

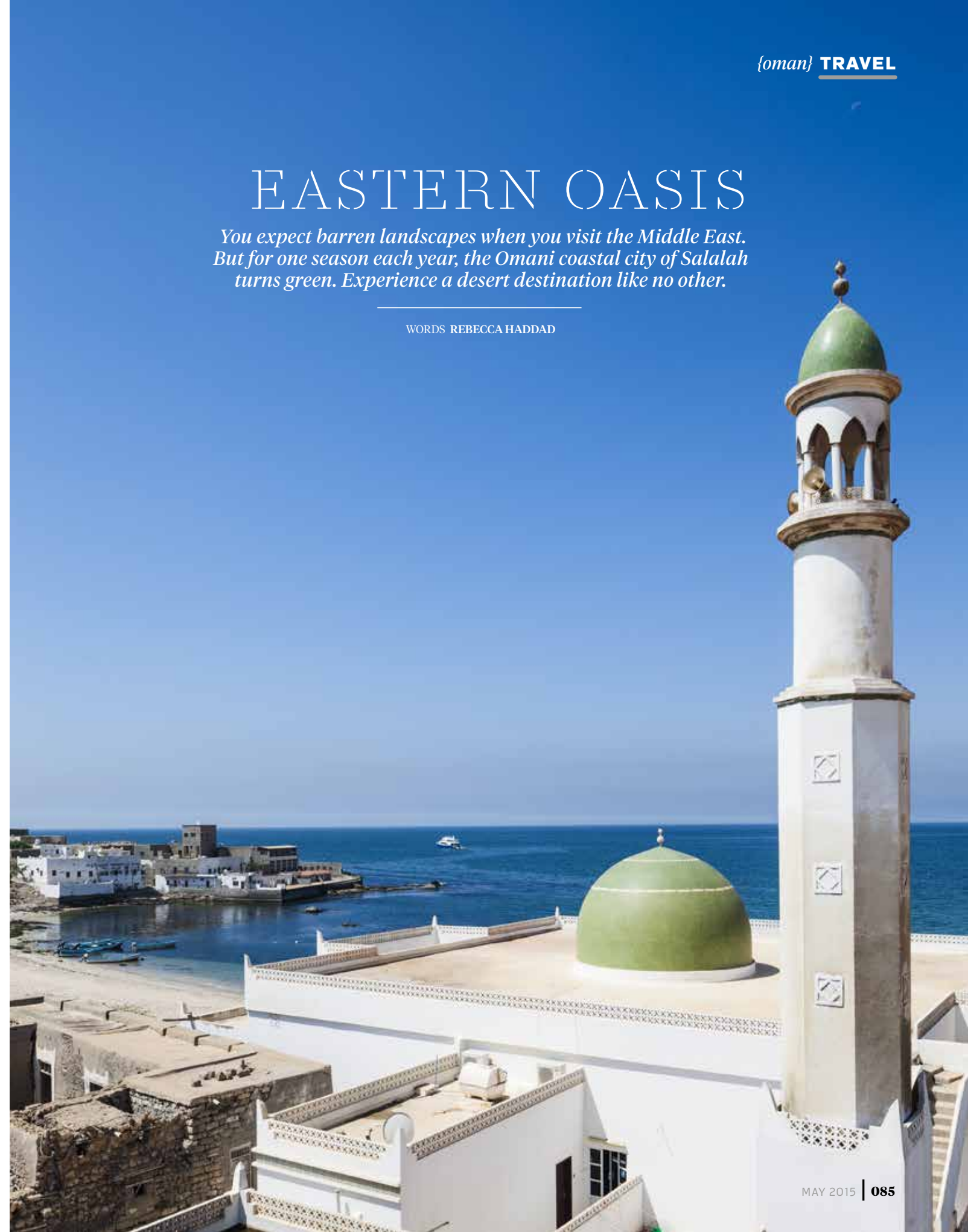
EASTERN OASIS

You expect barren landscapes when you visit the Middle East. But for one season each year, the Omani coastal city of Salalah turns green. Experience a desert destination like no other.

WORDS REBECCA HADDAD



An Omani man wearing a traditional *kumma* outside Al Husn Souk. **(opposite)** A former fishing port in Oman.



For a plant so revered in Arabian culture, the frankincense tree is rather unfortunate in appearance — its mess of twisting branches and burnt-looking bark do little to allude to the fact that the tree produces a sap which, centuries ago, was more prized than gold. It seems fitting then, that it's found in a place that is also far more than it appears.

The Dhofar province in southern Oman has, from time immemorial, been the beating heart of the frankincense trade. Its capital, the coastal town of Salalah, was at its most prosperous in the 13th century. These days, the town is a jumble of low-rise commercial buildings and stone houses in various states of disrepair.

Modern development is certainly slower in Oman than in the neighbouring United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, and yet, curiously, the country has seen year-on-year growth in tourism. For what Salalah lacks in record-breaking buildings, bars and mega malls, it makes up for in spectacular natural beauty. A beauty made extra special by the fact that you'll only see it for a few months each year.

While Oman's neighbours swelter in late-summer heat and almost suffocating

humidity, Salalah catches the edge of the Indian monsoon season. The rain brings far more bearable temperatures and cloaks the otherwise Mars-like, jagged landscape of the surrounding Dhofar mountain chain in green vegetation. The season (from the end of July to the beginning of September) is known locally as *khareef*, and it's why regional and international tourists make the annual pilgrimage.

SWELL SEASON

Salalah's surrounding frankincense trees are harvested just before khareef and the spicy incense can be smelt throughout the city, from the stalls of the old souk to the lobbies of the few sleek, modern hotels. The heady scent serves as a clear reminder about why Salalah is known as the perfume capital of Arabia.

The city was a significant stop on the ancient frankincense trade route, linking the Arabian Peninsula with Africa and India. It's the same trail we are following now, though with a few modern upgrades

— dirt tracks are now smooth tarmac roads and our caravan and camel is a slightly beat-up rental car.

Winding our way out of Salalah's city centre (stopping for camel pedestrians slowly sauntering across the road), the effects of the khareef become more obvious. The mountainside is as green as the English countryside, rendering it even harder to comprehend that in a few months' time, the landscape will return to its arid self. We share the road alongside countless four-wheel drives filled with Arab families, European travellers and local Dhofari. Children hang outside the car windows in glee as they whizz through the thin layers of mist that hover over the crests of the mountains.

Dotted across the hills — between the frankincense trees — more families have made a lunch stop, rugs spread out and laden with plate after plate of Arabic meze, rice and meats. We decide to follow the crowds, stopping to enjoy the bananas and papaya we picked up back in town. ►

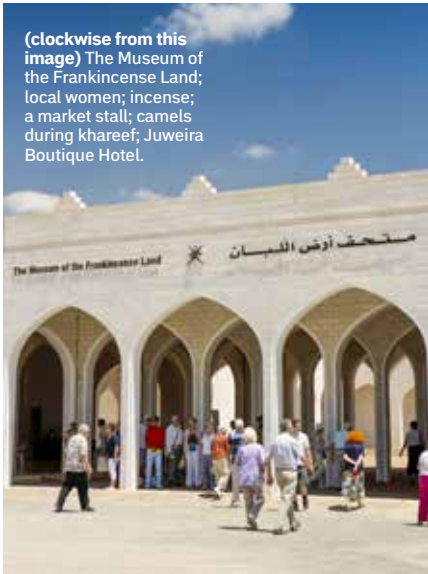
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One of the perfume capital's famous frankincense trees.

(clockwise from this image) The Museum of the Frankincense Land; local women; incense; a market stall; camels during khareef; Juweira Boutique Hotel.



There are plenty of other interesting stops to make along your journey through the green wilderness. The wadies (valleys) are teeming with local wildlife including flamingoes, leopards and notoriously shy gazelle — just be sure to leave plenty of time to visit as the base valley roads will probably be gridlocked after 11am.

Visitors with a keen interest in history will be rewarded with plenty of spots that offer further insight into the story of the area and the evolution of Dhofari culture.

At the top of a mountain north-west of Salalah is the tomb of Nabi Ayoub. Better known as Job, this man remains a prominent figure in Islam, Christianity and Judaism and, even for non-believers, his burial site is a welcome example of religious unity. On your way back, stop at one of the charming cafes a short distance downhill to enjoy a fresh juice and spectacular views, stretching all the way back to the Arabian Sea.

If you're feeling a little adventurous (and your car can make the desert trip), the UNESCO World Heritage site often referred to as the fabled lost city of Ubar is also worth a pit stop. The journey from Salalah's city centre should take about 2.5 hours by car, and it can be quite difficult to navigate, but many of the locals speak English and are more than happy to point you in the right direction — and invite you to stop for a cup of strong Arabic coffee.

It's surprisingly easy to spend a whole day in the mountains — indeed, the general manager at the Juweira Boutique Hotel (Salalah Beach Marina, Taqa Rd; +968 23 23 9600; www.juweirahotel.com) confirms that many of his guests don't actually return until closer to midnight. When they do get back, the hotel offers a cosy, welcoming environment, seafood restaurant and deliciously cool pool.

The hotel is part of a bigger development known as Salalah Beach, with villas, shops, a marina and another hotel called Salalah Rotana Resort (+968 23 27 5700; www.rotana.com). The site will also feature more residential complexes and two Professional Golfers' Association golf courses once it's complete.

WALKING POINTS

Back in town, we amble down 23rd July Street, a main hub, so named for the date that the country's current ruler, Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said (born in Salalah), ascended to the throne in a palace coup ►



THE MUSEUM SHEDS LIGHT ON THE AREA'S SIGNIFICANCE AS A TRADING PORT AND ITS CONSEQUENT CULTURAL MIX OF EAST AFRICAN, INDIAN AND ARABIAN INFLUENCES.



in 1970. This is where you'll find small shops selling everything from colourful shawls, *khandoras* (robes) and *kummas* (traditional embroidered caps worn by Omani men), to some of the cheapest and most succulent shawarma kebabs in town.

Alternatively, head to the nearby Crowne Plaza Resort Salalah (Al Khandaq St; +968 23 23 8000; www.ihg.com), where the Dolphin Beach Restaurant offers plenty of menu options and a buffet in the evenings. It also has great views of the beach.

It's just a few minutes' drive from the city centre, along the coconut palm-fringed coastal road, to The Museum of the Frankincense Land (As Sultan Qaboos St; www.omantourism.gov.om).

Comprising two main halls, the museum has a fascinating collection of relics dating back several millennia, and sheds further



light on the area's significance as a trading port and its consequent cultural mix of east African, Indian and Arabian influences.

The museum is adjacent to the Al Balid Archeological Site's old temples, mosques and imposing citadel, all worn down by the elements, but nonetheless impressive.

While ancient ruins may be all that's left of the glory days of international trade, the frankincense trees standing tall outside are a clear reminder that Salalah — and the Dhofar province — certainly continues to offer more than meets the eye. 🌴

GETTING THERE Virgin Australia offers flights to Muscat with its codeshare partners Etihad Airways. Visit www.virginaustralia.com or call 13 67 89 (in Australia) to book.

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