



Carrots & Magic in the

U.A.E.

Damian Cook was enticed from Hungary to the United Arab Emirates by the money. He also found some climbing and a bizarre lifestyle.

All photos by the author unless credited.



Top: Abu Dhabi City
Above: Hello Pretty
Right: Rachel Laverly, climbing Groovy Chick HVS.

IN RESEARCHING MY occasional series on the world's climbing backwaters, I arrived in Moonbase Abu Dhabi to the sweltering spring heat and humidity of XS on the sweaty bastard scale. Sandwiched between the oil rich waters of the Gulf and the extensive desert known as 'the Empty Quarter', this place has artificially sprouted in the last 30 years to provide its third world population with first world lifestyles. The Emiratis, suffering from a severe case of future shock, have packed up their tents into the back of their Landcruisers and headed in from the heat to air-conditioned villas in a city that makes Palm Springs look like a centre for culture and heritage.

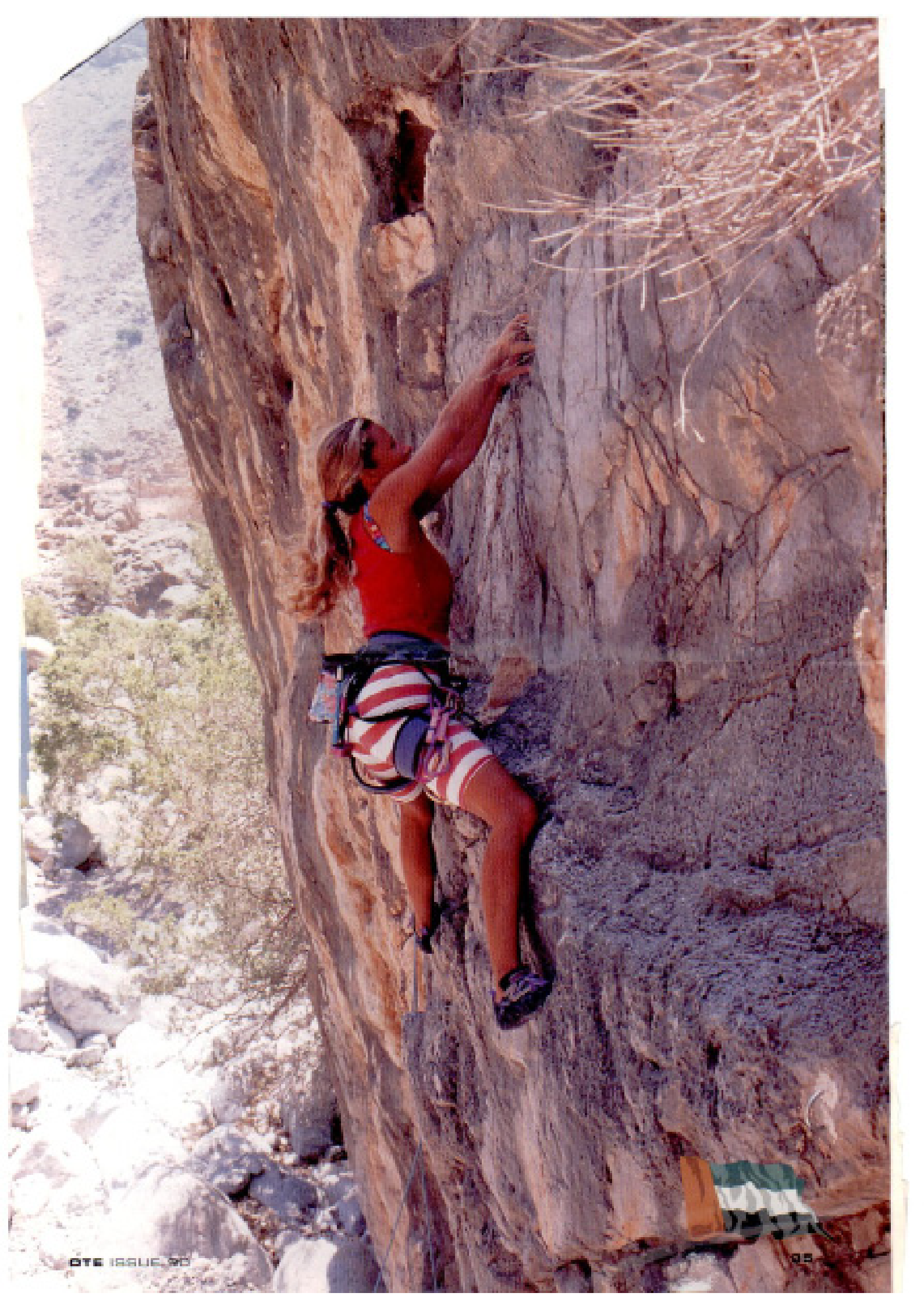
It's hot, sticky and shallow; it's a mismatch of ultra-consumerism and Islam; it's at least two hours drive from the nearest rocks, so who on earth would want to live in a place like this?

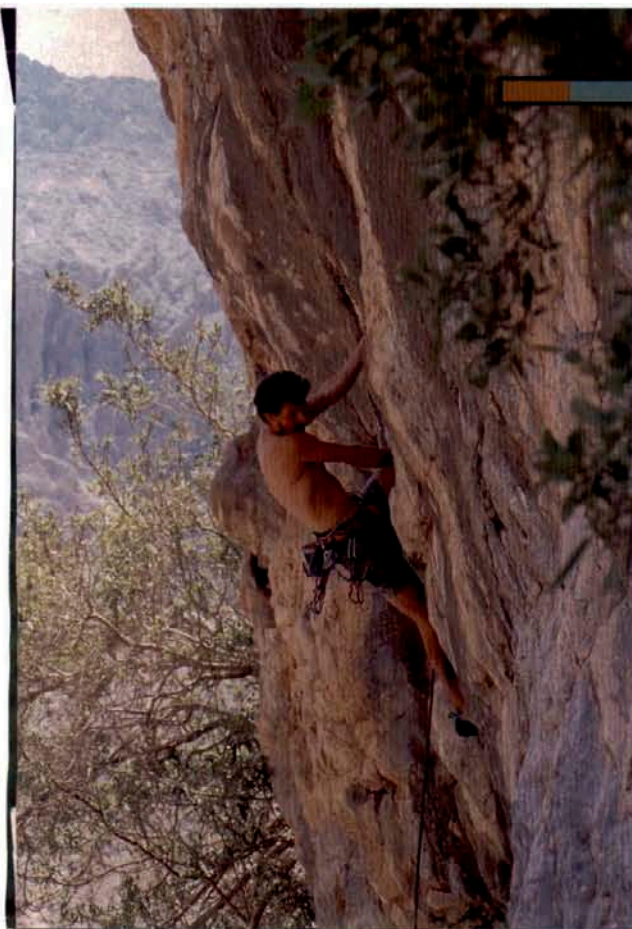
Carrots come in all shapes and sizes. Mine was a salary about ten times what I was earning in Hungary. The path had already been beaten by two of my brothers, and as Daffy Duck once put it, it's not the principle of the thing it's the money. So here I am, overpaid and underworked as some kind of officer in the UAE army, teaching English to reluctant children in soldiers' uniforms.

Dominic and Simon had been here two years by the time I arrived. It had taken Dominic that long to find some climbing places. It's not that there aren't any mountains, there're loads of them all over the Northern, and Eastern Emirates. They look like giant coconut macarons and have solidity to match. But even coconut macarons sometimes have hard, lumpy bits, and so it is that the Emirates does have the occasional pocket of solid rock, thank Allah.

Wadi Bashing has nothing to do with duffing up Crispin, rather it's the generic term given to tearing your 4WD through rocks and sand until you get stuck, at which point you get the picnic out...

Climbing in the UAE, like most other places, is about much more than whether there is anything to climb or not. It's the little differences that make the experience unique. Yes, the rocks are a long way from Abu Dhabi, and not much closer to Dubai, where most of the climbers out here seem to be based. Yet somehow that doesn't seem to matter very much when you are cruising along the four lane highway in a *de rigueur* brand new, 4WD 6000 SUX. It gives shitty mileage but petrol's dirt cheap. Need to stop for a coffee? The five star





Damian Cook on Each Perfect Second E5 6a. Rachel Laverly

hotels have coffee bars which serve reasonably priced refreshments in suitably plush settings. Nobody will think you look out of place despite your Wurzel Gummidge climber-ware. Fancy an *apres* climb lager or two? Forget fundamental Islamic tendencies, hotels throughout the Emirates usually have at least one bar where alcohol is available to those whose beliefs permit, at prices which compare very favourably to Britain. One of the seven Emirates, Sharjah, is alcohol free. O.K., so they don't put the fun in fundamentalism, but that doesn't stop the Sharjans from propping up the bars of neighbouring Emirates, resplendent in their national costume *disdashas*. In fact, it should be pointed out, the Emiratis are often the biggest drinkers out here, encouraged by an act of law which states "Nationals can do whatever they like". That may not seem relevant, until you are on the roads. Who puts the car in carnage? It's small consolation that 90% of road accidents in Fujairah, the second most mountainous of the Emirates, involve local drivers and no other cars. As for the other 10%; it could be you!

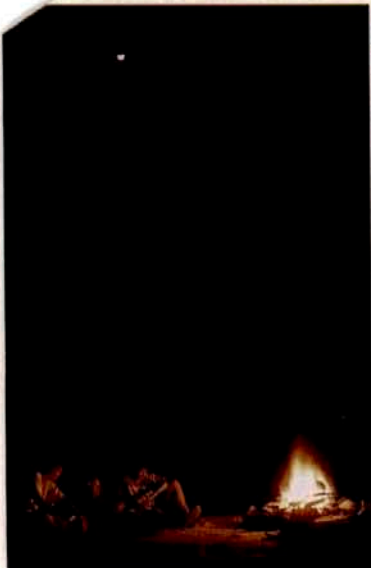
But back to the climbing. As mentioned, Dubai seems to have more of a scene than Abu Dhabi. It's better situated for accessing solid areas of rock, and even has a pretty good wall located in the up-market, Egyptian themed, Wafi leisure complex. Tony lives in Dubai, owner of what was probably the first woody in the Gulf. I make that two walls in a very large city. A typical day out from Dubai involves driving through three rather non-descript Emirates; Sharjah, Ajman

and Um al Qwain, to Ras Al Khaimah in the far north and the delights of Wadi Bih or Wadi Gallelah. Chossy multi-pitches and house-sized boulders abound. Climbing inevitably takes place either first thing in the morning before the sun hits the rocks or last thing in the evening when shadows and shade offer some respite. In the winter, you can often climb reasonably comfortably throughout the day, but it's best to always pick a route in the shade. Summer is definitely a wipe out. You may be able to climb in temperatures of 50°C, but you need a check up from the neck up if you want to. Even the Wafi's air-conditioning struggles to cope (the pyramid shaped glasshouse ceiling doesn't help). Tony's place is always a good option. He's got the air-conditioned woody, the mags, the videos and a nice little pool out the back of his villa.

Most of the Dubai climbers entertain themselves with a number of other activities. Mountain biking, paragliding, alcohol abusing and of course Wadi Bashing. Wadi Bashing has nothing to do with duffing up Crispin, rather it's the generic term given to tearing your 4WD through rocks and sand until you get stuck, at which point you get the picnic out, and wait for other similarly deranged individuals (hopefully more experienced than you) to dig you out.

The fledgling Abu Dhabi scene is based on a lot of intention but not much action. Hopefully this is slowly changing as the handful of would-be and used-to-be climbers realise they are not alone in their strange cravings. Across on the other side of Abu Dhabi Emirate, and linked by a soon-to-be-completed, palm fringed expressway (watch out for those camels!) lies the desert oasis town of Al Ain. Al Ain shares its oasis with the Omani town Buraimi, but the border check point is several kilometres further back after an area well endowed with climbable rock. In common with just about every half decent rock in this corner of Arabia, these mountains are Omani. It's as if the Omani's had several mountaineers in the team which haggled over the borders. "Tottering pile of shite? We'll let Sheik Zayed of the UAE have that one," they must have sniggered. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Musandem peninsula. No sooner does the rock coagulate and soar into the skyline, than you are in Omani territory. Back in Al Ain, Jebel Hafeet offers a ray of hope to nationalistic Emiratis, but if you take the dual carriage-way to the top of this Ayer's Rock style landmass you realise that it's solid appearance is just a mirage. Nevertheless, when you've finished your coffee at the Hilton or the Inter-Continental just 20 minutes cruise will bring you covertly across the border to a striking area known as Wonderwall, or Wadi Body, depending on who you are and which road you took.

Wonderwall was so named by UAE guidebook writer Alan Stark, awestuck by this solidish multi-pitch slab. For me, the wonder is how I managed to knock one of my teeth out testing a half Friend placement here. The hidden dangers of trad climbing. It's certainly a rather pleasant area of shady fins of rock which offer good moderate lines. It's five to ten minutes of negotiating the off-road tracks periodically blocked off by Omani border guards to get to the Wadi Body side of the range. This owes its rather unsavoury name to the mutilated corpse Dominic, Tony and myself discovered carelessly discarded behind one of the boulders hereabouts. In a country with little crime, even less violent crime, it's not really



Bedouins Dom, Joff and Al beneath the reclined crescent moon.

enclave where rocks are rocks and the only dead bodies I've seen were half a hammerhead shark and two turtles, one of which was the size of a rowing boat. We've been busy here bolting, bouldering and even a spot of the ol' deep water soloing. The southern extremity, open to those without the special visa required to pass the border post, is contained by a mountain track which runs from Wadi Bih on the west side, to Dibba on the East. It's a beautiful drive and not a bad cycle either if you believe those chaps from Dubai. There are so many craggy wadis crammed together here, it's hard to know where to start. Tony's team has focused on an area he named Spice World on the Wadi Bih side. It's spicy alright. Me and my bros. started at a point where the Wadi road is at its narrowest, a mere 4m across with near vertical, solid walls stretching up 200m or more on either side. More recently we hit an enormous, secluded, shady wadi, which runs infinitely up the unnamed mountain in multi-pitch steps and seamless slabs. Butterflies, goats and vipers are now the inhabitants of the small cluster of semi-ruined stone huts near the entrance. Giant cicadas tune themselves up to 90 decibels, you're sure they're going to explode any minute.

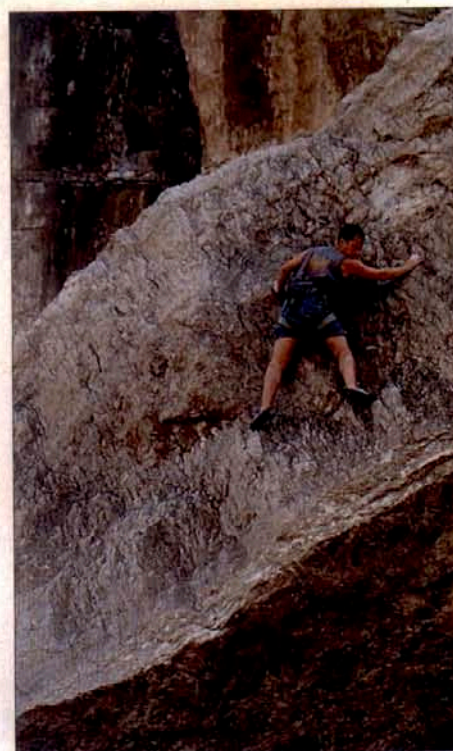
Night falls, and it's time to set up camp in the boulder field at the entrance, or better still if it's not too humid, on the nearby beach littered with coral washed from the Arabian Sea. I've tried bolting some of this to my woody; it's a bit fragile but I've just got to find the right piece. Swimming at night beneath the reclined crescent moon, your movements are highlighted by a phosphorescent glow, underwater fireworks courtesy of some algae or other. Dominic asked one of his wisest students who came from this area about this phenomena: "Ah yes, I know what that is," he answered, "Sihir, that's called sihr". It turns out 'sihr' means magic.

In the morning you can go snorkelling, or traverse the boulder ruckle heading north in search of overhanging pitches above deep water. We hired a boat from Dibba port and were seriously ripped off but it was worth it to see this outstanding coastline of sheer cliffs and fjords (yes, fjords) stretching up to the Straits of Hormuz.

Before long the winter is over and the sentence is two-three months on wood. On the sixth floor of a 20 storey block the spare bedroom resounds to the squeaks, creaks and grunts of man versus gravity. The next time I'll be sending anything real will be in Europe over the summer. I appreciate the luxury of having no distractions from my training regime, the eternal struggle for power. In fact I appreciate a lot of things out here. Sure this place can frustrate the hell out of you, but there're enough carrots and magic to keep me here for a while. ♦

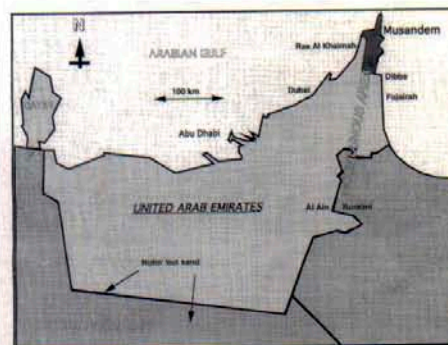
what you'd expect from a nice afternoon's bouldering. The Omani police assured us this wasn't an everyday occurrence, but the open border was an attraction to those with stiffs to stash. Turns out it was the peak of a domestic dispute between an Emirati and his now-deceased Egyptian wife. He may well have been executed by now. The hidden dangers of bouldering. If this all reads a bit cold it's probably my post traumatic psychological defence mechanism, at the time I was seriously harrowed, and pepperoni pizza will never taste the same again.

Musandem, as I mentioned earlier, is the Northern Omani



Tony without a spotter in sight on Spiceworld. Ian Gregory

Climbing inevitably takes place either first thing in the morning before the sun hits the rocks or last thing in the evening when shadows and shade offer some respite.



Damien Cook is a poor love-sick puppy who reputedly dogs diffs. (This information was provided by Jonathan Cook, one of Damian's numerous siblings.)