

HEINKE AWARD 2022



RAS AL HAMRA SUB AQUA CLUB
SULTANATE OF OMAN



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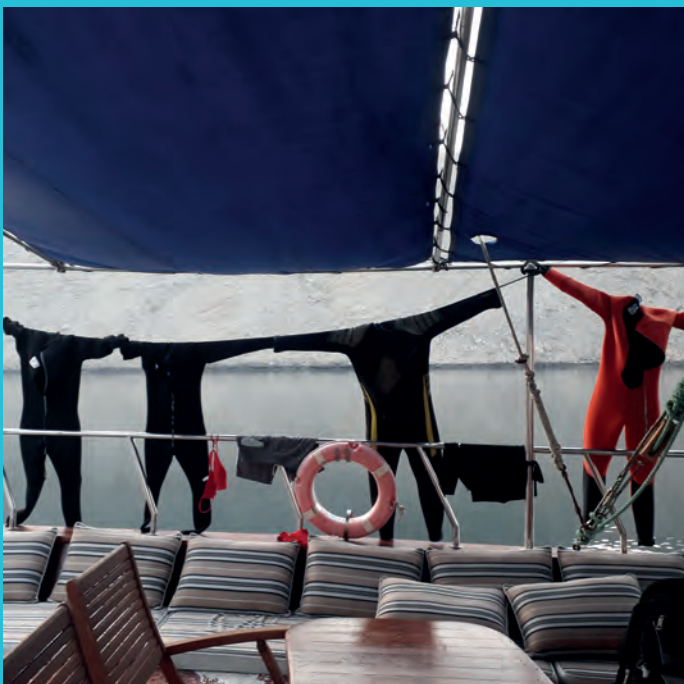
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Introduction

Ras Al Hamra Sub Aqua Club's entry

Fiona Lemaire (Chairperson)

“Find a group of people who challenge and inspire you, spend a lot of time with them, and it will change your life forever.” (Amy Poehler)

When we first considered submitting an entry to BSAC's most prestigious award; the Heinke Award we were very apprehensive. Did we, Ras Al Hamra Sub Aqua club based in Oman, have what it takes to enter and maybe even win?

Together, we carefully thought through a possible entry, taking time to reflect thoroughly on how, as a club, we had risen to the challenges of an unpredictable, constantly shifting and occasionally frightening environment. We focused on how, far from our families and home countries, we had pulled together taking on unprecedented difficulties with humour, creativity and compassion. The challenges not only included Covid-19 but also one of the fiercest storms ever to hit Oman; cyclone Shaheen in October 2021 which resulted in debilitating damage to equipment. As a club which includes many nationalities, differing cultural perspectives and skill levels, we managed to overcome these difficulties and create deep bonds and lasting friendships along the way, emerging as a stronger club.

As we assiduously considered our application for the Heinke award, we came to realise how much we had achieved despite the challenges and perhaps more importantly how much we had developed and learnt as a club, coming out from the “Covid Years” robust and healthy as a very active, fun loving and supportive club.

And so, the decision whether or not to enter the Heinke Award 2022 became very clear. Here then, is our entry from Ras Al Hamra Sub Aqua Club, Muscat, Oman.



Challenges faced in 2021

“Tough times don’t last, tough teams do”. (Robert H Schuller)

RAHSAC is an overseas BSAC branch founded in 1982 in Muscat. We operate through the Ras Al Hamra Recreation Club; a private club which provides a focal point for activities for Petroleum Development Oman staff, their families and supporting staff.

We are immensely proud of our club and all of our members as part of the wider BSAC community. We firmly believe that we have demonstrated strong resilience to unprecedented difficulties and that in rising to the extended challenges faced during the pandemic as well as coping with the damages inflicted by storm Shaheen, we have made significant and lasting contributions to the growth and development of scuba diving. This year’s Heinke award has given us the opportunity to create a lasting record of an extraordinary time.

Oman and the pandemic

As we are all too aware, Covid-19 affected and continues to have repercussions throughout the world. However, each country had very different infrastructures and policies in place to deal with it, which in turn influenced the impact on their citizens. Oman was no different in this respect.

While we can, in no way, compare the hardships suffered or claim that we were worse or better off than anywhere else, what was perhaps different for those of us based overseas, was an added sense of disquiet as we tried to navigate Covid-19 rules here as well as trying to follow developments in our home countries so we could work out if and when we could see our families again.

Most of our members are a long way from home and Oman was one of the first countries to close its borders, remaining closed for an extended period. In addition, Oman was on many countries’ “red list” finally coming off the UK’s on September 22nd 2021. Only Omani nationals and residents were allowed to enter the Sultanate until June 2021 making it extremely difficult for visitors to come here or for us to leave. On arrival there were strict quarantine rules with obligatory wrist bands tracked by the authorities.

Just like people everywhere, we experienced deep loneliness, fear and frustration. Some members here decided to split their families and send their children and spouses back to their home countries; others were unable to return to Oman, stranded in another country unsure when they could return. A few of our members didn’t see their close family for up to 3 years and most of us at least one year. Sheer distance compounded the feelings of isolation.

The vaccines arrived approximately 6 months after the first dose in the UK. Meanwhile from 1 September 2021 the Supreme Committee announced that it was strictly forbidden to enter government and private establishments including restaurants and other commercial activities, as well as attending cultural, sports and group events without a vaccination certificate. This included the club for us, resulting in many of our members being unable to dive until receiving their first vaccination. Curfews and lockdowns continued well into 2021. The last full lockdown was from July 20th 2021 until July 24th during Eid Al Adha followed by a curfew from 5pm to 4am until July 31st 2021.

<https://timesofoman.com/article/106859-fliers-can-travel-from-oman-to-united-kingdom-from-this-week>

<https://timesofoman.com/article/104230-total-lockdown-extended-in-oman-until-saturday-morning>

<https://www.omanobserver.om/article/1105611/oman/health/sc-makes-vaccination-a-must-to-enter-public-places>

<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1805816/middle-east>

Study conducted by Sultan Quaboos University:
The Impact of the pandemic on development in Oman: 20th October 2021

On the impact of the pandemic on society, Aseelah Al-Azri - Center for Humanities Research - said: "Undoubtedly, the pandemic has affected various groups of society. For example, the precautionary measures taken by the supreme committee to combat coronavirus and ban certain commercial activities are quite serious; there have been negative effects on the owners of small and medium-sized enterprises, loan holders, those laid off from work, expats who suddenly found themselves jobless, and families in need of support; other measures included the closure of places of worship, recreation, sports and tourism, the suspension of education, and confining employees to working from their homes; **all of this caused restricted movement of individuals and families, thus depriving them from leading their normal lives or performing religious social activities such as praying in mosques, holding wedding parties, funeral gatherings, visiting relatives, and family gatherings on Eid and other occasions.**"

She added: "We cannot ignore the fact that the elderly and children are especially vulnerable under these exceptional circumstances, which have forced them to stop short of engaging in many social and entertainment activities, or seeing relatives or friends. As a result, they have undergone great psychological stress, anxiety and panic."

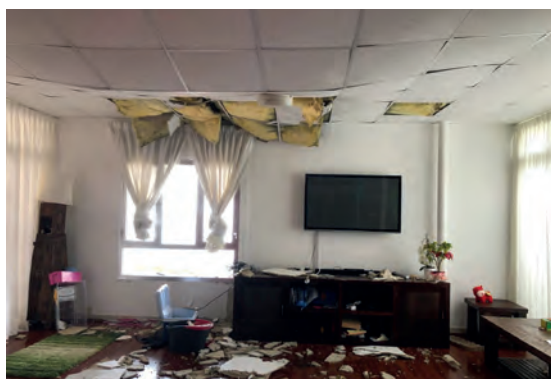
Cyclone Shaheen

On Sunday 3rd October 2021 a tropical storm battered the coast of Oman causing significant damage, flooding and 13 deaths. We received alerts before the cyclone hit and warnings to stay indoors. The winds and rain were ferocious; most of us had never witnessed such a storm. Our club secretary, living on the coastline, was evacuated during the night as the ceilings in her lounge collapsed. Luckily, she and her family were unharmed but the experience was traumatic.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-58783992>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/04/cyclone-shaheen-hits-oman-and-iran-causing-flooding-and-deaths>

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/4/uae-saudi-arabia-brace-for-cyclone-shaheen-after-oman-landfall>



Fortunately, none of our divers were harmed during cyclone Shaheen; their safety and well-being is our main priority, however the club equipment and boats sustained significant damage. Our club notice boards were completely destroyed, our boat canopies ripped and the club area required a lengthy clean up from the debris deposited. However, the most serious damage, which was to have a lasting effect on our ability to dive, was the flooding of the winch electrical box. This meant the boat winch was out of action for six months as we struggled to find a way to fix it. In the meantime, we were unable to launch our bigger boat and so had to rely on our smaller boats, reducing the number of divers. Launch and recovery were an enormous challenge each time. But we persevered and found ways to coax the winch into working enough to launch the smaller dive boats and unloaded equipment before recovery. This meant a much longer and harder start and finish to the dive day and fewer divers. But we overcame this obstacle as a team with patience and ingenuity, building our muscles along the way from all the lifting of equipment.

Strengths of RAHSAC

Working as a team

All our members have been involved in this application, making this a genuine team effort and very much a reflection of how we function as a BSAC club. The process has revealed how important a role the club plays in our members' lives and how successfully we have pulled together and adapted. Each section of the application has been written by a different member; each individual contributing in their own unique way to the overall completed application. In addition, we asked all of our members to write a couple of sentences or a short paragraph to describe what being part of RAHSAC during 2021 meant to them personally. The idea was met with customary enthusiasm and has created an energy and excitement, generating ideas and suggestions for the future. These very personal contributions reflect a spirit of togetherness.

Excellence in training

We consider our BSAC instructors and the world class level of training which they consistently provide to be the "jewel in our crown." Our highly experienced instructors are by far our most valuable asset contributing significantly to raising the profile of BSAC worldwide and to the development of scuba diving. Despite all the restrictions and difficulties posed by the pandemic, training continued apace with new methods of teaching and incredible energy and drive with outstanding results. Our members have benefitted enormously from the training provided, building on their skills and enjoyment of diving.

Membership growth

Despite the unique challenges of the pandemic, one of the highlights of 2021 for us has been the growth of our club membership. We were delighted to welcome 21 new members to BSAC from all corners of the world who will undoubtedly go on to take their scuba diving knowledge and skills, developed here in Oman, with them to wherever they are posted next or back to their home countries. Two members of our club soon moving to Australia and Italy respectively have already looked in to the BSAC clubs where they are going. In RAHSAC we have 23 different nationalities; a firm endorsement of our wide appeal.

Caring for our environment

Cyclone Shaheen brought catastrophic damage to Oman, causing fatalities and significant damage to infrastructure, property and land. Witnessing first-hand the force of the storm on the sea, we were also concerned as to what damage it might have wreaked on the marine environment and within the limits of what we are permitted to do locally, we recorded the effects of the storm on marine habitat. As far as we know, we are the only group of divers to have done this.

Resilience and adapting to change

On occasion and especially during lockdowns and after the damage inflicted by Cyclone Shaheen, we sometimes wondered what more could be thrown at us. However, we focused very much on being a welcoming, inclusive and generally fun place and on bringing people together. In addition, we are very mindful of the importance of encouraging a younger demographic and we involve our young people in our social media platforms, updating aspects of our information board including marine life and environmental issues and in welcoming their ideas and suggestions. During a time of great uncertainty and constantly shifting external rules and regulations, our club brought a much-needed sense of belonging, community and fun.

Transparency

We are very aware that a happy club and therefore successful club is one in which all members feel included, accepted and listened to. With the often opaque and sometimes very sudden rulings during Covid-19 time, it became very important to foster openness and transparency in a place where we could and for all our committee members to be approachable. We developed our methods of communication by embracing the favoured platform here in Oman of Whatsapp and Instagram to organise dives, meetings and events. With frequent external changes affecting us, we remained flexible and agile, rescheduling cancelled events as soon as we could, informing members as quickly as possible.



History of Ras Al Hamra Sub Aqua Club

Wim Vranckx (BSAC member since 1984) interviewed.

In 2021, RAHSAC celebrated its 39th anniversary; branch 1299 of the British Sub Aqua Club. While researching the history of the club, we wanted to include the voice of one of its early members in our application to bring a personal insight into RAHSAC's past.

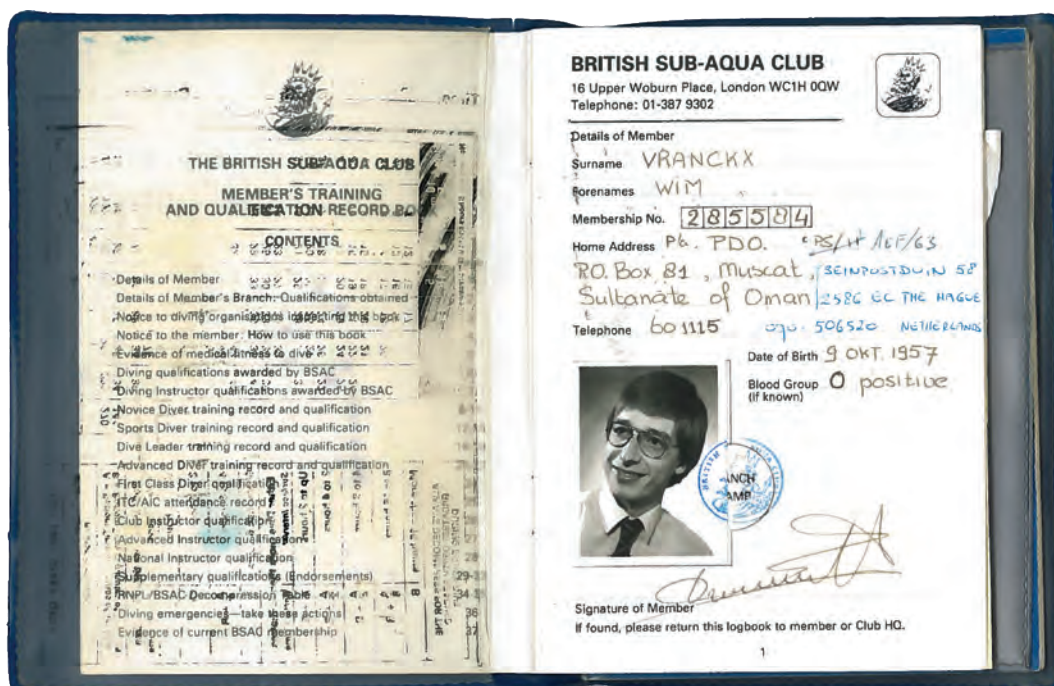
Wim Vranckx joined the branch in 1984, two years after the club was founded on the 19th May 1982 as a section of Ras Al Hamra Recreation Centre; a private recreation club for employees of Petroleum Development Oman and its associated companies. Wim has been part of the club on and off since then and has seen many changes over the years. He is a much valued and respected club member and friend. During one of his stints away from Oman he joined a BSAC branch in the Netherlands and had periods of non-diving when based in Nigeria.

When Wim joined RAHSAC, most of the original founders; Richard Keech, Frances Green, Gerard van der Schot, Mike Philip and John Elder were all still here and very active. The club started out with just 15 members and grew very quickly; we now have over 60 members. Wim fondly remembers;

“a great group of people; a bubbly, fun, very close- knit community with a real spirit of camaraderie; a spirit which is still very much present today”.

“The club atmosphere is very similar even now and the soul of the club remains the same, but there are a few differences. In 1984, the club was made up mainly of men and predominately British and Dutch expats. We had just one Omani who came along only occasionally. We also had more freedom in that there were no patrols by the Royal Omani Police coastguards, no permits required and night dives were allowed around Fahal”.

“Equipment has also changed considerably. We were still diving with “horse collars”, with no computers and only depth gauges. We went by the motto “plan the dive, dive the plan” using BSAC tables. There was no GPS so we used “dead reckoning” to find dive sites. There was a real spirit of adventure and we wanted to explore as much as we could. We were real adventurers with a collective energy to discover new places.”



Since 1982, the club has had over 13 dive boats with the newest craft Robian Nadir being commissioned in 2013. Over the years, the boats have been named after Omani fish but using the initials of a key member of the club at that time for example; Al Wahara (Crocodile fish) is named after Arie De Weerd and the boat Robian Nadir (Little shrimp) after Robin Norman both of whom spent many hours diving and caring for the boats. The club also “discovered” and dived several wrecks and spent many hours trying to recover propellers and ships lights on these new wrecks; a group of real pioneers of which Wim was very much a part.

“I have witnessed some changes in marine life. In the 1980s we always saw sharks on the South and East side of Fahal Island. We see them far less nowadays which is quite a dramatic change.

RAHSAC has always been a strong club despite divers leaving Oman every couple of years. We always feared that when people moved on we would never be able to replace them and it’s still a fear today; But miraculously other people always turned up and new characters came and went but the spirit of the club lives on.”



Glen Perry



Gerard van der Schot



Oman; our host country

“Wherever you go becomes part of you somehow.” (Anita Desai)

As our club is based in a country very different from the UK, we wanted to include in our entry a short background to our host country to give some idea of where we are based and how that has shaped us.

The Sultanate of Oman is the oldest independent state in the Arab world. It is a wonderful, welcoming and strikingly beautiful country which we are lucky to call “home” for just a few years. Until January 2020 it was ruled by Sultan Qaboos bin Said a hugely popular, innovative and cultured leader. From the age of 16 he was educated in Berry St Edmunds in the UK and later graduated from the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. He was a keen anglophile and maintained strong links with the UK throughout his reign. As Sultan, he implemented a policy of modernisation and opened up Oman internationally. His successor, Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, an Oxford graduate, continues his predecessor’s policies of peaceful relations with all nations and further developing the country.



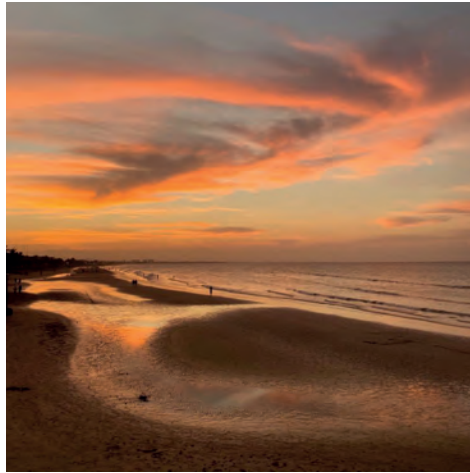
Oman is located in the Middle East on the south eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula, sharing land borders with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. It is relatively easy to get to from Europe and Asia when borders are open. It has spectacular desert, seas and mountains.

Oman is 95% Muslim and as foreigners based here who might follow other faiths or otherwise be non-religious, we must remain respectful of our host country’s beliefs and traditions. As a club, we must adhere to the regulations of RAHRC and strictly follow their policies as set out by the Supreme Committee of Oman. RAHRC has a variety of sections and activities managed by volunteer members. The dive club is the most active of all the sports sections and has close relations with the main club and other sections, helping out whenever we can in wider club events and with environmental and safety issues.



Oman's coastline

Oman has 3165 kms of incredibly beautiful, rugged coast line which remains unspoilt and largely unpopulated. Its coastline borders the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman. In the north of the country is the Musandam Peninsula with coast-line along the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf sharing maritime borders with Iran and Pakistan. Tourism in Oman remains low key and mainly attracts outdoor lovers and the slightly more adventurous. Hotel prices are high so camping is by far the best option for accommodation.



Diving in Oman

We are all very aware how lucky we are to be based here in Oman for the fantastic diving. We also know that for most of us our time here is limited to a few years so we don't take anything for granted and seize the opportunity that we have here, diving as much as we can. The conditions are mainly good throughout the year with water temperatures ranging from 20°C to 31°C. When water temperatures are cooler, it can happen that we find ourselves getting very hot and sweaty on the surface in a 7mm wetsuit but just comfortable in the water at depth. Visibility can vary from day to day or even from dive to dive; sometimes very clear and sometimes low visibility with what we refer to as "green pea soup". This is due to strong cold water upwellings which generates the rapid development of large volumes of phytoplankton. This in turn sustains the diverse and abundant range of marine life which makes the diving here so special.

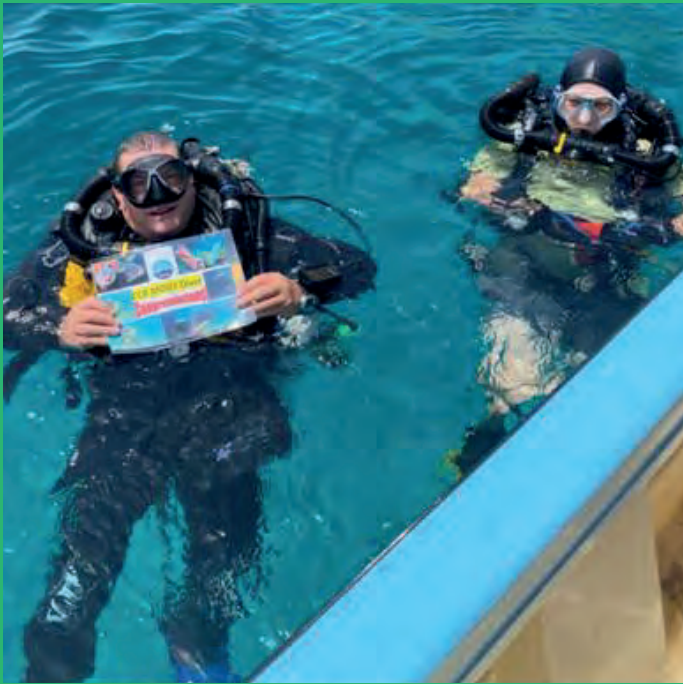


We have whaleshark migrations in the months of May and October and some of the largest turtle nesting sites in the Middle East at Ras Al Hadd, Ras Al Jinz, Masirah and the Daymaniyats. Resident turtles include green turtles, hawksbill and loggerhead. There are Arabian humpback whales and Brydes whales in the South of Oman; with some just living within Omani waters. They are indeed an incredible sight. We have super pods of dolphins; spinner and common dolphins off Bandar Khayran and when we are lucky, our home dive site, Fahal Island. A dive trip is always extra special if a pod happens to play along in the wake of one of our boats. There are black tip shark nurseries at the Daymaniyat Island Nature Reserve and also on the East Side of our very own Fahal Island as well as some sites in Bandar Khayran. We have a resident family of elegant eagle rays and occasionally are lucky enough to see leopard sharks and guitarfish as well as devil rays.

Although diving is year-round, there are rougher periods in February and July as well as November or when usual storms come in with monsoons (generally affecting India). During this time, diving may be restricted due to the inability to launch the boats on the ramp when the waves and wind come in from the North Westerly direction. Timing of dives also depends on the tides to have sufficient water to launch or recover the boats, so in the winter this can lead to some early or late starts. The wind often increases in the afternoon so we prefer to be back by 2pm generally (unless going long distance).







In normal times I travel over 350km every weekend to dive or help out as required and this keeps my sanity after working in a remote area. During covid the borders were shut for a prolonged time and diving was affected for a few months before we were able to resume with reduced capacity and wearing masks. I had previously arranged to do a PADI tech 40 CCR course in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) but that was not possible with border closures. Fortunately for me we had two Technical Diving Instructors in the club and I was able to complete the MOD 1 CCR APD course to 45m (trimix) during covid restrictions, excellent for mental health.

*John Colquhoun BSAC A206412
(A.I. 655) (Scotland)*

“As an international expat teacher who found herself in Oman during two COVID lockdowns, managing change became all-too-familiar...after all, everybody everywhere was in the same awful club, one way or another. But the fear, uncertainty and isolation of those early months made me appreciate being on a dive boat or underwater with RAHSAC somewhere so, so much. The calm of focusing on your breathing in a beautiful place that gave no thought whatsoever to all the madness and chaos above the waves was a constant, fixed haven in a shifting universe. Thank God for scuba. “

Claire Woodhouse (UK)



I am the only Omani woman diving at RAHSAC - I joined the dive club as an open water diver – the club encouraged me to develop my diving skills and become a sports diver enabling me to undertake more challenging dives. The club has always been welcoming and I have made many friends from different countries through the club and I hope to encourage other Omani ladies to join the club so they too can experience the beautiful diving my country has to offer.

Wafa Al Hadhrami (Oman)



Membership

Ann Allin (Membership Secretary)

Membership numbers

RAHSAC membership increased during 2021 to a total of 66 active members by year end including 23 different nationalities. Membership levels continuously fluctuate due to the nature of the location and the year 2021 was no exception with 7 members leaving and 21 new members joining throughout the year!

	Active	Total (Active+Expired)	Active	Total (Active+Expired)
Membership Clas	Status on 01/01/2021		Status on 31/12/2021	
Family Member	1	1	4	4
Full Member	38	42	39	39
Joint Member	10	12	12	12
Junior Member	2	2	7	7
Student Member	1	2	4	4
Total #	52	59	66	66

The increase in divers joining in 2021 is due, in part, to people's need to connect with nature during the pandemic and also as the dive club was one of the few places able to function (albeit in limited fashion) we were a place where people could meet either virtually or with Covid-19 masks. After long periods of isolation, RAHSAC was a place able to fulfil the universal human impulse of connecting with others. Above all, we provided much needed fun in otherwise grim times.

Our divers come from all over the world and include British, Dutch, Omani, Kenyan, Lebanese, Syrian, Iranian, French, Belgian, Spanish, Norwegian, American, Malaysian, Chinese, Indian, Colombian, Canadian and Australian. The international nature of RAHSAC means that we have a wide global reach with members going on to dive across the world, promoting BSAC's values worldwide.

One of the challenges RAHSAC faces is the transient nature of our members with most in a job here for only a few years and then moving on. With a very high turnover of divers our overall dive numbers have remained stable year to year at around 60 divers but the divers change. This brings in new ideas and wonderfully varied characters but also means that we spend a lot of time training new divers and bringing up everyone's skills only for them to move on. This means our instructors are continually training with the focus on trying to get more Dive Marshalls and Assistant Dive Marshalls as a few of our senior instructors and Dive Marshalls will be leaving in the near term.

One, perhaps unique, small group of members we have here is what we call our "migratory divers" who come over here for the winter and then go off to Europe or cooler climes during the summer. This has positive and negative aspects in that we are very happy when they return but miss them when they leave.

To retain the interest of senior more experienced members, we occasionally run more technical deep and challenging dives.

Welcoming new divers

We put a lot of emphasis on making new divers feel welcome to ensure that their first experiences of diving with us are enjoyable and to encourage them to continue diving with us. We arrange to meet up with divers who express an interest in joining us for a coffee or a drink to explain how we operate and to outline what they can expect. We then send out a welcome email detailing how to join BSAC and informing them of the costs involved and requirements to come along diving. We also add them to our Whatsapp groups as well as providing details of dive shops in the area so they can find out what is available here and buy a few items of their own equipment if they want. They can also rent equipment from us. We also take time to explain different types of equipment, giving advice on what to buy and how to ensure the fit is correct for masks, wetsuits and fins. New divers are assigned to an instructor for their first few dives out on the boat or until they feel completely comfortable. They often remain with an instructor or dive leader if they are still learning skills.

We update the RAHRC website for diving and regularly add photos to the RAHRC Facebook, Instagram and newsletter so all RAHRC club members know what we are seeing or the conditions. The RAHRC club has over 3000 members, not including family, who are reached through these club website and Facebook sites.



Snorkelling

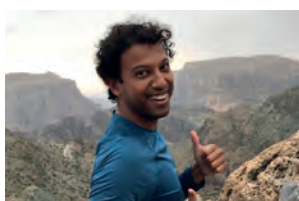
Although we don't have a specific snorkel section, we do occasionally offer snorkelling boat trips to other sections of RAHRC including the arts section who are interested in creating art pieces from what they see during the trips. During quieter periods we sometimes have space to bring along younger family members of our divers so they can get a taste of being in the sea and an idea of what diving entails. We have also conducted 2 introductory snorkelling sessions to club members' young children from the beach.

Administration

RAHSAC has a fully constituted committee as laid out in the BSAC Officer's Handbook. The Committee is made up of both BSAC required roles as well as RAHRC required roles. The committee is relatively large which allows more members to be involved and to spread the work load. It includes both new divers (ocean divers with 20 dives) and very experienced divers which gives a diverse input. We have a good balance of men and women. In 2021 we added an additional role of communications secretary to refresh the website and set up a social media account, Instagram and to manage our Facebook account. Divers' photos of their dives as well as divers' milestones are posted a couple of times a week. Our social media platforms are gaining followers and we enjoy seeing comments from our members and others. The "ordinary members" of the club are invited to give ideas and suggestions which are listened to and when appropriate acted upon. We actively encourage our more junior members to follow courses to develop within the club to be able to take on roles in the future as our more experienced divers move on. Everyone is involved in one of the rotating jobs we have on a dive day, for example keeping the records, boat cleaning, engine running, fuel refilling, signing the boats out etc. In this way, members learn all aspects of a dive day.

Our AGM falls around the time of our anniversary in the Spring and is a much looked forward to event. It is open to everyone in the RAHRC club and those that come along from other sections have commented on how enjoyable the event is; rather like a celebration of our year.

Committee 2021



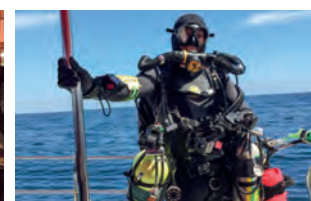
Naaman Al Busaidy
(Chairman)



Paul Brocks
(Treasurer)



Germaine Bonney
(Secretary)



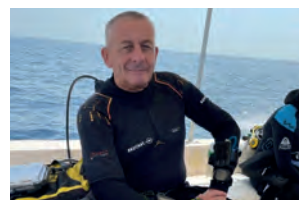
Neil Hadfield
(Diving Officer)



Angie Hadfield
(Training Officer)



Ann Allin
(Membership Secretary)



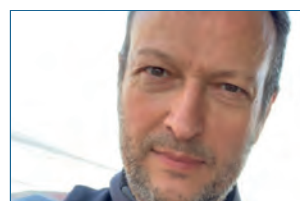
Neil Abbott
(Cylinder Officer)



Jamie Stewart
(Boat Officer)



Gareth Simmonds
(Social Secretary)



Jan Briers
(Equipment Officer)



Hayley Kennedy
(Communications)

All committee meetings are held at the recreation club in the available meeting rooms. The committee met as a minimum on a quarterly basis where each committee member shares an update and overview of any outstanding actions. Minutes are issued after each meeting with the list of actions and action parties. In addition, extra meetings were organised to discuss specific maintenance issues for example boat leaks, engine and fuel issues and compressor issues to allow more focus on what needs to be done to fix the issues. We “pencil in” meetings for the year ahead and confirm following meetings at each one.

A couple of the committee meetings focused on when we could increase capacity for diving again as cases of Covid-19 were reducing in Oman after lock downs in July 2021. We needed to demonstrate safe practices for diving and updated our Covid-19 procedures (which had to be submitted to the RAHRC president for approval) for example: wearing face masks on the boats (unfortunately in Oman we had to wear facemask when even outside all the time) and not using each other’s equipment and ensuring that hire equipment was sterilized and not used for at least 3 days after a dive trip and limiting diver numbers on the boats. We had many dives oversubscribed so we had to make a priority system to ensure divers were able to come on at least 1 trip each weekend while having enough dive managers and Cox’n with a limited boat capacity of 6-8 divers (depending on the government regulations during the year).

The committee needed to also clarify a way that divers who did catch Covid-19 following recovery could get back to diving. This was very challenging as we do not have any approved dive medical referees in Muscat. We tried through our usual DMC contact Doctor (who has signed off many of the divers from our club), however, at the time further tests for lung capacity were required which could not be carried out in Oman. This made it very frustrating especially for 1 diver who runs ironman competitions and had most definitely fully recovered as he could run 30km in 40°C (probably fitter than all the other divers combined!) Yet he was not allowed to dive for several months. We were all relieved when the new recovery rules came into place in 2022. We also had to ensure that all members had updated to the new medical forms before joining the diving.

The branch documents including diving guidelines and dive manager procedures were all updated in 2020 during the lock downs. The dive manager checklists and dive manager club guidance presentation were refreshed in 2021 as we had more dive leaders coming through who needed to gain more experience managing dives and understanding the dive sites.

The committee was also involved in reviewing the potential redevelopment of the Ras Al Hamra club, specifically for the update of the diving facilities. The initial designs unfortunately were not practical so the engineers in the diving committee first reviewed the current facilities and room layout and then redesigned it. We returned to the redevelopment team with full plans and layouts for an improvement of the club facilities. We also highlighted a number of concerns for car access for loading heavy equipment, boat manoeuvring and launch and recovery of the boats on a new ramp, also concerns for the new ramp placement based on our knowledge of the bay from many dives and watching how the sand moves during storms and winter time when the low tides are in the morning making launching challenging.

Dive Planning

The Dive focal point / social meeting is held at the boat club bar every Wednesday evening at 8pm and gives all divers a chance to make requests and see what dives are planned for the weekend as well as relax and have midweek drink. However, during lock downs this was held virtually.

All dive information is posted on the dedicated Whatsapp group. Divers then reply directly to the Dive Marshall to tell them they are coming and if any equipment or training is requested. We have a second Whatsapp group for all photos and dive chat information, any kit sales or if we are making large equipment orders for example or torches, DSMBs, reels, O-rings etc.

Information

During the pandemic it became even more important to have clear communication via different methods and this is an area we developed and improved. In Oman Whatsapp is used to communicate with almost everything ranging from medical appointments, restaurant bookings and business appointments. At RAHSAC we have adopted this method of communication to arrange dives, social events and general information.

We also have two notice boards outside the dive room with a year ahead forward planner to communicate dive planning and events. We have information about marine life which we encourage younger members to update and change every month. We display member's photographs and celebratory milestones on the boards which become quite a focal point not only for our divers but for passers-by. We have a map of our most visited dives sites with pictures of all the marine life and underwater features to be seen. Members enjoy seeing the monthly update of our calendar featuring one of our divers.

Within the dive room, we have all our health and safety regulations, emergency procedures and dive management plans in prominent positions which constantly remind us about actions to take.

Promotion

We haven't actively needed to promote RAHSAC as word of mouth of a friendly, very active club seems to bring more interest than we can actually accommodate. We offer shore dives for those interested to get back into diving. Under RAHRC club rules we are not permitted to promote RAHSAC externally.





During Covid-19, at some point everybody needed motivation. For me RAHSAC played a big role at that time. Diving with them has helped me to get over those stressful days. I've started to treat dives as a kind of meditation. When I needed time to ground myself, I used to dive with them; The team themselves are so cheerful & supportive and with the extra safety measures taken into account, we were able to keep diving despite the situation that was going on.

Fady Hamde (Lebanon)

During the COVID period my family were back in the UK - the dive club became a much bigger part of my life; I went from diving a couple of times a month to diving both days most weekends and never missing a DFP. This also facilitated other members in similar situations to meet and many friendships were formed which helped us get through the pandemic.

Gareth Simmonds (UK)



Joining as a newbie in 2014, I never expected diving to become such a huge part of my life. How to describe RAHSAC for me? Well, I went from 4 to 400 dives and became Dive Leader along the way which sums it up nicely. This strong affiliation enabled me the honour to serve as chair during a historical moment in life... Covid times!! The club became a rock for so many, and all the way through 2021, I felt a duty to ensure our members could feel safe and enjoy diving during those tough, restricted times - providing me a strong sense of purpose, responsibility and most of all, fulfilment.

Naaman Al Busaidy (Oman)



Diver Training

Angie Hadfield (Training Officer)

We have 4 highly experienced instructors based in Oman who are fully active and also have our “migratory” instructors who teach whenever they are here. We are very fortunate to have instructors who can teach the full range of BSAC courses from Ocean diver to Advanced diver, to boat handling, ADP, Twin set, Open Circuit sports/ Explorer mixed gas and Closed Circuit MOD1/MOD2 courses and gas blending.

We take a good deal of time with our training and preparation for exams as well as practical lessons. For the majority of our divers, English is not their first language so we have to double check understanding to ensure safety. At times this creates great fun as we try to explain English words and introduce local content so divers fully understand what they are doing or seeing in the context of our diving in Oman. For example, a dry suit is something quite alien to divers who may never have seen one, so when a few divers use them in the winter months we have to explain how they work and what the difference is.

Diver training is generally continuous within the club with divers learning new skills, for example DSMB skills and navigation even if between official sports diver courses. DSMB training is essential as there are many other water users from pleasure craft to fishermen to jet skis most with no concept of divers or diver safety so all our divers must surface with a SMB or DSMB. Virtually every weekend dive trip has training ongoing for sports diver or dive leader or boat handling.

Water Work

We have not had access to a pool due to Covid-19 for diver training so we have not been able to complete any ocean diver training. Instead we encourage interested divers to become certified with a local dive operator and then come diving with the club. This supports the local economy and builds good relationships. We completed over 20 refresher shore dives in 2021 for new and experienced divers who had not been in the water for some time, often many years. The RAH bay shore diving can also be used for sheltered water exercises to 5m.

Theory lessons

Theory sections of diver training courses are conducted in the evenings over 1 or 2 weeks and then practical sessions are arranged at the weekends depending on instructor availability. Any diver who would like training comes to the dive social meeting on a Wednesday night to discuss options for completing lessons. The dive manager can then advise which day to sign up for depending on instructor availability, level of other divers and the depths of sites planned.

In between various lock downs, training was started with some of the dive leader theory conducted via Zoom with 3 new trainees in different countries while some were in quarantine so that as soon as they returned they could start the practical sessions.

Courses

Dive leader

4 dive leaders were completed in 2021 (from previous courses). But with the high turnover of divers one promptly left the country straight after finishing.

Sports Diver

We had another large group of 11 sports divers begin their training in 2021. 6 completed their training in 2021, as well as a few from 2020. The sports diver rescue skills were conducted in the sea of the RAH bay (instead of in the pool) which made the development of initial skills more challenging but more realistic before attempting rescues with full equipment during the dives.

Nitrox, Advanced Diver and AED refreshers

We also completed 1 nitrox training and continued an Advanced diver training especially focusing on some of the deeper, more challenging dives, dive managing and planning and executing club expedition trips. We completed AED and O2 admin refresher practicals (using our AED trainers and 3 old oxygen administration kits that we use just for training, to ensure the real kit is clean and ready to go in case of emergency). We completed Dive leaders / Advanced divers (which also supported running of the Rescue management scenarios) in batches of 3 (due to Covid-19 restrictions) and then cleaned and left the equipment for 5 days before the next batch. Care was taken for rescue skills so that where possible husband and wife teams were each other's casualty or where a pair were in the same work bubble (no face contact made and masks kept on at all times).

Trimix Rebreather

We conducted our first in-house trimix rebreather training course using the newly issued MOD1 course and so were able to give feedback to the BSAC technical team on how it went. This ran over several weekends and created a lot of interest within the club; onlookers were fascinated to see how divers with so much kit could get off the boat! Currently there are very few technical divers in Oman so we are lucky to be able to conduct open and closed-circuit technical training and have access to the facilities to make it possible.

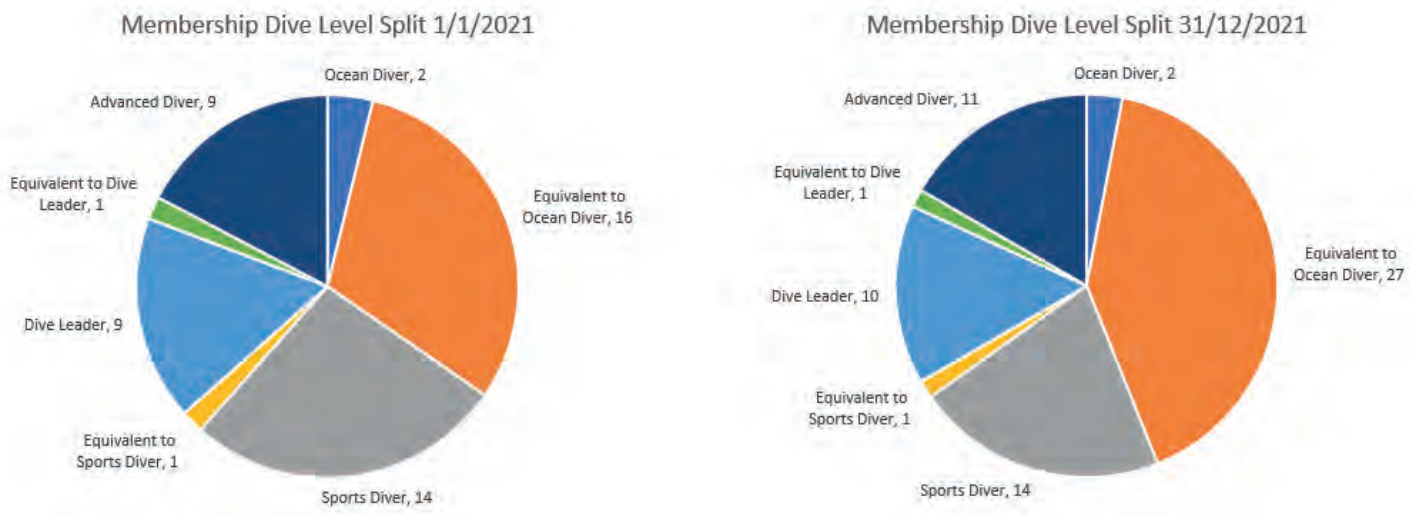
Boat Handling

A Boat handling course was completed for 4 divers focusing on dive leaders who can then support as a dive manager and coxswain. At first, they are an assistant cox'n joined by a boat handling instructor who can continue to give advice as the boat handler gains experience and confidence. We practised on the main dive boat as well as having some fun on a small tiller rescue craft. The practical sessions are spread out to fit in with normal diving activities so most boat handlers receive more than the required 2 hours minimum experience.

Qualifications

We have many levels of diving abilities, ranging from those that come to us with Open Water and 4 dives through to advanced divers with over 3,000 dives, 7 of which are also advanced instructors (but not all active) and 2 of which are also technical rebreather diving instructors. So, we have a very strong diving community with experienced divers assisting new divers.

The split of dive levels within the club has changed significantly since the start of the Covid pandemic with the end of 2021 seeing a reasonably even split between Ocean Diver, Sports Diver, and Dive Leader/Advanced Diver. All the Ocean Diver level members having joined during Covid times, 3 in 2020 and 15 in 2021.



Equipment

We are very fortunate to have 2 main dive boats each capable of taking 10 divers, a mono-hull and a catamaran both with twin 140hp outboard engines, 2 Bauer compressors and 2 air banks (consisting of a total of 9 large cylinders we can fill to 275bar) connected to 10 filling whips in a water bath, oxygen and helium is available for technical diving. We also occasionally have access to an older dive boat now used by the fishermen and a small craft which can take 4 divers in calm conditions if we have a large number of divers or just 2 buddy pairs.

We have 11 BCDs for rental and in 2021 purchased an additional XS and XXS BCD to cater for our junior members. We have 20 regulators and rotate these so 10 are out at a time so they can be serviced depending on use and last service date, Interstage pressures are checked every 6 months. At the start of the busy dive season each BCD/regulator is tested to ensure there are no leaks or issues.

We have around 80 club Cylinders (a mix of aluminium and steels) which are all tagged with their next service date. They are regularly checked and logged in a spreadsheet and in 2021 over 20 were hydrotested and valves refurbished. We also have 4 club 5.5L stages to have a separate alternate air sources for deeper dives and for use during training for the accelerated decompression procedures course.

O-ring changes are completed as required when instructor/senior divers notice any issues. We also have 8 computers and 2 torches for rental, the torches have been a great success especially for night dives – but we have had to make a rule that torches must be clipped on and not removed as one was already lost! We advise our new divers to purchase their own mask, fins and wetsuits.

For safety equipment we have 3 oxygen kits (11L Aluminium cylinders of oxygen) which are checked monthly and before each dive which cater for both conscious and unconscious casualties. We have a defibrillator that is stored in a waterproof case, with towel, razor and snips, this is taken out on each dive trip. We have 2 sets of trauma kits (for major injuries eg propeller / boat injuries and first aid kits (for minor injuries eg stings/urchin spines or seasickness).

We take a spare kit bag on the boat which has a spare BCD, regulator, fins, masks and at least 4 snorkels in case we see a whaleshark and the divers forget their snorkels!

We also have 2 AED training sets and 3 older Oxygen kits that we use with our 3 resuscitation dummies to allow skills development with a very old dummy that we use on the boat or beach when training.

All the equipment is stored in air- conditioned rooms consisting of a compressor room, cylinder room, dive room office and dive equipment room.



Maintenance

We carry out a significant proportion of boat and diving equipment maintenance ourselves as we are lucky to have experienced divers who also know about compressors, boat engines, and electrical consoles. This involves a lot of manual labour to repair seats, engines, bilge pump replacement, fuel tank repairs in up to 45°C heat (those that manage on the side lines have to provide drinks on demand for the workers!). We complete our own compressor filter changes and gas quality tests. However, for specific engine or compressor servicing we use local contractors.

A broken winch

Following Cyclone Shaheen the boat winch broke down. The winch is required by diving, fishing and sailing, so only a few small boats could be launched and not the main dive boats. So, an interim solution had to be found which involved pulling together all our members skills from instrument engineering, brain storming alternative ways to launch/recovery eg with a 4x4, negotiation skills with the RAH club committee to raise the priority to fix the issue and identifying replacement parts ourselves and attempting to keep a boat out on a mooring which was a concern with winter storms. In the end this took 6 months to resolve, and meant sometimes it could take an hour to launch a dive boat which usually takes only 20mins.

Engine repairs and a rebuild following water ingress in 1 of the dive boat's starboard engine. The water ingress was traced to the starboard fuel tank, by draining fuel on both sides to see if any water entered which could indicate water build up over time, flooding the deck and see if any water goes to the starboard bilges or comes out of the fuel tank - water did come out of the fuel tank hence leak could be from fuel gauge float assembly or a hole in the tank. We finally found a small hole where a screw had been drilled in from the deck and just entered the fuel tank so finally we could make permanent repair. We also had to get a new canopy for the boat following storm Shaheen.

We had to hunt down a potential Compressor pipework leak or an airbank leak so we performed leak tracing on all air bank cylinders and connecting pipework. We tighten pipework and replaced the over pressure relief valve to resolve the issue.

AW hull leak required Fibreglass repairs to suspected leak areas which once completed then required sea trials to ensure the repairs were sufficient to be able to take the boat long distances again.





Being part of RAHSAC in 2021 was an amazing experience on so many levels. Firstly, it allowed me to rekindle my love of diving after a long absence. The frequency of the club dives and the access to great instructors and courses allowed me to greatly improve my confidence in the water and gain new skills and expertise. I am a much better diver from my time with RAHSAC.

Secondly and even more important, is the friendships I have made through diving with the club. I have made many amazing friends at the club, folks from different backgrounds and age groups, whom I wouldn't have gotten to know otherwise.

Graham Congdon (Canada)

It was so fantastic that we were able to continue diving with BSAC in Muscat over most of the covid restrictions! Even with masks on and distancing on the boat, so less divers could join, it helped me keep sanity when we could hardly enjoy any other activities. Being able to socialize with other divers was really important during these hard times.

Irene Gomez (Basque Country)



In Covid times it was great that the club did everything they could to continue organising diving trips taking the required pre-cautions. For me it meant the opportunity to enjoy the outdoors, doing something I love, as a necessary break from the entire week working from home and hardly moving away from my headset and laptop.

Mieke Kosters (Netherlands)



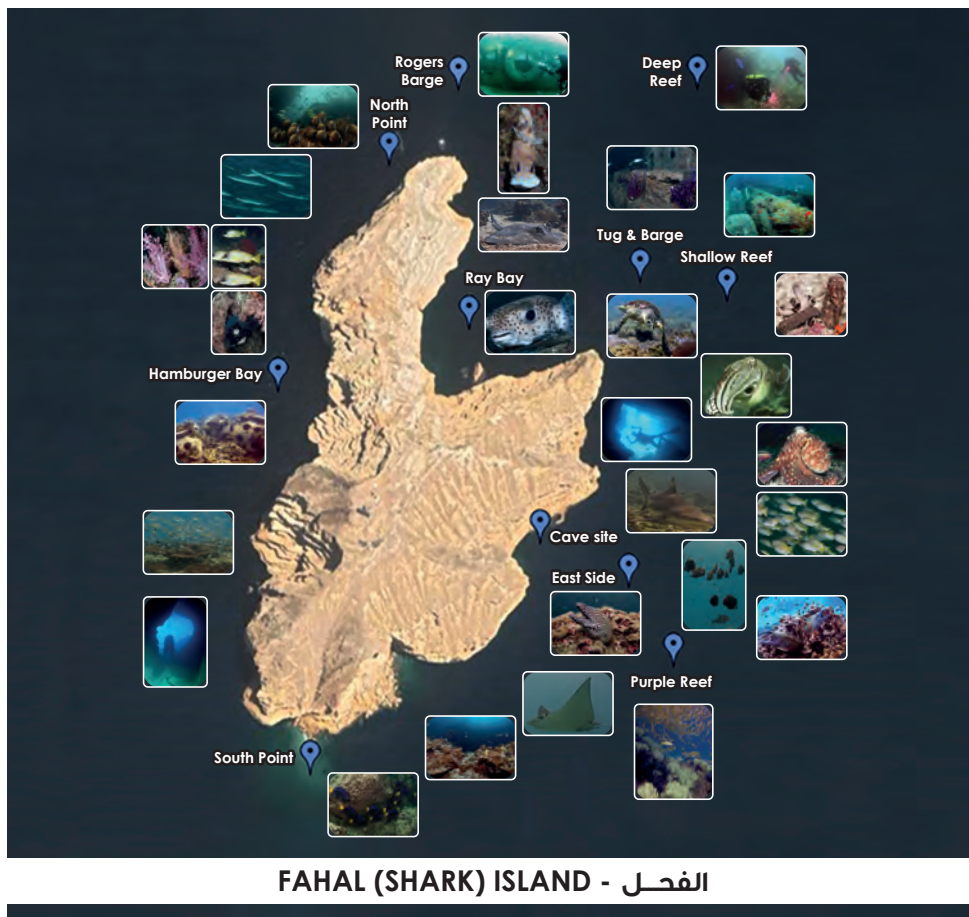
Diving activities

Neil Hadfield (Diving Officer)

Club Dives

We are extremely lucky here in Muscat to have diving right on our doorstep from shore diving, just off the Ras Al Hamra bay (RAH bay) to our main dive site; Fahal Island (5km offshore of the RAH Bay) We consider Fahal Island our “home dive site.” It can be dived all year round and is just a 10-minute boat trip from our launch spot and has a wonderful variety of dives available including a cave swim through, sheltered bays and conditions for all levels of diving.

Depending on the weather, there is always a sheltered side. Depth ranges from 3-5m in some shallow areas to 45m off the North Point walls, this gives good opportunities for depth progression as our divers develop.



We have over 40 known dive sites with the majority being around Muscat, Bandar Khayran (45mins boat ride away) and The Daymaniyats nature reserve (1 hour boat ride away).

There is also diving in the North of Oman from Musandam and in the South from Mirbat.

As a dive club we have around 8 regular Marshals and cox's so diving can take place most of the year even when many people take annual leave. We offer boat dives both days at the weekend (Friday and Saturday here) as well as a mid-week dive (Tuesday) with options for shore dives on Monday or Wednesdays. We also dive during public holidays. The majority of dives are open to all qualification levels as we can manage deeper and shallower dives on the same day depending on instructor / dive leader availability.

Approximately every six weeks, we offer more challenging dives to our more experienced divers to give the dive leaders and technical divers some fun when they are not leading ocean divers including 45m reefs and 50m wrecks all of which were dived in 2021.

Weather permitting, we try to let divers know well in advance so that our less experienced divers can arrange other activities.

In 2021 a total of 2368 Dives were completed safely.

This included **119 boat dive** days using 2 club boats a total of 2150 dives, diving over 20 different local sites.

There were some clear favourites with 52 dives on East side, with 30 dives conducted on Ray bay, Hamburger and Shallow reef. Where we can dive depends on the local conditions and expected current and visibility which can be hard to predict!

More than 30 keen divers made more than 10 dive trips in the year, with 10 really keen divers making over 30 trips and some up to 90 trips in the year! We have an average of 9 divers on each dive day trip.

We also completed **218 shore dives** (62 days diving) the majority just from our Ras Al Hamra bay exploring the right and left sides. All of our new divers complete a shore dive to refresh their dive skills (as many did not dive for a long while and especially not during early Covid-19 days) and see how the club works, before they come on a busy boat dive, often learning how to kit up and check their own equipment instead of a commercial dive operation doing it all for them!. This gives us the chance to really see how a local dive site changes over time and check on the local wildlife for example watching a new baby moray eel find a new home and grow over the year, or finding nudibranch season on the sponges or how an anemone moves after a storm to a new location.

We completed 5 night dives in the RAH bay with 8 to 16 divers each time, generally the highlights include rays and octopus and lots of sleeping fish. We also managed a few after work dives where divers who had time to prepare the boat and cox were ready to launch for when divers coming straight from work jumped on the boat for a quick single dive to return before sunset.

We also explored a number of shore dive sites a few hours down the coast in the Ras Al Hadd area (renowned for turtles – this trip did not disappoint as the group saw mating turtles) and Crown Peninsula (great for spotting lobsters), which is great for aspiring advanced divers to plan trips and make plans which require total self-sufficiency of equipment and a good understanding of anticipated weather and conditions.

As travel restrictions made travel overseas extremely difficult, our focus became much more “home based” we arranged club trips to other locations within Oman. The trips had very good participation to explore lesser dived locations such as Musandam Peninsula (2 club trips) and also to the South of Oman which has seasonal diving in between the Khareef (monsoon) in Mirbat. Being unable to travel overseas, brought the positive aspect of making the most of the place we live.

Each year we do an Omani National Day dive – which generally involves trying to get all the divers to hold the Omani flag and pause their breathing at the right moment. This is always harder than it sounds (similar to herding cats). Also, we try to do Christmas Eve or Christmas Day dives (in 2021 we did both) as a social group, and everyone really enjoyed mince pies and special homemade American Peppermint cookies during the surface interval.

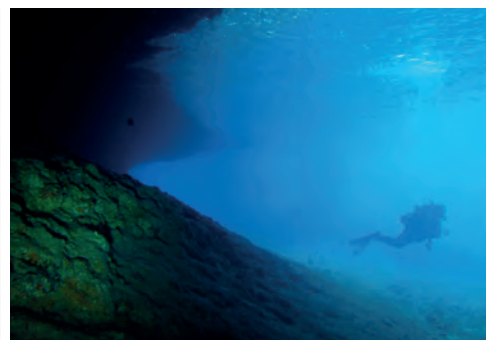
We like to celebrate divers' achievements with milestones from 50 dives to 3500 dives in 2021 – as it gives a team photo opportunity and cake duties for the diver! This also applies to divers celebrating their birthdays underwater, again ending up with cake duties or a round of drinks after the diving is completed.

We log all our dives in a folder in our dive room and transfer this to a spreadsheet for further analysis. We add any special mentions of sharks, rays (especially eagle rays) or turtles and get to know our turtles mainly by the barnacles on their backs and 1 who has a missing flipper. Some are extremely friendly and like being photographed!

Arrangements for risk assessment, safety and emergency procedures

Our dive day starts with each diver preparing their own kit and loading the boat with spare fuel, safety equipment and checking the engines. Then once everyone is ready we do a dive briefing which includes all the buddy pairs, expected conditions and dive sites, the roles of divers on return to clean the boat, refuel and fill cylinders and then **reminders on the safety and emergency procedures (including safety, decompression stops, use of DSMBs, separation procedure and diver recall)**. We then push the boat out to the ramp and launch with the winch. Once the trailer is safely back in place we all go down to the beach and board the boat. **Lifejackets** are used during the boat transits to site and on return. Each buddy pair conducts their own **SEEDS brief and then a buddy check** before entering the water. We then usually dive in waves unless a dive manager/cox'n is giving surface cover eg. for after work dives.

Our key area of **safety focus** is to remind divers when pushing out the trailer with a 3-4 tonne boat to mind their toes on the jockey wheel and the axel wheels as the boat is moving. During the diving the main concern is keeping track of the divers especially on days where there are strong currents to ensure divers do not get drifted off the island. Divers are briefed to put up their DSMB if currents are strong. We maintain a very stringent recording of divers' entry and expected exit time. All our divers are encouraged to look out for bubbles, and be very aware of expected surfacing time of fellow divers.



Expeditions

In early December 2021 we planned a scouting expedition trip to Masirah, an island off the Omani coast about half way down the country.

The aim of the expedition was to see the viability of dive shore sites and to see if the famed coral heads that were mentioned on the marine chart were still there. The island can only be dived from November to March generally as it is too windy and rough at other times. Two days diving with a total of 4-5 dives were planned to cover the south eastern side of the island and 1 on the south western edge. 7 intrepid divers and snorkelers made the 6 hour drive down to the ferry port to make the 1 hour crossing with the local goats and camels! Divers had to go fully prepared as there are no dive operators or facilities on the island. The cars were full and we decided that hiring a house rather than camping would be sensible to ensure we could fit enough dive kit in! (it also meant a hot shower at the end of the day could be really enjoyed).



The arrival afternoon was used to drive round the southern coast of the island and mark on a GPS potential dive site access points based on our proposed sites from the chart (the island is approximately 95km long and 12km wide). This led to some changes in sites as some appeared to have no car access or were sheer cliff to get into the water while others just seemed to have too much sand to have any reef at the location. A plan was then formulated that evening for the next day's diving the role of surface cover and snorkelers / divers' routes discussed. Dives were kept shallow with a maximum of 7m due to the lack of medical facilities on the island.

The plan and safety aspects were then reconfirmed on the morning after final scouting of the proposed entry and exit points. For the first 2 dives the divers were stunned at the amazing hard coral in just 5m, this meant that during a snack break, snorkelers could then be redirected to find some nice locations too. The currents were strong in certain areas especially near the drop offs and meant getting back to the start where the shore cover was expecting us was quite tiring. We then set off round the island to see if there were any further possibilities for diving the Western side of the island before planning the second days diving. 3 dives were planned on the second day which started with a great but very different dive on a wall and rock channels on the south western edge, here there was no coral only rocks and sand – the highlight was 4 large golden catfish, a school of trevally and mini canyon like swim throughs. The second dive was back on the Eastern edge, as no further western side dives sites were found on this trip (all required a boat or the entry was not considered safe enough with cylinders). The coral was good but there were few fish and it was a very long swim to get to the exit point! The final dive was near a fishing boat launch area, however this dive was aborted after 15minutes due to the silty bottom, poor visibility and lack of coral despite a promising rocky out crop.

During both days we had a lot of local interest in what we were doing as the main activity on the island is fishing and for tourists kite surfing. They wanted to show us their fish while we were trying to tell them what we had seen! They did mention that there are more reef ledges offshore but there were also strong currents and often large waves.

Conclusions from the expedition – all dives conducted safely, yes definitely there are some amazing hard coral areas which could be surveyed during another club trip, there is also potential for boat diving as we learnt there are offshore reefs and a small wreck but good surface cover would be required due to the strong currents. We were glad to find the specific Oman anemone fish (only found in the South of Oman and not in Muscat), many nudibranches and a variety of fish. However, the larger fish were noticeably absent. We also recognised we need to take much stronger booties to be able to cope with the sharp rocky entries or exits! A short video was made of the dive sites and corals found.



In December 2021, a mini expedition was also completed diving 6 dive sites in the Hasik and Mirbat areas, this involved camping in the Hasik area as there are no facilities except a fishing village – all needed to be accessible from the car and, learning from our previous experience, we took thick booties. So as usual the divers needed to be fully self- sufficient.

The aim of the trip was to decide if it was worth bringing a larger group to dive the sites. The outcome was mixed with 3 dives Hasik South (new dive site), the china wreck and Camel rock (new dive site) were very good, for the other 3 dives there was significant swell, a lot of seaweed and visibility was not the best. While looking for car access to another know dive site called Aquarium we found that this has now been totally cut off with the building of a massive army base, so that one of the better sites in the area can now not be dived at all! The highlight of the trip was finding the dolphins in the dolphin bay and being able to snorkel. A short video was made of the dolphin encounters and Hasik/Mirbat sites.



Another full club expedition was completed to the Western Daymaniyats 18km offshore in March 2021 for 2 days' diving. The aim was to dive sites not regularly dived, the 2 dive boats had to be moved from their usual location to the start point as there is not usually diving from this area. This was part of an advanced diver training using commercial operators for boats and staying at a hotel an hour up the coast. A total of 20 divers joined the trip, the dive site briefing was given by the commercial operator but the main dive briefing was given by the advance diver trainee. The boat drivers and Dive masters seemed to find it quite entertaining when all the buddy pairs completed a full buddy check before getting in the water. (We find this happens a lot when we go in groups to commercial dive centres as buddy checks do not seem to be normal!) All divers enjoyed the trip and the dive manager discovered that you cannot always rely on a commercial operator to provide reliable equipment or safe leading skills on day 1, and so had to make changes for day 2 to ensure divers felt comfortable to dive in more remote locations. This was a good learning experience.



DAYMANIYAT NATURE RESERVE



During the early Khareef season in July 2021 a scouting trip was made to Ras Al Hadd area to try and find new suitable locations for shore dives. Three potential sites were found all requiring a 4x4 with full off road capability to access the sites. In addition, 2 dives were made in the usual sheltered sites to see turtles and rays.

We also completed 2 club trips to Musandam in April 2021, staying on a dhow (traditional Omani boat) in the fjord region. The trips involved 2 days diving with a commercial dive operator from the dhow, with 10 divers attending each trip. This allowed some divers to complete their 1st night dives in one of the fjord bays. It also allowed the divers to gain some valuable experience in coping with strong currents (similar to those often encountered in the Maldives or Bali). The water was cool and the visibility very variable, however, the highlight for a couple of divers was seeing a Mola Mola being cleaned. We were also able to see the endemic humpback dolphins that play near the dhow when moving through the Fjords. This was a very social trip with divers who also have musical talents bringing guitars and encouraging an evening singsong! A short video was made of the marine highlights.

MUSANDAM PENINSULA

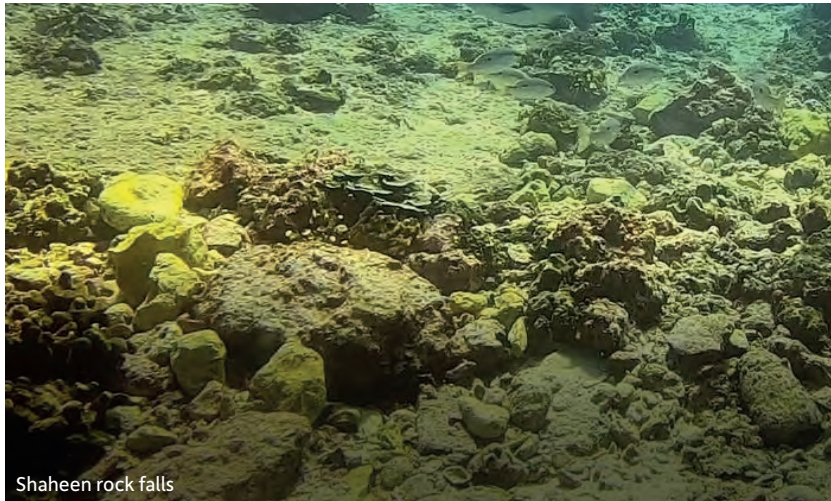
Oman



Scientific/environmental

In early October 2021, the Omani coast was hit by a devastating cyclone just north of Muscat. As divers we were very keen to see the impact of the storm on our Fahal island dive sites. So, a week after the storm and with the power restored temporarily to allow light boats to be launched by the winch at the RAHRC, we set out to video the damage to create a record of the changes to then go back and see how and if the coral has recovered or if algae would take over.

There was significant hard coral damage on East Side, with coral heads tipped upside down, coral fingers ripped off, lots of rock falls – the new rock falls being easy to see as it was bright yellow and white and sand covering a lot of hard coral areas. All the soft coral was gone from Hamburger rocks (fortunately this has already fully returned). However, in some ways we were very pleased that the damage was not as bad as previous storms and that the fish were still around. The Daymaniyats another popular location was more strongly hit and received a lot of reef damage which is still not recovering.



We also had to reattach buoys in the bay to allow mooring of safety boats for sailing. We tried to locate missing mooring ropes and chains as a number were now completely buried (30cm deep) in the sand – unfortunately not all could be found with the significant shift in sand (whole areas of the bay were suddenly devoid of sand and other areas including on the boat launching ramp were covered in sand, which made launching and recovery of boats very challenging. We also recovered mobile buoys which had ended up in the bay.

When shore diving in the bay to the right side where we have a wall overhang, this is usually home to many fish, rays, batfish and an anemone. However, we found the overhang full of rubbish, debris (large rocks, wood, metal) and sand. It took many weeks for the debris to be moved away with the tides (we collected rubbish where we could) so eventually the fish could move back in, however the anemones and several others in this area all moved to new locations. To the left side of the bay a turtle sleeping place had been destroyed, so we did not see turtles in that area for a number of months. We have continued to monitor the sites and will review in 2022.

We all have to have dive permits from the ministry of the Environment and occasionally we drop in to see the team to find out what's happening. The ministry aims to set up more artificial reefs and we let them know of some of the environmental impacts we are seeing such as an increase in crown of thorns, level of bleaching, imbalances in fish life as well as a sudden increase in the number of file fish due to an explosion in jelly fish or the effect of green / red tides. We work with them to recover ghost nets (with their permission) which have frequently occurred on Fahal as local fishermen fish on all the reefs and have priority over diving.

As a club we were requested to give a presentation to local school children on the marine life and impacts and changes we are seeing in Oman as we dive. We were able to share some photos/videos as well as a presentation on Omani diving and give them an idea of the wildlife and impacts we see from over fishing, building activities and changes in the water over time for example: Large number of jelly-fish in April 2020 (sign of low oxygen content in the sea), Large number of grey filefish 2020/21 – an ecosystem imbalance, Crown of thorns invasion 2014/15 & 2020/21. A lack of seahorses for last few years (used to be regularly sighted). Huge increase in Omani fishing catches including that of shark fins. Huge fish trawling fleets eg Ras Madrasah (previously foreign fleets seen ~10years ago). Significant coral reef storm damage from Cyclones Gonu & Phet, also Tourism increasing and there are a large number of building projects & new roads. Finally we included where we feel they could support with their families (eg ensuring to pick up their rubbish after a picnic). This presentation was well received and the children went to complete a project to decide how they would improve things.



RAHSAC supported a local film production company with videographers flying in from South Africa and Canada who were making programmes on the marine life in Oman, as a club we were able to show the videographers the best sites and give recent locations for certain animals that they wished to video, and provide support to the cameramen filming in the Muscat area over several weeks. We also provided dive kit to one cameraman as he could not bring his kit in his luggage with over \$20,000 of filming equipment! As well as providing our usual hospitality and accommodation for a few days! We are hoping to see the outcome and some familiar dive sites in 2023!

Our club has excellent relationships with the local commercial dive operators and they use our mooring and shot buoys when we are all on Fahal. We have also assisted in dropping shots on remote reef locations and wrecks as we have an echosounder which the dive operators do not have. We have also proposed different dive sites for deeper technical diving as we dive the sites regularly.

We take part in beach clean ups and collect rubbish from the reef on a regular basis, RAHSAC signed up for the Mile Clean Project in 2021. Plastic bottles and cans are unfortunately a very regular feature and divers come up with pockets stuffed with rubbish that we then dispose of onshore. In 2021 we collected around 20kg of rubbish. We see numerous turtles (both hawksbills and green turtles are common) and we have had to cut out of nets dying turtles as well as seeing some washed ashore which is distressing for the divers involved. This is one area we would like to work further with the locals and ministries to try and educate people to dispose of rubbish sensibly and for fishermen to understand the impact of their ghost nets.

We teach our new divers about the 2 types of turtle we see in the area (green and hawksbill) and how to tell if it is a male or female turtle. We teach them to know the different type of rays from eagle ray, cow tail ray to electric stingrays. We have a book at the dive club room to be able to show new divers once we are back on shore what they have seen on each dive – from snapper to goat fish to pufferfish. We also show divers when we have mating seasons eg for cuttlefish or when octopus are seen – often in April. We have also begun to know that during certain times the resident black tip sharks move from their cave site location to Hamburger south location. We get very excited when we see new baby sharks and have seen up to 20 sharks in 1 location, with a full range of sizes from juvenile to adult, so we know there is a breeding site nearby. We use our Whatsapp group to share issues seen eg during beach walks where rays have had fins cut off or stranded turtles or for identification of fish seen underwater. We also use it to share when local commercial dive operators have spotted special creatures eg whalesharks to know when/where to start looking.

In 2021 we spent time mapping all the main Fahal and RAH Bay dive sites so that hand drawn overviews could be created (as previously only a couple of deeper reef sites were mapped). In the end we managed to create overviews for 11 sites these are now laminated and in the dive room to allow the dive sites to be explained to new divers and well as for telling experienced divers where particular animals have been seen eg. a resident octopus or turtle.

We also make an annual photo /video of the special critters seen in each year – which can be shared.



Competitions

During the AGMs or other social events, awards are often given for some of the more notorious events during the diving year. 2021 saw the golden weight awarded to an advanced diver trainee who, with his buddy on a shore dive, seemed to end up in the next bay so that the shore cover had to send a fishing boat out to find them (all safely returned) – he has since then reviewed his navigation skills and what to do if there is current.

We also hold annual photo competitions with categories including marine life, spectacular scenery and divers being divers. All photos in this application are by our divers.

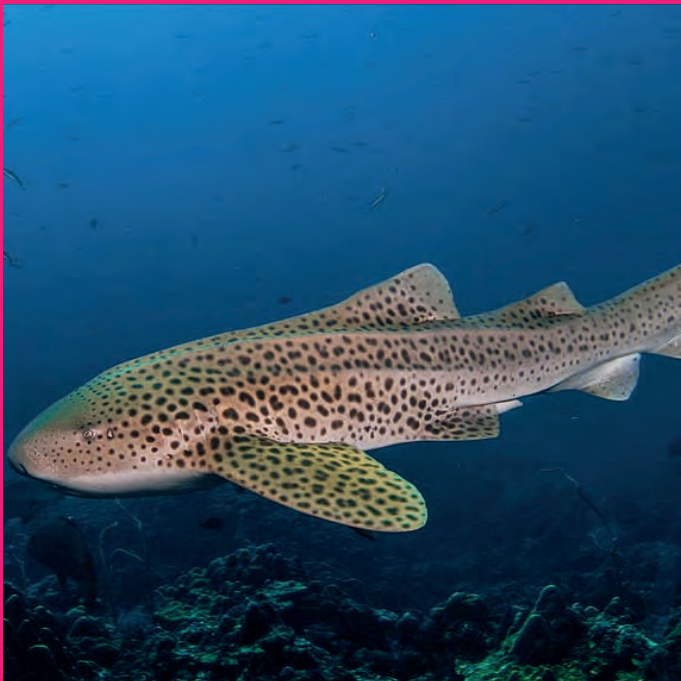




Before COVID I used to dive with RAHSAC maybe once or twice a year as a guest, without being a BSAC member. However, I decided to join BSAC just a few days before the COVID-19 was declared a pandemic. Unfortunately, I couldn't dive for the next few months. Nonetheless, I joined the weekly Zoom meeting with other members. Once the restrictions were eased I signed up for the Sports Diver Course, I completed the theory and drills supported by a great group of Instructors and Dive Masters. The social events e.g. beach BBQ, Christmas parties, farewell parties have been great and well organized.

All in all, being a member of RAHSAC for the past two and half years have been a privilege. The only thing I regret is that I hadn't joined earlier.

Bahjat Haddad (Syria)



As for many, parts of 2021 were somewhat challenging. I was hit pretty hard by Covid around April. When I started to recover, my thoughts turned to when I could re-commence diving. Unfortunately, getting the medical clearance was not straightforward, and my plans were put on hold for several months. But of course, with BSAC there are boundless opportunities to get involved above the waves too, so (restrictions permitting) I started to help out on RAHSAC's regular dive trips, in the capacity of boat handler, top cover, cylinder filler and general dogsbody. This was a great way to actively recuperate after my bout with covid- a win-win situation was created whereby I could refresh my skills, benefit from the sea-breeze, and enjoy the social(ly distanced) aspects of diving, whilst at the same time helping the club out. These elements, reflecting a friendly, self-running club are inherent to BSAC Clubs the world over, and differentiate us from more commercially-oriented outfits. So, despite the challenges, 2021 will also be remembered as a year when huge enjoyment was derived from opportunities that we may sometimes take for granted, like being out on the waves with friends on a balmy Oman morning, enjoying a few slices of home-made cake and engaging in some good-humoured banter...

Steve Hollyoak (UK)

General Activities

Gareth Simmonds (Social Secretary)

Branch meetings

The club meets every Wednesday evening at 8pm to plan the weekend's dives. The meet up starts in the dive room and then usually moves to the main club bar area. This encourages members to attend in person as priority is given to those who come to sign up for the weekend's dives. Wednesday evenings are very sociable and it is not uncommon for people to attend even if they are not planning to dive. Non-diving friends who know that the divers meet every Wednesday also come along for a drink. It's rather like dropping in to the pub to see friends.

When diving activities got suspended due to Covid-19 restrictions and although there was no diving to be planned DFPs continued via zoom.

Maintaining social connections

Quite a number of expats left Oman during Covid-19 and to say our farewells and wish them well, we held virtual leaving drinks for them.

Club members who had left Oman previously but who were still on our Whatsapp groups joined in our chats; they were also isolating and this was a good way of keeping in touch and feeling connected.

A number of new people arriving into Oman just as lockdown started joined the dive club as a way of making friends and social contacts.

When curfews were introduced DFPs moved back online. We were still able to dive but had to be home by either 5pm or 8pm depending on the dates.

The dive club provided a lifeline for isolated expats whose families were stuck overseas and some of our divers formed "Covid-19 bubbles" which allowed them to have social contact.

Social

RAHSAC is known as the most sociable club in RAHRC and we have a very friendly, open atmosphere.

Partners and family members are always invited to our social events which are very popular. In 2021 we held 3 social BBQ evenings, and a mulled wine and mince pie evening. We held a family weekend dive trip in Sifah to visit Ras Abu Daud (which would usually be a couple of hours boat trip from Muscat). We also held a thank you ceremony to our fabulous Chairman Naaman who worked so hard to keep the club diving. Our socially distanced AGM was held outside in 2021 and was also attended by the Recreation Clubs Sport section head who commended the dive club for its openness, friendship and comradery during the meeting, and hailed it as an example for how to conduct meetings for other sections.

As many of our divers leave to other countries, sadly we have all too frequent "leaving dos" but we ensure they are memorable and that our divers are given a good send off to their next destination.

Publicity

RAHSAC is not permitted to publicise outside of RAHRC club but we provide information about ourselves on the main club website and via social media platforms.

External relations

Unfortunately, due to Covid-19 we have not been able to manage inter club activities as we have a close association with Piasau divers and Panaga Divers and previously Muscat divers. However, Muscat divers club is suspended but fortunately their senior divers all joined our club and we are benefiting from their experience and instructors

Conclusion

“Never underestimate the importance of having fun”. (Randy Pausch)

RAHSAC has faced some significant challenges in 2021 with the “double whammy” of Covid 19 and cyclone Shaheen; a year which brought bleak moments and tough obstacles. However, with perseverance, humour and a collective sense of fun, we worked together to overcome these and kept our divers diving.

We embraced new technology, social media and online platforms for training. We continued to offer as much varied diving as possible, we became engineers to fix the winch problem, we socialised via zoom, we surveyed and recorded damage to our diving sites, we became architects to design a new dive zone in the club and above all we supported each other through difficult times while all the time developing and building the BSCAC diving community worldwide.

It has been a very rewarding experience working together to submit this application for BSAC’s Heinke award and we have wholeheartedly enjoyed the process. In sharing all our experiences we are reminded what a tough but ultimately positive year 2021 was.

Special Thanks

Thank you to RAHRC for their steadfast support of RAHSAC and for continually complimenting the spirit of RAHSAC.

A huge thank you to all our instructors who patiently give so much of their time and energy, developing our members’ confidence, skill levels and enjoyment of diving.

And thank you to all our members who make RAHSAC what it is today.

I remember deciding to do AD and Covid clashing. I got my pack from the club and a lockdown was announced. I then found BSAC resources and online teachings to do the 4 theory sessions led by Dave Lock & Ron Evans. I was sat in bed at 11pm headphones in listening in to the UK online trainings with the instructors settled in with cups of tea, everyone seemed to know each other and for them it was a chance to connect with old dive buddies. Here was me 4 hours ahead trying to stay awake nodding off every now and then (the unimportant bits 😊).

Diving was one of the few activities we could continue to do even golf with its wide open spaces was closed down. BSAC website says to find a friendly instructor I had mine, John Colquhoun and what an excellent support with the patience of a saint. We planned dives, we cancelled dives we planned again we cancelled again due to lockdowns and restrictions in place here in Oman finally we executed.

Fast forward to July 2022 and covid restrictions are truly lifted and the final few dives, Navigation, Search technique and accelerated decompression are complete as are all the signatures in my book (Mostly Johns). I persevered throughout Covid it was something to focus on, something to remove conversation from Covid apart from the daily bad news, number of new cases, could we get a vaccine, daily deaths. I am now an advanced diver with so much experience that I am happy to have and only have to wear the one mask nowadays.

Wayne Bryant (UK)

I had my first open water dives during the pandemic. As I was discovering the basics, trying to adapt to the new sensations, learning the rules and adjusting to the laws of breathing and buoyancy underwater, the rules had already changed at the surface. The way of life as we knew it and the social structure we took for granted, were already shaken by the COVID-19 pandemic and we had to unlearn the old rules and learn the ever-changing new ones. Having just landed in a new country, we were forced to isolate ourselves from the little social connections we established in Oman, while travel bans created a wall of isolation between us and close family members. In the haze of obscure rules as what was allowed and what was not, RAHSAC was a great beacon of continuity. The one place to look forward to going, after a working week from home. The one place where one could be social while socially distant. We let the salt water drown our worries and the joy of diving provided just enough buoyancy to our spirits. Each time we push our boats out, I remind myself of the great privilege that is to be among this group of dedicated, passionate, kind, supportive friends, and teachers. Thank you RAHSAC!

Behrooz Bashokooh (Iran)

RAHSAC was very much a lifeline for me throughout my 4 years in Muscat. I arrived as a mere PADI Advanced Open Water Diver and got patiently and meticulously trained and brought through the ranks to conversion to Sports Diver and eventually Dive Leader. As the pandemic and very long lockdowns hit Oman, the resilience and persistence of our divers prevailed and we found ways and means to get our cylinders filled and get diving, even when the facilities were locked down and locked away. For me, personally, to dive (and to spend time – “socially distanced” – with these much loved characters) was quite simply a lifeline. It brought me through the darkest moments of lockdown. Even in moments of personal trauma when I had to face travel for family reasons and institutional quarantine in foreign lands, my friends at RAHSAC made it a point to reach out daily to check in on me and cheer me up and chat to me, reminding me always of what a close-knit family RAHSAC truly is. Throughout all turbulence (from weather, and boats, and ever-changing internal and external regulations) the RAHSAC spirit of love for diving (and each other) kept going strong. RAHSAC must surely be among the top Dive Clubs in the world as I can't really see many ways for a Dive Club to be any better.

Germaine Bonney, BSAC Diveleader (Malaysia)

Date: 08th August, 2022

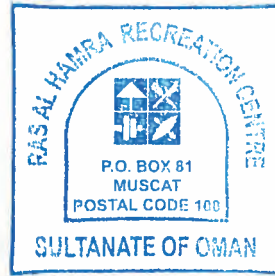
TO WHOMSOEVER IT MAY CONCERN

I would like to commend the Dive Section (also called the Ras Al Hamra Sub Aqua Club or RAHSAC) for its contribution to Ras Al Hamra Recreation Centre (RAHRC). The divers are well known for bringing fun and life to the club and for enriching the atmosphere. They are one of our most active sections of the club and have contributed to safety by replacing buoys in the bay and helping at the Fahal Island Swim and providing boat cover for our numerous RAHRC swimming events such as Beach to Beach swimming, Annual Regatta, etc., and have assisted in beach clean ups. RAHSAC also provides, assistance to the Sailing club, environmental clean-up in association with Ministry of Environment and Climate Affairs (MECA).

Yours sincerely,



Saleh Al Sharji
General Manager - RAHRC

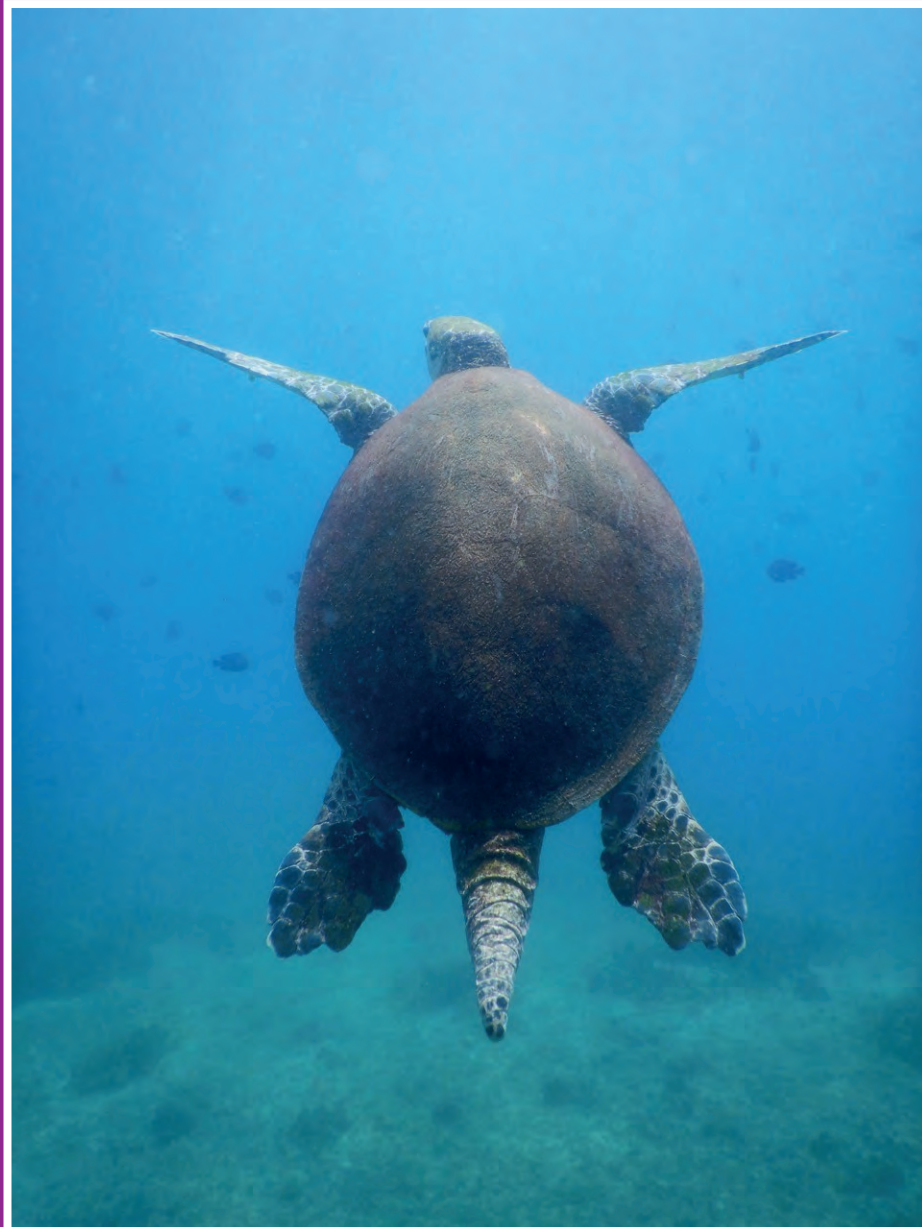


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