

UAE 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 just as omicron began to be a thing, 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.

(2) Car Hire, Navigation, and Guides / Travel Agents

In UAE, the prepaid hire car was ready as promised, and on Hood's phone plan (Verizon), we could use Siri to get around. The only problem was a delay in the phone seeing where we were, especially in Dubai proper, where we had already passed the exit before Siri could tell us what to do next. There is often a lot of traffic in UAE, and some of it is driving very, very fast.

In the UAE we did not hire any in-country guides: nobody listed previously in this forum is now working here or accepting clients.

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

UAE feels increasingly managed / containerized / de-naturalized. See site notes below, but unless you have a free stopover, for mammal listing (and even birding), other sites might be more productive. In Dubai proper for example, there used to be a large wetland called Rhas Al Khor, and birders have spent hours there. Due to freeway construction, as far as we could see only one access point remains open: an enclosed walkway with no viewing windows that goes from the car park to just a hide, in front of which they feed flamingos. We were not permitted to use the trails that we could clearly see (wide enough for jeeps) that went upstream / downstream from the car park. With a scope, you could see a few incidental waders from the hide, but 95% of the reserve was unavailable.

On the other hand, the infrastructure was good: at a petrol station one could also get McDonald's food or Baskin Robbins ice cream, and at the airport it was amusing to see Bentley stretch limos or supercars straight out of Top Gear. In that sense, it is very easy to get around.

Jacky Judas—used by Mark Hows and Jon Hall—no longer lives in the UAE, so not available to guide.

(4) Site Listings

(4a) Jabal Hafeet for Arabian Tahr

Jabal Hafeet is a limestone reef 1,000 meters tall reached by driving through the busy, traffic-filled city of Al Ain, two hours from Dubai. There probably is a ring road or some faster access to the mountain from the city, but we never found it. Cross-town traffic was busy and slow.

The mountain's main feature is a raceway to the top that is lit by intense streetlights spaced every 5 meters. (From a distance, the road is a continuous glowing river of light.) Crash barriers line the road on both sides, fitted as tightly as the stones of Machu Picchu. The few extant side roads are barricaded against entrance. There are fenced car parks along the way at vista points, but no

trails. The road ends at an immense car park with a cafe and a very sturdy perimeter fence; the actual Oman border is a few hundred meters further on. The road is in constant use day and night, and the primary animals at the end of the road are feral cats, along with some wheatears, soaring vultures, and coveys of snappy looking Arabian partridges.

The road up passes mostly unvegetated stone; we did put out traps in the bushes between crash barriers and cliff face, but had no luck.

A mile before the end of the road a short side road goes to the Mercure Grand Jebel Hafeet Resort, which vaguely looks like a 1970s Hilton and which once had a water park and other features (now closed off). Good food, nice staff, pretty pool: if you were traveling with civilians, it would be fine. World's slowest elevator—which only matters if (like CH) you have missed tahr from the room and are trying to get downstairs in a hurry to try from the grounds proper.

So far as we could tell, there are three places to look for tahr, which some hotel staff they see daily and some staff say they have never heard of.

Option 1: the end of the road at the top of the mountain. This may be best in summer? One is looking through a fence (or over it, if somebody has unbolted a bench and brought it near the fence), into land that is technically in Oman. We had a scope and bins and patience, and can verify that despite checking early and late and even midday, no tahr were ever visible on any of the adjacent mountains.

Option 2: just below the hotel there is a lay-by / vista point with two cafes, one called Paradise something. Using that as a starting point, go back uphill towards the hotel slowly, scanning up the gullies between road and hotel. There is a slim chance to see one that way, but do be aware there can be a lot of speeding cars on that road.

Option 3: the hotel itself. Our room faced the pool and hence bands of cliffs, and from the one-person balcony, Mike R saw two **Arabian Tahr** crossing the ravine (canyon?) directly below the pool. He called for CH, who was in the loo thinking that the neighboring room really should turn down the telly, as it sounded like some angry chef was explaining how best to prepare jars of tar. The world's slowest elevator took them down to the grounds, where Mike R saw a tahr's tail disappear over a ridge and CH saw rocks and air.

Other than the potential for tahr, and other than our as-yet-un-ID'd bat detector hits from the car park, nothing else of interest at this site.

next page: view of hotel, view from room, view of the terrain at top of the road.



(4b) Green Park (in Al Ain proper)

At the bottom of the Jabal Hafeet road, this is a combined park (?) (the “green” is some kind of well-watered succulent?) and housing estate, and maybe has golf courses? Trails? We needed to show an entrance guard covid tests to get in—well, Mike showed his (CH did not have his on him!)—and there seemed in to be internal gates as well that we opted not to circumvent. There used to be a dam here? Some big shots were touring the grounds, which very much are ready for a refresh and reboot. We just got the sense we did not belong there, and so left. We did not try to get in after hours. Hoopoes seem to like the lawns (but do not like telephoto lenses).

(4c) Jabal Nazwa Conservation Reserve for gazelles and bats

This is a fenced, no-access reserve NE of the Al Ain / Dubai road (Highway 66), but despite the fence, with a high clearance vehicle you can poke around the perimeter. It is about halfway between Dubai and Al Ain; to help Siri find it, try putting in Nazwa Mosque, Al Madam Toll Gates, Vision Cricket Centre, or even Big Red Adventure Tours, though that is a dune bashing centre a bit south and east of the preserve.

See sketch map for location of **Arabian Gazelle** and possible bat roost.



We came here to try for **Naked-rumped Tomb Bats** in crevices of low outcrops outside the fence on the north. None found in daylight or seen at dusk; the only thing seen and bat-detector'd was **Kuhl's Pipistrelle**. It is good site too for **Pharaoh Eagle Owl**, and inside the fence was at least one **Arabian Oryx** and one **red fox**, plus more **gazelles**. You could camp here if needed.



(4d) Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve

This is a large area of wild sand dunes that also has a resort inside of it; it seems to cost \$8000 usd a night? We had planned to spotlight / trap the reserve's entrance roads, up to a gate. Gates are now right at the main road on both sides; there is no actual "entrance road" in a public sense. We tried from all sides and never figured out a way into wild habitat. Tamer Khafaga (who helped Jon Hall) no longer works at the reserve, and despite several emails, we were unable to get permission to enter the reserve for spotlighting or trapping (perhaps due to Covid or perhaps due to increased security). Without permission, it is now impossible to access suitable habitat. Desert outside reserve extremely degraded.

(4e) Wadi Shees to Nahwa Road

Birders try for owls in the canyon that runs from the mountains to the coast, where Blanford's Fox is also possible. You can access it from either side. In the center is a piece of territory owned by Oman (and inside of that, a sub-territory owned by UAE); this is a soft border and you have to look hard for flags and markers even to know when you have left one country and entered another. My cell phone did know though; I got charged roaming fees for being in a new country on the same day as the other country.

The paved Khorfakkan Highway leaves Highway 89 near Defta (also spelled Daafta) and heads NE to the coastal towns of Khor Fakka and Mirbah. Halfway to the coast is a turnoff for an oasis and archaeology site (Wadi Shees), and dirt roads—SUV clearance needed—go down through Wadi Shees to the coast. Alternately, one can do it uphill from Qidfa / Mirbah Beach: you want the road going into the canyons that heads towards Madha Post Office and Madha Police Station and then on higher into Al Nahwa Old Hamlet and Nahwa Cave.

This should have been REALLY good... but we had nil luck.

We only drove the road once due to time constraints.



(5) Species Listings

- Kuhl's Pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus kuhlii*)— hotel grounds, Jabal Hafeet, plus Jabal Nazwa.
- Arabian Desert Gazelle (*Gazella arabica*)—two sites at Jabal Nazwa outside the fence (plus some, inside the fence): see map.
- Arabian Tahr (*Arabitragus jayakari*)—two from hotel balcony, Jabal Hafeet.
- Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*)—one at Jabal Nazwa.

From the hotel grounds at Jabal Hafeet we had sight and detector “hits” for lots of bats. No idea what they were.

We did not trap the hotel grounds (too much CCTV plus not good habitat).

Trapping the Jabal Hafeet road got us nil.