

taSawur
Sultanate of Oman

Photographer Gerald Mclean



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A Photographer's Dream

Introduction

During 1991 I travelled to the Sultanate of Oman. After spending the first three months shooting hotel brochures and advertising assignments, I began the project. To 'go anywhere, and photograph anything, that showed Oman's beauty, its people, and progress; under the wise leadership of, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id Al-Sa'id'.

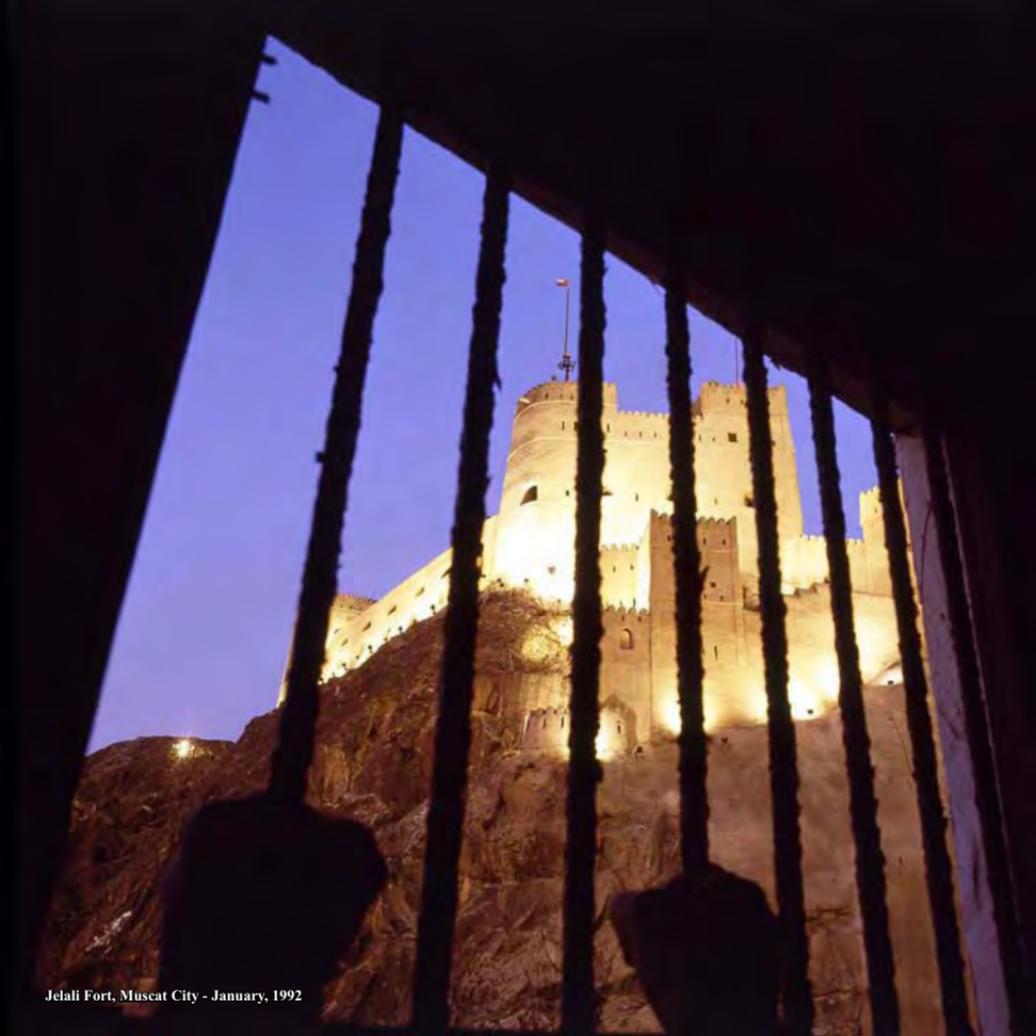


So, I set off with the intention to visit as many inhabited places, irrespective of how awkward or inhospitable the journey proved; across some of the most dangerous roads that I had ever experienced, in a four-wheel drive vehicle, in which I had little to no experience. In the back of the jeep were the best camera systems available; Lica, Hasselblad and Sinar, needed to get the job done. 'A Photographer's Dream'.

This is a chronological account of the project, and trips to the interior, expressed through anecdotes, of my experiences.



RGO Mosque, Seeb - January, 1992



Jelali Fort, Muscat City - January, 1992

5th March 1992, Wadi Makhl (Wadi Bani Khalid)

265km from Muscat and 800 metres above sea level; Wadi Makhl has water all year round, and is suitable for swimming. It's not sign posted in English and therefore, can be hard to find. The nearest map reference is Wadi Bani Khalid, on Route 23 to Sur from Muscat. Then, turn left onto a dirt road through the mountains. Then, left again, at the beginning of the first village you come to on the other side. Welcome to Wadi Makhl. A 'Wadi', for those who don't know, is a steep-sided watercourse; a seasonal river that runs between mountains. When it rains in the interior (I'm told), you can hear distant 'warning shots', as millions of gallons of water, gush through wadis to lower lands. Taking with them, anything in their path. In many cases, everything is back to normal within forty-eight hours.



I found Wadi Makhl by firstly going to Wadi Bani Khalid, and then being guided by a local, having ended up on a dead end road. I was somewhat, apprehensive at first, as we seemed to drive forever, along a very rough graded path. But eventually, it opened up into a place of natural beauty, with large chalk white rocks, which supported a tree next to a waterfall refilled from a sapphire pool, warmed to the delicate temperature of 30°C. To think I get paid for this!

Finally, I've actually started the project, I now hope to begin a series of three day trips within a couple of days.

8th March 1992, Al-Ashkara

350km from the capital area, approximately four and a half hours drive, with tarmac roads all the way. I headed along Route 23 to Sur, then turned right after 280km (3hrs), onto Route 35, then followed the road to Al-Ashkara. There I met Thbit Hamad Hassan, who teaches English at Ras Qumayla Primary School, and his friend Mohamed Salim, who showed me around the town.

At dusk, I attempted to rescue a man whose vehicle was stuck on the beach, but ended up getting stuck myself. Firstly, I unloaded the camera equipment to safety; then started to dig out the sand around the wheels. This didn't help. In fact, it left me with all four wheels spinning free, the chassis resting on the sand. With the tide now a couple of metres away, and edging nearer, the prospect of losing my jeep, within the first week of shooting, was a tangible reality. Just then, two Omani men came to my aid. The first thing they did was to replace the sand, which I had spent my time removing from under the wheels. They then let half of the air out of the tyres, put the jeep into 'four-wheel high', and drove it off the beach. After reloading all the cameras back into the jeep, and thanking them a thousand times, I found somewhere safe to park, and went to sleep.

9th March 1992, Al-Ashkara

This morning, I photographed Khalifa Abdula, the local maker of fine carved wooden doors. Mohamed Salim, showed me his collection of dried shark fins on the roof of his house, awaiting a buyer. At 12:45pm, I met with Thbit again, to go on a tour of Ras Qumayla, about 12km away.









Muhalab bin Abi Sufra Mosque, Muscat - April, 1992



By 7:30am I was in Quriyat. Gasping for water, something to eat and a cigarette. Mine were still floating in the jeep. The water I got, but all the shops were closed. There was no AC. I had arrived during a power blackout. I headed to the police station for help. After listening to my story, they tell me, 'you should not be travelling alone', and, there is nothing they can do. I should try the local municipality. So they gave me a lift, and left me there. The municipality listen to my story, they tell me 'you should not be travelling alone', and, there is nothing they can do. I should try the road-works company up the road. So they gave me a lift, and left me there. The local road-works company send an operator with his path clearing machine, weighing several tons. After some time, we almost got close. But there was this one section of soft sand, and if we did not turn back, we would have definitely got stuck. As we got back to the dirt track, the manager turned up. We tried to use his jeep to go, but his balloon tyres were not well suited to the terrain. And he turned back. That's when I spotted them. Europeans, brave / mad. Just like me. They had the larger version to my jeep, which is still being repaired back in Muscat. They were out touring the interior, looking for adventure. Just like me. Now, I just had to put it to them right, to get them to go. It worked.

I entertained my four new friends (a KLM captain 1st and 2nd officer and Cabin Service Director), as I guided them where no sane person would go. And kept them going with "it's just around the next corner". Just as that began to wear thin, there it was, and they couldn't believe it. They were really enjoying themselves. After they took all the photographs necessary, to show what could be achieved by an Englander, a jeep, and a relatively small amount of water, we used my newly acquired knowledge and got across the fifteenth stream. We tied a towrope between the jeeps, and with the CSD driving the lead vehicle, and the four of us men, pushing my jeep from behind, we finally got it out and started. I'm a happy man!

With our mission accomplished we headed off, stopping to swim in one of the deeper parts of the stream. And I really enjoyed myself. I guided them, whilst my wet seat kept me awake, on a fairly easy journey back to Quriyat. Then stuffed them with suhamers (kebab lambs meat in japatta bread), and lots of cold juice, at a local restaurant / cafe. After a relaxing walk along Quriyat's beach, we headed off in convoy, back to Muscat, where we parted company at the Intercontinental Hotel. With a promise that, I would return later to buy them drinks. And take them sightseeing around Muscat (18th June).

Now I am beginning to see real danger in the project I have undertaken. And my boots need repairing. Think I had better play it safe for a while, until I get my confidence back.

24th June 1992, Bahla

3:45pm, 430km. Just got back from Bahla, where I shot pottery factories. On Saturday 27th, some local village potters will be placing pots in their mud / clay kiln. Firing on Sunday, and opening it on Monday. Think I'll return to shoot that. Tried to get shots of government pottery works, but I'll need permission, from the Crafts section of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, in Muscat, near Al-Khuwair. After something to eat, I'll go find any local museums to see what's on show, and available for shooting. The weather is very overcast, making it bad for landscape photography. Why waste film? I'll shoot the local pottery works and Bahla Fort when I revisit on Saturday 27th, if the weather is better.





Jabal Akhdar - July 24, 1992



Woman potter producing frankincense burners, Taqah, Dhofar - September 4, 1992



Mosque, Salalah - September, 1992







National Day celebrations Al-Mintab - November 13, 1992

Interim



Official Residence, Muscat - October, 1998





Modern Oman

10th February 2008, Nizwa, Bahla, Gaul, BidBid

12:20pm. I'm sat by the camera at Bahla mosque. Having waited patiently, for the sun to align to the correct position, I've got the shot I wanted. Now I plan to wait until 'Dhuhr, Zhuhr', call to prayer goes out at 12:30pm, to see if I can get a few bodies in the shot. Don't think there'll be many, as everyone's at work, so would most likely pray where they are. If I was to shoot on a Friday there would be a lot of people, but someone would probably object. If I was to shoot at dusk, I would get an excellent sky, but everyone would be blurred, due to the long exposure. So this seems this is the best time to try.

I have just been told I can't be here at prayer times. So, I'm heading to Bahla Fort, to see how the restoration work is progressing. It's now 12:28pm, 26°C.

Bahla Fort is still not open to the public. The fort has been undergoing restoration for over three years, and still has at least another two to go. I haven't been very productive in the last two days. If it wasn't for the fact that, I've got the shot of the mosque I wanted, I'd be depressed about now. I've had enough of this, think I'll go in search of a few farming shots.



Following the main road, which snakes around the south of the Jabal Akhdar, I came to Gaul, and stopped to take a few photos.

Now I am heading back to Muscat via BibBib.



BidBid has grown into a large community. With improved water distribution, small farm holdings have cropped up all over the place. And best of all, many are being cultivated by young people, which is great for the future. This means I've finally got an image that I wanted. A young Omani man reaping his crops. If I have understood him, he sells this crop for livestock feed. I have lots of images with older men farming, but was concerned that, maybe all the young men were opting for office based city jobs.





The Wave, Muscat - February 12, 2008



14th February 2008, Qantab Beach

Only a few days left on this trip. Today I'm at Qantab beach, to photograph the, 'Muscat Grand Prix 2008 Formula 2 Intercontinental Championship Motor-Boat Race'. And the weather couldn't be better. This is also part of the Muscat Festival, and the first time, teams have been invited, to use Oman as a venue. Although the meeting was billed as a three day event, today is the first day that the boats have been in the water. It's also the last day of the event. Qantab is an idyllic setting, allowing for numerous vantage points, from which to watch the race. Yet, the venue suffers from climatic

changes that affect the seas surface. The competitors inform me that, 'these boats are ideally suited for inland lakes'. Although they can race in the sea, conditions need to be dead-calm, as they are highly susceptible to even small rolling waves, as wind-sheer can lift them out of the water, causing severe injury. All agreed they were hoping to race in the nearby marina. If they were able to compete behind the sea breakers, they would have been able to race for all three days. Personally, I don't think the marina is large enough, thus raising other safety issues, given that these are speed boats.

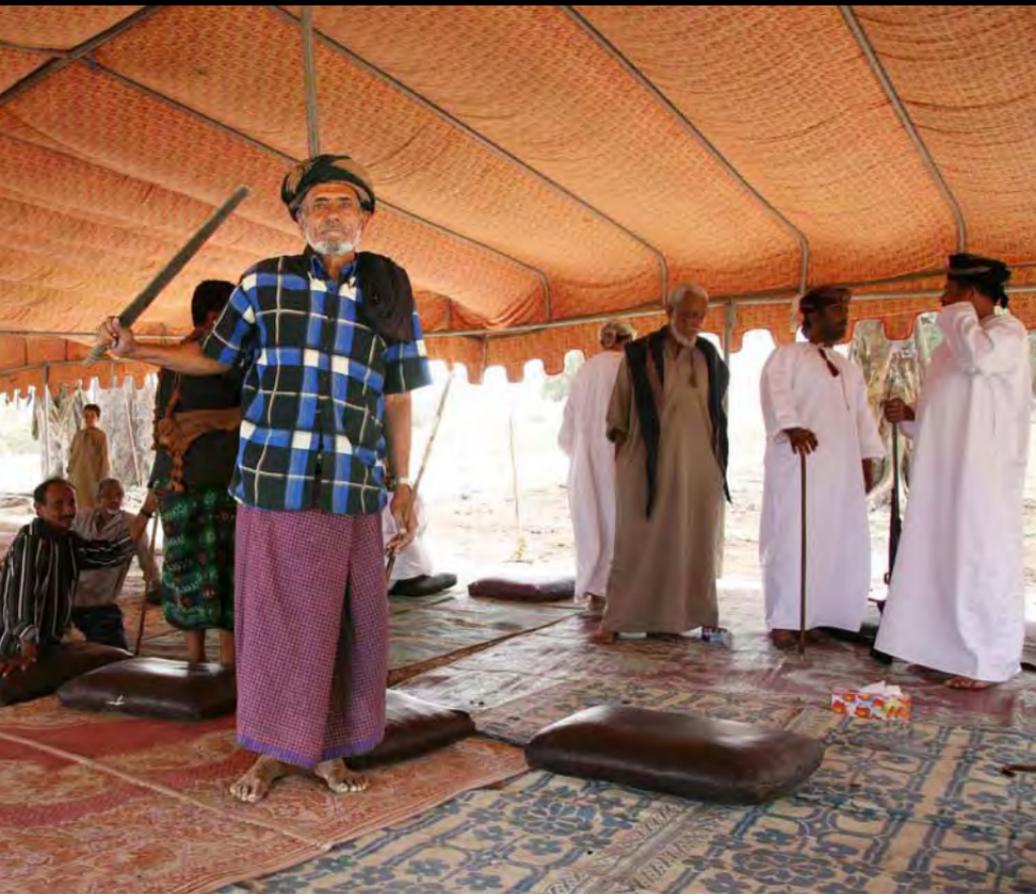
I've met and taken photographs of various teams, including the British contingent.

Flying the flag for team GB is a family from England. In boat number 1: Colin Jeff, and in boat number 2: Owing Jeff. Their father is also here, as part of the support-team. They are completely self-financed and looking for a sponsor. By the way, they are the champions, and won at the last race meeting in Malaysia. Few of the boats look like works-in-progress, as everyone has been busy adhering to the new rules. This states that the hull, surrounding drivers, must be reshaped to protect drivers, in case of impact. I'm also told that, next year, additional safety standards are to be enforced, which will entail replacing all windscreens on all boats.









Sheik Suhail Amer Mohammed Zabnoot, Dalkut, Dhofar - April 24, 2008



Elizabeth at Barr Al-Jissah, Muscat - April 27, 2008