

The Abalone of Dhofar

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The coast of Dhofar, the southern region in the Sultanate of Oman, is dramatic. Perhaps no more so than in the area between the small towns of Hasik and Sath where the stark rocky mountains cascade down into the sea. From here, until the distant shores of Antarctica thousands of kilometres to the south, there is nothing but vast ocean, which enables the summer monsoon to pound the coast with dramatic ferocity. During winter relative calm returns to the sea and it provides a living to the inhabitants of the small communities nestled in the mountain valleys and along the coastline.

Small rocky inlets are scattered along the coast, their indentations outlined by startlingly bright green algae and seaweed. Grazing marine molluscs and crustaceans jostle in the few metres around the tide marks almost like the sheep and goats on the land a few metres away. However, for us it was the sky above the drama of the



Abalone is a delicacy in the Far East and almost worth its weight in gold. Oman is one region that supplies this prized mollusc.

coast that was the focus of attention. At this time of year it must be the Piccadilly Circus or Times Square of the bird world as tens of thousands of gulls, terns and cormorants seemed to fly by on invisible routes along the coast.

WHILE WE were settling in for our bird watching and a light picnic, Amr Salim Al Mahari and several friends of his arrived at what, we found out, was their favoured location. Dressed in wetsuit, mask and flippers, as if for snorkelling, they all waved quite cheerily at us as we sat scanning the sky. I asked him if it was worth snorkelling in the sea; Amr laughed and said, "worth coming every day". The shock on our faces showed and Amr quickly added the missing fact, they were going diving for abalone (*Haliotis mariae*).

Abalone, a plant eating marine shellfish, is a prized gourmet delicacy around the world especially in the Far East and



Chinese communities. Its delicate taste and tender flesh creates superb soups, shellfish, steaks and even salads.

The demand is such that in the southern Omani province of Dhofar a veritable gold rush occurs in the season when diving for it is permitted. Before 1990, divers searching for abalone would scour these inlets for some six months. Today, to allow stocks to regenerate, there is a limited season of two months each year. During these two months there is a rush for the abalone of Dhofar and Amr and his little group spend much of those two months harvesting abalone along the coast.

I ASKED Amr why his equipment was so basic and he explained that the Oman Government prohibits the use of any scuba diving equipment so that stocks are not decimated by divers who could spend a longer time in the water.

The only tool that Amr uses is a crude chisel-like tool, which he uses to prise the abalone away from the rock. A simple sack made from netting is fastened around his waist to store the abalone that he has caught.

Without the advantage of scuba diving equipment, the maximum depth of water that an experienced diver like Amr can reach is about seven or eight metres. Most divers, however, content themselves with much shallower dives by simply wading out from the land and searching in the rocks just below wave height for the abalone.

Getting abalone requires much winking with bare hands into nooks and crannies which, unfortunately, the abalone also shares with moray eels and occasional sea snakes. Abalone also have a powerful attachment to their chosen spot. As Amr prepared to set off in the boat he told me stories of shells snapping tightly on to the rock trapping the fingers of a few of his friends. Like any good

horror story I never learned the results, which were submerged in the sound of the departing engine.

Our morning birdwatching having finished we travelled further along the coast and on our way found the main hub of abalone activity. Just above the reach of waves a small conglomeration of wire mesh huts had been set up and around them was a range of restaurants.

Since we had seen one part of the abalone story we stopped to look at what was inside the wire mesh huts. Carefully arranged on low trestles, almost like nuggets of gold, the abalone was drying in the sun and breeze. The owner of one of these mini food-processing plants, Suhail Bakhit Al Amri, invited us to sit with him and have some *shai bil nana* (mint tea).

AS WE sat, a continual stream of men and teenagers came with their catch of abalone to sell it to Suhail. The shells and flesh are visually checked and then the flesh is cut, quite deftly, out from the shell. It was then that we discovered exactly why Amr was so keen on his daily snorkelling: each kilo of abalone flesh was being exchanged for the equivalent of \$150 or, if the seller provided a limited period of credit to the buyer, it was \$170. Not quite its weight in gold but still an extraordinary income for these young men during the eight weeks they could go searching for abalone.

Suhail must have sensed our interest and he suggested that we return later in the evening to see how the abalone was prepared for sale. As an added incentive, if one was needed, he said that *mudhbi* (stone grilled meat) would be on the menu. We promptly arrived at 8.30pm.

Vast cauldrons were bubbling away, filled with saltwater. Somewhere in the froth, abalone was being cooked to perfection. Like most cooked foods, the cauldron needed constant watching

“The Dhofar coast is rich in abalone. A kilo of flesh sells for \$150.





and an appropriately vast spoon to stir the contents. The work was done at night so that the day's catch could be cooked quickly and also be ready for drying in the following day's sun. I asked Suhail how much abalone he would buy. He estimated that during a whole season between 1,000 to 2,000 kilos – the spread seemed more a question of not wanting to divulge his turnover than any uncertainty in how much cash he spent.

OVER THE MEAL that Suhail provided us with, we also learned that not only was the abalone flesh so valuable but also that the shell was a source of *Mother of Pearl*. The shells are sent whole to mainly Far East destinations where the inner part or 'nacre', whose colours dance and sparkle, is used in jewellery or decorative furniture.

Suhail told us that the drying of the abalone reduces its size and weight and accordingly the price per kilo shoots up around threefold by the time it is ready for export. Suhail said that he looked forward to the end of the season, for not only were the working hours long during those two months, but he usually went to Hong Kong or Singapore at the season's end and enjoyed mixing business with the pleasure of relaxing after eight weeks of long hours.

Of course, no visit to the abalone shores of Dhofar would be complete without a taste of such an extraordinary culinary treat, and Suhail made certain that we could see what created such demand. Well, for the people of China abalone may well be worth its cost, but I assured Suhail that the *mudhbi* was the taste that we would remember from our day of gourmet treats. ■

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