

Oman: the expressions and smiles of these Arabic girls always let you something that you won't ever forget.

The white low houses around the main road which crosses Muscat seem tell visitors welcome to the land of traditions and development. In this country one experiences the way of life following the ancient traditions which perfectly fits with the development and the modernity. The great Mosque of Sultan Qaboos dominates the city with its marvellous white stones and minarets which may be seen from the highway.

While driving through the city and walking around some districts, I was very impressed by the precision with which the architects and the rulers designed, built, and renewed some parts of this city. Streets, squares perfectly fit each other and are detailed settings. It seems to image the performance of a gentle and sophisticated symphony. This architecture also gives to foreigners a perfect idea of the care of Omanis for the culture and traditions. Few countries in the world have experienced development and modernity, by keeping at the same time ancient traditions and culture.

I met three young women wearing the typical dress called Abaya with whom I had a dinner. My eyes fell on one of them and on the fashion of her blue Abaya. While she fixed the foulard, my eyes dropped to her polite skin and light brown hairs *"Yes, we love our traditional clothes. We believe they are nice with deep roots in our history. She Replied me. In Muscat we usually wear different colours of Abaya and not necessarily the black one"*.

Abaya is the typical outfit worn by Muslim women. Some young women who were not used to wearing it, decided to wear it for walking in the evening through the streets and reaching clubs, bars, restaurants, or friends' house. They mostly decided to wear it for covering their legs and avoid any inconvenience.

We continued our conversation talking about different topics while the waiter was serving some traditional tasty food and we were admiring from the terrace the ancient area of Muscat called *"Mutrah"* where local people discussed in the streets and sold their products. Some old women looked tired while bearing a chest on her hat. When I left the place and went to walk in this ancient area, I could note in their eyes the conditions in which the women lived in the past. In western countries people have an idea of women in some Arabic states which is dated back and not true. During my stay in Oman, I had several conversation and dinner with young women living in several areas of the country, and with a different upbringing, who mostly told me more positive than negative things about their way of life in Oman. *"Women who want to study, drive car, do it without problems."*, answered me a girl. Yes, I can say that some of them are tired of walking outside covering their faces or their hairs. It seems that they want to show their beautiful hairs and faces and feel more comfortable.

The district of *"Mutrah"* still conserves its ancient houses and a fort on a top of a hill from which one has a beautiful view on the small harbour. In the middle of *"Mutrah"*, the typical Arabic market (*"suq"*) dominates this ancient area as in any Arabic city.

A winter sunshine reflecting in the blue sea and in the brown rocky mounting landscape accompanies me the next day from Muscat to Qantab Bay where I hired fisherman boat for exploring the turtles, the corals, and the coloured fishes.

Omani families like spend their free time in this bay and have a lunch on the shore rigorously wearing their typical long dresses. Most of them are still very conservative and avoid any contact with foreigners. If one wants to have a conversation with them, just approach them and ask something. They will kindly answer and speak with you or just tell you no thank you we do not want to have conversation. It is important to not take pictures of them if they refuse it. Sometimes some of these families are curious to know who you are, which country do you come from and why you are here. Fishermen stand together discussing about different topics. They spend here all day enjoying the sun and sharing their food and joy. It seems to see a big family. Quite all Muslims here have always in mind one of the principles of the holy book *"Coran"*: *"help others"*.

Sultane Qaboos¹ had a dream. Everyone in Oman should have the right to have a house and the necessities for living. The more one visits the country and talks with the population the more one realizes that he reached this dream. In fact, he built up new houses and grant them to poor people for some years until they do not become independent.

This *enlightened*² Sultan was not used to stay only in the royal palace, a complex of buildings which summarise the culture and tradition of Oman and whose marbles before the palace shine in the sun and one may mirror himself inside, so they are clean. But he spent every year a month travelling through cities and villages of Oman, talking with the population, and carefully listen to their worries and thoughts.

In Oman one never experiences the same sensation by visiting the different places. "*Bimmah SinkHole*", a hole in the ground closed to the sea in the middle of nowhere, one hour and thirty minutes south Muscat whose clear water welcomes visitors and residents to jump inside for refrigerating.

Wadi Shab, 155 Km from Muscat, is a valley where after a tracking of one hour, sometimes in the water, one reaches a cave whose waters come from a small waterfall and create a beautiful natural swimming pool. There is a straight passage between two rocks before reaching this natural swimming pool. If one is thin may avoid of going under the water for crossing this passage.

On the way to Sur, a city 50 minutes from Wadi Shab, I did not see any new construction which ruin the landscape, bult up following the worst western style, like in certain regions of Spain and Italy. "*Is it my feeling or did I miss something?*" I asked to the guide who answered me "*yes, it is true, there is only a natural landscape, there is no ugly buildings which ruin the landscape*".

The more I visited the different places, the more I realized that they share themselves for keeping tradition and culture as much as possible. The development finds a compromise with the protection of the environment and the respect for the nature. Mostly, there are not new constructions which do not fit with the ancient tradition and architecture. As I got closer and closer to the desert of Wahiba Sands and Nizwa, this sensation grew even more.

Sur is a city on the cost divided in two parts by a river where big turtles swim. From a fort on the top of a hill one admires a simple city with white houses. Near the river some houses are situated on the top of big stones. "*Are you still building the boat following the traditional method?*", I asked to one of the workers of a small shipyard, "*we keep doing this job as did our fathers and grandfathers*", he proudly answered me.

Our visit proceeded through the "*Suq*" of Sur. "*I usually come here for buying Abaya for my sisters. This typical old market is one of the most famous in Oman for buying abayas*". Told me the guide while we were walking through this place admiring different colour and style of Abaya in the different shops.

I would like to say thank you to Omani people for carrying on preserving their cities following their tradition. In this country the population adapted themselves to the nature and did not sacrifice the nature for their wish like in most of the developed and developing countries. One feels here far from any modern and western influence, but at the same time in a beautiful and developed place which convey unique emotions that leave their mark. A few times I wonder if these people live in this way because they want or because they do not have choice. 50 percentage of the time I found that they prefer to live this way. Maybe it is better to live there than in a developed country where salaries are low and the cost of life very high. I am sure they enjoy more the life. If one thinks about and spends some time in this state may clearly realize how a different way of life is possible without exploiting our planet with no sense. Sometimes, I think that the Omani, African and some Asian and south American populations, who happily live everyday with what life offers them, hold the destiny of humanity. I have a question: "*do you think that those populations may teach to people living in other countries the way for living in happiness?*" Maybe I will never find an answer.

The more one visits Oman and enter in contact with residents, the more feels the influence of the Asian culture in their lifestyle and character. Persons here seem simpler and more relaxed than in

¹ Died in 2020.

² As the population called Sultan Qaboos.

other middle eastern country. I would say that the population of Oman seems closer to the Asian mentality than to the Arabic one.

In Oman there are several valleys where a source of water creates a green landscape alongside the boring brown rocky scenery. One of them is Wadi Bani Khalid where it is possible to refresh in the natural swimming pools, but only with an integral suit bath since the valley is in the middle of a village. The water which gently flows through the valley comes from a source inside the rocks. If one pays attention to the bats, may walk inside the rocks looking for a source of water. It is highly advisable to ask a local guide to conduct you to the source.

From a place located in a remote area, I reached another one in the middle of nowhere, the desert of Wahiba Sands whose sandy landscape seems telling you short stories of the “*One Thousand and One Nights*” collection, and whose dunes create a perfect natural geometrical pattern. Though one may be accustomed to desert landscape, a trip and an overnight in the desert of Wahiba Sands should not be skipped.

Camels gently cross the marvellous dunes like an artist who paints a picture. One day a guide in Tunisia, told me: “*the camel through the dunes is like an artist*”. At that time I did not understand the significance of his sentence, maybe because I was in hurry, or because one should spend more days in the desert for fully appreciating its nature and the sense of the landscape which surrounded you, but these worlds of the guide have left a mark on my mind and while I was seeing the camels in Oman through the dunes, I could fully understand the meaning of that sentence.

The night in the desert is always magic with stars in the sky and a quite atmosphere which relax your mind and bring you in another planet, although I have not seen many stars like in the desert of Wadi Rum, in Jordan, during the summer season.

“*If one rides a camel through this fascinating desert in Oman, spending some nights in the middle of the dunes, may reach the coast by the sea, told me a Bedouin while describing me his family’s story and his land. Bedouin are interesting and welcoming people. Some Bedouins, even though the government built new houses in villages available to them free of charge, they do prefer to live in their historical tents following their traditions. They are very proud of their life and transmit this proudness and joy to their sons as you can also see from the smiles and eyes of these young people returning from school or staying at home. “Some Bedouins have only a problem, they drive cars as they were riding camels bending on the right and left side without seeing before if other cars are coming”, told me the guide while we were assisting to a car accident.*

In Oman there are some famous animal markets where people sell different beasts like cows, camels, and goats. The biggest and most famous one is located in the city of Sinaw and I highly recommend to visit it in the morning. This market amazes and shocks you at the same time, but it is one of the best places for understanding the Omani traditions.

I reached the city of Nizwa in the evening, the most historical and traditional place in Oman, together with other sites nearby, where traditions, culture, education, kindness mix each other bringing you into a world far from the reality. In some part of the small old town of Nizwa is forbidden to smoke and the population is very serious in respecting this rule. The same “*leit*” motif of black clothes for women and white for men reappeared. Sometimes, local traditions let one shocked, for example, Maram, a girl borne in a town closed to Nizwa who studied in Muscat told me: “*yes here in Nizwa we use black abaya because this city is more traditional than Muscat. I am sorry if I cover my face while walking beside you, but it is not common for a woman to walk with a stranger, and Nizwa is a small city, so everyone may remember my face*”. As we walked in the streets different people looked at us a little astonished. We decided to have a coffee and sit in a cafe to talk about the life in her town. Unfortunately, we could not sit in a cafe, because it was not allowed for women to sit there, but we stayed in the garden of a guesthouse. From her words and face I could understand that she loved her countries, but sometimes she cannot understand certain behaviours of my people. I did not hide the fact that she would move to another country, but with pain.

I left Nizwa for reaching Jabril Castle, one of the witnesses of the Omani architecture. *“These are my dates, please sit and help yourself”*, told me a woman outside the castle while offering me these tasting typical fruits.

What westerners really know about some Arabic countries is still a mystery.

“Unlike what some European persons say, in Oman most of the women are independent”, told me a young woman at the entrance of Jabril castle and while showing and explain me this marvellous place. *“In this room a sac full of dates were hanged on the wall until these fruits were transformed into a sirop, some kind of honey. This sirop slips from sacks through the wall until the floor, where it was collected”*. In the ancient period the honey of dates had two functions. The population used it as a defence against the enemy, which tried to enter to the castle. In fact, they boiled and lunched it down. Secondly it was a nourishment, as it is now.

I continue my visit appreciating the fine arts and cleverness of Omanis. The decoration of some rooms of this castle let me learn more about other skills of Omanis. In this castle lived more than 300 persons and other come from outside every day for attending classes. *“Do you like the life here in Oman?” “Why does the Coran say to respect the women and it happens that in some Arabic countries they have limited rights in comparison to men?”* I asked to her, at this question she started telling me her story and her feelings about the life in Oman and abroad, *“well I studied more than 5 years in Germany and then I decided to come back to my country, my town, and my people, I am an happy woman here in Oman, I can do whatever I want, drive a car, go outside and visit the places, and I prefer to live in Oman than in another countries”*.

The expressions and smiles of Arabic girls always let you something that you won't ever forget. A feeling of deep emotions around their body seems to tell you to discover the beauty of the life every day. They are very kind and polite and have a sophisticate upbringing which could have/have an important influence in the Arabic society. I felt this sensation many times in here in Oman and in other Arabic countries both in big cities and in small villages.

The mounting villages in Oman open another different landscape and represent for residents an escape during the hot summer season where the temperatures reach around 50 degrees.

In one of these villages, I met three kind girls who invited me to spend a day with them in Muscat.

The kindness of these young women let me intense and beautiful memories about this country. It is a country that deserve to be seen and lived with local people, for really learning about their culture and experiencing their courtesy.