

Oh! Lucky Oman

Andy Parks and his pals at Grampian SAC were looking round for something different for their autumn trip. A quick call to the travel agent and they were on their way to Oman and the Musandam Peninsula. Andy provides a full report ...



HEADING OFF to warmer waters has become an October event over recent years and several trips to the Red Sea have proved to be very successful with good diving but increasingly crowded dive sites. This year I decided to look for some less travelled destinations and see if I could get somewhere a bit different.

There were lots of ideas thrown around but I ended up going for the Musandam Peninsula of Oman. Why, I do not really know, I knew it would be warm but beyond that very little. I hadn't read much about diving in Oman and knew virtually nothing about Musandam itself.

It would be a bit of a gamble, but probably a pretty safe one. Soon I had persuaded a group from Grampian Branch and a couple from Wales who had dived with us before to come along and the boat was full. No one seemed to be put off by the 'dunno' answer to every question about the diving.

Musandam is a remote dolomite and limestone peninsula forming the southern side of the Straits of Hormuz, the entrance to the Arabian Gulf. The north side is Iran and the political situation in this region did put some people off, but our group seemed ok with the idea.

The area has been geologically active in the past and the whole region has been sinking over thousands of years leaving, at the north end, high cliffs and a maze of drowned fjord-like inlets. There is very little in the way of towns, no real rivers, and a rainfall that for most months of the year averages

0.0cms. It was starting to sound interesting!

We booked a liveaboard through Dive Worldwide and from the beginning they could not have been more helpful. We flew from Glasgow to Dubai with Emirates and it was streets ahead of the usual Red Sea cattle class. Leg-room, good food (for a plane), endless video channels to watch and best of all a 30kg baggage allowance - 10kg extra just for being a diver.

We landed in Dubai around midnight and it was still about 30°C; a couple of hours in a coach saw us transfer to Dibba on the east coast and cross into Oman to meet the boat. It was nice to go through an airport without the usual assortment of Kalashnikovs and other assorted weaponry on show, the crossing into Oman simply involved a wave from the guard at the border - all very relaxed.

We settled into our boat, a modern Dhow style vessel. It was a bit of a Tardis, much more space than first appeared and air-conditioning that could have you near hypothermic in your room if you set it wrong.

We sailed at 4.00am for our first dive site and woke to a lovely dawn on a flat calm sea. This was pretty much standard for the week, it is amazing how often you can write - 'hot, sunny, flat calm sea' in your log-book. The plan for the week was to sail to the most northerly point of Musandam and dive our way back to the start.

The first day's diving was at Jazirat Harma (Red Island), the tide was ripping past it so we dived the north





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side sheltered from the current. It proved to be a good start, the coral was in really good condition and the viz about 15-20m and 28°C water.

The viz is never as good as the Red Sea but the plankton brings the biodiversity. It was a bit of an aquarium with every conceivable type of fish, Spiny Lobsters, nudibranchs and some wonderful underwater scenery.

The second dive was on the east side when the tide turned where we were treated to stingrays and a small manta. The best dive of Day 1 was the night dive in the bay where we moored. A sand slope with coral outcrops provide us with a sea-life exhibition better than any I have seen anywhere else. The highlight was getting video of a Yellow-edged Moray catching and swallowing whole a coral grouper bigger than itself.

Day 2 saw us at Ras Musandam the most northerly point and only 20 miles from Iran. We dived an island called Kachalu as a drift dive which was brilliant until some up and down currents at the end of the island made the dive a little more exciting.

The next two dives were on Ras Musandam where we discovered one of the peculiarities of diving in this region. There are lots of thermoclines and you swim from warm water into cooler (26°C) and back into bathwater warm water in the space of a few metres. This can happen all through your dive.

Our dive guide Jhon was very good, he dived with us, was always around but

also left us to get on with it and did not get in the way. Perfect. All dives were limited to 60 minutes and a max of 30m and we certainly used all of the time available.

Day 3, and heading south again, took us to Ras Khaysah. We did three dives on the headlands and a night dive. The differences between Oman and Egypt were starting to tell.

We did not have the depth, the big viz, or the clouds of Anthias and Basslets you get in the Red Sea. We did have pristine hard and soft corals, a huge diversity of life, mirror calm seas, and a crew and chefs who were miles ahead of anything I have experienced in the Red Sea. They were fabulous - quietly efficient, very friendly, good boat handling and no-one got sick during the week.

Best of all we had the sea to ourselves. We only saw another tourist boat twice in the week and only saw other divers on our last dive.

Next day we dived an island called Jazrat Umm Al Fayyarin and were disappointed to see a trawl net draped across the reef and quite a bit of coral damage. We would not have noticed as much if on the rest of the dives the coral had not been so good. There was still plenty of life and it was a good dive but we all felt a bit sad at the damage.

The next dive, Hard Rock Café, made up for it - an unusual rock formation, it had a very nice 30m wall then up into a series of shallow gullies with great swim-throughs and huge shoals of parrot fish and fusiliers. There was a bit of a chop this day and the shallow gullies had quite a bit of movement.

Day 5 saw us a bit further south at Ras Sarkinn for four more wonderful dives. We finished with another brilliant night dive where a 12m wall provided enough interest for the photographers to just about burn out their batteries. One day to go and our gamble with Oman was paying off. Superb diving, no other dive boats and our Indian chef was continually plying us with excellent food. It beats working for a living.

Our last day of diving took us to the town of Limah the only town we saw; we could not land but were told that the main access was by sea, the mountainous terrain and desert made vehicle access problematic and 4x4 territory. Three more great dives with rays and Morays, and huge shoals of assorted fish left us wishing we could stay longer.

Milestones were passed during the week, Edna completed her 400th dive and Melanie logged her 1000th dive, not a bad place to do them. The general feeling was that it was a wonderful week.

We finished with a day in Dubai for shopping and sightseeing. It is impressive but I personally prefer the desert and the sea. Was Oman worth the gamble - definitely. The diving is different from the Red Sea and they do not pretend otherwise, but it is quite simply excellent in every way.

The diving down by Muscat in the south is more popular and better catered for, Musandam is (and feels) more remote. At the moment only a few boats go there and you have to really want to go and seek it out. It is comparatively undived compared to anywhere else I have ever been and that is something to treasure.

Should you go there? The diver in me would say yes. The selfish bugger in me would say no. I hope areas like this never get the volume of divers you see in the Red Sea and other places. The isolation and lack of exploitation has kept it quite magical and it is nice that there are still some of these places left.

For more information on diving in Oman with Dive Worldwide visit www.diveworldwide.com; call 0845 130 6980; or email: sales@diveworldwide.com



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