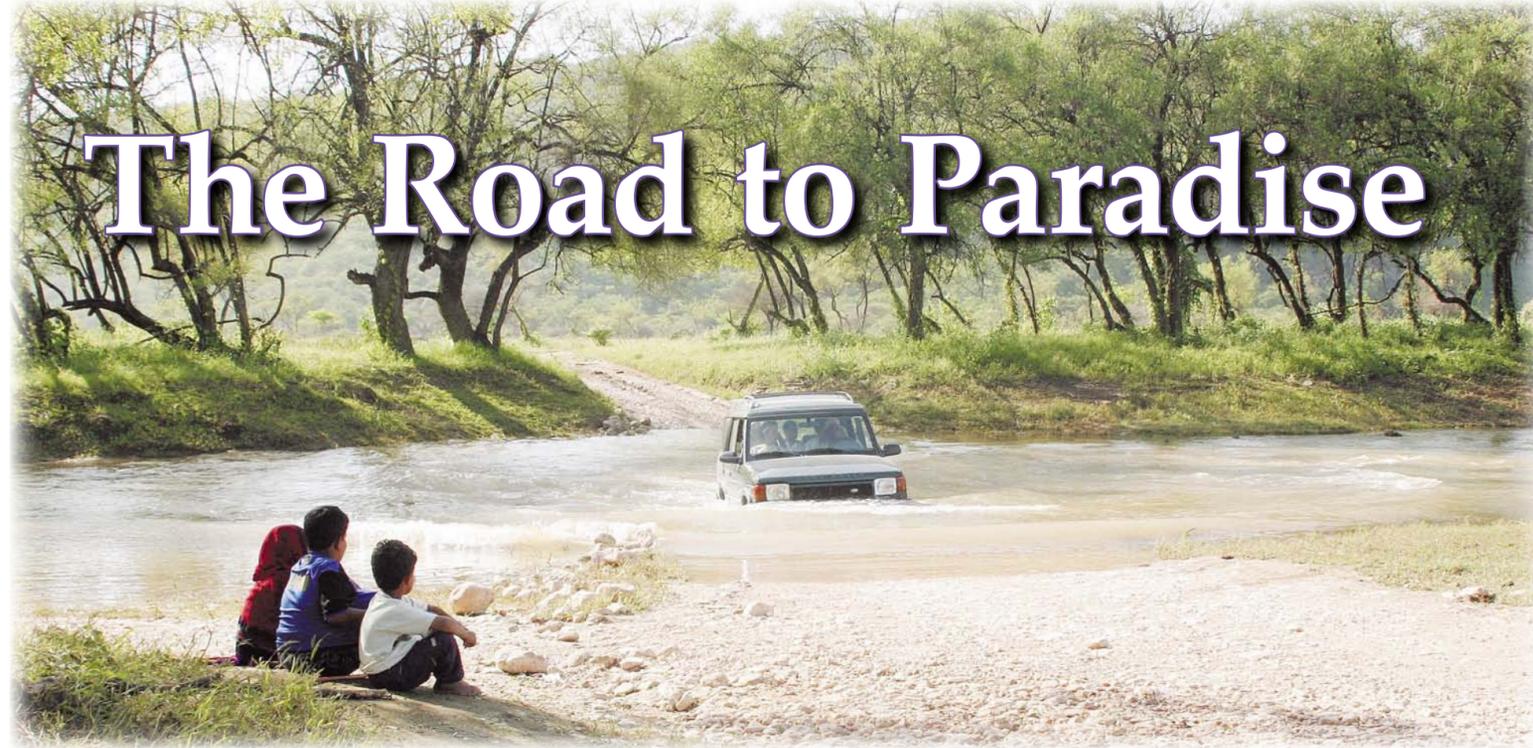


PLACES

The Road to Paradise



Crossing water during the Khareef in Salalah.



Visitors are dwarfed by the waterfall at Wadi Darbat.

TONY WALSH | SPECIAL TO REVIEW

THE road to paradise can be a difficult one. My road to Salalah in the far south of the Sultanate of Oman filled all the criteria any one could expect. Skirting the inferno of the Rub Al-Khali, I passed through some 600 kilometers of the stony plateau known as the Jiddat Al-Harisis. For the most part this featureless sepia brown plain is uninhabited, indeed its few inhabitants, the Harisis Tribe, seem to have found renown for having their language 'Harasousi' included among the most likely to disappear. With 600 recorded speakers spread over this vast plateau, the problems of finding someone to talk to must be immense.

The ascent up into the mountains was a welcome change after almost empty desert, though finding gates on the crest of the ascent was a little surprising. Attached to these gates stands a small police station and the traffic slowed for a cursory glance by the policeman manning them. I wondered nervously if there were an admittance test; if there were my fellow coach passengers and I were given a passing grade and our driver moved through the gate into the Elysian fields of the Qara Mountains, which surround Salalah like a green velvety cloak.

The morning after my arrival I set out to explore the town of Salalah itself. Close to the main shopping area is the Central Market which specializes in meat and fish. I found the cattle and goats on sale were from the Qara Mountains themselves. Ahmed Suhail was among those selling cattle. He seemed a remarkably contented man for someone who had lost money on his sale. He explained that he had bought the cow on impulse from a farmer in the mountains. His folly, he said, was that he had not found out the selling price in the market and the money he had lost was a small amount that would remind him next time not to make the same mistake.

Ahmed asked me where I was going — "the tomb of Nabi Ayoub" (Prophet Job) tucked somewhere away high in the mountains. "Come with me I'm going to work near there and I can drop you off" — I showed suitable reluctance before accepting and walked with him to his truck. Off we went. "Just wait, while I get some clean clothes," Ahmed said; we pulled off the road and made a few turns to his house. Looking smarter now, Ahmed asked if I had had lunch. Since I hadn't, he invited me to join him at the Bin Atique Restaurant. Bin Atique specializes in the cuisine and ambiance of Oman. We therefore sat on the floor, leaning on cushions. After some deliberation, I settled on ground shark with coconut sauce. The shark was dry and benefited from the sauce.

I realized that my day was going to be in Ahmed's hands when shortly after we left the restaurant, he said "Do you mind if I go to pick my car up and we can go up to Nabi Ayoub in that?" Since I was entirely at his mercy, I agreed. Again we turned off the road and bumping over the plain at the base of the mountains to arrive eventually at one of his relative's houses. The house was a single story with a range of outbuildings attached and wandering around were several, almost dwarf, cattle. These were the jebali cows that along with camels and goats form the principal livestock in southern Oman. The livestock is left to roam at will and while adding some character to the location, they have a degrading effect on the vegetation.

Ahmed clearly felt much better now that not only did he have fresh clothes but also a fresh car — I tried to make myself match the style as we made our ascent up the well maintained tarmac road to Nabi Ayoub. For the 3 or 4 summer months each year, these mountains seem to be magnets for clouds and we soon found ourselves driving through a grey leaden mass. Our speed, despite the excellence of car and road, matched that of a lazy cow — with good reason for occasionally the cloud parted to reveal one, meandering at leisure. If the cloud parted

further, I was treated to the remarkable scenery that we were driving through. On either side thickly forested valleys, remarkably similar to those in southwestern England. The occasional cow kept the illusion going and it was only the appearance of an elderly herdsman looking quite un-English that placed the scene in Arabia.

Like the cows he was guiding, the old herdsman was slight in frame. His clothing was quite different from the typical crisp white of the Arabian Gulf states. Around his waist he had wrapped a wazir (a single oblong cloth), dark blue in color that reached midway between his knees and ankles. His torso was bare; there was a touch of a dandy about him as he had draped his massar (turban) over his shoulder instead of around his head and his wispy beard was dyed a bright orange. Ahmed called out to him but it was not Arabic that they used; they spoke the language called Sharahi or Jebali. Sharahi is related to Himyaritic, one of the ancient languages of southern Arabia, spoken before the coming of Islam.

Ahmed, having been such a good host, seemed genuinely reluctant to leave me at the tomb of Nabi Ayoub but he had things to do and I assured him that I could find my way back to Salalah. The tomb has a setting befitting the man described as being fabulously wealthy in livestock. Perhaps he was buried overlooking his estate, certainly the views over the wooded mountains toward the sea are superb. The tomb is open to all visitors and having removed my shoes, I stepped inside. Covered in a glittering green and gold cloth, the grave is simple, perhaps reflecting the man's piety in life. Frankincense smoke filled the atmosphere as I joined a family in their visit.

The next day I made an early start for my aim was to get to the sea and looking at the map of Salalah, I saw that a somewhat circuitous route would take me through cultivated areas. Walking in Oman can be a dream; drivers are courteous, almost to an extreme, cars stopped to let me cross the road almost before I had thought about doing so. "Can I help you?" became a familiar phrase called out from passing cars. My desire to see the town on foot was only slightly greater than the driver's shock that I really did want to walk.

Instead of the ubiquitous date palm that is found everywhere else in Arabia, Salalah's palm is the coconut. The coconut has been a staple in Salalah for centuries; the traveler Nasir-i-Khusruw observed them in Oman in the 11th century. The plantations are vast and cultivated alongside the coconut are orchards of banana and papaya. Venturing off the road, down a well-used mud track I came across some laborers in the fields. I spoke to them at first in English, the lingua franca of the Indian subcontinent from where they seemed to come — blank faces answered back. So I tried Arabic and hit the mark. After the usual pleasantries, I asked "Where are you from?" "Bangladesh." "How many years have you been in Oman?" The replies varied but all were longer than 11.

Part of the Bangladeshi's incomes comes from the sale of fruits at roadside stalls. Reaching one, I chose fresh coconut milk; a few deft strokes of a hatchet and the coconut not only supplied milk but with an added drinking straw became the cup as well. Alongside the coconuts I found small bananas, each little more than a mouthful; I took a bunch and strolled along, enjoying the fruit's delicious sweetness.

My wandering took me to the archaeological site, Al-Balid. This was a trading town from the beginning of the 13th century until the arrival of the Portuguese at the start of the 16th century disrupted the trade routes around the Indian Ocean and sent Al-Balid into decline. The impressive remains of the mosque gives ample testimony to the town's former wealth. Any archaeologist, professional or amateur, would enjoy the site with its tantalizing stonework beckoning from mounds of soil.

Close to Al-Balid is what appears to be a key centre of women's fashion in Salalah. Numerous small tailoring shops with sumptuous women's dresses in various stages of completion line a street near Haffa Souq. Surprisingly velvet, given its weight for a warm climate, seemed all the rage. Sequins and diamante detailing glittered at me in a way I could not have imagined from the sober black 'abaya' cloaks worn in the street by women. Practical leggings were also being made and again, liberal use of all manner of shiny embellishments added quite some style to the calves of the garments.

The main section of Haffa Souq is given over to perfumes and incense. The effect of this concentration of fragrances in an open-air market is extraordinary — the very air seems saturated with an intoxicating mix of eastern spices. First among all the fragrances is frankincense. Prized by all ancient civilizations and associated with their gods, it features in the friezes of Queen Hatshepsut's Temple at Deir El Bahri near Luxor in Egypt. The Greeks described the frankincense trees as being guarded by winged serpents. Remarkably, this formerly most valuable of products is the sap which flows from cuts in a small nondescript bushy tree growing in isolated valleys on the desert side of the Qara Mountains. Small earthenware burners were waved in front of me so that the pale grey smoke from burning frankincense sap would scent my path.

Jostling for space in the packed shelves in the perfume shops are exotic Arabic perfumes. The heady scent of jasmine oil mingles with the latest creations by Chanel. The earthy oud perfume lingers where the more subtle sandalwood dissipates. Small mounds of 'bakour', a type of manufactured incense seemed less exotic than the frankincense I bought to give to friends as a gift.

While with Ahmed, we had driven past the Khareef Festival Grounds so I paid a visit to it during the evening. A whole section was given over to local cuisine. Innumerable flat breads were being prepared and close by, various meat snacks called meshwi were being grilled. I chose lahm ibl (camel meat) with khubz (bread) and enjoyed a truly authentic snack. Most of the festival grounds are given over to entertainment; a children's funfair with the usual cacophony of sound and light operated alongside camel rides which were as much a novelty for small Arab children as for their counterparts in London.

The main draw of the festival, however, is live enter-

tainment and since Salalah is being promoted as a cool escape from the summer heat of the rest of Arabia, the entertainment focuses on Arab singers. The principal singer on the evening I visited was the popular star, Khalid Abdul-Rahman from Saudi Arabia. His style was described to me as "jalsa" which means sitting down, presumably referring to the usual way of playing the Arab oud (lute). He was supported by a variety show; dance troops gave performances interspersed with live on-stage interviews with the stars from the festival.

Separate areas were reserved for male and female members of the audience. For the most part, everyone was seated quietly and applauding or whistling at the right time; the crowd of 15 — 35 year olds was quite a contrast to the almost riot-like atmosphere at Western pop concerts. Running around were small children, perhaps their mothers were using them as messengers to husbands seated in different areas.

Salalah certainly proved to be a remarkable contrast to the rest of the Arabian peninsula and after the arid brown of the desert, the little crescent of mountains is a small paradise on the shores of the Arabian Sea. Driving down to Salalah from Muscat takes about 10 hours. A friend chose to go by one of the regular coach routes which made 3 brief stops, making the journey time 12 hours. On his way back to Muscat, he flew with Oman Air which takes some 90 minutes between Salalah and Seeb Airport, Muscat.



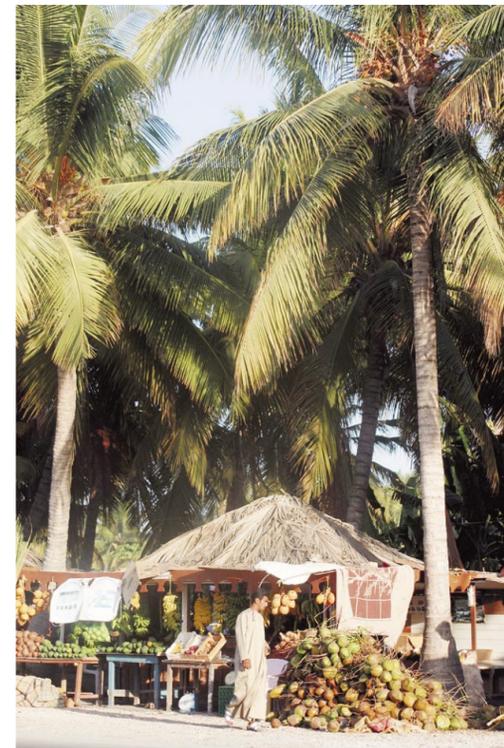
Camels wander in the Khareef clouds.



Frankincense smoke fill the air in the tomb of Nabi Ayoub.



The Mashribah of an old house in Mirbat.



Many stalls selling fruit line to roads in Salalah.

- In Salalah taxis are easy to find; fares are negotiated before hire but finding a driver with a good command of a language other than Arabic may take longer. Car rental firms include Budget (23290097) Thrifty (99323619 — haditha@omantel.net.om) and local companies including Al Manaba (23295444) & Anwar Al-Sheikh (23298085).
- Accommodation in Salalah ranges from the 5 star beach front Hilton (23211234 — sllbc@omantel.net.om) & Crowne Plaza (23235333) through the 3 star in town Haffa House (23295444) to innumerable self catering flats such as Al Saada (23225250) & Assafa House (23299706).
- Restaurants are limited in cuisine with western tastes being catered to in the Crowne Plaza and the Hilton. Other cuisines include bin Atique for Omani food (23292384) & Chinese Chopsticks (23289844). Hygiene standards are excellent with all food outlets & their staff undergoing regular health checks.
- Tour Companies in Oman can provide several day excursions around Salalah and the region of Dhofar. Some are Bahwan Travels (24704455 — btatours@omantel.net.om), Zubair Tours (24692943 — zubairtr@omantel.net.om) and Arabian Tours Company (23290088).