

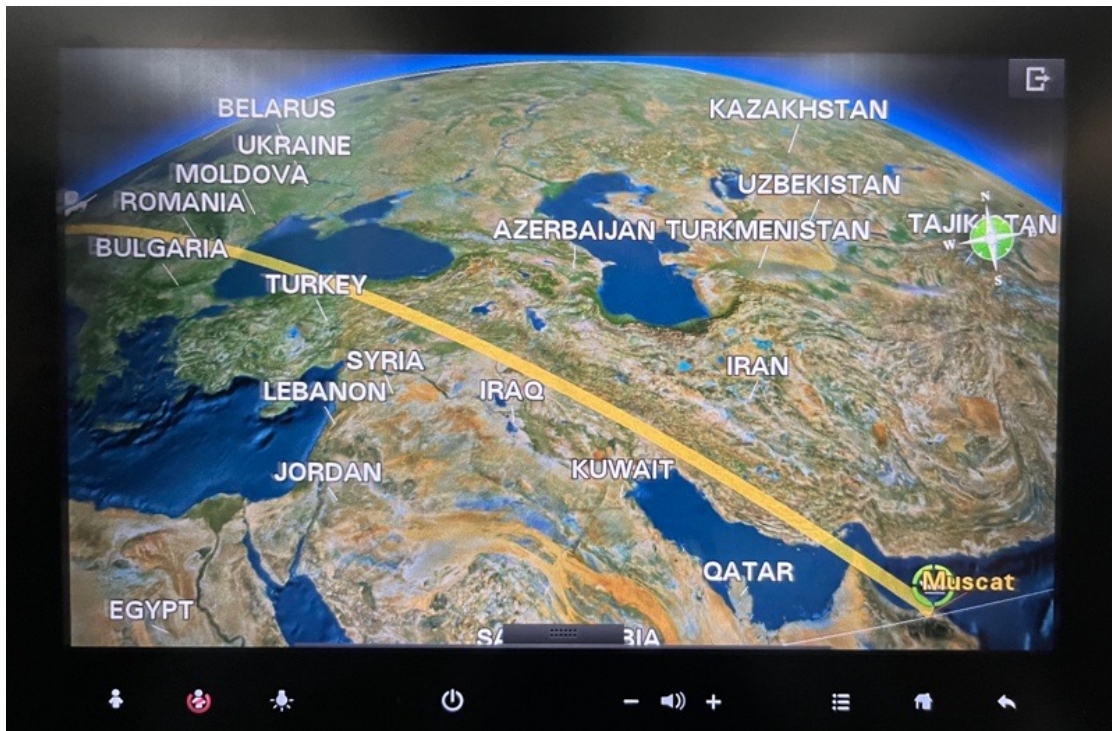
Arabian Dreams Tour – 2023 Oh Man, It's Oman!



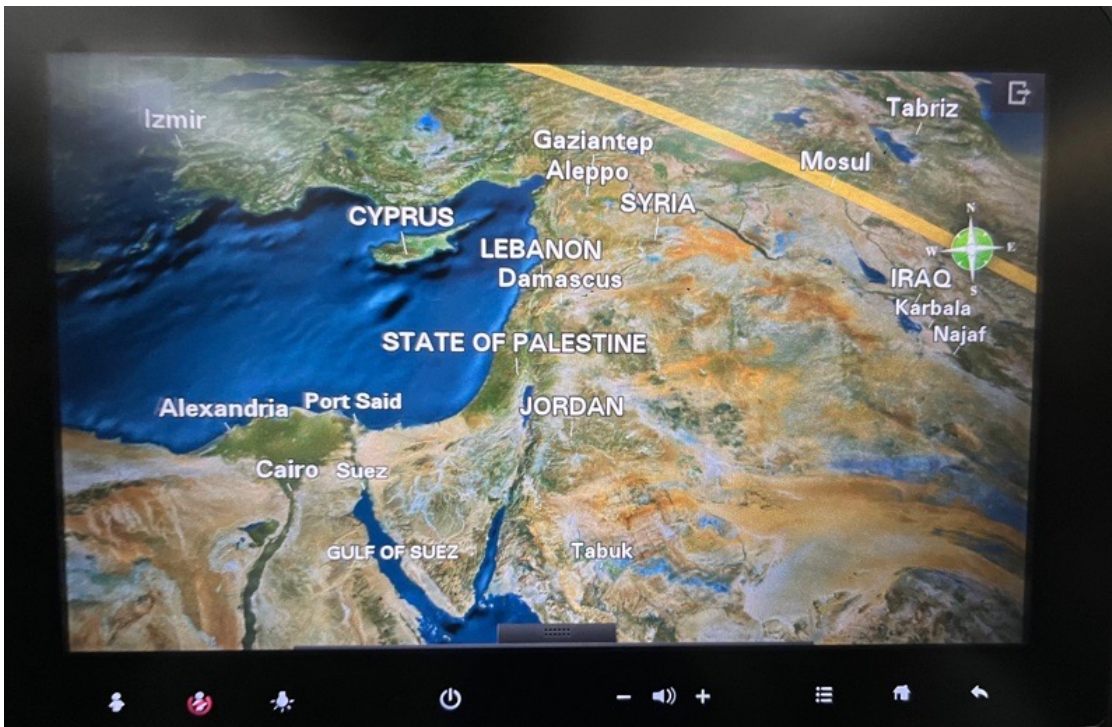
We're off on another great adventure! A pleasure cruise on the Persian Gulf with Tauck Tours — sounds crazy, I know, but it's for real. We'll be able to experience a different culture that we know very little about, and see sights we've only seen on TV. It's just what we love to do!



And it looks like we're not the only ones! The Oman Air flight from Frankfurt was full. I was expecting mostly Arabian people, but it was all Westerners (but very few Americans).



Here's a shot of the on-board flight map. The countries we're visiting are all peaceful, but the flight will take us over some pretty rough places we wouldn't want to land in: Syria, Iraq, Iran. At least we'll be far away from Ukraine!



Hmmm.... very strange.... something seems to be missing on this Oman Air map.... State of Palestine? I thought there was another country in there between Jordan & Lebanon...



Oman is 9 hours ahead of EST, and after 20 hours of traveling our diurnal clocks were so messed up we were wide awake at 4 AM to catch the sunrise over the Gulf of Oman.



Nice view! Our hotel is actually a beach resort outside the capital city of Muscat.



We went down to the beach, but didn't stay long because it was a little too cold! We didn't expect that in Arabia, but temps were in the low 70's (in summer they go up over 120). As you can see, the beach was pretty empty. Of the few people there, the western women wore bathing suits, but the Muslim women covered up from head to toe.



We made a new friend! Abdullah is the lobby guard. He was happy to talk about his traditional Omani garb: hat (kuma), robe (dishdasha) and his ceremonial dagger (khanjar) which men wear for special occasions. The handle is silver, inlaid with pearls. Don't put that in your carry-on!



Time to tour! First stop: the massive Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, built by (and named after) the prior king of Oman, who ruled for 50 years from 1970 to 2020. It's good to be the king!



The mosque is recent, completed in 2021 after 6 years construction.



Women must cover heads, arms to wrists, legs to ankles; and we all take off our shoes to enter.



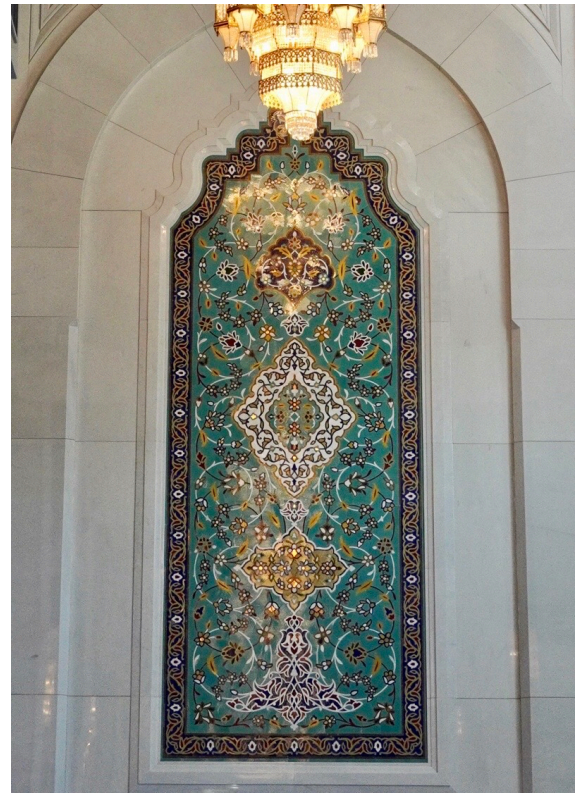
Inside, it is magnificent!



Close-up of the huge dome and chandelier



Behind us is the mihrab, the niche that always faces Mecca. All mosques have a mihrab, but few are as ornate as this one.



More chandeliers in the hallways lead up to giant ceramic tiles.



Sure, it's overly opulent and lavish, but what's a few million dollars when you're sitting on top of one of the largest deposits of natural gas in the world?



Next, a photo stop at the Presidential Palace, “one of the Sultan’s six homes”. He doesn’t live in this one, only receives official state visitors here.



The building dates from 1971, maybe the reason it’s somewhat understated. We loved the color scheme and the Art Deco-ish look. Too bad no tours allowed of the inside.



On the front gate, the symbols of power: the national emblem of Oman (crossed scimitars and the khanjar) and the crown. The Sultan is an absolute monarch. It's illegal to defame his name!



Next, a visit to the Souk, the traditional marketplace. It's not just for tourists; this is where regular Omanis go to shop for clothes, toys, sundries, coffee, and spices.



We've been in this type of market in Turkey. Bargaining is expected. And don't let Judy's charming smile fool you — she is one tough customer!



She bought saffron — from Iran! So hard to find in America! And.... at a great price!



Our final sight is the Royal Opera House. Completed in 2017, it's a massive modern white cubist structure, but it incorporates traditional Omani design in the many arches.
But first....



It's time for lunch!
The "Al Angham" restaurant (translation: "The Melodies") is right next to the Opera House.



As you might expect from the location, it's very high-end, serving traditional Omani cuisine. Ready or not, here it comes....



The green stuff...? Lemonade with mint. They serve it all over Arabia. Judy loved it, drank it every day. I opted for plain OJ, but as time went on, the mint lemonade kind of grew on me too. Refreshing!



Main course — or more properly, courses. They just kept bringing more & more food. Fried goat wontons with cardamom, spicy kingfish cakes, chicken in coconut sauce, ground lamb with ghee....Some were good, some were.... *not* so good. But we tried them all!



By far our favorite was the minced lamb patty over rice. The rice grains were very slender and long, unlike any we have ever seen.



And finally, a truly strange dessert assortment, clockwise from 11:00:
A cream tasting of rosewater (popular flavor in Arabian cultures); a sticky date (they love dates here); a caramel spiced with cumin; and frankincense flavor ice cream (they love frankincense in Oman, it was the cash crop during ancient times and is still a major export).
The cumin caramel was weird, but the frankincense ice cream wasn't half bad!



Top it off with a cup of Arabian coffee (strong & flavored with cardamom). The cure for jet lag!



We walk across the plaza to the Opera House. The marble is so highly polished it appears wet. Why.... it's just like a mirage in the desert!



The lobby is beautiful, with marble imported from Italy and teakwood from Africa. The guide (at left) told us the Sultan was a great lover of classical music & opera, having been exposed to it during his education and time spent in Great Britain.



He set out to build a world-class music venue and succeeded.



There's even a huge pipe organ built in Germany.
Of course, money was not a problem, but you have to give him credit for using his wealth to advance arts and culture for his people and the reputation of his country.



And now it's time to board our ship, Le Bougainville. It's tiny, only 148 cabins, but quite elegant!
The cruise line is French (Ponant), but everything is bilingual.
We'll be able to speak English and practice our High School French (what little we remember).



If I say so myself, we do look great at the Gala Welcome Aboard dinner.
We've got that "We're on Vacay" glow! More to follow soon....

Up next on video: Touring Dubai Old & New