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Whitewashed villas set among neat fairways? Enter the new Middle East

THE metropolis of Dubai is multiplying, drawing in foreigners disgruntled by the declining prospects of their native economies. But, while the mild business climate of low tax and little red tape might be to their taste, this swarm of expatriate executives are less impressed with other aspects of this capital of the Middle East.

Stressed inhabitants of the concrete jungle are increasingly looking for an escape – and the sights of many have settled on the less spoilt environs in neighbouring Oman, only three hours' drive away. The landscape of the Sultanate veers from 1,700km (1,056 miles) of coastline, adorned with fjords, mangroves and sand-fringed beaches, to vast, picturesque mountain ranges. The country is renowned for its unspoilt, yet relatively Westernised, culture. Alex Upson, a director of the estate agent Cluttons, says: "It is possible to have a very adventurous life in Oman, and yet the country remains safe."

These Dubai weekenders are now competing with second-home owners from Europe. Since a change in the rules over foreign ownership two years ago, which let foreigners buy freehold homes in designated developments, the first schemes are now



GULF CLUB

beginning to come to fruition. The Malkai, in Barka, near the capital, Muscat, is typical of the kind of upscale development that the sultanate hopes will ensure that it stands out from other Gulf rivals. The scheme – 101 white-rendered villas, decorated in mocha, cream and "Burmese beige" and set in austere, formal landscaping around a 41-suite boutique hotel – aims to introduce the concept of the country club to Oman. Wealthy Omanis as well as foreigners are



shelling out about £2 million through the estate agent Cluttons for villas scheduled to be completed in 2010. Locals have also been drawn to the Al Madina A'Zarqa scheme, known as Blue City, designed by Foster & Partners. The 32 sq km project, with commercial premises, schools, universities and four resort hotels, will ease pressure on Muscat, which is 90km away.

According to Chris Steel, a director of the estate agent Hamptons International, the Blue City should also become the sultanate's most significant city. The value of apartments in the scheme, priced at £160,000 for one bedroom, has risen 25 per cent in a year, the agent adds.

Hamptons reports that foreign buyers have proved more interested in The Wave, pictured, a more leisure-oriented beachfront development within easy reach (and indeed sight) of Muscat's international airport, set for completion in 2013. Here a one-bedroom apartment costs about £157,000.

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