

LIVING AND WORKING IN Middle East

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Hi everyone, long-time reader and enthusiast, I am a first-time contributor to the *LIV Young Lawyer's Journal*.

I have been living in Muscat, Sultanate of Oman for only three months, so in ex-patriot terms I am still very much "fresh off the boat", but, as the learning curve has been both sharp and steep, I still hope to be able to give you some insight on the life and times of a young law jack in the Middle East.

Where in the world...?

As I had no idea where Oman was before I accepted a job here, before I get started, it may be helpful to point out where Oman is located.

Oman is a country about half the size of South Australia. It is bordered on the north-west by the United Arab Emirates, on the west by Saudi Arabia, on the south by Yemen and its eastern border is completely coastline that runs from the mouth of the Persian Gulf, along the Arabian Sea to where it joins the Indian Ocean.

The capital of Oman is the city of Muscat, on the north-east coast. This is an incredibly beautiful city with old forts and look-out posts scattered among the modern day buildings. The city is narrow and runs north to south along the coastline for about 40km; it is flanked on the western side by a massive mountain range, which rises from sea level to 2000m above sea level in about 120km.

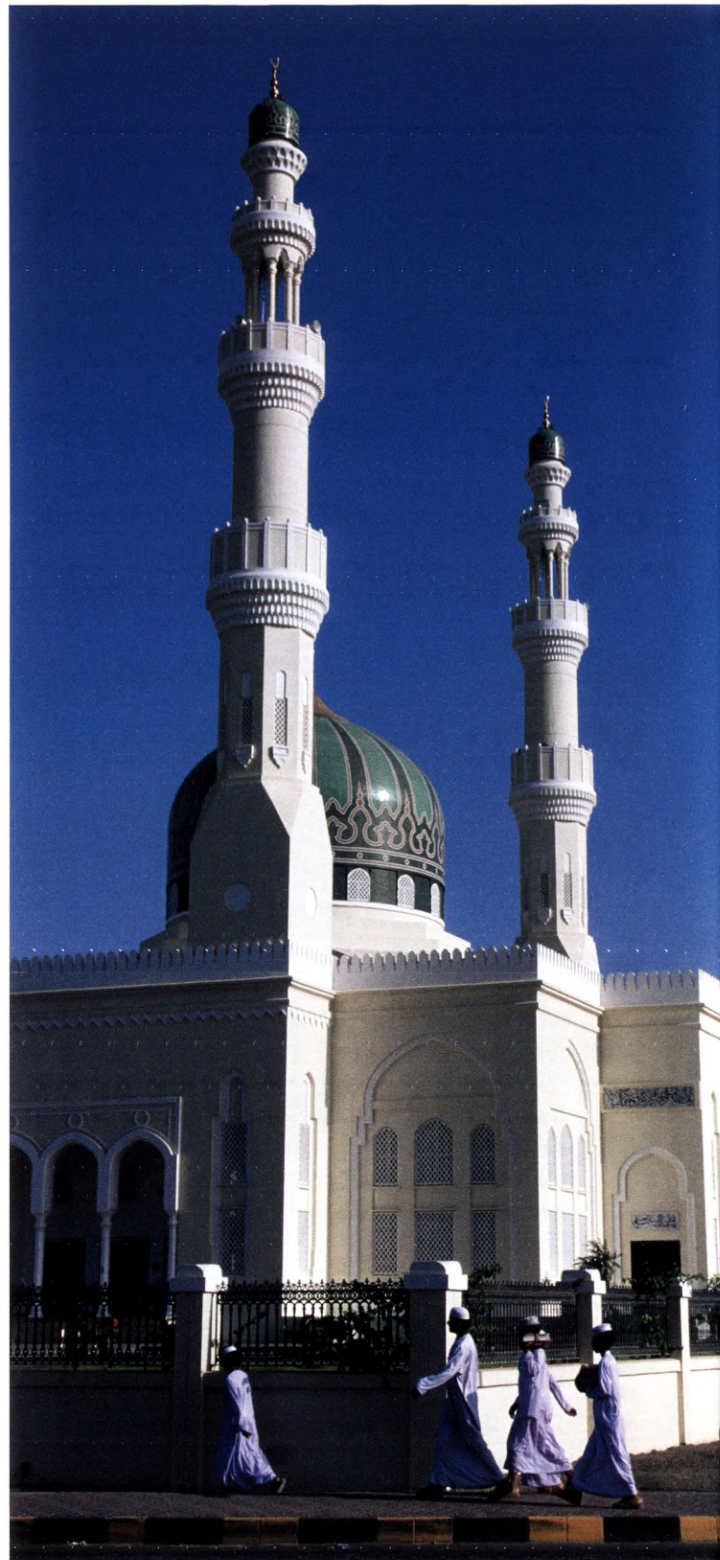
Finally, for those who have an idea as to where the city of Dubai is, Muscat is about a three-hour drive (30 minute flight) through the desert and over the mountains south east of Dubai.

Hopefully this helps.

My story

I am sure that most fans of the *Young Lawyer's Journal* have secret ambitions to roll out of old Melbourne town for a while and work overseas, either as a lawyer or in a completely different pursuit. In fact, I would go as far to say it almost seems to be a right of passage these days.

I was no exception and had been interested in landing a job in Dubai for a good few months before I organised myself and started putting together a CV. I found the rate at which Dubai is developing fascinating and thought it would be a great time to be among it, and pick up some good work/life experiences in the process. So I sent my CV to a legal recruiter who in turn sent it to firms in Dubai and throughout the Middle East. After a handful of interviews I landed a job with a large London-based firm that counts among its Middle East practice, offices in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Cairo, Istanbul and Muscat, and it was decided that I would be based in the Muscat office.



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Work options

Oman's economy is developing at a fast rate. Many property and tourist resort developers are looking for the next boom town in the region (after Dubai) and it looks like Oman could be the one. To provide one example, a consortium of US and UK companies is currently planning the development of a new resort city that will cover more than 35 sq km. This project has been priced at US \$13 billion.

As a result, many of the matters I have been involved in so far have to do with foreign investment, property and tourism development projects and the corporate structuring for multinational and foreign companies in Oman.

As it is the Middle East, there is never a shortage of oil and gas work and, as it never rains, it seems our office receives new instructions on water plantation projects each week.

Not to compare too much with the work I completed at my previous firm, but there is also a fantastic opportunity in the Middle East for junior lawyers to be involved in some really interesting and literally enormous cross-border deals that can send you travelling throughout the Middle East, south-eastern Europe and south and west Asia.

Setting yourself up

Basically, everything that you need to set yourself up in the Middle East is taken care of by the firm.

You should receive an economy airfare from Melbourne to your destination (most firms will also provide you with one return flight to Melbourne for each year you are with the firm).

As part of your package, on top of your salary (that is 100 per cent tax free), you should also receive:

- a housing/accommodation allowance that will allow you to rent a comfortable apartment or villa (in most instances this will be paid directly to your landlord);
- a furnishings allowance that will allow you to purchase all the necessities for your accommodation, for example, fridge, oven, tv, couch, bed, and washing machine;

- a car allowance that will allow you to purchase a new car (as public transport is basically non-existent in this part of the world, a car is absolutely required); and
- and a gym/club membership.

Enjoying life in the Middle East

The lifestyle for ex-patriots in Oman and throughout the Middle East is incredibly indulgent. Apart from the fact that you work long days (as a result of being both busy and in contact with and responding to the London office [which is three hours behind the Middle East]), there is a plethora of great, cheap restaurants many of which are licensed, and a number of pubs and clubs where you can let your hair down and get a little loose. (Admittedly you do not have anywhere near the selection of pubs and bars that you do back home, but everyone makes the most of it!).

The weekends are usually spent packing an esky, sailing along the coast, finding an isolated beach (some of the most amazing I have seen) to set up the BBQ and kick back in glorious sunshine amongst friends. There are also rugby, cricket, diving and other sports clubs if that takes your fancy.

The rich cultural diversity and history of the Middle East means you get your culture fix almost daily. Whether it is shopping in the souks, smoking the seisha, trying your luck at the camel races or visiting the museums, galleries and the like, there is always something new to see and do.

The young ex-patriot community itself is mainly made up of the English, Aussies and Kiwis and is incredibly cosy and supportive. Lots of dinner parties and gatherings throughout the week is very much the norm.

Securing a position

Unless you have a personal contact in the region, it seems the only way to get in contact with firms in the Middle East is to approach a legal recruiter.

As a junior with limited experience, when I called recruiters outlining my interest in moving to the Middle East, one quickly brushed me aside and told me to call back in 12 months, while another tried to convince me to take an in-house role in Perth and, on my saying it was not an option, she had the audacity to suggest a move to Adelaide. Finally, I found one who was supportive and willing to help me out.

Basically, when approaching recruiters, you should take their advice on board regarding the structuring of CVs and negotiation of employment contracts, but make sure you get them working for you. Regardless of what they say about your experience or lack thereof, make sure they send your CV to firms in whatever region/country in which you wish to try your luck. In the case of the Middle East there is so much work here at the moment that most firms will happily consider any candidate who is eager to make the move.

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