

## An Educational Journey Through Oman

By Ziana Qaiser

**W**HEN Dr Scott Monsma, a professor of Sociology at Northwestern College in Iowa, first visited Oman in 2002, he found it to be an exciting country that provided an opportunity to engage in a dialogue about Islam, Arab culture and more specifically Omani culture. He returned to the United States and decided to organise a study abroad trip from Northwestern College that would enable students to travel to Oman for a cross-cultural learning opportunity.

Dr Monsma was back in Oman in the winter of 2004, this time with a group of five students, for a memorable two week long trip that increased their understanding of Omani culture.

Speaking about the objective of the trip, Dr Monsma explained what he had hoped the students would achieve while in Oman. "The goal of this part of our class was to get us to think about three issues," he explained. "Firstly, how can we better understand 'the other' and learn to appreciate a different culture? Secondly, how can we better understand Islam? And lastly, how can we better understand the history and development of Oman?"

The goal for Dr Monsma was to do most of the teaching before the group reached Oman. After arriving in Oman, he encouraged his students to let the local Omanis be their teachers. Each student wrote a daily journal while in the Sultanate and now that they are back in America, they are writing a final reflective paper on what they have learned, relating it to the three main themes of the course.

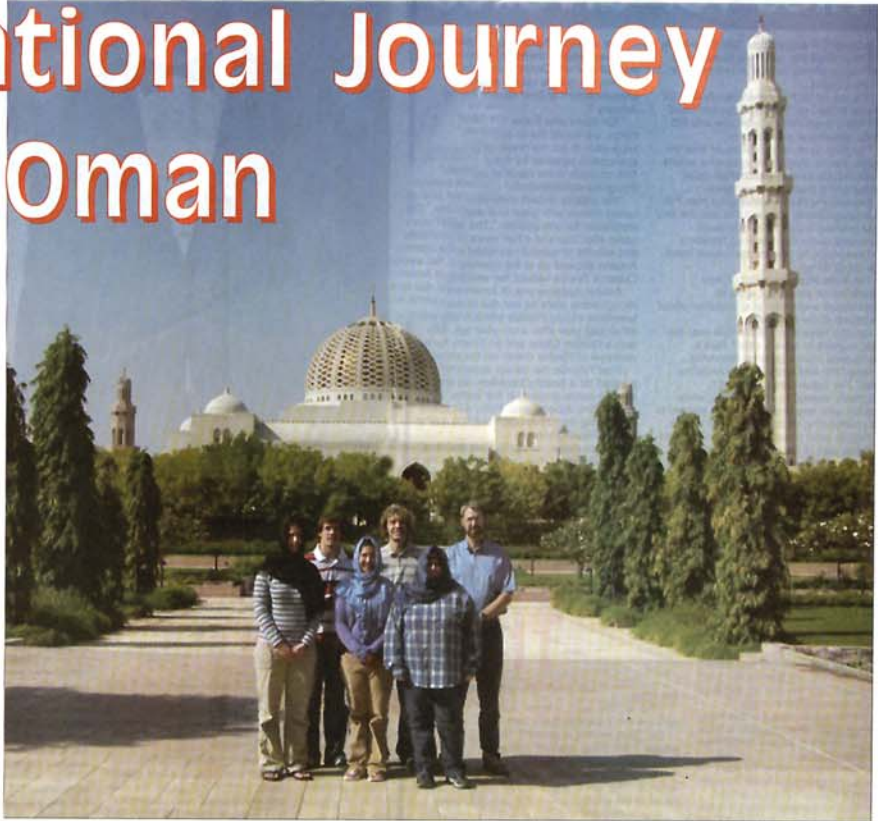
"I firmly believe that when we travel to another culture, such as Oman, it is important for us to immerse ourselves as much as possible," said Dr Monsma. "This means allowing the culture we visit to become our teacher, and living intentionally as students, for myself as well as for the five students who came with me. So every time the students engaged in a conversation with someone living in Oman, the person they were talking with became their teacher. I would be there to facilitate conversations and help the students process

what they were seeing and learning." Interacting with Omanis on a personal level turned out to be the best education for the students. "A major highlight of the trip was the people I was able to meet and the relationships I was able to build in the amount of time I had," said Aaron Thomas, a student. "Talking to people in Oman was not only an eye opener but a way to connect to someone who leads such a different life."

Visiting sites such as Bait Al Zubair Museum to learn more about Oman's history and culture, as well as the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque were part of the trip's agenda. "This was the first time that our students had ever been to a mosque," said Dr Monsma. "Not only were they impressed with the beauty of this mosque, we had an excellent guide who talked to us about Islam and the place of the mosque in Islamic thought and worship. It was valuable for us to walk through the mosque and have a chance to ask more about Islam and for us to try to have a greater understanding of Islam."

There were, of course, certain sights that the group from Northwestern College didn't plan for but ended up experiencing, such as the local atmosphere during the height of football fever. "One of our first nights in Oman was the semi-final game for the Gulf Cup," recalled Dr Monsma. "We did not realise the significance of this event, but when Oman scored — but ultimately it was a very quiet group when the game ended."

The group also had the opportunity to visit places outside Muscat by going on several trips. These included visits to the Rimal al Sahariya (Wahaiba Sands), Turtle Beach, Sur, Nizwa, Jabreen Fort, Misfat and Wadi Ghul.



The visit to the Grand Mosque was the first time that the students from Northwestern College had entered a mosque

"One day we received an unexpected invitation from a home in Izki, and we spent most of the day in Izki," said Dr Monsma. "Our Omani host invited us for breakfast and a chance to talk. We enjoyed a great breakfast and our host took us to see a fort in Izki, beehive tombs outside of Izki, and a nearby mountain spring. Then he insisted that we stay for lunch, which we did. We ended up spending the entire day in Izki."

It was this sort of traditional hospitality that impressed the students as well. "My expectations were surpassed in regards to the people's hospitality because there were several people who invited us to sit down and drink coffee with them even though we barely knew them or had just recently met them," said Kyle Jansma, one of the students on the trip. "I also found the nation's history and culture to have a distinct flavour that was added to the larger Arabic culture."

Another highlight of the trip was a meeting with students from Sultan Qaboos University. Collectively they engaged in a cross-cultural discussion about university life. Five students from Sultan Qaboos University presented on

topics related to their experiences, and the visiting students presented on topics related to their own experiences at Northwestern College. "While there were differences in some of the subjects we study, it was also clear that there were many ways in which our students shared similar experiences in going to an institution of higher learning," remarked Dr Monsma.

After the completion of a successful trip, Dr Monsma and his students returned home to share their stories. "We recently had an open forum where members of the campus community and the larger community were able to come and hear about our trip and what we learned," he said. "I believe more than forty people showed up to hear us and to see some of the pictures from our trip. It was clear as the students spoke that their view of Oman and the Middle East had changed, and in a very positive direction."

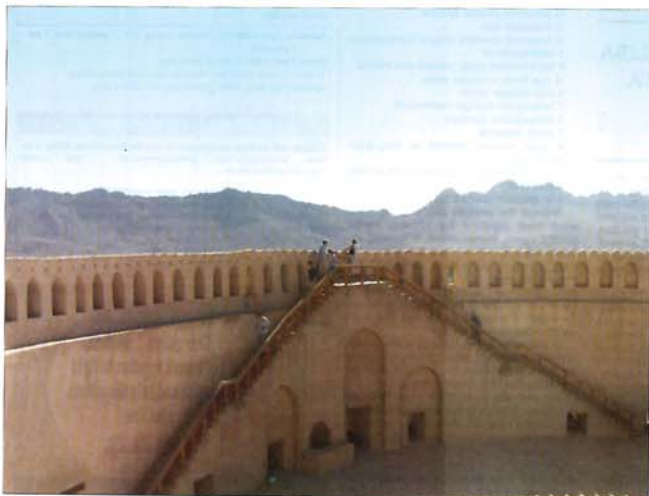
Always keen to work towards taking encouraging steps towards building cross-cultural dialogue, Dr Monsma looks forward to planning similar trips in the future to Oman so that his students can continue to challenge their perceptions of another culture.



The students found time to have some recreational fun sandboarding down the dunes



The group's local host took them on a tour through the historic part of Izki



A visit to historical sites such as Nizwa Fort was on the trip's agenda



Jabreen Fort was another site that Northwestern College students visited