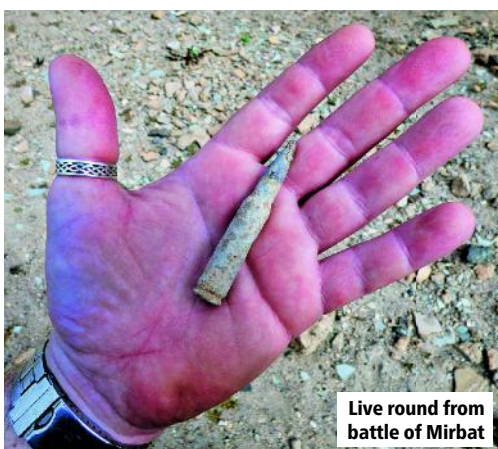




In central Oman, you really do feel far from the rest of the world



Live round from battle of Mirbat



Mirbat Fort has a place in SAS history

more surreal is that these 'dales' have camels grazing on them.

Dhofar was once the source of the best frankincense in the world and there are still large groves of the trees that 'sweat' this expensive, white resin that, when solid, burns with sweet-smelling smoke. Before driving into Salalah itself I camp in a frankincense grove – and the smell is amazing on the heavy, humid night air.

In Salalah I stay on a beach just outside the small town for a couple of days, parking the Disco above the high tide line and just chilling after the long drive south. The seashells are strange-looking things – very different from those you find on European beaches. My camp

is at the receiving end of the great breakers that roll across the Indian Ocean, so there's plenty of driftwood for a fire.

## Pilgrimage to Mirbat

**Highlight:** A poignant find

Next day is a pilgrimage – to a small fishing village called Mirbat. I'd visited once before, last year on a recce trip, but this time I wanted to have a proper look around. Here is where you'll find Mirbat Fort, site of one of the British Army's least-known and most heroic battles of recent times.

In July 1972, nine members of the British SAS were based here during the Dhofar Rebellion, acting as a training team for the Sultan of Oman's armed forces. Together with a handful of clerks who were also in the fort at the time, they were attacked by between 400 and 500 Marxist guerilla fighters who had been massing in the surrounding hills and who were determined to remove this British thorn from the side of their insurgency.

There followed a battle of epic proportions, which was unreported in the British media at the time because HM Government wanted to downplay our presence there. The SAS managed to hold off the huge numbers of enemy troops; and when reinforcements arrived they defeated them soundly.

As a kid I'd been wowed by tales of this battle; and during my own involvement with

**'I camp in a frankincense grove – and the smell is amazing on the heavy, humid night air'**

the army I'd seen the field gun that one of the SAS team fired over open sights and at point-blank range at the guerilla horde (It's in the Royal Artillery Museum in Woolwich), but the fort is still there – derelict now, so easy to explore. Bullet holes and pockmarks litter the walls and it's easy to imagine the SAS team crouching and firing in the rooms of the fort at the attackers outside.

To cap it all – find of finds – in a pile of rubble I found a live 7.62mm round, dusty and scuffed, from an SAS-issue SLR rifle that must have been dropped by one of the British team at the height of the battle during a frantic reload. Mirbat was a moving experience.

As is often the case, time catches up with me and I confront the two-day drive back to the UAE, planning to return to Oman in the autumn after the khareef.

The Disco is acquitting herself well on this trip, as I knew she would. I stock up on frankincense, Omani honey and fragrant cedarwood carvings before I drive back – so now she smells definitely Arabian! **LRO**

## HOW YOU CAN DO OMAN

Land Rovers (well, Evoques and Range Rovers at least) can be hired from Click Car Hire in Muscat – log on to [click-car-hire.com](http://click-car-hire.com) and look for Oman. There are some superb off-road and remote-area guidebooks devoted to the country, of which the best is probably *Oman Off-Road*, published by Explorer in Dubai and available for around £25 on Amazon.

Garmin's Middle East mapping is great for Oman's road system, which is being modernised and can be confusing unless your software is up to date.