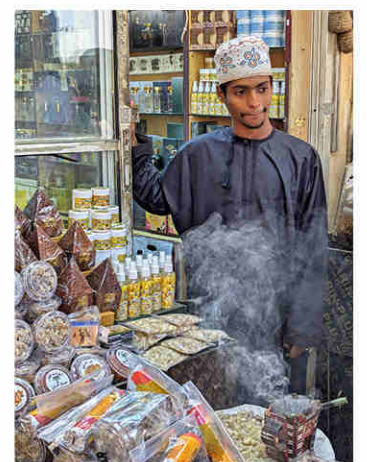
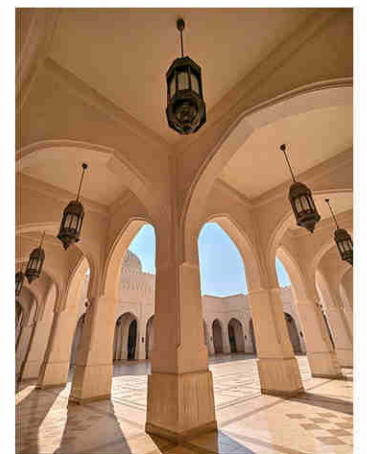


The Sounds and Scents of Salalah

From the gushing waterfalls to the woody aroma of frankincense, Salalah leaves a lasting impression of Oman's culture



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Camels walking along the Salalah coastline, (Top right) Local shop selling handicrafts, (Bottom right) Sultan Qaboos Mosque

By SHUVAJIT PAYNE and KUNAL BHATIA

Nestled between the Arabian Sea and the soaring Dhofar Mountains, the city of Salalah in Oman is a striking anomaly in the Arabian Peninsula. An aerial view reveals stark contrast—vast arid stretches and sand dunes of the Rub' al Khali Desert abruptly giving way to a sliver of green—especially during monsoon. Banana plantations line the streets and coconut palms sway along the coastline.

A few minutes away from the Sultan Qaboos Mosque, a fine specimen of Omani architecture, is the bustling Al Haffa Souq. Concentrate hard enough and you hear a faint soft crackling. It is the sound of frankincense burning in ornate *mabkharas* (holders) in almost every shop, filling the air with a woody, and citrus-infused aroma. Once as valuable as gold, frankincense has been Oman's prized export for millennia. There is a noticeable similarity with *dhuno* or *loban*; but frankincense is also eaten in small doses. A sip of

frankincense tea is a must-try Oman speciality!

Salalah's true magic unfolds beyond the city limits. As the *Khareef* or seasonal monsoon arrives, the region transforms into a mist-laden paradise and the sounds of nature take over. A short drive away, Wadi Darbat becomes an idyllic picnic spot, where turquoise pools shimmer with the Travertine Curtain waterfall in the backdrop.

The thrill peaks further at Al Mughsail Beach, with its famed and ancient blowholes created by centuries of erosion on lime-

stone rocks periodically erupting with electrifying roars, sending seawater skywards.

An hour away is the jaw-dropping setting of Jabal Al Qamar or the Mountain of the Moon, named for its black rocks that resemble a lunar landscape. During *Khareef* season, traversing across the flat plateau feels like a chase for sun rays through a shifting sea of mist. At its steep edge, where the land plunges 1,000 metres into the sea, one encounters not just breathtaking views but also the vertical thrust of the wind. For those who seek

more, Jabal Samhan's 1,700-metre peak offers camping, and a chance to spot the rare Arabian leopards.

Oman has a distinctive cultural side, too. The Dhofar folk music of the mountain tribes, particularly the Al-Bar'ah tradition, features chants and a war-like dance performed in a semi-circle by both men and women, often accompanied by drums, the oud, flutes, and conch shells. Listen closely to these sounds to hear the past, the present, and perhaps the very breath of Oman itself.