

Jabal Shams West Side
a walk in Oman
13-14 Feb 2006

What a way to get up a mountain! I mean, it does not get any slacker than that does it? Drive to 1900m, then walk up a gentle slope to 3000m. Even the unfit me could handle that. By the way, where else to go in the hottest month of the year in the hottest country on earth, but its highest point?

At 14kg, the backpack did not seem very heavy, with just the bare basics. Maybe too bare? There better not be any very cold wind or rain or crap like that, I thought. Shortly after starting I arrived at the rim of the Grand Canyon of Oman. Having seen the real thing a few years ago, I can vouch that this one is pretty good, some 6km long, 1km across and same distance deep. It is one giant scar in the gently sloping incline that is the West Side of the Jabal Shams ridge. Oman was a much wetter country many years ago and great rainstorms must have carved out this masterpiece. Even now, while the rest of the country is in the grip of a 1500 year drought, there were a few puddles here and there. Enough water to keep the wild goats going anyway.

The slope may have been gentle but the temperature was not, lingering in the low 30s all the way. That is great for the beach but not ideal for going up mountains. The beads of sweat over my body did a good job of keeping me cool, unfortunately this was stressing out my Spartan supply of drinking water, and I only brought three litres. After 4 hours or so I arrived at the summit ridge, a skyway joining the South and North Summits of Jabal Shams, both some 3000m high and located 4 km apart. My journey was to end at the South summit. The altitude was making me a bit puffy, the seaside dweller that I am. I was alone, the only person mad enough to be here at this time of the year. Some eagles circled over the Grand Canyon below, maybe looking for a fallen goat or tourist. Up here there were a few donkeys about, as evidenced by the many droppings and, well, the donkeys themselves. The donkey's call sounds like a foghorn, but more high pitched. It must be tough being a donkey up here.

By now the sun had mercifully disappeared behind clouds. Unfortunately they turned out to be storm clouds and thunder arrived, much to my discomfort. I was, after all, on the highest ridge in

Arabia, so if lightning was to strike, I figured I had an excellent chance of being the recipient. As the noise grew louder and clouds darker I ferreted out a sheltered location in a depression and behind a rock, and built my one man tent. Most of my goodies got piled inside. By the time I was finished building and panicking, the storm decided to leave me alone and moved off. Not a drop of rain, no lightning at all. It just growled off into the distance. Good boy.

With a lighter load I continued to the summit of Jabal Shams. The highest point in Arabia, this place is on nobody's wish list. No GoreTex brigades or Seven Summitters. Perhaps I would have missed it myself, that's how unremarkable it was. Just the highest point on the ridge, really. There was a government mounted plaque showing directions to other locations of no tourist interest, and some Arabic graffiti. The view down was the main attraction. The sheer 2000m drop down east side to the villages below was totally awesome. I promised myself to come back on a clear day, when there was less dust and fewer storm clouds spoiling the show.

It was after 6pm so I made my way back to the tent. I have now consumed two out of my three litres of water, plus some truly disgusting Quaker muesli bars; serves me right for being a cheap skate.

The morning dawned much clearer than the last day, and the views were again stunning. The white military radar on top of the North Summit glowed in the sun and the whole ridge was bathed in the soft golden light so beloved by photographers. The walk down was uneventful, except for the water situation. One litre was not quite enough for 4 hours in the sun, which quickly catapulted the shade temperature to the high 20s. Walking downhill is the very definition of boredom. Luckily, I happened on some juniper trees and the fruit season was on! I gorged on the tiny blue fruit, the size of a blueberry, but unfortunately with an enormous pip almost filling it up. It is very, very sweet though, almost pure sugar. While I was harvesting, a bunch of goats converged around me, and jealously eyed the fruit they could not reach but I could. There is something very crazy about a goat's eye, the full-eyeball, "loco" mad stare. That and the horns have unnerved me sufficiently to leave the juniper gully and move on. Shortly I was at the car where additional water and clean clothes were most welcome.

24 hours car to car, definitely no record, but in these conditions, I was just happy to avoid heat stroke. It would be nice to come back when it is cold, perhaps up the sheer East Face. We'll see.