



# Treasures of arabia



From gold and frankincense to jewellery and embroidery, all the fabled goods of the Middle East can be found in Oman, as Belinda Jackson discovers.

**Forget Gucci and Prada:** Oman's neighbours might be the label-fanatical Dubai and Saudi Arabia but Omani shopping is still an exploration of Arabia's unique, traditional offerings, from myrrh to frankincense to – camels, anyone? The riches of all Arabia are all on display in this extraordinary country on the Arabian Peninsula.

The stony, inhospitable Al Hajar Mountains that rise behind the capital, Muscat, yield Oman's great treasures – gold, frankincense, and rare and precious jewels – which dictate the country's key buys: fragrances, embellished weaves and silverware. The *kanjar*, the symbol of Oman, is

everywhere. *Kanjars* are curved silver daggers worn by men tucked into leather belts, now largely a ceremonial gesture.

If you had only one stop for shopping, it would have to be Oman's most famous market, Muttrah Souq, in Muscat, which gives you a taste of what's on sale in the small-town *souqs* throughout the country. Here, locals and tourists alike trade Omani rials for intricate silver jewellery, woven goods, customised perfume blends, fabric and leather slippers, bags of powdered kohl eyeliner and delicate little silver treasure boxes.

Set on the seafront in the south of Muscat, the *souq* dips into a hillside, wending down into cool, almost subterranean alleys that weave across each other, a mass of tiny stalls selling everything from plastic buckets to lime-green mosque alarm clocks and high-end silverware. Muttrah Souq's own peculiar

scent is a rich mix of tanned leather, sweet incense smoke, fragrant oils and the dust of a desert city. Traders ply the casual shopper with *pashminas* and lookalike copies, from coarse-woven shawls to the most exquisite cashmere weaves that trickle through the fingers like fine sand.

Silver shops line the main artery of the *souq*, where embossed silver bowls of every size are stacked in piles, traditional jewellery is suspended from the walls and braziers with varying levels of decoration fill the shelves. To the back of the shops are fine scales for weighing the silver – perhaps a memento of a tiny silver camel would be fitting – while cheap (and lighter) alloy versions are also stocked. Canny buys include elegantly curved Omani coffee pots for brewing the fragrant local coffee spiced with cardamom.

Main: Decorative silver braid on sale in Muttrah Souq in Muscat  
Above: A silver jewellery box from a local *souq*

“Omani shopping is an exploration of Arabia’s unique, traditional offerings, from myrrh to frankincense...”



Muttrah Souq is also where the country’s significant Bangladeshi and Pakistani populations come to meet their needs for adornment. Tiny shops sell nothing but reels of silver or gold braid, ribbon to trim women’s and girls’ dresses and intricate Arabian-style slippers, with their curved toes and coloured glass.

Nearby, Muttrah’s date, fruit and vegetable market and nearby fish market offer chances to shop with the locals, who will hand-pick the best dates for you and proffer some truly astounding sea creatures.

Scent is integral to Oman. Indeed, one of the world’s most expensive perfumes comes from renowned Omani perfume house Amouage. Amouage’s showroom is lined with jars of essential natural ingredients yielded from Oman’s harsh landscape – frankincense, myrrh, jasmine, amber and orris, with rosewater



from sweet Jebel Akhdar roses grown on high mountain plateaus. The cap on the brand’s Dia women’s perfume bottle is reminiscent of the dome of Muscat’s Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque while the bottle holding the men’s version is modelled on the *kanjar*; the House of Amouage’s now-classic original, the heavy, oriental Gold perfume, is gilded in 24-carat gold.

The country moves in a languid, perfumed haze thanks to the ever-present, ever-burning braziers that greet travellers in every hotel foyer, bureaucrats in every office. Tendrils of smoke even curl out onto the streets to sweeten the air for passers-by. Hot coals are covered in *bakhour* – a crush of oils and fragrant woods – or chunks of sweet frankincense, and burnt in braziers that range from basic bronze bowls to detailed, elaborate affairs. Be sure to check out those for sale in the gift shop

### wheretoshop

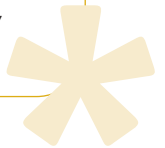
The Chedi Muscat gift shop, North Ghubra 232, Way No. 3215, Street No. 46, Muscat. Phone +968 2452 4400 or visit [www.ghmhotels.com](http://www.ghmhotels.com)

Muttrah Souq, Muttrah Corniche, Muscat. Amouage, Sabco Centre, Qurm, Muscat. Phone +968 2454 0757.

[www.amouage.com](http://www.amouage.com)

The Heritage Centre (handcrafted and antique silver jewellery), Shop 1164, Muttrah Souq, Muscat. Phone +968 2471 1966.

Oman Perfumes Centre, Muttrah Souq, Muscat. Phone +968 2471 3554.



at The Chedi Muscat; or small tins of *bakhour* are on sale in every *souq* and supermarket for just a few dollars.

Another great piece of memorabilia available everywhere in the country is the Omani man’s traditional cap, the *kumar*, which ranges from cheap, cotton, machined versions to richly hand-embroidered headgear.

Shopping opportunities come in the most unexpected places in Oman. Late one afternoon, we are driving into the desert sands that mark the beginning of the Empty Quarter. We're meeting a Bedouin woman, Umm Said who, with her son, tends their seven camels and 25 goats in the desert. It is late afternoon but the dry summer heat is oppressive, even in the shade of her large, dark goat-hair tent. On the sandy floor of the tent is a simple loom. On this loom, Umm Said weaves carpets and threads beaded bracelets in the region's earthy traditional colours – black, red, white and yellow – which she sells to visitors.

The town of Ibra, on the brink of the orange dunes of Wahiba Sands, just over two hours' drive south-west of Muscat, hosts a ladies' *souq* every Wednesday, where women-only buyers and sellers trade local handcrafts. Men are not welcome on this day but, come Thursday morning, the market returns to normal, pulsating with life the day before the weekend. As at most Omani markets, wares are a mixed bag of clothes, perfume and sandalwood, and there's a busy animal section where goats and camels trade hands.

In the south of the country, close to the Yemeni border, the township of Salalah is renowned for its high-grade frankincense. Once burnt, the sap becomes the black cosmetic powder, *kohl*: the township is also famous for its bead-covered bottles, *makhalas*, in which to keep it.

Omani jewellery is heavy and ornate, with the best silversmiths hailing from Nizwa, a fortress town north of Muscat. Shop here for silver *kohl* containers, jewellery boxes and beaten copper bowls with richly decorated handles.

On your way to Niswa, visit Oman's highest peak, Jebel Shams in the Al Hajar Mountains west of Muscat: the place has a reputation for producing the country's best woven carpets. Sellers ply their trade in a dramatic setting overlooking the chasm of Wadi Ghul.

Oman has its share of cosmopolitan malls, though none of a similar scale to those of its neighbours. But your most memorable Omani finds will be as unique and evocative as this challenging countryside and the people who created them. •

**Photography by Belinda Jackson**



Above: A Bedouin weave taking shape on a simple village loom

Right: A market seller in a local *souq*

Opposite page, clockwise from top: The entrance to Muttrah Souq in Muscat; beautiful solid silver camels; a Bedouin woman models a traditional bracelet