

■ by **Monika Savier**  
photos by Monika Savier

*The sultanate of OMAN, the enchantment of authentic Arabia, her people, her horses, her camels – a beautiful country smelling of incense and desert. In February, Oman opened her doors for more than 400 participants from 52 countries, all of them to take part in the WAHO Conference 2009 taking place in Muscat. That was an important motivation, of course, but eventually, the conference was not a serious competition for the beautiful spots and the fascination of the country. We will remember not only the highlights of the WAHO conference, such as the white beach of Muscat – many of the participants felt drawn by nature,*

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Muscat, cornice of Mutrah.



salalah beach



tradition and modernity

# OMAN



*the mountains, the desert, the clay castles and the ocean surrounding Muscat and the Southern part of the country, and they tried to experience as much of Oman as possible in the short time available. Unforgettable is that unique performance of the Arabian horses of the Royal Cavalry and the Royal Horse Racing Club, turning the scenery of a desert wadi into a historic arena with their mounted games. Unforgettable as well, however, the cordial hospitality of Oman's people, their modest and unassuming nature, and the enchantment of their Arabian culture and landscape.*

*Oman today tries, in a unique and socially fair way, to make one consistent and modern whole out of the interests of her many different population groups: of unbending mountain tribes, nomads, desert Bedouins, sea-faring traders, and others. The country has been developing into an Arabian model country which Western democracies could easily learn from.*







photo by Khalil Azedjali



His Majesty Sultan  
Qaboos Bin Said

*When Sultan Qaboos Bin Said accessed to his throne in Muscat in 1970, Oman was in an almost medieval state. As to natural surroundings and the animals in them, he was presented with an intact, original flora and fauna, including the Arabian horses and particularly the camels of Oman. Very carefully, he began to prepare his country for an opening towards the outside, initiating education, health care, high tech and economic re-structuring. As to the architectural and cultural heritage, nature and the animals, he kept to the traditions of his country: they received his particular protection, and in the case of the horses, his particular promotion.*

# OMAN







the fortress of nakhal

# OMAN



*The narrow strip of flat country in between the coast and the rugged peaks of the Hajar Mountains is called Batinah. Even in pre-Islamic times, this highly fertile land suffered from the constant threat of intruders from the direction of the sea. No wonder, then, that there were a lot of defence buildings there in ancient times, offering protection to the population. Today, these clay castles have often been restored and serve to bring into reality a part of Omani cultural history. The fortress of Nakhal is one of these castles, today open to visitors and offering a glimpse of traditional Omani living, architecture, and craftsmanship. The fort was built around 900 AD and extended in the 16th century.*

*Its six fortified towers can be seen across the flat country from afar and offer a fascinating view of the oasis and the adjacent mountains.*



*Maybe 50 km from Nakhal, the WAHO Conference organisers had made a sand wadi, the Wadi Al Abyad, into a vast desert camp with a racetrack. The track was at least a hundred metres across, with the dunes serving as natural grandstands for the spectators. Dust rose in the distance, a cloud of sand veiling more than a hundred horses*



wadi al abyad

# OMAN







"standing ovations" for the guests, riders and their arabian horses

# OMAN





*drawing nearer accompanied by singing. When the sand settled and only the drums of the Omani Bedouins were still to be heard, faces could be discerned: they were men, women and children from adjacent villages, on their own horses, displaying the Al Thorib strategy. They were all clad in brilliantly coloured traditional garb, their horses bridled in silver, many of them ridden without bits in their mouths. Most of the horses, even though they were privately owned, were of noble Arabian type, their chiselled heads with small mouths set on well-formed long necks. Some were obviously used to working; some were mares that were past their racetrack careers. The riders sat their classic*







# OMAN



*Omani saddles with bare feet, as these are used without stirrups. They resemble a big colourful cushion, but with a horsehair-filled ridge in front, a kind of stop in front of the horse's neck. A tight mass of colours and of horses of all kinds went by the spectators like a wave, disappearing in the distance. Suddenly; two riders drew away from the group all but obscured by the dust, galloping along the track side by side: the beginning of the Rakd Al Ardah game.*

*The utmost in joint performance, then, not a competition, but discipline and mutual fine-tuning, with both horses and both riders involved in order to reach their goal together. The conditions are extreme, by the way: the horses need to be ridden at the same stride length and in equal rhythm, and that at a speed of 60 km/h, to make that team success possible. A breathtaking game, an ancient tradition newly valued for its innovative potential today.*

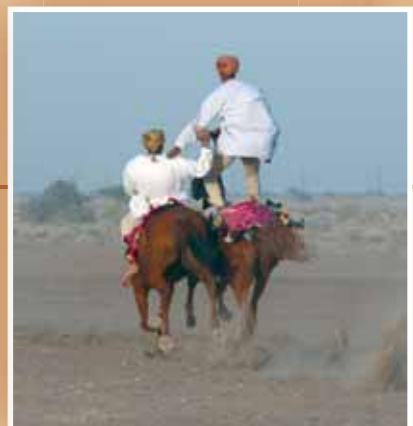
*As a display, this game can be ridden with a boost: when the horses are at a synchronised gallop, one of the riders climbs up in his saddle, standing the gallop at 60 km/h while being steadied by the other rider's hand. A game that requires total trust while combining a great sports performance with high risk.*



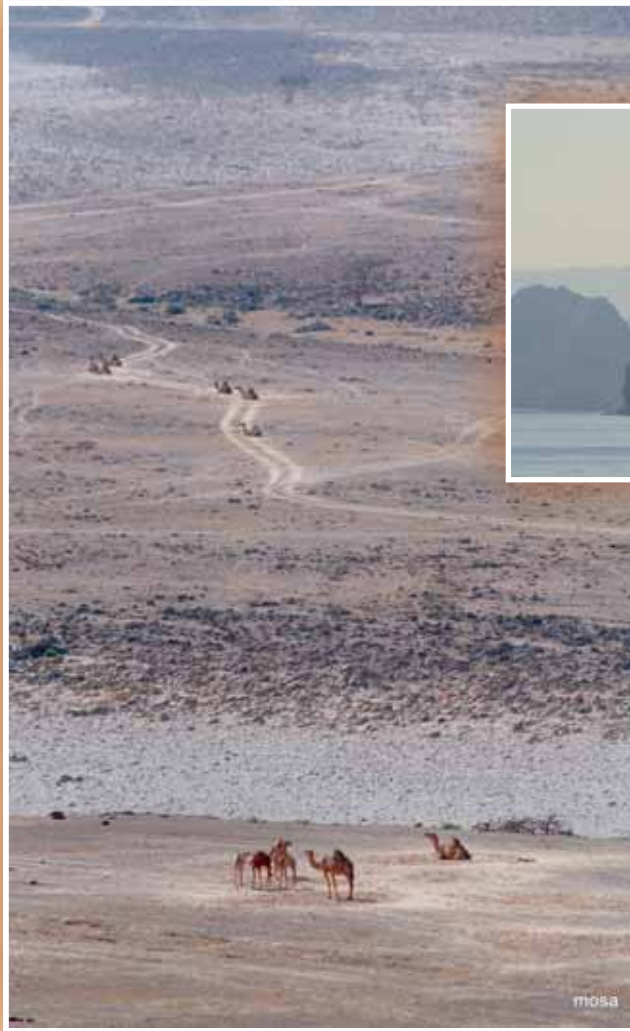
al thori b display



rakd al ar dah game







# OMAN





*Oman lacks everything that is presumptuous, pompous, or shrill. Oman is modern, but authentic, and the country has succeeded in protecting great parts of her natural enchantment – it is still one of the most beautiful and fascinating countries of the world to travel through. As to nature and animal life, protecting them explicitly is another tradition of Oman. Arabian horses today are strategically selected, with strict criteria applied in breeding. The camels are carefully bred as well and are closely intertwined with the traditions, the religion and the way of living of Omani people. Most of them roam freely around the mountain villages, foraging for themselves. There are camels everywhere, not only in the free stretches of wilderness, but also on the roads, particularly when they are still warm in the setting sun, inviting the beasts for a nap on the blacktop. But there are also donkeys, cattle and other animals crisscrossing the wadis on their search for food.*





wadi dauqah  
incense trees



market in salah



# O M A N





*Then, on the Indian Ocean, there is the ancient port town of Salalah in the province of Dhofar. Dhofar has been known for more than 2000 years, it's the province where incense comes from, the incense that the Egyptians once valued so much that they paid its weight in gold for it.*

*Here, in Wadi Dauqah, an UNESCO World Cultural Heritage location studded with incense trees, the world's best Frankincense Trees is harvested.*





*The beach of Mughsayl, located within a rugged mountainous region displaying bizarre rock formations. The ocean and the white sand beach were alive with birds, wading or swimming, most of them migratory species; vast black shadows in the water indicated schools of sardines, and now and then you could see playing dolphins taking an elegant jump across the waves, right in the middle of all those fish and birds. "Come back and stay longer in Oman" was the only fitting comment to this display. We are going to be back! Promised. □*



*To learn more about Oman and the WAHO Conference, see:*

**[www.wahooman09.com](http://www.wahooman09.com) - [www.waho.org](http://www.waho.org) - [www.rca.gov.om](http://www.rca.gov.om)  
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