



Gordon of Arabia

SCOTTISH DIVER's seems to have adopted the out of the way Gulf state of Oman and again we're featuring this exotic destination. In the first of two articles Gordon McSkimming recollects the pleasures of some great wreck and scenic diving he enjoyed during a stint working in the country ...

TO BE VERY honest the following text has to some extent been prompted by the article detailing the Grampian SAC experience of Oman's Musandam Peninsula which appeared in the March/April issue of **SCOTTISH DIVER**. Here Andy Parks gave an inspiring account of a region which is now easily accessible but remains free of diver saturation, for the time being at least.

I am going to cover a different part of this vast, rugged, hot and captivating country. I was fortunate enough to live near Muscat the capital of Oman for nearly two years. A working day that started very early and finished at 1pm meant a dive a day and two dives on Friday, our one day weekend. Unfortunately my diving routine was periodically interrupted by the necessities of tackling a laundry mountain etc.

During my last visit to Oman in 2004 I gathered information and took a few photographs with a view to updating a

previously published underwater photography article. However, following a rather difficult brush with Omani customs officers at the airport (more of this later) I decided that a cooling off period was required before writing anything. Four years on here we are, I must have been really mad!

About Muscat and Oman

Oman stretches along the south east coast of the Arabian peninsula and is separated from the rest of the region by rugged mountains and harsh desert. Muscat sits on the shores of the Gulf of Oman looking north towards Iran. Its harbour area of Muttrah and commercial centre at Ruwi along with other sprawling suburbs have all the urban trappings and bustle typical of a capital city.

Potential explorers and wilderness freaks please do not be put off, an hour's drive or an hour's boat trip in the right direction will see you well on the way to

being out of it all. The coastal plain to the west of Muscat is dotted with settlements built up around groves of date palms and is backed by the rugged and spectacular Hajar mountain chain.

The shoreline here is a continuous sandy beach with minimal diving potential. Around Muscat and to the south east the mountains meet the sea producing a harsh rocky coastline and hence some very good diving territory. The international airport is situated at Seeb about 32 km west of Muscat.

About 2,500 years ago Oman was settled by the Persians who introduced a falaj system, basically a network of small covered channels to route water from the mountains into the lower lying villages without evaporation loss, they are still in use today. Old fortifications are to be found everywhere and range from small towers guarding mountain passes to large forts strategically positioned on what were major trade routes.



Eventually the country became a hub for the slave trade coming under first of all Portuguese and then, following the demise of slaving, British influence. Now an independent and oil rich state Oman has seen a huge amount of change and development over the past 45 years much of which has been directed towards improving conditions for the population as a whole.

The climate is underpinned by high temperature and humidity throughout the year with a peak in June which will cause considerable discomfort for short term visitors from cooler regions. Red Sea veterans should note that this is very different from Egypt and Israel etc, the Hutchinson World Weather Guide describes the temperature/humidity combination in Muscat as dangerous a category that it reserves for very few other places in the world. Rainfall is infrequent but when it comes it does so with enthusiasm flooding wadi beds and making some routes impassable.

The Omani people are in general very friendly and courteous towards tourists. Given that a majority follow the Muslim faith visitors need to give due consideration to their behaviour, for example entering a public place wearing shorts and a sleeveless vest would cause great offence. Also taking a photograph of anyone without their agreement is not a good idea. I have a vivid recollection of fleeing along the cornice at Muttrah with an old Omani gentleman brandishing a camel stick in hot pursuit. A colleague, also in full flight at the time, had just taken some photographs of the gentleman's family.

The Seas

The seas around Muscat support a great

diversity of marine life. The whole marine ecosystem is influenced by the presence of occasional cold water upwellings initiated by the removal of warm surface waters during the summer monsoon winds. The resulting water temperature drop is typically from around 30°C (t-shirt temperature) to less than 20°C (good wetsuit temperature) over a few hours. Fortunately or unfortunately depending on your outlook the cold water upwellings have another effect; they are nutrient rich and usually set off plankton blooms. The bad side is poor visibility, the good side is the marine life sustained by this phenomena.

Coral reefs are present at various locations along the coastline and around all of the offshore islands. These are patch reefs and have developed at locations where the sea bed slopes away to deeper water. In general the growth of hard corals is to some extent limited as a consequence of the cold upwellings, not a great issue and from a visual perspective is easily made good by the abundance of other Indo-Pacific fauna.

Turtles

It would be remiss to discuss the undersea life that is found along the Omani coast without including a few words about turtles. There are many important turtle nesting beaches to the south east of Muscat particularly around Ra's al Hadd where the Gulf of Oman gives way to the Arabian Sea. Four species of turtle come ashore to lay their eggs. Three are classified as endangered; they are the green, loggerhead and olive ridley turtles. Fourth is the hawksbill which is classified as critically endangered. The hawksbill nesting beaches in Oman are considered to be the most

important in the world and along with all other nesting beaches are protected by law. For a small fee it is possible to join a controlled night-time visit a beach near Ra's al Hadd where green turtles come ashore to lay their eggs. It is well worth the visit.

The Dive Sites

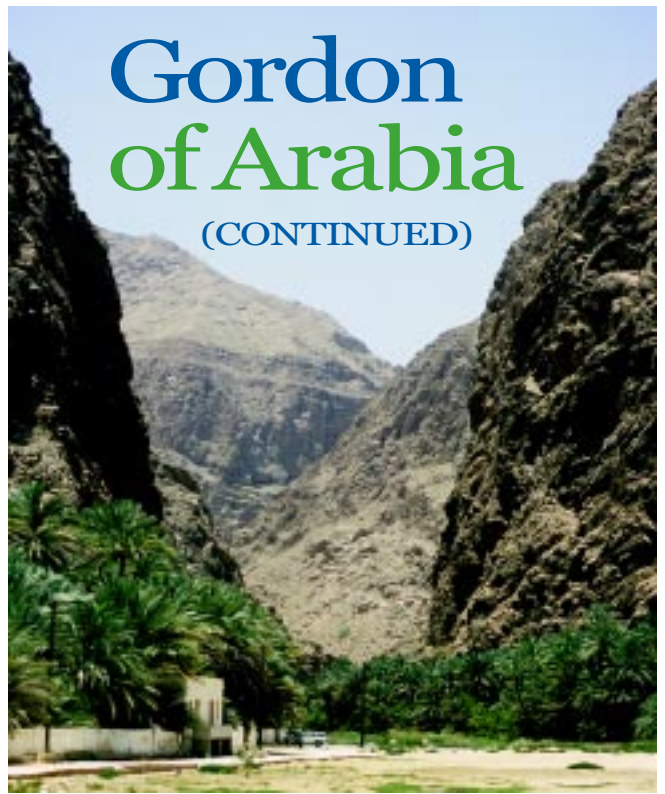
I believe that the sites I am about to described represent the best that Muscat and its surrounds have to offer. There are many other sites in the area which given the opportunity I would dive again, there is simply not enough space in a magazine article to cover them all. The one Oman diving experience that I would not like to repeat involves clearing a fouled prop in the disgusting waters of Muttrah harbour; mind you for a very considerable amount of money I could be convinced to do a repeat job this time wearing a drysuit and full face mask.

From a diving perspective the region can be grouped into three areas:

- 1 inshore dives
 - 2 dives around Fahl Island
 - 3 dives around the Daymaniyat Islands.
- Fahl Island lies about 4 km offshore to the north west of Muscat and the Daymaniyat Islands lie 18km offshore much further to the west. In this issue I will cover the inshore sites.

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Images from left to right: Diver and soft coral at North Point, Fahl Island; A large Honeycomb moray (Gymnothorax favagineus) investigates me from an opening in the wreck of the Munnassir near Bandar Khayran; A pair of peppered morays (Sideria grisea) at Muscat Island.



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1 INSHORE SITES

The following dive sites all require boat access unless otherwise indicated.

▼ Wreck of the *MV Anna Maria* (also called the Seeb wreck)

The *Anna Maria* was a small Greek freighter that went down in an April 1978. She settled upright in 9m just off the airport beach at Seeb about 32km west of Muscat. Her cargo of massive marble blocks is going nowhere, their mass and dimensions are such that they will still be a feature long after the wreck has dissolved. Her remains have attracted a great deal of marine life, invertebrates on the metalwork, shoaling fish in the surrounding waters. An abiding memory is of finning through the biggest and only shoal of adult striped catfish that I have ever seen, it simply opened up in front of me and closed up behind. Unfortunately I have heard that diving may now be prohibited at this site hopefully this is only a rumour.

▼ Wreck of the *Antonello* (also called the Qurm wreck)

During August 1966 the *Antonello* was towed inshore after catching fire. She now lies at a depth of around 7m a short distance off shore to the north of the nature reserve at Qurm, about 12km west of Muscat. At one time some of this large and well broken up wreck was clearly visible above water. On my last visit however I could see no sign of her even at low water. Like the preceding site this wreck lies on sandy ground and attracts a great deal of marine life. Unfortunately the water here is usually turbid but despite this it remains a good second or even third shallow dive and is a reasonable night dive. The surrounding sands contain large numbers of butterfly rays and close in to the wreck honeycomb rays (leopard like spots and long whiptails) may also be encountered.

▼ Ra's al Hamra

Shore entry at a public beach to the east of Ra's al Hamra gives access to some interesting reef in depths to around 6m. This is a good snorkelling site, juvenile Picasso triggerfish scurrying for cover in the shallows are a feature. As it is exposed to wave action there are areas of coral rubble, excellent for nudibranch hunting. Entering the water here if there is any swell is daft and will be rewarded with abysmal viz and the likelihood of some serious coral cuts. There is car parking behind this beach which is about 14 km west of Muscat by road.

▼ Ra's Kalbuh

Situated between Muscat and Muttrah this was at one time an excellent shore dive with depths to around 12m. Since I last dived here the adjacent shoreline has been developed to include a new hard

top road and recreational area. Marine life included a huge hump coral (*Porites sp.*). Marine biologists suggested that this coral head was probably more than 200 years old; I wonder if it is still there now.

▼ Muscat Island

Muscat Island is where the coast turns off in a south easterly direction and marks the start of the best inshore diving. There are a number of sites along the seaward side of the island but I am inclined to favour the SE tip where rocky ridges slope off to depths in excess of 30 m. It was here that I saw fit to try and move a juvenile sea urchin of the genus *Echinothrix* in order to enhance its photogenic qualities. No problem thick blunt spines. In the end the urchin did not move and I endured about three days of excruciating pain in my right index finger. The thick spines simply parted at my touch to reveal an array of much finer and 'penetratingly' sharper spines. To finish on a slightly more positive note this site has produced numerous sea horse sightings. Access to the western side of Muscat Island is prohibited.

▼ Pillar Rock

This is a prominent rocky islet to the SE of Cemetery Bay about 1km south east of Muscat Island. The best dive involves swimming round the islet in one dive and can be achieved easily as long as time in the deeper sections is controlled. Depths on the seaward side go to beyond 25m and a strong current sometimes sweeps through the mainland side of the island. Slipper lobsters are to be found in the rock fissures around this site.

The nearby Cemetery Bay takes its name from the Christian Cemetery that lies behind its shoreline. Until the late sixties the Sultans of Oman did not want Christian burials on Omani soil but as a concession permitted this cemetery which can only be approached by sea. Last year sailors from *HMS Campbelltown* called in to refurbish some of the headstones and carry out a general clean up.

▼ Cat Island

Situated about 12km south east of Muscat Island this used to be a good shore dive but since the construction of the nearby Bandar al Rowdha marina I would consider boat access to be a more realistic approach. Again this is a rocky islet that can be circled in one dive. Shallower than Pillar Rock this is an excellent site for beginners. This was the first place that I encountered flower urchins (*Toxopneustes pileolus*) usually on the coral sand at the periphery of reef patches. They are similar in size to our own common urchins but have the appearance of a bunch of flowers due to enlargement of the organs normally used to grab hold of the sea bed. Very beautiful and very dangerous, the organs

just described can cut into tender areas of skin and will inject venom.

The marina has a dive centre and is also home to Muscat Divers BSAC branch.

▼ Bandar Jissah

Bandar Jissah is situated about 25km south east of Muscat Island and can be accessed by road or sea. There are a number of dives in this area which are worth consideration but I mention it here mainly because it is the location of a well equipped dive centre and also the recompression chamber. Bandar is the Persian word for a haven and describes this and the following site perfectly.

▼ Bandar Khayran

Lying further to the south east this area is approachable either by road or by sea. It is an area of water sheltered by a large island with sea access by way of channels on either side. The shoreline is indented with bays and creeks some of which are mangrove fringed. The area behind the western island delivers very good snorkelling and shallow diving over coral reef and is an ideal beginners' site. The mainland side of the western channel has a good deeper diving at its entrance with patches of purple soft coral and boulder slopes. The seaward side of the large island has some sheer walls which drop down to beyond 20m.

▼ Al Munnassir wreck

East of Bandar Khayran is the promontory of Ra's al Khayran and sheltered on its eastern side is the *Al Munnassir*. Formerly a navy vessel of 3000 tons she was deliberately scuttled for divers during April 2003. She sits upright in about 30m of water and is slowly being colonised by the local marine life.

End of Part One

To conclude this section I have to say that for a purely diving holiday there are better warm water destinations than inshore Muscat but those wishing to combine diving with a bit of wilderness exploration on land will not be disappointed. A diving holiday concentrating on the offshore sites; that as they say is a completely different kettle of fish which I shall discuss in the next issue.

*Images on Page 26 from top: Wadi Shab - this is the scene looking inland from the coast to Wadi Shab south west of Muscat, about 170 km by road. Worth a visit and a good example of the rugged country to be found in the region; I found this flower urchin (Toxopneustes pileolus) at Pillar Rock. It is a venomous species that should not be handled; this Oman Hawkfish (Cirrhitichthys calliurus) is found only on the coastline of Oman and neighbouring states; Slipper Lobster
A slipper lobster (Scyllarides hannii) caught out in the open at Pillar Rock.*