



## EXPEDITION DIARY Oman 2006

By Matthias Hammer and Dom Hall

3 January

Welcome to the Oman diary. This is Matthias Hammer, your expedition leader for the first slot. It may surprise some of you to hear that I am the expedition leader, not Dom Hall, so let me explain. This year Oman is running for the first time and Dom will be assisting me on the first slot before taking over slots two and three, and this diary. This is our usual way of doing things whenever there is a new expedition. I started Biosphere Expeditions in 1999 and more about me is at [www.biosphere-expeditions.org/staff](http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org/staff).

But enough of the introductions; let me tell you about the expedition. Just before Christmas I was in Oman for a final reconnaissance visit and tomorrow, Dom, Tessa (field scientist), Barney (cook) and I will be flying out to start setting things up. Over the last few weeks, we've been ordering in equipment, liaised with the authorities, recruited local staff, etc. When we arrive, we have some interviews for the local press to give (who have taken a keen interest in the expedition), pick up the Land Rovers (three shiny V8 Discoveries, so this should be our most comfortable field rides ever!) and then go shopping for pots and pans, water canisters, food and all the other bits and pieces that we'll need over the next few weeks.

Hadi, one of our local field guides and right-hand man for Andrew Spalton, our chief scientist from the Diwan of Royal Court in Muscat (the conservation department comes under the wings of the Diwan in Oman), will be meeting us in Dubai with a pick-up for the shopping, before we drive over to the Musandam.

That's the plan anyway, which I am sure will change as things happen. "Nothing is as constant as the change of plan" (on expedition), someone once said, and this is the attitude you should arrive with please.

I'll be keeping you updated as we set things up and I look forward to meeting the first slot at the Oman Dive Centre in Muscat. Remember that we will wait by the diving pool at the Dive Centre at 20:00 in the evening of 14 January, the day before the assembly date. The plan is to have an informal dinner - anyone who turns up is welcome to join in.

6 January

Did I say "nothing is as constant as the change of plan"? We arrived in Dubai to the news of the recent demise of an important sheik and with the region in mourning. In Arabia this means that everything shuts down: festival cancelled, Dubai marathon cancelled, shops shut, government offices shut FOR A WEEK!. This means that we could not collect all the shiny Land Rovers, nor could we go for our shopping spree in Dubai. So we've all come to Khasab (the expedition base) to hatch a new plan. No reason to be alarmed at all though – in true expedition style, we'll get there (eventually) by a different route. And the desert stars are too good to be missed anyway, so be prepared for nights under the stars in the field camps ;->

On the note of field camps: PLEASE MAKE SURE that you bring a set of warmer clothing as per the dossier (where it says "remember that it can drop to freezing at night on the very tops of the mountains it can even snow on very rare occasions"). Our Land Rover contact recently camped at high altitude and tells me that the temperature dropped to about 4 degrees Celsius, so please come prepared for this! Also remember that if you get cold easily, your sleeping bag should reflect this.

The Musandam is as beautiful as ever and we look forward to having you here. We'll keep you updated on developments....

9 January

Dubai being Dubai, the shops were open again yesterday (Sunday), probably just for a day before shutting again today for an Eid holiday for a few days (Eid holidays follow a moon cycle and are decided by a moon committee – no, I am not joking – at the beginning of a month with intense speculation surrounding the process. This also means that planning anything ahead becomes very difficult).

Anyway, Dom (your expedition leader for slots 2 & 3) and I went on a shopping spree. We left the Musandam at 05.00, ready for the shops opening in Dubai at 09.00, then shopped until we dropped (it was eight or nine trolleys in the end, I think). You'll be pleased to know that the shop included some tents and even some fold-out stools for the field camp (luxury!), so you may be sleeping under a roof and have something to sit on (if you get there first, that is!). Quite a few Germans on the expedition, so beware those towels going down in/on the tents and stools! But the desert stars are great to sleep under anyway (in your snug sleeping bag). Talking about the field camps, here's an important announcement: **COULD YOU ALL PLEASE BRING A TUPPERWARE BOX BIG ENOUGH FOR YOU TO PUT A LUNCH PACK IN** (bread & water, I mean, a roll, a piece of fruit, some biscuits, etc.). Good quality Tupperware is hard to get and you'll be the best judge of what size box you need for your lunch pack. You'll also have a great story to tell ("my lunch box in Oman") at your next Tupperware party!

Dubai is a crazy place. I am told that half the world's yearly production of concrete is used up here, along with a significant proportion of the world's cranes. Skyscrapers going up everywhere, six lane highways through the desert, five and six star hotels abound, along with three of those "the palm" islands by now and "the world" (where Rod Stewart is rumoured to have bought the British Isles). The whole thing is topped by the world's largest indoor ski slope, yes indoor ski slope (!), inside one of the many massive shopping malls. All pretty unsustainable, of course and I wonder what is going to happen when the oil runs out / the bubble bursts...

Meanwhile at the other end of the universe, Dom and I were driving back to Khasab with the Land Rover packed full of equipment to end our intergalactic shopping trip.

Tessa, our field biologist, has spent the last three days with Hadi getting to grips with the study site, meeting possible guides, talking to local people, investigating wadis worth surveying and assessing possible field camp sites. The weather has been warm (in the mid-twenties going up to thirty degrees Celsius) and dry with the odd cloud build-up, looking like it's going to rain, but never managing to do so. At night it gets chilly and jackets are needed. Higher up it'll be even colder.

Today Wouter from Land Rover is arriving for a few days to let us benefit from his off-road driving and camping experience in this environment. Must remember to visit the local police station to make sure you are all allowed past the mountain checkpoint when the time comes. So long!

11 January

Much of the post-shopping day was spent unpacking and labelling our gear and putting it all up, making sure everything is there and working. The picture shows much of the camp gear. The gazebo will house the field kitchen and the dome tent sleeps two very comfortably, three comfortably and four at a squeeze. We have six of those, so you can do the maths yourself. Notice the absence of the Bedu (mess) tent, which has only been on order for a year, but will be delivered next week (Allah willing!). Also notice Wouter with his head under the bonnet of the Discovery, expertly persuading the car to stop throwing a wobbly after we had tested our 12V DC to 220V AC inverter on its cigarette lighter socket. The Discovery didn't think this was funny and went into a shut-down mode sulk, but the arrival of one of its masters from Land Rover brought it back to heel. Henceforth this green Discovery shall be known as 'Herbie'. Before you get too excited about the Defender in the background, it's Wouter's (who'll be visiting for two days only during slot1)!

Yesterday we went for another reconnaissance drive with Wouter putting us through our off-road paces and giving us valuable tips on camping and desert field craft. Wouter's been working for Land Rover in Dubai for a few years now and often comes to the Musandam for hiking, camping or doing adventure races. We also found a great spot in a wide & open wadi for the slot 1 camp (flat ground, few stones, next to some old stone dwellings and surrounded by steep mountainsides).

The way the slots are shaping up is one day to get to the Musandam, two to three days of training with day surveys in larger groups, then more day surveying in smaller groups interspersed with a rest day, then three nights in a field camp for everyone to cover the remoter survey blocks, back to base and back to Muscat. We may also do some penetration surveys during the day survey days, which means that small groups of those who want to (and are fit enough to do so), can carry their own supplies into the field to sleep out in the open for a night in order to cover a wider area. If you are interested in doing this and have a bivi bag (Biwaksack in German), please make sure you bring it along. During the day surveys, we'll be staying in our town apartment villa; when we are in the field camp, we'll be staying in our tents or under the stars.

12 January

We're getting there. Most of the survey sites for slot 1 are set, camp sites identified, the bulk of the shopping is done and most of the paperwork is finished. Just a few courtesy visits to the military, police, etc. to do, some odd bits & pieces of shopping and then we should be ready for you. I have attached the day-to-day plan as it currently stands, so that you have at least an idea of what's coming (terminology: "base" is the town apartments villa and "camp" is the field camp that we will be setting up on the edge of one of the wadis).

Tomorrow is a day to finish off the odds & ends before we drive to Dubai Saturday 4 a.m. to collect the two remaining Land Rovers and from there straight to Muscat to meet whoever is there from slot 1 for dinner at the Oman Dive Centre. You probably won't be hearing from me again before then, so assume no news is good news!

Looking forward to getting going and meeting you "first slotters" in a few days!

Oh, and the Land Rovers have CD players, so please feel free to bring some along, although the staff reserve judgement and right of refusal on your music tastes ;->

17 January

On 15 January most of the team were there for dinner at the Oman Dive Centre and we were joined by Dr. Andrew Spalton, our chief scientist from the Diwan of Royal Court who filled us in on some of the history of the Arabian leopard study in Oman.

The next day, after a mammoth drive of 12 hours from Muscat to Khasab, we arrived at base at around 19:00. On the way we had the world's slowest one-finger keyboard typer on the Emirates border who accounted for a one-hour delay single fingeredly and a very correct officer on the Omani border getting onto the Musandam who checked each person's passport number, date of birth and name with great diligence before letting us through.

Once on the Musandam the team were rewarded for the long, uneventful drive along dual carriageways by the sudden end of the asphalt and a spectacular drive through the gorges of Wadi Bhi and up and down two mountain passes of the Musandam. High winds blew up and on top of the mountains they were so strong that it was difficult to open car doors and stand up straight, let alone take some photographs!

We spent yesterday going through briefings, datasheets, some of the kit and procedures. We also very studiously went through plaster casts of animal tracks and bags of scat (faeces) of tahr, domestic goat, wolf, leopard, etc., studying, smelling, prodding so that we will hopefully recognise them again in the field.

Later the drivers went on a driving course for a few hours and found it hard to find anything that is a real challenge for the Land Rovers. Tessa took the non-drivers on a foray to find some more guides for the next few days and they were promptly invited in for tea with a family in a small village who eventually produced two guides. Many team members have gone 'native' with Hadi showing them how to wrap the cloth they have brought round their heads in the correct way. Hadi also showed some of the women on the team how to cover their hair correctly out of respect for the more conservative local people in the villages dotted around the campsite.

The winds are still howling around the building and today (I am writing this early in the morning) we will teach people how to use a GPS, compass, re-visit the datasheets, etc. before going out for our first survey foray into the field as a big group, practising newly-acquired skills.

19 January

We've just finished two very good days of surveying. Yesterday we went as a big group to survey a nearby and spectacularly beautiful wadi. On the survey we found a fully articulated fox skeleton, evidence of caracal and of course lots of goat droppings. In the afternoon I took a small group to the end of the wadi and as we were spread out across, I sat down for an observation stop on a ledge and out of sight for the rest of my survey team. As I scanned the mountainside, my binoculars caught the shape of something and as I focused in on it, I could not believe my eyes – it was a caracal sitting high above me in the rocks like a pussycat, seemingly enjoying the afternoon sun. I stared at it for a while until I was sure it was a caracal and then tried to alert the others, which of course made the animal disappear across the ridge! I can't believe how much beginner's luck we've had on this first survey day! On the drive back, when everyone was pretty excited anyway, we also came across a road kill, which we were fairly certain was of a wolf pup (although we are currently seeking a third and fourth opinion on this), a species that is meant to have disappeared from the Musandam long ago. Watch this space for further information on this.

After such an incredible first day, we all thought we would not see anything anymore for the next six weeks, and sure enough today's two survey groups had hard, but non-feline days (apart from a few cats the villages). Tessa had arranged two local guides and one group went up with Tessa surveying one steep wadi, whilst the other group spent a very hard day climbing up some very steep and sharp rocks for five hours without finding a single sign of a carnivore. Admittedly the two wadis were very close to two villages, where the arrival of our Land Rovers filled with westerners in strange clothes and gear caused much excitement and a small village gathering complete with farewell and welcome parties of children as we went into and returned from the mountains.

Tomorrow Dom and I are taking a group out for an overnight survey, which means we'll go light and carry only food, water, a sleeping mat and sleeping bag onto a high plateau to survey for two full days, sleeping out in the open in between. I'll let you know how that went in a couple of days...

22 January

Our overnight survey took us to a high plateau intersected by beautiful narrow wadi gorges and framed by spectacular cliffs of limestone. Eight of us descended from a high point on the road down onto the plateau and then went on to split into many small survey teams, covering the wadi gorges, ledges, ridges and surrounding peaks, uniting at intervals and for our overnight camp. We found very few signs of predators, but ubiquitous sign of goat. We also came across five people living in a small village, who seem to look after the four or five areas of terraced fields and date palms that are dotted around the plateau. These areas were once villages with many more people in them. We found abandoned stone houses, graveyards, traditional irrigation channels and water cisterns. Nowadays water is brought down by black pipes running over the plateau and fed by tanks high up and close to the road. That way only a few people can look after fields and date palms that once took whole communities to literally scratch a living from rocks. No sign of leopard on this plateau, but we found a great observation spot overlooking the next valley and a multitude of cliffs and rocks over a wide area.

It was a spectacular two days of walking and surveying with a cold night (down to 0.5 degrees Centigrade) out in the open in our sleeping bags. The memories of the silence at night, the stars, the pitch black darkness, the amazing landscape, the scrambles up and down the wadis and up to the ridges and tops, I am sure will stay with our survey team for a long time.

We have put a few pictures of the last few days since the start of the expedition on [www.biosphere-expeditions.org/oman+](http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org/oman+), so please feel free to have a look.

29 January

Much has happened in the week since I last wrote. The team spent a relaxing Sunday on a dhow cruise, while we had time to catch up on some admin and a little rest. We then moved into our field camp, which entails packing up everything and moving it deeper into the mountains on a one and a half to two hour drive, and then putting up camp at the end of a wide wadi (we'll put some pictures of the camp up on the website soon and let you know).

Once at camp, we surveyed the mountains and wadis around. No sign of leopards, sadly, but plenty of fox and caracal. I spent much of my time with the VOX film crew and two team members out on surveys and taking shots – great fun and I look forward to seeing the result (to be aired in Germany at the end of March).

Dom and Tessa took the rest of the team on some hardcore (mountain) surveys. I often returned to camp in the afternoon to see exhausted but happy faces at camp.

I think everyone really enjoyed the nights out. The temperature drops to eight degrees Centigrade during the night, so quite comfortable for most people in their tents and sleeping bags. A few brave people also slept out in the open, moisture covering the outside of their sleeping bags in the morning. At night it is pitch black dark, you can hear vixens and owls calling whilst you sit around the campfire.

On Thursday we moved back to base, cleaned up the equipment ready for the next slot and packed up our own gear. Friday's drive back to Muscat was spectacular (through the mountains) but uneventful, except for Dom's problems at the border with stamps in his passport, which were quickly resolved by taking a little detour.

This brings me to the end of my diary. Dom will be taking over from here and I wish him and the incoming teams a great time and successful surveying. So long everybody – Matthias.

30 January

As explained in the last diary, I am Dom and I am now taking over the ropes from Matthias. The first slot has flown by in a whirl of scat, sun, scrambly wadis, hardcore ridges and happy memories. As ever there are the usual mixed feelings at the change of teams. It is sad to see a great team leaving - they have surveyed some very challenging terrain with great determination and persistence, and of course the required sense of humour - a thousand thanks to you. On the other hand there is the excitement of a new team arriving and so they did yesterday morning in Muscat - they were greeted by one shiny Discovery - courtesy of the Muscat car wash, and one which hadn't made the car wash and bore the battle scars and dust of a fortnight in the wadis. The team looked from one to the other and began to realise what was to come. Before they had a chance to change their minds we whisked them all into the cars and hit the road to Khasab. Despite our high hopes of cutting some time off the journey from the last slot and far more rapid border crossings we still managed to shave only about an hour off the time, but at least this was enough to mean we arrived with the fading light and could fully appreciate the beautiful drive through the study area and the gorge at Wadi Bih. The team are now swimming in new information with risk assessments, scientific information, datasheets and new 4x4 skills. It's a lot to take in, but everyone is eager to cram this all in and get on with the business of surveying.

Aside from the all important training and survey news, the most important update is that we now have two CDs - of course it is two more than we had before but if I tell you that one is John Denver you will begin to see into my world of despair - so anyone coming on slot three please immediately chuck out any other things you have packed in your rucksack and fill it with CDs!

2 February

Hardly possible to believe we are into February already but the routes marked all over the map are testament to how much is already done and over the last few days the second team, now fully trained up and raring to go have started to add their imprint to the map. Their first full day surveying resurveyed an area which had provoked interest during the first slot and this beautiful wadi (now further furnished with flowering Arabian almond) provided the perfect place to work together as a whole team and put those surveying skills into action. Game birds were again sighted along with the first sighting of a pair of lesser kestrels. Sadly I was dragged away to try to sort out our malfunctioning Land Rover which has been on strike and has had to be carted off to Dubai to be plugged into some high powered computer which will hopefully sort out its transmission fault. Unbelievably Land Rover were able to send someone out from Dubai the same day to pick up the vehicle, although the fact that they did not arrive until 2 am leaves me feeling pretty knackered today.

At least it left the way clear for me to join the team on a beautiful survey today. We headed out for the first time into survey block one - the northerly peninsular cut off from the roads and the rest of the Musandam. Therefore we bounced out on two speed boats around the headland and through the deep blue Arabian Gulf. Perhaps the hottest sun so far beat down on us as temperatures reached the high 30s and it was hard work climbing up from the village of Kumzah. Slot three must prepare themselves for rising temperatures through February (I suggest climbing uphill with your head pressed between two hot plates to get in practice). But the heat could not take away from a wonderful day's survey. We found a fox carcass and ideal, textbook leopard and tahr terrain. From the top of the wadi the views out over the fjords and across the sea were truly breathtaking and I'm sure these views and the memory of bouncing back in the speed boats as the light faded to that beautiful evening mountain light and the sun dropped in to the sea will stand out as a highlight of the expedition for everyone.

It was Hadi's birthday today so we have introduced him to the intricacies of British birthday celebrations. He extinguished the candles like a pro and we all head to bed now tired but happy. Tomorrow I take some of the team into the hills for a two day overnight survey - of which more on my return.

5 February

As we headed out laden with full rucksacks for our overnight survey we soon decided that the heat wave of the day before was perhaps not a blip. With the thermometer already into the thirties before 11.00 we knew we were going to have a hard few days. We skipped from one patch of shade to another as we slogged up the seemingly never ending goat trail leading from the guide's house to the plateau at just over 1000 metres. The plan was that myself with my two (previously) willing victims Jim and Andreas would slog up onto the plateau, sleep up there and then use the second day to survey the ridges and plateau at the top. The rest of the team followed along behind us out only for the day and slowly surveying the goat trail itself. They found caracal sign on the trail and our last radio contact saw them heading home after a good day's surveying though everyone was suffering with the heat.

As they headed off back to showers and we began to cook and settle down for the night, I think we were all wondering if we had made some terrible mistake! Our spirits warmed however by the traditional noodle soup and the blanket of stars spreading across the sky things didn't seem so bad. One upside of the hike in temperatures was that a night out in just a sleeping bag was far warmer than on the previous slot, though perhaps the heat radiating from our reddened faces was at least partly responsible.

We were woken in the morning by the stunning sunrise that such occasions demand and sprung out of bed with enthusiasm for an early morning in the mountains. The plateau seemed less overgrazed than others we had visited and the views out over the sea were stunning. Disappointingly, however, sign was very thin on the ground and by 11, already over three hours of surveying under our belts and the pleasant morning temperatures again supplanted by searing heat we began to long, and head for home. Again skipping from shade to shade we crouched down in another tiny patch as the guide wandered on ahead. Suddenly he started to shout excitedly, "come quick, caracal". Of course we did, and of course it was gone. The caracal had rushed across his path within 20 metres of him and sped across the plateau and out of sight! We had to satisfy ourselves with collecting a caracal scat further along the plateau which confirmed the guide's story and were left with a wish we could have carried on another 20 metres before our break and a tale of what might have been! Nonetheless this observation combined with our sign and that of the team yesterday confirms that caracal are active in this area, so a good addition to the picture we are forming.

Today is the team's well-earned day off and I think a shady dhow is just the place to spend it to recharge batteries and get ready and raring to head out for three full days in the field camp next week. We continue to adapt our plans to fit the needs of the science and the conditions. We will put the day back a bit to make more use of the cool mornings and for slot three will look to alternate big wadi walks with the interviewing we must do to complete the picture we are forming of the area and which will allow some much needed breaks in the shade as well. As I will be away in the field for the next four days, this is my last diary for a while - slot three please prepare for steaming heat, beautiful views and fascinating culture - bring CDs, news of Liverpool Football Club and a good sense of humour!

7 February

UPDATE FOR FRIENDS & FAMILY WHO MAY BE WORRIED ABOUT THE SITUATION IN OMAN POST DANISH MOHAMMED CARTOON.

You are probably wondering what the situation is like in Oman after having seen the pictures of unrest in the Arab world. To put your mind at rest, I have copied below the answers we have received from our local partners in Oman.

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Absolutely nothing here that I am aware of except that I cannot get Danish butter.

Oman remains very very safe.

Andrew

Diwan of Royal Court  
Office of the Adviser for Conservation of the Environment PO Box 246, Muscat 113, Sultanate of Oman

Here in Dubai, there have not been any reports of violence related to the Danish cartoons. The government has only embargoed Danish products in the supermarkets etc. But besides that it's business as normal.

To be honest Khasab is too remote, too small and non European influenced that one would expect any unrest. I wouldn't be worried concerning your expeditions.

Regards  
Wouter Kingma  
Land Rover Middle East

9 February

I am now fresh from a much needed shower back at base and sit down to reflect on slot two's period out at camp. I guess the themes will be becoming familiar now – fabulous scenery, baking heat and hard but rewarding days out surveying.

On arriving in camp we had everything set up in record time – our beautiful Bedu tent once more in situ in the wadi and into it everyone collapsed to hide from the midday sun. As the temperatures started to cool off in the late afternoon we headed up a wadi near camp and set up a camera trap by a cave which we had surveyed in slot one. We will collect the camera during slot three and fingers crossed that by then we just might have captured something interesting on film.

The next day we were up and out by seven having shifted our daily schedule back to make the most of the cool morning air. The intention was to return to base correspondingly early though the wadi had other ideas. We climbed a beautiful ridge up onto a high mountain plateau and everyone's attention was focused by some precipitous drops on either side. The ridge showed new and interesting vegetation and most excitingly what we think to be a wild cat scat and track. By 11.30 we neared the top of the plateau and the sun was beginning to reach its peak once more. We surveyed for a while on the plateau where another potential cat scat was found. The guide – armed with the ever present flipflops was adamant that we could take an alternative wadi down but as we neared the top of it we feared that our boots, let alone his flip flops were ill suited for the descent. Nevertheless we made our way slowly down very difficult ground stopping occasionally to stare in disbelief either at where we had come from or what was still to come. Nonetheless everyone arrived happily and safely back in the wadi – we tried to reassure the team that our intention in starting the day earlier was not to trick them into a few hours extra surveying but they were not convinced! It was a very interesting day's survey, however, revealing a very interesting wildlife area and some good results.

The next day we took a break from the uphill ridges and headed out in smaller groups to cover a larger, wider wadi near camp. This time we were off surveying again by 7 but returned to camp at 2.30 to beat the worst of the sun – this proved to be just as well as the temperatures here are now touching 40. By breaking up into smaller teams we were able to cover a large area along the length of this wadi and into its side wadis and we are building up a really good overall picture of the Musandam.

Back at the apartment Tessa and I completed plotting slot two's surveys on the map and setting a final plan for slot three, targeting the few remaining areas we have to cover. A big thanks to the team members from this slot who again have clocked up distance and some very good surveying in an area and in temperatures which are far from easy. We depart for Muscat early tomorrow morning with a tired but happy team and look forward to meeting the third and last slot at the Dive Centre (remember dinner at the Dive Centre Saturday night for anyone who is around – otherwise no later than 8 on Sunday morning – it's a long drive so if people can make it even earlier and we can get off at 8 on the dot – all the better.)

15 February

The team for slot three all arrived at the Dive Centre in good time for departure though their luggage was not so successful. Amazingly three out of the eight team members arrived without luggage. Two were lucky that theirs was retrieved by the guilty airline in time to travel with us to Musandam. One, now four days later, remains an ongoing saga with hourly phone calls to the airline and many half truths about the luggage's location including a driver going to Dubai especially to pick up the luggage only to be told that it was now in Muscat. As I speak another driver is winging his way to Dubai again (the luggage is apparently there and not in Muscat). Hopefully by this evening we will have a full set of belongings.

All else on the journey back to Musandam went smoothly - the border crossings are getting quicker despite the fact that on the Emirate border we were all hauled in for iris recognition. My guess is the border guard had a new toy he was desperate to try out. Nonetheless we made it back to base a further half hour ahead of our previous record time.

Since arriving we have been busy with the now familiar training program and the team are now armed with new GPS, map reading and surveying skills.

Tessa and Hadi meanwhile carried out a very successful recce to Wadi Bhi - all Hadi's hard work with the border permissions is finally paying off as he and Tessa were waved through the crossing with only a brief stop for the border guard to invite them in for lunch!

We have just returned from our first full day survey and a very interesting and exciting one it was. We walked through a wadi near Khasab which we had visited with both previous teams. This time we therefore walked for an hour and a half before beginning to survey so we could survey the further reaches of this area. Not long after beginning our survey we came across what looked to be a large cave which on further inspection turned out to be a tunnel through to another hidden wadi. With thoughts of the hidden valley buzzing in their heads four of the team members rushed down the wadi to investigate. A little later there was a call on the radio to say they had found a waterfall. They hastened to add that it was tiny - and probably not worth the rest of the team coming over to see - but being the first running water we have found in the mountains I headed there with the remainder of the team. The waterfall was indeed small but beautiful and definitely a viable drinking spot for wildlife. It was amazing to feel so excited to find this small running water. Two months ago at home in the lakes such an amount of water would barely have registered in my mind, but Musandam is so dry that I ran around excitedly taking photographs and exploring. Nearby we found a likely caracal scat and this confirmed our feeling that this place was a potential attraction for wildlife in the area.

Though thankfully the heat has eased off slightly the days remain tough, but rewarding. Time is racing by and before we know it this last slot will be over so I look forward to a busy week ahead of surveys to fill the gaps on our map.

17 February

The last two field days have been perhaps amongst the highlights of the expedition so far taking in a variety of scenery, cultural interaction and information. Yesterday we headed off on another survey with a big mountain route on our minds. We were happily waylaid, however, for an hour by the inhabitants of the village where we began who made us coffee and dates and gave us a tour around the village. There we saw some fantastic old houses, long since deserted and in occupation around 150 years ago. The tiny wooden beamed and stone walled buildings were incredible and I felt we got a real insight into what life must have been like in the past in these mountains. The warmth and enthusiasm with which we were greeted was wonderful and we reluctantly headed off up the mountain already an hour behind schedule. A familiar pattern of heat and up up up, punctuated with cries of "come on, come on" from the guide ensued as we headed slowly but surely towards the peak. For more than two hours the guide Said reassured us that it was only an hour to the top and by the time we finally hit the ridge we knew that after four hours of climbing it was going to be a long day. And so it proved as we eventually crawled out of the wadi at 5.30 to be greeted again by news that dinner was on its way and we must stay. A fabulous dinner of freshly cooked goat and rice with such open and welcoming hosts was the perfect end to a day, which offered everything a survey day could – chatting with the locals, incredible scenery and historical insight all in one.



Then for further contrast we headed out today to survey by boat. The speed boat ride, as it had been in the second slot, was a great way to start the day. By using the boats we were again able to reach a remote part of the peninsular - this time focusing on the thin ridge of land which links the peninsular to the main land. Aside from again stunning scenery this area proved as we had hoped a hotspot for animal activity. We were falling over ourselves with scratch marks and scats. Most were fox with some possible caracal but this was enough to show that animals were using this land bridge extensively and marking it - if there were a leopard using that area we should have found sign but it was sadly lacking. Nonetheless it proved an excellent survey day whereby focusing on one small area we are able to learn a lot about the wildlife in this peninsular.

We have one more day to go before a well earned day off. After that it will be out to the campsite for one last time to survey in Wadi Bhi and collect our camera trap. It seems amazing to think that for this reason it might not be until I return from camp - and the expedition finishes that I write my next and final diary entry.

25 February

I am sat now overlooking the sea back at the Oman Dive Centre to write my last diary entry of Oman 2006. We have had a hectic last week in camp. Heading out for our now familiar camp site we were joined by a press pack of a TV crew and three print journalists who stayed with us for two days at the camp site. Our first task was to retrieve the camera trap set up in slot two. This made for an interesting introduction for the press to our work here and an introduction to the sort of terrain we have been dealing with. Sadly the trap had only captured goats but nonetheless it was an interesting experiment and I believe the first at camera trapping in Musandam.

The next morning we woke in utter amazement to rain, and significant rain at that – a grey / black sky and a persistent and heavy drizzle which showed no sign of surrender. It was not possible therefore to head high into the hills and instead we headed out to do some very revealing interviews. As ever we were very warmly greeted and by the time we had negotiated the ever present coffee and dates and then the interview proper it was nearly lunchtime and the rain had slightly abated allowing us to spend the afternoon tracking in the wadi around camp.

For our last survey of 2006 we returned to the Wadi Bhi area and spent a full day exploring some beautiful wadis. Wadi Bhi is dominated by dramatic gorges and cliffs and also far more fully grown trees than in other areas with resultant increased birdlife. We even found some waterholes but sadly predator sign on this, our last day, was in short supply.

And so the following morning we began to pack up camp and prepare to leave. I am now familiar with the emotions associated with this – on the one hand the feelings of happiness and relief that the expedition is coming to a safe and successful conclusion, on the other the sudden and horrible realisation that you are leaving behind a beautiful place and more importantly the people who have made this expedition. The following day was a blur of cleaning, packing and emotional good byes to the guides, officials and shop keepers who for the past two months have been our companions and the people who have made the success and enjoyment of this expedition possible. Thank you to everyone!

Our final drive out through the mountains and back to Muscat was suitably melancholic as the clouds once more rolled in over the mountains. Bathed in cloud the mountains were truly majestic and I was glad to see them in this new mood before we left. The dramatic scenery of the Musandam will stay with me for a long time as will the warmth and enthusiasm with which we were continually greeted. I think two months in Musandam has been far from easy. It is a difficult area to survey in and it has stretched the teams physically and mentally. However, we leave with a far clearer idea of the habitat of the Musandam and its suitability for wildlife. We leave with enthusiasm for the future prospects of Musandam and finally with huge warmth for this stunning area and its people. For the last week of the expedition to be blessed with possible leopard sign seems a fitting note to end this diary on – a reminder as it is both of hope for the Arabian leopard and the fragility with which it and other animals cling on.

I hope you've enjoyed the diary. So long & hope to see you on another expedition some time.

Dom Hall.