

THE FOOD OF OMAN

Recipes and Stories from the Gateway to Arabia



FELICIA CAMPBELL

FOREWORD BY JAMES OSELAND

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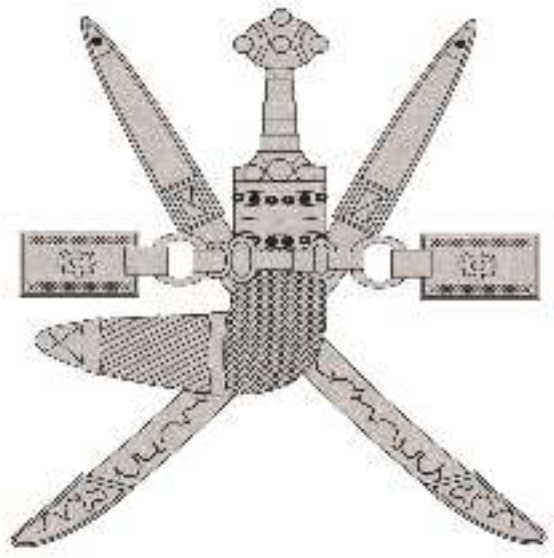


**Andrews McMeel
Publishing**

Kansas City • Sydney • London







This book is dedicated to the people of Oman who invited me into their kitchens, homes, and lives, introducing me to a world that captivated my imagination and my heart. As the flavors of this singular place transformed my palate, their graciousness, hospitality, patience, and rootedness in the world transformed my life.



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FOREWORD

Some people enter your life with a bang. Others saunter in more quietly, on cat's feet. Felicia Campbell came into mine by way of the latter method. She'd been an intern for a number of months at *Saveur*, where I was editor in chief. But her presence hadn't registered too intensely for me until one day I needed help with the most menial of tasks: pinning page proofs to my wall. As Felicia and I worked together, we got to talking.

She was from California, she told me. Her parents were academics. She had moved with them to Colorado, where she dropped out of high school (like me) and enrolled in college early at CU Denver, where she had begun a pretty typical first semester. Then September 11, 2001, rolled around. And for Felicia, as for so many others, everything changed.

"I was so upset by what I watched on TV that morning that I decided that I had to do something—though I didn't know what, at first," she said. "The thing that came to me over and over again was: Join the army."

I stopped pinning proofs. I listened to her recount the extraordinary tale of joining the military at seventeen; learning how to repair helicopters; and, just after her nineteenth birthday, being sent with the first deployment of American soldiers to Iraq, where she—counter to all expectations—fell in love with the Middle East.

Against all odds, Iraq—its people, its history, its food—resonated profoundly with her. After her tour of duty, a college education, and a stint in the restaurant industry, Felicia earned a master's degree in food studies, specializing in Arab foodways. The cultures and extraordinary cuisines of the Middle East became the focus of her work.

In the years after that first conversation, I've gotten the chance to know Felicia much better. She was hired after her internship as my assistant and then graduated to a more senior position. Throughout it all, she continued to develop her knowledge of the Middle East, traveling there at every opportunity and championing the coverage of its diverse foods and culinary history in our pages.

On one trip, she made her first visit to Oman. I remember vividly her animated state when she returned.

"Jim, it's an amazing place," she said. "And the food! Each dish practically tells the story of the ancient spice routes."

In the multiple trips Felicia made to Oman after that first one, her enthusiasm and knowledge for its cuisines blossomed and deepened. What would take most people decades to acquire in terms of culinary knowledge, Felicia packed into a few extraordinarily dedicated years.

I knew she was onto something profound when she invited me to spend a day testing recipes for some of the dishes that appear in this book. A group of dedicated Felicia fans gathered one chilly fall morning to help out. I was given the job of cooking the complicated Zanzibari Biryani—a recipe that required each element, from the spice blend to the rice to the rich sauce and pan-fried chicken, to be prepared separately and then layered before being finished with saffron-infused rose water.

I won't lie: It was a daunting task. But as I got deeper into the process, simmering the chicken in a spiced broth, frying onions, and toasting spices, I fell into a kind of wonderful trance. I began to see the biryani start to come together, what made it function, why it worked the way it did.

As we cooked, the kitchen filled with the most miraculous aromas. It was as if the shores of the

Arabian Sea were drawing near, lapping at the door of the New York City kitchen. It was intoxicating

—At the end of the day, we sampled a dizzying array of foods: a savory chicken and rice porridge called [Madrouba](#); [grilled lamb](#) and [chicken kebabs](#); [Musanif Lahm](#), a kind of meat-stuffed, pan-fried dumpling; and creamy spinach simmered in [coconut milk](#). While I'm proud to say the biryani was extraordinary (really, insanely delicious), so was everything else. I understood then what I know for certain now: Not only has Felicia crafted an essential book about a remarkable cuisine relatively unknown outside its native place, but she has also captured that culture's beautiful soul in its recipes.

—James Oseland, editor in chief of Rodale's Organic Life and author of Cradle of Flavor



INTRODUCTION

Oman is not merely a place; it is an immersive, sensory experience. After the warmth of the sun and sultry ocean air, smell is perhaps the first sense ignited upon arrival in the capital of Muscat. Sweet vanilla- and orange-scented Abyssinian roses grow wild on the roadsides; woody oud, bright citrus musk, and dark amber perfume and *bahoor* incense linger on the clothes of the people; and from crowded souks to the receiving rooms of homes throughout the country, frankincense smoke lends its ancient, velvety cover. In the kitchens tucked in the rear of cavernous villas or in the courtyards of mountain homes, bouquets of sizzling onions melting in oil, cardamom simmering in coffee and curries, and pungent cloves dancing in a medley of hot chile, coriander, ginger, and musky dried black lime play against the subtle backdrop of coconut milk bubbling with spinach or mashed green bananas.

The cursive sound of Arabic, from gentle murmuring at urban cafés to the cacophony of laughter, children happily shrieking, and women talking over one another in village kitchens, interrupted only by the echo of the call to prayer, sung five times a day from minarets in cities and towns from Salalah in the south to Musandam at the northern tip of the Sultanate.

As singular as the sounds and scents are the visual juxtapositions: Jagged, black sand mountains jut out of the flat beige earth at sharp 45-degree angles; crisp, white adobe houses overlook the dark blue sea; golden sand dunes stretch to the powdery horizon; and in the south, rolling green hills are wedged between the flat, white desert of Rub'al Khali, the Empty Quarter, and Salalah's lush green seaside cliffs.

The people themselves—men in starched white, ankle-length *dishdasha* and colorful embroidered *kuma* caps or wrapped *mussar* turbans and women in brilliantly colored *dishdasha* and scarves from India or elegant black abayas with delicate, sheer *sheila* scarves—look as diverse as the landscape, with complexions and features that reflect ancient trade connections between Arabia, East Africa, South Asia, and Persia.

The tastes of Oman reflect both Bedouin pragmatism and hospitality, and the curiosity and adventurousness of the ancient Indian Ocean seafarers. Typical *Khaleeji* (the Arabic word describing people and things from the Arabian Gulf) rice dishes are enlivened with ginger, cloves, cardamom, and tart black lime; Indian biryanis are subdued, becoming mild, more subtle versions of themselves. East African vegetables in coconut milk are made using richer, malty coconut milk powder. These tastes are reminiscent of many places, but distinctly Omani. I was seduced by the incredible distinctiveness of this place and the people there, whose food felt vaguely familiar somehow but was unlike anything I'd ever had before.



When I set off for Oman for the first time in 2013 to report a feature, I was simply looking to tell an interesting story about a little-known subset of Middle Eastern cuisine. I certainly wasn't expecting

find an answer to that unnamed longing that had been scratching at the inside of my chest since returned from serving in the war in Iraq in 2004.

The Iraqi desert, which had at first appeared so empty, had been filled with howling winds and fierce sunsets and a people who knew how to patiently weather its fits and furies. In that wild, ancient place, as a restless 19-year-old, for the first time I learned to be still. In Iraqi cafés I was welcomed by those I thought were my enemies, their warmth and graciousness softening my carefully guarded heart, humbling me. With them, I learned to sit and simply be, savoring the minutes or hours spent with my platoon, my tribe, safe from the brutal loneliness that lay beyond our encampment. But despite their kindness and my own curiosity, I remained afraid of the local people, and before I even learned much about those who gave me refuge as mortars fell and time crept on through blistering heat and freezing storms, it was time to go. I never learned their names. We redeployed to America and we all went our separate ways, to our separate houses, getting down to the business of building our separate lives. There was no more time for sitting.

Over the years since, I'd learned how to ignore the haunting emptiness I returned home with, filling the space with raw ambition, with work, the distraction of relentless pursuit. New York City was the perfect place for that kind of compulsion.

And it worked, kind of. The ache faded to a tickle, and I began to wonder if that haunting desert, or the girl who sat and sipped sweet glasses of tea in those makeshift Iraqi cafés, ever really existed at all.





As a graduate student and then a journalist, I returned to the Middle East many times after the war, eating and learning and writing about the fascinating region etched in my heart. I loved every return to the warm embrace of Arabia: the food, the people, the ancientness of the place, coupled with the enthusiasm of young Arabs for anything new. But the Mediterranean seaside cities of Lebanon and the towering skyscrapers of Dubai hardly echoed that desert or the intimacy I had found there. So when I got on a Muscat-bound plane from JFK, heading for the picturesque Sultanate just south of the Emirates, east of Saudi Arabia and across the sea from Iran, I thought I already knew what to expect.

On a whirlwind culinary tour of the capital city, I ducked in and out of catering halls, fish markets, stylish fusion restaurants, and a gracious home where I enjoyed tart turmeric fish soup, mild beef curry, and molasses-rich date chapati in an opulent outer dining room. The foods of Oman were a wonderfully bizarre mash-up of Bedouin rice and meat, South Asian curries, and East African vegetables spiked with coconut milk, hot chiles, and lime. It was thrilling to find something so new and different, unexplored in a world where I'd come to believe everything was Google-able.

I was excited and returned with a photographer a few months later. On that second trip to Oman, something began to shift inside of me. I went out from the capital city, leaving behind my carefully crafted itinerary, accepting my Omani acquaintances' generous offers to stop everything they were doing to take me further into their worlds. I was humbled by the time they gave so freely to help me, as I was taken to ancient mountain villages, beyond *majlis* receiving rooms and into home kitchens, and, two days before I left, back to the desert.

Amid the dunes of a region called Sharqiyah, I crouched under a violently flapping tarp with a tribe of Bedouin women as they fried dough and drizzled it with thick date syrup; boiled rice in a heady stock spiced with cloves, cardamom, cinnamon, and coriander; and crisped paper-thin rounds

Omani bread, *khubz ragag*, on a metal plate placed over burning palm fronds and cinder blocks.

—When the cooking was complete, I followed an old Bedouin woman to a woven palm frond hut at the top of a hill. In her vibrant, emerald *dishdasha*, floral *lahaf* scarf, and pointed black *burqa* facemask, she looked like an exotic bird. She motioned for me to sit. We ate together and then sipping light cardamom-scented Omani coffee, I spent hours listening to the musical intonation of their voices, watching them dance and laugh. I felt at home for the first time in years.

I returned to New York, but my heart and mind continued to drift back to Oman: obsessing over this place so different from the countries that surround it; captivated by the gracious, diverse people I'd met; and intrigued by the foods I'd only just begun to discover.

I tried to learn more, devouring the two self-published English-language Omani cookbooks I found in Muscat and reading everything I could find about the Indian Ocean trade routes, but there was nothing more to be found. There were only a handful of recipes for Khaleeji specialties on Emirati home-cooking blogs, and I found that the trade histories, even those on the spice routes, typically ignored food altogether in favor of stories of war and commerce. As I told friends and colleagues about my experiences in Oman, they would nod excitedly, then ask, "Where is Oman exactly?"

So I enlisted the help of my best friend, Dawn Mobley, a brilliant cook, researcher, and recipe developer, and together we traveled back to Oman half a dozen times over the twelve months that followed. One Omani friend would put us in touch with another friend, people willing to let us into the private sanctuaries of their homes and kitchens, where we would spend hours: Dawn standing over the hot stove, carefully chronicling every spice and step, while I spoke to the women about their food, families, and lives. I wanted to capture, in some small way, the essence of this incredible place with the first internationally available, English-language Omani cookbook, a love letter of sorts to the people and place that reawakened my heart.

As we learned to cook [Luqaimat](#), fried balls of dough soaked in thick, local honey, alongside *nicab*-clad women in the northern border town of Buraimi; made [Tuna Kabuli](#) with young Omani men camping in the desert; and watched mountain people in the far southern province of Dhofar turn perfectly charred chickens using nothing but hot river rocks, fire, and salt ([see here](#)), I learned about far more than food.

Over the past twelve months, watching in Oman and cooking Omani dishes in New York, I learned about patience that can transform creamed coconut greens, edible after about 15 minutes, into a lusciously savory dish after 45, in the same way that the Omani style of greeting, taking an extra moment to respectfully say, *Salam alaikum, Kefak? Allah Yasalmik* ("Peace be upon you, how are you? May God keep you well"), rather than the more succinct *Marhaba* ("Hi"), gives the sense of an unhurried culture that values respect and honor over efficiency. And in some ways, I slowly began to learn new ways of dealing with the unpredictable winds of life, as I watched the incredible people who had become my friends savor the good times for as long as they lasted and accept the bad as *dunya*, part of life.

The deliberate, leisurely daily meals we shared throughout our time in Oman were expressions of what was most important: love and family in all its forms. During those meals in Oman, I learned how to sit and be still again, to care and allow others to care for me, to connect with a terrifyingly uncertain world instead of running from it.

This book is an invitation to explore a place you might never have heard of through the foods of Oman and the people behind them. This is not an exhaustive catalog of every Omani dish, but an introduction to

flavors and techniques shared with Dawn and me by home cooks and chefs, as well as dishes inspired by the styles of eating we experienced throughout the Sultanate.

The book is arranged to reflect the way Omanis eat, with a section about the menagerie of distinctive and commonplace ingredients that make up the Omani pantry, and two recipe sections. Part II covers Omani main dishes. *Al gha'ada* is the main meal of the day, taken at lunchtime, and almost always includes rice, the cornerstone of Omani cuisine. Other mains reflect the diverse influences of the Indian Ocean trade routes, with rich coconut curries and slow-cooked, caramelized beef braises that may be served with rice, bread, or East African polenta. Rich porridges are Omani comfort foods eaten after sundown during the holy month of Ramadan, when mealtime is turned on its head, with nothing eaten between sunrise and sunset. And many celebratory mains are grilled, and cooking outside is a favorite way to entertain. All other meals in Oman orbit around the hearty, late-afternoon lunch, or post-sundown Ramadan *iftar* supper. Many dishes can be eaten for breakfast, dinner, snack, or dessert, so I began to think of recipes like delicious [Omani flatbreads smeared with savory white cheese and egg \(see here\)](#), [fried chile-potato puffs](#), and [luscious crêpes drizzled in date syrup](#), as “in-between” meals. [Part III](#) covers these bites and sides.

Many of these recipes were developed in the absence of any written instructions, conveyed to us through demonstration, and though some of the steps may seem strange or unnecessary, after many rounds of testing during which we tried to simplify as much as possible, we came back again and again to the methods we were taught in Oman. The techniques are there for a reason, often because the magic happens in the last few minutes of a long simmer, when seemingly disparate flavors suddenly harmonize.





QUICK FACTS

COUNTRY NAME: Oman, Sultanate of Oman

GOVERNMENT TYPE: Sultanate (monarchy) with a popularly elected legislative body, the Majlis al Shura

POPULATION: 3.9 million, 1.15 million in the capital, Muscat

LANGUAGES SPOKEN: Arabic (official), English (taught in school), Swahili, Urdu, Lawati, Baluchi, as well as Jabali and other local dialects

RELIGION: 86 percent Muslim (majority are Ibadhi/Ibadiyah, a moderate local sect of Islam, some are Sunni and Shia); 6.5 percent Christian; 5.5 percent Hindu, Buddhist, or Jewish; 2 percent unaffiliated

SIZE: 119,498 square miles, a little smaller than the state of Kansas

Geography:

SEA: Eastern and southern borders comprise 1,299 miles of coastline, feeding the coastal plains that account for 3 percent of Oman's geography

DESERT: 82 percent desert, including the beginning of Rub'al Khali, the Empty Quarter, the largest desert in the world at 250,966 square miles, extending into Yemen and Saudi Arabia

MOUNTAINS: 15 percent mountainous areas, in the north and far south, with the largest range being Jabal Akhdar, the Green Mountains, whose highest point (snow covered in the wintertime) is 9,776 feet



KEY DATES

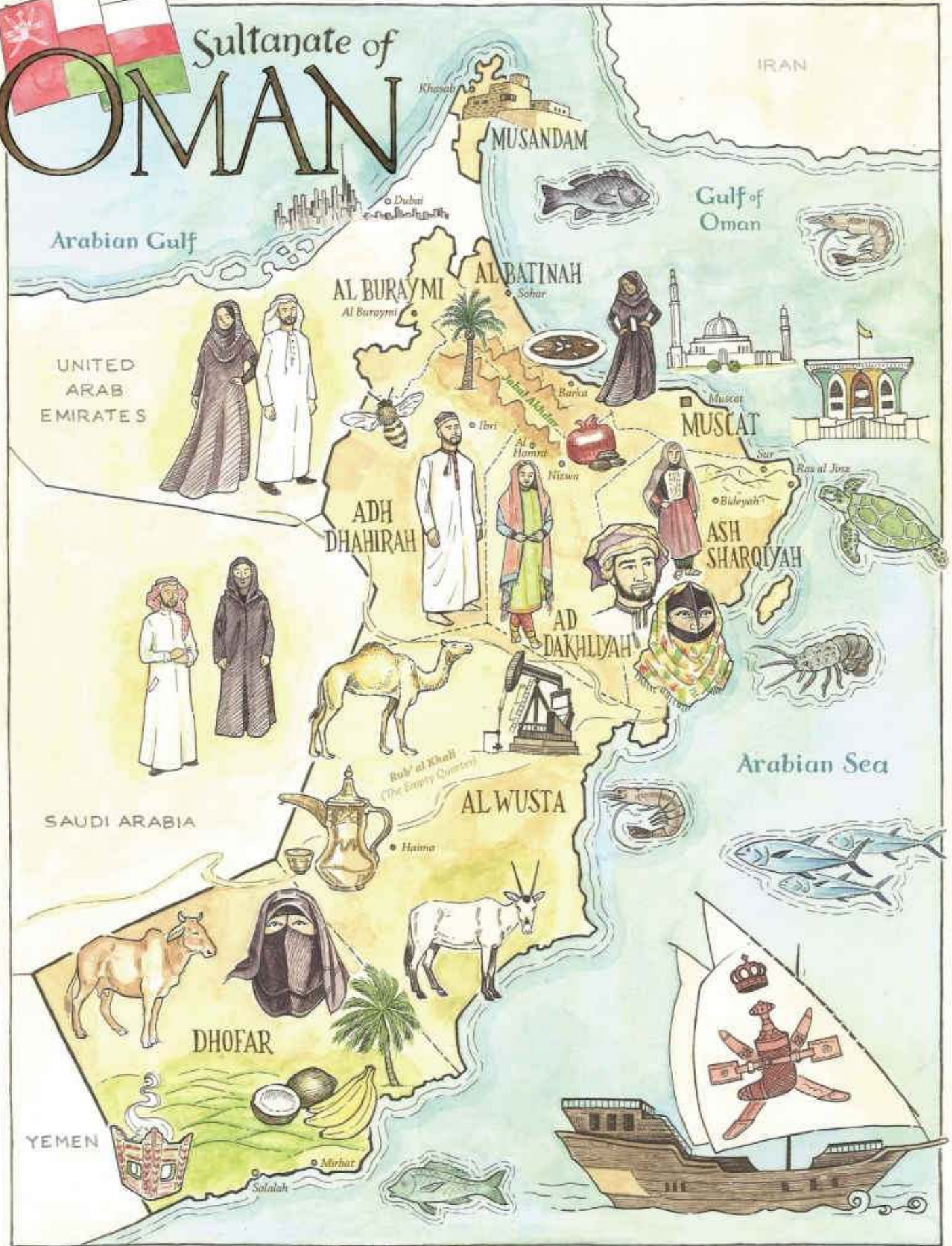
- **700s** Introduction of Islam
- **800s** Ibadiyah sect and rule by hereditary Imamate begins
- **1507** Portuguese take Muscat and capture the Omani coastal cities
- **1650** Independence with expulsion of Portuguese
- **1698** Portuguese expelled from East Africa, Zanzibar becomes part of the Sultanate of Oman
- **1737** Persian invasion and rule
- **1749** Persians expelled and current Al Bu Said dynasty established
- **1800s** Expansion period and Indian Ocean trade domination
- **1832** Oman's capital moved from Muscat to Stone Town, Zanzibar, for 8 years
- **1856** Zanzibar and Oman divided into The Sultanate of Zanzibar and The Sultanate of Muscat and Oman
- **1913** Rebellions by Imams of the interior split the country

- **1932** Sultan Said Bin Taimur comes to power and moves the capital from Muscat to Salalah
- **1959** Sultan Taimur imposes harsh restrictions and violently stomps out the rebellions in the interior
- **1962** Oil is discovered in the Ad Dhahirah region by Petroleum Development Oman (PDO)
- **1965–75** Civil war breaks out in the southern Dhofar region
- **1970** Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said overthrows his father in a bloodless coup and begins modernizing Oman
- **1981** Oman is a founding member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) along with Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates
- **1997** Women are decreed eligible for election to the consultative council and two women are elected
- **2002** Voting privileges are extended to all citizens over 21
- **2011** Oman begins mediating talks between the United States and Iran



Sultanate of

OMAN



IRAN

Arabian Gulf

Gulf of Oman

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

AL BURAYMI
Al Buraymi

AL BATINAH
Sohar

MUSCAT

ADH DHAHIRAH

ASH SHARQIYAH

AD DAKHLIYAH

Arabian Sea

SAUDI ARABIA

AL WUSTA
Ras' al Khali (The Empty Quarter)

DHOFAR

YEMEN

Salalah

Mirbat



A BRIEF HISTORY OF OMAN

Sultans and Seafarers

The story of modern Oman dates back only to July 23, 1970, when the current sultan, Qaboos bin Saif Al Said, overthrew his father, Said bin Taimur, in a bloodless palace coup and established a modern monarchy. He appointed a cabinet and an elected consultative council and set about pumping the country's new oil wealth into building public schools, roads, and hospitals as part of an aggressive modernization campaign. The story of the great Omani empire, however, is thousands of years old.

Since 500 BC, Oman's position at the intersection of Asian and African maritime trade routes as well as overland caravan routes to the Eastern Mediterranean, was vied for, and in 1514 the Portuguese succeeded in gaining control of coastal Oman after a bloody seven-year war. Despite an Ottoman- and Persian-supported uprising, the Portuguese remained in power through brutal rule for over a hundred years, until Sultan bin Saif Al Arubi expelled them in 1650. Omani forces went on to drive the Portuguese out of their East African trade ports as well, taking control of Mombasa in 1697, then, finally, the entire coast of Mozambique and Zanzibar. Omani expansion continued for the next two centuries, Omani trade from the Far East to Western Europe flourished, and by the early 19th century, Oman was the most powerful state in Arabia.

The first sultan from the current ruling Al-Busaidi family came to power in the 18th century after a civil war weakened the empire and Oman briefly fell under Persian occupation. In 1749, provincial governor, Ahmad ibn Said, led the uprising that liberated Oman and he was elected Imam. He then established the hereditary sultanate that continues today.

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