

Oh My! Oman

It's no wonder that Dubai has become a popular port for cruise lines, including Crystal, Oceania, and Regent Seven Seas. It's a fascinating city and well located for excursions into the surrounding area. Savvy travelers arrive at least a few days before sailing and use the time to explore the city and nearby destinations.

Zighi Bay, Oman is less than two hours from Dubai, but the contrast between these two places is dramatic. The highrises and sand dunes of the UAE had disappeared by the time we crossed the border. Instead, the highway wound between mountains the color of chocolate ice cream and past scattered humble homes. Everywhere I looked, goats — seemingly millions of them — picked

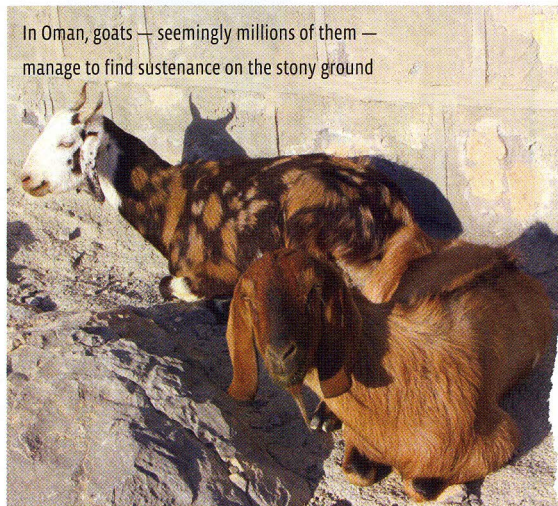
through stony ground. When the road rose to a summit, I caught my first breathtaking glimpse of the royal blue water of the bay.

Located on Oman's Musandam Peninsula, this remote coastal area is home to a small fishing community and a remarkable Six Senses Hideaway resort — built of stones in the style of the local villages. Each of the 82 guest villas comes with a private pool, but sun worshipers also have the option of walking on the mile-long sandy beach or lounging around the resort pool. Some of the other public spaces include Chill Bar, where homemade vodka is the specialty, an open-air deli-restaurant, and a wine cellar stocked with selections from around the world.

(www.sixsenses.com/six-senses-hideaway-zighy-bay)

In contrast to Dubai, where hotel staff is all imported, nearly 50 percent of the resort's employees are from Oman. The country is a constitutional monarchy, where women are entitled to vote and hold three seats in the Cabinet of Ministers. Children from the

In Oman, goats — seemingly millions of them — manage to find sustenance on the stony ground



community next to the resort are transported to school by boats — separate ones for boys and girls.

On our first night, we enjoyed dinner at Senses on the Edge, Zighi Bay's signature restaurant perched on a cliff overlooking the resort and the sea beyond. The meal included a range of innovative dishes, but my lasting memory from this experience is lingering over a glass of Cloudy Bay with a starlit sky overhead while the call to prayer from the village mosque carried on a gentle breeze.

Back in our spacious villa, we appreciated the rustic chic décor, including slate floor, open-beam ceiling of natural logs and cane, and a large bathroom with indoor and outdoor showers and a



Six Senses Hideaway Zighi Bay is surrounded by mountains the color of chocolate ice cream. Some reach a height of almost 7,000 feet

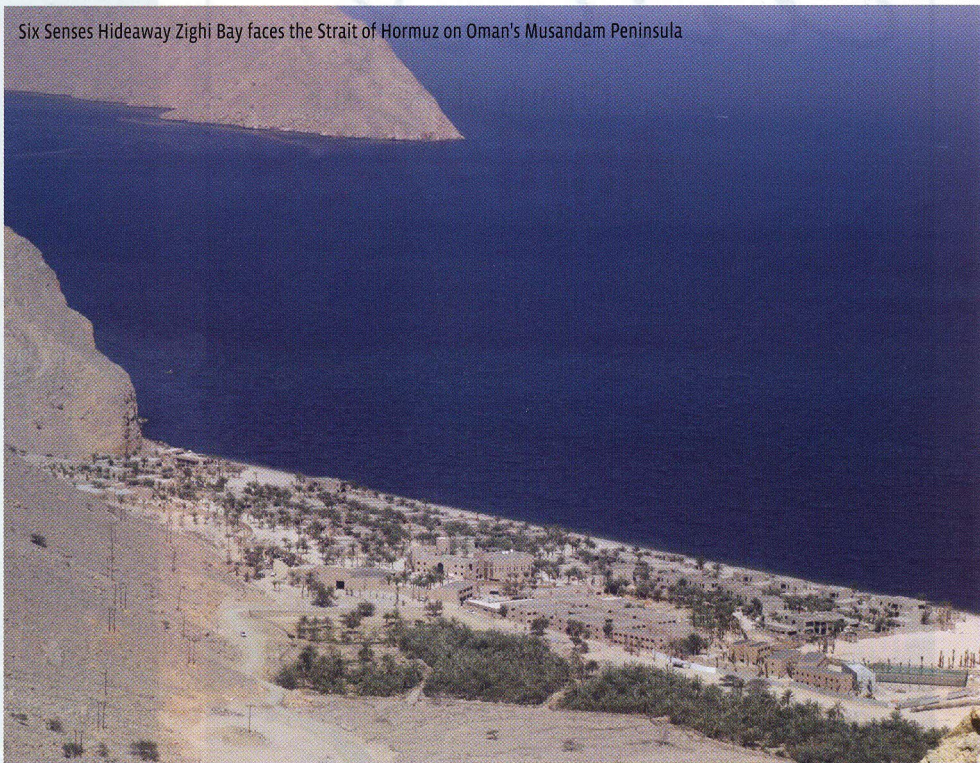
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terrazzo tub for two. Outside, our pool and patio were surrounded by stone and cane walls high enough to ensure complete privacy. Five-star service was provided by staff who ride bicycles along the sand paths that wind throughout the resort. In addition, butlers (ours — Maria — was formerly a lawyer in Russia) cater to guests' every whim.

It was tempting to “stay home,” but my urge to explore beyond the resort led us to Absolute Adventure, a first-class outdoor activities company, and its senior guide Ram Sunder Thapa — a native of Nepal with extensive experience in the Musandam region. (www.adventure.ae)

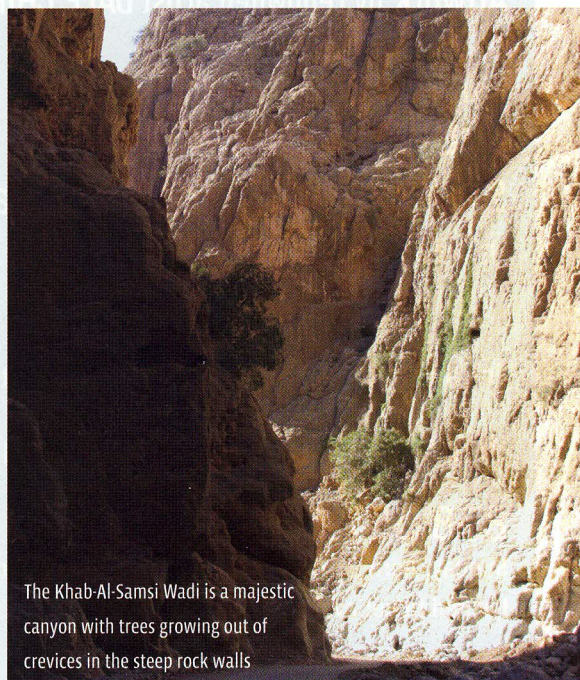
He devoted a full day to showing my husband and me the area's natural attributes and sharing his knowledge of the local culture. Our destinations included the Khab-Al-Samsi Wadi, a majestic canyon with trees growing out of crevices in the steep rock walls. Along the way, he explained that historically the local people lived

Six Senses Hideaway Zighi Bay faces the Strait of Hormuz on Oman's Musandam Peninsula



along the coast until the Portuguese invaded in the 17th century. Then, the Musandam residents fled to the mountains, where they remained until the early 1980s. When Oman started earning oil revenues, the government encouraged locals to abandon their mountain homes and move to the coast where they could have a higher standard of living. Today, the revenues provide fresh water and food aid to those who need it. All that remain in the mountains are countless goats and the Pakistani men who are paid to look after them. We visited one abandoned 400-year-old village where primitive drawings of camels can still be seen on the walls of a partially-collapsed house. When the three resident Pashtun goatherds invited us for tea, we gladly accepted.

I love five-star resorts and luxury travel, but — oh my — this Omani adventure was an excursion that we'll never forget.



The Khab-Al-Samsi Wadi is a majestic canyon with trees growing out of crevices in the steep rock walls

For more exciting activities available to guests at Six Senses Hideaway Zighi Bay, to learn about Zighi Bay's efforts to go green, and for the scoop on “Dubai Port Deals,” see www.ranchandcoast.com.

ELIZABETH HANSEN

Primitive drawings of camels can still be seen on the walls of a partially-collapsed house in an abandoned 400-year-old Omani village

