

Greece-Turkey-Iran-UAE-Oman Tour 2002/2003

1st of March > 31st of March 2003

In the morning of March 1st a strong wind caused a sandstorm, we had to stay inside the car to have our breakfast without chewing sand! As quickly as possible we went on with our journey, this day we drove up Jebal Samhan. This mountain range is situated east of Salalah, and is limited by a steep cliff towards the coastal plain. We took the rough road through wadi Hinna which winds up into the hills. Approx. half way up there is another spring, and also a group of Baobab trees. How those trees did get here nobody knows, for they only grow in Africa. Some people think sailors did bring the seeds in the past, others say the monsoon winds brought the seeds to this place. We were very pleased to see these magnificent trees again, we like the typical shape. At this time of the year the trees are leafless so they didn't provide enough shade to stay a bit longer. Temp. were as high as 34°C., and we hoped we could have a swim at the spring just nearby like we did on our first visit to Oman. This spring is situated in the surrounding forest, but also this spring had a sign now warning for Bilharzia!

After this bad luck we drove further up the mountain, passing the village of Tawi Atayr and driving over the plateau of Jebal Samhan. The people who live in these mountains are known as Jabalis. They speak their own dialect and have their own distinct dress, a wrapped skirt and head band. On this plateau we saw some typical plants growing, giving the impression of being somewhere in Africa. We drove right up to the edge of the escarpment and found a spot to stay for the rest of that day and the night. The view down to the coastal plain, some 1300m. below, was breath-taking! Temp were much more comfortable and no mosquitoes to keep you awake!

After a cool sleep, temp dropped to 15°C, we had a walk along the edges of the escarpment to have a closer look at the flora of this mountain. We saw several beautiful Draceana trees, we think they must be very old. They only grow along this sheer rock face and on some similar places in Jebal Qara and Jebal al Qamar more to the west. We also found a very spiny Euphorbia species which looked like a very old Bonsai and a cacti-like Euphorbia. On the plateau we found 2 species of Stapelia which had dried in considerably, just longing for the next monsoon rains. Of course we saw many unknown species, several of them in flower.

After this first acquaintance with the 'alpine' flora of Oman we drove back down to the coastal plain and Salalah. There was still a stormy wind blowing, causing a real sandstorm at places and sometimes we even had to put our lights on!

After some shopping and some 'internetting' in Salalah we went on along the west coast to Mughsayl beach. There are many pavilions built for shade along the beach, during the summer turtles still use the beach to lay their eggs. Here we found a suitable spot to stay for the night.

After a good night we continued on the road in the direction of the Yemen border. Ascending from the beach at Mughsayl begins the road that is one of the most incredible engineering achievements in Oman. After winding up for a few km. over the first hills, the road spirals down in 5 hairpins to the foot of a 1000m.high mountain. Starting at the bottom in wadi Afawl, the road was sliced across the sheer face of this mountain in a series of 8 hairpins to the summit. The road then follows along the crest of the mountain range running parallel to the coast. You can imagine the wonderful views! When we came over the first hills, we saw a beautiful beach in a bay where wadi Afawl ends in the

ocean. As far as we could see it was only possible to get there on foot, but when we came on the bottom of this road we saw a track leading into the wadi. It was possible to follow this track for a few hundred metres into the wadi, we decided to park our car at the end of the track and walk to this 'paradise beach'.

It turned out to be an interesting walk too, many nice plants were growing in and on the sides of this wadi. We saw some remarkable frankincense trees(*Boswellia sacra*), Dhofar is said to produce the finest frankincense in the world. These trees grow wild from the Salalah plain onto the mountains and across the desert beyond. Its collected from December through May. A strip of bark, shaved from the tree trunk, leaves a wound oozing sap called luban. Once its hardened its collected, the clear and light form being the best quality.

Until late that afternoon we stayed on this wonderful beach and after taken a shower at our car we went on again on this amazing road along the coast. We wanted to go to the village of Rakhyut , a small village at the end of a steep forested gorge with a beautiful beach. We had been here before during our first visit to Oman . But this time we came across a military check-point just before the Rakhyut turn-off. The soldiers said we were not allowed to continue without a special permit from the authorities in Salalah! After some discussion, we tried to persuade them to let us through by showing some of the pictures we had taken of Rakhyut on our first visit, they got a bit doubtful. After they called one of the senior officers for advice, the answer was a clear no! We think the threat of a war between the USA and Iraq made the Omani army more careful, and of course the proximity of the Yemen border. A bit disappointed we drove back to the Mughsayl beach to stay for the night.

When we had breakfast in the morning of March the 4 th , we saw a school of dolphins just off the coast. We returned to Salalah to do some shopping again, after this we again went eastward along the coast. We first visited the tomb of Bin Ali just before the town of Mirbat .

It's an onion-domed mosque built over the tomb, around the tomb is a large cemetery with inscribed headstones. Mirbat was an important port for the frankincense trade, there are still some old merchant's houses with carved doors and windows and a small fort next to the sea.

From Mirbat we decided to take a brand new road in the direction of the village of Sadh , further east along the coast. Unfortunately the road was still under construction, after a while we had to follow the rough track again. From Sadh we followed an even worse track to the village of Hadbin , here we saw several protected bays and some secluded beaches.

When we stopped at one of these bays to see if we could stay there for the night our dog Lex tried to chase a camel... he never did this again, the camel just kicked him a few metres in the air !! Just the right way to get some respect for camels... Just before Hadbin we found a spot to stay for the night close to the sea, here we also could make a phone call with my mother for her birthday!

Next morning we took the same very rough track back to Sadh, we had hoped to continue along the coast back northwest but the track ended in Hadbin. Back in Sadh we saw some old merchants houses again, in one of them there was a tyre repair shop the inside being a complete chaos! Soon we were surrounded by a lot of children, many of them having a black skin and African looks. In the past parts of the east African coast were colonized by the Omanis, for instance the island of Zanzibar was an Omani colony for centuries.

Here in Sadh we saw the 'results' of this African connection. When we went to see one of the other old houses, a young man in a car approached us. He introduced himself as Mohammed, and asked in

good English if we wanted to see some old pictures of Sadh. He invited us to come and see those pictures and of course drink some tea at the town hall, he had a job as a municipality official. So we followed him to the town hall and were introduced to all the people in the building, giving us a feeling of being very 'important'! After he showed us around and drinking tea, he proposed to go out on the ocean with a boat of one of his friends. We raced down to the harbour, Mohammed driving in front of us like a mad man! His friend was already waiting at the harbour. It turned out to be another Mohammed, a fisherman and a very friendly and nice guy. After I had lifted Lex in the boat, a new experience for him, we sailed out on the ocean. The sea was quite rough at times, and soon I didn't feel very well! We decided to stop in one of the secluded bays along the coast, another passing fishing boat gave us some fresh caught fish. After we had a swim, Mohammed the fisherman made a fire and roasted the fish. After a delicious meal, we sailed back to Sadh. Now we went to Mohammed's house to get his camping and fishing equipment because they wanted to come with us to stay for the night at one of the beaches near Sadh. Mohammed the fisherman had gone to his house to get all kinds of food for the evening meal. After we arrived at the beach we first went fishing together, Mohammed the fisherman also did dive up some Abalone, a kind of sea snail. After we caught several fish, Mohammed the fisherman prepared a nice meal on a fire again. The first Mohammed turned out to be a real charmer; José had to warn him several times not to go to far! She almost could be his mother....

Next morning we went back to Sadh together, here we said good-bye to these nice guys and promised to visit them if we ever would come back to Oman again. Because it was not possible to follow the coast past Hadbin we had to return to Salalah and from here drove back inland. From the town of Thumrait we followed a graded road towards the oilfields of Marmul over a wide open plain. It was quite difficult to find a way across the field with its grid of pipelines, after an 8 hours' drive through a dusty, hot and boring landscape we arrived in the town of Shuwaymiyah and back on the Arabian sea coast. We straight went to wadi Shuwaymiyah which begins just outside town, its possible to drive into the wadi on a graded road. We had been here during our first visit to Oman in 1998, at that time we liked this wadi very much. And after this second visit we think this still is the most beautiful wadi of Oman . This wadi is unlike others in that the vertical bluffs are of white limestone. Against the cliff face are a few palm groves with deep freshwater pools. Lining the cliffs are long fingers of a porous sponge-like material called travertine. At one of these groves was a nice spot to stay and we first went to the pool to have a swim after this exhausting day!

In the early morning of March the 7th we returned to the pool to have another swim and enjoy the beautiful view down the wadi. After this we drove further through the magnificent scenery, everywhere there are beautiful shaped Acacia trees. We saw a gazelle, but also hyena, jackal and ibex can be spotted in this wadi. In the afternoon we went back to the nearby beach and found a spot to stay for the rest of that day and the night.

After a cool night we followed the graded road further back inland again in the direction of Qahal. After a while we took a take-off to the village of Sharbithat , but could not find a suitable place to stay here. We continued on the very rough and desolate track, but luckily just before the town of Qaysad (Qahal) this terrible track had turned into a brand new blacktop road! From Qaysad we followed one of the many tracks towards the lagoon of Khawr Ghawi, the largest and most scenic lagoon of the coast. This lagoon stretches for 6km, separated from the sea by a narrow sandbar with

its northern end open to the sea. We saw many flamingos and found a spot to stay for the night between some acacia trees with a view over the lagoon.

Next morning we followed some tracks to get to the nearby Pink lagoon. These lagoons are completely cut off from the sea, so the water has become extremely saline. A particular kind of alga which blooms in this extreme environment gives the water a deep pinkish colour.

From here we drove further over tracks along the coast, after several km. we came back on the new blacktop road again. After some time we took another turn-off to yet another lagoon, Khawr Dhiris. Here we spend the afternoon and saw all kinds of birds coming to this beautiful lagoon. In the late afternoon we went on to Ras Madrasah, here we took a rough and bumpy track to a deserted beach and found a suitable spot to stay for the night.

In the morning of March the 10th a passing car waked us, it were fishermen going to their boats. We had a walk to the other end of the beach to a shipwreck; it must have been a Greek ship according to the lifeboat which carried the name of the port of Piraeus on its side.

From this nice place we took the new road to the village of Duqm , again over a hot empty plain. We tried to get some food in this village, but there wasn't much to get! The fridge was becoming empty! We decided to go to the coast again to find a nice beach protected by a rock face on the landside, here we could swim and lay in the sun. The rest of that day and night we didn't see any other humans and felt like being the only people left on this world!

Next morning we woke up early to see the sun rise out of the ocean, it was still cool and in the distance we saw a mist creeping over the hills. We drove back to Duqm and to a nearby desalination plant to fill our water tanks. Everywhere in Oman you can find places where you can get drinkable water for free. Along the coast there are several desalination plants where drinkable water is made out of seawater. At the plant near Duqm there are even places made where you can take a shower! After we found a few shops to buy some food we went on to a beach near Sidarah. Just before the graded road reached the beach we followed some tracks which ended at a long secluded beach with a white cliff at the north end. We drove up this beach and stayed here until late that afternoon before we went on to the small fishing village of Khaluf . It had already turned dark before we reached Khaluf, so we decided to stop for the night somewhere between the surrounding sand dunes. After a while a pick-up truck came out of the middle of nowhere, 2 men and a woman jumped out to see if we maybe had some trouble. After we explained there was nothing wrong with our car, or us they asked if we would like to come with them to a party somewhere nearby. We already had heard the exciting sound of drums in the distance that night, but we said we were too tired to join them. Somewhat later we climbed up a sand dune to hear the typical singing together with the beat of the drums and we felt sorry we didn't go there together with those Bedouin people!

Following morning we woke up early again to drive on to Khaluf, a village which still has many traditional houses build of palm leaves. When José wanted to take a picture of one of these houses 4 women came out to see what was going on, inviting José in to have a look!

After a while I also was invited to come in and drink tea, even though there were no husbands or other male relatives around! These kind women still wore traditional colourful dresses and also the burqa, a kind of face mask. After this tea break we went to the nearby beach to see the fishing boats bringing in their catch. The fish was traded and cleaned straight on the beach, mostly done by people from India and Pakistan . We could drive over this beach to the nearby 'pink beach', this beach is

covered by millions of small pink button-top shells giving it its pink colour. After we had another break here, we went on in northerly direction again along the coast. From the village of Filim we went inland again towards the town of Sanaw, a distance of more than 200km along the edges of the Wahiba desert. Temp. were very high again, 40°C and more! After some time we saw a forest of Acacia trees in the far distance, here we went to have a break until the late afternoon. Then we went on again to Sanaw, from here the landscape becomes more mountainous. By eight o'clock that evening we arrived back in wadi Muaydin, at the spot near the water channel and 'waterfall'. Next thing we did was taking a shower at this waterfall, also our dog Lex liked to have a shower this time!

Next day we cleaned the car and washed our clothes, no problem with all this water! Although temp had dropped to 24°C in the morning there was still a warm wind blowing drying our washed clothes with high speed. After a while a big family arrived in a school bus to have a picnic, first 2 girls brought us some rice and meat and when I brought back the plate we were invited to join them and drink tea. One of the men spoke English. It was a very religious family, men and women were sitting separated on the carpet. When I asked permission to take pictures, I was not allowed to take pictures of the women. After we said good-bye to this friendly family we went to the city of Nizwa to send some e-mails and do some shopping. From Nizwa we drove to wadi Tanuf, in the evening we found a place to stay for the night at the wadi entrance. Still being 34°C in the late evening!

After a warm night we went back to Nizwa next day. Because it was still early, and we found a shaded parking place, we left Lex in the car to go and see the impressive fort and some of the old parts of the souq. This day being a Friday, there was also a sale of goats and sheep on a square. This always attracts a large crowd, a good opportunity to make some nice pictures. From Nizwa we went into the mountains again, first we went to the village of Al Hamra and from here followed a graded road along wadi Ghul which slowly winds up Jebal Akhdar.

Jebel Shams, mountain of the sun, is the tallest peak in Oman at 3009m. Unfortunately the summit is a restricted military zone, but just before the gates of this area a track leads to the right. After some km. this track skirts the edge of a spectacular canyon on the left, it's a 1000m., almost vertical, drop to the wadi below. At an altitude of 2000m. it was much cooler than in the wadi below. We had been here also on our first visit to Oman, at that time we camped on the edge of this canyon. But this time weather wasn't so nice with poor visibility, as soon as we had stopped on the plateau we were surrounded by some children trying to sell handmade carpets. We also had come here to search for *Dionysia mira*, the only species of *dionysia* growing so far south. We knew it only grows in the summit area of the Jebal Akhdar range at alt. between 2000—3000m. Because this summit area wasn't accessible we were afraid it would not be possible to see this *dionysia* in the wild. Other interesting plants which grow on Jebal Akhdar are: *Euphorbia larica*, *Monothea buxifolia* and *Euryops arabicus* which we found in flower. A bit disappointed we returned to Al Hamra, from here we took a rough track to the village of Hat on the other side of the Jebal. When we had reached an altitude of approx. 2000m., we found a place to stay for the night.

In the morning of March 15th, after a cool night, we continued our way to Hat. The sky was crystal clear again, after some km. we saw an interesting cliff at the track side. After we had stopped to take a closer look, we saw to our surprise some plants of *Dionysia mira*! All of them were growing on vertical cliffs, being almost inaccessible. After a while I found one spot where I could climb up the

rocks, at last had we found *Dionysia mira*! Some of the plants were still in flower and I could make the first pictures of *dionysias* in the wild on this trip.

There was also a *Viola* sp. growing on the same spot. After following the spectacular track further down to Hat, we saw a wet rock face covered with ferns together with *D.mira* and an orchid. Water was dripping down from overhanging rocks, *D.mira* growing on the slightly drier parts of the rock. After this surprise, we followed the track further through wadi Bani Awf and then went back to Muscat . We now had to go to the Iranian embassy to see if we would get our visa, but again it was refused! They advised us to go to the Iranian consulate in Dubai in the UAE. We had to return to the UAE anyway because our visa for Oman expired the next day. Of course we were a bit concerned about the situation, a threat of war in Iraq and only one chance left to get visa for Iran ! Nevertheless we started our journey back to the UAE, but we first found a suitable place near the sea to stay for the night.

Next day we crossed the border at Wajajah, again without any trouble. We went straight on to Dubai, after some searching we found the Iranian consulate. Because the application forms had to be type written, we had to find one of the special shops where this could be done. We also had to find a place to make copies of our passports. After all this was done it had become too late to go back to the consulate, so we found a place on the beach right in the middle of Dubai to stay for the night!

First thing we did next morning was to go back to the Iranian consulate again to hand over all the paperwork. The man who helped me said it would be no problem to get the visa and we could come back after a week to get them. So, we hoped for the best and returned to the east coast again. We went to a lagoon near the city of Fujairah and stayed here for the rest of that day. We had hoped we could stay here for the night as well, but in the evening the wind had turned bringing a bad smell of rotting fish! A few hundred metres away the beach was covered with fish which was put there to dry. We turned back to Khor Fakkan, to a place we already had been before. Until the 24 th of March we stayed at the east coast, we went to all the places we had been before mostly on beaches. In this time we also met some people from Holland who lived in Abu Dhabi and came here for the weekend. In the meantime the war in Iraq had started, we just hoped this war would not take too long for we were a bit concerned about our visa!

In the morning of March 25th we returned to the Iranian consulate again to see if we could travel back to Iran . When the man at the consulate asked for our passports we were very relieved, now he could enter the visa in our passports! We had to come back next day to get the passports with those most wanted visa. After this we went to the shipping agency in nearby Sjarjah to ask when the ferry to Bandar Abbas would sail. The next ferry to Iran would depart 4 days later, so we decided to go back to the beach in Dubai to stay for the night and get our passports the next day at the consulate. After this we returned to the east coast again to stay for the following days.

In the morning of March 29th we drove back to Sjarjah again to get our ferry to Iran . After the usual paper hassle we sailed out in the late afternoon. Again this time we got permission to stay and sleep in our car. We also met a nice Iranian guy and his Filipina wife who lived in Dubai and went to Iran to visit their family for the Iranian New Year called Nowruz.

After a good night we arrived in Bandar Abbas next morning. Here the crazy bureaucracy started all over again, after 6 hours and seeing all offices in the port we finally were allowed to enter Iran. José already had changed her clothes while on the boat and looked like a real Iranian woman again.

In the late afternoon we drove through the crazy traffic in Bandar Abbas to find a nice and quiet place somewhere outside the city. Finally a place to recover from this mad and busy day!

Next day we started our journey through Iran in northeast direction towards the city of Bam. Near the town of Jiroft we tried some tracks into the mountains in search for plants. We found several *Astragalus* species already in flower and heard the call of the cuckoo the first time this year. We also found a place to stay for the night.