This hiking guide details the first long distance walk across the Hajar Mountains in the southeast corner of Arabia. It is a challenging but not technical climb across the elevations 620 to 3000m in exhilarating scenery with benign winter weather. The track follows the spine of the mountains with frequent diversions to springs that sustain a string of ancient villages. You will walk past spectacular rock formations, Bronze Age tombs and *falaj* irrigation that has been in use for over a thousand years.

ISBN 9781908531797

Wilderness Trekking

OMAN

209Km Traverse of the Western Hajar Mountains

John Edwards

Wilderness Trekking in Oman
209km Traverse of the Western Hajar Mountains

Published by John Edwards in 2020
Email: john@hajarhiking.com
www.hajarhiking.com

ISBN 978-1-908531-00-0

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Cartography: Lovell Johns

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CIP Data: A catalogue for this book is available from the British Library

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Traverse of Western Hajar Mountains from Al Afyah to Yiqa including three circuits. The 21 km of gravel roads are not shown.

Wilderness Trekking, Sultanate of Oman





The author tasting water from a *saqa* at a semi-nomadic pastoralist camp

Wilderness Trekking Oman

Most of my winters in Oman have been spent exploring Al Hajar Al Gharbi to the west and Al Hajar Ash Sharqi to the east of my home in Muscat. I lived in the Sultanate of Oman with my family from 1991 to 1994 and again from 2002 to 2014. My ambition with this book is to resurrect the historic trading routes connecting the mountain villages, enabling walking tourists to help sustain an emerging hospitality industry that uses some of the ancient village houses as hotel rooms, which otherwise will fall into ruin.

Safety Information

In an emergency in the mountains of Oman ring 9999 on your mobile and have your GPS coordinates in latitude and longitude ready for the operator.

You need a satellite navigation device to follow the tracks described in this book and you should have both 2G and 4G mobiles with SIM cards for both the Oman telecommunication companies, Omantel and Ooredoo, which will provide coverage across almost all the mountains. If you activate a personal locator beacon your coordinates will be sent to the emergency services automatically. Rescue starts on foot with police and local villagers followed by air-force helicopters. At the date of publication there are no charges for rescue services in Oman, however the Royal Omani Police recommend both domestic and international adventure tourists carry an appropriate level of insurance for their intended activities.

Maps and GPX

The National Survey Authority has approved the Roman spelling of the Arabic village names, issuing registration number 1246 authorising the sale of these maps in Oman. Local names in a lighter font to indicate they have not been approved by the NSA include semi-nomadic pastoral campsites with their plastic water tanks, *falaj*-irrigated gardens, mountain passes, historic track junctions, caves and remote sources of drinking water: mountain springs, water-dripping cliffs, wadi dams and open reservoirs. Also shown are historical features such as Bronze Age tombs and pre-Islamic rock art that are near the traverse.

The maps are scaled to 1:50,000 with 25m contours and thirty second divisions of latitude and longitude. The key is on page 19. GPX tracks and waypoints were recorded using a Garmin GPSMAP64s with a satellite fix every 10m of track. The GPX files can be downloaded from www.hajarhiking.com which features updated hotel and logistic contacts and a link to purchase the fourteen maps in this book sold separately as a two-sided A1-sized folded map.



Preparing a donkey for the journey to the nearest road for supplies, Dalil

Introduction

Book Description

Traverse Description and Schedule, Overview Map, Elevations

Book description

This is a practical guide for hiking in the Western Hajar, which is the western portion of the main mountain range in the Sultanate of Oman. The best walking weather in Oman is from mid November to March. The traverse follows the spine of the mountains in a point-to-point walk taking sixteen days. It consists of eight one-day walks, two two-day walks and one four-day walk. There is a road intersection with a village or hotel between each of these eleven sections. The traverse climbs to the highest accessible peak in the country at 2999m and finishes in remote dry valleys, called wadis, where impregnable cliffs have precluded road construction and electricity transmission. This has preserved the Arabian mountain lifestyle that has existed for centuries. Exploring the Hajar Mountains with my family and Omani companions was my passion during the sixteen years I spent living in Oman.

This traverse is for hikers who are competent with GPS navigation, as only six of the sixteen day tracks are marked. There are two shorter options, of which one has two chain ladders that do not require ropes. These options reduce the traverse to twelve days or make two multi-day circuits, one with hotels and the other entirely in the wilderness. A loop in the traverse can be used to make another three-day wilderness circuit, or can be skipped altogether to further reduce the traverse duration to nine days. In Oman there are no mountain rangers, so this traverse is for experienced hikers who are comfortable looking after themselves. I have selected the route over many years by linking ancient and current donkey trading and walking tracks.

This book describes where to go, what to carry, where to sleep and, most importantly, where to find drinking water. Some hikers may choose to be supported by friends meeting them in a 4WD vehicle at road intersections marking the end of each section. For their benefit this book includes excursions at eight of these ten rendezvous points. There are other possibilities for resupply at all ten road intersections.

Digital data for download comprises GPS tracks, waypoints, kmz map files and PDF files of each chapter. A folded 1:50,000 map covering 604km of the traverse, side tracks and ultra marathon tracks can be purchased separately. Hikers who have completed part or all of this traverse are invited to post reviews on social media accessible from www.hajarhiking.com, where there are historical photographs and video recorded on parts of this traverse in 1992 when there was only one road in the entire mountain range.

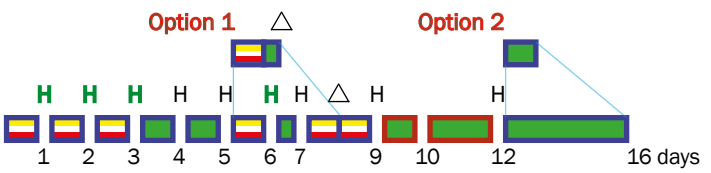
To make the most of this experience, a hiker would benefit from some knowledge of the history of the mountains and an awareness of the sedentary farming and semi-nomadic pastoralist societies that live there. An understanding of Arab culture and etiquette will contribute to your enjoyment of this journey. The book provides relevant social information including the ways in which you are likely to interact with Omanis who you may meet on the mountain. There are descriptions of the many sights on the traverse including geological features, *falaj* (pl. *aflaj*) irrigation system, Omani crafts, Bronze-Age tombs and ancient rock art.

Traverse Description

The east-to-west traverse of the Western Hajar is 209km long and it crosses two mountains – Al Jabal Al Akhdar then Jabal Shams. The 188km of mountain tracks are interspersed with graded roads totalling 21km, of which the longest is 6km. The altitude range is from 620m to 2999m. The daily elevation change is typically 1000m with walking times of four to ten hours, which allows for time spent navigating by GPS. It is abrasive limestone underfoot so tough boots are recommended, and from my experience, only leather boots survive more than one season in this terrain. There is some climbing but ropes are not required.

The sixteen-day traverse consists of eleven walking sections of one, two and four days long separated by road intersections. During the day or days of each section you will not see roads nor civilisation and the only short cuts once you commit to any section are on the last four days. There are two options replacing some sections. Six of the sixteen days have paint or ultra marathon marks, otherwise you need GPS navigation or a guide.

Nine of the eleven sections finish with hotels, of which four are restored village houses. There are also camping alternatives for all the hotels. The two two-day walks and one four-day walk require wild camping for five nights. (see diagram below).



Track needs GPS navigation or a guide. Diagram boxes are for 0.5, 1, 2, and 4 days

Track has painted stripes or green dots, GPS is recommended but not essential

Partially marked one day shorter high route which joins low route near the summit

Three-day unmarked loop in traverse, or skip instead walking 3.2km of road

H Hotel in restored village houses, H Modern hotel

△ Jabal Shams summit, the only campsite without water

Option 1 Choice of shorter high route with ladder climbs or low route with hotels

Option 2 Choice of one-day or four-day unmarked routes to finish traverse

The first option in the traverse stays closer to the mountain spine on the approach to the summit of Jabal Shams. This high route climbs two cliffs with chain ladders 12m and 2.5m, (see photographs on pages 149–150). The first campsite on this option has only stagnant water from a reservoir that must be boiled before drinking. There is clean water near the track the next day but not at the summit nor during the descent. Accordingly this route, shorter by one day and 10km, is more demanding than the longer low option that passes two villages with hotels. These high and low routes can be combined to make a 46km multi-day circuit, or a 37km circuit using the Burkat Ash Sharaf side track.

The second 16.2km option is at the end of the traverse replacing the last four-day remote section. This direct route to Al Iqaybah 4km from Yiqa can be combined with Days 13–16 to make a 72km five-day circuit with water at all the wild campsites. Two short cuts across this circuit provide several more options.

Days 10–12 on the traverse form a loop, with 3.2km of road completing a 34.5km-long circuit. Skipping these three days is the easiest way to shorten the traverse.

Traverse Schedule

Table 1 is a schedule for the sixteen-day traverse. The two two-day walks and one four-day walk are indicated by green cells and the four longest graded roads are indicated by grey cells. Hotel transport is available for two of these roads. The three-day circuit of Days 10–12 starts from the road 3.2km before Kurb returning to Kurb via Yisab and Naqa Ar Ruways. Table 2 summarises the shorter high track to the summit and Table 3 summarises the one-day option replacing the final four-day section. Both these tables are on the next page. Table 8 on page 247 details hotel contacts.

Table 1

In the right-hand column R, H and W indicate what is at the end of a day's walk: R stands for road, H for hotel and W for wild camping. "Up" and "Down" are the total metres ascended and descended on each day. The walking times do not include break times.

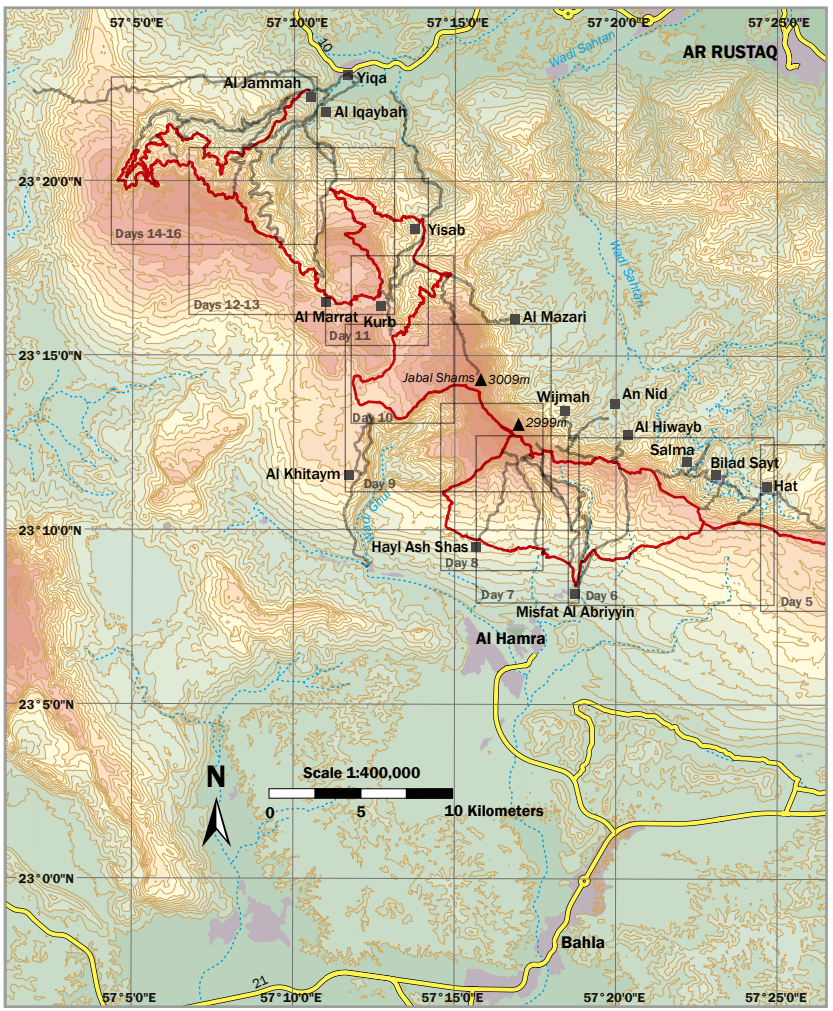
Day	Tracks on each day of the traverse Six have painted markings	Time hours	Track km	Road km	Up m	Down m	End
	Drive from Muscat International Airport	1	-	100			
1	Al Afyah to Hadash	10	10.5	-	1400	600	R, H
2	Hadash to Wukan	7	9.6	-	910	910	R, H
3	Wukan to As Sawjrah	7	10.2	-	820	440	R, H
4	As Sawjrah to Ar Rus	8	16.6	0.8	790	730	R, H
5	Ar Rus to Ash Sharaf (from Al Jabal Al Akhdar to Jabal Shams)	8	15.5	0.5	770	670	R, H
6	Ash Sharaf to Misfat Al Abriyyin	7	14.2	-	200	1270	R, H
7	Misfat Al Abriyyin to Hayl Ash Shas	4	6.8	1.0	700	230	R, H
8	Hayl Ash Shas to Jabal Shams summit at 2999m (3.3km NW inside a restricted area is a 3009m peak).	8	10	-	1650	90	W
9	Jabal Shams summit to Sama Resort on the Jabal Shams plateau	7	11.4	-	130	1250	R, H
10	Kurb road to start Day 10 (hotel taxi possible)	1:30	-	6	310	90	
10	Kurb road start to Yisab road saddle	9	9.2	-	340	930	
10	Yisab road saddle to Yisab (no taxi, hitchhiking if you are lucky)	1:30	-	5.1	0	370	R
11	Yisab to Naqa Ar Ruways	8	7.5	-	920	440	W
12	Naqa Ar Ruways to Kurb	6	9.6	-	900	410	R, H
13	Al Marrat road, finish Day 12 to start Day 13 (hotel taxi possible)	1	-	5	-	-	
13	Al Marrat road to Daan As Sanin	10	15.5	-	850	690	W
14	Daan As Sanin to Ghayl Shadhan	8	15	-	310	660	W
15	Ghayl Shadhan to Dar Ar Ruways	4	10	-	390	670	W
16	Dar Ar Ruways to Al Jammah	8	16.4		420	1110	R
16	Al Jammah to Yiqa and Highway 10	1		2.4	68	36	R
	Taxi then bus to Muscat Airport	1:45		160			

Table 2

Day	Shorter high route to the summit with two ladder climbs	Time hours	Track km	Road km	Up m	Down m	End
6	Ash Sharaf to Al Barbad	9	15.8	-	1050	790	W
7	Al Barbad to Jabal Shams summit	5	6.3	-	815	115	W

Table 3

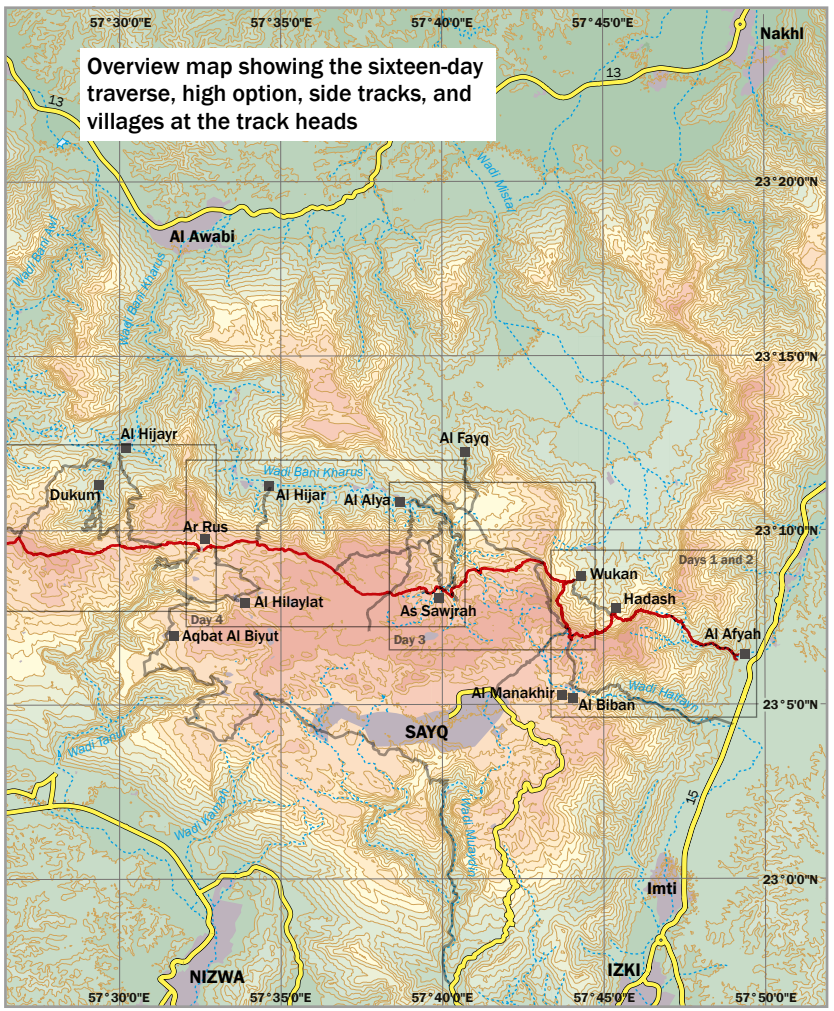
Day	Option at the end of the traverse, one instead of four remote days	Time hours	Track km	Road km	Up m	Down m	End
13	Al Marrat road to Al Iqaybah	9	16.1	-	575	1835	R
13	Al Iqaybah to Yiqa and Highway 10	1		4.0	100	50	R

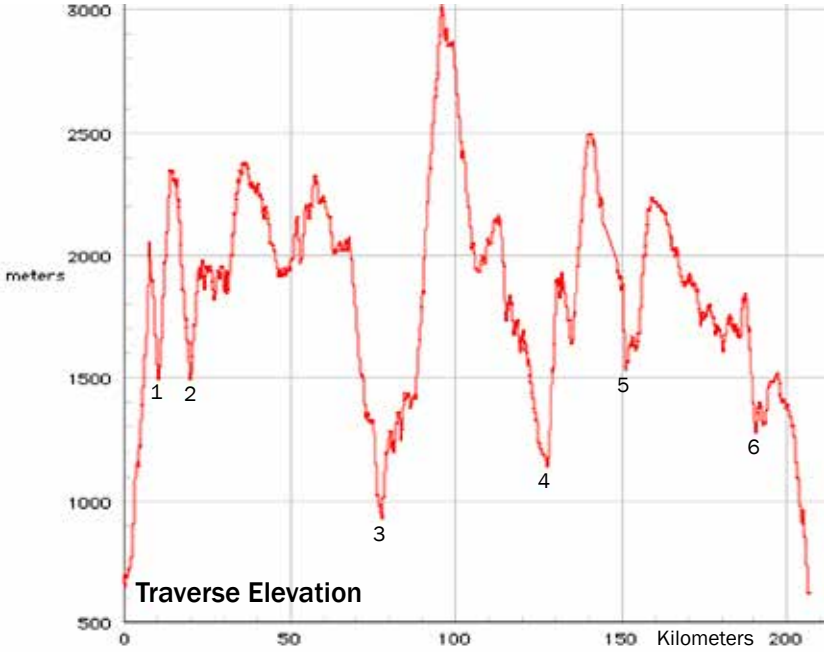


Overview Map

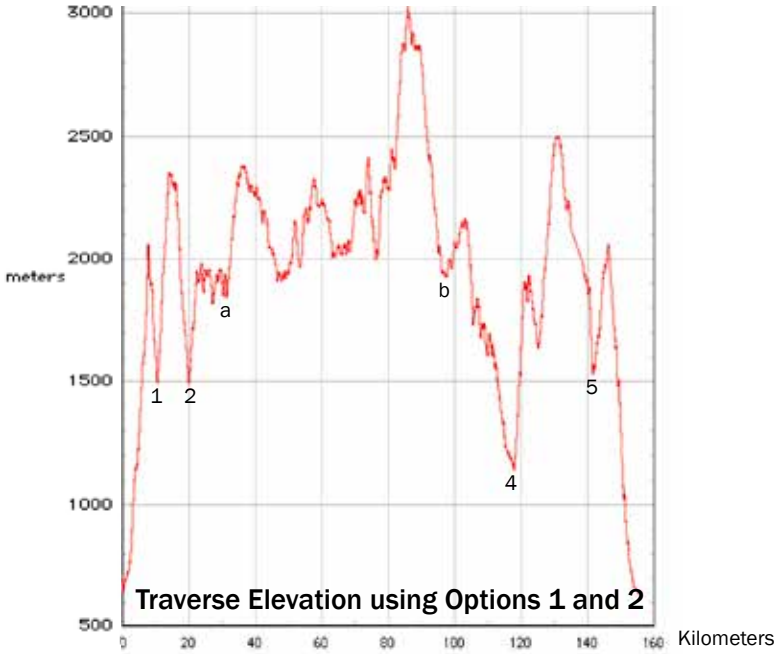
The scale of the three overview maps is 1:400,000. The traverse and high option are coloured red and all the other donkey and most of the man tracks that cross or approach the traverse are in grey (see Table 7 page 234). Major roads are yellow and village areas are purple. Outlines of the 1:50,000-scale maps that accompany the walking chapters are shown on this overview map.

Some of the villages on this map are not recognised by Google Maps including Al Afyah on Highway 15 at the start of the traverse. Al Najad Coffee Shop, 1km to the south of Al Afyah, is the closest point on Google Maps. The traverse finishes at either Al Jammah or Al Iqaybah, both of which are small settlements 2.4km and 4km respectively by gravel road from the large village of Yiqa on Highway 10, which is recognised by Google Maps.





Traverse Elevation



Traverse Elevation using Options 1 and 2

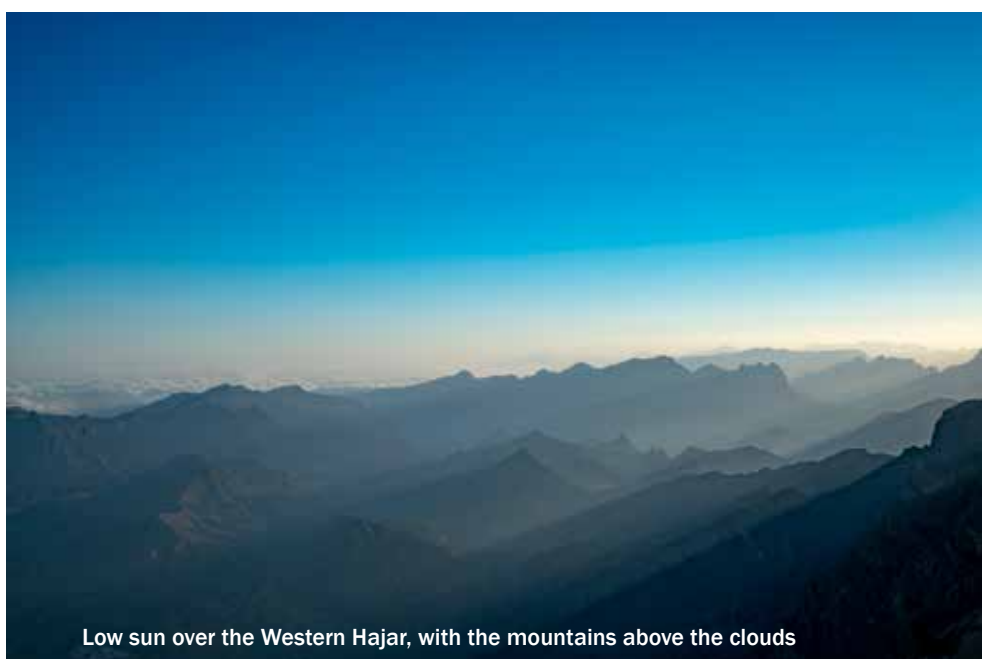
Traverse Elevations

Page 12 details the elevations of the 209km traverse and the shorter 156km traverse by following both options shown in Tables 2 and 3 and in the diagram on page 8. The horizontal scale of the two plots is identical, and the elevations are the same for the first 68km until the tracks diverge.

The sharp elevation drops on the traverse correspond to Hadash (1) and Wukan (2) at 1500m, Misfat Al Abriyyin (3) at 950m, Yisab (4) at 1140m, the Hayl At Talhat gardens (5) at 1520m and Dar Ar Ruways *shawawi* camp (6) at 1275m. On the shorter traverse following the two options the drops corresponding to Misfat Al Abriyyin and Dar Ar Ruways are avoided. Each village has a road connecting it with the desert plains, which is why there are ten road intersections but only six places where the track briefly follows a road.

High-Altitude Walk

A high-altitude walk suitable for October and early April, which extends the walking season when the lower-altitude temperatures are too hot, uses part of the traverse and the first option via the two chain ladders. This 67km walk, shown in elevation on the bottom of the facing page, starts at As Sawjrah (a) and finishes on the Jabal Shams plateau (b). The lowest elevation is 1850m at As Sawjrah. This walk will take four days, overnighting at Ar Rus, Ash Sharaf and the Al Barbad hut.



Low sun over the Western Hajar, with the mountains above the clouds



My wife sleeping on juniper needles under a large tree

Preparation

Navigation and Communication
Water, Logistics and Cooking
Climate
Sleeping
Hotels
Water Locations and Treatment
Pests
Packing



Improved reception when mobile is immobile



Navigation and Communication

This guide book should be used in conjunction with a GPS navigation system containing the tracks and waypoints downloaded from www.hajarhiking.com. The tracks were recorded at 10m intervals using a Garmin GPSMAP64s. Only six of the sixteen days will be on tracks with yellow, white and red painted markers or ultra marathon reflective green dots, so you must be proficient in using a navigation device such as a Garmin and have a backup loaded with all the tracks and sufficient batteries. Some of the terrain requires remaining within a metre of the actual track, for example to avoid nearby dead-end ledges, but GPS repeatability is only 7m. Route finding on these sections will take time and it is recommended you test your ability with a guide before committing to the whole traverse on your own. Guide services are listed on page 245 and will be kept current on www.hajarhiking.com. This book and the folded map are the only detailed contoured maps of the Western Hajar available to the public.

At the date of publication there are two competing mobile telephone providers in the Western Hajar: Omantel and Ooredoo. They have both built communication towers, which together provide almost complete coverage of the traverse. The newer 4G towers do not have 2G and the older towers only have 2G so you need both your 4G smart phone and a 2G phone, such as the Nokia Dual SIM 2G which can be purchased in Muscat. Prepaid SIM cards from both providers are available at the airport arrival hall or in Muscat. A high-capacity portable power bank can recharge the Nokia numerous times as well as some cameras. Note some airlines have passenger regulations on transporting power banks. Consider charging your iPhones or Android with a mobile pack-mounted solar panel, which only weighs 355g. Poor reception can be enhanced by fixing your mobile to a tree trunk with string instead of holding it (see photo on page 15).

In an emergency ring 9999 and have your GPS coordinates ready for the operator. This is a general emergency number that will initiate a foot search followed by air-force helicopters, if necessary. If you activate a personal locator beacon your request for help and coordinates will be sent to the emergency services automatically. At the date of publication there are no charges for rescue services in Oman.

Water, Logistics and Cooking

Drinking water is available at each campsite other than the summit, and during some days (tabulated on page 20 are the three sources of water shown on three maps: villages page 10, hotels page 18 and remote water page 20). This information is repeated in the 1:50,000-scale maps in the chapters on each day's walk, and in the GPX waypoints.

You should treat this traverse as an expedition as there are no shops in the villages where supplies can be purchased. Lightweight freeze-dried meal packets are ideal because water is available every night. It is advisable to establish how many of these food packets you will need to sustain yourself for continuous eight- to ten-hour walks for sixteen days, and test how many you can carry that will determine how many supply rendezvous you need, for example at hotels. This will depend on the weight of your pack, which is partly determined by how much drinking water you carry. Daily drinking water consumption will depend on the month you are walking. Three litres per day is enough in the optimum walking season, mid November to March. Load your pack, including this water, to determine how many days' food you are comfortable carrying, remembering there are 1000m climbs. A reasonable pack weight is 18kg. You need to carry enough

food and water for a minimum of two days to complete the summit section. Donkeys are recommended for the remote four-day section at the end of the traverse (see page 33).

Meal packets should be purchased in your home country and posted with tracked delivery to your choice of hotel rendezvous at least a month before your trip so you can get emailed confirmation that they have arrived before you leave home. There are four hotels or guest houses at or near three campsites on the traverse that will accept freeze-dried food in advance for collection. All the hotels are listed in Table 9 on page 249, and will be kept updated including postage and courier instructions on www.hajarhiking.com.

Bringing food parcels to Oman and arranging a series of vehicle rendezvous with a tourist services provider is an expensive alternative for food resupply, although they may provide a luxury campsite service (see page 247 for contact details. A list of providers will be kept current on www.hajarhiking.com).

A third alternative for food resupply is to rely on friends and family. If you are accompanied by non-walkers, they could drive a vehicle and meet you at some of the villages. Driving instructions to each road intersection are included in the daily track descriptions starting on page 86.

It is recommended but not essential to use camping gas to boil water for your freeze-dried food. There are plenty of dry fallen branches for a fire, which is easily started but they should be used judiciously. Use existing fireplaces whenever possible and be aware that cutting live hard wood is illegal due to conservation measures.

Climate

The walking season is mid November to March but February is the best month because it is still cold and has longer days than December and January. There is little cloud cover so sun protection is essential. The most important variable in these arid mountains is the temperature. The warmest in winter will be 25 °C at the lowest elevation but it can freeze on the summit where it snows every two or three years. Strong winds and rain are rare but when it does rain it is usually windy so tents are not that useful because there are few fixing points. Weather forecasts for the Western Hajar in winter are accurate and there is a weather station on Jabal Shams. Winter rain is usually light from the northwest while summer monsoon storms can be torrential causing flash floods. Check the weather forecast regularly and if it rains seek shelter in a cave, overhang or *shawawi* camp.

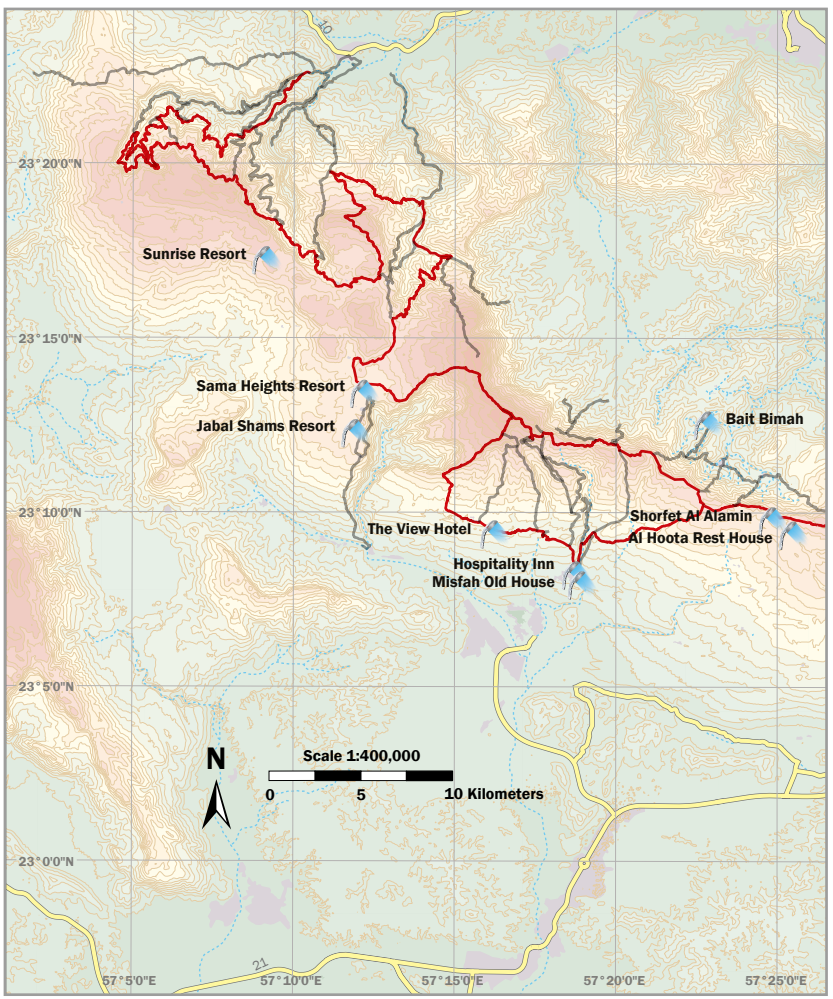
Sleeping

You do not need to carry a tent or bivvy bag as only two campsites are low enough for mosquitoes, and the dew is not heavy. Wild camping is permitted in Oman and is the only choice for the five nights in the wilderness when you are not near a road or hotel. There are no fixed campsites. The terrain is mostly rock so you will need to choose a site carefully. Sleep under juniper trees on needle beds when at high elevations. Elsewhere disused goat enclosures have soft build-ups of dried droppings. Ledges under rock overhangs or caves often have comfortable layers of dust. Wild donkeys create stone-free dust bowls when they roll on their backs, which are conveniently sized for one person.

There are a few natural pools in which to swim and it should be noted that it is not acceptable to bathe in the irrigation systems known as *aflaj*. For showering, plan to use hotels, of which some offer washing and toilet facilities for campers.

Hotels

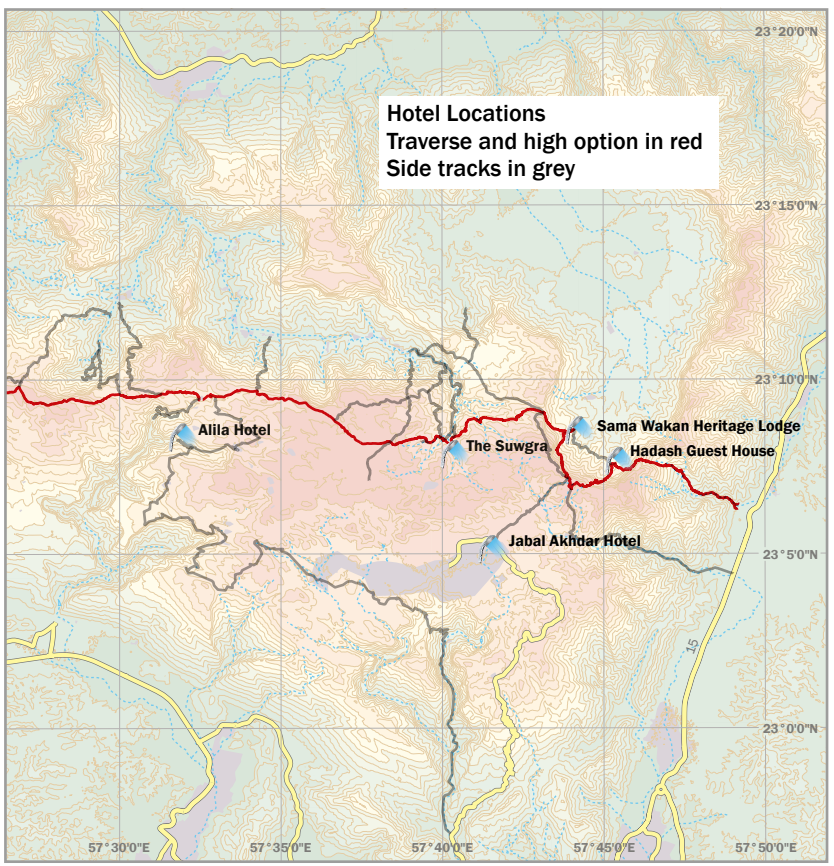
Hotels are located within walking distance of the end of eight of the sixteen days' walks (see map below). It is also possible to use a hotel on Day 12 finishing at Kurb if you phone for a hotel taxi for the 9.2km journey. The Alila Hotel and The View are expensive so most hikers will stay at the other hotels for a total of six nights, including the four restored village houses. Advance booking is recommended during the winter tourist season. Some of the hotels provide shower facilities for a reasonable fee if you are camping nearby, and restaurants. The water in the hotels that is delivered by tankers and piped desalination water is safe without treatment. (see Table 9 on page 249 for hotel contacts, kept current on www.hajarhiking.com). This table, map and web page do not include all hotels on the Western Hajar.



Map Key

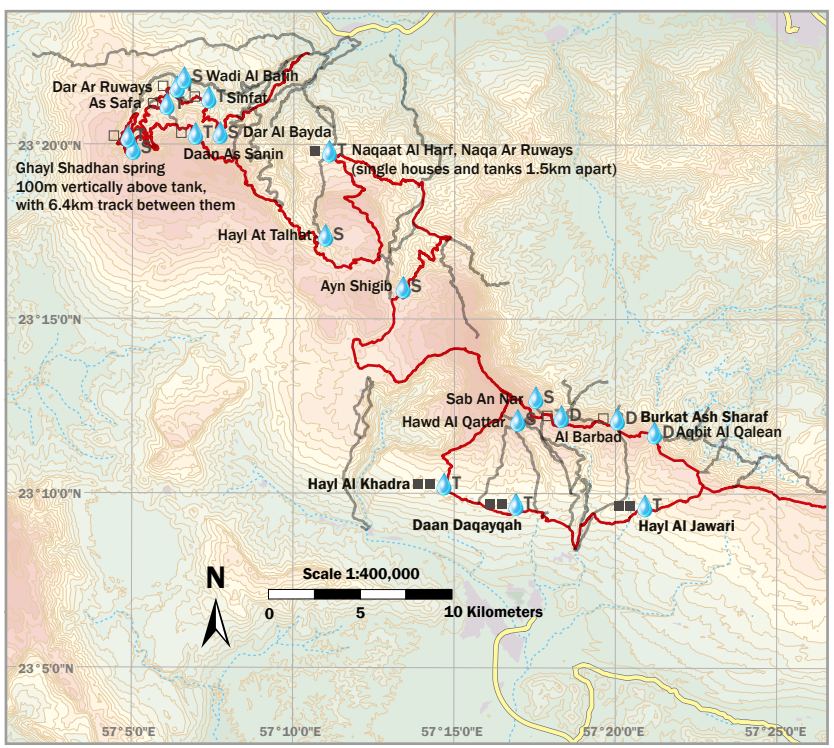
- Traverse
- Side tracks
- Major road
- Minor road
- Contour 25m
- Dry wadi bed
- 4WD track
- Ultra Marathon
- Track start on road
- Track junction
- Track chain ladders
- Historical interest
- Other waypoints
- Spring
- Tank
- Dam or open reservoir
- Terraced gardens, spring and *falaj*
- Hotel
- Inhabited village
- Inhabited house
- Abandoned village
- Empty house

2800–3000m
2600–2800
2400–2600
2200–2400
2000–2200
1800–2000
1600–1800
1400–1600
1200–1400
1000–1200
800–1000
600–800
400–600
200–400
0–200



Tables 4 and 5. Water on the Traverse and Two Options

Day	Traverse Track	Water at start	Water midway
1	Al Afyah to Hadash	Al Afyah *falaj*	none
2	Hadash to Wukan	Hadash public tap	spring near Wukan
3	Wukan to As Sawjrah	Wukan public tap	tank in two hours
4	As Sawjrah to Ar Rus	As Sawjrah *falaj*	none
5	Ar Rus to Ash Sharaf	Ar Rus public tap	none
6	Ash Sharaf to Misfat Al Abriyyin	Shorfet Al Alamin H.	tank in four hours
7	Misfat Al Abriyyin to Hayl Ash Shas	several hotels, *falaj*	tank in two hours
8	Hayl Ash Shas to Jabal Shams	The View hotel	tank in one hour
9	Jabal Shams summit to plateau	none	none
10	Kurb road to Yisab road saddle	Kurb tank or hotels	spring in two hours
11	Yisab to Naqa Ar Ruways	Yisab *falaj*	tank in seven hours
12	Naqa Ar Ruways to Kurb	Naqa Ar Ruways tank	none
13	Al Marrat road to Daan As Sanin	Al Marrat tank	*falaj* in two hours
14	Daan As Sanin to Ghayl Shadhan	Daan As Sanin tank	spring in six hours
15	Ghayl Shadhan to Dar Ar Ruways	Ghayl Shadhan tank	tank in three hours
16	Dar Ar Ruways to Al Jammah	Dar Ar Ruways tank	tank in one hour spring in two hours

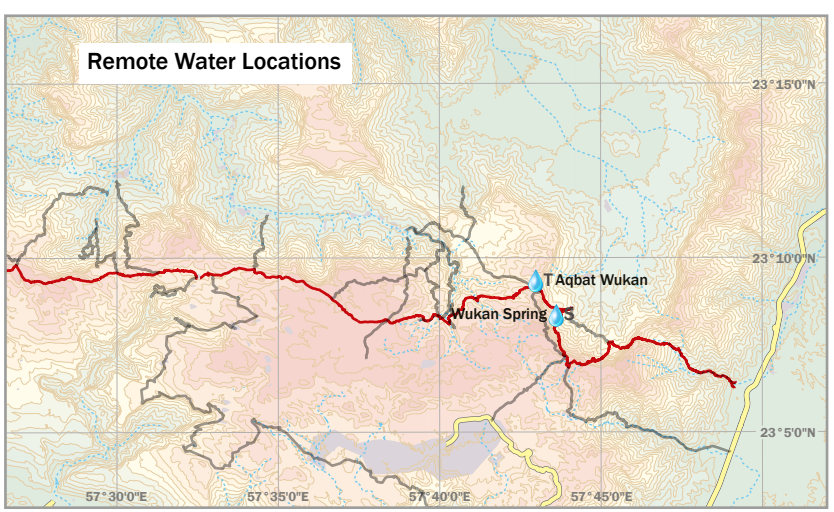


Day	Two Track Options	Water at start	Water midway
6	Ash Sharaf to Al Barbad	Shorfet Al Alamin Hotel	open reservoir in four hours open reservoir in five hours
7	Al Barbad to Jabal Shams summit	open reservoir	cave pool in one hour, cliff drip in two hours
13	Al Marrat road to Al Iqaybah	two hotels or Al Marrat tank	*falaj* in two hours, tank in five hours

Remote water not in villages or hotels is indicated by blue cells.

Water Treatment

Aini falaj water is from springs, described in detail in the Irrigation chapter on page 64. Water from springs, cave pools and cliff drips does not require treatment. Water from the public taps in Hadash and Wukan comes from nearby springs while that from the villages of Hayl Ash Shas, Hayl Al Khadra, Kurb, Ar Rus and Al Marrat is from regularly used tanks and tastes fine. All tanks in semi-nomadic pastoralists' campsites (described in the Culture chapter), for example above Misfat Al Abriyyin and to the west of Jabal Shams, are large closed plastic containers filled with rainwater that has a slight plastic taste due to infrequent use. Treating this water is optional. The tap for these tanks has usually been removed and placed nearby to avoid any accidental emptying, for example by a goat nibbling the tap. The photograph on page 217 shows one of these tanks and a nearby tap. This tank water is available for any traveller to drink sparingly. The only tank water you are likely to use will be during the last four days, and it is advisable to forewarn Abdullah Al Khambashi or one of his relatives in Al Jammah who own them. Their contacts are on page 247 and will be kept current on www.hajarhiking.com. Water from open reservoirs and dams should be boiled or treated before drinking, for instance the water at Burkat Ash Sharaf and Al Barbad on the high option as it approaches the summit.





Day 14. Filling water container from spring above the Ghayl Shadhan garden



Wadi Halfayn wall, once a *falaj* with a stone lid used to make a donkey path



Low cloud against the Western Hajar ridge viewed to the east from the summit



Day 8. Cold at the summit

Pests

The main pests are mosquitoes but these only occur on the two nights where you sleep at low altitude near exposed water, 950m at Misfat Al Abriyyin and 1140m at Yisab. Mosquitoes can be avoided at Misfat Al Abriyyin by sleeping at one of the guest houses but bring mosquito repellent for the overnight stay at Yisab. Malaria tablets are not necessary. There are other noxious animals but it is very rare for them to cause problems. Scorpions live under rocks, which you may disturb when preparing fireplaces. You may encounter racers, which are non-poisonous snakes sometimes seen near or in water, but all other snakes should be considered venomous, although most are not and are rarely seen. None of the villages on this route keep dogs. Goats are determined to be fed but will not bother you at night, but do not leave edible belongings unattended during the day or they will be eaten. It is better not to feed them.

Packing

A suggested packing list is on page 246 (see photograph of the contents of my pack on this chapter's cover page). A 65-litre pack is big enough. A -20 ºC down sleeping bag is recommended. If you sleep wearing just light walking clothes in freezing conditions then you need this rating to remain comfortable. Therm-a-rest NeoAir mats are designed to be used inside a tent, so you need to provide the equivalent protection from thorns and sharp rocks, for example a rubber sleeping mat under it will protect it and provides more cushioning. With this double-mat combination you only need a flat surface on which to sleep; even sleeping on hard rock is possible. This rubber mat will not fit inside your pack; the ends will protrude when secured under your pack's top cover and will be ripped by acacia thorns probably necessitating its replacement after sixteen days, but they are inexpensive and available in Muscat in most large department stores. Spare mats should be included in your rendezvous food parcel. You need three clothing layers for cold evenings and a raincoat as a windbreaker. At night you will swap your sun hat for a woollen hat, both of which should cover your ears. Lightweight OMM insulation clothing is ideal, though expensive. Clothing layers should have front zips so they can be adjusted for changing temperatures. Hiking clothes and sun hats should cover as much skin as possible for cloudless days.

A cooking pot to boil water for the freeze-dried food should be light. Collapsible water containers are preferable to bladders because water levels are easier to monitor. Purification tablets or a straw are for drinking stagnant dam water; an unlikely scenario. A back-up Garmin is recommended in case you drop and break one. To keep to within a few metres of a recorded track, which is sometimes necessary, you have to hold and continually monitor the Garmin except when climbing with both hands. It is a good idea to make a dry run of carrying all this gear in your pack.

If you have arranged for a vehicle support team to meet you on consecutive evenings, give them your main pack and walk with just a 20-litre day pack. In this case bring the day pack with you to Oman as there are no quality camping shops in Muscat. If there is space in the support vehicle load it with a stretcher, pillow and camping gas cooker for comfortable roadside camping. Check that the support vehicle has a USB charge socket for recharging phones and cameras. An adequate standard of roadside camping gear is stocked at the Carrefour department stores in Seeb and Qurum.



Horse track, side track Al Alya to Al Jahm and the grazing plain Jahm Al Jabayl

Journey

Tracks
Donkeys
Mountain Etiquette
Women in Oman
Driving
Speaking Arabic
Place Name Spelling



Day 14. Daan As Sanin to Ghayl Shadhan



Day 16. Laden donkey track with sticks to keep donkeys away from low overhang



Day 16 alternative. Unladen donkey track is steep with little vertical clearance

Tracks

There is no concept of public rights of way in the mountains and deserts of Oman. The public can walk anywhere without a physical barrier indicating private property, such as walls surrounding a house or yard and irrigated garden perimeter fences. The only restrictions are on tracks passing directly through villages where men from neighbouring villages need permission. This does not apply to tourists. Most of the tracks on the traverse cross land that is used by semi-nomadic pastoralists, called *shawawiya* (adj. *shawawi*), to browse their goats, and collect firewood and medicinal plants. The economic benefit of this territory, called *isbah,* belongs to the *shawawiya* but there are no restrictions on anybody crossing the land.

There is a considerable variety of tracks on this traverse. Some have not been used for generations while on others you will see donkeys carrying supplies. They include major and minor donkey caravan routes, unladen donkey routes to man tracks requiring scrambling by hand. One of the side tracks is a horse track, although it has not been used by horses for three hundred years. This horse track has elaborate stone staircases built for the less robust but faster horse caravans. The major donkey trading routes have their own names (see table of side tracks on page 234) and are built with stone stairs and walls to provide sufficient room for a laden donkey. Donkey barriers made from stones and sticks keep them away from overhanging cliffs with insufficient clearance for their load. Unladen donkey tracks have narrow sections that are impassable for a laden donkey. The caravan routes still in use, easily identified from the continuous line of donkey droppings, carry provisions to the semi-nomadic pastoral settlements not serviced by roads.

The tracks between the summer and winter villages of sedentary farmers have stones polished from hundreds of years of footfall. These shiny rocks remain visible even when the track is disused and overgrown with acacia bushes. Six of the tracks on the traverse have recently been painted with stripes of yellow, white and red or have green dots from recent ultra marathon races for which GPS navigation is not required. A few other tracks show earlier applications of infrequent paint. All the paint marks are reliable, although different vintages follow slightly different routes. High cairns on cliff tops mark the start of descents. The most difficult climbs on the traverse are a 2.5m cliff, though this has plenty of handholds, and on the high option a 12m cliff that has a chain ladder. All the climbs are shown in photographs in this book. The easiest tracks to follow are trading routes that link villages to the large market towns below the mountains, to the coast and to each other if they are growing complementary crops. For example, lower warmer villages grow dates while higher cooler villages grow wheat if their terraces are mostly in sunshine, or walnut and pomegranate trees on narrow shaded terraces.

Be careful asking directions. A villager from As Sawjrah who accompanied me on my first walk to Ar Rus knew the first 5km extremely well as that was within the range of his foraging goats. The route we followed from there to Ar Rus was based on his mountain instinct, not specific knowledge of a track, while my second attempt was 3km shorter. The *shawawi* semi-nomadic pastoralists' knowledge of tracks is more extensive than villagers as their *isbah* could extend 25km from their homes. As of publication date, no one has knowledge of the entire traverse, although this is expected to change, and it is necessary to be confident with a navigation device to walk this traverse. However, if you prefer not to walk this traverse alone then Omani guides will keep you safe. You would be guiding the Omani with your navigation device and the Omani will keep you company and would be able to get help in an emergency (see page 247 for a list of tourist services, including guides).



Horse track between Al Alya, Al Jahm and the Jahm Al Jabayl plain



Man track in Wadi Halhal. The tracks on the traverse are not this exposed



Horse track between Al Fayq, Al Jahm and the Jahm Al Jabayl plain



Ancient *sarooj* used to build foundations for the track wall, Al Fayq










Donkeys

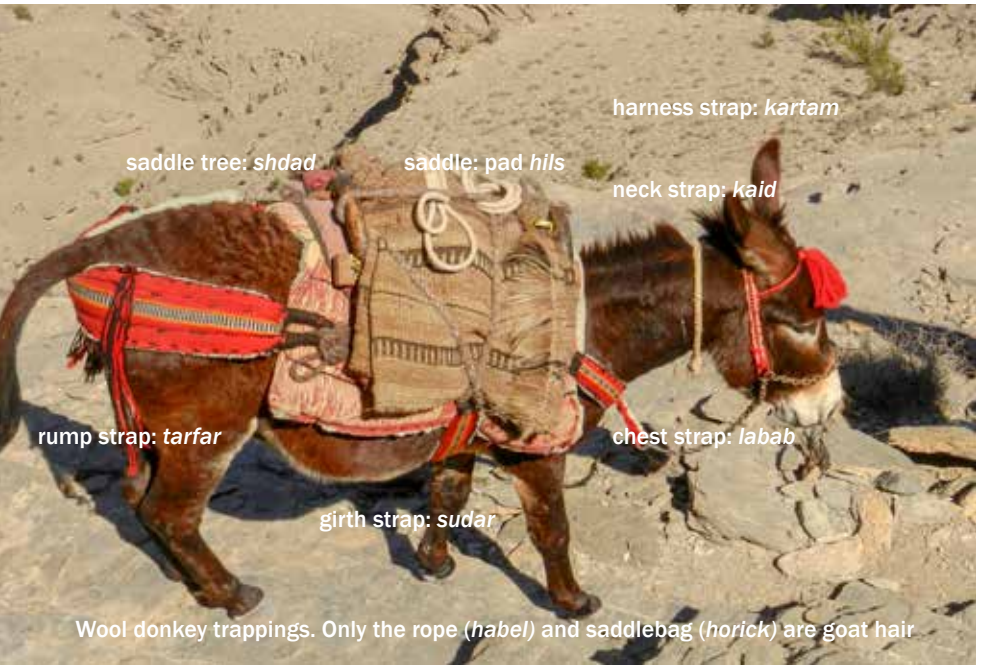
Walking with a guide and donkeys is recommended for the last four days because it is safer for you and donkeys are an interesting experience, although it is not any faster than walking alone. These mountain donkeys are trained to carry loads and know most of the tracks, but neither village donkeys that are only used for agriculture nor desert donkeys are capable of walking in the mountains. The only village donkeys you will see on the traverse are in the extensive terraces at Misfat Al Abriyyin.

Abdullah Al Khambashi and the *shawawiya* who live in the satellite settlement of Al Jammah to the west of Yiqa have nine mountain donkeys and are keen to use them for tourism (contact details for Abdullah are on page 247 and will be kept updated on www.hajarhiking.com). Abdullah and most of the men from his extended family had military jobs before retiring. Trekking tourism helps utilise their numerous semi-nomadic campsites and remote gardens. Typical of *shawawiya*, Abdullah's family own five simple storehouses in the wadi, plus their modern house in Al Jammah. There is water and a donkey enclosure at each of their campsites.

Donkeys prefer to have company, so hiring a pair of compatible donkeys for four hikers is easier to manage than a single donkey. They walk quickly for four hours then need to drink, eat and rest for two hours. They are fed hay, which they carry in a bag tied above their load, with a bowl of dates. Abdullah made a point of being totally silent to avoid disturbing his donkey when it was drinking. The donkeys have to be unloaded for their rest, when they immediately roll on the ground to scratch their backs. This unloading and subsequent loading procedure is done carefully. There are five saddle blankets that spread the point loads of the saddle tree, which has a pair of wooden loops that fit into two pockets on the fabric saddlebag. The heaviest items are loaded into the saddlebags, then the rest of the load is tied on top with the hay bag last. If the loaded donkey is lopsided it is balanced by adding rocks to one of the saddlebags. Balance is more important than weight (see photographs on the the facing page of Abdullah loading his donkey at Dar Al Bayda).

The *shawawiya* will lead or let their donkeys loose depending on the track. They are led when the track climbs steeply or when negotiating something difficult, such as boulders in a wadi. The only time Abdullah threatened his brother's donkey with a stick was on a track that had not been used for forty years. Two places on this eroded track were too steep for a laden donkey so we carried the saddlebags ourselves. Most of the donkey tracks from Yiqa are in frequent use and well maintained. When donkeys are not on leads they will walk briskly ahead then stop and look behind or turn around to face you. Sometimes they will not stop and you have to run to catch up, especially if you pause to take a picture. They will trot to the end destination when close to a familiar campsite. The first few kilometres starting from their home is the hardest; a solo donkey will exchange bellows with the herd back in the village and try to rejoin them by swerving off the track. The herd, while all in separate enclosures, are in frequent communication.

When donkeys are not imminently required for a caravan they are released for grazing into areas of a wadi's natural barriers. These barriers, such as cliffs, are augmented with short fences across any ledges that are on donkey tracks exiting the enclosure. These fences, made from a tangle of branches, are called *shiggy* and function as gates; they have to be dismantled and reassembled when travelling on these tracks. A donkey's working life is from three to twenty years.



Wool donkey trappings. Only the rope (*habel)* and saddlebag (*horick)* are goat hair



Day 16. Donkey gate that allows goats to pass

Mountain Etiquette

Omanis are renowned for their hospitality, enthusiastically practicing their Arab generosity towards travellers. You will meet many Omanis on the mountains and experience their kindness. It is respectful to cover shoulders and knees to avoid embarrassing your hosts.

Drinking water is freely given and taken from a house tank even if the owner is absent. The water adjacent to village mosques is available to everyone, and it is considered offensive if payment is offered. Their generosity extends to coffee, dates and a full meal. If you are offered food you should accept as this is an important part of Omani culture, especially in remote areas. In the cool evenings you are likely to be invited into a *majlis* (pl. *majalis*) which functions as a sitting room used for greeting and entertaining guests. Private houses have two *majalis*, one for men and one for women. Some villages, such as Ar Rus, have communal *majalis* next to the mosque. Shoes must be removed before entering a carpeted room, the walls of which are lined with cushions. Once inside you will be greeted with a bowl of dates, Omani coffee and water. The strong and bitter coffee is served in egg-shaped cups, which are thought to be a legacy of early trade with China. Cardamom was introduced to Oman centuries ago from the Malabar coast of India and is often used for flavouring coffee and tea. Traditionally you drink a few cups of coffee then shake it from side to side to indicate you have had enough. Whenever a newcomer enters a room everybody rises in greeting. At meal times a plastic sheet will be put on the floor with bowls of fruit and trays of meat and rice, and everybody leaves their seats to sit on the floor around the meal. The custom in Oman is to eat with your right hand and not to use cutlery. Most *majlis* have an adjoining washroom to wash your hands before eating.

If you are served a full meal you must insist on paying for it. While your Omani host will resist accepting payment, it is unreasonable for foreign guests to accept this extent of their generosity as the traditional mountain lifestyle is marginal. There is no need to pay for a place to sleep except if it is a commercial establishment. You are likely to sleep on a terrace or in a compound associated with a house, or under trees in a *hala* or *diyar*, which is a goat herder's campsite.

If you see goats being shepherded on a track, move away to avoid disrupting them. A startled goat that becomes separated from the herd can go feral. The rules on not leaving litter are universal; what you take in you must take out.

Women in Oman

Oman has an impressive record of equal opportunity for women in both education and employment. Women science graduates outnumber men and many women hold professional positions in both the public and private sectors. These opportunities extend to women living in the mountains if they are prepared to migrate to one of the larger towns, but their lifestyle, as well as that of men, is more conservative. This is probably related to the cultural rhythm in the Middle East rather than being specific to Oman. Prior to 1970 the interior, including the Hajar Mountains, was a closed area and had been for a hundred years. There had been little exposure to outsiders until they were opened to tourism in 2005 after the military restriction on the road up Al Jabal Al Akhdar was lifted. This is the opposite of the coast where, in Sohar in 1982, a researcher recorded eight languages spoken by the resident souk traders. Despite this isolation, society in the mountains was not as conservative as it is now. In 1837 Wellsted quoted the desert Arabs who told him that the mountain people were not jealous of their women. In 1992,



Day 16. Dar Ar Ruways to Al Jammah

during a trek between villages, I was greeted by both men and women at the entrance to each village. The women wore their dowry of ornate silver jewellery and colourful clothes. Today they are more likely to be dressed in black. If you are a male visitor you will share coffee and eat meals with the villagers and *shawawiya* but may not see any local women. You should not initiate shaking hands with any women you meet.

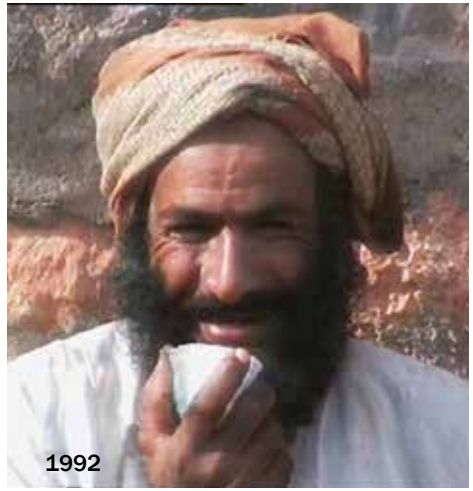
A female visitor will not normally join the men in the main *majlis*, instead if you are invited into a village house it will most likely be to the women's *majlis*. There will be no men inside and the women's heads may not be covered. You will receive traditional Omani hospitality and kindness, and should partake of any food and water offered.

Should you meet an Omani man on the track he will probably offer to carry your pack and inquire as to whether you need anything. If he is carrying water he will offer it to you. *La shukran,* meaning "no thank you", is what you should say if you wish to politely decline the offer. Omani men and women will treat you very courteously and will be thrilled that you have made such an effort to see their country. The respect offered to strangers is an Omani tradition and it is a very safe place for both male and female guests and residents.

Al-Azri K. M. (2013) *Wellsted, J. R. (1837)*

Driving in Oman

The highways in Oman are new and easy to navigate, and road signs are in both Arabic and English. A support team should not experience any difficulties in making a rendezvous at any of the villages on this traverse. Driving times, directions and whether a 4WD vehicle is required are detailed for each of the ten rendezvous as part of the descriptions of each day's walk. Taxis, shared taxis and baisa buses are available to Al Afyah and return from Yiqa.



1992



2018

This man from Daan Al Hamra was thrilled when I gave him a video still taken in 1992. Omani men do not generally mind having their photographs taken but always ask first.

Speaking Arabic

Nearly everybody younger than thirty speaks enough English to give directions, and are competent with Google Translate on their smart phones. Below are some Arabic words that you may need in the mountains (see also Arabic Glossary on page 251). No thank you: *la shukran*; you're welcome: *afwan*; no problem: *mafee mushkilah*; there isn't any: *mafee*; impossible: *mush mumkin*; good: *zayn;* left*: yasaar;* right*: yameen;* straight ahead*: seeda;* up or above*: fauq;* down or below*: taht;* slowly or little*: shwayy;* track*: tarik;* village or town*: bilad;* meeting place*: majlis;* mosque: *masjid;* house*: bayt;* garden*: bustan;* spring*: ayn;* mountain*: jabal;* mountain pass: *aqbah;* mountain top*: ras;* rock: *haja;,* dates*: tam;* water: *maay;* donkey*: hammaar,* guide*: daleel;* very difficult: *wagid taqleef.*

Place Name Spelling

Roman alphabet spelling of Arabic place names on street signage is sometimes inconsistent from one junction to the next, and road maps and recently published tourist brochures and website information include numerous spelling alternatives. There are spelling variants of most of the villages on the traverse. For example Al Afyah/Al Afiah, Wukan/Wakan, As Sawjrah/Saqrah/Sukirah, Ar Rus/Ar Ruus/Roos and Yiqa/Yiqah/Yuiqa. In each example the first spelling is correct.

The Omani government is in the process of enforcing a standard transliteration of place names from Arabic, which is being undertaken by the National Survey Authority (NSA). Village place names on maps that are on the NSA list and have been approved by them appear in bold font, while local names that are not the responsibility of NSA but are useful for walkers, such as mountain springs, mountain passes and important track junctions are not in bold. The NSA registration number for the maps in this book is 1246.



Day 10. Ayn Shigib spring near track from Kurb to Yisab

Nature

Plants

Mammals and Birds

Hajar Mountain Geology



Day 8. Juniper tree near the summit after snow

















Plants

Mountain vegetation is dominated by acacia shrubland at lower elevations, becoming woodland with wild olive trees at 1,500m and, above 2200m, juniper trees. Some of the olive and juniper trees are several hundred years old.

About 20% of the plants growing on the mountains have practical uses that are as varied as anaesthetics and pillow stuffing (Aerva). The eight pictures and following descriptions are some of the most commonly utilised mountain plants.

Caption Number	Arabic Name	Practical Use and Scientific Name
1.	*Boot*	Edible berry sold by children on Al Jabal Al Akhdar during the season. *Sideroxylon mascatense*
2.	*Dja*	Eaten with lemon and spices with a very bitter taste, said to be a cure for diabetes. The flower smells rotten to attract flies for pollination. The taste is so bitter that goats will not eat it. *Caralluma arabica*
3.	*Hanqalan*	Mixed with water and rubbed into goat, sheep and cow skins when curing to reduce the smell. *Euryops arabicus*
4.	*Jaada*	Medicine made by making a tea, used to clear diarrhea, and mashed and mixed with water as a cure for headaches. *Teucrium mascatense*
5.	*Qassam*	Eaten like peanuts. *Ziziphus hajarensis*
6.	*Nimt*	Eaten raw as fruit. *Sageteria thea*
7.	*Sekel*	Jelly under the plant skin used as medicine for children for upset stomachs, using a portion of the plant growing below ground. Also used for shampoo and to treat skin for pimples. (plant not native). *Aloe inermis*
8.	*Zatar*	Tea made with the leaves is sometimes used as a medicine. Chopped leaves mixed with olive oil used as a herb. *Zataria multiflora*

Table 6. Useful plants

Photographs and scientific names from Annette Patzelt



Mouse-tailed bat inside Kahf Amar Cave, near Sawjrah



Arabian spiny mouse drinking in Wadi Al Hajur below Balad Sayt

Mammals

Oman encourages wildlife conservation. For example killing a wolf is an imprisonable offence. Natural shelves on the cliff bordering the east side of the Eastern Hajar support herds of the endangered Arabian tahr, which are protected in the Wadi Sireen Reserve. They are present throughout most areas of the Western and Eastern Hajar and are the largest wild mammal in Oman. The Arabian red fox is common and most likely heard at night although not often seen. Red foxes are very unlikely to kill goats but do scavenge carcasses. Their 50mm-long, 5mm-diameter faeces are full of goat hair and are often seen on tracks. The Arabian red fox is a subspecies of the common red fox that has adapted to arid life and has larger ears and a smaller body. There are three species of fox in Oman. One of them is the Blanford's fox, which my daughter and her friends successfully captured and photographed on the Eastern Hajar during a British School trip organised for this purpose. Mouse-tailed bats inhabit caves in the mountains (see the photograph on the opposite page). Kahf Amar cave is an excursion from As Sawjrah on Day 3. Once I found a hedgehog skin in the mountains that did not impress my office colleagues the next day. A caracal, rarely seen but not endangered, was caught in 2016 near Yisab, which you pass on Day 10.

There are small rodents on the mountains that are considered pests by the semi-nomadic pastoralists due to spoiling food stored at campsites. Slatted wooden baskets are used to protect bulky food items and military munitions boxes for everything else (see photograph opposite and on pages 212 and 216).

Since 1970, when roads were constructed into the mountains, domestic donkeys no longer needed for transport have been released and there are now feral herds. You may see herds of twenty or more as you cross the plateau on Day 4 or grazing on the Aqbat Adh Dhafar plain on Day 5. Instead of domestic breeding, foals from these feral herds are captured and domesticated by Omanis, who still need donkeys for transport or agriculture.

There are small numbers of wolves on the Eastern Hajar, which I personally verified by carrying a faeces sample off the mountain for identification. There are also Arabian gazelle on the Eastern Hajar and Jabal Kawr, which is 25km south of the Western Hajar. The last leopard was killed near Nakhl in 1976. Hyenas are mentioned in *Travels of Arabia* as one of the animals observed by James Wellsted in 1836 on the Western Hajar but none have been seen for a long time.

There are nature reserves in other parts of Oman that are inhabited by wild and some rare mammals. The Al Wusta Wildlife Reserve in the desert at Jiddat Al Harasis has oryx, Nubian ibex and Arabian gazelles. Leopards, ibex, gazelles, foxes, wolves, porcupines, honey bears, hyraxes and striped hyenas live in the Jabal Samhan Nature Reserve in Dhofar.

Wellsted, J. R. (1837), correspondence and tahr photograph from Andrew Spalton

Birds

The Western Hajar is one of the best places to see the Egyptian vulture, which nests on the same cliff edge that you will be following for most of the traverse. The adult wingspan is 1.6m and they are often seen from the track soaring over the wadis to your north. Adults are easily recognised by their white plumage, with black flight feathers in their wings (see photograph on the next page).



Arabian tahr, now protected from hunters



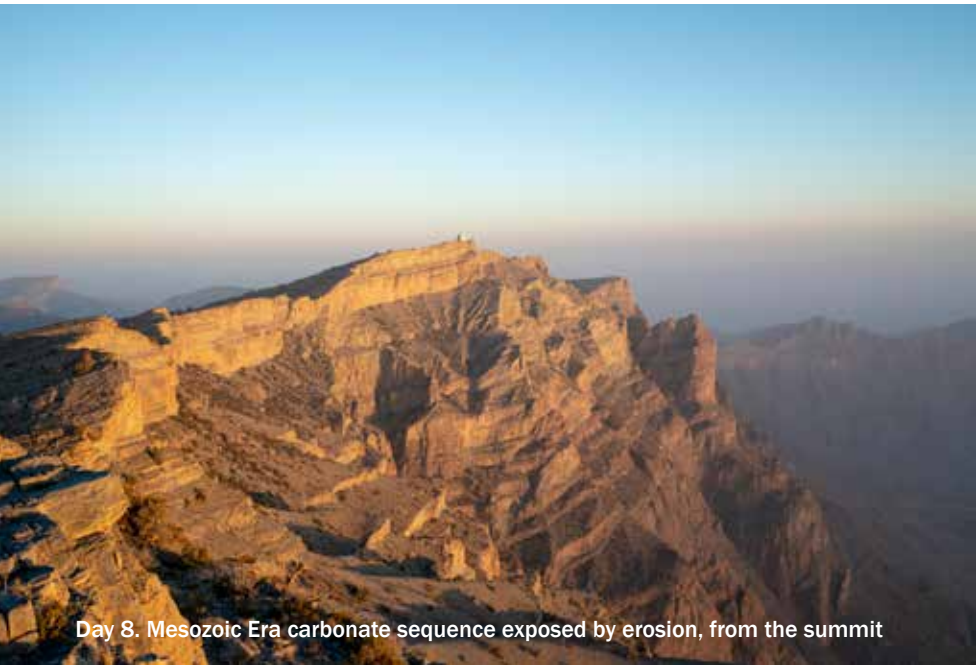
Day 4. Feral donkeys on the plateau between As Sawjrah and Ar Rus



Shawawi campsite on Jabal Kawr with tahr hunting trophies



Day 6 high option. 2m Egyptian vulture nest in a juniper tree 1km from Al Barbad



Day 8. Mesozoic Era carbonate sequence exposed by erosion, from the summit

Hajar Mountain Geology

The Hajar mountains are a geologist's wonderland, exposing a unique sequence of rocks spanning 800 million years of Earth history. Erosion during more humid times has created the topography and the sparse vegetation in Oman's hyperarid climate means all these rock formations are exposed.

Creation of the Hajar Mountains culminated about 10 million years ago as the Arabian Plate collided with the Eurasian Plate. The current plate movement is 10mm a year causing a mountain rise of 2mm a year. This plate movement is also creating the Zagros Mountains of Iran and the Makran range of Iran and Pakistan. The thrust direction is towards the northeast creating the huge anticline of the Western Hajar Mountains. You see this when driving around the mountains and observe the rock layers always dipping towards you. The traverse is on the southern side of this anticline, with a gentle dip slope to the southwest, which is truncated by a 500–1000m erosion cliff and 10–20km wide erosion basins to the north which exposed 540-million-year-old Late Precambrian sandstone and carbonate formations.

The foothills surrounding the Western Hajar consist of oceanic crust and mantle called ophiolite, which was thrust onto the continental crust by a process called obduction 100–90 million years ago. You will see this dark brown-green formation on your left on the drive south from Muscat to the start of the traverse. Ophiolite once covered the area that became the Hajar Mountains and was eroded as the anticline grew, remaining on all sides of the mountain (see satellite image on the next two pages where the ophiolite can be seen on the left, right and top).



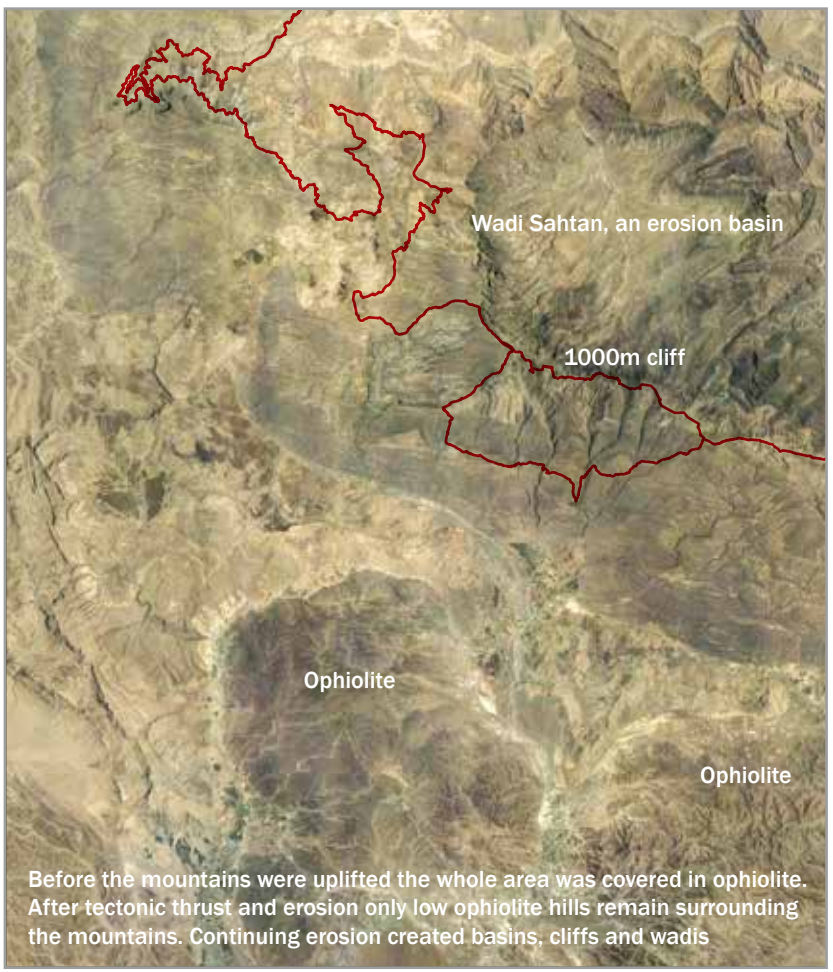
Day 16. Dar Al Bayda amidst the Mesozoic Era carbonates



Day 16. Close-up of Dar Al Bayda, a single isolated inhabited house

Beneath the eroded ophiolite is the 270–95 million-year-old Mesozoic Era carbonate sequence, which is up to 3km thick and consists of nine distinct limestone and dolomite layers, some up to 600m thick. Most of these layers are marine sediments, some rich in fossils which deep in the subsurface can be hydrocarbon reservoirs.

The boundary between the Mesozoic and the underlying Precambrian sequence is an angular unconformity. This means the folded layers, which are due to thrust pressures, in one sequence are not parallel with the folded layers in another. The underlying Precambrian sequence was tilted and eroded before the overlying Mesozoic carbonate sequence was deposited. In geological time there is a 300-million-year gap between the two sequences. Rainwater accumulating in the upper porous carbonate flows down to this unconformity, which acts as a seal because the older rock is impermeable. Most of the springs and corresponding villages in Al Ghubrah Bowl and Wadi Sahtan are located where this unconformity intersects the surface at an elevation of approximately 1500m.



Before the mountains were uplifted the whole area was covered in ophiolite. After tectonic thrust and erosion only low ophiolite hills remain surrounding the mountains. Continuing erosion created basins, cliffs and wadis

The walk on Day 2 is between two of these springs, at Hadash and Wukan. The most fossils will be seen on Day 6 down the dip slope from Ash Sharaf to Misfat Al Abriyyin. These are shallow marine fossils, particularly rudists, a once-prolific bivalve that is now extinct (see photographs on the following two pages). A view of the carbonate sequence observed as an outcrop created by erosion is from the summit looking west reached on Day 8 (see photograph on the previous page).

There are bajadas, or broad slopes of alluvial material at the foot of escarpments, on both sides of the mountain, that are zones of coalescing piedmont outwash fans. Piedmont are gravel and silt sediments that accumulate in front of the wadis as they intersect the plains at the foot of mountains. On the interior west side of the mountains the bajada extends up to 25km before merging into the desert, while on the east side of the mountains the bajada extends to the Batinah coast. Mountain rainwater drained by wadis flowing in these bajada is exploited by the *aflaj* built in the 1st millennium BCE.



Satellite image from the National Survey Authority, Sultanate of Oman



Cretaceous Period rudists, bivalve marine molluscs, above Misfat Al Abriyyin



Fossils on the dip slope above Misfat Al Abriyyin



Cretaceous Period rudists, bivalve marine molluscs, above Misfat Al Abriyyin



Fossil on the dip slope above Misfat Al Abriyyin



Day 11. Spinning wool at Naqa Ar Ruways. Their tweezers are to remove thorns

Culture

Hajar Mountain Society

Hajar Mountain Crafts



Day 5. Ar Rus, video stills from 1992



Day 5. Ar Rus, video stills from 1992

Hajar Mountain Society

Traditional mountain societies comprise of one of two lifestyles, *shawawi* and sedentary farming, both of which still exist. *Shawawiya* are semi-nomadic pastoralists who browse goats on natural vegetation.

Shawawiya divide their time within their territory, called *isbar,* between their numerous campsites that, on Al Jabal Al Akhdar, are either called *hala* (a single stone storehouse, under a cliff overhang or under a large tree) or *halil* (multiple houses). These campsites are called *diyar* on Jabal Shams. *Shawawiya* will only sleep inside their storehouses if it is particularly cold or raining. The storehouses, goat shelters, donkey enclosures and cow stalls that make up a large *halil* will be spread out if in a wadi, or compact if built under an overhang or inside a cave. They may consist of two or three stall-fed cows, goats, sheep, donkeys and small gardens. Usually there is no mosque or *sabla* (meeting place). The water source at each *hala* is a dammed wadi or small spring. Sometimes their gardens are remote from the *hala*, for example a few date palms growing with natural irrigation near a small spring or seepage, called a *hayl (*pl. *huyul)*. The date palms in *huyul* that are not standing in groves are exposed to wind and so have lower yields. *Shawawiya* move between *hala,* which is usually only a few hours' walk, according to the season; for example lower warmer altitudes in winter and higher windy *hala* in summer to escape the mosquitoes. These migrations benefit their herds but this is not their primary motivation. Their *isbar* territory is where they have economic rights to browse goats, collect firewood and medicinal plants, cut grass and, historically, hunt. *Isbar* are usually demarcated with a natural barrier or watershed, with the boundary, called *dar*, and typically traversed in one or two days.

Goats are fed a supplementary diet of dates daily and sometimes cut foliage and dried fish to ensure they return by themselves to their *hala*. Herds typically number from fifty to a hundred, with some kids sold every year. There is more foliage on mountain shrubs than grasses, which suits agile browsing goats more than grazing sheep. Cows are purchased live in animal markets in Nizwa or Rustaq, which were once walked up the mountain on tracks but now transported in vehicles. They are not bred in the mountains. A cow's lifespan is four to six years and when their milk yield drops they are killed and pit-roasted for one of the Muslim festivals. Mountain donkeys will be periodically released for grazing in wide naturally confined wadis augmented by branch fences called *shiggy*. *Shawawiya* led many of the long-distance donkey caravans on behalf of sedentary farmers, hence they have the most knowledge of mountain tracks. *Shawawiya* trade products such as woollen rugs, wild honey and firewood for dates with the sedentary farmers, or purchase dates with cash from the sale of goats. The market value of a goat is comparable to a lamb in Europe.

On Day 1 the man track passes several *hala* below the lip of Al Ghubrah Bowl and on Day 4 you pass a large abandoned *halil* called Al Mikhayti from where there is a 300m side trip to the Ma'awil cave *halil*. From Ar Rus there is an excursion to a cliff overhang *halil* on the way to Masirat Ash Shirayqiyyin and you may sleep at the abandoned *halil* called As Sarab. On Day 6, during the descent of the dip slope to Misfat Al Abriyyin, there are several *diyar*. On the way up to the summit on Day 8 you will pass a large occupied *diyar,* called Hayl Al Khadra. You will be sleeping at *diyar* on Day 11 and on the last three days of the traverse between Yisab and Yiqa.

The sedentary farmers who live on the mountains sometimes have two houses: one in their summer village at high altitude and the other in their winter village lower down. Their main economic activity is growing crops for direct human consumption, for

example tree crops such as date palms are grown on low terraces, pomegranate and walnut trees on shaded terraces and seasonal crops, such as wheat, on sunny terraces. In the pre-oil era, when well-tended date-palm annual yields were 45 kg, five palms produced 2000 calories per day; enough for one person on an all-date diet. Crops are grown on terraces adjacent to their winter villages and irrigated by ancient *aflaj* from one or more permanent springs. Terraces are constructed on slopes with stone retaining walls to maximise the flat land and utilise the spring water. They also keep smaller herds of goats, and a few cows and donkeys, which are all partly crop fed, except the cows, which are entirely stall-fed. Livestock are kept at summer villages and their dung is used to fertilise the terraces. Donkeys are used for transport on the farm and between their summer and winter villages. The village layout is compact and with a mosque and a covered central *sabla* or a village *majlis*. On the traverse you will sleep at six farmers' villages that have *aflaj* and terraces: Hadash, Wukan, Misfat Al Abriyyin and Yisab, and the summer villages of As Sawjrah and Ar Rus. Excursions off the main traverse take you to three winter villages: Karar, Masirat Ash Shirayqiyyin and Masirat Al Jawamid, which are all warm enough for date palms.

The traverse does not cross any deserts so you will not meet any camel-herding Bedouin. In the desert the moisture deficit between evaporation rates and rainfall is even more extreme, so nomads' territory is vastly larger than that of the mountain *shawawiya* and the *isbah* of the mixed-herding Bedouin who live on the broad slope of alluvial material at the foot of the mountains. Unlike the mountain *shawawiya,* Bedouin migrations are to seek pasture for their livestock.

Prior to the discovery of oil in Arabia, the Hajar Mountains were entirely populated by *shawawiya* and sedentary farmers living a subsistence lifestyle, with some repatriated wealth from Omani families living in Africa. In the 1930s, paid jobs became available in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates creating an alternative vocation for Omani men who became commuters, thus increasing the cash economy and altering the gender balance of chores in the mountains. The domestic head could then be a younger man or wife, which gradually eroded the traditional pastoral system of husbandry. This accelerated when Oman itself started exporting oil in 1967 and jobs became available in Fahud, 140km southwest of the mountains. These jobs were taken by Omanis returning from the Arabian Gulf and Tanzania, and by those from the mountains and desert. In 1970 the country began investing in roads and electrification, and rural construction started to utilise modern cement. Concrete house construction brought expatriate tradesmen from southern Asia, who by the 1980s started to work on farms. At the same time, hunting and trapping predators resulted in the disappearance of the wolf from the Western Hajar and *shawawiya* no longer had to spend every night in the mountains protecting their herds. The connection between wolf extinction and the efficiency of animal husbandry has been observed elsewhere, for example in medieval England where huge sheep flocks were made possible by the absence of predators. Now there are modern houses in the mountain villages whose owners commute by vehicle to salaried employment. Nearly all farmers employ south Asian labourers and some lease their farms to them. Most of the *shawawiya* have a primary residence near a road, which provides access to electricity and convenient transport for migrant work. They may choose to drop the *shawawi* label. In this book these roadside *shawawi* homes are called settlements because they no longer resemble *halil*, nor are they a sedentary farmers' village with ancient *aflaj*. Many of the *hala* now have plastic water tanks to augment their wadi dams.



Shawawiya diyar on the Eastern Hajar. Note the hanging strips of preserved meat



Shawawiya diyar on Jabal Kawr

Despite the impact of exposure to modern civilisation, both the *shawawi* and sedentary farming lifestyles still exist with farmers sharing responsibility for their tracks, garden fences and *aflaj*. The people of Misfat Al Abriyyin still use donkeys for transporting agricultural produce to sell in the markets at Al Hamra, Nizwa, Bahla, on the internet and through WhatsApp. You will see and hear mostly Omani women herding and calling their goats off the mountain, sometimes carrying a newborn kid to goat enclosures where the herd is fed dates, hay, leaves cut from wild shrubs and dried fish, which gives the meat a distinctive flavour. The last four days of the traverse are on tracks that are still used by *shawawiya* leading their donkey caravans. The wadis on this section of the traverse have 200m cliffs that prevent road access for the three families who live at Naqa Ar Ruways, Dar Al Bayda and Dalil. You will meet both *shawawiya* and sedentary farmers, although the distinction is not always obvious. Some tribes were originally all *shawawi* or all sedentary farmers, while others included both lifestyles. Since they are all part of the Omani tribal system who can trace their ancestry, intermarriage is acceptable and both intertribe marriage and cousin-to-cousin marriage is practiced. Examples of cooperation between *shawawiya* and farmers include allowing farmers to browse livestock on *shawawi isbar*, *shawawiya* minding the goats of farmers, and individual date palms or terraces owned by *shawawiya* but maintained by farmers for a fee or share of the crops.

Al-Azri K. M. (2013)
Birks. J. S. (1976)
Chatty, D. (1996)
Dutton, R. W. (1999)
Edwards J. E. (2006)
Wilkinson J. C. (1977)
Winder, R. (2017)

Hajar Mountain Crafts

Some heritage items are still in use and you may see them during your traverse. Omani women once received silver jewellery as part of their dowry (see my 1992 video stills on the chapter cover page). This jewellery is still worn, although today it is more likely to be gold. Only female hikers will have any chance of observing this.

The brothers who live at Naqa Ar Ruways spend time spinning as they chat. They use a drop spindle with an angled notch at the top end around which yarn can be secured while the spindle is rotated (see photograph on page 52). Their drop spindle is identical to one depicted in a bitumen compound carving from Susa, Iran, dating to 800–600 BCE. Rolls of dyed wool spun by the current resident hang from the tree shelter at Dar Al Bayda (see photograph on page 59).

The *shawawiya* living in the three settlements of Al Jammah, Ras Adh Dhahar and Al Iqaybah, spin and weave blankets (see photographs on pages 58–59). The rug in the photograph with the two boys took two days to weave and comprises two narrow rugs stitched together. It would have taken one man nine days to spin and four days to dye the wool thread, although usually several people work together. The only modernity in this mountain craft is the origin of the dyes, which were once natural but are now purchased. The two boys are making a wool neck strap (*kaid) (see* photograph on page 34).

In the photograph of donkey trappings, the saddle pads are made from woven wool, with the striped pattern created by using different dyes for the warp. The woollen straps used for the chest and girth use strong colours – red, white and black. The forehead band is decorated with a red tassel. Coarse-plied goat hair is stronger than wool so it is used to make the rope and saddlebags. The saddle tree is made from naturally curved *sidr* branches.

Richardson, N. Dorr M. (2003)



Day 16. Dar Al Bayda, salt lick to encourage goats to drink, to increase their milk



Day 16 option. Making a wool *kaid* in Al Iqaybah



Day 16. Dar Al Bayda, balls of hand-spun wool



Day 16 option. Hand loom at Ras Adh Dhahar, and looking at a draft of this book



Spinning a woollen thread, Dalil



Thread mending the saddlebag



Saddlebag loaded on the donkey



Goatskin water container



Stitching an external hand-carved splint on an injured goat, Dalil



Lunch at Dalil *shawawiya* camp



Preserved dried meat under shelter at Dalil *shawawiya* camp



Day 4. Excursion to Masirat Ash Shirayqiyyin, holding tank on right

Irrigation

Introduction
Types of *Aflaj*
Aflaj on Mountain Foothills
Mountain *Aini Aflaj*
Falaj Construction and Maintenance
Management of *Aflaj* Water
Aini Aflaj on the Mountains Today



Day 6. Stone on-cloth used as a sluice on a *falaj* in Misfat Al Abriyyin



Holding tank filled by a *falaj* from a spring above terraces in Wadi Halhal

Introduction

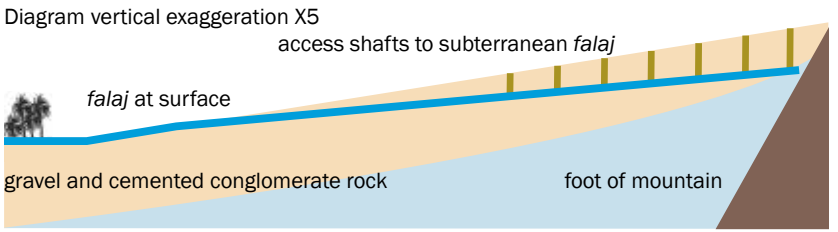
Starting in the 1st millennium BCE in the Near East, agriculture at the locations of today's villages on mountain foothills and margins were established and grew due to the enhancement of communal irrigation systems. Two major irrigation techniques used in the Western Hajar Mountains and foothills are the dam diversions of flash floods, called *sayl,* and subterranean *aflaj*. They were developed by the indigenous population, themselves earlier migrants, migrants from Persia who developed what they called the *qanat,* and migrants from Yemen, who built terraces on the Yemeni mountains that were irrigated by harvesting rainwater. The following paragraphs explain the technology, history and the political systems that built, then delivered, this communal irrigation. The last paragraphs explain how the *falaj* is used today and best camp site to see them on the traverse.

Types of *Falaj*

In Oman '*falaj'* is a term for a complete irrigation system. The letters "flj" in Arabic mean to divide property into shares. A *falaj* is both a mechanical system for delivering water and a management system for distributing it among shareholders. There are three types of *falaj*. *Aini aflaj* collect water from springs and *ghaili aflaj* divert a portion of the surface water from wadi beds. Both transport water to irrigated land through distribution channels controlled by sluices, which can be cut into the rock or built up with sealed stone walls and sometimes covered with flat stones. These types of *aflaj* are designed to exploit any surface water that exists within reasonable proximity to arable land, sometimes requiring considerable effort. If necessary, flat land is created by terracing steep slopes, which connect to *ghaili aflaj* that can hug the sides of winding wadi walls for kilometres. The entire system is exposed and requires constant maintenance. There are numerous springs at the geological unconformity at approximately 1500m elevation where you will be walking, so those you pass on the traverse are all *aini aflaj*.

The third type, *daudi aflaj,* are subterranean aqueducts sourcing water from underground aquifers. *Daudi aflaj* drain the outwash fans situated on lower-altitude mountain margins where the rainwater run-off from the entire wadi catchment accumulates. Underground aqueducts 3–9km long are tunnelled into cemented conglomerate from the ground's surface at a constant gradient a little shallower than the sloping gravel plains that extend perpendicularly from both sides of the mountains. The aqueduct intercepts the water table at a depth of typically 20m but sometimes down to 40m. Vertical wells at the upstream end of the aqueduct increase the flow from the rock below. Vertical shafts staggered along the remainder of the aqueduct provide access for excavation and ventilation for the tunnellers. Upstream excavation shafts are sealed but those downstream are left open for maintenance. Aqueducts usually continue on the surface for another few kilometres as either covered or open channels before splitting into distribution channels. The majority of the length of this type of *falaj* is deep underground, which does not require constant maintenance, and upstream sections of some of these flowing *daudi aflaj* have remained undisturbed since they were built in the 1st millennium BCE, and are continuing to flow even after two thousand years. Of the three types of *aflaj*, *daudi aflaj,* known as *qanat* in Iran, have had the biggest impact on agricultural output and population density.

The three types of *aflaj* are quite different in their design and in the skill of selecting their location. Springs and wet wadis are easier to recognise than aquifers. *Aini falaj* have the most reliable water flow, followed by *daudi falaj* with *ghaili falaj* being the most sensitive to rainfall; they may cease flowing in a drought.



Schematic Diagram of a *Daudi Falaj*

The upstream portion of the 3–9km-long subterranean *falaj* is 20–40m below the surface and is immersed in the water table near the foot of the mountains in the mouth of the wadi. This is where the aquifer depth is relatively stable and salinity is low.

Aflaj on Mountain Foothills

The first *aflaj* in Oman were built as early as 1000 BCE in villages including Nizwa, Izki, Salut and Al Hamra. Some of these shallow-cut and covered *aflaj* were accompanied by what archaeologists believe were public administrative buildings. These *aflaj* are assumed to be responsible for population increases in these oasis villages and the slight shift of settlements from Bronze-Age sites that had *sayl* irrigation to locations more convenient for *aflaj* construction. *Daudi aflaj* were built on the western side of the mountains during the Persian Achaemenid Empire (559–330 BCE), whose territory included northern Oman. The objective of these deep *aflaj* was to bring the rainwater accumulated in wadi-mouth gravels to the surface where there was cultivatable land on the sloping alluvial plains. Longer *daudi aflaj* cross bajada to the Batinah coast on the eastern side of the mountains. Most of these were built during the third Persian empire; the Sassanids, who occupied the Batinah from 224–650 CE and during the first Imamate in the 9th–10th centuries. These *aflaj* were waterproofed with an ancient cement called *sarooj* which was made by mixing water, lime and the product of heated local clays. The cement and inverted-siphon technology used on Batinah *aflaj* is postulated to have come from a combination of Roman and Persian technology. These bajada *aflaj* supplemented the shallow coastal wells, from which water was lifted by rope pulled by yoked bullocks walking down an excavated ramp.

Mountain *Aini Aflaj*

Aini falaj located high on the mountains that connect springs to terraces were probably first used in the 1000 BCE settlement of Balad Sayt in Wadi Bani Awf, where seven springs surround a flat cultivated area. This village is an excursion from Day 6 of the traverse.

The current inhabitants of Al Jabal Al Akhdar are predominantly the Bani Riyam tribe, who were part of the early migrations from Yemen. They came from the mountain province of Hamdan on Jabal Atwa near Sanaa, where they used diverted flash-flood waters to irrigate their terraces. The successes and periodic failures of this irrigation, particularly the 680m-long 16m-high Marib dam (700 BCE–500 CE), created population pressures that resulted in migrations to the rest of the Arabian Peninsula. Until 650 CE there was an overlapping Persian and Arab presence on bajada but, with the exception of one Persian invasion, the Bani Riyam alone occupied Al Jabal Al Akhdar. They adapted their Yemeni irrigation technology to the reduced rainfall and prolific springs on the Western Hajar. For example, the soil enrichment of the terraces in Yemen, which resulted from repeated depositions of silt by flash floods, was replicated with animal manure. The springs that supplied *aini aflaj* in Oman's mountains come from rainwater accumulated in soft porous carbonate and occur wherever the rock transition between this and the deeper hard rock is exposed. *Aini aflaj* bring water to the nearest low-gradient land suitable for building terraces, which are constructed from silt and manure retained behind stone walls.

There are Persian connections to mountain agriculture. The pomegranate tree is believed to have been introduced from Persia but will not grow on bajada. It needs to be cool, preferably shaded and well irrigated. Pomegranate trees are still grown today and are fed by *aini aflaj* irrigation on the Hadash and As Sawjrah mountain terraces that are shaded by adjacent cliffs. The Persian Sassanids used an ancient fourfold colour classification of water resources, possibly adopted from the Chinese. Al Jabal Al Akhdar means "the green mountain" and the name may have originated from this classification. The mountains were invaded three hundred years after the Sassanids in 973 CE and, for the first time, the Persians settled in the mountain village of Ash Shirayjat; much of the *aini aflaj*, terrace and stone-track construction at this village dates from this period. Today the agriculture in the mountains comprises 3% of the total in Oman.

Falaj Construction and Maintenance

During their two periods of imperial rule, Persian society was quasi-feudal with a governor, military aristocracy and land-colonising class. The empire granted five-generation lease rights for arid land on the condition that water was found and exploited. During the Sassanian period, peasants paid 30% land tax and 30% poll tax funding *aflaj* construction and maintenance. Water distribution was controlled by only a few land owners.

After the Arab conquest of Oman (650 CE), Omani tribes assumed responsibility for maintaining *aflaj* on bajada, and during the two most stable periods of their history they extended it. During, and shortly after, the first Imamate in the 9th and 10th centuries they constructed Falaj Al Mutaridh, which had four water mills, between Sohar and the mountains. The Ya'ariba Imamate (1650–1725) regained control of the coast and maritime commerce financed investment in the interior. They built new inverted siphons when they restored many of the bajada *aflaj* on both sides of the mountains. The Awamr tribe, which were based at Qala'at Al Awamr near Izki, became specialists at divining and digging *aflaj* extensions on bajada. They worked underground in high temperatures, humidity and poor lighting using a hammer and chisel while crouched inside a tunnel digging cemented conglomerate. Minor *aini aflaj* construction in the mountains continued until the 1950s. The grandfather of the current owner of Ghayl Shadhan, the *diyar* you will reach on Day 14, built the *aini falaj* and created the gardens there.

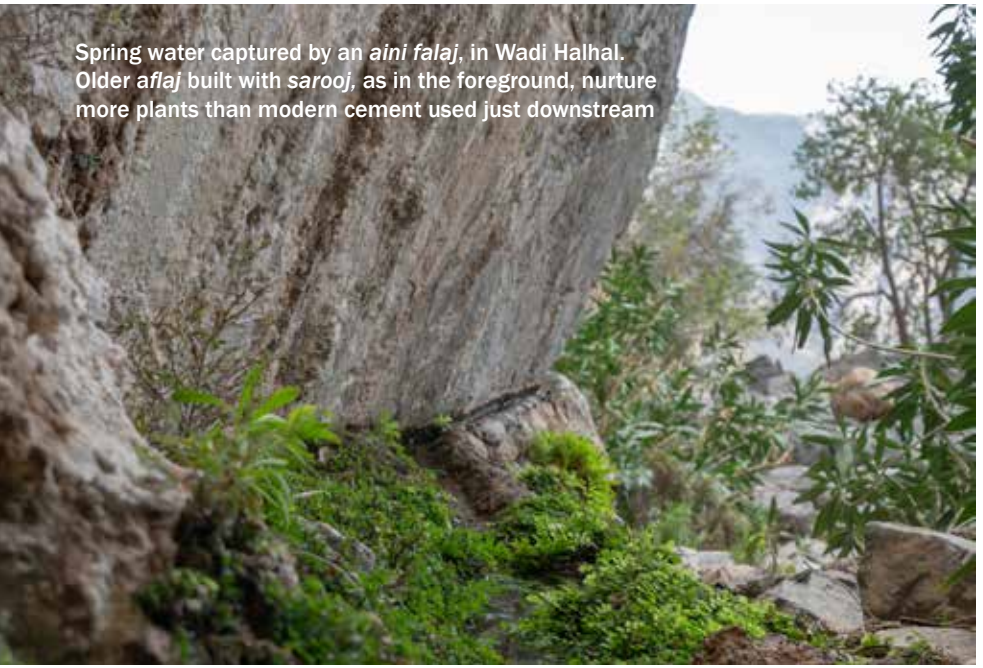
Management of *Falaj* Water

It is interesting to understand how Arab tribes managed a complex communal irrigation system without the empowerment of a few individuals that is inherent in hierarchical societies such as the Persian Empire and the Sebaean Kingdom in Yemen, where water distribution for irrigation management was quite different. Rainfall and sporadic flash-flood diversions in Yemen could not be forecast, so the terrace farmers' sophisticated water-distribution system was multiple diversion channels. In Oman, rainfall contribution is minor relative to the near-constant flow from both *daudi* and *aini aflaj*. Omanis had to develop a system to equitably distribute the flow between a large number of individual land owners, which required intertribal cooperation and political leadership because multiple settled tribes often shared connecting *aflaj.* In 650 CE, politics were inseparable from religion and religious leaders became responsible for creating a system for sharing *aflaj* water. This system developed over hundreds of years concurrently with the conversion to Islam and the refinement to Ibadism and is explained further in the following three paragraphs on Ibadism, *dawran* water sharing and financing *falaj* maintenance.

The Semitic tribes that migrated from southwest Arabia had their own territories on the interior side of the mountains. There were periods of war and negotiated territorial coexistence with the Persians until 650 AD, when the Arab tribes derived from Semitic migrations fully replaced the Persian leadership. The catalyst for this conquest was the conversion to Islam. After a hundred years of internal strife most of the tribes adopted the Ibadi interpretation of Islam, one of the first schisms in this new religion, which is distinguished by the method of determining their political and religious leader. The Imam is an appointed position, not hereditary and not even permanent, with appointees the acknowledged wise men of the community. Of the sixty-one Imams who governed between 747 CE to 1954, only five inherited the position from father to son, or from brother to brother. Today Oman is the only country where Ibadis are the majority Muslim sect.

During the first Imamate in the 9th century, the elected Imams evolved their own cooperative system for managing *aflaj* for the benefit of settled Arabs. This was an egalitarian society, with everybody participating in ownership of relatively small properties. This *falaj* water-distribution consensus has only experienced minor adjustments by subsequent Imams for the last thousand years. Drinking, washing and water for stock is free to everybody, available in a sequence upstream from the *falaj* feed into irrigation channels. Timesharing is the principle that allocates downstream *falaj* water between individual owners. Times for the watering cycle, called *dawran,* came from observing the sun's shadow and twenty-four specific stars before clocks became available in rural Oman in 1970. *Dawran* allocates the water flowing sequentially in multiple channels from a split *falaj,* with individual *dawran* then used for the side exits. The origin of each *dawran* are shares of water rights unique to each *falaj*, and the division of unique *dawran* has created different units of time, called *athar*, in different parts of Oman. *Dawran* are not static. Alterations can be made to account for inheritance divisions, seasonal changes in evaporation rates and daytime and night-time. Sometimes land ownership includes water rights but they can be owned independently.

Aflaj maintenance is usually financed by auctioning a fraction of the schedule to any farmer who wants more water. An endowment to *falaj* is sometimes part of a villager's will. Large bajada villages keep *aflaj* record books, have dedicated Islamic agents, called *wakil*; timekeepers, called *arif*; and auctioneers. In some villages, auction money surplus to maintenance requirements is used for social services. In smaller villages *aflaj* water distribution and maintenance is managed by appointed villagers with at least two



Spring water captured by an *aini falaj*, in Wadi Halhal. Older *aflaj* built with *sarooj*, as in the foreground, nurture more plants than modern cement used just downstream



An *aini falaj* in Wadi Halhal gardens rebuilt using modern cement

appointees elected for six months by village men at a meeting after Friday prayers. This indigenous democratic process for managing their most important resource is consistent with Ibadism. The elected representatives are paid directly by the land owners or water-right owners for their watering time and use the money for *aflaj* maintenance and their own wages. Some bajada villages, such as Izki, have land ownership distributed among farmers belonging to different tribes who often lived in conflict. However, water-cycle cooperation survived this tension and two civil wars, as evidenced by numerous different tribal names recorded in *aflaj* records, and the essence of this 9th-century management system still survives today. According to the 2017 National *Aflaj* Inventory Project there are 4,112 *aflaj* in Oman of which 3,017 are flowing. The *falaj* water supply is now augmented with water trucks and desalinated water piped from the coast.

Aini Aflaj on the Mountains Today

Most *falaj* irrigation water is allocated to tree crops and is directed to individual terraces by using stone-on-cloth plugs to sequentially open gaps in communal to private *aflaj*. Water is directed through the terraces by individual owners with impromptu dirt channels. In a drought the *arif* negotiate how to allocate the reduced water and which terraces to leave fallow with the owners. For example, pomegranates are a drought-resistant tree but irrigation determines their yield, so less fruit is produced in dry periods. Less well-irrigated terraces planted with seasonal crops lie beyond tree crops, and terraces not reached by *aflaj* lie at the outer edge of the gardens. These are only tilled and planted with seasonal crops when it rains, sometimes six times a year. This practice used to involve the entire village with men and women working together to complete maintenance and planting within a day of the rain, but this has ceased in the last three decades as the Middle East has become more conservative.

The villages of Hadash, Wukan and As Sawjrah, on the first three days of the traverse, are built next to terraces irrigated by *aini aflaj*. The Cliff Hotel at As Sawjrah is just above terraces that are directly below the mother spring, with pomegranate and walnut trees that were planted four hundred years ago. The largest area of irrigated terraces you will pass are at Misfat Al Abriyyin and Yisab, which are low so warm enough to grow dates.

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Abandoned *falaj* fixed to the cliff with *sarooj*



Day 5. Bomb shelter built during the Al Jabal Al Akhdar War, 1957–59



Day 5. Shrapnel from Shackleton bombers or De Havilland Venom fighters

History

19th-Century Descriptions of the Western Hajar
The Hajar Mountains and Maritime Trade
Conquests of Al Jabal Al Akhdar
Ancient Rock Art in the Hajar Mountains
The Myth of the Persian Steps
The Yemen Connection
16th-Century Portuguese in the Mountains
The First Humans in Oman
Maps of Migrations and Ancient Trade Routes
Archaeology in the Hajar Mountains
History by Date
Particular Details of Oman's History



Day 5. Remains of Bronze-Age Tomb on the track Ar Rus to Ash Sharaf

19th-Century Descriptions of the Western Hajar

In 1838 Lieutenant James Wellsted of the British Navy visited the Western Hajar, accompanied for part of his journey by Lieutenant Whitelock. They claimed to be the first Europeans to explore the mountains of Oman, although there is circumstantial evidence that the Portuguese visited them in the 16th century. The mountain lifestyle Wellsted recorded is still recognisable today but there have also been significant changes. He observed wine being consumed with every meal and exported in goatskin liquid containers, called *saqa,* to the coast. These are no longer used to transport wine, milk and water but are still employed as water coolers. You will see full or disused *saqa* hanging from trees near *shawawi* campsites together with other possessions that are kept away from nibbling goats. The goatskins that make a *saqa* are tanned with the bark of the acacia tree, the leg apertures stitched shut and the neck aperture stitched into a spout. Grease is used to seal the skins, which still allows enough evaporation to cool drinking water. Wellsted observed some wine being made with a mixture of grape and pomegranate juice; white grapes for wine and red grapes dried to make raisins. Grapevines and pomegranates are still grown in villages today, for example Wukan, which you reach on Day 2. It was still possible to purchase bottles of vinegar in Al Manakhir in 1993, which was made with wine that had undergone two stages of fermentation, but Wukan stopped selling wine in 2000. Wellsted describes the mountain traders arming themselves with matchlocks and swords when leading donkey caravans to trade with the desert Arabs. Wellsted's host for his journey was the Sheikh of the desert plain town of Tanuf, who Wellsted noted as having paramount authority on the mountains. The Sheikh described the mountain inhabitants thus: "They neglect their prayers, break the fast of the Ramadan and openly indulge in the forbidden pleasures of wine". Wellsted's intention to visit Al Jabal Al Akhdar was not encouraged by his plains' Arab companions, who warned him of "great labour and considerable peril". The mountain tribe, that Wellsted identified as Bani Riyam, similarly distinguished themselves from the plains' Arabs. They boasted of living in peace in the security of their mountains, isolated from "foreign invasions, anarchy, and internecine broils". They were referring to what Wellsted described as quarrelling, plundering and killing by camel-mounted robber hordes and feuds between tribes. Wellsted's travels in Oman coincided with the period of tribal feuding that gave rise to the defensive towers you will pass at Hadash, Wukan and As Sawjrah.

The ascent route used by Wellsted was up Wadi Tanuf to Sayq. He describes a portion of the track as being too narrow for laden donkeys so their load was carried by the Omanis themselves, and his aborted attempt at following a man track as a short cut that he ultimately found too difficult. These are still familiar experiences. Wellsted descended the Western Hajar on the trading route from Sayq to Birkat Al Mawz via Wadi Muaydin. He was amazed at the man hours and organisation that would have been required to construct the stone steps that he followed down the side of the wadi, equating them to the greatest public works in Arabia. Portions of your traverse follow other historic donkey trading routes that will give you an opportunity to observe similarly impressive track construction. Although they do not link with this mountain traverse, the two tracks Wellsted walked still exist today.

Several other British officers hiked up the mountains after Wellsted. In 1845 Lieutenant C.S.D. Cole from the vessel *Palinurus* made the journey by donkey to the village of Wadi Bani Habib via Wadi Tanuf and then on to Sayq, returning on the same track. "I found the descent far more fatiguing than the ascent and had I not been barefooted, (my shoes having been cut to pieces during my short stay in the mountains) I would never have ventured on riding, for one false step would have been destruction to both rider and donkey". If you attempt this traverse in unsuitable shoes you will understand his predicament. "The inhabitants of these valleys indulge in wine of their own making; it is like the common black wine of Europe, only much inferior. Their excuse for doing so is on account of, as they consider it, the excessive cold of the mountains". Cole describes the cultivation as "... consisting almost entirely of fruit trees, viz. pomegranates, figs, peaches, apricots, walnuts, and sweet limes, while the hills on either side are completely covered with the vine".

Colonel S.B. Miles was the British Political Agent and Consul in Muscat from 1872–87. He crossed the mountain range in 1876 via Wadi Bani Kharus to the village of Al Alya at the end of the wadi, up the donkey track to Sayq, then down via Wadi Muaydin, crossing our traverse 2.8km from As Sawjrah (see map on page 118). Miles made this journey in June in the heat of summer, a choice dictated by personal safety not comfort. "The country at that period was very unsettled, tribal and dynastic wars being of perpetual occurrence and it was not for several years that a fitting opportunity for carrying out my design presented itself". Miles had donkeys and porters, and started the climb from Al Alya at midnight. "The path would be here quite impassable for beasts of burden had it not been artificially improved by the construction of successive series of rough steps formed of huge slabs of stone and by the curbing and revetting up the road in parts where it overhangs a precipice. The stupendous nature and difficulty of the work and the skill and enormous labour bestowed on it claimed my wonder and admiration but it was in vain that I endeavoured to gather any local tradition respecting its origin. The absence of tradition and the character of the work led me to regard it as of Persian conception and execution. A scattered Arab tribe like the Bani Riyam, always at war with its neighbours, could not have done it, and I think the most probable period to which it can be assigned is that of the Dailemite (Persian) conquest of Oman in the 10th-century". Today these stepped mountain paths, particularly the thousand steps above Imti, are called the Persian Steps, a name that reinforces the opinion of today's visitors and Omanis that these mountain paths are a consequence of the 973 CE Persian invasion. It is likely that Miles underestimated the age of these caravan routes by five hundred or more years, and they were built by the Bani Riyam tribe in calmer times. Miles' descriptions of the walnut, apple, pomegranate, fig, peach, apricot, vine, almond and lime crops still apply today, and he echoed the remarks of earlier British visitors about the extensive vineyards and wine consumption. He described the rind of the pomegranate being used to cure fevers and to cope with intestinal worms.

At the time of Miles' visit, the Bani Riyam occupied all the mountains and portions of the villages at the bottom of the mountain tracks: Birkat Al Mawz, Tanuf, Nizwa and Izki. During his stay at Sayq, Miles had coffee with two brothers, sheikhs Nasir and Suliman bin Saif, whose father was the *temimeh sheikh* of the Bani Riyam. Miles remained in Oman for eleven years after this trip and followed the family's fortunes. "Sheikh Nasir bin Saif died a few years after my visit, leaving three sons, the eldest of whom, Mohammed, inherited his father's position as *temimeh sheikh*. In 1886 Mohammed and his second brother were murdered by their uncle Suliman, who usurped authority and held it until 1899, when Nasir's third son retaliated and put his uncle Suliman to death". According to Miles this sort of family tragedy was not unusual.

An observation shared by all the British visitors is that the Omanis treated their slaves differently than the British on their West Indian sugar plantations. Philips makes this point very strongly. The slaves' tasks in Oman were largely domestic, and they were owned by individual families and rather than being shackled and guarded they were the

guards, sometimes armed as bodyguards for the sheiks and the sultan. Their loyalty was both expected and given. A sultan's will would usually free many personal slaves. There was no mention of slaves on the mountains.

Cole C. S. D. (1848) *Miles, Colonel S. B. (1901)* *Philips W., (1966)* *Thomas B. (1931)* *Wellsted, J. R. (1837)*

The Hajar Mountains and Maritime Trade

The Hajar Mountains form an isolated arc 650km long, touching the coast at each end and set back from the coast by 30km in the centre. The three passes through the mountains that connect the coast with the interior have been used for trading since at least the Iron Age. These passes are wadis whose sediments were exploited by *daudi aflaj* to supply interior villages and the coast. The coexistence of fresh water, land trade routes, the coast and seasonal wind reversals that gave dhow access to India and Africa across the seas led to the creation of trading centres. These monsoonal ports serviced the maritime trade across the Indian Ocean between China and India in the east, Persia and Mesopotamia in the Middle East and Africa in the west. The first transhipment ports were at Sohar, then Qalhat from 1230 followed by the twin sheltered ports of Muscat and Muttrah from 1515. From north to south the mountain passes and their associated historic settlements (see map 3 on page 81) are Wadi Hatta, Wadi Al Jizzi, between Sohar and Al Buraimi oasis, and the Sumail Gap between Muscat and the interior villages of Izki and Nizwa. Qalhat is at the eastern extremity of the Hajar Mountains. You will drive through the Sumail Gap to Al Afyah.

The mountains themselves contributed to maritime trade; copper and diorite stone during the Bronze Age (see map 2 page 81), while pomegranates and dried limes supplemented the larger volumes of date exports. The principal imports that reached the mountains were rice from India and woven goods from Africa. Wealth from the coast benefited the mountains via *aflaj* restoration during the Ya'ariba Imamate and through individual Omanis who repatriated fortunes made in Africa. Mountain communities gained from their proximity to cultural exchange between Asia and the Near East through new crops. Farming yields were improved with the introduction of diverse cereal grains. Vegetables, such as eggplant, were introduced to the mountains, citrus fruit came from India and pomegranates from Iran. Peaches, apples, carrots, onions and garlic came from Asia, and bananas were introduced from Southeast Asia. Grapes, roses for rose water, apricots, figs, plums, mulberries, almonds and walnuts are all exotics mentioned by historic visitors. Citrus fruits and bananas were recorded as being mountain crops by 10th-century Arab writers. Central and South American crops that arrived in the 16th century via the Portuguese included corn, chilli peppers, pumpkins, passion fruit, pineapples, sweet potatoes and tomatoes.

Dried limes were the most significant maritime trade export from the Hajar Mountains; they could be consumed throughout long voyages after a ship's supply of fresh fruit and vegetables ran out. Although the medical science of the remedy was not understood until the 20th century, dried limes eliminated the vitamin C deficiency that caused scurvy, and eating them earned British sailors the nickname "limeys" in the 1850s. Limes drying on the roofs of Omani village houses is still a common sight.

Buerkert A. et al. (2010) *Petraglia D. M. et al. (2009)* *Wilkinson J. C. (1977)*

Conquests of Al Jabal Al Akhdar

The rulers of Oman's coast and foothills have alternated between Omani tribes and numerous invaders since the Iron Age. However there have only been two conquests of Al Jabal Al Akhdar. The first invader was the Buwayid Malik of Fars, Adhad ul Dowla, who sent an invasion fleet to Sohar in 973 CE. These Persians battled Arab tribes on the Batinah plains, then Nizwa, before finally fighting their way up the donkey tracks through Wadi Muaydin and Wadi Tanuf. The final battle was on a plain abutting the edge of Wadi Bani Kharus, which you will cross on the traverse 10km from As Sawjrah on the way to Ar Rus on Day 4. The Arab army was defeated and the victors settled on the mountain in what is now the village of Ash Shirayjat overlooking Wadi Muaydin. They named their new village after the capital of Fars. Subsequently as the Persians lost power throughout their empire due to struggles with the Seljukian Turks, Omani tribes recovered their mountains. The Persian settlers were gradually absorbed into the Bani Riyam. Miles reports that in 1876 the descendants of these Persians had assimilated into Arab culture in language, dress and habits but remained a separate community. Miles suggests that their descendants introduced wine making and perhaps rose water. Today the terraces of Ash Shirayjat are the most extensive on the Hajar Mountains.

The second invasion was a successful attack by the British SAS that concluded Al Jabal Al Akhdar War (1957–59). This was the end of the independent Imamate in the interior of Oman. The surprise night attack on Sayq involved scaling an exposed sloping slab east of Wadi Kamah. The traverse passes several points between Ar Rus and Ash Sharaf that are relevant to this conflict. At 4.4km there is a bomb shelter (see photograph on page 70), which was built by the tribesmen supporting Talib, the brother of Ghalib bin Ali, the Imam and leader of the Imamate. He was resisting the coastal-based Sultan's attempt to unite the country, and the shelter protected them from British aerial bombing. Pieces of shrapnel remain on the track from munitions dropped by Shackleton bombers or fired from De Havilland Venom fighters. Airborne attacks were unsuccessful, despite the help of a spy who planted flags to guide the aircraft, which led to SAS involvement. On the night of the final assault there were several diversionary attacks, including one from Cassino, the only permanent base the SAS established on the mountains, which is at the top of their supply track up from Hijayr that you pass 12km from Ar Rus.

Philip C., Taylor A. (1992) *Miles, Colonel S. B. (1901), (1919)*

Ancient Rock Art in the Hajar Mountains

There is rock art on boulders and wadi walls on both sides of the Hajar Mountains and that seen on the traverse is in Wadi Al Asi at the beginning of Day 1 and on the Wadi Bima side track (photographs on the next page). The rock art is pecked not painted and its age is uncertain, but from its anthropomorphic content it is pre-Islamic, so older than 650 CE. It features mounted and unmounted figures, and representations of animals and weapons including lances, *khunjar*s, bows and arrows. The mounted figures are on horseback and camels, some depicted with reins and weapons, and they are usually in groups shown fighting animals or each other. Unmounted figures are often shown above cattle or other livestock. The figures are drawn naked or skirted, often exhibiting exterior features including genitals, and range from 15–40cm tall.

Preston K. (1976)



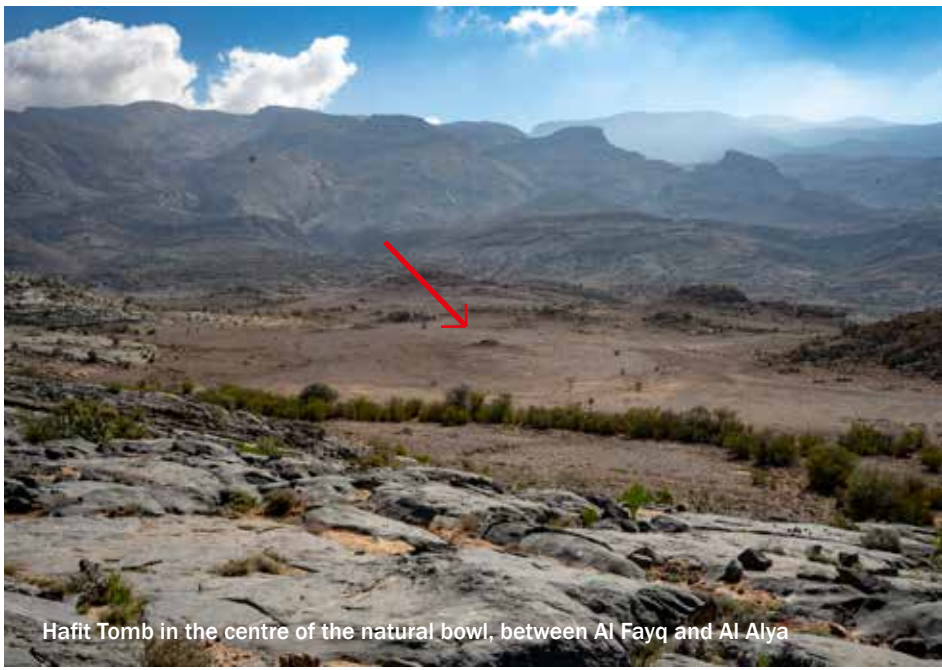
Day 1. Ancient rock art at the beginning of the traverse next to Al Afyah *falaj*



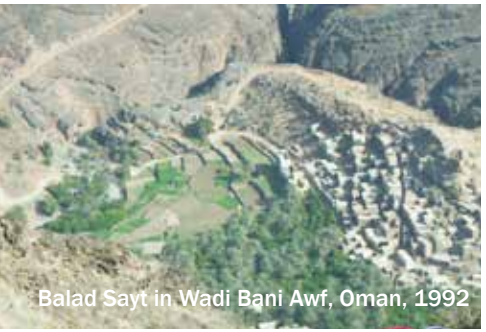
Ancient rock art in Wadi Bima near Balad Sayt

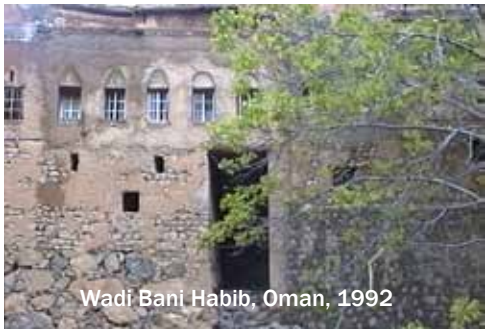


Hafit Tomb on a cliff edge overlooking Al Fayq, a village in Wadi Bani Harras



Hafit Tomb in the centre of the natural bowl, between Al Fayq and Al Alya


Balad Sayt in Wadi Bani Awf, Oman, 1992


Wadi Bani Habib, Oman, 1992


Hamdan District, Yemen, 1992


Hamdan District, Yemen, 1992


Hamdan District, Yemen, 1992


Hamdan District, Yemen, 1992


Hamdan District, Yemen, 1992


Hamdan District, Yemen, 1992

The Myth of the Persian Steps

Omanis and expatriates sometimes refer to the most spectacular track constructions in the Hajar Mountains as the Persian Steps (See photographs on pages 26, 30, 100, 102, 112 and 160). I believe this is an historical error originating from incorrect conclusions drawn by early British explorers, particularly Colonel S.B. Miles' reports from 1876, which are discussed and quoted on page 73. Miles thought the feuding Arab tribes were incapable of the organisation required to complete such extensive civil engineering works and attributed the stone-staircase construction to the Persians whom he knew had occupied parts of Oman in the past.

The first Persians in the mountains was an invading army who stormed Al Jabal Al Akhdar via Wadi Muaydin in the 10th century. This involved a 1000m climb over a short distance, suggesting that a usable mountain path already existed. There is archaeological evidence that the stepped path up Wadi Muaydin existed in the Early Iron Age, as described on page 82, predating the first Persian Empire.

The Yemen Connection

Yemeni highland and *sayl* irrigated foothill settlements are five thousand and three thousand years old, and are more densely populated than their equivalent in Oman. Following each of the seven Marib Dam collapses and other periods of food shortages, Yemen contributed pre-Islamic migration waves to the rest of the Arabian Peninsula, including the ancestors of the Bani Riyam, who replicated their mountain lifestyle in Oman.

Persians, Portuguese and other maritime invaders who settled on the coast and foothills introduced new crops. However, the skills and community organisation necessary to settle on the Hajar Mountains, including building stone-staircase tracks, is indigenous to the current Arab inhabitants and their Yemeni ancestors, not the Persians.

These photographs on the facing page demonstrate the similarity between the two mountain scenes, which has lasted for two millennium. It is the same people who chose the same methods to settle arid mountains with irrigated terraces adjacent to compact villages. The architecture also bears some resemblance. The window arches on the grand house in Wadi Bani Habib looks similar to the windows in the Yemeni house in the photograph directly below it. The Yemeni defensive towers and house built on a massive rock in the lower two pictures resemble Misfat Al Abriyyin.

These photographs are from my own weekend and holiday video recordings from 1992 when there was little impact from modern civilisation in the mountains of either country. My route in Yemen was 90km between two highways starting northwest of Sanaa, on inter-village tracks that headed as close to north as possible. I did not have a map and there were almost no roads, but the tracks were in constant use and quite easy to follow.

16th-Century Portuguese in the Mountains

The 19th-century British explorers, such as Wellsted, lived at a time when their stories of discovery had an eager readership throughout the British Empire. It was tempting to boast of being the first, "... no European traveller has hitherto penetrated it, and its people, with their country, remain wholly unknown to us ..." is a quote about Oman from Chapter One of Wellsted's book *Travels in Arabia*, published in 1838 (see page 72). However, Wellsted may not have been the first European. While 16th- and 17th-century Portuguese ambitions in Oman were primarily maritime, they may have ventured inland to investigate the silver and copper mines 190 years before Wellsted.

There are documents in the National Archives (Torre do Tombo) in the Documentos Remetidos da Índia collection, Lisbon, Portugal, detailing this Portuguese exploration but they are not catalogued nor translated into English. This exploration is referred to in a published petition sent to the King of Portugal via Rome encouraging him to exploit this mineral resource. A Christian Arab, Manuel Carvalho from Basra, stated that his Chaldean Catholic community of 12,000 followers of St John was being tyrannised by the Turks, and his plan was to migrate with his people to an island near Basra, which was frequently visited and controlled by Portuguese fleets, to live under their protection as subjects of the Portuguese king. In return for building and garrisoning a fort on this island he proposed guiding the Portuguese to silver and copper mines in Oman, which he had surveyed and obtained ore samples. The mines were thirty leagues from Muscat, with the copper but not the silver being exploited and sold by the local community. The petition was delivered in 1646, four years before the Portuguese were expelled from Muscat. Did the Portuguese have time to pursue this opportunity and be the first Europeans to visit the mountains? The answer is in the archives.

Al-Salimi A. et al. (2018) *Wellsted, J. R. (1837)*

The First Humans in Oman

There is abundant evidence of a 1,500,000–150,000 year old Palaeolithic culture on the Arabian Peninsula, however what interests anthropologists is the routes our species took out of East Africa, when multiple dispersals of modern humans colonised the rest of the world beginning 120,000 years ago. There are two possible routes with climatic and mitochondrial DNA lineages supporting the existence of both, together with recent fossilised bone discoveries. There is the northern route which runs along the Mediterranean coastline across the Sinai Peninsula, and the southern route along the coasts of Yemen and Oman after crossing the Red Sea (see Map 1 on the opposite page).

Geologists and climate scientists have evidence of the Arabian environment varying between dry and wet phases, with periodic sea level drops of over 100m, which shrunk the Red Sea to a width of 10km. This is assumed to be sufficiently narrow to cross in a raft in the same manner that humans reached Australia 65,000 years ago. Humans would have crossed the Bab Al Mandab Strait at the southern end of the Red Sea where it was narrow, then walked northeast along the coasts of Yemen and Oman to the west of the Hajar mountains and to the fertile basin that is now the Persian Gulf. The lower sea level that reduced their marine crossing from today's 26km would have exposed submerged springs along the Yemen and Oman coasts that may have sustained their journey.

Petraglia D. M. et al. (2009)



Map 1. Two postulated migration routes of first modern humans out of Africa



Map 2. Bronze-Age trade between Harappa and Mesopotamia via Magan, the old name for part of Oman. The numbers are Bronze-Age trading centres



Map 3. Three Al Hajar Mountain passes and associated historic settlements

Archaeology in the Hajar Mountains

The oldest ruins in the Hajar Mountains are the Hafit tombs that date from 3100–2700 BCE. These tombs are named after Jabal Hafit, a mountain near the city of Al Ain in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi where there are also numerous tombs. There is a Hafit tomb 5km along the track from Ar Rus to Ash Sharaf that you will reach on Day 5 (see photograph on this chapter heading page). There are several Hafit tombs in strategic locations on the cliff edge and one in the centre of the grazing plain Jahm Al Jabayl overlooking Al Fayq (see photographs on page 77). They are near the horse track that climbs the cliff above Al Fayq. Hafit tombs look like mounds of rocks, however they have an internal structure with typically two or three rings and one or two internal chambers. Archaeologists have identified fifty-seven Hafit tombs in groups across the Sayq Plateau and say that there are hundreds more that have not yet been catalogued or mapped. The average base diameter of a Hafit tomb is between 4m and 5m, with a maximum of 7m. They are usually located on flat mountain ridges and may have served as waymarks as well as graves. It is postulated that these tombs are from a time when people grazed livestock on the mountains. Charcoal sediments indicate that a relatively wet period occurred in an otherwise drying climate that coincides with the Hafit period. During these moist years there was a relatively high population across southeastern Arabia.

There is a gap of fifteen hundred years in the mountain archaeological record following the Hafit Period until the Early Iron Age (1200–600 BCE). Two ruins have been dated by pottery shards from this period. One is the remains of a tower or building guarding a branch of the track from Wadi Muaydin leading to the Sayq Plateau from the west, 875m southwest of the airport runway. The second is a fortress on the upper slope of Wadi Muaydin located directly above the spring of the village of Al Ain, which overlooks the donkey track ascending Al Jabal Al Akhdar. Both these ruins have waypoints in the GPX file that can be downloaded from www.hajarhiking.com. Early Iron-Age steps remain on part of the current track leading between the villages of Al Aqr and Al Ain. The presence of these two fortifications strategically located at the head of Wadi Muaydin suggests the donkey track from Birkat Al Mawz to the Sayq Plateau is also three thousand years old.

During the gap in the archaeological record, the foothill oasis villages of Izki, Nizwa and Ibra were occupied in the period known as Umm an-Nar (2700–2000 BCE). The populations of these oasis towns dramatically increased in the Early Iron Age, coinciding with their first *aflaj*, which also corresponds to the earliest signs of settlement in Al Hamra and Balad Sayt in Wadi Bani Awf. The match in the 1000 BCE shards of these two ancient communities suggests that they had a trading link. The direct route between them is a 20km donkey track that partly overlaps our traverse, meaning this section on Day 6 is a track that has been used for three thousand years.

Buerkert A. (2010) Schreiber J. (2007)

Overview Map

Wadi Bani Awf, Wadi Bani Habib, Wadi Kamah, Wadi Bani Kharus Wadi Muaydin and Wadi Tanuf are mentioned in the preceding sections in this history chapter, as are the towns Al Hamra, Bahla, Birkat Al Mawz, Imti, Izki, Nizwa and Sayq (see overview map pages 10–11). The smaller villages are on the detailed maps in the walking chapters.

History by Date

It is possible that Oman's coast and the interior to the west of the mountains was part of the migration route of modern homo sapiens that left Africa 60,000–120,000 years ago to colonise the rest of the world.

Hunter-gatherer communities evolved to practice animal husbandry based on introduced goats, sheep and cattle. Sites and time periods: Jabal Qara and Al Hadda (8000–7500 BCE), Wattayah and Suwayh (7000–3800 BCE), Ra's Al-Hamra (3800–3100 BCE).

The moist Hafit Period (3100–2700 BCE) resulted in a population increase and is named after the ruins of distinctive tombs in the Emirates and on the Hajar Mountains.

Bronze-Age copper exports were carried out of the Hajar Mountain foothills by donkey caravan to Umm an-Nar then by boat to Akkad, when Oman was part of a region known as Magan (2500–1800 BCE).

Dhofar frankincense was exported by boat (from 2000 BCE) and, more recently, by domesticated camel caravans (1500 BCE).

The Achaemenid Persian Empire (559–330 BCE) included part of Oman. *Daudi aflaj* were introduced and determined the location of the interior villages including Izki and Nizwa.

Semitic migration started from Yemen and southwest Arabia to Oman (about 200 BCE). Irrigation failures due to periodic major storms causing the flood diversion Marib Dam in Yemen to fail, resulting in population pressures and further Semitic migrations (100–400 CE).

The Sassanid Persian Empire (224–650 CE), which included northern Oman and the coexistance of Persians and Arabs. *Daudi aflaj* were constructed to irrigate plantations on the Batinah coast.

The new Islamic religion was sent from Prophet Muhammad to the Julanda leaders of Oman's Arab tribes (629 CE) and promptly accepted. Islam was adopted throughout tribal Oman (650 CE). The Arabs completed their conquest of Oman and expelled the local leaders of the Sassanid Persian Empire.

Most Omani Arab tribes adopted Ibadism (747 CE), one of the first schisms in Islam.

The first Imamate (793–886 CE) built a navy and used it to rescue the inhabitants of Yemen's Socotra island from an Abyssinian invasion. This one-hundred-year Imamate ended with a tribal-religious territorial war between northern and central Oman (886 CE), which precipitated an invasion by the Abbasid caliph from Baghdad in support of the northern Sunni tribal confederation. In spite of this Sunni invasion, central Oman remained Ibadi.

The collapse of Omani control opened the country to a series of foreign invasions motivated by the wealth of the maritime trade. These included the destruction of Omani ships at Sohar by the Buyids (965 CE) who then controlled Sohar for a hundred years. There was the conquest of Al Jabal Al Akhdar by Buwayid Malik of Fars (970–1042 CE), the invasion by Seljuk Turk Empire (1063–1154), the invasion by Hormuz Dynasty (1261 and 1330) and the invasion by the Moghuls of Shiraz (1276).

Omanis regained control of some of their country during the Nabahani dynasty, who were non-religious rulers who named Bahla as their capital (1154–1560). This coincided with the peak of Arab maritime sailing and trade (1400–1500).

Portuguese coastal occupation (1508–1649) with coastal forts built to support their spice trade between Asia and Europe. Qalhat fell (1508) then Muscat (1515) and the prosperity of this trade attracted interest from British and Turkish competitors. The Ottomans made two brief occupations during Portuguese rule, including Muscat (1522).

The Ya'ariba Imamate (1624–1743) signed a free trade treaty between Sohar and the British East India Company (1646), expelled the Portuguese (1633–50), captured their ships, press ganged their sailors, captured the Portuguese fort at Mombasa (1698) and colonised most of the coasts of the Indian Ocean and East Africa. Slavery became part of the Oman's economy, with slave markets in Sur then Muscat. The rich Imamate financed major *falaj* restoration. Dynastic succession meant that the child Saif bin Sultan was nominated Sultan (1718) prompting a prolonged rivalry for control between his relatives, which ultimately resulted in a civil war between two tribal groupings, the earliest immigrants to Oman called Hinawi (Ibadi) and the Ghafiri (Sunni). This rivalry had its origins in the collapse of the First Imamate. The leaders of both tribal confederations were killed in battle. Saif bin Sultan was left with control of the coast, and twice requested support from the Persians to fight rival Imams based in the interior. Subsequently Nader Shah raided the interior, Sohar and Muscat (1737 and 1742) which ended this Imamate.

The current Al Busaidi dynasty was founded by an elected Imam, Ahmad bin Said Al Busaidi (1749) after expelling the Persians from Muscat (1747), the last invaders of Oman, and ending the civil war. He established a navy and renewed expansion into Zanzibar, Mombasa and Gwadar. Oman signed agreements (1798, 1800) accepting an East India Company Agent, choosing Britain over France and the Dutch. The summer capital was moved from Muscat to Zanzibar (1840) reflecting the wealth of Oman's colonies and trade, including slavery. Omanis started the clove industry in Zanzibar, penetrated interior Africa in pursuit of ivory and made the first Arab Atlantic crossing. After the death of Said bin Sultan (1856) a power struggle between his sons culminated in the Governor-General of India deciding Oman should be split from its East African colonies (1861).

Britain signed treaties with Oman of which four (1822, 1839, 1845 and 1873) suppressed and ultimately outlawed slave trading, which was to be enforced by the Royal Navy and East India Company. Oman became much poorer due to the loss of her African colonies, the abolition of slavery and competition from steam ships. The Zanzibar subsidy did not rescue the economy. Migration to better prospects in East Africa, which were still governed by Omanis, resulted in the population of Muscat declining by 85%.

Oman became unstable with patricide (1866), Persian threats on its Bandar Abbas lease, Al Busaidi family revolts, conservative Ibadi rebellions, Wahhabi invasion threats via Buraimi and the capture of Muscat (1868) by religious fanatics. French rivalry, the Muscat munitions trade spreading arms and the (1913) election of the Ibadi Imam in Tanuf led to British Indian soldiers based in Bait Al Falaj, and the Treaty of Seeb (1920–55) between the revived Imamate and Muscat that gave the interior restricted autonomy.

Omani men migrated to the Arabian Gulf for work, without their families (1930).

Al Jabal Al Akhdar War (1957–59) was a failed attempt to continue the authority of the interior Imamate, supported by Saudi Arabia. The SAS discreetly fought for the Sultan.

After 166 years, Oman sold its province of Gwadar to Pakistan (1958) for £3 million.

The first exploratory drilling for oil in the Dhofar concession was initially awarded to archaeologist Wendell Phillips (1955) and at Fahud in the Oman concession (1956). Both wells were dry.

The African nationalist revolution in Zanzibar overthrew the Omani monarchy, and liberally educated Omanis were expelled, many ultimately repatriating to Oman (1964).

The Dhofar War (1962–76) was a failed Arab Marxist revolution with local and international participation. British, Jordanian and Iranian soldiers fought for the Sultan.

The discovery of oil at Yibal (1962), with first production in 1967 by Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), a company owned by the government, Shell and partners. PDO is still the largest oil producer.

His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said took power from his father (1970). He started infrastructure development and ended the isolation of the interior from the coast and the world. Financed by the petroleum industry, this modernisation has continued unabated.

Particular Details of Oman's History

Oman was on the Bronze-Age trade route between between Harappa in the Indus valley and Mesopotamia. The Hajar Mountains' first exports were copper, when Oman was part of the region called Magan. A cuneiform text from 2300 BCE documents the instruction by King Sargon of Akkad to sailors from Magan as to where they should dock their ship. Bright green and blue oxide-carbonate minerals were separated manually from the mined ore, pulverised using anvil stones and then smelted with charcoal in clay ovens. In 2005 an unsuccessful attempt was made to sail a boat built in Oman that recreated Bronze-Age maritime technology. It was constructed of reeds, date-palm fibres and bitumen, with woollen sails and teak oars. The intention was to complete the 960km voyage across the Indian Ocean from Oman following what archaeologists believe was the maritime portion of a Bronze-Age trade route between Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley.

The overlapping period of Persian and Arab presence in Oman after the first Semitic tribe migrations of 200 BCE–650 CE saw numerous battles and truces. In one battle, at Salut near Bahla, the Persian Sassanids were said to have used elephants, but they were still defeated.

Arab sailing reached its peak in the 15th century, when Ahmed bin Majid from Julfar documented the monsoon winds and navigation routes to ports on the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, Indian Ocean and South China Sea. At the end of this century a Gujarati navigator helped Vasco da Gama cross the Indian Ocean from Africa, and European-sailed ships, beginning with the Portuguese, have controlled this ocean ever since. Dhow trade between Oman, East Africa and India, however, has been continuous. This maritime commerce was protected by the British from India. Hindu merchants from Kutch in Gujarat settled in Oman from the 16th century, and the souq behind Mutrah port contains a gated quarter called Sur Al Lawatia where the descendants of Sindhi merchants have lived since the 18th century. Since the first Imamate, foreign traders have been tolerated in Oman, although their residences were confined to the ports.

The 18th-century civil war involved most tribes in Oman and caused significant damage to *aflaj*, as well as resulting in the total cultivated area dropping to below that of the 10th century. Defensive towers and forts built during the conflict were used until the 1950s, with early oil prospectors reporting on the volatile situation in the interior. Many of these defensive structures have now been restored for the benefit of tourists.

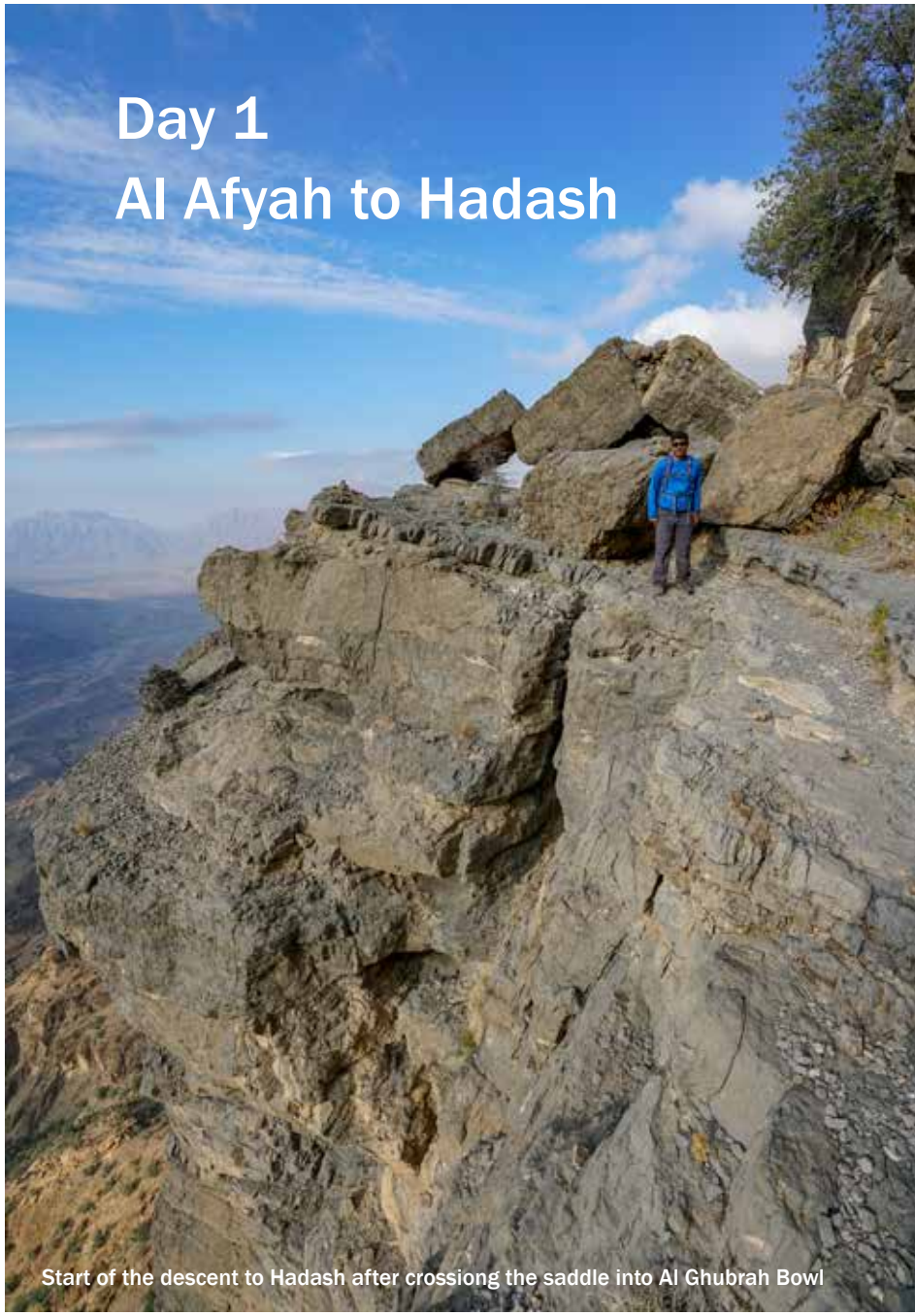
Oman's involvement with Africa started in the 5th century, culminating in the 19th-century colonisation of most of the East African coast. Some Omanis still live there, but after many generations abroad, these expatriate Omanis still identify with their home country. Today many Omanis have an African connection, with some speaking Swahili as their first language and spending part of their lives in their property in Africa.

For a hundred years prior to 1970, the interior was isolated from the coast and the world, and during the 114 years prior to 1970, Oman endured the loss of its Indian Ocean empire, the migration of many Omanis, the secession of the interior, a rebellion in the mountains, the expulsion of its citizens from East Africa and a violent left-wing revolution. This puts the achievement of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, who ruled continuously and peacefully from 1970 to 2020, in perspective.

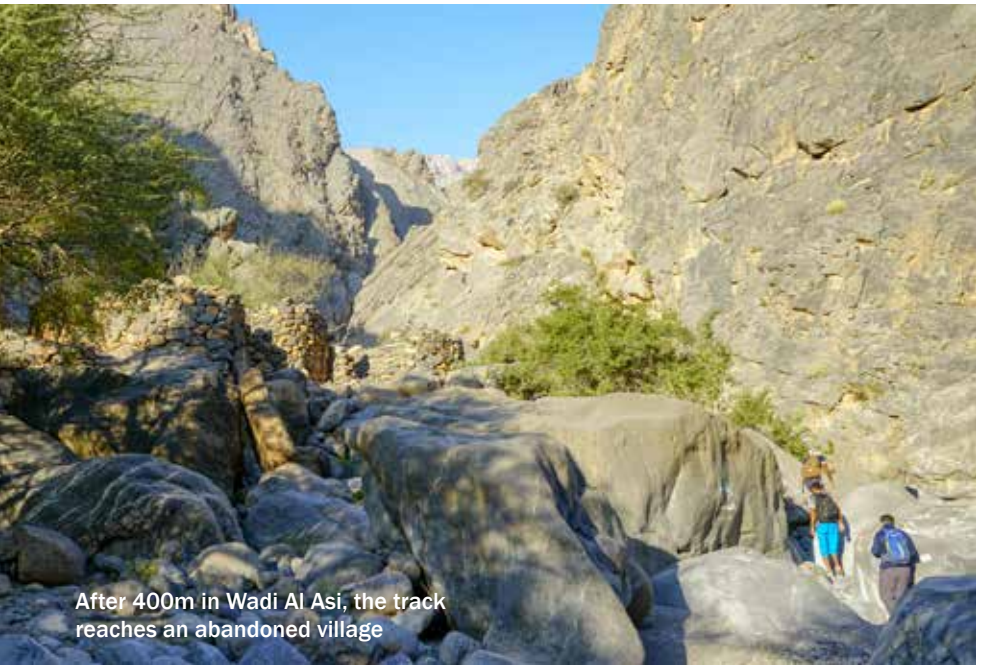


On the descent to Hadash, looking back up to the lip of Al Ghubrah Bowl

Day 1
Al Afyah to Hadash



Start of the descent to Hadash after crossiong the saddle into Al Ghubrah Bowl



After 400m in Wadi Al Asi, the track reaches an abandoned village



The cave contents are for any traveller, but primarily intended for villagers from Al Afyah who choose to sleep here with their goats on the high plateau

Driving to Al Afyah

The Sumail Gap is a natural east-west pass dividing the Hajar Mountains and connecting the coast with the deserts and main interior town of Nizwa. Al Afyah village is on the desert side of the Sumail Gap, on the eastern edge of the Western Hajar Mountains. It is an hour's drive on tarmac 100km south of Muscat International Airport on Nizwa Highway 15. Transport options include taxis, shared taxis or minibuses also known as baisa buses. The shared taxi and baisa-bus options will leave you 1km from the start of the track on the highway. Day 1 requires an early start not always possible with baisa buses, therefore book a private taxi to ensure you start walking at dawn. Alternatively start later and camp on the plateau at the small cave making Day 1 a two day walk.

About Al Afyah

The original name for Al Afyah was Hamma, which was changed by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said because "*hamma*" means "fever" and "*al afyah*" means "health"; His Majesty preferring the more positive name. The residents of Al Afyah are from the Al Hashami tribe and were historically in conflict with the Bani Riyam who live higher in the mountains, and were on the opposing tribal confederation during the 1722 civil war. Camel caravans using the Sumail Gap were replaced by vehicles between 1965 and 1973. Al Afyah was the earliest village on the traverse to have a road connection.

Start of the track

Al Afyah is split by Wadi Al Asi with the old village on its north and new village on its south. The shortest access to the start of the track from the highway is from the south of the wadi, where a new 350m track drops to the wadi floor and meets the original donkey track that descends from the watchtower visible in the old town.

Day 1. Al Afyah to Hadash

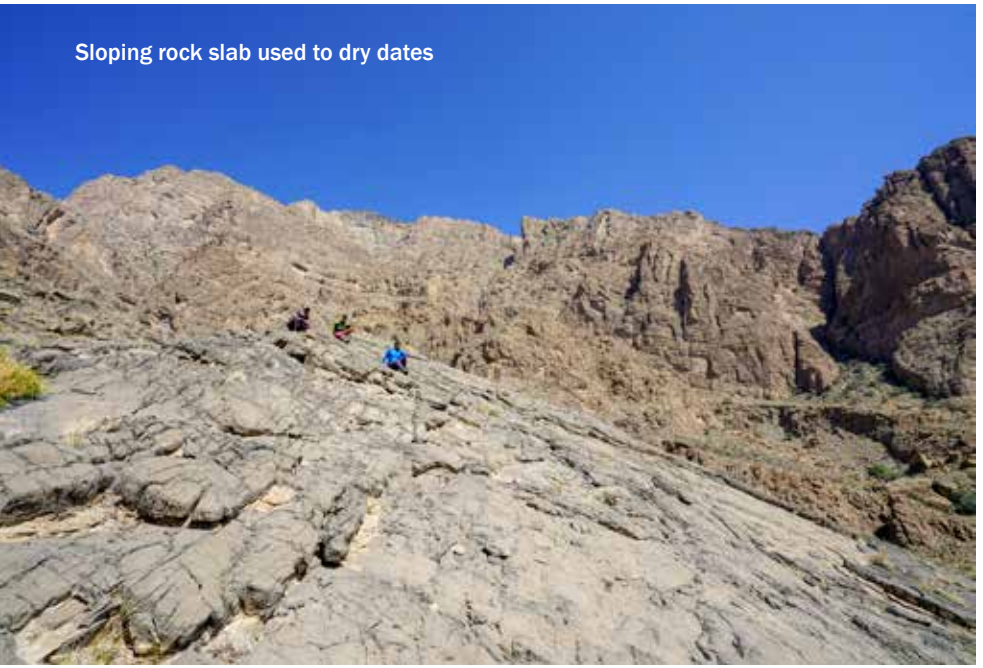
The 10.5km ten-hour walk is a climb from the gravel plateau, altitude 650m, to the pass on the lip of Al Ghubrah Bowl at 2040m, then a descent to Hadash at 1500m. Total climbing is 1400m and descending is 600m. This is the second most difficult day of the whole sixteen-day traverse, with some exposure.

This track involves some scrambling on both sides of the high pass, and most of the day's walk is a man track, not a donkey track. Follow the painted marks carefully as the multitude of cliff descents and ledge traverses down to Hadash from the pass are only possible if you are on the right ledge. If you are attempting anything more difficult than in the photographs in this chapter, or if you feel you need a rope, then you are not on the right track.

During the walk you will not pass or approach any permanent settlements or roads. You will start with a single layer of clothes but on a winter's evening may need three layers. The Western Hajar traverse will not reach this low altitude again until the final descent into Yiqa. Temperatures drop with increasing altitude, so the warm winter temperature at Al Afyah is not representative of the rest of your journey.

The Sumail Gap provided Al Afyah with trading access to both the interior and the coast. The track up Wadi Al Asi was not used for trading by donkey caravans except for the first 400m to the abandoned village.

The track has several old vintages of paint markers (blue arrows, white arrows, red dots) and new marks combining stripes of red, white and yellow painted by the National Youth Committee. It starts by following the wadi bed past a concrete cover protecting a spring that supplies two *aflaj* irrigating both sides of the wadi downstream of your direction of travel. The water running in the *aflaj* channels is suitable for drinking and is where we filled our containers. There are several boulders



Sloping rock slab used to dry dates



The perimeter of date-drying rock slab is impregnable even for goats

carved with pre-Islamic rock art near the *aflaj*. The track here is easily followed because foot traffic has highly polished the stones.

After 400m in the wadi or along its banks, the polished-stone track reaches an abandoned village whose inhabitants left during the 1960s when the Muscat to Nizwa road reached Al Afyah. The 1972 map shows it as abandoned but my walking companions from Al Afyah said their grandparents lived in these houses. Roads, such as the first linking Muscat to Nizwa, brought electricity and access to migrant work opportunities. In the absence of roads it was common for sedentary farmers to divide their time between two homes located in different villages that were within a day's walk of each other. The location of each of these villages was near a natural water supply and had complementary functions. In this case the abandoned village was convenient for browsing livestock, while the twin village at the wadi mouth was close to their irrigated terraces. Once the road brought electricity and vehicular transport, the residents of Al Afyah chose to live continuously in their roadside houses. Road construction has initiated the abandonment of many twin villages on the Western Hajar.

Beyond the abandoned village the track in the wadi and on the wadi banks was used less frequently but primarily for moving herds of goats, which is still a common sight. Herds of goats are now sometimes left to themselves for several days, particularly in winter. Not all goats are tended continuously and herded to shelters every night because there are no longer wolf predators on the Western Hajar. There is a system to resolve issues created by mingling different owners' herds in the absence of shepherd supervision. If the ownership of a kid is uncertain, the Imam, the prayer leader in the village mosque, decides. In the heat of summer goats are still regularly herded into natural and constructed shelters for shade.

You will pass two man-track branches to Al Manakhir. The first is when our track leaves the wadi 2.5km from Al Afyah and begins a more rapid ascent. There is a natural syphon in the middle of the wadi junction at this point. While there is not much to see when it is dry, after rain the flow from the two upstream wadis spirals before disappearing here and reappearing at the wadi mouth. The emergence of this underground water flow is preceded by a dust cloud. Heavy rain occurs about six times a year.

You reach a grassed plateau and a small cave that has a water container, pots, metal storage boxes, a prayer mat and blankets 1.3km above the wadi (see photograph on page 88). The contents of this cave are for anyone to use but primarily intended for any tribe members from Al Afyah who choose to sleep here with their goats on the plateau. Equipped *hala* such as this are located wherever there are grazing locations worthy of a few nights' stay. Sometimes there are drums of drinking water that any traveller is welcome to use. If you do drink any of this communal water do not leave the container completely empty. The existence of these stocked *hala* means *shawawi* goat herders can travel with minimal equipment, usually just a mobile phone. Near the west end of the small plateau there is a goat enclosure made by closing the gaps between three large rocks with wire fencing. This part man-made part natural enclosure is used for goats that are being milked or for their kids. A further 400m up the track is the vertical side of a large tilted rock slab used to dry dates because three of its sides are too steep for goats (see photographs on the opposite page).

Numerous trees grow on the next plateau. One of these is a storage point for another equipped *hala* and everything is hung from it to avoid being nibbled by goats. My walking companions from Al Afyah remembered that the last time a donkey caravan passed this plateau was



The final ascent to the saddle is a steep scramble



The descent is via a series of ledges

in the 1960s for a wedding party. After this second plateau there is no longer a clearly visible track. The goat herders have no reason to go further and this man track to Hadash is not a trading route The pass over the lip of Al Ghubrah Bowl is now visible as a "W" on the horizon at the top of a steep slope (see photograph opposite).

The view from the saddle down into Al Ghubrah Bowl reveals that the steep slope you just climbed is relatively gentle compared to the 500m vertical drop down to Hadash. Following the track down is difficult but there is little exposure and no need for ropes. A series of short climbs between ledges makes the descent an interesting southwest traverse of the cliff (see photographs on pages 92, 94 and 96–97). There are a few places with man-made stone steps and a single-branch stepping aid. If you find yourself attempting anything more difficult than my companions in these photographs, then backtrack and look for an easier option.

One of the ledges has a wolf trap that was once used to catch goat predators (see photograph on page 94). It is a box made of stones whose entrance is blocked with a rock slab trapdoor triggered by a rope tied to a bait. Many traps are visible on ledges on the traverse and are located on ledges of natural paths (see photographs on page 163).

The hard wood of the *sidr* tree on this cliff is durable and its branches are ideal for making the walking sticks popular with Omanis. They are used as an indication of wisdom even if they are not required as a walking aid, as in 17–18th-century Europe.

Beyond the foot of the cliff there is a gravel slope leading to a watchtower overlooking Hadash (see photograph on page 96). Most villages have watchtowers that were built for protection following the 1718 civil war between Hinawi and Ghafiri tribal confederations. Intertribal raids continued until 1950.

Sleeping at Hadash

There is a hotel at Hadash called Hadash Guest House. There is also a public washroom with toilet facilities and drinking water adjacent to the only car park in the village, which is located at the end of the only road to Hadash.

It is not advisable to camp in the village car park itself as it is used by the villagers as well as visitors, but just above it there is a convenient flat gravel area. If you are being supported by a vehicle, then a stretcher would be more comfortable. Hadash is in the shadow of Al Ghubrah Bowl cliffs, so it is colder at night than you would expect for 1500m altitude.

The nearest shop is 2.5km down the road to Hadash and then 4.5km across the plain of Wadi Mistal. This road follows the route of the camel track that connected Hadash to the coast.

Road access to Hadash for logistics support is via Wadi Mistal. From the expressway that follows the coast northwest from Muscat, take the exit to Rustaq (Route 13) then turn left into Wadi Mistal past the Wadi Mistal Hospital and finally follow a steep gravel road to Hadash. From Muscat International Airport it is 131km of tarmac road, then 2.5km of steep gravel road for which a 4WD vehicle is required. The journey will take two hours.



Disused wolf trap



Steep descent from one ledge to another, ropes are not required

About Hadash and Wukan

Hadash and Wukan are both built on the flatter land below and within a few hundred metres of prolific mountain springs. *Aini aflaj* bring this water to the villages for domestic use and to irrigate the terraces. These open channels were once made from stone and *sarooj* but are now constructed with modern concrete. The high-volume springs and their proximity to relatively flat land suitable for terraces, and camel caravan routes leading to the coast made Hadash and Wukan prosperous. Some of the buildings in Hadash are at least five hundred years old, as proven from inscriptions carved on a building stone recently uncovered during mosque maintenance. The old men in Wukan believe their village existed in pre-Islamic times.

The Hadash and Al Khadhra villagers are from the Bani Hadhram tribe. The first to settle in the villages of Wukan, Al Qawrah and Al Hijar on the other side of Al Ghubrah Bowl were the tribes Al Mayahi and Al Masrrory followed by the Al Sheriqi and finally the Bani Riyam from higher on Al Jabal Al Akhdar. Each new arrival to mountain villages would have purchased terraces and water rights, as they do today. Most villages have residents from several tribes, and intertribal marriage is usually but not always accepted.

Prior to the 1980s road construction, all commerce except livestock were transported by camel or donkey caravans. Camels travelled north to the coast and Mutrah via Wadi Mistal and donkeys travelled south on mountain tracks to the interior. Portions of these mountain trading routes are shared with As Sawjrah, the next village on the traverse, as they converged on the main descent routes through Wadi Halfayn to Izki and Wadi Kamah to Nizwa.

Residents lived in houses immediately adjacent to their terraces. Hadesh and Wukan do not have separate summer and winter villages like As Sawjrah and Ar Rus. Crops grown on the terraces included garlic, onions, peaches, apricots, grapes and pomegranates, and village wealth came from trading high-altitude crops for dates, dried fish for human and animal consumption, commodities such as flour, rice, coffee, tea, sugar, salt, kerosene, cooking fat, soap and brightly coloured cotton cloth. Rice was imported from India and Pakistan, and the best coffee came from Yemen.

Pomegranates were the most lucrative crop from Hadash because they matured before the trees growing in the higher Al Jabal Al Akhdar villages. The high percentage of mountain shade at Hadash, due its proximity to the surrounding cliffs, reduces the temperature compared to Wukan, which is located at the same altitude but on the other side of the bowl. This cool climate suits pomegranates, while Wukan's sunnier climate suits grapes and apricots, whose blossoms have become a tourist attraction in February and March.

Since the road connections, commercial agriculture as the source of village wealth in both Hadash and Wukan has been replaced by the salaries of daily commuters who work in the larger towns, or weekly commuters to Muscat. The cost of this commuting has doubled since 2014 when a retail petrol subsidy was removed, which means the villages are only partially occupied during the week, although some houses are permanently empty. The terraces are now tended by south Asian labourers, producing crops for the owners, and their neighbours' use. Wukan still sells apricots and grapes in the markets in the major towns but stopped selling wine from their black grapes in 2000.

Things to do at Hadash

There is a climbing location with good-quality limestone rock, which is usually in the shade, 1km from Hadash on the track to Al Qawrah. There are fifty bolted sport climbs of difficulty from 5c to 8b+.



Continuing the 500m descent of the cliff to Hadash



Branch and stone-step crossing



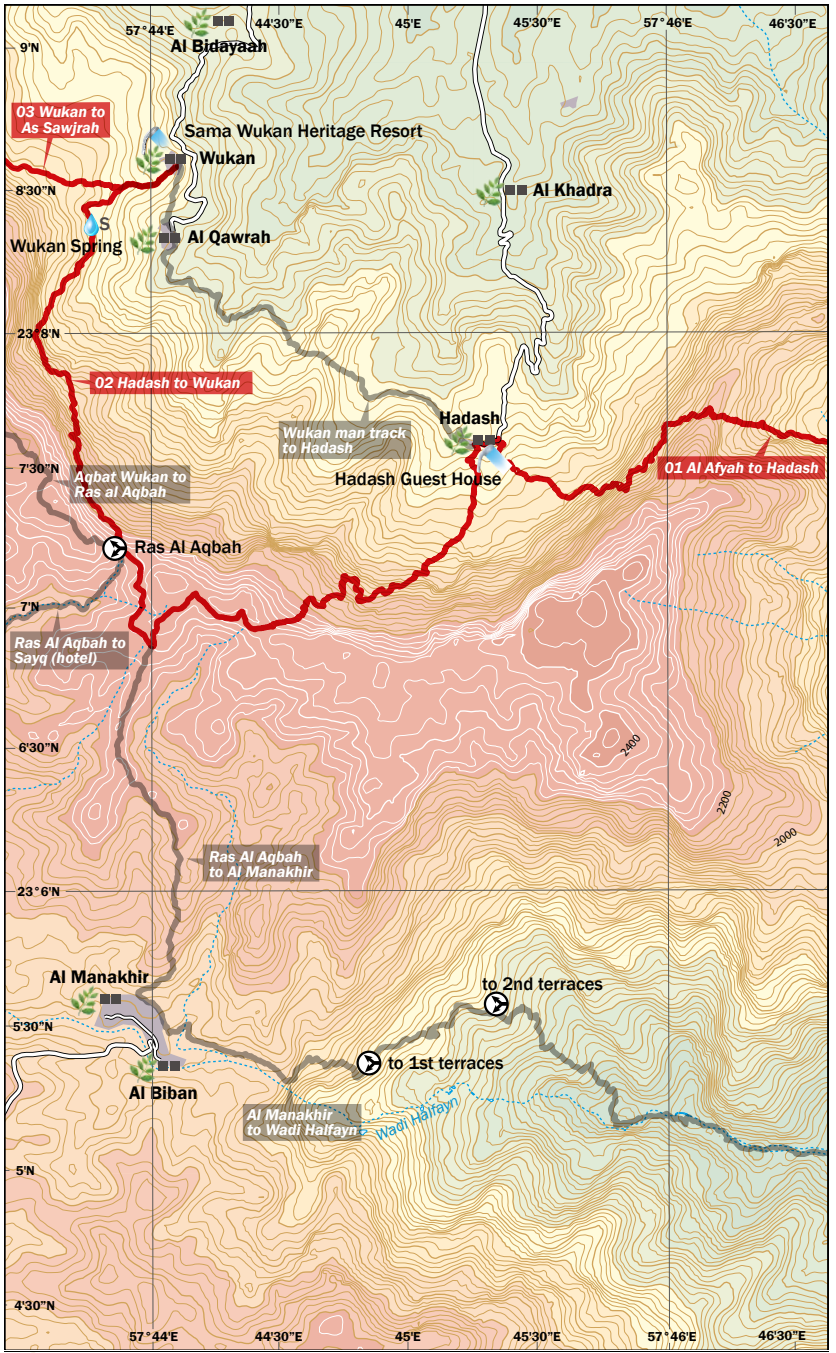
The author on another awkward descent

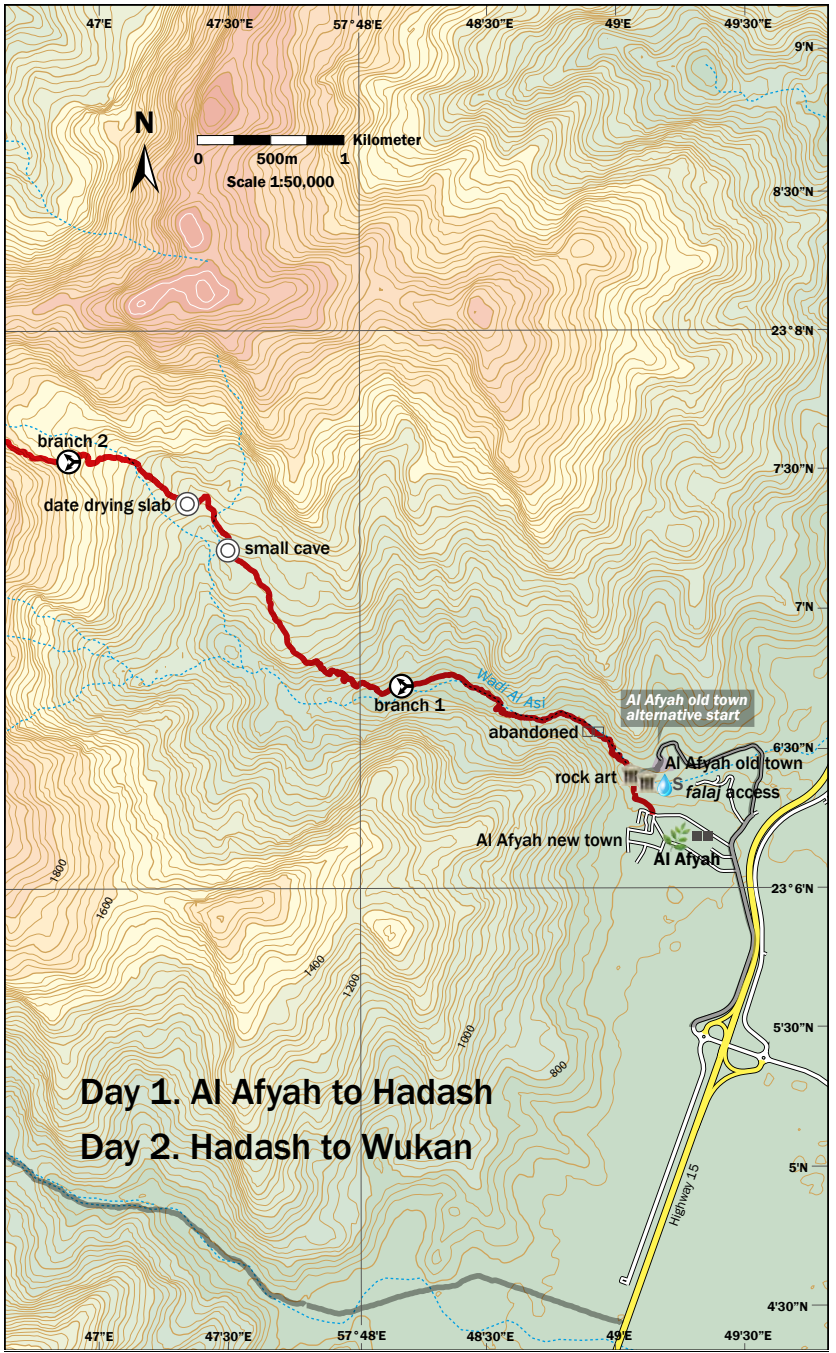


Defensive tower overlooking Hadash



View across Al Ghubrah Bowl from Hadash

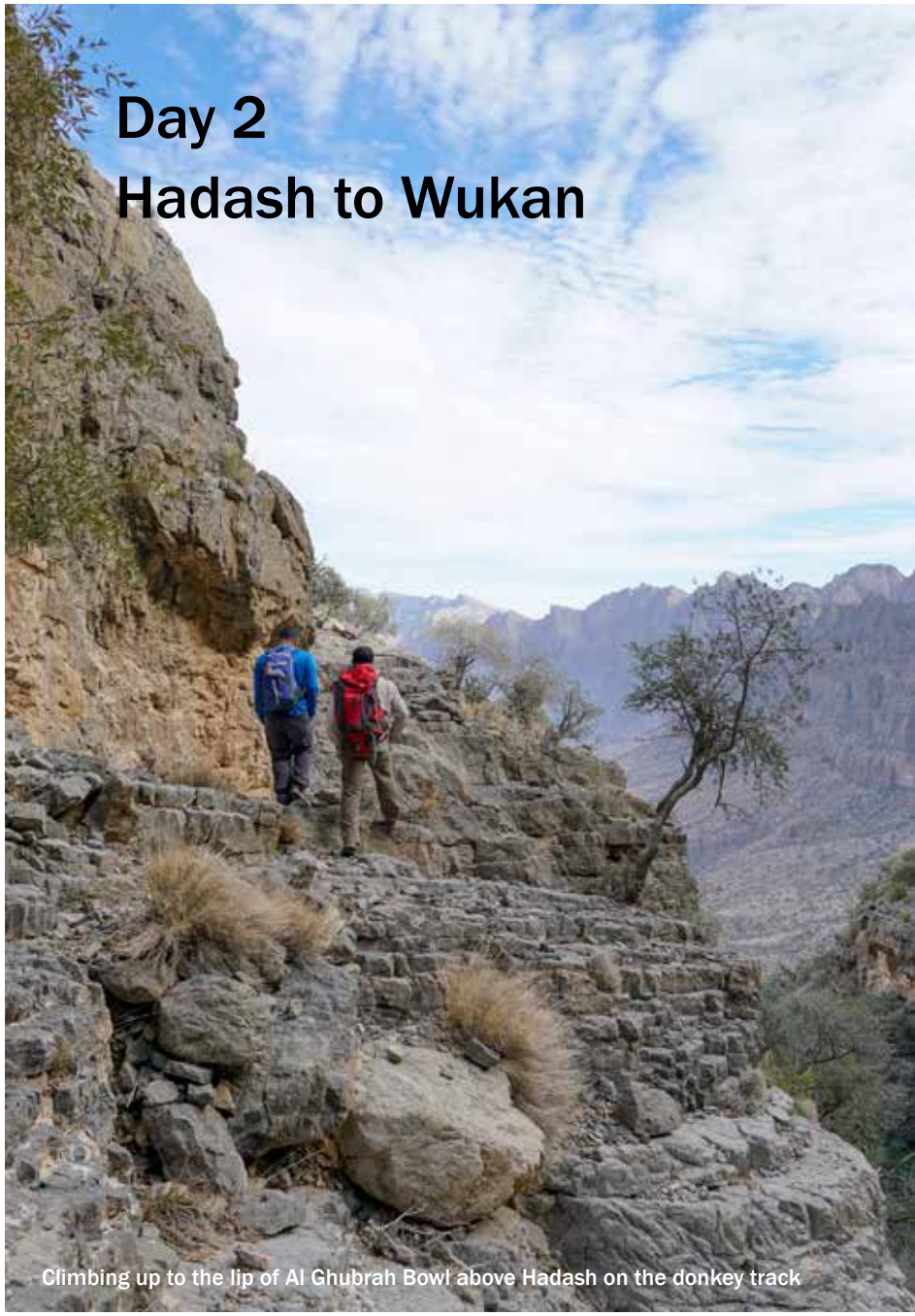

57°44'E
44'30"E
45'E
45'30"E
57°46'E
46'30"E
9'N
8'30"N
7'30"N
7'N
6'30"N
23°8'N
23°6'N
5'30"N
5'N
4'30"N
Al Bidayaah
03 Wukan to As Sawjrah
Sama Wukan Heritage Resort
Wukan
Al Khadra
Wukan Spring
Al Qawrah
02 Hadash to Wukan
Wukan man track to Hadash
Hadash
Hadash Guest House
01 Al Afyah to Hadash
Aqbat Wukan to Ras al Aqbah
Ras Al Aqbah
Ras Al Aqbah to Sayq (hotel)
2400
2200
2000
Ras Al Aqbah to Al Manakhir
Al Manakhir
to 2nd terraces
to 1st terraces
Al Biban
Al Manakhir to Wadi Halfayn
Wadi Halfayn


47°E
47'30"E
57°48'E
48'30"E
49°E
49'30"E
9'N
8'30"N
7'30"N
7'N
6'30"N
23°8'N
23°6'N
5'30"N
5'N
4'30"N
N
Kilometer
0
500m
1
Scale 1:50,000
branch 2
date drying slab
small cave
branch 1
Wadi Al Asi
abandoned
Al Afyah old town alternative start
Al Afyah old town
rock art
falaj access
Al Afyah new town
Al Afyah
1800
1600
1400
1200
1000
800
Highway 15
Day 1. Al Afyah to Hadash
Day 2. Hadash to Wukan

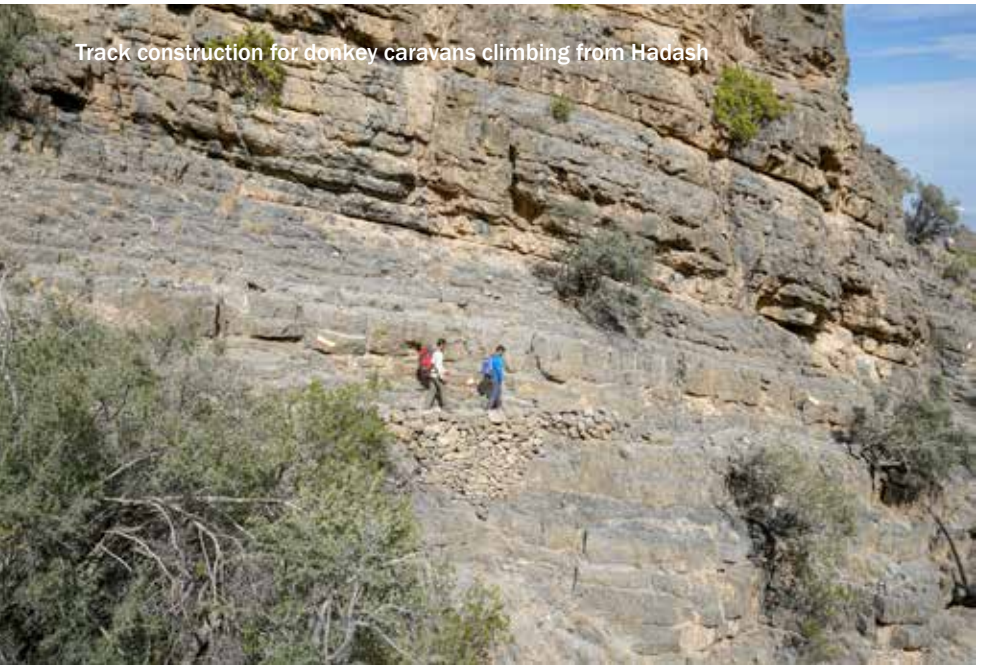


Start of descent to Wukan on the donkey track

Day 2
Hadash to Wukan



Climbing up to the lip of Al Ghubrah Bowl above Hadash on the donkey track



Track construction for donkey caravans climbing from Hadash



Track construction for donkey caravans, guide stones on the ledge

Day 2. Hadash to Wukan

Hadash to Wukan is an easy day on tracks marked frequently enough that you will not need GPS navigation. It follows track numbers W24a and W25 marked with stripes of yellow, white and red painted by the Ministry of Tourism in 2005. The 9.6km seven-hour walk comprises a 910m climb from Hadash at 1500m on a donkey track to the lip of Al Ghubrah Bowl at 2340m, a 3km rim walk, then a 900m man-track descent to Wukan, also at 1500m. There are no other villages or roads on or near the track.

The walk starts from the middle of Hadash village and ascends to a saddle on the lip of Al Ghubrah Bowl on a partially man-made track that is typical of major donkey caravan routes (see photographs on the opposite page). The track has enough clearance to accommodate a fully laden donkey and has ramps or steps whenever it is steep or awkward. Man-made donkey-road construction is what distinguishes a donkey-caravan route from unladen donkey tracks and man tracks. Unladen donkey tracks may have height restrictions or be very steep and are used for faster unladen return journeys.

The rim walk passes two junctions before finishing at a second saddle overlooking Wukan. At 4.7km there is a branch to Manakhir leading to the descent to the Samail Gap through Wadi Halfayn. It was used for trade with Izki by Hadash, Wukan and As Sawjrah, the first three villages on the traverse. According to the old men in Wukan, this Wadi Halfayn donkey track is relatively new and has only been in use for a few hundred years. The donkey tracks leading south off the mountain via Imty and wadis Manakhir, Kamah and Tanuf are much older.

The second junction at 5.7km is called Ras Al Aqbah from where tracks lead to Sayq and to another junction called Aqbat Wukan. Donkey caravans from As Sawjrah to Sayq or Izki travelled around the top of Al Ghubrah Bowl on the 5.3km track linking these two junctions, which reaches 2500m at Qarn Wukan. You can use this track to walk directly to As Sawjrah from Hadash, thus avoiding the descent to Wukan and the climb back up Al Ghubrah Bowl. However the total journey from Hadash to As Sawjrah via this bypass takes eleven hours even for someone familiar with the track, so it is too long for one day. The only water on this journey is the open dam and plastic tanks at Aqbat Wukan. Anyone attempting this alternative needs to be self-sufficient for a night on the mountain.

After the saddle overlooking Wukan, the track drops down a cliff on a series of stone steps (see photograph on page 100). After this stone staircase the man track branches off the donkey track, proceeding directly along the foot of the cliffs around Al Ghubrah Bowl to the spring above Wukan. The difference between a donkey track and this man track will be immediately apparent: there are a few small cliff descents that require hands as well as feet and there are a few ledges where you have to duck your head (see photograph on page 104). A small landslide once made one portion of this track almost impassable, so military volunteers built a pedestrian bridge, which is the only recent man-made bridge on any of the tracks on the Western Hajar traverse. These obstacles are much easier than those encountered on the previous day's walk from Al Afyah to Hadash, but they are still significantly more difficult than the first half of this day's walk following the donkey trading route.

There is a concrete tourist path next to the *aini falaj* through the terraces from the prolific spring above Wukan to the village. This path finishes at the bottom of the village at the car park. Similar to Hadash, the village lanes are too narrow for vehicles so this car park is used by residents as well as visitors.


Al Ghubrah Bowl from the saddle above Wukan


Man track on the descent to Wukan

The donkey track from the steps beneath the saddle to Wukan follows a longer route via another village called Al Qawrah, which is located below Wukan. This portion of the donkey track has not been used for trading since the 1980s when gravel roads reached Wukan, and was never used for walking because the higher man track is shorter.

Sleeping at Wukan

There is a hotel but no grocery shops at Wukan. The hotel rooms are in restored village houses but not owned and managed by locals, like the accommodation at As Sawjrah and Misfat Al Abriyyin. There is a restaurant with a view over Al Ghubrah Bowl and a public washroom with toilet facilities and drinking water adjacent to a newly built lookout tower at the end of the only road to the village. This tower was built for tourists to see the spring blossoms when visiting Wukan. It is possible to sleep inside the tower beneath the spiral stairs where there is shelter from wind. A stretcher will make the night more comfortable on the concrete floor if you are being vehicle supported. There is room for six people. The terraces above the village provide a softer surface if you are sleeping on the ground. The villagers will give you permission to do this but you should ask first.

There are enough tourists visiting Wukan in February and March to support a a tea service provided by the village children, who run a canteen by the tourist tower. Buying tea or coffee from these children is one of the few occasions on the traverse you may need 100-baisa notes. There are 1000 baisa in an Omani Riyal.

Road access to Wukan is the same as Hadash. The turnoff is after the Wadi Mistal Hospital, finishing with 2.5km of steep gravel road above the wadi floor.

Things to do at Wukan

The easy 1km walk through the village and terraces following the *falaj* up to the spring is very pleasant with seats and shade. The terraces and blossoms are in the photograph on page 106. This is the most touristic site on the traverse.

There is a 4km short cut across Al Ghubrah Bowl directly back to Hadash. This track passes under the grapevines of Al Qawrah (see photograph of the track under the vines on page 228), crosses steep scree slopes before a rock-climbing site 1km before Hadash. This is a man track marked with Ministry of Tourism yellow, white and red paint. It is used by day walkers returning to their vehicles after finishing the more interesting ridge walk between Hadash and Wukan. This Hadash–Wukan–Hadash circuit takes ten hours. You are only likely to meet local recreational walkers on weekends, which are Friday and Saturday in Oman.


Final approach to Wukan

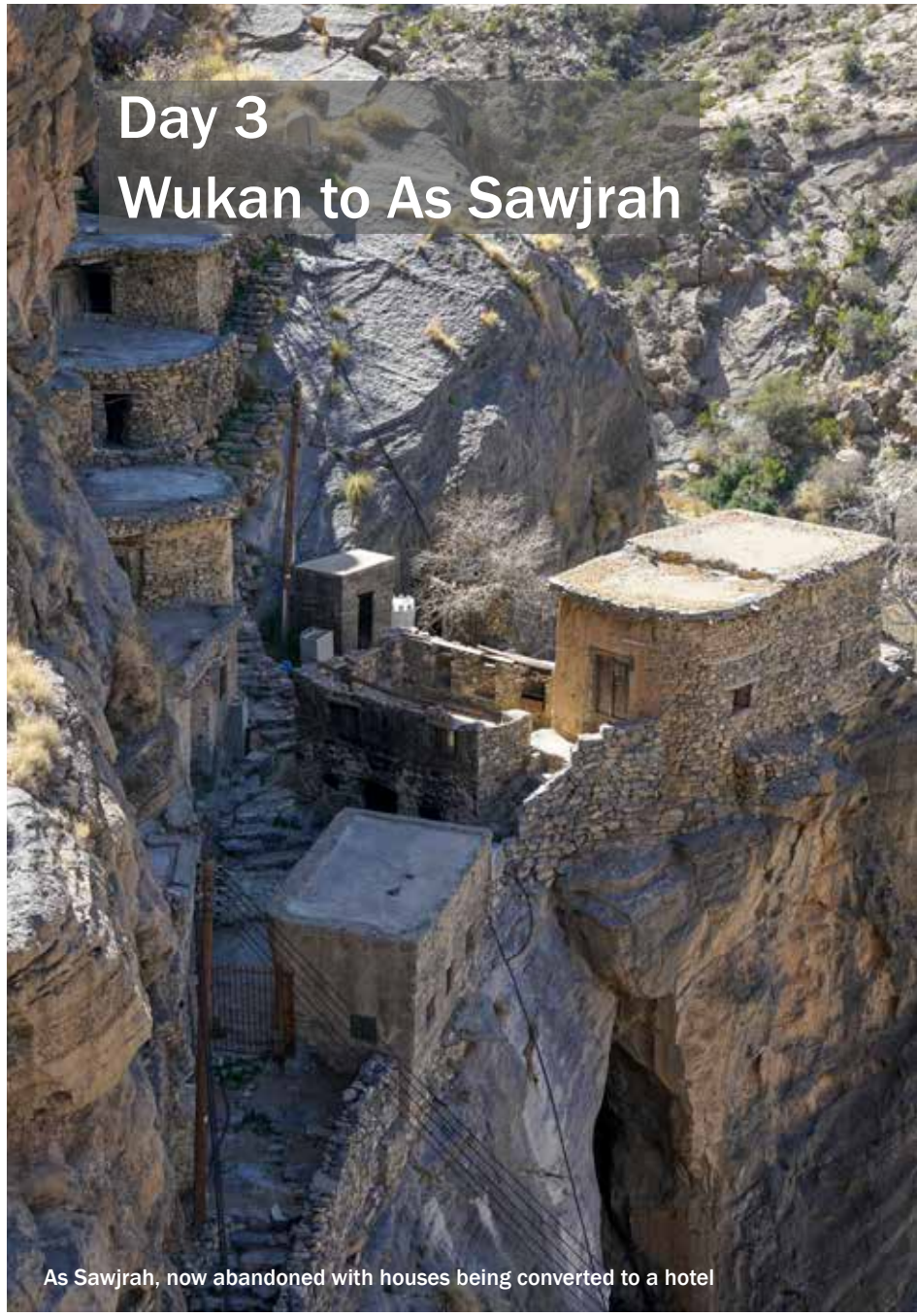


Spring blossom in Wukan with Al Ghubrah Bowl in the background

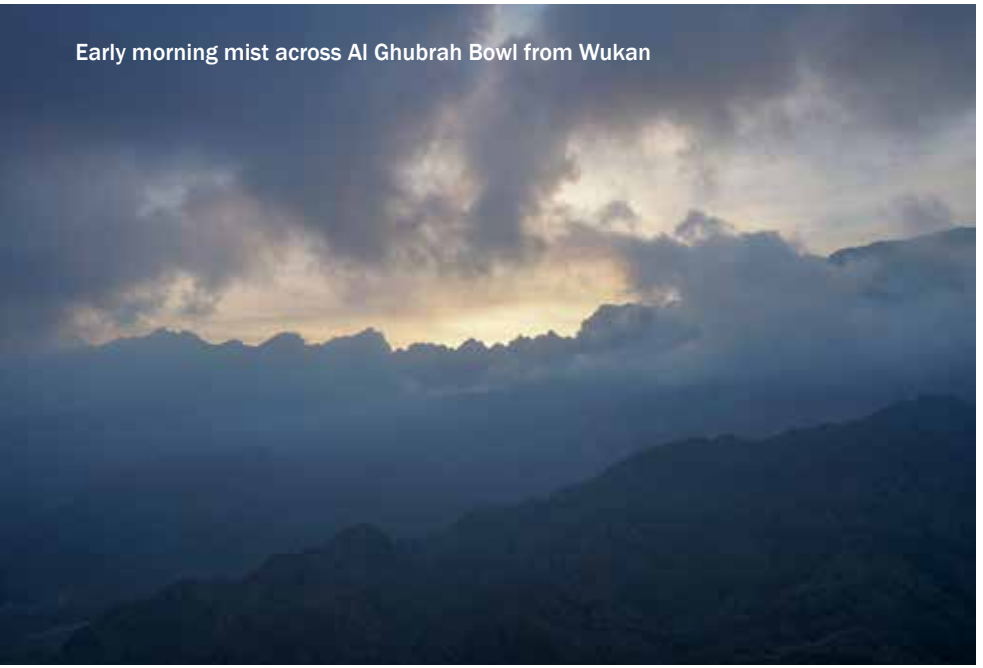


Walnut tree on an As Sawjrah terrace

Day 3
Wukan to As Sawjrah



As Sawjrah, now abandoned with houses being converted to a hotel



Early morning mist across Al Ghubrah Bowl from Wukan



75m-ramp climb, a 55m vertical ascent to Aqbat Wukan above Wukan

Day 3. Wukan to As Sawjrah

The 10.2km seven-hour walk consists of a 2.5km climb from Wukan at 1500m elevation on a man track to the lip of Al Ghubrah Bowl at 1950m, then on a 7.7km donkey track across the plateau that crosses three large wadis, the deepest of which is 100m. The total climb is 820m, the total descent is 440m, and the track has painted marks.

The walk starts 350m back up the concrete path towards the Wukan spring. There is one scramble on this track; the final ascent to Aqbat Wukan at the top of Al Ghubrah Bowl (see photograph on the facing page). This 75m climb, which ascends 55m vertically, is a steep slope but has plenty of handholds. It does not need a rope but is too difficult for donkeys, hence the track from Aqbat Wukan around the edge of Al Ghubrah Bowl to Ras Al Aqbah.

This high bypass, which reaches 2500m, is a trading route linking As Sawjrah, Al Alya and Al Fayq, whose donkey tracks converge at Aqbat Wukan with Wukan, Hadash, Sayq and Izki via Wadi Halfayn, whose tracks converge at Ras Al Aqbah. There are are blue water-filled drums and a fenced concrete pond near Aqbat Wukan. The drums are air-lifted by Omani Air Force helicopters, an example of government support for the *shawawiya.* Military helicopters will also airdrop domestic purchases for the *shawawiya* that are too big or heavy for a donkey. The drum water is safe to drink but tastes of plastic. Prior to the connection of the larger villages with roads, children had a helicopter commute to their weekly boarding school.

From Aqbat Wukan there are three wadi crossings on the plateau track to As Sawjrah, which are made easier by a zigzag of stone steps typical of the construction for efficient donkey caravans (see photograph on page 112). The largest wadi crossed by the track is Wadi Mithra.

Shortly before arriving at As Sawjrah there is a defence tower visible from the track (see photograph on page 113). This is one of three towers that were used to protect As Sawjrah during the period of intertribal rivalry. The other two towers are on the ridge above As Sawjrah; they would all have been manned by armed guards.

Sleeping at As Sawjrah

There is a six-room guest house in the old village of As Sawjrah called The Cliff, with space to sleep outside if there are not enough beds (see photographs on pages 113 and 246). Contact details for the hotel are on page 247. You will not be charged for sleeping outside within the confines of the guest-house courtyards. The guest houses include a self-serve coffee room with an honesty box. The Omani-family owners of this business now live on the opposite side of the wadi, with the other five As Sawjrah families, in new houses at the end of the road built in 2010. They will probably see you arrive and meet you in the old village, but if they do not notice you, walk the 400m track to the new village where everybody knows everybody and ask for them. The guest house offers full board and the owners' children will bring you home-cooked meals, carrying them on the track across the wadi from their new kitchen. They also provide drinking water and there are hot showers.

This guest house is special for several reasons: it is a way of sustaining the old village buildings that were abandoned recently, and it is entirely run by Omanis whose ancestors have lived in this village for five hundred years. These villagers continue to tend their terraces themselves, which is now unusual as most of the other villagers employ south Asian labourers. Please do not photograph the women who you may see gardening in the terraces, and if you wish to photograph the men you should ask their permission first.



View across Al Ghubrah Bowl with Aqbat Wukan in the foreground



Stone steps for donkey caravans



Library documents, Al Sheriqi migration



Oven used for Eid food preparation



Remains of As Sawjrah defence tower



As Sawjrah and The Cliff Hotel



Bayt Karah, an abandoned house in the winter village of Al Karah



Inside Bayt Karah

The road access to As Sawjrah for logistics support is from Al Jabal Al Akhdar, for which a 4WD is essential. The steep tarmac road up to Al Jabal Al Akhdar has a road barrier, where the Royal Oman Police (ROP) will stop any non-4WD vehicles from accessing the mountain. They give 4WD drivers a quick lesson on using low gears for the steep descent. There have been tragic brake failures due to overheating as you will see from the vehicle wrecks below the road barriers. Directions from Muscat International Airport: Expressway Northwest then Nizwa Highway Route 15 up the Samail Gap, past Al Afyah where the traverse started, to the turn-off to Birkat Al Mawz, past the barrier up the mountain, taking the right turn-off signposted to the Alila Hotel where there is a steep tarmac road of 4.2km to the town of Shinut. Turn right at Shinut onto 5km of gravel-road descent to As Sawjrah. The 178km journey will take 2.5 hours.

About As Sawjrah

The five Al Sheriqi families of As Sawjrah have records of the purchase of their village approximately four hundred years ago from the Al Kharusi tribe after they migrated to Wadi Mistal from Jordan, then to As Sawjrah, which was well established when their ancestors purchased it. The village is at least five hundred years old.

The spring's location has determined the layout of the terraces, which are inside a wadi, unlike Hadash and Wukan. They are narrow and line the side of the wadi starting immediately below the spring. A holding tank is used to fill the *aini falaj* using stone-cloth sluices. The steep-sided wadi reduces the hours of direct sunlight, which suits the pomegranate and walnut trees that grow here and prefer a colder climate. Records of the pomegranate trade show that twenty-five thousand fruit were once sold in one year. If there is enough irrigation water to produce an excess crop, fruit is still sold today.

The village was built under a series of natural overhangs on one side of the wadi above the terraces. Rearing goats was also part of their economy. The goats' enclosure was separate from their houses, and is now visible now as a huge mound of goat manure above and to one side of the village (see on the upper left of the photograph on page 113). As Sawjrah has a mosque and an *aresh* sun-sheltered village meeting point, called *sabla*. The communal oven used for food preparation for the Eid and other celebrations is on the track to the spring, just below the village (see photograph on page 112).

The Al Sheriqi families did not live in their primary village all through the year; they moved to one of two secondary villages down the wadi, Al Karah and Al Kuhuf, during the winter months. The closest of these is Al Karah, which is 1.4km from As Sawjrah and 150m lower. It has its own spring, *aflaj* and terraces that are relatively warmer due to their lower elevation and because the wider wadi receives more sunlight. Dates are grown on these terraces. Date palms thrive in dry heat and are tolerant of salt up to 6000ppm but need a large quantity of water. When grown in optimum conditions the best date palms produce more sugar per hectare than sugar cane. Al Kuhuf is the third village belonging to the Al Sheriqi families and is visible from Al Karah on the opposite side of the wadi at the foot of the cliffs. A portion of the Al Karah terraces are now owned by villagers from Shinut, a nearby roadside settlement that was previously entirely pastoral.

The modern village across the wadi at the road head was built when the road and electricity arrived in 2010. The five families who live in As Sawjrah moved their library from what is now a guest room in The Cliff to a building beside their new house. This library contains documents of the Jordanian origins of their tribe. (see photograph on page 112).



Ma'awil Cave



Ma'awil Cave and abandoned houses

Excursions from As Sawjrah

There are three excursions from As Sawjrah. If you arrive mid afternoon from Wukan there will be enough time to do one before dark as these walks are not strenuous. Alternatively, The Cliff is a delightful place to stay if you need rest after the first three days of the traverse.

The small village of Al Karah is further down the wadi from As Sawjrah, descending 1km on a track branch that starts 400m back towards Wukan. There is a grand uninhabited house called Bayt Karah that is interesting to explore (see photographs on page 114). It is a two-storey house entirely constructed of local materials: stone and fired mud bricks, mud and wheat chaff for plaster, ceilings of branches and split palm trunks, which support a roof of knotted palm fronds and mud. Elaborate internal structures are still intact including stairs and the cooking area.

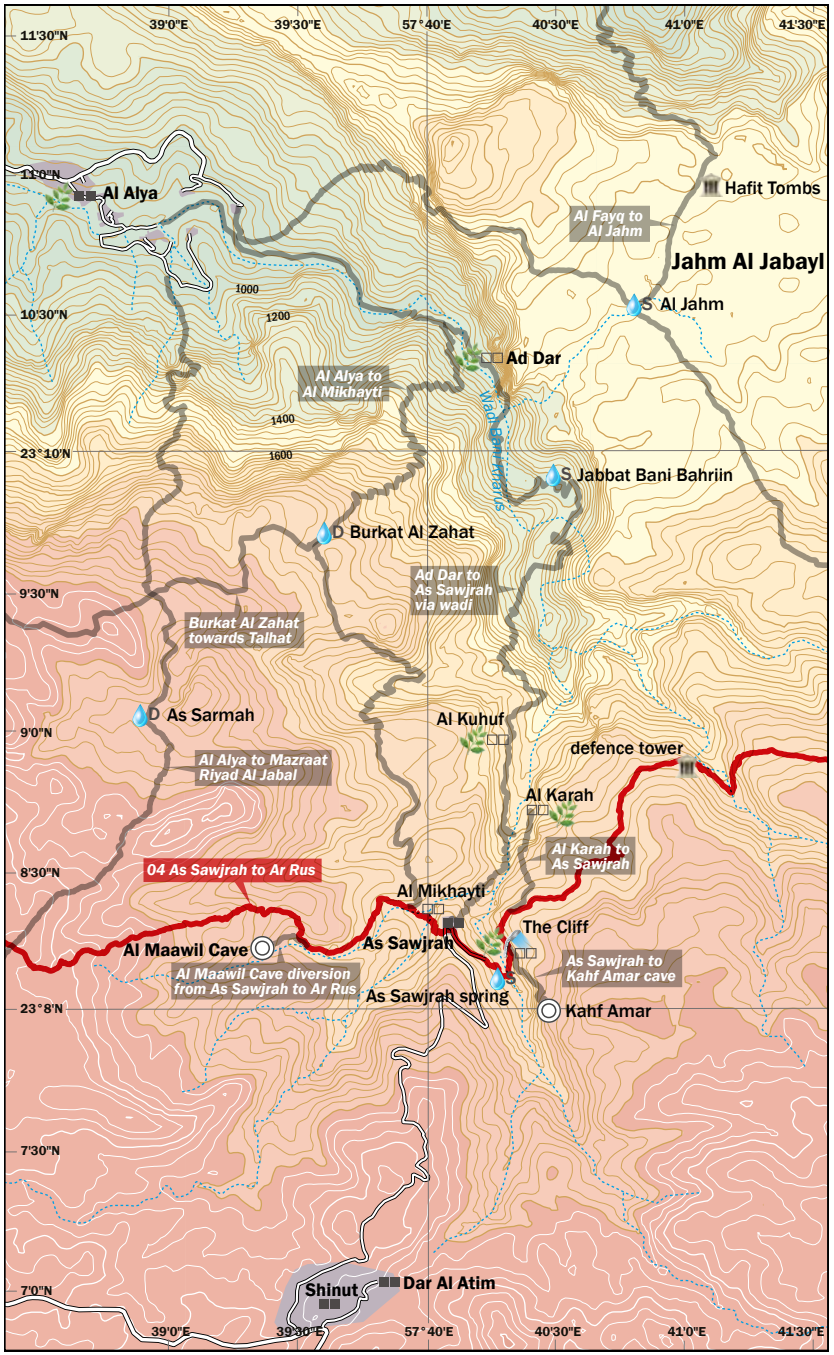
Al Ma'awil Cave is big enough to contain a now-abandoned six-house *halil* (see photographs on the facing page). It is 2.2km from the new village of As Sawjrah on a 300m branch from the track to Ar Rus (Day 4 of the traverse). The track to Ma'awil Cave passes Al Mikhayti, another abandoned *halil*. All these stone houses were secondary homes for the *shawawiya* whose primary home was Shinut, which became their permanent home when the road reached them in 1997. In these *halil,* goat enclosures and cow sheds are built adjacent to houses. The goat enclosures are the elongated buildings, which housed kids and milking goats. A family would have two or three cows kept permanently in small houses and fed cut grass and crops. Unlike goats, cows do not graze in the mountains. The houses in Al Mikhayti are distributed over a wide area because, for *shawawiya,* there is no geographic focus for their occupation, such as irrigated terraces. Water is from dams as there are no nearby springs. These *halil* do not have a mosque, and the layout of the house contrasts with As Sawjrah, a sedentary farmers' village whose goat enclosures are 100m from their houses and where houses are built in a tight group just above their terraces.

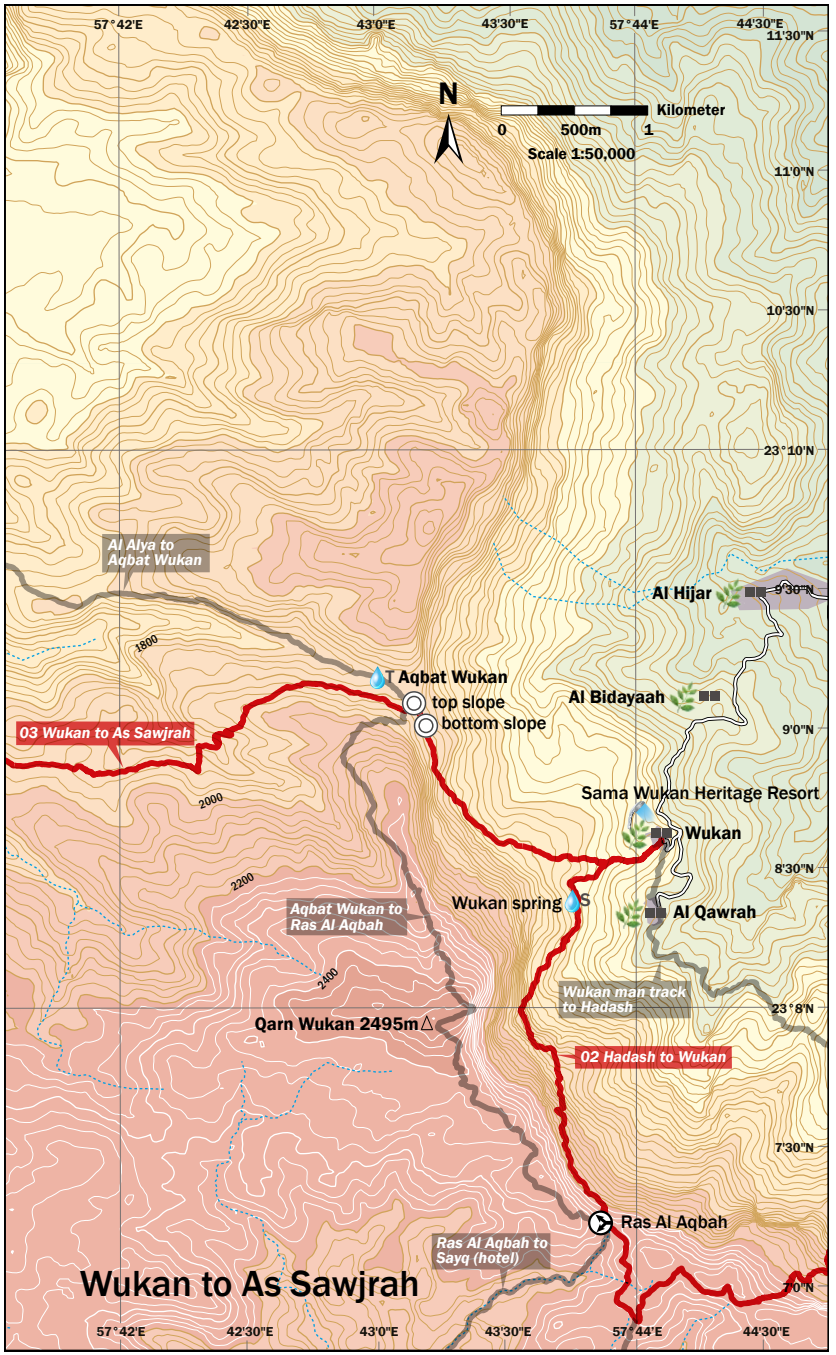
There is a dusty cave that supports a colony of bats 750m from the guest house. It requires some scrambling but there is a rope inside. Below are two photographs inside Kahf Amar cave.





Inside Kahf Amar Cave


Al Alya
Hafit Tombs
Al Fayq to Al Jahm
Jahm Al Jabayl
Al Jahm
Ad Dar
Al Alya to Al Mikhayti
Wadi Bani Bahriin
Jabbat Bani Bahriin
Burkat Al Zahat
Ad Dar to As Sawjrah via wadi
Burkat Al Zahat towards Talhat
As Sarmah
Al Kuhuf
defence tower
Al Alya to Mazraat Riyad Al Jabal
Al Karah
Al Karah to As Sawjrah
04 As Sawjrah to Ar Rus
Al Mikhayti
Al Maawil Cave
As Sawjrah
The Cliff
Al Maawil Cave diversion from As Sawjrah to Ar Rus
As Sawjrah spring
As Sawjrah to Kahf Amar cave
Kahf Amar
Shinut
Dar Al Atim
11°30'N
11°0'N
10°30'N
23°10'N
9°30'N
9°0'N
8°30'N
23°8'N
7°30'N
7°0'N
39°0'E
39°30'E
57°40'E
40°30'E
41°0'E
41°30'E
1000
1200
1400
1600


N
Kilometer
0
500m
1
Scale 1:50,000
Al Alya to Aqbat Wukan
Al Hijar
Aqbat Wukan
top slope
bottom slope
Al Bidayaah
03 Wukan to As Sawjrah
Sama Wukan Heritage Resort
Wukan
Wukan spring
Al Qawrah
Aqbat Wukan to Ras Al Aqbah
Wukan man track to Hadash
Qarn Wukan 2495m
02 Hadash to Wukan
Ras Al Aqbah
Ras Al Aqbah to Sayq (hotel)
Wukan to As Sawjrah
11°30'N
11°0'N
10°30'N
23°10'N
9°30'N
9°0'N
8°30'N
23°8'N
7°30'N
7°0'N
57°42'E
42°30'E
43°0'E
43°30'E
57°44'E
44°30'E
1800
2000
2200
2400



Pool on the man track between Ar Rus and Masirat Ash Shirayqiyyin

Day 4
As Sawjrah to Ar Rus

Masirat Ash Shirayqiyyin, the now-abandoned winter village of Ar Rus



Wadi Bani Kharus on the edge of the plateau between As Sawjrah and Ar Rus



Plateau on the approach to the Talhat mosque

Day 4. As Sawjrah to Ar Rus

The walk from As Sawjrah to Ar Rus is 16.6km, ascending 780m then descending 730m, and finishing at 1900m at almost the same elevation as As Sawjrah. The walk takes eight hours as the pace on the plateau is much faster than the climbs of the first three days.

Initially you follow the As Sawjrah donkey trading route, which ultimately reaches the coast via Al Alya at the end of Wadi Bani Kharus. The track to Ar Rus starts at the new As Sawjrah village down past a fenced enclosure to a dam in the wadi, then to an abandoned *halil* called Al Mikhayti.

After the track branches to Al Alya at 1.36km and the Al Ma'awil cave at 2.3km, there is no defined track to Ar Rus until just before reaching Talhat mosque at 13.8km. There is no geographic reason to follow a particular route on this easy 11km walk west across the tree-dotted plateau. There is little motive to walk between two distant villages at the same elevation, so there is no well-defined man track. Trade routes typically connect villages from different elevations that grow different crops, which on the Western Hajar usually run north to the coast and south to the interior.

After 5km you cross a donkey track running from the Sultan Qaboos farm to the south that leads to Al Alya to the north and, at 5.6km, an unsealed service road for a mobile transmitter station overlooking Wadi Bani Kharus. At 8.7km there is a side track along a ridge to Al Alya (see Table 7 on page 230).

The walk across the plateau is largely parallel to the cliff edge of Wadi Bani Kharus and, at one point, is within 40m of the cliff where a short diversion provides a good view (see upper photograph on the facing page).

Once you reach Talhat mosque you are back on a proper track. Talhat mosque, which is not associated with any particular village and is for the use travellers, is on the edge of the cliff overlooking Wadi Bani Kharus at the top of the donkey trading route from the village of Al Hijar on the wadi floor to Ar Rus and the surrounding plateau villages. The single-room well-maintained building is not locked, and it is acceptable to sleep inside in bad weather, but there is no water (see photograph on page 124). Your track now follows this donkey caravan route for 2km to the tarmac road 800m from Ar Rus.

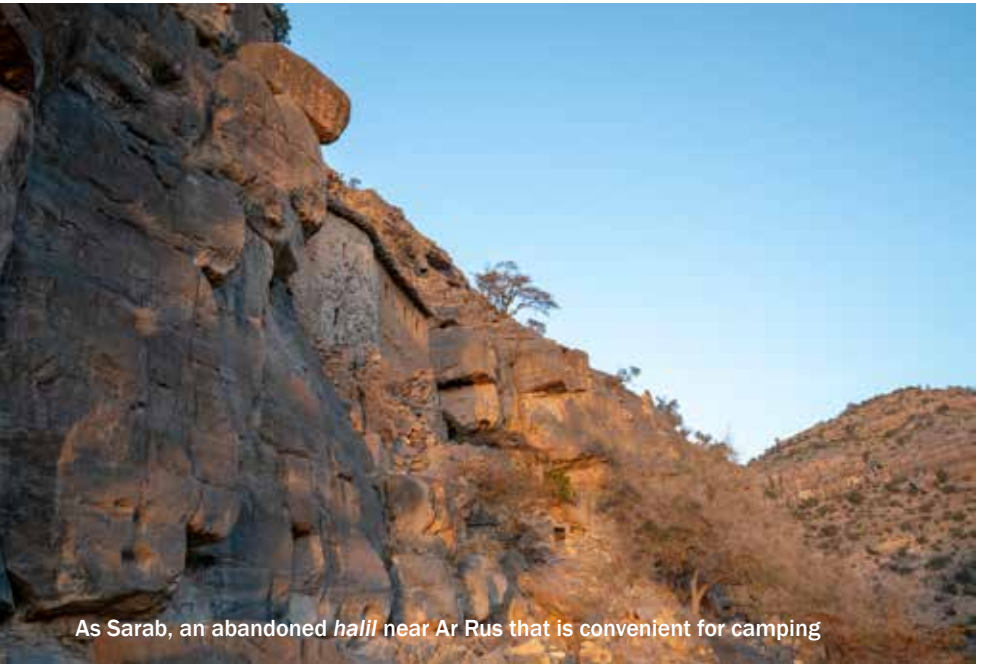
Sleeping at Ar Rus

As you approach Ar Rus on the tarmac road there are communal buildings on your left and the modern houses are on your right. Ar Rus has a communal *majlis* next to the mosque and a toilet for public use. The water in the wash basins is fine for drinking. Visitors are rare and the mountain Omanis are so hospitable they will insist you eat something with them inside their *majlis*, even if it is just an orange they've peeled for you. A number of people in Ar Rus now work outside the village and have learned English so will be keen to have a conversation. With the villagers' permission it is possible to sleep inside the *majlis*. It is only busy on Friday evenings when the men of the village will chat until at least 11pm. It is not appropriate to make a fire near the *majlis*, but cooking on portable gas is fine. The village welcome is special even if you are not intending to sleep in the *majlis*.

The vehicle support drive is a 20km continuation of the journey to As Sawjrah, staying on the tarmac road beyond Shinut and following the signposts to the Alila Hotel and then Ar Rus. There is a car park that is ideal for camping with vehicle support, but without water, in front of the abandoned *halil* of As Sarab. As Sarab is 3.25km from Ar Rus, 2.15km back along the tarmac road you just walked, then 1.1km left on a gravel road. The abandoned houses in As Sarab are worth exploring.



Talhat mosque used by travellers on the donkey track from Al Hijar to Ar Rus



As Sarab, an abandoned *halil* near Ar Rus that is convenient for camping

If you are without vehicle support and sleeping in the *majlis* does not appeal, there are two more alternatives. A few abandoned houses 670m along the track of Day 5 have flat camping places. You can refill your water at Ar Rus and start the next day's walk. The last alternative is the very grand five-star hotel, the Alila, which is 3.5km from Ar Rus, but booking is essential. The hotel contact details are in Table 8 on page 247 and there is a photograph of the massage room on page 246. The Alila Hotel has a taxi service and they will collect you at the *majlis*. Tell the Ar Rus villagers if you are taking this option as some of them work at the Alila Hotel and they will be grateful if they can share your taxi.

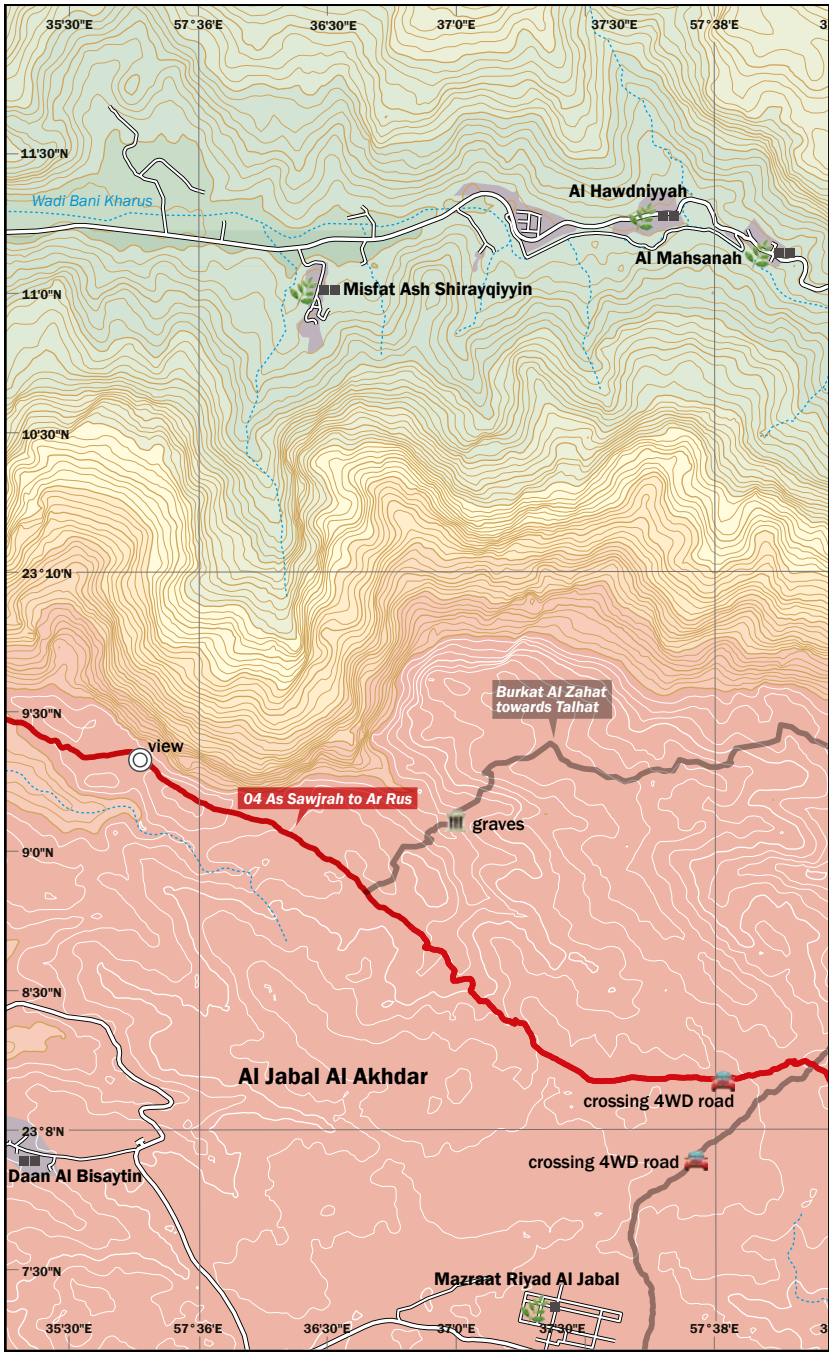
About Ar Rus

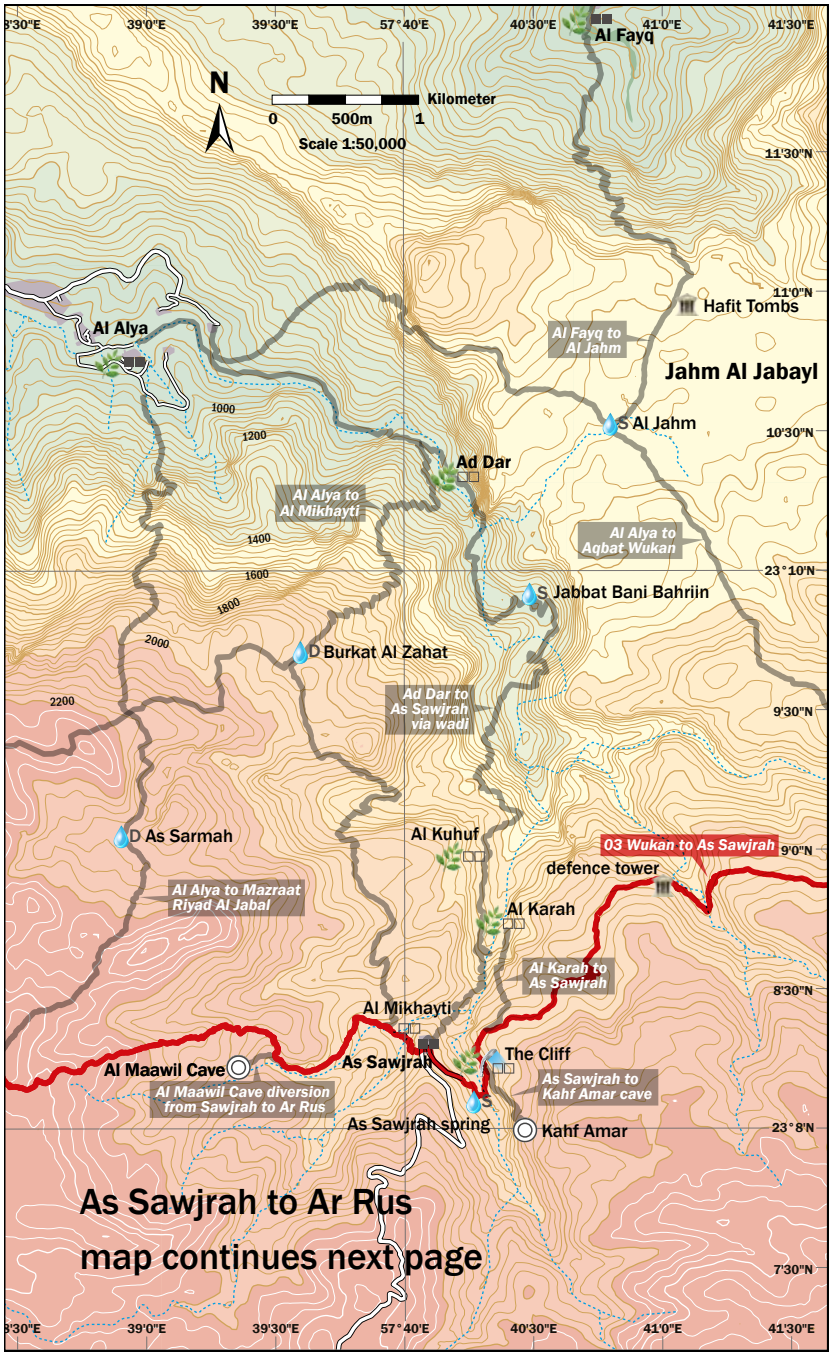
Life has changed dramatically since the roads brought vehicle transport and electricity in 1997 and 2002 respectively. Previously the villagers of Ar Rus spent their summers tending goats on the plateau, living in one-roomed stone houses clustered around the present location of the communal *majlis* and spending their winters gardening and living in Masirat Ash Shirayqiyyin down Wadi Al Hijri adjacent to their irrigated terraces. They also spent one summer month down in the warm wadi to harvest their dates. Masirat Ash Shirayqiyyin has seven *aflaj* and continuous terraces for 700m along the wadi.

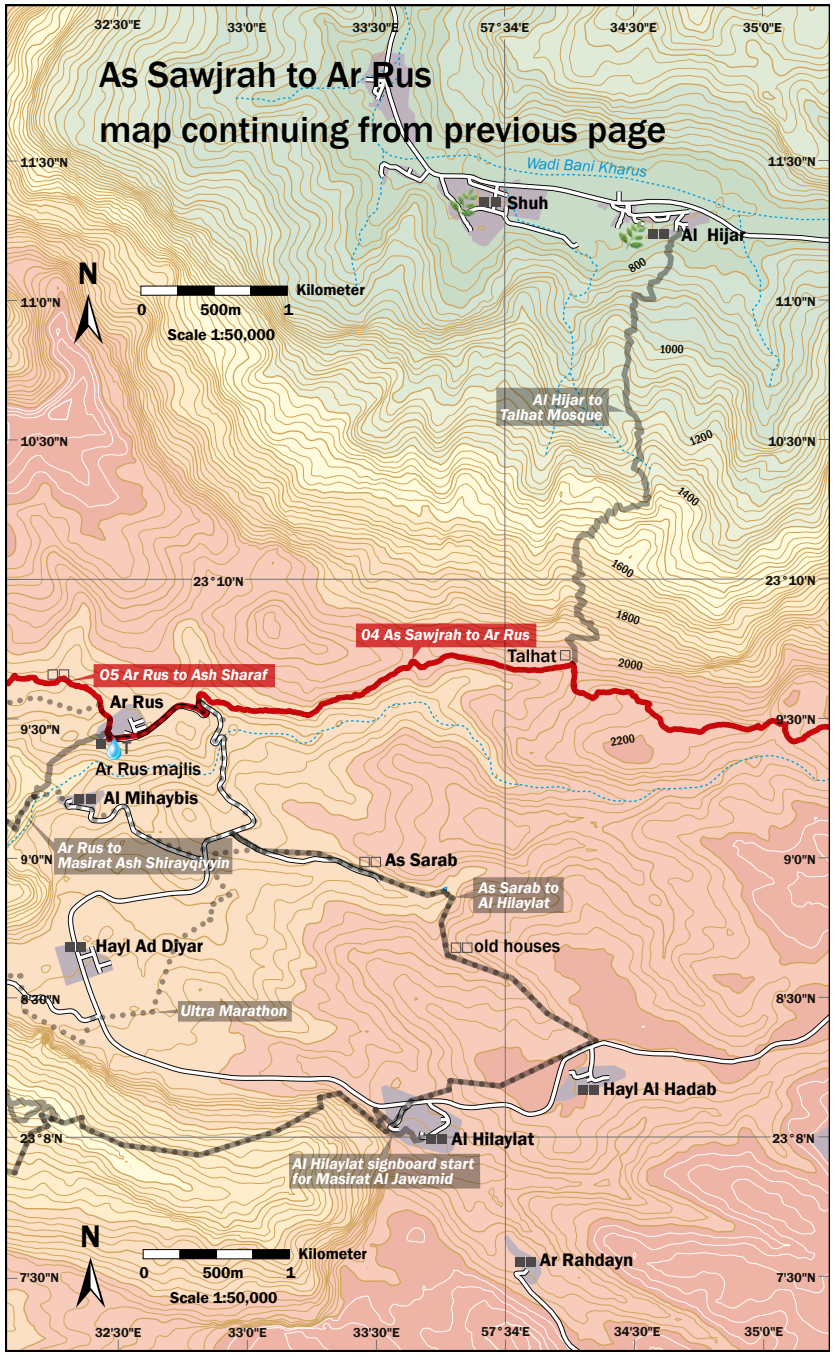
In 2018 the young Omani men of Ar Rus were fascinated by the 1992 video I showed them of themselves as children, and they reminisced on the old way they used to live. Each family group owned at least two houses, one in their winter village down the wadi and one in their summer village on the plateau. They slept inside if it was cold or raining, otherwise on their communal porches. When we passed through Ar Rus in 1992 on a circuit of the Sayq Plateau, the whole village was assembled to greet us as we walked up the stone steps to their *majlis.* The children had bonnet-style hats, the women wore colourful clothes and jewellery, and the men were in dishdasha or football shirts. They were not so isolated as to miss playing a Friday game against the neighbouring village. There was only one road up the mountain to Sayq, continuing to the village at Wadi Bani Habib. The mountain access road was limited to military traffic. There were no tourists and the few visitors were weekend hikers such as ourselves.

In 1992 the mountain culture was not as conservative as it is today. With permission it was possible to take pictures of the women. It is not now. In 2018 at the Friday evening gathering at the *majlis,* I distributed video stills of the faces of the Ar Rus villagers who greeted me in 1992, including the women. These pictures and the video were welcomed by all but one of the women. However, they all declined my request to publish their 1992 pictures in this book and asked me not to show them to the neighbouring villagers. I was given permission to publish the two pictures on page 53 because these women had died.

Today Ar Rus families live in modern houses, each separated by a few metres as in a modern suburb. Many of the village men have jobs off the mountain and employ south Asian gardeners to manage their terraces of dates, bananas, garlic and lemons. The manual skills required to pollinate the female flowers of the date palms, tie back the bunches as they form and cut the ripe dates are being transferred from Omanis to south Asians, particularly Bangladeshis who are skilled gardeners. Donkeys are no longer used to carry farm produce on the 4.7km track from the lowest garden to Ar Rus as the quantities do not justify their upkeep. Agricultural produce is now carried manually up the track.


35'30"E
57°36'E
36'30"E
37'0"E
37'30"E
57°38'E
11'30"N
11'0"N
10'30"N
23°10'N
9'30"N
9'0"N
8'30"N
23°8'N
7'30"N
Wadi Bani Kharus
Al Hawdniyyah
Al Mahsanah
Misfat Ash Shirayqiyyin
Burkat Al Zahat towards Talhat
view
04 As Sawjrah to Ar Rus
graves
Al Jabal Al Akhdar
crossing 4WD road
crossing 4WD road
Daan Al Bisaytin
Mazraat Riyad Al Jabal


39'0"E
39'30"E
57°40'E
40'30"E
41'0"E
41'30"E
N
0
500m
1
Kilometer
Scale 1:50,000
Al Fayq
11'30"N
11'0"N
10'30"N
23°10'N
9'30"N
9'0"N
8'30"N
23°8'N
7'30"N
Hafit Tombs
Al Alya
Al Fayq to Al Jahm
Jahm Al Jabayl
S Al Jahm
Ad Dar
Al Alya to Al Mikhayti
Al Alya to Aqbat Wukan
S Jabbat Bani Bahriin
D Burkat Al Zahat
Ad Dar to As Sawjrah via wadi
D As Sarmah
Al Kuhuf
03 Wukan to As Sawjrah
defence tower
Al Alya to Mazraat Riyad Al Jabal
Al Karah
Al Karah to As Sawjrah
Al Mikhayti
Al Maawil Cave
As Sawjrah
The Cliff
Al Maawil Cave diversion from Sawjrah to Ar Rus
As Sawjrah to Kahf Amar cave
As Sawjrah spring
Kahf Amar
As Sawjrah to Ar Rus
map continues next page



Excursions from Ar Rus

The walk to explore the tended terraces and abandoned *halil* on the way to the winter village of Masirat Ash Shirayqiyyin is a worthwhile excursion (see photograph on the cover page of this chapter). This is a round trip as there is a 4km man track inside Wadi Al Hijri and a longer 4.7km donkey track that climbs most of the way out of the wadi following a high contour. The natural pool in Wadi Al Hijri (see photograph on page 120) is fine for swimming, though not warm. The man track passes a *halil* consisting of numerous mud-brick houses built under a massive overhang inside the wadi (see photograph on this page). A second multi-dwelling *halil,* called Al Khutaym, is visible below the high donkey track. Both tracks of the round trip have been painted for the benefit of the guests of the Alila Hotel. Below Masirat Ash Shirayqiyyin *aflaj* from seven springs flow to storage tanks supplying one or more *aflaj* distributing irrigation water. It is fine to swim in the tanks because this water is not used for anything except irrigation as the village is abandoned (see photograph on page 62). This excursion can take four hours if you have a swim. If you enjoyed this side track there is similar abandoned winter village below the summer village of Al Hilaylat 5km by track from As Sarab. The 3km track from this plateau village descends Wadi Al Kawr to the gardens and village of Masirat Al Jawamid and then on to Aqbat Al Biyut.

There is a via ferrata managed by the Alila Hotel directly below the hotel. One section is designed for serious climbers but, as of 2018, only one hotel guest has attempted it.

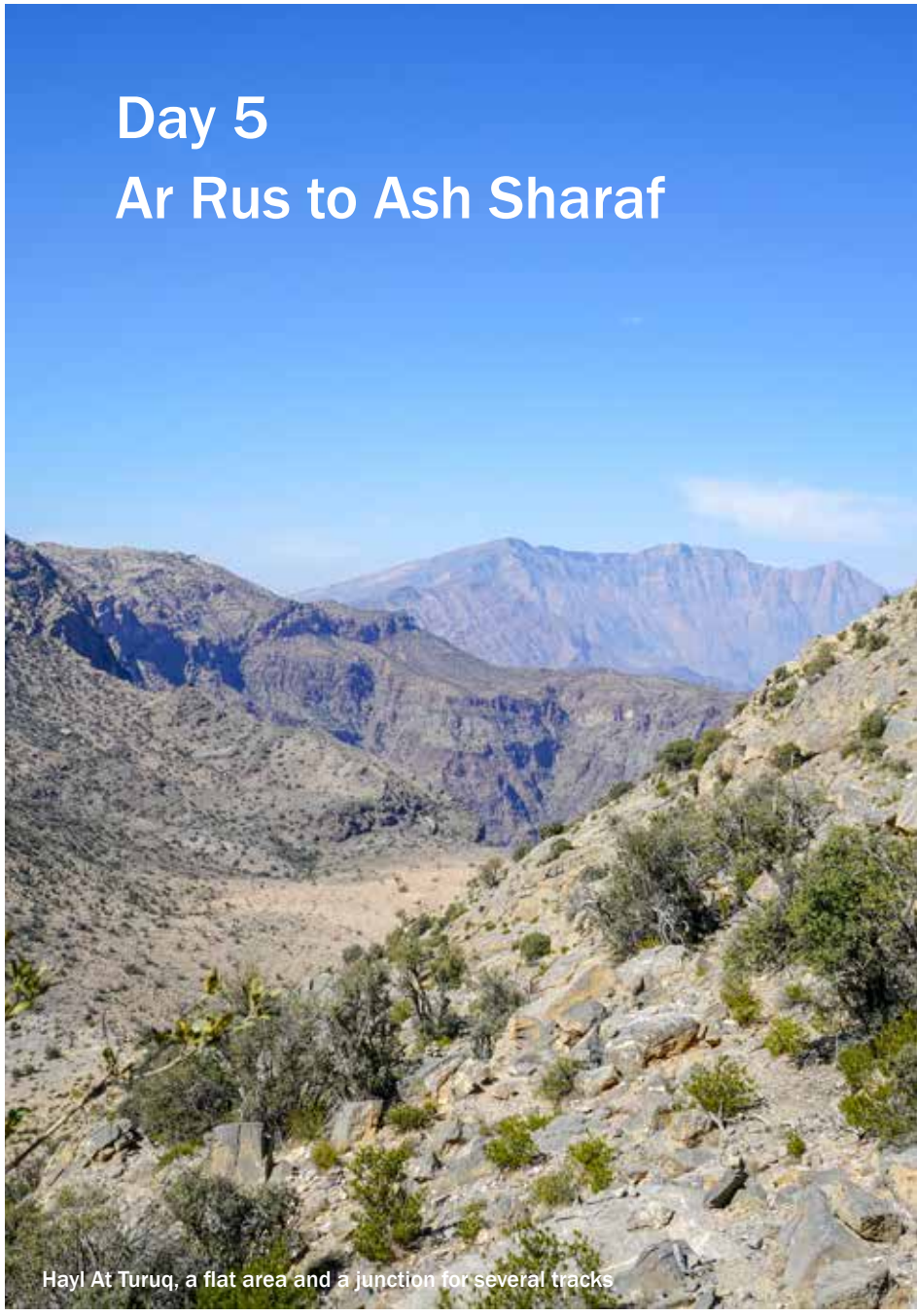


A *halil* in Wadi Al Hijri on the track between Ar Rus and Masirat Ash Shirayqiyyin



Wadi Halhal with the village Dukum in the centre and Al Hijayr further behind

Day 5
Ar Rus to Ash Sharaf



Hayl At Turuq, a flat area and a junction for several tracks



The Alila Hotel rooms spaced along the cliff edge, viewed 1.5km from Ar Rus



The rim of Wadi Sahtan viewed from the track Ar Rus to Ash Sharaf

Day 5. Ar Rus to Ash Sharaf

This 16km track links the mountain Al Jabal Al Akhdar with Jabal Shams, takes eight hours climbing 770m and descending 670m, finishing at 2000m on the only road that crosses the mountains. The highest point is 2330m.

It is a donkey track, apart from the last kilometre, which is a 500m man track and 500m of tarmac. The track is named Aqbat Adavar and was part of the trading route from Ar Rus to the desert towns around Al Hamra, but it has not been used as such since 1997. Part of the track follows the edge of the bowl at the head of the large and inhabited Wadi Halhal, which is a tributary of Wadi Bani Kharus (see photograph on page 130).

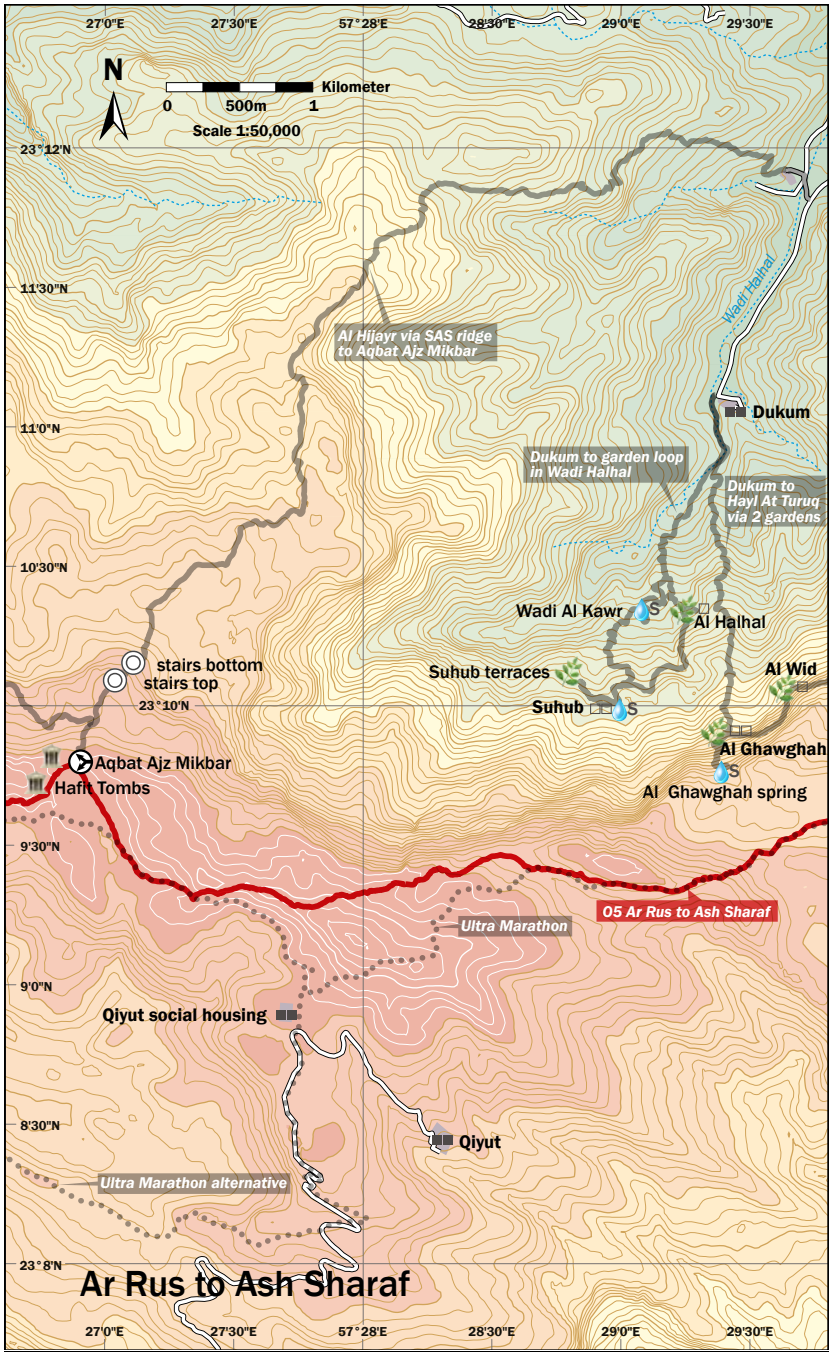
In 2018 a new track with green dots was built for an ultramarathon and partially follows the Aqbat Adavar track. It was designed for night running so frequently diverges south off the main ridge where the surface terrain is easier, and it makes large diversions south to the road-head settlement of Qiyut and to the Al Hoota Rest House. There are fewer views to the northern wadis from this new track and it bypasses the track branches that drop down the north-facing cliff (see the map on page 134 and the GPS data).

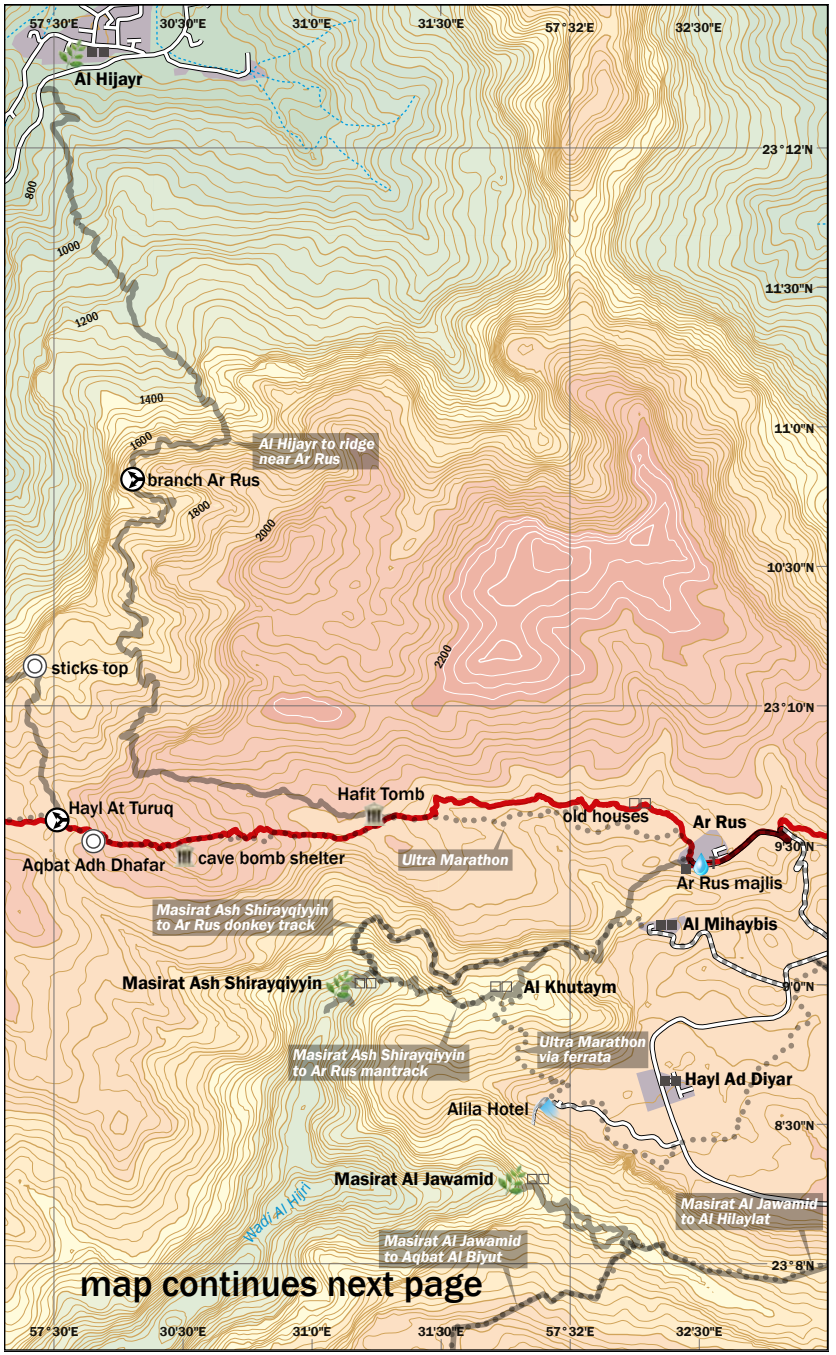
The Aqbat Adavar track has a number of landmarks. At 0.7km there are abandoned houses, at 1km there is a branch to the village of Al Hijayr, at 2.8km there is a Bronze-Age Hafit tomb and at 4.43km there is a 100m branch to a bomb shelter, a relic of the 1957–59 Al Jabal Al Akhdar war. The shelter protected the supporters of the Imam from British aerial bombing from which pieces of shrapnel are still visible on the track (see photographs on page 70). The SAS attacked this rebel base, which they called Sabrina, from their own base, called Cassino. At 5.44km there is a track branch to Wadi Halhal, a man track with a 95m exposed climb like a natural ladder (see photographs on pages 31 and 229). The grazing plain Hayl At Turuq is at 5.6km (see photograph on page 131), overlooked by another Hafit tomb, (see photograph on page 71). The ultramarathon track diverges towards Qiyut at 8.1km rejoining at 10.7km. At 12km, near the SAS Cassino base, there is a four-way track intersection called Aqbat Ajz Mikbar. In addition to the Ar Rus to Ash Sharaf track, there is a branch to a ridge on the west side of Wadi Halhal that the SAS used to supply Cassino. This track is an easy eight-hour descent, with 140m of stairs crossing the only cliff. The fourth track runs northwest to Hat, a village in the next major wadi system, Wadi Bani Awf. There are two more Hafit burial mounds near Aqbat Ajz Mikbar. The track to Ash Sharaf finishes by descending on a man track to a tarmac road that links Al Hamra on the south of Western Hajar with Hat and Balad Sayt at the head of Wadi Bani Awf on the north of Western Hajar.

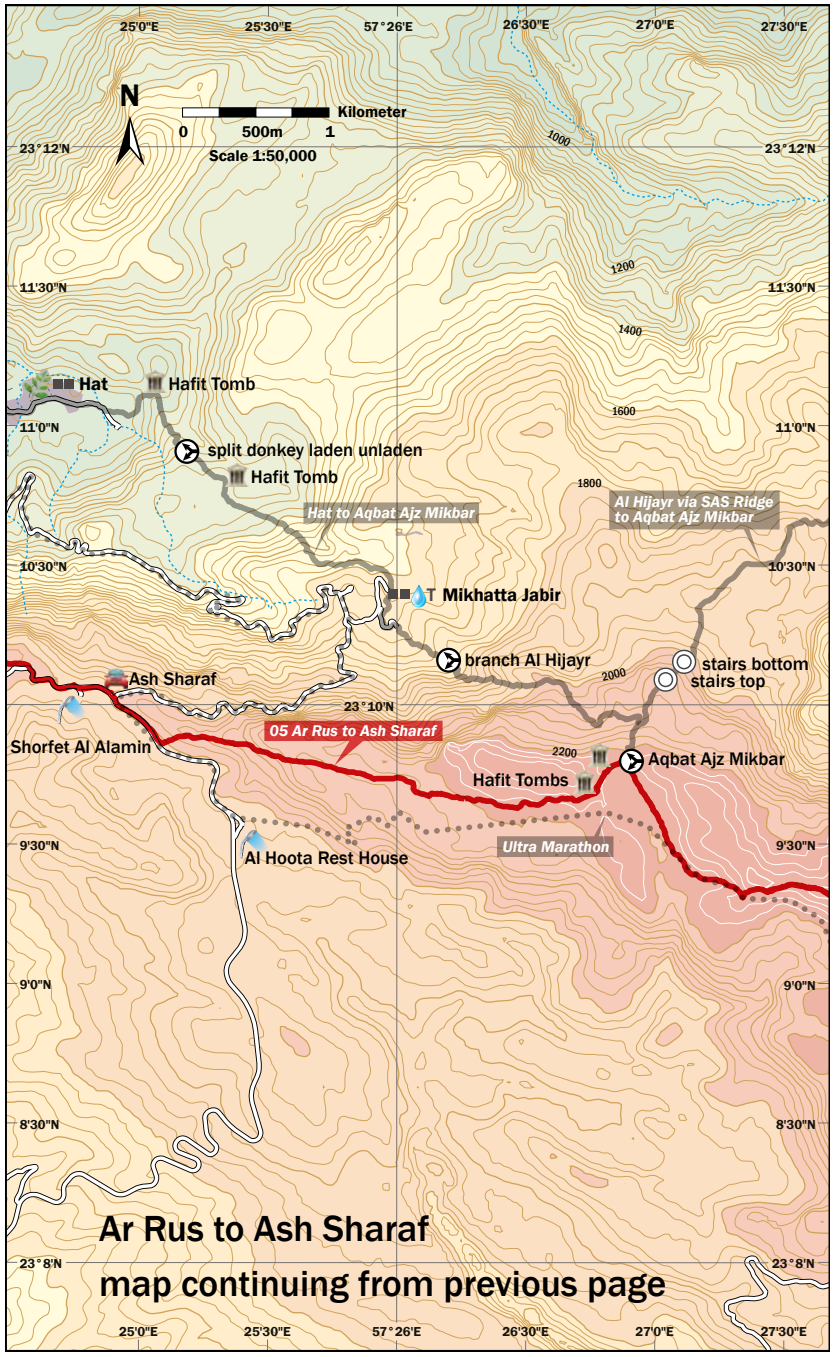
Sleeping at Ash Sharaf

There are two reasonably priced modern hotels nearby. Hotel Shorfet Al Alamin is at the end of the track while Al Hoota Rest House is 800m down the tarmac road from where the track intersects the road. You will have to get water from one of these hotels. The track on Day 6 starts from Hotel Shorfet Al Alamin towards a mobile tower. If you are camping be aware that the graded road to this tower is a popular place for vehicle camping with noisy crowds around campfires. The track beyond the mobile tower has many flat camping sites where you will not be disturbed.

The driving distance from Muscat International Airport is 218km via Nizwa, which is 2.5 hours on a tarmac road suitable for a saloon car. Alternatively, from the north, the distance is 167km via Wadi Bani Awf, requiring a 4WD for the graded road that starts midway into the wadi, which is particularly steep as it approaches the saddle from Hat.


N
Kilometer
0
500m
1
Scale 1:50,000
Al Hijayr via SAS ridge to Aqbat Ajz Mikbar
Wadi Halhal
Dukum
Dukum to garden loop in Wadi Halhal
Dukum to Hayl At Turuq via 2 gardens
Wadi Al Kawr
Al Halhal
stairs bottom
stairs top
Suhub terraces
Al Wid
Suhub
Al Ghawghah
Al Ghawghah spring
Aqbat Ajz Mikbar
Hafit Tombs
05 Ar Rus to Ash Sharaf
Ultra Marathon
Qiyut social housing
Qiyut
Ultra Marathon alternative
Ar Rus to Ash Sharaf


Al Hijayr
Al Hijayr to ridge near Ar Rus
branch Ar Rus
sticks top
Hafit Tomb
Hayl At Turuq
old houses
Ar Rus
Aqbat Adh Dhafar
cave bomb shelter
Ultra Marathon
Ar Rus majlis
Masirat Ash Shirayqiyyin to Ar Rus donkey track
Al Mihaybis
Masirat Ash Shirayqiyyin
Al Khutaym
Masirat Ash Shirayqiyyin to Ar Rus mantrack
Ultra Marathon via ferrata
Hayl Ad Diyar
Alila Hotel
Masirat Al Jawamid
Wadi Al Hijri
Masirat Al Jawamid to Al Hilaylat
Masirat Al Jawamid to Aqbat Al Biyut
map continues next page



About Ash Sharaf

Ash Sharaf is mountain pass at 2000m elevation on the Western Hajar ridge. The road to the north is graded and the road to the south is tarmac providing easy access. There are no villages or settlements other than the two hotels.

Excursions from Ash Sharaf

There is a canyon descent of Snake Gorge near Balad Sayt in Wadi Bani Awf. Balad Sayt is 13km from Ash Sharaf via the village of Hat on a steep graded road. The five-hour descent of Snake Gorge requires a 50m rope for a 23m cliff abseil, and multiple swims in very cold water. Guides with abseiling equipment are available. There is a shorter branch canyon into the main canyon bypassing this cliff that does not need a rope. Once you start descending either of these canyons there is no easy way of going back. There is a guest house, Bait Bimah, at the top of the shorter canyon. If you do not have two vehicles, to leave one at each end of the canyon, your fittest person can walk fast back up a 5km steep graded road to collect a vehicle left at the top. It is possible to reach Balad Sayt, descend Snake Gorge and return all on foot. The painted donkey trail to Balad Sayt from Ash Sharaf is 5km west on W10h, then 3km northeast on W8 down the cliff from a junction called Sharaf Al Alamayn, marked with a large cairn. There are two track junctions on W10h before the branch down to Balad Sayt. The first is a cliff-top branch down to Hat involving an exposed climb. The second is the branch to Misfat Al Abriyyin at 4.1km, which is the continuation of the traverse. The paint stops on W10h at the junction with W8, although the track continues and is the high option for the traverse (page 149).

The Al Hoota Cave, a major tourist attraction, is 30km on a tarmac road.

Balad Sayt has been inhabited since the Early Iron Age according to archaeologists who found an ancient *falaj* from one of the seven springs that surround the village. Al Hamra was also inhabited in the Early Iron Age, where 1000 BCE pottery shards similar to those at Balad Sayt were found. This suggests the two communities were linked. W8 is the most direct route between them, so it is likely this track has been used for three thousand years.

Schreiber J., (2007)



Unusual track marker shortly before reaching Ash Sharaf



Entering a storehouse in the *diyar* Hayl Al Jawari, halfway to Misfat Al Abriyyin

Day 6
Ash Sharaf to Misfat Al Abriyyin

Tea on the boil thanks to the boy in the facing picture



Storehouse at Hayl Al Jawari, and a *saqa* container hanging from the tree



Purchased dates and dried fish inside the storehouse in Hayl Al Jawari

Ash Sharaf to Misfat Al Abriyyin

For the next three days you leave the mountain ridge. There is a day's walk west and down the dip slope, a half-day walk west that gradually recovers some altitude and the third day ascending the summit. Leaving the ridge avoids two chain ladders on an alternative route that more closely follows the cliff edge overlooking Wadi Sahtan. This provides an opportunity to spend both nights at hotels, while the high option requires camping without logistics support until you reach the Jabal Shams plateau after the summit.

The 14.2km walk from Ash Sharaf down to Misfat Al Abriyyin is a donkey track taking seven hours, climbing 200m and descending 1270m, finishing at 950m. The track has painted markers and marathon dots so not requiring GPS navigation.

Painted markers start after a 2km gravel road between the tarmac car park on the saddle and a mobile transmission tower on the cliff edge. The track is called W10h and splits after 4km into W8 and W9. Be careful not to miss this junction, which can be reached in an hour at a brisk walk. W8 continues straight ahead following the ridge then descending the cliff to Balad Sayt. This is also the beginning of the alternative high route. W9 descends southwest to Misfat Al Abriyyin passing several occupied and abandoned *diyar.*

You reach a *diyar* called Hayl Al Jawari after 7km, which is accessed by a graded road built in 2017 (see photographs on this and the preceding two pages). Several new single-room stone houses were constructed in 2018 with the walls built by Pakistani stonemasons using local stone and minimal mortar. The semi-nomadic *shawawiya* prefer to pay Pakistanis to build the walls because they are straighter and the corners more perpendicular than traditional houses. *Shawawiya* will supply mortar carried on donkeys or by vehicles and build the branch or palm-trunk roof, which the Pakistani stonemasons then cover with concrete. These houses function primarily as stores, and are only used for sleeping in cold or wet weather. They are inexpensive and, in terms of the typical market rate of goats sold in the Nizwa market, a new house costs between five and seven goats. Livestock prices are highest prior to Eid celebrations that mark the end of Ramadan, (Eid al Fitr) and the Festival of the Sacrifice (Eid al Adha). Hayl Al Jawari is in transition from using donkeys to vehicles and donkey saddle blankets can be found stacked on trees.

At 8.7km you pass the stone storehouses of the *diyar* Manzal Ash Shurfah, which is located on both sides of the wadi. Some of these houses are no longer used, as evidenced from the collapsing roofs made from palm trunks and fronds topped by mud and straw. Aqabat Al Hamra to the west across the wadi is still only accessible by donkey caravans although the new road to Hayl Al Jawari has shortened the route. At 11.5km there is a donkey-track branch back up to the ridge to Burkat Ash Sharaf. The last few kilometres into Misfat Al Abriyyin (see photograph on page 142) pass through irrigated date terraces on the most used and, therefore, clearest donkey track on the traverse.

Sleeping at Misfat Al Abriyyin

There are several hotels in the old village built in restored mud-brick houses. The Hospitality Inn, beside the village car park, is reached first and Misfah Old House is deeper in the old village. These are upmarket versions of the guest house in As Sawjrah. Bookings are recommended. If you are camping the best places are near the track you have just walked, above the old town. The relatively low elevation and proximity to the *falaj* means you can expect mosquitoes, so repellent will be necessary. *Aini falaj* water is fine to drink. The next day's walk is short at 6.8km to Hayl Ash Shas, which you reach in three to four



Manzal Ash Shurfah, an inhabited *diyar* near the track to Misfat Al Abriyyin



Last kilometre of donkey track to Misfat Al Abriyyin

hours. If you start early from Ash Sharaf it is possible to reach Hayl Ash Shas in one day and not sleep at Misfat Al Abriyyin.

The drive from Muscat Airport to Misfat Al Abriyyin is suitable for a saloon car, and is 206km taking 2.5 hours. There are taxis available in Misfat Al Abriyyin for the 7.6km fifteen-minute drive to Al Hamra where there are grocery shops.

About Misfat Al Abriyyin

This village has high-volume spring irrigating terraces extensive enough to require village donkeys to transport the crops. As the old village population moves to the adjacent new town, the restoration of old houses as hotels is one way to avoid their deterioration. The cultural resistance to this change of use took the first Omani house owners seven years to overcome but now the thriving locally owned hospitality industry is well accepted.

Misfat Al Abriyyin has a village organisation using *waqf;* individuals, who are paid a commission, undertaking part-time community service. *Waqf* are elected and serve until the individual wants to retire. *Waqf* administer historic gifts to the village such as land, water rights and date palms, some of which are hundreds of years old. Profits go to whatever community service was stipulated by the original donor. Donations to the *waqf* system, typically land not cash, must be capable of generating a sustainable income. *Waqf* are assisted by the *wakil,* who maintain records. The system works for the whole village independent of tribal affiliations. All public services have *waqf*, for example the mosque, track maintenance, hospitality and Eid feast firewood. There is a separate *wakil* who manages *aflaj*.

Excursions

There is an easy walk through the old village and down the *falaj* extension that loops around to the opposite side of the wadi. The *falaj* extension is only eighty years old, whereas the old village is five hundred years old. Even older houses once existed in a village closer to the spring. There is a short walk to the Rajan watchtower, which the villagers believe was originally built by the Persians after their defeat at Salut as part of their last stand against the Arabs before their ultimate expulsion in 650 CE. There is no archaeological or written record to support this story. A three-hour 4.8km circular walk crosses the main wadi, passes under star-gazing towers once used as a clock for the *dawan*, and follows a ridge above and opposite the terraces to intersect the track from Ash Sharaf.

There are several circular walks near Misfat Al Abriyyin using pairs of the seven tracks that lead up the dip slope. The traverse descends the most eastern of these seven tracks and ascends the most western (see Table 7 on page 230 for the other five tracks).

The dip slope is cut by wadis (see photograph on page 161) with few crossing points. Above them, near the high ridge, there is sufficient precipitation to sustain clumps of tall grass and enough vegetation to justify the construction of donkey tracks above the *shawawi* camps to utilise this resource. A pair of donkey tracks start 500m from the settlement Dar Al Bayda, which is either a thirty minute drive up a 4WD road or a 2.6km walk up a donkey track from Misfat Al Abriyyin. The 10.2km circular walk is to Al Harf up one wadi and down another but you have to climb higher to reach the slopes with the grass. Another 5.6km man track descends from Dar Al Bayda to Misfat Al Abriyyin passing the terraces and houses of Muzara. There are a few exposed climbs on this wadi scramble.

One of the track junctions above Hayl Ash Shas is called Dabk Awlad Siwayid, which is a stick bridge that ascends the cliff 1.25km below the summit. This climb is not difficult. Hayl Ash Shas is a 14km 30 -minute taxi journey from Misfat Al Abriyyin.



Rajan Tower overlooking Misfat Al Abriyyin

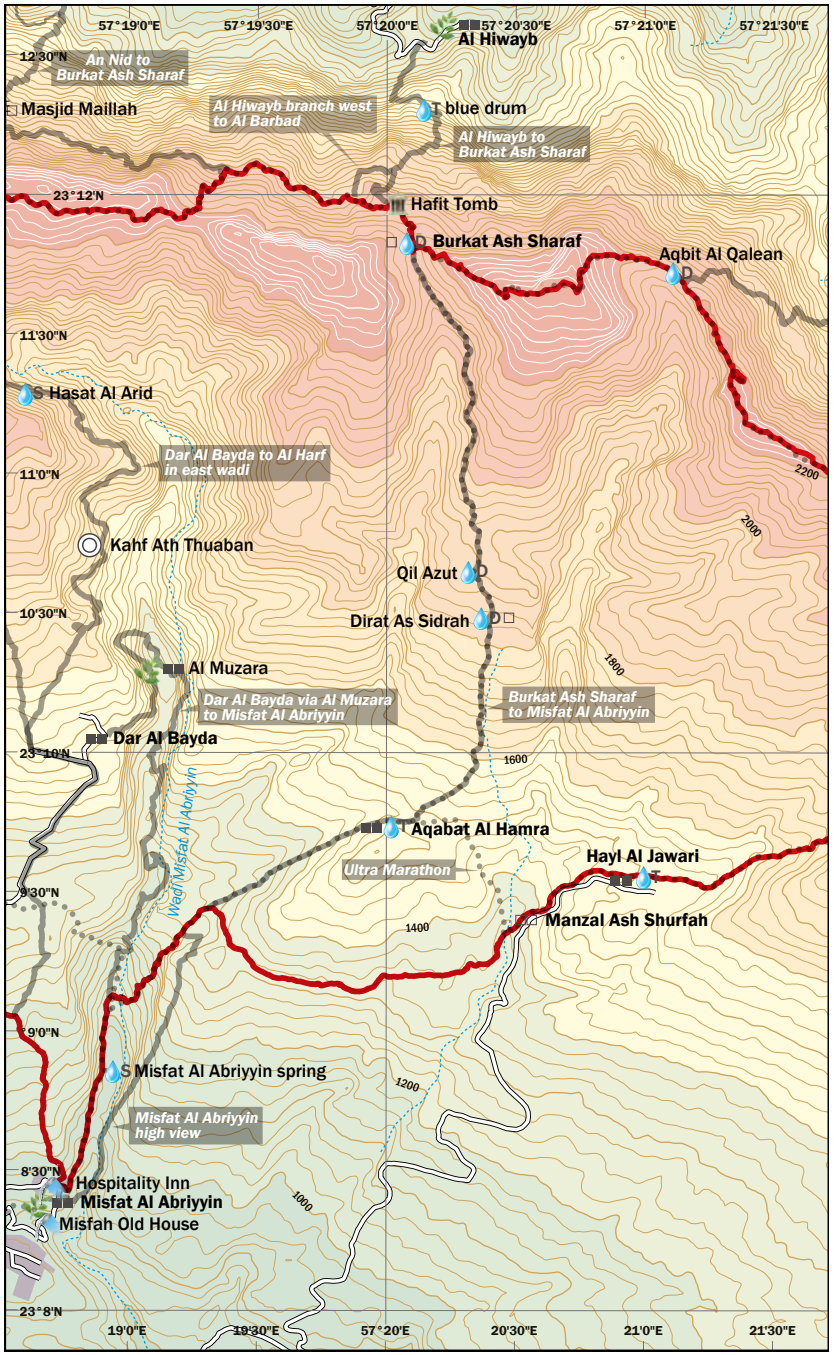


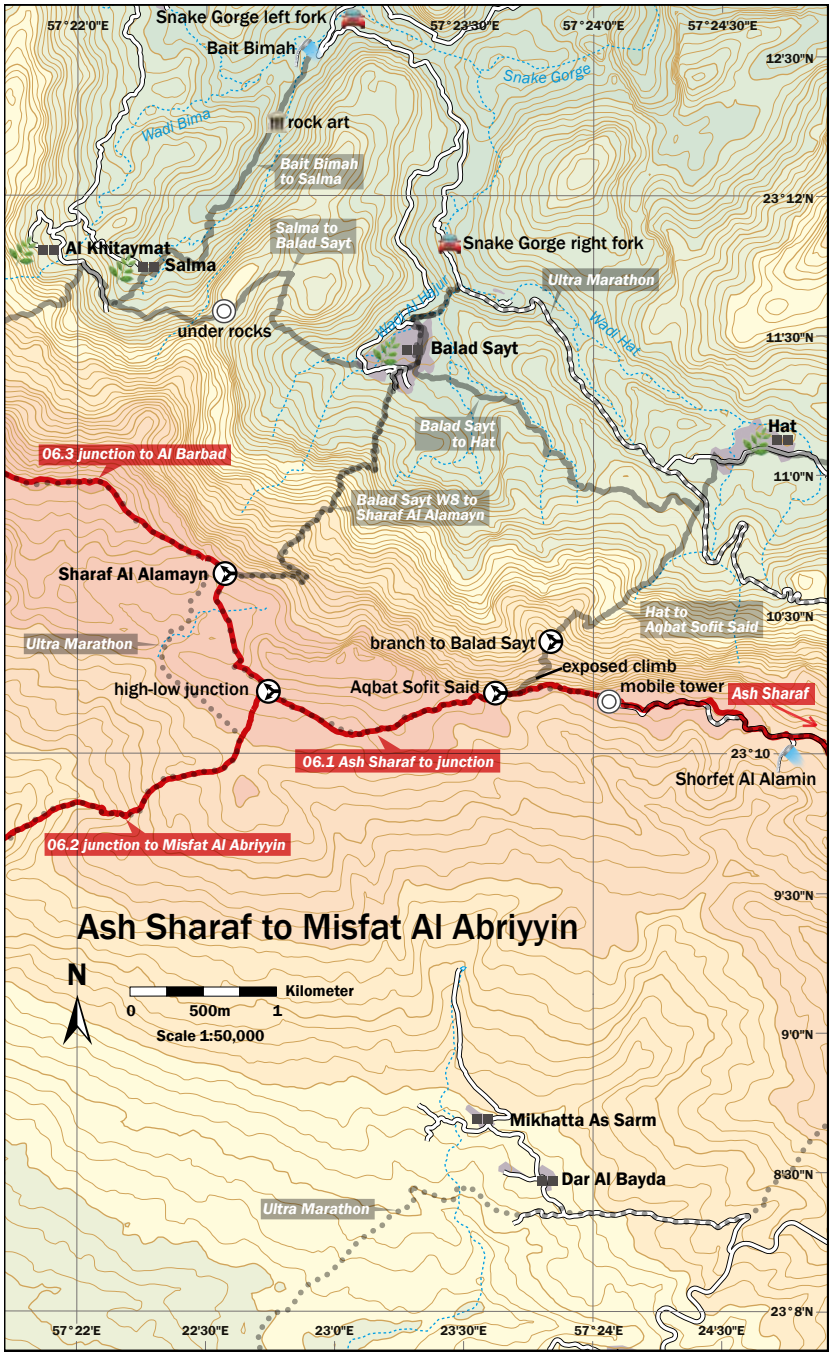
Collapsed floors reveals the internal design of a large house in Misfat Al Abriyyin

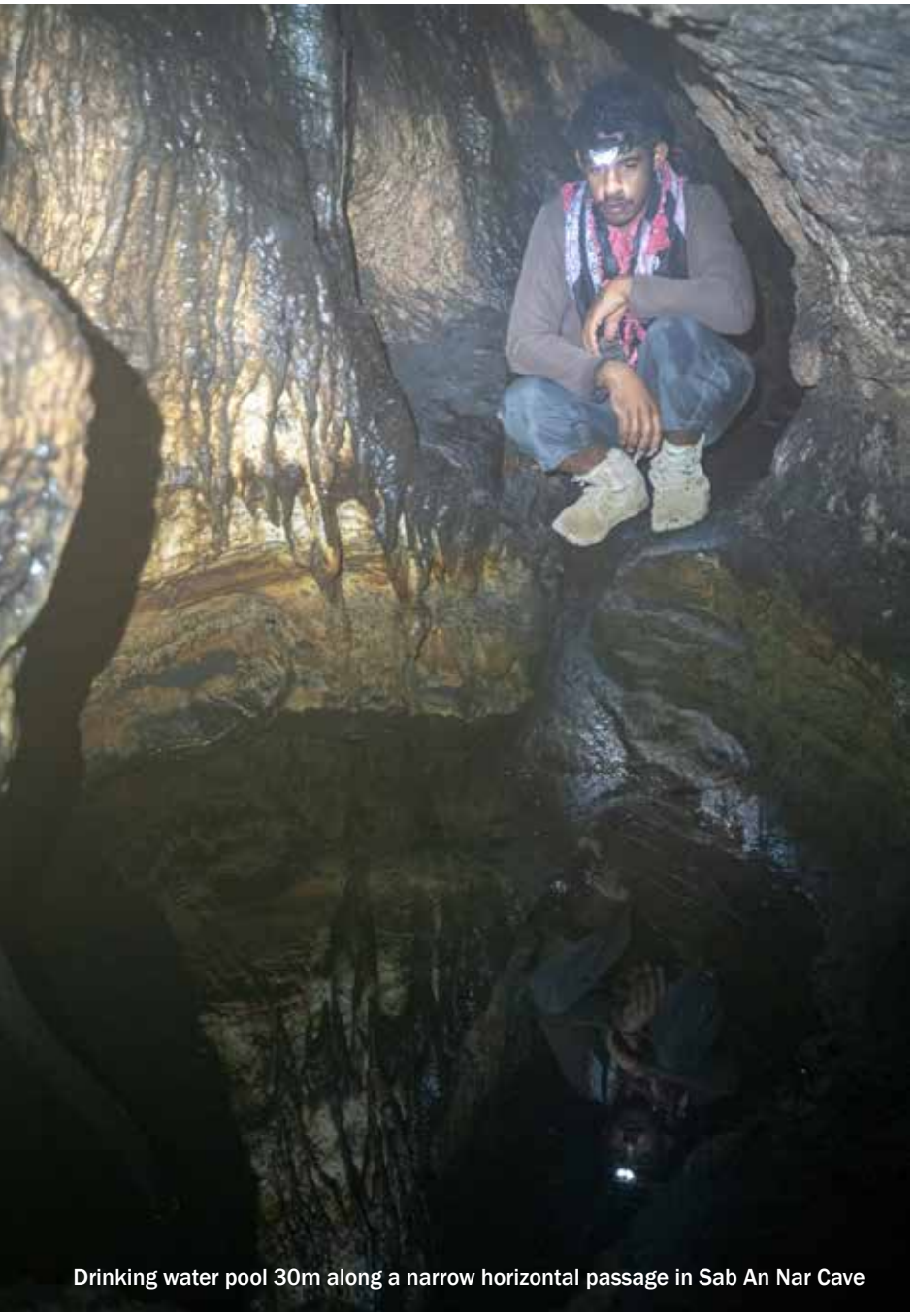




Qil Azut waterhole between Misfat Al Abriyyin and Burkat Ash Sharaf


57°19'0"E
57°19'30"E
57°20'0"E
57°20'30"E
57°21'0"E
57°21'30"E
12'30"N
An Nid to Burkat Ash Sharaf
Al Hiwayb
Masjid Maillah
Al Hiwayb branch west to Al Barbad
blue drum
Al Hiwayb to Burkat Ash Sharaf
23°12'N
Hafit Tomb
Burkat Ash Sharaf
Aqbit Al Qalean
11'30"N
Hasat Al Arid
Dar Al Bayda to Al Harf in east wadi
11'0"N
2200
2000
Kahf Ath Thuaban
Qil Azut
10'30"N
Dirat As Sidrah
1800
Al Muzara
Dar Al Bayda via Al Muzara to Misfat Al Abriyyin
Burkat Ash Sharaf to Misfat Al Abriyyin
Dar Al Bayda
23°10'N
1600
Wadi Misfat Al Abriyyin
Aqabat Al Hamra
Hayl Al Jawari
Ultra Marathon
9'30"N
1400
Manzal Ash Shurfah
9'0"N
Misfat Al Abriyyin spring
1200
Misfat Al Abriyyin high view
8'30"N
Hospitality Inn
Misfat Al Abriyyin
Misfah Old House
1000
23°8'N
19'0"E
19'30"E
57°20'E
20'30"E
21'0"E
21'30"E


57°22'0"E
Snake Gorge left fork
57°23'30"E
57°24'0"E
57°24'30"E
12'30"N
Bait Bimah
Snake Gorge
Wadi Bima
rock art
Bait Bimah to Salma
23°12'N
Salma to Balad Sayt
Al Khitaymat
Salma
Snake Gorge right fork
Ultra Marathon
under rocks
Wadi Al Ayn
Wadi Hat
Balad Sayt
11'30"N
Balad Sayt to Hat
Hat
06.3 junction to Al Barbad
11'0"N
Balad Sayt WB to Sharaf Al Alamayn
Sharaf Al Alamayn
Hat to Aqbat Sofit Said
10'30"N
Ultra Marathon
branch to Balad Sayt
exposed climb
high-low junction
Aqbat Sofit Said
mobile tower
Ash Sharaf
06.1 Ash Sharaf to junction
23°10
Shorfet Al Alamin
06.2 junction to Misfat Al Abriyyin
9'30"N
Ash Sharaf to Misfat Al Abriyyin
N
Kilometer
0
500m
1
Scale 1:50,000
9'0"N
Mikhatta As Sarm
Dar Al Bayda
8'30"N
Ultra Marathon
23°8'N
57°22'E
22'30"E
23'0"E
23'30"E
57°24'E
24'30"E

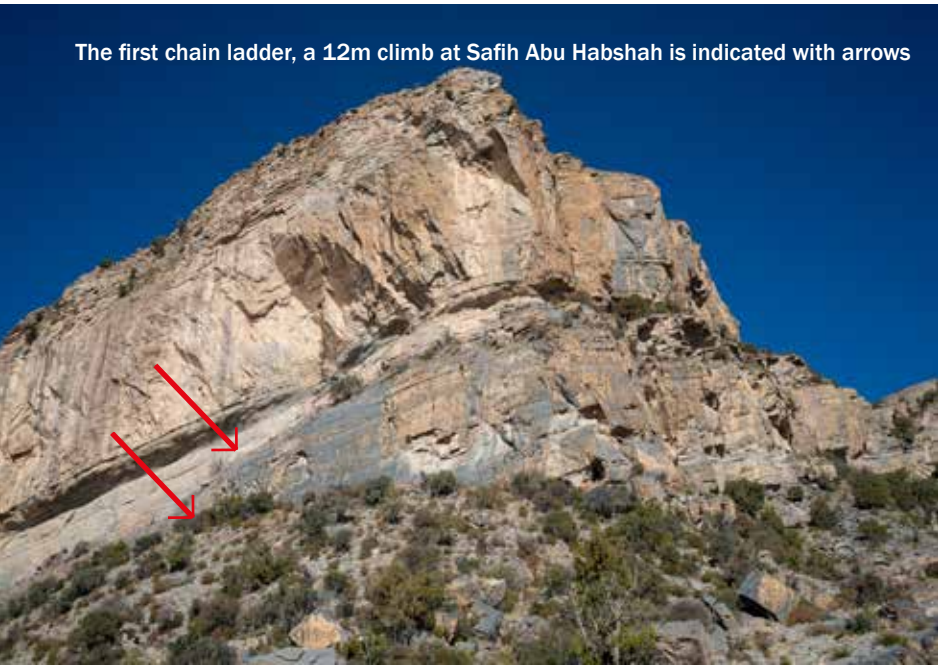


Drinking water pool 30m along a narrow horizontal passage in Sab An Nar Cave

Day 6 High Option
Ash Sharaf to Jabal Shams summit



The first chain ladder climb, 12m at Safih Abu Habshah



The first chain ladder, a 12m climb at Safih Abu Habshah is indicated with arrows



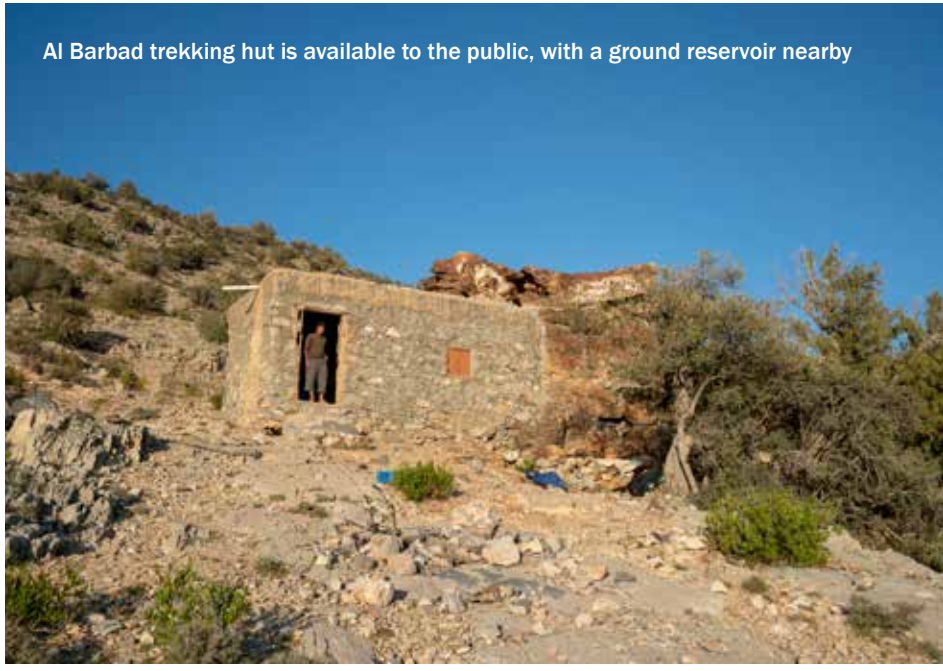
Second chain ladder, a 2.5m climb at Aqbit Saydran 800m west of the summit

Shorter High Option to the Summit

This option replaces Days 6, 7 and 8. The first day is a nine-hour 15.8km walk along a mountain ridge to the Al Barbad hut. The total climb is 1050m and the total descent is 790m.

The second day is 2.7km to the first chain ladder at Sath Abu Habsa, 2.8km to the second chain ladder at Aqbit Saydran and 900m to the summit. Overall the 6.3km will take 5 hours, climbing 815m and descending 115m.

The first 1.5km from Ash Sharaf is near a gravel road to a mobile mast, followed by a painted trail called W10h that passes a man track branch to Hat at 2.3km. This painted track is flat until it splits at 4.1km when one painted branch follows the dip slope to Misfat Al Abriyyin (W9, Day 6) and the other, called W8, heads back up to the mountain ridge. At 5.1km along W8 there is a tall cairn called Sharaf Al Alamayn that marks the top of the painted track down to Balad Sayt, whose terraces in Wadi Bani Awf are visible 1060m below. Ultra marathon markers are on the donkey track that continues 8.8km along the ridge past a man track branch to Salma and stone-covered water-filled holes, called Aqbit Al Qalean. You reach the saddle and track junction, called Burkat Ash Sharaf, 11.3km from Ash Sharaf, which is a popular campsite for walkers coming from the south on the donkey track from Misfat Al Abriyyin. There is a single-hut mosque that can be used for shelter in poor weather and an open ground reservoir, whose water should be boiled or treated. Our route to the next hut, still on ultra marathon green dots, takes the north track, dropping 150m beyond the saddle to start the descent into Wadi Sahtan, then turns west along a wide ledge below and parallel to the ridge. There are man-track branches 400m and 800m after Burkat Ash Sharaf down off the ledge, to the north to Al Hiwayb. Continuing along



Al Barbad trekking hut is available to the public, with a ground reservoir nearby



2m diameter Egyptian vultures' nest 1km before reaching Al Barbad



Wadi Sahtan, and Wajmah village with its extensive abandoned terraces

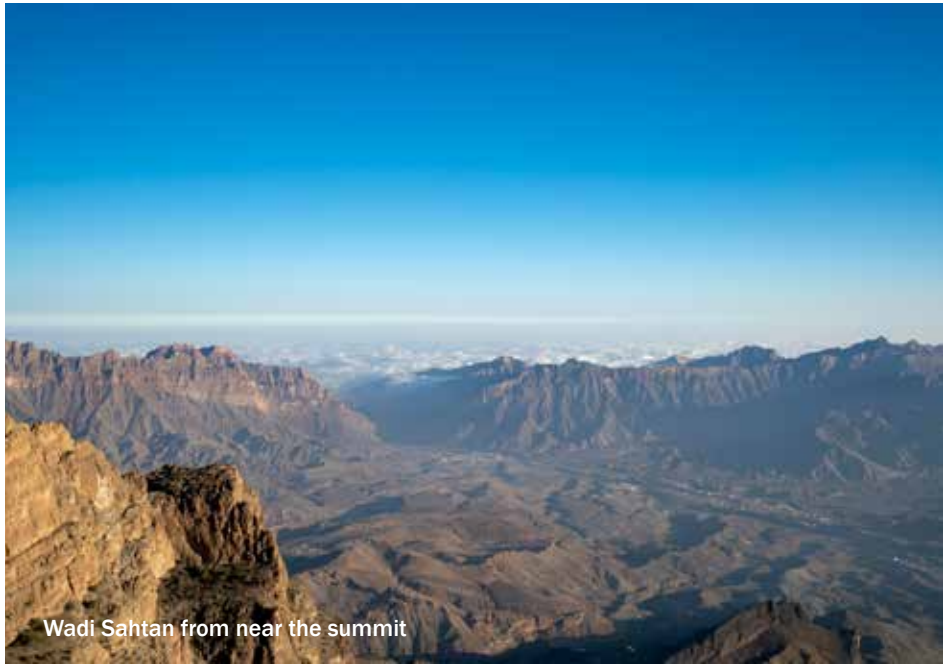
the wide ledge the track turns southwest at another junction at 13.1km and climbs back up to the ridge. The other branch continues along the ledge and passes an isolated mosque called Maillah, then heads north down to the road 4km west of Al Hiwayb. This is the only trade route between Jabal Shams and Wadi Sahtan.

The high-traverse route continues west along the ridge with views to the north into Wadi Sahtan and to the south over Al Hamra. Egyptian vultures have built a huge nest that dwarfs its host tree 1km before Al Barbad (see photograph on the facing page). GPS is required for the 2.7km from Al Barbad to the first chain ladder at Safih Abu Habshah, or follow the green dots for 3.4km via Al Harf. The second ladder, Aqbit Saydran, is 900m from the summit. On Day 9 your descent retraces this 900m. From the summit the seven-hour descent to the Jabal Shams plateau is described on Day 9. With a dawn start from Al Barbad hut it is possible to reach this plateau in one day.

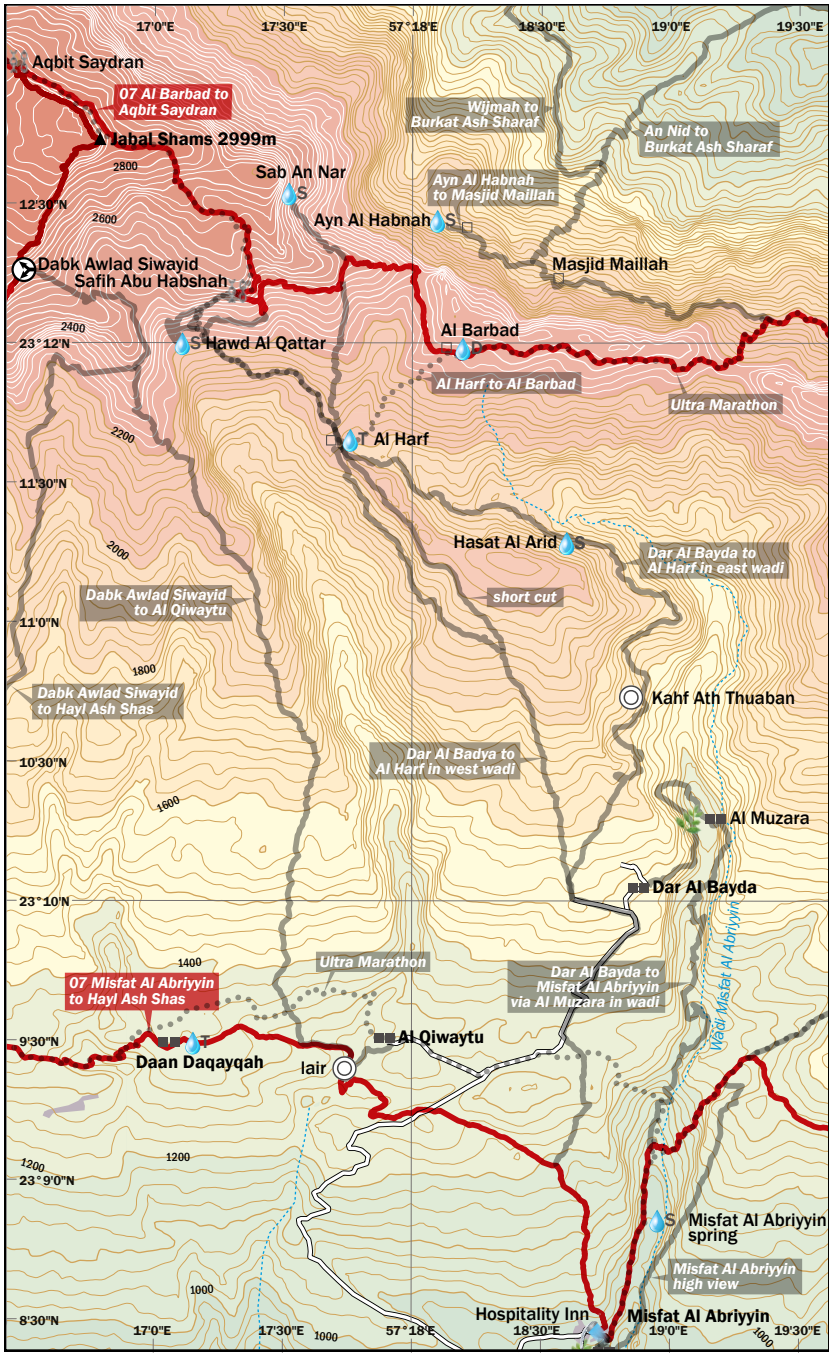
Sleeping on the High Option

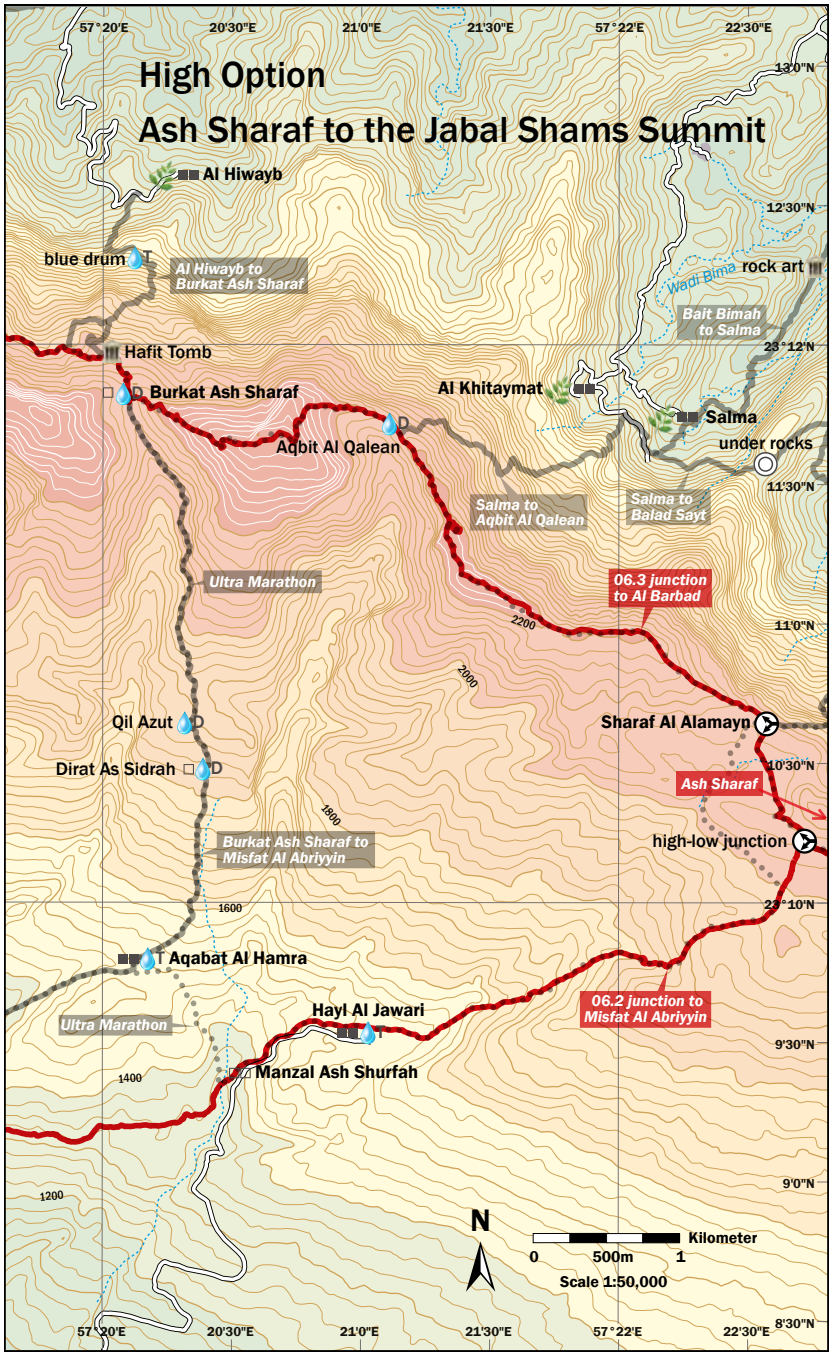
The Al Barbad hut was built by the Al Hamran Hiking Club for public use. They have left blankets and pots inside for anyone to use. Please leave everything as you find it. The water in the open reservoir nearby should be boiled before use.

Fresh water is available in the Sab An Nar cave on a 600m diversion off the track 1.4km from Al Barbad towards the summit. At the end of a 30m natural tunnel through the cave, which is just big enough for one person, there is a drip feeding a pool of clean water. You need a torch (see photograph on page 148). Another source of drinking water is a diversion to a wall drip 800m southwest from the foot of the cliff at Safih Abu Habshah, called Hawd Al Qattar, where two pools have been built under the cliff to collect drips. At Safih Abu Habshah, 30m to the east of the bottom of the chain ladder, there is a dry cave in the cliff that is ideal for camping.



Wadi Sahtan from near the summit

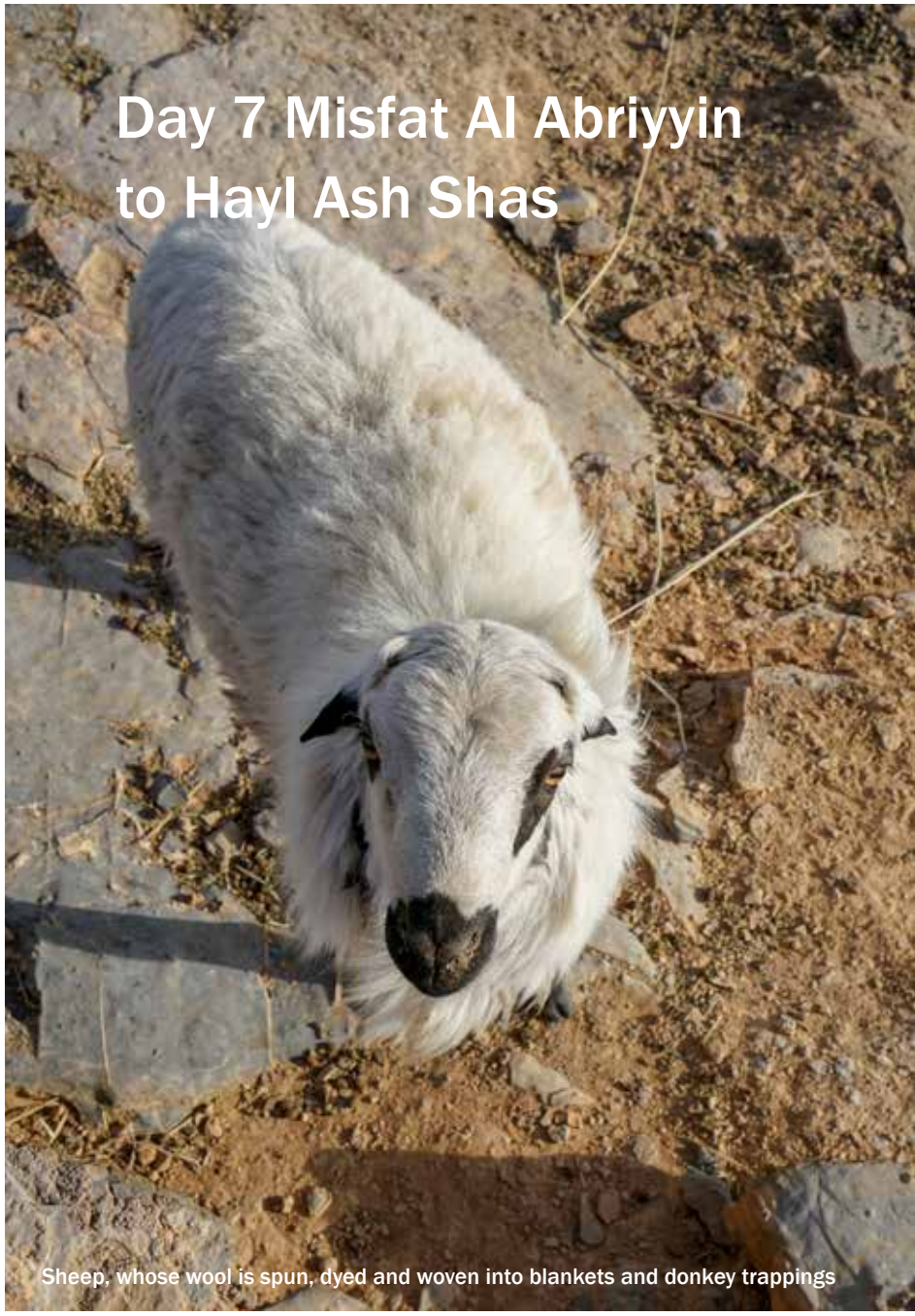

Aqbit Saydran
07 Al Barbad to Aqbit Saydran
Jabal Shams 2999m
Sab An Nar
Wijmah to Burkat Ash Sharaf
An Nid to Burkat Ash Sharaf
Ayn Al Habnah to Masjid Maillah
Ayn Al Habnah
Masjid Maillah
Dabk Awlad Siwayid Safih Abu Habshah
Hawd Al Qattar
Al Barbad
Al Harf to Al Barbad
Ultra Marathon
Al Harf
Hasat Al Arid
Dar Al Bayda to Al Harf in east wadi
short cut
Dabk Awlad Siwayid to Al Qiwaytu
Dabk Awlad Siwayid to Hayl Ash Shas
Kahf Ath Thuaban
Dar Al Badya to Al Harf in west wadi
Al Muzara
Dar Al Bayda
Wadi Misfat Al Abriyyin
Ultra Marathon
07 Misfat Al Abriyyin to Hayl Ash Shas
Dar Al Bayda to Misfat Al Abriyyin via Al Muzara in wadi
Al Qiwaytu
Daan Daqayqah
Iair
Misfat Al Abriyyin spring
Misfat Al Abriyyin high view
Hospitality Inn
Misfat Al Abriyyin
17°0'E
17°30'E
57°18'E
18°30'E
19°0'E
19°30'E
12°30'N
11°30'N
11°0'N
10°30'N
23°10'N
9°30'N
23°9'0"N
8°30'N


High Option
Ash Sharaf to the Jabal Shams Summit
Al Hiwayb
blue drum
Al Hiwayb to Burkat Ash Sharaf
Wadi Bima
rock art
Bait Bimah to Salma
Hafit Tomb
Burkat Ash Sharaf
Al Khitaymat
Salma
under rocks
Aqbit Al Qalean
Salma to Aqbit Al Qalean
Salma to Balad Sayt
Ultra Marathon
06.3 junction to Al Barbad
Qil Azut
Sharaf Al Alamayn
Dirat As Sidrah
Ash Sharaf
high-low junction
Burkat Ash Sharaf to Misfat Al Abriyyin
Aqabat Al Hamra
Hayl Al Jawari
06.2 junction to Misfat Al Abriyyin
Ultra Marathon
Manzal Ash Shurfah
N
Kilometer
0
500m
1
Scale 1:50,000
57°20'E
20°30'E
21°0'E
21°30'E
57°22'E
22°30'E
13°0'N
12°30'N
11°30'N
11°0'N
10°30'N
23°10'N
9°30'N
9°0'N
8°30'N

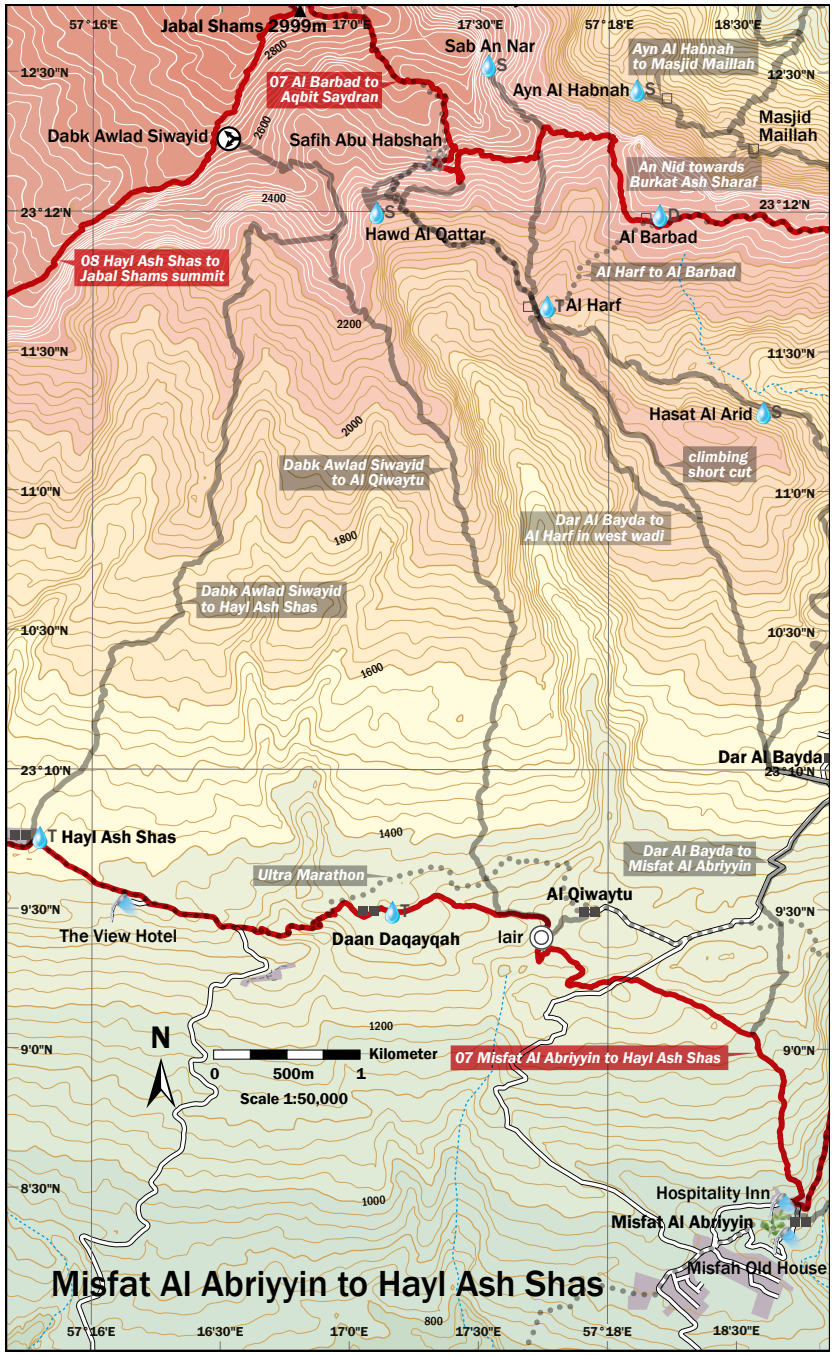


Rajan tower guarding Misfat Al Abriyyin, viewed from the track to Hayl Ash Shas

Day 7 Misfat Al Abriyyin to Hayl Ash Shas



Sheep, whose wool is spun, dyed and woven into blankets and donkey trappings



Misfat Al Abriyyin to Hayl Ash Shas

This is the shortest and least interesting walk in the traverse. It is 6.8km to Hayl Ash Shas, which you reach in four hours, climbing 700m and descending 230m.

The route is a combination of several donkey tracks that are still used by the *shawawiya* living on the dip slope above Misfat Al Abriyyin. This is the only walk in the traverse that can easily be replaced with a taxi. It is a 14km thirty-minute drive from Misfah Al Abriyyin down to Al Hamra, then back up to the View Hotel in Hayl Ash Shas. In the wadi leading up to the settlement of Al Qiwaytu, after 3.5km you pass a small cave just large enough for one person that is partially walled in with rocks. This is a bird-shooting lair that should no longer be in use. Birds were hunted on the opposite bank, or down in the wadi, lured by water bait (see photograph on this page). At Daan Daqayqah there are *diyar* with a donkey enclosure being irrigated with a black hose from a wadi dam. 340m from here the track has green dots. We passed a wild beehive whose honey interested my walking companion. He placed a few leaves inside, which he assured me would let anyone else who found the hive know that the wild honey had an owner. The track joins a graded road, which after 150m reaches the View Hotel.

Sleeping at Hayl Ash Shas

The View Hotel describes itself as an Eco Luxe retreat. It has a restaurant. You may need to visit the hotel for water even if you do not use their accommodation. On the next day's walk the settlement of Hayl Ash Shas is 1km along the graded road, followed by a donkey track to the occupied *diyar* of Hayl Al Khadra at 2.8km. There are flat camping sites on the track between the two, or beyond Hayl Al Khadra before the climb starts at 3km. For logistics support the drive to the View Hotel is via Al Hamra and is a similar distance and driving time as to Misfat Al Abriyyin. The 7.5km of road from Al Hamra up to The View Hotel is steep and graded meaning a 4WD is recommended but not essential.

About Hayl Ash Shas

This is a roadside settlement. The next *diyar,* Hayl Al Khadra, is more interesting because a deep wadi separating the two villages has prevented road access, so they use donkey caravans for the short journey to the road head. A one-day walking excursion from here back to Misfat Al Abriyyin is described in the Day 6 chapter on page 143.


Bird shooter's hideout, above wadi pool

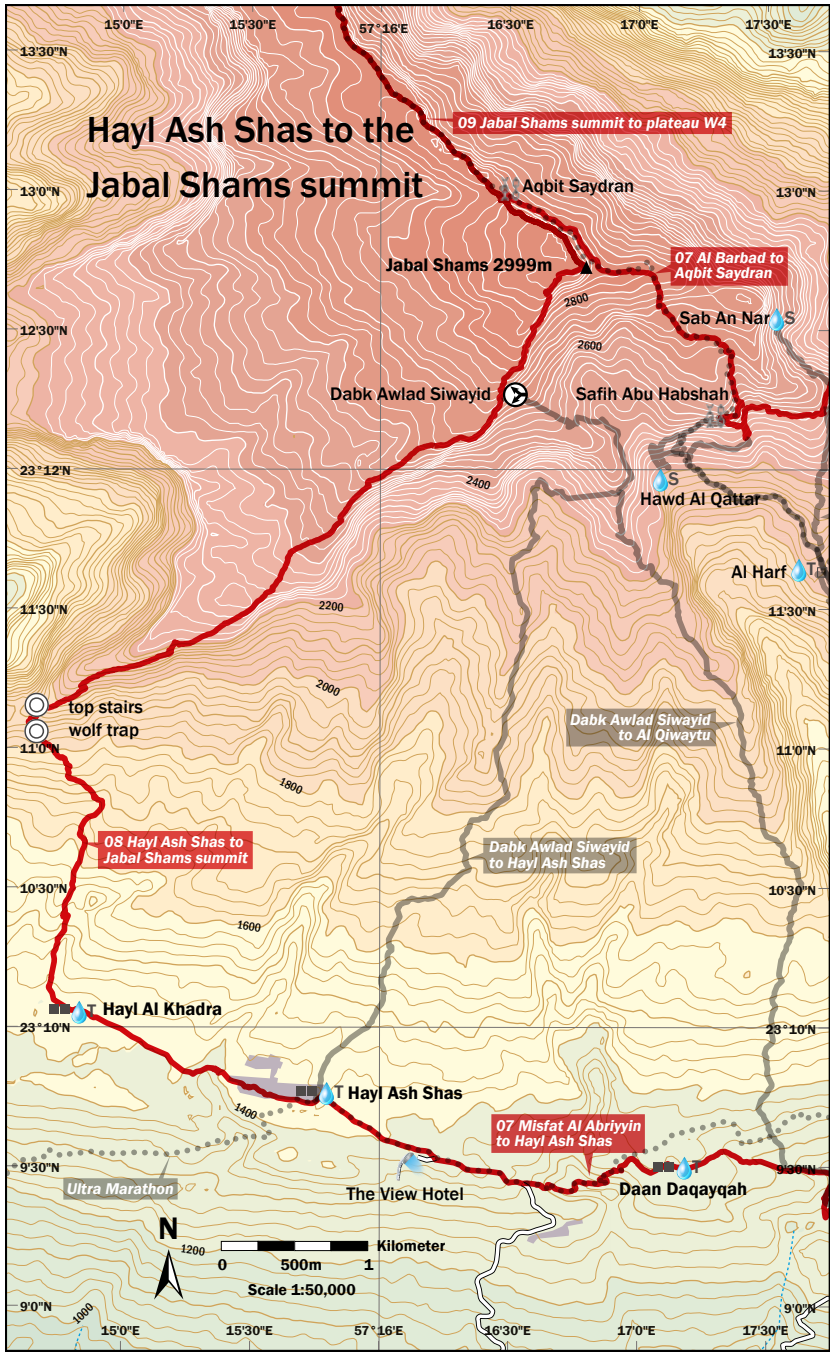

Wild bees, with honey claimed by the leaf owner



Steps up to a wide ledge, which continues in an easy walk to the summit

Day 8
Hayl Ash Shas to the Jabal Shams Summit

View from the cliff edge near summit looking down the dip slope towards Al Hamra



Hayl Ash Shas to Jabal Shams

The summit is 2999m elevation, 1600m above Hayl Ash Shas. The ascent is 11km, and will take eight hours.

There is no water available for the walk to the summit, nor on the descent so careful consideration of what to carry is required.

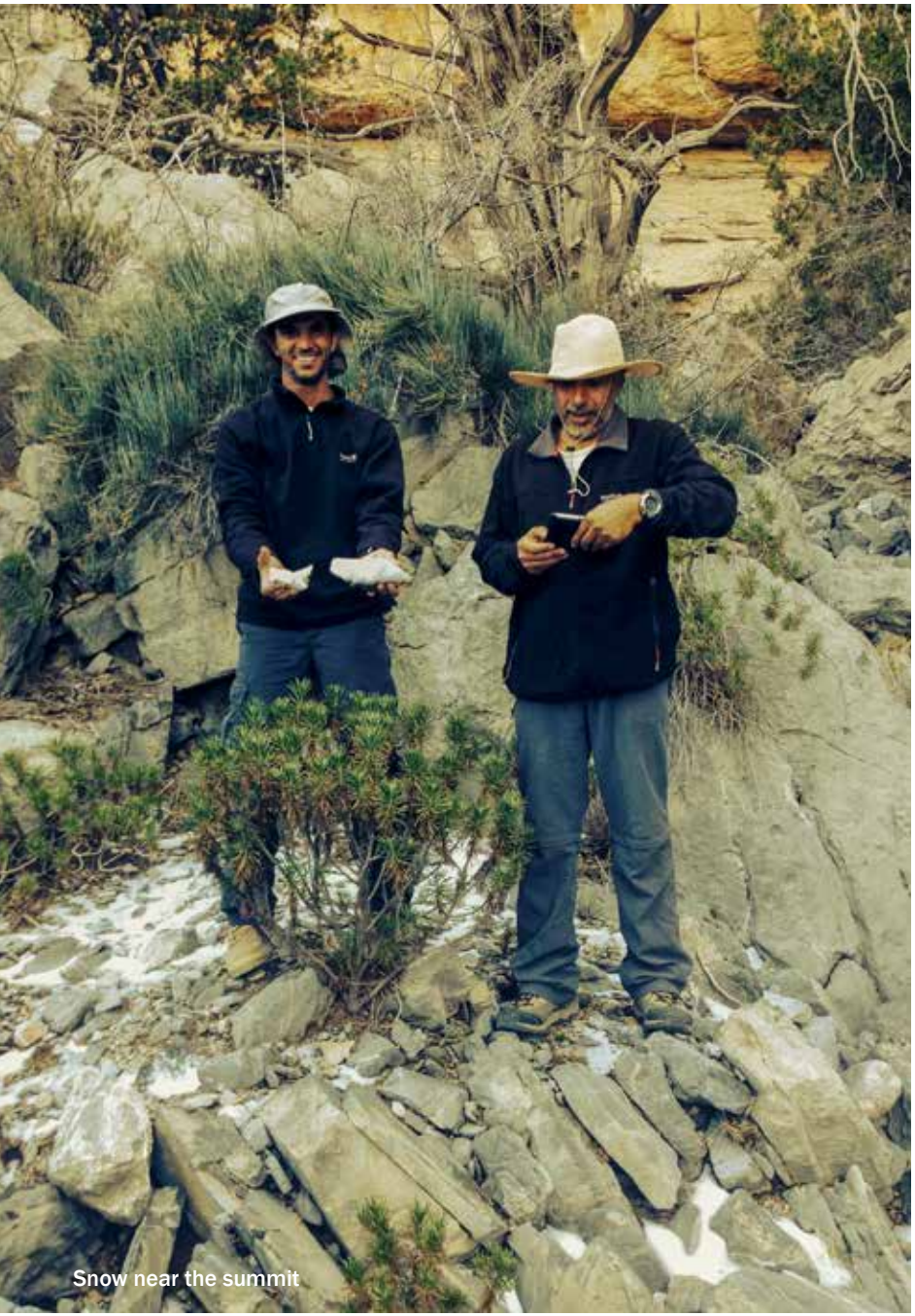
Two days water per person is at least six litres, excluding cooking water. Carrying dehydrated camping food for an overnight camp with no water source is pointless as the total carried weight is the same for hydrated foods or dehydrated foods plus their corresponding water. My favourite local camping food is sweet potatoes easily baked in embers in aluminium foil and stuffed with cheese.

The first 3km is flat, passing through Hayl Al Khadra and crossing a few wadis, then it is a continual climb. At 5.45km there is a wolf trap whose stone trapdoor is still in working condition (see photographs on this page). A few metres further on, a flight of stone steps brings you to the top of a sloping ledge that terminates to both the west and east in dramatic cliffs (see photograph on page 160). To the west is Wadi An Nakhur, Oman's Grand Canyon. This 1000m-deep crevice splits the dip slope leading to the summit. Your descent tomorrow follows the opposite side of Wadi An Nakhur. There is a man track to the summit that has two Grade 3 climbs of 15m to the summit from inside this wadi: the easier track follows the edge of the cliff to the east. At 9.8km there is a junction Dabk Awlad Siwayid to a 7.4km track down the cliff and back to the View Hotel. This cliff descent is a scramble with sticks arranged for security on a makeshift bridge. Taking this track branch makes a one-day excursion loop of 16.2km from the View Hotel. The track to the summit continues at a constant gradient to a small cairn topped with a metal plate marking the highest point. The large wadi at the foot of the massive cliff to your north is Wadi Sahtan. There are man tracks from the two villages beneath you, Madruj and Al Hawb, to the summit. These two tracks with technical climbs are described in *Adventure Trekking in OMAN*. Video on www.hajarhiking.com shows climbing the two cliffs inside Wadi An Nakhur.

Sleeping on the Summit

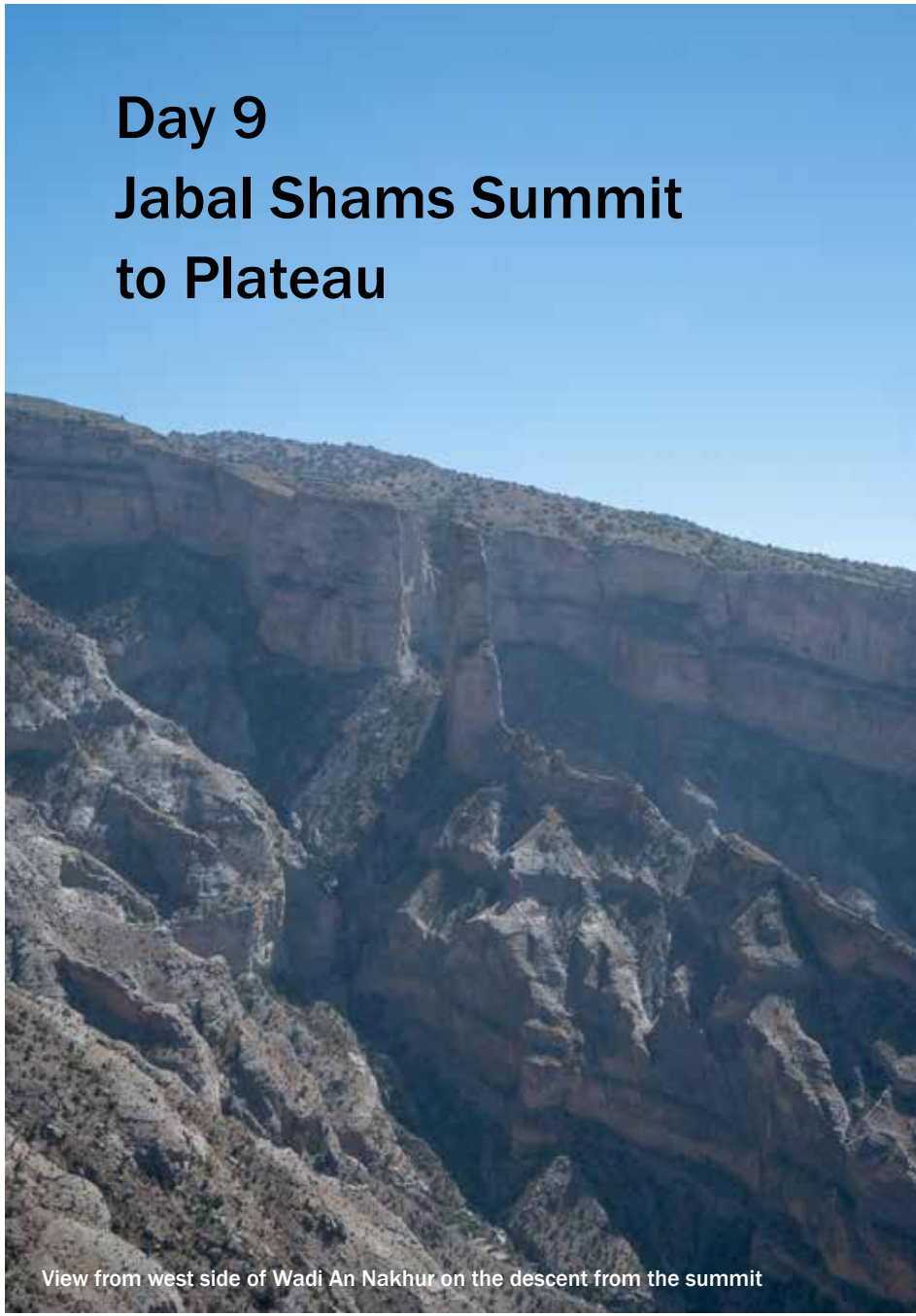
The temperatures on the summit are both season and weather dependent. Weather forecasts are reliable and should be checked before you ascend as it can freeze and snow on the summit (see photograph on page 24). The best place to sleep is under one of the large juniper trees, which will provide shelter from the wind and enough needles to dig yourself a soft horizontal bed. There is plenty of firewood lying on the ground.


Wolf trapdoor operation



Snow near the summit

Day 9
Jabal Shams Summit to Plateau



View from west side of Wadi An Nakhur on the descent from the summit



View west from the Jabal Shams summit



View south into Wadi An Nakhur after 2.5-hours of descent from the summit

Jabal Shams Summit to Plateau

The seven-hour 11.4km descent of 1250m to the Sama Heights Resort on Jabal Shams plateau is a painted trail called W4.

Shortly after leaving the summit, following the same cliff as yesterday that is now running west, there is another descent route at 900m. This track branch Aqbit Saydran leads to a ridge track that offers an alternative route directly from Ash Sharaf (see chapter on page 149). This cliff descent is a 2.5m climb with handholds and a chain ladder. The non-climbing descent track you are following continues towards the two large communications installations on the cliff edge, then turns southwest parallel to the west edge of Wadi An Nakhur to the Jabal Shams plateau. Shortly before leaving the cliff edge, there is a man-made wall augmenting a wadi drop that creates a donkey funnel trap. Feral donkey foals of about four months old were caught here by men using a long strap, then trained by carrying incrementally heavier loads.

Sleeping on the Plateau

The building opposite the first road you cross after descending to the plateau is the Sama Heights Resort, which has two standards of room. The other hotel on the plateau is Jabal Shams Resort 3km to the south. Water, a toilet and a restaurant are available at both resorts. The water supply for these hotels is provided by tankers: blue-coloured trucks that will usually give you a lift if you wave as they approach. If you prefer to camp, the closest flat land away from roads is close to the track a kilometre back towards the summit. It is a three-hour drive of 232km from Muscat International Airport to the Jabal Shams plateau on Route 15 and through Al Hamra. The road is graded in parts but suitable for a saloon car.

Excursions on the Plateau

There is a three-hour return walk on a ledge inside the west cliff of Wadi An Nakhur to the abandoned village of Sab Bani Khamis. This is known as the balcony walk and is popular with tourists because it is dramatic but easy, and it is painted. Walk W6 starts at the settlement of Al Khitaym, which is 4.5km drive from the Sama Heights Resort. There is a walking track from the resort to Al Khitaym though it is unremarkable as it is mostly near the graded road. The resort has a taxi service to Al Khitaym specifically for guests making this excursion.

There is an alternative to walking back from Sab Bani Khamis to Al Khitaym; a via ferrata that goes up the cliff beyond the spring and pond that irrigated the terraces of Sab Bani Khamis. This via ferrata is a Grade 3 80m vertical climb built on and near the extreme man track once used by the Omanis who lived at Sab Bani Khamis. Tour companies supply guides, harnesses and helmets. The via ferrata finishes on the Jabal Shams plateau 650m from the Sama Heights Resort.

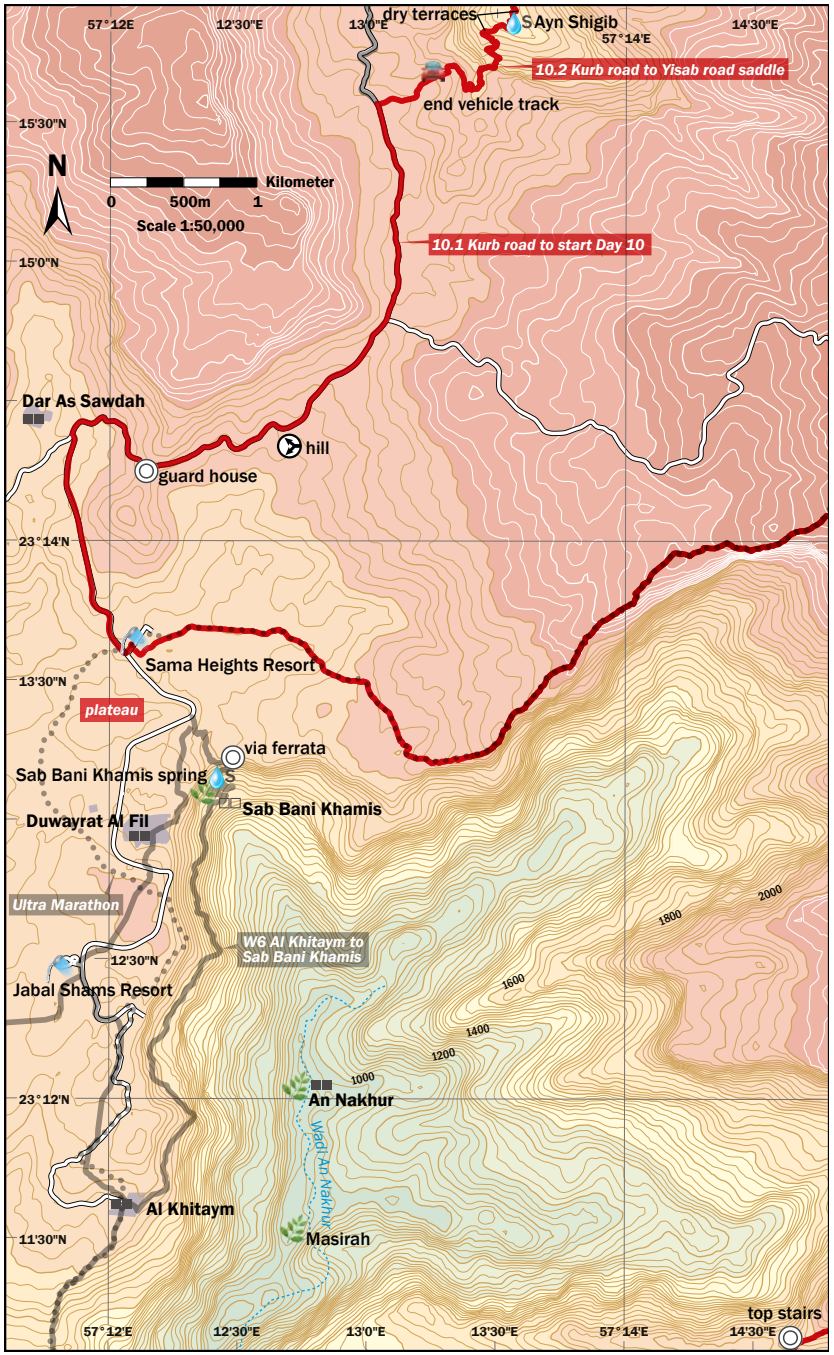
A painted 6.7km track, called W6A, descends 1140m from Al Khitaym following the edge of Wadi Ghul to the road, passing a large abandoned village before reaching the date plantations next to the village of Ghul.

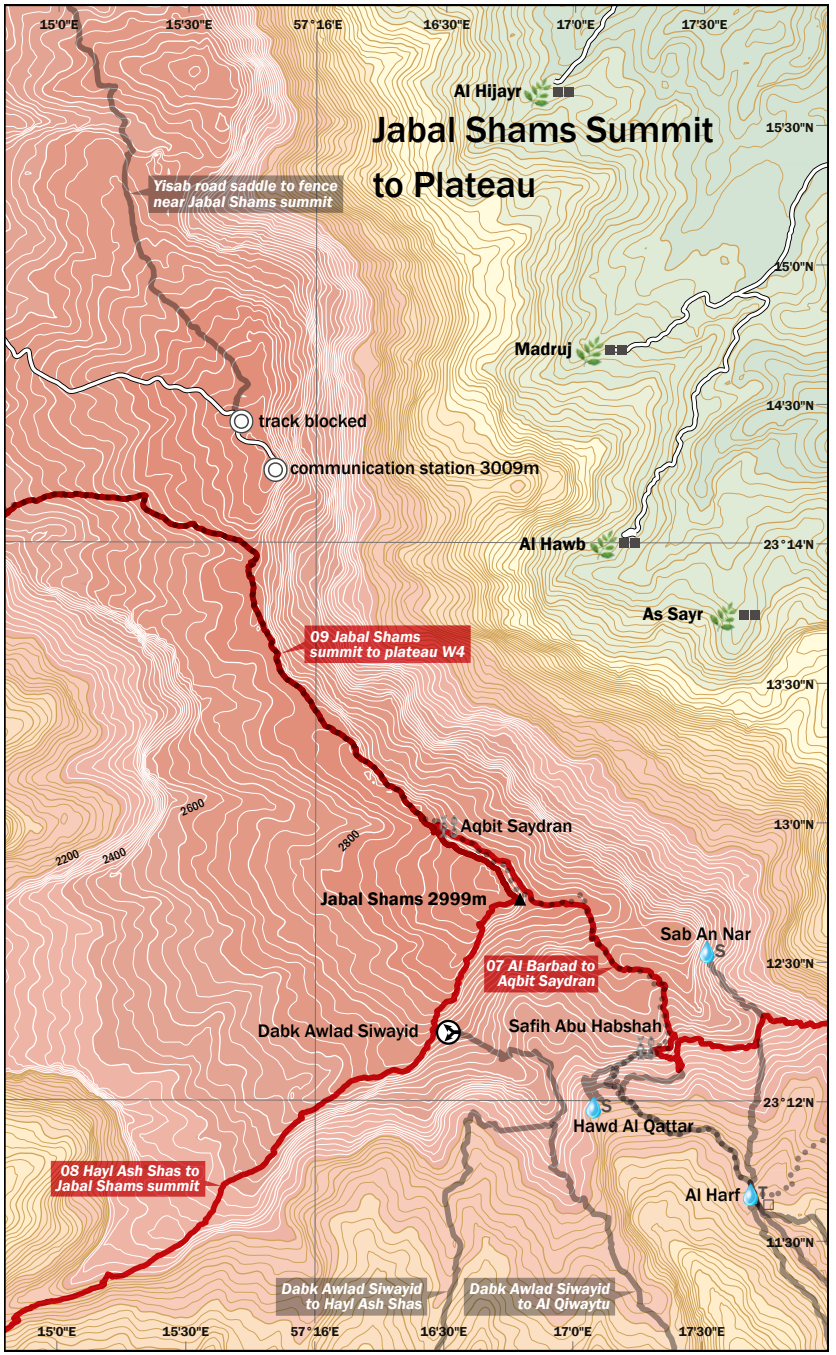


Juniper tree near the summit



View south with Jabal Kawr on the horizon at 1.5 hours descent from summit

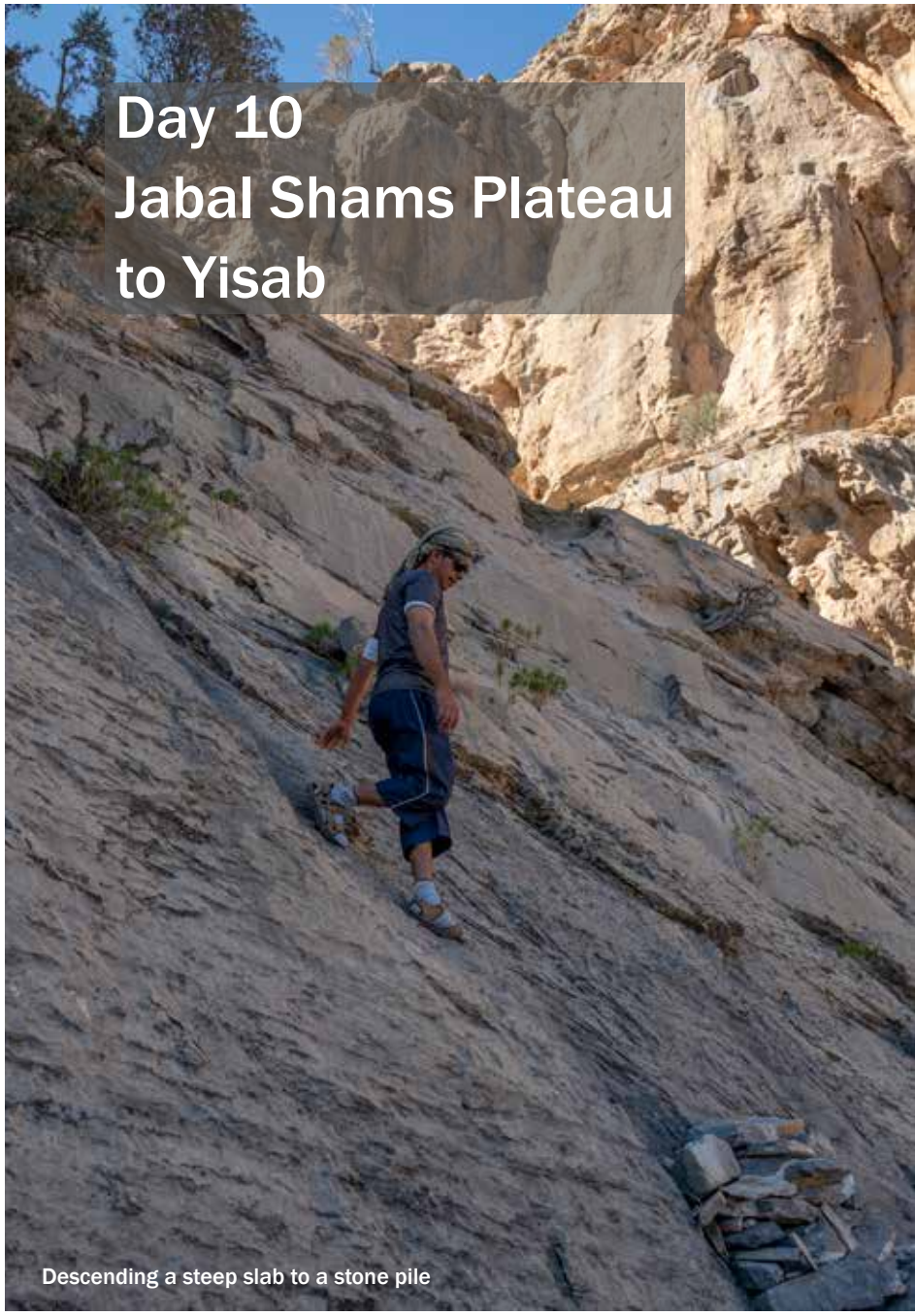

dry terraces
Ayn Shigib
10.2 Kurb road to Yisab road saddle
end vehicle track
10.1 Kurb road to start Day 10
N
Kilometer
0 500m 1
Scale 1:50,000
Dar As Sawdah
hill
guard house
Sama Heights Resort
plateau
via ferrata
Sab Bani Khamis spring
Sab Bani Khamis
Duwayrat Al Fil
Ultra Marathon
W6 Al Khitaym to Sab Bani Khamis
Jabal Shams Resort
An Nakhur
Wadi An Nakhur
Al Khitaym
Masirah
top stairs
57°12'E
12'30"E
13'0"E
13'30"E
57°14'E
14'30"E
15'30"N
15'0"N
23°14'N
13'30"N
12'30"N
23°12'N
11'30"N
2000
1800
1600
1400
1200
1000


Jabal Shams Summit to Plateau
Al Hijayr
Yisab road saddle to fence near Jabal Shams summit
track blocked
communication station 3009m
Madruj
Al Hawb
As Sayr
09 Jabal Shams summit to plateau W4
Aqbit Saydran
Jabal Shams 2999m
Sab An Nar
07 Al Barbad to Aqbit Saydran
Dabk Awlad Siwayid
Safih Abu Habshah
Hawd Al Qattar
Al Harf
08 Hayl Ash Shas to Jabal Shams summit
Dabk Awlad Siwayid to Hayl Ash Shas
Dabk Awlad Siwayid to Al Qiwaytu
15'0"E
15'30"E
57°16'E
16'30"E
17'0"E
17'30"E
15'30"N
15'0"N
14'30"N
23°14'N
13'30"N
13'0"N
12'30"N
23°12'N
11'30"N
2600
2800
2400
2200



Narrow ledges are polished by footfall

Day 10
Jabal Shams Plateau to Yisab



Descending a steep slab to a stone pile



Goats hesitating because we are blocking the track



We hide, and the goats descend

Jabal Shams Plateau to Yisab

The route for the next three days begins 6km from Sama Heights Resort on the road to Kurb, 3.2km before Kurb, which is spelled Krub on the road sign. Immediately west of the Jabal Shams summit is a restricted area so you have to use this road. There is nothing to indicate the trail head on the roadside. The resort can arrange transport or you can walk 4.1km to the trail head: 1.6km across the plateau from the resort towards the small hill beside the road, then turning right (east) proceeding 2.5km along the road towards Kurb.

The next three days almost form a circuit, with 3.2km of gravel road between the start of Day 10 and the finish of Day 12. These three days cross a jumble of remote mountain passes and wadis to the road above the village of Yisab, then from Yisab up a steep wadi to a single dwelling Naqa Ar Ruways where two families live an isolated life, returning via a gentle slope and across a high plateau to Kurb.

The first two days are man tracks that are little used, difficult to follow and involve some climbs, although ropes are not necessary. There are no painted marks. Rigorous GPS navigation is essential to ensure you keep on the right ledges. You should keep as close as possible to the recorded track on these first two days except when cliffs interfere with GPS accuracy. There is nothing more difficult than that shown in the pictures in this chapter and the third day is an easy donkey track.

Vehicle rendezvous at Yisab is possible but it is a long drive. There is no road to the campsite at the end of the second day. Water and firewood are available at each campsite so heating dehydrated food is possible. It is recommended that you are self-sufficient with food for these three days. Bring freeze-dried packets from home to be collected at a rendezvous on the Jabal Shams plateau or by mailing a parcel to one of the hotels.

There are two other tracks to Yisab that start from Kurb. Our track is the most interesting, though not the shortest.

The man track between the Kurb road and Yisab road is 9.2km, 340m up and 930m down. From the road saddle there is 5.1km of graded road to a campsite at the far end of Yisab. Allow nine hours for the track and 1.5 for the steep graded road.

The start of the man track to Yisab is a short unmaintained vehicle track leading east from the graded road. Use your navigation device to tell the taxi where to stop. After 500m this vehicle track peters out and the track passes some stone steps heading down a slope. At 1.8km there are abandoned terraces and at 2km you will hear the spring Ayn Shigib to your left. It is a 50m scramble down a narrow steep boulder-lined gorge to reach this waterfall, which is good drinking water (see photograph on page 38). At 2.2km there are more terraces but no houses. At 3.65km, 4.88km and 5.73km you cross saddles of a complex ridge and wadi system. Unlike the previous walks on this traverse, it is not obvious where this track is going, and twists and turns are necessary to avoid impassable cliffs. The minimal track construction consists of a few steps at the end of narrow ledges. There is a house built into a cliff 250m before the Yisab road intersection where another 7.7km track leads back up to the summit but via the restricted area. You reach the road at a saddle between two wadi systems, Yisab to the west and Wadi Sahtan to the east. Turn west (left) down the Yisab road, which was built in 2000 onto a donkey track. For the next 2.4km the road drops 400m bordered by impassable cliffs, then follows a wide wadi planted with date palms for 2.7km to Yisab. The end of this road is parallel to an *aini falaj* with drinking water. On the side of the road at the beginning of the village there is a public tap supplied by this *falaj.* There is not much traffic, but if anyone does pass they may give you a lift.



One of several semi-nomadic pastoral campsites on the track



View towards Yisab from near start of the track

Sleeping at Yisab

There is no hotel at Yisab. There is a "Food Stuffs Sale" grocery store with uncertain opening hours. Camping anywhere among the date plantations or in the wadi is fine. The relatively low elevation of 1126m and the abundance of *falaj* water means you can expect mosquitoes in the evening and early morning so insect repellent is necessary. The campsite we used was at the end of a vehicle track beyond the end of the village. There is plenty of firewood. We refilled our water containers before reaching this campsite. The road to Yisab is via Rustaq and then Wadi Sahtan from the northern side of the Hajar Mountains, a 184km drive from Muscat International Airport that will take three hours. This is logistically the most difficult rendezvous in the traverse, accessed from the same side of the mountains as Hadash and Wukan. The winding gravel road between Wadi Sahtan and Yisab climbs 900m and drops 400m. Carrying three days' dried food from Jabal Shams plateau would avoid this resupply. A 4WD is essential but for motoring enthusiasts the steep drive across the high pass from Wadi Sahtan then down to Yisab is dramatic.

About Yisab

This village was only accessible by donkey until 2000. The road built on the donkey-track pass from Wadi Sahtan brought electricity and construction of modern buildings, for example the large school you walked past on your left. The low and consequently warm wadi with ample water is ideal for date palms.

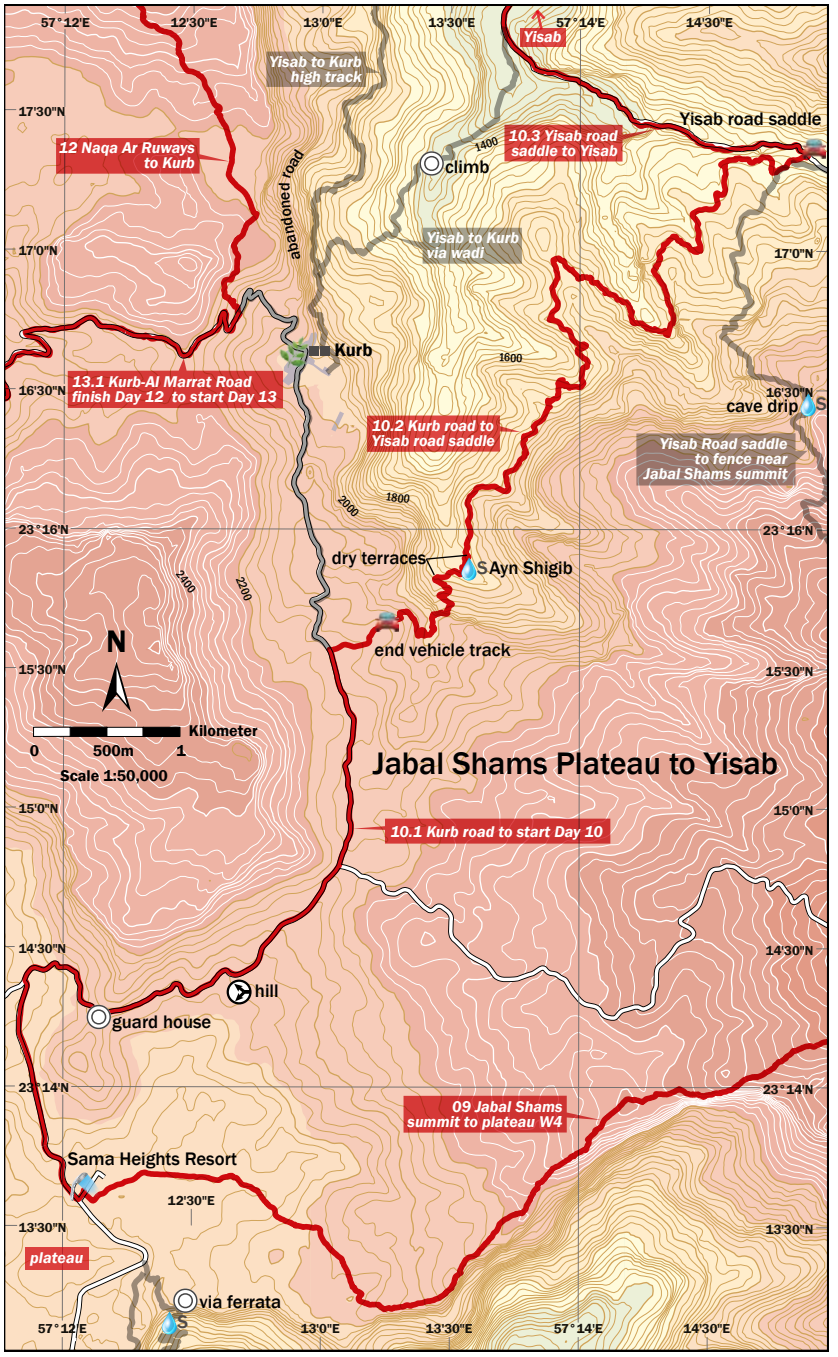
Excursions from Yisab

There are four other tracks from Yisab in addition to the two on the traverse. Two of these tracks start from the bottom of the cliff directly under the northern side of Kurb. There is a well-used goat herders' track from Kurb to the foot of this cliff. The shortest 2.9km track goes straight down the slope intersecting the date plantations and road 2.7km from Yisab. This man track has some scrambling. The second man track follows contours around numerous folds in the mountain bowl above Yisab, finishing after 5.3km at the village, and includes several exposed climbs and narrow ledges that do not need ropes provided you are exactly in the right place. Even with a GPS it will be difficult to follow this unmarked track without a local guide. The third track is not marked on the map in this book. It was a donkey track linking Kurb and Yisab, longer but with an easier gradient than the two man tracks beneath it. The route of this donkey track was used in an attempt to build a second road connection to Yisab, running south to Kurb. This link would have been the second road crossing of the Western Hajar Mountains, however the volume of rock blasting required to complete the road caused the attempt to be abandoned. The remains of this construction are two blind sections of deteriorating gravel road, one from Kurb and the other from Yisab.

The fourth track is a 10.1km man track from Yisab that follows a wadi north to the road that links Rustaq and Ibri, at a village called Hayl on Highway 10. This track starts with dramatic ledges around a water-filled canyon soon after leaving Yisab, passing a date plantation after 2.4km. Ropes are required to reach the deep pools in this Yisab canyon. There is one difficult section on this track, a 4m traverse of smooth steeply sloping limestone. The exposure is a 2m fall into water. The track passes through water before and after this narrow wadi section, so your companion's feet wetting the smooth rock make it even more difficult. It is easier without a pack. The track leaves the wadi 1.9km before reaching Hayl and follows a vehicle track. There are taxi and baisa buses at Hayl. The drive back to Muscat International Airport from Hayl is 158km.



A pregnant donkey with ear clipped to show ownership





The track climbs this cliff to the V pass from the aborted road on the lower right

Day 11
Yisab to Naqa Ar Ruways

The most difficult climb. 2.5m. There are numerous handholds



Ledge then steps to cross one of several wadis on the plateau section of the track



Mountain visible for much of the plateau section of the track

Yisab to Naqa Ar Ruways

This is the most challenging track on the traverse, with three climbs. The hardest, although not requiring a rope, is a 2.5m cliff with numerous handholds.

This climb is in the photograph at the beginning of the chapter. As for the entire traverse, if you encounter anything more difficult than the climbs in the photographs, you are not on the right track.

This man track is only 7.5km long, climbing 920m and dropping 440m but is difficult to follow. Allow eight hours to reach Naqa Ar Ruways.

The track starts by alternately following and short-cutting loops of the abandoned road for 1.8km winding up a steep slope above your Yisab campsite. Initially it follows the original donkey track heading south under the cliff towards Kurb, then heads west into the only wadi that intersects this cliff (see photograph on page 180). This is a steep wadi, so a difficult climb. There are a few places where the track leads you to very steep cliffs, but do not attempt them and look around to find an easier way up. GPS navigation devices are compromised inside narrow wadis so they will not always be accurate to 3m. There are three climbs before reaching the top of the cliff after 3km.

The next 4.5km winds around and crosses several wadis, passing a single house at 6km, called Naqaat Al Harf, which is only occupied for part of the year. If the owner is not there to greet you, it is acceptable to help yourself to drinking water from his tanks. Your destination is also a single stone house.

Sleeping at Naqa Ar Ruways

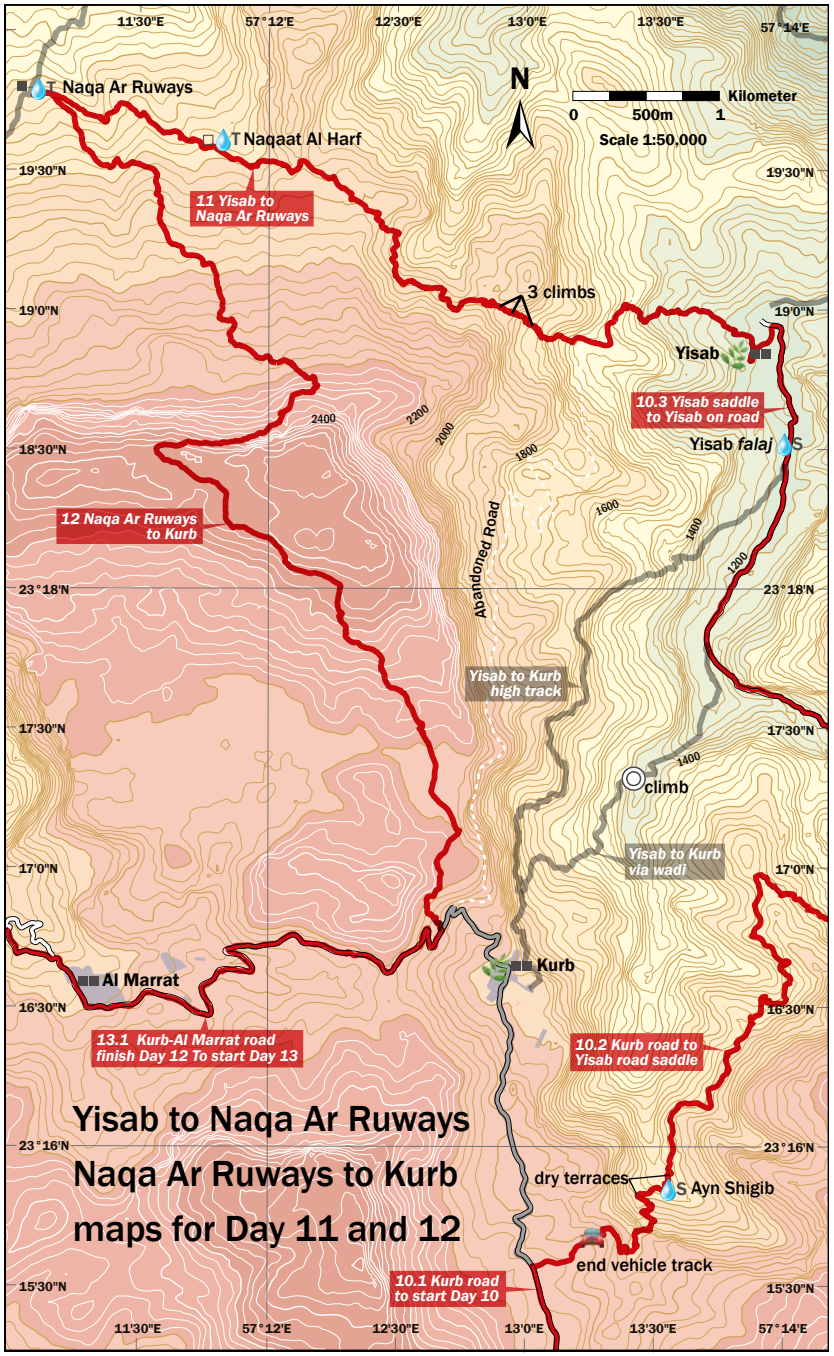
You will be expected to sleep in a stone-wall shelter, which is used as a goat enclosure, in the *diyar* of Naqa Ar Ruways. The dried goat droppings make a soft bed for a comfortable night. There is a fireplace inside this roofless enclosure and plenty of firewood. One of the *shawawiya* living at Naqa Ar Ruways will bring you drinking water. In the unlikely event of no one being home, it is fine to help yourself to water from the large plastic tanks nearby. The removable tap handles are stored separately, somewhere close by the tap, to avoid a goat nudging the tap open.

About Naqa Ar Ruways

Naqa Ar Ruways is a single house occupied by three *shawawi* brothers, two accompanied by their wives (see photograph of two of the brothers spinning wool on page 52). Salim has a beard, Said does not. Notice both brothers carry a knife and tweezers to remove prickles, and Said is in bare feet. Their oral history says they have lived here for three generations. They do not speak English. You are unlikely to meet their wives, whom you should not photograph if you do. Neither should you photograph the domestic zone around their house nor the massive tree in front of it, which is used as a hanging support for most of their belongings.

Their house, this tree, water tanks and the stone-walled enclosure, where you will sleep, are all inside a large walled compound. There are no roads or services at Naqa Ar Ruways. Their water is piped from wadi dams to tanks near their house, but if there is no rain for six months, a rare event in their lifetimes, these dams will run dry and everybody, including livestock, has to move off the mountain. They would then have to pay for hay and alfalfa to feed their goats and sheep because they cannot graze near the irrigated terraces at Yiqa.

Their supplies come by donkey from Yiqa, paid for by selling goats. They have about a hundred goats and a hundred sheep. Large items purchased by the brothers that are too big to be carried by donkeys, such as the plastic water tanks, are dropped off by military helicopters having been delivered to the military base at Rustaq. This free delivery service is part



of the government's policy to extend to the *shawawiya* something equating to basic social services the rest of the Omani population receive but without pressuring them to change their lifestyle. Subsidised veterinary services is another example of this.

Salim and Said rarely have visitors other than their immediate family. When they do the Omani custom is to offer coffee, dates and a meal if near midday or in the evening. Being generous with food for every hiker will strain their resources and I have explained to them that they should expect to be paid for meals or guiding services, which they willingly offer. Do not offer to pay for drinking water and a place to sleep as this will offend them.

Excursions

There are two other donkey tracks from Naqa Ar Ruways, both of which are used regularly by donkey caravans. One is north to a *shawawi* settlement 4km by road from Yiqa, called Al Iqaybah, and the other is south to the gardens of Hayl At Talhat (see map on page 202 and photographs on pages 198 and 199). It is possible to make an unsupported five-day circuit combining these two donkey tracks from Naqa Ar Ruways with Days 13–16. Alternatively these two tracks can be used to shorten the traverse.

The nearest market to Naqa Ar Ruways is a 11.3km six-hour walk north down past Al Iqaybah to Yiqa. Following a steep descent on scree there is an equally steep wadi leading to a confluence with another wadi to your left (west), which is reached after 5.7km. There is a *shawawi* family living in a single house by a spring 3.9km back up this wadi, called Dalil (see photographs on pages 60 and 61). Continuing down the low-gradient main wadi towards Yiqa for 1.6km is a large *diyar* called Al Iqaybah, which has been accessible by road since 2018. The track passes their donkey enclosure. This *diyar* has a working loom, a rare survivor of the domestic weaving industry that has suffered from the importation of competing textiles (see photograph on page 58). There is another *shawawi* settlement, called Ras Adh Dhahar, after 1km on the new road on the bank of the eastern wadi leading to Yiqa. Ras Adh Dhahar is the primary residence of the *shawawiya* that graze goats in the east wadi and own the distant gardens at Hayl At Talhat as well as other remote houses in the mountains. They also hand weave their own blankets (see photograph on page 59). There is 3km of gravel road from Ras Adh Dhahar to Yiqa that is suitable for a saloon car if you wish to arrange a rendezvous.

There is a 1.75km man track short cut on this donkey track from Naqa Ar Ruways to Yiqa, which includes an exposed steeply sloping ledge. The corresponding donkey track is 2.3km. Agile *shawawiya* think nothing of this terrain and take the 550m short cut that starts 1.85km from Naqa Ar Ruways.

The gardens of Hayl At Talhat are a 7.2km three-hour walk south of Naqa Ar Ruways. These gardens and the spring are on the route of the traverse near the start of the walk on Day 13. Taking this track straight to Hayl At Talhat reduces the traverse by 4km but precludes the possibility of getting supplies and spending a night in an hotel on the road at Kurb. This short-cut implies a self-supported six-day trek from Yisab to Yiqa if you continue with Days 13–16.

The donkey track from Naqa Ar Ruways to Hayl At Talhat follows the edge of a large wadi system, passing the spring and pond at the top of the *aini falaj* 700m before the gardens. Hayl At Talhat is 1.6km of man track and 400m below the road beyond Kurb, near the roadside settlement of Al Marrat. If you do take this short cut via Hayl At Talhat, the 1.6km steep track offers the possibility of a 3.2km round trip for supplies in preparation for walking the last four days on the long scenic route to Yiqa.

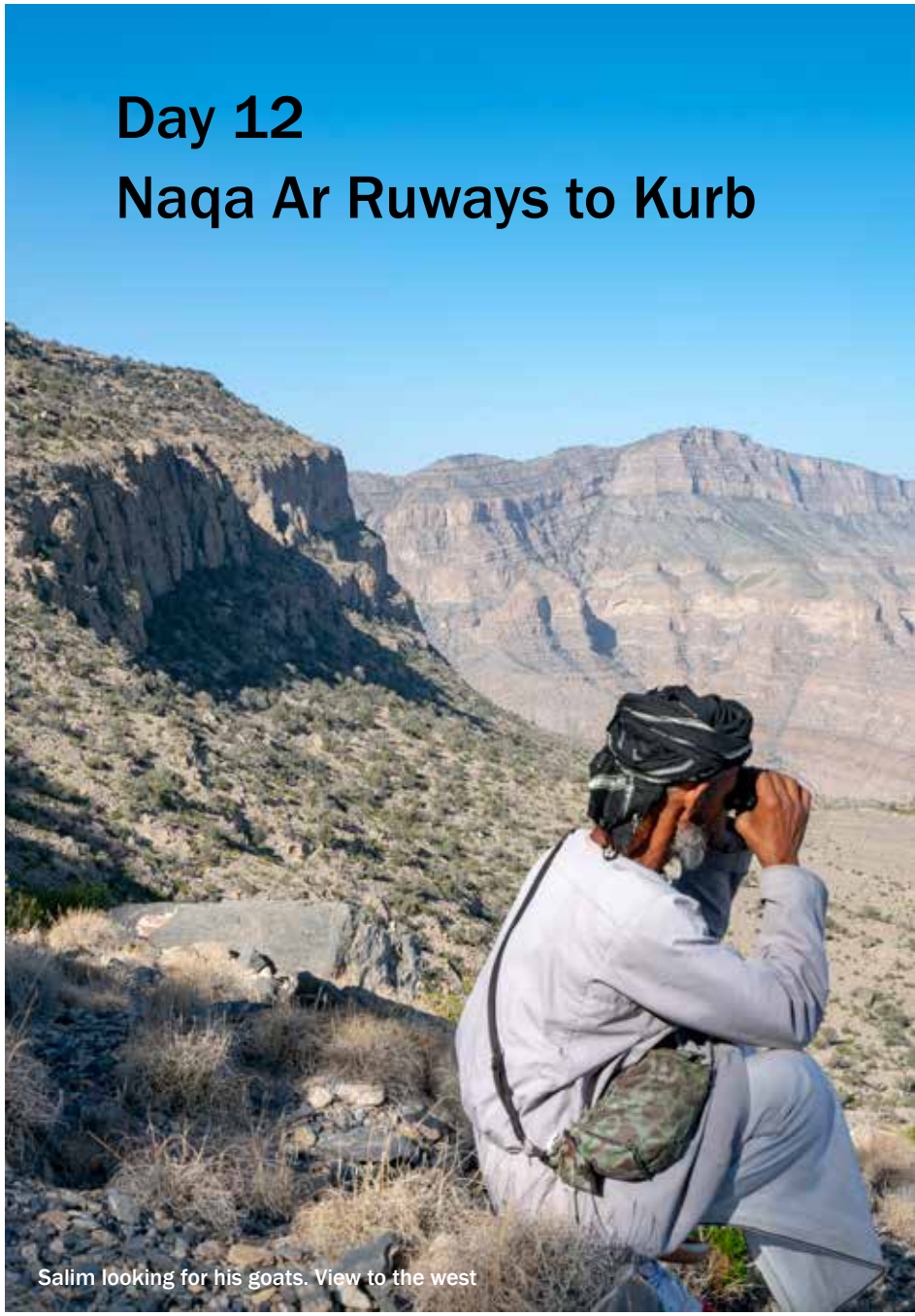


Sunrise looking north from Naqa Ar Ruways



Approaching the flat-topped mountain that you cross before dropping to Kurb

Day 12
Naqa Ar Ruways to Kurb



Salim looking for his goats. View to the west



Lightning struck tree on flat-topped mountain above Kurb

Day 12. Naqa Ar Ruways to Kurb

This 9.6km donkey track is easy, a gentle six-hour 900m climb and 410m descent.

All the tracks in the wadis west of Yisab are so old that there is no memory of their construction in the residents' oral history. No tracks have been created recently.

The track crosses a few shallow wadis, passes through a wooded area under a cliff, then across a flat-topped mountain. Grazing donkeys are enclosed on the slope below the cliff by a fence of sticks, called *shiggy,* that blocks the entrance to this plateau. After passing many large trees there is a 410m drop to a road 100m from Kurb. This brings you 3.2km further west on the same gravel road where you began Day 10. The three-day circuit is 34.5km long including the road sections of 3.2km and 5.1km.

Sleeping at Kurb.

There are two hotels nearby with a taxi service: the Sama Heights Resort at 9.2km east and the Sun Rise Resort at 9.3km west. If you are camping near Kurb there is a comfortable ledge with a great view at the foot of the cliff beneath it that is accessed by a 360m track from the Kurb side road. The *shawawiya* at Kurb have tank water. Kurb is a 223km three-hour drive from Muscat International Airport on Route 15 and via Al Hamra. The road is graded from the Jabal Shams plateau but does not need a 4WD.

About Kurb

This is a roadside settlement with no excursions. The graded road beyond Kurb passes the Sun Rise Resort, looping on the plateau to a mobile tower overlooking the deep wadi system to the north where the traverse spends the next four days.



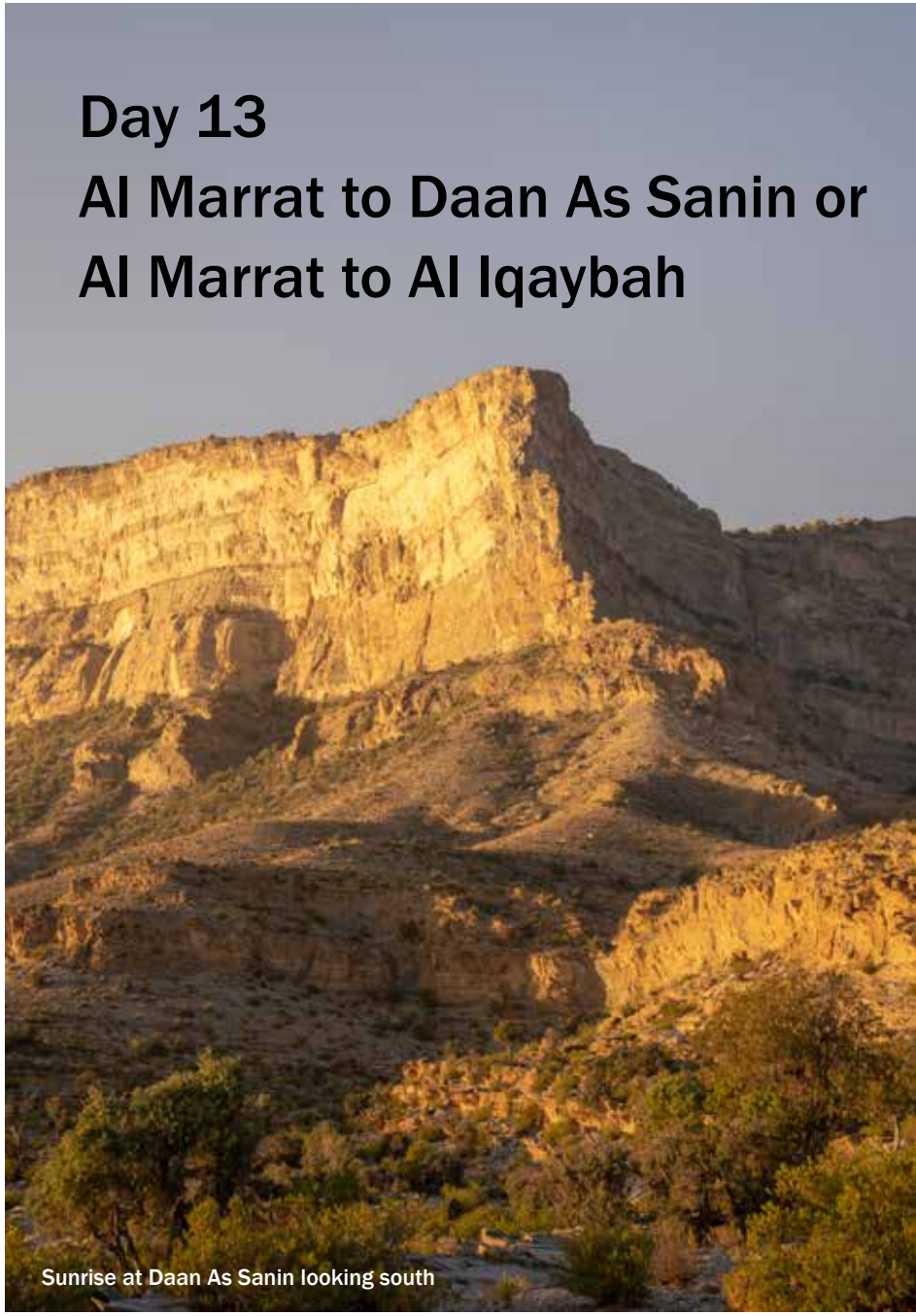
View north from the edge of the flat-topped mountain

Houses near the final destination, Yiqa, are visible to the right of the mountain



Terrace gardens of Hayl At Talhat can be seen in the background

Day 13
Al Marrat to Daan As Sanin or Al Marrat to Al Iqaybah



Sunrise at Daan As Sanin looking south



Looking north towards Daan As Sanin one hour after leaving Hayl At Talhat garden



3.5 hours from Daan As Sanin

The Last Four Days

The last four days are remote with no roads, villages or settlements, and with only infrequently inhabited *diyar,* two inhabited houses and two tended gardens. The tracks are nearly all donkey with many regularly used. None of these tracks are painted, so you must have enough battery power for your navigation device. There are a few man-track short cuts not suitable for walking with a donkey but they do not save much time. They are recorded as separate tracks in the GPS data.

It is possible to arrange to be met by a donkey caravan from the *shawawi* settlement Al Jammah with food and to carry your packs. Hayl At Talhat, Daan As Sanin or Ghayl Shadhan are all possible donkey rendezvous. A section of the track between Hayl At Talhat and Daan As Sanin is too steep for laden donkeys so the load must be carried manually. One donkey will support two hikers and food can be purchased locally as a donkey can carry a heavier load than two 18kg packs.

If you wish to reduce the length of this remote section there are numerous tracks in these two wadis that link the *diyar* and provide six routes to Yiqa. All these tracks have GPS and should be on your navigation device; they are included in the maps in this book.

One of these options is the track from Al Marrat to Ras Adh Dhahar (see Table 3) which can be used with Days 13–16 to make a five-day circuit. The track starts from the roadside near Al Marrat with a 1.6km 400m descent on a man track to the Hayl At Talhat garden, as at the start of Day 13. The next two stages are donkey tracks from Hayl At Talhat to Naqa Ar Ruways, and from Naqa Ar Ruways to Ras Adh Dhahar, which are both described as excursions from Naqa Ar Ruways on Day 11. The Al Marrat road to the Ras Adh Dhahar track via Naqa Ar Ruways is 18km and will take nine hours. The total descent is 2200m.

Al Marrat to Daan As Sanin

The total walk from the road to the *diyar* Daan As Sanin is 15.5km, 860m climbing and 700m descending. Allow ten hours for this walk.

The track starts on the south of the graded road 6km beyond Kurb and 1.1km past the next roadside settlement of Al Marrat but there is nothing to indicate a track head. The first section is a man track that drops 400m over 1.6km to the Hayl At Talhat garden, one of two isolated gardens in this twin wadi watershed that drains into Yiqa. This garden has been owned for generations by *shawawi* families whose primary residences are in the Ras Adh Dhahar settlement 3km from Yiqa. The garden is well maintained, although no one lives there permanently. It is irrigated by an *aini falaj* sourced from a spring 700m to the east, which is fine to drink. The donkey track to this spring continues to Yiqa via Naqa Ar Ruways, Al Iqaybah and Ras Adh Dhahar (see the one-day option described in Table 3).

Your donkey track goes in the opposite direction. After 4.2km of easy walking from the garden there is a donkey-track branch on your right (east) used by *shawawi* families with laden donkeys between Hayl At Talhat and Ras Adh Dhahar. At 22.8km it is longer than the 15.5km route via Naqa Ar Ruways but has a maximum elevation of 1840m instead of 2060m.

The next section climbs 500m for 4.9km out of the north–south wadi to a high shoulder on an eroded donkey track that has not been used for fifty years. There is one cliff section which is impassable for a laden donkey so we carried the saddlebags ourselves. This track was once used for five-donkey caravans trading goat hair and kids with Al Hamra and returning with dates, rice, soap and small dried fish. At the top of the climb, just beneath the plateau edge cliffs that border both wadis, is the boundary between two tribes' *dar,*



1.5 hours from Daan As Sanin

marking their tribal grazing rights. This point, called Al Ililanah, is the watershed between the two major wadis draining into Yiqa and intersects with a track that could be used as a short cut. This 4.7km man track descends 840m north intersecting the traverse on Day 16 only 6.7km from Al Jammah. From Al Ililanah it is a 4.8km walk with a 180m descent to the Daan As Sanin storehouse.

Sleeping at Daan As Sanin

If it is freezing sleep inside the single building, a recently built storehouse, otherwise anywhere soft and sheltered outside. This location can be windy and misty but remains free of mosquitoes throughout summer. Water is available from plastic tanks (see page 247 for the owner's contacts, Abdullah Al Khambashi, to report water useage).



Sunrise at Daan As Sanin looking northeast towards Yiqa



Daan As Sanin. There are water tanks and a stone storehouse



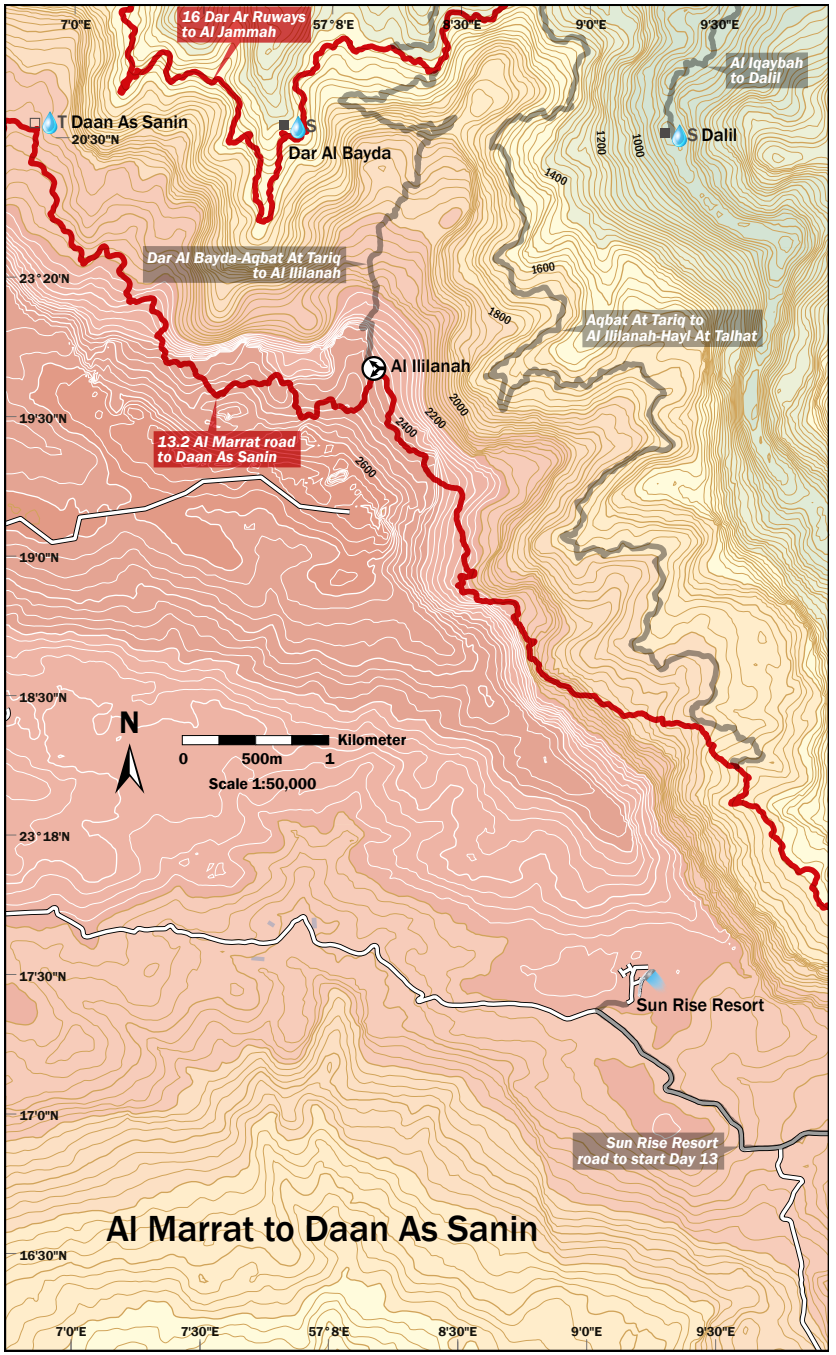
One-day option. Al Marrat to Al Iqaybah, one hour above the Hayl At Talhat garden

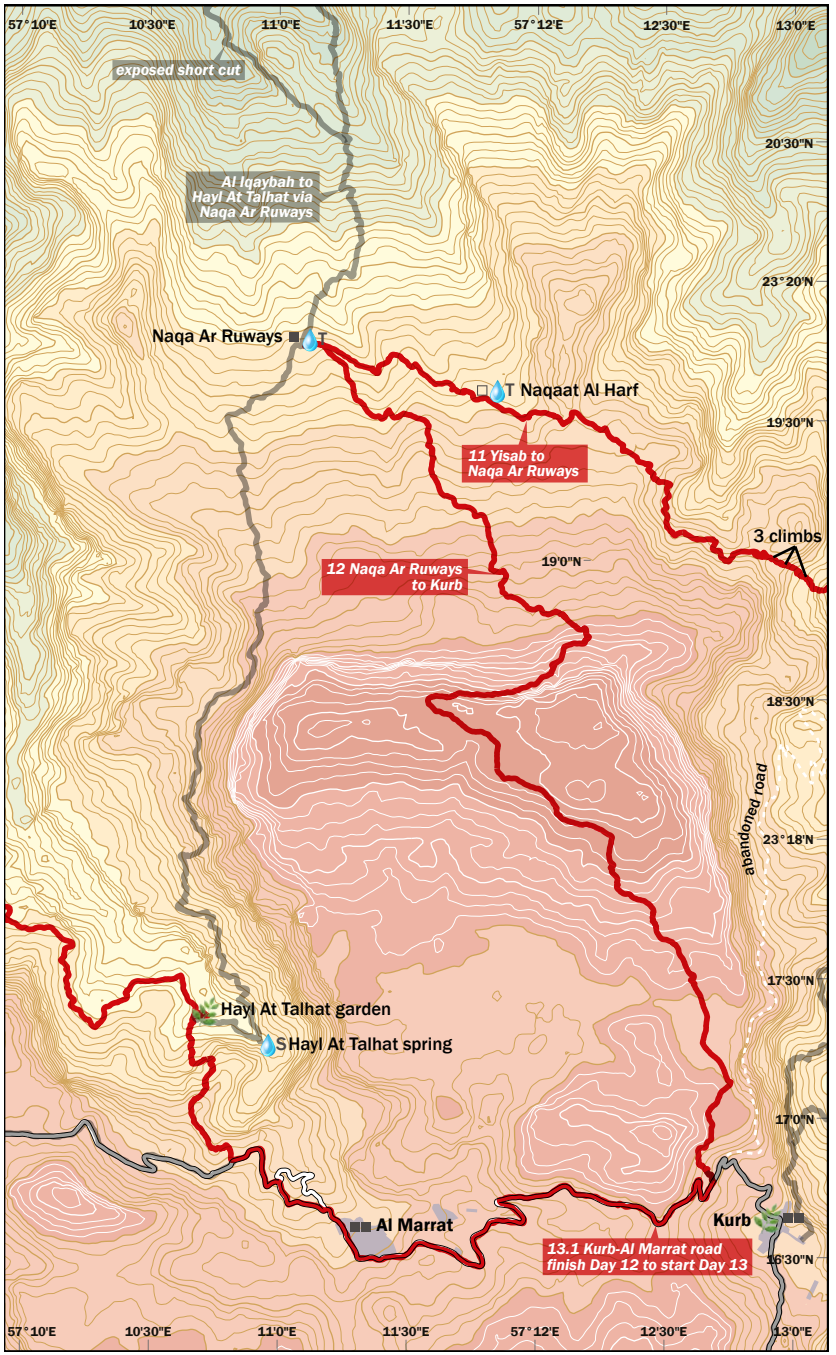


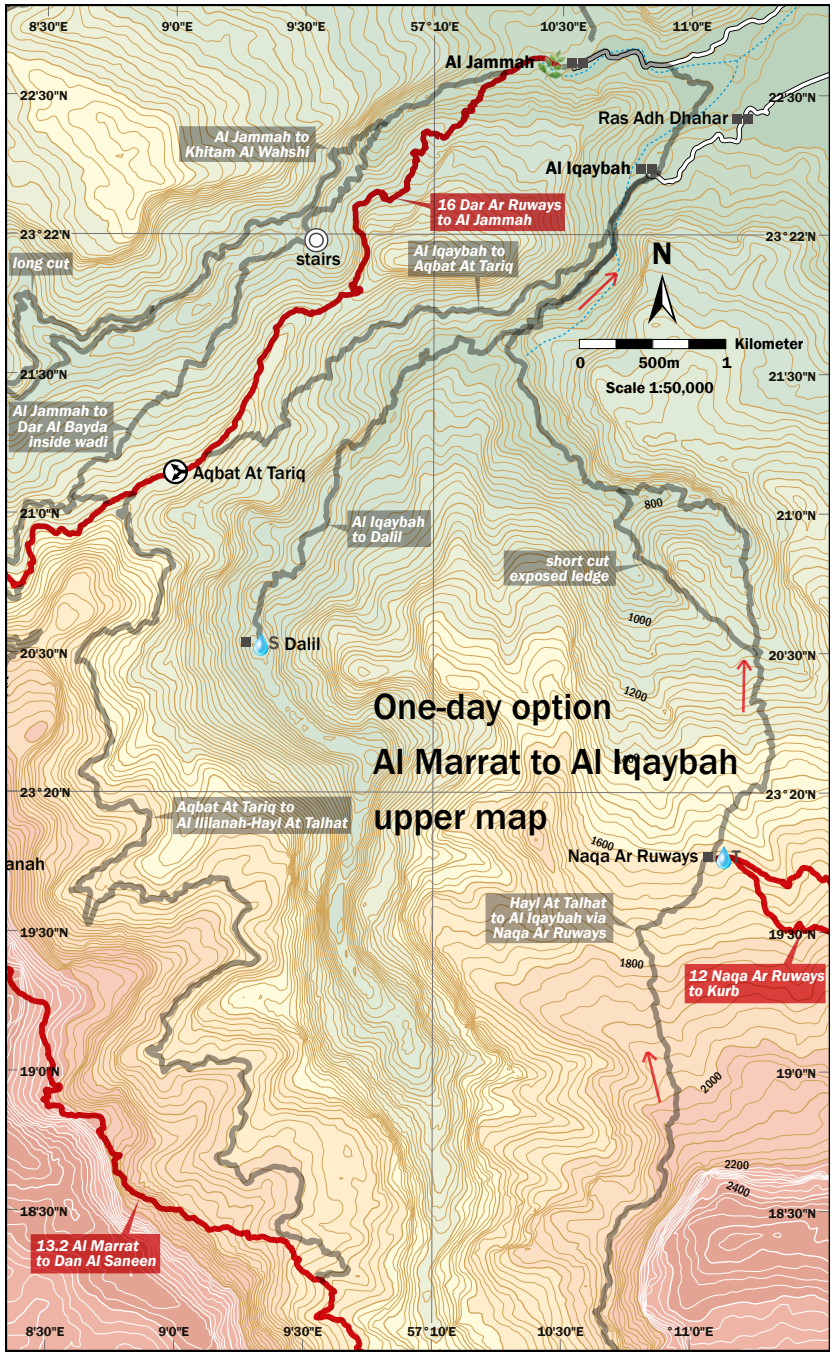
One-day option. Al Marrat to Al Iqaybah, two hours after the Hayl At Talhat garden

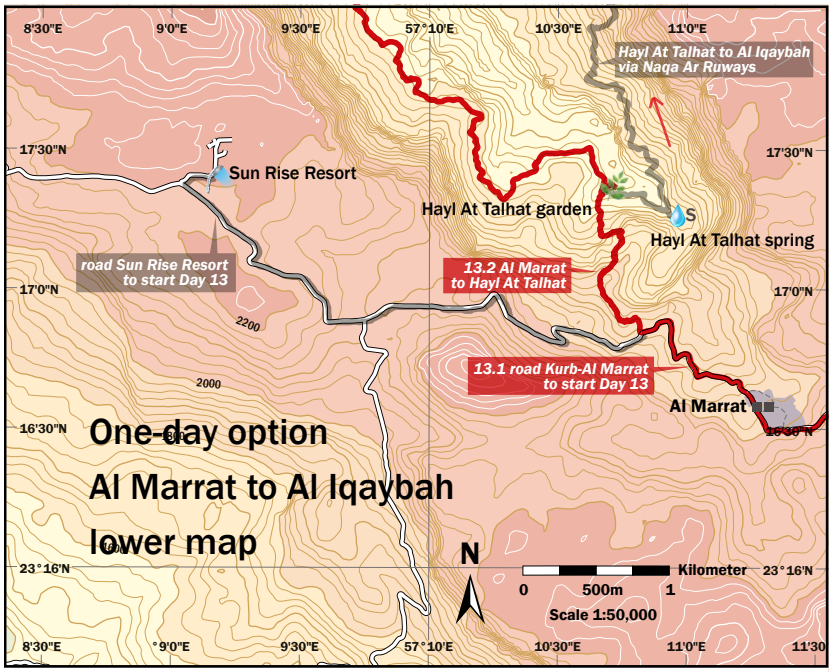


One-day option. Al Marrat to Al Iqaybah, the wadi floor two hours to Al Iqaybah


16 Dar Ar Ruways to Al Jammah
Daan As Sanin
20'30"N
Dar Al Bayda
Al Iqaybah to Dalil
Dalil
Dar Al Bayda-Aqbat At Tariq to Al Ililanah
Aqbat At Tariq to Al Ililanah-Hayl At Talhat
Al Ililanah
13.2 Al Marrat road to Daan As Sanin
N
Kilometer
0
500m
1
Scale 1:50,000
Sun Rise Resort
Sun Rise Resort road to start Day 13
Al Marrat to Daan As Sanin
7'0"E
7'30"E
57°8'E
8'30"E
9'0"E
9'30"E
23°20'N
19'30"N
19'0"N
18'30"N
23°18'N
17'30"N
17'0"N
16'30"N


exposed short cut
Al Iqaybah to Hayl At Talhat via Naqa Ar Ruways
Naqa Ar Ruways
Naqaat Al Harf
11 Yisab to Naqa Ar Ruways
3 climbs
12 Naqa Ar Ruways to Kurb
abandoned road
Hayl At Talhat garden
Hayl At Talhat spring
Al Marrat
Kurb
13.1 Kurb-Al Marrat road finish Day 12 to start Day 13
57°10'E
10'30"E
11'0"E
11'30"E
57°12'E
12'30"E
13'0"E
20'30"N
23°20'N
19'30"N
19'0"N
18'30"N
23°18'N
17'30"N
17'0"N
16'30"N



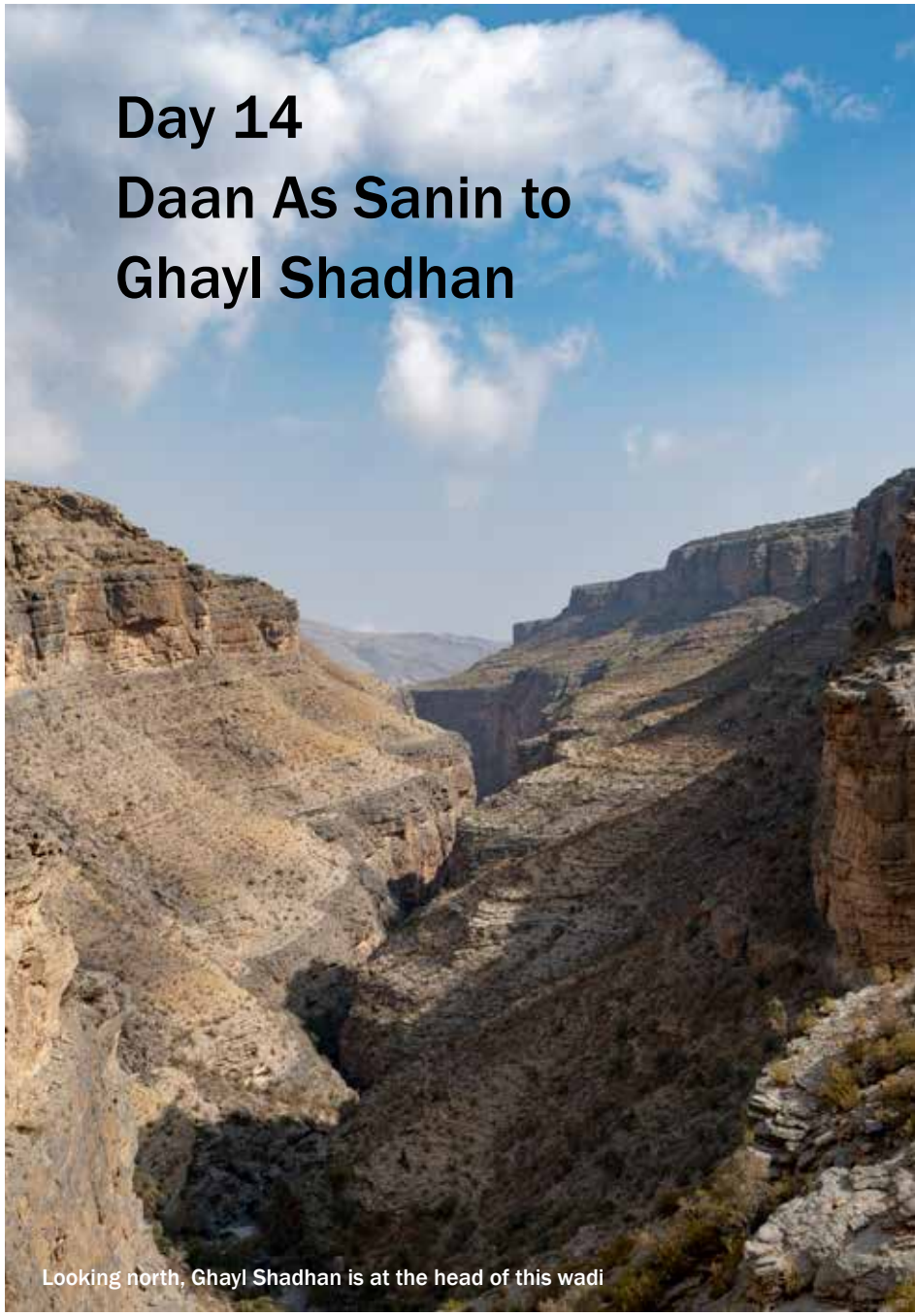



Enthusiastic Omanis at Ras Adh Dhahar photographing a draft of this book



Spring and pool 100m above and 500m south of the Ghayl Shadhan gardens

Day 14
Daan As Sanin to Ghayl Shadhan



Looking north, Ghayl Shadhan is at the head of this wadi



Our donkey had to be unloaded for this climb on an infrequently used donkey track



Easier track for our donkey

Daan As Sanin to Ghayl Shadhan

It is a 15km 660m descent to Ghayl Shadhan, the second remote garden on our traverse that is well maintained but not permanently inhabited. Allow eight hours for this rarely used donkey track.

At one place on the track we had to unload our donkey and carry the load ourselves. After 8.6km the track reaches the spring and natural pools 100m above and 500m south of the gardens they irrigate. There used to be a *sarooj*-supported mud-brick *aini falaj* built into the wadi walls to channel the water down to the nearest low gradient land, remnants of which are visible from the pool. The *falaj* has been replaced with a plastic pipe. The garden can be reached by precarious stairs using branches jammed into cracks that descend the narrow, almost vertical, wadi walls. However our route is a donkey track that winds along ledges in a 6.4km loop past Khitam Al Wahshi to provide an easier way down this cliff (see photographs on the preceding and this page).

There is a 1.3km short cut to As Safah starting 1.2km west from Dan As Sanin that bypasses Ghayl Shadhan.

Sleeping at Ghayl Shadhan

There is a flat area under trees 50m from the garden on which to sleep. The water in the open tank just above the garden is fine to drink. Fresh water is added to the tank by opening the tap on the pipe fed from the spring (see photograph next page).

About Ghayl Shadhan

There are two extreme man tracks that are not covered by this book up the cliffs that wrap around three sides of the head of the wadi containing the Ghayl Shadhan garden. The access to Ghayl Shadhan for garden maintenance from Al Jammah is via a regularly used donkey track that is the final section of this traverse. This garden and the grazing rights to the wadi are owned by the *shawawi* families who live at Al Jammah, a settlement 2.7km by road from Yiqa. Abdullah, a retired soldier, is from this settlement where his grandfather built the garden for his subsistence lifestyle growing onions and garlic and keeping goats. When the road reached Yiqa in the 1960s, Abdullah's father abandoned the family garden in favour of external employment. After they had served twenty years in the military, Abdullah and his brothers revived their grandfather's garden in 2000 as a hobby, growing pomegranates, peaches, apricots, grapes (red, green and black), lemons, dates, apples, fig, guavas, mandarins, oranges and pears. Outside the irrigated terraces are edible wild boot berries and olives. It is unfortunate if one of their goats manages to break through the garden fence because once started this habit cannot be broken, so the offending goat is sold or eaten.

Abdullah visits weekly in summer and monthly in winter to water his trees. This involves connecting the pool just above the garden in sequence to a series of dirt channels that lead to each narrow terrace. He spends three hours forming, then blocking, narrow dirt channels with a spade so each tree is watered. Abdullah's family and their goats stay here, or at one of his four other storehouses, during his six children's school summer holidays. Each house has dried food, pots and blankets. The water for their houses that are not close to the gardens comes through hoses from dammed wadis to a tank beside each house. Provided it rains at least every six months, the dammed water does not completely evaporate.

Abdullah's extended family also own sixteen *diyar* in this wadi. These are older stone huts, caves and ledges suitable for camping by between two to five men and women. Foxes and caracal steal food from these stone huts, so they are protected by wire fencing and doors. Historically these



The Ghayl Shadhan gardens



Holding tank above the gardens, supplied by a hose from the pond below the spring



Watering the Ghayl Shadhan gardens

pests were controlled by traps made of stone but these are no longer in use. Munitions boxes are used to keep mice out of grain, dates, rice and dried fish. Their own goats are also a nuisance, so everything is hung in trees. These *diyar* are inhabited for one to six weeks each time, and the *shawawi*ya stay until they have a reason to leave, or until their goats have browsed all the nearby natural foliage.

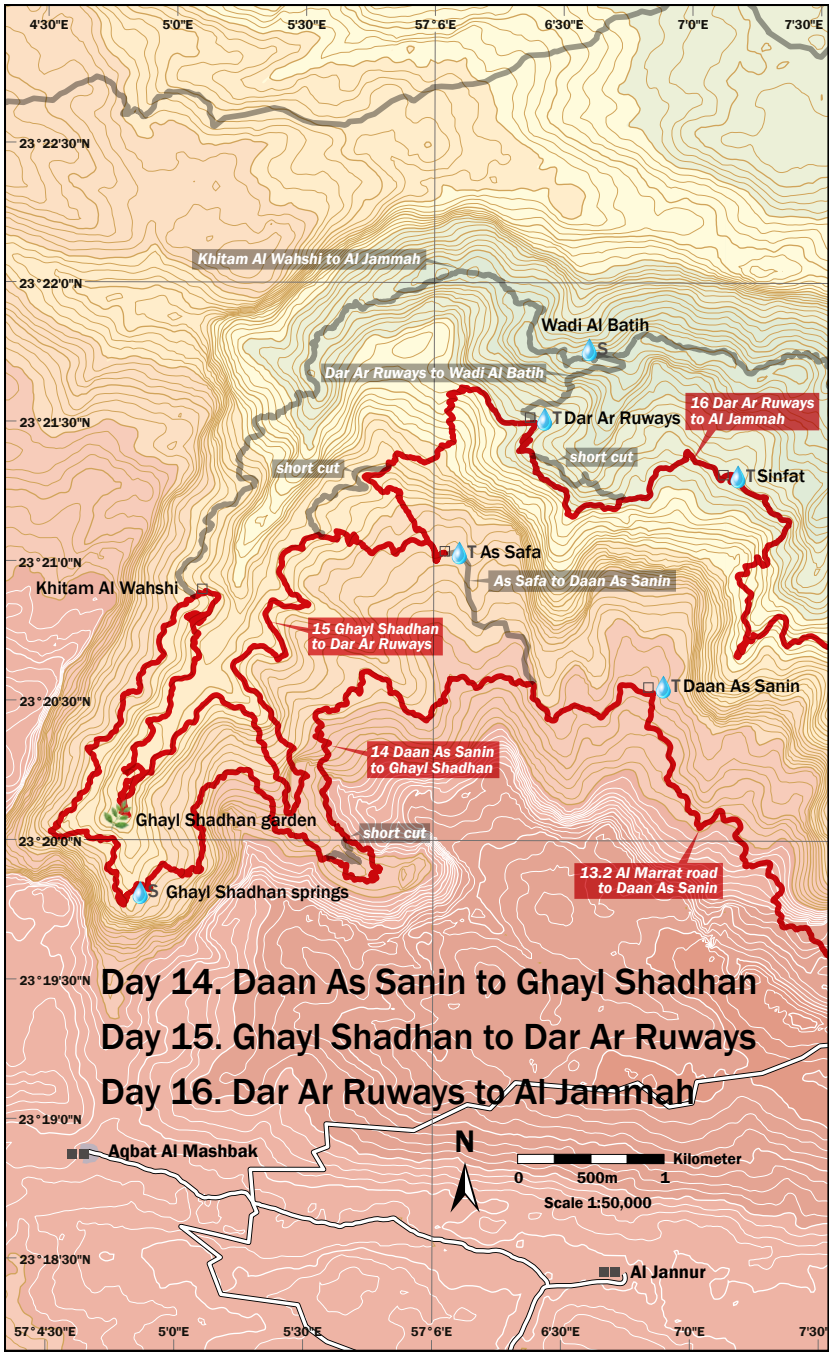
These *shawawiya* are maintaining their culture despite having their principal residence in modern houses with television, laptops and internet access.

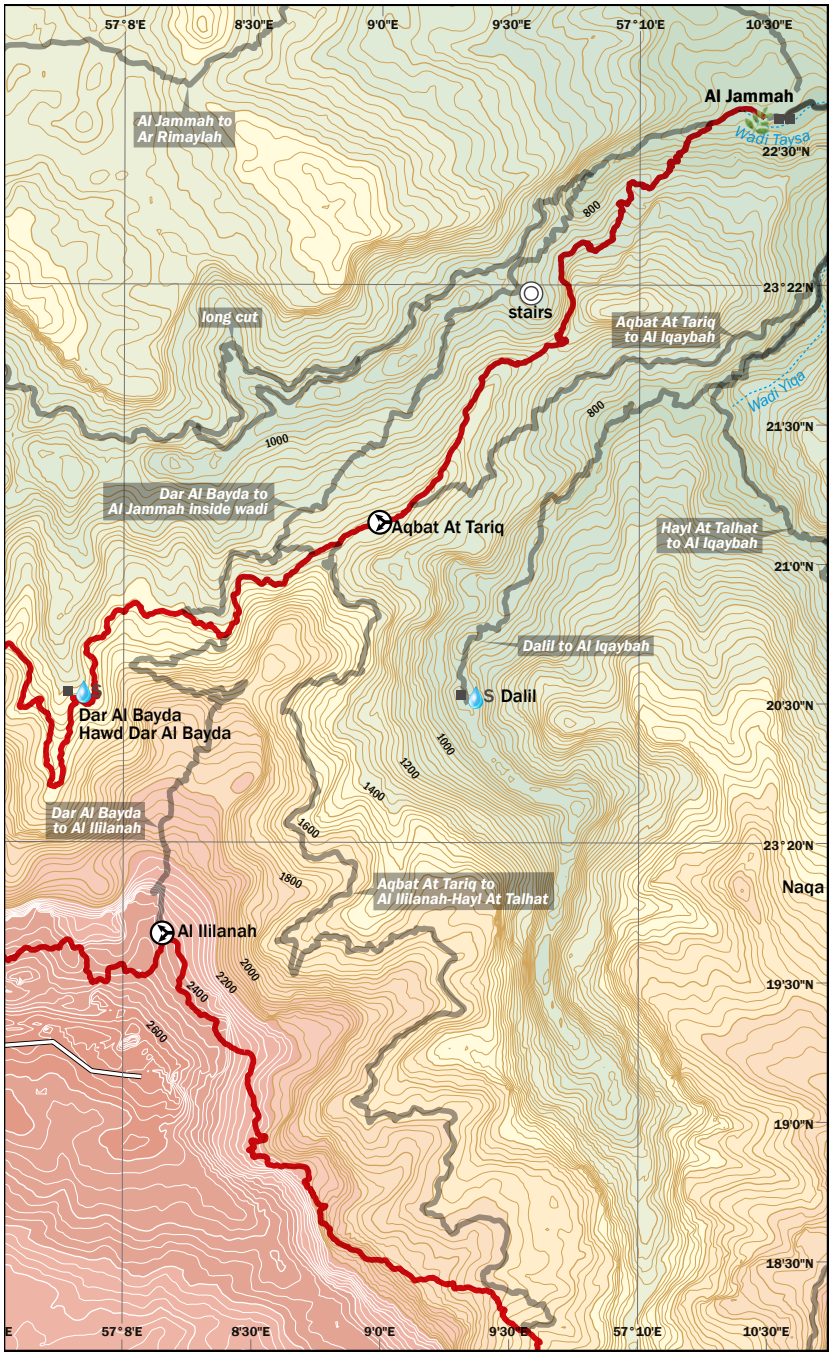
Excursions from Ghayl Shadhan

There are two short wadis behind the gardens terminating at huge cliffs. After a few hundred metres scrambling across boulders in the eastern wadi, you will reach the stick stairs on your right that climb to the spring and pool you passed yesterday. I did not attempt this stick-stair ascent.



Stick-stair climbing 100m to the spring, natural pond and top of the plastic pipe

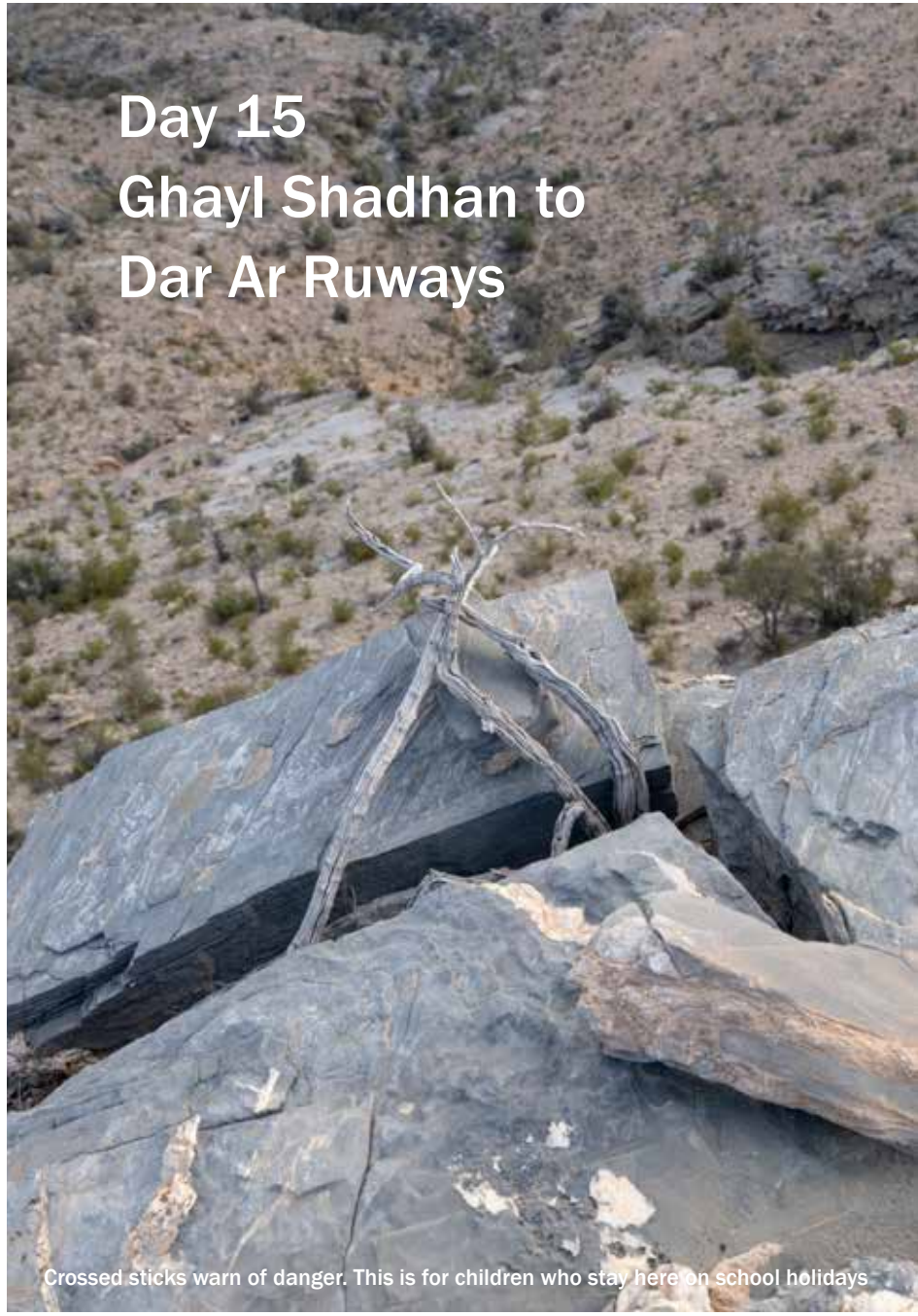

Khitam Al Wahshi to Al Jammah
Wadi Al Batih
S
Dar Ar Ruways to Wadi Al Batih
T Dar Ar Ruways
16 Dar Ar Ruways to Al Jammah
short cut
short cut
T Sinfat
T As Safa
As Safa to Daan As Sanin
Khitam Al Wahshi
15 Ghayl Shadhan to Dar Ar Ruways
T Daan As Sanin
14 Daan As Sanin to Ghayl Shadhan
Ghayl Shadhan garden
short cut
S Ghayl Shadhan springs
13.2 Al Marrat road to Daan As Sanin
Day 14. Daan As Sanin to Ghayl Shadhan
Day 15. Ghayl Shadhan to Dar Ar Ruways
Day 16. Dar Ar Ruways to Al Jammah
Aqbat Al Mashbak
N
Kilometer
0
500m
1
Scale 1:50,000
Al Jannur
4'30"E
5'0"E
5'30"E
57°6'E
6'30"E
7'0"E
7'30"E
23°22'30"N
23°22'0"N
23°21'30"N
23°21'0"N
23°20'30"N
23°20'0"N
23°19'30"N
23°19'0"N
23°18'30"N
57°4'30"E


Al Jammah to Ar Rimaylah
Al Jammah
Wadi Taysa
long cut
stairs
Aqbat At Tariq to Al Iqaybah
Wadi Yiqa
Dar Al Bayda to Al Jammah inside wadi
Aqbat At Tariq
Hayl At Talhat to Al Iqaybah
Dalil to Al Iqaybah
S Dalil
Dar Al Bayda
Hawd Dar Al Bayda
Dar Al Bayda to Al Iilanah
Aqbat At Tariq to Al Iilanah-Hayl At Talhat
Naqa
Al Iilanah
800
1000
1200
1400
1600
1800
2000
2200
2400
2600
57°8'E
8'30"E
9'0"E
9'30"E
57°10'E
10'30"E
23°22'N
22'30"N
21'30"N
21'0"N
20'30"N
23°20'N
19'30"N
19'0"N
18'30"N



Food left in stone storehouses is protected from pests

Day 15
Ghayl Shadhan to Dar Ar Ruways



Crossed sticks warn of danger. This is for children who stay here on school holidays



Looking down to Ghayl Shadhan garden terraces from the track to Dar Ar Ruways



View towards the cliffs behind the Ghayl Shadhan garden

Ghayl Shadhan to Dar Ar Ruways

The last section of the traverse is a well-used donkey track on the south side of the wadi to Al Jammah. It is too far for a donkey to reach Al Jammah in one day, and if you walked without donkeys it would take eleven hours.

Dar Ar Ruways is a *diyar* with a house and water tank at 10km, a four-hour walk that climbs 390m and drops 670m.

Several stone stores are built against a 2m cliff 7km from Ghayl Shadhan. This is one of the sixteen *diyar* owned by Abdullah's extended family and is called As Safa. It has a water tank with the removable tap kept under it, and a 2.6km branch donkey track to Dan As Sanin.

If you want to walk further than 10km there are two *diyar* on this track with water beyond Dar Ar Ruways: Sinfat in another 2.5km and Dar Al Baydah at 7.7km from Dar Ar Ruways. There is also a donkey track on the north side of the wadi from Ghayl Shadhan to Al Jammah. There are two ways to join this northern route. One returns 2.8km towards Daan As Sanin to Khitam Al Wahshi, then continues on a branch track that follows the north side of the wadi for 16km to Al Jammah. This northern route can also be intersected from Dar Ar Ruways, a 1.3km track crosses the wadi linking the two parallel donkey tracks. The northern route passes Wadi Al Batih spring near the intersection of this link. 2km from Al Jammah there is 300m of steep stone stairs that require serious donkey persuasion, so the southern route is the easier return. The track abuts the grave of Abdullah's great uncle. Habitual passing of ancestors' graves reinforces the tribe's affiliation with their land.

Sleeping at Dar Ar Ruways

There is a gravel courtyard in front of the storehouse offering a comfortable night's sleep with water tanks nearby.



View towards Dar Ar Ruways and Yiqa at the far end of the wadi



As Safa *diyar,* one of numerous well-stocked campsites on the track



Inside the As Safa storehouse. Munitions boxes protect food from rodents



Taps for the water tanks are usually removed and placed nearby

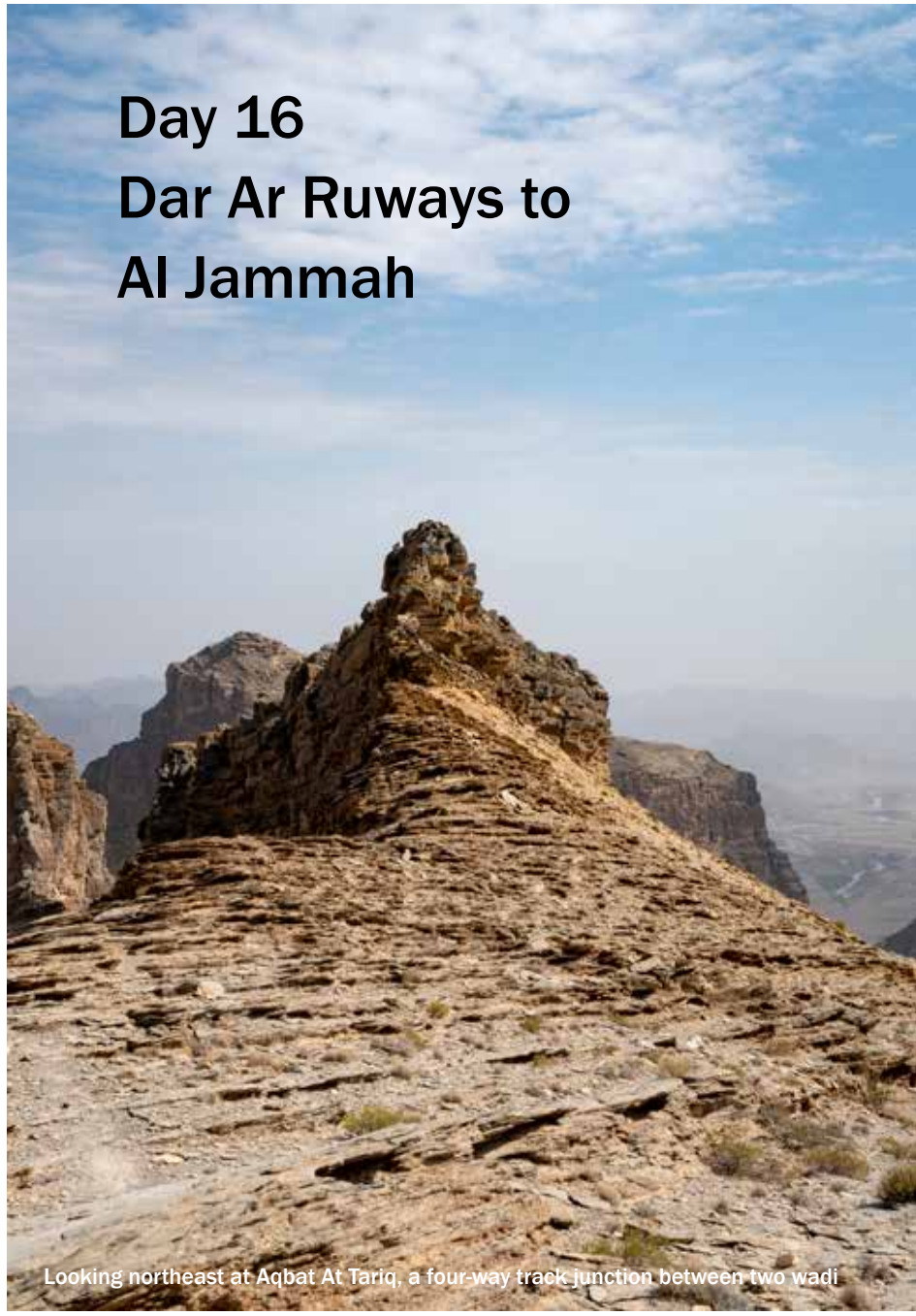


Dar Ar Ruways *diyar*, four hours from Ghayl Shadhan. Tanks are in the background



Abdullah and his donkey on a ledge above a waterfall on the track to Al Jammah

Day 16
Dar Ar Ruways to Al Jammah



Looking northeast at Aqbat At Tariq, a four-way track junction between two wadi



Peeling onions at Dar Al Bayda, a single remote house



Hawd Dar Al Bayda spring 200m towards Al Jammah from Dar Al Bayda

Dar Ar Ruways to Al Jammah

From Dar Ar Ruways to Al Jammah is 16.4km and will take eight hours. It is 420m of climbing and 1110m of descent.

You will pass two *diyar*, a house with water tanks, called Sinfat, at 2.5km and an inhabited house, called Dar Al Bayda, at 7.7km. This house is built on a rock mound (see photographs on pages 46 and 47, which are taken from the track on the opposite side of the wadi). The location is so remote that the government has built a helicopter pad next to the house. There is only one inhabitant at Dar Al Bayda, an old man who will be glad of company, even if conversation is impossible. When we arrived at his house he was out, so we rested our donkey and had lunch. As we were leaving he arrived and invited us for lunch, which we could not refuse, so we ate twice. His water comes from a dam below his house and there is fresh water from a small spring, called Hawd Dar Al Bayda, 200m along the track towards Al Jammah. The metre-diameter collection pond under the spring is next to the track, so convenient for a drink (see photographs on this page).

The track reaches Aqbat At Tariq at 11.4km, a saddle between the two main wadis that both lead to Yiqa. This saddle is the intersection of four tracks connecting each garden with Al Jammah and Ras Adh Dhahar (see photograph on the chapter cover page). At 14km the track follows the shoulder above the narrowing wadi before steps and a zigzagging path lead down to the wadi floor, finishing with a short walk along the wadi bed to the *shawawi* settlement of Al Jammah at the road head above Yiqa. The main town of Yiqa on Highway 10 is 2.4km down a graded road, which is just passable with a saloon car. Yiqa is 160km from Muscat International Airport. There are taxis at Yiqa, then you can take a bus from Rustaq or continue in a taxi to Muscat.



The *diyar* Sinfat, which has water tanks



On the shoulder above the narrow wadi 2.5km from Al Jammah

Abdullah staring down his donkey, who has rebelled and turned around to go home



Unladen donkey starting the descent on the alternative track to Al Jammah

Alternative track

This alternative is an unladen donkey track that drops inside the narrow wadi leading to Al Jammah 2.5km before the higher donkey track drops into the same wadi just before the village (see photographs on this and the next two pages). You are in the shade while in the narrow wadi section, so it is a good option for a hot day, The 2km narrow portion has poor GPS satellite reception, but you will not get completely lost although you may lose the track momentarily and be confronted with a difficult descent. Do not attempt it but go back and search for the polished stones that lead to ledges and stairs. The reason the track is only suitable for unladen donkeys is the low overhang on the sloping ledge at the beginning of the descent where a loaded donkey would get stuck (see photograph on page 28).

The branch to this alternative track is 9.3km after Dar Ar Ruways and 1.6km after Dar Al Bayda and is easy to follow with a GPS navigation device until the descent into the narrow wadi 13.6km from Dar Ar Ruways. Once inside the wadi, the track continues to hug the south (right side) that you used to enter the wadi in a series of ledges and steps, occasionally reaching the wadi floor before continuing on ledges.

It is hard to believe that donkeys can negotiate this track but the picture on the facing page and on page 28 shows they can. This track is still used and if you meet a donkey caravan you will be surprised how fast they travel. If they are behind you it is advisable to give way to avoid getting trampled. They are usually not on a lead and when they are nearly home they assume command of the track!



After the stone steps and natural ledge steps, the track follows a sloping ledge



After ledges linked by stone steps there is a staircase down to a dusty ledge



The track continues in and just above the wadi floor, under this boulder



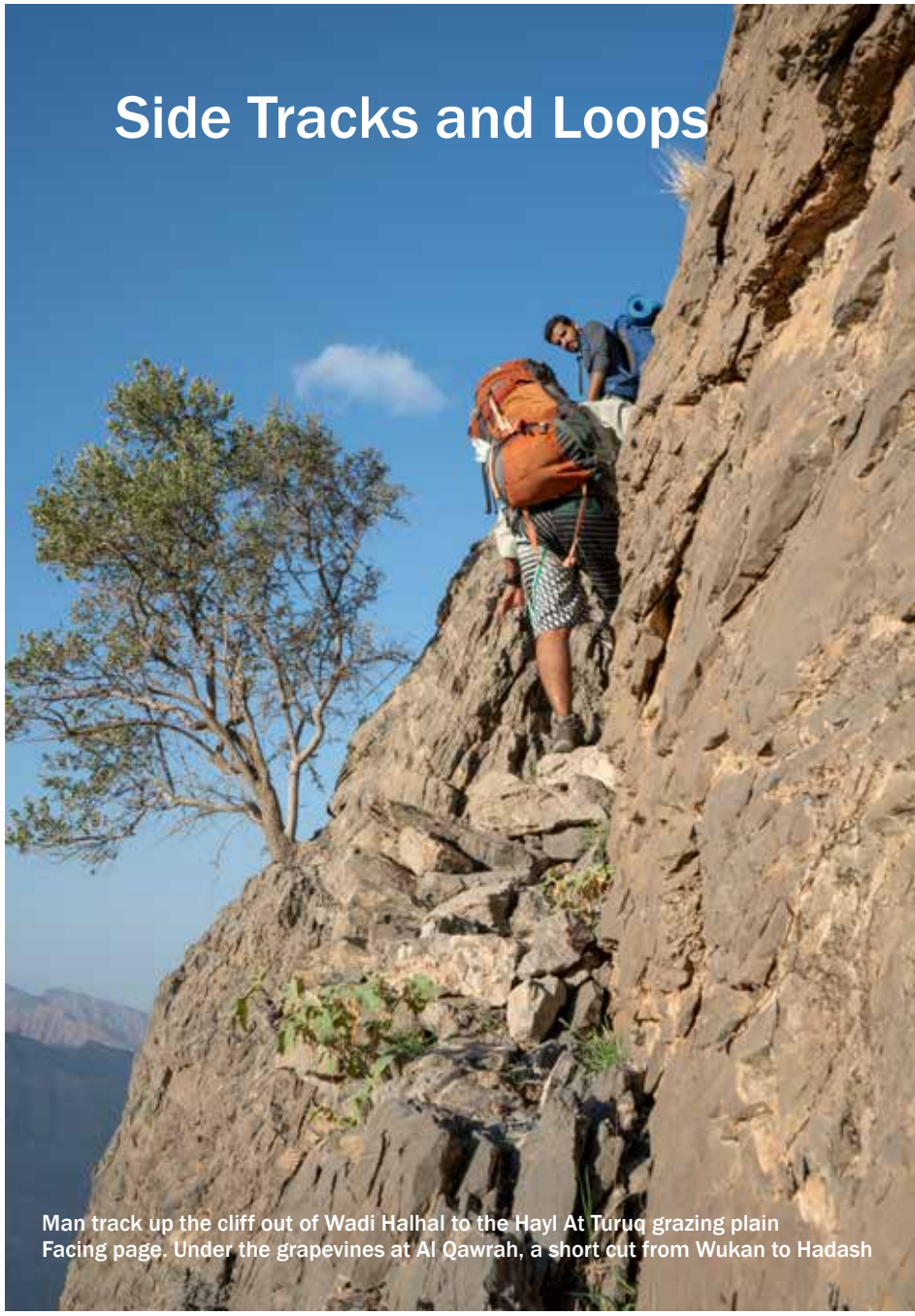
This ledge continues under an overhang to meet the wadi floor



Eventually the track stays on the wadi floor



Side Tracks and Loops



Man track up the cliff out of Wadi Halhal to the Hayl At Turuq grazing plain
Facing page. Under the grapevines at Al Qawrah, a short cut from Wukan to Hadash

Tracks painted

Side tracks from the traverse listed from east to west	Difficulty	Time hours	Track km	Up m	Down m	Description
Wukan man track to Hadash (track name Ayn Al Ghurab)	Man track, difficult scrambling	2.5	4	336	384	Unpleasant walk up, down and across steep exposed scree slopes. This walk is for fit day walkers returning to their vehicle after finishing the more interesting ridge walk between Hadash and Wukan. This Hadash–Wukan–Hadash loop takes ten hours.
Ras Al Aqbah to Wadi Halfayn (track name Safat Halfayn)	Easy donkey track	6	12.4	25	1605	From saddle Ras Al Aqbah this trading route links the mountain villages Sayq, Wukan, Hadash, As Sawjrah, Al Fawq and Al Alya to Izki. 2km road joins track to Highway 15.
Sayq (hotel) to Ras Al Aqbah (track name Widyan Al Aqbah)	Easy donkey track	2.5	6.2	330	68	Trading route from the Al Jabal Al Akhdar Hotel on the edge of Sayq to the saddle Ras Al Aqbah. Originally the track started at the centre of Sayq but is now overbuilt.
Aqbat Wukan to Ras Al Aqbah	Easy donkey track	2.5	5.3	610	220	Trading route linking two saddles with track junctions reaching an altitude of 2500m.
Al Alya to Aqbat Wukan	Horse track	5	9.7	1232	152	Fabulous stairs built for horse caravans at the top of the ascent from Wadi Bani Kharus. The track passes the Al Jahm well and grazing plain.
Al Jahm to Al Fayq (track name Al Fayq)	Horse track	2.5	4.4	57	728	Ancient horse-trading route linking the grazing plateau and the villages on Al Jabal Al Akhdar with Wadi Bani Harras and the village of Al Fayq.
Ad Dar to As Sawjrah via wadi (track name Al Ilayah)	Very difficult, boulder and cliff climbing	4	7.8	922	44	Man track best done in the company of a local guide who can pull you up the boulders. The wadi has numerous swimming pools and is spectacular.
Al Alya to Al Mikhayti (track name Al Furs)	Easy donkey track	5.5	9.8	1400	371	Main trading route linking the end of Wadi Bani Kharus with Al Jabal Al Akhdar villages. This is the track and stone stairs that impressed Colonel S.B. Miles in 1876.
Al Alya to Mazraat Riyad Al Jabal (track name As Safah)	Easy walking track, then donkey track	5	9.3	1526	125	Track originally continued to Al Hayl. Dramatic climb out of Wadi Bani Kharus made easy with steel ladders. The plateau portion of this track is a donkey route.
Burkat Al Zahat towards Talhat	Easy donkey track	4	7	667	256	Branch trading route crossing both the As Safah and Al Furs tracks.
Talhat mosque to Al Hijar (track name At Talhat)	Easy donkey track	3	4.8	0	1307	Main trading route linking the villages surrounding Ar Rus with the middle of Wadi Bani Kharus, and then to Ar Rustaq. This walk does not have much shade.
Ar Rus - Masirat Ash Shirayqiyyin	Easy man track	2	4.1	0	754	Track via wadi to abandoned village and extensive gardens with seven *aflaj*.
Masirat Ash Shirayqiyyin - Ar Rus	Easy donkey track	2	4.7	18	750	High return for donkeys. Masirat Ash Shirayqiyyin is the winter village of Ar Rus.
Al Hilaylat to Aqbat Al Biyut	Easy donkey track	4	9.2	518	745	After 3km the track passes the abandoned Masirat Al Jawamid village and gardens.
Al Hilaylat to As Sarab	Easy donkey track	1.5	5.0	150	266	Easy walk linking As Sarab and Ar Rus with the excursion to Masirat Al Jawamid.
Dukum Hayl At Turuq via gardens (track called Rufsit Al Wid)	Exposed man track, cliff climb on sticks	4	6.2	1300	126	Spectacular track through two gardens and springs to a 95m cliff climb on a natural ladder. The climb is not difficult but there is significant exposure.
Dukum to garden loop in Wadi Halhal	Easy donkey track	4	6.0	643	400	One way up the wadi from Dukum, then a loop passing two gardens and a *falaj*, and a wadi pool deep enough to swim. Good day trip.
Ridge near Ar Rus to Al Hijayr (track name Sab At Turuq)	Difficult donkey track	7	10.6	267	1482	Track not used by donkeys for fifty years. It crosses many ridges and is difficult to follow. Better described as a man track.
Aqbat Ajz Mikbar to Al Hijayr (track called the SAS route)	Easy donkey track	5	9.1	23	1491	Track passes through a cleft in a cliff, and numerous steps. It was used by the British SAS to supply a decoy attack during Al Jabal Al Akhdar War, 1957–59.
Hat to Aqbat Ajz Mikbar	Donkey track	3	6.4	1100	33	Track not used by donkeys for fifty years, but easy walk. Track continues to Qiyut.
Aqbat Sofit Said to Hat (track name Al Khaniq)	Exposed man track	2	2.9	0	857	Near the top of the walk there is an exposed cliff climb of 2m above a 2m rock pile. There are handholds. This 4m cliff is best negotiated with two people.
Balad Sayt to Hat (track name Ar Rawdah)	Easy donkey track	1.5	3.0	288	46	Useful track to make a round trip with other tracks. There is a gravel road between these two villages.
Balad Sayt to Sharaf Al Alamayn (track name W8)	Steep donkey track, painted	3	2.8	1067	0	Not used by donkeys since the last one fell and hurt itself. It is spectacular and there is archeological evidence suggesting it dates from the Bronze Age.
Salma to Balad Sayt	Easy man track	1.5	2.6	194	385	Track crosses Salma garden terraces and short tunnel at saddle above Balad Sayt.
Bait Bimah to Salma	Donkey track	1.5	2.7	324	7	Track passes pre-Islamic rock art in Wadi Bima.
Salma to Aqbit Al Qalean	Steep man track	3	2.7	976	0	Difficult track to follow, scrambling with no exposure.

Side tracks from the traverse listed from east to west	Difficulty	Time hours	Track km	Up m	Down m	Description
Wadi Al Hajur upper Snake Gorge	Easy man track	1/2	0.75	52	0	No swimming or climbing required. Shaded cliffs have rope fixtures for rock climbing.
Snake Gorge right or left fork	right fork 23m abseil	5	-	-	-	Swimming in deep pools, cold in January, left fork only scrambling, back on 5km road
Al Hiwayb to Burkat Ash Sharaf	Man track	2	2.2	840	0	Dramatic stick bridge on an interesting man track.
An Nid towards Burkat Ash Sharaf	Easy donkey track	4	6.0	1190	54	Main trading route to the saddle Burkat Ash Sharaf linking Wadi Sahtan with the interior. This track intersects the traverse route 2km from the saddle.
Misfat Al Abriyyin to Burkat Ash Sharaf	Easy donkey track	4	6.1	852	0	Main trading route linking interior village Misfat Al Abriyyin to Wadi Sahtan. Track passes an occupied *shawawi* camp, Aqbat al Hamra.
Wijmah from An Nid/Burkat Ash Sharaf	Difficult donkey track	1.5	2.1	10	207	Branch from track An Nid to Burkat Ash Sharaf to the abandoned village of Wijmah. The spring feeding the *aflaj* stopped flowing. In 2019 there was only family left.
Ayn Al Habnah to Masjid Maillah	Easy donkey track	1/2	0.8	26	72	Branch to spring from track An Nid to Burkat Ash Sharaf starting near Masjid Maillah.
Misfat Al Abriyyin high view	Easy man track	1.5	2.5	448	130	Ridge walk opposite Misfat Al Abriyyin with views across terraced gardens. Return on the traverse track for a half-day walk.
Dar Al Bayda to Misfat Al Abriyyin via Al Muzara in wadi	Difficult man track in wadi with exposure	3.5	5.0	70	461	Popular wadi walk past village and terraces without road. There are a few exposed climbs on smooth rock with concrete ridges for handholds.
Dar Al Bayda to Misfat Al Abriyyin	Easy donkey track	1.5	2.6	0	334	Return walk from Al Muzara wadi scramble. Track joins traverse 1.3km from Misfat.
Dar Al Bayda to Al Harf in east wadi	Easy donkey track	3	6.2	565	134	Al Harf is a four-way track junction with a single house and open reservoir. This track passes a cave and a cliff drip. The cliff drips are fine to drink.
Dar Al Bayda to Al Harf in west wadi	Easy donkey track	2	4.0	565	54	Great one-day loop when combined with previous walk from Dar al Bayda to Al Harf in east wadi.
Al Harf walking track short cut	Man track	1	1.9	21	147	Slightly shorter track with one easy climb, little exposure.
Al Harf towards Sab An Nar cave	Donkey track	1	1.4	378	0	Donkey track to intersection with man track branch to the Sab An Nar cave pool.
Al Harf to Barbad	Donkey track	1	1.2	250	0	Donkey tracks used for transporting cut foliage from high pastures.
Al Harf to Safih Abu Habshah	Donkey track	1	2.0	336	8	Donkey tracks used for transporting cut foliage from high pastures.
Al Qiwaytu towards summit	Man track	3	6.6	1197	86	Easy walking track that joins track Hayl Ash Shas to Dabk Awlad Siwayid.
Hayl Ash Shas to Dabk Awlad Siwayid	Man track, one climb	4	7.4	1291	29	Easy walking track that joins track Hayl Ash Shas to the Jabal Shams summit, except just before this junction called Dabk Awlad Siwayid there is a climb on a stick bridge.
Sab An Nar cave pool	Man track	1/2	0.6	30	30	Pool 30m along dark cave tunnel. Branch from track Al Barbad to Aqbit Saydran.
Hawd Al Qattar to Safih Abu Habshah	Donkey track	1/2	0.8	10	84	Cliff spring drip and collection pool. Branch from track Al Harf to Safih Abu Habshah with loop return on 700m track directly to chain climb at Safih Abu Habshah.
Wadi Ghul to Al Khitaym (W6A)	Donkey track	3.5	6.7	1142	18	Painted track passing abandoned village above Wadi Ghul, views of Wadi An Nakhur.
Al Khitaym to As Sab Bani Khamis (W6) then via ferrata	Easy donkey track, Grade 3 via ferrata	3	4.9	367	308	This balcony walk is easy and spectacular. Most people return the same way. The optional via ferrata ascent follows the original extreme man track. It needs a harness.
Al Khitaym to Shams plateau	Easy and a bit dull	1.5	4.0	153	88	Option to taxi or walk to start of W6 balcony walk from Jabal Shams resorts.
Yisab road saddle to securiy fence near the Jabal Shams peak	Man track on narrow ledges	4	7.7	1533	128	Access to summit is blocked due restricted area around the communications dome. Track passes cave drip.
Al Mazari to Yisab road saddle	Man track with some scambling	1.5	2.6	672	20	Steep sections, but no exposure. Track short-cut to Yisab road saddle, then 3.7km road to where two other tracks start from the Yisab road saddle.
Yisab to Kurb via wadi	Man track with one exposed climb	2	2.9	642	11	Shortest route between Kurb and Yisab. There is 2.3km of flat gravel road from the track head to Yisab.
Yisab to Kurb high track	Man track, exposed narrow ledges	3.5	5.6	740	60	Even with a GPS this track is difficult to follow without a local guide. Climbs between the ledges are easy to miss, and everything off track is dangerous.
Yisab to Al Qabil	Man track with one difficult traverse	4	10.1	186	798	Difficult traverse on sloping limestone shelf with exposure 2m drop into water, then a difficult climb out of the pool. Otherwise an easy walk. Date plantation enroute.

Side tracks from the traverse listed from east to west	Difficulty	Time hours	Track km	Up m	Down m	Description
Hayl At Talhat to Al Iqaybah, part of the shorter option in Table 3	Donkey track	7	14.5	575	1465	Dramatic track passing a single inhabited house, Naqa Ar Ruways, finishing with an easy wadi walk to the *shawawi* village of Al Iqaybah that is 4km by gravel road to Yiqa.
Branch to Aqbat At Tariq	Donkey track	6	12.3	381	754	Dramatic and easy track following ledges on the opposite side of the previous track.
Aqbat At Tariq to Al Iqaybah	Donkey track	2	4.1	0	677	Easy descent then flat wadi walk.
Al Iqaybah to Dalil	Donkey track	2.5	5.6	153	52	Interesting donkey track inside and on wadi shoulders to *shawawi* camp.
Al Iqaybah to Al Jammah	Easy man track	1	2	58	87	Short-cut between two *shawawi* villages, alternative to using the road via Yiqa.
Al Ilalanah to Aqbat At Tariq	Easy man track	2.5	4.7	33	840	Track branch starts midway between the traverse track Aqbat At Tariq to Dar Al Bayda
Al Jammah to Khitam Al Wahshi	Steep donkey track	10	15.7	611	1734	A long track with a steep 200m zigzagging climb out of the wadi 2km from Al Jammah. Water is available at Wadi Al Batih spring 10.2km from Al Jammah.
Al Jammah to Dar Al Bayda inside wadi	Unladen donkey track	3	5.9	780	98	Ledge and stair exit out of wadi then gentle ascent, mostly in the shade. This track is described with photographs as an alternative at the end of Day 16.
Al Jammah to Ar Rimaylah	Man track	9	19.5	1533	1168	Walk above wadi system across toe of the mountain range. It is not very interesting.
Daan As Sanin to As Safa	Donkey track	1.5	2.6	31	205	Alternative to shorten the traverse bypassing Ghayl Shadhan gardens.
Dar Ar Ruways to Wadi Al Batih	Man track, one climb	0.5	1.3	55	327	Wadi Al Batih is a spring and swimmable wadi pool. There is a climb into the wadi.

Table 7

The best side tracks for a family looking for a short walk to a swim are the 2km from Dukum to the pool at Wadi Al Kawr and the 2.3km from Al Alya to Ad Dar where there is a string of wadi pools.

The total length of the side tracks in Table 7 and the traverse is 604km. The side tracks do not overlap with each other or any of the traverse tracks. Many of them are branches from other tracks. Twenty loops have been created using these sidetracks and portions of the traverse (see Table 8) and are on www.hajarhiking.com as GPX files. It is possible to make your own loops by appending side tracks and traverse sections using Garmin BaseCamp software.

The times provided for walking these side tracks and loops are one-way times. They allow for some time spent referring to a navigation device, but this will depend on the hiker's skill. It is recommended to employ a guide for your first walk to become familiar with the terrain.

Several of the donkey tracks have man track short cuts not included in this table but are shown on the maps and in the GPX files. Most of these short cuts are only marginally shorter and, due to their increased difficulty, may not save any time. They are included on the maps to avoid confusion when walking past a track branch. Until you are familiar with the terrain it would be prudent to stay on donkey tracks.

The side tracks in this table include nearly all the donkey trading routes that intersect or are near the traverse, but it is not a complete list of all donkey tracks on the Western Hajar. Historically important tracks not included are the trading routes ascending the south side of the mountains from the interior, for example the tracks up Wadi Kamah, Tanuf, Muaydin and Imty, most of which have their own name. The track from Imty is called Alerurqub. These tracks are excluded because they are far from the traverse and being near the developed side of the mountain range are sometimes crossed by roads.

Side tracks that need ropes are excluded. For example, the 2200m climb out of Wadi An Nakhur to Jabal Shams has two exposed cliffs. When it has chain ladders installed it will be added to the GPX files and maps on www.hajarhiking.com.

Four ultra marathon tracks are also included on the maps and GPX files.



4m cliff descent using a 2m stick propped on an exposed ledge on the Ad Dar to As Sawjrah man track. This wadi walk is described in the table as difficult

Loop walks using side tracks and portions of the traverse	Difficulty	Days	Track km	Up m	Down m	Description including water
Al Afyah to Wadi Halfayn via Hadash	Difficult scrambling to Hadash, then a donkey track	2	29.8	2287	2311	There is water at Hadash, Al Manakhir and at the end of the descent into Wadi Halfayn where you can swim. There are baisa buses on the 5km of highway between the finish at the entrance to Wadi Halfayn and Al Afyah. Map on page 98,
Hadash loop via Wukan	Donkey track out, scrambling on return	1	13.7	1247	1264	Allow 10 hours. There is water at Wukan and Al Qawrah. It is an easy walk to Wukan, but the return to Hadash has some steep scree climbs. Map on page 98.
Wukan high loop	A scramble up a steep slope to the saddle, then donkey	1	11.8	1063	1063	There is tank water at Aqbat Wukan 300m beyond the saddle above Wukan, although Aqbat Wukan is not on the loop. This is a high walk, with a minimum altitude of 1500m, so suitable for warmer temperatures. Map on page 119.
Al Alya loop via As Sawjrah	This is all a donkey track	2	28.5	2108	2127	There is clean well water at Al Jahm, tank water at Aqbat Wukan, spring water and The Cliff hotel at As Sawjrah, dam water at Burkat Al Zahat and spring water at Ad Dar where the pools are large enough for a swim. Maps on page 118, 119.
Halal gardens loop	Donkey track	0.5	7.7	643	643	There is spring water and a swimming pool at Wadi Al Kawr, and springs at Suhub and Halhal gardens. Map on page 134.
Al Hijayr loop	This is all a donkey track, though half of the loop is difficult to follow	2	29.3	2122	2109	There is no water. This is a donkey track but the east half of the circuit has not been used for fifty years and is better described as a man track. Maps on page 134, 135. A shorter circuit ascends from Dukum instead of Al Hijayr, but there is an exposed though non-technical climb before reaching the ridge (see photo on page 229).
Hat loop	One exposed climb	1	15.8	1259	1259	A long one day walk. There is tank water at Mikhatta Jabir and the hotel Shorfet Alalamin is near halfway. There is an exposed and difficult climb near the start of the descent off the ridge above Hat (see photo on page 243). Maps on pages 136, 147.
Balad Sayt loop via Hat	One exposed climb	1	10.7	1235	1235	There is no water. There is an exposed and difficult climb near the start of the descent off the ridge above Hat. Map on page 147.
Balad Sayt loop via Salma	Man track, steep but not exposed	1	12	1538	1538	There is spring water at Salma and dam water under rocks at Aqbit Al Qalean (see photo on page 145). The cliff between Salma and the ridge is an infrequently used man track, not exposed but steep and hard to follow. Maps on page 146, 147.
Misfat Al Abriyyin summit loop	Donkey track, except for two chain ladders	2-3	37.4	2746	2746	There is tank water at Aqabat Al Hamra, dam water at Qil Azut, Burkat Ash Sharaf and Al Barbad, a 600m diversion to a spring at Sab An Nar, and water at villages Hayl Al Khadra and Hayl Ash Shas and the hotel The View. Maps on pages 154, 155, 162.
Misfat Al Abriyyin high loop	Easy walk	0.5	5	466	466	View over the Misfat Al Abriyyin terraces and the star clock towers. Map on page 154.
Misfat Al Abriyyin wadi loop	Slippery scramble	1	10.9	680	680	There is water in the wadi, with a few exposed slippery climbs. Map on page 154.
Dar Al Bayda loop	All donkey track	1	10.3	687	687	There is a wall drip at Hasat Al Arid and a tank at Al Harf. Map on page 154.
Al Hiwayb to An Nid near loop	Man track ascent, donkey descent	1	9.2	870	1231	There is a spring Ayn Al Habnah on a 500m diversion. The circuit is incomplete; there is 4km of steep gravel road between the two track heads. Maps on page 154, 155.
Hayl Ash Shas loop	One exposed climb	1	16.3	1384	1384	There is no water, an exposed branch bridge, otherwise easy. Map on page 162.
Kurb loop via Yisab	Three climbs	3	31.4	2194	2194	This circuit is described in detail with maps on pages 172 to 191.
Wadi Yiqa loop	Donkey track	2-3	35.7	2135	2135	Tank water at Naqa Ar Ruways and spring at Hayl At Talhat. Maps on pages 202, 203.
Al Jammah one day loop	Unladen donkey track	1	11.4	850	850	There is no water, with some walking inside a shaded wadi on an unladen donkey track. This walk is described on pages 224 to 227. Map on page 211.
Al Jammah five day loop	Donkey track, with a few easy climbs	5	72	3480	3480	This is four days of the traverse plus the one day option described in detail with maps on pages 192 to 227.
Wadi Taysa loop	Donkey track, with one easy climb	2	27.4	1554	1554	There are springs at Wadi Al Batih and Dar Al Bayda, and tanks at Dar Ar Ruways and Sinfat. Map on page 211.

Table 8



Hasat Al Arid cliff drip on the track from Dar Al Bayda to Al Haraf, east wadi



Pools above Ad Dar
Below. Well and holding tank on the Jahm Al Jabayl grazing plain





Disused beehives made from hollowed date-palm trunks, Halhal gardens



Hayl At Turuq grazing plain, and the intersection of several tracks



One of four gardens in Wadi Halhal above Dukum. Stick climb is up the cliff behind



Stick bridge on the ascent from Al Hiwayb to Burkat Ash Sharaf



Lunch at Masirat Al Jawamid



Terraced gardens at Masirat Al Jawamid



4m exposed cliff on the descent to Hat from Aqbat Sofit Said



Abandoned terraces in Wadi Halfayn

Pack and sleeping

Pack, 65 litres
-20 ºC down sleeping bag (in reality only comfortable at -5 ºC)
Rubber sleeping mat (spare with rendezvous supplies as they get ripped)
Inflatable Therm-a-rest NeoAir upper body sleeping mat or equivalent

Night-time

Warm zipped jersey
Insulation jacket
Woollen hat covering ears
Good quality light raincoat with hood (provides extra layer for wind as well as rain)
Head torch, spare AAA lithium batteries
Mosquito repellent

Cooking

Ultra-light titanium pot
Matches
Camping gas and cooker
Spoon/fork
Freeze-dried food
Omani Riyals for Wukan and Al Hamra (denominations 20 or less)

First Aid

First aid kit
Ibuprofen
Blister plasters

Toiletries

Toilet paper (also used for starting cooking fires)
Dry wash soap
Toothbrush and paste

Walking

Collapsible water bottle capacity 2.0 Litre (x 3 for summit as no water)
Chlorine dioxide tablets for dam water or LifeStraw water filter with micro filter
Light quick-drying hiking trousers
Light quick-drying long-sleeved hiking shirt
Leather boots, socks, underwear
Sun runner cap with flaps for ears and neck
Sunscreen
Lip balm
Sunglasses

Navigation and Communication

Garmin and spare AA lithium batteries, two Garmin per hiking group
Maps, either folded sheet or book
Mobile phones for 4G (smart phone) and 2G (for example Nokia dual SIM)
Power bank and leads for mobiles
Optional Emergency Beacon (for example PLB1 from Oceansignal)

Camera

Camera in soft case, spare batteries or rechargeable from power bank

Contacts in Oman who can arrange guides

As Sawjrah	The Cliff Hotel, www.thecliffguesthouse.wordpress.com
Wadi Bani Awf	The Bait Bimah Hotel, www.baitbimahoman.com
Misfat Al Abriyyin	www.canyonadventurestours.com
Some tracks	www.omantrekkingguides.com

Tour companies in Oman who can arrange logistics

Sport Zone LLC	omansportszone@gmail.com

Guides and donkeys for the last four days

The contact for donkeys in the Al Jammah settlement, 2.4km west of Yiqa, is Abdullah Al Khambashi +968 9569 8833. Guides for this long remote section will insist on bringing donkeys to carry their own provisions as well as yours.

Acknowledgements

This book would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of my walking companions: Mohamed Al Azri, Mohamed Al Toobi, Hamdan Al Abri, Said Al Shukali, John Van Wunnik, David Lambert and Bill Huguelet. All my companions are either Omanis or long term expatriates living in Oman. I am very grateful for the company of my wife, three children and our golden retriever who all joined me on some of these walks. Thanks are due to my brother Graeme and friends whom I asked to read and offer advice on this manuscript. Thanks also to Haydee who prepared most of my camping food over many years, and my driver Mr. Hassan who faithfully waited for me at the foot of the mountain so many times, sometimes making a fire to guide me down.

The maps were prepared by Louisa Keyworth of Lovell Johns Mapping Company.

Dedications

My book is dedicated to my family: my wife Paula, who I courted on these mountains in 1993, and my three children, Jennifer, Veronica and Benjamin, who have hiked up and down these donkey tracks numerous times. Benjamin, in particular, will never forget these mountains. His middle name is Akhdar, and he was six years old during his first ascent.

Disclaimer

Every effort has been made in this book to inform you what to carry, and to give you sufficient navigational aids to find drinking water every night. The author is not responsible for any dangerous circumstances you may encounter. Hike at your own risk. The reference information was correct when this book was published.



Massage room in the five-star Alila Hotel



The Cliff Hotel in As Sawjrah, with rooms in restored village houses

Hotels and Food Parcel Delivery

Hotels who have received my recorded delivery posts of dried food parcels for collection are highlighted in green in Table 9. Allow three weeks for regular post before the hotel's awknowledgement email. The contacts and addresses for postage for five hotels are listed below. As more walkers use their facilities it is likely more of these hotels in future will accept posted dried food for their walk-in guests. Their addresses and postage times will be updated on www.hajarhiking.com.

Day	Location	Nearest Hotel	Road to hotel	Hotel Web Address
2	Wukan	Sama Wakan Heritage Lodge	0	www.samaresorts.com
3	As Sawjrah	The Cliff	0	www.thecliffguesthouse.word-press.com
4	Ar Rus	Alila Hotel	3.5km	www.alilahotels.com
5	Ash Sharaf	Shorfet Al Alamin	0	www.shorfetalalamin.com
		Al Hoota Rest House	800m	www.alhootaresthouse.com
6	Misfat Al Abriyyin	Hospitality Inn	0	al-misfah-hospitality-inn-lud-hiana
		Misfah Old House	200m	info@misfaholdhouse.com
7	Hayl Ash Shas	The View	0	www.theviewoman.com
9	Jabal Shams plateau	Sama Heights Resort & Spa	0	www.samaresorts.com
		Jebel Shams Resort	2.7km	www.jebelshamsresort.com
12	Kurb	Sama Heights Resort & Spa	9.3km	www.samaresorts.com
		Sunrise Resort	9.2km	www.sunriseresort-om.com

Table 9

The Cliff: thecliffguesthouse@gmail.com, Mohammed Alsheriqi +96898836356, Postal address: P. O. Box 1069, Postal Code 611, Nizwa, Sultanate of Oman. (postage 16 days)

For both Misfat Al Abriyyin hotels: info@canyonadventurestours.com, Abdul Rahman Al Abri, Postal address: P.O. Box 64, Postal Code 617, Al Hamra, Oman. (postage 21 days)

Sama Resorts are at Wukan and Jabal Shams plateau, sales@samaresorts.com, Phone +968 24489853, Postal address: Golden Oryx Tours, 6th floor KFC building, Al Khuwair, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman.

Shorfet Al Alamin Hotel: shorfetalalamin@gmail.com, Ayetullah Sharif +96890268418, Postal address: P.O. Box. 3435, Postal Code 111, Nizwa, Sultanate of Oman.

Jabal Shams Resort: reservations@jabalshamsresort.com, Postal address: P.O. Box 344, Postal Code 617, Al Hamra, Sultanate of Oman.

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Arabic Glossary

aini falaj: water channel from a spring.
aresh: palm-frond roof shading the s*abla* village meeting place.
arif: official who supervises the day-to-day time schedule of a *falaj.*
aqbah: saddle pass on mountain ridge, changes to *aqbat* for a specifically named saddle.
athar: water share-time unit of the *dawran*, for the *falaj.*
dallah: Omani coffee pot.
daudi falaj: subterranean tunnel bringing aquifer water to the surface.
dawran: time cycle by which *falaj* water is distributed.
diyar: shawawi campsite on Jabal Shams, changes to *hala and halil* on Al Jabal Al Akhdar.
falaj: pl. *aflaj*, water channel.
ghaili falaj: water channel from surface water in a wadi, sometimes created by diversion dam.
hala: pl. *halil*, *shawawi* house-campsite on Al Jabal Al Akhdar, becomes *diyar* on Jabal Shams
hayl: pl. *huyul*, small mountain spring or seepage. Anglicised plural *hayl*s is used.
hayl: a flat area in the mountains, usually suitable for grazing.
hayl tariq: a flat area with one track, *hayl at turuq*, flat area with many tracks.
isbar: territory with boundaries called *dar* for semi-nomadic pastoralists to browse goats.
majlis: pl. *majalis*, sitting room for entertaining guests, may be larger than a s*abla.*
masirat: deep wadi with water and cultivated terraces.
minbeq: small drip spring.
nom: sleep.
s*abla*: village meeting place, used daily in the past, but now mostly for weddings and funerals.
s*aqa* or s*aeyn*: goatskin liquid containers used for water, goat or cow milk and wine.
s*arooj*: ancient cement made by pulverising cooked residue of a mixture of clay, charcoal and lime, then mixing this dust with wheat stalks, wool and water.
s*ayl:* irrigation by diverting flash floods with dams.
sharaf: mountain ridge, often used with another name to identify a particular ridge.
shiggy: branch fences on ledges confining domestic donkeys to a grazing area inside a wadi.
shawawi (adj.), *shawawiya* (noun): semi-nomadic pastoralists who live in the mountains.
tariq saeb: difficult walking track.
temimeh sheikh: chief of the tribe, the highest level *sheikh*.
wadi, a valley or ravine that is dry except in the rainy season. Wadi is not italicised as it is in common usage.
waqf: individual responsible for part-time community service.
wakil: Islamic agent.
zakat: a 5–10% tax on livestock or durable products such as grain, dried fruit and dried dates.

Technical Glossary

Anthropomorphic: ascribing human form or attributes to something not human.
Bajada: a broad slope of alluvial material at the foot of mountains.
Conglomerate: a coarse-grained sedimentary rock of rounded fragments embedded in a matrix of cementing material such as silica.
Diorite: intrusive igneous rock used for carving in Mesopotamia.
Garmin: a commercial battery device used for personal satellite navigation.
Piedmont: a gentle slope leading from the foot of mountains to a region of flat land.
Unconformity: a surface of contact between sedimentary rocks significantly different in age.

Track Report

Janneke and James are the first people to complete the traverse, a journey they made in January 2020. They found my website via Explorersconnect.com. This is their report:

Traversing the Hajar Mountains was the most incredible adventure of our lives. For two weeks we were taken out of the 21st century and into our own magical world where we slept under the stars and drank water from ancient reservoirs while barely seeing another soul, except wild donkeys and fearless mountain goats.

John has crafted a wonderful route taking in the best of the Hajar Mountains while ensuring you are never too far from water or a local settlement, where you might be fortunate to encounter the generous hospitality of the Omani people. We set off as newcomers to the Omani mountains without a local guide; navigating was a rewarding experience using occasional painted markers, GPS and John's daily description of the route. The hardest and most exposed parts of the trek are comparable to the GR20's famous Cirque du Solitude, however with consistently good weather the Hajar Traverse is more welcoming.

Wild camping every night greatly contributed to our experience as it allowed us to cook during golden sunsets, fall asleep to shooting stars and rise with the morning sun. Before long our daily rhythm got in sync with the simple yet enriching mountain life. With time we learnt to distinguish between the unpredictable 'man tracks' and our preferred gently meandering donkey tracks.

In a valley high among the mountains we drank coffee with a shawawiya (semi-nomadic pastoralist) sharing smiles and a few words of Arabic before we bid him goodnight to set up camp by a 3000 year old donkey track as the old decade faded into the new. If you are in search of an adventure with unexpected turns the Hajar Mountain Traverse will offer you a thousand and one.

Janneke and James