

ARABIA'S OCEAN OF SAND

Words & Photography | Jerzy Wierzbicki

Regardless of the harangue against modernisation, what is most striking about this phenomenon is the rapid process of unification that we are witnessing in the way the global culture has penetrated our markets. Almost everywhere around the world, in the standardised big shopping malls, we can buy products that look exactly the same, regardless of whatever culture, region, and climate we inhabit. In addition, Internet, mobile phones, and social online networking have made intercultural relationships much easier than it was years ago. In the modern world today, we can notice hundreds of examples of all these cultural changes taking place simultaneously around the world. Obviously, networking has several positive aspects; youth today, from the Middle East, Asia or the West, have much more contact with their counterparts around the world. Today, they understand each other much more, regardless of the culture, language or religion.

On the flip side of the coin, there are the negative influences of such rapid cultural changes on small local communities who have steadfastly held on to their old customs; it has significantly impoverished certain cultures and common traditions. Today, it is almost impossible to find a culture or even a small community that has never been influenced by the modern cultural mainstream. Even in the deepest part of inaccessible Papua New Guinea or the Amazon Rainforest, people are wont to use mobile phones and other technological gadgets; typical elements of the global culture. All these changes are irreversible; culture is forever evolving and will never stop doing so.

Besides, enormous developments in air communication have also helped increase the numbers of tourists around the world. Spurts of growth in the tourism industry have also permanently changed the culture in many countries. One of the best examples are countries like Tunisia and Egypt. The tourism business is one of the most important branches of the economy in these two countries; both have permanently changed after more than 20 years of developments.

So, how does Oman compare with other Middle Eastern countries and the rest of the modern world? Has the Sultanate, which is proud of its local culture and customs, been able to protect itself from the adverse effects of massive tourism activities?



Personally, I have had the privilege to travelling around the Sultanate since 2007. During my trips, undertaken to turn my photography projects into reality, I do observe many aspects of the local culture and understand their restraint in preserving those qualities. There are subtle measures taken to protect and retain its innate cultural integrity. I have noticed that this cultural and societal integrity is pure, very often untouched by the modern environment. Another important aspect is the political stability, which is one of the most valuable treasures in this part of the world.

Residents and even visitors/tourists would be aware that many years ago Sultanate of Oman was almost unknown in the worldwide tourism market. Compared to North African countries, the number of visitors was very tiny; the tourist infrastructure was also limited.

Even today, most of the top branded hotels are located only in the big towns and the average cost of an air ticket is more expensive, in comparison to travelling to other countries. Still, many people are, nevertheless, planning to visit Oman heedless of the cost or other inconveniences. One of the reasons for this could be that many people, especially in this decade, seek to experience pure traditions and local Omani culture, especially in the interiors. Very little, if at all, has changed in the local customs and habits of people, and it is this that attracts visitors from abroad.

Last but not least, the political and economic stability of the Sultanate has performed a vital role in helping tourists decide in favour of this country.

All the factors collectively put together have made Oman a much more popular destination now than it was years ago and it is demonstrated by the fact that the number of visitors to the country keep on annually increasing.

In Oman, there are a few small but professional tourist service providers, who are hard to locate in the worldwide catalogues or high printed magazines or international newspapers. These companies have tailor-made programmes for customers with specific expectations and needs from their holidays. Diving, dune bashing, bird- and turtle-watching, fishing, mountain trekking and beach camping are just a few of the activities that make up the programmes' agenda.

To check out some facts, I spoke to Clara Zawawi, Chairperson of the Ocean Blue International LLC, a company specialised in providing original and high standard tourist offers, about tourist developments in the last few years. The Ocean Blue Oman, she said, has witnessed steady increase of 30 percent sale from 2007. Most of their visitors come from Germany, Great Britain, France, Switzerland, Austria and Australia. The future for companies like



Ocean Blue does look bright; diversity in the offerings and sustained high standards make their products attractive for the visitors.

The natural environment in Oman is relatively 'undiscovered', which is what makes Oman a fantastic place for anyone who would like to explore little known gorges and other locations. Uninhabited deserts, high mountains and hundreds of kilometres of empty beaches make a good impression on those who live in highly urbanised parts of the world and seek to spend their holidays in a natural environment.

Oman is not for every kind of tourist; it is not for random people who just want to spend a couple of weeks in a warm and sunny country.

I receive many questions about the Sultanate as a special destination. Most of these people would like to spend an unforgettable vacation, far away from the noise and modern civilisation's competitiveness. I mostly recommend them to explore Omani interiors, especially mountains and the desert. In this issue, I would like to share with the readers my experience of the trip to one of the last pure, natural and almost uninhabited places on planet Earth - Empty Quarter (Rub'ul Khali).

Some months ago, I received a call with questions about the Sultanate. After a few minutes, I recognised that my caller was full of appreciation for Oman and would like to visit some places that are still not available for the masses; places where he could find some isolation and experience real adventure in the pristine yet challenging environment. We decided to go to Empty Quarter, specifically to a place called Ramlat Hashman situated there.

Empty Quarter (Rub Al Khali) is the largest sand desert in the world. The desert is spread over 670 000 km² - around 1070km length and 540 km width. The terrain is covered with sand dunes that are reddish in colour, with heights of up to almost 300 meters. The climate there is very dry and in the summer the temperatures can reach over 50C°. Empty Quarter is the second most oil rich region in the world. In the past, Empty Quarter was a huge geographical barrier for the cultures that lived in the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula. Several centuries ago the Empty Quarter was the route for many caravans that carried frankincense to the northern part of the Middle East as part of the Silk Route. In the last century, it was featured in many books, movies and art around the world.





with the wind between these small sand dunes, we moved deeper into the Ramlat Hashman. The temperature was not very high, just less than 40 degrees. Sand was soft, but hard enough and predictable for driving. As we penetrated the desert, we noticed that the further we drove from the edge of the desert, the higher and more massive the sand dunes appeared. Around noon we pulled our cars over, just a few meters away from a big dune. The sun was much stronger now and there was not a single place where we could find shade.

The desert appeared totally overwhelming. I could notice that my friend, who was experiencing such an environment for the first time, was feeling a bit queasy. Increasing heat and being surrounded by the great sandy deserts, is an unforgettable experience for newcomers, especially from the metropolitan world. Around 60kms from the village called Hashman, we found a sand dune, which was huge, shaped like a five-pointed star. It was a great location for camping that night.



In the evening, tired and beaten by the heat, sand and sun, we climbed up on the dune to take some photographs and experience this infinite sandy overview. After sunset, a small dinner and a cup of tea was enough. The silence in the night is indescribable—people living in the towns almost never experience such deep silence...the darkness there has an incredible quality to it as well. In the morning, I again lit a bonfire to prepare some strong coffee and a simple breakfast. The plan for

Empty Quarter possesses one of the most harsh climate conditions on earth. Be aware of that and be ready to meet many unpredictable elements.

We set-off from Muscat International Airport on two Land Cruisers, travelling directly to the tiny settlement, Dawkah. We reached Dawkah late afternoon and set-off on the gravel track leading us to a little village, Shisr. This point has a strategic importance due to the last petrol pump. Without possibilities to refuel our vehicles we could not continue our expedition, and so we filled more than 200 litres of petrol for each car and moved slowly ahead to Ramlat Hashman. A few minutes before sunset, we encountered the first of the many sand dunes.

Next day, we were welcomed by specific sounds. It turned out that this massive desert, which otherwise seems desolate, is inhabited by many local animal species. Just a couple of metres away from my car, I noted footprints of a fox, lizards and a small bird. Around 9am, when the sun was still to gain strength, we moved in the northern direction between the sand dunes. The gravel track, which I'd found earlier, was crossed by several small sand heaps, created by the permanently blowing wind. Driving



the next day was clear - drive to the north, deeper between Ramlat Hashman and reach the bigger and higher sand dunes. My friend, who was experiencing it for the first time, was happy and fully convinced that Oman is really a special place.

Next day was a bit different. The weather changed and the sky was covered with thin clouds, reducing the temperature slightly. At that moment we were exactly 120km from the Shisr where we refuelled the cars. The gravel track, very often, was covered by sand and we had to drive as per the GPS locator. Before the trip I had prepared a precision map and marked all significant points on the map. Often, we had to cross the dunes, which needed time; it was also a little risky, especially for someone who was driving to the Empty Quarter for the first time. After noon the next day, we reached the giant sand dunes that dominated the entire area. GPS locator displayed that we had stopped exactly 167km from Shisr. It was our deepest point during this expedition. It was also a fantastic place for some good landscape photography.

During the last two days, we had used 50 percent of our fuel and we decided to return back the next day to the main gravel track connecting Shisr with a small town called Mitan. So, the next day in the morning, we set-off slowly towards the south but chose a route alternative to the one by which we had arrived. Late afternoon, tired, overheated, and dusty, but full of positive impressions, we came back to Shisr about 900kms from Muscat.

The impressions following an expedition such as this are unforgettable. Even if this trip was extremely expensive in comparison to standard vacations under the palm trees on the beach in some exotic resort, it did not matter considering the wealth of experiences we returned with. I am certain, many visitors, planning to come to the Sultanate of Oman, would like to experience something unusual and original along the lines of such a trip.

THE EMPTY QUARTER TRIP ADVICE:

I have visited Empty Quarter several times since 2007. This place is really dangerous for anyone who ignores desert conditions or is not well prepared for the trip. There are some basic rules that we followed to ensure our safety, which are applicable to not only the Empty Quarter but every kind of desert.

First of all, never ever go there alone or just in one car; two cars are absolutely the minimum. During the last trip to Ramlat Hashman, we had driven in two cars only, which limited our journey to few days and less than 200kms. More cars with more drivers make the trip safer and the distance better. Only good condition 4x4 cars with good tyres, and one spare tyre, are needed. I have had the experience of losing three tyres in one day at the Empty Quarter. If you are not an experienced off-roader, hire a guide and drive following his instructions. You may need more fuel so jerry cans are required. Do not forget food, water, basic medical set and communication equipment. Mostly, in deep desert, the phone reception is non-existent so a satellite phone is needed.

Communication between the cars is also vital so try to use walkie-talkie, if possible. If you are seriously planning to go to the Empty Quarter, choose the coolest time of the year. In the summer the temperature is more than 50C° and driving and other activities can make it an extremely harsh affair.

