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OASES OF BEAUTY

Discover the otherworldly landscape of Oman. Plus: the pleasure palaces
of Marrakesh; and an insider's guide to Mauritius

PHOTOGRAPH: CHIARA ZONCA (WWW.CHIARAZONCA.COM)

*Villages in the
Omani hills*

S A N D S

O F

T I M E

Alex Preston embarks on a life-changing journey
across Oman, a land of pristine beaches, flourishing reefs
and vast deserts under a canopy of stars

*A pool villa at the
Al Baleed Resort
Salalah by Anantara*



Right: the Dhofar Mountains. Below: camping in the desert



Almost two decades ago, I was staying with my mother-in-law in Shropshire, when she invited a friend to lunch. The great explorer Sir Wilfred Thesiger was by this point an old man, not a year from his death, with pale eyes that seemed unsuited to the cool, dim light of my mother-in-law's dining-room. I'd read and admired his *Arabian Sands*, and was glad to speak with him about the desert and its people, about a time when there were still places uncharted in the world. I thought of him later, in 2003, as I stood on the crest of a dune in the Wahiba Sands in Oman, a tiny fraction of the vast desert that Thesiger had explored in the wake of World War II – the Rub Al Khali, or the Empty Quarter.

Nearly 20 years after our first trip to Oman, with my mother-in-law recently departed to join Sir Wilfred in the great oasis in the sky, and all of us feeling rather glum about life as a result, we decided to return to the desert, in the cruel depths of the English winter, seeking an escape, bright sun, deep beauty.

Encircled by the Dhofar Mountains, Salalah is Oman's second city, and due to its unique topography – the mountains, the long reach of sea to the south – it has a microclimate like nowhere else. During the *khareef* (the rainy season, June to September), it is the only place to see and be seen on the Arabian Peninsula, with cool breezes that bring forth a decidedly unlikely landscape of lush foliage and tropical flowers, surging waterfalls and sparkling wadis.

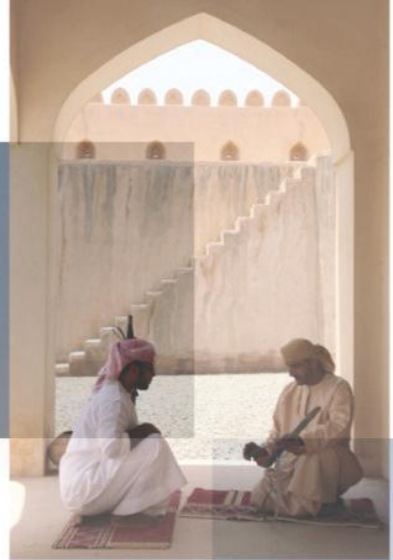
We flew into Salalah at dawn, looking down over the arid, dust-blown desert before coming first to the brown rocks of the mountains and then the green jewel of the city, with the sea mirroring out endlessly beyond it. While we were visiting in the dry season, it still seemed different from anywhere else we'd been in the Middle East, with a kind of jungle haze hanging in the atmosphere and signs of the region's fertility all around, from the numerous plantations of dates and coconut palms to the verdant fields of crops that lie between the city and the steep surrounding mountains, one stretch of which is the Sultan's personal organic farm.

Our first stop was Al Baleed Resort Salalah, an Anantara hotel sitting on a pristine beach looking out over the Arabian Sea. We stayed in a walled suite with its own plunge pool overhung by jacaranda; jasmine tumbled over the walls, so strongly scented you could almost see the fragrance in the air. As we made our way down to the beach, we could hear the soft rustle of palm fronds, the call of birds, taste the sharp tang of the sea. It felt like paradise – a little swankier than





*The khors, or fjords,
of the Musandam*



*A light desert wind whipped spindrift sand
from the ridged peak, orchids swayed gently as the
last stars were extinguished*



*Sand dunes at dawn.
Right: the Al Baleed Resort
Salalah by Anantara*



Wilfred Thesiger might have liked, but precisely what we needed: to feel our toes in warm, white sand and the sun on our skin. We ate exquisite food at the hotel's three restaurants – the Asian cuisine at Mekong is particularly special – and had superb massages at the spa. Things that had been broken by a brutal year gradually began to heal.

Then, it was time to strike out. Sean Nelson is a legend in Oman: a former SAS soldier-turned-mercenary who served under the Sultan against Communist insurgents in the same crack squad as Ranulph Fiennes, he is now an adventure guide to the stars. Taking Hollywood royalty on once-in-a-lifetime trips, he offers that most precious of commodities: authenticity. Sean arrived in a convoy of Land Cruisers with his local business partner, Mohammed, a young Dhofari in an immaculate dish-dash who drove his 4WD with easy grace. We stopped off at Salalah's frankincense souk, then crossed the road to the gun market, where Sean joked in Arabic with old men bent over shotguns with hilts of fine silver filigree.

Next, we headed north, towards Saudi Arabia and Thesiger's Rub Al Khali. The mountains are sharp-toothed and barren, with only the occasional frankincense-tree reaching up from the rocks. As we crested the great ridge, we passed through a police check-point, a reminder that we were only a few miles from the Yemeni border, to find ourselves in an arid wasteland, the only car on the road. From there, we drove for more than 100 kilometres through a landscape that was utterly flat and without even the hint of water.

When the dunes came, they were like a release, suddenly rearing before us, some of them reaching hundreds of feet into the air. We were each offered a piece of soft woven cloth known as a *shemagh* and shown how to tie it, an initiation into the life of the desert, before being driven further into the world's last great wilderness, 650,000 square kilometres of nothingness. Finally, beneath a dune the size of a mountain, we pitched camp, two tents with a rug before them, a fire and frankincense burner sending up plumes of scented smoke into the evening sky. After climbing to the top of the dune for aperitifs, watching the red sun descend, we enjoyed a wonderful meal cooked on the fire and then retreated to our tents to lie listening to the silence – an all-pervasive, never-before-experienced kind that led to the best night's sleep I've ever had. The next morning began with a pre-dawn march up the dune with my children to watch the sun rise, a light desert wind whipping spindrift sand from the ridged peak, orchids swaying gently as the last stars were extinguished.

The time we spent with Sean felt like an adventure and an education wrapped into one – he is generous, knowledgeable, genial and patient, clearly still deeply in love with the country and its people. Leaving behind the desert, he let my son and me take the wheel of two of the Land Cruisers as we leapt and skidded our way through the dunes. Eventually, we hit a great stretch of flat land, where we got out for a drink and saw that what looked like salt was actually a vast plain of geodes, all of them shimmering brightly in the coruscating sun. We stopped off to visit the home of Mohammed's great-uncle, a local sheikh, who was wise and

ancient and kind, his house on a hillside that was swathed in mist and might have been on a Scottish moor, save for the black camels that chewed thoughtfully at the tufts of grass.

We camped on the beach that night, with the sea roaring against the rocks and then expending itself on the pale crescent of sand in front of our tents. I woke in the small hours and stepped out to see comets dragging their tails through a sky milky with stars. How lucky we were, I thought, to be granted this time and space, to be able to immerse ourselves in such a remarkable landscape.

We returned to Salalah via Mirbat, where Sean led us up onto a hillock overlooking the dusty, half-ruined houses and recounted the story of the siege of the city. In 1972, a force of 300 Communist Adoo guerrillas from southern Yemen had attempted to take Mirbat, which was a site of strategic importance and yet guarded by a force of only nine SAS soldiers. Sean knew many of those who fought that day and told the tale so vividly it was as if we were there, winning the battle against impossible odds. It was a fitting end to our time with him, just one of the ways in which this extraordinary man brought this astonishing country to life.

We spent our final days in Oman in the moonscape of Musandam,

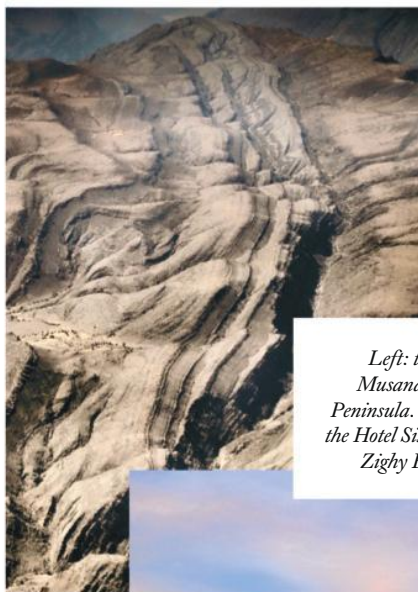
a prong of land that juts out towards Iran where the Strait of Hormuz lets the Arabian Gulf into the Indian Ocean. The coastline here is all steep-sided rocky *khors*, or fjords, with crystalline water, dolphins and dhows. We stayed at Six Senses Zighy Bay, which is adjacent to a fishing village and seems to flow naturally out of it as you approach over a perilous cliff and down a breakneck road. The villas are laid out along a series of dirt tracks, and each is furnished with its own bicycles so you can wheel your way from the spa to the salt-water pool to the beach. Over five glorious nights at this verdant resort, we led the most

heavenly barefoot life, swimming in our private pool and sampling the best chicken shawarmas outside Beirut at the beach bar.

On my last day, I was taken on a guided dive by the resort's brilliant in-house instructors, led along a wildly thriving reef surrounded by great hawk-beak turtles, dazzling, dangerous lionfish and all the riot of underwater life. That night,

we raised a glass to my mother-in-law and to Sir Wilfred, both of whom had helped us to appreciate the strange, rich wonder of life, which is nowhere so vivid and deeply felt as in Oman. □

Al Baleed Resort Salalah by Anantara (www.anantara.com), from about £6,075 for two people, including two nights at the resort and two nights mobile camping. *Six Senses Zighy Bay* (www.sixsenses.com), from about £515 a pool villa a night. *British Airways* (www.ba.com) flies from Heathrow to Muscat, from £369 return.



Left: the Musandam Peninsula. Below: the Hotel Six Senses Zighy Bay

