

DESERT SCENTS

KATHRYN BRADLEY-HOLE goes in search of Oman's fabled frankincense and is swept into an Arabian dream



Within tent: my traditional Bedouin home in the Wahiba dunes is a strong shelter woven in goat hair, comfortably furnished inside

BEFORE setting out, I conjure up agreeably exotic scenes of Arabia—spice-scented *souks*, rippled dunes, disdainful camels, flowing robes topped by deftly wrapped turbans. But none of these imaginings prepare me for the Wadi Dharbat in Dhofar province, at the southern extremity of Oman's large land mass. Here, in cave-riven hills looming above the fabled Incense Coast, the landscape suggests not Alma-Tadema exoticism, but a pastoral scene by Gainsborough or Constable. Folds of green downland roll into fertile meadows, and well-fed cows plod down lanes under shady trees. Only when I spot camels grazing among them can I be certain that I'm in Dhofar not Dorset, and just a mile or two, as the flamingo flies, from the foamed edges of the Indian Ocean.

This is *Arabia Felix*—the Happy, or

Flourishing Arabia searched for by the Romans and, uniquely for Arabia, reliably given a good soaking each year by the skirts of India's monsoons. For millennia along this coast, people traded ivory, ostrich feathers, silks, spices and, above all, high-quality frankincense, a gum resin extracted from the scrubby *Boswellia sacra* trees endemic to Dhofar and neighbouring Yemen.

During the *khareef* (the monsoon season from June to September), Gulf Arabs flock to Dhofar to soak up the mists and rains that are such a contrast to their habitual life among desert sands and scorching sun. But more of Dhofar later. First, to get some idea of the almost mystical significance of this rain, one must spend time in the parched landscapes that form most of Oman's land mass, and a good place to start is its capital, Muscat, on the country's northern coast.

My first port of call in Muscat is a trea-

sure trove: the Bait Al Zubair museum in the Old Town. Every visitor to this fascinating country should come here first. Its displays of traditional handicrafts, furniture, regional costumes, jewellery, embroideries and weapons—especially the ornate dagger known as a *khanjar*—will set the scene for everything you experience thereafter, as Oman is mercifully still attached to its culture and traditions. (A day or two later in a country village, I pass a berobed elder strolling down the street with a huge old rifle slung over his shoulder. 'It is tradition,' emphasises my guide, for the older generation to venture out to the shops armed to the teeth, as you or I might sport a handbag.)

The ancient Greek navigators called Muscat 'the hidden port', as it is almost concealed by rocky coves and islets, and protected from the searing deserts of the Empty Quarter by ranges of jagged



Welcome to our village: fishing boats and inquisitive local fauna at Tiwi on the scenic north coast, between Muscat and Sur

mountains whose narrow valleys are crowded with date palms. The city is a cultural gem in a stretch of mostly unspoiled coast, with a pleasing mixture of elegant low-rise buildings and delightfully whimsical roundabouts. The latter celebrate various icons of the region such as coffee pots, forts, ships, date palms and precious water, and driving round them perks up any car journey. Muscat is also one of the most friendly, fragrant (wafts of rosewater and exotic perfumes are ubiquitous) and courteous cities you will find anywhere in the world.

After a couple of nights of fabulous comfort and cossetting at the Barr Al Jissah resort and spa, which makes a luxurious out-of-town base, I head south-east down coastal tracks with a local guide and a Toyota 4x4. Long sections of our route are off-road and we pass through shaly landscapes in little peaks that could suggest Wales if they were not so arid, although the bird life is glamorous: white flamingoes, Egyptian vultures, brilliant blue Indian rollers, egrets and wading bitterns. The coastline is amazing: miles of deserted white-sand beaches lapped by gentle turquoise waves. At 10am in Qurayyat, a fishing village as old as time, the vestiges of the morning's catch lie moribund on a concrete slab in the covered market and a stench of fish guts pervades the air. Yet

the village is photogenic, and little huddles of women and goats occupy slender shadows between the houses. Mangroves on the edge of town provide sappy material for basket-making and salt is scraped from shallow mud pans. Will all this change when the massive coastal highway, due to be completed in a few months, creates a tarmac umbilical cord to the capital city?

My Richard Burton moment (as in the explorer, not the screen idol) arrives when our sturdy vehicle heads to the interior and negotiates the great dunes of the Wahiba Sands, heading for our

camp of traditional Bedouin tents tightly woven from black goat's hair. Just as the sun disappears in a stream of brilliant apricot, a shimmering silver coin of a full moon rises behind the opposite dune, where a wandering camel obligingly poses in silhouette. None of this has been stage-managed, of course, yet it feels like the stuff of epic films, so perhaps Burton the actor is the spiritual presence, after all. And, contrary to expectations, the desert is clearly teeming with life; it seems that every square yard of the powder-fine sand is tracked with the footprints of tiny reptiles and other

FRANKINCENSE LORE

● Omani frankincense trees, which are believed to produce the highest-quality resins, are confined to small areas of specific limestone habitat and microclimate in the southern (Dhofar) region

● Nicks are cut into the twisted, unprepossessing tree trunks in the spring, enabling release of droplets of the milky resin. It takes up to three weeks to harden, before it is painstakingly collected by hand

● Frankincense's link to Christmas, and specifically the Epiphany, coincides with the height of the frankincense trade in the Middle East, when it was one of the most valuable and revered substances in the world. Having healing properties, and connection to God, its smoke carries prayers to Heaven



creatures; a reminder that the dunes are special ecosystems in their own right, easily destroyed by blundering wheels.

Next day, we head west for the dramatic peaks and vast plateau of the Jebel Akhdar range, 8,000-plus feet above sea level. En route, in the ancient town of Nizwa, there is just time to wander through the old spice *souk* before the heavy carved doors in its high wall slam shut when the imam calls the faithful to midday prayer. Nizwa has one of the best of Oman's scores of historic forts and was formerly the seat of factional imams until the 1950s (when the British military helped the Sultan regain control of a troubled region).

Our 4x4 takes a nail-biting route into the mountains. It is an extraordinary limestone landscape riven with canyons, but the steep hillsides are sliced into fertile terraces full of pomegranates, figs, walnuts, grapevines and, particularly, fragrant pink roses for a thriving rosewater industry. All are irrigated in the time-honoured way by ingenious *falaj* channels. I find it difficult to tear myself away from these remarkable mountains, but must do so to find the frankincense forests around Salalah, capital of Dhofar province, an hour and a quarter's flight south from Muscat (or 620 miles by desert roads).

After the deserts and mountains, the Crowne Plaza Hotel on a pristine south-facing beach is my luxurious base for exploring Salalah and Dhofar's hills and ports. White-sailed *dhow*s used to arrive here laden with dates, as all the palms in humid Salalah yield coconuts; these days, the dates come, a little more prosaically, in dusty lorries through the Empty Quarter, from Saudi Arabia. My search for frankincense leads me first to Salalah's Al-Husn *souk*, where I am astonished that



In the Jebel Akhdar, tiny villages and numerous fertile terraces cling to the mountainsides

more than 50 tiny shops are piled high with the aromatic dried resin and other perfumed delights. This deeply symbolic, medicinal and costly commodity is still harvested annually in the very precise habitats where it can be found, although there is less call for it now than when Herodotus wrote thrillingly of winged serpents guarding the precious trees.

A score of miles east of Salalah, Khor Rouri at the water's edge is little more than a few romantic piles of stones, but long ago, it was one of the most important ports on Earth, created by the Sabeans, the peoples of the Queen of Sheba. The frankincense 'forests' occur sporadically

in the foothills of Dhofar's mountains and towards the border with Yemen. The trees are sparse, not leafy, like piles of sticks on fast-draining, rocky hillsides; their bark is flaky like birch and a pale golden colour. Even so, I am thrilled to make their acquaintance, and when I board the plane to leave wonderful Dhofar, it is with heavy heart and even heavier luggage, as I have stocked up with fragrant resins, and head-spinning perfumes made from age-old recipes by the charming and amusing, veiled ladies of the *souk*.
Photographs: Kathryn Bradley-Hole.

GETTING THERE

Kathryn Bradley-Hole's trip was arranged by the Oman specialists Shaw Travel Ltd (01635 47055; www.shawtravel.co.uk), which will create tailor-made itineraries to suit your interests.

Gulf Air flies daily from London Heathrow to Muscat.

Oman Air flies from Muscat to Salalah, www.omanair.aero/uy

Where to stay

Muscat: The elegant Grand Hyatt hotel is in the heart of the Embassies quarter of Muscat, surrounded by luxuriant gardens.

Near Muscat: Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah Resort and Spa (www.shangri-la.com). An exclusive resort on the Barr Al Jissah bay with three luxury hotels of different characters.

Salalah: Crowne Plaza Resort, Salalah (www.crowneplaza.co.uk). Has been recently fully refurbished.

An 18th-century merchant's house at Mirbat on the historic Incense Coast, east of Salalah

