

Wabah Crater – Just A Hole in the Ground

Category Easy (1) – No special equipment needed
Date 17th & 18th February 2005
Party Brian (scribe, leader), John & Andrew, Bill & Leslie & James, Keith, Thomas & Chris, Robert & Stephen, Peter & Alena, Mel & John & Dawn, Khamseng & Niji, Benjamin & Timothy and not forgetting Beethoven!



What is it that would make a normally sane group of people drive over 1,400 kms around Saudi Arabia simply to go and look at ... a hole in the ground?

For that was the apt description given of the trip in the list of forward events that had everyone slaving at the bit to sign up for this weekend of delights.

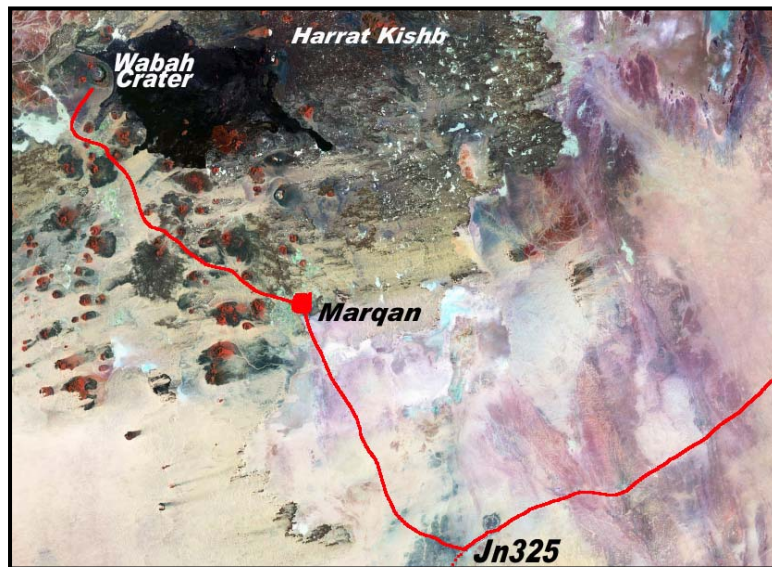
Well, twenty people, to be honest; not forgetting Beethoven, who didn't have much say in the matter. Reveille at the crack of dawn and a tired group of people meeting at the Eye wondering what was in store for them. What was in store was a tale of not just one hole in the ground, but many – of varying appeal and complexity.

We left at 7am and drove down the escarpment on the Makkah road. The weather was 'grismal'; and after a week of bitterly cold nights the prospect of shivering at our camp wasn't the most appealing. The road led us past the red sands, which soon turned to yellow around junction 11 and on to brown near Jelah.

120kms from Riyadh there lay a great stretch of nothingness ahead of us except for a double row of pylons stretching into the distance, whilst the sun played peek-a-boo with the altocumulus.

But a giant Saudi logo (which, incidentally, looks splendid at night) proclaimed the start of the hills once again at Quwayyah – a pleasant little town that looks unusually as if some thought has been put into its urban planning; and as we passed a convoy of cars from Bahrain we saw what looked like red slag hills, rich in copper, lead, zinc, iron and manganese.

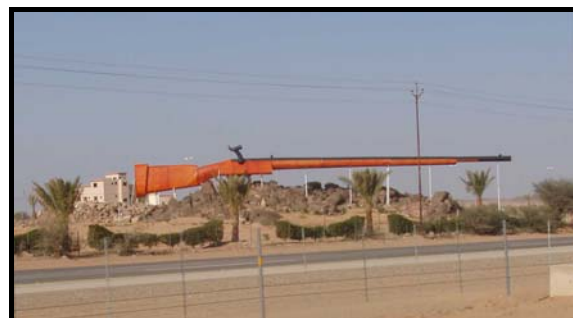
But how could we have thought about driving straight past what must be the most picturesque petrol station on the trip – a purple and pink palace



dedicated to good taste, situated on the outskirts of Jizala? But we did.



And on to Ruwaydah, proclaimed to all visitors by a giant rifle flanking the northern side of the highway.



Fact #1: Ruwaydah, by the way, is a popular girl's name in Arabic which means *Walking Gently*.

We drove gently on past the tasteful row of plastic palm trees – green, yellow, orange and red – and on past the pegmatite rocks stacked haphazardly one on top of another. Pegmatite is mostly comprised of microcline and quartz, but that may well have been furthest from our minds as we headed for the next service station to top up the tanks and to do what comes naturally.

Lesley's face said it all when she emerged from the 'facilities'. "I'll never complain about British service stations again", she remarked, giving this first hole in the ground a measly 2 out of 10 for visitor appeal.

On again and past the checkpoint at Halban (don't miss the canary yellow service station on the eastbound carriageway for yet another visual feast!) and into a large stretch of grey-green rocks (ferrous magnesium silicate, for those interested in geological strata) that then flattened out once again around Barzah.

By 11.0am a dust storm blew up with fingers of sand reaching across the road, twisting into eddying whirls as impatient drivers scurried past. But the storm subsided by the time we reached Dhalim and we coasted in to a Sasco service station.

Fact #2: Westbound the signs say Dhalim – or Dhalm; eastbound, however, it is spelt Zalim!

Now, I was told by a Saudi in the office who visibly shuddered at the thought, that Dhalim is one of those places that mothers use to hush the errant behaviour of their offspring. "You just behave yourself or I'll ship you off to Dhalim" you can hear them say as they admonish their dear little brats. Apparently in 'the old days' it was a centre for the camel train raiders and even to this day, I was assured, you will not find many gas stations in the vicinity as people are afraid of their businesses being ransacked.

Fact #3: Dhalim means revolt, injustice or oppressor.

But either Mr Sasco hadn't heard about such stories or was too big to care. This time Lesley's face told a very different story. "Definitely the best hole in

Saudi" she proclaimed. "8 out of 10 by my reckoning."

Chris was also pleased. Appointing himself king of the camp fire, he had already found his first piece of 'drift wood' in the service station and proudly carried it back to his charabanc.



Almost exactly 600kms from Riyadh, we turned northwards off the Makkah highway at junction 325, only to find that our convoy now consisted of only five cars – not the nine we had set off with. The bad news was that the rules of convoy driving had suffered from momentary lapse (the objective being to keep the car behind you in view). The good news was that as all drivers had a set of instructions, it wasn't long before the remainder caught up as the lead group sat parked by the side of the milky white quartz fields discussing whether we should send back a search party.



And so, on to Wahba; or Wabba; or Wabha (not to be confused with the Wabar craters of the Rub' al-Khali which were discovered in 1932). Whichever you choose, you can be assured that in terms of sheer spectacle it sure takes a lot of beating. The road nowadays goes all the way to the very edge of the crater; only a set of painted poles warns you not to drive over into the abyss.

At the bottom some 400m below you is a white salt bed made up of sodium phosphate crystals. There are two theories as to how the crater was formed. Some believe it came about from volcanic activity in the form of an underground explosion. The rising volcano hit a body of water and the result was a massive explosion which ended up with this big hole in the ground. On one side of the crater lies an ash cone which is all that is left of the volcano.

Others would have it that a meteorite struck the region and formed the 3km-wide hole. The locals, on the other hand, apparently think that a large lake used to be here; but the lake decided it didn't like the area. They say it moved to Yemen. (I always did wonder about those locals!)



Nearly a kilometre away lies a field of black lava, textured with swirls as if it had been made of molten fudge. That's where we pitched camp and decided that after the rotten weather of the previous week it was contrarily now too hot to go down the crater in the afternoon!

Whilst a few decided to sit it out and gossip over a mug of the hot and steaming, some of us more hardy souls decided to hike our way around the crater's rim. Last time I was there I had been assured by others that it took a mere 90 minutes to circumnavigate the 'ole. 92 minutes in, your poor narrator was teased mercilessly that we were not even two thirds of the way around and by the time we staggered back in to camp the thought of a long drink and putting our feet up was highly appealing to one and all.

But there was wood to be collected for the camp fire; and after a five minute break, scavenging parties broke out over the lava field retrieving pieces of dead acacia which were thrown into a large pile.

Hyper-Panda's disposable bar-b-q came up trumps (just light the touch paper and stand well back) and James was pressed into service to put his natural pyromaniac tendencies to good use in lighting the campfire. Alena reckoned that the somewhat oversized piece of fowl taking up an unfair percentage of the barbie was in reality half an emu masquerading as a chicken leg.

Meanwhile Niji thrilled us with her samples of Thai cookery (and we haven't forgotten your rash promise of Thai cookery lessons!) whilst Beethoven knocked back more than his fair share of

best quality Stilton. Thanks to some 'refreshments' produced by Bill and Lesley, and to the sounds of German, Thai, and various dialects of the Queen's English, we gossiped into the night.



The following morning after a hasty breakfast it was time for some to venture down the crater itself whilst others took life easier, searching for the fabled desert diamonds in the angled rays of the sun. Obsidian and perigots sparkled up from the ground, waiting to be added to various collections of desert trophies.

Down the crater things were tougher: through the oasis where water had collected in little pools, we squelched our way down to the shale and rock slope; but another 100 metres further down came to a near vertical rock face. Surely no-one but an idiot would even attempt to climb down it. But Chris, Andrew and Keith shouted words of encouragement to Thomas whilst James did his impression of a mountain goat not once, but four times demonstrating how 'easy' the drop actually was. Thomas got half way down before discretion took over from valour and he pulled himself back to



safety. Khamseng, Niji, Benjamin and Timothy contemplated the thought of trying to reach home with a broken leg and backed off, whilst your erstwhile narrator simply chickened out!

(It was only later that we discovered that if we had moseyed over to the right by about 20 metres there was a gentle slope that would have taken us all the way down to the bottom!)



Back at camp once more there was time for a test of Khamseng's borrowed gas stove where he and Niji found themselves playing host to a bevy of thirsty mouths knocking back more Nescafe and Liptons than you'd give credit for. And then it was time for the off, pausing briefly near the graffiti-covered concrete huts so that we could grab some final pictures before starting the long trek home. The westbound 'holes in the ground' were only mediocre this time (a 4 and a 7, pronounced our resident expert) and we hit Riyadh in



good time to avoid the worst of the wacky races as the sun expertly gave up the unequal struggle for another day.

Lessons to be learned? Well, there has to be at least one complaint per trip. This time a person who should remain nameless remarked, as

she scrunched her way through a lettuce leaf, that the next time she goes out on an expedition she hopes the leader won't be so obnoxiously thin and will have a good healthy appetite, rather than letting everyone starve as they wait for up to an hour for their next snack!

Bill saw his pride and joy getting a stone chipping on its windscreen (*makes a change from flat tyres! – ed*) and if you come across any really good holes in the ground, do let Lesley know before she gets round to publishing her first edition of the "Good (Saudi) Loo Guide".



Malawi's Judges End Car Strike
Malawi, 25th January 2005

Judges in Malawi have called off their first industrial action, after the government promised them a new fleet of four-wheel drive cars.

However, they are getting a cheaper model than the one they had demanded. The 26 high court and supreme court judges first wanted Mercedes or BMWs.



For four days, the judges have only heard serious cases such as murder.

They said they were inconvenienced by their 10-year-old saloon cars, which needed constant maintenance.

High court registrar Sylvester Kalembera told AFP news agency that the parties "reached an agreement after lengthy deliberation and the meeting resolved that we get four-wheel drive vehicles."

The judges had already dropped their initial demand for German vehicles and agreed to accept Toyota Prados at \$80,000 each.

Mr Kalembera said they would now get Nissan Terranos, which cost about \$60,000 each.

Former President Bakili Muluzi had originally promised to replace the cars before leaving office last year.

The attorney general said it was unfortunate the new President Bingu wa Mutharika was being punished for Mr Muluzi's unkept pledge.



According to the BBC's Raphael Tenthani in Blantyre, most of the judges were present in the court building but spent most of the day reading newspapers in their chambers.

One member of the judiciary said that when a new cabinet is appointed, a fleet of expensive cars is procured for them almost immediately.

"But most of us judges have had our official Toyota Corollas for more than 10 years."