

The Mystique of Muscat

Sarah Lee heads to the Oman capital, Muscat, to explore the city's ancient history, and to seek out the promise of eastern luxury

Broad white sails billowed on the breeze as I peered across the Gulf of Oman. It was a view that pulled me closer, seducing me into staying longer at the Millennium Mussanah Hotel where I'd attended a conference and rested in one of its stately suites.

But I'd heard much about the mystique of Muscat – of minarets and domes of mosques punctuating the city skyline with spiritual grace, of spices and gold traded in bustling souks and of luxurious treats in this fast-growing economy, so I headed into town.

An hour later I was in the centre of Muscat, making my way to the city's most impressive modern monument. The Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque is the sort of imposing place you'd expect for a religious site named after the country's highly revered leader.

The bright Omani sun flashed off the building's

white marble walls which rose to cut shapes into the deep blue sky.

The mosque is testament to the Middle East's love of record-breaking. In 1992 Sultan Qaboos decided Muscat should have the largest mosque in the world and nine years later it was completed, meeting his vision and accommodating up to 20,000 worshippers. However the project's other record-breaking objective – to have the world's largest hand-woven carpet in its prayer room – was surpassed by Abu Dhabi's Grand Mosque eight years later, despite the fact that it covers an area of 4,343 square metres.

Still, as I took in the work involved in lovingly hand crafting a rug of this size, I realised that only being able to claim the second largest carpet of its kind wasn't such a bad record.

Another giant attraction which drew my attention was the colossal chandelier that hung from the mosque's dome, bouncing colour off its stained glass triangles.

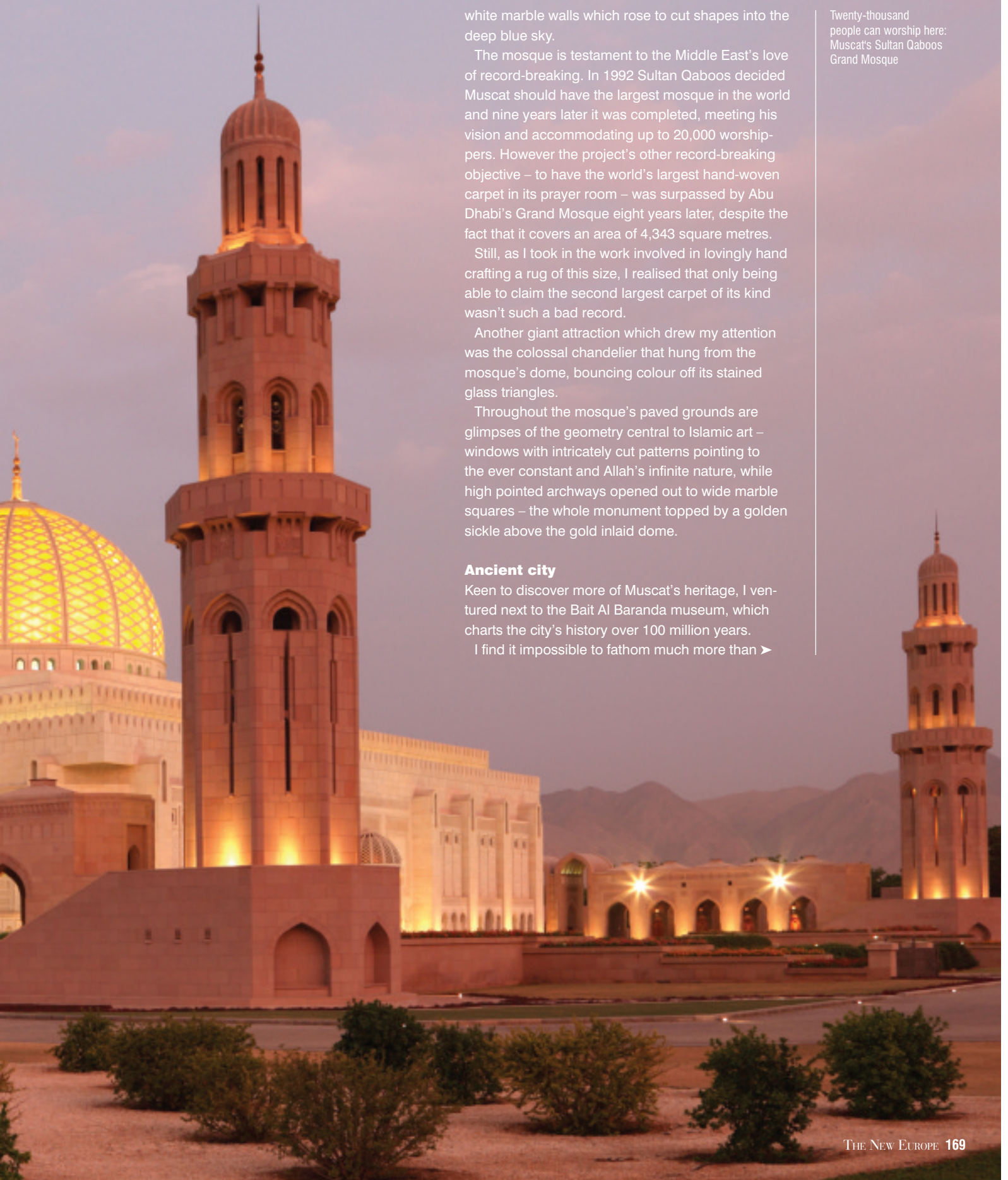
Throughout the mosque's paved grounds are glimpses of the geometry central to Islamic art – windows with intricately cut patterns pointing to the ever constant and Allah's infinite nature, while high pointed archways opened out to wide marble squares – the whole monument topped by a golden sickle above the gold inlaid dome.

Ancient city

Keen to discover more of Muscat's heritage, I ventured next to the Bait Al Baranda museum, which charts the city's history over 100 million years.

I find it impossible to fathom much more than ►

Twenty-thousand people can worship here: Muscat's Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque





100 years, least of all 100 million, but the museum's interactive displays kept me enthralled from the state's geological infancy through to the many faces of modern Muscat. And I discovered an Arabian city unafraid of regaling its traditions while keeping pace with modernity.

Eastern promise

Ready for lunch I headed to my next hotel, The Chedi. Yes, the Millennium was delightful, with great food and conference facilities but I wanted to be closer to Muscat's action, and I'd heard the spa at

The Chedi was one of the region's best.

Entering the hotel's lobby I was struck by the exotic scent on the air. I referred to it as Eau de Chedi – a heady mix of zest and spice that seemed to seal the Arabian feel of Muscat for me, but I later discovered it was the hotel's trademark citrus rose candles.

After being shown my suite I did something I rarely do – forgoed the city's restaurants to sample food at one of the hotel's restaurants. The Beach restaurant is renowned for fantastic quality seafood. Feeling overwhelmed by the choices on offer – from French



Main: The Beach Restaurant at The Chedi

Top: Muscat is famous across the world for its craft

Right: Fabulous ferry ride along Muscat's coast

oysters to Beluga caviar – I plumped for the degustation menu.

After a delicious four-course meal it was all I could do to stumble to the spa past gently waving palm trees and take in a treatment. The hotel was expanding its spa facilities during my visit (due to open late in 2011), but my Arabian Sea Wave massage wasn't any less relaxing for the construction work.

Formula One ferry

The next day, still feeling the benefits of an evening of rest and relaxation, I was ready to take in one of

Muscat's busiest spots – the Muttrah Souk.

Gold, frankincense and myrrh – well okay, not the latter, but Muttrah and its traders reminded me of something as old as the Bible itself. After all, much of Oman lies on one of the world's oldest trade routes – the frankincense trail, which runs from the southern state of Salalah where the knobby trees are one of the few things to thrive in the desert heat.

Cinders clustered in the bottom of burners as red embers sent a rush of fragrant frankincense into the air. Be it a gold shop, one selling spices or pashminas, most were shrouded in the intoxicating fragrance. ►



But most dazzling were the colours – rich red and gold scarves fluttering next to electric blue and fuchsia sequinned dresses, which hung behind the russet, saffron and ochre of tray-upon-tray of spices.

Dizzy with the souk, I left for a more relaxing afternoon – a boat ride along Muscat’s coast. Yet even this had the pace of a Formula One race. For Oman has claimed yet another record – its national ferry company has unleashed the world’s fastest diesel-powered boats on the water.

At first I figured the ferry’s speed would be barely discernable. How many of us have been on superfast trains without really noticing a difference in physical velocity? But as it whipped up to 56 knots and the wind fixed my face into a vibrating grin, it was clear this was by no means an average ferry journey, and I headed to the comfort of my VIP class seat to take in the views.

We journeyed out of the city past the Forts of Jalali and Mirani towards Khasab in the Musandam Peninsula, Oman’s ruggedly beautiful outpost and I soaked up the views.

As the sun slowly dipped in the sky I knew my seduction was complete – Muscat had shown me its mystique and I was captivated. ■



Inset & Main: Ornate offerings at the Muttrah Souk & 5-star comfort at The Chedi

Left: The Fort of Jalai viewed from the ferry around the Musandam Peninsula

