

the long view

Shannon Bennett, of Melbourne's acclaimed Vue de monde, has avoided more predictable destinations to open his first overseas restaurant. The leading chef unveils the vivid landscape and extraordinary flavours of Oman that have inspired him

WORDS Sarah Nicholson PHOTOGRAPHY Mark Roper





CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT
The dining room at Vue
de monde by Shannon Bennett;
Nakhi Fort - one of the
renowned forts of Oman;
silverware at Muffrah Souk;
the opulent foyer with
bubbling crystal fountain
at the Al Bustan Palace
InterContinental OPPOSITE
The impressive setting of
the Al Bustan Palace

A scarlet, open-topped Rolls Royce cruises by on the private driveway that services the secret ninth floor. The Sultan of Brunei's wife passes through the glittering golden foyer that has a 19-tonne crystal chandelier dripping from its 38-metre domed ceiling. Unbeknownst to guests, the security detail for a foreign delegation in the lunch crowd includes sniffer dogs and armed guards at the kitchen door.

Welcome to the mysterious world of the the Al Bustan Palace InterContinental in Oman's capital city, Muscat, home to acclaimed Melbourne chef Shannon Bennett's latest restaurant.

The dramatic setting of the hotel is nearly as sensational as the goings-on inside it. Surrounded by barren, serrated mountains, the Al Bustan hotel, completed in 1985 primarily for the Sultan of Oman to host a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Summit, has the astonishing appearance of some headquarters in *Star Wars*. Making it more terrestrial, however, is the sprawling lawn scattered with date palms, the infinity pool and the kilometre-long white-sand beach. Not for the less-is-more set, the hotel is unrepentantly luxurious and, with a recent multi-million dollar refurbishment throughout the plush rooms and five restaurants, plus a Six Senses spa on the way, this oasis is becoming only more opulent.

In reality, this type of excess is not the norm in Oman, a country that still holds tightly to its traditions. As Omanis are quick to point out, their country is a world away from its UAE neighbour, Dubai, whose towering feats of architecture and glitzy malls sit in sharp contrast to Oman's low-rise white buildings and ancient forts. And

while native Emiratis are as scarce as hens' teeth in Dubai, it's an odds-on chance you'll find yourself invited into an Omani home for coffee.

This authenticity appealed to Shannon, 33, on his first visit. "Oman wasn't touched by the tourism wand," he explains, "but I saw the potential."

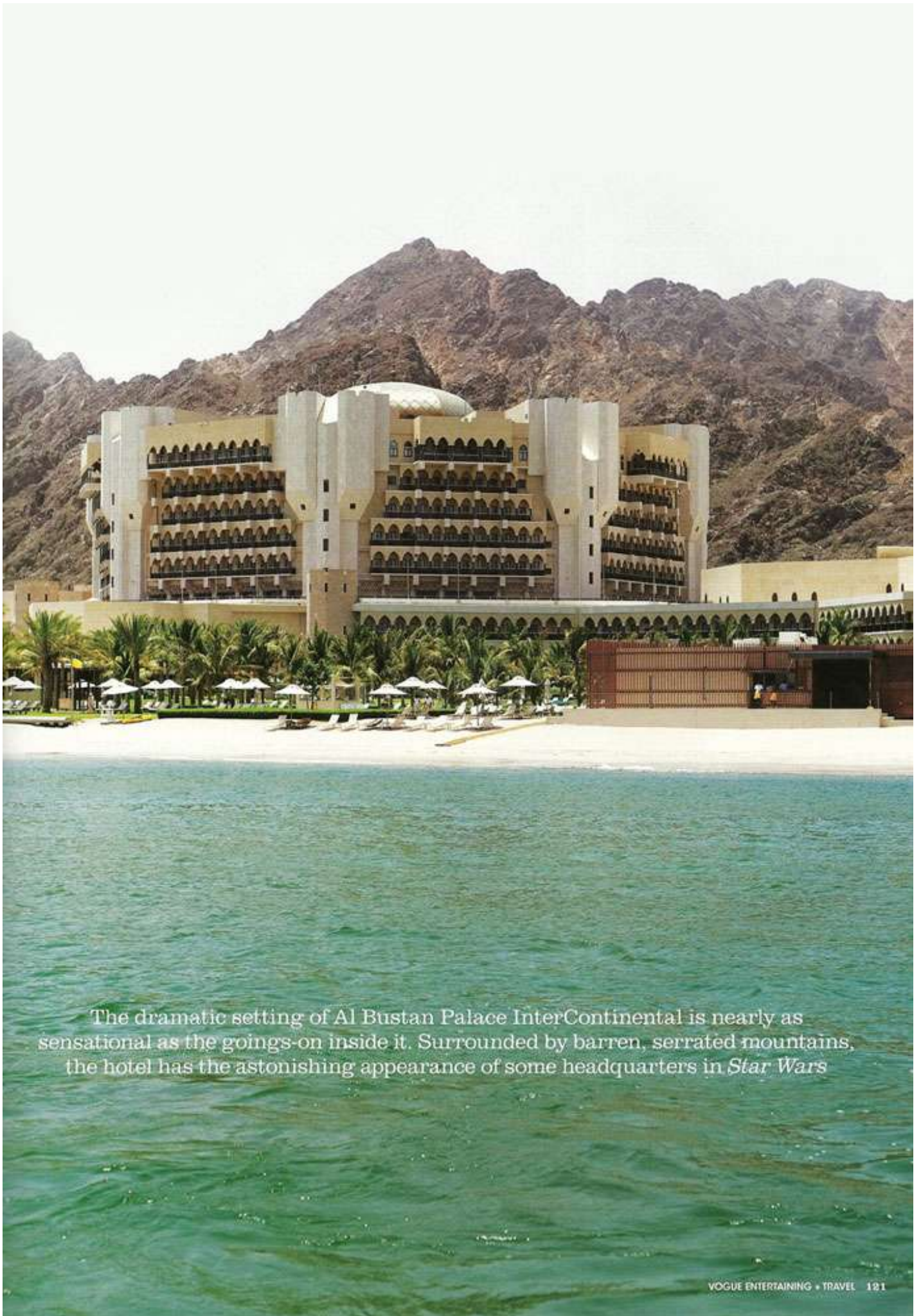
Chef Josh Lewis, 24, from Shannon's Vue de monde restaurant, was also front of mind. "Josh was always earmarked for when we expanded," he says, "so it had to be somewhere he could live." Upon seeing the lifestyle afforded by the coastal situation of Muscat, which borders the Arabian sea, Shannon knew that Josh, a keen angler and diver, would be happy to head up the kitchen there.

Local produce sealed the deal for Shannon, especially the seafood. "I did an experimental order of a dozen red mullet from the market and they were still flipping when I got them," he smiles.

Indeed, aside from Fridays (the Omani weekend), when Josh goes fishing with a local, Amin, he visits the Muttrah fish market daily. When we join him, he wanders the stalls, chatting in a mix of English and basic Arabic, ascertaining what's good. We sidestep wheelbarrows ferrying massive yellowfin tuna, pass piles of local hamour and metallic-looking mackerel tuna to reach a stall where a package is slyly pulled out from under a chair and passed to Josh. "He keeps fresh baby squid for me - it's usually frozen," says Josh.

In the fruit and vegetable section, there are bunches of fenugreek, gnarled bitter melon and glossy eggplants. We taste tiny, squishy apricots and Josh points out the first harvest of dates yet to be dried. "The food is really seasonal," he says, "so it's a pretty inspirational place to come up with dishes."





The dramatic setting of Al Bustan Palace InterContinental is nearly as sensational as the goings-on inside it. Surrounded by barren, serrated mountains, the hotel has the astonishing appearance of some headquarters in *Star Wars*

8 Nearby is the renowned Muttrah Souk – a kaleidoscope of aromas, sounds and colours. The scent of burning sandalwood and frankincense fills the snaking alleyways; the click of small, ceramic cups signals the presence of the coffee seller; flames lick around the hand of a baker as he pulls freshly blistered Iranian bread from his oven; and sacks of oregano and chilli sit outside spice stores. Colourful scarves abound, and the jewellery stores sport an incredible amount of silverware, including earrings, huge, traditional anklets and ornate coffee pots that pile up in tubs and smother walls. And then, there's the whole separate gold souk...

But to be truly bedazzled, we visit the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, where soaring archways lead into the magnificent, serene marble courtyard. The sheer scale is nearly overwhelming and so is the late-spring heat blazing off the stone (perhaps a black scarf wasn't the wisest choice of hair covering), so we move through to the cool of the main prayer hall. To give an indication of the grandeur here, a few statistics are in order: the 21-tonne prayer mat was handwoven by 600 Iranian women over four years and is the largest single piece in the world. Above this hangs a 14-metre-long Swarovski-crystal chandelier. The room holds 6500 worshippers, but there's

capacity for 20,000 within the complex. Yet the mosque still manages an understated elegance.

Shannon's keen to get out of the city to show us why he's so fascinated with Oman. After a three-hour drive, we arrive at Ras al-Jinz. It's a major nesting site for the endangered green turtle and we're here to observe the intimate spectacle of the large reptiles laying their eggs and see babies hatch.

Our previously low-key driver transforms into a speed freak, ferociously charging up and over the dune, spinning the wheel

We're staying at the new, non-profit Ras al-Jinz Scientific and Visitor Centre that's devoted to the turtles. We're guided to the beach where we encounter a large turtle sitting in a sandy basin – a fake pit to fool predators such as red foxes, which may dig up and devour the eggs she has just laid. We watch the arduous process as she intermittently flicks her paddle-like flippers to send a spray of sand over the nest behind her. Finally satisfied, she haltingly makes her way back to the water. Soon after, we spot a tiny newborn making its first, instinctive journey towards the sea.

Only about one in 1000 hatchlings survives into adulthood, and our collective breaths are bated as sizeable crabs, another predator, scoot around nearby. Finally, a wave lifts the turtle up and takes it away into the dark sea. Incredibly, although they may swim thousands of kilometres, females will remember to return to this beach to nest for the rest of their lives.

Today, as we drive in convoy, the burnt-orange hills of the Wahiba Sands begin to shimmer on the hazy horizon. The desert is rising up before us. Shannon's looking forward to it; on his last trip, he went 4WD 'dune bashing' with his team and it has made quite an impression. Our drivers stop to adjust the tyre pressure for the soft terrain, then we speed off on the burning sand.

Our previously low-key driver, Rahema, suddenly transforms into an aggressive speed freak – she ferociously charges up and over the first dune while wildly spinning the steering wheel to avoid sinking. It's exhilarating but bone-jolting stuff.

Eventually, we see a sign of life and pull to a halt in front of a palm-frond house. However, the 4WD behind us screams past and we realise that Shannon has taken control of the wheel. We watch as the vehicle temporarily vanishes into the saffron landscape in a spray of dust.



A date palm plantation surrounds a village

Meanwhile, our hostess welcomes us into a typical Bedouin room – there's no furniture, but mats cover the floor and cushions line the walls. The once nomadic, self-sufficient existence of the Bedouin has been reinvented in the modernised country. Most no longer lead an itinerant life, but many, like this woman, have a summer house in the nearby town. Quite a number have garnered wealth through training race camels (often 'ridden' by remote-controlled robots), but they still choose a simple life with few possessions.

Word on the dunes is there's a Bedouin wedding nearby. Men far and wide will attend, even if they're unknown to the couple, and the celebration may last four days (all that partying and no alcohol – the mind boggles). Sure enough, we soon encounter an ever-growing stream of white pick-ups hurtling past in maniacal fashion, packed with turbaned men off to the event. Unnervingly, our driver asks us to keep our windows down – with no lanes in the desert, it pays to listen out for someone coming over the next rise.

Early evening, we arrive at Desert Nights Camp to check in to one of the tents (only the roof is canvas). It's not quite five star, but it feels indulgent to have mod cons, given the setting. Shannon and Josh are immediately off on quad bikes to continue the speed thrills and other guests are preparing to ride camels up to the ridge where we're headed for sunset. We watch the landscape surrounding the isolated camp become a deeper red as the sun slides below the facing ridge. The serenity is broken by our two Aussie chefs, who are now attempting to launch themselves down the soft dunes on sandboards.



ABOVE, FROM LEFT Chefs Shannon Bennett and Josh Lewis; chocolate mousse with pomegranate granita and rosewater jelly BELOW Roses from Jebel al-Akhdar OPPOSITE The glamorous Azzura

That night, we enjoy a simple barbecue in the restaurant, then move outdoors to star gaze, while a Bedouin band plays laidback music and tourists are adorned with intricate henna tattoos.

It's light and warm at 5.30am, so it isn't too hard rising for our two-hour drive to the city of Nizwa for the market. Here, we're faced with a sea of men in sparkling white *dishdasha* (long robes) and colourful *kumma* (caps) and turbans, gathered in a circle watching the parade of picture-perfect long-haired goats and toffee-coloured calves. It's hot and hectic, but certainly not smelly and gritty. Omanis definitely have a certain decorum in everything they do. Although the masked Bedouin women stand on the outer, we're told they hold the money (often huge wads of cash) and their husbands bring the animals to them for the final inspection.

After a wander around the historic Nizwa Fort and the city's atmospheric souk, we head up to Jebel al-Akhdar (Green Mountain), which is known for its bountiful fruit terraces of apples, apricots, pomegranates and grapes, as well as roses. The air is cooler here and we're afforded majestic views, especially from Diana's Point (yes, that Diana visited) across to the villages and terraced gardens clinging to the mountain slopes.

In the village of Saiq, Josh takes us to meet Mohammad, who, over an open fire in his rudimentary kitchen, creates rosewater from the condensation of intensely perfumed pink roses. He offers some to splash on our faces (it has many uses here). It's remarkably smoky. "It's incredibly bitter," Shannon chokes, as he sips some. Nevertheless, the purity of the process inspires him and he buys a bottle to see what he can do with it.

Mohammad then invites us into his modest home. After a few visits with so many hospitable Omani people, we're more than comfortable sitting on the carpet, sipping coffee, while eating dates and sticky, sweet halwa.

Back in the big smoke, our final day in Muscat ends in style aboard the luxury catamaran, Azzura. The boat takes private charters, from romantic, candlelit dinners to boatloads of Omani schoolgirls (who, in order to party, have to do it a long way from shore), as well as scheduled dolphin-watching trips. Today, it's not long before we see the sleek mammals launching themselves high above the water while we sip cocktails.

Vue by Shannon Bennett, with its sophisticated, modern food from the original Melbourne menu, as well as new, locally inspired dishes by Josh, has already upped the ante for fine dining in Muscat. But that's only the beginning for the ever-inventive chef Shannon, who plans to break new ground here by extending his kitchen garden, running cooking classes that incorporate market visits and creating a chef's table in the Vue kitchen. Plus, he hopes to have an open kitchen here one day, so guests can fully appreciate the theatre in the assembly of his food.

Josh and Shannon present us with a dessert they've created that's been inspired by our travels – a vibrant pomegranate granita atop luscious chocolate mousse with lemon cake and delicate cubes of jelly made from Mohammad's smoky rosewater.

Unsurprisingly, all the flavours work together beautifully, and this will no doubt be just one of many culinary innovations to come from their adventures in Oman. **VE•T**



+ OMAN FILE

Getting there

Etihad Airways, the national airline of the UAE, offers one-stop connections from Australia to Muscat, Oman 11 times per week from Sydney, seven times from Melbourne, and three times from Brisbane. etihadairways.com.

Where to stay

Al Bustan Palace InterContinental Muscat, +968 2479 9666, albustanpalace.com; doubles from \$450.
Ras al-Jinz Scientific and Visitor Centre, al-Sharqiyah region, +968 9655 0606, rasaljinz.org; doubles from \$125 per person.
Desert Nights Camp, al-Wasil, +968 2470 2311, desertnightscamp.com; doubles from \$785.

Where to eat

Vue by Shannon Bennett, Al Bustan Palace InterContinental, Muscat, +968 2479 9666, albustanpalace.com.

What to do

Azzura cruises, +968 9612 5081, oceanblueoman.com.
Euro Divers Oman, +968 2477 6042, euro-divers.com. Oman has fantastic scuba diving.
Bait Al Zubair Museum, Al Saihiya St, Muscat, +968 2473 6688, has an interesting overview of Omani art and culture.
More information
Sultanate of Oman Tourism, (02) 9113 5959, info@tourismoman.com.au, oman-tourism.gov.om.