

# ROUND THE BEND

Jenny Hewett takes a road trip to Oman and finds paradise among the majestic fjords of the Musandam Peninsula.

Growing up 'down under' has its endless perks but it's not until you travel that you experience the meaning behind this geographic truism and accept that when on home ground, crossing a border into another country will inevitably involve a long-haul flight over water. Living in Dubai couldn't be further from that truth, here we have the Middle East and it's neighbouring countries right at our fingertips – Europe of the desert. As someone who stems from one of the most isolated continents in the world, it is exciting to know that in less time than it takes to drive from Sydney to Canberra, you can be standing in Oman, a whole other country. And although the initial terrain looks similar to Dubai, Khasab on the Musandam peninsula is a world away. Heading out of Dubai on Emirates Road, the lingering dust that's churned up daily doesn't truly settle until well into the two-hour drive to the Omani border. The road takes you north through emirate Ras Al Khaima and the further you get, the more towering the jagged mountains ahead of you become. A UAE national flag painted on the rock face of a peak reminds us where we are, although where we're headed, the Sultanate

of Oman, stands alone – separate from the United Arab Emirates agreement that was signed in 1971, the welcomed vision of Abu Dhabi's Sheikh Zayed. On approach to the border, UAE and Omani national flags fly from almost all houses and public buildings as a reminder of the division of the two countries. Designate at least an hour for border formalities and don't leave home without your passport. Crossing into Oman the scenery changes dramatically, once dull-coloured mountains, scorched by the heat and sun, come alive as the golden backdrop to the piercingly green waters and hot-blue skies of the Arabian Gulf. The winding road snakes through small, ornate villages where the tallest high-rise is the minaret on the mosque. Sleepy and unaffected villages extend back into large wadis or deep limestone valleys that torrents of floodwaters have carved out over centuries. Forty-five minutes later and we've arrived in Khasab, the Musandam's main port. Located on the northernmost part of Oman, the Musandam is a tiny peninsula that extends out into the Strait of Hormuz and is separated from the rest of Oman by the UAE. Across the strait is Iran, a mere speed-boat ride away and trade takes place daily –

the Iranians come at daybreak, faces entirely masked with the traditional *shemagh*, they resemble cowboys, whizzing over in souped-up silver tinnies packed with goats which they deliver to Omani traders. They return at darkness with their new cargo of mostly US cigarettes and tea. Trade is illegal in Iran but operations still run smoothly this side of the strait and smuggler spotting is a trip highlight – look out for the goats' heads popping up out of the boat's interior. Although Khasab is the largest town on the Musandam, it is fortunately still a quiet tourist destination and only a few hotels operate in this area. The Golden Tulip, [goldentulipkhasab.com](http://goldentulipkhasab.com), is the most upmarket and enjoys a beachside location. Each room has a balcony that opens out onto the turquoise seas of the Strait of Hormuz and the breathtaking mountainous landscape that frames it. For something more affordable try the Khasab Hotel, [khasabhotel.net](http://khasabhotel.net), a few streets back from the port. Plan ahead as both hotels get fully booked out in the cooler months. A dhow cruise is the only way to explore the fjord-like bays and inlets of the Musandam – both The Golden Tulip and Khasab Hotel can organise this or to pre-

book visit [dolphinkhasabtours.com](http://dolphinkhasabtours.com).

The traditional-style boats are open air and very comfy with colourful cushions lining the deck. Sailing off in the morning, our first stop is to play with the humpback dolphins that inhabit the area. This turns out to be quite the performance. Each boat takes its cue to rev the engine as the crew fiercely clap their hands. The dhow then speeds off at full steam, with the dolphins chasing alongside to surf the wake. It's clear there's a shared bond between these angelic mammals and the gentle Omani people, whose pride for their beauty is evident the moment they successfully entice them to play from the water.

Further into the rocky maze the dhow anchors in the Khor Ash Sham inlet, home to Telegraph Island and tiny fishing villages that are accessible only by boat. The British arrived on Telegraph Island in the mid-19th century to lay a telegraph cable from India to Britain. They stayed for long periods, installing the cable round the bend of the Gulf which explains the expression "going round the bend" since the isolation and heat drove most of them crazy.

The snorkelling sights around this area are nothing to rave about but the Musandam Peninsula on the whole is reputed to offer some of the best diving in the world – to organise a full-day trip, visit [goldentulip.com](http://goldentulip.com). If diving's not your cup of tea, try shark spotting – large basking sharks especially, are often spotted circling in the shallow bays near Khasab. Apparently they dine on plankton not human flesh. We stopped at a vantage point along the road to peer into the bay from the plunging cliffs and there it was. A shark, quite eerily and elegantly swaying its way back and forth around the bay, in true predator fashion. We were convinced it spanned close to six feet after sizing it up to the large bird on the shore that was now puny in comparison.

Back on dry land, it's worth checking out the Khasab Fort, just opposite the port, built in 17th century by the Portuguese, it now functions as a small museum showcasing Omani handicrafts. For the more adventurous, a 4WD through the wadi and then up the steep mountains for some spectacular views will leave you speechless, if not a bit shaky. But the plummeting views from on high are well worth the grey hairs. After all the excitement from that little expedition, you'll be starving for a feed. The best grub in Khasab can be found in the local restaurants half way through the town and seeing as you're so close to the source, you'd be crazy not to try a local seafood dish before heading back to the big smoke.



Khasab port, the town's hub.



Chill out on board a dhow.



Humpback dolphins come out of the water to play.