

Oman! What a surprise

Dubious about Dubai?
Why not check out
a really exciting
Arabian alternative.
By Graham Norwood

AS DUBAI in the United Arab Emirates disappears under a forest of cranes and footballers' wives, there's a quiet but growing hum of investor interest emanating from the nearby Sultanate of Oman. South of the UAE and across the Gulf from Iran, it might not top everyone's relocation wish list, but Londoner Graham Jackson doesn't need convincing of the merits of Oman.

Graham is one of the first Britons to buy a home there, spending more than £400,000 on a five-bedroom villa now under construction in the capital, Muscat. 'I've spent time in Abu Dhabi and Dubai and, by contrast, Oman is wonderful,' he says. 'The people are very European-friendly. They don't just say hello in the morning, they really want to know how you are.'

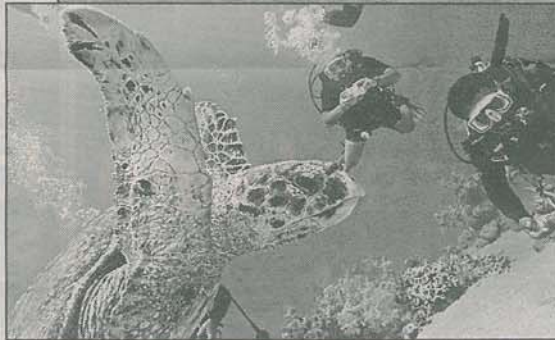
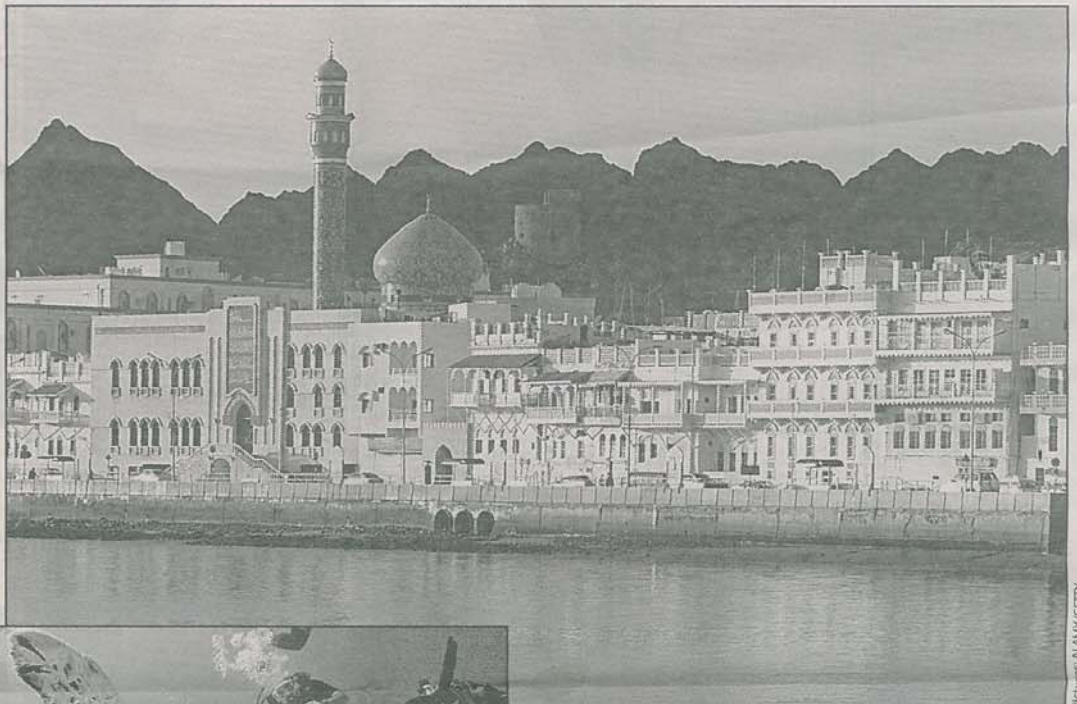
A pilot who spends much of the year working in the Middle East, Graham bought at the Muscat Golf and Country Club and already has his days planned out after his home is completed next summer.

'It's very easy to get good food, it's a quick drive to get to the mountains and the desert, or I can go to the beach and see turtles. There's almost no crime in Oman so there's a great feeling of security.'

The area also offers an almost entirely unspoilt coastline and the growing, elegant capital Muscat. The city has several beaches (Qurum and Bandar Al-Jissah are the best) as well as landmark buildings dating back to the 13th century, including mosques and the forts of Al-Jalali and Al-Mirani, which flank the ruling family's palace.

There are now many modern buildings too, including Oman's stock exchange, international hotels and a growing business quarter. English is widely spoken throughout the country and foreign visitors are generally made to feel welcome.

Chris Steel of Hamptons International — so far the only British estate agent to operate in the Oman — describes the country as 'perhaps the world's only undiscovered destination for property investors'.



The Sultanate is large enough to have a very varied terrain: the northern coastal strip along the Gulf of Oman is known as the Batinah Coast, separated from the rest of the country by the Hajar Mountains on whose southern slopes you'll find oasis towns where date groves flourish in the dry desert air.

Meanwhile, off-road lovers can enjoy Oman's many wadis or dried-up riverbeds, sometimes temporarily brought back to life by rain, which have a stark beauty.

And although Muscat is incredibly hot from mid-March until October (during June average daytime temperatures vary from 90F to 100F) it's pleasantly warm during the rest of the year.

While the area around Salalah, in the south, enjoys a more temperate climate thanks to a monsoon season between June and September. The landscape is also considerably greener.

As with other Middle East nations, oil is the mainstay of the economy but compared to its neighbours Oman is a modest producer.

Agriculture and fishing remain major sources of income for many Omanis, and this is reflected in the country's geography with its many farms and small fishing ports.

In recent years, Oman's rulers have looked enviously at how Dubai has attracted foreign buyers and extra income. Oman does not want to reproduce that ferocious scale of building but has

Undiscovered pleasures: Oman remains blissfully unspoilt

designated two zones for low-rise marinas and resorts to tempt Britons.

The first was the Golf and Country Club in Muscat, where only a few villas and apartments remain on sale. The second is Blue City a new town which by 2020 will have 250,000 residents and is located midway between Muscat and Sohar (fabled birthplace of Sinbad) en route to the UAE to the north.

Eventually, Blue City will have conventional neighbourhoods, hotels, universities, entertainment facilities, shopping centres and business districts but the first homes, now being built, are aimed at international second-home owners.

These flats, villas and townhouses are based on the coast and are within easy reach of the main road to Dubai, which is about a four-hour drive away.

What's more, the properties will overlook a mangrove creek and be connected to a resort with five top-class hotels, an 18-hole golf course plus a spa and treatment centre. Some of the poshest apartments will even have private pools and spas.

In addition, all properties in the zones open to British buyers are freehold, so there's none of the

uncertainty over ownership seen in Dubai where leasehold is the norm.

For investors, there are other attractions — rights of residency come with property ownership, and the absence of any personal income tax may persuade a few buyers to live in the Sultanate permanently.

But what impresses Graham Jackson most is the restraint he reckons is being shown in the new developments.

He says: 'When you see what's happened in Dubai, with so much traffic and so many high-rise blocks everywhere — well, you just breathe a sigh of relief when you cross the border into Oman.'

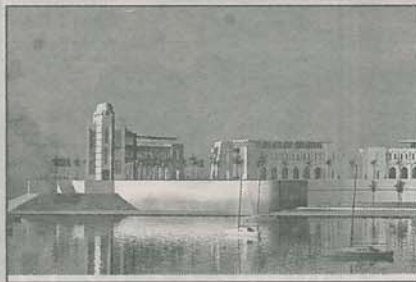
But he has a word of warning to fellow British buyers: the Omanis are still getting to grips with the concept of selling to foreigners.

'Paperwork is processed very slowly and building work on my home is 12 to 14 months behind schedule,' says Graham.

'That's not because of any major problem, just that the country is still finding its way in the international property market.'

'But I've been to my plot and seen that work is underway. Oman is lovely, so I know it will be worth the wait.'

ON THE MARKET ... ON THE ARABIAN PENINSULA



Blue City

GLASS and marble are the order of the day on the two-bedroom apartments and three to five-bedroom villas and townhouses available in this 'new town'. Most properties will have a private pool or spa, and all will be wired for remote sound and heat controls. Prices range from £97,000 to £325,000. Contact Hamptons International on 0207 244 4740 or visit hamptons.co.uk

Muscat Golf and Country Club

THERE are a few villas remaining on this 280-home gated development close to Seeb International Airport. This was the first major scheme to be made available to foreign buyers. All homes have extensive entertainment areas and prices for three-bedroom villas from 600 square metres upwards start at £340,000. Phone 00 96 8245 10065 or visit muscatgolf.com

