



TRAVELERS' TALES,
FROM NEAR + FAR

EDITED BY
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*Frankincense
resin is burned
in the spa at Al Baleed
Resort Salalah by
Anantara, in Oman.*



EXPERIENCES

Something in the Air

Aromatic frankincense turned Salalah, Oman, into one of the ancient world's most important trading ports. Writer-photographer **Marta Tucci** explores the history of this fragrant resin—and finds its storied appeal very much alive.



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*The coast of Oman
between Salalah and
the Khor Rori estuary.*

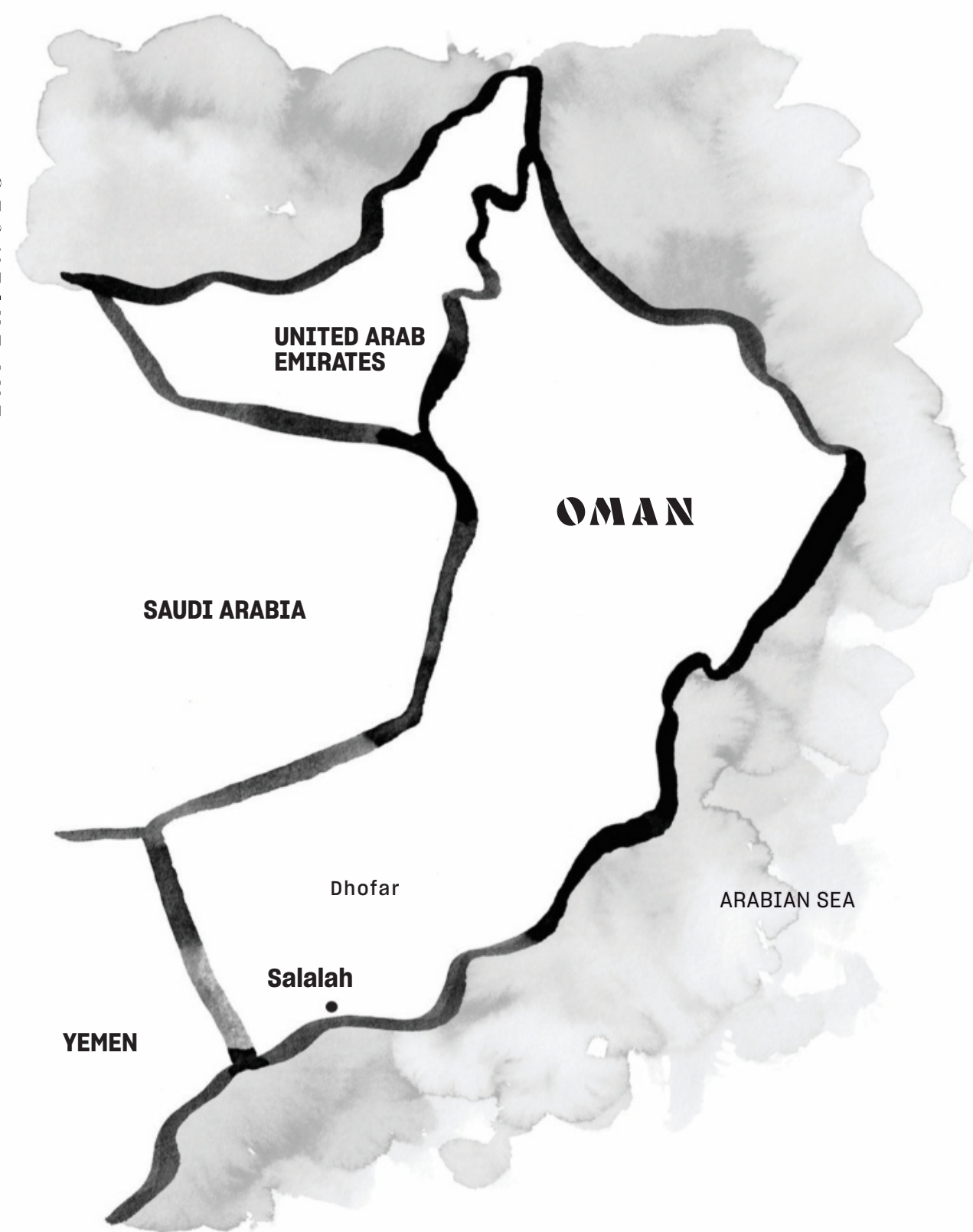
THE PEOPLE of Oman have an old proverb that warns God will prevent anyone who steals as much as a pearl of frankincense from setting sail from the country's shores. Standing among the ruins of Sumhuram, a first-century A.D. trading port on the Arabian Sea, I imagined what it would have looked like in its heyday—merchants bargaining with shoppers; Hindustani, Arabic, and Latin ballads echoing through the alleyways; dozens of frankincense-laden ships heading off into the distance. Minus, presumably, any would-be thieves.



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*A vendor scoops up
frankincense at the Al-Husn
souk, in Salalah.*

The tale of frankincense—the precious resin once considered more valuable than gold—begins high in the desert plateau of Dhofar, Oman's southernmost province, where beds of limestone offer just the right amount of water for scraggly *Boswellia sacra* trees to thrive. Once a year, in the hottest months of April and May, a handful of Bedouin men make a trip to the groves and cut into the tree's papery bark, allowing it to ooze a fragrant sap that is then left out in the sun to crystallize into frankincense.

I had traveled to Salalah, the capital of Dhofar, after reading travelogues of Marco Polo and T. E. Lawrence, whose accounts spoke of the region and its incense. While desert traditions and camel caravans still characterize parts of Dhofar, Salalah is almost tropical, with palm-fringed beaches and verdant mountains.



Not the worst place to be left ashore, I thought as I settled into my room at the **Al Baleed Resort Salalah by Anantara** (anantara.com; doubles from \$392). Situated within UNESCO Heritage grounds, the beachfront hotel incorporates arched doorways and other design elements that pay tribute to the ancient trading post of Zafar, the ruins of which can be seen in the archaeological park next door.

Soon after I arrived, I met up with Hussain Balhaf, Anantara's on-site frankincense expert and my guide for the next few days. As we chatted, I learned that, while the majority of Oman's residents are Arabs, Dhofar developed into a more multiethnic community thanks to the trade caravans that connected it with Rome, Babylon, and East Asia, beginning in the fourth century B.C. The routes are long gone, but the scent of frankincense lingers, perfuming the air with notes of honey, pine, vetiver, and lime.

After a quick lunch at a fisherman's shack, Balhaf and I made our way to Al-Husn, Salalah's famous souk. We were greeted by kaleidoscopic displays of the famed resin—from opalescent rose to deep topaz—in containers lining the narrow, sun-dappled alleys. "*Najdi, shathari, shaabi*," shouted a vendor, calling out the names of the different grades, which cost between \$10 and \$104 per kilogram. Balhaf prompted me to request *hojari*, the highest-quality, which merchants often hide in velvet-lined pouches.

When we returned to the hotel, I headed to the spa for a treatment designed to showcase the

medicinal properties of frankincense. After placing a few granules of resin over an ember to perfume and cleanse the air, my therapist, Ansaya Kaewsawang, handed me a date-size pellet to chew. As I got accustomed to its soapy taste, she explained that frankincense has antiseptic properties, so gnawing on it can improve oral health and digestion. Next came a shiatsu-style massage with frankincense-infused oil, which has anti-inflammatory effects.

That evening, I weighed whether to make the two-hour trek to the ruins of Ubar the following day. A trading and processing center of the ancient world, the city had been lost for more than 1,500 years in the sands of the Empty Quarter, before being rediscovered in 1992 by the famed British explorer Ranulph Fiennes. Concierges and locals had cautioned me to "skip the disappointment," but I couldn't let the story go and called Taimur Al-Said, the owner of **Hud Hud Travels** (hudhudtravels.com) and the only person who could arrange this expedition on such short notice.

The following morning, I met one of Al-Said's guides, a sheikh named

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From left: An abandoned fort at Ubar; dishes like the prawn-and-saffron risotto served at Anantara's Al Mina restaurant are a reminder of Oman's position on the fourth-century B.C. spice route.

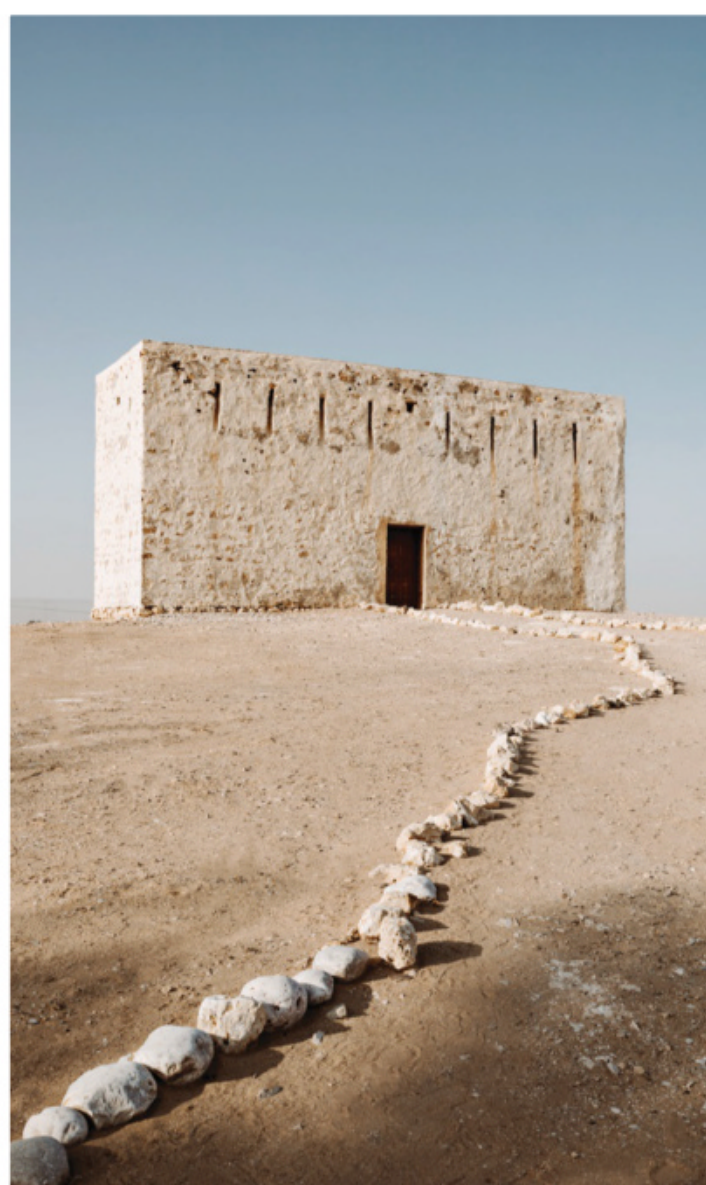


ILLUSTRATION BY LARA COSTAFREDA



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Some private villas
at the Anantara
resort look out onto
the Al Baleed
Archaeological Park.

Musallam Hassan. We crossed the mountains that stand between the desert and the coast, eventually stopping at Wadi Dawkah—a UNESCO-protected grove of *Boswellia sacra* and the largest cluster of frankincense-producing trees in Oman.

Seated in the marbled shade of an old wounded tree—left scarred from centuries of sap-extracting incisions—Hassan reflected on how he’d seen his country change. “Life before 1970 was hard,” he said, referring to the year the late Sultan Qaboos took over the throne from his father, Sultan Said bin Taimur. Unlike his predecessor, the new ruler leveraged wealth from recently discovered oil to build hospitals and other much-needed infrastructure while protecting heritage areas, including sites like the one we were sitting in.

Back on the straight, single-lane road, I began to lose my sense of time and direction as we traveled farther into arid, barren desert. I looked down at my watch and thought, *We should be there by now*. Just as I was turning to ask Hassan how much longer it’d be, the car came to a sudden halt.

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Frankincense expert
Hussain Balhaf under a
Boswellia sacra tree in
Afor Valley, near Salalah.



As everyone had warned, what was once a thriving, life-giving oasis on the fringes of the Empty Quarter was now a scant collection of ruins slumbering away beneath a faded billboard. We toured the site in a mere 10 minutes, then jumped back in the car and set off into the saffron sands.

We reached a sea of wind-carved dunes just in time for Hassan to set up camp as the sky turned amber and blush. I joined him on a kilim beside a crackling fire and gratefully accepted his offer of dates and cardamom-laced coffee before twilight called him to prayer.

As Hassan went through the serene motions of his ritual, I caught the scent of frankincense on the breeze—perhaps from his dishdasha. I wondered where the trail would lead us next—and who else I’d encounter along the way. 🌐