

# STEPPING BACK IN TIME

From watching fish drying in the sun and exploring miles of tranquil beaches to checking out blowholes and frankincense trees – not to mention relaxing in the lap of luxury— **Anand Raj OK** had a whale of a time in Oman's Salalah

Is that dried fish?' I asked, pointing to what looked like a massive tattered black carpet thrown haphazardly in the middle of the desert.

'Yes, dried fish,' said Mohammad, better known as Salah Guru, our guide. 'And don't roll down the windows of the car because the smell is not good. Also, flies might swarm in.'

It was day four of my January trip to Salalah, in Oman, and we - a small group of journalists

from the UAE - had set off from the luxurious Al Baleed Resort Salalah by Anantara, where we were staying, to Taqah, a quaint fishing village east of the city, to experience some of the unusual sights of Salalah.

Just in case you were wondering why I wasn't lazing in my private pool while sipping on a beverage that comes in a tall glass with a little umbrella on it, and instead heading off to see fish drying on the sand, well, let's just say that's par for the course on some media trips.

But I'm racing ahead. Before heading off to see drying fish, for four days we were treated to the kind of hospitality that Oman is so well known for. In fact the pampering and cosseting started even while we were in the air - in Flydubai's well-appointed business class enroute to Salalah from Dubai.

Minutes after touching down at the modern and spanking new Salalah airport - it opened less than two years ago - smiling and extremely courteous staff were on hand to welcome us to the Sultanate's popular summer getaway city before being swiftly chauffeured to the Anantara's latest regional resort, which opened last November.

A far cry from the glitz and glamorous structures its neighbour the UAE is known for, Salalah has very few high-rises. Most buildings are inconspicuous, standing either two or three storeys tall, blending into the surroundings. The absence of mega malls and bumper-to-bumper traffic lends the city a quiet, unhurried air - although there are enough cranes and heavy equipment dotting the landscape to indicate all that could change soon.

'The city *is* becoming busy. Tourists and traffic are increasing,' admits the driver, stopping behind two vehicles at a signal.

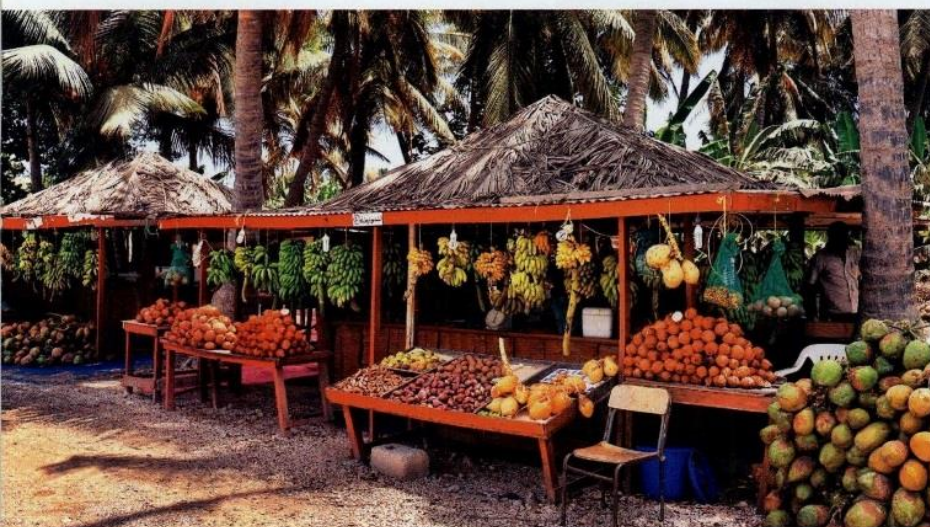
Some 20 minutes away from the airport, we spot extensive banana and coconut plantations flanking either side of the two-lane carriageway, the large swathes of greenery resembling a tropical countryside.

'The greenery is thanks to the monsoon we get from July to September,' says the driver. 'Called Khareef, it's also the tourist season of Salalah.' Almost abruptly, a





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After visiting Taqah to see tonnes of fish drying on the sand, stop by at Al Baleed to sample bananas and coconuts, after which you can head to the resort for a delicious meal

seemingly unending stretch of shanties displaying bunches of bananas and coconuts pop into view. Rows upon rows of makeshift lean-tos, one adjacent to the other, running almost a kilometre, all selling bananas and coconuts; yes, just bananas and coconuts.

'Wouldn't it make better business sense if these shops were spread across the city instead of on this one road?' I ask the driver.

'When people want fruit, they come here,' he says, enigmatically.

He didn't explain further – instead turning off the main road onto a single-lane carriageway before coming to a halt five minutes later at the welcome entrance of the resort.

Boasting 136 rooms that offer spectacular

views of the ocean or gardens, the resort that threw open its doors last year has a warm yet elegant appearance.

**T**he pampering begins almost as soon as we check-in. Leading me to a spacious villa with stark Arabic accents, the very pleasant employee seats me on the comfortable sofa, before asking me to kick off my shoes.

'You must be tired after the flight, sir,' he says, before proceeding to gently bathe my feet in a large bowl of warm, aromatic oil-infused water. He then dries my feet before massaging them tenderly to ease out the tensions of the day.

I could have fallen asleep were it not for the dinner I had to attend in half an hour at

Sakalan, the marine-themed restaurant where it was seafood buffet night.

The minimalistic al fresco dining area overlooks the beach where, on a silent day, waves can be heard gently lapping the shore. On the Thursday evening, however, there is a band playing soothing melodies as guests trickle in to spend the weekend.

A dinner of calamari, mussels, a variety of fish and prawns later, I return to my room, one of 88 private pool villas that dot the resort's sprawling landscape. The villa has a private courtyard entrance, a 20 sqm private pool, a sun deck with loungers, an indoor lounge area, a king-size bed and a fantastic music system; truly everything to keep you happy.

The next day, keen to update my wife about what I was up to, I phoned home.

'Frankincense,' she said, after a perfunctory hello and when I told her I was going to visit the Land of Frankincense Museum. 'Can you get me a box - or bag or pouch or whatever it is it comes in - of that stuff?'

Sure, I said, wondering whether I did the right thing in making that call. Quality frankincense was once said to be worth its weight in gold, and that was when the yellow metal was being traded at princely sums and not at today's relatively low price. Worried she might next ask for gold and myrrh as well, which Oman is also known for, I shouted a hasty bye and set off to the museum.

**C**onsidered one of the most prominent museums in Oman, the Land of Frankincense Museum sits in the heart of the Unesco world heritage listed site of Al Baleed in Dhofar, an area that also houses the remnants of an ancient city. The 13,700 sqm museum houses 14 galleries showcasing the awe-inspiring history of the country with particular reference to marine achievements.

There are several sections highlighting archaeological findings of pots, pans and urns and when you tire of terracotta, you can move on to study replicas of the different types of boats that Omani craftsmen, expert boatmakers, built and sailed.

An hour later, and having had my fill of pots and coins, prows and cleats, I decided to step back into the present.

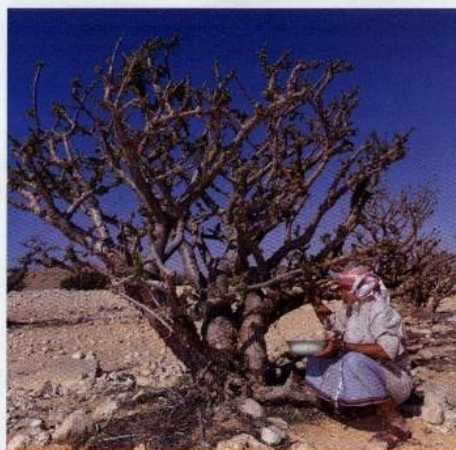
'Can you guess what tree that is?' asked Salah Guru, pointing to a shrub-like tree that took pride of place in the bright and open courtyard that I emerged into after exiting the museum's gallery.

I had no clue. 'It's a frankincense tree,' he said, grinning at having scored a point.

Less than two metres high and appearing like a scraggly shrub with branches sprouting from its base, the tree's sap is one of the region's most famous exports.

Small incisions are made in the trunk of the tree causing it to produce a resin that hardens to form little pearls of frankincense which is then collected, graded and sold, the guru says.

Burnt in a traditional burner, its smoke is used to perfume clothes, hair, homes and office spaces. So widespread is its use in the Sultanate that the fragrance lends the country a unique olfactory signature. Higher-quality resin is used to treat minor health worries like an upset stomach, says a salesman at the souvenir shop in the museum, chewing on a small nugget and offering me one. Since my tummy was fine, I declined politely although I did buy a packet for home.



With 136 rooms that offer spectacular views of the ocean or gardens, the resort is a perfect point to tour Salah, a city well known for frankincense



Luckily, I did not have to max my credit card for it. 'Next stop is the Al Baleed Archaeological Park,' says our guru, herding us into a four-wheel drive. 'Relax and rest because it's a long drive from here.'

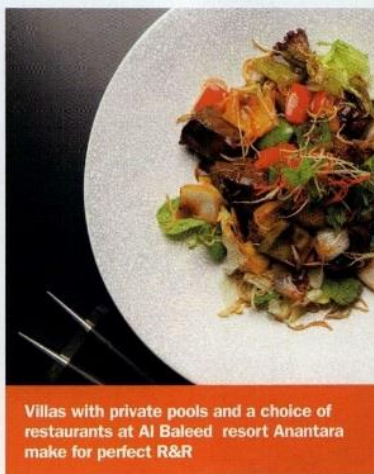
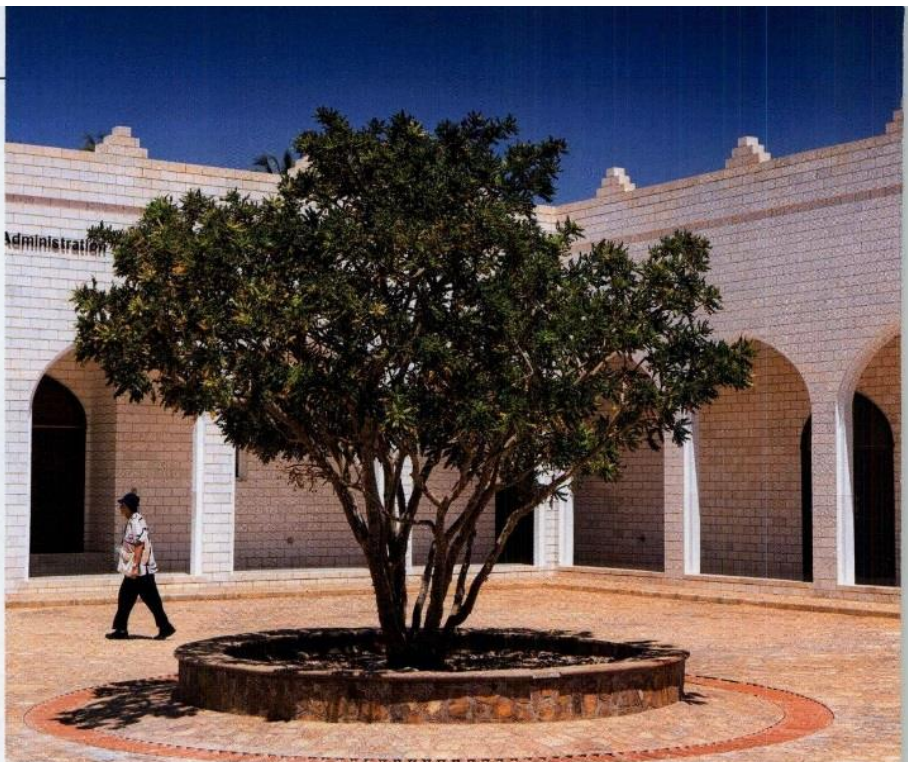
Then he pulls into a parking lot barely 50 metres away. 'We've arrived,' he grins, chuffed to bits at having pranked us about the distance.

**S** pilling out of the car, we hop into golf buggies for a tour of the archaeological park. A protected heritage site, Al Baleed was Dhofar's primary settlement from the 8th to the 16th centuries and remnants of the ancient city's mosques, houses and public areas can still be seen. Believed to have been inhabited since the Iron Age, it was considered to be one of the foremost metropolises of the time with strong walls and a moat protecting the citizens from marauding armies.

'Al Baleed, a port city, was the hub of trading with the West and a key port for exporting frankincense,' says a guide who doubles as the buggy driver.

The buggy follows a circuitous route through the park, pausing often near piles of rocks, broken down pillars, half-excavated walls and minarets for us to read the neatly labelled signs which offer an insight into the history and culture of the once-booming city.

Tour over, back in the resort it was time to relax at the well-appointed Anantara Spa. I opted for Anantara's Signature massage where the expert therapist used a fusion of oils to knead, massage and extract the stresses from the body. I guess she did not have to work too hard because just taking a walk in the lush, soothing and calm environment of the resort was enough to de-stress the body.



Villas with private pools and a choice of restaurants at Al Baleed resort Anantara make for perfect R&R



## With a **BACKDROP** of craggy mountains, the seven km-long **STRETCH** of beach begs to be **EXPLORED**. Dotted with several small shelters and **PICNIC** areas, the unspoilt sands are a **FANTASTIC** sight

Suitably refreshed, the next day I was ready for a tour to Al Mughasayl beach that sits on the west of Salalah. If the 50-odd kilometre picturesque road to Al Mughasayl beach does not leave you slack-jawed with awe, the almost untouched and quiet beach is sure to. With a backdrop of craggy mountains, the seven km-long stretch of beach begs to be explored. Dotted with several small shelters and picnic areas, the unspoilt sands are a fantastic sight.

Further along the road that leads to Yemen, Salalah Guru pulls off the highway that hugs the mountains and points to an

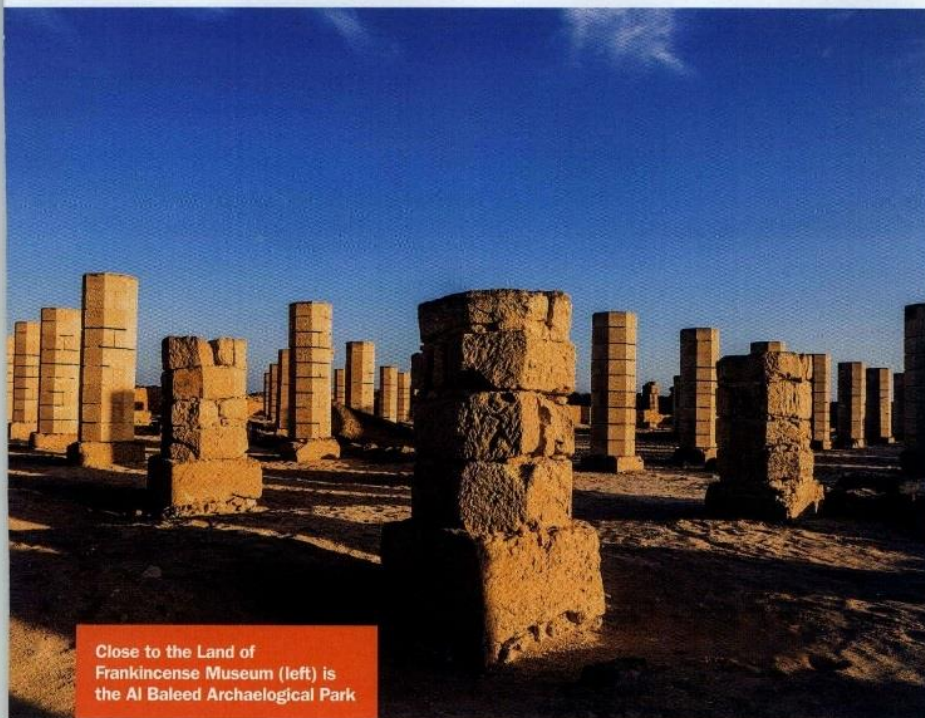
overhang of rock about 50m up a mountain. 'That's the Al Marneef cave,' he says. A flight of steps leads to the natural cave-like hollow in the mountain, which boasts a rudimentary bench for tourists to relax on – and of course take some mandatory selfies.

We followed suit before the guru suggested we check out the Al Mughasayl Blowholes a little away from the cave.

Covered by a thick iron grille, the blowholes look like large manholes. Standing over one of them and trying to peer in, I got a shock when a gush of air accompanied by a loud rumbling sound

burst forth from the hole. 'It's low tide now so you are lucky you didn't get drenched with seawater,' laughs the guru seeing my shocked face. 'On a good day during the Khareef season, the vertical water jet from the blowholes can rise almost 30m or more.'

On the way back, we stop at a few points to capture photographs of fishermen with nets and in small traditional fishing vessels setting off to sea. Pausing to sit on one of the several beach benches and listening to the waves while watching the aquamarine waters is, for me, easily



Close to the Land of Frankincense Museum (left) is the Al Baleed Archaeological Park

one of the highlights of the tour. Back in the resort, I spend the rest of the day just lazing in the villa's private pool; sheer bliss listening to birds chirping and watching a butterfly flit from one flower to another in the villa's garden.

Later, after a relaxing dinner at the resort's Mekong restaurant that offers captivating views of the beach, I took a long walk through the resort.

With twinkling stars and a pale moon for company, and the resort's soft low

lights illuminating winding pathways, the setting was truly fairytale-like. So soothing and calming was it that my only worry was that I might end up writing maudlin poetry.

The next day, which was our last at the resort, I was keen to explore some lesser-known areas of Salalah.

'Let's go to Taqah,' said Guru.

The 30 kilometre drive cuts through the city before skirting the sea then abruptly goes off-road to a large open area where

## TRAVELLERS' CHECKS

- Flydubai has regular flights to Salalah. Return fares start from Dh580.
- For the one-bedroom pool villa I stayed in at Al Baleed Resort Anantara starts at Dh2,405.
- A premier Sea View Room is Dh1,250 per night during April.
- Al Baleed Resort Anantara has offers when you book on [salalah.anantara.com](http://salalah.anantara.com).

truck loads of small fish, such as sardines, were left to dry in the hot sun.

Never having seen anything quite like it, I quickly hopped out of the car hoping to take a few photographs. Wrong move. The sharp stench of drying fish quickly assailed my nostrils while a few pesky flies buzzed around.

'The dried fish is used as cattle feed and as fertiliser for coconut trees,' said Salalah Guru.

Even as we were watching and taking pictures, a pick-up truck arrived with a fresh load of fish, which workers unloaded and began spreading on the sand using large trowels.

A murder of crows, sensing a feast, quickly swooped down from nowhere and began pecking at the fringes of the spread.

'There are more interesting places,' announced Salalah Guru, 'but since you don't have time we'll head back to the resort.'

'Maybe next time,' I said.

'Yes, you must visit. And next time visit during the Khareef season,' he said.

'Inshallah,' I replied.

## OTHER ATTRACTIONS OF SALALAH

■ The capital city of southern Oman's Dhofar province is renowned for morphing into a tourist magnet from July to September - the famed Khareef season - when the otherwise dry region turns into a stream-laced and waterfall dotted landscape thriving with vegetation. There's something here for just about every tourist, a long-time Omani resident and a good friend told me.

■ If you are a lover of history and archaeology, visit the ruins of Samharam. With a history that dates back to 1000 BC, it's believed to have been a link between Dhofar and the rest of the world. Jars of Omani frankincense bound to the

Queen of Sheba were said to have been loaded from Samharam Port. The area is currently called Bokhor Rori.

■ Looking to pick up some typical Omani souvenirs? Check out the Al Hafah and Al Husn souqs. Frankincense, Omani lanterns, wood carvings - and even the curved dagger that is Oman's national symbol, can be found in these souqs about



three kilometres from Salalah.

■ Interested in marine life? The seas off Oman, and particularly Dhofar, are home to a variety of whales and dolphins. From the Indian Ocean humpback dolphin and the Indo-Pacific humpback dolphin to the common bottlenose dolphins and long-beaked common dolphin, the chances of spotting at least a few varieties are very high. There are plenty of tour

operators who can arrange a tour to watch these creatures.

■ If you're visiting during the khareef season, don't miss a trip to Wadi Darbat, near Taqah, off the Tawi-Attir road. Boat lovers have lots of options to choose from. There's plenty of picnic spots where you can set up a bbq, too.

■ The romantic type? Go for a walk with your loved one along Ad Dahariz beach. A stretch of white sand with coconut palms fringing the beach adds a novel touch. There's also the picturesque Ad Dahriz Park next to the beach. Located on the eastern part of Salalah.