

# DIVER

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JULY 2011

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# WHALE OF A TRIP

**W**E'VE BEEN IN THE WATER for less than a minute when it begins. I've heard whale song under water before, but not like this. This is loud and strange and beautiful, a series of clickings, pulses, wails, hoots and squeals, that all give way to an insistent knocking noise coming towards us out of the blue.

And then the whale appears, a juvenile humpback that carves a wide circle around our little group, a low rumbling continuing all the while. I'm hanging upright in the water as it makes its way, my hands clutched to my heart as I gasp with joy at this extraordinary encounter.

I spin in a circle to follow the whale's progress as it soars past me, close enough that I'm able to look into the creature's great dark eye. A moment later and it's gone, back into the blue.

My buddy and I exchange wide-eyed glances, shaking our heads in disbelief at what has just occurred. The story already feels far-fetched. We continue the dive.

**IT'S DAY FIVE** of a liveboard trip to the Hallaniyat archipelago, five islands situated 25 miles off the south-eastern coast of Oman. Most of Oman's diving takes place in the north of this huge country, off the Musandam peninsula and around the capital Muscat (including the Daymaniyat

**Above:** Humpback whale near the Hallaniyat islands – a bonus few divers get to enjoy.

**Right:** Dragon moray eel.

**Below:** At the helm.



Islands, as reported on by Dan Burton recently (*Daymaniyat Days*, March).

But there are benefits to venturing south. Only one operator has a licence to dive these waters and it runs one liveboard only. Apart from a few traditional fishing dhows that make an appearance on the horizon every now and then, we're entirely alone for the whole trip.

The Hallaniyat Islands feel remote but

they're actually pretty easy to get to, a matter of changing flights in Muscat to reach the city of Salalah 600 miles to the south, followed by an hour's transfer by road to Mirbat, a small town on the coast.

It's here that my buddy and I board the mv *Saman Explorer*, along with just three other guests. This steel liveboard can take up to 22 guests, but there are so few of us on this trip that the second dive-guide decides to take the week off. We can't believe our luck.

Our destination is the archipelago, but we don't rush there right away, instead sticking around to get a measure of the temperature, visibility and variety of flora and fauna in these waters at a series of dive-sites up the coast from Mirbat.

My first proper taste of the action is a wreck of unknown provenance sitting



in shallow water directly off the fort-like Salah Marriott hotel. Known today as the Marriott Wreck, it's believed to have been there for 50 years, but no one really knows.

The wreck is badly broken up, but plenty of identifiable bits and bobs remain, spread over 70m of seabed at around 11m deep.

Honeycomb morays display their patterned mouths from beneath a mess of concrete panelling and sections of propeller and funnel. A shoal of shining yellow goatfish envelopes me – so numerous are they that I lose all sense of where I am in the water.

My buddy, concentrating on photographing a bright blue-spotted ray, narrowly misses bumping his tank on a crocodilefish, expertly camouflaged against the detritus on the seabed.

Disgruntled by having to shift a few centimetres to the side, it snaps angrily in our direction, my buddy losing no time in snapping right back.

Later in the dive I gaze, fascinated, as fish of all shapes and sizes take turns racing towards a piece of shining metal on the seabed, sliding themselves along it to rid themselves of parasites and algal growth.

Further up the coast we visit Hamdi Rock for a dive of around 20m on a reef buzzing with tattooed and dragon eels, dancer shrimp and adorable pyramid boxfish.

Just when I begin to despair of seeing anything bigger than my hand, a massive pufferfish appears at the edge of the blue.

It's seen better days – one eye is blind, surrounded by dead white tissue and a vicious tear – but the fish is stately and calm, swimming gently around me seemingly without a care in the world.

**THE FINAL DIVE** of the day done, we sail for the Hallaniyat Islands overnight, waking up the following morning at Al Sawda, the second most westerly of the group.

The shoreline of this barren, uninhabited rock is like something out of *Star Wars*, dotted with concrete structures intended to have been an exclusive luxury resort.

Work stopped when the crisis in Egypt began and it's hard to regret the demise of a project that would have destroyed the



**Above:** Diving at Farsha Mahmoud, the site named after the captain of the *Saman Explorer*.

**Below from left:** Longfin bannerfish; anemonefish; Qibliyah island looms through a porthole; yellowtail snapper; *Chromodoris nudibranch*.

peace and quiet of this isolated place.

My computer tells me that the bottom temperature at the Al Sawda Coral Garden is 24°C. My body isn't so sure. The sun is still hazy in the sky on this early-morning dive, and I've had no breakfast to warm me up.

Visibility isn't great – around 15m – but there's plenty to see. Small coral pinnacles scattered across the seabed are home to discrete communities of triggerfish, clownfish and honeycomb, yellow-mouth and tattooed morays. I had seen dolphins playing at the surface in the bay before we jumped in, but they're not here now.

What I do come across, much to the delight of the photographers among us, is a pair of scorpionfish in an intense territory battle. For a long time it's just about posturing, the fish staring each other out and occasionally blowing sand.

Finally one of them makes a proper move, grabbing the other's fin in its jaws and holding on for dear life. They're still at it, grappling back and forth, when we come back past them half an hour later.

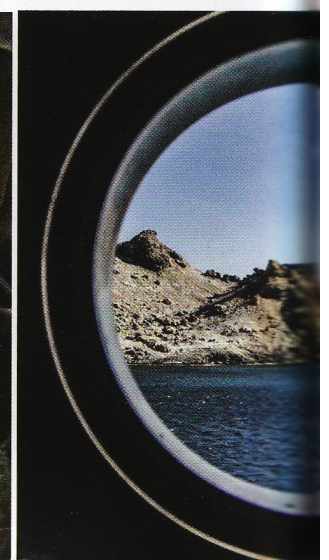
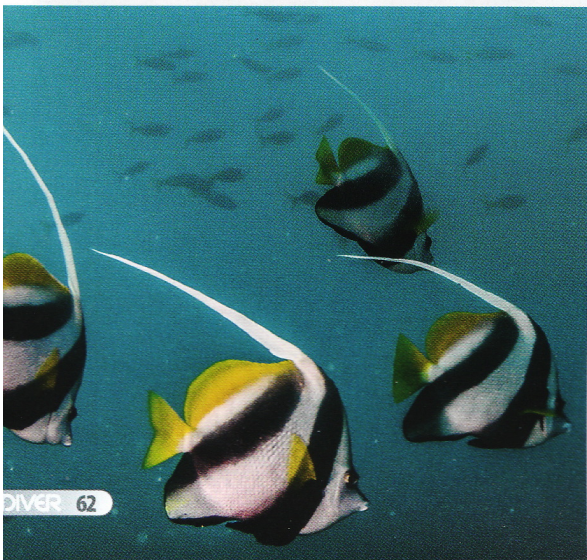
After another dive at the same site we head off to the far side of the archipelago. The previous season a highlight of the trip would have been diving the wreck of the *City of Westminster*.

This WW1 British warship was requisitioned and scuttled by the Germans in a bay on the east side of Al Hallaniyah, the only populated island in the group.

Thanks to the rumoured discovery of a hoard of gold in another nearby wreck, however, the *City of Westminster* is now off limits. It's infuriating – we're not the types to sneak onto the other wreck and plunder the gold – but there's nothing to be done.

**THE GOOD NEWS** is that the crew have come up with a thrilling alternative. Farsha Mahmoud is a dive-site in the open ocean named after the man who discovered it: the captain of the *Saman Explorer* noticed depths of only 21m on his way through much deeper water earlier this season, and suggested they stop and explore.

What they found was a narrow channel





**Above:** The *Saman Explorer* moored off the coast.

## 'IT'S ONE OF THE MOST INVIGORATING DIVES OF MY LIFE'

filled with bright purple broccoli coral that on the afternoon of our dive is coursing with a current so swift that I have to swim at full throttle to make any progress at all.

Thousands of schooling fish – triggerfish, bannerfish and cardinalfish among them – whirl by, while dozens of morays (they're at every site here) bob their heads in the rushing water.

It's one of the most invigorating dives of my life, and the excellent visibility only adds to the experience.

The *Saman Explorer* isn't allowed to land on Al Hallaniyah, but the captain does the next best thing and pilots us almost within touching distance of Ras al Hallaniyah, a stark cliff rising 501m almost vertically from the sea at the island's most northerly point.

From there we continue to Qazarwit Island for a night dive at a site known as Schmies' Fingers, for its unusual five-pointed underwater rock configuration.

Again we hope to see dolphins on the dive, having followed a huge pod of them around the tiny island in a RIB earlier this

evening, but instead I satisfy a long-held wish to see parrotfish snoozing in their mucus bubbles.

Another overnight sailing takes us to Qibliyah Island, the most easterly in the archipelago, and the chilliest, thanks to the sudden onset of very strong winds from the north.

Extremely choppy seas put paid to the planned early-morning dive at Qibliyah Rock, a five-minute RIB ride across the bay. We dive the Canal Garden instead, but poor visibility caused by suspended sand makes it a rather underwhelming experience.

**T**HE DIVE AT Qibliyah Rock in the afternoon is much better. There's still a big swell on the way over, but it's sheltered and mostly calm at depth. I follow a wall at around 10m down, before descending further into a spectacular canyon-like landscape of boulders and ravines.

Enormous shoals of smaller reef fish are punctuated with the odd parrotfish, pufferfish and grouper, all huge, though nothing compared to the whale we meet here the following morning, of course.

It's a site to which I would readily return – unmatched for variety of marine life, geological allure and ease of navigability.

It's the beginning of the end of our trip, time to start heading back towards the mainland. The final dives in the archipelago are off Al Hasikiyah, yet another barren rock with no human inhabitants.

Few creatures live here but seabirds, the guano of which led a British merchant to lobby for the secession of the islands to the British crown in the 1850s. The guano extraction project was never particularly profitable, but the UK retained possession of the archipelago until 1967.

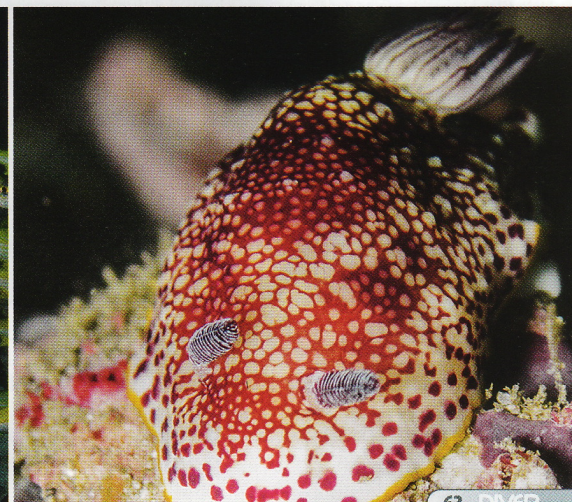
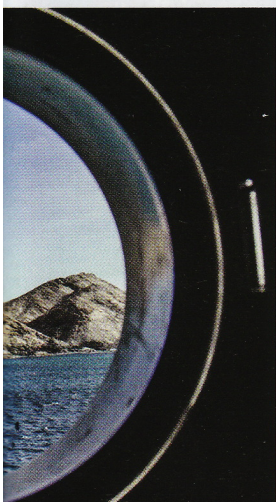
The birds are very much in evidence as we prepare for a night dive at Ra's Hasikiyah, coming home to roost in their tens of thousands. A Cheshire cat-style crescent moon and a glorious carpet of stars light our ride to the dive-site across the bay, and phosphorescence shimmers in the water as we descend to around 17m.

Night-blooming coral resembling daffodils gives the site a garden feel, and lonely sting rays, pufferfish and cornetfish offer a taster of what's to come when we revisit Ra's Hasikiyah the following day.

Less predictable is the brief appearance of another humpback, which swoops silently past us a few minutes after we drop into the water for the morning dive.

With everyone else facing down to the reef, only the guide and I spot the majestic creature, and it's gone before we can alert anyone else to its presence. I spend the rest of the dive with half an eye on the blue in case the whale returns, but it never does.

Instead I'm rewarded by the sight of a small shoal of bonito, busy hunting fusiliers, a skittish eagle ray and a gracefully circling mobula – the closest I've come to seeing a manta ray yet.



The afternoon brings another new experience – visiting a dive site that has never to our knowledge been explored. I'm calling it Cave Rock, for the small marine grotto at the base of the tiny islet we encircle in the bright mid-day light.

Accompanied by clouds of damselfish, a pair of substantial grouper and some of the fattest nudibranchs I've ever seen, we venture into territory unknown, discovering not one but two crowded coral gardens, and emerging on the other side of the bay feeling like underwater pioneers.

By far the most glorious dive-site in the area, however, is Hasikiyah Aquarium, a 10-minute ride from our anchorage. Table corals up to 8m across are lit up as if in Technicolor by the bright sunshine filtering through the shallow water.

**SPEND MOST** of the dive no deeper than 6m down observing the intricacies of life on the reef – parrotfish munching on the coral, damselfish guarding their eggs and yet more honeycomb morays hunting in and around pinnacles on the seabed.

We head back to the mainland that evening, just two dives to go until the end of the trip. The early-morning dive, at a site called the Channel, is disappointing. Visibility is poor, there's not much to see in the way of marine life, and rubbish from

## Saman Explorer


The 34m steel *Saman Explorer* takes 22 passengers. A large lounge and dining room plus the sun-deck provide plenty of communal space (especially when there are only five occupants!). The food isn't gourmet but there's plenty of it, with mounds of salads served alongside simple grilled meat and fish dishes. Abundant breakfasts are the best meal of the day, freshly made crepes vying for attention alongside eggs, fruit and cereals.

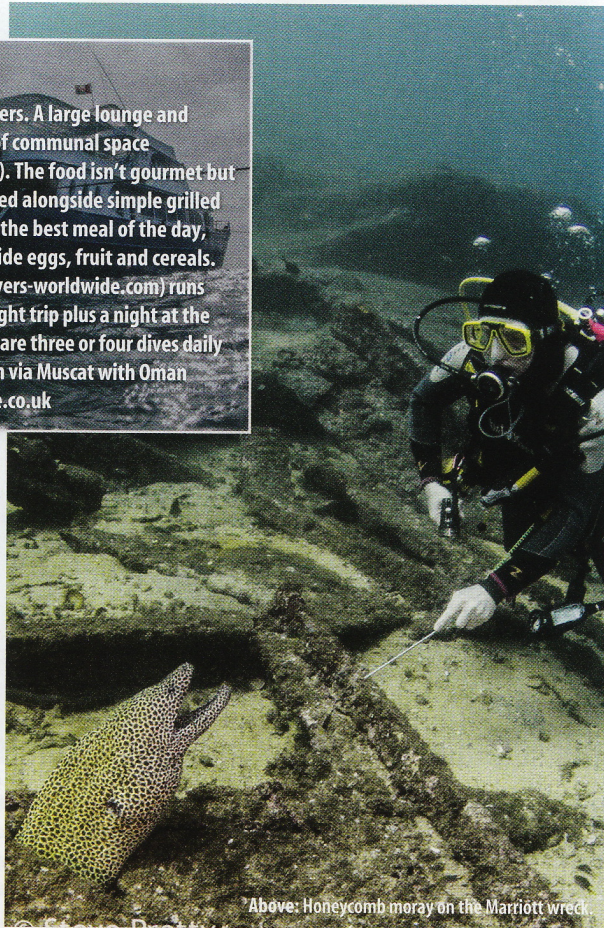
The season for *Saman Explorer* ([www.extradivers-worldwide.com](http://www.extradivers-worldwide.com)) runs from December to May. RegalDive offers a six-night trip plus a night at the Salah Marriott Resort from £1999pp. Included are three or four dives daily including night dives, flights to and from Salah via Muscat with Oman Air and transfers. Nitrox is extra, [www.regaldive.co.uk](http://www.regaldive.co.uk)

the nearby shoreline litters the seabed.

There's litter at the Chinese Wreck too, and the visibility isn't great here either, thanks to the abundance of silt carpeting the broken-up bits of ship, but it's not a dissatisfying end to the trip.

Along with a trio of bannerfish gently buffered by the current and a pair of huge clawless lobsters with little colourful faces, I catch sight of the smallest clownfish I've ever seen.

Less than a quarter of the size of my little fingernail, it darts in and out of its anemone home, as curious about my presence in its world as was the enormous humpback of Qibliyah Rock. I go on my way, full of wonder at the majesty of life beneath the waves. 



Above: Honeycomb moray on the Marriott wreck.

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