

UNCHARTED WATERS

Part of a nature park off the coast of Oman, the waters surrounding the uninhabited Daymaniyat Islands make for quiet, eco-friendly chartering sans the crowds.

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The untainted coastline offers pristine waters

Sailing Destinations/Oman



Coastline exploration from the waves

One of the more traditional countries in the region and the oldest independent state in the Arab world, the Sultanate of Oman has always valued and made good use of its coastline. The country occupies the south-east corner of the Arabian Peninsula, a strategically important spot in pole position that stands guard at the mouth of the Arabian Gulf.

At one time, because of the country's mighty fleet of trading ships, Oman had its own empire which, at its peak in the 19th century, traded with the east African coast and vied with Portugal and Great Britain for influence across the Indian Ocean. Now, as the Sultanate turns on the publicity in a bid to attract tourism to its shores, marinas are being built and with them come yachts eager to cruise the waters, even if some of the islands to visit are shown only on large-scale charts.

Into virgin territory

One of the newest marinas to open along the coastline of Oman is located at the new Millennium Resort at Mussanah in the South Batinah region of the country, and a 45-minute drive

from Muscat International Airport. Nestled along the Gulf of Oman, the 230-plus-room hotel offers panoramic views over its private 54-berth marina and, in the distance, the Hajar Mountains. It is here that we joined *Spirit of Mussanah*, a brand new 13.4-metre (44-foot) Orana catamaran built by Fountaine Pajot in Aigrefeuille, France. This sailing catamaran is one in a fleet of yachts offered by Oman Charter and can be hired either as a bareboat charter boat or, as we had chosen, expertly helmed by a professional skipper.

Our Captain, Simon, and the rest of his crew welcomed us on board as they made their final preparations for our voyage. Safety brief completed, we let go the lines and motored clear of the breakwater. Our plan was to sail along the coast down to Muscat, calling at the uninhabited Daymaniyat Islands inside Oman's only marine nature reserve, under UNESCO protection for over 20 years.

It is necessary to stick to your plan because park fees are payable in advance at the Ministry of Environment. They are date specific, valid only for the islands that you

have requested and are only for those on board a particular boat, so it is necessary to name the craft and guests aboard. The first advantage of having a skipper who knows the rules becomes immediately apparent! Charges are: one rial per person per day or five rials per person for each overnight stay plus a three-rial-per-person extra charge if diving is undertaken. Diving is very



The shoreline scenery is spectacular

popular as the underwater world is incredibly rich.

Some 15 miles east of our departure point at Al Musanah and just half a mile offshore, close to the resort of Al Sawadi, is the island of Juzor as Sawadi, our first stop. Visitors come here from the resort and locals come to visit the mosque at the top of the hill. Dive boats also visit the island which can, at times, make the area seem relatively busy. We dropped anchor here, and after lunch sailed on to the Daymaniyat Islands.

Heading ashore

There are two islands that locally go by the names of Little Jun and Large Jun. We anchored off the bigger of the two, just 40 metres from the large, white fine-sand beach, behind which a bank of sandstone cliffs rose quickly. It being Thursday night and the start of the weekend in Oman, there were a

couple of local fishing boats drawn up onto the sand. Each had ferried a group of people to the islands, who were enjoying the freedom and partaking in games of football on the beach. At sundown, makeshift sun shelters were pulled down and one boat departed. The remaining locals erected a tent so that overnight we had company. The light of their fire silhouetted the party who, judging by the songs they sang and the occasional whoops of joy, were clearly having a very merry time. We enjoyed our own meal on deck in the large cockpit that can comfortably accommodate all eight guests that the twin-hulled craft has cabins for. We all, including the boisterous party ashore, retired early and soon the only sounds were nature's noises.

Life under the surface

The next morning everyone was up

early and the shore party motored off as we ate breakfast. After a quick walk ashore we too set sail, around the island. This side there were no beaches, just steep cliffs that offered very little in the way of interest to a visiting yacht, so we were not tempted to linger. Instead, we hoisted the sails and set off.

Our next port of call, some 10 miles to the east, took two hours and we passed the Central Daymaniyat Islands some distance to port. We did not stop because these were to be our destination overnight and we wanted to visit Kharabah, known for an excellent snorkelling experience, for lunch. Along the mainland coast opposite is Bait Al Barka, the royal residence used by the Sultan and his entourage when he is not in Salalah, and his home base in the deep south of the country on the coast of the Indian Ocean. It was difficult to see clearly and



The *Spirit of Mussanah* takes to the open water

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the area immediately surrounding it is marked as a no go area on the charts. Small fast patrol boats are likely to intercept you if you ignore this warning.

The islands all support small but beautiful reefs filled with soft and hard coral and rich marine life. Everything flourishes in abundance because the water is un-fished and there is no local pollution; nature is in perfect harmony. The sea seems to best support alcyonarians, which include sea feathers, sea fans, flexible whip corals and sea pens. Sporadic infestations of the crown of thorns starfish has led to some coral dying off, but here it seems to have fared better than elsewhere along the coast, making it one of the better diving locations. Recently the islands were used to pilot a scheme of reef management that conservationists hope soon to roll out along the entire length of the country's coastline.

After our swim we walked ashore and found large white sandy beaches scored with the tracks of the hawksbill turtles that nest on the islands; the islands attract some 250 nesting turtles in winter. Each turtle lays three or more times to produce over 1,000 nests on 1,500 metres of beach on a total of six islands, indicating a large number of nesting females by any standard. The hawksbill turtle is one of the world's

most endangered species. They lay eggs in nests shallower than other breeds, and as such attract more attention from foxes and dogs on the mainland. Fortunately these islands are free from predators, making them the most important sanctuary in the region of any real value to the hawksbill.

The central islands

After lunch, we sailed back to the three main islands of the Central Daymaniyats. Police Island is the biggest with a smaller one flanking it on each side. It has its own Coast Guard outpost and it is from there that visitors are monitored and permits are occasionally checked. Eventually, at around teatime, we dropped the mainsail, furled the headsail and motored into Lighthouse Bay where we dropped anchor. Here, three wide sandy beaches were covered in turtle tracks and it was clear that these beaches were also favoured by the hawksbill. That night we went ashore in the hope of seeing them climb the sandy beach to lay their eggs.

Our next stop was the still-to-be-completed residential and marina complex at the Wave. This is clearly not your average home and marina lifestyle destination. The project master plan incorporates a diverse selection of

five-star hotels, golf courses and private housing, offering investors apartments, townhouses and villas spread out over 2.5 million square metres. The complex is intended to offer a life that flows around elegant street scenes, attractive homes set around courtyards and residential areas linked with green spaces and inland waterways. The marina will be finished soon and is expected to play host to many of the sailing events being planned by Sail Oman as the country embarks on a programme to get locals to once again fall in love with the art of sailing.

Exploring further

Muscat as such does not have many facilities to offer visiting yachts, but it is possible to enter the port to anchor and go ashore, provided the yacht is left attended at all times by a crewman. This makes it the ideal spot to jump ashore for a visit to the old souks at Mutrah, along with the many museums and of course the Royal Palace.

For those seeking to spend longer in the area of Muscat visiting the many wonderful museums, mosques and markets, it may be better to continue five miles further south-east along the coast to berth inside Marina Bandar al Rowdha. Here they have an outdoor restaurant, licensed bar and great outdoor swimming pool for children.

We disembarked and bade a fond farewell to our crew who had looked after us so well. There is plenty more to see and well over a week can be spent exploring this coast without ever getting bored. We were just sorry that our time was up and we had to fly back to Britain. **IB**



Boats of all sizes get set to explore



Full sails set for open seas