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Résumé: The article focuses on various mosques built by Omani ruler Sultan Qaboos bin Said in Oman. While creating an atmosphere where business and commerce thrive, Sultan Qaboos has not neglected the spiritual and intellectual sides of his country's character, recognizing that in order to ensure comprehensive, balanced development equal importance must be afforded to both the material and the spiritual aspects of life. This integrated approach is illustrated by the fact that since the dawn of the renaissance period, which began with his accession to power in 1970, Sultan Qaboos has made provision for the construction of a number of large mosques at his personal expense. The first Sultan Qaboos Mosque was built in Ruwi, in the 1970s and followed by the construction of several others in other major Omani towns and cities. As the capital of Muscat developed and its educated and prosperous population increased, Sultan Qaboos decided the time had come to build a Grand Mosque which could be a major landmark of Islamic architecture in the historic city. Every architectural element of the interior combines features of traditional Islamic arts and crafts, frequently in a contemporary manner. The outer walls are ornamented with engraved design, which include depictions of plants, as well as geometric shapes and Koranic verses in the Thuluth calligraphic script. The Grand Mosque, is a remarkable spiritual and architectural tribute to the distinguished and noble heritage of Islam.

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SULTAN QABOOS MOSQUE

The Omani ruler, Sultan Qaboos bin Said, like all wise leaders, attaches great

importance to his country's economic and social development. Over the past three decades he has transformed Oman from a sleepy desert backwater into the bustling vibrant country it is today. But while creating an atmosphere where business and commerce thrive, Sultan Qaboos has not neglected the spiritual and intellectual sides of his country's character, recognising that in order to ensure comprehensive, balanced development equal importance must be afforded to both the material and the spiritual aspects of life.

This integrated approach is illustrated by the fact that since the dawn of the renaissance period, which began with his accession to power in 1970, Sultan Qaboos has made provision for the construction of a number of large mosques at his personal expense. The first Sultan Qaboos Mosque was built in Ruwi, in the 1970s and followed by the construction of several others in other major Omani towns and cities.

As the capital of Muscat developed and its educated and prosperous population increased, Sultan Qaboos decided the time had come to build a Grand Mosque which could be a major landmark of Islamic architecture in the historic city.

A site was chosen for the mosque alongside the road that links Muscat's Seeb international airport with the heart of the capital. Work began on construction of the mosque in 1995 and was completed in March 2001, since when it has become a national landmark, combining the very essence of traditional and contemporary Islamic design and attracting many thousands of worshippers and fascinated visitors.

The site itself covers 416,000 sq metres with the mosque podium covering 40,000 sq metres. The main prayer hall has a capacity of over 6600, while the women's prayer hall can comfortably accommodate 750.

The outer sahn (courtyard) can hold 8000 people and, with additional capacity in the inner sahn and riwaqs (arched chambers), the mosque could accommodate 20,000 worshippers.

Every architectural element of the interior combines features of traditional Islamic arts and crafts, frequently in a contemporary manner. The outer walls are ornamented with engraved design, which include depictions of plants, as well as geometric shapes and Koranic verses in the Thuluth calligraphic script. The ornamentation gradually becomes more intense and elaborate as one proceeds towards the interior of the building and its inner sanctum.

The detail on the exterior is, in general, limited to finely carved stonework in geometric and floral border motifs. The soffits (inner curves) of the vaulted areas are inlaid with stone mosaics in a combination of abstract and formal designs. The north riwaq blends themes from Oman and wider Arabia, with examples of Ottoman, Mamluk, Maghreb, ancient Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Byzantium art. The rich combination of classic and modern patterns is continued in mosaics, cut tile work, ceramic tiles and inlaid marble.

The interior walls of the main prayer hall are entirely clad in off-white and grey Bardiglio marble; ceramic floral patterns adorn each framed mural panel, forming blind niches in a

variety of classical Persian designs. The elegant stained glass windows complement the patterns which adorn the interior.

A magnificent single piece Persian carpet, designed in prayer-space-sized units separated by blue and white borders, containing decorations derived from traditional Omani weaving designs; its 4,263 sq metres cover the floor of the prayer hall.

The spectacular floor covering is made up of more than 1,700 m separate knots and weighs 21 tonnes. It was woven in Nishabur, in Iran by 600 women and took four years to complete. Much of the design is floral (Safavid) and arabesque patterns. Flowers within flowers add to the sumptuousness of the design bringing together the classical Tabriz, Kashan and Isfahan traditions. Some 28 colours in a variety of shades were used, the majority obtained from traditional vegetable dyes.

Austrian Swarovski crystal chandeliers with gold plated metalwork illuminate the interior of the mosque, the largest of which adorns the main prayer hall dome dazzling in its beauty as well as its statistics. Fully eight metres in diameter and 14 metres in length, it contains 1,122 lamps and weighs eight tonnes.

The nine smaller chandeliers that embellish the women's prayer hall are made, of Turkish crystal.

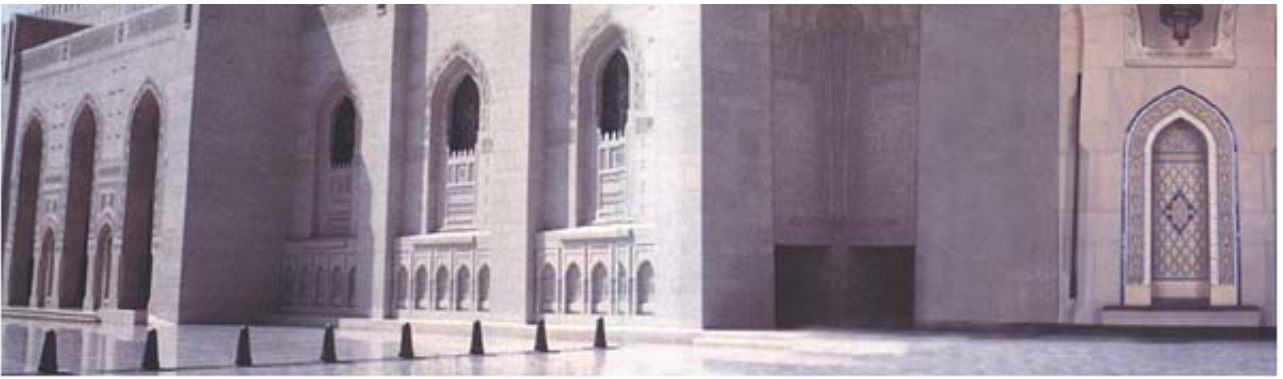
Marble tiles are used for the paving of the entrance courts. The landscaping which provides for formal gardens to the east, with lawns to the south, reinforces the Islamic theme in the gardens. A water fountain with a falaj (traditional irrigation) system links the garden pavilion to the far east of the site.

A spectacular library containing more than 20,000 books on Islamic culture is housed in the south riwaq and, in keeping with modern times, houses not only books but computers for public use.

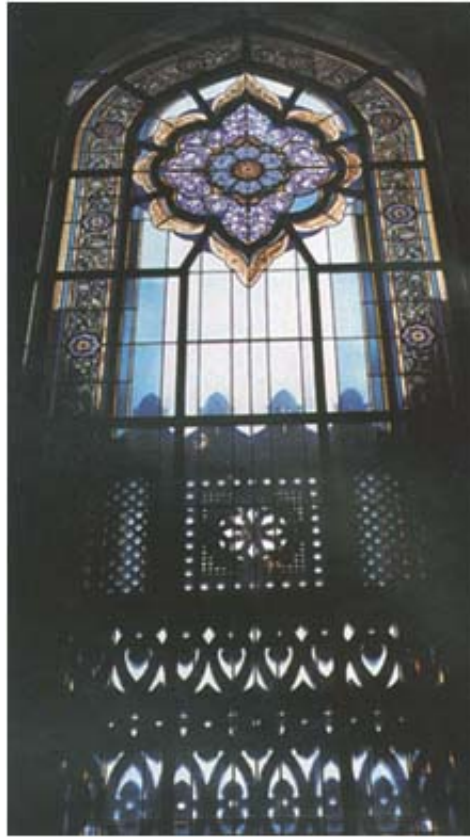
A local scholar observed that while Omanis are proud of achievements made in recent years in the world of commerce and trade and the significant steps towards democracy, the completion of the new Sultan Qaboos mosque is a tremendous source of national pleasure. "We have some exceptional mosques in Oman but this one is the jewel in the crown, every Omani hopes, one day to pray here," he added with confidence

The Grand Mosque, is a remarkable spiritual and architectural tribute to the distinguished and noble heritage of Islam.





Mosaic Niche



Stained glass window in the main hall





The Swarovski chandelier



The ablution court in the south riwaq

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Words and Pictures by Rhona Wells

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