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Fragrant Memories History Meets Legend In Salalah And Beyond

Date: 14 Nov 2009



Noted Australia-based travel writer Chris Pritchard, was in Oman touring the southern city of Salalah during the Khareef season. Usama Bin Karim Al Haremi of Oman Air's Corporate Communications and media brings to focus the well-narrated report of Chris that has appeared in The Australian, broadsheet daily.

"Chris Pritchard's report throws a new light on the reports that has been appearing on Oman as he delves deeply into the history of Salalah. While most of the reports by Western journalists touch upon the capital, endless dunes of the empty quarter and the mighty mountains, this report captures the essence of Salalah in a very interesting and informative way, and gives due credit to the historically rich Dhofar region," Al Haremi says.

Chris writes in his report:

Sinbad the Sailor was here. Omanis I meet swear this is true. The famed teller of tall tales was born in the port of Sohar, so the story goes. Perhaps he was. Italian traveller Marco Polo visited in 1285, extolling a frankincense port called Al Baleed, where contemporary archaeologists sweat in roped-off surrounds on the outskirts of Salalah, Oman's second city. Even more revered is Ibn Battuta, a renowned 14th-century wanderer who, as a Moroccan, is accurately described as both the Arab world's and Africa's most intrepid traveller. The Arabian Peninsula, I am frequently reminded, is a bridge between Africa and Asia.

From Al Baleed's brown walls of stone, their remains seldom more than waist-high, I head into the adjoining Museum of the Frankincense Land. It encapsulates Omani history and the pivotal role of frankincense trading - as well as showcasing contemporary Oman, the petrochemical industry and the initiatives of head of state Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said.



Then there's the Queen of Sheba. Many Omanis believe one of her palaces was within another frankincense port called Samhuran at a place called Khor Rori, a half hour's drive from Salalah – sometimes longer if wandering camels linger while crossing the asphalt highway. An ostentatiously wealthy monarch, she reputedly showered King Solomon – builder of the first temple in Jerusalem – with lavish gifts of frankincense. Some authorities poo-hoo this, insisting the Queen of Sheba – whose kingdom reputedly encompassed parts of Ethiopia, Eritrea and Yemen – was unfamiliar with Samhuran.

Whatever the truth, there's no disputing this part of Oman – Dhofar governorate – oozes colourful stories in a complex intertwining of history and legend. Archaeological digs continue at various locations, unearthing the past and exposing the fanciful.

Tourists come increasingly, rambling amid ruins and lazing in the sun at beach resorts – attracted because Salalah is an Omani oddity where monsoonal rains, absent elsewhere in Arabia, allow bananas and other tropical fruits to be cultivated. Other pursuits include wadi bashing (in 4WDs on dry river beds), dune-bashing (plunging from dune cliffs in 4WDs with soft sand slowing downward speed), sea trips to dolphin pods and trudges along remote beaches where turtles hatch.

'Like everyone who visit Oman, Chris too is impressed by the friendly Omanis who he met on his travel. It is important to note here that the reports on Oman that has appeared in Australian journals together with the proactive measures taken by the Ministry of Tourism through various road shows and awareness workshops, have been indeed successful in attracting tourists to visit and sample the famed hospitality of Oman, the true exotic gem on the Arabian Gulf,' Al Haremi said.

In his report, Chris explains about the famed frankincense trade of Oman.

"A common thread through Oman's past is the frankincense trade. Capitalising on this, Oman terms itself "the frankincense land". Dried resin from frankincense trees – is still placed in pebble-sized pieces in burners in homes and workplaces, emitting a pleasing aroma much like incense sticks in India or Thailand. The smell is in the smoke.

Some of Oman's most eye-catching monuments are of giant frankincense burners. Frankincense is harvested mainly for perfume-making. It's an ingredient, too, at Amouage, an Omani venture supported by Sultan Qaboos, producing expensive fragrances sold at duty-free shops and perfumeries worldwide.

Britain's T.E. Lawrence ("Lawrence of Arabia") suspected land near an oasis named Shisr in Oman's Empty Quarter – a forbidding but enticing zone of shifting sands – concealed the legendary lost city of Ubar. Subsequent archaeological research, using space-age sensing equipment, confirmed this. Researchers believe references to a place called Irem in the Qur'an relate to Ubar, a hub of the frankincense business. Trade routes led to and from it before the city disappeared under drifting dunes. Digs have so far unearthed a fort, towers, city walls and other artefacts.

Shisr is part of a World Heritage-listed "frankincense trail" but – because it is 200kms from Salalah – it is less visited than easily accessed Al Baleed, Khor Rori and Wadi Dawkah Frankincense Park. Friends in Muscat, Oman's capital are unanimous: Samhuran at Khor Rori is the most impressive set of ruins. They're right – though Al Baleed, handily at Salalah's edge, better suits the exceedingly time-poor.

Historical daydreams envelop me as, with a driver named Ali, I negotiate hairpin bends on a one-hour climb into the Dhofar Mountains. Ali, though friendly, is less loquacious than most Omanis I meet. Conversations are usually one of the joys of Oman.

Fortunately, Ali isn't a frustrated rally driver. So, I have plenty of time to think on the road to Wadi

Dawkah. We sit behind trucks, piled high with bananas, on their 1000km journey from Salalah to Muscat. They struggle, sometimes at less than walking pace. When descent begins, the pace quickens. We turn from highway to dirt track. A sign announces “Wadi Dawkah Frankincense Park”.

Frankincense comes from an arid-zone tree of the same name, not among the world’s prettiest. Occasionally emerging from seemingly solid rock where roots penetrate the narrowest of crevices, these trees often grow near wadis supplying access to subterranean moisture.

Ali’s fingers scoop seeping resin from one of many trunks, holding it beneath my nose. A gorgeous fragrance is unmistakably frankincense. It is as much a symbol of the sultanate as distinctive headgear and khanjars (curved daggers). Omanis boast of their history and their preservation of the old – in stark contrast to neighbouring Dubai and Abu Dhabi where emphasis is on the new.

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Fragrant memories

History meets legend in Salalah and beyond, writes Chris Pritchard

SINBAD the sailor was here. Or, at least, the Omanis I meet swear this is true. The famed teller of tall tales was born in the port of Sidon, or so the story goes. Perhaps he was, but some historians suggest Sidon, hailed from ancient Persia or Mesopotamia. Others contend he didn't exist and was a composite based on adventurers who took to sailing ships to spread Islam. Omanis ranged far and wide longer for prized spices meant the tale of Zanzibar, off Tanzania's coast, was Oman-ruled for almost two centuries until 1956.

Marco Polo visited Oman in 1285, including a frankincense port called al-Bahal, where contemporary archaeologists now scout in rapid-off standstills on the outskirts of Salalah, Oman's second city. Even more renowned is the Bahala, a renowned 14th-century wanderer who, as a Moroccan, is accurately described as the Arab world's, as well as Africa's, most intrepid traveller. The Arabian Peninsula, I'm frequently reminded, is a bridge between Africa and Asia.

From al-Bahal's brown walls of stone, their remains seldom more than waist-high, I head into the adjoining Museum of the Frankincense Road to understand the preservation of the old, in stark contrast to the neighbouring emirates of Dubai and Abu Dhabi, where the emphasis is firmly on the new.

Dried resin from frankincense trees is still placed in pebble-sized pieces in burners in homes and workplaces, emitting a pleasing aroma, much like musky incense. The smell is in the smokes.

Some of Oman's most eye-catching monuments are shaped like giant frankincense burners. Frankincense is harvested mainly for perfume-making. It's an ingredient, too, at Anoushage, an Omani venture supported by Sultan Qaboos that produces expensive fragrances sold at duty-free shops and perfumeries worldwide.

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Khor Rori's pathways take me through the ruins of fourth-century Samhuran: residential areas, shops and frankincense storage areas (but no visible remnants as yet of the Queen of Sheba's purported palace). The area, about 200m by 50m, offers splendid views of sea and countryside. I pause at one of several look-walk-outs to gaze across calm sea towards the horizon, imagining sailing ships laden with fragrant cargoes heading to distant destinations.

Between me and the sea is the bluest of lagoons, a safe haven for sailing ships. Khors are lagoons with openings to the sea, a common feature of the local landscape. Frankincense, Ali reminds me, was transported to this fourth-century port on camels' backs along desert trade routes. I turn from the sea. The Dhofar Mountains rise in the distance. From these ranges to the coast is a rocky plain with little vegetation. It reminds me of travelling from Western Australia to South Australia across the Nullarbor Plain. Then, far away, I spot camels, 18 in all and moving in a line across this harsh vista.

Not all the Salalah area's ruins are frankincense-related. Much visited, and 27kms from town at a place named Beit Zarbij, is Job's Tomb, burial place of a prophet featured in both the Bible's Old Testament and in the Qur'an. A nearby spring called Sharsate is said to have gushed wildly in response to one of Job's prayers - another reminder that Oman is a meeting-place of history and legend.

"The Australian is the biggest-selling national newspaper in Australia. It is published by News Limited, which also owns the sole or most popular metropolitan dailies in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, Hobart and Darwin. To get an entire page dedicated to a destination in Oman speaks volumes about the impression that Oman was able to create and sustain," Al Haremi concluded saying.

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