

**In This Issue**

Oman

A New Dawn*Written by John Lawton*

When Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id took power in 1970, he told his people: "Oman in the past was in darkness, but... a new dawn will rise..." Qaboos kept his promise. Though its oil production is modest, and though the Dhofar rebellion diverted vital resources for years, Oman is already enjoying a new dawn as it moves into the modern world at an impressive pace.

In the past, to be sure, Oman has known other periods of prosperity: from the export of copper and frankincense in ancient times, and from trade and its African possessions during the Middle Ages. But by the 19th century, following the loss of Zanzibar and the decline of its sailing fleet, Oman was virtually bankrupt. In 1958, in fact, Qaboos' father, Sultan Sa'id ibn Taimur, had to sell the last of Oman's foreign territories - the Gwadar enclave - to Pakistan to keep his country solvent.

Even the discovery of oil in Oman in 1964, made little difference, since Sultan Sa'id, after years of necessarily-frugal, rigidly-centralized rule, was unable to adapt to changing times; though oil revenues raised Oman's export earnings from \$2.5 million in 1964 - from sales of limes, dates, fish and frankincense - to \$18 million in 1970, the sultan was slow to use the new wealth to modernize the country and help its people.

By the time Qaboos replaced Sa'id as sultan, Oman had only three primary schools, one private hospital and 10 kilometers of paved road (6.2 miles) and thousands of disaffected Omanis had left the country to study and work abroad. Worse, a rebellion had broken out in the south.

Today, by comparison, there are over 2,000 miles (3,219 kilometers) of asphalt highways, 14 government hospitals and over 450 state schools. Many educated and talented Omanis have returned from voluntary exile to help rebuild their country. The Dhofar rebellion has been checked and Sultan Qaboos seems to have the genuine support of his people.

Using income from oil, Sultan Qaboos has, in little more than a decade, revolutionized a way of life untouched for centuries by the outside world: schools, hospitals, clinics and roads have been built, welfare aid has been introduced and many girls have been given the chance of an education. New ports and airports have been constructed, industries set up and color television introduced. The armed forces have been modernized and Oman's relations with the rest of the world restored.

As it is only a modest oil producer - 317,000 barrels a day during 1981 compared, for example, to its neighbor, the United Arab Emirates, Oman has had to use its money sparingly and plan well. And because it began its development late, it has been able to learn from the mistakes of others. Consequently, there are few prestige projects in Oman, and much of the country's original character and charm has been preserved.

To help plan development and modernize security forces, Sultan Qaboos has brought in mainly British advisers. Though Oman also gets fiscal aid from the United States and help from Saudi Arabia, the sultan is following a tradition based on a long friendship between the two countries; he himself was educated in Britain and is an unabashed Anglophile.

Compared to some Arab neighbors, Oman's development program may seem small; it is spending only \$6.5 billion on development in its current Five Year Plan, compared to £227 billion in Saudi Arabia. But because it was, until recently, one of the region's most undeveloped nations, the effects of development have been dramatic. Today, there are traffic jams where a decade ago there was not even a road and supersonic jet fighters streak over crumbling fortresses that 10 years back were Oman's main line of defense. At night, moreover, the Capital area - the twin ports of Muscat and Matrah, and the modern township of Ruwi, is ablaze with lights and bustling with people, whereas before 1970 the gates of Muscat were closed after dark and the few people who dared venture afoot were forced to carry lanterns.

In the interior, the effects of modernization, though less visible, are equally profound (See page 34). Old wooden ox ploughs have been replaced by shiny, new tractors, and fast pickup trucks have taken the place of plodding camels; in fact, it is not uncommon

to see camels, once the principal means of transport in Oman, now being transported themselves by truck.

The extent of change is reflected in the fact that many of the formerly-nomadic camel herdsman have now become settled - some even farming the land. Change, in human terms, is also graphically illustrated by lines of women, in colorful purple baggy pantaloons, waiting outside a health center in Dhofar to have their children vaccinated - preventive medicine where, 10 years ago, there was virtually no medicine at all.

Some things, however, do not change. The *Jiballi* cattle herdsman, for example, still seem to prefer their traditional semi-subterranean homes, built into the hillsides of Dhofar, to modern, above-ground concrete houses, which give less protection from the fog and drizzle that envelope the southern al-Qamr mountain range during the summer monsoon. And they still feed their cattle partly on sardines, caught and dried on the coast, just as Marco Polo noted, with some amazement, in his famous book *The Travels* centuries ago (See *Aramco World*, July-August 1982).

Although some signs do remain of the recent Dhofar rebellion - a makeshift mosque, for example, built by the guard force at Taqa out of empty ammunition boxes - the once-beleaguered Salalah is expanding fast, even to the extent of a luxurious Holiday Inn serving delicious poolside buffet lunches of grilled lobster caught offshore.

Because of the monsoon rains - which catch only the southern corner of Oman - Salalah with its white beaches, blue surf and swaying coconut palms, resembles the Caribbean more than Arabia, which is one of the reasons past sultans have preferred to make it their home rather than mooncape-surrounded Muscat. It has always, too, been blessed by a wide variety of farm products and in its busy market place, where women sell once-priceless frankincense for three dollars a kilo (See page 26), it is possible to find, on just one stall, apples and aubergines, bananas, beans and bread fruit, cabbages, carrots and coconuts, garlic and ginger, marrows and melons, oranges, tomatoes and papaya.

In addition to all these, you can now buy pasteurized milk - produced on the arid plain behind Salalah at the modern, government-run Sun Farm. "Just a few years back, all this used to be desert," says farm supervisor Omer Alwi of the 200 hectares of lush green cattle fodder (500 acres) now covering part of the plain. Mr. Alwi, who worked for 16 years as an Aramco refinery supervisor at Ras Tanura, in Saudi Arabia, is one of the many Omanis who returned to help rebuild his country.

The government is actively encouraging the development of agriculture by all possible means, to try and reduce the high rate of food imports and, a long term goal, to provide for the day when its limited reserves of oil and gas run out. It is, for example, spending \$136 million on agricultural development in its current 1981-1985 Second Five Year Development Plan - five times the amount spent on agriculture during the First Five Year Plan. In addition, the government has set aside \$66 million to improve the country's centuries-old system of underground irrigation channels, *aflaj* - still the main source of water supply in rural areas (See page 28).

As part of its effort to reduce Oman's dependence on crude oil exports, the government is also setting up new industries; oil presently accounts for about 75 per cent of the country's Gross National Product and about 95 per cent of governments' revenues. In November, 1982, Sultan Qaboos inaugurated Oman's first oil refinery, a 50,000-barrels-a-day facility at Mina al-Fahal, near Muscat, which will eliminate Oman's reliance on imports of petroleum products refined abroad, and by June, the country expects to export its first shipments of refined copper from the \$200-million copper mining complex at Lasail (See page 18). Using ore reserves estimated at about 11 million tons, the sultanate proudly plans to be the first significant exporter of a non-hydrocarbon natural resource from the Arabian Peninsula.

Despite this flurry of development, Oman has not lost sight of its rich past; in fact, the country is making a determined effort to preserve it. Oman, is one of the few countries in the world to have set up a Ministry of National Heritage. Established in 1976, with a specific mandate to save the nation's past, this ministry has already helped enact laws forbidding developers from destroying old buildings.

"The law," says Director General of Heritage Mohammed Sa'id Nasar al-Wohaibi, "came too late to save the Matrah sea front," where many of the beautiful, old, balconied houses were torn down, in the first flush of development, to make way for ugly, modern office blocks. But much of Muscat has been saved from the wreckers ball and many of the country's magnificent old forts are being restored (See page 24).

With its colorful people, exciting history, breath-taking scenery and sun-drenched climate, Oman would seem to be a tourists' paradise. For the time being, however, tourism will be limited to a few carefully selected groups. This is because Oman is not ready for too many visitors; there are, for example, nowhere near enough hotels. For those who do get there, however, the visit will be exciting since Oman is a country where, for the moment at least, the medieval and the modern meet face to face across the centuries.

This article appeared on pages 12-15 of the May/June 1983 print edition of *Saudi Aramco World*.

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