

CARS AND INDOORS

BIRD LIFE

Soaring on warm air currents, gulls circle over the dazzling blue waters of Khawr Ghawi



Destination

Khawr Ghawi

Wash away the dust from the desert with a refreshing trip to a lagoon, where the bird life is as beautiful as the soft white sand and crystal clear waters, says Jerzy Wierzbicki





Have you ever had that wonderful moment of discovering something is so much better than you ever expected?

It doesn't come along very often for me. So when it does, it's an even more memorable experience.

This is exactly what happened on my second visit to Khawr Ghawi, a six kilometre-long tidal inlet in the central part of Oman. I was simply blown away by the vivid colours and rich landscape of the area, a safe haven for several species of birds.

It was unexpected because my first trip there hadn't been anything particularly special.

I have the impression that the central part of Oman is less known – and a little more neglected – than the rest of the country. People searching for weekend adventures tend to overlook it in favour of camping or family trips into the mountains near Muscat or Al Sharqiya Sands, around a 90-minute drive from the capital. The Dhofar region is, of course, another hugely popular place during the Khareef.

Central Oman gets a bit of a raw deal. It is much more varied and diverse than you can imagine, rewarding those who are prepared to take a chance on the unknown.

One of the most spectacular central locations is the longest beach in the whole country, twisting like a long sandy snake along more than 180 Kms from Ras Madrasah to Al Lakbi. I have visited a few times before, mostly for fishing and camping, not photography. I wasn't convinced that a flat, sandy strip was much interest to me photographically. How wrong I was.

Last summer, on my way back from Dhofar and a bit exhausted by the intensive previous days and the heat, I stopped in a town called Al Khalil. There's a small coffee shop there, which has great sweet Karak tea. Near Khalil is Khawr Ghawi.

Khawr (Khor) is a lagoon created at the end of a wadi, and are typically found in the Dhofar Region. Khawrs are mostly filled with a mix of fresh and salt water. In the mountainous regions, Khawrs are created naturally. I was curious how they could establish themselves in the flat sandy part of Oman. My first visit there was very short. I didn't take any photographs, it didn't strike me as anything special, but I did file it away in my memory as a place to visit another time in a better season.

The time came a few weeks ago. On my way back from the Empty Quarter, I decided to break my usual routine and not go to Muscat by

Road 31. Instead, I headed to the shoreline near Lakbi. I wanted to spend one more night near the sea and this long, white sandy beach looked like the perfect place. I set up camp on the beach, enjoying the salty smell of the sea and change of scenery after days spent between desert dunes.

In the morning, refreshed after a good night's sleep, I headed north and stopped in Khalil to refuel my car. It was still early and the light was much better than when I was there the first time. I stopped my car on the end of the white beach. The views were incredible: dazzling ivory sands, a dark blue sky and turquoise water in the lagoon created a fantastic palette of colours.

As with most lagoons, it was a bird's paradise. Among the many species of sea birds swooping from the sky, I spotted gulls and dunlins. My dog, Trop, was also in heaven. After several days of unrelenting desert sun, he was overheating and immediately ran into the sea, where he happily splashed around in the shallow water. Afterwards, he rolled in the wet sand and looked – and smelt – like a little damp monster!

I put a long lens on my camera and tried to approach the birds as close as possible. Dunlins and a small group of flamingos immediately took flight and landed in the far distance.

I was luckier with the seagulls.

The water in the lagoon is very shallow and warm. In one place, I could walk right along the sandy peninsula opposite the mainland to get an excellent overview of the whole area.

There is something else that makes Khawr Ghawi unique. Along with the water and birds, there's a mangrove plantation, established by the government in 2005. You can find out about it before reaching the lagoon; near the main sandy track is a big sign that gives you lots of information about the mangrove project.

I wandered over to see the greenery. In the deeper part of the lagoon, near the mainland, I found lots of mangrove trees. They occupy a huge area of several dozen hectares. Unfortunately, humans have blighted this little sanctuary. Everywhere between the mangroves and some parts of the lagoon, I found lots of plastic bags, bottles of boat engine oil and bits of discarded rubbish.

It's a shame that local fishermen and visitors do not respect the place's reserve status and dispose of their detritus properly.

Still, the beauty that has been preserved and the peace of the lagoon is, in my opinion, worth the trip any day. ■



HOW TO GET THERE

TRAVEL GUIDE

It's very easy to reach Khawr Ghawi. From Muscat go to Duqm on Road 32. Pass Duqm and go straight to Al Jazir by Road 41, which goes very close to the ocean.

When you reach Al Khalil, turn towards the seaside. The main track will lead you directly to the lagoon. A 4x4 would be helpful, although the main sandy track

is good enough for a small SUV as well.

Location of Khawr Ghawi:
18°34'55.20"N
56°38'20.65"E