

Global Recruitment

Guide to Oman

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Contents

Introduction to Oman	3
The Legal Market	4
Immigration	4
Entry Requirements	4
Employer Sponsorship	4
Non-Exempt Nations	4
Entry Limitations	4
Culture & Law	5
Religion	5
Regular Dress	5
Local Customs & Courtesies	5
Alcohol	6
Lifestyle	7
Shopping	7
Travel	7
Leisure & Local Attractions	8
Quality of Life & Costs	8
Healthcare	8
Property & Residence	9
Education	9
Taxes	9
Safety	10
Utilities	10
Public Transport	11
Climate	11
Pets	11
The Little Things	11

Introduction to Oman

Oman is an absolute Monarchy with an interesting and troubled past - civil war, colonial encroachment, and at one point an expanding empire to name a few turning points. Although predominantly Arabic speaking, historically having influence as far as Tanzania and Iran, there is a mixed population speaking a variety of languages. This multi-culturalism was achieved through commonality of purpose and faith. More recently the Sultanate saw a change in power in 1970 when Sultan Qaboos deposed his father and ended a long period of isolationism.

Previously a 'shut in' country, rejecting modern influences and increasing globalization, change arrived swiftly, and in only 40 or so years since extreme feudalism, Oman has distinguished itself with growth and influxes of expat populations. Unlike many GCC states Oman has a majority over the expat force, with modest oil dividends (compared to neighbouring states), and has invested heavily into tourism and industry. Muscat is the capital and is the central area in which expats go to work.

The Legal Market

The oil market does have a limited shelf-life, but Oman's natural gas reserves number at 849.5 billion cubic metres, ranking 28th in the world. With large scale projects such as the 'Blue City' and continual investment in infrastructure, the demand for skilled lawyers is high. There have also been efforts to bolster the economy through free trade deals. In 2009 Oman signed an agreement with the US to eliminate tariffs on consumer and industrial products. This had a dual purpose, both to improve business at home, and to protect Oman's interests elsewhere. As this nation is relatively behind the other GCC states, the government is eager to expand and generate business.

Immigration

Entry Requirements

For certain countries (refer to the embassy) you may obtain a 30 day visa on arrival, and can further extend it for 30 days for a fee. You will also require a minimum of 6 months remaining on your passport however we recommend more than this as you may be delayed when trying to leave Oman.

Employer Sponsorship

Whilst you could get a one month visa to shop around for jobs in Oman, we do not endorse this option. The majority of expats will secure their position within a company and will get sponsored by their employer. Considering there are many administrative issues to be addressed it is best to streamline the process through your sponsor.

Non-Exempt Nations

Not all nations will enjoy the relatively relaxed entry requirements that some countries like the UK enjoy. Please refer to the Omani Embassy or immigration expert to ensure your visit is without issue.

Entry Limitations

If you have an Israeli stamp on your passport you will not gain entry.

Exit Requirements

If you are under the age of 16 or are not a permanent resident, you will require an exit stamp. To ensure this is problem free, please make sure your passport is valid for at least 6 months before attempting to leave, otherwise you will have to attain an emergency travel document which can delay your travel plans.

Culture & Law

Religion:

Unlike most of the Arab world, Omani's primarily ascribe to the Ibadi tradition of Islam. Following the Sharia Law system, this school of thought has philosophical differences from those of the Sunni or Shia denominations. About $\frac{3}{4}$ of Omanis are Muslim, with Ibadi's making up roughly more than a third of the whole populace. Although a fairly conservative doctrine, Omani's are quite friendly and welcoming of expats so long as their history and customs are respected. Other than Muslims, there are Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Zoroastrain, Jains, Buddhist, and Baha'i minorities. It is illegal to conduct any religious activities even privately without registering with the government. As such, there are places of worship for a few of these groups.

Regular Dress:

Do be wary that dressing inappropriately is a violation of decency laws. The general rule for most is not to expose too much skin, meaning wearing short shorts, a bikini, or displaying yourself in a sexualized or provocative manner. Do not wear tight fitting or see-through clothing. This is the official stance but is reflected in the attitudes of the local populace. Since there is such a large ex-pat population, there appears to be some leeway for these rules, but have been known to be used in certain altercations. Ultimately, the populace may turn a blind eye to some of your clothing choices, but you should avoid conflict with anyone who points out their discomfort with your attire. The police may get involved and you could be charged with public indecency. You should be sensitive to a complainants concerns and offer to remedy your outfit. For women, wearing a hijab is commonplace but none are required to cover their face, such a practice is banned for any public office jobs.

Local Customs & Courtesies:

Remember, this is a conservative Muslim country and you must be sensitive to the culture. Interactions between men and women are stringent and you should not attempt any touching of the opposite sex unless a handshake is offered. Omani's are friendly and will greet one another with enthusiasm, even with strangers. If invited to a citizen's home, do bring a small gift and take care to avoid offending your host. Turning food or drink down is not seen as being polite, rather a sign of dissatisfaction. Conversation can get quite personal, i.e. are you married? Religion may be discussed as well, avoid saying anything that would touch on spiritual sensitivities. Lastly, no matter the situation, do not use any foul gestures or words with anyone as these are punishable offences. Omani's take great pride in their country so always bear in mind that you are a guest, likewise you must be active and thoughtful in your choice of words.

Alcohol:

You may purchase alcohol and consume it at select vendors and venues. There are not many

places where you can go to drink, some include hotels and western clubs & associations. Otherwise consumption is limited to your home. Public intoxication is not acceptable, nor is drinking or driving – this is a zero tolerance policy. Finally you must obtain a licence from the government which allows you to purchase and consume alcohol. To apply you will need the following: copy of passport, completed application, employment contract confirmed by Ministry of Manpower, 2 passport sized photos, copy of labour card, no objection letter from employer, and the original labour card application to confirm your salary.

Lifestyle

Shopping:

While not as grand as Dubai in comparison, Muscat has similar offerings to many UK outlets. Shopping locally is also an option instead of the big chain stores, if that is what you're looking for. Here is a small example of what you can find.

Qurum Mall:

- Adidas
- Aldo Accessories
- GNC
- H&M
- MAC
- Mango
- Next
- OshKosh B'gosh
- Panasonic
- Samsung

It is more expensive to shop at places like Marks & Spencer in Oman, but the quality difference is noticeable. Some opt to purchase locally for food or other items as it can be cheaper, but you may not be satisfied as the quality might not always match what you are used to. Karfour is popular as a one-stop destination for a lot of your daily needs and is frequented by expats. You can also find popular fast food chains like KFC, McDonald's etc.

Travel:

Air traffic between GCC nations is extensive as the oil and real estate boom has created a relaxed cross border culture. Many people travel within the Gulf area to enjoy the wonderful historical landmarks and fare offered by the bustling cities.

Accommodation costs can vary depending on where you go, but generally is a greater expense. Hostels in this part of the world are virtually unheard of, further, if you are looking to enjoy a short period in the UAE, Bahrain etc. you will soon find yourself spending relatively more than you would for other destinations. Ultimately, how much you wish to spend is up to you.

Among your options are: the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, and Egypt. You'll find that Egypt is relatively cheaper than the other Gulf States, but do be wary of the political climate before visiting.

Once you've arrived, local travel can vary in price depending on where you are. However, considering the large oil subsidies in places like the UAE, a taxi ride is not at an unreasonable cost. Although you might save on flights, one should not underestimate the higher cost of enjoying the GCC region- arguably well worth it.

Leisure & Local Attractions:

Khareef Festival: Nestled in the Salalah, the flora and fauna is a stark contrast to the desert sprawling across the Arabian Peninsula. Thousands flock to Dhofar region in August to enjoy the beautiful weather and take in this oasis.

Old Muscat: A tourist destination in Muscat itself, much of the city was built around the foundations of this 1.5km by 1km settlement. Surrounded by walls, the previous ruler took a strong isolationist approach by limiting communication and travel in and out of the city. Things have changed since and the city has far outgrown its previous area. Still, there is much to see within these walls, consequently, tourists often visit to see what once was.

Among the many activities you can enjoy:

- Diving
- Sailing
- Paragliding
- Sailing
- Windsurfing
- Kayaking
- Fishing
- Caving

Quality of life & Costs

Muscat can be expensive for the expat lifestyle; however, if you are looking to save you can do so quite easily. In comparison with London, Muscat is significantly cheaper, with some items or services more than 200% cheaper than what you would pay in London; petrol is over 600% cheaper! There are a few things that are more expensive, but this does not compare to the possibilities for frugal living in Muscat.

Alcohol: As is the case with a good deal of GCC countries, alcohol has heavy duties imposed on it. This will be a large expense if you choose to indulge.

Internet: Internet can cost you twice what you would pay in London. Still, this one high cost is well offset by the savings opportunities in other areas.

Healthcare:

Ranked 8th by the World Health Organisation in 2001, Oman's health services have drastically improved in the last 40 years. The public service is available to expats but only in emergencies as they are required to get private medical insurance (usually through your employer). This is preferable to most anyway, as private hospitals have an even better standard of care, coupled with friendly English speaking staff and short wait times.

Property and Residence:

Cars: Due to the low import tax on vehicles, you can buy a reasonably priced car new or used.

New is preferable as you can get great deals during Ramadan and even free servicing for a period. Be prudent with used and try to avoid private sellers. Otherwise, petrol is very cheap and many purchase or rent cars for their day to day travel. We do encourage you to rent or take taxis on the short-term before you commit to anything, however, these options can become greater expenses. To purchase a vehicle you will need the following documents: Original Passport, copy of your passport and visa, passport sized photos, copy of labour card, valid driving licence and copy, vehicle purchase form which is signed by your sponsor and given to the insurer.

Home: Most expats rent villas, apartments, or homes, as until recently Oman did not allow foreigners to purchase property. New rules have allowed restricted buying in certain freehold areas such as: The Wave, Muscat Golf and Country Club, and Blue City. Blue city is a megacity project due for completion in 2020, essentially a smaller scale version of the opulent and incredible construction projects in the UAE. If you do buy property you are automatically given residence status along with your family. In the event of a run in with the law resulting in deportation, the government has the right to sell your property. It should be noted that these areas can be expensive, if looking for more affordable options then consider living away from expat areas.

Education:

Expat children rarely attend public schools as the quality of teaching is still improving, not to mention the Islamic focused curriculum. Instead foreigners usually pick from a number of international schools in the region. Offerings include: British School in Muscat which follows the English education system, i.e. GCSEs, A-Levels. The International Baccalaureate program is available at the American British Academy. Lastly, the American International School uses the American system of education and provides exceptional quality. The one downside is that these programs are quite expensive and new contracts usually will have allowances negotiated into them to mitigate some if not all of the cost.

Taxes:

Taxes do not exist for those working for a sponsor. You may be taxed if your income is linked to a business. There is a 6.5% social security contribution that everyone pays, your employer is expected to add on to the amount you pay as well. No other payment is levied by the government.

Otherwise your concern should be how your earnings are transferred to non-Omani accounts. Depending on your home country, you may be subject to taxation on assets brought back. For example, although returning to the UK with income is not typically taxed, depending on the vehicle you use to move your assets, you may be subject to capital gains tax in the UK. Prudence, insofar as referring to a financial specialist, is highly recommended.

Americans: For US expats and their spouses the laws for taxation in the US have recently changed and affect your income while working abroad. It is far too detailed to discuss here, but

we insist that you check with a tax specialist before making any decisions.

Safety:

Overall, Oman has very little crime and the streets are quite safe. There has been some recent political unrest, but as long as you avoid any demonstrations you will be fine. Otherwise, exercise general rules of safety, do not travel alone at night or enter unfamiliar neighbourhoods etc.

Utilities:

All payments for water and electricity are paid to the Oman Investment and Finance Company or through an expat bank. While water is safe to drink most order it to be delivered to their homes. Gas is available but it must be bottled and delivered as there are no gas lines. Electricity works on the 240 V system but the outlets are oddly double pronged instead of triple. You will need to pick up an adapter.

Public Transport:

Although infrastructure exists, most use taxis or drive themselves. The former option can get expensive so many rent until they decide on long-term plans. At that juncture people usually buy a vehicle since petrol is so cheap and nothing beats the freedom to drive wherever and whenever you wish.

Climate:

Oman is a land of topographical contradictions. While a good deal of the country is desert, west of Muscat is the Hajjar Mountains where you can find beautiful and sprawling wildlife and fauna. Venture south to the Dhofar Mountains and you will be even more surprised by the tropical climate. It is surprising to find so many ecosystems within such a relatively small country. These localities provide a source of tourism and as well as pride for the diverse and hardy Omanis. Temperatures get as high as 50 degrees Celsius in the summer months, while you enjoy a moderate winter ranging between 22-25 degrees. Gharbi or desert winds also add to the heat, so do be wary of when you go out!

Pets:

Since the temperatures can get quite high you should take a decision to bring a pet with health considerations in mind. This is especially true if you wish to bring a dog, you will find that taking your pet for a walk is taxing on the animal, regardless, if you absolutely cannot do without (they're family after all!) you will need to do a considerable amount of preparation and paperwork. Your pet must be micro-chipped, over 4 months of ages, up to date vaccinations administered no more than 30 days before entry, and possessing a certificate of good health from a veterinarian from your home country. Your pet will further be inspected by a veterinarian on arrival to ensure full compliance.

The Little Things:

With so much to consider it is easy to forget the little things. These are far too many to list so do be thorough in your research! This guide is a great starting point and if you do choose to work with Douglas Scott, we'll make sure that you've got all your bases covered. Otherwise, we wish you luck on this new and exciting journey!



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