

Into the abode of death



After 49 days on foot and by camel, **Mark Evans**, along with Omani explorers Mohammed Al Zadjali and Amur Al Wahaibi, arrived in Doha having followed the 1930 trail of explorer Bertram Thomas across the Empty Quarter of Arabia

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN C SMITH AND SIM DAVIS

As a wise old Omani sage once told me, 'a map of Oman will show Muscat, Salalah and the major roads, but the real stories, and our history, lie in places where there are no roads'.

The achievements of the little known Bertram Thomas, and his Omani guide, have been lost in the sands of time, overshadowed by Wilfred Thesiger's beautiful black and white images and poetic writing. One of the aims of our journey, the first time in 85 years anyone had been given permission to attempt the same route from Salalah in southern Oman, to Doha, the capital of Qatar, was to put Thomas back on a pedestal, and give him the recognition his achievements deserved.

On 10 December 1930, Bertram Thomas, born into a humble background in the village of Pill, near Bristol; his father a pilot on the Avon River, his mother running the local post office, set off from Salalah, walking into

the unknown with no maps to follow. He would survive through his own wits, good fortune in terms of rains and grazing, and the skills of a local Bedouin Sheikh - Salih bin Kalut. Sheikh Salih was the only person who accompanied Thomas all the way to Doha, the others only daring to go to the edge of their tribal areas.

Much of his journey took place during the holy month of Ramadan, and was racked with constant uncertainty, as relay teams of camels and men were needed for him to achieve his goal. Had rains not fallen the previous year, there would have been no grazing, and no grazing meant there would be no people and no camels. In such a situation, the only option would have been to retreat back to safety along the line of wells they had followed to date.

After 56 days, having crossed what he later described in his book *Arabia Felix* as 'an abode of death', Thomas and bin Kalut walked into the Emir's mud-brick fort in Doha. Such was the level of interest that the news

quickly made the front page of the *Times* in London, and in New York. Thomas first lectured at The Royal Geographical Society, where he was awarded the Founders Medal, and his early images of southern Arabia are carefully stored in the archives today. His contribution to science was considerable, not only through his anthropological work, but also through the collections he made of flora and fauna.

2015 was the 85th year since Thomas and bin Kalut had left Salalah, and coincided with the 45th year of the reign of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos as the ruler of Oman; the planets were in alignment to attempt to retrace this historic journey. Our main challenge was to find the key to unlock the door, and get permission to

THE DESERT UNIVERSITY

For 48 nights we slept on the sand, enjoying the desert sky in a rare landscape of often zero light pollution, with stars evident down to a 360 degree horizon. Sitting around the fireside, drinking cardamom-infused coffee as the first stars appeared was the best part of each day, and a fundamental element of our journey. In *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, TE Lawrence described that fireside as the Arab's university, 'about which their world passed, and where they heard the best talk, the news of their tribe, its poems, histories, love tales, lawsuits and bargainings. By such constant sharings in the hearth councils they grew up masters of expression, dialecticians, orators, able to sit with dignity in any gathering, and never at a loss for moving words'.

It was based on that philosophy of face-to-face dialogue that in 2004, The University of the Desert was launched in Oman. Each winter, with the support of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, three five-day, camel-backed expeditions head out into the Sharqiyah Sands of Oman. The current programme runs until 2020, and each group consists of 18 inspirational young people, from up to 17 countries. Our mini-United Nations of future opinion formers and agents of social change from Oman, UK, Iran, Germany, Yemen, Lebanon, Spain, Jordan and others spend five intensive days living and travelling together on what is a powerful journey of learning. With no doors to hide behind, the silent desert is a great leveller, and source of inspiration and thought.



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not only enter Saudi Arabia at a remote location, but also to spend one month walking with camels across the sensitive eastern province. An issue of equal concern was to find camels tough enough to withstand the demands of walking for 30 to 40km per day, for 50 or so days, with limited food and water. Camels, like humans, have gone soft in recent years; rather than wandering the sands in search of rain-fed grazing, today they tend to lead static lives, with water trucks bringing water to them, and locally grown fodder crops being served up each day.

To give them every opportunity of succeeding, and to protect the sensitive pads on the base of their feet, we parked them at a Bedouin community on the southern edge of the sands, and on 10 December 2015, 85 years to the day since Thomas and bin Kalut started their own journey, my two Omani companions Mohammed Al Zadjali, Amur Al Wahaibi and I set off on foot from the old souk in Salalah, on the edge of the Indian Ocean.

Our journey did not set out to be a first or fastest, but was, among other things, a celebration of slowness that attempted to reconnect Omani, Saudi and Qatari people to their rich culture and heritage, and to show a side of the Middle East different to that which normally dominates the media. With the Empty Quarter now being emptier than it has ever been, many of the waterholes used by Thomas are now long abandoned and full of sand. With much uncertainty regarding water supply, we made the early decision to use two 4x4 support vehicles to carry tightly rationed water that would be supplemented by the possible discovery of water in the sands; Thomas had used a sextant to record the location of the wells he used, accurate

enough for his needs, but little help in reality when searching for a small well on the ground in what could be an area of up to 15km square.

At the start of the journey, our vehicles carried 50 days-worth of food, carefully labelled, packed and sorted into 25 plastic crates. In the first two weeks we barely touched a crumb, overwhelmed by more than 1,000 unexpected visitors who sought us out even in the most remote of locations in southern Oman each day. A desert expedition in Arabia is no place for a vegetarian; 'You cannot enter the land of the Al Kathiri without accepting our hospitality,' announced a proud Omani Sheikh, and in an ongoing effort to out-do the hospitality of each previous gathering, by the time we had reached the border with Saudi Arabia we had consumed 27 goats, in addition to several camels and sheep. Any hope we had of losing weight was slim.



Among the visitors were some so old (none knew exactly how old as nothing was documented at the time of their birth) that, despite having limited sight and being unstable on their feet, they still produced well preserved black and white images of them as young men, standing proudly with Thesiger and his camels at a waterhole.

After trekking through the frankincense-clad Qarra Mountains, where we followed the footprints of striped hyenas and discovered 4,000-year old pre-Islamic rock art, we were reunited with our own camels. Our passage across the border into Saudi Arabia was uncertain until the eleventh hour; verbal assurance had been given, but we had nothing as yet for us to show a dubious, heavily-armed border guard at one of the most remote unfenced and unmarked borders. Fortunately, one day from our arrival, word reached us that we would be let in by Royal Command of the King himself.

The enormous star dunes of Dakaka, where it had not rained for seven years, made for the most beautiful of landscapes, and while the night-time temperatures dropped to a low of 0.4 degrees, for the most part a northerly wind made daytime progress bearable. On days when that wind did not blow, temperatures rose and camels bellowed, kicked and spat in protest.

Our daily routine was a simple one; each night we would sleep on the sand, Amur would rise first before dawn to pray, and by 6.30am we would have un-hobbled the camels and were on the move, keen to get as many kilometres under our belts in the cool morning air as we could. We would always walk for the first couple of hours, by which time the camels would have settled, ready for us to ride along at a steady speed of 6kph. Our day would end some 30 to 40km later an hour before sunset, when we would hobble the camels again, gather wood for the fire, bake bread under the sand and settle down for the nightly star show.

After a few weeks that saw us following a line of small wells to the northwest, the large dunes of Dakaka gave way to the flatter sand sea of Sanam, and we were able to start what Thomas described as 'The Northward Dash' for Doha, our goal, still several hundred kilometres ahead. As we steadily descended to the Arabian Gulf the sands gave way to gravel and, eventually, to the dreaded *sabkha*, a salt-encrusted mudflat that after rains can be treacherous territory for the camels. Like Thomas, at this point we were beset by several days of heavy dew and thick fog, hiding the sun from view until midday and making navigation a challenge.

Finally, on 27 January 2016, some 49 days after we had left Salalah, riding fresh camels sent by the Emir of Qatar, we arrived at Al Rayyan Fort in Doha; the Empty Quarter had been crossed once more.

Mark Evans (www.markevans.global) is the Executive Director of Outward Bound Oman, Founder of The University of the Desert, and Patron of the Andrew Croft Memorial Fund. He was awarded the MBE in 2012 for his work in the field of intercultural dialogue.

Photographs, film, maps and memorabilia from the first expedition across the Rub' al Khali by Bertram Thomas in 1930 and the second by Mark Evans in 2015/16 will be on exhibition in the Pavilion at the RGS-IBG from 29 November to 15 December.

Mark will also be giving a lecture at the RGS-IBG on 1 December. For more details, please visit: www.crossingtheemptyquarter.com.

TEN OF THE BEST

Crossing the largest sand desert on Earth is no small achievement and for **Mark Evans** it required some serious equipment. From heavy-duty solar panels to keep power running to the cameras and internet systems, to both modern and traditional desert clothing, to buckets and ropes to keep the water flowing. And, of course, there were camels...

1. Footwear

Bedouin wool and goat hair socks

Omani bedouin socks are the real deal; a double layer at the bottom protects feet from both hot and cold sand, and a loose weave enables sand to fall through. The bristly nature prevents scorpions from getting too cosy. Hand-made in the desert of Oman, can be ordered from www.outwardboundoman.com.

2. Cape

Bisht - £30 (approx.); 4kg

A long cape, heavy and bulky, but a touch of luxury in the chilly desert nights. It doubles as a duvet over the sleeping bag, and makes for the ultimate pillow and camel saddle. Can be bought in southern Oman, or throughout Saudi Arabia.

3. Wi-fi

Thuraya IP+ - £2,600; 1.4kg

One of our key aims was to reconnect Omani, Saudi and Qatari youth to their culture and heritage, so communications were essential. The Thuraya XP is a superb, lightweight bit of kit that gives wireless internet even in the largest sand desert on Earth.

4. Water Filter

Katadyn Base Camp Pro 10L - £95; 350g

Buckets, ropes and pulleys were essential to get water out of wells to keep our very thirsty camels happy. Most of the wells held water, some of it clear and drinkable, others with a sulphurous smell that proved too much even for thirsty camels. We carried a Katadyn filter as a back up.

5. Sand goggles

Sundog Desert Goggles - £35; 56g

Lightweight, and perfect for sandstorms. Padded eyepieces make for an even pressure around the nose, cheeks and forehead. They even have side air-vents to avoid fogging.



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6. Shirt

Rail Riders Eco-Mesh Shirt - \$69; 198g

These shirts are lightweight, simple and strong, offering great protection from the relentless sun. Fast drying when washed in well water, an event that was much appreciated by my team mates.

7. Head-torch

Petzl Tikka RXP - £90; 115kg

I really liked the optional beam system - a built-in light sensor automatically adjusts light output without needing to fiddle with buttons and switches. Another really useful element is the USB charging option that saves on the number of batteries that need to be carried.



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8. Storage

Zarges K470 Case - from \$200; 2.7kg

Tough, light and last for ages, despite rough handling. Built from high-quality aluminium, with a sealed lid and heavy duty sprung drop handles. Easily doubles as a chair or table to make base camp a comfortable work area. I have some that are over 20-years-old, having done multiple desert and arctic expeditions lashed to Land Rover roof racks and snow-scooter sledges.



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9. Solar Panels

CT Solar Hurricane Survival System - \$3,950; 9kg

The power demands of getting regular information out of the desert, and of a documentary team needing to recharge an octocopter and camera batteries meant that power supply became a key issue; the kit provided by CT Solar was a tough and capable solution that ensured our power supply was never a problem.



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10. Camels

In Arabia today they are rarely working animals, and have gone soft as a result and are best toughened up prior to any journeys. Females are better than males. Ours were loaned by Oman's Royal Cavalry, were all 13-years-old and were worth an estimated £9,000 each. Cheaper options can be found at various weekend souks throughout Arabia. **G**



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DON'T FORGET... ... an assa. A thin, lightweight, supple walking stick that is a symbol of identity and pride in Oman; used traditionally to control camels, herds of sheep or goats, you can use it to tap the ground to make your point during conversations!