



## CASTAWAYS



The 250 year old tale of *Amstelveen* shipwreck near Oman gets a much deserved retelling

**Our Correspondent**  
Muscat

A shipwreck, the castaways' arduous and traumatic journey of survival and an invaluable diary that stands testimony to the event - all these form the crux of Dutch filmmaker Gilles Frenken's documentary *Expedition Oman*.

The year is 1763 and the *Amstelveen*, part of the Dutch East-India Company's fleet, is sailing from Indonesia (erstwhile Dutch East Indies) to Muscat. A combination of rough seas and human errors proves fatal for the ship and most of its crew members; some are cast away on the shores of Ras Madrakah.

The sailors, including naval officer Cornelis Eyks, go through a harrowing walk in the desert in search of water, life and the nearest harbour (Ras al Hadd), and survive to tell the story.

After 250 years, Frenken follows acclaimed Dutch writer Abdelkader Benali, who in search of the shipwreck remains, unravels the true story by retracing the footsteps of Eyks, whose diary is filled with details of their fight for survival.

In an exclusive interview from the Netherlands, Frenken said, "I am following Benali who is well aware of history of the Arab world. He is trying to locate the *Amstelveen's* wreck with the help of Eyks' account of the journey in the desert. He accomplishes his goal of finding out many more facts by visiting locations and people in Muscat and Sohar."

Frenken, whose documentaries have been telecast on Discovery, National

Geographic and PBS, has had his cast reenact the events in the desert between Ras Madrakah and Ras al Hadd.

Frenken said that shooting in Oman was a pleasant experience and that the country is friendly to foreigners and tourists.

"Almost everywhere, even in the desert, there were people who could speak English and were hospitable. For seven weeks in 2012, I travelled throughout the country."

Bedouin hospitality is a timeless feature of Oman, he said, as the castaway Dutch crew, too was touched by the helpfulness of Omani villagers.

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"What I am trying to bring out through *Expedition Oman* is the story of Eyks, which speaks volumes not only about the Dutch sailors, but also about the Bedouins," Frenken said. "It is important to realise that Eyks and his men could not have survived without the help of Bedouins, who offered them water and food. This hospitality was very important 250 years ago, and still is. Why do we live? It is to help one another. This is the underlying message of the film."

Speaking about Eyks' account of the shipwreck, Frenken said, "From his diary, we found out that the captain made some mistakes. His stubbornness made him ignore the advice offered by his mates during the disaster. The captain did not realise when his ship was in shallow waters and at a certain moment, she ran aground. She was lost to the seas thereafter."

"This happens in real life, too. People



Cast and crew of *Expedition Oman* during shoots Oman (Dave Mothershaw)

in higher ranks can use their power, but should listen carefully to well-informed subordinates. Inefficiency of this captain led to the ship's ruin and loss of lives."

Narrating tales of the past has been the passion of the Dutch filmmaker who has produced more than 100 films. When he heard about the *Amstelveen*, he immediately wanted to bring its story to a vast audience.

"Of the 105 men on board, only 30

go to Indonesia to visit the port from where the *Amstelveen* started its voyage to Oman. Editing is estimated to take about four more months."

Speaking about the movie's shooting, Frenken said that the biggest challenge was to film the 250 year old events. "We had to set up re-enactments in January this year. We had to dress castaway European sailors, Bedouins and recreate that time in 1763.

A lot of research is also happening on the shipwreck and attempts are being made to find its remains.

"Its cargo was mainly sugar and spices, which would have obviously perished. But we tried to find and are still on the lookout for items like the anchor, cannons, navigation instruments, personal belongings of the crew and wooden pieces of the ship. During the survey, we noted objects from the ship at various places, but could not find them while filming at these locations. We will continue our search."

Benali and a team of scientists from Oman and the Netherlands conducted surveys before filming started.

"Now a yacht, equipped for underwater exploration is being used. The survey team, under supervision of two maritime archaeologists, David Bouman of the Netherlands and Ayyoub al Busaidi of Oman are using sidescan sonars and a magnetometer (a tool to detect iron) for the survey," he said.

Another challenge was to raise enough money to produce the film. "With help of the Dutch Embassy in Oman, we found financial support from companies in Oman and the Netherlands. We're thankful to Dr Mohammed

al Barwani because without him this film would not have been possible."

H E Stefan van Wersch, the Netherlands Ambassador to Oman, said, "I had my sleepless nights, particularly when we started the fundraising campaign at a quite late stage. We needed real big money. We were able to establish excellent cooperation with the Ministry of Heritage and Culture (MoHC) and my fear for a fundraising debacle evaporated. We found a number of sponsors, both Omani and Dutch, and we owe them major gratitude. I still think however, that the main reason for the success was the power of the *Amstelveen's* story itself. Ultimate survival appeals to the imagination."

According to him, the film also throws light on the good trade relations between the countries for almost 400 years. "The story had it all: Seafaring, transport and logistics - three terms that not only define Dutch East India Company but also Oman's history."

The preview of *Expedition Oman* will be screened at the GCC Supply Chain and Logistics Conference that will take place at Al Bustan Palace, a Ritz-Carlton Hotel on April 14 and 15. Frenken said, "This will be the first version of the film, a concise story of 48 minutes with the highlights. Later this year, I hope to release its two-hour version in a theatre in Muscat." Frenken also hopes to publicise the movie worldwide.

He further credited MoHC for supporting the film. "Maritime archaeologist Busaidi is still involved in the survey to find the wreck. H E Salim al Mahrooqi, Undersecretary in MoHC is also supervising the project on behalf of the Omani government."

