

**In This Issue**

## Oman

**A Recollection**

*Written by Barbara Wace*

For a long time, I had wanted to go to Muscat and Oman - as Oman was then called - because it was still, in 1961, one of the most romantic, least-known countries in the world. But since it was also one of the most inaccessible countries, and the sultan, Sa'id ibn Taimur, was known to distrust journalists, it was most unlikely that he would ever admit me.

I reckoned without my old mother, however, who, in her late 80's, was still an avid reader of *The Times*, and a great sympathizer with her daughter's adventures. "I see the sultan had tea with the Queen yesterday," she told me on the telephone one afternoon. "Why don't you try to see him while he's here?"

Mostly to please her, rather than with any real hope of getting an interview, I found out from the Foreign Office that he was at the Dorchester, and left a letter there, addressed to his Minister of Defense, Brigadier Waterfield.

To my amazement, Brigadier Waterfield called me the next morning to find out more about me and followed this up the next day with a letter saying the sultan would be able to see me the next afternoon at four o'clock.

It was a meeting I will never forget. His Highness rose to greet me, a small, bearded, very dignified figure in flowing Omani robes and turban. Alone together, we sat a few feet apart, facing each other, on two straight-backed chairs in the middle of the sitting room. He spoke excellent English, for he had been educated at the School for Princes in India, and we made small talk. When I asked about the desert he jumped up to fetch me a little bag filled with sand, which he let trickle through his fingers to show the many colors of the tiny grains.

But when, at last, I took my courage into my hands and asked if I could go to his country and write about it, his eyes flashed. "Journalists tell lies," he snapped. I explained that I was a travel writer, not a political writer, and that I always tried to write the truth - at which, charming again, he bade me goodbye and told me that when I was in the Middle East I should let him know and he would consider my request.

With that encouragement, I immediately began to organize a trip to the Middle East, which I had, in fact, not considered before. What I did in the various other Gulf countries is another story; suffice it to say that I spent weeks in the area without hearing from Oman. Then, as I was about to fly home from Bahrain, a message reached the British Political Agency there to issue me a visa to visit Muscat, Matrah, and the Batina coast - only - for a total of nine days. Afraid His Highness might change his mind, I took the first of two weekly planes to Bait al-Falaj, the army headquarters outside Muscat, without organizing any hospitality on the other end - a risky thing to do in those days since there was not a single hotel in the whole country.

The flight itself was interesting. We took off with a full complement, dropped a couple of Western oilmen and a large party of Arabs at Qatar, left two British servicemen and two Trucial Oman Scouts at an airforce base in Sharjah and went to Muscat with an engineer who, it turned out, serviced the sultan's planes at Salalah in the Dhofar Province.

It was a nerve-racking leg - flying through ominous black mountains, frighteningly close to the peaks and shelves of rock, then landing on the small strip a few miles out from Muscat's walled city and learning, as I walked down the ramp, that Brigadier Waterfield was away. Fortunately, his wife, who was seeing off some visitors as I came in, took me back to her quarters at a nearby army enclave.

My problems, however, were still not entirely solved; getting into the country was not getting around it. There were no trains, buses or taxis, and even if I could have borrowed a jeep with desert tires, I could not have driven it since women were forbidden to take the wheel. Furthermore, only a few people had private cars; every import had to be personally approved by the sultan.

But I was lucky. The sultan's development secretary, an Englishman named Bill Clark, had been recently appointed to advise on a modest medical program and he was leaving

next day "on trek" to inspect medical centers already started and to open a new dispensary. I could go too.

It was quite a party: two trucks loaded with furniture and medical stores for the new dispensary, and the two tents and a third truck to carry servants, drivers and armed guards. We took almost everything we needed with us, including two live chickens, tinned food, chairs, tables and a carpet.

I soon learned why we traveled so elaborately. When we made our first camp - on the beach in front of a little village by the palm trees fringing the coast, the local *wali* - governor - with other town dignitaries and retainers turned up within minutes to greet us, and almost immediately we had to set up the chairs and table so that Bill and his visitors could "exchange the news," and take coffee and refreshments.

This occurred at each stop and sometimes a veritable procession would wind its way towards our beach campsite: Arabs of all sizes with dishes and cauldrons on their heads. Even if we had just had lunch, we could not refuse the food: roast goat, rice, pineapple chunks, tinned pears, dates and local sweetmeats. We received special attention from the Pakistani and Indian doctors, who were often lonely, without their families or anyone speaking their language.

One highlight was the opening of the new dispensary at which the *wali* of the area cut a tape with a pair of surgical scissors, and one vivid memory was a stop to wash in *afalaj* — one of the irrigation canals built hundreds of years ago (See page 28). The canal was full of little fish that mercilessly nipped our feet and legs.

In the remaining days of my stay with the Waterfields at Bait al-Falaj, I explored Muscat and Matrah, the twin ports, and one evening, in full evening dress, attended a cocktail party at the British Consulate, a lovely building overlooking Muscat harbor with a flagpole flying the Union Jack. We had to have a chauffeur, since even Mrs. Waterfield was not allowed to drive, and we needed a permit signed by the *wali* to allow us to leave the city again after dinner; without a permit, no one could leave after the big cannon of the fort thundered at sunset, and we would have had to stay until dawn.

That trip, of course, only whetted my appetite for more, and in 1964 - when oil in commercial quantities was confirmed - I began the long preliminaries I knew would be necessary before the sultan would give me permission to return. I started with a letter, asking whether, since he had allowed me in *before* oil, he would now permit me to see what he had decided to do for development with the first oil money.

The old sultan still did not like journalists, but after long correspondence with the then Consul-General Bill Carden, he again gave me permission to go to Muscat and Matrah and Batina. This time, in fact, he also permitted me into the interior as far as Nizwa, though I was to stay, he insisted, at the Consulate General with the Cardens, and be escorted by Colonel Colin Maxwell, a British officer serving with the sultan's armed forces. I was also to see John Harris, an architect in charge of the development plan, and I was to dress carefully: trousers, over which should be worn a dress reaching to below the knee, with long sleeves to at least the elbows.

By May, 1964, when I returned to Muscat, there were already changes: many more Europeans - most assigned to building roads, installing electricity, water pipes and so on - and more European wives. This, as it happened, was the era of the miniskirt, so most of the European women wore a long, wrapped skirt over the fashionable short dresses they wore indoors.

By then, Muscat and Matrah looked rather like building sites; accommodations for visiting experts and workers were being constructed and work had started on the Matrah port. There was now a post office, so we did not have to queue at the consulate to send letters home, and plans were being made to install telephones.

Traveling with Colin Maxwell was very pleasant, but quite different from my safari with Bill Clark. In true "mad-dogs-and-Englishmen" style, we went out early every morning for a short while, but came back for breakfast about 9:00. It was a delightful meal, often taken in the headquarters of one of the sultan's regiments, but it usually meant starting out again under a blazing sun.

Everybody knew Colin in every village we went to, so we had even more hospitality than on my first trip, and he was able to explain a great deal to me about the country and its people. At the oil company headquarters, for example, I watched young trainees learning engineering. It was an encouraging sign, for the future - and not the only one; there was change in the air, even then: a plan had been accepted for the first hotel, with 33 rooms, just outside Muscat, and for a new bank building and currency reform. Moreover, new stores were opening with luxuries such as air conditioners and Polaroid cameras; graders were working on roads; and other heavy equipment could be seen in remote areas on the way to Nizwa. Significantly, perhaps, the ancient watch towers were crumbling.

This change would not get fully underway until the sultan's son - Qaboos bin Sa'id -

came to power, but it *was* the beginning of the development that has since transformed Oman.

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