



OMAN'S SWEET SIDE

A TRIP TO OMAN WOULD BE INCOMPLETE WITHOUT EXPERIENCING THE SWEET CULINARY TEMPTATIONS OF MUSCAT – FROM ITS FAMOUS ROSEWATER AND HONEY TO HALWA, THE NATIONAL CONFECTIONERY.

Muscat, the capital of the Sultanate of Oman in the Middle East, is one of those cities you don't merely visit. From the frankincense-infused air and the subtle cardamom taste of the coffee to the baking heat of the Arabian desert, this city can be recalled fondly, with eyes closed, long after leaving.

Bordered by the strikingly arid Al Hajar Mountains on one side and the brilliantly cerulean Gulf of Oman on the other, Muscat is a low-rise city that is equally mesmerising in appearance. Built in shades of white and sand, its far-reaching districts now make up a modern-day capital city, home to asymmetrical winding alleyways, centuries-old forts and emerald green oases.

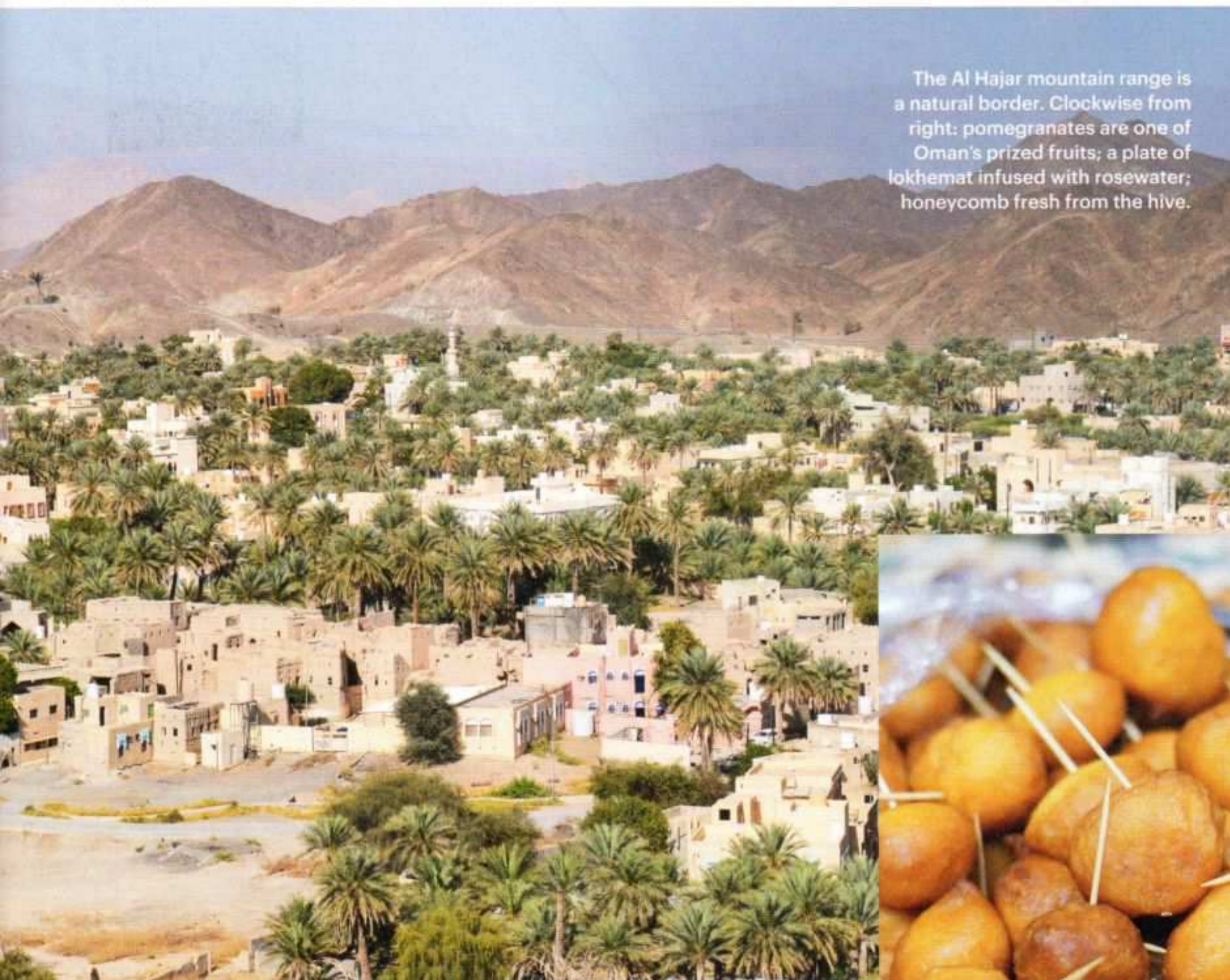
Aside from famous literary recollections (Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and the many tales of Sindbad the Sailor), this illustrious, ancient trading capital was a mystery to most foreigners of the modern era until after the Gulf War in the 1990s, when the country was finally opened up for tourism.

There are many discoveries to be made on a trip to Muscat and its surrounds, and Omani cuisine – some of it unknown outside

of the region – is a bewitching, new taste-experience for nearly all first-time visitors. A gustatory representation of the diverse cultural influences at play in Oman over past centuries – enjoying the fine flavours on offer in the city, be it on a plate, cup, spoon or, as is often the tradition, by hand – is a joyful experience.

Any talk of Omani food must have sweets at the forefront, since they are the signature treats of the Sultanate and symbolic of the warm, local hospitality. Visit any home or wander the streets of *Muttrah souk* (the traditional market area) and Muscat's old town, and it's inevitable you'll be invited to share a small cup of *kahwa* (Omani coffee), along with a handful of superb, freshly dried dates, and often a scoop of *halwa* – the iconic, national sweet.

Halwa is cooked by hand in batches by renowned specialist producers in and around Muscat. Sticky, gelatinous and in colour variations ranging from deep yellow to dark brown, the main ingredients of eggs, brown sugar, water, ghee, saffron, cardamom, nuts and rosewater are blended in proportions known only to the skilled halwa-maker. The mixture is continuously stirred for at least



The Al Hajar mountain range is a natural border. Clockwise from right: pomegranates are one of Oman's prized fruits; a plate of lokhemat infused with rosewater; honeycomb fresh from the hive.



two hours over heat in a large, purpose-built pot by two people, one stirring and the other scraping. "You will see that the men regularly switch positions to avoid exhaustion," explains Humaid Al Habsi, a private tour guide born and bred in Muscat. Once set, halwa is served from a large bowl with a spoon and then taken by hand to eat. "We eat halwa throughout the day with coffee breaks and at home, often before a meal commences," Humaid adds.

For particularly special batches of halwa, the celebrated rosewater from the Jabel Akhdar ('green mountain') region is considered a must. Jabel Akhdar roses bloom each spring for just two to three weeks, and are harvested on multi-generational farms that have been operating for more than 300 years. Famous throughout the whole of the Middle East, Jabel Akhdar rosewater is distilled by hand; the petals are placed in traditional mud ovens where they are covered with a second copper bowl and steamed. The resulting rosewater is then stored in batches for at least a month before being bottled and sold.

The prized ingredient is frequently used to infuse the sweet offering *lokhemat*, reminiscent of the Indian sweet *gulab jamun*. These deep-fried, doughnut-like balls are made from flour, yeast and cardamom, and taste sublime served with lime and cardamom syrup. Smoky Jabel Akhdar rosewater is also sprinkled on house guests as a welcoming gesture, and used for medicinal purposes, too.

Omani honey is considered some of the world's finest, and is often still farmed by hand. Beekeeping has been practised since ancient times. Around Wadi Sahtan, in the Al Hajar Mountains just outside of Muscat, honey is produced just as it was centuries ago. Clusters of dried, hollowed-out date palm trunks are set out in rows and become home to tens of thousands of bees. There are three honey seasons a year, and the start of a season begins when a honey farmer places

a small piece of honeycomb and a queen bee inside each trunk. He then seals the end with a mixture made from wet ash, except for a small hole that worker bees can enter. The resulting dark brown honey is widely coveted and used in sweets and breakfast dishes. Sometimes honeycomb is even crumbled onto curry.

Superb produce cultivated by hand is a source of great pride for Omanis, and is encouraged by Qaboos bin Said, the Sultan of Oman. Even in remote rural enclaves and the most mountainous regions, schools and hospitals have been built to encourage villagers and farmers to continue their traditional way of life. In Muscat, a city that combines the old with the new, these traditional methods of food production can be tasted on every corner.

"Of course, there's more food variety in Muscat now than there was 20 years ago, which is wonderful," says Humaid. "But Omani people are very proud of our heritage, and our beautiful food produced the traditional way is very important to us, too."

Indeed, the flavours, sites and sounds of Muscat make this very safe, welcoming and special city a superb sensory experience, and is just a taste of what else awaits further afield in magnetic Oman. 🍯