



**EDA**

جمعية الإمارات للغوص  
Emirates Diving Association

# DIVERS FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

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# EXPEDITION NOTES: OMAN

## NEW REEF CHECK BIOSPHERE EXPEDITION – MUSANDAM, OMAN



Reef Check is partnering with Biosphere Expeditions, a non-profit award winning Eco-expedition organization, to offer a unique, one-week, marine science research expedition to a beautiful, unexplored, coral reef area in the middle eastern country of Oman. Despite its location bordering the Arabian Gulf and Indian Ocean, Oman is a peaceful country and has never experienced the turmoil afflicting other counties in the region. A stable government led by an open-minded Sultan who promotes higher education for both sexes has allowed Oman to enjoy long-term peace and prosperity. The expedition is to Oman's Musandam peninsula, known as the Norway of Arabia due to the dozens of fjord like bays bordered by towering mountains. The spectacular terrestrial scenery is only exceeded by the cornucopia of life found underwater.

Expedition members will arrive at the bustling airport of neighboring Dubai, one of the six "emirates" of the country known as the United Arab Emirates or UAE. The contrast between metropolitan Dubai and the Musandam peninsula could not be greater. Dubai resembles Hong Kong on steroids, with a building boom that puts Shanghai to shame. Wealthy local entrepreneurs are competing to build the biggest, tallest, most ostentatious office buildings, hotels, and mosques and in the world. The latest entrant is a mile high building. The Trump Palm development actually looks like a giant Palm tree floating in the waters fronting the city. It may be hot outside, but there is a downhill sky center in town with man-made snow. Expedition members will travel three hours up the coast by car to Khasab, a small historic town, where they will board the MV Khalad, a live-aboard boat. The MV Khalad, a 23 m long, air conditioned dhow that comes with an experienced crew, a skiff and an imaginative cook. The expedition leader is Jon Shrikes, a jovial British doctoral candidate in coral reef ecology at Oxford University. Jon has led Biosphere Expeditions/Reef Check expeditions for two years to Cayos Cochinos, Honduras.

During the first two days, participants will enjoy a mixture of Reef Check training in the classroom and in the sea. By the end of the expedition all members will be trained and those who pass the certification test will be formally certified Reef Check EcoDivers and will also be eligible for a PADI Reef Check Specialty Certification. During the remaining expedition, participants will carry out Reef Check surveys throughout the peninsula.

During the first week of October, I participated in a reconnaissance expedition to Oman to choose suitable reefs for sampling. The team included Jon Shrikes, Biosphere Expeditions Managing Director Dr. Matthias Hammer, Biosphere Expeditions Director Kathy Wilden, coral biologist Dr. Michel Claerebout of Oman Univeristy, Rita Bento a Portuguese marine biologist, Udo Neumann a scuba Instructor from

Germany and Suhail Batook a recreational diver from HSBC, the expedition sponsor. The team carried out manta tows and recon dives at over 40 sites throughout the peninsula. The scenery can only be described as spectacular with 1000 m high, solid rock peaks dropping straight into the sea. Below the water, the reefs are often 90% living coral and teeming with large grouper, emperors, and schools of jacks, snapper and fusiliers. Turtles, lobster and sting rays were seen at several sites with an occasional reef shark passing by. Colorful species endemic to the Indian Ocean and Oman are numerous. Blue and yellow Indian Ocean Angel Fish are so common that they form schools. The Arabian butterfly fish is everywhere and hard to miss due to their brilliant yellow-orange color. The dives range from walls to gentle rocky slopes covered by hard corals, with black coral, blue gorgonians common. The reefs are in excellent condition with percentage coral cover reaching the highest levels seen in the world (80%-90%) with over 200 species present. Human impacts on the reefs are relatively low but include gill net and trap fishing, periodic exposure to oil from spills, storm wave damage and predation by crown-of-thorns sea stars.



Participants will survey a range of coral reefs, many that have never been surveyed scientifically previously. An expedition report will be issued and it is hoped that in addition to tracking human impacts on the reefs of Oman, that the results will be useful to the Oman government to help with planning a network of protected areas in Musandam. Only 15 spaces are available on this unique expedition so book your place now at: [www.biosphere-expeditions.org/musandam](http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org/musandam).