

Oman to invest \$20 billion in rugged beauty to lure upscale tourists

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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Southern Oman is famous for the beauty of its summer monsoon season
- The region's rugged, untouched natural sites are a tourism draw
- The Persian Gulf nation has historically been overlooked as a vacation destination
- Oman is developing the tourism industry to diversify its oil-dependent economy

Salalah, Oman (CNN) -- As temperatures soar across the Persian Gulf, one oasis is blossoming with greenery.

The summer monsoon season, or "khareef," draws visitors from around the world to Oman's southern reaches. For forty-five days, the coastal city of Salalah celebrates cool temperatures and welcome drizzle with a festival of stars, singers and artists from across the Arab world.

But locals are most proud of what waits outside the carnival tents and market stalls.

Oman's natural beauty remains relatively untouched compared to the Gulf's developed urban centers. Don't visit expecting Dubai's skyscrapers and shopping malls. Oman touts the quiet grandeur of its mountains, deserts and beaches, according to Sultan Bin Hamdoon Al Harthi, head of the Muscat Municipality.

He told CNN: "We have been blessed with this terrain. And this is one of the elements that identify us from others. We have these mountains. It's a very rugged landscape, which has its own mystique and its own haunting beauty."

Publicizing this trove of natural resources and making it accessible to tourists, has become a top priority for officials -- and they are spending big money on it.

Estimates are that investments to expand facilities for tourism across Oman will amount to \$20 billion over the next few years, according Business Monitor International.

Oman wants to attract 12 million visitors annually by 2020, according to the head of the state airline. He said country's long term plan is to diversity from its current dependence on oil and gas production.

Currently, visitors can already choose among 11 five-star hotels and resorts throughout the country. The two hundred acres of private beach and gardens of the Al Bustan Palace Hotel in Muscat bring nature straight to the tourist. Adventure-seekers can also take in camel racing, whale and turtle watching, and climbing and caving further afield.

Sultan Quaboos Bin Said, Oman's ruler, has steadily opened his country to foreign visitors since assuming power in 1970. He sees travel and tourism as an essential part of his nation's economic development, according to Oman's Ministry of Information.

But the expansion is calculated to balance luxury resorts with the country's uniquely rugged, undeveloped landscape. Unlike the high rises of Dubai and Abu Dhabi, Oman's walled cities and ancient forts emphasize historic architecture, including several UNESCO World Heritage sites.

Other draws include fragrant frankincense trees dotted along medieval trade routes, mosques rich with Islamic art and 2,000-year-old archeological sites, according to UNESCO.

Al-Harhi said: "It is extremely significant for cities to have an identity, to have character, to avoid any urban alienation to its residents. We try to keep it humane as possible, in the face, of course, of the throes of modernism."

Oman still has work to do to distinguish itself as an international destination.

Historically, the sultanate has been largely overlooked by visitors, and tourism made up only four percent of the economy in 2008, according to Business Monitor International.

But as Oman tries to diversify from its oil industry in search of a prosperous future, it is banking on its other natural resources -- the green mountains and flowering desert that stretch up from sea.