

CHASING THE SUN

THE TROPIC OF CANCER IN OMAN

Written and photographed by TONY WALSH

Somewhere along Quriyat's shore is located the magical number I am looking for – latitude 23.2622 N, the Tropic of Cancer

On the border of Oman and the UAE, the sun disappears in a miasma as it follows its route along the Tropic of Cancer

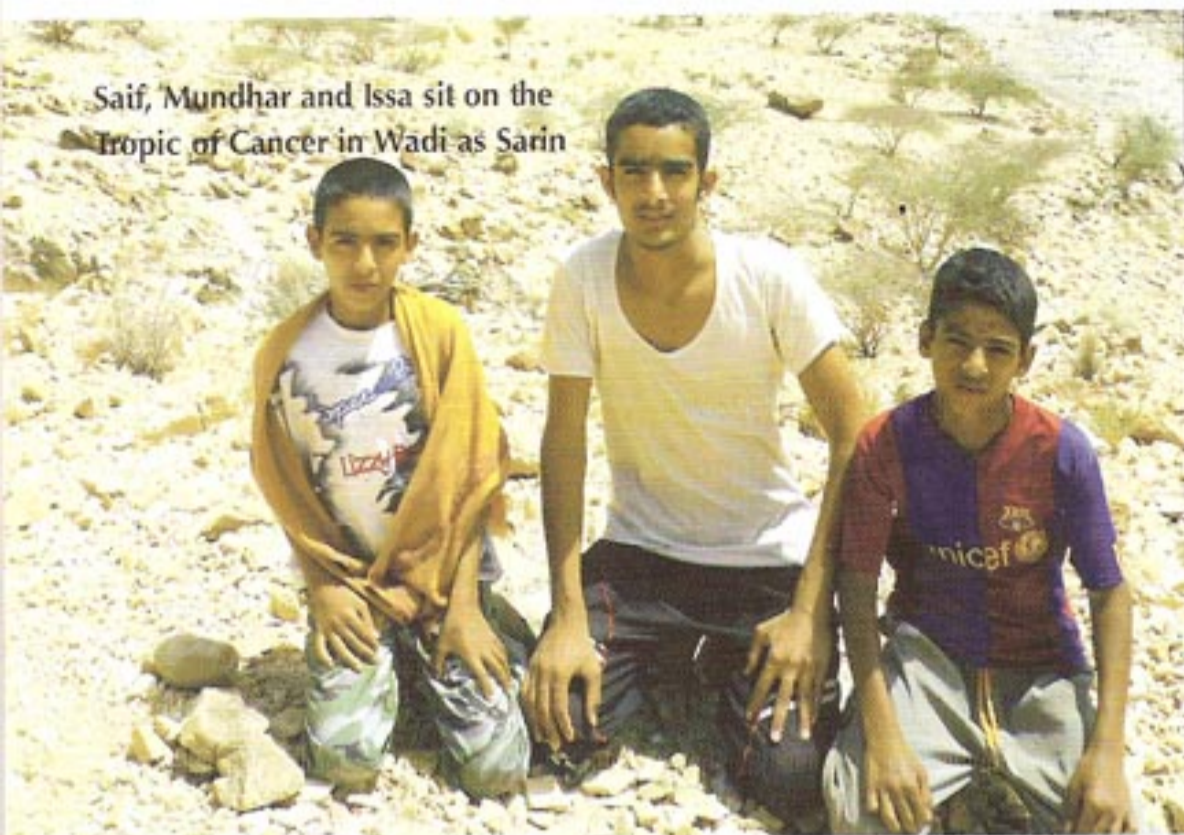
Crossing northern Oman on the maps is the Tropic of Cancer, one of the five great circles that enclose the Earth. This tropic represents the most northerly position of the sun in the entire year. Feeling that such a significant route would be worth exploring, I set out to discover the places that lie on the sun's path as it will travel through Oman on June 21 – that special day when the sun follows its most northerly line in Oman, from sunrise to sunset.

In many respects Quriyat, my first destination, is a quintessential Omani coastal town. Fishing boats speed out to sea in the darkness and return after daybreak loaded with fish. At the core of the town is a small fort; date plantations encircle the fort and town and the ever-present mountains tower over them all. Daily, Quriyat is

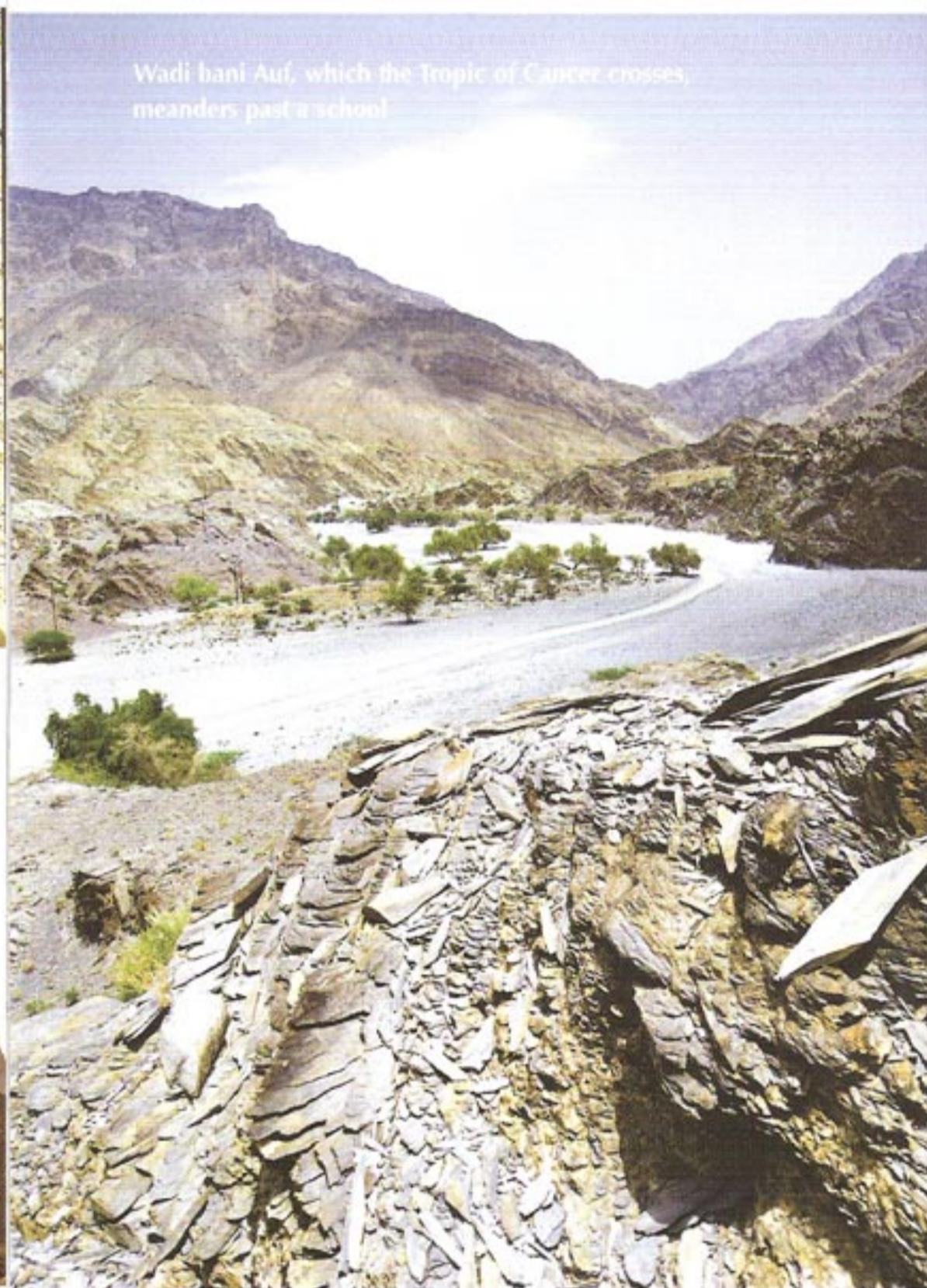
treated to the sight of the sun rising out of the Gulf of Oman and beginning its westward journey across Oman. But on June 21, Quriyat will be due west of the rising sun for somewhere along its shore is located the magical number I am looking for – latitude 23.2622 N, the Tropic of Cancer.

In the first of a series of remarkable places, I find my spot next to Quriyat's much-photographed coastal watch tower Burj al Seera, where at 5.19am on June 21, the sun will rise from the sea due east of the tower's entrance door. Burj al Seera sits on a small island that rises sharply out of the sea; perhaps there was an earlier tower in the same location when Alfonso da Albuquerque's general Antonio do Campo ransacked Quriyat in 1507. At the beginning of the Yarouba

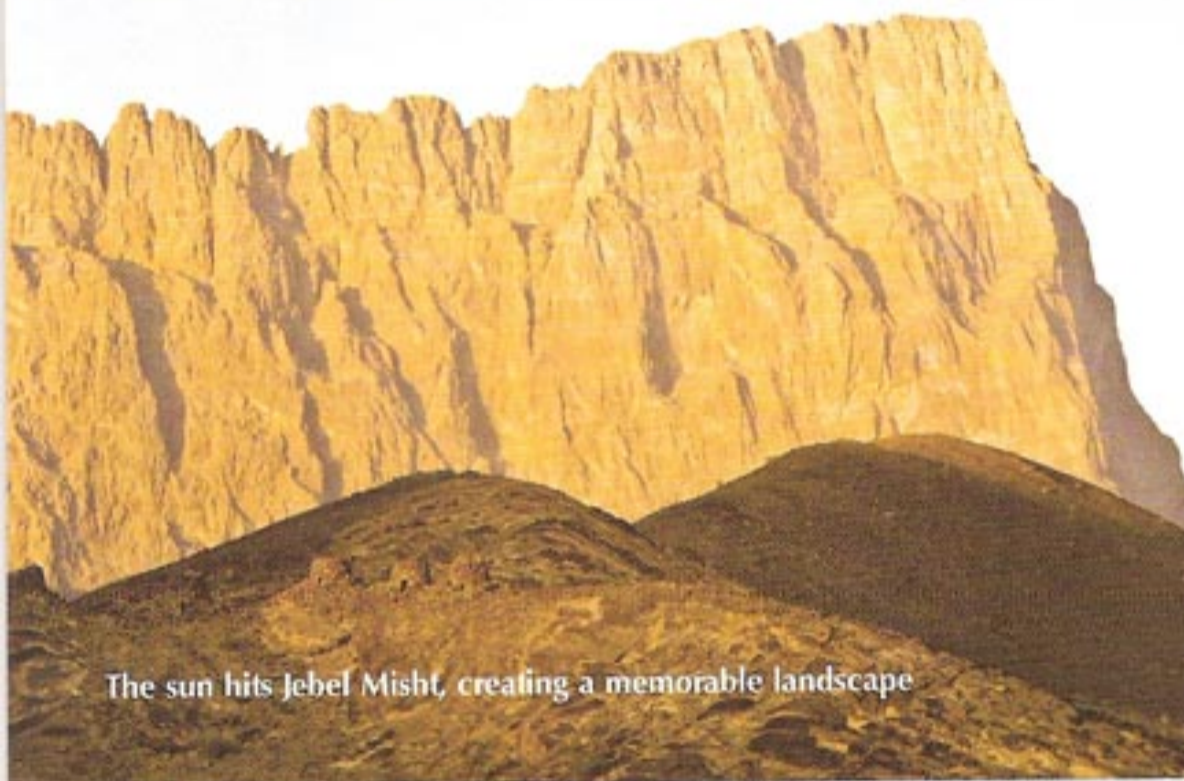
Saif, Mundhar and Issa sit on the Tropic of Cancer in Wadi as Sarin



Wadi bani Auf, which the Tropic of Cancer crosses, meanders past a school



The sun hits Jebel Misht, creating a memorable landscape



dynasty's rule in Oman, the Imam Nasir bin Mushid built the current tower and in the 20th century Sultan Taimur bin Faisal restored the tower. Today it is surrounded by the sea defences of Quriyat's new fishing port. It is tempting to linger here and watch the sun pass directly overhead this historical tower – but the journey is long and the day short.

Setting off in a westerly direction, I pass through the foothills of the Eastern Hajar mountains. My next stop on this journey is beside a small group of houses at Maqfah, which is home to Khalfan Abdulla's family in Wadi as Sarin. Sharing the latitude with Burj al Seera, Khalfan's family also share their mountainous valley with one of Oman's special animals – *Arabitragus jayakari* or the Arabian Tahr. The tahr is listed in the IUCN's Red List of Threatened Species

as 'endangered'. With possibly less than 5,000 tahr in the world, probably all of which now live in Oman, it's easy to understand why it is a protected animal in Oman. Tahrs live in small family groups of about three animals as they move through the mountains feeding on vegetation. This means that in some places where they live, they compete with the domestic goats that feed on the same plants. Though the youngsters in Khalfan's family knew about the tahr, they hadn't realised how special their location is as it sits under the Tropic of Cancer sun.

Passing south of Muscat's main residential areas, the Tropic crosses the Nizwa road south of Sumail and through the peak of Jebel Ghubra at the mouth of Wadi Mistal, before it arrives in Wadi Bani Auf. Here, standing astride the magical latitude on a small outcrop



Jebel Misht provides a spectacular backdrop to the Wadi al Ain Tower Tombs

of this area's ubiquitous siltstone pencil cleavage, I am overlooking a school and health centre. The school, Wadi Bani Auf Elementary, is almost 20 years old and seems to be set in such a remote area that I expect only a few students there. Yet inside, I find Class Four sitting enthusiastically at their desks as they welcome me in unison, 'As salaam alaikum'. At the end of my visit, I leave hoping that the teacher, Ahmed al Balooshi from distant Sohar, will now have a few budding geographers keen to learn about their school's remarkable wadi and special latitude.

As Wadi Bani Auf rises towards the escarpments of the northern face of Jebel Shams, the Tropic of Cancer moves away well north of Oman's highest peak and then with seeming purpose runs through the axis of Jebel Misht. The impressive southern face of Jebel Misht rises to peak at over 2,000m and is an extraordinary cliff some 900m

high before hitting the talus slopes below. Jebel Misht is one of Oman's 'exotics', an outcrop of rock that is unrelated to the rocks surrounding it and clearly Jebel Misht is a stand-out among the exotics. It is up its western slopes that I scramble to gain a dramatic view over the region surrounding the Tropic of Cancer. Far below the ruins of one of Oman's acclaimed archaeological sites, the Tower Tombs at Wadi al Ain, can just be seen before a date oasis. These tombs are part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site that includes Bat.

Sitting on a low hill, they face out a valley meandering towards the location of the midday sun in winter, and throughout their history people arriving at them from the natural wadi route must have been astounded at the extraordinary backdrop that Jebel Misht gives them. These extraordinary towers have survived for some

Kasr al Khafji sits exactly on the Tropic of Cancer in the village of Bat



4,500 years so it is up to present-day visitors to ensure that they last another 4,500.

As the sun begins its descent through the afternoon on June 21, it will cross the village of Bat. Wandering on the Tropic at Bat, I stumble over Kasr al Khafji's lower walls. Like the tombs at Al Ain, this substantial tower is a Bronze Age monument and is also part of the same UNESCO site.

When new, some 4,500 years ago, it must have been a substantial building perhaps topped with mud or wooden walls. In the mid-1970s, a Danish team conducted a series of excavations that firmly placed Bat on the archaeological map of the world. Recently a team from the University of Pennsylvania has excavated part of

Kasr al Khafji. The tower with its nine rooms and a well was constructed out of massive limestone blocks; clearly the community intended the tower to be strong and permanent. Like Oman's prosperity today, the wealth that built these towers at Bat and the tombs at Al Ain was also a commodity – in Bat's case, copper. Vast quantities of the metal were excavated and refined in Oman's northern mountains and exported to far-off Mesopotamia.

My final dash was to the western edge of Oman, at its border with the UAE. Passing the foundation of Oman's modern wealth, oil wells, my route took me through substantial sand-dune fields. These are the eastern fringes of the sea of sand that is world's largest sand



Burj al Seera in Quriyat is the first point in Oman on the Tropic of Cancer.

desert, the Rub al Khali, the golden sands of which provided a glorious setting to the completion of my exploration of Oman's Tropic of Cancer.

At 7.07pm, as the sun drops into the folds of the desert on June 21, a traveller who has followed the sun would have extended their day by fourteen minutes. From the start, some 364km due east at Quriyat, they would have been treated to insights into Oman's historic past and modern renaissance and enjoyed the warm hospitality and dramatic scenery found in few other places along the Tropic of Cancer.

My thanks to Nawaf Juma Rashid al Baloushi and Ibrahim al Busafi

The Five Great Circles are the Arctic Circle, Tropic of Cancer, Equator, Tropic of Capricorn and Antarctic Circle. After leaving Oman on June 21, the sun will pass through UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Libya, Chad, Niger, Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, Western Sahara, Bahamas, Cuba and Mexico. Then on June 22, through Taiwan, China, Vietnam, Myanmar, Bangladesh, India and back to Oman where it will pass slightly farther south than on the 21st. Since Quriyat is in the Governorate of Muscat, Oman is the only country in the world whose capital is crossed by the Tropic.