

The Fra



Frankincense Trail

JOE WORTHINGTON
FOLLOWS THE GHOSTS
OF MERCHANTS,
SULTANS AND
CAMELS IN SEARCH
OF AN ANCIENT
TRADE ROUTE AND A
GLIMPSE OF A LONG-
FORGOTTEN WORLD.





built a palace in Sumhuran [an ancient port city near modern-day Salalah] on the trade route,' a stallholder in the souk tells me while he wafts frankincense bakhour (fragrance-soaked woodchips) in my face. 'She used to intercept shipments and hoard chests full of frankincense because she loved the smell so much.'

Bottles of liquid frankincense are everywhere in the souk, alongside piles of milky white frankincense boiled sweets, skin creams and fragrant pure oils. It's obvious the resin remains important in everyday Omani life, but to see its real influence – not just how it appeals to modern consumers – I need to get out of the city.

My first stop on the Frankincense Trail is Al-Baleed Archaeological Park, a Unesco World Heritage Site that was once the site of the ancient city of Zafar. During medieval times, after the decline of the city of Sumhuran, this area became the most important port for frankincense shipping in the Middle East. It was included on a map drawn by Roman geographer Ptolemy, and visited by merchants and explorers Marco Polo from Italy, Ibn Battuta from Morocco, Ibn al-Mujawir, and Zheng He from China.

I walk between 144 towering round stone columns laid out in 13 neat rows, the remnants of the Grand Mosque, where desert Bedouin and windswept sailors would meet to pray before exchanging their frankincense and going out to sea or trekking back through the desert for days on end. I can almost imagine their ghosts praying around me.

Just behind the mosque are layers of bricks from the former sultan's palace – one of the most important buildings in Oman at the time – while crumbling stone walls lie to the north and west of the area, used to protect the town from seasonal floods. This is where people from across the known world

Frankincense. The ancient Egyptians used it in their religious rites; the Jewish Torah refers to it countless times as a purifying incense so divine that it was reserved

for only the holiest of occasions; and it was one of the three gifts carried across the desert by the Magi for the baby Jesus. This most precious of resins had the power to make or break great empires.

I'm in Oman, the land of frankincense, to follow the ancient caravan routes along the trail left behind by this mystical ingredient. Locals in Salalah, a city in the arid Dhofar region in the south of the country, proudly tell tales passed down through generations of visits from legends of history, including Marco Polo, Lawrence of Arabia and the Queen of Sheba. 'They came here for *al luban* [the Arabic name for Frankincense]. Queen Sheba even

PREVIOUS PAGES FROM THE LEFT:

Frankincense tree growing in a desert near Salalah; Frankincense burning in a market.

LEFT:

A creek at Al-Baleed Archaeological Park.

THIS PAGE FROM THE LEFT:

Ruins at Al-Baleed Archaeological Park; The landscape near Salalah.



converged. All brought together by the power of a simple resin from a tree.

It's easy to imagine locals haggling over the best price, goats and camels wandering the streets, and the sweet smell of frankincense combining with salty sea air and burning wood, while the sultan watches from on high.

I head next to the archaeological ruins of Sumhuram at Khor Rawri, an hour or so from Salalah. This ancient port, dating back to the first century AD, was the final stopping off

point for frankincense trade caravans before it was loaded onto dhows and shipped to India, Africa, Europe and even China. I walk through mounds of crumbling stones – once houses and warehouses – and past the remains of a defensive wall to a small museum. Inside, a stone tableau refers to the city of Sumhuram, home to the port of Moscha – the largest frankincense port in Ancient Rome's vast trading empire. It was also one of the wealthiest trading posts in the world, guarded by fleets of Roman warships.

Afterwards, I stand in the creeping midday shadow in front of the museum and look out to sea. The *khareef* (monsoon) season is just starting, and thick mists are gradually rolling in from the water, swallowing up the rocky coastline in a grey soup. I think I can smell a sweet ambery scent rolling in on the mist – the cloying fragrance synonymous with frankincense – but perhaps it's so overtaken my brain that my olfactory senses are playing tricks on me.

I retrace my steps back through the ruins, searching for what could have been the mythical palace of the Queen of Sheba. Local legend says that she collected frankincense resin each year – which she locked in a heavily guarded room – until she had enough to fill a boat, which was then sent to King Solomon in Jerusalem as a token of her love (or lust) for him. I don't find any sign of her palace, just

THIS PAGE AND RIGHT:
The archaeological ruins of
Sumhuram at Khor Rawri.

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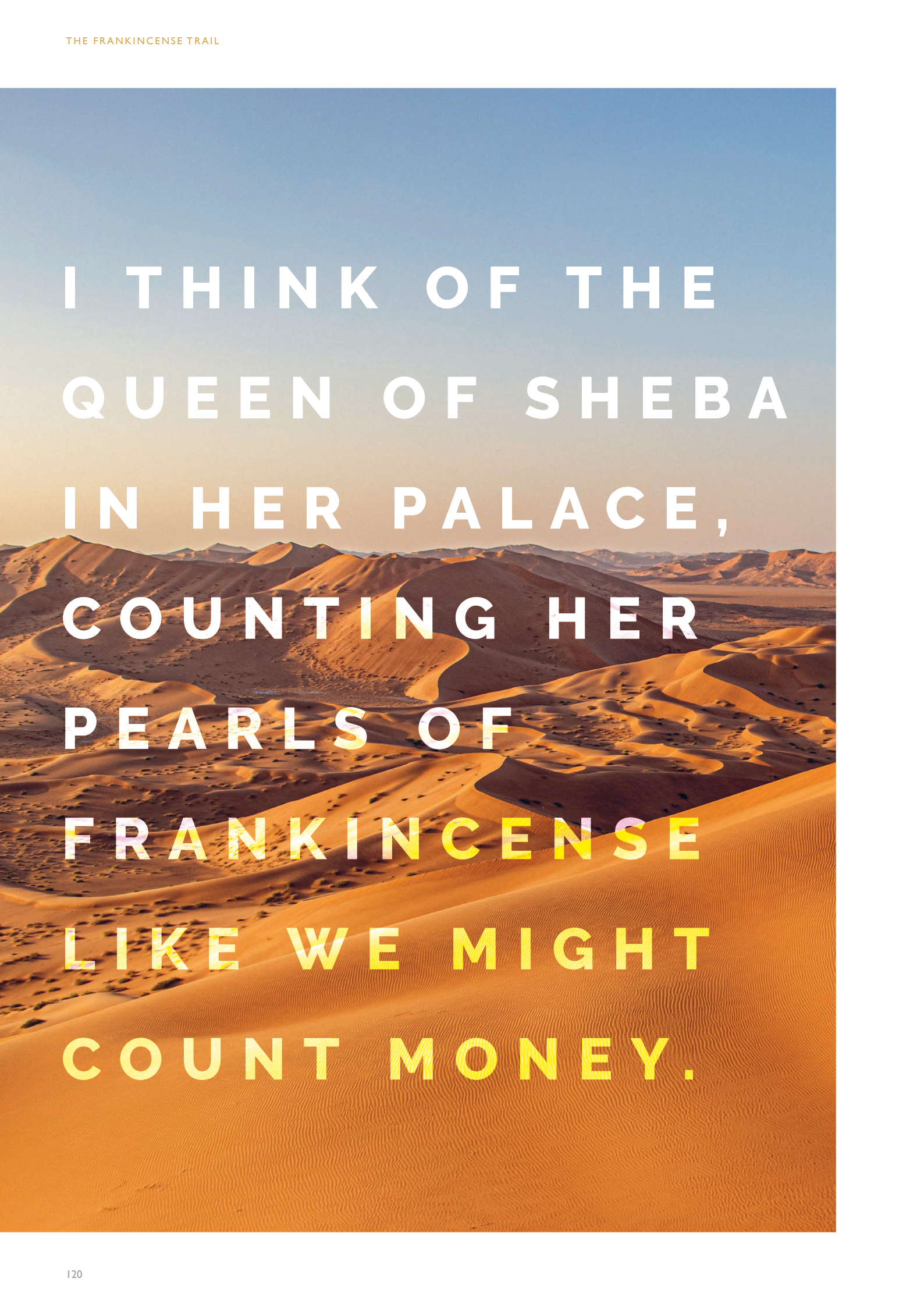
a few dusty pathways and a ruined wall or two, but I like to think it was there, somewhere.

I ask my driver to take me to the historic source of the frankincense industry. I had seen the end products in the markets and its final stops before being exported around the ancient world, but I wanted to retrace the start of the route of the endless camel caravans that, for centuries, transported the resin from the fields of trees to the ports.

We follow a sandy road out of Salalah along the Frankincense Trail proper, supposedly built on top of one of those ancient trading routes, into a vast area of emptiness known, quite appropriately, as the Empty Quarter. No settlements, no shops, not many people, and – most crucially for those ancient traders – no fresh water. After an hour of driving, questioning whether we were actually lost, a sparse misshapen tree appears, then a few minutes later a cluster, then minutes later a field of crooked trees. The air fills with that ambery sweetness that I thought I had smelled



CLOCKWISE FROM THE TOP LEFT: Driving through sand dunes in the Empty Quarter; The sand dunes of the Empty Quarter; Frankincense resin; Frankincense tree in Salalah; A bowl of frankincense resin for sale.

A full-page photograph of a desert landscape featuring rolling sand dunes. The dunes are illuminated by warm, golden light, likely from the setting or rising sun, creating long shadows and highlighting the textures of the sand. The sky is a clear, pale blue. The text is overlaid on the image in a bold, sans-serif font.

I THINK OF THE
QUEEN OF SHEBA
IN HER PALACE,
COUNTING HER
PEARLS OF
FRANKINCENSE
LIKE WE MIGHT
COUNT MONEY.



LEFT:
*Evening light on the dunes
of the Empty Quarter.*

THIS PAGE FROM LEFT:
*A Boswellia
(frankincense) tree;
Resin seeping out of a
frankincense tree*

at the port, and even my driver, Ahmed, has a gleaming smile on his face. 'This is the smell of my childhood. When it was harvesting season, this is the scent that filled my home,' he tells me.

Despite the once-priceless nature of frankincense, I wouldn't say the Boswellia trees – from which the resin comes from – are particularly attractive to look at. Each one is



sparsely vegetated, distorted and bent. I guess there's a moral in those trees: it's not what something looks like that counts, it's what it can do that is most important.

We are just outside of Thumrait, which has been the most important frankincense growing region in the world for millennia. It is Alkashem, the end of the tree tapping season; local men, heads bound in patterned masar turbans, were cutting the outer bark of the trees. A thick and milky off-white substance slowly emerged from the wounds; a fully grown tree can produce over 8lbs (4kg) of resin twice a year – one tree that I see, I am told, has been oozing for over a week. I watch as a man chips away at the tears of resin, flicking them into a bucket, one after the other. Each time, a faint lemony waft hits my nose.

With the wave of a hand, I follow the man and his bucket along a dusty track towards a small cave in the side of a jagged cliff. Inside, row after row of buckets overflow with small jewels of white resin. Most are the AL-Hawjri variety – the whiter and clearer version of frankincense. I think of the Queen of Sheba in her palace, counting her pearls of frankincense like we might count money; no doubt she would have thought she had hit the jackpot had she seen this cave.

Before heading out to Oman, I had read some of explorer Bertram Thomas's writing; Thomas, by all accounts an interesting character, was the first westerner to cross the Empty Quarter. Like his counterparts Lawrence of Arabia and explorer Wilfred Thesiger, he wrote of how he had tried, and failed, to find a settlement known as the 'Atlantis of the Sands'. I ask one of the workers at the frankincense farm if they know of the city but am met with a few shakes of the head. My driver, however, knew what I



was talking about. 'You mean the lost city of Ubar. A city that might not have existed, but if it did, it revolved around the frankincense trade. I'll take you.'

Apparently, Bedouin storytellers had told Thomas tales of the residents of Ubar being so wicked that God destroyed the city and erased all trace from existence. The Bedouin also recounted to Thomas how they thought they had also seen castles of the fabled king Ād on their journeys through the desert, mentioned in the Quran as 'the City of the Pillars'... only to find they were actually mirages. Countless explorers had searched for the city, to no avail. My hopes of finding this mythical city at this point are, it is fair to say, quite low.

Nevertheless, we get back onto that endless, sandy, bumpy road that connects almost nowhere to absolutely nowhere for miles and drive deeper into the Empty Quarter. We follow the road towards the modern settlement of Shisr from the south, veering off the paved highway slightly along Wadi Ghudun, a deep and dusty valley that cuts through towering cliffs, to a pile of grey stones that, if I squint hard enough, look a bit like a section of a tower. If this was once the grand city of Ubar, not much of it is left.

We pull up alongside the ruins and I get out of the car to explore. Below the stones is a deep collapsed well filled with gravel and bricks. Perhaps this was a stopping-off point for camels carrying frankincense from the farms in Thumrait, through the desert, and north to the Mediterranean. There is nothing else for as far as the eye can see, other than sand, a few mountains in the far distance, and the odd thorny bush here and there. This must have been a settlement. Gazing out across the desert, I can easily imagine a line of camels carrying hessian sacks filled with frankincense, setting off for days of walking to a port filled with boats waiting to ship the resin around the world.

It may not have been the lost city of Ubar, with its bustling streets and vast wealth, built for and by frankincense merchants. But, standing there, at the end of the Frankincense Trail, it seems to me that it could be – that maybe I have discovered what Thomas had failed to. Travelling out here had been a journey, not just through the sometimes seemingly endless deserts of Oman, but along a trail that provided a glimpse of a long-gone, ancient world and the liquid gold that once helped sustain it.

**THIS PAGE FROM
THE TOP:**
*Jeeps driving through the
desert near Shisr; Ruins
near Shisr.*

Photo Credits: Dreamstime.

NEED TO KNOW

GETTING THERE

The nearest airport to the Frankincense Trail and the Empty Quarter is Salalah Airport. Most travellers will need to travel via Muscat or airports in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan or India.

BEST TIME TO GO

From June to September, when the monsoons hit the region, transforming the arid deserts into forests of trees, plants and wildlife; temperatures are also cooler than during the drier months.

CURRENCY Omani riyal

TIME ZONE GMT +4

FOOD

Seafood is available in abundance in Salalah, with locally caught kingfish, snapper and cuttlefish appearing on many menus. *Ma'ajeen* (camel meat dried and then fried in fat) is a popular local dish.

WHERE TO STAY

Salalah is the only major settlement in Dhofar with hotels. Al Baleed Resort Salalah by Anantara is close to the archaeological park.

HOW TO DO IT

A 4x4 is required to visit the remote desert ruins and frankincense farms in the Empty Quarter. You can either rent a car at the airport or, preferably, hire a local driver and/or guide to add colour and context to what you see and make sure you don't get lost. Hotels can give recommendations on local tour companies to use.

MUST-PACK ITEM

A scarf to cover your head and face, especially if visiting the desert in the wind and midday sun.

WHY GO

To experience a side of Oman that is often overlooked but which has shaped the country and its culture over thousands of years.