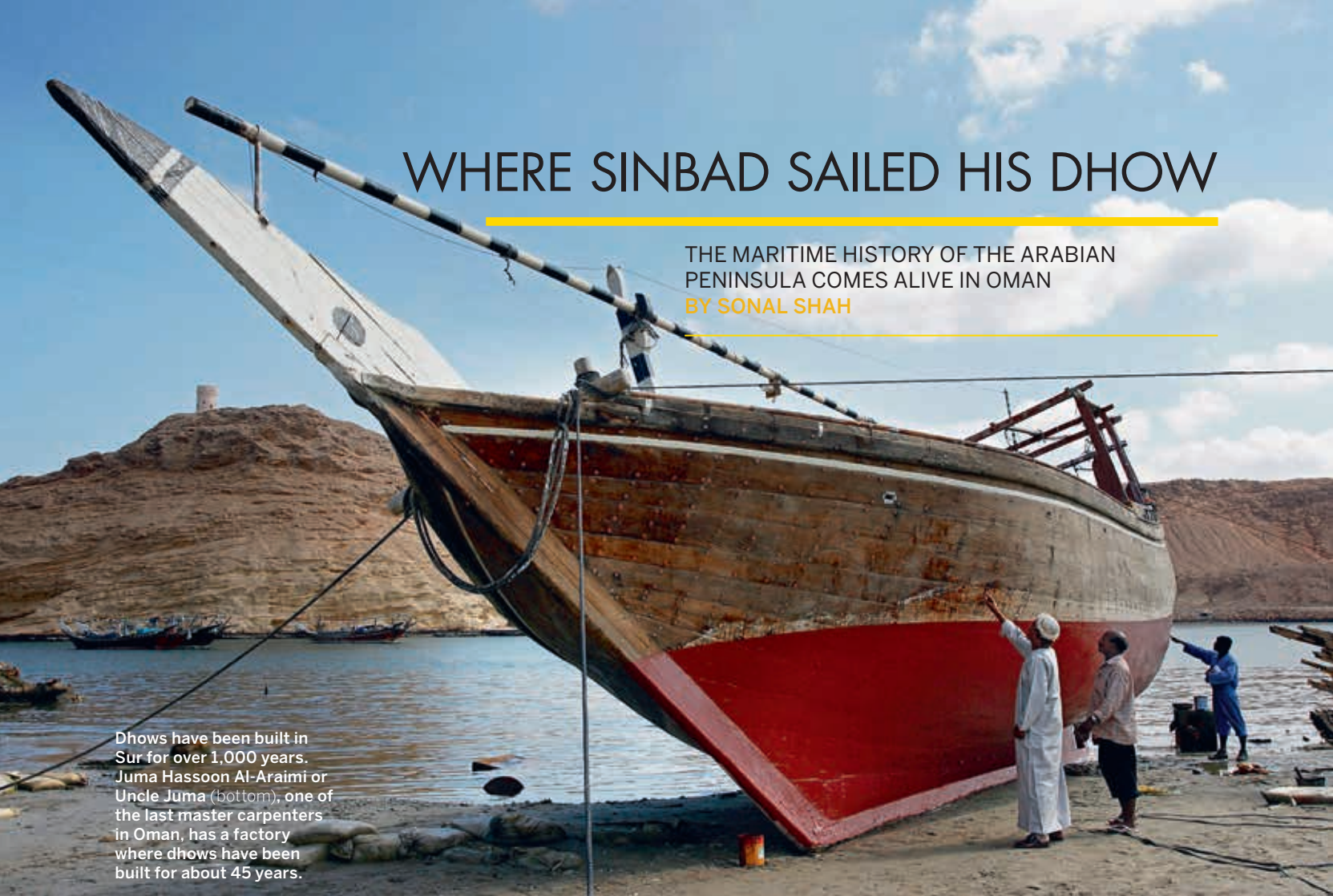


WHERE SINBAD SAILED HIS DHOW

THE MARITIME HISTORY OF THE ARABIAN PENINSULA COMES ALIVE IN OMAN

BY SONAL SHAH



Dhows have been built in Sur for over 1,000 years. Juma Hassoon Al-Araimi or Uncle Juma (bottom), one of the last master carpenters in Oman, has a factory where dhows have been built for about 45 years.

In 1979, British adventurer and maritime explorer Tim Severin wandered the west coast of India, the country of his birth, looking for rope. Severin had already voyaged across the Atlantic in an open boat, approximating the journey of a sixth-century monk. Now he wanted to captain a craft from Oman to China, bringing to life the legend of Sinbad the Sailor.

Severin's search for good coir rope eventually led him to the Lakshadweep islands, along the Indian Ocean route, advanced during the early centuries of Islam by Arab merchants. Arab ships—loosely referred to as dhows—were stitched: the planks of their narrow, long hulls woven together by a kind of coconut husk coir. It was only after the Portuguese arrived in the 16th century that dhows began to be nailed together in the European style.

Severin's dhow was named *Sohar* for the Omani town where, according to some stories, Sinbad was born. Today, 200 kilometres from Muscat, in the

northeastern port town of Sur where the *Sohar* was built, one can still see a living piece of Oman's maritime history.

PORT OF DEPARTURE

Severin chronicled his 9,600 kilometre journey to China (on the world's longest sea route before Magellan circumnavigated the globe) in his 1982 book, *The Sinbad Voyage*. While scholars argue whether Sinbad, if he even existed, was from Oman, there's no doubt about the historical importance of Sur on the map of an empire that at its peak in the 19th century stretched from modern-day Pakistan and Iran, down the shores of eastern Africa to Mozambique and Zanzibar. At that time, Sur was a big shipbuilding centre, supplying vessels used to transport slaves and spices.

Today, it is Oman's second

richest city. Its recent good fortune is largely linked to Sheikh Suhail Salim Bahwan, who once captained his father's dhow as a trader but eventually made his millions importing Japanese cars, among other things.

Parts of Sur, like the Al Ajjah watchtower and old lighthouse, could be straight from Sinbad's time. Every morning wooden fishing boats set out from the port at the mouth of the town's large estuary. The town's closest link to the past, however, lies a little further inland just past the steel Khor Al Batah suspension bridge: the Juma Hassoon boat factory.

TIMBER AND SAIL

At the factory, sexagenarian Juma Hassoon Al-Araimi, or "Uncle Juma" holds court by his boatyard. At 14, Uncle Juma, like many young men at that time, left Oman to find employment.





Muscat's National Museum has large sections dedicated to Oman's maritime history (top left); A historic trading port, Sur (top right) has a centuries old boatyard (left) from where dhows have sailed to as far as China.

He worked in a Kuwaiti dhow factory for over a decade before returning to set up his own workshop where his family and employees have been making dhows for about 45 years now, all from schematics in their heads.

At any given time, there are one or two dhows in the yard—each takes about a year to build and larger ships can cost over ₹2 crore. These dhows, made from Burma teak and *ghaff*, a local desert tree, have sterns designed to accommodate not only the engines but also the captain's quarters—a Portuguese introduction.

The yard workers, about 50 of them, are mostly from Beypore in Kerala, a millennium-old centre of shipbuilding. They communicate in Arabic, with a smattering of Malayali, and still use some traditional techniques: moving planks by rolling them over logs, at times using bow drills instead of electric ones. They build boats for tourism, not trade: currently, the two dhows taking shape will be used as restaurants for the 2022 Football World Cup in Qatar. Once complete, the ships are taken out onto

the estuary and tested for seaworthiness, before sailing on to their destination.

One worker builds models for display in a small showroom. Inside are scale replicas of boats built here, including one commissioned by Sultan Qaboos, the beloved leader of Oman. Apparently the Sultan was passing in his helicopter when he caught sight of Uncle Juma up in the rigging. The shipwright was summoned to Muscat, and given a royal commission: a dhow for the King of Jordan.

THE LAST GHANJA

Further down the road, in the Al Qanja boatyard, stands the finished—albeit retired—*Fatah Al Khair*. The vessel is a *ghanja*, a heavier dhow variety, with a curved prow and a carved stern. In the late 19th century, with better enforcement of the abolition of slavery, the use of dhows dwindled in the Indian Ocean. *Fatah Al Khair*, built in 1951 and fitted with a diesel engine, was among the last of the commercial trading ships from Sur. This “last ghanja” travelled the Gulf and India, before dropping

anchor in Yemen, where it remained for decades.

In 1993, Sheikh Bahwan and another business leader financed the refurbishment of the vessel as a symbol of Sur's maritime history. It now stands in dry dock next to a small maritime museum with artefacts illustrating Sur's long relationship with the sea.

TOP MODELS

Given Oman's maritime history, it's not surprising that much of its National Museum in the capital of Muscat is devoted to the subject. There are models; technical information about ropes, sails, anchors and wood; and timelines tracing Oman's relationships with other parts of the world.

One of the most beautiful models is of the *Jewel of Muscat*, a replica of the ninth-century Arab dhow found wrecked and overflowing with Chinese treasure off the coast of Belitung, Indonesia in 1998. The *Jewel of Muscat* embarked for Singapore in 2010, making the trip in less than five months and coming to rest there. With over 1,20,000 stitches, the hand-sewn replica is incredibly detailed.

There's a model of Severin's *Sohar* too, but the ship itself is 10 minutes away, at the Al Bustan Palace Roundabout. The dhow looks a bit at sea in a small pond, surrounded by flower beds. Still, its lance-like jib and soaring masts define “elegance and grace,” as Severin wrote. She “could have sailed straight from the pages of the Arabian Nights.” 🐾

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