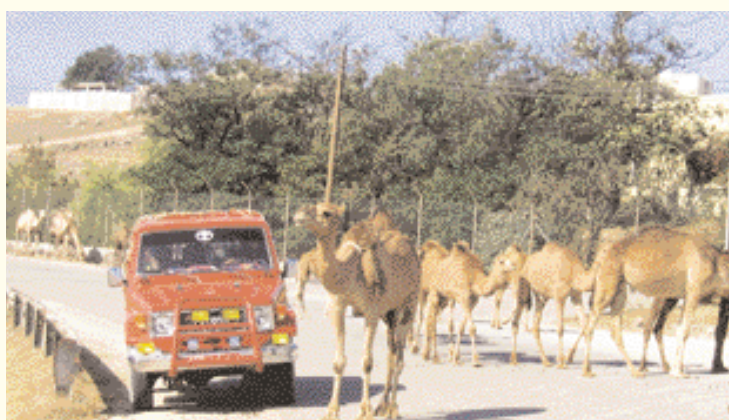


Salalah

Oman's Historic Incense Capital

By Alison Gardner

Flying south from Muscat truly confirms that Oman is a desert kingdom. Sand and rock dominate the landscape for one thousand kilometres, until you glimpse Salalah. In the fabled Governate of Dhofar close to the border with Yemen, the monsoon – that rare and beautiful seasonal visitor to this small area of an ever-thirsty Arabian Peninsula – has given Salalah a moderating countenance of green with splashes of vivid colour from flowering shrubs and trees, and thousands of birds that migrate through this seaside oasis.



Camels rule the roads beyond Salalah الجمال تسيطر على الطريق خارج صلالة



Frankincense Tree شجرة اللبان

Salalah is surrounded on land by a half-circle of mountains and behind that by the classic sand desert of the vast Empty Quarter. It has served as a natural fortress for thousands of years. Along with favourable harbours, it is the Khareef, the cooling, renewing annual monsoon that has drawn rulers and merchants, to visit or settle the shores of Frankincense Land. Even the Queen of Sheba fell under the spell of the area's treasure far greater than gold and sent gifts of frankincense to impress Solomon! Today it is the fine sand beaches, the cultural history and archaeology, and the natural diversity that draw visitors to this ancient paradise, mainly from Europe and the Middle East. Enormous incense burners along main roadways declare that visitors have arrived in the land of frankincense, once a more valuable commodity to the Arabian Peninsula than oil is today. A stroll through the city's aromatic suq revealed dozens of stalls with mysterious ingredients waiting to be blended into fragrant combinations. Bathed in the characteristic scent that accompanied me

throughout my stay in Salalah, I selected brightly-coloured pottery incense burners of different sizes and packages of lumpy raw incense to burn in them.

Next day I drove to the source. Marvelling at the survival of such gnarled trees sprinkled randomly across the rugged landscape, I imagined how many centuries of incense sap has been carefully harvested from each hardy little warrior. In 2000, the United Nations declared the region a UNESCO World Heritage Site for the unique historical legacy of its frankincense.

When fine white sand beaches bordering the Arabian Sea lose their attraction, history offers a stimulating substitute. Premier among the sites is the newly-opened Frankincense Land Archaeological Park (Al Balid) on the Salalah waterfront, an impressive early-Islamic excavation site where the government has built a world-class museum of local artefacts, a gift shop, restaurant and snack bar, and a botanical garden of indigenous plants. Or for a less organized archaeological adventure, explore

the fortified ruins of Samahram dating back thousands of years. Its exports of frankincense reached Egypt, Greece and Rome from ancient harbours below Samahram that are today vivid blue estuaries and rivers [khor] attracting dozens of bird species. Or drive 45 kilometres into the flowering hills where Job's tomb [Nabi Ayub] is a pilgrimage attraction once your driver navigates around herds of haughty camels that rule the road and the countryside. Major hotels and the tourism office will recommend guide/drivers for these worthwhile attractions. Salalah is blessed with the widest choice of accommodation anywhere outside Muscat. It ranges from five-star multinational resorts like the 45-acre Crown Plaza, to oceanside vacation villas and apartments. Most Omanis speak English and all signs are in English. Foreign visitors are welcomed as special guests. www.omantourism.gov.om. Alison Gardner is a Canadian travel journalist and editor. She is publisher of Travel with a Challenge web magazine, www.travelwithachallenge.com. ■