

## Embracing Sustainable Tourism in Oman: Case Study of Mirbat Settlement

Alya Al-Hashim <sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Civil & Architectural Engineering, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman

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### Abstract

Currently the tourism in Oman is at its initial formation stage, making it a great opportunity for researchers, planners and decision makers to propose tourism plans that would best fit with country's nature and culture. The present paper explores the potential of converting existing settlements in Oman to touristic destination and as a case study an old settlement in the Southern region of Oman called "Mirbat Settlement" was chosen. Mirbat Settlement is one of the thousands of settlement in Oman, which started disappearing after the mass modernization that started in 1970.

The paper will focus on the three pillars of sustainable tourism: the first is developing the local economy of the region and involving the society both in heritage preservation and cultural tourism development in Oman. The second is minimum impact on the surrounding environment and finally providing unique quality experience for the visitors.

**Keywords:** *heritage tourism, built heritage, sustainable tourism*

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**JEL Classification:** Z30

### 1. Introduction

Oman, is a country in the Middle East known for its millenary history because of the various foreign attacks it was subjected to throughout history. This is evident in the defensive settlements and numerous monuments that can be found in various parts of the country. These monuments and settlement can be considered important features for touristic attractions. In 2012, Muscat (capital city of Oman) was chosen as the capital of Arab tourism [1], indicating that Oman has managed to maintain its traditional identity throughout the years.

Despite Oman's potential in becoming a hub of heritage tourism, it is yet at very early stages of development. This could be explained by the fact that most of the built heritage sites have been abandoned by its inhabitants in peruse of modern life-styles in bigger cities. This has led to the neglect of the existing built heritage and eventually to the deterioration of many.

The Southern region of Oman, specifically city of Salalah (second largest city in Oman) has witnessed a total of 415,209 visitors during the "khareef season" in 2016, which is an annual fall season event from June 21st to September 21st. The highest percentage of tourists were from neighbouring GCC countries (16.1%), followed by Arabs (1.5%), Europeans (0.65%), Americans(0.22%), Africans(0.06%) and Oceanians (0.06%) [2]. Annual "Salalah Tourism festival" takes place during mentioned "khareef season", however khareef is not the only thing Salalah is known for, Salalah is even more famous for its ancient frankincense trade, with the UNESCO including several ancient settlements (Al Balid, Sumharam, Shisr and Wadi Dawkah) in Dhofar in its World Heritage List, appropriately naming it the "Land of Frankincense".

## **2. Importance of Heritage Tourism**

One definition that encapsulates the term “Heritage Tourism” properly is “is travel that is motivated by a desire to experience the authentic natural, historic and cultural resources of a community or region” [3]. Heritage tourism is the desire to visit and experience a site that is unique to a community or region and cannot be found elsewhere. This can include buildings, folk stories, landscape, art and music, they are all considered expressions of heritage [4].

In recent years, tourism has witnessed drastic development and has become world’s largest industry. It is was estimated that travel and tourism would generate around \$5.5 billion of economic activity in 2004 [5]. Since tourism marketplace has become increasingly saturated, there has been a trend towards increasing specialization among tourists, hence heritage tourism is becoming fastest growing sector. Many countries have taken this opportunity to boost their local culture and enhance tourism activities [6].

There are some authors who consider heritage as the past [7], however recent literature has provided a fresh perspective on the modern-day use of elements of the past, making heritage element of present and future.

Heritage preservation is not merely the preservation of a structure or building, it is also preservation of culture, which is why it should consider the links between the past, present and future [8].

The benefits and values of Heritage can be categorized into emotional, cultural and functional. Emotional values include wonder, identity, continuity and spiritual, whereas cultural values include documentary, historic, archaeological, age, scarcity, aesthetic, symbolic, architectural, townscapes, landscapes, ecological and scientific. Functional values include the economic, social and political importance of heritage [9]. Because of these benefits, Heritage tourism has become one of the fastest growing sector in the tourism industry. It can be a source of income and education not only for the local community but also the global community, in addition to its capability to influence policy [10].

Oman has a rich history and the cultural sites are evidence of this history, these sites have been not yet been properly utilized. Opening these sites to the world and sharing their stories would connect Oman with the world and become a link to the remote past. Cultural sites in Oman can be categorized as personal heritage, they reflect a sense of time when people were more authentic and had simpler pleasures, reflecting the values longed for in today’s complex society.

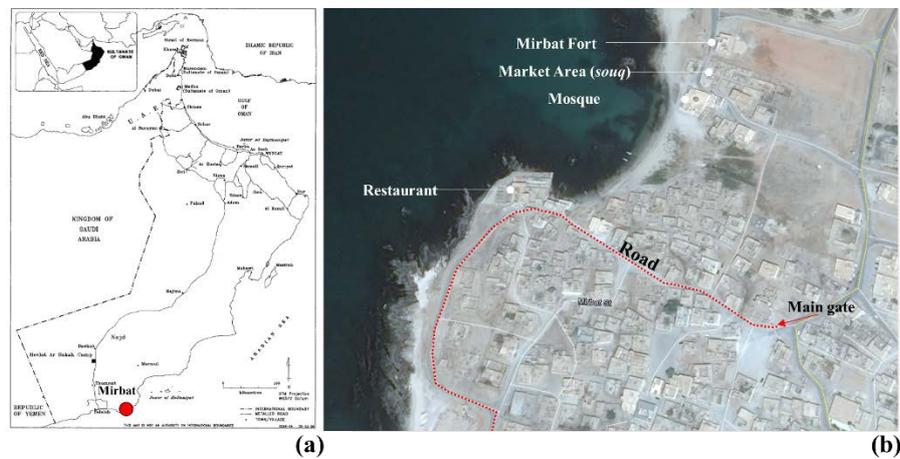
For this paper, Mirbat settlement was chosen for analysing tourism potential in Oman, it is studied in terms of its authenticity and possibility of converting it to a touristic destination, which can serve as case study for other traditional settlement in Oman in the future and would also set a new possible direction for Oman’s tourism sector, which is “heritage tourism”.

## **3. Settlement of Mirbat**

The settlement is located at an old Mirbat port, which used to be an active port in the old days and since the settlement is located at the coast line, it has an amazing view to the open sea from one side and view of the mountains from the other side.

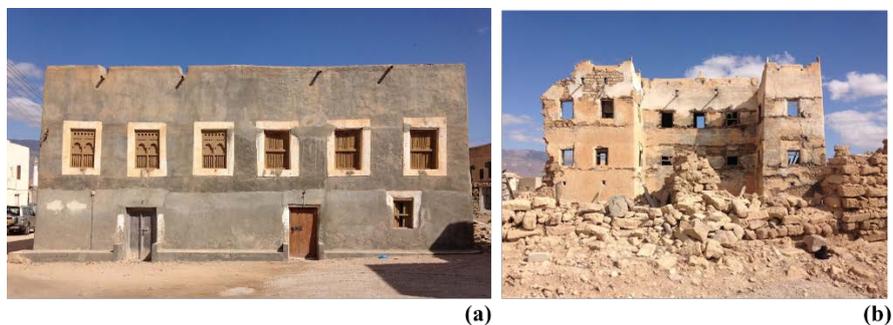
The site was very quiet and remote from the city area, giving it a natural touch and had paved road leading to it and was around 1hour away from the airport.

**Figure 1.** Location map (a) Oman map showing Mirbat location. (b) Mirbat settlement layout (Google Earth 2016)



Despite the historic significance of the site, it was abandoned and mostly ruined because of neglect. Most houses still maintained their architectural character, because if which the identity of the area was recognizable. Some of the houses were inhabited by the locals, indicating that there are some houses in liveable conditions with proper supply of water and electricity. The area surrounding the settlement was also active, with commercial and governmental buildings.

**Figure 2.** Buildings in Mirbat settlement



The settlement fabric can still be easily recognized as well as the major buildings. A new development took place just near the settlement, with residential and commercial buildings. In addition to that there were several significant buildings that might have been developed along with the settlement, such as: Old Mirbat fort, which seemed in a relatively good condition as it was renovated recently. Also the old souq (market area), which was almost in ruined conditions, but its structure was still standing. In addition to that the settlement still has an active local restaurant on the sea shore that provides an excellent view of the settlement. Overall the settlement seemed to have a well sorted fabric that can easily be adopted for future development. The area looked authentic and untouched, with the real feel of the old Mirbat town, you can almost forget which year it is just by walking around in the alleys of the town.

**Figure 3.** Mirbat settlement overview (2014)



There is a single road leading to it and you would enter the settlement through a grand welcoming gateway, which seemed relatively new. As soon as you get inside the settlement, there is an open welcoming area, where events used to take place, according to the locals. Most of the structures in the settlement are residential units with all shapes and sizes. They all have a very memorizing architectural character reflecting the authenticity of Mirbat town. Most of these units are more than 80 years old, some of them were renovated, whereas others were left as they are. Each of the houses in the area are unique and at the same time fit well with the urban fabric. The houses are scattered, creating interesting clusters. These clusters create interesting walkable spaces. In addition to the residential units there also are some commercial units in the settlement. One is the restaurant at the sea front, which is still active and attracts many visitors. The other is the traditional market (souq), which seemed abandoned from long time ago.

Both the commercial units have proper locations in the settlement, with spectacular views to the sea. They are conveniently located at the end of the trip of the settlement.

Mirbat settlement was analysed in four main aspects: cultural, physical, product and experiential values in order to assess its potential to become a cultural and heritage attraction in the future.

### **3.1 Cultural Values**

The settlement reflects a unique cultural tradition of Omani man in the past, it also holds a regional significance as it used to be an active port. The settlement has the capability to create emotional connection with the visitor because of its cultural aspect and can be considered an asset “worth conserving” as it represents heritage of Southern Oman community (Dhofari community). In the future if the settlement was opened for visitors, it can withstand visitation without damaging its cultural values, as it has large open gathering areas. In fact opening the settlement for visitors may even help in better preserving it, as it is currently getting neglected. However, if the local residents and government bodies realize the cultural value of the settlement, they would start taking better care of it.

### **3.2 Physical Values**

The settlement can easily be accessed, because of the paved road that leads directly to the main gate of the settlement and can be considered ‘safe’ as there are potential hazards for visitors in the area. Around 30% of the building in Mirbat settlement are ruined or semi-ruined, 40% are in acceptable condition and 30% are inhabited by the locals, which also are in acceptable condition. The site is not only appealing within its boundary, it’s also attractive in its surroundings as it surrounded by sea from one side and mountain from the other.

### 3.3 Product Values

The site is big enough both in scale and content to retain tourists for a long time and not much effort is required to get to the site. The site is near Mirbat fort and an old market place (traditional souq), it also is relatively close to Samahram, an existing archaeological site in the area. However currently the site does not have much of a market appeal as it has not been advertised as Samahram, which is an archaeological site in Salalah that contains the remains of an ancient port city and military stronghold and was center of the ancient frankincense trade route.

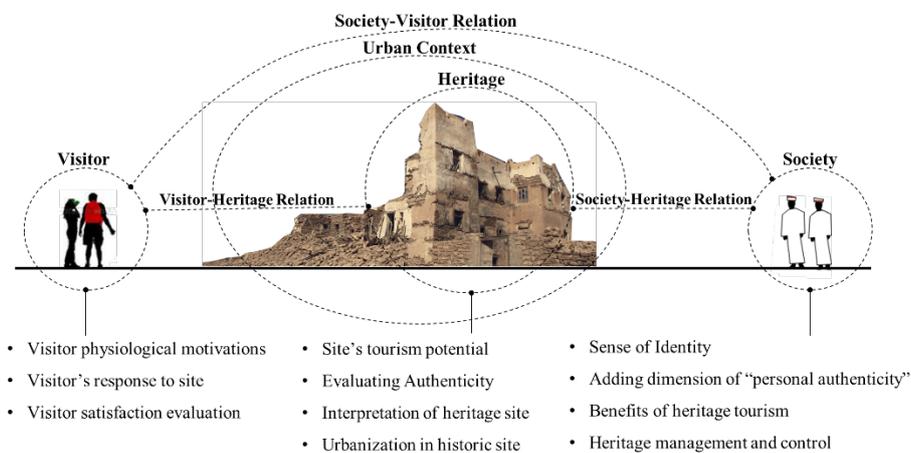
### 3.4 Experiential values

In addition to the cultural value, the settlement also offers multiple activities that can be appealing to different visitor types. Because of the proximity of sea and mountain, different sea and hiking activities can be introduced. In addition to that, market area can be reactivated allowing the visitors to purchase authentic souvenirs. The site has the potential to meet different visitor expectations along with providing a unique experience unlike any other cultural experience.

## 4. Identifying elements of heritage tourism in Mirbat

There are three main components in any heritage tourism, which are: heritage itself, visitors and the local society. Heritage tourism can be viewed as a business, where heritage is the product, tourist is the consumer and society is the merchant, hence ways to optimize this business model are proposed from view point of each of these parties. These three elements will be further analysed for the case of Mirbat in the following section.

**Figure 4.** Identification of heritage tourism elements and their interrelation



### 4.1 Visitor – what are the visitors looking for in Mirbat?

Since the visitor is considered the consumer in the heritage tourism model, his satisfaction is considered the ultimate aim of this model as the existence of heritage tourism is highly dependent upon the visitors. The expected visitors for Mirbat settlement are mostly visitors with interest in culture and heritage and who are looking for authentic and unique experience.

Unexpectedly, tourists were in Mirbat settlement, they loved the settlement and were enjoying their trip. When asking them about their experience, they said that they were amazed with the settlement and would love to visit it again. They also welcomed the idea of opening this settlement for tourists and promised to

visit it if such thing is developed further. Despite the poor or no advertisement of Mirbat settlement, tourists with interest in cultural heritage were able to find it easily, indicating that the site is easy to find and quite attractive despite the neglect.

#### **4.2 Heritage – historic value of Mirbat**

Heritage is what makes a certain community or region unique and it can include structure, art, folk stories and many more forms of cultural representation. Although a region may have a number of similar resources, it is the individual stories linked to each site what makes a place different and unique. Heritage provides us with a sense of place, a connectedness to that place, to land, traditions, customs and family [8].

Authenticity of heritage is a matter of concern for researchers, practitioners and management involved in heritage tourism industry. Authenticity of heritage can be addressed under three dimensions and two contextualizing aspects, the three dimensions are: the objective (real), the constructed (sociopolitical) and the personal (phenomenological). And the two aspects that contextualize authenticity are: space and time [11].

In the case of Mirbat settlement, objective dimension of the authenticity are the traditional buildings that reflect the local vernacular architecture of the area. The constructed dimension can be achieved through activating the old market place and by hosting traditional performance arts of Dhofar (South of Oman) in the open areas of the settlement. Whereas personal dimension is realized through providing the visitors with living experience in the settlement and interacting with locals.

#### **4.3 Society – society’s acceptance to tourism industry in Mirbat**

Communities and societies in addition to being the rightful owner of this heritage as in most cases, they often have sentimental attachments to a place and these attachments depends on a place’s social, historic and/or aesthetic value [8]. A place’s significance is sometimes related with its local history, giving a community their sense of identity from past events of great importance [4].

During our visit we interviewed tourists and locals asking them about the settlement and their impression about the area. The locals were emotionally attached to area and yet welcomed the visitors and were proud to share their history with them. When discussing the idea of opening the settlement for tourist, the locals embraced the idea and welcomed it, they said that they would love the share the settlement history with tourists.

**Figure 5.** (a) Interviewing locals in Mirbat settlement. (b) Tourists visiting settlement



#### **5. Interrelation of Heritage tourism elements in case of Mirbat**

The interrelation between elements of heritage tourism have been intensively researched about in the past decade and methods of developing these relations have also been proposed to make the heritage model more effective. Interrelation between heritage tourism elements of Mirbat settlement will be analysed in this section in order to understand how to satisfy each of these elements.

### **5.1 Visitor-Heritage Relationship**

Over the years researches about visitor motivations were based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Need (1954), which states that the basic needs, such as physiological, safety and security must be met before the next levels in the needs hierarchy can be met, such as sense of belonging and self-actualization [12]. However research in the theory of visitor motivations evolved into combination of push/pull factors. Push factors are defined as internal motivations that peruse the person to travel, such as self-expression, self-development and relaxation. Whereas Pull factors are external and are related to the destination attributes [13].

In case of Mirbat settlement, push factors can be identified as personal desire to visit historic or cultural sites, exploring new cultures and knowledge enrichment. Whereas the pull factors can be uniqueness of the site, activities provided and cultural richness of the settlement.

### **5.2 Society-Heritage Relationship**

Ming Ming Su (2011) emphasized on the interactive relationship between a heritage site and the local community in tourism development. Heritage site being the basis of any heritage tourism and are the main source of attracting tourists, tourism development often enhance the local community infrastructure, provides employment, opportunities and improves local income level. Moreover, local community can be become a major part of the heritage site and enrich the touristic experience for visitors by providing them with needed services, activities and products. Thus, if managed properly, both parties: heritage and community can benefit from the flow of income forming a mutual supportive relationship [14].

Y. L. Huang (2006) identified six impact factors for a community to participate in heritage tourism: community costs, community benefits, social and cultural impacts, impacts on individuals, living standards and economic impacts.

By involving the community in Mirbat settlement, it is expected that the tourists would be attracted to stay longer and spend more as the experience becomes more enriching. Moreover, the Omani government should set up an effective mechanism for community participation, so the local community can benefit from the tourism development and local economy, hence improving their living standards.

Mirbat settlement is considered cultural heritage of the local community in the area. It builds their local identities, maintains community sustainability and provides them with 'sense of space', hence it is very crucial that stay attached to the settlement and be involved in all the future developments in the area.

### **5.3 Visitor-Society Relationship**

Edson (2004) states that "heritage enfranchises the emotionally and culturally disenfranchised". He also adds that heritage resources process astonishing emotional and intellectual appeal and the capability of evoking the feeling of prestige and sense of pride. The personal interaction between visitors and local community helps promote the local culture. This highlights the importance of sharing "place stories", as it helps in developing peaceful relations between individuals and communities.

## **6. Promoting sustainable tourism in Mirbat**

It is proposed to develop the settlement in three phases in order to find the funding for such large development. During the first phase, the houses at the coastal area would be renovated, in addition to the restaurant, market area (souq) and the old houses at the entrance area. In the second phase the houses near the roads would be renovated as they are the closer to the services. In the third phase, more houses in the internal part of the settlement would be renovated. The rest of the settlement would be restored depending on the available funding and the revenue from the developed parts of the settlement.

In order to ensure that the tourism in Mirbat settlement evolves to become sustainable tourism, it is important to satisfy the three pillars of sustainable tourism, which are: developing local economy, minimum impact on the site and providing quality experience to the visitor.

## **6.1 Developing local economy**

By activating tourism in Mirbat settlement, it would definitely impact the economy of the area, as the visitors will require amenities and services. In addition to that the existing market area can be revived to become the hub for selling local art work and souvenirs. In addition to that, existing restaurant can also be reactivated by providing local cuisine to the visitors, which would enhance the experience of the tourist to another level.

## **6.2 Minimum impact**

As the existing buildings are form of vernacular architecture of the area, they are in perfect harmony with the surrounding. The existing setting does not have any negative impact on the site, however as the site opens for tourists, site management plan should be developed to make sure that the heritage in the site does not get impacted by these visits. Also it is important to maintain the site by regular inspection and repair. Local community should be educated in this aspect so they can maintain and manage the site independently without need of external intervention.

## **6.3 Quality visitor experience**

It is important to enhance the quality of visitor experience, as the tourism sector is solely dependent upon visitors. By providing them with a unique experience that they cannot find anywhere else is important, so they would promote and recommend the site and would also revisit in the future. Authenticity and uniqueness of experience are two important factors to ensure the visitor satisfaction.

## **7. Conclusion**

In summary, Oman has a vast opportunity to develop its heritage tourism, because of the huge number of cultural sites. By maintaining these sites appropriately, so they would satisfy the basic needs of the tourists and at the same time don't compromise the sites' authenticity, which attracted the tourists in the first place.

When converting these sites into touristic attractions, it should be taken into consideration that enhance the visitor experience and consequently ensure public support for heritage conservation.

The goal of this project is to offer high quality, comprehensive service which is distinctive, affordable and personalized. This project is committed to the natural, economic and historical environment, with which it aims to strengthen the image of Omani tourism and link it to sustainable development.

## **8. Acknowledgement**

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