Getting to Sur

It was October in 1975 and the first in-country training for Peace Corps Volunteers in the Sultanate of Oman was about to begin. Arabic language training would take place in an old fort in Sur, situated on the Indian Ocean, once belonging to the former Sultan and arranged for our use through the Ministry of Health. The new Sultan's government was building the first rural health centers throughout the country and Peace Corps was helping to provide nurses and technicians.

However, getting everyone to Sur, located 100 miles down the coast from the capital Muscat, was a problem. For half of the way there was no real road and what there was made its way through rocky terrain and across the sands in a bone jarring 7 hour trip. Peace Corps did not have access to a vehicle big enough. The way for a group to go to Sur was by boat: an easy coast hugging 10 hour journey. The Ministry of Health was providing their motorized launch and the trip would take a day. A nice, easy but enjoyable way to get to Sur. Just as the trainees arrived we learned that the Ministry of Health's boat had been held up in the south by monsoon storms.

So the Peace Corps director said: "Just find a dhow." (a traditional Arab sailing ship which takes passengers and goods from north to south Oman) So we did: find a dhow. We asked around the dhow harbor in Mutrah near Muscat for one going to Sur. We found a boat that was taking passengers and arranged with the captain, Mohamed Ali, to take us to Sur the next day. The captain looked a bit surprised when we turned up, all 18 or so of us, women and men and an Omani teacher, all with luggage.

The dhow had a large open deck, one end with a canopy for the sun and a little box stuck off the back of the dhow for the toilet facilities. We brought provisions for a day's outing on the water, a picnic lunch in an ice chest and a large container with drinking water. Our luggage also included a case of breakfast cereal and one of peanut butter, necessities not available in Sur and which might come in useful for the 10-week training. We were outfitted for a lovely day, sailing down the coast of Arabia in the Indian Ocean on a dhow.

Mohamed Ali and his crew untied the boat and then spent most of the morning motoring around Mutrah harbor picking up goats from other dhows and other passengers. By the time we left the harbor we had a herd of goats on board

being taken down the coast beyond Sur for sale and an additional group of passengers. The goats were corralled on the far end of the boat from where our group was lounging in the shade on huge burlap bags of cumin seed.

The timing of this made me a bit nervous. If we were supposed to arrive by night fall and the trip took 8-10 hours we would need to get going; we were expected by the training staff that evening. As the day progressed and we made our way down the coast of Oman, I kept asking Mohamed Ali how many more hours it would take for us to reach Sur. His answer was consistently 8, no matter how late in the day it became. We had our picnic, drank our water and enjoyed the passing view.

And then we passed Sur. Apparently the tide would not allow us to sail up the inlet into Sur harbor where the training staff was waiting. Mohamed Ali said that there was a place we would be able to land just beyond Sur the next morning. "Just beyond Sur" seemed not to pose a problem. It began to get dark and the dhow turned to run straight into the shore. I had visions of headlines in the papers: "Peace Corps Trainees Lost in the Indian Ocean".

Soon we could see the crack in the cliffs that was the entrance into a "khor" or natural protected harbor, invisible from the sea. A perfect pirate cove. As the sun was setting we dropped anchor in what looked like a lake once we were inside. There were many other dhows already anchored there and one could see reflections of cooking fires and kerosene lanterns bobbing up and down in this magical shelter. The growing darkness was lifted by a rising moon and as we settled down for the night on our cumin seed beds we could hear singing from the dhows in Arabic, Hindi and other languages. It was a view surely seen by Sinbad, straight out of the Tales of the Arabian Nights. Into this quiet magic moment, one of the Volunteers, looking out at the view, sighed: "full moon and empty arms." It became the mantra of the trip and I am sure remembered by one and all from that group.

The next morning we had to break into our cases of peanut butter and breakfast cereal for food and into a case of tomato juice from the ship's cargo, for which we had to pay. The only strenuous vocal objection I can remember from the trainees the whole time was when I added chlorine tablets to the water we were able to get from the boat's water tank.

The next morning we lifted anchor and sailed out through the invisible slit to the ocean. We soon motored into another smaller natural harbor fringed by desert sands and with a tiny village at its edge. The dhow's crew unloaded all our people and possessions using little tippy dugout canoes, making many trips to get us all on shore. After saying goodbye to Mohamed Ali, crew and goats we unbelievably and luckily found 3 Land Rovers at the village willing and able to drive us to Sur. It turns out that our little landing just past Sur required a ride, in the end, on the roads we had attempted to avoid in the first place. We split up and rode in the cabs and open backs of the Land Rovers for the 4, maybe 6 hour drive across the Wahiba Sands to Sur.

We had to drive through a village that had a health center for which some of these Volunteers would be working, and so we stopped and asked for help. We were given food and water and a midday break from the sun, before we headed back on the road to Sur. The food was actually a wonderful meal of rice and curry rustled up by the health center staff with great and typical instant hospitality.

Through all of this the trainees, as far as I could tell, seemed to take this journey as par for the course, showing great adaptability. Even in the two years those Volunteers were serving in Oman, roads were built that would make this boat trip unnecessary. Buses now connect the villages. But I think we were lucky to have missed the Ministry of Health boat and that the tide was against us in Sur. The view from the dhow that night in the hidden magical cove was one that none of us will ever forget. Who knew that just getting to the training site in Sur would be such an adventure.

Ann Larson Watts, Sur Training Site Director Oct-Dec 1975