



## Oman's Religion

Almost all Omanis are Muslims. Three-quarters of them belong to the Ibadi branch of Islam (a small branch, similar to Sunnis in practices). The rest of the population is mostly Sunni Muslim, while there is a significant Shi'a majority as well. Oman is very open and tolerant with regard to religion: all Muslims may worship together in Omani mosques. Christians and Jews, as fellow worshippers of the one God, are free to practice their faith (as they are in other Muslim countries). In Oman, even Hindus (who are polytheistic and thus less acceptable to Muslim thinking) are also allowed freedom of worship.

So what does it mean to be Muslim in Oman? Naturally, most people practice the five pillars of their faith: faith (in one God and in Muhammad as a prophet), fasting (during the month of Ramadan), prayer five times a day, pilgrimage (a once-in-a-lifetime journey to the nearby Saudi Arabian cities of Mecca and Medina for those who are healthy enough and financially well-off enough to make the trip), and alms to the poor. People also dress in a way that is considered modest – even foreigners are expected to wear clothes that cover their bodies, their upper legs, and their upper arms.

If you are not Omani, you may worship where you like and dress in a modest but not Omani fashion. You are expected to be respectful of Muslim traditions though you are NOT expected to participate in them. For example, during the month of Ramadan, Muslims do not eat or drink ANYTHING AT ALL during the daylight hours. Since Muslims have a lunar calendar, which is shorter than the solar calendar, Ramadan sometimes falls in the summer. Imagine not being able to take even a sip of water during the hot summer days when temperatures typically reach 109 degrees! And days are very long in the summer – you wait many hours for the sun to go down. As a non-Muslim, a foreign visitor would also avoid eating or drinking in public during the day – the restaurants are closed anyway. However, non-Muslims are allowed – in fact, *expected* – to eat or drink out of the public view. You may be served lunch in your hotel room or eat in a tour bus with the curtains drawn. Often tour guides, who are themselves fasting, will nonetheless hand you an ice cold bottle of water on a hot day with the encouragement, “Drink! You are not fasting; just I am.” And when the sun goes down and the feasting begins, Omanis will invite you to participate even though you are not the one breaking a fast!

Overall, Omanis take their religion seriously, but they are a tolerant people. Centuries – millennia – of interaction with other cultures have made them accepting of differences.