



AAC Publications

Musandam Peninsula, Various Ascents

Oman

The Musandam Peninsula is a 700-square-mile enclave of Oman at the tip of the Arabian Peninsula, separated from the rest of the country by a 45-mile-wide swath of the United Arab Emirates. The Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf define its eastern and northern limits, and 25 miles across the Strait of Hormuz lies Iran. The mountainous core of the Musandam is called the Ru'us al Jibal (the mountain tops) and is often referred to as the "Norway of the Middle East." This range, the northern terminus of the Al Hajar al Gharbi (Western Hajar Mountains), is slowly being subducted beneath the surface of the Persian Gulf. What's left above sea level is an intricate maze of rock and water attached to the mainland by a slender, 10-mile-long isthmus. Deep bays and fjords incise the snake-like peninsulas, and in some places the land is nothing more than a knife-edged limestone fin rising straight from the ocean. Toby Foord-Kelcey, author of *UAE Rock Climbs*, estimates there may be as much as 300 kilometers of seacliff lining the shoreline of the Musandam Peninsula between the villages of Khasab and Dibba.

The goal of our expedition, from October 27 to November 17, was to explore the Ru'us al Jibal's climbing potential from a 44-foot catamaran, which served as our floating base camp. We focused most of our attention on the section of the peninsula between Khawr Shimm and Khawr Habalayn, two of the biggest fjords in the Ru'us al Jibal. Our team included Alex Honnold, Hazel Findlay, Jimmy Chin, Renan Ozturk and Mikey Schaefer, plus two Omanis, Abdullah Said Albusaidi and Faisal Alwahaibi.

We established numerous first ascents, from deep-water solos to long free routes. At the back of the nine-mile-long Khawr Shimm (aka Elphinstone Inlet) we established several first ascents on the limestone walls rising above the village of Sibi. Alex, Hazel, and I soloed the north face of a 665-meter, unnamed mountain just south of the village. The route was mainly fourth class with several sections of mid fifth class.

Two days later, we split into three teams and established three first ascents, sharing some sections, on the 900-meter west face of Jebel Letub. The rock quality was variable, from choss to solid limestone. Much of the stone was extremely sharp; Jimmy and Mikey's lead line was severed by a falling stone while Mikey was leading. (Mikey didn't realize it until he was belaying Jimmy up and suddenly reeled in the severed end of the rope.) Climbing on the three routes was in the 5.9 to 5.11 range, and no bolts or pins were placed. Honnold soloed a couple of other new routes in this area, including the 600-meter Captain Synnbad's Buttress (5.10a), which he called perhaps his best outing of the trip.

Other highlights included: the first known deep-water solos on the uninhabited island of Jazirat Salamah, which lies in the Strait of Hormuz; a two-pitch route by Hazel and Alex in Fakk al Asad (the Lion's Mouth), a gap where the Gulf of Oman meets the Persian Gulf; and several new deep-water solos and the first ascent of a 150-meter tower in a zone we dubbed Sand Castle Bay, which lies in the Ghubbat ash Shabus bay, near Ra's Dillah.

One of the first climbers to explore the Musandam area was Read Macadam, a Briton living in Muscat. Macadam has pioneered many deep-water solos, particularly on the section of coast between Dibba and Khawr Habalayn. A Swiss team did some unrecorded long routes in the bays around Khasab in 2003. A British team led by David Pickford climbed some deep-water solo routes in

2005 in the Khasab area, as well as a 400-meter route farther inland. The prolific first ascensionist Geoff Hornby is reported to have climbed several long routes along the Indian Ocean coast in 2005. Foord-Kelsey has established several new routes in the Musandam, mostly on the section of coast between Dibba and Khawr Habalayn, including a striking 300-meter tower called the Pyramid. In 2011, a group of British climbers including Neil Gresham, traveling out of the town of Dibba aboard a tourist dhow, established a slew of hard deep-water solo routes along the Indian Ocean coast. For more information on the Musandam's climbing history and established routes, visit Foord-Kelsey's website. [AAC member John Boyle toured the Musandam Peninsula in 1996 and pointed out climbing opportunities in the July 1996 edition of the **American Alpine News**.]

The most rewarding part of a visit to this fascinating part of the world is the opportunity to meet and interact with the local inhabitants, who live in isolated fishing villages that can only be reached by boat. There are three main clans that inhabit the Ru'us al Jibal: the Shehi, Dahoori and the Kumzaris. The Kumzaris have a unique pidgin language that is only spoken in the village of Kumzar (pop. 5,000) and across the strait on Larek Island. Linguists don't know exactly how it developed, but it mingles Farsi, Arabic, Hindi, Portuguese, French, Italian, Spanish, and even English. One theory is that the Khumzari's ancestors were nomads from the mainland who were pushed out onto the tip of the peninsula by Arab, Yemeni, and Portuguese invaders. Another more intriguing theory, which seems to be supported by their enigmatic language, is that the inhabitants of the Ru'us al Jibal are descendants of shipwrecked sailors who washed ashore, perhaps as far back as the Middle Ages.

When I told people that I was going sailing and climbing in the Strait of Hormuz, many worried that I would be kidnapped by pirates. They would be surprised to find out that I felt as safe in Omani waters as I do on the coast of Maine. In a region fraught with political uncertainty and violence, Oman—and the Musandam Peninsula, in particular—is an oasis of peace and stability. We would like to thank the National Geographic Society, the North Face, Oman Sail, the Omani Coast Guard, and the Omani Royal Police for their generous support of this expedition.

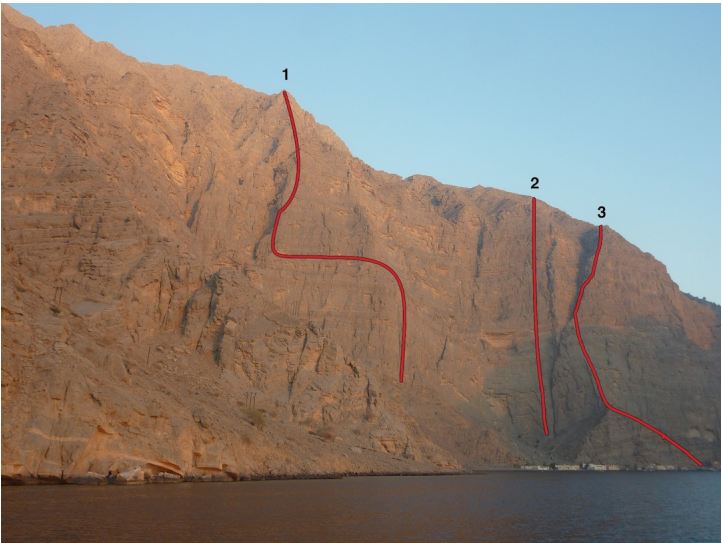
Mark Synnott

National Geographic magazine published an article by Mark Synnott about this expedition in the January 2014 edition, with photos by Jimmy Chin. See it [here](#).

Images



Jebel Letub, above the village of Sibi.



The 900m west face of Jebel Letub, above the village of Sibi. (1) General line followed by three separate pairs of climbers for the wall's first ascent; each team did variations low on the face. (2) Captain Synnbad's Buttress (Honnold, 5.10a). (3) Honnold solo (5.6).



Renan Ozturk high over Khawr Shimm fjord on Jebel Letub.



The Sand Castle.

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