

Visitors' Perceptions of Religious Tourism in the Sultanate of Oman

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Abstract

This paper presents and analyses the religious tourism potential of the Sultanate of Oman from the point of view of its visitors: tourists visiting Oman. Oman has recently started to promote its tourism attractions and heritage focusing on a couple of iconic sites and symbols. The Ministry of Tourism has developed a clear strategy supported by private and governmental companies in order to market the destination as well as attract tourists. Oman has a significant tourism potential to exploit and can rely on its natural landscape, cultural traditions and high market facilities to offer a unique tourism experience in the Middle East; a region that lost a great deal of its essence and authenticity in a craze of modernity and mega building projects. However, within this new tourism strategy, religious tourism does not seem to have a huge importance at the moment, even though Oman has many religious sites of significant importance as well as religious attractions. Consequently, this paper aims to present Oman's religious tourism potential as well as understanding Oman's visitors' awareness of its religious sites and attractions and defining their interest in such experience. Within this context, secondary data was utilized in combination with a semi-structured questionnaire to compile and analyze the required information from visitors. The results show that visitors are interested in religious tourism experiences and Oman's religious sites and attractions but that they are not aware of what is available for them to discover and how it related to their personal view of religious tourism principally due to a lack of information and advertisement.

Introduction

Oman is a relatively new tourism destination with a good potential to thrive in the Middle East and also to become very popular overseas. The Ministry of Tourism, which was recently formed in 2004, is strategically planning and shaping Oman's tourism for the next six years. The mission statement of the

Ministry of Tourism is to have “Oman globally renowned as the most exciting tourism destination in the Middle East for authentic and unspoiled natural and cultural experiences by 2020” (Oman Ministry of Tourism, 2012:27). The Ministry is relying on Oman's eclectic landscape, its climate, its tourist sites and good infrastructure to develop its tourism. In the past couple of years, its national carrier Oman Air has won numerous awards and its hotel parks have welcomed prestigious brands such as Grand Millennium, Shangri La, The Ritz Carlton and the Chedi, which are easily accessible by a good road network. Oman stretches on 309,500 Km² sharing borders with Yemen to the south-west, Saudi Arabia to the west and the UAE to the north (Figure 1): it's the second largest country in the Arabian Peninsula and features 3,165 km of coastline.



Figure 1- Political Map of Oman

Source: Maps of the World “2014”

Its geographic setting allows varied sceneries to cohabit as Oman is host to numerous beaches, mountain chains, islands, desert, valleys, water springs and caves, which can cater for numerous tourist activities and special interest types of tourism ranging from nature based tourism “e.g.” bird watching, turtle watching, natural reserve trekking to adventure tourism “e.g.” off-roading, cliff climbing, desert safari, dune quad biking to any outdoor type of tourism “e.g.” boating, trekking, camping.

The culture and heritage are well preserved in the country with long standing traditions, a unique architecture and cultural sites (some of which are world

listed UNESCO sites) enabling tourists to witness and take part in an “*authentic Arabian experience*” as shown by figure 2 below. Interestingly, a couple of those cultural sites are religious tourist sites of great significance as they are mentioned in the holy books of the three monotheists religions: Judaism (Torah), Christianity (Bible) and Islam (Quran). Accordingly, this paper aims to present Oman's religious tourist sites as well as understanding Oman's visitors' awareness of those sites and perception of Oman as a religious tourism destination. To do so, firstly the paper will explain the concepts of religious tourism and religious sites as well as present the religious tourist panorama of Oman. Secondly, it will analyze the perceptions of Oman's visitors on religious tourism and investigate their level of awareness and interest in those sites in order to evaluate whether or not those sites could potentially become important tourist sites in Oman and participate in the development plan of the Ministry of Tourism at a later stage.

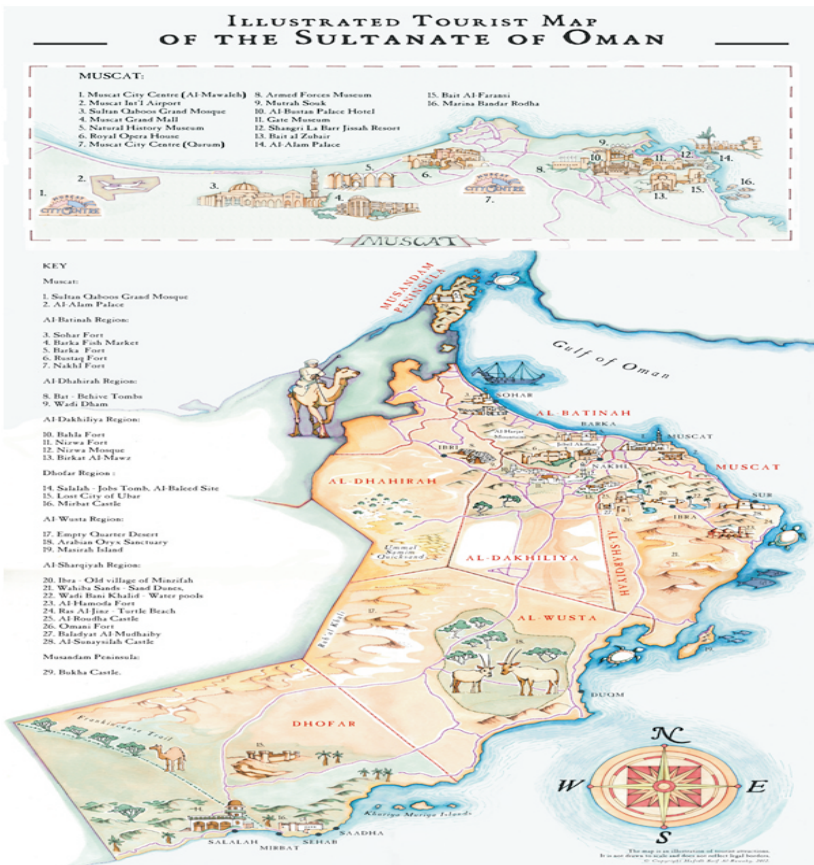


Figure 2 – Illustrated Tourist Map of Oman

Source: Abigail Daker “2014”

Literature Review

Religious Tourism and Religious sites

Religion and tourism have a close relationship that is long standing and pilgrimage is often an expression of the ties between the two sectors. Sacred places are among the most ancient travel destinations (Coleman & Elsner, 1997; Nolan & Nolan, 1992) and religiously motivated tourism is probably as old as religion itself (Rinschede, 1992). Proof of this phenomenon has been found among tribal societies of Europe, Asia, America and Australia in prehistoric times (Coleman & Elsner, 1997; Rinschede, 1992). Consequently, it is considered to be one of the oldest forms of tourism, with human circulation and travels being recorded from the earliest time in history (Vukonic, 1996). Religious tourism is a type of tourism that is defined by its visitors' motivations, which are centered on a religious aspect. It includes visits and activities related to a certain religious heritage located on sacred or religious sites (Rinschede, 1992). The Roman Catholic Church defines religious tourism as "...a system that encompasses a range of holy places, from the grandest cathedral to the smallest rural chapel..." (Nolan & Nolan, 1992:69). Religious attractions can be divided into 3 overlapping categories: (a) pilgrimage shrines, defined as places that serve as the goals of religiously motivated journeys from beyond the immediate locality; (b) religious tourist attractions, in the form of structures or sites of religious significance with historic and/or artistic importance; and (c) festivals with religious associations (Nolan & Nolan, 1992: 69). Shackley (2001) also offers an interesting and comprehensive classification of sacred sites based on common and defined physical characteristics which are illustrated in the table 1 below.

Table 1. Classification of sacred sites

Category	Type	Examples
1	Single nodal feature	Canterbury Cathedral, Emerald Buddha (Bangkok), Hagia Sophia (Istanbul).
2	Archaeological sites	Machu Picchu (Peru), Chichén Itzá (Mexico)
3	Burial sites	Catacombs (Rome), Pyramids (Giza)
4	Detached temples/shrines	Borobudur, Angkor Wat, Amritsar
5	Whole towns	Rome, Jerusalem, Assisi, Varanasi, Bethlehem
6	Shrine/temple complexes	Lalibela (Ethiopia), Potala (Tibet), St katherine's Monastery (Egypt)
7	"Earth energy" sites	Nazca Lines (Peru), Glastonbury
8	Sacred mountains	Uluru, Everest, Tai shan, Athos, Mt Fuji
9	Sacred islands	Rapa Nui, Lindisfarne, Iona, Mont-St-Michel
10	Pilgrimage Foci	Mecca, Medina, Mt Kailash, Compostela
11	Secular pilgrimage	Robben Island (RSA), Goree (Senegal), Holocaust sites

Source : Shackley (2001) Managing Sacred Sites,Continuum, Great Britain. P2.

The notion of religious tourism is currently generating a growing literature and benefits from various angles of research incorporating anthropological, historical, geographical and tourism-focused perspectives. Consequently, its definition has evolved from its original function. It is now a rather complex notion, which is very much linked to the visitors' expectation and beliefs. Religious sites have evolved from embodying a very strict religiosity to a more secular and new age kind of embodiment, allowing each visitor to have his/her own interpretation and spirituality. Religious tourism involves religious sites and attractions but does not necessarily involve religious feelings or motivations (Cohen, 1998; Shackley, 2001; Sharpley, 2009; Timothy & Olsen, 2006). The fact that religious tourism has strong affinities with social tourism, cultural tourism and heritage tourism (Moscardo, 2001; Nolan & Nolan, 1992; Collins-Kreiner & Gatrell, 2006) reinforces the duality of usage of religious tourist sites. In many parts of the world, religious tourism and religious sites have huge impacts on the nature of the economic activity of a site and its surrounding cities and regions. It often shapes and transforms the design of public space and socio-cultural settings (Collins-Kreiner, 2010a). It is therefore very important to strategically plan and manage religious sites to preserve their significance to the indigenous community and to the nation's history and culture (Shackley, 2001). As Nolan & Nolan (1992) explained, two distinct groups of visitors are often coexisting at religious sites: pious pilgrims or followers of a particular religion looking for some kind of religious experience and secular tourists satisfying their need of curiosity and recreation about a sacred site. However, the distinction between those two groups in the current over secularized and modern society is becoming extremely narrow (Pfaffenberger, 1983; Smith, 1992). Indeed, even Turner & Turner back in 1978 admitted that modern pilgrimage is inextricably linked with tourism as they claimed "*a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist*" (Turner & Turner, 1978:20). Most of the time, religious tourism and its variations enable the visitor to go on a quest for holy places, religious sites and shrines in order to experience and connect with sites of historical and cultural significance (Collins-Kreiner & Gatrell, 2006; Nolan & Nolan, 1992). Nevertheless, more often than not, regardless of their expectations or original motivations to travel, visitors will be touched in a way that will transform them and enable them to move away from their original category to be labeled as a "*spirituality affected visitor*" (Eade, 1992). Indeed, the religious tourism field has known different phases in terms of characterization and understanding of its motivation, function and market as well as its similarities and differences with other tourism and social practices. Consequently, the current academic trend, which started in the 1990s consists in clearly linking religious site travel and pilgrimages to tourism by explaining that they are very similar in nature and purpose (Collins-Kreiner, 2010b; Badone & Roseman, 2004). Smith (1992)

emphasized the fact that the sacred does not have to be solemn or restricted to religious visitors as secular tourists' encounters can also be spiritual. Undeniably, religious and secular tourists often share the trait of searching for a mystical experience revealing a certain need of history recognition and authenticity (Collins- Kreiner, 2010b; Digance, 2003; Shackley, 2001). It follows that religious tourism is one of the oldest and most relevant phenomena in the world as it portrays an accurate picture of civilization in its need to witness the past to understand the present and to analyze ancient practices or rituals to understand a nation's culture and heritage. Defining religious tourism and characterizing religious sites is a cultural construction, which overlapses with notions of history, aesthetics and spirituality generating a highly-sought tourist activity and catering to different niches within the special interest tourist markets of cultural and heritage focused tourists (Trauer, 2006).

Tourism in Oman

The Arab spring, terrorist attacks and overpopulated cities displaying important numbers of mass tourists in search of cheap sunny holidays have deterred tourists to visit the well-established destinations of the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa) such as Egypt, Tunisia or Jordan. This climate of geo-political uncertainty and general negative view of the Arab world and its communities have also encouraged the development of intra-Arab travels towards new developing destinations of the Gulf States such as Dubai, Abu Dhabi or Qatar (Al-Hamarneh, 2008; Al-Hamarneh & Steiner, 2004; Scott & Jafari, 2010; Steiner, 2010). Actually, MENA destinations have the highest tourism growth rate, but they are also characterized by smaller volume of tourists (Turner, 2009). Turner (2009) compares Oman with other Asia Pacific destinations in terms of growth pattern and takes the example of the Maldives, which she believes has the most similar pattern to Oman. She concludes that tourism can have a significant positive impact of the Omani economy, especially because Oman has much more to offer in terms of attractions and accessibility. Incontestably, the Middle East is experiencing a growing and flourishing period that has started since the second half of the twentieth century (Daher, 2007). GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries are heavily depending on hydrocarbons as the region is considered to be the largest oil reservoirs of the world (Daher, 2007; Freire, 2012; Scott & Jafari, 2010). However, in a growing effort to diversify their economies, they have all engaged in the development of tourism (Freire, 2012; Scott & Jafari, 2010). Consequently, tourism marketing and destination development have been very rapid and in constant expansion in the region in the last twenty years (Steiner, 2010); however, in contrast to other GCC countries, Oman seems to be taking a different route and is adopting a distinctive tourism strategy (Daher, 2007; Ministry of Tourism, 2012; Solanki, 2011; Winkler, 2007). Indeed, Oman

is carefully expanding its tourism products and market in order to sustainably manage the local economy and secure the socio-religious identity of the indigenous population (El Amrousi & Biln, 2010; Solanki, 2011; Winkler, 2007); the figure below summarizes well the tourist offer of Oman (Figure 3). Tourism in the GCC countries is often referred to as artificial since most of the Gulf countries rely on extravagant tourism projects involving luxury hotels and infrastructures lacking of a certain *“historical and social embeddedness”* (Steiner, 2010:241). The lack of strong heritage and culture has been replaced by mega tourism projects *“attempting to create an identity where identity is inherently absent”* (Steiner, 2010:248).

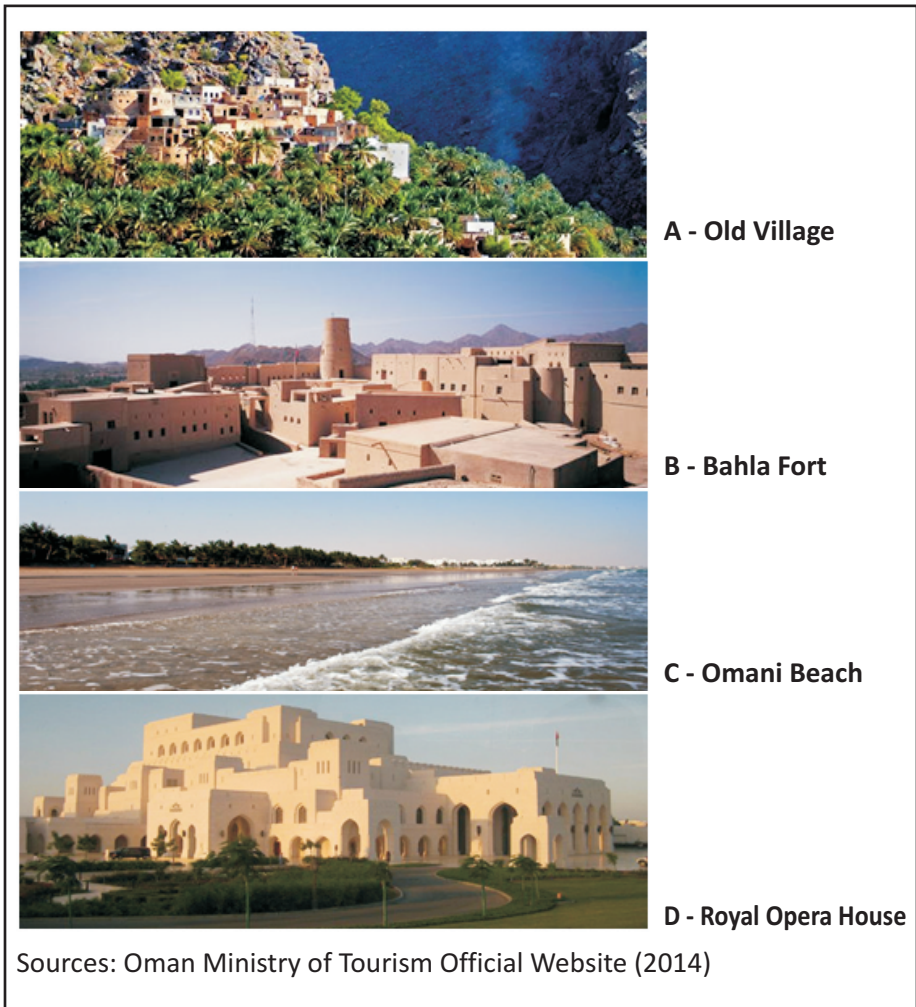


Figure 3 – Pictures of tourist sites in Oman

On the contrary, one of the focus points of the Omani Ministry of Tourism strategy is Omani Heritage Conservation. It has been recognized that tourists have a great interest in traditional heritage and local manufacturing, consequently the government has put in place “*Brand Oman*”, which is aimed at developing and supporting local brands as well as preserving local heritage and culture (Freire, 2012; Winkler, 2007). In addition, measures are being implemented in order to put Oman on the tourist map. One such development is the construction of a new airport in Muscat, which will enable to carry 12mn passengers annually and increase the inbound tourism flow. The Cruise market is also booming enabling many visitors to pass by Oman to undertake one to two days excursion in the country (BMI, 2013). Indisputably, the government is actively managing the tourism development of Oman by implementing successive development phases as well as attracting foreign investment, enabling Oman to develop its infrastructure and tourist attractions to cater for its growing tourist arrivals (BMI, 2013). New Hotels are being built in order to meet the government's plan of achieving 20,000 rooms by 2015 (BMI, 2013) and similarly to its neighbours, Oman has an overwater residential tourist project named The Wave in the capital city, which required 3bn(Euros - €) investment (featuring a 7km beach, a 18 holes golf course, a marina, luxury residences, leisure parks, luxury hotel chains and retail shopping centers), even if Oman is still far behind the likes of Dubai or Abu Dhabi in terms of overstated projects (BMI, 2013; Steiner, 2010). The country is very committed “*to consolidate an unified identity*” while establishing tourism as a major source of foreign income. Strategically, the government is eager to maintain a very traditional architecture while incorporating modernity in its cities. It adopted a “*culturally sensible urbanism*” (El Amrousi & Biln, 2010: 258) structure allowing daily activities and necessities of the local population while portraying a traditional lifestyle and essence to the foreign eye. This Arabian modernism is in contrast with its neighbour countries who favored high-rise buildings and modern architectural complexes while scattering some elements of Arabian architecture in staged districts only existing to satisfy a certain tourist need of false Arabian authenticity (El Amrousi & Biln, 2010). The Muscat Grand Mosque is a perfect example of this urban functional duality enabling “*independent religious and tourist functions to coexist in the same spaces at different times*” (El Amrousi & Biln, 2010: 256). Oman's strategy is to be very selective and to focus on a high-end niche market type of tourism instead of mass tourism. This is believed to enable a more sustainable approach to tourism that limits negative impacts to the environment and preserves socio-cultural traditions (Novelli, 2005; Trauer, 2006). Indeed, visitors' flows and increasing numbers of visitors on any tourist sites, especially religious tourist sites, often result in a certain level of commercialization of the religious heritage (Eade, 1992) with strong socio-cultural impacts (Collins-Kreiner, 2010a). Consequently

developing religious sites for tourism in Oman needs to be planned properly and managed in a sustainable way in order to preserve the sites, the culture and the country's history (Raj and Morpeth, 2007). Special interest tourists, which are often linked to niche tourists are usually focused on being actively involved in their own tourist' experience, instead of being spectators of their tourist's ventures. Indeed, special interest tourists are in search of a more authentic and engaging cultural experience, which correspond well to the type of tourists that Oman is trying to attract as a destination (Novelli, 2005; Trauer, 2006).

Religious Tourist sites in Oman

The original development of tourism in the MENA region was primarily based on cultural and heritage tourism with a very strong element of religious tourism. Most tourist activities were driven by religious sites and visits to pilgrimage sites such as Mecca or Medina in Saudi Arabia, the Holy City of Jerusalem in Israel and the Al Azhar Mosque in Cairo (Steiner, 2010). Because of its geographical location and history, the Middle East is the stage of most of the religious and ancient history accounts of the three monotheist religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Many important religious figures have lived and died in the region transforming the Middle East into a great archaeological field impregnated with important cultural and heritage sites (Scott & Jafari, 2010). In line with the new vision of religious tourism and its interpretation, many countries have tried to merge religious and leisure tourism in order to satisfy the existing and growing niche market. Saudi Arabia is slowly and carefully moving towards a modern vision of pilgrimage combining leisure activities to the more traditional pilgrim visits to holy sites (Al-Hamarnah, 2008; Scott & Jafari, 2010). Even though Oman is focused on and dedicated to developing its cultural tourism niche market, so far it has mainly focused on the capital city and its surroundings by renovating castles and forts in an effort to revive Oman's colonial past. Religious tourism is not being the aim of any promotional or renovating efforts. The only element that symbolizes religious tourism is the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, which is heavily marketed and has become a key tourist landmark.

The Grand Mosque is located in the capital city Muscat and is categorized as a religious tourist attraction by the Ministry of Tourism. It enjoys a dual usage because Muslim followers access it as a place of worship during prayer times and tourists visit it during separate visiting hours. It can be seen as *"a space of authentic cultural exhibition"* (El Amrousi & Biln, 2010: 260). The sustainable usage of the Grand Mosque has attracted much attention in the Gulf region and this model has been transferred to Abu Dhabi, who also built six years later: the Grand Mosque of Sheikh Zayed. It was completed in 2001 and at the

time held the world records for the largest hand woven Persian carpet measuring 4343 m² and hanging chandelier, which is 14 m tall (El Amrousi & Biln, 2010).

There are many other sites of significant religious, cultural and archaeological importance, which have not been developed from a tourist point of view yet. Those sites are all located in the Dhofar region, which lies on the eastern border with Yemen and was the chief source of frankincense in the world. This region is unique in the Gulf as it benefits from a tropical climate with a Monsoon season (*Khareef*) generating an exotic vegetation and fauna & flora. It is a very intriguing region with mixed tribal and Omani cultures. It is currently enjoying a development phase including the building of new transport infrastructure, hotels, cinemas, restaurants and retail centers, which could possibly enable the region to become a popular tourist destination. Most importantly, cultural tourism and religious tourism could become consequential in the region and the country, thanks to key heritage tourist sites. Indeed, Dhofar hosts several heritage sites, which can be labelled as religious tourist sites. Those heritage sites of religious nature are significant on different levels and will be presented below in order to reflect their historical, cultural and religious connotations (Clapp, 1999; Clapp, 2002; BMI, 2013, Ministry of Tourism, 2012).

Prophet Imran's Tomb

Prophet Imran is considered to be the father of Maryam or most commonly known as the Virgin Mary, who is of great importance in Christianity and Islam. It is important to mention that in Christianity, Virgin Mary's father is referred to as Joachim, while in Islam he is a prophet named Imran. Even though Mary is perceived differently in both religions, they agree on the message that she was sent to communicate to the world. Indeed, Mary is the messenger of the word of God and she is a symbol of Islam as well as a representation of the perfect Christian. Finally, she is at the centre of both religions because God considered her highly as he gave her the virgin birth and preserved her from all sins (Harden, 2004). Consequently, her father is of high value to both religions, even though he is mostly known through his daughter.

Prophet Saleh's Tomb

Prophet Saleh is an Islamic prophet mentioned in the Quran who is linked to the tribe of Thamud that was considered as wicked because of its sins and were eventually destroyed. Saleh's narrative in the Quran starts with a well-known prophecy involving a camel and the Thamud tribe, which originated from Southern Arabia. It is believed that God gave the She-Camel to the people of Thamud in order to support and authenticate Saleh's preaching. The people of

Thamud rejected the gift and failed the test of God by slaying the She-Camel (female camel). God allowed them three days to repent but as none did, an earthquake was sent to destroy the Thamud community. Most people perished except the believers who followed Saleh and his preaching (Ibn Kathir, 2003).

Prophet Ayub's tomb

This prophet is important to Judaism (Job), Islam (Ayub) and Christianity (Job). In Islam, he is a symbol of patience and gratitude towards God. He was approached by Satan to reject God and suffered many diseases and pain as a test sent by God. During all his torment, he remained faithful to God and to his religion. In Christianity, he is the main figure of the Book of Job, which narrate the same episode that the Quran's narrative regarding his endurance and gratefulness To God. The Torah on the other hand portrays Job as a powerful figure and one of the three advisors that Pharaoh consulted before pursuing the Children of Israel in the Book of Exodus (Ibn Kathir, 2003).

Prophet Hud 's Tomb

Prophet Hud is an Islamic prophet who is believed to have led the people of Ad and warned them of their macabre fate if they did not change and abandon their wicked ways (Ibn Kathir, 2003). The tomb of Hud was marked on al-Idrisi's map of Arabia from 1154. The people of Ad were an Arabian tribe who used to harvest the finest frankincense from groves in the Dhofar. This narrative can be found in the Quran and the popular Arabian nights tales (Clapp, 1999).

The Lost city of Ubar

The city of Ubar is the Atlantis of Arabia. It is mentioned in the Quran as a city of great wealth and sins, which was sunk into the desert by God as a punishment (Clapp, 1999). It is often referred to as the Sodom and Gomorrah of the Arabian Desert because of its similar fate (Fiennes, 1993). The lost city of Ubar was discovered through the use of radar imaging, pictures from the shuttle, and image data from orbiting satellites by a research team that undertook a ten-year excavation project (Fischer & Fischer, 1999). This is one of the most important archaeological discoveries of the region (Clapp, 1999).

The ruins of Queen of Sheba's palace

The Queen of Sheba is a very popular figure in religious accounts and popular myths, who reigned in the kingdom of Saba apparently located West of the city of Ubar. The prophet Sulaiman (Islam) or King Solomon (Christianity) are believed to have built her palace and city (Clapp, 1999; Clapp, 2002). According to the legend, she is a powerful and beautiful Queen full of mysteries while in

Islam, she is presented as a pagan who converted to Islam after hearing prophet's Sulaiman preaching (Wills & Lancaster, 2002).

This brief presentation of the six Dhofar religious sites reveals that those sites are jointly important in Islam and Christianity and for some, even in Judaism. Taking into consideration that those three monotheist religions are central to modern history and society, because they shaped the world, as we know it today; those religions whether we believe in them or not, are key to our cultural, historical and social settings. It is therefore important to explore the perception of tourists regarding those sites as well as their level of awareness towards Oman's religious heritage. It is in this context that the paper aims to examine the religious tourism potential of Oman through the Dhofar sites, focusing on its visitors' perception and interest.

Methodology

This paper is based on qualitative research methods; it combines secondary data analysis based on observation and analysis of previous research work with semi-structured interviews conducted with visitors to Oman.

Interviews approach and design

The interviews were conducted in the capital city of Oman, Muscat, during a two-week period from 1st April to 20th April 2014. The interviews were audio recorded and conducted with the help of an "interview guide"; they featured a list of open-ended questions and topics on visitors' habits, visitors' visit to Oman and their views on religious tourism and attractions. In addition, a small section featured closed-question and was used to create a visitors' profile. Semi-structured interviews were selected as a data collection method because they usually provide reliable, in-depth comparable qualitative data. This type of interview allows for the use of open-ended questions and the interviewees to express their views in their own words. Indeed, they provide a good insight into respondents' perceptions and opinions because they facilitate a rapport/empathy, allow a greater flexibility of coverage and allow the interview to go into novel areas, which tends to produce richer data (Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith et al., 2009).

Sampling and data analysis

The research adopted an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach to examine the perceptions and opinions of visitors on religious tourism in Oman. IPA enables a detailed and very personal approach because *"the main currency for an IPA study is the meanings particular experiences, events, states hold for participants"*(Smith & Osborn, 2003:1). The

phenomenological nature of this analysis allows to gain an insider's perspective (Conrad, 1987) as the researcher is focusing on the perceptions and understanding of a particular group rather than making general claims; this group being visitors in Oman in the case of this study. Generally, IPA studies are conducted on a small sample; consequently the author conducted ten interviews, selecting respondents by snowball sampling requesting each respondent to provide a new interviewer (Smith et al., 2009). Each interview was conducted on a face-to-face basis in French or in English. As the interviewer wanted each respondent to feel comfortable in order to fully express his feelings and perceptions; the interviewer was flexible regarding timings and locations of the interviews. However for practical reasons, all interviews were conducted in the capital city Muscat, where the respondents and interviewer were staying at the time of the research. Consequently, most interviews were conducted at the respondents' holiday accommodation but two of them were conducted at a beach club and a coffee shop. Afterwards, the interviewer analysed the audio recording by engaging in an interpretative relationship with the transcript and was able to identify emerging themes and extract key ideas.

Results and Findings

Visitor Profile

The visitors were principally females (60%) and married (70%) with at least one child (50%). The vast majority was above 30 years old with 40% of respondents between 30-40 years old and 50% above 50 years old with a remaining 10% on the 25-30 years old range. All respondents had some degree of education with the biggest proportion being undergraduates (30%) while 20% had a Master Degree, 30% a diploma, 10% had some kind of professional training and 10% finished Middle School. Finally, the majority of respondents considered themselves as belonging to a religion with a variation in the degree of daily practice and devotion; however this data translated as having interviewed 10% of Muslim respondents, 60 % of Christian respondents and 20% of atheist respondents. Therefore, the sample was heterogeneous and well balanced on most of the demographic components, allowing a good variety of opinions and perceptions.

Most of the respondents were in Oman as VFR (Visiting Friends and Family) with 70% VFR visitors while 30% explained that they were in Oman in order to discover a new destination, consequently fitting into the tourist category. Their stay was relatively long: 50% of visitors stayed in Oman more than 2 weeks, 30% stayed between 7 to 15 days and the remaining 20% stayed less than one week. Additionally, for 50% of the visitors, this was the first time in Oman while

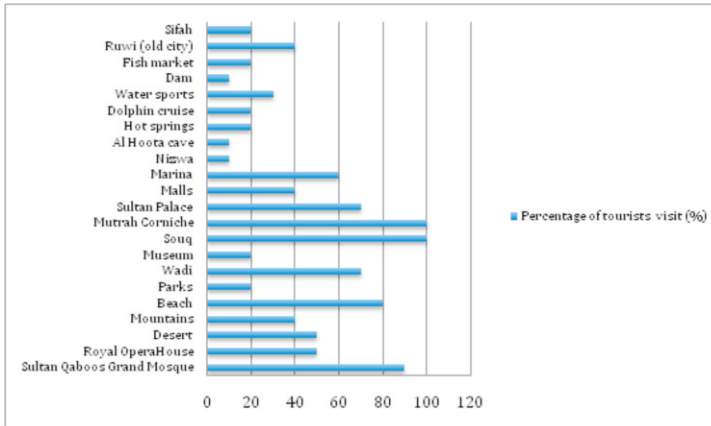
40% explained that they visited frequently and the remaining 10% stated that they had been in Oman more than three times. The above data is a good reflection of the general visiting pattern of the VFR market which is characterized by long stays, repetitive visits and higher level of education (Hansel & Metzner, 2011). Oman is considered a long haul destination when departing from Western countries, which is often characterized with 7 day holiday rather than short breaks.

Visit in Oman

Range of tourist activities

Respondents were asked about their visit to Oman and their tourist habits. The results revealed that all visitors engaged in some kind of activities or tours while in Oman. More specifically, all respondents engaged in tourist activities and visits combining cultural, leisure and outdoor/natural elements. Table 2 below summarized the tourist sites visited by the respondents while in Oman. The data collected clearly emphasizes two key tourist sites as all respondents went to visit the Mutrah Souq and Corniche, which are emblematic tourist sites of the capital. The third most important site visited was the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque with 90 % of respondents taking part in the mosque non-guided tour.

Table 2. Tourist sites visited in Oman (Data Collected from respondents in Oman)



In terms of tourist habits and what respondents enjoyed or were used to do when on holiday, the interviews revealed that visitors took part in a wide range of tourist activities and visited different types of tourist sites. Most interviewees indicated that they were mostly interested in beach based holidays featuring destinations with good seaside potential and activities as well as engaging in historic site visits. The most popular tourist interests lied

with beach-based holidays involving relaxation and idleness, cultural and historic sites visit, discovering the country's heritage and culture and visiting key landmarks and/or iconic sites. This data revealed that most respondents preferred and chose to be active during their holidays in order to enjoy and discover the country they visited.

Range of tourist sites

The interviewees were asked the following question *“Does Oman have interesting tourists sites or attractions as a tourist destination?”* compared with other countries that they had previously visited. The respondents were divided on the subject as they explained that there were some interesting elements in Oman but that they were not sure that those elements were entertaining enough or of a tourist nature. Indeed, 50% of the respondents who stated that *“Oman had interesting tourists sites and attractions”*, mainly referred to natural tourist sites such as Wadis, which provided incredible sceneries and many possibilities of activities; they were described as being unusual and enjoyable experiences. Indeed, Oman counts numerous Wadis, the most touristic being Wadi Shab, Wadi Tiwi and Wadi Bani Khalid featuring waterfall caves, fresh water pools and good hiking opportunities as they are natural mountainous valleys containing ephemeral riverbed induced by the rainy season. The other 50% who answered that they did not think that Oman had interesting tourist sites, explained that Oman lacked iconic sites and key landmarks to visit, especially sites that explained the history of the country and its development. They highlighted that other destination usually have key tourist sites, which embodied the country and are of cultural and historical significance such as Natural History Museums, National Art Galleries or Heritage and Traditions centers. According to interviewees, this component is missing in Oman and the rich and traditional heritage of the country is not well represented at key sites. They indicated that cultural sites that represented the country and its people are missing.

Reality versus Perception

The most important element of their tourist experience was the contrast that Oman offers as a tourist destination against their previous expectation regarding the geopolitical situation in the Gulf region and the views that one might have on Middle Eastern culture and local law. Oman surprised them with the variety of landscapes available, the level of safety and the welcoming nature of the locals. They also agreed on the fact that Oman was simply *“unique”* as a Gulf country because it kept its authentic Arabian essence and had tourist sites of different natures. The main concerns expressed by the visitors regarded the difficulty to find out what was available and fundamental

to visit in Oman which are often labelled as the “do not miss “ or “must see” attractions as well as their accessibility. They often found locating tourist attractions difficult because of their lack of visibility, advertisement and signage. In addition, they complained about the lack of infrastructure around tourist sites such as toilets, snack kiosks, merchandising and simply good explanatory information at the tourist attraction itself.

Cultural Heritage attractions

The interviewees believed that Oman has a lot to offer being one of the only two countries governed by a Sultan in the world and is an important figure of Oman's history; however, they criticized the fact that there were no tourist sites focusing on its majesty, its reign and its history. They also added that many cultural sites are beautiful but cannot be entered or visited such as the many forts available in different parts of the country. The data indicated that Oman has strong heritage and cultural elements engraved in its traditions and development, which are visible through its architecture and its locals who both kept their Arabian essence but that element is not easily accessible or made comprehensible to tourists. Nevertheless, they admired the beauty and urban landscape of the cities as well as the ability to experience the indigenous culture on a daily basis. Talking to locals or witnessing their way of live was the most interesting element of many interviewees' visit, for instance when visiting the Fish market early in the morning, which is very representative of Oman's identity as a nation of fishermen and sailors.

Religious Tourism in Oman

80% of the respondents believed that Oman had no religious tourist sites; while the remaining 20% of the respondents who believed that Oman had religious tourist sites cited the Sultan Qaboos Mosque and explained that not only it was a great religious tourist site, but it was also the most important and interesting attraction of Oman displaying great architecture and symbolizing the Omani culture.

The respondents were questioned on the notion of religious tourism in order to understand their understanding of this notion and how it could apply to Oman. The notion of religious tourism was very complex to define in words for all respondents, which were more comfortable with giving examples. Actually none offered a comprehensive definition of this notion, however suggested that Pilgrimage was religious tourism and identified the action of travelling or visiting pilgrimage sites or major shrines as religious tourism. They mentioned the sites of Lourdes in France, the Vatican in Italy and Mecca in Saudi Arabia as sites where visitors could undertake religious tourism. This difficulty to describe and clarify this notion is coherent with the current literature on the

field. Indeed, Scholars emphasizes the complexity and interconnecting between religion and tourism as well as underlying the fact that religious tourism is anything that involves a religious element and is fitted into a tourist concept (Rinschede, 1992; Nolan & Nolan, 1992).

The analysis enlightens the fact that even though respondents were unable to qualify religious tourism they all agreed on the fact that religious sites and religious attractions were key components of religious tourism, implying that religious tourism is a form a tourism, which involves visiting sites of religious nature. They had a better understanding of the notion of religious sites and attempted to classify them by explaining that religious sites or attractions might be buildings used as place of worship (80%), major pilgrimage sites (60%), religious figures' tombs or graves (30%), sites where significant religious characters lived or died (20%) and finally sites commemorating a specific religious event (10%). Those examples and the sites classification helped them to think about the notion of Religious Tourism that became clearer as they suggested that visiting religious sites was not necessarily a religious act; they believed that it could be a tool to witness one's culture and tradition as well as to understand a place's history, practices and heritage. They labeled religious tourism, any trips where religion, religious feelings and practices are involved in any sort of way. They also emphasized that the location of those sites sometimes did not matter, as the importance in religious tourism was the internal journey, which enabled visitors to find internal peace and reach a state of spirituality. They believed that the trip was within oneself as it enabled visitors to find sacredness and God. Indeed, they referred to religious tourism as going to a place where one could discover and learn about religious practices and rituals, going to visit religious buildings or places of worships, visiting holy graves and visiting places where famous or well known religious figures have lived.

The respondents were provided with a list of the 7 religious sites of Oman and were asked if they were aware of them. All the interviewees confirmed that they knew the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, which was the highlight of their trip, while 20% had heard of prophet's Ayub's tomb and only 10% had heard of the ruin of Queen Sheeba's Palace. The respondents were not aware of the existence of the four other religious sites in Oman but all had a general knowledge of the figures associated with those sites (the four prophets, the city of Ubar, the Queen of Sheeba) and were eager to know more about those sites. All respondents revealed that the sites presented were interesting and would have liked to know about them prior to arriving in order to plan a potential visit. They agreed by saying that they were major historical sites as well as religious tourist sites of significant interest to certain religious groups and cultural tourists.

The results of the research show that Oman attracts visitors with a desire to engage in cultural and heritage tourism as well as enjoy its natural beauties and traditional urban settings. The data confirms that the Ministry of Tourism is attracting the anticipated niche markets and is focusing on developing the country's infrastructure and tourist attractions, which was one of the visitors' concerns. The fact that all respondents considered that religious sites must include elements of culture, aesthetics and heritage in order to be relevant is important as the six religious tourists sites of Dhofar have this capacity. Indeed, the six sites correspond to the second category of religious sites labeled by Nolan & Nolan (1992) as they are *“religious tourist attractions, in the form of structures or sites of religious significance with historic and/or artistic importance”*. The respondents themselves suggested tombs, places where religious figures have lived and died and where important religious events have taken place as religious tourist sites; consequently those sites are legitimate religious attractions. Even though Oman is not primarily considered as a religious tourism destination such as Israel or Saudi Arabia, there is potential to offer genuine religious sites of quality. Indeed, all respondents agreed that Sultan Qaboos Mosque was a great religious tourist site and that if the six Dhofar tourist sites were marketed and developed appropriately for tourism, they would become significant tourist sites and landmarks in Oman. Dhofar could be the religious tourism region of Oman and finally cater for the visitors' demand for authentic heritage and history.

Conclusion and Implications

These findings expand the understanding on the significance of religious tourism and present an opportunity to analyse the emergence of a sacred and secular spiritual trend applied to tourism. The findings highlight the religious tourism potential of Oman and focus on the visitor's perceptions and awareness of the notion of religious tourism applied to Oman. The findings provide valuable implications for religious tourism from the tourist's perspective.

In addition, the current findings make a contribution to the notion of religious tourism as being far more complex than the notion of religious attractions, which was easily identified and categorised. However, when both notions were associated, the respondents were able to find some similarities and correlations, which extended to a definition of their vision and understanding of religious tourism. Their answers reflected the fact that it could be any site or place, which combined a tourist and a religious element. The respondents' answers highlighted that religious tourism is composed of religious tourist sites combining cultural, historical and religious elements of great significance to a nation or a certain group of people allowing its visitors to feel the importance

of the place and learn about another people's religion, heritage, history and way of life by including a certain element of authenticity and spirituality. The classification of the sites that they proposed and their definition of religious sites enabling them to define religious tourism support Shackley's (2001) classification of sacred sites as shown in the table below.

Table 3: Religious Sites Classification (Data Collected from Visitors in Oman).

Type of Religious Attractions	Description	Examples
Place of Worship	Church, Mosque, Temple, Synagogues....	Notre Dame de Paris (France) Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque (Oman)
Pilgrimage Site	Shrines involving Pilgrimage rituals and processions.	Hajj (Saudi Arabia) Lourdes (France)
Religious Figures' tombs or graves	Prophets or saints ' Tombs and graves....	Job's Tomb (Dhofar, Oman) Saint Peter's Tomb (Vatican, Italy)
Sites where significant religious characters lived or died	Sites involving the lives and actions of figures from the holy books and scriptures	Ruins of Queen of She eba's Palace (Dhofar, Oman). House of the Virgin Mary (Mt. Koresos - Ephesus, Turkey).
Sites commemorating a specific religious event	Place that witnessed key religious historical events	The Lost City of Ubar (Dhofar, Oman) Mount Sinai (Egypt)

Shackley's (2001) classification is key in religious attractions as it enlightens the fact that religious sites can be natural or man made as well as single nodal, part of a significant sacred element or forming a whole town. It demonstrates that religious attractions are heterogeneous, which is what the respondents concluded. The classification in Table 3 created according to the respondents' data analysis shows this element of diversity and the aspect of tourist spirituality. It demonstrates that a religious attraction is any site incorporating religion, sacredness or any aspect of one's spirituality, consequently if a site brings spirituality and involves religiosity for one person and no one's else it could be presented and considered of religious importance, thus be labelled a religious site and enter into the lists of religious attractions composing religious tourism. This is a key finding because it demonstrates that Oman is a religious tourism destination because it features 4 types of religious sites as per our respondents' classification.

In a country, which carefully plans its tourism strategy to attract a high-end market preferably composed of the heritage tourism niche market; the Dhofar religious sites are key to the future development of cultural tourism in Oman. Following the great popularity of the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, which is an iconic tourist site in Oman and labeled as a religious site, it would be

interesting and beneficial to develop more sites on a religious tourism basis. It is important to note that it is unlikely that the Omani religious sites will become pilgrimage sites, however they are cultural and historical sites of great religious significance to the followers of the three monotheist religions as well as to a good proportion of tourists, eager to discover Oman through its Arabian ancient history and through Islam and its writings. Considering a future for those sites, it is easy to see them flourish in the Dhofar region, which is known for its enjoyable microclimate, exotic fauna and flora and pristine beaches. The region is currently developing with new infrastructure being built and placing those sites on the tourism map could only contribute to its growth. As the region is vast, it would be interesting to develop the prophets' tombs' as a trail by linking the lost city of Ubar to the tomb of Hud and by extension ending the trail to the Queen of Sheba's palace. While it would be beneficial to develop the main 7 religious sites as tourist attractions, at the same time, it is crucial that the sites are developed and managed in a sustainable manner in order to avoid physical damage as well as damage to the cultural meanings embodied, which could be caused by increased visitor numbers. One can imagine developing each site by renovating them and incorporating on-site tourist facilities, adequate signage to access the sites and appropriate and accurate information about the sites, their function, their figure and history. The explanatory and informative element of those sites is key, as it will enable to develop a link to Oman, its religion and its people to allow the tourists to understand it and relate it to their own general knowledge, culture and history. Further research and studies on Oman religious sites development and management has to be undertaken in order to successfully be in accordance with the Oman Ministry of Tourism "Vision 2020", which prioritise the development and promotion of Oman heritage and culture.

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