

INTO THE GREEN

ESCAPE TO THE CLIMATIC COMFORT OF SALALAH IN OMAN

For many people in the Middle East, Salalah is synonymous with one thing – rain, and lots of it. The southernmost city in Oman catches the tail end of the Indian Monsoon, and between June and September experiences weather patterns unheard of in the arid summer furnace of the Arabian Peninsula.

But for those of us from colder climes, or that have not been in the region long enough to appreciate rain, Salalah is much more than somewhere to beat the summer heat. Once the monsoon, or Khareef, recedes, Salalah remains abundantly green. Add to this the crystal blue of the ocean and you have a vivid colour palette distinctly different to anywhere else in the Middle East. With temperate weather all year round and regular flights directly from Dubai and Muscat, Salalah is the perfect destination for a short break.

Located in a natural, wide bay, Salalah is encircled by the dramatic peaks of the Dhofar mountains, which are peppered with the peculiar gnarled and stunted Frankincense trees. Three thousand years ago, long before oil, Oman made its mark on the world as a provider of frankincense, an aromatic and much sought after substance. Salalah was the birthplace of the Frankincense Route and with its numerous souks, is still a great place to buy incense.

We stayed at the Hilton Salalah Resort, one of only two upmarket hotels in the area and a beautifully relaxing retreat, surrounded by vibrant bougainvillea and lush palm groves. After a day exploring the old town, souks and Sultan's palaces



Above: After the arid sand of the Arabian Peninsula, the fresh green of Wadi Darbat is welcome relief on the senses



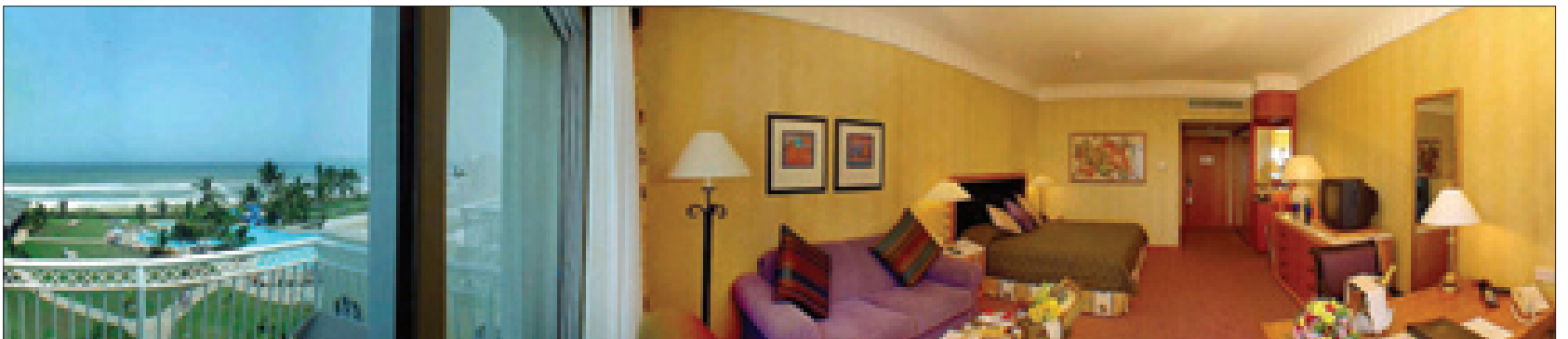
Above: A view of the Hilton resort from the sea.
Below: One of the resort's beautiful bedrooms.

on foot, we hired a car to explore a little further afield as the real beauty of Salalah lies in its breathtaking scenery.

We headed west from Salalah and within minutes we were driving alongside ivory beaches and turquoise waters, stopping to watch a pod of dolphins playing in the early morning sunshine. Further up the coast was the small town of Mughsayl, famed for its magnificent blowholes. These are formed by the sea eroding the cliffs from underneath and creating a narrow channel through

the rock. As the waves crash against the shore, huge plumes of water shoot upwards, reaching heights of 30 metres or more during the Khareef, although on our visit generated a slightly less impressive three metres.

We continued along the coast road in the direction of Yemen and were soon ascending through windy mountain roads, which provided a stunning view over the bay. We zig-zagged higher and higher, and after an hour or so of camel trains, goat herds and dizzy heights, descended back down to the coast. Here we found pristine white beaches, tucked well away from





Above: Miles and miles of quiet beach - perfect for a weekend break. Below: The cool swimming pool at the hotel, surrounded by lush green palms.



civilisation and teeming with wildlife. Salalah is a migratory route for numerous bird species so don't be surprised to find yourself in the midst of what seems like an exotic aviary.

Salalah and the surrounding area is also home to some of the finest and unspoiled diving in Arabia. The following day a short trip east took us to Mirbat, and the rocky coves of Sath. One dive site was called the Aquarium, and it was easy to see why. Every rock was home to either an octopus, blue-spotted ray, or moray eel, and the colourful corals were almost hidden by shoals of jacks, parrotfish, angelfish and more. Easily accessible from the shore and shallow in depth, snorkellers are also able to enjoy this underwater paradise. Boat dives can also be arranged and open water divers can be lucky enough to see sharks, dolphins or maybe even one of the nine species of whale resident in the area.

Another day trip provided us more active adventure as we explored the rugged areas around Wadi Dharbat. During the Khareef, the run-off from the mountains culminates in a 300 metre waterfall that plunges from limestone cliffs, and during the rest of the year is ideal for hiking, picnicking or swimming in one of the many glassy pools.

Most striking of all was the sinkhole at Tawi Attair.



Above: You might be lucky and spot dolphins swimming in the sea. Below: The Hilton Salalah Resort.

This natural phenomenon is one of the biggest in the world, at over 200 metres deep and 100 metres wide. Set a few kilometres from the coast, a sinkhole is as it sounds: a huge well, formed when the roof of a cave collapsed. It is linked by a tunnel to the sea and filled with brackish water, a mixture of salt and fresh water. This particular spot is slightly eerie to say the least and home to hundreds of species of birds, which swoop in and out, giving the site its other name, "the well of birds".

Finally, we finished off our tour with a little bit of culture; a visit to Khor Rhouri, a once-thriving port which carried the frankincense on the first stage of its journey to the bazaars of Damascus and the temples of Rome. It is here that the fabled Queen of Sheba had a palace, and the remains can still be seen to this day... accompanied by cloudless blue skies and not a drop of rain in sight. Perfect.



WHERE TO STAY:

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