

ISSUE 42

# DESTINATIONS

THE EXPATRIATE FAMILY MAGAZINE



Focus on

## Oman

- Challenged by the sand
- Oman and its people
- Fort McMurray, North of nowhere...
- JMS Literary Prize 2007

## DESTINATIONS

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### Cover

Camels in Oman

photo:  
Courtesy of Jan Schreurs

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## Letter from the Editor

I read recently a travel tale about someone who was offered coffee by a customs officer at a country border. The writer said that checking her passport seemed more of a social opportunity than a security measure. Most unusual I thought...until I realised that the country she was entering was Oman. I like this tale a lot, because it provides such a vivid example of the warmth and generosity of the Omani people and of the easy relationship that Omanis seem to have with Westerners - both subjects that many of the contributors to this issue have touched on in their articles.

I visited Oman last year and had a glimpse into life for Shell expats in that part of the world (although in Oman, PDO is the employer and Shell is a shareholder of PDO). I met expats at the PDO camp who were onto their second posting in Oman. I met others who had been there for significantly longer than the standard 3-4 year term, and it was not hard to imagine what they were all doing there for such long stretches! A hard to beat lifestyle - thanks to friendly locals, untold water sports, delicious weather, good schools and a close and energetic community - keeps Shell folk who can, coming back for more and extending their stays.

The place gets under your skin people told me. Sheila Smyth-Kramer who wrote the challenged by the sand article (page 4) emailed me about her reasons for writing for this issue. I am printing part of this email below, because I think that the sentiment she so articulately shared will resonate with anyone who has ever lived there, and provides a touching insight for us unlucky ones who haven't:

'Our years in the Sultanate have been fulfilling and fun, adventurous and trying, and my reasons for writing at this moment go far beyond any type of record I may wish to leave regarding our life here; as it has really been quite an ordinary life (much less exciting or full than that of many of my friends). But I feel compelled to write...our experiences, the people we've met, the sunsets and rains (a real event!), all that has happened in the last seven years have left an indelible mark on our lives. Seven years is a long time for a posting, but it is a tribute to Oman that many expatriates posted here find it hard to leave and many return for another posting as soon as possible. We'll transfer this June and I feel like I'm leaving home.'

The variety of focus stories in this issue is a testament to the richness of Oman and to the get-up-and-go of the local expats who are enjoying what it offers to the full.

PS We didn't receive any stories about Sur in the North-East of Oman - where Shell expats also live - but would be pleased to receive stories from Sur for publishing in future DESTINATION issues.

## Contents

### ➤ Focus on Oman

- 4 Challenged by the sand
- 6 Oman and its people
- 8 'Doesn't your child deserve a safe ride?'
- 10 Oman provides inspiration for artists
- 11 The Caledonian Society of Oman
- 12 Oman to Holland by car
- 14 Sunsets, turtles and doing the shopping
- 15 Happy to be back



3



**4**  
Challenged by the sand



**6**  
Oman and its people



**10**  
Oman provides inspiration for artists

➤ **Eating and drinking**  
16 New country, new food

➤ **My life**  
18 Fort McMurray, North of nowhere

➤ **My life**  
20 Leaving Nigeria

➤ **Archive Centre**  
21 Old times, new times

➤ **Health**  
22 Cosmetic plastic surgery

➤ **Your career**  
24 Planned Travel London  
25 'Who am I now that I don't work anymore?'

➤ **Sidelong glances**  
26 Cafe society

➤ **Outpost news**  
27 The JMS literary prize 2007

➤ **Outpost news**  
28 Filming in Iran

# Challenged by the Sands

*By Sheila Smyth-Kramer*

*With input from Deidre van Son*



**The Wahiba Challenge is a two-day challenge. It involves crossing Oman's Wahiba Sands from East to West. On the first day participants must reach a pre-determined campsite by sunset. The following day, a second set of coordinates must be reached to finish the challenge. It is not a race against each other, but a challenge against time and the elements. 13 teams of eight to ten people took part in 2006. For the last four years an all women's team has participated, the Wahiba Divas. This is their story.**

It was 2003, and a group of men sat at a BBQ on PDO beach discussing the makeup of teams for the upcoming Wahiba Challenge. My sister Deirdre joined in the conversation and thought: "Wow! Every year I sit around and watch these guys go off to this scary retreat and come back with fantastic stories... why don't women join in? ...Maybe we could make a team..." Another glass of wine and she and her friend Sabine had decided that it was a marvellous idea to start an all-female team! The men's laughter only served to strengthen their resolve to prove that women do understand the workings of a four-wheel drive.

Before long, nine women from diverse backgrounds and nationalities came together, myself included, to form

the "Wahiba Divas": Geologists, artists, psychologists, anthropologists, designers, teachers and mothers; we all had something to offer the team and took on the dare voiced by our male counter-parts – we too would conquer the Wahiba! We formalised our registration and the gallant men of the Challenge Committee even exempted us from the pre-challenge qualifier (still a bit incredulous and not knowing whether to take us seriously!).

We were soon busy collecting the many items that other teams had deemed necessary on previous trips. We carefully planned our team's distribution, each member's responsibilities, and the packing of cars: boxes of bottled water, long-handled shovels, satellite phone, tools, spare parts, gloves, sun-screen and food (and a hundred other essentials) had to be readily accessible.

We'd also have to meet the "standards" of the other teams, which meant training medically and mechanically, shovelling sand, changing tires and driving the slopes at Bowsheer in preparation. We learned to use GPSs, walkie-talkies and low gears! Warned by Maarten (the Committee Head) that we would be "...abandoned to our fate for a couple of days if we did not succeed to get ourselves out of our own trouble"; we reflected that we might not return to Muscat for a couple of weeks. This meant adding extra wine and tanning lotion to our packing list.

The day before the challenge, we found ourselves driving towards Al Areesh Desert Discovery Camp, on the Eastern border of the Wahiba. Along the way, we temporarily lost our Team Captain (Deirdre), Head Explorer (Sabine) and Head Navigator (Zuwena). They took a wrong turn and ended up

WAHIBA DIVAS - LOST IN OMAN....



in Nizwa (two hours in the wrong direction!). Yes, they had satellite and topographical maps of the Wahiba and maps of Bowsher dunes, but... whoever thought that they would need a map of the roads in Oman?

Next morning, we were first at the starting point by Al Kamil gas station. Teams were given the GPS coordinates for the mid-way camp and the ending point. The Divas were first to leave and happily drove off in the wrong direction. A quick u-turn solved the problem and we headed off on our great adventure.

Bowsher dunes could never truly prepare us for the Wahiba Sands: we entered a shifting wilderness, a sea of sand that extended as far as our eyes could see. At the end of a hot and difficult day, two of our four vehicles became stuck, the first one in a rather precarious position above a sand-bowl (tricky to negotiate due to the soft sand in the bottom). At 4.6km from the camp, we lost any hope of arriving before sunset. The Wahiba Sands won this time, as we were unable to

reach the first coordinates in time. But our frustration and disappointment soon dissipated and our spirits lightened at the thought of all we had accomplished.

Few sights compare to the desert horizon early in the morning. The thick mist of dawn dissipates with the rising sun and the sands and vegetation are left glistening in the light. We quickly ate and packed our camp, ready to free the stuck cars and find a path out of the sands.

The Wahiba Divas have made this desert journey on four occasions to participate in the "Wahiba Challenge". In 2004 we arrived at the midway camp as the sun was setting, aided by the cheering teams who shone their flashlights on the path up the last dune. The reception was heart-warming. The men no longer laughed: they congratulated and welcomed us as equals (well, almost!). That year we managed to collect over 600 Omani Riyal for The National Association for Cancer Awareness, which added to our feeling of accomplishment.

We initially took on the Wahiba Challenge as a dare from our male friends and spouses who laughed at the thought of an all-female team participating (nay worse, completing!) the test. Four years on, we have reached our goal twice and learned much along the way about teamwork, companionship, our personal strengths and the beauty and severity of that arid wilderness.

The team changes every year as friends leave for other postings. In 2006 it was formed by: Arleen Edwards, Zuwena Al Rawahi, Sharon Bergren, Kirsten Bennet, Sabine Vahrenkamp, Marlies Davies, Leslie Wiechniek, Laurie Ottenbreit and I. To the Divas of years past - Deirdre van Son, Kelly Dyer, Louise McCullough, Alice Newall, Okkie van Rossem and Inge van den Berg: It's been an honour to travel the sands in your company and to have you as friends.

At the halfway camp: Zuwena, Marlies, Leslie, Kirsten, Arleen, Sheila, Sabine, Sharon & Laurie





# Oman and its people

Jan Schreurs

6

## DESERT HOSPITALITY

We arrived in Oman in September 2001, just one day before 9/11. We had neither TV nor radio, not a clue about what was going on in the world, and will never forget our friend Mohamed, knocking at the door in the early morning and carrying a big TV inside. "Lilian, Jan, you must see this", he said, and without further comment he left.

Mohamed is so typical of the Omani people, considerate, helpful, and friendly and we are glad to count him, his wife and their children among our closest friends. It is not difficult to meet people like them in the small villages, in the mountains, in the desert interior, or along the coast. The Bedouin people in the middle of the Huqf, in the middle of nowhere, their pick-up full with fruit from a far away market, yet wanting to share with us everything they had - almost embarrassing to return this with the food and drinks we carried in our cool boxes. The people that invite you for Omani coffee below a tree (the majilis) in a village in the mountains. No need to talk a lot, the sharing of hospitality is universal.

The Omanis greet each other extensively, which directly links back to a difficult existence in a generally hostile desert environment. Meeting others was, and still is, an important happening. That desert hospitality also extends to us visitors, and it is important to be open to it. Driving with a big dust cloud through a small village without waving may be normal in the west, but it does not fit in the Omani culture. Long beards, white Khalabeas and black dresses may be unusual to Western eyes, but it does not take long to recognise the gentle human nature associated with them.

It is perhaps surprising to find this gentle human nature where people struggled to survive in the past, in a harsh desert existence. Survival in such conditions depends on supporting each other and that's probably why the proverbial desert hospitality is to be found in places like Oman.

## RECENT HISTORY

The Omanis consist of groups with very different origins that only became one nation when modern Oman unified under its present leader Sultan Qaboos in 1970.

Many Omanis have close links with Zanzibar and adjacent Tanzania & Kenya along Africa's eastern coast. Links that go back to Oman's seafaring days when Zanzibar was an important part of the Omani trading empire. Links that also connect across the Arabian Sea to Iran and across the Indian Ocean as far as India and that can still be recognised in family names such as Baluchi (Baluchestan in Iran).

The Sultanate of Oman was a relatively unknown patch on the world map as recently as the mid-1950's. Oman, during this period, was masterly described by Thesinger, the famous explorer who preferred the Bedouin world above his own Western one. He travelled through the deserts of the Middle East, and almost secretly crossed Oman at a time when it



was still known as 'Muscat and Oman'. Oman's boundaries were based, at that time, on feudal allegiances (and disputes) rather than solid lines on a map.

The discovery of commercial oil in 1962 at Yibal in Oman's desert interior set the country on an irreversible course towards modern times. The change was not without the stress and strain that always marks a transition from old to new, certainly for a country with a feudal powerbase that was almost locked into its old ways.

A change of leadership to cope with the changes became eminent in the late 1960's. Sultan Qaboos bin Said took over the reins of government from his father, Sultan Said bin Taimur, in July 1970 and helped the country to benefit from its new wealth. In the same period the Omani rule of Zanzibar was overturned and many Omanis who lived in Zanzibar and neighbouring countries returned to Oman, taking with them a mix of different cultures that amalgamated into the modern Oman. It has been going strong ever since.

**BOOKS ON OMAN**

Jan recommends the following books for anyone interested in finding out more about Oman and its people.

For the tourist visitor there is Peter, J. Ochs II 1998 'The Maverick Guide to Oman', Diana Darke 2000 'Discovery Guide to Oman' and Hatim Al Taie, John Pickersgill & Nasser Al Taie, 1999 'A Comprehensive Guide to the Sultanate of Oman' and Mark Grist 2006 'Oman off-road'.

For the best feel for the 'old times' read Philip Ward's 1987 'Travels in Oman' as well as Wilfred Thesinger's 1959 'Arabian Sands'.

David Gwynne-James' 2001 'Letters from Oman' captures the change with the oil in the early 1960's and 1970's and so does Pauline Searle's 'Dawn over Oman'.

Don Sheridan's 2000 'Fahud the Leopard Mountain' and Quintin Morton's 2006 'Into the Heart of the Desert' are a

must for everybody to read a first hand witness account of the beginning of Oman's big change. Going back in time there is the spectacular story by Nicholas Clapp 1998 'The Road to Ubar', describing the fascinating story of the lost city of Ubar connected to the ancient frankincense trade.

The 'Journal of Oman Studies' provides a series of papers on Oman's archaeology and cultural heritage, but a good starting point in Middle Eastern archaeology is Geoffrey Bibby's 1970 classic 'Looking for Dilmun', which reads like an Agatha Christie whodunit.

