

## Footprints on the Beach

Angry shouts puncture the morning air. Heads twist to stare at two men in grubby dishdashas, nose to nose in furious confrontation. Beneath the stark, earthy battlements of Barka fort, they could be warring tribesmen from three hundred years ago in Oman's turbulent past. Instead, their fingers jab towards fish writhing in a small motorboat and argue about a stolen catch.

The argument fades behind me, replaced by bartering on the beach and hopeful gulls in the air. I step over gutted fish entrails in the sand. Gaudy umbrellas fill the sky, casting welcome shade from the Arabian sun. It's March and already forty-five degrees.

Tourists stroll between the maze of boats, pulled high from the water. Cameras click incessantly. Then boys howl with laughter when they see their faces on an LCD screen. This is Barka fish market. The fish couldn't be fresher if I'd walked into the sea and caught them myself.

'Assalamu alaikum,' I say to an old fisherman. The man nods and flashes a gap-toothed grin. His leathery face creases against the glaring sun. "Wa alaikum assalaam," he replies in gentle tones, wishing peace upon me as well. He sweeps his open palm across the array of fish on a tattered, blue tarpaulin on the sand. He will sell whatever his family can catch. Today, it is tuna and grouper. The next stall has a marlin that fills the sheet.

'Bikam?' I ask, bartering for the tuna. This takes some time, involves much arm waving, horrified gasps, and even walking away, but I get my fish with a look of triumph.

I drive by the towering fort where Ahmad Al Bu Said invited his Persian enemies to a banquet, fed them, and then had them executed. Forts and watchtowers dominate the Omani skyline as much as the minarets, a constant reminder of battling tribes in this unassumingly beautiful country.

I'm camped with friends on a beach nearby. By mid afternoon, the delicate aroma of fish wafts from the barbecue, mixing with spiced goat, lamb and chicken with rice and bread. Groups of us huddle in the shade of palm trees, trying to stay cool in the punishing heat. Sunset comes quickly here and sparks an Omani passion - beach football. Swelled by people from the nearby village, hundreds of players fill every inch of the beach. All along the coastline, thousands take to the sand every evening as the heat leaves the day. Football shirts from teams around the world are displayed with pride, silhouetted against a blaze of orange on makeshift pitches. Passionate cries of joy, anger, desperation and triumph fill the salty air.

Later, the murmurs of waves in the darkness follow me as I walk along the beach. Ghost crabs scuttle for morsels of food, grey flashes dancing around me in the sand. Then I stop and stare.

A large creature is splashing in the dark surf. My imagination spikes until it reaches a patch of weak light and the breath sticks in my throat. I stare in fascination as a three-hundred pound loggerhead inches its way through the sand, searching for a place to lay her eggs. It's an incredible sight but one that also fills me with concern. Turtles usually lay their eggs on Masirah Island or at Ras Al-Hadd reserve. Not where we had just been playing football.

The turtle scours the sand in clumsy jerks then she uses her powerful flippers to dig a hole in methodical swipes. I'm mesmerized as she lays her clutch of one hundred golf ball-sized eggs over the next hour. I'm so close I can see salty tears sliding down her cheeks. The crabs return to scuttle around her. By the time they are born, the hatchlings will face many threats before a terrifying, predator-filled scurry to the ocean. Few will survive. She covers the nest and crawls back into the surf. I shiver in the chill off the sea and head for my tent.

I return at dawn. The tide is coming in and I wonder about the strange dream until I glimpse the edge of her tracks, like tractor treads, leading back into the Gulf of Oman. I stand there on an empty beach and smile.