



Honeycomb morays are literally everywhere

"It is just teeming with schools of fish, dizzying, disorientating, swarming schools of fish of every description – bluelined snapper, yellow-lined snapper grunts, sergeant majors, anthias, red-tooth triggerfish and yellow-striped goatfish are all in abundance"



Anemonefish

## The authentic *Middle* East

Adrian Stacey makes a stopover in Oman, but finds the uncrowded, unspoilt taste of the 'real' Middle East demands more than a week if you are to sample all its delights

Photographs by ADRIAN STACEY

After six months of diving in Thailand, it was time to return to England. However, after observing the Arctic weather conditions from a safe distance, it seemed wise to delay my return home for as long as possible. My flight was due to have a two-hour stopover in Muscat, which I promptly extended to a week. I knew very little about Oman, the city of Muscat, or the quality of the diving and was eager to discover what was on offer.

The Sultanate of Oman is situated along the southeast coast of the Arabian Peninsula and it counts Saudi Arabia, Yemen and the United Arab Emirates as its neighbours. The official language is Arabic, but everyone also seems to speak English. Flights from London to Muscat take about seven hours. The coastline is formed by the Arabian Sea in the south and the Gulf of Oman further to the north. The enclave of Musandam also has coastal water on the Strait of Hormuz.

Muscat is a beautiful, sprawling city sandwiched between the sea on one side and barren, rugged mountains on the other. There are no high-rise

buildings tainting the skyline, instead traditional flat-roofed white buildings stretch as far as the eye can see, occasionally punctuated by the minarets and domes of the many mosques in the city. Old fortifications which perch on top of mountain ridges that stretch down to the sea watch over the older parts of the city that were built in the valleys. The city is very clean and the people very friendly, but there is not much evidence of public transport - the best way to get around is either to rent a car, or take one of the many taxis.

Above the water there is plenty to do: there are several souks and museums to visit, or just wandering around the old town looking at the architecture and exploring the city is a pleasant way to spend time when not diving. The above-water highlight for me though was Wadi Shab. It is about a two-hour drive out of Muscat. Upon arrival a small boat takes you across a river. After a short walk along the palm tree-lined banks, the wadi opens out into a large canyon, imposing cliffs dominate the vista and after snaking along the canyon wall and picking a path through a large boulder





field, we arrived at a series of refreshing pools, some we could wade through and some we had to swim through. At the end we came to a large pool that ends at a sheer rock face. A small crack in the wall gives the adventurous the opportunity to swim into a completely enclosed waterfall. It is possible to climb up the waterfall, which opens out into a secluded rocky plateau complete with another small waterfall and a clear cool pool. A truly magical experience.

Euro Divers, the dive centre I was diving with, was located in a pleasant little marina just on the outskirts of Muscat. For those of us who enjoy an après-dive beer, there is no need to worry because the Sultanate of Oman is not completely dry; the marina restaurant next to the dive centre offers alcoholic refreshments, as do most hotel bars. My hotel, the Golden Oasis, was only a ten-minute drive from the marina. It is worth noting that Muscat is a large city, so if you wish to avoid an hour-long commute through rush-hour traffic, it is advisable to book somewhere close to your dive centre.

The best time for diving is May and June; visibility gets up to 25 metres and the marine life is more prolific. July to September also benefits from good visibility, but above the water becomes very hot and humid. October to April is a little more hit-and-miss, with visibility down to five metres on occasion, but averaging around ten to 15 metres. Water temperatures range from 29 degrees C in the summer down to 22 degrees C in the winter. I arrived towards the end of March and booked a five-day diving package with Euro Divers and had a mixed bag regarding visibility.

Muscat offers a good variety of dive sites, from the impressive limestone edifice of Fahal Island to the undersea mounts and walls of the Daymaniyats, and for the wreck lovers there is the majestic wreck of the Al Munassir. More to come on these last two dive sites in a future issue, but for now, just let me say that that the Daymaniyats and the Al Munassir are well worth a visit. In fact, if you are diving in Oman, they are a must. Whalesharks are supposedly occasional visitors to the area, but I am sure these mythical creatures are extinct. Although I am not basing this assumption on any hard facts, I have

**Stunning topside scenery complements the underwater offerings**



**Table corals off the Daymaniyat Islands**



**Reef balls play host to yet another honeycomb moray**

only ever seen one in my entire diving career. I am now beginning to believe that on that occasion I was suffering from the effects of nitrogen narcosis, even if I was only at 8m!

The majority of the diving takes place around Fahal Island or Bandar Khayran. The first dives I did were around the latter, and a small but comfortable boat whizzed us along the spectacular, barren coastline comprising of seemingly endless weathered limestone cliffs. After 30 minutes we reached our destination. The first site was called Cave Site. This is usually a drift dive, however due to somewhat choppy seas and with safety in mind, we dropped into the water in a more-sheltered cove where the boat could moor to make entries and exits a little simpler. The dive began on a shallow boulder field and barely a minute into the

dive the undulating form of a large free-swimming honeycomb moray came into view. Apparently unfazed by divers, it headed straight for me, mouth opening and closing almost as if it were trying to say 'move, you are in my way'. After taking a couple of quick photos I dutifully moved out of the way and the moray swam past. It was to be the first encounter of many with these mesmerising and photogenic creatures. In fact, they are my abiding memory of diving in Oman. As the dive continued the boulder field gave way to a wall that dropped down to about 25m and rose to just below the surface. Almost every inch of the wall was covered in yellow, green and purple whip corals. Small schools of grunts, a variety of reef fish and, of course, more morays sheltered in this coral forest.

The second dive was at First Entrance.





## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW...



### MUSCAT, OMAN

#### HOW TO GET THERE

Oman Air flies direct from London Heathrow to Muscat. Flight time is about seven hours. To drive from Dubai takes around five hours.

#### WHEN TO VISIT

Diving in Oman is year round. The best months to visit regarding visibility are between May and September.

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#### ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

You can obtain a VISA on arrival for up to 30 days at a cost of 20 Omani Rials (OMR).

#### CURRENCY

Omani rial (£1 = 0.6 OMR).

#### WHERE TO EAT AND MEET

The Yacht Club Marina restaurant (next door to Euro Divers) offers a place to get an après dive beer and good western food. For a taste of traditional Arabic cuisine try the port district of Muttrah and the nearby quarter of Old Muscat.

#### VERDICT

Muscat is a beautiful, traditional and friendly city. It offers some great un-crowded diving especially at the wreck of the Al Munassir and the Daymaniyat and Fahal Islands. So for a real taste of Arabia and some excellent diving I would highly recommend Oman.



Sunrise over Muscat

“Apparently unfazed by divers, it headed straight for me, mouth opening and closing almost as if it were trying to say ‘move, you are in my way’”

This is a shallower dive along the wall of one of the many inlets along the coast. At around 7-8m, the wall gives way to a gentle slope where stingrays hide and goatfish frenetically graze. Large terraces of table corals dominate the later stages of the dive and provide a home to sergeant majors.

Fahal Island is an impressive limestone rock that juts out of the sea and can be reached after a 30-minute boat ride off the coast of Muscat. The island boasts nine dive sites. My personal favourite was North Point, which can be dived two ways - you can either drop on the west side of the island and swim around the north point into a shallow bay, or you can start in the bay and head around to the west. For the first dive there, we started on the west side dropping down about 20m. We were greeted by an artificial reef that appeared to be a favourite playground for the ubiquitous honeycomb morays. Further along the site large slabs of rock dominate the topography. As you come around into the bay, a wall is littered with colourful broccoli corals and staghorn coral. But for me the highlight of this dive was a cauldron-shaped bowl that leads into a narrow, shallow gully close to the north point. It is just teeming with schools of fish, dizzying, disorientating, swarming schools of fish of every description - blue-lined snapper, yellow-lined snapper grunts, sergeant majors, anthias, red-tooth triggerfish and yellow-striped goatfish are all in abundance.

Due to Oman’s relatively close proximity to Egypt, comparisons between the two will be drawn. There

are pros and cons on both sides. Is the diving in Muscat as good as in Egypt? The quick answer is no, not quite. But it would be unfair to just leave it at that since I don’t think I saw the diving around Muscat at its best, and not many places I have visited in the world are as breath-taking as Ras Mohamed in July and August. But Oman really does have a lot to offer and is a more-than-viable alternative to diving in the Sinai. For a start, you are usually the only boat on the dive site, which is a huge plus in my book. Both soft and hard corals are abundant and there is plenty of marine life - schooling fish in the thousands, cuttlefish, turtles and what seems like moray eels in every crevasse. The Al Munassir is a fantastic wreck, and the Daymaniyats offer some truly fantastic diving. Above the water you are transported back to Lawrence of Arabia times, especially when visiting Wadi Shab, which is simply stunning. Muscat feels and looks authentic. It is a beautiful city. The people are very friendly and, in the entire week I was there, I was not once dragged into a perfume, papyrus, rug or other miscellaneous gift shop, then forced to drink scolding hot tea while being enticed into buying something I really did not want.

The diving is good, the city and surrounding areas are very interesting, and overall, Oman is well worth a visit. In fact, I found that one week was not really enough to fit in everything I wanted to do. So if you want a change from Egypt, to get away from the crowds and experience something a bit different, I would highly recommend Muscat. ■