

CARS AND ADVENTURES



GEOLOGIST'S PARADISE

Multilayers of rocks built up over time give clues to the history of the Al Huqf region and chronicle the changing landscape.



Destination



SOUTHERN AL HUQF

Back in familiar territory, Jerzy Wierzbicki checks out the unique landscape of the **desert in Al Wusta**, encountering camels while he's there

The gauge on my car was reading an outside temperature of 47°C and the sun was blindingly strong through the windscreen. All around was barren scenery of sand and craggy outcrops stretching as far as the eye could see. There was no sign of any civilisation. I was in my element.

Regular readers will know how much I love the desert. And the Al Wusta region, with its unique terrain and geological phenomenon, is one of the most interesting.

Some of you may be wondering why I'm visiting the desert during the summer, when the sun is at its most ferocious. I'm either slightly crazy or the weather has peaked and is beginning the slow climb down. Perhaps it's a little bit of both.

I am thorough with my preparation, though. Before I go anywhere, I research the weather and conditions I can expect. With this trip, I checked maps and spoke to some of my friends working in the oil industry, who told me Al Huqf was one of the best locations for geologists.

It was my 29th trip to the region, but this time I wanted spend two nights somewhere off the beaten track. As it's still summer, we made sure to pack extra water as we set off on Route 32 by Sinaw to Mahout, where we hit a small sandstorm. Visibility was very limited and the temperature was past 40°C. In Mahout, we refuelled and continued on to our destination, a long valley called Wadi Shital.

About 60km before the wadi, I decided on a change of plan and turned into the desert very close to Jebel Aswad. The wind was still strong, so we camped behind the shelter of a high rock that was shaped like a pyramid and settled down for the night.

The next morning, we got an early start and headed south

towards Wadi Shital. Before the wadi's entrance, we refuelled again. The main adventure was about to start. From here on in, we would be off-road. A sandy track, cutting straight through the middle of the valley, led to a huge and almost flat stony desert called Jiddat al Harasis. At the end of the wadi, we turned north and explored the southern part of Al Huqf.

The environment there is very complex. I always say to my friends that in Al Huqf, you can experience every type of desert environment in Oman in one place.

There is everything. Sand dunes of different colours and shapes, old and weathered rocks, small and natural oases, flat sandy plateaus and salty basins called sabkha.

We were ready to explore all of these and more. About 5km after leaving Wadi Shital, we pulled our cars over next to a lonely 20m-high rock that was partly covered by a sand dune. Investigating with my camera, I soon found out why Al Huqf is called a "geologist's paradise". What looked like a massive plain monolith from a distance, had a whole new perspective up close. The rock was made up of thousands of tiny thin layers, some intensely brown, giving it the appearance of a chocolate wafer. Time had left its mark with cracks and jagged edges.

We drove slowly on the sandy tracks and sometimes on the small sand dunes. After 15km, we reached a wide gap, where the sand was slightly softer and between the dunes we noticed a lot of small trees. Looking through my camera lens, I noticed something green in the distance, near another rock structure. A further 2km on, we found a small oasis with young palm trees. Their source of life is water dripping slowly from the rock. In the middle of the day, it was very hot, with the temperature hitting 47°C,



but I wanted to move on. I had a plan to reach another formation several kilometres away and one of the few locations for a night camp. On the way, we stopped near a well close to the track, which may feed the small trees dotted around the landscape.

Further on, the formations looked like the remains of the bottom of a shallow sea.

By early evening, the conditions were stunning, with a gentle breeze blowing and temperatures of 30°C. We found a great location to set up our camp and root out wood for our campfire. At night, the desert shone in the reflection of the moonlight.

Al Huqf is fascinating place with many secrets. Even after almost 30 trips there, I realise how little I know about this place. ■



HOW TO GET THERE

Al Huqf is an almost uninhabited part of Oman. There are a few small Bedouin settlements and nothing more. The desert can be unpredictable and dangerous. A 4x4 car is compulsory. Do not travel there alone. Prepare yourself properly before you set off. Be sure that you have enough fuel, water and food. There is no mobile phone reception in the desert.

GPS location of the rock formation in the story:

20° 6' 32.61" N
57° 34' 1.83" E

The Buah formation and our night camp:

20° 21' 15.68" N
57° 41' 25.53" E

TRAVEL GUIDE