

# Heaven *scent*



With its empty deserts, warrior fortresses, dramatic fjords and the overwhelming aromas of rose and frankincense infusing all areas of life, Oman is a dreamscape for travellers looking for the authentic Middle East, writes Belinda Jackson

Soft and dewy, the rose petals flutter from my hands in a flurry of pink fragrance.

It's just past sunrise in the hill villages of Al Jabal Al Akhdar mountain region, and it is the season of the rose harvest. I watch as the pickers, clad in snowy white robes – *dishdashas* as they are known here – move between the terraced rose bushes, snipping the fragrant blooms and tossing them into bags or scarves slung around their necks.

Occasionally, they'll pour their fragile harvest onto a large sheet laid on the ground, creating a small mountain of the softest petals of the damask

rose, still damp as the sun rises from behind the jagged ridges around us.

On my journey through Oman, I'll find the roses' essence wrought into luxurious skin creams, in my spa treatment, in its oils and perfumes and even in my coffee.



OPPOSITE: the mosque at Mutrah in Muscat.  
LEFT TO RIGHT: handwoven baskets of petals from the seasonal rose harvest perfume the air in the Hajar mountains; desert architecture in the old capital, Nizwa.

To learn what makes Oman tick, you just have to look at the roundabout decorations in its seaside capital, Muscat.

A *dallah*. A *dhow*. A *mabkhara*. A *khanjar*.

A coffee pot. A sailing ship. An incense burner. A dagger.

Hard to miss, these giant sculptures help you navigate the city; ("Turn left at the *dhow* to get to the Al Bustan Palace Ritz Carlton.")

The coffee pot is the heart of Arabian hospitality. The ship for Oman's love of the ocean. The incense burner for frankincense. And the dagger, a link to its history and culture as a peaceable nation – the Switzerland of the Middle East, if you like.

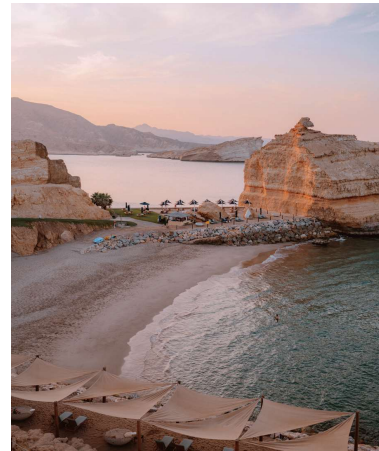
To put that in context, Muscat is just shy of five hours' drive across the desert from the glitterati of Dubai, and shares borders with the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

With a sparse population of just five million people, it is a sum of dramatic fjords and great sand deserts, stark mountain ranges and a sub-tropical monsoon season that plays through its southern region, a thousand kilometres south of Muscat.

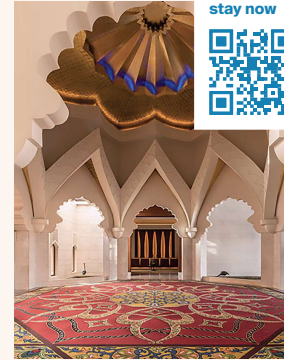
Oman is also possibly the most beautifully scented country in the world.

Walking into the Shangri-La Al Husn, the cavernous white marble lobby is veiled in a cloud of frankincense burning from a gold brazier. It is the signature scent of the hotel, of the people, and of the entire country, evoking purity and spirituality, calm, serenity and higher thought.

"I grew up in a family where my mother burns *luban* [frankincense] every day at sunrise and sunset," recalls Khalid Al Amri, the world's only frankincense butler, who is



## Shangri-La Al Husn



The Shangri-La Al Husn is the most luxurious of the three hotels that comprise the Shangri-La Oman. Located 15 minutes south of Muscat, it is open to guests 16 years and above, with 180 guestrooms, a frankincense butler and private beach where turtles nest each year.

## Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar



Set in the highest section of the Hajar Mountains, Omani cuisine, spa and design are incorporated in this cliff-top hotel, renowned as the location of Diana's Point after the Princess of Wales' visit in 1986. Two hours from Muscat, it has 115 rooms and pool villas with dramatic canyon views.

based at the beachside Shangri-La resorts on the southern fringe of Muscat. "She burns *luban* at the start of her day to bring positive energy to house, and at the end of the day to separate from the stress."

"Frankincense butler" is an uncommon title in the world of hospitality, and an uncommon job, even in Oman. Every morning, Khalid attends to his duties of sharing the story of frankincense.

"Good morning, babies," he coos as we walk together into a small, gated park, waving his hands across a dozen small trees. "These are my children," he says proudly.

Not just any trees, these are *Boswellia sacra*, which produce the fragrant resin that is frankincense. Burnt in the cathedrals of Europe and every house in Oman, the perfume world agrees that the most pure frankincense comes from the Salalah district in the country's south.

Oman's wealth was built on the curl of smoke. More expensive than gold, frankincense filled Oman's coffers before oil took over, and it's also embedded in Oman's traditional medicines – drop a pearl of the whitest frankincense into water and drink to ease a congested throat. Chew it for fresh breath. Burn it to calm the mind.

"As a blessing for a new baby, we burn frankincense in the house for 30 days to welcome the new life," says Khalid, waving a tendril of smoke across my face. "Did you know the symbol of our national airline, Oman Air, is its smoke?"

As we talk, we step through the plume to let it weave through our clothes, and Khalid offers me dates and pours the tiniest, white porcelain cup of cardamom-infused coffee. It's my third for the morning and my one for the road.



OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: the Shangri-La Al Husn interior; the hotel's beach; Shangri-La service has an Omani flavour, with cardamom-infused coffee on offer. ABOVE: Oman has a population of just 5 million, led by its capital, Muscat.

# Stop(over) and smell *the roses*

That road leads to Oman's interior, and to its old capital, Nizwa. On Friday mornings, its streets and souq ring with the bleating of its famed weekly goat market. The narrow lanes are packed as floppy-eared kids are paraded past an eager audience of shoppers, men in their always-white dishdashas and embroidered caps, kumars.



Until very recently, Nizwa's mudbrick old town, Al-Aqar, was but a beautiful ruin of collapsing walls gathered around the sand-coloured, 9th-century castle and 17th-century fortress. But there's life in this town, and the towering city walls are being rebuilt; for a *rial* – (about \$4) you can promenade atop the wall in the cool of the evening, descending to sit in the open-air cafes set amongst the palm gardens.

Old houses – deserted by local families 30 years ago – are being reborn as tiny boutique hotels, with mudbrick walls and timber shutters, rooftop lounges and the rich red, black and white handwoven fabrics of eastern Arabia's tribes.

As the light from a hundred terracotta lanterns and fairy lights plays over the palm leaves, a grandfather invites me to sit, welcomes me to Nizwa and calls for short cups of *karak*. The sweet milky tea is infused with cinnamon and a bite of pepper, and costs 100 *baisa*, or about 40 cents apiece.

"I remember Nizwa before electricity," he recalls – until 1970, the country still ran on gas lamps and dirt roads, until its progressive young Sultan took the reins. As we sip, his grandchildren crowd around to share our qurus, small crepes striped with date syrup, before returning to their evening game of football in the warm, summer air.

The road from Nizwa zig-zags up into the Hajar Mountains, past flocks of goats and the occasional wild donkey, to the highest hotel in the Middle East, the Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar. At a checkpoint, police determine whether our 4WD is suitable for the steep climbs and descents of the highest section of the Hajar range, whose knobbed spine runs 700km from the northernmost tip of Oman – up in the fjordlands of the Musandam Peninsula – south to the whitewashed port city of Sur.

Within minutes of arriving on the Saiq plateau, 2000 metres above sea level, someone is bound to tell you you're at Diana's Point, where the then



Princess of Wales and her husband paused for an afternoon on a tour of the Middle East, back in 1986.

Lucky me – I'm sharing her view from my room. As I look toward the sunset, I spy a chain of small stone villages tucked into the mountains' folds. A narrow footpath runs between the villages of Al Aqr, Al Ayn and Ash Shuraiqa, where I'll walk early tomorrow morning to watch Oman's pink damask roses being harvested.

For six weeks, from March to early May, the fragrant flowers dominate all life in these hill villages, as their essence is distilled and ensnared. The houses of Jabal al Akhdar's villages are filled with baskets of petals, as the rose growers start the second task of the harvest, distilling the precious petals into pure rosewater for use in cosmetics and as a sweet-scented addition to food.

"I sleep, eat and work here for two months," says Mahmood al Amry, who works alongside his 80-year-old father to harvest

the roses. His children drop in to visit their father as he stokes the fires over which simple bowls steam the petals to ensnare their precious essence.

Back at Anantara, the spa beckons – its antioxidant-rich pomegranate treatment, made from the fruit trees surrounding the spa, intrigues, but in the midst of harvest, it is the rose rescue ritual that beckons. With roses on my face, my feet and massaged into my skin, am I not the fragrant embodiment of the rose harvest?

Darkness has fallen as I return to Muscat for my late-night Emirates flight back to Dubai. I'm sharing a long-distance taxi with two other passengers, and tales are shared like *A Thousand and One Arabian Nights*.

"My father is 120 years old, and had 40 children," contributes the geography teacher from the back seat of the taxi.

Driver Ali and I are amazed. "What's the secret to his longevity?" we ask, sipping hot *karak*.

"He eats nothing that's been put in a refrigerator." The rest of the 150-kilometre journey is spent digesting these incredible facts, until we finally reach Muscat airport.

"The road is very short when we speak," says Ali, placing his hand on his heart in the classic Omani gesture of thanks, before turning his taxi back toward Nizwa.

You can buy pyramid-shaped chocolates in any airport in the world, but in Muscat's glossy airport, you're shopping for frankincense and rosewater, while ordering tea infused with cardamom and saffron – here, Oman's identity is on display.

Its most famous perfumier, Amouage, has its own concession in the shopping section, where I spritz its Opus XII Rose Incense on my wrist. Frankincense as the top note, myrrh at its base, and the heart note of damask rosewater. The fragrance warms as I board my flight, and I am, literally, wearing Oman on my skin.

IMAGES: SUELLA JACKSON/OPF, LEFT, BOTTOM LEFT, TOP RIGHT.

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: Nizwa's mosque and fortress reflect the colours of the sand; crowds at Nizwa's Friday morning goat market. Oman is famed for its damask roses, and visitors are welcome to watch the harvesting. ABOVE: the highest hotel in the Middle East, the Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar, in the Hajar Mountains.