Coral Monitoring in the Gulf of Oman

For my summer placement, I traveled to Oman to work with Five Oceans Environmental Services (http://www.5oes.com/), a marine consultancy based in the capital, Muscat. As part of the company’s ongoing interest in coral habitats, my project was to collect coral data at a popular dive site near Muscat to be used as a baseline for a continuing coral monitoring project. Due to extreme local environmental conditions, the coral communities here are quite unique and isolated. However, they are little understood and under threat from coastal development and the negative effects of tourism. This project therefore aimed to better understand the reefs around Muscat, with the aim of improving the management of these resources.

The research involved creating permanent 30m-transects on the reefs (hammering steel stakes into coral rock is harder than it sounds!) and then taking photographs of the corals along these lines. These photos were then analysed via a computer program called CPCe to calculate the proportions of each coral genera and their bleaching status. This work will hopefully be carried on annually (perhaps by futures MEMS!) in order to build up a picture of local coral communities and their trajectories. It was a great experience to see the project through from beginning to end, and to take responsibility for collecting and interpreting raw data.

For three days I also helped out with some commercial work, taking water and sediment samples near two local coastal development sites, which were then tested for hydrocarbons and toxicity. This was extremely hot (~50°C on some days) but the thermocline was only ever about 5m down if you needed to cool off underwater!

When not in the office or the field, there was SO MUCH to do in Oman. Every week almost I would find myself in a different landscape - one week in the high-altitude pomegranate orchards of Jebel Akhdar, the next in the enormous caves of Kaf Tahry, the next in the rapids of Wadi Bani Awf. For anyone into outdoor pursuits and wild landscapes, this is a great place. In my final week in Oman, I took some cardboard and a pen, and hitchhiked to Salalah in the south of the country where, because of the high mountains catching the summer monsoon, everything is suddenly VERY green. Such a nice contrast and such a great
country, I would recommend it to anyone thinking about working in the Middle East or just wanting to get off the beaten track. Five Oceans were a really nice company to work for too and I hope to keep in touch in the future.

Dramatic camping spot above Wadi al Nakhr - the Grand Canyon of Arabia.