

**In This Issue**

Oman

The Mountains Of Musandam

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The four nurses, clad from head-to-toe in white - except for black face masks - dashed through the dust kicked up by the descending airforce helicopter, whisked the woman on the stretcher from the cabin and hurried her into the hospital, their flowing robes flapping in the wind. Seconds later, we were airborne again and clattering over the razor-sharp peaks of the spectacularly-mountainous Musandam Peninsula.

In Oman, the airforce - and all the armed forces - support the civilian administration to a greater extent than in most countries, and nowhere is their help more vital than in isolated Musandam. Separated from the rest of Oman by a 70-kilometer strip of the United Arab Emirates (44 miles), the peninsula is dissected by deep canyons and ribbed by layer-upon-layer of almost impassable, mile-high slabs of rock thrown up by some prehistoric geological convulsion.

It was army engineers, for example, who hacked out the one road that zigzags dizzily up and down Musandam's precipitous mountainsides to connect the remote peninsula with the outside world. And it is the airforce's helicopters that constantly crisscross the desolate terrain - ferrying supplies, doctors and sometimes even water to Musandam's tiny farming and fishing communities perched precariously on mountain tops or crammed into cracks between cliffs plunging straight into the sea.

The sultan's armed forces patrol Musandam for other reasons too; because the rugged, limestone peninsula juts into the Arabian Gulf, Oman controls the important Strait of Hormuz, and from the scattering of rocky islands at the tip of the peninsula, and from its sinuous fiords - once the lair of fearsome pirates - the Omani navy polices the strait. And from Musandam's recently resurfaced and extended airstrip, Oman's airforce and reinforcements can protect the strait and its crucial cargoes of crude oil. But what is more striking is the impact of the military on the government's civilian development program - an effort to stem what one official described as a "real risk" of the people of the peninsula "emptying out" into the neighboring United Arab Emirates.

Separated by natural barriers from the rest of Oman, and largely unnoticed by the government, the tribes of Musandam had become economically dependent on and more closely allied to the Emirates, which, nearer, less populous and more prosperous, provided a market for Musandam's manpower and a natural trading partner.

Even today it is still cheaper to import manufactured goods via Ras al-Khaimah than it is through Muscat, and many of Musandam's men continue to work in the Emirates, some, as a result, adopting the white headdress of the Gulf instead of the more traditional Omani turban.

The tide, however, is beginning to turn. For although the roads built by the Omani army now, ironically, make it easier to seek work in the Gulf - previously, the only way to get there was by boat, donkey or on foot - more people are returning to Musandam than are leaving. They are attracted by the new jobs and improved living standards of their native land.

At Saih, a plateau slung high between the mountain peaks, its bare landscape scarred by mud houses and a few fields, a young man told us over cups of herb-flavored tea how he had just quit his job as a policeman in Ras al-Khaimah to return home. He proudly showed us the new, concrete-block house, its gaily painted door already in place, and said he was building it with the help of a government loan.

Those men who do continue to work in the Emirates now commute to-and-fro rather than take their families with them. For example, Harf, a large village perched on top of high cliffs overlooking the Strait of Hormuz, and another village wedged in the bottom of a narrow, step-sided canyon nearby, seem populated solely by shy women and children during the week, but bustle with menfolk too at weekends.

Trading patterns are changing too. Whereas Musadam's main export - fish - was once sold to "buy boats" from the Emirates, today much of it is collected at newly-built cold storage depots in Musandam and then transported to Muscat and other Omani towns for sale. And yet another sign of changing times: tailors in Khasab, Musandam's main town, report a growing preference for *dishdashas* cut to the Omani pattern - with a dangling

tassle - rather than Emirates-style: with a high collar and buttons down the front.

Much else, too, has changed in Musandam in recent years. Besides a new hospital and the airfield - from which there now are almost-daily flights to Muscat - Musandam now has a network of gravel roads linking all major towns, cold storage depots and hundreds of new barracks-type homes; there are now also schools, desalination plants, electric power stations, ports and, in Khasab, a hotel, two banks - and, unbelievable a few years ago, with not a single road in the peninsula - an automobile distribution agency.

Because developing such an isolated and rugged region posed tremendous problems, the government, in 1976, set up a special agency, the Musandam Development Committee (MDC) to spearhead the development effort.

This effort has, so far, not been lavish. "We are putting in the rudiments, no frills," says one MDC official. "The only luxury we have allowed is street lighting between the Khasab *suq* and the port." The emphasis too has been on self-help rather than mollycoddling, which, some MDC officials fear, could destroy the mountain peoples' traditional toughness and make them soft and totally dependent on government help to survive. This, however, is not always appreciated by the hill tribes. "They frequently threaten to move to the Emirates if we don't build a road to their village," says one MDC official.

One particularly successful self-help program has been to repair and modernize the cisterns, or *birkas* - some of them as deep as 20 meters (66 feet), and usually from 25 to 30 meters long (82 to 98 feet) and three to six meters wide (10 to 20 feet) - used by villagers to collect and store rainwater during the rainy season for drinking the rest of the year.

"We supply the cement, sand and water (including lifting it by helicopter to isolated villages) and they supply the labor," said one MDC official. "It took six months for it to catch on - then there was an avalanche." Even so, some of the fiercely-independent hill people still can't quite get used to getting something for nothing, and one helicopter pilot tells of the farmer who shoved a goat into his cockpit as "payment" for a delivery of free sand and cement.

To supplement the traditional cistern system, the MDC are also installing steel water tanks - which they top up regularly by tanker - in villages now accessible by road. They also deliver water by ship to isolated coastal villages.

Education presents problems too. The MDC want to build a school at Kumzar but there literally is no room - the village is hemmed in on three sides by steep cliffs and by the sea on the fourth. There is so little space, in fact, that the only place left to bury the dead is under the homes.

The people of Kumzar and other coastal towns speak a mixture of Arabic, Farsi and Urdu - reflecting their ethnic links with nations on the other side of the Strait of Hormuz. The hill people, or *Shihuh*, however, are somewhat of a mystery. "They are a most extraordinary people," says Paolo Costa, head of Oman's Department of Antiquities. "Ethnically, we don't know who they are. There is speculation, but no evidence, that they are the original inhabitants of Arabia" - pushed back into Musandam's mountain security by Arab invaders of pre-Islamic days.

The *Shihuh* are semi-nomadic - farming their hillside terraces in the winter and living by the coast in summer to fish and harvest dates - their summer homes palm frond huts, their winter ones low stone houses that blend almost invisibly into the mountainsides. Another of the *Shihuh's* peculiarities is that the men carry a long-handled axe, rather than the traditional curved Arab dagger, or *khanjar*. "The remains of some prehistoric weapon?" wonders Costa. No one is sure, now, though the light of the country's new dawn may one day illuminate even these hidden corners of history.

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