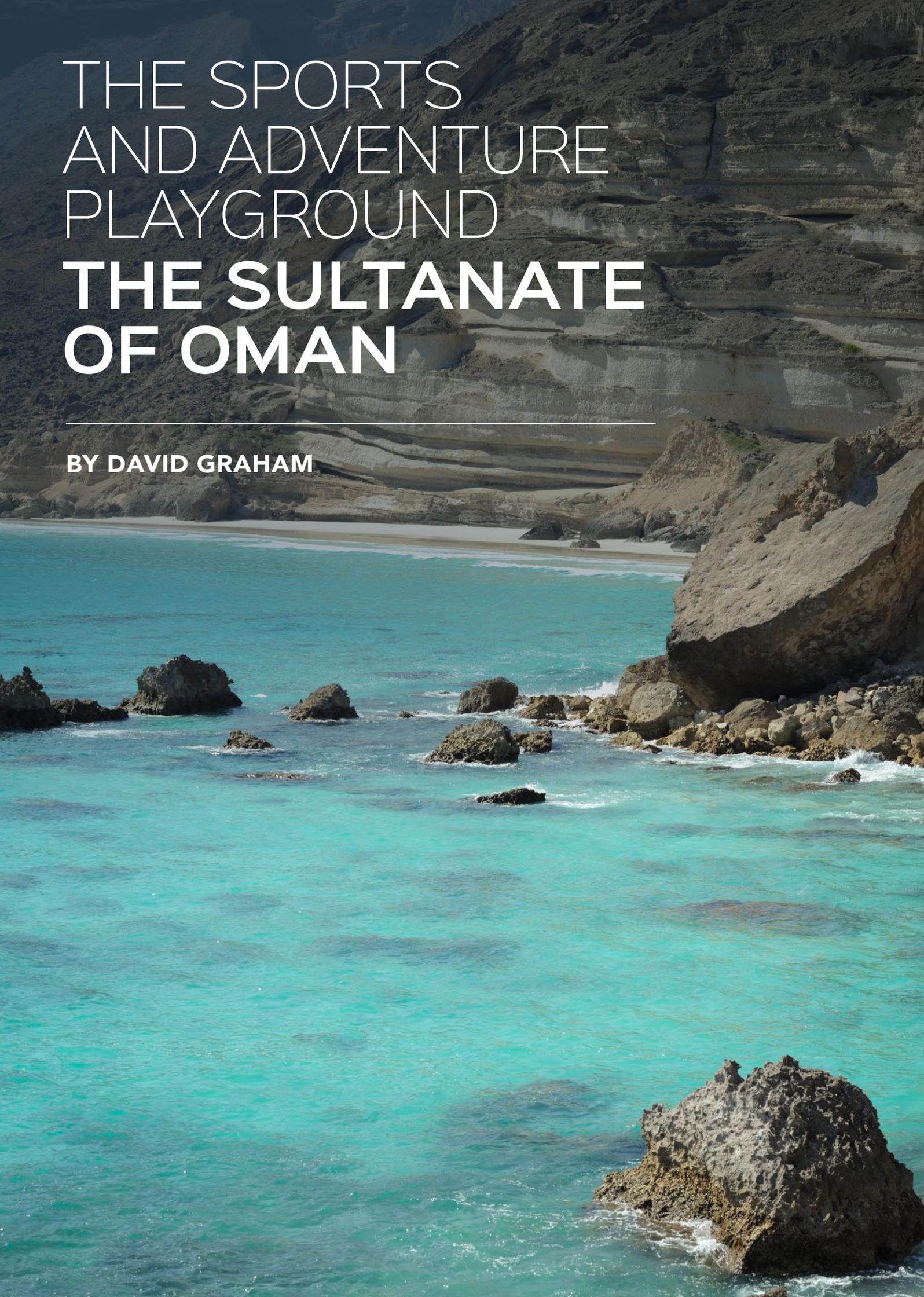


THE SPORTS AND ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND **THE SULTANATE OF OMAN**

BY DAVID GRAHAM



If I had to encapsulate sports and adventure in Oman in single words, it would be:



Unrelenting



Challenging



Invigorating



Rebellious



Surprising



Colourful



Stunning



Generous



Peaceful



Unique



Spellbinding

When describing Oman I find the most appropriate way to start is with the foundation - the people.

Omani residents don't really talk about the people, perhaps it's like the weather, which is also not talked about; there is only so much talking about the sunshine that can be done. Why talk about the normal? - the generosity, the smiley family, the genuine interest, the curiosity and intrigue in you. I initially assumed that such overt warmth and generosity was religion driven behaviour as the Quran is full of quotes and anecdotes such as:



Bander Kheran on our Omani fishing boat IBRA III

“

And whatever you spend in good, it will be repaid to you in full, and you shall not be wronged.”

(Quran 2:272)

For sure that has an influence, but Omani people in general are unique, warm, generous, forgiving, hospitable, caring, peaceful, happy and kind and this is not the same for all Islamic states. This results in a nation that is consistently ranked highly on “the safest countries in the world”, a list compiled by the World Economic Forum. If you read Oman history these behavioural traits are clearly evident in their forefathers. Looking at today, this peacefulness generosity starts at the top.



Mountain man. Jebel Shams, 2014

Below is an excerpt from His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik's first speech after been sworn in on January 11th this year; yes, this is referring to foreign policy, however the spirit of the content, is deep in the psyche of the Omani people.



“

In the foreign front, we shall trace the course of the late Sultan, reaffirming the fundamentals of our country's foreign policy based on peaceful coexistence with nations, good neighbourliness, non-interference in the internal affairs of others, respect for countries' sovereignty and international cooperation in various spheres. We will remain as the world had known us during the reign of the Forgiven one, God willing, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said bin Taimour.”

These behaviour traits are abundant, it is normal here. Why am I talking about them in an article about Sports and adventure? They obviously don't create an adventure playground, but these are the foundations in which you can safely enjoy it. Mix this with perfect Wadis, incredible beaches and oceans, endless deserts, stunning remote islands only inhabited by an impressive biodiversity of marine and bird life, formidable mountains that peak at Jebel Shams [3009m].

This generous, helpful mentality is important, as you will be helped in your time of need, you will be given assistance or encouraging words when you don't ask for them. The dictionary definition of the word adventure is - An unusual and exciting, typically hazardous experience or activity. AKA you may well get caught out - help won't be far away, and it will be help that wasn't expected or conventional, it will be thought provoking, generous, it may be simple and in the guise of an old man or beautiful children wanting to sell you their handicrafts which provokes thought.



Girls selling bracelets. Jebel Shams, 2014

Oman allows wild camping and you are completely spoilt with regards to where you can set up camp; on the edge of a cliff, on the beach, in the middle of the desert.

This article is more about my experiences from a perspective of some of my adventures in Oman, rather than an organiser as big sports tourism events in the country, and I have separated these experiences into: the desert, the ocean and the mountains.



Approximately 50km west of Salalah, family camping on the beach, dolphins and camels keeping the kids entertained.

THE DESERT

The Omani desert is inhospitable in the summer months, no escape from the brutal relentless heat. In the winter however, it is a vibrant haven which has such tranquility.

Road cycling adventure - 7 days
Muscat to Salalah, March 2017

1,426km
distance

6,596m
elevation

29.7kmh
average speed

48hrs
in the saddle



Hasik, Dhofar - about to set off on day 7 Hasik to Salalah, final day. March 2017.

A memorable desert experience was on this huge road cycling exhibition. Eight of us took on this adventure to raise money for a charity my late brother supported – The Rainbow centre in Sri Lanka. Towards the end of day 2 (another 220km+ day), we rode through kite surfers and wave riders paradise, Asilah (this place is as good as it gets globally, the south winds start in late June and run through till September, average, consistent wind strength of 25 knots and 1.5m rolling waves). A little further south was the planned camp spot, its unique when a desert meets an ocean; here the Wahiba sands meets the Arabian Sea, a beautiful area to camp. Yuri said it wasn't a good idea for the drivers to take the jeeps into the dunes.



Rub Al Khali at sunset. March 2017.



Omani bedouin deflated the tyres almost completely, rocked the car back and forth out of the hole in a few minutes.

Nick, fuelled with a sore backside, tired legs, testosterone, a V8 engine, a desire for a shower and a cold drink, got in the drivers seat and with trailer in tow drove his jeep into the dunes, got stuck in what was a lovely camp spot and settled in for the night; quite rightly describing the current tricky situation as tomorrow's problem. The following morning, 2 hours of digging, sweating sandy bodies, snapped tow ropes, the situation was getting tense. Chris walked to the road, 10 minutes later returned with 3 bedouin elders in a further 10 minutes they drove both jeeps and trailers out of the deep sand. They would accept nothing in return other than tea, laughter and the exchange of stories. These people lived in the desert, they lived simple lives, they wanted for nothing, they were educated, life was fun, you could see in their eyes and their huge smiles and they were happy with their lot.



Our new bedouin friends. March 2017.

Wahiba sands is the smaller desert in Oman, which is magnificent for day trips and weekend camping. Rub al Khali [empty quarter] is vast and known to be especially daunting and inhospitable. Unless you are experienced in travelling and navigating through deserts, it's advisable to take a guide. The red sands spread from Oman to UAE and Saudi.



Harvey, Romily and Mollie about to descend a huge sand dune. Rub Al Khali, February 2015.

In 2015 Helen [my wife] persuaded me to spend 3 nights there – I am a sailor and spending three nights in the desert didn't appeal at all. I read Thesigers book on the first crossing [well worth a read], and that was the catalyst to go. We were advised the best place to enter is from Salalah and we need a guide. Rather than driving over 1000km we decided to fly and for OMR 50 we put our packed car on a car transporter and flew the following day. I asked the Omani owner of the transport company if he could get my car to the airport in Salalah he said: "Sure, there is a small café in arrivals, I will leave the key with them." We picked up our keys from the café, met Sohail, our guide at the airport, the iceboxes were still freezing, we followed him all day, deep into the desert; Well, it felt deep as we were driving for so long, when we looked at the GPS pin later, we were still near the perimeter.



Taken from my tent, camping with family and friends in the Wahiba Sands. February 2012.



Sohail took his wadi mat, placed it on the leeward side of the car, lifted the end up to the sill of the car, put his thin mattress and blanket on top, got out his dried camel meat, boiled some rice, had his supper. We were less efficient as we had a tent for the children, camp beds, cookers, table, chairs etc... All these added luxuries confirmed my novice bedouin status, this reached a new high when I drained 2 liters of pasta water onto the sand with Suhail watching, his rice absorbed the water, and he wasted none of the earth's natural resources. We rarely used the chairs as we spent the nights around Sohail's campfire listening to his charming bedouin tales, it was good for our children to listen to his upbringing and the lengthy trips he made on foot with a camel before he was 10 years old.

[Taking my life into my own hands] I woke Helen up at 3am, we were deep in space in the centre of the milky way; a site i have seen while sailing offshore but here was different, spellbinding, like you were in it; what a magical place. We didn't hear or see and another soul for 3 days, sand on the horizon, complete peace, tranquillity, beauty and time to think.

I would return there in a heart beat!

Harvey (age 9) climbing up a 300m sand dune with his snowboard, Rub Al Khali at dawn. February 2015.

THE SEA

Nasser my dear friend from Sidab, swam for Oman in the junior Olympics in Moscow 1998 and his brother Rashid in 1996 in Atlanta. Nasser is multiple Extreme Sailing Series champion, as strong as an Ox and exudes the said “Omani behavioural traits”. He offered to take me fishing for yellow fin tuna. Nasser has 8 brothers and 3 sisters, they are all employed, successful and very happy. Nasser’s father provided for his family by fishing every day and selling his fish in the Mutrah fish Souq.



Another win for Nasser Al Mashari and his team.

Equipped with a line, a hook and a humble boat we took to the sea. No cabin, no echo sounders, no electronic fish finders, no rods no reels.....

We will stop here said Nasser, this looks good (it looked the same to me!). The hook through the nose of the live sardine, pop it in next to the boat and repeatedly banging the side of the boat, Nasser said the sardine is now diving. 1 minute later the yellow fin takes the bait and the next 20 minutes I was enjoying my private viewing of Ernest Hemingway’s novel «The Old Man and The Sea». The respect Nasser gave the fish, the struggle to get the 40kg fish onboard with his bare hands, I feel privileged to have witnessed. He of course gifted me with a lovely fish. Nasser dropped me at the beach near my home and as I walked home carrying my huge yellow fin by the tail in my left hand, I started to daydream; these gifts from the sea (as they called them) encapsulated their life – fed, educated and employed their family – they don’t take more than they need. This family is the epitome of Omani people; a deep love for their nation, deep respect for their mother and father, work ethics that are off the scale and a positive, can do attitude to top it off!



Masirah Island, winter 2018.

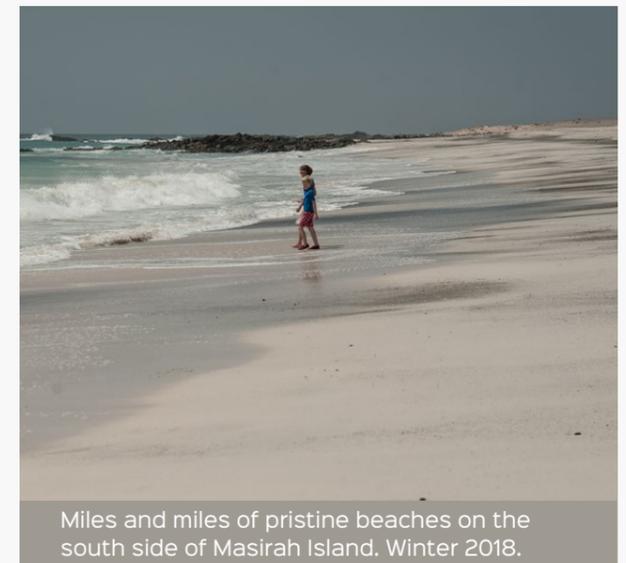
On many occasions when my family and I have camped on the beautiful beaches in Oman we have been given fish. I no longer attempt to give money as it is genuinely insulting; “We have taken it from the sea for nothing, why should we charge you?”.

About 5 years ago a company started renting campervans and Oman Sail started to charter 40ft catamarans, if you prefer to adventure with a few home comforts, look no further. Spring break 2018, our mobile home, family, dog, paddleboard and kitesurfing kit headed to Masirah Island, a kite surfers dream. The Island is a haven for marine life and migrating birds, it has more species of turtles than anywhere in the world. It is always a stopover for Sailing Arabia The Tour, the annual regatta in Oman.

Three quarters of the way down the island on the west side, we parked our van 20 meters above the high tide mark, as you can see from the photo, a remarkable beach to have to yourself. White sands and turquoise clear waters we blew up our kites and surfed.



SeaOman’s charter boat anchored at Damaniyat Islands. January 2016.



Miles and miles of pristine beaches on the south side of Masirah Island. Winter 2018.



A motorhome extends the camping season as they are fully air conditioned. It’s not that straight forward getting on and off the ferry but with wheel chocks and friendly help at hand we were soon on our way.

The first afternoon we arrived a fisherman called Zal came and gave us a kingfish – the spaghetti bolognese just got bumped a night. The following day at G&T time, the huge sun kissing the water, Zale returned with shell necklaces for Helen and the children. In his broken English and my broken Arabic he asked us to go to his house for dinner. Ordinarily I would accept the offer as I have been in Oman long enough to know he wants nothing from us, he just wants to be hospitable. But as the sun had gone over the yard arm and we were fully set up, just to mobilise would have been a good hours work then a 30 minute drive... He became insistent, he said he has told his mum, they are cooking, I was insistent too, we were at an uncomfortable loggerheads, we swapped phone numbers and he departed.

20 minutes later he called, and said he was coming back. In most other countries, you would question your safety, alone in the wilderness and the insistent man returning. I did have a moment. He returned “Asalam Alaykum” presented me with a platter of 5 grilled lobsters, a big bowl of tomato and lettuce salad and 30 freshly cooked, hot flatbreads rolled up in foil. “Ashoofek Bukra” [see you tomorrow], and got back in his car to drive 30 minutes back to town. Spag boll got bumped again, The sun fully set the stars were out, we toasted with Chablis and devoured Zal’s hand caught Masirah lobster.



Camping on Damaniyat Islands. Winter 2012.



2017 in Bar Al Hikman. In summer there is a 15° temperature drop from the nearest road to this kite surfers paradise. Wild camping, family, kiting and BBQ's. Joie de vivre!

THE MOUNTAINS

Does Oman have big mountains, yes. Does Oman promote adventure tourism, yes. Does Oman have efficient emergency services and healthcare, yes. Does Oman have the enthusiasm to create 170km of trail off the beaten track in the mountains, Yes. Criteria passed for Oman to be the exclusive Middle Eastern licence holder for UTMB®.

November, last year my wife and I decided we would take part in the baby one...

53.1km
(they lied said it was 50!)

2,553m
elevation

9hrs 51min 52sec
running time

5,913
calories burnt

The main event was 170km & 10,000m of elevation. It was being branded as the most challenging trail running race globally. The local Omani mountain families love that adventurers were coming from all corners of the world to “enjoy” their back garden, their mountains.



Helen and Mark with weary legs, with 15km to go. November 2019.



Precarious spot for a family portrait. Jebel Shams, June 2014.



Backpacking in Jebel Shams with french sailors. April 2017.

In year one, we had a complication when we were doing the final heli drop to the most remote feed station (12hr walk from the nearest road), the first runners would be there in 26hrs very hungry and thirsty and we needed to find a solution. We asked the nearest village and there was no question they would help, they gathered the local donkeys, laden with 1 tonne of water and sustenance, they walked through the night and with 4hrs before the first runner arrived feed station no.19 was filled to the rafters. Last year we took the complications of helicopters out (other than for emergency evac), and all the feed stations were supplied by villagers and donkeys.

An unmapped village we named “The Coffee House” because every time our course markers found themselves in this remote area, the same family always came out with Omani coffee and dates, sat and shared them with our team.

This remote settlement was on the 170km course and we used it as a water station. The locals turned it into a full feed station, saying that the runners looked tired and hungry; they set up a table at the mosque and brought down rice, meat and dates. Many of the mountain men didn't know about the relatively new sport of trail running, many of them lived their life running the goat trails of Jebel Akhdar (The Green Mountain). Last year we had an Omani local podium on every distance. Hamdan al Kharti came 2nd in the 170km, a young athletic military guy, who used to be an overweight bus driver, changed his lifestyle and now runs thousands of kilometres a year. Check him out on Strava; a humble, kind, generous young man who is supersonic! The feed stations were manned by locals. They built fires, made soup, played music; they lifted spirits, assisted the needy, gave history lessons to those who were interested and invited runners to their houses after the event for dinner and many took them up on their offer.



Dinner time on the terraces, Jebel Shams, 2500m. April 2017.



Even in the heart of Muscat, you can have an adventure.
Shatti Beach, December 2019.

In Oman practicing international sport is in its infancy; there is a lifestyle shift that I have witnessed in my time here. Sport is becoming more prevalent in modern day lifestyle.

There is no shortage of impressive sportsmen and women here, world-class talent; to name a few - **Sultan al Touqi** has a youth Olympic silver medal in show jumping. **Fatma al Nabhani**, a globally seeded tennis player in both singles and doubles. **Barakat al Harthy** a sprinter who runs 100m in under 10 seconds, **Ahmed al Harthy** who won 2019 Blancpain GT Series Endurance Cup and in 2019 he podiumed 5 times out of the 6 races he raced.

These people also have the “Omani traits” I have been describing in abundance, they are wonderful people and amazing ambassadors for a glorious country. They are encouraging the youth to participate in sport, they jointly ran a campaign to get the youth to take part in the running weekend The Al Mouj Muscat Marathon and it worked - Omani's were more than 50 % of the 10,000 strong field.



Al Mouj Muscat Marathon. Start line, 2020.



Oman By UTMB. Jebel Shams, 2019.



Al Mouj Muscat Marathon. Kids' Run 2019.



Haute Route Oman. Tanuf Ruins, 2020.

Sports and adventure is just starting in Oman, it is the most resilient and fastest growing sector of global tourism. The country has the topography, the will and the athletes. It has a massive future of attracting sports tourists and as I leave Oman this month to return home, I for sure will be one of them.

