

# So Old a Ship: Twilight of the Arab Dhow

by Marion Kaplan

Living and working in Kenya as a freelance photojournalist in the 1970s, it was my good fortune to be assigned by *National Geographic* to do a story on Arab dhows. These wooden ships had withstood change in the Indian Ocean for more than 2,000 years, but their numbers were then in rapid decline. In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, between 600 and 700 wooden dhows with their great billowing sails would arrive each year in Mombasa, Kenya, with the monsoon from Muscat and Oman, Arabia and India. In the 1930s and '40s, their number exceeded 200, but by 1970 the dhows were being pushed off their ancient trading routes by speedy freighters and containerization. The year I embarked on my expedition, the number making the seasonal voyage had diminished to fewer than fifty.

I spent five months on the venture. In Kuwait, I joined the crew of a small dhow as a passenger for a trip through the Persian Gulf; in Dubai, I transferred to a large seagoing dhow called a “boom” for a voyage down the African coast, ultimately bound for Mombasa. My 3,500-mile journey was very probably the last close look at dhow people, dhow trading, and dhow life before those lovely wooden vessels were gone forever.

## Kuwait

In 1973, Kuwait was a city with an ambience of Islam, oil, and money. Gowned men rattled rosaries against steering wheels



ALL PHOTOS BY MARION KAPLAN

of big American cars. The night sky glowed with oil-burning flares from the desert. Big cargo ships were handled in Shuwaikh port, while the small dhows lay along the waterfront in Seif port. Out in the green water,

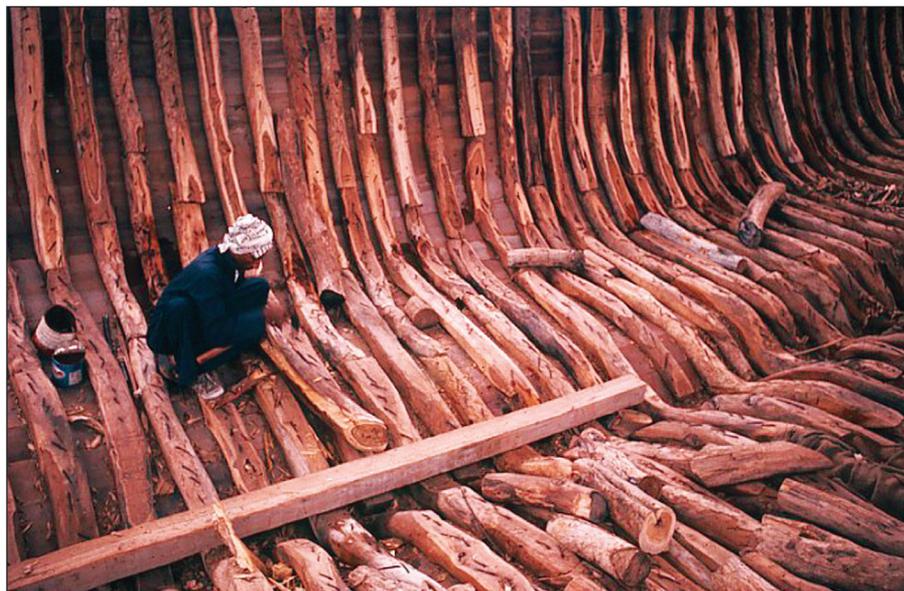
vast freighters steamed past tiny scimitar sails. None of the great deep-sea sailing craft were left. The remains of probably the last true engineless boom were propped on a beach beside a college sailing club.

## Aziz

I had arranged passage aboard the *Aziz*, a plump little 94-ton double-ender with a 70-foot deck and a 150-horsepower engine. Ahmed Jassim, the *nakhoda*—or captain, was younger than his crew but always indisputably, confidently, master of his ship. His long robe and headcloth, even at sea, remained immaculate. He was handsome and dashing—in striking contrast with the nine seamen—a motley lot, unshaven, in ragged clothes, broken-toothed, cross-eyed,

(top) Setting the huge lateen mainsail.

(left) In the 1970s, dhows were still being built in Kuwait with local teak, by master shipbuilders who had learned and passed along their trade for generations.



and, in one case, more than a little simple. All the men were Iranians from Kangan, a Persian port they pronounced “Kangoon.” The men spoke Arabic among themselves, not the Persian language, Farsi. Were they Arabs or Iranians? I asked the captain. Well, it depended, he said, but really they were both. Or either.

*Aziz* was a Kuwait-registered ship built five years earlier in Qatar, where Jassim’s brother ran the family’s merchant trading business. *Aziz* sailed the eastern waters of the Gulf and called at all the Persian Gulf ports of Iran.

I slept at night, or dozed really, wrapped half around the helmsman on the shelf of the wheelhouse. There was no room to stretch out. This little hutch was also the captain’s cabin, but all the time we were at sea, Ahmed Jassim maintained watch from his place on the crates, snatching perhaps an hour or two of sleep at dawn or after the midday meal. I never knew where, among all the boxes jammed on deck, everyone else slept. Even the ship’s cat seemed constantly to be looking for a comfortable spot.

Our nakhoda took no bearings. He navigated by keeping a close eye on landmark flares ashore, the patterns of the sky, the barely perceptible breeze, and the flow and color of the water. Our sail required little adjustment—one rope eased to starboard and a couple hauled in to port, an operation that infinitesimally modified the angle of the yard to the mast and the sail to the wind. Because a dhow has no standing rigging, a shift of the sail can be, and usually is, a rousing exertion.

### Abu Dhabi

In the 1970s, Abu Dhabi was home to the richest people in the world; under the emirate’s 25,000 square miles of desert, lay oil reserves estimated at twenty billion barrels. The harbor, for all that prodigious wealth, was modest at best. Abu Dhabi, though, was never a major dhow center.

We had expected to stay in Abu Dhabi no more than two or three days. We were there a week. In time our business was finished, the ship was cleared, a manifest issued, and we were off—all the way to the lee side of the harbor wall. In the last day or two the wind had piped up and the sea became a choppy grey. Here we tied up to



*The seventy-foot Aziz was my first experience voyaging in a trading dhow. (below) Their version of a lead line: taking soundings in the Persian Gulf.*





*Before harbor facilities were built in Salalah, on Oman's Dhofar coast, dhows sent goods ashore via hand-stitched surfboats.*

a rusty freighter and stayed put. Two days later, *Aziz* at last ventured out of the harbor. The sea was still steep and the wind fresh, but clear skies and sunshine convinced our nakhoda to proceed. All the chests and remaining boxes were given extra lashings, and out we went, pitching and rolling, to Dubai.

### Dubai

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Dubai is an urbane and wealthy city-state oozing success and ultra-smart technology. Its long streets are filled with skyscrapers. Yet beyond the refinement of handsome hotels and five-star shopping, past the fancifully shaped man-made islands and the allure of a glittering holiday destination is a monotonous desert to one side and the vastness of the sea on the other. In the great *khor*, or creek, an Arab Grand Canal that is Dubai's prime geographic feature, the blue waters still present a grand parade of teak hulls, bustling ferryboats—all the signs of lively trading and a prosperous people. It is a fine picture of development and progress. It is also a picture where significant elements of the past have been obliterated.

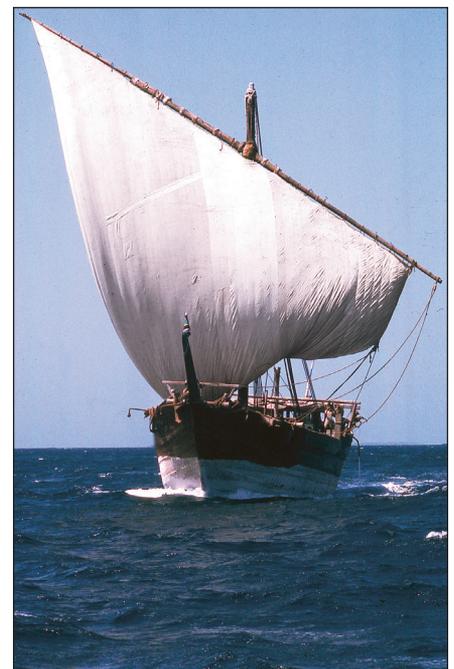
As we made our approach to Dubai, the sea around us suddenly filled with ships. They came from all directions—*kotias*, fast booms, *sambuks*, dhows—with the flags of Kuwait, Qatar, Iran, India, all the states of the Arab Emirates and beyond streaming from their jackstuffs.

In Dubai, *Aziz* headed into the *khor*, where dhows were massed as closely as fish in a shoal. *Aziz* tied up to a row of vessels eight-deep. One of these, someone said, was going to Mombasa—my ultimate destination. Ahmed Jassim negotiated in Farsi with the nakhoda of the larger dhow, a boom. Her captain, Issa Abdullah, was not eager to take me with them as a passenger, but terms were agreed upon and it was time to say goodbye to my shipmates in *Aziz*.

### Mihandust

*Mihandust* was considerably larger than the *Aziz*. More than a hundred feet long, she had a registered capacity of 170 tons. Loaded, she drew sixteen feet. She had been built twelve years before as a sail-only vessel, but a 250-horsepower engine had been installed four years before. On top of whatever

other cargo she carried, perched two saloon cars, two pickup trucks, a miscellany of bedsteads, plywood and poles, and two Honda motorbikes. The work of the ship was arduous. Not only did the men have



*A "boom" at sea, riding high on the water.*

to keep watch and sail the ship, but they were also her stevedores and dockworkers as well. They loaded and lashed and stowed every piece of cargo. When the time came, they unlashed and unloaded.

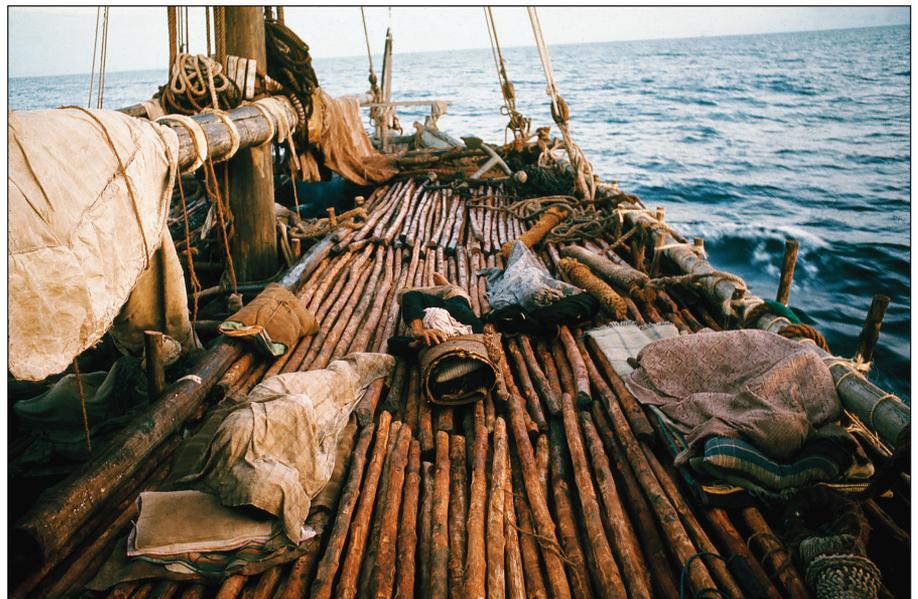
Issa sailed with his two sons on the crew; one of whom, Mohammed, served as second captain. They carried a curious assortment of equipment. They had a clock with a loud chime that was set to twelve each sunset, but no ship's bell. There was a sextant—Mohammed would point it at the horizon each noon according to his wristwatch—but no chronometer, nor a barometer. There were two compasses, one housed in a binnacle by the wheel and another on a shelf in the wheelhouse. Charts with a cardboard rose and a card were frequently put to use to get us from point to point, island to landmark, all the way from Dubai to Mafia Island off Tanzania. There was no derrick for moving cargo; the mast and rigging were used to offload heavy gear like our longboat or the four vehicles we carried to Salalah, Oman. An old capstan was put to use in these situations.

There was not much traffic at sea. We saw tankers entering and leaving the Gulf through its narrow mouth between Iran and the Masandam peninsula. We saw a few Indian *kotias*, two lovely wooden ships from Muscat, and, near the shore, a scattering of white lateen sails of local fishing boats.

At Dhofar, we dropped anchor in Salalah Bay. Cargo had to be unloaded by surfboat, a picturesque but impractical task. A new harbor under construction at Risut, to the west of Salalah, would hasten the end of the stitched surfboats that had performed this task for centuries. We unloaded the four vehicles at Risut because the harbor had the platform floats that could carry them, but the rest of the cargo went by surfboat. Hour by hour, day by day, our cargo went ashore. In addition to the vehicles and motorcycles, *Aziz* had carried a pile of wooden shutters and numerous bags of onions, window frames and sheets of corrugated iron, doors, and bedposts, cartons of tinned ratatouille, Chinese thermos flasks, American dishwashers, evaporated milk, South African Groovy brand cola, Iranian rosewater, timber, a vast number of busting bags of sugar, 300



*Setting sail aboard Mihandust. Privacy was non-existent, from the zuli (toilets) lashed off the stern (below) to finding a place to sleep on a deck loaded with mangrove poles (bottom photo).*



bags of Finnish cement, and, finally, a seemingly endless supply of canned fruit and juice. The nakhoda also carried a supply of Persian carpets, of which we sold thirty to individuals in the English community in Salalah, some of whom were engaged in development and construction work, as well as a number of army officers.

After our arrival in Mombasa, *Mihandust's* crew began preparations for her port chores, in particular, her *sbehamu*—the oiling and coating of the hull with animal fat to protect it from damage by marine borers. They would also provision and top off the water and diesel tanks. Mohammed told me that they needed to decide where to go this year for their *boriti*, a cargo of mangrove poles highly sought after for Iran's building construction projects. Mangrove poles in 1973 were the only commodity that made the long voyage from the Persian Gulf to Mombasa worthwhile. Issa decided to head to the Rufiji River delta in Tanzania, where the best poles were to be found, but the work of acquiring and loading them had a reputation for being taxing on the crew.

Alan Villiers once called the motley mouths of the Rufiji River a “delta of misery,” and so it was. It rained most of the time. *Mihandust* anchored outside—where there were no mosquitoes—and Issa commuted by small boat to a convenient base within to do business. Mangrove poles, unlike most logs, sink, and therefore had to be carried out to the ship in cutters and lighters rather than floated out. Local protocol required that food had to be taken to the men who manned the vessels hired to ferry the cut poles to the dhows. *Mihandust* worked in company with three other booms. The ships sailed together, ordered the poles together, and dealt as a group with the local headmen and forestry officials. Soon thousands of slippery poles were sent out in lighters, tossed onto the decks of the dhows, and passed to seamen stowing them in the dark and humid hold. When the hold was filled, more were stacked on the main deck, whose sides had been built up by several feet.

A month after we had departed Mombasa, we returned to a much different scene

than we had left—the monsoon had changed. Uneven winds were blowing from the southwest, which would help the dhows on the homeward-bound leg of their seasonal journey. I would not join them and disembarked, after a voyage of five months, and bid farewell to my shipmates in Mombasa, as they headed seaward, bound for home waters.

Today, *Mihandust*, a direct descendant of dhows going back to Phoenician times, and her sister ships are gone. ⚓

*Photojournalist and author Marion Kaplan lived in Africa for twenty years working as a freelancer for a wide range of newspapers and magazines, including National Geographic, which published her article, “Twilight of the Arab Dhow” in 1974. This article for Sea History is adapted from her new book, So Old a Ship: Twilight of the Arab Dhow (Mobo Books, 2015, ISBN 978-0-9557-208-2-6), which includes many previously unpublished photographs of her voyages in Aziz and Mihandust. She now lives in the southwest of France.*

*Mombasa Old Port in 1973.*

