

Reef Check News



NEW REEF CHECK/BIOSPHERE EXPEDITIONS ECOEXPEDITION: MUSANDAM, OMAN

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By Reef Check Executive Director Gregor Hodgson
Photos: Matthias Hammer/Biosphere Expeditions

Reef Check is partnering with [Biosphere Expeditions](#), an award winning eco-expedition company, to offer a unique, one-week, marine science research expedition to a beautiful, unexplored, coral reef area in the small, 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 countries 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 the Middle East because of its 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 United Arab Emirates. The contrast between metropolitan Dubai and the Musandam peninsula should 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 outrageous office buildings, hotels and mosques in the world. The latest entrant is the 2,313 foot (818 m) high Burj Dubai- a building double the height of the Empire State Building. The PalmJumeirah development actually looks like a giant palm tree floating in the waters fronting the city.

After arriving in Dubai, expedition members will travel by car on new roads three hours up the coast to Khasab, a small historic town, where they will board the MV Khalad, a live-aboard boat. The MV Khalad is a 23 m long, air conditioned "dhow" with an experienced crew, a skiff and an imaginative cook. The expedition leader is Jon Shrives, a jovial British doctoral candidate in coral reef ecology at Oxford University. Jon has led Biosphere/Reef Check expeditions for two years to Cayos Cochinos, Honduras.

During the first two days, members 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 Shrives, Biosphere Managing Director Dr. Matthias Hammer, Biosphere Coordinator Cathy Wilden, coral biologist Dr. Michel Claerebout of Oman University, Portuguese marine biologist Rita Pena, scuba instructor Udo Neumann, and Suhail Batook, a recreational diver from HSBC, the expedition sponsor. The team carried out manta tows and reconnaissance dives at over 40 sites throughout the peninsula. The scenery can only be described as spectacular. Along the coast, one thousand meter high solid rock peaks drop straight into the sea, and below, the reefs, which are often 90% living coral, teem with large grouper, emperors, and schools of jacks, snapper and fusiliers. I saw turtles, lobster and sting rays at several sites, and even an occasional reef shark passing by. Colorful species endemic to the Indian Ocean and Oman are numerous. Blue and yellow Indian Ocean angelfish are so common that they form schools. The Arabian butterflyfish is everywhere and hard to miss due to its brilliant yellow-orange color.

The dives range from walls to gentle rocky slopes covered by hard corals such as black coral and blue gorgonians. The reefs are in excellent condition with percentage coral cover reaching the highest levels seen in the world (80 -90%) and 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 in the 2009 Biosphere/Reef Check surveys will focus on a range of coral reefs including many that have never been surveyed scientifically. An expedition report will be issued and it is hoped that, in addition to tracking human impacts on the reefs of Oman, the results will be useful to the Oman government for planning a network of protected areas in Musandam. Contact [Biosphere Expeditions](#) to learn more and reserve your space on this exciting trip!



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