

# Oman

## Dhofar's Monsoon Flora and Muscat's Geomorphological Showcase

### A Greentours Itinerary

Oman offers a real taste of Arabia in a safe and friendly environment. The combination of desert flora and scenery, mountain ranges and wadis rich in endemic and unusual plants, and a fascinating cultural heritage, means that you'll not miss the onset of autumn back at home!

The phytogeographical split within the country is fascinating with the North being in what is termed the Nubo-Sindian plant region, and the humid south of Dhofar being in the Somali-Masai plant region, in other words decidedly African! In addition the vegetation is influenced in the North by plants of holartic origin and in the South by plants of palaeotropical origin. In other words Oman is at the centre of an important biological crossroad.

### Day 1

#### Depart London

Our flight leaves London in the evening.

### Day 2

#### Arrive Muscat and to Salalah. Afternoon Wadi Hinna

We'll land in Muscat not long after dawn, perhaps catching our first sight of the arid and spectacular mountains inland before connecting with our onward flight to Salalah. There we'll head straight to the hotel and check-in and have lunch and a rest before heading out for a brief sight of Dhofar in the afternoon.

Dhofar is a very surprising place. For just a month or so in the year you can envisage how the region appeared only a few tens of thousands of years ago as what we now think of as African megafauna teemed across the seasonal grasslands and savannah landscapes. Now for most of the year it is as arid as ... well ... Arabia. The Southwest monsoon brings an extraordinary transformation. In mid-September the coastal plains look like the green fields of southern England except that its huge herds of camels grazing there rather than cows. And the impressive escarpment just inland traps the moisture for a month and is full of luxuriant greenery and beautiful rivers. Truly unexpected.

We'll drive across flat plains where camels graze the fresh green growth soon reaching the first escarpment inland. Here we'll explore Wadi Hinna and its enigmatic grove of baobab trees (*Adansonia digitata*). There are just a couple of small populations of these iconically African trees in southern Arabia and there is of course discussion about their origins. Were they brought here long ago by the Arab traders plying the East African routes, or are they native? The latter is quite possible given that 15000 years ago the fauna and presumably flora present here would pass for the Serengeti!

### Day 3

#### Wadi Darbat

Wadi Darbat is a serene spot with a delightful river tumbling gently down a green valley. It is really difficult to imagine you are in Arabia here! It is one of very few permanent water bodies in Oman. A richly varied woodland lines the river and both sides of the wide wadi, and in between, believe it or not, are green pastures! The flamboyant *Ruttya fruticosa*, known in gardening circles as Jammy Mouth, a shrub that has lovely big bright orange flowers, blooms along the stream edges. A rich avifauna includes Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Shining Sunbird, Bruce's Green Pigeon and Asian Paradise Flycatcher – in fact over 220 species have been recorded in Wadi Darbat. Its also a good place to look for mammals such as Caracal, Honey Badger and Common Genet – but that would require a night-time visit so perhaps for another trip?!

### Days 4 & 7

#### Going west towards Yemen - Jabal Qamar & Dalkut

We'll explore the Jabal Qamar where deeply eroded mountains reach the sea in spectacular cliffs. Rich semi-evergreen *Anogeissus* forest is replaced by sparse Frankincense *Boswellia sacra* woodland towards the interior. On slopes around the Frankincense trees we'll find many plants of *Desmidorchis adenensis*, a rare succulent. Hopefully there will be a few with their yellow and black flowers still in bloom. Amongst a range of fascinating woody species are *Acridocarpus dhofarensis*, *Cadia purpurea*, *Commiphora gileadensis*, *Lycium shawii*, *Senegalia hamulosa*, *Tamarindus indica*, *Withania qaraitica* and *Zygocarpum dhofarense*. There are stands of the Arabian Dragon Tree *Dracaena serrulata* and well-named *Euphorbia cactus* is a frequent sight. We'll also see the local flamboyant, *Delonix elata*, somewhat less showy than its scarlet cousin, but still a beautiful little tree.

Shaaf is amazing spot. An innocuous looking hillside suddenly ends with a 'more than sheer' drop into the ocean. At this season there is often a fog over the sea so one really feels like it's the end of the World – you cannot guess what lies below! 'More than sheer' because the cliff overhangs in its upper part which has allowed a walkway to be constructed that descends a little way down the vertical. The plantlife here is varied and includes some beauties such as the strange lilac-pink viola-relative *Hybanthus durus* and stunning *Barleria proxima*, a low-growing plant with flowers of a bright orange or a brilliant yellow with a red base. *Plectranthus barbatus* has large blue flowers in a tall spike and *Ocimum dhofarense* has amazingly long stamens!

We'll end a day full of amazing botany in the Dalkut area where we'll look for the strange orange-flowered succulent *Desmidorchis lavranii* amongst *Euphorbia balsamifera* and *Aloe dhufarensis*.

### Days 5

#### Jebel Samhan

The Jabal Samhan is a magnificent limestone massif bounded to the south by sheer (800-1000m) cliffs. At the base of the cliffs the foothills and coastal plain contain ancient basement crystalline rocks cut by numerous dykes. The northern slopes of the massif dip gradually to the north and are deeply cut by canyons and gullies forming a huge largely inaccessible region. This is the last stronghold of the Arabian Leopard in Oman. The fogs of the SW monsoon, build up against the escarpment, at its highest point over 2000m above sea-level and the highest point in southern Oman. These fogs support a narrow ribbon of *Anogeissus dhofarica* fog-forest with a band of semi-evergreen woodland (with *Olea europaea*, *Sideroxylon mascatense* and *Pappea capensis*) above and below the lip of the escarpment. The summit plateau is rich in a lovely array of flowering sub-shrubs such as *Aerva artemisioides* subspecies *batharitica*, *Barleria samhanensis*, *Boscia arabica*, *Carissa edulis*, *Commiphora habesinica*, *Ephedra milleri*, *Grewia villosa*, *Jatropha dhofarica*, *Sterculia africana* and *Vachellia nilotica*. *Maytenus* is quite a diverse genus in the region and here it is *Maytenus dhofarensis* that dominates. We'll also see white-flowered *Blepharis dhofarensis*, *Aloe dhufarensis* and *Aloe praetermissa* (both orange), and the lovely pink Desert Rose *Adenium obesum*. There are a number of newly discovered endemics growing on the northern rim of the Jabal Samhan including the succulent *Cibirhiza dhofarensis* and the endemic *Dhofaria mcleishii*.

## **Day 6**

### **Jabal al Quarra**

Heading directly north from the Dhofar coast we'll soon pass over the escarpment and then descend gradually to the north. The aridity increases sharply once one crosses the escarpment. In minutes one can drive from a rather lushly vegetated landscape into desert. Hardly five kilometres inland of the escarpment we are surrounded by nothing more than sand. However in that five kilometres we can find much of interest. The Frankincense woodland in Wadi Dawkah on the north facing slopes of Jabal Qara receives some benefit from the fogs. Here we'll find the unusual succulent *Caralluma quadrangular* with its lovely yellow starry blooms. There is a good variety of other xerophytes in this zone and many of them are in flower at this season.

## **Day 8**

### **Morning flight to Muscat. Then Birkat Al Mouz and to Nizwa**

The western Al-Hajar mountains in Muscat are home to a relict Juniper woodland amid a scenic masterpiece full of 'in-your-face' geomorphology. The geology of the Oman Mountains is extraordinarily well-exposed and diverse, spanning a geological record of more than 800 million years. Ocean-crust ophiolites have their largest exposure worldwide here but the Oman Mountains have much more to offer; including, Neoproterozoic diamictites, currently helping with Snowball Earth theories, and fossil-rich Permo-Mesozoic carbonates. The arid climate and deep incision of wadis allow for nearly complete rock exposure which can be seen in three dimensions.

The ophiolites become very obvious once we reach the start of the mountains not far inland of Muscat and we'll have them in sight for much of the journey to Birkat Al Mouz. This lovely little village is an oasis at the foot of the mountains. There is an ancient falaj irrigation system still providing water to the date plantations which have increasingly turned to banana plantations in recent years. The falaj irrigation system is protected as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. We'll take a walk along parts of it, the shaded paths taking us through a lovely cultivated landscape that nevertheless has plenty of pretty weeds and lots of brightly-coloured birds such as Little Green Bee-eaters and Indian Rollers.

In the later afternoon we'll arrive into Nizwa and have a chance to visit the historic fort before settling into our hotel, the Heritage Inn. The Inn comprises a number of local townhouses which a government sponsored initiative rehabilitating the town centre has refurbished to make a hotel in the tradition style but with modern comfort.

## **Day 9**

### **Jebel Akhdar**

The steep southern slopes of Jabal Akhdar are dissected by deep gorges and in the flatter areas there are several natural springs. The south-facing Sayq Plateau lying at 2000m is still terraced for cultivating fruit trees and various cultivated species (including old land races of *Prunus armeniaca*, *Prunus dulcis*, *Prunus persica* and *Punica granatum*) which have been grown for many centuries. These irrigated areas near mountain villages with their often precipitous terraced fields and ancient falaj irrigation systems provide an important habitat for many native species to thrive and hence are very biodiverse. The old terrace walls are important "man-made" refugia which support both weeds and native species such as the Omani endemics *Campanula akhdarensis* and *Clematis hajarensis*, the Arabian endemic *Diplotaxis kohlaanensis*, and strange *Dionysia mira*, a primula relative that clings to rocky crevices by means of its woody stock.

The Wild Olive has an outlying population here, the local form being subspecies *cuspidata*. Other woody species found in amongst the Olives and *Ziziphus* in this part of the Jabal Al Akhdar include *Berberis baluchistanica*, *Dodonaea viscosa*, *Euryops arabicus*, *Rosa x damascena* and *Sideroxylon mascatense*.

The Jabal Akhdar is cut by many deep gorges that offer a range of micro-habitats, at once hot and dry, also cool and shaded. We'll find small trees of *Moringa peregrina* showering their fine foliage from the wadi walls and also species such as *Lonicera hypoleuca* and clumps of succulent *Euphorbia larica* which typify the landscapes hereabouts.

## **Day 10**

### **Jebel Shams & Hail Al Jawari**

Hayl Al Juwari is a wooded valley occurring at 2250 m on the north western flanks of Jabal al Shams. This is an open, more or less flat-bottomed valley between two steep-sided ridges, the south-facing cliff dropping to a narrow wadi with small

caves. The area is most famed for its woodlands and is considered to contain possibly the best example of *Juniperus seravshanica* woodland in the country. Associated species include *Berberis baluchistanica* and *Cotoneaster nummularia*, both indicators of the cooler montane climate found at higher levels. Other species found in this sublime habitat include *Acridocarpus orientalis*, *Daphne mucronata*, *Ephedra pachyclada*, *Lonicera aucheri*, *Ochradenus aucheri*, *Sageretia thea* and *Ziziphus hajarensis*.

We'll stop for a view down into the Wadi Ghul, a landform worthy of the superlative 'Oman's Grand Canyon'. In places the Wadi's almost sheer sides descends vertically a full kilometre.

We'll have a chance to visit some of the famous beehive tombs before returning to Muscat by evening of Day 10.

## **Day 11 Departure**

We won't need to be at the airport until midday so we've time to visit the new National Museum of Oman. Shiny and new it may be, but its exhibits are anything but - the long history of Oman and the southern end of the Arabian Peninsula is well exhibited here.

If you would like to ask about any other aspect of this holiday, please call 01298 83563 or email us at [enquiries@greentours.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@greentours.co.uk).

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