

## DUBAI MUSCAT RACE

When it rose in the East, the Sun dawned with a golden glow over a steel gray sea. It was my 71<sup>st</sup> birthday. Above flew the white spinnaker contrasting against the pale purple sky still dotted with waning twinkling stars and the odd planet. We were doing just over nine knots on the second day of the Muscat Khasab race, the return event of the Dubai Muscat race.

A little shorthanded on crew, I was still at the helm after three hours and steering by the spinnaker. Not as fast but it allowed my inexperienced crew to doze on watch. The other two from the earlier watch were down below one of them snoring for Germany, his home country.



Our boat, a 44 ft sloop, weighing eight tons and locally built, was ultimately headed for Dubai. This was my 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> Dubai Muscat race, so many of them that in my dotage I am starting to lose count. I have been on nearly all since the race started in 1991 and although this was the 22<sup>nd</sup> year, two races had not been completed, one of which was cancelled by the Omani authorities on a political whim only 48 hours before the start.

Back in 1988, I had conceived the idea of this race along with Andy Gibbons of the majestic Bustan Hotel in Oman. We had in mind that the race would go from the Jebel Ali Hotel slightly South of Dubai to the Bustan. Redha Attallah, the manager of the Jebel Ali Hotel Marina at the time was fully supportive and the small fleet of keel boats at Dubai Offshore Sailing Club seemed keen.

Andy and I quickly found out, particularly in those days, that trying to get agreement to sail between two countries both of whom had had a spattering war going between not long before and still had mixed relationships to say the least, was not an easy task. Andy approached the Royal Navy of Oman and their initial

reaction was lukewarm as the boats would have to sail through the sensitive Straits of Hormutz, the narrow passage of water between Iran and Oman. The Straits are a magnificent natural wonder with sheer cliffs and swirling tidal currents and the Navy had strong reservations about small yachts sailing through them, particularly at night with little or no navigation aids.

Eventually, after much negotiation, Arab style, over a lot of coffee and tea, agreement was reached but then Saddam invaded Kuwait. This caused a delay but finally it was planned to start in March 1991. By this time Jebel Ali Hotel had got cold feet so I decided to start it at Dubai Offshore Sailing Club. They too were not happy with the risk and made me take it all, in writing. Fortunately I had the support of Saeed Hareb of the newly formed Dubai International Marine Club and Ali Bin Shafar head of Dubai Coastguards.

What excitement when we sailed off from Dubai after the start. On my small 8 metre yacht we felt like Christopher Columbus. We were heading for the great unknown. Few of us had ever sailed so far on an ocean trip and certainly not to Muscat. The first Emirati team was skippered by Shebib Ahmed Shebib, racing in their 26ft boat.

On approaching the Straits late in the afternoon, storm clouds gathered over the mountain tops. When the Sun set these clouds were shot with bolts of lightning. The wind and the sea picked up and in our small boat we became very anxious and wished that we had played golf instead. Midnight came and the wind peaked, whistling loudly through the rigging and the reefed main flogged noisily. Suddenly there was an unbelievable cloudburst and our cockpit filled with rain that flattened the sea.

Drenched and cold we stood ankle deep in rainwater and with the wind reduced to a whisper we drifted towards the Straits. The tide took us in the



direction of the mystical Lion's Mouth, a narrow gap between the Island of the Musandam and the mainland. Our hopes were raised as the clouds had disappeared and the night was clear and the sky filled with stars that shone bright.

But our luck did not hold. The tide changed and drove us into a small bay in the lee of the island. We tried to haul ourselves by hand around the island but the tide was too strong. Stuck in the lee of the island we peered down into the deep purple colored water and watched the mayhem below as fish hunted fish illuminated by streaks of phosphorescence.

Just before dawn we had all started to doze off when we were rudely awakened by a loud slapping noise. The tide had changed and small waves were lapping at the rocky overhangs. Around us the water swirled and the tide carried us unceremoniously out of the other end of the island. We were spat out into the Indian Ocean along with all the other flotsam including a half submerged wooden pallet and a dead goat. We were on our way to Muscat.



After that I was hooked. Such an adventure, I had to do it again, and again and now next year will be my twentieth race. No matter how you approach the Straits, they are always threatening if not a little scary but always different.

It could be the dead of night, moonless, only the eerie flash every ten seconds of the Telegraph Island light with a jet black sea, as smooth as a mirror, that seamlessly merged with the dark sky. Around a rocky crag a village lights up as if it were on fire then disappears as quickly as it came. Or strong winds against the tide, standing waves as high as the gunwale, a reefed main and a blur of spray.

Sailors on the Dubai Muscat race have witnessed whales blowing, sharks, dolphins, turtles, smugglers, pirates, the US Navy aircraft carriers and on one occasion an abandoned half submerged fishing boat. The Indian Ocean off the coast of the UAE and Oman teems with plankton that draws a huge variety of fish.

Similarly, the wealth of Dubai draws illegal migrants like a massive magnet, many of them chancing the hazardous trip on small boats operated by people smugglers across dangerous shipping lanes full of giant oil tankers and container vessels. Some don't make it. Some are captured by the Oman Navy. Some drown after being thrown overboard by the smugglers to avoid capture by the navy. Some do make it. And a very few send back a small fortune to their families in India, enough to lure more on this perilous trip.



Shebib and his team arriving at the Al Bustan hotel in Muscat at the end of the first race.

Satisfied with the stringent safety requirements and the professional race managers appointed by the Organizers, the Royal Ocean Racing Club has recognized the

Dubai Muscat race as one of their qualifiers. Local sailors can benefit from this to gain the sea miles they need to join the RORC, as I have done, filling a long held wish.

If, by chance, you have the luck of passing through Dubai in the month of November and you are an experienced sailor, boats are always looking for crew. You could do a lot worse than spending a couple of weeks on the Dubai Muscat Race.