

# Nothing to SEE here

Follow in the sandy footsteps of a legendary British adventurer in Oman's Empty Quarter – the most fearsome desert in the world

WORDS OLIVER SMITH • PHOTOGRAPHS JUSTIN FOULKES

‘No man can live this life and emerge unchanged. He will carry, however faint, the imprint of the desert, the brand which marks the nomad; and he will have within him the yearning to return, weak or insistent according to his nature. For this cruel land can cast a spell which no temperate clime can match.’

Wilfred Thesiger, *Arabian Sands* (1959)



Kareem fearlessly inspects Wadi Ghul, the so-called 'Grand Canyon of Arabia', from the top of Jebel Shams



FROM LEFT Preparing a meal in the Bait al Safah museum in the Hajar Mountains; assorted nuts in Nizwa souq; guide Kareem Al Balushi; Nizwa's 17th-century fort

## 'The precipices of the Hajars emerge and a hazy horizon marking the edge of the Empty Quarter'

**T**HERE IS NO WAY OF telling precisely when you arrive in the Empty Quarter. There is no road sign, because there are no roads (and there are no roads, because there is nowhere much to go to). There is no-one to ask, because there are no towns, villages or buildings. The Omani military keeps maps of the desert. But you can't use a regular mobile phone to call up and ask them for help – because, you see, there is no reception in the Empty Quarter.

But there is sand. Sand piled high in pyramid-sized dunes. Sand that gets everywhere: by the end of a day walking in the Empty Quarter, you will have in each sock enough sand to build a medium-sized sandcastle. Sand is an unwelcome ingredient in breakfast, lunch and dinner. And there are enterprising grains of sand that gather in remote regions of the nostrils, tummy button and ears. Anyone who travels through the desert will find these specks of sand for months after leaving – they will blow their nose and find a stowaway from the most fearsome wilderness on Earth.

Translated from the Arabic Rub' al Khali, the Empty Quarter is the world's largest sand-dune desert, the Sahara being bigger, but mostly stony rather than sandy. It covers an area about the size of France, spread across Oman, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Seen on a map it is a blank space comparable to Antarctica. To the northwest

are the mosques of Mecca and Medina; to the northeast the skyscrapers of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, and to the south the warm currents of the Indian Ocean. And in between them is a featureless void that looks like a cartographer might have skived off early from work one afternoon. With a big atlas, you can study every feature of the Middle East – from the gardens of Jerusalem to the foothills of Afghanistan – all while handily balancing a mug of coffee on the blankness of the Empty Quarter. It is a place where no ink was spent and few souls go.

But, of course, there is no adventure quite like a journey into the middle of nowhere...

### THE MOUNTAINS

A dust storm blows over the waters of the Persian Gulf, making landfall in Oman and gusting across the Hajar Mountains. In the town of Nizwa, sparrows take shelter in crumbling watchtowers. In the souqs, merchants cover sacks of spices – nutmeg, star anise, cumin and caraway – padlocking their shops before pottering off to find lunch. Out of the clouds, the midday call to prayer begins, echoing up into mountain crags which murmur back the verses.

Anyone travelling to the Empty Quarter from Oman's northern coast will first need to cross the Hajar Mountains. The range rises abruptly from near the capital, Muscat: at the bottom are sands so hot they will scald your feet, at the top are summits visited only by intrepid goats and occasional flurries of

winter snow. Today this is a very safe and welcoming part of Oman. Yet not that long ago, no foreigners dared travel here. In the 1940s, these remote mountains were ruled by an imam with a passionate dislike of outsiders (matched only by his passion for threatening to lop their heads off).

My guide Kareem drives me up to the highest peak in the range, Jebel Shams, stopping to point out the castles that once guarded these passes against prying eyes. High above the road, mudbrick villages – such as Misfat – cling to the hillsides, and around them gardens of date palms and mangoes. The gardens are watered by springs channelled from inside the mountain, fed by rainwater that might have fallen centuries ago.

Soon, the road reaches the top of Jebel Shams and the dust clouds clear. The precipices of the Hajars emerge and, to the south, a flat hazy horizon marking the edge of the Empty Quarter.

One spring day in 1949, someone squinting into this haze might have spotted a Bedouin caravan trotting out of the desert. In the group was a tall, silent figure with thin eyes and a crooked knife. Had he spoken, he would have betrayed a cut-glass Eton College accent, for this was Wilfred Thesiger – a boxer, writer and all-round professional eccentric hailed as the last of the great British explorers. On the dubious pretext of studying locusts, Thesiger had just emerged from four years roaming →





Guarded over by a millennia-old watchtower, the village of Misfat is thought to be one of the most ancient settlements in Oman



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barefoot through the Empty Quarter with Bedouin tribesmen – a story told in his book *Arabian Sands* – and had now set his sights on exploring these mountains.

But it was not to be. The imam heard of his plans and politely asked Thesiger to choose between clearing off or suffering a painful death. The caravan retreated into the wilderness of the Empty Quarter and nothing more was heard about it – no-one would follow them this way. ‘Even locals sometimes get lost in these deserts,’ says Kareem with a grin, standing on a cliff edge and gesturing into the distance. ‘The Empty Quarter is a dangerous place.’

### THE COAST

One man for whom the Empty Quarter is not a frightening proposition is Mussallem Hassan – a guide, cook, driver, mechanic and skilled teller of bedtime stories, who has, for two decades, been a one-stop shop for camping trips in the sands (and, encouragingly, has returned every time).

‘If you are experienced, the Empty Quarter is not a dangerous place,’ he insists, loading his 4x4 as a cool breeze rolls in off the Indian Ocean. ‘The desert is my home. I read it like a book.’

Born in a cave on the edge of the sands, Mussallem grew up in a Bedouin family – walking with camels in a landscape dotted with frankincense trees and wild jasmine, sleeping in wadis where the growls of Arabian leopards could be heard after dark. He was a young soldier in the Omani army when he first began to explore the Empty Quarter – and is one of only a few people who know their way around there.

He picks me up in the southern port of Salalah – little more than a village in 1946, when Thesiger set out from here on a →



Hamed bin Nasser – a resident of Misfat, returning from a morning trip to a nearby market



Driving along Wadi Ghul – the canyon sometimes turns into a river during heavy rains





FROM LEFT Bengali fishermen on the quays at Mirbat; palm trees line the beaches in Salalah; fishing boats anchored in Mirbat harbour

## ‘The road turns from tarmac to dirt, before losing enthusiasm and disappearing altogether’

desert expedition, now transformed beyond recognition into a thriving modern city. But further along this coastline are scenes Thesiger would still recognise – fishing villages like Mirbat, where migrant Bengali fishermen breakfast on sweet curries on the decks of their boats. They pause between mouthfuls, shooing away cats that paw at nets full of twitching red snapper and mackerel. Here and there, ruined castles guard the coast against invaders who never turn up – relics of the frankincense trade from which this coastline once made its fortune (a chunk of which, some say, ended up beside a manger in Bethlehem). But trade dwindled long ago. The ruins are mostly empty, save for sunbathing lizards.

Loaded up with water, food, tent pegs and a satellite phone in case of emergencies, we leave Salalah behind, and set out on the six-hour drive to the Empty Quarter. People and buildings gradually abandon us. Refreshment stops become more basic as the hours pass: first air-conditioned motorway service stations; then iron shacks serving chapatis by the roadside; finally, a small boulder where a pleased-looking camel sits in the only patch of shade for miles around.

The temperature climbs higher. Winding down the passenger window feels like

checking up on a Sunday roast in the oven (meanwhile, flies buzz inside to escape the stewing heat). Hours pass, with nothing but featureless gravel plains on all sides. More hours pass. The flies drop dead. The road turns from tarmac to dirt, before losing enthusiasm and disappearing altogether.

Until finally the dunes appear.

### THE SANDS

The dunes of the Empty Quarter move about ten metres every year. The desert is, in some ways, like a stormy sea rolling in slow motion – a world of inching tides and sandy swells, with campsites pitched right under the crest of breaking waves (some of which measure 300 metres high). It means Bedouin guides like Mussallem must constantly be updating their mental map of the landscape: recognising old dunes withering, while watching young ones grow tall.

But the view Mussallem knows the best is the underside of his Toyota Land Cruiser. Soon after entering the dunes, the tyres slip and our car is stuck in soft sand. Mussallem gets out to dig around the chassis.

For someone like me visiting the Empty Quarter for the first time, this experience is a bit concerning. I suddenly become aware of millions of square miles of nothingness in

every direction. I do some panicked arithmetic to work out how long I could survive on three custard cream biscuits in the glove box. Minutes pass, the wheels spin some more and darker questions come to mind: the logistics of drinking your own wee, or the feasibility of snacking on scorpions like Bear Grylls does on TV. It is a full six minutes later that Mussallem gets the car moving and three custard creams are eaten in triumph.

‘Getting stuck in the sand will happen every time you travel in the Empty Quarter,’ he says solemnly. ‘If you are a nervous person, you should not guide people here.’

Once upon a time, there were more travellers in the Empty Quarter. When Thesiger came here in the 1940s, a tapestry of tribes were moving about the sands. In the company of these Bedouin, he wandered north into the loneliest leagues of the desert. By day, they tracked allies and enemies – recognising the footprints of individual camels (speculating what they had for dinner). At the day’s end, they camped beside wells where their camels grazed, baked bread in the sand and ate it with butter stored in lizard skins. Even if they were weak and skeleton-thin, they would welcome guests to share supper. →





## ‘In recent decades, skyscrapers have soared across the Arabian Gulf. But in many ways the Empty Quarter is now emptier than it has ever been’

Dark-coloured camels are common in the Omani part of the Empty Quarter. **BELOW** Making ginger tea back at camp



‘When you see a village or houses, you see a closed door,’ says Mussalleem, ‘When you see a tent, there are no closed doors: you know you are always welcome there.’

But Thesiger knew he was witnessing the last days of a nomadic life little changed since the first migrations out of Africa. Today most Bedouin live in towns. Some say the Empty Quarter has so little grazing, it is now impossible to travel far by camel.

It wasn’t always this dry. Just 10,000 years ago (a geological heartbeat) there were forests here, alive with birdsong. Giraffes, hippos and ostriches grazed on the banks of mighty rivers. Since the last Ice Age, the land has grown increasingly arid. In the Qur’an, it is written that God turned the entire Arabian Peninsula dry as punishment for the misdemeanours of mortals – and it was in the Empty Quarter that he was most vengeful. A century ago, British explorers went looking for Old Testament cities and ancient treasures thought to be buried under the sands. They returned disappointed, with bags full of old ostrich eggs and meteorites.

In recent decades, skyscrapers have soared across the Arabian Gulf, and population sizes have exploded. Yet in many ways the Empty Quarter is now emptier than it has ever been.

The sun begins to set as we arrive at camp, scattering streaks of saffron light through the western sky. Mussalleem shows me to my quarters – a goatskin tent he bought in Damascus. It is left standing in the desert when he is not visiting.

‘I have not seen the whole world,’ he says, stoking up the fire to grill camel kebabs. ‘But this desert gives me peace like nowhere else. Your mind is free. It is hard to describe.’

For Thesiger, too, this desert meant indescribable freedom. He lived a life like few others: he wrestled with lions on the grasslands of Kenya, and scaled the icy summits of the Hindu Kush. By the time he died in a nursing home in Croydon in 2003, he had seen wildernesses around the planet – but nothing stirred his soul like the most lifeless of them all. He considered the rest of his life as being ‘in exile’ from the Empty Quarter – away from the gentle sting of sunburn on his shoulders, and the feeling of warm Arabian sand between his toes.

I climb a big dune next to the camp while dinner is prepared. The contours of distant dunes are silhouetted against a bloodshot sunset, and the air turns cooler with every →



Sturdy 4x4s have overtaken camels as the favoured means of transport in the Empty Quarter, even if they are more apt to get stuck in sand





Mussallem Hassan looks out across the dunes

minute. At this time of day, it is easy to understand why Thesiger loved the Empty Quarter. The price was an uncertain and sometimes dangerous existence. Yet the reward was (and still is) the freedom of roaming in a landscape that gives the sense of being infinite – where you can walk alone but for your shadow, which grows as tall as a giant with the setting sun.

Night comes, stealing the shadows of the twilight, casting spectral moonlight over the dunes. We lie on sand still warm with the memory of the midday sun, drink sweet ginger tea and watch campfire smoke drift and dissolve among the stars.

As is tradition among Bedouin, stories are shared before bedtime. Mussallem tells the tale of the great rains of the 1980s, where he saw lightning spark on the distant horizon, and followed it to find a small corner of the Empty Quarter turned miraculously green. And then there are other, older stories from the last days of nomads – of genies who could make the sands play strange music, and Bedouin woken by whispers to see phantom tribes walking the dunes by night.

Wherever you go in Oman, a special macabre interest is reserved for stories of people who get lost in the Empty Quarter. Once or twice a year, this same story features in newspapers across the Arabian Gulf – a shortcut that went wrong, a car that broke

down. Some are never found; buried alive by sandstorms or swallowed whole by quicksand. But the precise details of these stories haunt the nightmares of anyone who travels deep into this desert. The ding of an empty fuel tank. The chirpy jingle of a mobile phone switching on in a place where there are no signals stirring the air. And, of course, the most frightening sound of all: your own speeding pulse set against the immortal silence of the Empty Quarter.

We rise before dawn, sipping cardamom coffee that wakes up sleep-muddled heads. Stories of the night's goings on are written in the sand; the trail of a snake that wandered over to the camp to sniff at the cool box; the tracks of various beetles scuttling about on nighttime errands. The wind picks up, and it's time to begin the drive home. The dunes disappear, and the road reappears. Before long mobile phones are buzzing with voicemails – Mussallem's customers, concerned relatives.

There is no way of telling precisely when you leave the Empty Quarter. And soon – with the desert wind blowing sand to cover our tracks – there will be no sign we were ever there at all. ☪



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Mussallem's camp is made from traditional goatskin tents bought in Syria before the war