Five Year Plan (2006–2010) as one of the key strategies aimed to speed up the process of diversifying sources of national income (Ministry of Information, 2008b).

In 2004, the Ministry of Tourism was established as a government agency in its own right, and in recent years, Oman has experienced strong growth in the tourism sector. Market research (IMC, 2008) indicates that in 2006/07 inbound

visitation increased by an average of 14 per cent a year. The Sultanate welcomed 1.4 million visitors in 2007 and the majority of these were from neighbouring Gulf Cooperative Community (GCC) countries including the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait.

As the Sultanate's premier tourism body in Oman, the Ministry of Tourism's objectives include promoting socially and environmentally sustainable tourism and employment opportunities. The Sultanate's marketing brand positions Oman as a high quality destination for cultural heritage, nature and adventure; strengthening Oman's standing in the international arena as a destination with many unique nature-based products.

The Sultanate has for some time had a small but thriving geological field trip industry catering mainly for groups of professional and amateur geologists (Oman Observer, 2004). This has partly been fuelled by the large number of resident professional geologists working in the oil industry in the Gulf, and the word of mouth advertising amongst the international networks that these people tend to maintain. Using specialist vehicles and trained staff, tours are offered as either off-the-shelf packages or customized group expeditions that may extend into desert environments of Oman. The Geological Society of Oman also offers a field trip programme ([www.gso.org.om](http://www.gso.org.om)).

On a broader level, market segments inclined to appreciate the opportunity of understanding of Oman's nature based (including geological) aspects are 'independent explorers', 'mature geo-travellers', and 'family travellers', as well as specialist groups such as climbers and trekkers (IMC, 2008). These market segments engage in an exploration and discovery experience (mainly utilizing the northern regions of Oman).

A wide range of guided safari packages are offered by numerous commercial tour operators. Typically, these tours offer a mix of cultural and nature-based experiences. A two to three-day guided tour in a 4WD vehicle may take in a selection of mountains and wadis, heritage sites such as Nizwa Fort and Souk, an overnight desert experience and coastal attractions such as the Ras al Jinz turtle nesting sanctuary (with a newly established interpretation centre and trained eco-guides). Whilst these groups receive an excellent nature-based tourism experience, the level of geological interpretation delivery differs from group to group and from guide to guide. However, a number of private sector tour operators are responding to increasing consumer interest for interpretation of geological sites by offering tours with a greater geological content as part of their mainstream product offering.

For the self-organized geotourist, geological field guides are available for selected areas (Hanna, 2006). Also, the Geological Society of Oman's newsletter *Al Hajar* provides numerous informative articles, including findings of some of the latest research concerning the geology of Oman ([www.gso.org.om](http://www.gso.org.om)). However, many geological sites are only accessible by 4WD vehicle. A number of

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