

CARS AND ADVENTURES

A ROSY OUTLOOK

A mound of salt is gathered and set to dry before being collected from a pink-tinged expanse.





Destination



SALTY WILDERNESS

The blinding expanse of salt flats near **Shennah** in **Sharqiyah South** may look like a tempting excursion, but this is **strictly a 'look but don't touch' affair**, writes Jerzy Wierzbicki

Blazing light was pouring in around the edges of my sunglasses as the sun's rays glinted off the white expanse that lay before me. It wasn't the dreamy white of sub-tropical sands on the coast. It was a stark, blinding white that assaulted my eyes and caused me to squint, even behind the relative sanctuary of my shades.

But I'm not standing before a thousand raging suns. I'm on the edge of a salt lagoon on the long desolate approach to Shennah ferry harbour.

It was a blisteringly hot day as I made my way back from Masirah Island, my 12th visit to the 649-square kilometre land mass lying off the east coast of Oman.

It had been a challenging and arduous trip, due, in part, to the staggeringly high humidity that seeped its way into everything during the evening.

Not even a beachside campfire, that had been difficult to start in the damp conditions, could alleviate a feeling of being encumbered with a dewy sheen.

While the ferry back from Masirah Island should have signified the beginning of the end of the trip, it was, in fact, just the start of another adventure.

The road from Shennah winds through possibly one of the most inhospitable parts of the Sultanate.

This stretch of road from the harbour to the inland Route 32 scythes through a swathe of lagoon that shimmers from afar. At this

time of the year the waters have receded back to the shoreline, leaving salt flats shining bright white under the midday sun.

The panorama before us was cut in two, as the sky abruptly prevented the salty flats from racing away before us into infinity. But whereas horizons can sometimes be sharp, the worlds of heaven and earth blurrily merged together in the shimmering heat.

I grabbed my camera and coupled it with a long lens to see if I could capture the warm air, which was shaking above the ground and creating surreal forms.

Around us was the epitome of a mirage. In the drier parts of the terrain, where there wasn't a drop of liquid, the horizon glimmered and the parched surface appeared to be covered in water.

In other parts, a brilliant white layer of thick salt covered the muddy surface of the lagoon and it's that characteristic that makes it so unique.

During high tide and storm surges, some parts of the lagoon are flooded by warm and very shallow water that quickly evaporates and leaves a carpet of pure white salt. It creates an almost winter-like scene as the landscape becomes coated in a layer of snowy white.

I had problems trying to correct the white balance setting for my camera. But don't be fooled into thinking that it's a monochrome landscape. In some places, the ground had bluish or violet colours that contrasted beautifully with the salt.



In some parts, we found the effect of the chemical reaction between the salt and minerals from the ground, leaving a big reddish salty "puddle". It was significant and completely different from anything we could see around us.

Yet, this is a landscape where people make their living. Local traders collect and refine the salt to sell it at the side of the road. And it's not just small bags of salt that are being bought by the odd passing traveller. I witnessed one family loading up the back of a Toyota Hilux with sack after sack of the local produce.

With just a few ramshackle huts where the traders live alongside a huge white expanse, I found the desolation a little overwhelming.

The saline expanse near Shennah looks like nothing I have seen before in Oman. Even the salty basins of the Empty Quarter or Al Huqf Escarpment cannot compare with this kind of environment.

If you are looking for a unique location, then this is definitely a trip for you. ■



HOW TO GET THERE

TRAVEL GUIDE

This is an adventure that's to be enjoyed from the safety of the road.

Do not attempt to venture on to the lagoon's surface, whether in a car or by foot - no matter how dry and stable the surface looks, even if you see tyre tracks of others. Cars will quickly

break through the crusty surface or churn through the salty mud and become bogged down.

The trip is easy. Head to Sinaw and then continue on road 32 to Mahoot. In Mahoot turn left at the central roundabout and go straight to Shennah.

The salty lagoon is just a few kilometres before the ferry harbour. The distance from Muscat is about 400km.

The GPS location of the road near the salty lagoon:

20°44'22.12"N
58°40'36.40"E



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