Oman – Recent Activity

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During a four week visit to Oman in December/January 1988/89 Di Taylor and I travelled through most of the northern mountains, namely the massifs of the eastern and western Hajar, facilitated by expatriate rock climber Alec MacDonald.

The rock is limestone and rises to 3009m at Oman's highest summit, Jebel Shams, part of the Jebel Akhdar range in the western Hajar. Unfortunately, owing to the nature of the rock and the extremes of temperature (freezing at high altitude in midwinter and over 50°C out of the shade, even in midwinter) the vast majority of it is either exfoliating or broken and not climbable with any feeling of great security!

Having said that, there is good rock to be found and Alec MacDonald has collated details of about 60 routes on rock of varying degrees of solidity, some in the wadies of Aday and Mayh, near Muscat, and others further afield. The biggest routes in the country are on Jebel Misht (2090m), on its six kilometre long SSE face, which rises to a height of 1100m at the central 'Nose'. A route has been climbed near the 'Nose' by three French guides headed by Raymond Renaud with extreme free climbing and 'some aid in the lower section'. On the western sector Mike Searle and team added a difficult 1000m route and, at the western extremity, a 150m climb of a more amenable standard. Together with Alec MacDonald we added a 400m route up the SE pillar (UK 5b). We also climbed and added some extra routes to Alec's smaller cliffs and did a lot of trekking into the many superb upper mountain valleys and canyons.

In the western Hajar, Jebel Akhdar (and Shams) have some superb treks in magnificent scenery, in wild valleys where remote and beautifully terraced villages are situated. Here also are big walls up to 1200m, but with loose rock despite their very attractive and challenging appearance. Some of the canyons, however, seem to have excellent walls of 200–300m. The view from Jebel Shams down into the 1000m-deep Saydran canyon is very reminiscent of the view into the Grand Canyon!

To the east, there seem to be fewer opportunities for climbing, but the through canyon of Wadi Dayqah is a particularly splendid 15km trek with a 1000m cliff at its NE end and the journey through Wadi Bani Khaled, over the pass and down to Tiwi on the coast, should be excellent. There is also considerable caving in both massifs, some very spectacular, and for bird watchers both the mountains and coast offer an amazing variety from vultures, eagles and ospreys down to kingfishers and sun birds.

In the winter of 1989–90 we continued our explorations. This time, at the request of the Ministry of Tourism, we had a larger team including friends from France, Switzerland and Italy who had climbed with us previously in Wadi Rum. We were also joined by two British cavers, including my partner at Troll,

Paul Seddon. Excellent climbing was found in canyons within two hours' drive of Muscat – Khubrah to the west and Dayqah to the east – on cliffs up to 100m high. Further afield we spent some time in the Musandam Peninsula, which is a magnificently wild and mountainous place with numerous 800m walls – very impressive to look at but of unknown quality. The limestone sea cliffs guarding the entrance to the Gulf look very attractive and like the rest of Musandam would be well worth another visit. The trekking potential here is also great, between the isolated hilltop villages of Shihuh tribes-people, but water is so scarce as to be almost non-existent!

In the other direction from Muscat we also visited Dhofar in south Oman, which involves either a two-day drive down the Desert Highway on the edge of the 'Empty Quarter' or a crossing of the Wahiba Sands by a drive down the endless empty W coast beaches and dunes – an unforgettable experience.

We found nothing in Dhofar to interest the climber, but there is some excellent trekking country through shrub forest and valleys with small rivers, also along wild escarpments high above the coastal plains and the Arabian Ocean. Home of the Djebali people, it is still a wilderness area into which few venture and a major trek would have to be very well planned.

Dhofar also has magnificent caving potential with numerous huge sinks and shafts, very few of which have been fully explored. Our intrepid team ventured into the biggest with the help of expatriate cavers from the nearby Thumrait Air Base, the local Sheikh guarding the abseil ropes in case someone decided they could be put to better use as camel halters!

We also did more caving back up north in the Akhdar massif, including the unique 'through trip' of Hoti Cave: 5km long, with numerous abseils and an underground river and lake. Also in the Akhdar range, we made a descent of the Bani Awf Canyon, a superb trip, again involving abseils, down a river canyon in the heart of totally arid mountains. The canyon walls are so close that the sky is occasionally blocked from view and at one point they close completely so that the canyon has to be exited through a cave – believe me, swimming in utter blackness weighed down by ropes through a log-choked tunnel isn't the most pleasant of experiences! It does however add to the great variety of wilderness adventures that can be had in Oman, where, for those willing to make the effort, there's never a dull moment.