



EXPEDITION DIARY Musandam 2009

By Matthias Hammer

4 October

Hello everyone and welcome to the first diary entry for Biosphere Expeditions' first ever Musandam expedition. I am Matthias Hammer, founder and Managing Director of Biosphere Expeditions, and I will also be your expedition leader for this project. Working with me will be the lovely Rita Bento from the Emirates Diving Association, a qualified Reef Check instructor and PADI AI. There will also be a divemaster from Khasab as well as the crew and cook of the MS Sindbad, our live-aboard dhow.

It's quite some time since I've led an expedition myself and I am very much looking forward to the experience and touching base again with what Biosphere Expeditions is all about.

At the moment I am still in Europe, preparing paperwork and equipment, but soon I will be flying to Dubai for more preparation work and some extreme shopping for the expedition (what better place to do this in than Dubai!). One of my paperwork jobs was to set the itinerary (attached). As you can see, it's a packed schedule, especially on the first three days with lots of training and some tests before we let you lose on the reef, collecting data and experiencing conservation in action. No doubt you'll need a holiday after the expedition ;), but please try to come rested and fresh in your minds, ready for the challenges ahead. Please also remember that we are all trailblazers and that this is the first Musandam diving expedition ever. The itinerary may look well-organised, but things are bound to change for a multitude of reasons, so please come with an open mind and lots of "Insha'Allah" attitude.

"Insha'Allah", by the way, is a phrase you are about to become very familiar with... It translates roughly as... 'If Allah wills it' and is a marvelously useful term of complete fatalism and one which has no direct English equivalent. The nearest thing would probably be '...but on the other hand I might get hit by a number 73 bus tomorrow' - uttered in tones of sodden dejection by a clinical depressive with a strong Solihull accent :))

But I digress. You won't be hearing from me for a while now and I'll probably be back in touch the week after next from Dubai with news of all the pairs of shoes I have bought for myself next to some expedition essentials such as aftersun lotion, duck tape, vinegar, a stapler and the all-important LAMINATOR! You'll see what I mean when you get to the dhow.

Make sure your PADI medical statements are in order (otherwise you ain't getting in the water!), that your dive gear is working and that your buoyancy skills are up to scratch.

Finally, my mobile phone number during the expedition will be +968 92380988. Remember that this is for emergency purposes only (such as being late for assembly, for example).

I'll see you all at the Ibis in Dubai in due course, Insha'Allah.

Best wishes

Matthias

P.S. This diary is now also on www.biosphere-expeditions.org/diaries, so you can pass this on to your families & friends for updates on what we are up to.

15 October

Too easy! I found most of the stuff we still needed in one big mall in Dubai. Only the GPS, some lead weights and THE LAMINATING SHEETS required a special trip.

The word from the peninsula is that MS Sindbad, our trusty live-aboard was seen afloat a couple of days ago, so that's also a good sign and I am hoping she is waiting for me in Khasab harbour as I write this sitting in a lobby in Dubai waiting to be picked up.

We're all packed, ready to go. The lovely Rita is sitting next to me, also ready to dazzle you all with coral disease, fish & invertebrate ID, substrate composition and other such exciting stuff.

Dubai is as ever mad, hot, dusty, sunny. It'll be great to get out of here and my next instalment should be from MS Sindbad with the wind in my bld head and the sun in my eyes ;)

See you all soon.

16 October

As promised, here's an entry from the Sindbad, all afloat and well in the middle of nowhere. We're pretty much ready for you, the sun is shining, it's hot and the visibility isn't too bad. The corals are still here, as are the skipper Ali, his deck hand Mohammed, our cook Polly and his helper Chandu, all from last year's reconnaissance trip.

We're back in Khasab tomorrow and then off to Dubai at some ungodly hour in the morning to meet trailblazing slot 1 in the Ibis at 09.00.

See you there soon.

19 October

Slot 1 has arrived safely. Within a few hours we had left the madness of Dubai behind and made our way to the mountains and the port of Khasab. As I write this our bellies are full with another great dinner by our cook Polly and our heads are full with indicator fish, invertebrates, substrate, transecting lines and other such sciency stuff. Rita has taught as well and we're about to go into our Reef Check exam. Wish us luck!

Our classroom is surrounded by mountains, sits on a glassy sea and has the world's biggest swimming pool all around us. Oh, and diving is fun too. 31 C today!

More later...

22 October

We now have a fully trained Reef Check team and we are managing to get three survey dives in per day. Rita tells us that we are the best Reef Check team she's ever taught and we desperately want to believe her ☺.

Highlights of our diving so far include some interesting currents, a beautiful coral garden with 81% hard coral cover, a few eagle rays, a turtle, as well as two big lobsters, one of whom mysteriously disappeared, so we named that site "Lobster's Demise".

The weather is brilliant, the coastline stunning, the food great & the pace brisk. Hard life of a marine biologist ;).

24 October

Slot 1's passed in a flash. We managed to get 20 sets of Reef Check data, which is a brilliant result for a week including training. We've surveyed and named many new sites. Highlights included "Coral Garden" and "Snapper's Tragedy", where a snapper we freed from a hook in its mouth, was promptly eaten by a moray eel within seconds after we let it go. Some of the sites were spectacular above and below water. High mountains and sheer rock walls plunging into the water with coral gardens and fish galore below. But we also surveyed sites such as "Death Valley", where a combination of storm damage and last year's red tide algal bloom have turned the reef into a wasteland of death and destruction with very few living corals and fish.

Highlights included a shark, a huge ray, several turtles, a barracuda, 81% hard coral cover, and of course Polly's cooking.

As I write this, I am sitting in an internet café near Khasab port. Parts of the team have gone for a quick tour of Khasab and its souk and fort, others have stayed on the dhow for some snorkelling. Soon we'll be heading back to Dubai for the changeover. A big thank you to Conny, Adel, Michele, Steve, Pippa, Dörthe, Rob, Berit, Lars, Gordon, Wayne, Anke, Rita & the crew for their efforts. It's much appreciated and we hope to see you again sometime.

Safe travels and I'll see slot 2 tomorrow.

26 October

Slot 2 has arrived safely and I am writing this from the top deck as the team is getting ready for their first exam below. Other than studying hard, we went for a couple of training dives today and saw lots of firefish, a ray, huge hard corals, a barracuda and some interesting dive techniques :)

More exams and a mock survey dive tomorrow, before going for the real thing...

30 October

Apologies for the silence, but we have been out of range around the remoter parts of the peninsula for the last few days.

The wind has blown up, so some of the sites we wanted to survey, we could not because of the waves. The sites we did survey yielded cuttlefish mating, groupers being rescued from discarded nets, a monster moray eel and plenty of good fun whilst collecting data. Only one more dive to go until we are done for this year. It's passed in a flash and I want to thank everyone for their efforts and input - we could not do this without you.

Preliminary results and a last farewell in a few days. Until then, please don't forget to share your pictures via www.biosphere-expeditions.org/pictureshare.

1 November

The 2009 Musandam expedition has come to an end and I am in Dubai wrapping things up for a day with Rita, starting the report, storing equipment, giving interviews, etc. A first article about the expedition has appeared yesterday and you can see it at <http://www.thenational.ae/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20091031/NATIONAL/710309823/1010>.

The expedition has been a great success and I want to thank everyone for their efforts and contribution. I hope we have shown you that your input is essential in this little researched and important area. The Musandam peninsula is a unique place that deserves our attention. We have found that siltation (for example from construction) and bleaching are not a problem and that hard coral cover is slightly above the global average. This is good news. More worryingly, however, fish numbers and general biodiversity were low, probably due to overfishing and the recent red tide and category 5 cyclones such as Gonu in June 2007 add further stresses to the fragile reef ecosystem. Other stresses are coral damage due to boat anchors and the cyclone as well as trash and fish nets. Despite these stresses, you have all seen that the reef life of the Musandam is really quite amazing and definitely worth protecting.

These are preliminary results, of course, and the report will go into much more detail. For now, I think we can all be proud of what we have achieved.

I wish you safe travels home and hope to see you again some day on one of our expeditions.

Very best wishes

Matthias

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