



Oman's History

Oman has been inhabited since pre-historic times. Because of its important strategic location, it has been a major trading country since the 6th century BCE – though it was often dominated by other peoples (Persians, Babylonians, etc.). After the coming of Islam, the area was ruled by religious leaders (imams) and then by hereditary kings.

With the growth of European influence in the area, the Portuguese took control of Oman and the surrounding areas, ruling through the 16th and part of the 17th centuries. By the mid-1600s, however, Oman was gradually gaining independence; by 1698, Oman had also taken control of Zanzibar (2000 miles away, but easily accessible by sea thanks to the monsoon winds) and other parts of East Africa. Zanzibar became such an important part of the Omani Empire that for a few decades in the mid-19th century, the Sultan of Oman actually moved to the island and ruled from there. By the 1860s, however, the two areas were ruled by different branches of the same Omani royal family; by the 1890s, the British seized Zanzibar, permanently severing the political link between Zanzibar and Oman.

The 20th century saw Oman begin to modernize. In the 1950s, the sultan had to put down a revolt led by the Muslim religious leader (imam) of Nizwa, while in the 1960s, the government had to fight a communist-led rebellion in the Dhofar region, which borders Yemen. The Omani government eventually was successful in putting down both revolts.

In 1970, the current sultan, Sultan Qaboos, came to power by ousting his father, who went into exile. The new sultan worked hard to overcome the divisions and create a united country. He also used the oil revenues (Oman has some oil – though not as much as the surrounding countries) to modernize the infrastructure, building roads and schools, financing electrical and water projects, etc.

In general, Oman is a contented country. However, it will face many challenges in the coming years. Will Oman be able to continue to balance between East and West? Can it continue to remain on good terms with the rest of the Arab world, with Iran, and with the U.S. – even though the three do not like each other? What will happen to Oman's government when Sultan Qaboos dies? What will happen to the economy when the oil runs out? All these issues require careful consideration and planning.