

DIRTY ROPES: MORE DANGEROUS THAN YOU THINK

Climbing

A woman in a red jacket and white helmet is climbing an ice wall. She is using ice axes and has a rope attached to her harness. The background is a white, textured ice surface.

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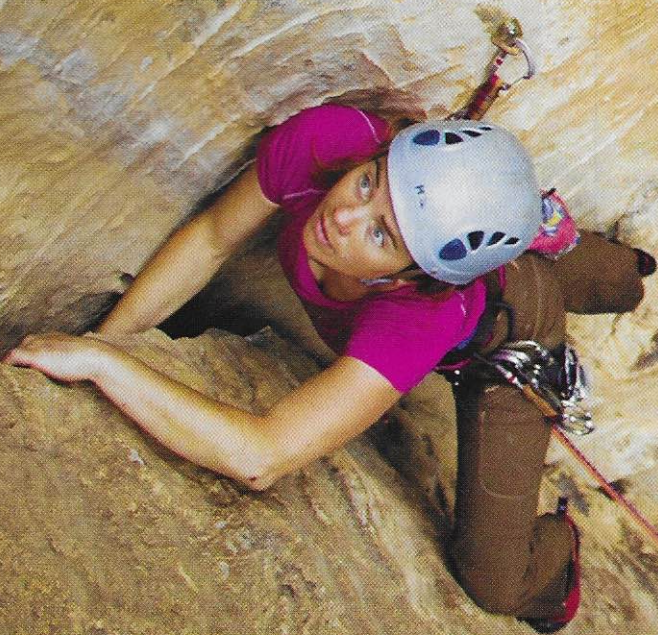
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THE RIGHT WAY
TO AVOID INJURIES

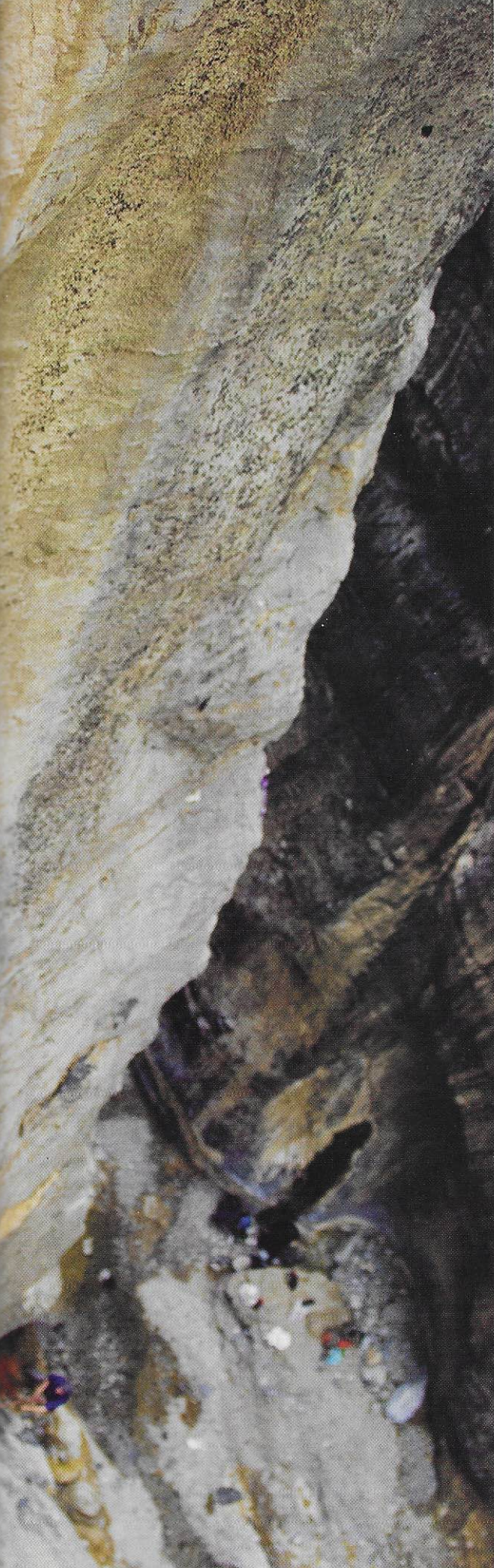
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DIAMONDS IN THE DUST





TWO WEEKS IN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN

BY MOLLY LOOMIS / PHOTOS BY GABE ROGEL

A CROWD IS FORMING BELOW ME—MEN IN LONG WHITE ROBES AND BILLOWING PANTS LEAN AGAINST THEIR CARS AND BICYCLES. SOMEONE LAYS ON A HORN, WAVING A HAND OUT A CAR WINDOW. ARABIC POP MUSIC BLARES FROM ANOTHER VEHICLE. “BE CAREFUL UP THERE!” CALLS AN INDIAN MAN PULLING ON A CIGARETTE, HIS SINGSONG TONE EXPRESSING NO REAL CONCERN.

YET HIS WARNING IS APPRECIATED AS I TAP ON A HOLLOW FLAKE THAT LOOKS LIKE IT COULD COME OFF IN MY ARMS, DROPPING ME ONTO A LINE OF GEAR SQUEEZED BETWEEN NUBS OF DUSTY, ANCIENT CORAL. THE CROWD IS UNNERVING. HERE IN OMAN, ON THE EASTERN EDGE OF THE ARABIAN PENINSULA, CLIMBERS ARE AS RARE AS AN OMANI DRESSED IN TRADITIONAL DISHDASHA AND EMBROIDERED CAP WOULD BE BACK HOME IN IDAHO.

I TRY NOT TO CURSE TOO LOUDLY. AS A WOMAN IN A MUSLIM COUNTRY, I’VE TRIED TO BE COURTEOUS AS WE TRAVEL THROUGH SMALL, CONSERVATIVE VILLAGES, WEARING A HEADSCARF, PANTS, AND LONG-SLEEVE SHIRTS. NOW, HOWEVER, WITH THE TEMPS IN THE 90S, I’M TURNING INTO A SWEATY STEW IN MY WINDSHIRT, AND I’M NOT SURE HOW THE CROWD WILL REACT IF I STRIP TO MY TANK TOP. INSTEAD OF HANGING OUT AT THE CLIMBING GYM, I SHOULD HAVE TRAINED FOR THIS TRIP IN A SAUNA.

Left: Molly Loomis eyes her next move on *Aero Friend* (5.10a), Wadi Bani Auf.





“Off belay!” I call down, searching for a spot to belay up my partners, Andy Tyson and Gabe Rogel. It appears the crack has never been climbed before. And likely never will be again. It was just something that we’d spotted from the car window, too irresistible to pass up. But that’s the wonderful problem we’re finding with Oman—there are so many opportunities along the way that the original destination becomes irrelevant.

The crowd filters back to their bicycles and cars. As I string my cordelette through a web of pieces, a low, droning call to prayer, broadcast over a loudspeaker tacked to the rafter of some hidden mosque or a palm tree, echoes through the canyon. Below me, a construction worker prays toward Mecca, kneeling on a carpet beside his bulldozer. Dusk filters through the warm air. A breeze coming off the nearby ocean rustles the date palms, bringing the smell of salt.

Andy, Gabe, and I came to Oman on a whim, looking for a warm, off-the-beaten-path place where we could experience another culture. We surfed the Internet, found Omanclimbing.com, and opened pictures on Google Earth. Convinced that Oman was worth a visit, we ordered *Oman Off Road*, a 4X4 driving guide recommended for accessing the climbing areas, and booked our tickets.

The Sultanate of Oman has received little attention from North American travelers. While it lacks the abundant oil of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Oman was not wholly left high and dry, and this country of 3.1 million has modernized under the reign of Sultan Quaboos. Prior to 1970, Oman had just five miles of paved road, two hospitals, and two schools. Today, the country boasts multiple hospitals, universities, and a slowly expanding network of paved roads—although 4X4ing to the climbing sites is still part of the fun.

The Oman climbing scene is perhaps best known for the Jebel Misht massif, an El Cap-sized wall sitting in the desert like a marooned ship. In 1979, a French team made the first successful ascent of Misht’s southeast face and was whisked from the summit by helicopter, back to the Sultan’s palace to celebrate. In the early 2000s, two French guides working in Oman, Nathalie Hanriot and Patrick Cabiro, began developing areas like Coco Canyon, Wadi Tiwi, and La Gorgette. In addition to transient visitors traveling with drills, a small but active crew of resident expats, including Kim Vaughn and Bill Huguelet, have developed numerous crags within a day’s drive of Muscat, the capital and largest city. Information, especially about the less popular crags but even on cliffs like Jebel Misht, can be tough to come by. A route name, date, grade, and maybe an aspect are what you’ll get, if you’re lucky.

Left: Dream of wild wadis: en route to Wadi Tiwi.

Right: Loomis leads the team’s new route *Camel Toe* (5.10b), near Wadi Tiwi.





After renting a Land Rover in Muscat, we head for Wadi Dayqah, an area 55 miles south, described in our Internet printouts as “extensive Euro-style pockety rock... the best climbing crag reasonably close to Muscat.” A “No Trespassing” sign greets us at the turn-off (many road signs in Oman use both Arabic and English). In this country, where you can get a ticket for having

out shots of Arabic coffee and platefuls of fresh dates. Then there’s the afternoon boulder session and the requisite “swim-thirty.” There is no “beer-thirty” in Oman.

“So what happens when someone comes the other direction?” asks Andy, as we bounce up the single-lane track between Harat Bidah and Wadi Tiwi, one of the roughest and narrowest roads in all of Oman, according to the guidebook. A steep wall towers up on one side, and on the other, an even steeper drop-off. It is a delicate balance to keep enough momentum for the hill climbs yet go slow enough to allow time to avoid a head-on. Assuming he has the right of way while driving uphill, Andy forces one oncoming driver to hug the side, and he gets the back of the hand in response—apparently the Omani version of the bird.

In just over six miles, we climb from our campsite on the ocean to approximately 1,500 feet. We pass through the

Armed with French topos, but little knowledge of French, we scout the canyon, matching the lines to the walls.

an unwashed vehicle, we decide not to poach and instead head to our next destination, Wadi Tiwi.

What should be an afternoon drive turns into four days as we lose ourselves in Oman’s wonderland of *wadis*. Sprinkled with warm, emerald-, turquoise-, and jade-colored pools, these beautiful limestone canyons offer incredible cliff jumping and bouldering. We wile away the days bouldering around the swimming holes, each one surpassing the next. Our motivation to tackle a route on Jebel Misht’s huge and hot southeast face wanes each time we slip from a hold into the water.

In the wadis we meet the teenage boys who hang out around each village’s watering hole. They show us the best jumping spots and their repertoire of mid-air poses (salutes seem to be a favorite). We show them how to boulder. At Wadi Bani Kahlid, I try to ignore the faint white lines across a boy’s back from where he’s been lashed, while I coach him toward holds on the pool’s overhanging wall. At Wadi as Suwayh, cultural norms are thrown aside as I arm-wrestle with the boys.

Wadi after wadi, at lunchtime the boys inevitably invite us back to one of their homes. We follow our young friends along irrigation canals that deliver water in an intricate network of channels from the wadis to the date palms, whose large fronds shade us from the beating sun. Mothers and sisters remain tucked away in back rooms, but pass

outskirts of the village of Mibam and pull into a small parking area at the end of the road. Just a glimpse at Wadi Tiwi’s towering walls, which add another 2,000 feet of relief to the topography, makes me wish we’d spent less time bouldering. Typical Oman—every stop warrants a week of exploring.

We organize our gear next to a man unloading grass for his goats. A group of children, their eyes ringed with dark kohl eyeliner, toddle around us while their big sisters offer us an unknown, cherry-like fruit plucked from a nearby tree. Like all the Omani females we have met, the girls scatter as soon as Gabe pulls out his camera. They do allow me to take a picture of the intricate beadwork on the cuffs of their *abayas*.

Armed with French topos, but little knowledge of French, we scout the canyon, matching the lines to the walls. We pick our next day’s objective, a 1,500-foot, 12-pitch route that tops out at the canyon rim—*Juliette Jauffret*, 5.10c.

Based on the dihedral down-canyon and the limited amount of traffic Wadi Tiwi receives (we’d found information online for around 15 routes), we don our best alpine attitudes despite the tropical setting. The climbing is surprisingly fun and clean—even classic. We find cracks, pockets, giant huecos, and delicate edging, the rock changing as we move higher and higher through ancient seabeds, climbing our way through time. Eventually we can see the deep blue of the ocean to our east.

“The weather’s looking threatening,” Andy jokes. A single white cloud, the only one we’ve seen in a week, has formed in the otherwise blue sky. We top out in a groove of polished white slickrock. Below, shepherds whistle to their goats and emerald pools taunt us.

By the time we finish with the 12th and final rappel, our voices croak with thirst. We scramble down to the pools, the thick smell of orange blossoms filling the air. We float on our backs in the warm, still water, as night falls. The canyon walls curve to meet the indigo sky.

Right: Andy Tyson licking off the sweat in Coco Canyon, Oman.







Orion's belt shines right above the route. **Our topos describe** Wadi Ban Auf's La Gorgette, located below the village of Bayad Sayt, as Oman's best hard sport-climbing area. The slot canyon could be easily missed if it weren't for the wa-

Two young women appear, teachers from Bayad Sayt. I ask if they want to try climbing. A demur "yes" tumbles out with their giggles.

terfall gushing from it. We wander up a narrow path built into the cliff wall, cooled by the fall's spray.

La Gorgette's curving dolomite walls are deceiving. What looks like smooth, sloping rock feels more like a cheese grater. The upside is that our shoes stick to anything. We steer clear of Razorback Wall at first, allowing ourselves time to adjust to the mental challenge of leading on this new sort of rock that could slice our skin—or ropes—in a fall.

After enough tentative crimping up the steep walls, we soon grow to appreciate the arêtes, cracks, and massive runnels. Like masochists, we keep coming back for more, addicted to the unique mix of pleasure and pain.

The canyon doubles as a pathway leading from the village of Bayad Sayt down to the road, and people constantly walk by. The men and boys greet Gabe and Andy with "Al-salaam Alaykum" and a handshake. Few will acknowledge me unless I say "hello," but once such permission is given, conversation flows as if we were anywhere in the world. One day, while belaying, I fall into conversation with a firefighter who is home for the weekend visiting his family. When I ask if he's been to the United States, he responds with a gesture, cocking his fingers like a pistol. "No Arabs, United States," he says.

He's not the only Omani who has expressed the concern that Arabs would not be welcome. Similarly, people back home asked if we'd be safe coming here—a question that now seems ridiculous, considering the warm welcome and

incredible hospitality we have received.

One afternoon, we set up some topropes for the local boys who've been watching us each day. They heckle, jeer, and cheer each other on as they pull and grunt their way up the routes. Then, as the canyon grows dark with shadows and the boys have gone home for dinner, two young women appear, teachers from Bayad Sayt. I ask if they want to try climbing. A demur "yes" tumbles out with their giggles.

I disassemble my harness and show them how to wear the waist belt around their flowery, flowing dresses—using the leg loops and exposing their satin, pajama-like pants is not an option. Whenever voices float through the canyon, they look around anxiously, concerned that someone might see them.

There's no rule prohibiting them from climbing, they explain, they're just shy. I give them each a congratulatory hug after their successful ascents, but as Gabe holds up his hands for high fives, they shoot him a surprised look and leave him hanging. We've crossed a few cultural bridges with climbing, but we can't cross them all.

Less than an hour from Muscat, a quiet bay houses a colony of limestone outcroppings and pedestals rising up from the Arabian Sea's warm waters. With its five-star hotels, Bandar Jissah is at the other end of the spectrum from the simple mud homes we visited in Oman's villages. We camp on the beach, next to Omani families who unload their camping gear from shiny new Land Cruisers.

Several local fishermen are lounging on the beach, so we hire a boat and head out into the emerald bay. Swells keep us from motoring too close, so we dive in, shoes and all, and swim toward the rocks. Little crabs scurry around near the waterline, popping in and out of holes like gophers. Problems range from a 5.10 jug fest across a 10-foot roof to desperate 5.12s. Our arms give out before we're over the novelty of falling into the sea. We trade our climbing shoes for flippers and spend the rest of the day snorkeling with the parrotfish and turtles.

All too soon we board a bus back to Dubai for our flight home. Watching the barren, burnt land roll by, I think of the bird—an Indian roller—I saw after our first day of climbing. It sat in a lone tree in the middle of a moon-like landscape, and I hardly noticed it for its drab brown plumage. Then it opened its wings, revealing brilliant turquoise feathers. Much like Oman—full of beautiful surprises hidden under a dusty exterior.

Molly Loomis lives in Teton Valley, Idaho, but is busy plotting a return trip to Arabia. Still thirsty for mango lassies, long limestone routes, and falling asleep to the sound of the ocean, she sends a big thanks to the locals at oman-climbing.com.

Right: Loomis on the sweet, sharp crimps of *Crack Boum Huc* (5.11a), La Gorgette, Oman.



BETA BOX

Oman has a tremendous amount of climbing terrain—imagine Las Vegas' Red Rocks multiplied by 100—and limited route information. This has resulted in multiple claims of first ascents and the need for an adventurous approach.

GUIDEBOOKS: *Rock Climbing in Oman*, by R.A. McDonald, 1993. Distributed by Cordee in the U.K.; very dated. Jakob Oberhauser, a resident guide, has drafted a new guidebook that may be released soon. *UAE Rock Climbing*, by Toby Foord-Kelcey, covers remote areas of Oman; the author also did an extensive online guide to the classic route on Jebel Misht, easily found through Google.

WEBSITES: www.omanclimbing.com, maintained by local climbers, offers a wealth of information. www.remi-thivel.com/topos/topos.html, a French site, has many topos for Oman.

LANGUAGE: Arabic is Oman's native language, but a surprising number of people speak basic English, even in the smallest of villages.

GETTING THERE: The cheapest way to the Arabian Peninsula is flying to Dubai in the neighboring United Arab Emirates. Check out the climbing in U.A.E., or take a bus straight to Oman's capital, Muscat—approximately \$30 each way. (Guys, take note: save the seats up front for the ladies. You sit in the back.)

STAYING THERE: If you're camping and cooking most of your own food, your biggest expense is vehicle rental. Land Rovers are the vehicle of choice; prices range from \$70 to \$100 per day. Bring an international driver's license. Lodging in Oman is expensive. In Muscat, Sun City Hotel (\$60 to \$80 per person, depending on occupancy) is a good option, right across from the bus station. Camping is, for the most part, well received as long as you ask permission locally. Packing up each day is recommended to keep your belongings safe from curious two- and four-legged creatures. Be respectful with any treats you might have purchased in Duty Free. It's illegal to transport alcohol except by air.

