

Go to [www.thenational.ae/motoring](http://www.thenational.ae/motoring) for an interactive, GPS-based map of Paolo's route on Google Earth. Or download the .kml file for your own GPS unit

off the beaten path  
Paolo Rossetti

# Dune for the ride

A journey into the **Liwa** region gives you a true sense of how inhospitable the inner desert can be

In Canada and other northern countries, there is a tradition that balances precariously on the very edge of sanity – it's an annual event called the Polar Bear Swim. On January 1, holes are broken into thick ice-covered ponds, bonfires are set along the frozen beaches and then hoards of people run into the absolutely freezing-cold water for a quick dip.

Why? To experience what the water feels like at the coldest time of year.

Conversely, maybe it could also inspire people in one of the most arid environments on the other side of Earth to experience the desert at the hottest time of year. Which is why, this August, we are going to Liwa – in the Empty Quarter, or the Rub al Khali – the world's largest continuous body of sand.

Do you know what "extreme heat" really feels like? How the summer wind mercilessly sucks moisture out of your skin? Would you like to deepen your respect for desert people and creatures that survive in these extremes?

My family and friends gave it a try, but we were cheating because I was driving a brand-new Land Rover LR4, with air-conditioning that won the battle with the 50°C-plus temperatures.

Besides the boasting rights with the set of wheels, on this trip we had several pleasant surprises: finding large desert roses, a lively scorpion and a pregnant gazelle.

Now for the disclaimer: For now, please refer to the interactive map on *The National* website, where you can study the route and see photos along the way – this will help you form a clear idea of what's expected.

When you click on the map, you will navigate to a Google Map, which allows you to zoom for detail – you will find photos and travel notes of each waypoint, satellite images of the actual terrain and also the downloadable GPS track, in .kml format, which means it can also be opened in Google Earth.

Please make use of this unique support to this article on *The National* website. Quite frankly, mistakes and mishaps can become life-threatening situations in the remote desert in summer, so please do not take this trip lightly. We will stay close to a permanent, well-established track, but be aware of the seriousness of the situation brought on by both the climate and sand-dune terrain. This is a trip for experienced desert drivers only.

We start from Highway E11, leading from Abu Dhabi towards Al Ruwais, where at waypoint one you take exit 306 towards Hameem.

The benefit of this route is that it passes by Sheikh Hamad bin Hamdan's famous Emirates National Auto Museum, which is definitely worth a stop at waypoint three.

Once the interminable motorway reaches the Adnoc petrol station at Hameem, at waypoint four, make sure to fill your tank and stock up on water. Our trip will not require additional petrol, but if you think you might deviate and forge your own track, extra fuel canisters are a good idea, as is filling half your vehicle with drinking water.

Continue towards Liwa from the



You don't have to go far off of this winding desert track to feel swallowed up by the dunes of the Rub al Khali in Liwa. Paolo Rossetti for The National

Adnoc station, staying on the main motorway and following it around to the right as it naturally curves, until you reach waypoint five, where a tarmac track on your left branches off the highway and heads south into the desert. It is signposted to Mahdhar al Khudaira and it is an access road to the nearby oil fields, so it is well-travelled.

This road is our lifeline, our entry and exit, and we should always maintain our position in relation to this track. There are no other exits, other than going overland traversing over 100km of dunes in any other direction.

As you can see from the interactive map, when we enter the sands at waypoint six we will remain parallel and never far from this road. We will travel south in the dunes and re-join this track to return to civilisation.

From waypoint six to waypoints seven and eight, we are in the most difficult segment of our adventure: the dunes are high and the bowls are deep.

The LR4 is not considered one of the UAE's foremost dune bashers, due to its complex electronics and weight, but let me assure you its performance is stellar.

Traction systems were turned off to allow the wheels to spin and we gave it a good workout, with a very watchful eye on the coolant temperature gauge, which thankfully did not move too close to the red. The rpm gauge,

however, did. When you're in the thick of Liwa dunes, in summer-soft sands, you have no mercy for the machine: it has to deliver.

At waypoint nine you will have reached a high plateau. Ahead of you will be a steep slipface dropping down to the flat sebkha.

Descend slowly, with the transfer case in low gearing and locked in first gear. And if your vehicle offers hill descent mode like the LR4, engage it. Do not apply the brakes as you slowly point your car straight and drive off the end of the world – it will be scary, passengers will hang on for their lives but, slowly, the vehicle will follow gravity and descend in full control.

Do not allow the vehicle to turn sideways; if it does start to wander off the direct line downhill, then apply a little gas to straighten it, but not the brakes. The reason is that the front of the car is the heaviest because of the engine and so applying the brakes further digs the front in and encourages the light rear to swing around. Easy does it.

Once down in the sebkha, have a good look around. Exit the vehicle and take a deep breath of furnace-like air. Imagine what it would be like if you were on foot! Life is tough in the desert all year round but, in summer, any living thing that can survive has my respect.

In the sebkha, we found desert roses not deep under the surface

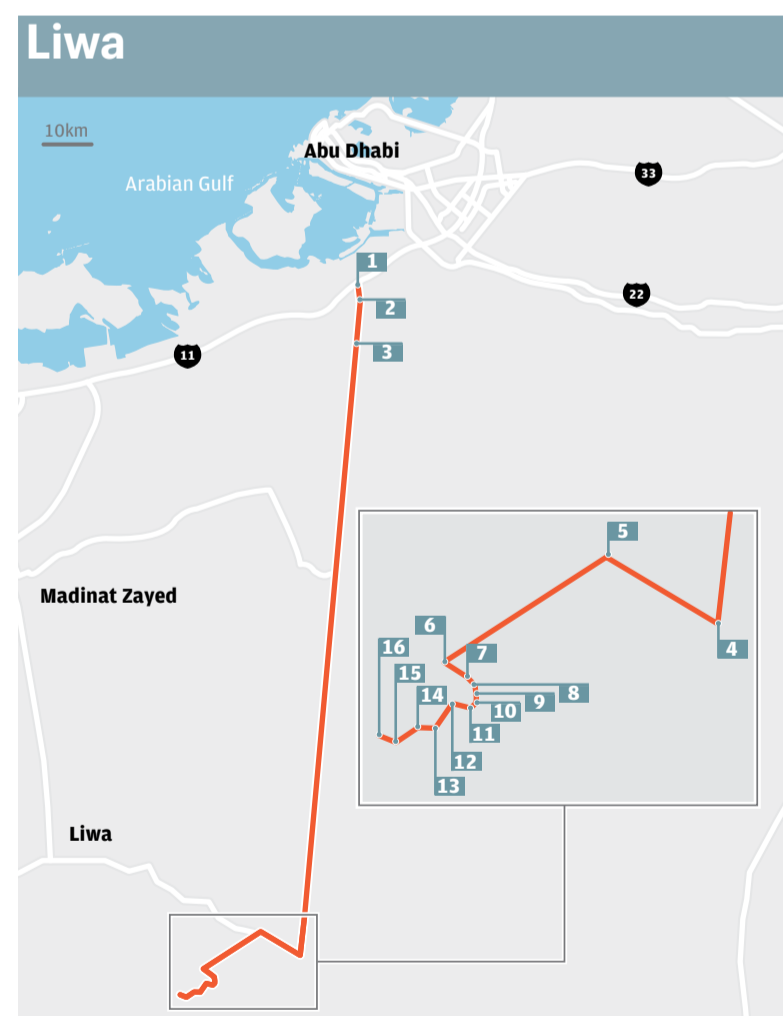
– they are crystallised formations of gypsum, formed as the water from winter rains percolated down through the hard-packed sand. While quite common, it takes a trained eye to spot their presence.

In the distance, we spotted a gazelle. Fortunately, we knew better than to chase, because surviving the desert summer requires all their energy just to stay alive, let alone being pushed to exhaustion by reckless drivers. As it turned out, it was an expectant mother and I hate to think that, had we gunned our cars after her, she almost certainly would have lost the baby. We approached gently and were rewarded with some nice photos of mummy-to-be, one of which you will find in the interactive map.

We were also visited by a curious scorpion overnight: it nestled under our tent and we discovered it in the morning.

If you are not staying the night, you had better keep up pace because you have a difficult segment ahead of you. As you travel south on the sebkha, through waypoints 11 to 14, you will be skirting the slipface, which will be to your right (and our lifeline road is just over the dune range), but as you reach waypoint 15, you will have to cross a 500m patch of difficult dunes again to reach the road at waypoint 16.

Your time on the edge of this great desert should be a good example of what real heat can be like. Take care.



Source: Google

## how to survive the heat

### Lay low and stay put: the key lessons to endure in the desert

Let us assume you are in deep desert dunes, 5km from a tarmac road, in the middle of the day in summer, and somehow get separated from your group of friends. And then you get stuck in the soft sand.

As the summer sun beams down, a wind of misfortune blows and the car overheats as you try to escape the grip of the soft sand. You reach for your mobile phone and suddenly realise it's gone – perhaps forgotten at the shop you stopped to buy water at.

It would be now that you realise

you could be in very serious trouble.

Firstly, remain calm. The situation is not that bad, actually. Your friends know your approximate location and they will be searching for your tracks, except if a sandstorm blows up and erases your tracks. You're in good health and not stung by a scorpion or bitten by a sand viper. Your car will probably cool down and start up – it's not that you rolled it and are now stuck with your arm trapped under the vehicle's side. You know there is a road about 5km that way and you are not completely lost and disori-

ented. And you have plenty of water, don't you? It's not as if rolling the car also broke the water canister you had.

So the first thing is to remain calm and count your blessings. While all the above are theoretically possible, and you might be surprised to learn that dangerous situations are normally the result of two or three concurrent misfortunes, let us not assume that all that misfortune occurred to you at once.

Secondly, do not leave the vehicle. Not even for that 5km trot to the road. In the daytime, you would not

reach a third of the way over sand dunes before you collapsed dehydrated in the sand. Besides, the sand is even too hot to walk on, unless you are wearing boots. Instead, lie down under the car, scrape a little depression in the sand (taking care not to waste too much energy), cover yourself as much as possible to keep out of the dry wind and take a nap.

If you did have a medical condition, or other situation requiring immediate assistance, then setting fire to the spare tyre might be an option – since your friends might spot the plume of black smoke –

but, normally, conserving energy and maintaining your level of hydration is paramount.

Thirdly, wait for the sun to set. Nighttime is when you can emerge from the shade. If there is a full moon you can see for miles. It's decision time.

You might consider walking out. Walking 5km over dunes is not going to be easy and will take all night, but you might feel it's within reach.

Unless you have a very clear and feasible destination, and a navigation device such as a compass or GPS, or if you know how to navigate

by the stars, then you must fight the urge to leave your vehicle.

The fact is that, in the UAE, if no one knows your exact whereabouts the authorities will come and find you and it will not take more than a few days.

Your job is to hunker down and keep thinking straight – your vehicle offers shade and evidence of your presence. A helicopter will easily notice a forlorn vehicle in the desert, but a person on foot is very difficult to spot.

So the rule is to stay put, under your vehicle, and wait.