



Left the otherworldly Empty Quarter desert; **below** local tribespeople accompany guests on camping trips



OMAN DESERT

TRAILS OF THE UNEXPECTED

A new luxury camping experience is the first to explore southern Oman's diverse landscapes and ancient frankincense routes. **Lisa Kjellsson** follows the scent trail.

Standing at the top of a dune in the Empty Quarter desert, all I can see for miles and miles in every direction is a sea of reddish sand, an almost otherworldly environment. There's a hint of a breeze, but no sound whatsoever. The stillness envelops me and makes me still, too. I sit down to watch the sunset and reflect on how rare it is to experience the silence and solitude of completely untouched surroundings. I have a feeling it's good for the soul.

As camping trips go, this one, led by Oman Expeditions and accompanied by members of the Mahra tribe, is as intrepid

as it gets—without compromising on comfort. After a day-long car journey from Salalah, a beachy town in the south famous for its monsoon season, we are treated to cocktails and a three-course dinner rustled up by a private chef, and later I sink into a soft bed placed outside my tent so that I can drift off to sleep while looking out for shooting stars.

It's no wonder the British explorer Wilfred Thesiger developed such a passion for this part of the world. In his 1959 book, *Arabian Sands*, he chronicled his adventures around the Empty Quarter from 1945 to 1950—"the five most memorable years of my life"—when much of the region

had not yet been seen by European eyes. With the discovery of oil, the Middle East soon changed dramatically, but the Rub' al Khali desert has remained unchanged—250,000 square miles of soft sand dunes spanning Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman and the UAE, uninhabited bar the occasional Bedouin camp.

We discover one the following day while exploring a route historically used to transport frankincense, once the country's most valuable export. Omanis are known for their hospitality, and my fellow travellers and I are promptly ushered into the makeshift lodgings of a nomadic camel herder and offered coffee and dates as predicted by our expedition leader, Sean Nelson, a former officer in the British Royal Marines and the Royal Army of Oman's desert regiment. He has been organising bespoke luxury camping trips in the country since 2006. Ours, however, is the first to cover the diverse landscapes of the southern Dhofar region.

After our second day in the desert we move on to the coast, passing through the sprawling Wadi Dawkah frankincense tree plantation, and camp on a secluded beach near the small town of Mirbat. It's a welcome opportunity to swim and snorkel in the Arabian Sea, and again we marvel at how we have this beautiful spot all to ourselves. Returning to Salalah, we stop for a picnic lunch in Wadi Darbat, one of the country's most lush wadis ("wadi" is Arabic for "valley"), where camels wade through the turquoise water, surrounded by an array of bird species.

Our journey ends back at Anantara's Al Baleed Resort with its collection of private pool villas by a long stretch of pristine beach. It's a dreamy location, ideal for some R&R after the bumpy ride across the dunes. I head straight for the spa to have any remnants of sand washed off with a pomegranate scrub, and my muscles kneaded with the finest frankincense oil. As I enjoy its rich aroma, I think about the fact that Dhofar's frankincense was once more valuable than gold, and how, over the past few days, I've explored the region's many riches. It's been quite an adventure.

Rates for a tailor-made camping experience with Al Baleed Resort Salalah by Anantara start at 2,820 OMR (or around £5,665) based on two sharing, which includes two nights all-inclusive luxe mobile camping, and two nights in a One Bedroom Garden View Pool Villa at the resort with breakfast and dinner. salalah.anantara.com