

Dec 2022 / Jan 2023

# Sultanate of Oman Climbing

## Jebel Misht and Hajar Mountains

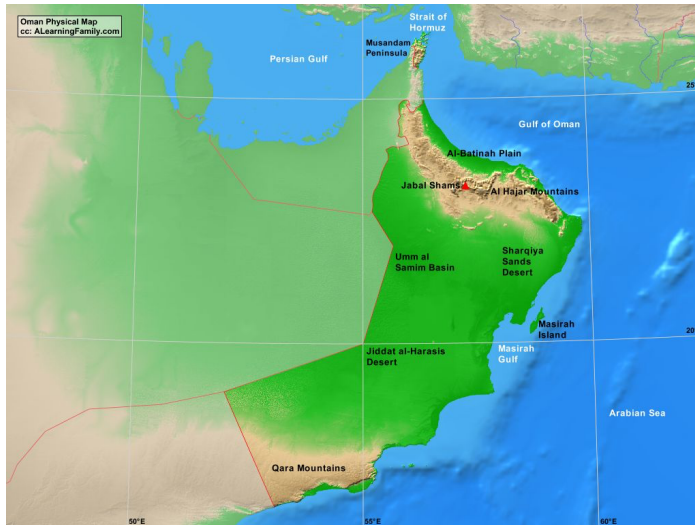
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## Summary

We travelled to Oman from 9th Dec 2022 to 9th Jan 2023 for a month-long rock climbing expedition. The nature of the climbing in Oman is varied, from single-pitch sport in Wadi Daykah to 1000m long big wall routes on the limestone faces of Jebel



Misht peak, and even some deep-water soloing within the capital city of Muscat. We started on well-established, easier routes from the guidebook but also explored off the beaten track in a 4x4, almost exclusively living in our tent, keeping costs low and taking advantage of the relaxed attitude to wild camping across the beautiful landscapes of Oman. We kept to the North of Oman, mainly around the Hajar Mountains which to the east of the capital Muscat

which is the location of the highest mountains and the most established climbing.

Our goals were as follows:

- Improve our ropework, climbing and route finding, climbing some long multi-pitch routes up to 750m
- Experience living in a remote and adventurous location, wild camping for extended periods
- Discover a different and special natural and cultural environment
- Try some exploratory climbing, going offroad to find new rock
- Produce a report about our experience, as a source of inspiration and information for other members of the mountaineering community

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## Team

We have climbed together for 3 years in 4 countries, and are excited to develop their climbing skills further together. Previous climbs together have included the north face of Ben Nevis and Aiguille Debona in Les Ecrins.



**Anahita Laverack (22)** - Imperial aeronautical engineering

- Multi pitch experience up to 350m and 15 pitches in Ailefroide
- Travel experience in India and remote trekking Ladakh region
- Led sport 6b, led E1 trad, seconded E3 trad

**Ciaran Dowds (22)** – Imperial electronic and electrical Engineering

- Led sport 7b, led E4 Trad, TD+ Alpine
- Outdoor First Aid qualified
- Multi pitch experience up to 300m and 10 pitches in the Verdon Gorge and French Alps
- Solo travel experience in Europe
- Former Imperial College Mountaineering Club President



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## Rough Costs Breakdown

4x4 Hire:	£1200
Flights:	£1100 (£550 each)
Visa:	£80 (£40 each)
Food:	£400
Sim Card + Data:	£60
Guidebooks:	£40
Hotels/Hostels:	£120 (4 nights)

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## Travel and Arrival

Snow, sun and strange supermarkets

We flew from London to Muscat via Zurich. Choosing an extended 14 hour layover knocked about £100 each off our flights and gave us enough time to pop into the city. Zurich airport is very well connected (<20 mins by tram/bus to the city center). To avoid the typically high Swiss prices, we spent most of the day walking, enjoying some snowy sightseeing. We also wandered into the KTH main campus and found an interactive exhibition on renewable energy, finishing the day with a quick pint in the student bar before returning to the airport for our onward flight.



Landing in Muscat, we got a taxi to the cheapest hotel we could find. We picked up the car the next morning. For most of the climbing a 4WD is essential as many approaches require driving on graded dirt tracks or off road along a wadi. Most online quotes were very



expensive but we didn't want to risk arriving with no booking so we compromised on a cheapish rental from Thrifty. It was a Toyota Fortuner but was very white and pristine with only 4000 kilometers on the clock. We were expecting something a bit more 'worn' and were nervous about what state we would be returning it in after a month of offroad driving. Especially as Ciaran had forgotten



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to purchase excess waiver insurance.

Before leaving the capital and traveling to our first campsite, we explored Muscat's Muttrah Souk (market), hustling past the hawkers selling their "Gucci-Rolex" jewellery and clothes. We visited local climber Larry Michienzi who lent us some cooking and camping kit (many thanks to Larry for contributing to the development of the climbing and guidebook as well as saving us lots of luggage space). We then stocked up on supplies at a large supermarket. The meat aisle had an intriguing selection including sheeps brain and camel organs and the fishmongers section was also memorable with a large aquarium behind the counter.

## Kubrah Canyon

Bolts, goats and dodgy dinner

We kicked off the trip with a visit to Kubrah Canyon. Single pitch bolted climbs, a short walk-in and a wide selection of 'holiday grades' made this an ideal first choice. As the canyon is a wadi, the bottom two meters of rock tended to be incredibly smooth from previous floods, meaning the crux of each route was always at the bottom! We camped just 10 minutes from the crag, flat ground and ready built fire pits. We found wild camping and open fire cooking was easy and totally accepted throughout Oman.



We also came across the animals that were to be our regular companion for the rest of the trip: goats. They stepped on our ropes, sniffed our climbing shoes and caused a lot of amusement in-between climbs with their shaggy haircuts and characteristic strutting. On the first day, a small group from the Omani Army were also in the canyon training climbing, and they invited us to lunch with them, offering us a seemingly endless supply of mutton kebabs, cooked over open fire.

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This crag was also the most popular of those we visited - we met Italian climbers who were bolting a new multipitch, an American couple who had just come from climbing in Saudi Arabia, and a German couple, who like ourselves were visiting Oman for a whole month.



There was one less pleasant incident during this part of the trip. Within five minutes of tucking into our main meal of the third day, Ciaran started showing signs of an allergic reaction. Flushed face, tingling tongue, and a relentless irritated cough that showed no signs of abating caused a lot of concern. The ingredients in the fairly simple meal were all foods we'd eaten before multiple times in the UK, but we thought the cause might be the aubergine, which had a huge unusual amount of seeds. This cough did become more sporadic but didn't truly vanish for the rest of the trip. This was not all! A bad insect bite caused Ciaran's hand to swell roughly 30% in size. A particular hand-jamming crack climb also aggravated the swelling, but luckily some antihistamines and rest allowed this to die down within a couple days.

## Hadash



Offroading, good rock and secluded mountain campsite

After this induction, we felt we had sufficiently familiarised ourselves with camping etiquette and climbing style. We headed to the mountain village of Hadash - which had a good range of grades from f6s through to f8s. A nerve-wracking drive up a steep dirt track took us to the remote village, which was high in the mountains surrounding the flat bottomed basin of the Gubra Bowl. The village itself



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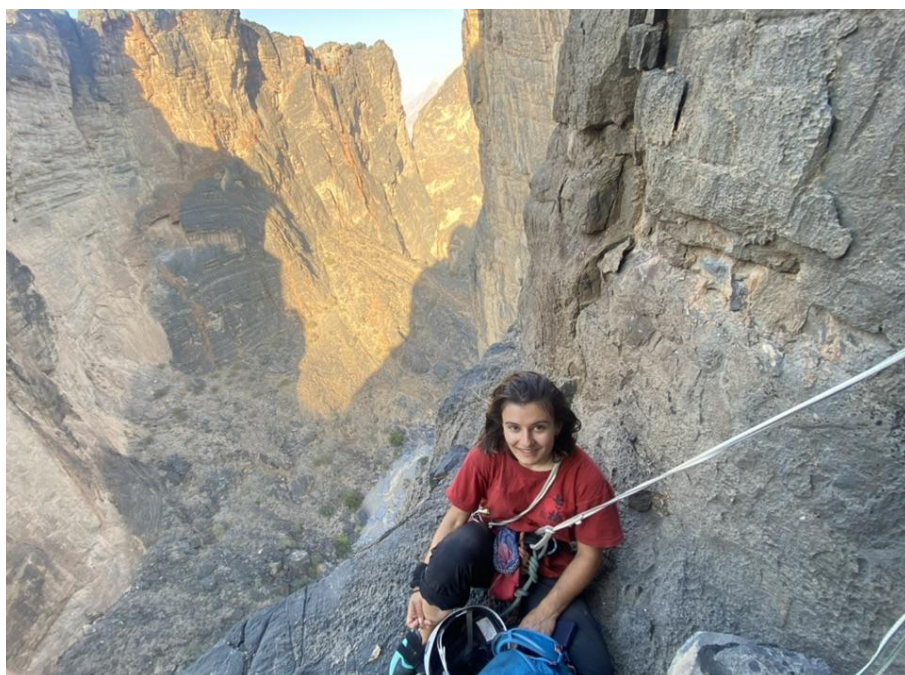
consists of traditional Omani houses and vast palm terraces, with the greenery standing out against the dry mountainous landscape.

The rock quality here was fantastic, with some beautiful climbs and an even more beautiful camping spot right below the crag. Highlights included 'Mentally Challenged', 7a+, and "Tufa Man", a steep 6b.

## Snake Canyon

Finally a wash and lots of getting lost!

Our big objective for the trip was to climb the French Pillar route on Jebel Misht. To work up to this we started with some more physical sport climbing to get used to moving on rock again. However, after 8 days of clipping bolts at Kubrah and Hadash, it was time to bust out the gear and get on some trad. We started off at the famous Snake Canyon. Although popular with adventure tourists for cliff jumping and canyoneering in peak season, we found the area very quiet in mid December.



Our first multipitch of the trip was a 170m VS. Anahita led the first pitch, a huge flake that ran 30m tall with excellent climbing, though she became slightly unnerved by snappy footholds. The sketched topo was not the most clear which resulted in confusion, and we think the route taken near the top was quite different to what the guidebook intended. The abseil

point also had a similarly vague description, and the sun had set by the time we began to descend, leaving us dangling from the ropes in complete darkness with one small head torch to share. The walk back to the tent through the canyon was very atmospheric, though we tried to make as much noise as possible to alert / scare off any snakes known to frequent the area.



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We tried buffalo meat for dinner, which after what felt like a long day was an excellent treat. As we ate, we also used up some precious mobile data to tune into a dramatic world cup final.

## **Chilling Out**

We took our first rest day, and went off in search of a place to wash. The canyon had numerous small pools where water accumulates, and we managed to wash ourselves and all our clothes in there. It was generally pretty hard to find places to bathe due to the lack of natural water features in such a dry country. Fortunately drinking water was readily available: even the smallest settlements had a mosque and every mosque was hooked up to a government installed groundwater pump with public water supply.



We also reviewed our climb from the day before. It had taken 4 hours to climb an easy 170m multipitch. Loose rock and a very vague topo were the main causes of the slow pace, but both of these would likely be present on other routes in Oman. Larger multipitches require up to 1000m of climbing, which at our pace was looking difficult in 10 hours of daylight!

## **Detour to La Gorgette**

A quick break from multipitches took us to visit one of the best sport climbing spots in Oman, La Gorgette. Anahita had injured her shoulder on the multipitch and the rest day had not helped, so we used this as an opportunity to do some shorter climbing.

To access the crag, we take a short but slightly terrifying drive above Snake Canyon and surrounding steep drops, towards the town of Bilad Sayt. This remarkable settlement appears out of nowhere, nestled among the cliff faces. The crag itself is in a narrow "alley", complete with an ancient rock staircase, used as a passageway from the town to a nearby mosque and plantation. The tufa-style rock was like nothing else in Oman and the steepness of the rock gave a good range of grades. The climbs were in a good shade all day and it was great to see and chat to the villagers as they passed through. Interestingly the lower bolts of the climbs have been hijacked by the locals to hang water pipes from the mosque up to the plantations in the town.

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## Back to Snake Canyon

We returned to the canon to climb a 250m multipitch called 'Help I've lost a Friend'. We started at 8:30am and aimed to complete it, up and down, in a generous 5 hours ..... And returned to the bottom at 4:30pm, 8 hours later. The first 3 pitches were quick and easy (about UK Severe) but we weren't confident we were on exactly the correct crack and corner system from the get-go. This led us on to a section that didn't even resemble the topo and we were pretty sure we were off route. We decided to just climb the most 'interesting' looking line (probably E1 / XS), encountering some very poor rock quality which caused some anxiety. Fortunately, just as we were starting to worry we'd made a bit of a mistake, we found a bolt. It wasn't the route we'd intended but at least someone had been here before. We were grateful to have some solid protection after moving through steep and brittle rock and decided to follow a line of spaced bolts off to the right. We were a bit disappointed to find more poor rock to come. This time, 60m of slabby, snappy, flakes with



no protection lead to the summit. Again we struggled to find the descent cairns mentioned in the guide and found our own way down.

It was interesting to do some off route exploring and the climbing would have been excellent were it not for the scary rock. We were left a bit nervous of the larger multi pitches to come, doubting our route finding skills and losing faith in following the guidebook topos to get us up and down in good time.

Absolutely exhausted, we drove to the well-recommended Jebel Shams plateau to camp for the night, and got into bed, excited for a long rest. The location was a big mistake. We were woken up by groups arriving at 1am, who then stayed up until sunrise with music playing, giving a very sleepless night.

## Jebel Shams and Stolen Chicken

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Needless to say, we weren't in a fantastic mood the next morning. Feeling quite hungry after the multipitch, we decided to cook a big meal - fried chicken with curry. Chickens can only be bought whole, so Anahita had just finished dicing a whole raw chicken into chunks and was washing her hands when .... turning back to the meal ... she saw a goat, head buried in our pot, raw chicken swallowed whole! By the time she ran back and shoo'd it away, most of the chicken was gone, much to the amusement of a tourist family who had just rocked up to take pictures of the plateau.

The plateau sits above Wadi Nakhr - nicknamed the 'grand canyon' of Oman. The stunning rift was made more dramatic by swirling white mist and groups of egyptian vultures circling overhead. We travelled down to the bottom of the canyon to set up our next campsite.



### **Wadi Nakhr**

After our navigation experience on 'Help I've lost a friend' we decided to do some multipitches with more obvious lines. A short but interesting 3 pitch E2 suited this well. Big rounded bulges on the first pitch conjured up images of a much smoother version of Stanage edge. The second pitch had some finery moves leading to a hand crack and the final corner pitch. The climbing was excellent and we finally managed to climb the right line, but Anahita still managed to pull off quite a large block- it seems the loose rock issue wouldn't go away. Over time we did learn to identify and avoid loose holds much better, and this was likely one of the most important parts of the training for Jebel Misht.

### **Christmas**

Neither of us had skin left on our hands, so we had a rest on Christmas, checking into one of the only hostels in Oman. Our remarkable host Mahmood had recently converted his three bedroom apartment to host 12 guests, taking himself a bed in one of the shared dorms. Amazingly helpful, he made us coffee and chatted to us about the local area before heading off for a night shift as a nurse at the local hospital, and then got up promptly the next day to take another guest for a tour on his motorbike!

We used the holiday as an excuse to try all the interesting foods available in Oman for an unusual christmas meal: camel milk, saudi arabian cheese, and a lot of lychees among other interesting drinks and meats.

### **The Cockscomb on Jebel Misht**



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We decided to drive to Jebel Misht, a huge freestanding bastion of limestone, allegedly the tallest cliff on the Arabian peninsula and the main objective for our exped. We first decided



to climb one of the smaller routes ('only' 500m) below the western 'Cockscomb' ridge as a warmup for the spectacular 1000m SE face.

Up at 5am, and began the approach to the Cockscomb, which was a two hour hike up a wadi and scree slopes. The rock was slabby and initially did not take a lot of gear, but the quality was good (not loose!!) and the climbing roughly VS. Roughly 250m up we followed an obvious crack line straight up, when

the topo route had needed us to climb more diagonally. We soon realised our mistake, but rather than downclimb we decided to follow an easy scramble in the right direction to try and join up with a neighboring route. This took us to an obvious feature in the rock that meant we could locate ourselves exactly. Since it was only 1:30pm at this point we decided to take a more difficult line to the top. This resulted in us summiting at 4:30pm, in light rain. The descent description was rather vague (see a theme here?), involving climbing along the ridge to a col and scrambling down some slabs.

Unfortunately mist had come in, reducing visibility to about 50m, which reduced as night set in. We started scrambling down what our best guess of the descent was, zig-zagging around to find the easiest sections, and roped up for most of it as by now it was dark and the rain had made the rock slippery. Eventually the terrain steepened until it wasn't reasonable to down-climb further. A very small break in the fog showed that there was a ledge and easier terrain not far below, so we rigged an abseil and descended to a plateau. By this time it was 7pm. There was still a significant height to hike down and although hard on our tired legs, at least there was no more sketchy downclimbing. We reached camp at 1030pm after an 17 hour epic of a day!



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## Prep Day

After another recovery day we decided we were ready for the French Pillar, the huge E3 graded multi-pitch was the main objective we had planned for the trip. First climbed by a French team using siege tactics in 1979, the 1000m line climbs the obvious nose-like arete that forms the SE corner of Jebel Misht.

Given our track record of getting lost, we decided to bivy on the route to give ourselves two days. Following advice we also drove to stash food and water at the base of the descent (which finishes on the other side of Jebel Misht with 20km to travel by road back to the starting point).



To get as close as possible to the start, we followed the guidebook's advice and drove up a marked Wadi. This was a nerve wracking experience, trying not to damage the car as we moved over 3km of barely passable stony terrain. After pitching the tent, we also decided to practice the approach hike to the base of the wall. This would allow us to stash our climbing gear at the base, look up at the first few pitches and ensure that we wouldn't waste time getting lost on the first morning of the ascent. This was well worth doing, as the route to the base was hard to find (we were 30 mins faster on our second hike in the following morning). We regret not having dinner, water or headtorches as the approach was much more physically demanding than expected and we got back to the tent late, dehydrated and hungry. Not ideal given the early start and demanding climbing ahead.

## French Pillar

Up at 6am, and trekked to the base of the route. Ciaran led all of the first 3 pitches for speed: a lovely HVS pitch, then a long E3 with thin moves off the belay, followed by strenuous pulling on creaky flakes, which was tricky with a full rucksack. More HVS took us to the heart-shaped middle section. This is mainly a long scramble, moving together and pitching a couple of exposed sections. We had put a lot of effort into memorising the topo and had read almost every single online account of the route, so all went to plan in terms of sticking to the correct line. We passed a food cache from the original 1979 expedition, with some rusty tins still intact. The final section of the scramble was the best due to the wild exposure - a 500m drop on one side. The climbing was still VS or below but the slabby nature meant gear was fairly sparse. We reached the bivy spot used by previous teams, and actually got a pretty decent rest.

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Next day, up at 5:30am, and physically we both felt rough. The climbing started off easy, but we got off to a slow start after disagreeing about the correct line. The crux E3 crack passed without issue and led into consecutive E1 pitches. The first of these was enjoyable but the second featured an awkward flaring chimney: impossible to fit with the rucksack, Ciaran climbed the thin, protection-less face to the right which made for a spicy lead. The last easy pitch was broken up to reduce drag and the end was a welcome sight. We had carried up two small 'mountain cakes' to celebrate Anahita's birthday on the summit.



The descent was pretty brutal. About 1000m of descent in about 2.5km. Constantly steep bouldery terrain killed knees and morale. Legs were already tired from the two days of slab climbing, and we both fell over multiple times. Dehydration and lack of food made this worse, and we were relieved to reach the bottom and our water stash.

It was a 20km walk back around the Misht to our tent, but we were hopeful of getting a lift. Within about 30 seconds of reaching the road, an Omani driving in the opposite direction turned around and immediately offered us a ride. We were very pleasantly surprised when our driver stopped off and treated us to sweet tea and Shawarma. It turns out hitchhiking is very easy in Oman and it is reasonably common for drivers to offer food and drink to their passengers. Kindness and hospitality to strangers

are important values in Omani culture and it made our day to return to our tent in daylight with a full stomach!



### **The Final Week**



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After completing the pillar, we didn't have any more big objectives on our list. Following weeks of wild camping and pretty much non-stop climbing, we decided to relax and explore some more. We booked a night in a hotel as a belated birthday celebration for Anahita. It was one of the limited hotels in the country allowed to serve alcohol - although at £12 a pint we only had the one! Recuperated, we returned to camping as we explored the area east of Muscat towards Sur. We visited Wadi Daykah for some short climbs. We also stopped off at the Bimmah sinkhole to have a 'pedicure' paddling alongside the native Garra Rufa feet-eating fish. We then returned to our favorite mountain crag, Hadash, to try some harder routes. Despite a few burns on the brilliant Spartacus (7b+), Ciaran didn't have the endurance to link the crux sections. On our final day we visited the impressive Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque.



Before we knew it, our time in Oman was over. We returned our borrowed gear to Larry and thoroughly cleaned and returned the car. Thankfully it made it to the end of the month unscathed. Two flights later we were back in London, soon missing the warm weather and rugged mountain scenery.

We had a fantastic month exploring Oman. It's a beautiful country and the locals are all incredibly welcoming. Logistically it was much easier to find food, water and phone signal than we expected, and the freedom to wild camp almost anywhere makes traveling around incredibly easy. As a climbing destination, the weather around December is absolutely ideal and there's plenty of variety in the climbing from bolted single pitch (f5-f8c), short trad multi pitch and huge alpine-style rock routes. Most excitingly there's so much potential - we saw many unclimbed faces and big gaps between existing lines waiting for a first ascent. We think it won't be long until we head back again for more.



Once again, our thanks to the Imperial College Exploration Board for providing funding towards this trip. Without them it wouldn't have been possible to fund a trip like this. We

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hope this report will inspire others to visit Oman. If you're interested, please don't hesitate to get in touch - we'd be very happy to share our experience and help answer any questions (email [ciaran\\_dowds@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:ciaran_dowds@hotmail.co.uk)).