

SURRENDER TO THE SENSES

When a Swedish fashion model falls for an elegant Old Etonian on the French Riviera, it's the beginning of a spectacular journey.

Eva Malmström met Eton- and Oxford-educated Sonu Shivdasani amid the supercharged glitz of the Monaco Grand Prix. They married and a languid and luxurious honeymoon followed at some of the world's most glamorous hotels and resorts.

But as well as sealing their romantic bond, the honeymoon confirmed their desire to establish a resort like no other and in 1995 the Soneva Fushi Resort opened on Kunfunadhoo Island in the Maldives. Combining Eva's innate style and attention to detail and Sonu's management smarts, Soneva Fushi soon became an essential retreat for a legion of high-flying guests.

Less than 15 years later, that first foray into the world of exclusive accommodation has become a global network of almost 20 resorts, with the Soneva, Six Senses and Evason brands all bywords for the ultimate in luxury travel.

The Six Senses promise of "Intelligent Luxury, Innovative Style, Redefining Experiences and Balancing Senses" can now be experienced at resorts in places ranging from Spain, Vietnam and Thailand, to Jordan and Oman.

With such a glamorous back-story, our expectations of a visit to one of Six Senses' newest resorts are high. Six Senses Hideaway Zighy Bay in the Sultanate of Oman opened in mid-2007, but it's already receiving rave reviews in the world's most prestigious travel magazines, including a spot on *Condé Nast Traveler's* 2008 Hot Hotels List.

Our anticipation soars when our bookings are confirmed. How would we like to arrive at Zighy Bay? The options include 4WD, paraglider or boat – all three forms of transport reinforcing the promise of

sublime isolation. With Iran just a strong tailwind away across the Strait of Hormuz, and a lingering paragliding memory involving Corfu and Albania, I tick the "4WD" box. Debra's feeling braver and signs up for an airborne check-in – one voted the world's Most Amazing Arrival Experience by *Travel + Leisure* magazine in 2008.

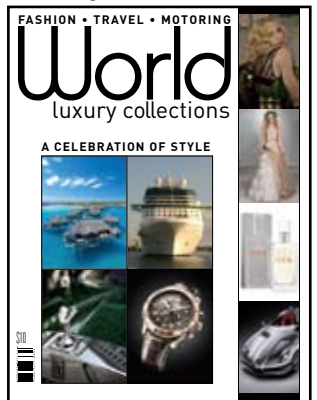
Unfortunately, our planned 5am arrival at Zighy Bay meant that she would be paragliding in the pre-dawn darkness, so after a 3am arrival into Dubai we're whisked away in a sparkling BMW 4WD northeast towards Oman. The resort sits amid the sculpted fiords of the Musandam Peninsula, a tiny sliver of Oman separated from the rest of the country by the vast deserts of the United Arab Emirates. Just two hours by road from Dubai, Zighy Bay is the perfect stopover if you're travelling with Emirates to Europe.

We hum along the world's best motorway for 90 minutes until we reach an isolated checkpoint manned by two guards wielding serious-looking machine guns. After a cursory glance at our passports, we climb steeply on unsealed roads into the mountains as dawn struggles to become day. Welcome to Oman.

The receding indigo dawn gradually reveals a surrounding lunar landscape dotted with goats and the odd camel. Vegetation is totally absent, and the environment is elemental, with a beautiful simplicity. It's the ideal blank canvas on which to create a luxury escape and a huge contrast to the exciting welcome-to-the-future megacity buzz of nearby Dubai.

The emerging Omani light slowly reveals the resort, elegantly constructed in local stone and dotted with pools shaded by rustic gazebos. Private chill-out areas fringe an intense turquoise ocean, and the shimmering beach is just 20 metres away. Arriving by boat, 4WD or paraglider would elicit the same response combining

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Dawn casts a rosy hue
over Zighy Bay.



awe and expectation. Around us, another 78 Pool Villas, the Private Reserve and two Retreats share the same rustic-chic décor modelled on local indigenous style.

We're introduced to our personal butler, Faiyaz Ansari. He informs us we're on Zighy Bay time now, one hour ahead of the United Arab Emirates and Oman. It's a special time zone for a very special place and, with a personal wine fridge and private infinity pool at hand, removing my watch seems an appropriate response. Potentially the only activity we need to be on time for is a spa treatment in our adjacent air-conditioned treatment room or in the resort's spa centre. Two bikes wait outside should we wish to take a leisurely spin around the island. Privacy is guaranteed: the only uninvited visitors are a few curious goats.

Breakfast is served – fresh fruit and fresh, still-warm bread and croissants – and the long haul from New Zealand is now starting to make perfect sense. With an international resort crew featuring an Australian GM, Indian butlers, and chefs from Japan and France, Six Senses Hideaway Zighy Bay achieves a coolly cosmopolitan ambience in effortless style.

Zighy Bay's restaurants showcase this marvellous diversity.

Dining on the Edge, for example, must be a contender for the most spectacular eating experience on the

planet: sitting majestically on a cliff top, it looks over the entire resort. It's only open two nights a week and you need a 4WD to get there, but it's certainly worth the effort. An alfresco deli is open throughout the day for a global selection of burgers and sandwiches, and the new Bites seafood restaurant presents local seafood influenced by many different cuisines. A traditional Omani fishing village lies next door and local fishermen ensure that Six Senses' seafood is the freshest of the fresh. The Dining on the Sand eatery is the resort's hub, with several open kitchens providing pan-Asian, Middle Eastern and European flavours. Chill Bar is an essential diversion for cocktails before or after dinner.

If you can't make up your mind where to eat, Zighy Bay's personal butlers can arrange a private dining experience in a range of locations that include a table setting right on the beach or atop the resort's tower. According to Faiyaz, anything goes – there are simply no rules or restrictions.

We decide on a private dining experience in the Wine Cellar. Six Senses Hideaway properties are renowned internationally for their wine selections, and Zighy Bay is no exception. An in-house master sommelier holds regular wine-tastings, and "Haute Couture Wine Dinners" provide stunning wine-matched dining. With a menu that includes Arabic spiced prawn and pineapple

Above and opposite: Zighy Bay's rustic-chic design is modelled on local indigenous style – but with an added dose of comfort and cosmopolitan ambience.



Top to bottom: Local fishermen ensure that Six Senses' seafood is the freshest of the fresh.

Paragliding is one of the more unusual ways for guests to arrive at Six Senses Hideaway Zighy Bay.

A day aboard the resort's dhow, *Buzbuz*, includes stops for hand-line fishing and snorkling.



salad, lobster tail, and a superb fillet of Australian Angus beef with roasted hazelnuts, asparagus spears and a sweet teriyaki glaze, we almost forget we're in a small, remote slice of the Middle East. An artisan cheese platter served with Spanish membrillo (quince), and a white-chocolate parfait do nothing to dispel the delicious illusion.

After such a meal, an appropriate response would be to dive into Six Senses' active menu of watersports such as snorkelling and parasailing, or to sign up for an all-day 4WD desert excursion to the *wadi* (oasis)-studded canyons of the nearby Hajar Mountains. More adventurous expectations are fulfilled with game-fishing expeditions, and if you get lucky with the local tuna or barracuda, there's the option of private in-villa cookery classes. Active travellers can get busy on treks and mountain-bike rides through sublime lunar landscapes.

We forge our own combination of food and the ocean on a day cruise on the resort's own dhow, *Buzbuz*. The spectacular day includes a few stops for snorkelling and hand-line fishing, while the resort's Asian chef rustles up a Japanese meal. Fresh sashimi devoured off the coast of Oman is certainly different. Isn't globalisation wonderful?

For many guests, the Six Senses brand is synonymous with luxury spa treatments, and Zighy Bay's holistic spa is nestled into the rugged Musandam mountainside. There are nine treatment rooms, two traditional Arabian *hammams* combining luxury pools, saunas and steam rooms, and a juice bar. Six Senses' stated core values pledge to appeal to all the senses in everything they do, and Zighy Bay's international therapists provide the ultimate proof in the areas of relaxation and rejuvenation. The spa's signature Arabic Ritual blends basil, mint and henna in a four-hour treatment combining massage and a facial. The Men's Journey is a deserved reward mixing an Indian head massage and hot-stone therapy.

Daily spa treatments are musts for many Zighy Bay guests, but we're just as happy to enjoy our private pool and villa. We're wishing our three-night stay had been six when it comes time to leave Zighy Bay and our new-found friends the goats make their final appearance. There's no paragliding departure on offer, so we retrace our steps by 4WD through back the rugged mountains to the armed guards on the UAE border.

A romance forged at Formula 1 speed in Monaco almost two decades ago has helped produce a great travel experience. We're sad to leave, but at least we've discovered an essential and surprising stopover to break the next long journey to Europe. 