

The aptly named beautiful cowry (*Cypraea pulchra*) is nocturnal and relatively uncommon. This specimen was found during a night dive at Bill's Bumps on Fahl Island



Looking up the reef towards Fahl with damselfish canyons seen in mid-water and an arabian cushion star (*Culcita coriacea*) on the coral head to the right

# Gordon of Arabia Part 2

In his concluding article on Oman, Gordon McSkimming takes us on a tour of the varied delights of Fahl Island and the Daymaniyats. Gordon highlights superb wall dives, swim throughs and occasional wrecks. However the real stars are the fabulous marine life and the unspoiled underwater environment ...

I WILL limit my comments here to the sites and areas that I have already dived and would be prepared to re-visit. There are many other sites worthy of diving in this region. Note that some operators have different names for the same sites; I have used the names with which I am familiar.

## 2 JAZIRIT AL FAHL (FAHAL ISLAND)

Fahal Island looks like a large limestone boulder emerging from the sea about 4km off the Muscat coast. It is situated to the north of Ra's al Hamra on the mainland making it easily accessible by boat from the capital area. It is surrounded by some excellent dive sites, some suitable for beginners and some only for the more experienced. I have had more dives around Fahal than at any other location in Oman and believe that it would take many years of diving to exhaust its possibilities.

### ▼ North Point

At the northern extremity of Fahal a rocky ridge extends seaward giving some good walls underwater. This was the first place that I encountered Malabar groupers. They can reach a length of around 1.2 metres, not as big as the giant grouper but big enough to make you pause in mid-water. A glance towards the surface at this site often reveals large shoals of fish typically fusiliers but often large pelagics including barracuda.

Depths to 30m.

A small tug wreck lies further out from North Point beyond the 40m contour. It is a reasonable wreck dive for more experienced divers.

### ▼ Bills Bumps

Located on the west side of the island this is possibly the most popular dive site at Fahal.

There are swim throughs, a deep cut and large lumps of rock strewn across the slope. Marine life is extremely varied with representatives of most Indo-Pacific reef families in attendance. The sloping profile of this site starting at depth and working up to the shallows provides a good combination of safety with reasonable dive time. Good for photographers and a good site for beginners. Depths to 20m.

To the south of Bills Bumps there is a surge cave in shallow water. The entrance makes an excellent silhouette frame for wide angle photography; just place your buddy in the centre of the opening and expose for the open water behind. Note that it is called a surge cave with good reason don't try this during a heavy swell.





*Normally nocturnal I encountered this large crab (*Carpillus convexus*) late one afternoon at Bills Bumps on Fahl Island*

#### ▼ South Point to East Bay

The location is I believe self explanatory. Here the seabed slopes gently down to deeper water. Inshore there are limestone boulders. Further out coral sand is interrupted by small outcrops of reef alongside larger fields of *Pocillopora* coral. The inshore areas deliver good snorkelling and when swimming out over the coral sand the outlines of large stingrays can be seen from the surface. This is the one area where by snorkelling and staying down current we could regularly see sharks, usually relatively harmless black tips but occasionally other species.

A tunnel at the north end of East Bay is also worth a visit. In daytime it is home to large numbers of copper coloured sweepers (hatchet fish) and sometimes resting sharks. Not a place to be if there is any swell.

Further out there is a small wall which extends for a short distance parallel to the shore. It drops abruptly from 19m to 24 m and can be identified by the prolific growth of purple soft coral running along its top edge. It is a very good dive best achieved by swimming from one end along the deeper section and back along the top.

#### ▼ Tug and Barge

A little offshore to the east and north of the island are the remains of a tug and barge. The tug lies in about 30m of water and is broken up, the barge is in shallower water. Personally I think that this pair are overrated, the tug is probably worth a dive for the visiting diver but I would not join a queue to dive the barge.

#### ▼ Shallow Reef

To the east of Fahl are two rock outcrops which rise from depths greater than 30m

up to 17m, this is Shallow Reef. It is just possible to circumnavigate close to the base of both reef sections on a single dive but this allows little time to absorb the volume of marine life. My first dive in Oman was at this site and it was an eye opener, vibrant reef life, constant mid-water life, passing pelagics, with spotted eagle rays and a large green turtle thrown in for good measure. On subsequent dives it never failed to impress and along with the next site to be described ranks with the best diving in the Muscat area.

#### ▼ Deep Reef

Lying a short distance to the north of Fahl this is a rock outcrop which rises from beyond 40m up to 22m. It can be quite dark, not unlike a dive in north European waters, there are even soft corals which look like dead men's fingers on the vertical surfaces but that is where the similarities end. Like the previous site marine life is prolific and includes a resident group of unicorn surgeonfish. This has been visited by groups of oceanic sunfish which reside for a few days before moving on. This is not a site for newcomers to diving.

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*A view from the surge cave on Fahl Islands west coast*

### 3 JUZUR AD DAYMANIYAT (THE DAYMANIYAT ISLANDS)

The Daymaniyats lie about 40-50km west northwest of the Muscat area and arguably provide the best diving in the region. A direct translation of the name into English is 'the string of pearls', and is appropriate to both their appearance on the map and to the quality of diving which they provide. There are 9 islands in the chain which extends to about 20km and is oriented approximately east west. They have been designated as a national nature reserve and access to the islands is controlled.

We used to do the 40km plus trip to the Daymaniyats from the capital area in a fast boat using a diving compass to bring us into sight of the easternmost island. This gave a superb run out of about 45 minutes on a flat sea first thing in the morning. Two dives later the land had warmed up sucking in a substantial onshore breeze with accompanying swell. The return journey was often a hack through the waves for up to two hours. A better mainland access point is from the headland of Ra's as Sawadi about an 80km drive to the west of Muscat. From here the boat trip is down to about 20km to the westernmost of the islands.

I first visited Ra's as Sawadi with a friend to do some beachcombing. The approach was by way of a dirt road leading from the main highway. While walking the beach a local tribesman with a Lee Enfield rifle strung diagonally across his back in one direction, a bandolier of ammunition strung across the other diagonal and a ceremonial dagger or khanjar in his waistband approached us. He passed us giving the ubiquitous greeting "as-salam alaykum" (peace be upon you), "waalaykum as-salam" (on you be peace) we replied as he moved on at an impressive pace.

Today you will probably not find a fully armed tribesman, the greetings however remain the same and will be given by local people only too happy to direct you by way of the now black top

road to the Al Sawadi Beach Resort with its fully equipped dive centre which of course runs regular trips to the Daymaniyats.

Diving conditions at the islands are considerably better than the inshore sites with prolific marine life and healthy reef systems.

Deeper water to around 30m is usually found close in to the offshore side of the islands. Typically the inshore side is shallower and hosts many patch reefs. There are three distinct island groups usually labelled eastern western and central. The eastern group around the island of Jazirat Kharabah is relatively shallow giving good snorkelling and limited diving options. The central and western islands give access to deeper water and have the better dive sites.

#### ▼ The Aquarium

I have only managed to dive this site once but it is a dive that remains embedded in my mind. Unlike the other Daymaniyat sites it is a shoal lying in open water about 2.5km to the south west of the eastern islands. It has depths of around 15m and is characterised by an amazing abundance of fish life. I do recollect that the visibility was not particularly good but this did not detract from a dive site that I would strongly recommend.

#### ▼ Round the Bend

This is a sheer wall dropping to 25m on the north side of the easternmost island of the central group. In my experience it

is usually current swept and this should be planned for. It is easily my favourite site on the islands and gives the opportunity to see some of the bigger fish of the area. The first time I dived here in 1987 my buddy cut open an unmarked fish trap freeing a number of small reef fish along with a



Three divers go 'Round the Bend' at the end of their dive at the Daymaniyats

large Malabar grouper which escaped at an impressive speed with an audible crack from its tail. I was to witness this same fish freeing exercise at a nearby site many years later in 2004 when an Omani dive guide carried out the same operation this time completely dismantling an illegal marked trap.

#### ▼ Jaap's Bend

Named I believe after the Dutch diver who first found the site. A wall with soft coral gardens on the adjacent reef ridges and a huge shoal of fusiliers combing the mid water for food. I have yet to identify the brilliant red-purple soft corals found here and at a number of other sites in Oman.

#### ▼ Police Island

So called because it was once home to a Police post, the largest island in the central group was the first place that I dived on the Daymaniyats. The dive was memorable for two reasons; first of all fascinating rock formations with a great swim through and secondly a very long cold and bumpy run home. The northern shore of the island is indented by a large bay, good diving is to be found both east and west of its entrance.

The Al Sawadi Beach resort website has links to a map showing many more Daymaniyat dive sites.

#### Conclusions

If I were to return to the Muscat area today I would aim to do most of my diving around the Daymaniyat Islands they remain relatively untouched by mainstream diving and there are loads of sites in the group which I have not dived. Deep Reef and Shallow Reef at Fahal would also be on my hit list but if my last visit to Muscat was anything to go by this might be difficult. The dive operation which I approached was very reluctant to drop divers on either site. In the end I tagged on to my old BSAC branch Muscat Divers who delivered the goods all be it at a couple of other sites.



An Omani dive guide dons his gloves before trashing an illegal fish trap at the Daymaniyats