SAUDI ARAMCO world
January/February 1989 Volume 40, Number 1

In This Issue

Images of Oman

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Geography and history have decked Oman in diversity. A desert land about the size of Kansas, it has peaks rising to nearly 3,000 meters (10,000 feet), a narrow but fertile coastal belt, lush oases, vast stony plains where rain seldom falls, and grass-covered hills brushed by monsoon showers. It is home to the Arabian tahr, a wary, grey-brown mountain goat, and the Arabian oryx, a large antelope reintroduced to the wild in recent years after facing extinction (See *Aramco World* , July-August 1982).

Metaphorically, Oman is an island. Its mountainous spine, which dominates the southeastern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, is bounded on the north, east and south by the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. To the west lie the treacherous salt flats and towering red dunes of the Rub' al-Khali, or Empty Quarter, as forbidding as any ocean. Together, the mountains and the sand have proved a more formidable barrier against intrusion and influence from outside the country than the seas have, and the self-sufficient villagers and tribesmen of the interior are predictably more insular than the merchants and sailors of the cosmopolitan port towns.

Although 85 percent of Oman's estimated 1.25 million citizens are Arabs and virtually all are Muslims, small non-Arabic-speaking Semitic tribes inhabit both the isolated Musandam Peninsula in the far north and the rugged Qara Hills in the far south. There are also minorities of Baluchi, Indian and East-African origin, a reflection of Oman's maritime heritage.

In ancient times Oman enjoyed a passing prosperity from trade in frankincense, harvested in the southern Dhofar region, and in copper mined in the Hajar Mountains of the north. For some 2,000 years her wooden sailing ships were masters of the Indian Ocean's monsoon winds, at various times enabling this fragmented desert land, virtually bereft of natural resources, to control colonial outposts on the coasts of Persia, Pakistan and as far away as Zanzibar. The advent of European steamship lines about a century ago brought a sudden end to Oman's sailing hegemony.

With little to fall back on but traditional agriculture, herding and fishing, Oman endured a period of economic decline, tribal division and what some older Omanis frankly remember as near-medieval isolation. Change became possible with the discovery of oil in 1964, and it accelerated with the accession of Sultan Qaboos bin Said - the 14th ruler of his line - in 1970 (See *Aramco World* , May-June 1983).

Today Oman is using its modest petroleum reserves - estimated at about 4.5 billion barrels - to dissolve the regionalism imposed by geography and history and to revitalize itself as a modern state. It has built roads, electric power systems, medical clinics, a natural-history museum, and classrooms for a massive adult-literacy campaign. It is immunizing itself against the costs of rapid modernization by preserving its music and dance, and other parts of its cultural heritage. And to prepare for the time when its oil and gas are depleted, Oman is strengthening its agricultural and fishing base; once again it is exploiting the ancient copper mines.

But Oman's leaders perceive its young people to be its most important resource, the key to knitting together the land as Oman's fleets once knit together the rim of the Indian Ocean. In less than 20 years Oman has built a country-wide system of schools, vocational institutes, sports clubs - and the nation's first university. On these pages are a few of the manyfold faces of this singular land.

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This article appeared on pages 2-5 of the January/February 1989 print edition of *Saudi Aramco World*.

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