

Oman Trip Report

In December 2021 Charles Hood from USA (hoodcw@gmail.com) and Mike Richardson from UK (mike.richardsonwinch@gmail.com) did a combined United Arab Emirates / Oman trip.

We are separating the reports into two countries to make it easier for others to use our notes.

Both reports have a similar structure:

- (1) travel and covid process
- (2) car hire, navigation, and guides / agents
- (3) impressions of the country
- (4) site listings
- (5) species listings.

(1) Travel and Covid Process.

This trip started out as a clouded leopard trip to Nepal, but as Delta surges continued to keep international destinations on one or both home country's no-visit lists, a few months before departure we tried to find a location we both could be fairly certain we could reach. For that reason, UAE / Oman became the new target.

As a side note about travel, neither of us contracted covid while on this trip. We both are jabbed and both practice the usual protocols. (We both have not had covid previously, either.)

Leaving our respective homes we both needed recent test results to check in for flights; these took longer to arrive than we had guessed. Hood got his USA results the night before leaving for the airport and Mike got his results on the drive TO the airport. It is hard to enjoy planning for a trip under those circumstances.

Once in the UAE, we needed both new tests and a completed health packet to get into Oman. We got the tests in the NMC Hospital, Al Ain. It did however take three visits. Visit 1, we left due to crowds. Visit 2, we were turned away because we did not have a local mobile number—the results only would be sent to a UAE phone, not email or international numbers. Visit 3 then we came back with the hotel manager's private mobile and we paid an extra fee to get expedited results. Those did go to his phone as promised but we had to locate him and get them forwarded to us, then had to have help from home-front spouses to get the documentation assembled into Oman's health packet (which was checked three times on arrival).

For our return flights, we had a doctor come to our hotel in Salalah, but the results came in at 11 pm and we had a 1 am check-in for flights, and to get the testing done in Salalah delayed us from leaving on a 1,100 km drive back to Muscat. Once we had the results on our respective emails, we still needed to go to an airport hotel in order to get hard copies printed, as required by our travel process. In all it was do-able, but it added a lot of stress and bother to the journey.

(2a) Customs, Car Hire, In-Country Navigation

In Oman, even though we had pre-booked our visas online, the queue at immigration was quite slow and the tone was generally indifferent / hostile. It took seemingly hours to get through, though that no doubt was made worse by two things.

The first is we got pulled aside in customs and had our hold and hand baggage re-x-rayed. (It had been x-rayed once already, but that I guess was not the “real” one?) Staff were very unhappy with us: all these batteries and lenses and Sherman traps and a birding scope and a tripod and just what kind of spies, were we, anyway? Mike R has lens caps on his bins that flip up... well, he lives in a rainy place, so that makes sense. (Living in the desert, I can’t be bothered.) That made them accuse him of having night-vision goggles, and so they x-rayed the bins all over again, just to make sure.

I had brought a mammal guide in Arabic for just such a moment, but that did no good either. One fellow was obsessed with video—as in, we were not to take any—which is daft, given that any given iPhone takes video now, and all cameras do too. I was trying to mime both a bird singing on a branch and “click click,” that the 500mm telephoto on the Nikon body was not a video rig, it was for photographing birds. The problem was, I did have a heat scope, and my usual story, that it is a kind of camcorder, would not have helped, given that video was verboten. Luckily, we got out of the holding bay without having the heat scope found / confiscated.

Second delay was that as we feared, once we finally got to Europcar, there was (a) a queue and (b) no vehicles left. In fact, of the half dozen transactions we witnessed, all the clients were unhappy. In our case we had pre-paid for a Land Cruiser, and so, no, we did not want a Ford Focus instead. After what seemed like hours and hours, they agreed to bring us a Nissan Patrol from some other site (the manager’s house?). In the most recently uploaded trip report from Birdquest, they mention having the same problem. It took hours to get the car sorted.

While waiting, we realized that Siri doesn’t work in Oman, so we had to rent a sat-nav. They did have one on hand but we later learned it had not been updated, so around the airport it was utterly useless—it did not have any of the actual slip roads or motorway exits as now exist. (In rural areas, it worked better.)

Perhaps a European phone plan would have allowed in-phone navigation? Or one could download google maps ahead of time—stupidly, we had not done this—or else bring a pre-loaded sat-nav from home. To be honest, we sort of expected the car to have one built in.

(2b) Guides and Travel Agents

In Oman we did not have any in-country guides other than Hateem, the boat operator for pelagic trips in Mirbat. He is recommended; see info below.

For flights and car hire arrangements, we used a UK agent, Sacha Barbato, who is a birder based in Norfolk. He gives super good service and we will use him again. He is recommended highly! His contact is sacha.barbato@travelcounsellors.com / ++ 44 01603 360099.

(3) Impressions of the Country

Oman is large and often beautiful, though the “Empty Quarter” in the middle is vast and mostly featureless. As Mike said at the time, he liked the somewhat chaotic nature of travel here—on average, one could pull off on the side of the road and nobody would mind. If you had camping kit and a truck, it would be easy to be self-contained and avoid hotels. When people did stop and check us out, it was usually just to be sure we were okay and did not need help.

Petrol was easy to get, but unlike UAE, the adjacent shops might be closed or have limited options. Always keep more water on hand than you think you will need.

There were a few police checkpoints, but they added only minor delays.

(4) Site Listings

(4a) Wadi Al Muaydin for Muscat Mouse-tailed Bat and Blanford’s Fox.



Wadi Al Muaydin is a scenic gravel wash below impressive rock cliffs. After five miles, the cobble-and-gravel road (high clearance recommended) ends in a village and hiking trails.

This canyon is close to the town of Nizwa, which is two hours southwest from Muscat in mountains. The Golden Tulip Hotel is recommended (and has bats around the pool). To find the right area, when leaving Muscat do navigation searches for the Golden Tulip Hotel, Nizwa Fort, Wadina Water Park, or Jabal al Akhdar Grand Hotel.

To find the wadi itself, you want the unpaved road that branches north off from the paved (and checkpointed) road to Jebel Akhdar, leaving the road before it begins to climb into mountains.

You could camp here if so equipped. As Jon Hall's note says, there is a fair amount of traffic, at least there is from sunset to midnight—sometimes a vehicle came by every few minutes.

Lots of unidentified bats after dark. We have recordings and will post updates if we get any IDs.

To find the day roost of the mouse-tailed bats, drive about 1-2 km up the canyon and look for an obvious ground-level cave on the right, about 100 meters from the track. Geckos here too.



We set traps along the side of the wadi closer to the entrance and had one **Eastern Spiny Mouse**.



A **Blanford's Fox** was seen in heat scope and spotlight early in the evening (within an hour of sunset) and was closer to the Wadi entrance than previous reports have said. It was high up on a near-vertical cliff face. As Mike notes, "Blanford's Fox are extremely agile and surefooted (think 'Squirrel Fox,' not 'Fox Squirrel'), and avoid predation from Red Foxes by utilizing extremely steep cliff faces and canyon walls. If mammal watchers are finding only Red Fox in a particular area, they may want to consider searching for steeper, near-vertical habitat."

(4b) Mirbat Pelagic Trip

If you stay in Salalah (which is where most of the tourist resorts are), it's about a 40-minute drive to Mirbat, which is a ramshackle fishing port. To find the harbor, exit the motorway and head towards the center of town and work your way to an un-signposted but obvious port.

You can contact boat captain Hateem through Facebook ("Mirbat Pelagics") and try your luck for cetaceans and seabirds. Late October seems to be peak season for bird variety, into mid-November. Our December trip had fewer bird species and numbers than an earlier trip would have gotten. We did have green sea turtles, manta rays, and jellyfish, plus a mixed pod of **bottlenose**, **spinner**, and **common dolphins**.

One distant Jouanin's Petrel was of interest to CH; October counts of this go past 65 per trip.



He has two boats; the larger and (one assumes) more stable one was out of commission, so we went out in an open fishing dory. Hateem speaks English and is a good spotter. Recommended.

(4c) Taqah for Humpbacked Dolphins

Between Salalah and Mirbat, the town of Taqah has a long stretch of public beach and we had **Indian Ocean Humpback Dolphins** from shore at west end of the start of the beaches. There was no reason they should have been there and nowhere else, but one can see the ocean easily from this part of the coast. We had a scope with us but you could have done ID with bins only.

(4d) Khawr ad Dahariz Estuary, Salalah

At the east end of Salalah there is a beach and estuary good for birds. We tried trapping in the wasteland between the estuary and the army base further east, since there were gerbil holes by the bushes. We just caught one **black rat**. The estuary itself has flamingos and slender-billed gulls and other avian features.



(4e) Inland Canyons in the Dhofar Mountains around Salalah

The combined lists for these canyons include sightings of honey badger, genet, caracal, bats, rodents, yetis, snakes, foxes, wolves—if you can imagine it, it has been seen here.

The most famous site is **Wadi Darbat**. We had genet here but nothing fancier. (Nothing wrong with a genet, of course!) Residents stopped us to ask what we were doing, as is to be expected.

Scouting during the day we found an **Arabian Chameleon** warming itself next to camel dung.



Another potentially good site is called (we think) **Wadi Shaboon**—from the highway east of Wadi Darbat a band of trees can be seen about midway up the mountains, and there is a failed resort there. Very birdy, even midday, and we had a gazelle here. Road is starting to collapse, but for now is passable. (Use care!) High potential, even if we didn't have any good luck ourselves.

Other canyons are visible from the main motorway and we explored them randomly.

A special note on **wolf**: on our dawn commute from Salalah to Mirbat, a yearling wolf crossed the empty expressway. We pulled over right away, and in sprint-climbing an adjacent rock face, CH was 10 meters away from an adult. It did an immediate “about face” and ran off full speed.

(5a) a note on feral cats

In the UAE and Oman, feral cats abound—many with very “wild” markings. They could easily be turned into true wild cats or even genets. *Caveat emptor*.

Genet on left; cat on right.



(5b) Species Listings

- Black Rat (*Rattus rattus*)—one in traps near Khawr ad Dahariz Estuary, Salalah
- House Mouse (*Mus musculus*)—one on grounds of Golden Tulip Hotel
- Eastern Spiny Mouse (*Acomys dimidiatus*)—one in a trap, Wadi Al Muaydin
- Kuhl’s Pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus kuhlii*)—bat detector’d and seen throughout
- Egyptian Fruit Bat (*Rousettus aegyptiacus*)—one on grounds, Golden Tulip Hotel
- Muscat Mouse-tailed Bat (*Rhinopoma muscatellum*)—five in cave, Wadi Al Muaydin
- Arabian Desert Gazelle (*Gazella arabica*)—singletons in foothills inland from Salalah
- Spinner Dolphin (*Stenella longirostris*)—Mirbat pelagic (including some “spinning”)
- Common Dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*)—a few, Mirbat pelagic
- Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphin (*Tursiops aduncus*)—a few, Mirbat pelagic
- Indian Ocean Humpback Dolphin (*Sousa plumbea*)—small group seen from shore, Taqah
- Common Genet (*Genetta genetta*)—several in spotlight, Wadi Darbat
- Wolf (*Canis lupus*)—two on motorway between Salalah and Mirbat, early morning
- Blanford’s Fox (*Vulpes cana*)—Mike’s much-coveted tick, Wadi Al Muaydin
- Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*)—a few throughout