



The Hamman at  
Al Baleed Resort  
Salalah by  
Anantara

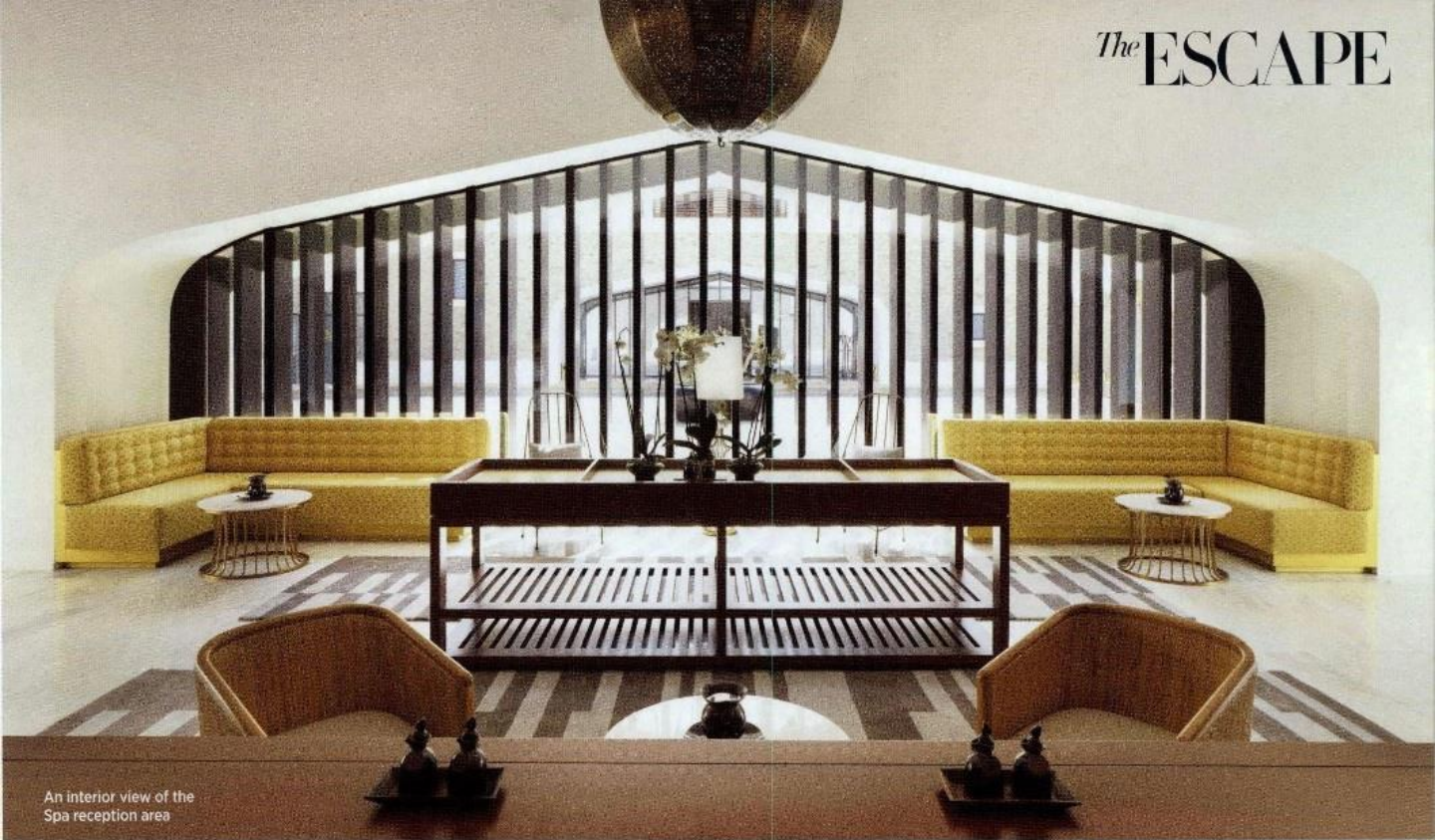
## WEEKEND WHIRL SALALAH LAND

*Until fairly recently, Salalah was basking in the quiet backwaters of tourism. But with the arrival of **Al Baleed Resort Salalah by Anantara**, all this is set to change*

*Words by POLLY SWEET*

Salalah has long enjoyed a sunny reputation for being an unspoilt green haven in the middle of the Middle East. But the former fishing town and home of Frankincense is currently undergoing a massive transformation that is certain to see it rise to the top of every travel bucket list going in 2017. With a shiny new airport – aiming to be one of the top 20 in the world by 2020 – an elaborate new highway system and a handful of major hotel groups eyeing up beachside locations, it is only a matter of time before Salalah is, once again, one of the most important hubs in the GCC.

Always one step ahead of the curve, the Anantara group has been the first to plant its 5\* star hospitality flag on Dhofar's powdery white shore with the opening of its latest offering, Al Baleed Resort Salalah by Anantara. Emerging from a plantation of coconut palms and banana trees, the hotel was inspired by the ancient fortresses that dot the landscape but it offers a very modern interpretation of Arabia. Travellers are beckoned onto the property through an arched structure, Arabesque in influence but nevertheless refined and modernised to suit our current times and so gleamingly white as to shake off even the most stubborn jet lag. It is a motif that is repeated throughout the hotel, from the gently sloping lobby windows that look out onto the Gulf Sea to the equally undulating doorways in the spa, and one that serves to remind guests that this, here, is very much the Middle East. It is easy to forget, when you arrive in Salalah, that this is still the GCC. Although its tropical



An interior view of the Spa reception area

climate has long made it a summer favourite with locals and expatriates alike, it is so lush and so green as to feel a million miles from the Gulf – more Sri Lanka than Sharjah, more Mauritius than Manama.

Paying tribute to traditional Omani custom, the main part of the hotel is the tallest building to be seen for miles and the only one to emerge from the canopy. The rest of the resort, including all 96 private villas, the recreation centre, the spa and the library is all below tree level – it is a nod to days gone by when only the chieftain's house could be seen from the sea. It is thoughtful details such as this that lend Al Baleed its own, warm and welcoming, identity, rather than allowing it to become yet another luxury hotel with a view. Nevertheless, those travelling from the GCC and accustomed to its standards of hospitality will find the hotel reassuringly familiar – all of the amenities that are associated with this part of the world are present and accounted for, from wonderfully welcoming staff to sumptuous accommodation and a fleet of white tuk tuks to make sure that guests never have to walk too far. But don't expect some sprawling resort with a different dining option for every night of the week – the hotel is intimate, with just three signature restaurants, yet it strikes just the right balance between a 5\* resort and a relaxed coastal hideaway. It is definitely big enough for an



The Mekong Terrace

unrestrained sense of privacy, yet small enough that you can quite happily walk the whole thing barefoot.

Beyond the walls of the hotel, there is plenty to do in Salalah. From a morning spent dolphin watching, to a tour of the ancient souk, to a visit to the Al Baleed Archeological Park there is something for everyone. A visit to the Museum of Frankincense is a must, if only to appreciate the importance of the essential oil in Oman's history and fortunes. On the way home, be sure to stop at the local sweet shop for karak tea and halwa.

If all this sounds like too much hard work however, then an afternoon by the hotel's infinity pool or a game of tennis on its brand new court is always on offer and for little ones and teens there are a specialised kids club complete with miniature swimming pool and sun loungers. On rainier occasions (and this being the tropics there is bound to be the odd shower) there is a cosy library to retreat into and, of course, the gleaming spa, which is the first of its kind in Salalah. Boasting the region's only Hammam and rasul treatment rooms (as well as beautifully ornate inlaid furniture from Muscat that would make a wonderful take-home souvenir were it not so heavy) it is the shiny jewel in Al Baleed's crown.

With an increasing number of international flights arriving into Salalah every day there really is no excuse for not discovering this little emerald gem. Just be sure to do so before the crowds arrive. ■

*Premier Sea View Room from Dhs1,450 per night*



The luxurious pool overlooking the Gulf