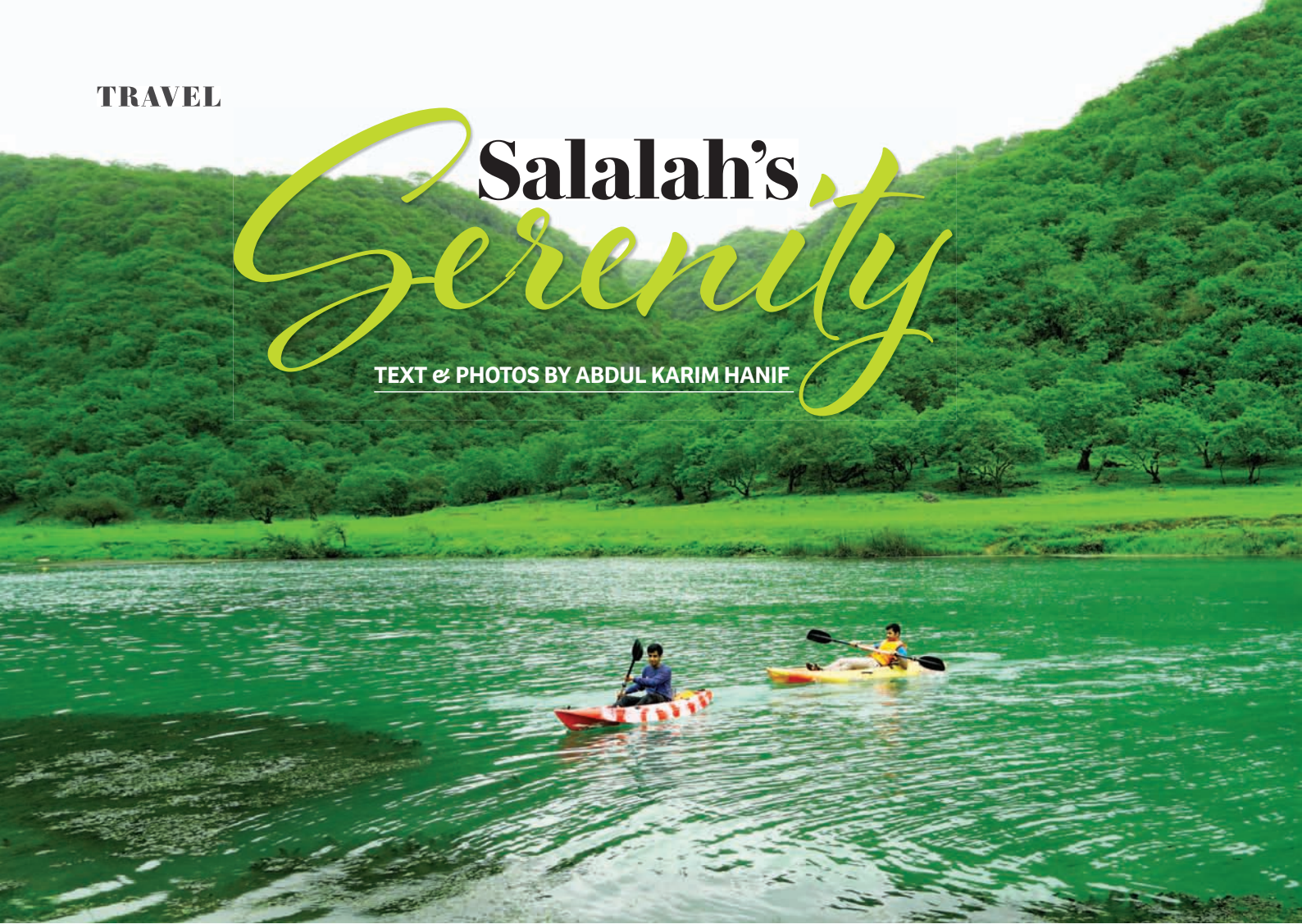


Salalah's Serenity

TEXT & PHOTOS BY ABDUL KARIM HANIF



When the mercury hits over 40 degrees in the summers, most residents of the UAE and the wider region are often looking for an escape to beat the heat. While the quest for a cooler retreat at a European or North American destination tends to top the agenda, it also leads to inflated prices of flight tickets. Let alone the scramble to secure an appointment to apply for a visa.

For those who were not able to book a getaway this season, how about exploring a glimpse of the European landscape right in our own region, in the form of Salalah.

Visiting Oman's third largest city Salalah is almost a rite of passage for earning the title of being a 'Gulf resident' due to its close proximity and popularity as a summer retreat, thanks to its tropical climate. If you're one of the long-term residents who claims to have visited Salalah before and would like to write it off as 'been there and done that' then you'll have to rethink. Thanks to the

emergence of new luxury resorts, Salalah should be viewed beyond just a regional getaway.

Whilst much of the Arabian Gulf has witnessed the scorching heat, Oman's Dhofar governorate, which hosts Salalah, is enjoying the pleasant 'Khareef season' and is the most popular time to visit the region. Khareef literally translates as autumn in Arabic, though it technically is the monsoon season, which transforms its rocky desert plains into lush green valleys between June and September.

Most people of the Gulf identify Oman's Khareef as an ideal time to escape the heat of their own backyard and spend weeks soaking in its pleasant atmosphere. It is an annual occurrence, when the low-pressure systems move across the ocean from India, which brings its fair share of the monsoon over to Dhofar. One can expect fog, overcast skies and temperatures hovering around mid-20 degrees Celsius. It rings in the much cherished occasion for the local

residents who flock over to its beautiful valleys for an outdoor picnic.

This article hopes to paint the picture of its pristine surroundings and justify why one should consider Salalah to be the destination of choice for the summer break coupled with the top spots to explore. First, let's sort out the logistics.

Where is Salalah?

Oman has 11 governorates of which Dhofar is the southernmost and country's largest. Salalah, which is the third-largest Omani city, serving as its capital. It is the birthplace of Oman's former Sultan, the Late Qaboos bin Said Al Said. Historically this region has also been an exporter of Frankincense and continues to be used in some of Dhofar's local delicacies.

How to reach Salalah?

In terms of driving, Salalah is over 1,200km away and has been a popular destination for a fairly long road trip, roughly around 13 hours should the bor-



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A) Monsoon rains of Khareef season transform this region into lush green valleys; B) Wadi Darbat becomes a magnet for local and regional tourists for a picnic at the 'mini Switzerland'; C) Wadi Darbat's cascade waterfalls are best explored with a boat ride; D) Camels join the thrill of the misty atmosphere

der control be the only pit stop. Thanks to the convenient flight connections and considering the current fuel prices, it is best to catch a direct flight, which takes you there in just under two hours.

Wizz Air offers good rates from Abu Dhabi, FlyDubai offers very convenient timing for a daily connection from Dubai International Airport's Terminal 2. Air Arabia's timings from Sharjah too can be a feasible option, particularly if one is looking for a quick weekend trip and to get on the plane straight after work.

Immigration

Oman offers an online visa system for those who hold a GCC residence visa that carries one of the roles found in the 'approved list of professions' which entitles them to apply under the category '29A'. Their companions or those under their sponsorship can apply using the '29B' category once the main applicant has received the visa. It is best to apply for the online visa at least a week before the date of travel, though it is often processed within a day.

Where to stay

There are a number of popular hotels located in Salalah city that can be suitable for one's budget, though the city becomes extremely busy during the 'Khareef' season, so it is best to explore other parts if you're looking for a quiet retreat.

Located around a 40-minute drive away from Salalah city is the coastal town of Mirbat, home to the Alila Hinu Bay resort, which ticked the box for my quest of serenity in Salalah. It fits the criteria of a romantic weekend getaway or even a quick family holiday, courtesy of its somewhat secluded glamping experience.

The Wilayat of Mirbat is located on the eastern side of Salalah and is known for its beautiful beaches. My local guide Adnan told me that the town derives its name from the Arabic word for 'saddle,' as it once was a breeding ground for Arabian horses. Its port played a larger role as a hub for exporting the valuable commodity of Frankincense.

Mirbat offers a convenient location to access the popular spots, such as Jabal Samhan and the Wadi Darbat. Secondly, it was away from the effects of Khareef season, which meant that one can actually make the most of the resort's facilities and not be too concerned about the occasional downpour.

The luxury resort first opened its doors during the pandemic in July 2021 and thanks to the eased covid-19 restrictions, international travellers can find an ideal Salalah sanctuary here. Apart from the tranquillity on offer, the hotel also has an ongoing pocket friendly offer of a complimentary night's stay for every night booked. It also has a soothing spa experience with Frankincense infused oils to



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F



BOX FACTS:

Perfect for: Romantic getaway and a family holiday

Best time to visit: Khareef season between June and September

Distance to Salalah from Dubai: Over 1,200km

Flight time: Direct flight of 1h 45m

Closest airport: Salalah International Airport

Currency: Dh1 = 0.10 OMR

Visa required: E-visa for GCC residents

<https://evisa.rop.gov.om/>

add to the resort's wellness element.

The beach-front resort also feels like a best kept secret of the region with its modern, spacious and luxurious rooms, far enough from the bustling streets of Salalah but close enough to its natural wonders.

From a commercial perspective, the presence of resorts such as the Alila Hinu Bay opens the prospect of the region to cater to the luxury travel sector and on the consumer level, it aims to offer something unique to those who have been to Salalah before.

Building on the first year of operations, the resort's General Manager Juan Paolo Alfonso says that Salalah is fast becoming an all-season destination. In addition to the Khareef season, it is a perfect spot to go on sea excursions such as dolphin and whale-watching in the winter months, thanks to the tropical climate.

What to eat

If you're staying at Alila Hinu Bay then you have to make the most of the culinary journey of the Frankincense Route offered at their eatery The Orchard. You



might have to rely on a Google search to understand some of the dishes on the list that are prepared with its treasured commodity. Though the team can offer a detailed explanation to help you browse through the menu and choose dishes prepared with locally sourced ingredients.

What to see

Salalah region has a long list of hidden gems that can garner the interest of an adventurer. Though here are some of the must-see attractions that are quite accessible. These excursions can be organised by the local operators or even the resort itself.

Wadi Darbat

Often referred to as a 'mini-Switzerland' Wadi Darbat is the most scenic spot of

Salalah and a magnet for local tourists and campers during the Khareef season. It has two waterfalls and vast green spaces for a picnic or grabbing a quick bite at one of the street food stalls. There are two waterfalls in the valley; 'The Cascade Waterfalls' and the second called 'The Travertine Curtain'. Its crystal-clear turquoise water surrounded by the lush green hills is a visual wonder. Swimming is not allowed here though the river can be discovered by renting one of the boats. It is best to reach the smaller waterfalls earlier as it tends to get very crowded. The much bigger waterfall is the Travertine Curtain, which is accessed through another exit close to the main road and involves a small hike along the riverbed after you've parked in the main car park.

Tawi Atair Sinkhole

Literally translated as 'well of birds', it is one of the deepest natural sinkholes in the world with a depth of 210 metres. There is water at the bottom and during the Khareef season it serves as an ideal spot for the migrating birds. There is a dedicated viewing platform for visitors though trekkers can also venture out on its paths with the help of a professional guide.

Jabal Samhan

Close to Marbat and overlooking the Arabian Sea is Mount Samhan which is one of the key seasonal attractions of the Dhofar region. This is a perfect spot to catch the scenic views from above, with its highest peak reaching 2,100 metres.

E) There are plenty of picture-perfect backdrops on offer during Khareef; F) During monsoon Salalah turns into a beautiful oasis; G) Luxury resort Alila Hinu Bay; H) Salalah's waterfalls

It also has a nature reserve covering an area of over 4,500 square kilometres and is a sanctuary for the endangered Arabian leopard.

Museum of the Land of Frankincense

Part of the Al Bareed Archaeological Park in Salalah is this UNESCO Heritage Site that offers an educational journey of the economic significance of Frankincense for the Dhofar region. It costs two Omani Riyal for entrance and it is recommended for history buffs. It is believed that it was a common practice in ancient Egypt to apply the incense to fight off demons. Thanks to its antimicrobial properties, it was often applied to heal wounds and even used in the process of mummification.

Verdict

Overall, Salalah should be viewed more than just an ideal road trip getaway and more of a luxury travel destination. Staying at the new luxury resorts can offer a pleasant change of scenery and with a feeling of home for the GCC-based holiday makers. Though the Khareef season is the best time to visit Salalah, the presence of these hideouts makes it a perfect spot to switch off, while not being too far away from home. **W**

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