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## Oman, Where Palms, Not High-Rises, Form the Skyline

By SETH SHERWOOD

**N**OTHING inspires like success. As mounting tourist dollars pour into Dubai, its neighbors are beginning to notice. Once somewhat aloof from the brouhaha down the block, the other Gulf states are now trying to keep up with the Maktoums.

The three palm-tree-shaped islands being built in Dubai by its crown prince, Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, can expect some competition from a group of 13 artificial islands being developed up the coast in Bahrain. Named the Durrat Al Bahrain - an allusion to "the most perfect pearl," according to its ads, the petal- and crescent-shaped atoll will hold luxury homes, upscale hotels, restaurants, spas, shopping malls and a golf course.

Not to be outdone, nearby Qatar is channeling its significant petroleum revenues into its own manmade, multibillion-dollar island, the Pearl of the Gulf. And in an apparent challenge to museum-poor Dubai, Doha authorities have hired two of the world's most famous architects to build a pair of high-profile art institutions. I. M. Pei will design the Museum of Islamic Art in the Middle East. Santiago Calatrava, meanwhile, has drawn up the blueprints for a photography museum.

Among these flashy cultured pearls, the Sultanate of Oman sits quietly to the side, still somewhat hidden in its shell. A historically seafaring nation of traders and fishermen, Oman centuries ago controlled swaths of East Africa and India, but it became increasingly isolated and economically stagnant during the 20th century. The country's fortunes began to recover only in 1970, when its current leader, Sultan Qaboos, seized power from his father and set about modernizing the nation as much as its modest resources allowed. Tourism didn't begin in earnest until the 1980's.

For travelers, the main attractions of this nation of 2.3 million are its unspoiled natural beauty - vast deserts, craggy hills and dramatic coastlines, well-preserved fortresses and tolerant, friendly citizens. The physical contrast to Dubai is clear as soon as you step off the one-hour flight to Muscat, Oman's capital. You depart an enormous airport framed by ugly construction cranes and arrive at a small airfield surrounded by picturesque jagged bluffs.

In Muscat, no sports cars fill the roads, and no glass palaces of commerce spoil the skyline. Crossing the city by taxi, you glide through deep ravines where white houses cling like teeth to the perilous inclines. Along the coast, spiny moon-rock formations descend to the water and push into the sea, creating sublime outcroppings.

Outside Muttrah souk, old men in white robes sit cross-legged on the ground selling fruit and vegetables. Inside its dusty lanes, close-packed stalls and shops hock spices, crafts, elaborate metalwork, bronze statues, cheap housewares, jewelry, incense and traditional curved daggers known as khanjars.

A short taxi ride down the coast and you're in Old Muscat, a historic harbor district dominated by a pair of 16th-century fortresses, Mirani and Jalali. The colorful palace of Sultan Qaboos rests behind gates at the waterside. Men in orange jumpsuits sweep the quiet streets, tidying up a city known for its cleanliness. In the Bait Al Zubair Museum, (968-24) 73-66-88, admission \$2.65 (1 rial), impressive costumes, elaborate jewelry, intricately crafted rifles and other artifacts offer a stroll through the nation's past.

But even in mellow Oman, it seems, the breezes of Western-style commercialism are starting to blow. In 2003 the city got its first design hotel, the minimalist-chic Chedi, which is set to challenge the two-decade dominance of the plush Al Bustan. This year, the Shangri-La hotel group will open the Barr Al Jissah Resort and Spa, a luxury property with three hotels, eight restaurants and extensive spa facilities.

And in the most ambitious move yet, an \$800 million development called the Wave is being planned along Muscat's coast. When finished, it will contain luxury hotels, a golf course, 500 private villas, a marina and a yacht club. The seafaring nation, it seems, is flirting with a bold new course.

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