

Between Inclusion and Exclusion: The Politics of Public Space in Muscat

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Supported by:



Federal Foreign Office



Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst
German Academic Exchange Service

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In Oman's rapidly urbanizing capital, public beaches offer rare open spaces in an increasingly commodified city—yet subtle social divisions remain.

The Sultanate of Oman, located at the southeastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula, stands out for its remarkable diversity—both geographically and demographically. The country is bordered by Yemen, the United Arab of Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and the Arabian Sea to the south. The coastline, which measures about 3,165 kilometers (Oman News Agency, 2026), plays a central role in the everyday-life of its people. Therefore, public beaches can offer a particularly revealing lens through which to observe Omani society's inclusivity and exclusivity.

Demographic Diversity and Rising Urbanization

The demography of Oman is considered among the most ethnically, linguistically, and religiously diverse countries in the Arab Gulf (Al-Ismaili 2018). Among the roughly 5.6 million residents (World Population Review, 2026), there are speakers of Arabic, Swahili, Balochi, Luwati, and Urdu. Residents encompass followers of Ibadi, Shia, and Sunni Islam, alongside Baha'i and Hindu communities—to name a few. Oman's diversity stems from its history as a naval power and trading hub that began to flourish after the second half of the eighteenth century (Risso, 1986). This is also a result of its complex colonial past, which includes occupying parts of East Africa (e.g., Zanzibar), being occupied by the Portuguese, and later falling under British influence (HistoryRise, 2025).

In contemporary Oman, moreover, society is shaped by labor migration, attracting people from other Arabic-speaking countries — such as Egypt — as well as from South-Asian countries, including Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. As of 2023, this migrant group constituted around 1.7 million of the country's inhabitants (Oman Observer, 2023). Rapid economic and infrastructural development over the past 50 years has contributed to an increasing urbanization (Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning (Oman), n.d.), with many people moving toward urban-growth centers. These urban centers are where investment, infrastructure, and employment are concentrated (ibid).

In these urban hubs—especially in the capital, Muscat, access to public space is limited in several ways. The hot and humid climate makes outdoor activities difficult during the summer months, leading many people to spend time indoors, either in their private homes or in air-conditioned malls and cafés. However, these are spaces of consumption and may exclude those with fewer financial resources. Public beaches thus offer a free and potentially more inclusive alternative—but does this hold true for everyone?

Athaiba Beach in Muscat as an example

When asked about their preferred activities, it became clear that visitors of Athaiba public beach engage in a wide range of routines. Some prefer to visit the beach alone, enjoying the silence,

either watching the sunset or walking along the waterfront. Others come in groups, gathering with family or friends, often for barbecues or picnics. Sport activities also play a role: football matches are commonly held in the evenings, along with opportunities for jet-skiing and kite-surfing, furthermore.

Additionally, people can rent out furnished seating areas, covered by tent-like structures. An Omani woman who visited the beach with her family explained: “The tent is for *sutrah* “cover” and privacy. It lets you sit comfortably without worrying about people looking at you. You can relax, watch the sea, and have your own space.”

Regardless of the different activities, the beach is widely described as a place of leisure and relaxation. Both an Omani university student and a Palestinian man referred to the beach as a “breather”. An Indian female expatriate elaborated: “It is my place for privacy and focus. If I am happy, I come with friends to sit and talk. But if I am moody or sad, I come here alone.”

A public space for everyone?

In a highly diverse society, spaces that do not exclude people along lines of ethnicity, class, or gender are scarce. When this issue was raised with several beach-goers, the overwhelming majority suggested that the beach might be an exception.

A young Omani man said: “Diversity is within us; it is part of us. In our houses, in the streets, or where we work—we are used to diversity in cultures”. A member of another Omani family that visited the beach expressed a similar view: “Oman is a mix of cultures. You see everyone here—it’s a place for everyone to feel free.” Highlighting the economic dimension, an Omani business owner at the beach remarked: “The public beach is inclusive—you find the rich, the poor, and the middle class all sitting together. It belongs to everyone.”

Responses of non-Omani nationals were very similar. An Egyptian woman noted: “Old and young different cultures and nationalities—if you come on Eid, or the weekend, you’ll see everyone. All are the same, there are no differences. And all are enjoying.” When asked if she felt a sense of belonging at the beach, an Indian expatriate shared a comparable perspective: “It feels like

home now. When I first moved to Oman, I didn't expect to find a public space that felt like my home country, but now I do. I would really miss it if I left.”

In the same space, but not together

A professor, who has conducted extensive research on the appropriation of space in Muscat by South-Asian migrants and wants to remain anonymous, offered valuable, nuanced perspectives to the previous observations. The professor emphasized the increasing urbanization of the coastline, which is accompanied by its commercialization. Cafés, restaurants, and hotels are being developed to attract investors and to create a ‘modern’ waterfront.

Within this context, the professor similarly identified the beach as one of the few spaces where people from different backgrounds can come together, although distinguished: “Well, not come together, because they are not spending time together. But they are spending time in the same space.”



Picture of the pier and park, showing how people are in the same place but not together. © Martje Abelman 05. December 2025

Through the professor’s extensive study of the beach, he/she observed an underlying spatial zoning—a set of unwritten rules that shape how different groups occupy particular areas: “Within

this beach, there are zones that are specific to certain groups for certain purposes. And the purpose and the zoning are very closely related to race, class, and gender.” Notably, the playground with the adjacent grass area tends to be more family oriented. According to his/her research, low-income labor migrants — often-times residing in Oman without their own family — may, hence, feel hesitant to appropriate this space: “They fear that they may make the families feel uncomfortable”.

Despite such issues of social division, the professor concluded: “Public beaches are very important for migrant workers. Because they are spaces where they can enjoy their free time while feeling like part of a society and participating in everyday life.”

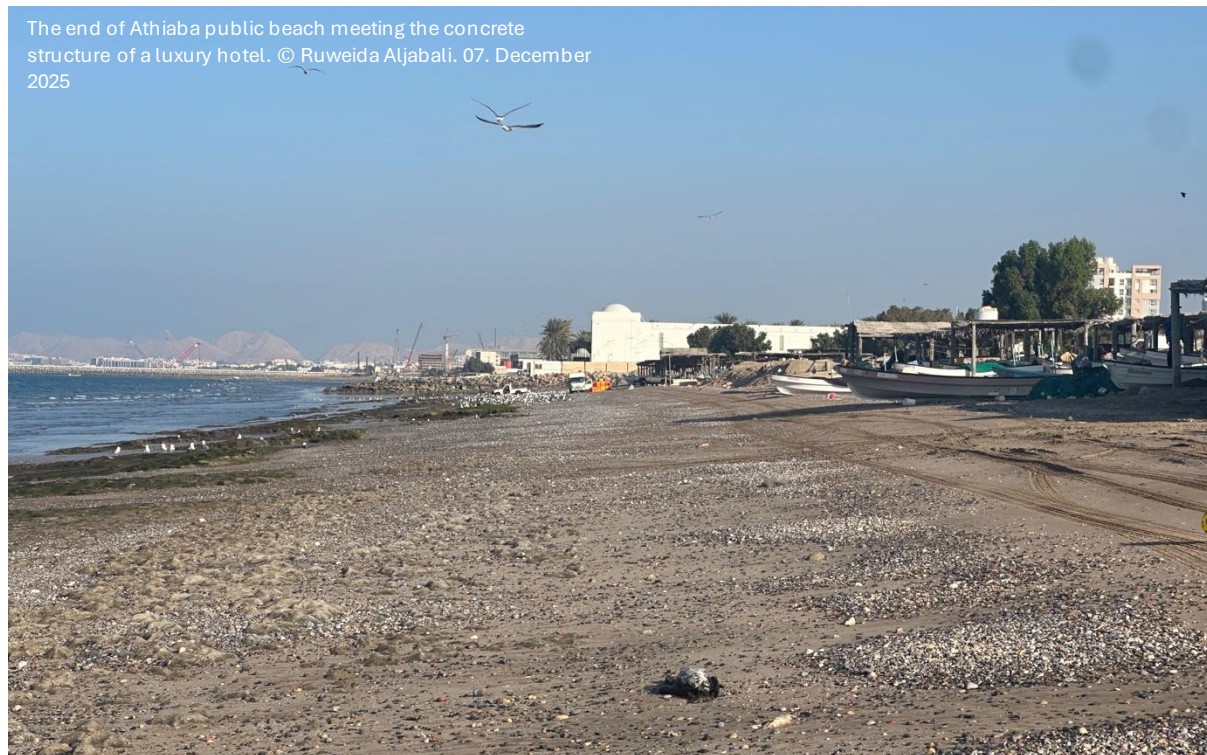
The fear of privatization

Since oil was first exported from Oman in 1967, economic diversification has been a central concern for Oman’s economy (Morton, 2012). Recognizing that oil is a finite resource, the country’s Vision 2040 emphasizes the development of alternative sectors—such as tourism and private enterprise—while also seeking to attract foreign investment (Oman Vision 2040, n.d.). The 2040 vision, as initiated by Late Sultan Qaboos and carried further by Sultan Haitham, aims to transform the Sultanate into a diversified, sustainable, and globally competitive economy and society -less reliant on oil (ibid).

These trends point a potential risk of privatization for beaches in Oman (Smith, 2026), as one of the sectors the vision predominantly focuses on is tourism. Opening the coastal areas for private companies and investors could potentially diminish one of the few spaces where the citizens of the Sultanate spend time in a shared public setting. This accompanying image captures the concrete wall of a luxury hotel in Muscat, marking the endpoint of the Athiaba public beach stretch: residents can still reach the remaining stretch, but the wall confines community -life and the fishing that, until the 1970s, shaped the coast's development and remains central to Omani heritage (Smith, 2026).

Based on an interview with an official from the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning, it is confirmed that the privatization of the coastline has already started. It was, however, claimed

that beach-privatization would be balanced. Privatization is, nonetheless, permanent and irreversible, and the potential to further privatization remains (Smith, 2026). Here, a question remains: how much privatization will the Omani society accept?



An inclusive space in an exclusive system

The question of how inclusive public beaches in Oman truly are offers a valuable entry - point for understanding the broader importance of non-commercial, accessible spaces. At the same time, any discussion within the context of planning inclusive public spaces must not overlook the structural conditions shaping the lives of migrant workers. Although not officially operative anymore, the sponsorship (kafala) system puts migrants' rights at risk and makes them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation by employers (Human Rights Watch, n.d.). It is, therefore, important to underline that public spaces are not the one-fits-all solution for achieving a just-society - in which access is equal and safe for all, regardless of background. Yet, as the example of the beach illustrates, public beaches remain crucial sites, where social boundaries (such as class and ethnicity) can be softened and where the possibility of collective-belonging, however limited, can still emerge.

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