

DestinAsian

FROM ASIA TO THE WORLD

THE ISLANDS ISSUE



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COMMUNICATIONS

DESTINASIAN
JUNE-JULY 2017

A dishdasha-clad
Sooman at
Al Baid Resort,
Salalah by Anantara.
Opposite: The
craggy coastline at
Mudraal Beach, a
40-minute drive
west of Salalah.

SOUTH

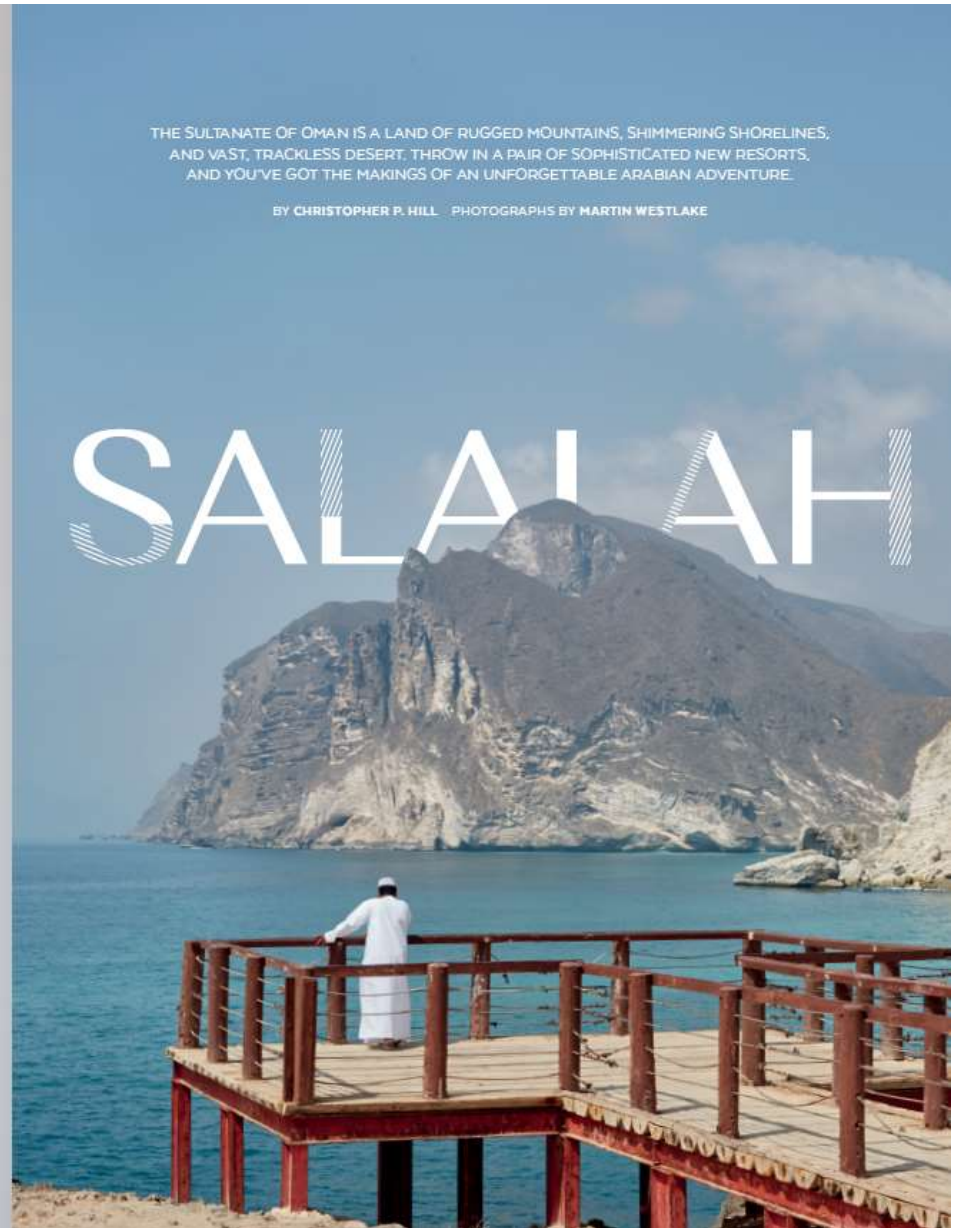


TO

THE SULTANATE OF OMAN IS A LAND OF RUGGED MOUNTAINS, SHIMMERING SHORELINES,
AND VAST, TRACKLESS DESERT. THROW IN A PAIR OF SOPHISTICATED NEW RESORTS,
AND YOU'VE GOT THE MAKINGS OF AN UNFORGETTABLE ARABIAN ADVENTURE.

BY CHRISTOPHER P. HILL PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARTIN WESTLAKE

SALALAH





"WELCOME

to the moon!" our driver Nabhan Said Al-Nabhani smiled wanly over his shoulder as we raced across the flat, sunblasted wastes of central Oman's Ash Sharqiyah region. It had been three hours since we stopped for lunch at Nizwa, and the terrain we'd been driving through ever since—an endless gravel plain broken only by the occasional dust-blown settlement or lonely roadside mosque—had indeed assumed a lunar-like quality. Or possibly Martian? Either way, Nabhan had begun fretting that we might be bored, as though the monotony of the visuals was somehow his responsibility. He needn't have worried: this road trip was my idea.

When I first decided to come to Oman to try out a pair of newly minted Anantara resorts, it seemed that flying between the two—one perched in the mountains outside Muscat, the other in the southern port city of Salalah—was the only practical option. After all, they were separated by almost a thousand kilometers of desert. Then one of the properties suggested we add a couple of nights to our itinerary and make a proper overland tour of it, bunking down at an encampment in the fabled Wahiba Sands before heading to Salalah by way of Duqm. It sounded like a fine plan. But my photographer friend Martin and I could only spare one extra night, putting the Wahiba dunes out of reach. So we settled instead on this mad dash through the moonscape of Ash Sharqiyah, which, after a few unremarkable pit stops and one remarkable sand storm, fi-



From top left: The circular tower at the Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar Resort; tea time at the same resort; overlooking the canyon below the Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar from its Diana's Point viewing platform.



nally brought us into Duqm around sunset. With that interminable stretch of asphalt behind us, I steeled myself for tomorrow's push to Salalah—another eight hours on the road. Oh, man.

Landing in Muscat four nights earlier on an Oman Air flight from Jakarta, Martin and I were whisked by chauffeur-driven SUV into the ink-black foothills of Jabal Akhdar in the Hajar Mountains, a craggy limestone range that rises between Oman's cosmopolitan northern coast and its desert hinterland like a bulwark. For centuries a stronghold of tribal customs and rebellious imams, Jabal Akhdar was until 2005 virtually off-limits to outsiders. Now, to judge by the impressively engineered, military-built motorway that winds 1,700 meters up to the Saiq Plateau, the area is being groomed as a premier tourism destination, with two international resort properties already in place: one managed by the Singapore-based Alila group, and the newer, larger Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar, which bills itself as the highest five-star resort in the Middle East.

Arriving by night left me unprepared for the view that filled the floor-to-ceiling sliding glass doors of my villa at daybreak. The Anantara is built along the rim of a canyon in the heart of the Hajar massif, itself a spectacular geological pileup of bare, contoured grayish-yellow limestone that was once part of an ancient seabed. A strip of rocky ground is all that separates most of the 115 rooms and villas here from the yawning chasm, which gives way to an Old Testament backdrop of craggy mesas and defiles. You could take in this

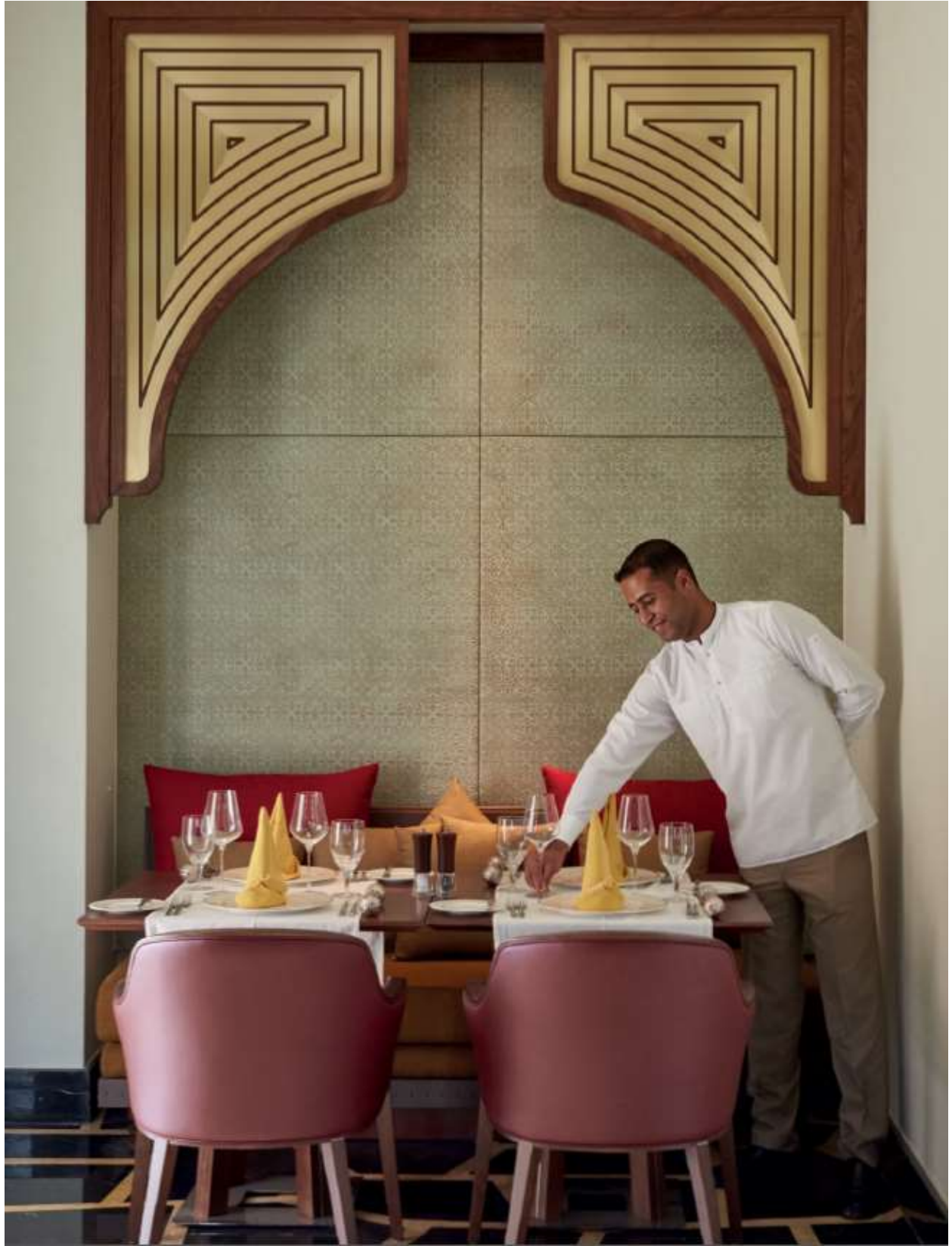
panorama from any number of vantage points at the property—the cliff-edge infinity pool, say, or Diana's Point, a glass-walled platform built on the site where Diana, Princess of Wales is said to have stood in 1986 and lingered over the view herself. But if, like me, you had a cliff-side pool villa and a pair of in-room binoculars at your disposal, you'd be tempted to spend hours ogling the vista from the privacy of your own terrace—or even your bed, for that matter.

Spread across more than six hectares, the resort—designed by French-Moroccan architect Lotfi Sidirahal's Paris-based Atelier Pod—has an architectural austerity that nods both to the local vernacular and the flinty mountainscape. ("It looks like a military camp!" Nabhan joked later on the road to Duqm.) But this is tempered by elegant interiors and features such as the riad-like courtyard off the lobby, where a central fire pit crackles in the cool evening air; a conical tower (inspired by a 17th-century castle in northernmost Oman) that houses both a Moroccan-style cocktail lounge and Al Qalaa, the resort's excellent Arabian restaurant; a central garden showcasing local plants and herbs (juniper, camel grass, myrtle, fig); and trickling water features that pay tribute to the traditional Omani irrigation channel known as *falaj*.

The climate is another attraction, offering a relatively cool respite for staycationers from Muscat or guests arriving from elsewhere in the Gulf region. "It snowed in February, if you can believe it," one staffer told me breathlessly. I had my doubts, but I couldn't deny the pleasant temperatures that greeted us on our April visit—not

Amid the dunes of
the Rub' al Khali
desert in southern
Oman. Opposite:
Setting tables at
Ananias Al Jabal
Al Akhdar's Al
Qalaa restaurant.







AT WADI
SHUWAYMIYAH,
THE ROAD
PLUNGED DOWN
THE SIDE OF AN
ESCARPMENT
THAT COULD
NOT HAVE BEEN
ANY MORE
DRAMATIC

quite jacket weather at night, but never rising above 25°C during the day. In other words, perfect conditions for the Anantara's menu of outdoor activities (rock climbing, archery, tennis) and excursions.

One morning, a guide from the resort drove us out to Wadi Al Bawaarid for a hike down through the gorge, which took us alongside a dry riverbed and past still pools of algae-green water. Another outing involved a walk through a series of semi-abandoned villages not far from the resort. Their terraced gardens and orchards are still being farmed, but most residents have relocated in recent years to towns with modern infrastructure. Famed for orchards that produce pomegranates, walnuts, almonds, peaches, apricots, and pears, Jabal Akhdar is perhaps best known for growing damask roses, which come May blanket the slopes in velvety pink blossoms. From the flowers, distillers extract high-quality rose water for use in cooking, perfume, medicinal remedies, and, more recently, in treatments at

the Anantara's sublime, hammam-equipped spa. For now, though, the village streets were deserted, and I could only guess how this fragrant harvest would unfold once the picking season began.

After three days at Jebel Akhdar, it was time to head south on the long road to Salalah. The hotel had organized a car and driver through local tour operator Bahwan Travels, and with Nabhan behind the wheel of a roomy, Wi-Fi equipped Nissan Patrol four-by-four, we left the highlands behind.

Twenty minutes beyond the foot of the mountain we stopped at Nizwa, a onetime Omani capital built around a dune-colored fort



Right: Canyon-view rooms at the Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar Resort. Opposite, from left: The hammam at the Anantara Spa in Salalah; hiking along the edge of a wadi on the Saiq Plateau.

that played a pivotal role in ending Portuguese domination of the country in the 17th century. With its crenellated battlements, round central tower, and “murder holes” through which boiling oil could be poured on interlopers, the restored fort rightly attracts busloads of sweaty sightseers from Muscat. As does the adjacent souk, where I bought half a kilo of dates to snack on in the car. The dates, as it turned out, were unnecessary, thanks to a huge and indecently inexpensive lunch at a roadside canteen called Arab World. The meal involved big platters of tender *shuwa*-style lamb slow-cooked with spices in a pit oven, barbecued chicken, pumpkin-and-carrot curry, and mounds of fragrant biryani, all washed down by ample amounts of Mountain Dew, apparently one of the most popular beverages in the country. “Omani beer,” Nabhan called it.

That lunch carried us through the rest of the day, which finally ended at Duqm, situated roughly halfway down Oman’s Arabian Sea coast. Our stop here was purely a matter of convenience; the town is booming as a hub for oil exploration and luxury housing estates, but

it has little to interest the traveler. It does, however, have a couple of decent beach hotels. Ours was the Park Inn by Radisson, a lushly planted property that also rents out its chalets and apartment-style rooms to the expat oilmen who congregate in its buffet restaurant or poolside bar at night. After the long drive through the barren wilderness of Ash Sharqiyah, it was all rather disorienting. Perhaps doubly so when you throw in the strip of neon mood lighting wrapped around my bedstead. That said, I slept like a baby.

The final leg of the journey went by faster than the first. One reason for this was Nabhan’s liberal interpretation of highway speed limits. “I used to drive rally cars off-road,” he told us matter-of-factly as the speedometer climbed above 140km/h. Another was the scenery. Beyond the small fishing harbor of Ras Sawqrah, where we stopped to check out the dhows moored behind a stone breakwater, the silver-blue ocean was now often within eyeshot. Farther south, stands of acacia and cedar began to color the landscape. The road looped and zigzagged around sea cliffs and boulder-strewn beach-



THE DETAILS

Getting There

Oman Air (omanair.com) connects Muscat with several major Southeast Asian cities, including Manila, Jakarta, Bangkok, and Singapore; it also operates multiple daily flights between the Omani capital and Salalah.

Where to Stay

Anantara Al Jabal Akhdar Resort
968/2521-8000; jabal-akhdar.anantara.com; doubles from US\$350.

Al Baleed Resort

Salalah by Anantara
968/2322-8222; salalah.anantara.com; doubles from US\$376.

Park Inn by

Radisson, Duqm
968/2208-5700; parkinn.com; doubles from US\$153.

Touring

Local travel specialist **Bahwan Tourism** (968/2465-4140; bahwantravels.com) can organize everything from dolphin watching to desert excursions.

es. And at Wadi Shuwaymiyah, it plunged down the sheer side of a 150-meter escarpment that couldn't have been any more dramatic, depositing us at an impossibly long stretch of sand where dolphins swam offshore and flamingos waded in a briny lagoon.

Salalah lies in the southern province of Dhofar, famous both for its 6,000-year-old frankincense trade and the summer monsoon season known as the Khareef, when water-laden winds transform the region into one of the greenest places in the Middle East.

As this was April, Salalah was still dry as a bone, though it hardly felt that way with all the reflecting ponds and swimming pools and expansive Arabian Sea views that greeted us at the Al Baleed Resort Salalah by Anantara. Opened just four months earlier, the Jabal Al Akhdar's sister property had already seriously upped Salalah's wattage as a luxury beach destination. Beyond the whitewashed, fort-like bulk of its main wing, the resort unfolds along a palm-fringed beachfront in a series of low sugar-cube buildings that house the only pool villas in southern Oman. These come with sizable courtyards, creamy marble floors, jaunty tribal fabrics, and a bathroom door from which you can walk straight from the shower into the pool. After the long ride from Duqm, it was palatial.

Food is another highlight. Our arrival coincided with seafood night at Sakalan, the resort's buffet restaurant, and a staggering display of oceanic bounty. There's a poolside Mediterranean restaurant too, as well as Mekong, serving food from the Southeast Asian countries through which its namesake river flows.

But one doesn't come all the way to Salalah to nibble on *pad thai* or lounge by a pool all day. At least, we didn't. And there is much

to see nearby, from the frankincense-perfumed souk in town to Al Baleed archeological park right next door, a 60-hectare World Heritage Site containing the ruins of an ancient port city that was once the center of the frankincense trade. At the park entrance there is also the Land of Frankincense Museum, with impressive exhibits about Oman's shipbuilding heritage and the country's emergence as a modern nation since 1970, when its current ruler, Sultan Qaboos, overthrew his conservative-minded father in a palace coup.

For trips farther afield, arrangements can be made with the resort's so-called "Salalah Guru," a locally born guide by the name of Hussain Balhaf who one morning drove us out to see the blowholes at Al Mughsayl before taking us to a deserted beach for a swim and a picnic. There was even more to come the next day, starting with a visit to Wadi Dawkah, an extensive grove of spindly frankincense trees that shares its UNESCO listing with Al Baleed and the remains of a nearby medieval caravan oasis called Wubar. "There are many types of frankincense tree in Africa, but these are the finest, *Boswellia sacra*," Hussain explained as he tapped a droplet of fragrant white sap from a trunk for me to smell. "They are our treasure."

The afternoon ended with a drive out into the Empty Quarter, a vast desert that stretches across the borders of Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and the United Arab Emirates. Hussain drove the SUV as far as he dared into the hilly dunes and then we got out and walked up the highest crest. There, with the setting sun coloring the sand a burnished orange, the cool, rose-scented mountains of Jabal Akhdar seemed light-years away. Tomorrow we would head back to Muscat, and I was very glad that we'd be flying rather than driving. But another part of me didn't want the adventure to end. ●

The beach
fronting Al Baleed
Resort Solesah
by Anantara.
Opposite: Spice
merchants at
Nizwa Souk.

