

DHOFAR:

THE GREEN TREASURE OF OMAN

Words & Photography | Jerzy Wierzbicki

Paradise, as conceived by writers and artists, is a picture-perfect place with rolling hills and bubbling brooks. Over the years, interpretations of this image may have seen several modifications and alterations, but the basic premise behind the yearning to be in such a place is the same: to savour tranquillity and oneness with nature. Oman's very own paradise, the green beauty of Dhofar, is no far from this idyllic ideal.

One of the significant features of the beginning of the 21st century has been the accelerated development of human civilisation around the entire world. It has led to globalisation and has plugged all the gaps, creating a new world that has given networking an all new meaning. The growth in the economy and its associated perks has made our lives that much easier... but, there has been a price to pay for those changes that we often tend to forget.

The most disconcerting of all the problems is the impact of the changes on our environment. In the last couple of decades, our planet has endured countless miseries that have been perpetuated by developments made by man in various sectors. To recall a few: Bhopal tragedy in the pesticides factory in India in 1984; nuclear catastrophe in Chernobyl in Ukraine in 1986; burning oil fields in Kuwait after first Gulf war in 1991; 'Prestige' tanker catastrophe near shore in Spain in 2002; Mexican Gulf Oil disaster in 2010; the nuclear plant tragedy in Fukushima Daiichi in 2011, are just a few examples of the biggest ecological catastrophes in the last 25 years.

These catastrophes changed not only the natural bounty of earth, but also had a critical bearing on the economy, owing to the costs accumulating from such disasters. For example, elimination of oil waste in Kuwait needed several years work and cost almost five billion dollars.

Another direct effect of the overall growth in the progress and prosperity has been the increase in population. This increase led to the expansion of cities, as more and more people hankered to find their bearing in the metropolitan areas. Now, in mega-cities around the world, like Istanbul, Shanghai, Delhi, Mexico City, Beijing or Cairo, the percentage of population is more than the rest of the country, some counting more than ten million people. This has had serious consequences on the environment, most importantly fresh water and food; food and fresh water supply is one of the biggest problems in the modern world, and affecting not only the environment, but generating social and political tensions as well.

Increasing growth in the manufacturing industry, especially in China and other Asian countries, has meant increase in demand for natural resources like wood, minerals and water. Most of these natural resources cannot be replenished, leading to large-scale depletion of the same. The biggest rainforest on Earth, the Amazon, is constantly decreasing in size, despite protests around the world and several ecological campaigns and protection programmes.



However, cultural influences and changes in the mental framework of people have, in a way, shaped the ecological trends in the last few decades. Today, people are opting for organic food and even lifestyle to ensure the ecological balance of the world. Cars and other vehicles on the road are equipped with the most fuel-efficient engines; several laws and regulations also have been put in place to protect nature and its bounties. In EU countries today, anyone wanting to use old or high fuel consumption cars need to pay special taxes and also be willing to face further restrictions. In Berlin, for example, owners of old cars with engines that do not meet ecological standards cannot drive in the centre of the town. Even in London city centre, only those who use electrical cars do not pay any additional fees.

In addition, there are several entry restrictions in natural places like forests, mountain parks, lakes or other natural locations that have been brought under the protection of the government.

In my native country Poland, from the late nineties to now, more than 40 percent reservoirs have been closed for visitors. The fines for investors, industries or companies that destroy the environment to further their business interests are draconic. Many countries around the world have introduced several programmes to safeguard the environment; protection of specific locations, certain species or any other natural phenomenon has become a topmost priority.

These protection measures have created a sense of environment among people, and, many like to visit pristine natural locations, with clean environment and natural bounties that add significantly to the tourism value and thereby the national economy. However, seeing the pace of destruction that the nature has endured, we can easily predict that the last natural locations in the world will turn into very costly destinations in the near future.

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OMAN & ITS NATURAL BOUNTY

From the above focus on environment and the eventual fallout in terms of depleting natural resources and paucity of ideal tourism locations, let me take you on a trip to Dhofar, whose vibrant greenery and natural bounty underscores Oman's wealth of touristic destinations. In Oman, we still have the privilege of travelling to a lot of natural places, many of which are not too far from the capital city.

Personally for me, Oman is a traveller's delight. I have been constantly travelling into the Omani interior since I came to the Sultanate in 2007. A few months ago, I travelled to the Empty Quarter, which is one of the most untouched places in the world. My reason for undertaking that risky trip was to experience the pure natural desert conditions.

In the times that we are living, it is not very easy to find places which embody that untouched ambience. But Oman, indeed, has much more to offer than pure deserts alone! And, undoubtedly, the most attractive part of the Sultanate is the Dhofar mountain range, with Salalah as its traditional capital.

DHOFAR BECKONS

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Salalah is surrounded by the Dhofar Mountains, which represents a completely different kind of environment in comparison to other parts of the country and even most parts of the Arabian Peninsula. During the summer, every year, Dhofar is treated by the monsoon and this part of Oman experiences high amounts of rain. The natural features undergo an immense change

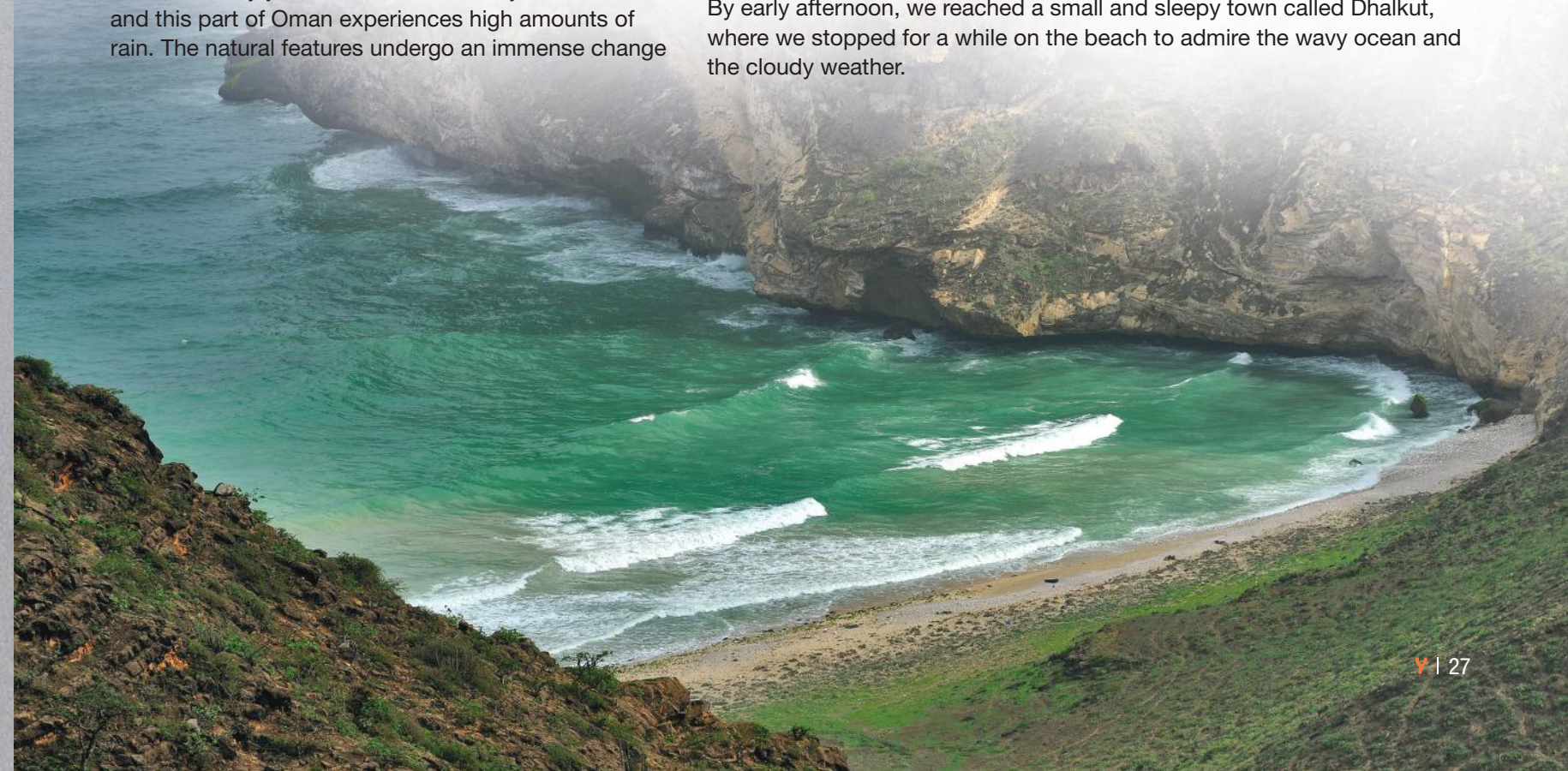
and the entire terrain is covered in a big fresh and natural 'green carpet'. The temperature is low but with high levels of humidity. This season, called Khareef, is one of the most interesting attractions for many visitors, not only from the Sultanate but also from across the region.

During the Eid holidays, last month, I travelled to Dhofar along with a couple of my friends; our 'expedition' comprised two cars and four people. We had an ambitious plan to reach a small town called Dhalkut, only 15kms away from the Yemeni border, on the second day of our trip. The distance from Muscat is more than a thousand kilometres and we found it impossible to reach there the very next day after starting the trip.

We spent our first night somewhere in the desert in Al Wusta and the following day we reached a town called Thumrait, which was an important stop on our way, due to the petrol pump and a well-equipped food shop. In Thumrait, we set off on road number 45, leading us towards west, straight to the Yemeni border. The next night, we camped in a wide stony wadi with green shrubberies and small trees for company. It was around 2 am when we were rudely woken by strong winds and the accompanying rain. We had chosen that spot as it was much ahead of the monsoon zone; however, we, nevertheless, had to leave it in a hurry due to the risk of flooding. We quickly packed up and were back on the black top road, where we pulled our cars over on the side of the wadi for a few hours rest, before hitting the road again.

Morning was blissfully cool and pleasant; cloudy sky and low temperature, plus the mild wind offered a good condition for continuing with our drive. However, the asphalted road came to an end somewhere in the middle of the range between Thumrait and Dhalkut and we took to driving on the gravel track. And suddenly, as if out of nowhere, we came across the monsoon zone and the environment changed totally!

From the top of the mountain range, where the landscape still looks more like a desert with naked rocks and little green spots on the ground, we had reached the green 'jungle', and nothing was comparable to it. The driving conditions also dramatically changed; visibility was very poor due to fog and the roads and tracks were covered by a small film of mist on the mud. The presence of Dhofari camels, which walk randomly on the road or cross it, also pose difficulties while driving. We drove very slowly and carefully. By early afternoon, we reached a small and sleepy town called Dhalkut, where we stopped for a while on the beach to admire the wavy ocean and the cloudy weather.



One of the attractions of this place is an old crashed Russian helicopter on the beach. There are many stories revolving around the reasons for that helicopter crash in Dhalkut; I do not know which, or, indeed, if any of those are true, so I leave it to our readers to find out more about it.

From Dhalkut, wet and muddy but happy to experience such beautiful weather, we moved to Salalah on road number 49. We again witnessed a lot of fantastic places, which have been carved out by nature. Winding roads spread between steep mountains added to our exhilaration and we pulled over our vehicles for photography. In Dhofar, there are also several species of small animals, which present great opportunities to take nice macro shots.

As we resumed our drive, we followed caution to avoid camels on the road. We took time out for shopping in Salalah and then moved quickly forward to Mirbat. Late afternoon we set off to the mountains again to find a nice spot for night camping. At that moment we did not realise that one of the biggest adventures had just begun. Unsettled weather had changed again and we had to drive the last kilometres in rainfall; this completely changed the track into a slippery muddy terrain, posing problems while driving even in our big 4X4, which is made for such conditions. Our cars got bogged down in the soft mud and just after 1.5kms from the main track, driving seemed impossible. With great difficulty we got back on the main track, which was more predictable for driving, and 15 minutes later found a good location for the night.

This was an unusual night. For the first time in years I had to switch on the heater in my car. In the morning, twisted up after sleeping on the car's floor

I went out to prepare some coffee but it was difficult to make a bonfire, as the wood that we had collected earlier was wet.

We spent the next day on the road to Jabal Samhan - Samhan is a part of eastern Dhofar; it reaches around 1800m. Jabal Samhan is known also for the last Arabian Leopards living in the natural environment.

This largest surviving wildcat species live in the inhabited and deep wadis in the eastern part of this mountain. Protection of these cats is one of the most important ecological projects in Oman (For further information on this visit www.biosphere-expeditions.org).

From there we went to Tawi Atayr and visited the local sinkhole, which was covered almost completely in greenery at this time. We then moved to Taiq; this place offers a fantastic view of the mountain range and the deep valley. We got back on the main road after leaving Taiq and after several kilometres reached the edge of Jabal Samhan, above the monsoon zone. Here we got to see one of the most fantastic landscapes of Oman; an overwhelming view of the Indian Ocean and the green Dhofar. Adding to this visual treat were the hovering clouds, which created a magical impression of walking in the clouds.

The visibility was not perfect for digital photography, but I believe that after Khareef is over, in the winter when the sky and air is clean, there would be myriad fantastic location for fans of photography.

After four days and nights and hundreds of kilometres in Dhofar, we got back to the 'dry land' and the desert part of Oman. We spent the following night in a small wadi, somewhere between Marmul and Al Jazir, located close to the seashore. The weather here was dry and hot. By evening-time, tired but happy after my fulfilling experience, I sat on a small camping chair pondering over the events of the last few days. The biggest thrill came from the fact that it is, indeed, a privilege to experience a trip of such magnitude in such a fascinating location.

For even today, when the world is constantly facing side-effects from the environmental hazards brought on by man, there are places like Dhofar which shout out their natural abundance and bounty and the sheer scenic delights. This is a treasure chest of Oman, which will retain its lustre for a long while to come. The obvious wealth of this place was evident in the number of people flocking it during the Eid break. We saw several cars bearing Emirates' number plates, which demonstrate the yearning among people to visit places that have been created by nature alone.

Dhofar is an invaluable destination. Its natural sources of water, unique animal and plant species and the absence of any heavy industries, plus the laidback pace of life, add to its value.

I am sure that the value of Dhofar will only increase in future. I really recommend everyone to visit and experience this location. A memorable venture guaranteed!

TRIP ADVICE:



Dhofar is good to visit the whole year round. In summer though there is plenty of rains, which can make driving difficult. The fog and mist reduce visibility on the roads, so drive very carefully; the conditions are much more difficult than those you encounter in Muscat. However, you can drive there in a saloon car. There are a lot of good conditioned tarmac roads, but, honestly, 4x4 cars, with reduction, are better for driving in the monsoon conditions. Do not, at any costs, go on the muddy tracks, especially if you are alone. The standard road tyres, which most of cars in Oman are equipped with, are completely useless on muddy surfaces.



Some routes on the mountains can be difficult even for small and light 4x4 cars equipped with special mud terrain tyres. Please note that the driving conditions after monsoons will be better. Watch all sides of the road as you drive, as there are more camels here than you could find in other parts of Oman. Prepare yourself before you set off; make a plan of the trip and do not forget your GPS locator. There are a lot of brown road-post directions to some of the attractive locations. You could find additional information about the interesting places on the Internet.

Dhofar is very safe! You can camp outdoors even in the night. There is a good network of roads and service stations. Total distance from Muscat: 1000kms.