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THE KITE BOAT PROJECT

THE KITE RACER INTERVIEWS
KITEBOARDING IN OMAN



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ARABIAN DAYS:

ONE THOUSAND &
ONE WAVES IN OMAN

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Photo Gabi Steindl



Photo Xylia Loubster



Once upon a time, Sindbad the Sailor (Abu Ubaida ibn Abdullah ibn Qassim) ventured out on the adventure of a lifetime. Today I'm sure he would be a kitesurfer and he might never have sailed so far from home. Why? I recently traveled to his home grounds and found sheer kiteboarding perfection.

Riders who have followed my travels over the past few years know that ever since I stopped competing on the World Tour, I have been focusing on freeride missions in search of new and unknown kitesurfing destinations far away from the crowds. I simply love to immerse myself in other worlds and different cultures. So far, my journeys have taken me to some of the most remote corners of our planet.

On my mission as a globetrotting freerider I have managed to enter the history books of the Trobriand Islands (Papua New Guinea) as the 'Flying Blonde Girl,' had the privilege to kitesurf on hidden lakes in Russia, ridden perfect waves in the deepest outback of Australia, explored unknown coastlines in Belize, Venezuela, Brazil, Mexico, New Zealand, and Cape Verde, and played in the waters of Caribbean islands that are still completely unknown. During these travels I have had many special and unforgettable experiences.

With this in mind, once again I packed more than 100 pounds of gear at the invitation of a friend and jumped on a plane to a fascinating country that not many people would associate with kitesurfing. At least not yet. The country I landed in was Oman and ahead of me was a place that would truly enchant me with its cultural mix, its symbiosis of past and modern times, and of course its absolutely amazing kiting conditions.

The proud Omani people and the breathtaking landscapes of their country are largely unknown to the outside world, but Oman is a place well worth exploring. Located along the southeastern shore of the Arabian Peninsula, the geography of Oman consists of wildly ragged high-altitude mountains, deep canyons, idyllic oases, and widely spread out plantations. The nearly endless stretches of amazing sand and gravel deserts flow into a diverse rhythm of white sandy beaches and steep cliffs along the 1,700 mile coastline.

When people think of the Middle East, they often think of war, political unrest, pirates capturing tanker and container ships, religious fanaticism, chaos, and Iran working calmly on the bomb. In my experience, none of

Photo Xylia Loubster



The pink dream world on the way to Shana'a.
Photo Gabi Steindl



these stereotypes applied to Oman. Although Muslim to its core and a closed country for a long time, Oman has rapidly developed due to its oil assets but also has managed to maintain much of its traditional culture. With exceptional friendliness, openness, and great inner peace, Oman's inhabitants welcome all strangers. Pushiness is an unknown concept here and so is religious fanaticism. It's a stable and peaceful place and the Omanis are particularly proud of what they have established over the last 40 years under the reign of Sultan Qaboos, the leader responsible for easing the country into modernity.

The country of Oman is proof that progress must not inevitably go hand in hand with a loss of cultural identity and humanity. There's no space in Oman for hate-filled conflicts between tradition and modernity, between religion and cosmopolitanism. This placid oasis is surrounded by three bodies of water: the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, and the Arabian Sea. A safe place to travel with consistent wind, a seemingly endless coastline, and high-quality waves sounds a bit like a fairy tale, but the good news is that it's not, it's a reality!

To get there, one jumps on a plane to the city of Muscat, normally via Dubai, where I would definitely recommend a short sightseeing stopover. Muscat, the capital of Oman, is an incredibly picturesque town with fascinating markets, oases, date groves, and buildings that captivate visitors with an almost kaleidoscopic-colored mix of amazing Arabian architecture. "Muscat is a port the likes of which cannot be found in the whole world where there is business and good things that cannot be found elsewhere," said the great Arabian navigator Ahmed bin Majid al-Najdi in 1490. Muscat, even to this day, has a character quite different from its neighboring capitals. The name Muscat means anchorage and the town is strategically located along the trade route to India and China. As the world's largest natural harbor it saw immense trade in the age of sail. Today, the sea continues to constitute a major part of this amazing city. Wedged into a relatively narrow strip of land between mountains and sea, one of the must-sees in the Muscat province is without a doubt the Mutrah Souq, perhaps one of the oldest marketplaces in the world.

A three-hour drive south of Muscat lies Ras Al Hadd, a perfect lagoon for any freestyle enthusiast. Nearby hills can make the wind a bit gusty, but the flat water is guaranteed to get every freestyle-lover frothing for sure! Don't worry if flat water isn't really your cup of tea though. Just drive a bit further south and you will find a few sick wave spots along the coast of the mainland such as Al Askarah, Fishermen's Bay, and Assilah, a perfect point break that produces an extremely long wave. On good days at Assilah, a dozen turns on the same wave is easily possible.

I started the trip from Dubai in a convoy of a few cars. We picked up Alan Norton, an amazing photographer and really great guy, along with a few suitcases full of his camera gear. Taking into account Alan's tight schedule and the weather forecast, we rushed to catch a ferry to Masirah Island, the country's largest island off the southeastern coast of Oman. Driving through the desert was a truly memorable experience. Countless camels interrupted our journey over and over again, wandering through the desert ownerless and serene. They walk in the middle of the streets and force drivers to stop. Honking the horn doesn't impress these really headstrong and elegant creatures very much. They only respond with a slightly contemptuous look. If camels could talk, they would have probably said, "C'mon man, chill out, don't be such a pain in the neck!" before leisurely getting off the road when they felt like it.

Shortly before reaching the town of Shana'a where the ferries set off for the seven-mile journey to Masirah, we passed by a breathtakingly beautiful salt lake. The sky and the clouds were reflected in strong pink and rose colors in its perfectly flat mirror surface. The sight was so intense it inspired me to sit down on one of the salt bags along its edge to meditate for a few minutes. There wasn't a breath of wind in the air. If there had been even the slightest breeze, I would not have been able to resist the urge to pump up a kite and to go for a ride in this pink dream world.

The ferry crossing turned into one of the highlights of the trip due to some rather surreal scenes that I'm privileged to have experienced. Apart from us, there was a group of locals on board. Everyone was obviously in a very good mood and I could tell by their clothing that it must have been a festive day for



them. The men were wearing their traditional white Arabian Thawb, an ankle-length cotton tunic, and turbans. The women were dressed in their traditional colorful robes worn on top of Sirwal-pants and also had fine henna paintings on their hands and feet. This was the first time during my trip that I saw women wearing their traditional face masks, which can seem a bit scary at first glance. The men were a little scary at first as well, as they had rifles and Khanjars, the traditional dagger of Oman, worn on their waists.

Due to the language barrier, we couldn't really talk with each other, but the beauty about these moments on deck is that it didn't matter at all that we were unable to communicate with words. For reasons that I will never know, suddenly we were all having a little party together on board the ferry during the approximately 90-minute ride. It all felt so natural. The men were singing, the women clapped their hands, and we danced and made music together. Empty buckets that were rolling around on deck became drums with some of the men stabbing the air with their daggers to the rhythm of the music. "Wow, what a special experience," I thought to myself while the ferry berthed in the picturesque harbor of Masirah Island.

Right next to the port is the town of Ras Hilf, the only permanently inhabited town on the island. Approximately 10,000 people live in this sedate little township. There are a handful of markets, gas stations, coffee shops, and a rather modern hospital that I'd be lucky enough to see up close before the

end of my visit. Ras Hilf is the perfect place to fill up your energy reserves in one of the tasty yet very simple restaurants as well as to stock up on the always necessary supply of drinking water. Meals in the restaurants are super cheap (usually about \$5 USD) and very good. No matter whether it's grilled fish or meat, fresh fruits, or vegetables, everything is eaten with the fingers of the right hand. Tourists, however, normally get cutlery with their meals without having to ask for it. The locals are incredibly friendly and never pushy or disrespectful.

In terms of accommodations, Masirah offers a small but all-encompassing range of options. There are three local hostels, one four-star hotel (Swiss Belhotel Resort) that's situated directly on the beach, and Sur Masirah (www.kiteboarding-oman.com), a really wicked kite camp with Bedouin-style tents managed by a cool German dude named Alex.

Oman's summer monsoon season is locally known as Khareef. Really strong monsoon winds usually blow like crazy in Masirah from the end of May until the start of September. Days of 15-20 knots are common and 25-35 knot days are frequent. The further up the coast you go on the mainland towards the north, the less windy it is. During the winter the wind direction swings to the north and is considerably lighter and much less consistent. That's why European and US summertime is without a doubt the best time to come here. It





Photo Alan Norton



Photo Xylia Loubster



Photo Gabi Steindl



Photo Gabi Steindl

GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT OMAN

WIND: The peak wind season is May through September when small kites (5-7m) are mandatory! The further south you travel, the windier it gets.

SPARE PARTS: Kiteboarding and surfing equipment is basically impossible to find in Oman. I highly recommend bringing as many spare parts as luggage restrictions allow.

VISA: A visa is required to enter Oman and will allow you to stay for up to four weeks.

RAMADAN: The month of fasting is maintained in its traditional form in Oman. This means there's no food available from sunrise until after sunset. If you visit during Ramadan (July 20 – August 18 for 2012) you should stock up on snacks and water, but you should be respectful and not eat or drink in public during the daytime.

SENSITIVE TRAVELING: One should always pay respect to local customs and approach the Omanis appropriately according to their customs, so make sure to read up a bit beforehand! In Oman you'll be warmly received as a visitor. Unconditionally and without any thought of a potential business opportunity, one is warmly welcomed by the locals. A little basic knowledge about the Arabian way and culture will go a long way to ensuring mutually respectful experiences. Please make sure to always ask for permission if you want to take photos of the local people!

also happens to be the best time to be here with regards to swell. During summer the waves build with the strong wind from the south and can reach considerable size.

Due to the size of the island (60 miles long by 9 miles wide) the different conditions available vary widely. A car is an absolute must on the island if one wants to experience it all, but driving times and distances are really user-friendly. It's easy to ride at two or even three different spots in one day. There's a spot for every kiter's taste in Masirah: flat water freestyle heavens and wave spots for all levels.

The scenery here had me dreaming with its beautiful mix of mountains and desert. It made me feel like I was in another world at times. The feeling was especially dramatic as Alan and I were pretty much alone at most spots and hardly ever met another soul during our photo shoots or when driving from one spot to the next. This made the rare encounters with the locals even more interesting! Each person we met wanted to help or provide us with some useful information. Language barriers were bridged with friendliness and everyone had a warm smile for us. Even a group of desert women, who are known to be extremely shy, stood right beside me during a break between sessions and smiled at me from underneath their face masks.

The wave spots along the east coast turned out to be my favorite places to kite, regardless of a little accident during one of my last sessions at Shinzi on the northeast side of Masirah. While enjoying smooth little waves in a consistent offshore breeze, the wind all of a sudden dropped from one minute

to the next, something totally unusual for here. As a result I ended up on a really gnarly reef covered in mussels sharp as knives. This is when I got to know the Masirah hospital from the inside. Six clean stitches later I was back on track. Unlike the hole in my foot, there was no one on the island who could fix the huge hole in the brand new board that North had shipped to me for the trip. Luckily I had a spare board in my quiver. I highly recommend bringing as much spare gear as possible when visiting Oman.

Given the stitches in my foot, my motto for the trip from now on was "tape, tape, tape, and grit my teeth. A kitesurfer knows no pain." With duct tape and plastic wrap I wrapped up the fresh stitches as tightly as possible before going into the water.

Although I'm a wave freak to the core, one of the most memorable kiting highlights of my trip has nothing to do with the sweet waves of the Arabian Sea. Searching the island for picturesque places to shoot photos at, once again we passed by the harbor of Ras Hilf. I watched the hustle and bustle and the busy fishermen for a while and fell in love with the atmosphere. The wind was blowing at

least 20 knots, but the water inside the harbor walls was as flat as a mirror, the ferries and fishing boats reflecting on the surface like a painting. I hesitated for just a moment and thought to myself, "Surely the Omanis won't arrest me...I think," and off I went. An unforgettable dance with my kite in my very own private and perfect freestyle heaven came next.

Yet again dream-like moments and an amazing feeling rushed through my body while boosting all different sorts of tricks all alone out there in the harbor's waters. For hours I carved around the old wrecks of traditional dhows, and I wasn't the only one having a good time. A few minutes into my ride, a considerable number of locals were lined up along the breakwater walls observing the show. I jumped over a small fishing boat and they screamed and cheered for me like crazy. Cars stopped along the street and delayed the traffic, but nobody really seemed to be bothered with that. Everybody wanted a share of the action plus nobody is stressed in Masirah anyway. Back on shore, the kids ran around on the beach following my kite in the sky.

The sea around Masirah is full of life: Pink flamingos, dolphins, seals, and giant turtles. Masirah is home to the world's largest loggerhead turtle colony and it's mind blowing to watch these amazing, giant sea turtles rolling around in the sand in order to lay their eggs. One must do everything to not scare these wonderful creatures. With a little bit of luck freshly hatched turtle babies will crawl around right at your feet. Camels freely run around the island and it can quite easily happen that you find one looking right at you while pumping up your kite.

I've never been to a country that compares to the experiences and feelings that I had in Oman and I certainly will be visiting this very unique little piece of paradise one day again in the future. This trip has left me convinced that had Sinbad known about kiteboarding, he would have stayed right here!



Photo Katharina Kaelin