

A Sense of Oman

On the tip of the Musandam Peninsula in Oman sits a Six Senses resort that exemplifies indulgence. Take the senses on an Arabian journey at Zighy Bay. Giselle Whiteaker takes some time out Omani-style.

As the four wheel drive crests the winding gravel mountain road the Bay of Oman comes into view, the deep turquoise of the water providing a contrast with the beige sands. The stark outposts of the Hajjar Mountains ring the rim of the bay, ensuring visual impact. Nestled in the cove is a small collection of villas, owned by the local fishermen. More subtle are the structures constructed from local stone hewn from the mountain as the road was being built.

Based on a traditional Omani fishing village, the Six Senses Zighy Bay resort blends subtly into the landscape. Palm trees sway in the mild breeze swirling the air, offering respite from the midday heat. We pull into the resort and my bags are whisked away by the efficient hosts. I am handed a frothy smoothie. I take a tentative sip and my taste buds zing into life. "What is this?" I ask. "It's our own creation," says Ary smiling. "It is date and banana." So my Omani adventure starts. Ary will be my



personal butler, ensuring I want for nothing and making my stay nothing less than exceptional.

Oman is divided into three parts. The largest portion is on the southeast coast of the Arabian Peninsula. The remaining two segments are small enclaves surrounded by the United Arab Emirates. Zighy Bay is within the northernmost enclave, on the Musandam Peninsula. This is a sparsely populated area relying on goat farming and fishing - few crops are hardy enough to survive the heat. The interior has its own barren beauty, while the coastal fjords juxtapose the dusty landscape with the turquoise sea.

At the door of my villa are two bicycles, should I wish to freewheel my way around the resort. Through the heavy wooden gate is an enclosure with an outdoor shower. The next door leads into the villa. A large lounge area, orange cushions thrown casually across both comfortable sofas, looks out over the private pool and outdoor relaxation area. A chess game is set up on the coffee table. Through the bedroom, the bathroom is open plan, with a satisfyingly deep stone tub overlooking the side courtyard.

I slip into something more appropriate for the heat and walk along the sandy path, past the large public pool



to use the falafel shaping device (every kitchen should have one) to create symmetrical masterpieces for frying. After a few attempts I master this skill and Chef Ali stops laughing at me. Together we whip up the sauce, softening the bitter tahina paste with lemon juice and seasonings.

Chef Ali directs me to sit. "Because you are special..." he says, "...I'm going to make you Lebanese style falafel." He speedily enfold my golden falafel shapes into a soft saj bread wrap, with tomato, several different pickles, onion, cucumber; and a few secret pinches of this and sprinkles of that. The falafel on their own, dipped in the sauce are delicious, but they are superseded by the falafel wrap. The combination of flavours gives my taste buds a wake up call. I have to force myself to stop eating to leave room for the main course.

I move back into the kitchen to progress to *samkeh harra*, a fish dish with a spicy pepper; tomato and pine nut sauce. The lightly marinated fish gently sizzles in the pan while we put together the sauce, which is surprisingly easy. A few finishing touches and again I am instructed to eat. The fish has a delicate flavour; offsetting the spicy sauce. Full to the brim I groan when Chef Ali says it is time for dessert.

surrounded by loungers and shade huts. I am booked for a cooking class with Chef Ali, who greets me warmly. "Ah, you are alone," he notes. "You will have to eat a lot then." He is not mistaken.

We start by making fattoush, an Arabic salad of tomato, cucumber; and lettuce, flavoured with pomegranate sauce and sumac. The crispy freshness is topped with the Arabic equivalent of croutons – small squares of fried pita bread. We then move on to the more complex falafel with tahina sauce. Chef Ali offers up a "here's one I prepared earlier" moment, delivering a bowl of minced chick peas, garlic, parsley and spices. My job is simply





I roll off the chair and plod into the kitchen to tackle *um ali*, a decadent Arabic version of bread and butter pudding. Forget bread, croissants are where it's at. Add raisins and pine nuts, soak the lot in milk and sugar and top it with cream before a quick bake. Heavenly. Stomach distended, I thank Chef Ali, who hands me my apron as a souvenir. I waddle back to my villa for some pool time before dinner:

After a dinner snack on the terrace of the Summer House, I amble to the beach and pull up a sun lounger, ready for the evening movie. A personal headset ensures the sound effects of Hollywood are kept distant from the peaceful beach. Somehow I find room for a small cup of popcorn throughout *Black Gold*. While the movie is set "somewhere in Arabia", and that somewhere is certainly not Oman, the desert environment blends with my surrounds. Tonight I dream of camels and sand.

In the morning I have an Arabic lesson to kick start my brain. Ahmed guides me through the complexities of the Arabic alphabet in the relaxed



ambiance of the library. By the end of the lesson I can scrawl my name in Arabic script, count to 999 and give basic greetings. Not bad for a morning's study.

I deserve a break after the mental exercise and the Six Senses sanctuary of ultimate wellbeing, the spa, is the place for relaxation. I stay with my theme of Arabian pleasures and opt for the Rose Hammam Journey. Based on the traditional hammam of ancient Arabia, I start in the steam room. I am shrouded in warm mist, feeling

my muscles instantly loosen. My pores open, and in the semi-darkness I am sure I feel the toxins trickling away from my body.

By the time my therapist collects me for the hammam proper, I am incapable of coherent speech, a relaxed smile plastered on my face. She leads me into the tiled bath house, where I lie on a warm slab and she scrubs every inch of my body (well, almost every inch). This vigorous exfoliation is performed with a traditional hammam mitt and hand-made rose soap.

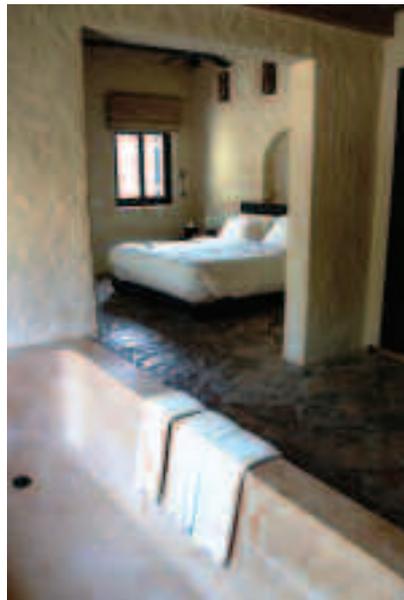


Thoroughly scoured, my skin is treated to an anti-ageing rose clay body mask and I am left to bake on the slab. Brought out of my semi-comatose state through meticulous rinsing, I dry off and lie down for the final coat – a special body oil to soften and nourish the skin. My sighs of pleasure echo throughout the hammam. I leave refreshed, recharged, and glowing. The rest of my afternoon is filled with nothing more strenuous than a dip in the pool and a stroll along the beach.

Evening brings more fantastic Arabian flavours. The Shua Shack is a communal beach hut, set up Bedouin-style, with low tables and comfortable cushions. Guests are seated together, encouraging social interaction. After the Arabic mezze, many of which I now know how to make, Chef Ali calls everyone over to a small patch of sand. Underneath, two haunches of Australian lamb have been slow-roasting over coals for the last eight hours. Two wiry men scrape the sand away and open the heavy lid, hoisting the haunches out of the pit with metal hooks. The succulent meat is so tender it falls from the bone, melting in the mouth. Traditionally, this would have been goat meat, but the lamb is oh so much better.

With all of this gluttony, I need some action, so I resolve to join the morning

kayaking session. I am the only one who makes it out of bed at the appointed time, so I have guide Jose to myself. We push through the mild surf and paddle along the coastline, enjoying the solitude. Landing on a small stretch of beach we plunge into the surprisingly cool water. As we paddle back, a small stingray breaches the water. Jose and I share a delighted glance at our fortune.



The enormous breakfast at the Spice Market is enough to undo the good work from my morning's exercise, so I haul my unwilling body up the stairs of the water tower, housing an extensive wine cellar in its base. The views are spectacular, and I admire the way the resort blends into the area. Six Senses prides itself on being part of the local fabric and culture, and projects an ethos of environmental responsibility. Among other projects, both internal and in the wider community, the resort runs its own water treatment plant, and has a herb and vegetable garden providing organic produce for the restaurants. I can see the garden from my rooftop vantage point.

In the afternoon I am booked to go fishing. Jose joins me, hefting a large cooler box. I assume this will house our catch. We drive to the pier and board our fast craft, the Captain skilfully manoeuvring the waves to find a portentous spot. As this is about local traditions, we are hand-line fishing, hoping to reel in a barracuda. Someone forgot to tell the barracuda we were coming. Not one nibble. With a resigned sigh, the Captain charts another course. We throw the lines out again, trying different strategies to lure our dinner. The ocean remains reticent to sacrifice any of her own. We may have only caught the sun's rays, but the excursion has provided another perspective on the Omani lifestyle, several local fishermen motoring past us hoping for better luck.

After welcome cocktails on the main beach, I wander back to the Spice Market. The restaurant staff forgive me for my empty cooler box and put on an extensive seafood buffet which explains the empty ocean. A selection of salads, sushi and seafood morsels whet the palate, complemented by a spicy Tom Yum soup, made to order. More temptations await around the barbecue area, where charcoal-grilled prawns and squid join complex seafood combinations. The barbecued barracuda mocks my fishing abilities, but the dessert selection provides a salve for my wounded pride, stretching along half the room.

As night falls, I sit at the open air Ziggy Bar and watch the stars. Tomorrow I will reluctantly return to reality, but I have experienced some of the best things Oman has to offer – delectable cuisine, traditional activities, and total relaxation, in a spectacular setting. For sheer indulgence, Ziggy Bay cannot be beaten. My sixth sense has been awakened.

For more information see: www.sixsenses.com
or email: reservations-ziggy@sixsenses.com