



### Treasures of Trade

In the time of Imam Bil'arub, the castle contained an array of treasures from the far corners of the Yar'uba trading empire. Fittingly, Jabreen today has a collection of 18th and 19th Century export porcelains from Britain, Europe, Japan, China, India and Zanzibar. There are antique Chinese blue-and-white porcelains, and rare bowls in the famille rose pattern, dating from 1750 to 1800. Porcelains such as these were brought under sail from Canton on Omani dhows, off-loaded at Sohar and conveyed overland by camel to Jabreen where they were displayed to full advantage in the royal rooms of the castle.

### Transition to the Modern Era

In the mid 18th Century the Ya'rubia were succeeded by the noble Al Bu Said Dynasty, of which His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said is the fourteenth ruler. Imam Ahmad bin Said, the illustrious founder of today's royal line brought the Persian presence in Oman to an end in 1747; and, after

uniting the country, re-established Oman as a powerful seafaring nation with a strong merchant fleet and a proud naval force.

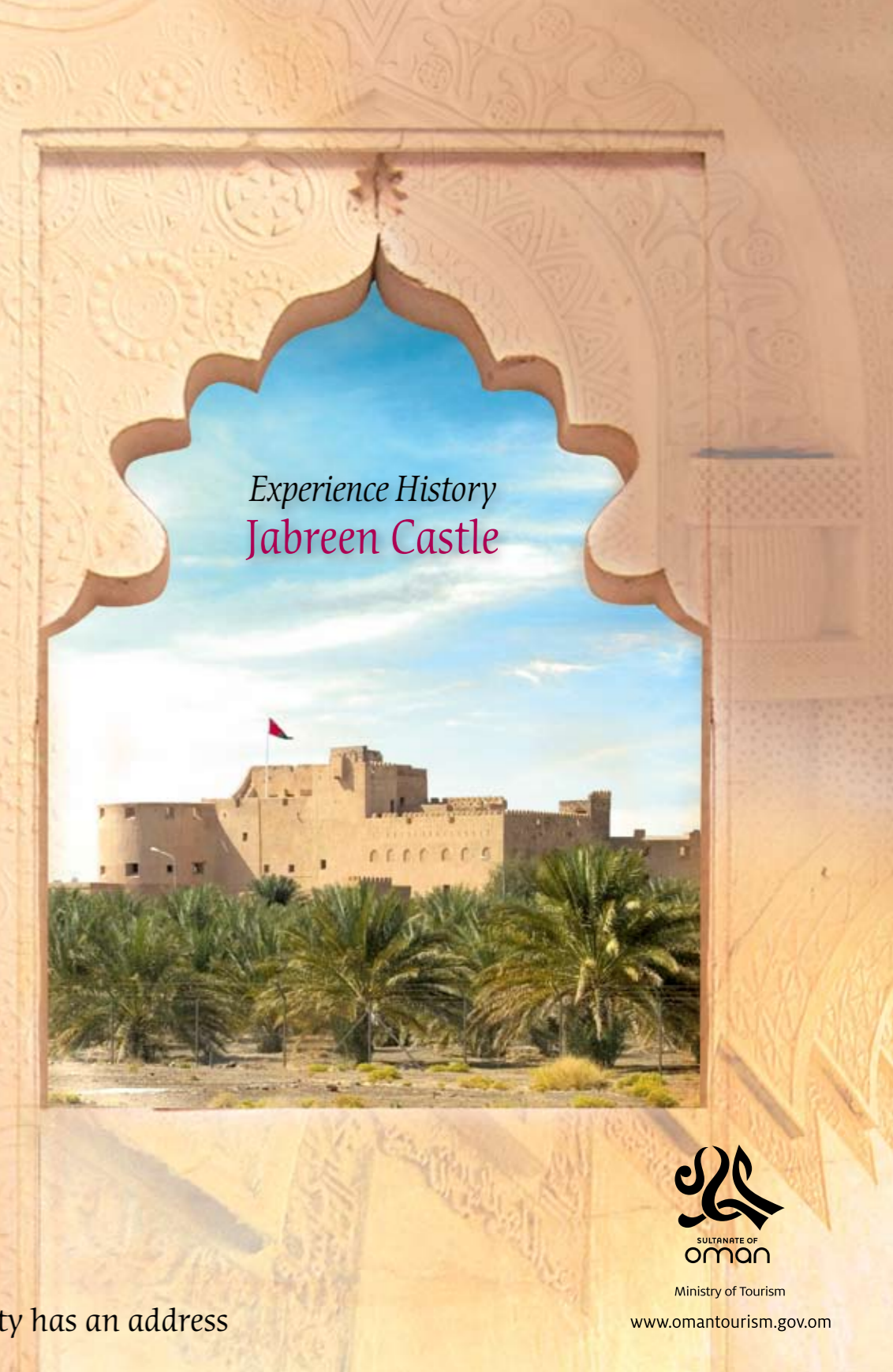
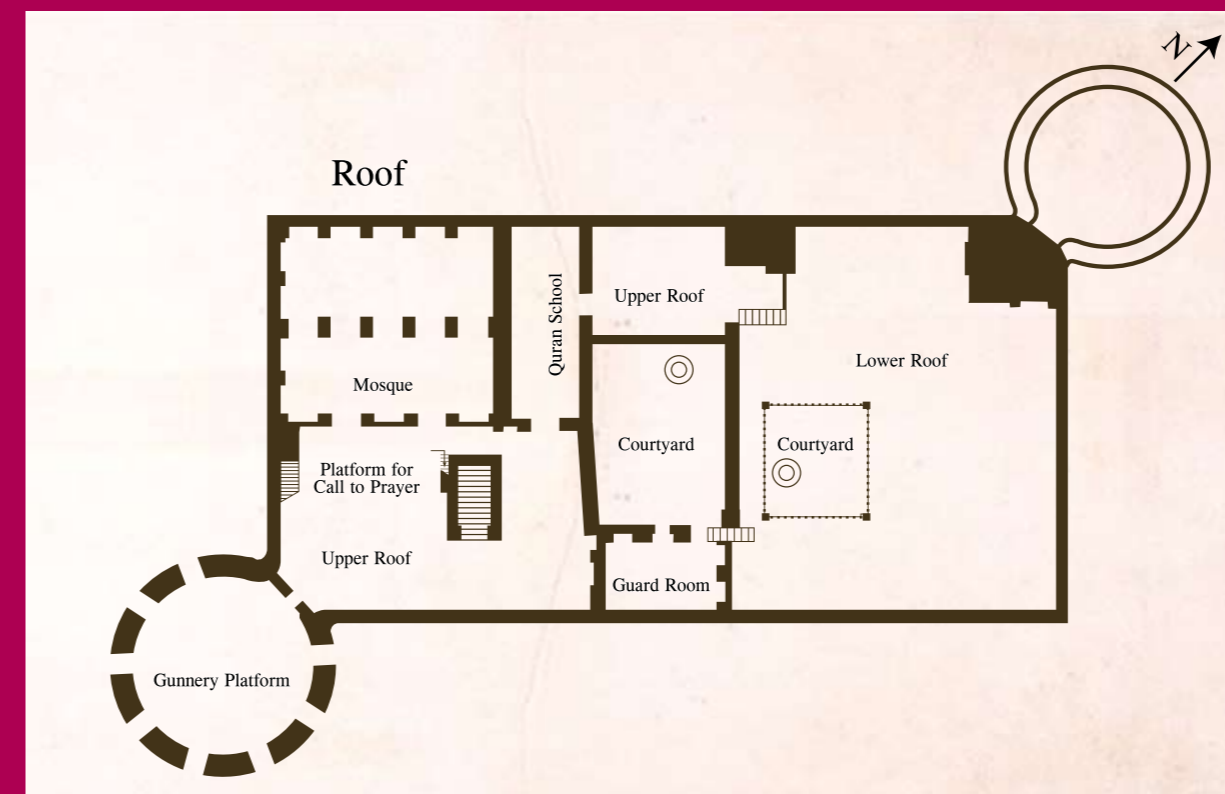
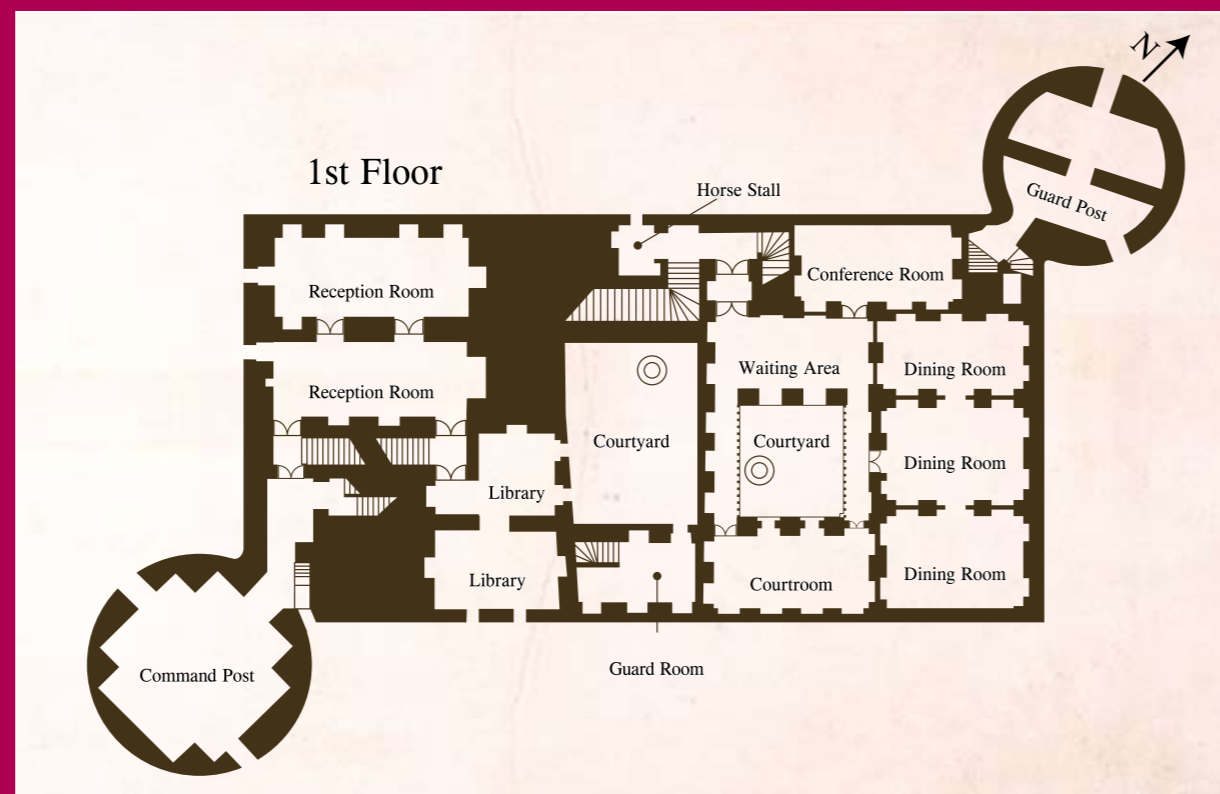
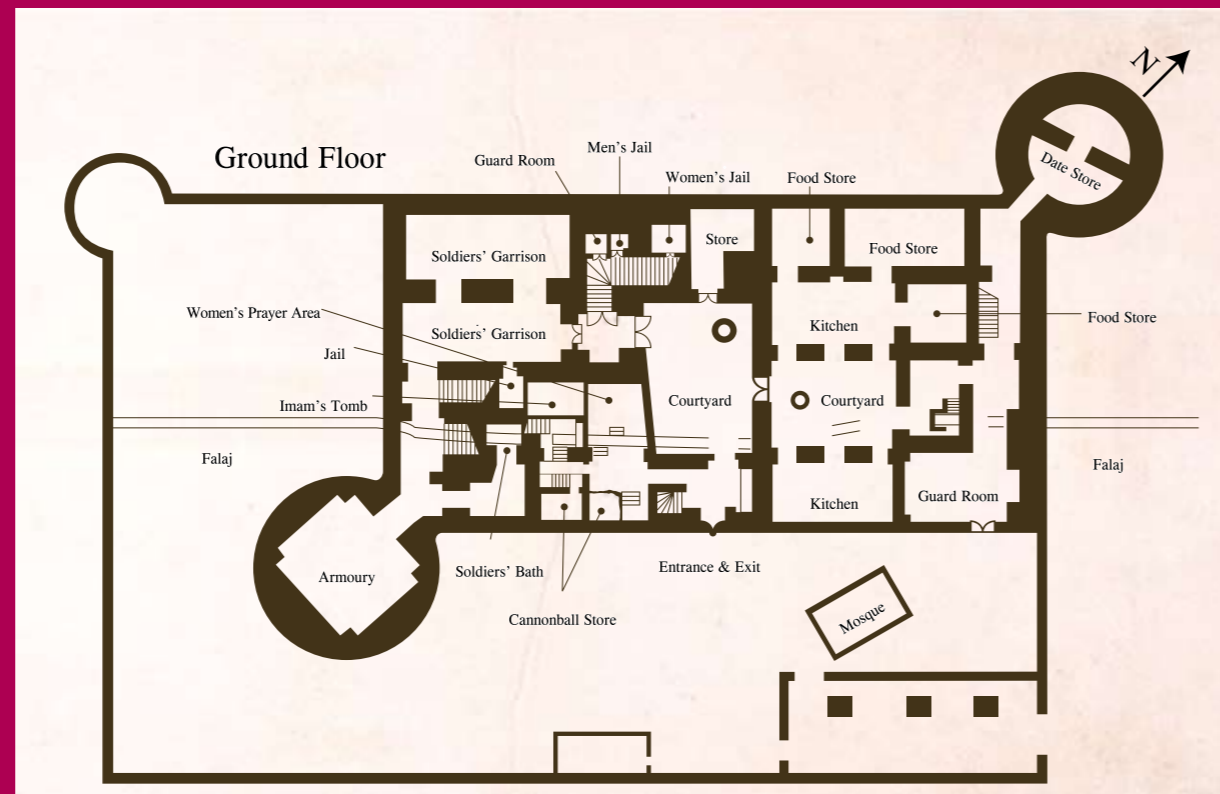
Two and a half centuries later, continuing this remarkable tradition of nation-building, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos has brought Oman into the 21st Century as a prosperous, enlightened and unified nation, demonstrating leadership for global peace and harmony, not only in the region but also on the world stage. And he has ensured that Oman has not lost its rich heritage. Time-honoured traditions are integrated in modern life and ancient monuments have been lovingly restored – not simply as artifacts, but as vital resources to share Oman's history and heritage with visitors from near and far. Oman's forts and castles are a central component in that enduring heritage; and Jabreen Castle takes pride of place as an outstanding example of an Omani fortified palace.

Research and writing by Dr. Patricia Groves. Images copyright Ministry of Tourism

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# In the Time of Jabreen

## Third Ruler in an Illustrious Dynasty

Jabreen Castle was constructed as a palatial residence circa 1680 by the third ruler of Oman's illustrious Ya'rubia dynasty, Imam Bil'arub bin Sultan, who lived here until he died in 1692. Imam Bil'arub (1670-1692) was the son and successor of the conquering hero Imam Sultan bin Saif, who had vanquished the Portuguese in 1650 after one hundred and fifty years of oppressive and cruel occupation.

## Trouble and Tragedy

When Imam Bil'arub built his beautiful residence at Jabreen, he replenished the water supply to the area and moved his capital from Nizwa. Though he began his reign during a time of peace and prosperity at the height of the Ya'rubia era, Imam Bil'arub bin Sultan was to reign for

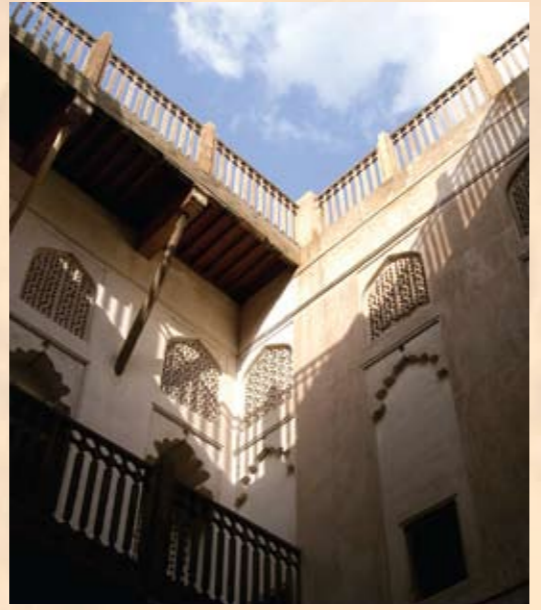
little more than two decades. Trouble and tragedy lay ahead.

In 1692 Imam Bil'arub was besieged at Jabreen by his brother Saif Bin Sultan at the head of a massive army. As the story is told, 'Losing all hope, the Imam prayed for death, and God granted his petition'.

## Victory and Abandonment

The victorious brother, Saif bin Sultan succeeded to the Imamate and moved on to become an outstanding leader, though his reign was short. Jabreen was to languish however, as Imam Saif bin Sultan's son and successor, Sultan bin Saif moved the capital to Al Hazm where he built a splendid new castle.

Though the abandoned castle at Jabreen is said to have been occupied again in the early 18th Century by Imam Mohammed bin Nasir, this was for only a brief period. Three centuries drifted past the old castle before its reclamation by the Ministry of Heritage and Culture in recent times.



## The Castle and its Mystique

The ancient structure still rises majestically from a small oasis of dusty emerald palm trees. It commands the surrounding plain that marks the end of the Akhdar mountain range and eventually recedes into the far distant Rub Al Khali.

The nobility of the castle and the serenity of its rural surroundings remind us that Jabreen Castle was once a centre of learning for the study of Islamic Law, History, Arabic, Medicine and Astrology. In harmony with its name, Jabreen was known for 'unity, peace and the call of Islam'.

## A Crowning Jewel

Sensitively restored to its original architectural elegance, Jabreen Castle is considered a crowning jewel in the firmament of forts, castles and watchtowers that once reigned over the land.

Wandering through the castle, the visitor goes from shadowed chambers into outside spaces infused with a radiance of light in shades of ochre and dusky rose. There are two open courtyards, one of which is graced by high balconies with carved wooden railings displaying a cutout, stepped-diamond motif. The balconies look inward and, along with windows in rows of slender, scalloped arches, counterbalance the solidity of the building.

## Celestial Artistry

The graceful architecture of Jabreen is matched by its fine decoration. The painted ceilings of the castle with their carved wooden beams are among the most beautiful in the country. The remarkable ceilings of Jabreen's three principal rooms are painted in floral motifs as if to rival the patterns of fine Persian carpets or to imitate skies of coloured stars.

Perhaps the most memorable of Jabreen's rooms is the 'Hall of the Sun and Moon', a reception room for guests featuring fourteen clerestory windows, seven of which are light bearing. Recessed and screened, the windows are designed to let the light of the moon stream in at night and to diminish the blaze of the sun during the day. From beds of darkened green or burgundy, constellations of flowers illuminate the ceiling, and each painted panel features an ellipse which is said to represent the eye of God, offering

protection and watching over those within.

Tall arches encase the colonnades of windows positioned above and below wooden shelves on which fine porcelains are displayed. The sumptuous atmosphere is enhanced by light slipping through lattice-like window screens in patterns composed of mathematical divisions in circles, squares and

octagons, further divided into smaller geometric units.

## An Atmosphere of Tranquility

There are places in the castle for quiet contemplation, study and prayer. On the rooftop is the Qu'ranic schoolroom, as well as one of the castle's two mosques. The other mosque is situated in the outer courtyard near the main entry. The peace and beauty of the castle is epitomized by its mosques and also by a vaulted stairway with religious inscriptions.

Set in a spacious corridor, the stairway, dated 1670, is announced by two panels with Qu'ranic inscriptions on a ground of red madder. A series of vaulted arches, pale white and adorned with holy verses, form a heavenly canopy over the stairway.

Beyond this lofty stairway is the castle library. Here, the Imam would have read at leisure, in a silence broken – as it is today – only by the rustle of wings from birds that nest in the castle's hidden corners. Before the Imam went to bed at night he passed the ninety-nine names of God inscribed in calligraphy in the arches and alcoves of the passage to his room.

Far from the public reception rooms of the Imam, in a simple chamber on the ground floor of the castle, there is a tomb set in the bare earth. It is here that Imam Bil'arub lies buried; and, poignantly. It was in this quiet corner that he had said his prayers each day.



## The Castle as a Stronghold

An unusual feature of the castle is that it contained a room for Imam Bil'arub's horse on the upper story, near the Imam's personal quarters.



The horse would have been led up a ramp in the curving passageway that is now a stairway route for visitors. The Imam's horse was kept close at hand to facilitate a quick escape and also for reasons of sentiment. In

the era of the Imam, horses were highly valued as the only swift mode of transport over land. Horses were critical to the success of military campaigns and demonstrations of superior horsemanship played a central role in festivities and celebrations.

A solid reminder of the military aspect of the castle is the northwest gunnery tower, the walls of which are two metres thick. The tower is accessed from

the top by means of a steep, dark stairway leading to a vaulted ammunition chamber, below which is the battery. It is generally believed that Jabreen started as a small garrison and that the main structure was originally built as a palatial retreat and later fortified to serve as a military stronghold, chiefly through reinforcement of the walls and the addition of two defensive towers. Nevertheless, in its essential character, Jabreen remains a royal residence.

