

# OMAN

Following a “high speed” chase (on foot) through the palace’s corridors and secret passageways, Sultan Said bin Taimur of Oman was overthrown in 1970 by his son in what would have been a bloodless coup had the Sultan not accidentally shot himself in the foot while trying to cock his gun. Forced to leave his 500 slaves and 150 concubines behind, Said bin Taimur spent the remaining two years of his life in exile at London’s Dorchester Hotel. His son, Sultan Qaboos bin Said assumed the throne of a country slightly smaller than Kansas, with just six miles of paved road, three schools, and two hospitals.

On the heels of Sultan Qaboos’ fifty-year reign, Oman is now all but unrecognizable from its donkey cart ways. The land of desert dwellers and camel herders is disappearing, as many Omanis indulge in a taste for city life, replete with five-star hotels and an opera hall. As a result, much of the country’s fiber history is now relegated to museum walls.

Fortunately, more than a few threads have survived. Thanks, in part, to the Omanis appetite for goat meat, Bedouins continue using goat and camel hair for making tents, ropes, carpets, and clothing. A tightly-woven cloth of goat hair not only blocks the sun, but also serves as an excellent windbreak. Every Friday at 8:00 a.m., Oman’s largest goat market takes place in Nizwa, 100 miles west of the capital city of Muscat. Goats are paraded counterclockwise around the ring. Some are led, some are carried, and most are dragged as the shouting begins. By all appearances, the men are in charge, examining teeth and testicles like an annual physical. In fact, custom forbids women from publicly conducting such inspections, even though women are responsible not only for the goats’ upkeep, but also their sale, leading to valuable income that often supports the family.

As the nation’s trend toward urbanization continued to grow (more than seventy percent of Oman’s residents now live in or near a city), Sultan Qaboos became concerned that Omanis would all too soon lose touch with their nomadic past. His answer was the thirty-day-long Muscat Festival, where people from all over the country come to ride the Ferris Wheel, gorge on shish kebob, and witness live displays of many of their ancient traditions, from well-digging to warp weaving. Think of it as a scaled down version of Williamsburg minus the powdered wigs and three-cornered hats, but framed against a fog of frankincense. Derived from tree resin (*Boswellia sacra*) that grows in the Dhofar region of southern Oman, frankincense, at one time, was the country’s most valuable commodity. To this day, men still dip the tassel at the neckline of their *dishdasha* (long robe) in frankincense oil as a form of cologne.



Sporting a traditional turban made of cotton, some wealthy Omanis, in recent years, have developed a taste for wearing embroidered cashmere shawls as turbans instead. Nizwa, Oman.



Camels are still widely ridden throughout the desert. However, this shepherd also has a day job in the city. His Land Rover is parked just beyond the camera's view. Dhofar Province, Oman.



Nighttime in the desert can get exceptionally cold particularly for goats who have very little fiber to begin with. This shepherd prefers to keep them protected in a portable shelter and is anxiously greeted by the goats at sunrise. Dhofar Province, Oman.

## HOOTIN' & HOLLERIN'

Omanis possess a cultural dictate against loud voices, flamboyant gesturing with hands, or anything deemed potentially aggressive, even when done with benign intentions. Omanis are peaceful, friendly and gentle spirited, making for a peculiar dynamic during the weekly goat market in Nizwa, where men walk around in a circle with their goat (often two), shouting its age, the price, and any other feature deemed necessary to secure a sale, or at least begin the negotiations. Apparently, the social rules of engagement do not apply to commerce.



Although the owner clearly appears animated, the goat is managing to maintain a measure of cultural decorum.  
Goat Market. Nizwa, Oman.



Not everyone believes hootin' and hollerin' is the only way to make a sale.  
Goat Market. Nizwa, Oman.