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## EXPEDITION OMAN



Volume 6, Issue 1

\$4.99 US & CDN



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# BEYOND ROADS:

## EXPLORING THE MUSANDAM PENINSULA OF OMAN

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Simon Donato

“What he said,” translated Shamir, “is that foreigners are not allowed to travel there. It’s a military area and is patrolled from the air”. Suleiman continued in Arabic, which was in-turn translated by our Indian hotel manager Shamir, “If somebody finds you, it’s bad for you, and it’s bad for him”. That was the last thing that I wanted to hear 10 hours before our Omani boat captain was to drive us to the remote tip of Oman’s Musandam peninsula. My worst fears were coming true and our good luck had apparently run out. We just lost our boat captain and the only person who could get us to the starting point of our expedition. It was time to start making some phone calls.

What turned me onto the Musandam was its geographic location. No roads, formidable mountains, and a lack of towns made this a region ripe for exploration. The last research party to document their visit to this region was that of RL Falcon, sponsored by the Royal Geographic Society of London in 1971. This survey produced several short reports on the region, but it was one sentence in particular that piqued my interest: “We were told of archaeological sites in the interior, but the terrain was far too mountainous to explore, therefore we did not visit them.” If I had ever heard a challenge for the

capability of Adventure Science to conduct field exploration, that was it. Falcon had unknowingly thrown the gauntlet down nearly 40 years ago.

Having spent three field seasons exploring the lagoons of Oman for tsunami deposits, I was intimately familiar with the country. As far as Middle Eastern countries go, Oman is a very progressive nation. Ruled by Sultan Bin Quaboos, who wrested the nation from his father in 1969, he is judged by most as a fair ruler that has provided for his people. Considering that at the time of the coup, sunglasses were banned and only five kilometres of paved roads existed in the entire country, huge leaps toward modernity were made during the last 30 years. Fast cars race along Chinese built highways, posh resorts dot the coast, and schooling and health care are provided for all. Funded primarily by oil and natural gas reserves, modest by Saudi standards, these fossil fuels provide enough wealth to keep the population, though largely impoverished by western standards, content and pacified.

The Musandam Peninsula is intriguing for a number of reasons. First is its strategic importance. For millennia, maritime trade has passed through the narrow entrance to the

Persian Gulf and subsequently by the tip of the Peninsula; as its mountains create the bottleneck known as the Strait of Hormuz. Today, millions of barrels of crude oil pass through the Strait (Iran to the north, Oman to the south), resulting in a substantial military presence in this region on both the Omani and Iranian sides.

The Peninsula is essentially a mountain range formed through collision of the Arabian continental plate with the Eurasian plate, resulting in marine limestone beds lifted to the surface as heavily folded and jagged peaks and plateaus, reaching upwards of 500 metres above the rocky coastlines.

Its reputation as a desolate and isolated piece of rock is well deserved. A violent geologic past has sculpted this natural fortress of rock and numerous fjord-like bays cut into this promontory.

Overall, the landscape is quite stark, with little vegetation and even fewer animals. There are no roads connecting the ancient port of Kumzar to the northern tip to the mainland. The only way in is by boat, which suits Omanis fine as they are part of a rich seafaring history stretching millennia, to the earliest reed boats created in present day Iraq.



## A TYPICAL DHOW CRUISE BOAT

Unfortunately, not even Oman was immune to the ongoing Middle Eastern reforms that brought violence to many nations. Six days before we were to depart, Sohar erupted in protest and violence. Thankfully, my ex-pat friend in Muscat, Barry Jupp, assured us that the trouble was localized and we should proceed with the trip. The team, composed of Dr. Richard Rothaus (an archaeologist), Adventure Science athlete/engineer Jim Mandelli, and I decided over a conference call two days before we were to depart that the situation seemed under control, and that the politics at work in Sohar were probably non-existent in the Musandam.

Located literally at the end of the road, the lively town of Khasab is the jumping off spot for all trips into the peninsula. It's proximity to Dubai and promotion of dhow cruises and diving charters draw reasonable numbers of tourists to the region. It was also our starting point.

When we landed at the Khasab airport, we had been in Oman for less than 24 hours. Besides the scare early on, so far, everything had gone to plan. All the luggage arrived, we had a breakfast meeting with Barry, and caught our morning flight from Muscat to Khasab. Finally in Khasab, our first priority

was to hire a boat. This was surprisingly easy. Leaving the airport we were met by a young boat captain from Kumzar named Suleiman. He had a boat for rent and tried to ply the usual tourist trip. Dhow cruise, snorkeling, dolphin watching, etc. Thankfully, he spoke some English and we spoke some Arabic, so we were able to explain our unusual request. After a quick negotiation, we arranged for him to pick us up at 6:30 AM, agreeing on a price of 140 Rials (approximately \$350 Canadian) for what amounted to a one-day boat rental. Although he was very surprised by the trip that we had planned and proposed to him, he agreed and then drove us to a local hotel that had vacancy (we had not prebooked), and left us to prepare for the following morning.

With a boat secured, our greatest variable was removed and we were free to enjoy the rest of the day, although I couldn't shake the nagging feeling that in a country like this, our luck, was thus far, way too good...I was waiting for the shoe to drop. We had our boat lined up. We had our rations – approximately 2,500 calories per day of freeze dried food and energy bars per man (which would put us at a caloric deficit), we had our tents, our 50 litre packs for major hikes plus smaller day packs, and we had arranged for approximately 80 litres of water to be

delivered to our hotel in 1.5 litre water bottles. Each man was rationed three litres per day for food preparation and drinking.

Our plan was to drop water at pre-designated campsites, where we would operate from for several days before moving to the next. We were pushing the limits of food and water in order to go light but ran the very real risk of running out of water. Daytime temps could easily reach 30°C at this time of year. An injury could be fatal if we were unable to get help quickly. If an injury were to occur, our options were to activate our SPOT unit, try to place a cellular call or send Jim or I overland to either Kumzar or Khasab to bring help. The later two options required that either Jim or I be uninjured. What this did was reinforce the importance of vigilance and avoiding injury, as we were even in the best rescue scenario, hours from medical help.

Since the last documented research conducted in the area was nearly 40 years ago it wasn't a surprise that finding any sort of recent topographic map for the Musandam would be impossible. Ultimately, I turned to Google to do my pre-trip planning, searching satellite images for anything that resembled a geometric shape. We knew that construction would be mud and stone, and that depending

# IF SOMEBODY FINDS YOU, IT'S BAD FOR YOU, AND IT'S BAD FOR HIM.

HAVING MADE IT TO THEIR DESTINATION, A RELIEVED SIMON DONATO LOOKS FOR THEIR NEXT SITE, FROM ONE OF MANY JAGGED LIMESTONE PEAKS.

Jim Mandelli

on the stone used, these ancient structures could likely be nothing more than piles of rubble. However, we were encouraged by the fact that once we zoomed in to areas that seemed to resemble plateaus and flat spots (which were exceedingly rare), we started to identify what appeared to be rectangular structures, and longer walls. In some instances, we were able to spot trails, which was what led me to what became our first, and proudest discovery during the trip.

Through this process, Richard and I identified a number of prospective areas, along the coast and in the apparent highlands. From these targets, I designed the expedition to begin on the northeastern tip of the Peninsula and then work it's way south back to Khasab. The first location that we were to visit was one that I had termed the "Machu Picchu" of Oman. I had noticed it because of a trail that ran from a circular enclosure that had been cleared of rock and consequently was a bright spot in the satellite image. The trail ran along the crest of the ridge towards the north, where a cleft in the rock appeared to hold a number of rectangular structures. This location was my number one, as it was located the furthest from any existing town.

However, with Suleiman pulling the plug on us as a boat captain, all of our prep was now

hanging in the balance. At best, we would lose a day. At worst, the trip may be cancelled due to the military sensitivities of the region. Time was ticking, and we could do nothing more until the morning, when we would have to enlist the help of my ex-pat friend in Muscat, Barry Jupp.

By 11 am the following day, Barry had come through for us and had spoken to the minister of the Environment and the Commander of the naval base on Gunham Island. Both of whom instructed us to stay away from Gunham and not trek the peninsula unless we possessed proper permissions. "Permission, what the hell does that mean Barry? How do we get permission?" He replied coolly, "I wouldn't worry about it, just keep your head down mate and have a good trip". Well, I guess we'll be keeping our collective heads down then.

Barry also connected us with a tour company that had worked with colleagues of his and had a good reputation. We had nothing to lose. After a spirited session of negotiations, we found a new boat captain, and arranged water drops, our drop off, and a pick up option for our final day. We were back on track and had only lost one day, which wasn't awful. I had factored in a buffer day for something like this anyways. However, we were all moderately concerned

about the military situation that we might encounter, despite Barry's call in to the naval Commander at Gunham island.

## DEPARTURE: WEDNESDAY MARCH 09TH: 6:45 AM

I could feel the excitement in the air as the three of us watched our new boat captain, Mohmed Kumzari (an entertaining Kumzar native with terrific English) slowly maneuver his vessel to the rocky shoreline where we had piled a mountain of gear (most of it food and water drops). It was sweet relief as we finally pushed our fully loaded boat from shore. Soon, we sped northwards alongside towering mountains that plunged steeply towards the sea. I began to realize that the terrain might prove more challenging than anticipated.

In order to make this trip work we would need fresh water. Based on our studies of the maps and research we conducted, we were not guaranteed water on the peninsula, as we knew for sure that only Kumzar was populated. Although we toyed briefly with the idea of having a boat come every few days to bring water, we doubted that this would work logistically so we opted to make all of our water drops in advance, which meant pre-packaging all food and supplies in rubberized



## A REMOTE FISHING VILLAGE.

dry bags and hiding them in the wadis that we selected as camp sites. Although initially skeptical this worked surprisingly well and ensured that we would have enough water to last us, provided we abided by our ration strategy of 3 litres per man per day, which in a desert, was tight.

We spent the morning making four water-drops at our preplanned campsites, and by noon, Mohamed's boat nosed onto a small beach that doubled as an occasional fishing camp. It was not a great place to camp, but

It did have a flat spot located above high water where we opted to stash gear while we hiked 200 metres up to check out the "Machu Pichu" of Oman.

There was no trail as we followed a steep wadi upwards. The surface was a mix of grippy limestone and loose rubble. Numerous small caves appeared as we gained altitude, and sparse vegetation provided some welcomed shade. The steepness was taking its toll on our travel time. Our archaeologist, Richard had come a tremendously far way in terms of improving his fitness for this trip, but he was struggling with the lack of trail and difficult terrain. I could see that our tentative schedule was in danger, as it became obvious that we wouldn't be able to

hit as many spots per day if we travelled as a group. Fortunately, we had a few days at this location before any hard decisions would be required. For the moment, we could just soak in the fact that we were finally there, although unaware of the magnitude of the site that we were about to stumble upon.

As we crested the ridge, I could see a stone wall in the distance. Approaching it, I could see that it appeared to be the circular structure that I had first seen on Google Earth. Approximately 40 metres diameter with a central wall bisecting the structure. As it was very flat and sandy inside the ring, we made a team decision to move our camp inside the ring. This required Jim and I to return to the water, gather all packs and 24 1.5 L bottles of water and hike back to camp. As we explored the immediate area, we discovered a deep cistern built into a natural fracture in the rock. The team was excited by this promising start.

We travelled several hundred meters uphill along the ridge, looking for the next prospect, which was the cluster of structures. What we found blew us away: over 20 large rectangular buildings, most with their walls still intact and the massive limestone lintel still perched above the door, easily weighing in excess of 200 pounds. It's not surprising that although the roofs collapsed on most

structures, these robust buildings are still standing. Pottery sherds littered the ground and helped give us a sense of the age of the site, which we place to at least the 1500s, but likely much older. As there were only two "fields" that could have provided crops to the inhabitants, much of their diet would have been derived from marine life (there was evidence to support this at the site with numerous shells littering the surface). What I did find odd though, was that there was no trail suggestive of a main path to the water leading away from this ancient village. Perhaps erosion had washed it away.

We explored the area and along the mountainous ridge over the next few days, finding more structures, several ancient trails, and a number of caves that had been walled off, possibly to be used as lookouts as this area would have seen significant maritime traffic.

We awoke on day three to a fierce wind from the south that battered our tents and made it impossible to sleep (despite the ear plugs). It was our planned departure day, so we were out of food, and had only enough water to make it to our next campsite. For Jim and I, this meant a rugged and highly exposed 10-12 kilometre walk along a mountainous isthmus connecting us to the main peninsula.



SEPTEMBER 10, 2011  
CAMP PINE CREST  
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We had decided as a group that Richard wouldn't be able to make the hike in the time allotted, so we decided to take a risk.

During the previous 2 days, we had noticed that there was a small fishing camp near our campsite (280 metres below our campsite). If we could get Richard there and then barter, perhaps they would be able to boat him to our next campsite. This plan however, required a very early start and by 6 AM we were beginning our hike down another steep, loose wadi towards the camp. This time however, we had our heavy packs and the walking was deliberate and precise; one missed step could end very badly. We reached the beach by 7:30 AM and definitely surprised the 15 fishermen camped there. Thankfully they were welcoming and after a few minutes of negotiations, we were able to settle upon a price of 10 Rials for Richard to be shuttled to our next camp (plus three cans of Pepsi).

With Richard safely en route towards our second camp location, Jim and I began our ascent back to the ridge and traverse across the jagged isthmus. With the high winds and exposed ridge tops, the day was as mentally exhausting from extreme concentration as it was physically. During the trek (which lacked any sort of trail), we gained and lost hundreds of metres at a time, walked along narrow limestone ledges on ridgelines – it was certain death should we slip. We also encountered a number of archaeological sites, including walls, scattered pottery sherds, and even crude lookouts built atop high points on the ridge.

After nearly eight hours of walking, Jim and I hit the wall. Literally. We were cliffed out. After a day of scrambling on highly technical terrain, we had met our match. Two kilometres from our camp a mountain rose over 500 metres above the fisherman's camp called Marwani. It had a near vertical face and from where Jim and I intersected it, it still towered nearly 200 metres above us. Physically and mentally drained, we evaluated our options. We could risk a very dangerous scramble, or accept our hubris and climb down to Marwani.

As much as I hated to deviate from our plan, the climb down was really the logical choice. The risk for scrambling and free-climbing on tired legs was far too great. We backtracked several hundred meters looking for a suitable wadi to enter. Unfortunately, we were in a very narrow point of the isthmus and the drops were steep, so we entered the main wadi above Marwani, dubbed the descent:

380 metres of terror on account of the loose boulders that occupied the upper 100 metres of the wadi and the two 30 metre high waterfalls that had to be solved on our way down. I was thrilled and grateful to be alive by the time we reached the beach. Now we had to convince the fisherman in the camp to boat us the kilometre across the bay to our camp.

After we convinced them that we were not soldiers, they were amazed to discover that we were trekking through the region. Generous and welcoming hosts, they served Jim and I sweet tea, apples, and oranges, which after a day of eating energy bars was a welcome treat. After our meal we asked our hosts if they would help by ferrying us to our camp. They obliged and then refused any payment. Truly hospitable people.

And so, for the next four days, Jim and I would rise early, and scramble 300-400 metres upwards to the interior plateau to explore for sites and artifacts. Richard would examine the coastal areas near where we camped for both tsunami deposits and archaeological sites. We would compare notes in the evenings, discuss theories about age of the sites, time of abandonment, etc. When it was time to move camp, we'd hike to the nearest fishing camp and negotiate a ride. The only downside to this strategy was that we would be unable to complete our expedition as initially planned, and in the end, hired a fisherman to shuttle us from the fishing village of Sharayah back to Khasab.

As alluded to in Falcon's 1971 report, the Musandam interior plateaus were indeed rich with archaeological sites. During our weeklong expedition, we discovered numerous villages, farming sites, cemeteries and graves, intact pottery, ancient tools, and even a German made gin trap – a metal leg trap for capturing animals. Its size would suggest that it would have been used for trapping a large carnivore, possibly the now extinct Arabian leopard. Perhaps used by Omani shepherds protecting their flocks. What we didn't find up there were people. We were alone. It was quiet. Oddly, we did have cellular reception, but for most of the time, we felt entirely alone with the ghosts of these ancient settlements.

The Musandam Peninsula proved to be a worthy challenge. The terrain was rugged, the mountains were generally devoid of life, save the odd tree or goat, and without proper planning, one could easily die of thirst despite being within walking distance from small camps. Traversing the mountainous

WE COULD RISK A VERY DANGEROUS SCRAMBLE, OR ACCEPT OUR HUBRIS AND CLIMB DOWN TO MARWANI.



JIM MANDELLI REFLECTING UNDER A RARE PATCH OF SHADE. 

and steep terrain required extreme concentration and that too took it's toll, as each step had to be properly placed, and each hand hold tested before bearing any weight. Couple that with the calorie deficit we endured, I was left feeling somewhat drained by the end of the week.

While circumstance prevented us from seeing all that we set-out to see, we did accomplish a significant amount during the seven days, and were the first researchers to accurately map and document the sites in at least the last 40 years, if not longer.

The Peninsula is no place for the meek. It is a natural limestone fortress that for centuries kept its inhabitants safe from armies and marauders. For the ancient civilization that built the villages we explored, the ocean provided sustenance, and during wetter times, farming was possible, and Maritime trade brought outside goods. Today the region is a veritable dust bowl, with bleached bones dotting the landscape, attesting to its brutality. The stone ruins are all that remain of a once active and productive culture, living in a land known for millennia, but explored by few.

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