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off the beaten path
Paolo Rossetti

Mountains to the sea

Venturing along the eastern coast of the UAE is a rewarding experience that doesn't require the mobility of a 4x4

Here is a gentle exploratory trip for those weekends when you just feel like going on a leisurely drive.

It is also an excellent route for newcomers to the UAE, for when you have visitors from overseas and for people who do not relish the idea of going "off-road". In fact, a saloon car will be perfectly suitable for the tarmac roads that run along the coastline of eastern UAE.

Starting from the red dunes of Sharjah, we will traverse the sharp Hajar Mountains – the highest in the eastern Arabian Peninsula – and then roll south along beaches for 100km before heading back inland in a wide, circular route.

For this trip, I'm driving one of my favourite cars, the Audi A8. And, in this case, it's the extended L model, which is basically a personal limousine. You know how most of us walk past first class as we board a plane, enviously taking note of their extra space and reclining sky-bed seats? Well, the Audi A8 L is definitely travelling in first class.

This itinerary can be covered in one day, as we did, or you can stay overnight if you prefer to spend more time at the beach or exploring the tracks that lead up into the mountains. A trip from Abu Dhabi adds an extra four hours so, for those of you based there, I would suggest it as a weekender. Your overnight options run from camping on the beach to inexpensive motels to five-star resorts.

We start from the bustling town of Al Dhaid, where the desert dunes flatten out as they hit the imposing rocky mountains, at waypoint one. You can reach Al Dhaid from Sharjah by taking the road out past the airport (E88) and from Dubai I would recommend you head directly out of the city to connect to the Outer Dubai Road (E611), which will bypass the city traffic completely and eventually meet up with the E88 that leads straight to Al Dhaid.

From Al Dhaid we will head due east on the road towards Fujairah, but taking the first roundabout left, at waypoint two, following the signposts for the east coast hotels and Ras Al Khaimah. This road takes us through some interesting terrain, such as an alluvial plain and some outcrops of harder ground that have been carved over the centuries. If you have a 4WD vehicle, you may like to explore.

At the first T-junction, waypoint three, turn right following the direction of travel and make an immediate U-turn when possible, so that you will be travelling north. This highway is fast and dangerous, so please take good care making this manoeuvre, as you will need generous acceleration to cross the fast lane to reach the U-turn lane. Fortunately, the Audi's V8 engine belts out 370hp so acceleration is rocket-like.

With the imposing Hajar Mountains on your right, keep an eye out for an intersection heading to your right, which will be signposted towards Dibba on road E87, at waypoint four. This road will head straight into the mountains.

There are a few exits from this highway that lead to little mountain villages where you will find



Beautiful Al Aqah beach is fully developed but there are many quiet spots along the way, while Al Biddiya Mosque, below, is the oldest in the UAE, dating back to 1446. Photos by Paolo Rossetti for The National

dirt tracks leading up to wonderful lookouts. However, the dirt tracks are not always properly maintained, so stay alert.

After numerous turns you will emerge on the eastern side of the Hajar, into a plateau sandwiched between another range of coastal mountains, with a lovely view of the emerald sea in the distance. You will pass Dibba's cement factory and turn left at the T-junction, at waypoint five.

The seaside town of Dibba is ahead of you and our route skims past its right side. I would recommend a quick look around as it is a charming town that is half in the UAE and half in Oman.

If you wish a diversion into Dibba, the roundabout at waypoint six provides a good entry point. If not, please continue straight through all the roundabouts, which will take you to the coastal road. This is an old road that hugs the eastern coastline of the UAE and offers probably the finest picturesque drive in the country. The stark mountains on your right drop almost directly into the sparkling blue sea and coves of sandy beaches nestle between rocky outcrops. Within swimming range lie a couple of small, uninhabited islands, and the waves of the Gulf of Oman are generally tame. There is also a variety of underwater life and, while snorkelling, I have spotted numerous sea turtles and colourful cuttlefish.

The number of public beaches has been drastically reduced by on-going development of resorts and beachfront villas, but there are still beaches open to the public, such as at waypoint seven.

At waypoint eight I normally pick

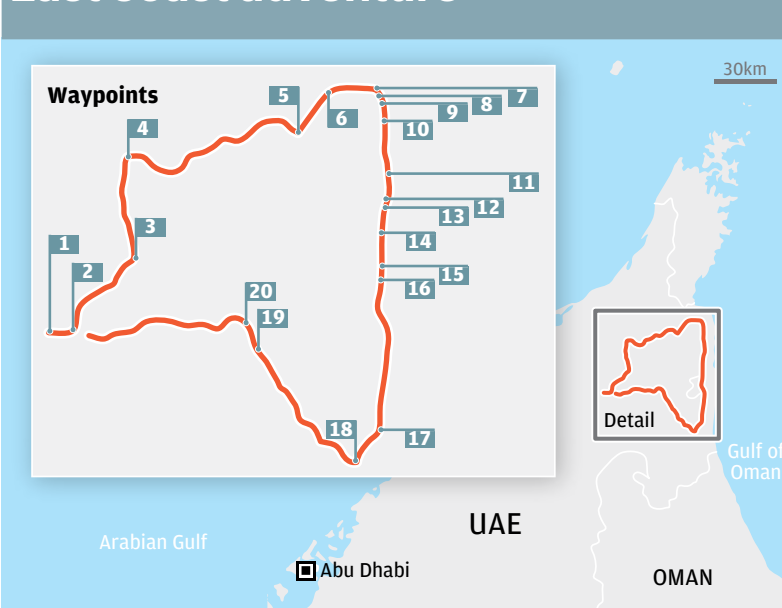


up some fresh fruit from the roadside stalls and I can't help but feel energised by the fresh seaside air. Farther along, at waypoint nine, is a wide beach designated for families only, so you may want to picnic there if you have children with you. Down the road, at waypoint 10, you will find a road that leads directly into the mountains – the kind of detour I love. You never know what you will find if you follow it as it turns into a 4x4 track and then, ultimately, a hiking trail. As you drive along the coast, stop as often as time permits, because even if you may not have time to explore fully, it can be the starting point of a future exploratory trip.

At waypoint 11 you will come across another public beach, this one with what is known to expats as "Snoopy Island" jutting out of the calm waters. Years ago, this was the spot where one of the first beach resorts was opened, when the beaches were occupied by local fishermen and not international hotel chains. The motel is still there and still reasonably priced.

The fully developed Al Aqah beach is further down the road, at waypoint 12, and a few kilometres later you will come across the UAE's oldest mosque on your right, dating back to 1446, at waypoint 13. There is a fort built up on the escarpment and the view from up there is

East coast adventure



well worth the few steps it takes to scamper up. Al Biddiya Mosque is formed by four small domes and is still used as a place of worship.

The turn-off to Wadi Wurayah is farther down the coast, at waypoint 14, and then you reach the town of Khor Fakkan, which has a good selection of eateries along the urban corniche. At waypoint 15 there is a grassy park by the sea, with children's playgrounds and picnicking areas. In the distance you will see the operations of a large shipping port.

From here on, civilisation has claimed the coast and we drive towards the city of Fujairah. You can avoid the denser populated

city streets by taking two rights, at waypoints 16 and 17 (on to Kuwait Street), which will bypass the city and take you directly to the motorway that leads back west through the mountains towards Al Dhaid, where we began the adventure.

Two more interesting places to note on the way – although if you made a day trip you are bound to be tired and will probably want to skip them – are a deep gorge formation at Dhafrah (waypoint 19) and the Friday Market at Masafi, where you will turn left at waypoint 20.

All in all, this route is a wonderful coastal circuit, with plenty to see along the way and many promising turn-offs to be explored.

how to select a vehicle for adventure

Big, nasty SUVs can reach the places saloon cars can't

If you have just arrived in the UAE or are planning on changing vehicles, you might be considering whether a 4x4 vehicle is really necessary.

We live in cities, a large network of tarmac roads at our disposal. No doubt you have heard that most SUV owners never set tyre off-road, so why not forgo the whole SUV fad and get a regular, sleek, economical street car?

As an off-road enthusiast you can probably guess what my preference is, but here is why.

The UAE and its neighbouring countries are exceptional for allowing open access to public lands.

If you are from Europe or the US there is practically no off-road left anymore – everywhere is private land, fenced in, and what is public is normally off-limits to smoke-belching, wheel-spinning vehicles. In fact, there are off-roading parks built specifically so 4x4 enthusiasts can find a place to drive around.

If you are from a densely populated Asian country, then off-roading is also getting scarce, unless you drive several hundred kilometres away from the cities.

In the UAE, however, off-roading is everywhere and sometimes the only way to reach the most beautiful spots. Biking and hiking are not

quite feasible due to the climate, remoteness and even soft surfaces one would have to navigate.

While you may feel the road network is well-developed – and it is if your destination is a shopping centre or government building or other urban facility – but to reach beyond the built-up areas, you are driving on sand or rocks.

And on sand, you will not drive farther than a few metres in a two-wheel-drive car. There is more of a chance your saloon can gingerly plod along a hard, dusty track, at least until the foot of mountains, after which you can proceed on foot, but the suspension system

will not last long when abused that way.

However, a four-wheel-drive vehicle opens up the entire territory to exploration. Not only to race around dune-bashing like a madman, but also to grant you access to the many natural and archaeological wonders in the region.

Did you know there are waterfalls streaming down tight wadis and that there are water holes in gorges that are deep enough to jump in from cliff-height?

There are mountain viewpoints that will take your breath away and ancient forts that lie undisturbed. And then there is the open dune

desert ... Besides access to nature, SUVs also carry more cargo and, since trips to the outdoors require a vehicle, camping in the UAE tends to be comfortable in that we can carry the conveniences and amenities we choose to, as opposed to a week-long hike where all you have is what you can carry in your backpack.

So, we bring large, airy tents and coolboxes loaded with fresh meats, and giant barbecues, and wood for bonfires, and inflatable mattresses with our home pillows and duvets.

Lastly, our roads are dangerous and, sadly, the chances of an accident are not too remote. While

saloon cars are built to the same exacting safety standards as SUVs, with crumple zones, airbags and all, the fact is that the tests are run under conditions where the car bumpers collide at a standard height. Next time you see a saloon parked next to a big SUV notice the difference in height of the bumpers, which means that, in a collision, the SUV rides straight over the saloon's impact zone, bypassing the bumper and directly into the body.

I prefer my family to be in the biggest, nastiest 4x4 I can find. For safety, and access to the most beautiful spots, it's the only way to go.