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off the beaten path  
Paolo Rossetti

# A splash in the desert

A short ride from Al Ain, a track ideal for beginner quad bikers and children leads to a freshwater lake

Nothing wrong with a quick ride – especially one that leads from one of Al Ain's most famous dunes, practically on the outskirts of the city, to one of the most amazing sights you will ever come across in this land: a lake, a sparkling blue, fish-jumping, ducks a-quacking, bona fide freshwater lake.

In 15 minutes of hard driving, or a half-hour of leisurely riding, either up on sharp dunes, down on rolling dunes, or even on a well-established track, this brief trip is ideal for quad bikers and fantastic for children or beginner riders.

My own daughter took her first proper rides here, about three years ago, so I thought she would be a good candidate to offer an opinion following a test ride of a Suzuki Quadrunner 250cc.

It is a light, single-cylinder quad, the sportier older sibling of the famed Suzuki 160cc farm quad that is extremely popular in the UAE because of its mechanical reliability. The 250 offers electric start, enough power to see an adult up the tallest dune, yet at the same time is very tractable and well behaved thanks to an automatic clutch that gives smooth delivery of power. It is rear-wheel drive and has a useful reverse gear.

We start the ride at waypoint 1, which is just the other side of the road from the neighbourhood of Zakher, in western Al Ain. It is quite simply the road parallel to the main road that leads to Jebel Hafeet and Al Wagan. From a distance, you will not miss two large pyramids of sand – one actually in a residential area, and off-limits, and the other one just across the road.

A long time ago, western expats named it "Devil's Plunge" because if you approach it from behind, you don't notice the height until you come over the crest, and before you is an immense slipface dropping away beneath your wheels. You are suddenly roller-coastered over and down, fast. This is not a trick to play on a beginner driver, by the way, as keeping control of a vehicle on a long, steep downhill requires some skill, and not applying the brakes, which is counter-intuitive.

The reason for not braking is that would transfer the weight of the vehicle even more to the front than the downhill is already doing, and so the lighter rear swings around, turning the vehicle and putting it at risk of a long roll all the way to the bottom.

If the rear end does start to swing out, simply apply a little gas to bring it back in line.

Fortunately, on a quad bike, controlling the descent is so much easier than in a car, and the large off-road wheels and short wheelbase make for better manoeuvrability as well as full-on rider visibility compared with cars.

So quads give a much more exciting experience in enjoying the desert, and as long as safety consciousness is implanted early on, they are ideal vehicles for children.

Besides wearing the appropriate safety gear, which is presented to the first-time riding youngster as non-negotiable, children need to understand that the accelerator is not an



Quad Lake, as off-road expats have dubbed the freshwater lake, is accessible for quad bikes with drivers at any level of skill. Paolo Rossetti for The National

on/off button, but rather like a dial for the control of volume on a stereo – you increase and decrease it incrementally, not in jerks.

Once those two notions are in place, it simply becomes a question of judging speed, and that comes with practice. My daughter is 12 years old and I suppose would be considered an expert rider for her age – she can ride cross-country all day, camp, and then back the next day. So I was curious as to how she would like the Suzuki Quadrunner 250cc – As it turns out, she loved it; the high riding position and the long suspension especially.

But back to the quickie. From waypoint 1, where we park the car and trailer, we head around the right of Devil's Plunge to get a good view at the slipface, waypoint 2, and then follow the dune line west. An important note is to stay high to avoid dropping into the first camel farm, waypoint 3. An additional bonus of "staying high" is the far-reaching view over the city of Al Ain, and on the opposite side, the imposing mass of Jebel Hafeet.

This dune area is so scenic, we often

don't even continue the trip and just stay in the immediate area – luckily, we know that an even more amazing view of a lake is waiting for us at the other end.

Crossing over the dune range, still heading west, will bring you down

to a plateau where there's some construction going on, and where you should look out for a beige cement wall (waypoint 4). This will help guide you in the right direction. Next to the wall is a sand track, should you wish to take a break from the dunes.

Keep parallel to the wall, even as it turns abruptly left, going past more camel and goat farms, at waypoint 5. The wall becomes a high fence, and soon you will be in a corridor of dunes, with yet another cement wall on your far right.

Where the fence and the wall start to diverge, ahead of you will be an area of soft, whitish dunes and trees, very tight and referred to as a "technical section" because of the lack of run-up space. We have seen mature foxes in this area so keep an eye out for them as you leave.

You will now be at waypoint 6, and the other side of the technical section will be your destination. If you do not want to cross the dunes, skipping to the right side and following the track by the wall will take you smoothly to the lake. Eventually, as you work your way forwards, you will spot a mirage in the distance: sparkling blue water (waypoint 7). Is it possible? Is it real?

As you get closer you will see the most amazing of sights in the UAE desert: a large lake formed where the groundwater has broken through in

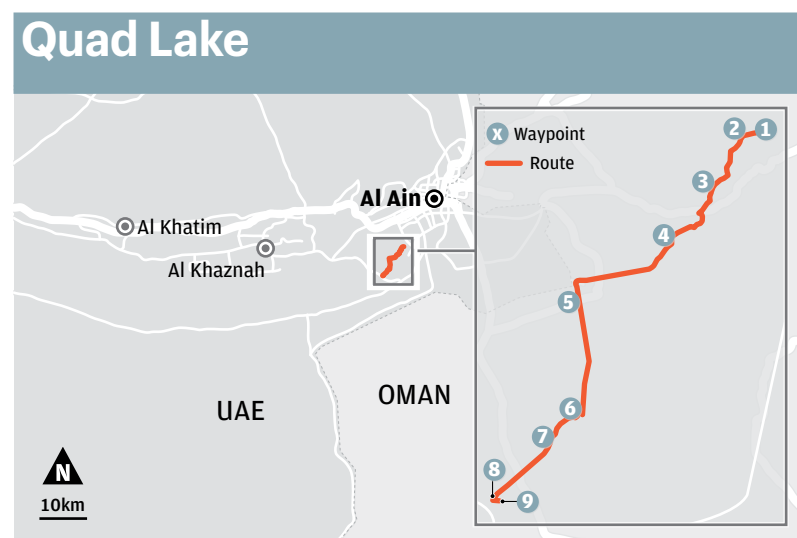
a low-lying valley. I used to think the lake – called "Quad Lake" by many quad-riding expats – was a run-off from the wastewater treatment plant, which is not far away, to the south, but there are some lakes of treated wastewater and they are quite different from Quad Lake.

You will spot a large concrete cistern (waypoint 8), used as a water reservoir, up on a hill to your right, and the wall passes right by it.

Heading around the right side of the lake, from waypoint 9, you can then turn left to soak up the view of the lake with Jebel Hafeet behind it.

There is a hard track on the southern side, and water trucks chug up and down to the four water pumps that fill them, and on the weekends scores of people come fishing – good for curry, they say happily, showing off their catch.

The lake has been a permanent fixture for the past four years, and the marshes are well established. A variety of aquatic birds call Quad Lake home, as do frogs and many other species. Quad Lake is nothing short of a miracle.



Source: Google

## How to deal with problems

### Always be prepared: physically and emotionally

Last month in Off the Beaten Path, we briefly discussed the dangers of heading into the desert alone – now let's look at what can go wrong.

A mechanical problem is bound to occur at some point, and I have seen many. In the worst I saw a vehicle left stranded for an entire week while a mechanic was hired to conduct repairs on location. Sometimes it is possible to tow the stricken vehicle to a garage, and other times it can be coaxed out under its own power, perhaps with a quick temporary fix just to get it out.

The main point is that there is always more than one vehicle, so a mechanical issue is rarely serious enough to cause more than frustration and a lighter wallet. Carrying a good tool kit can help make the difference between a lengthy repair involving several trips back and forth, and a routine visit to the mechanic.

A common issue is when a vehicle "pops" a tyre – that happens when the tyre is deflated to a pressure too low to keep the bead seated onto the rim, and so the tyre pops off and all air escapes. It can be re-seated

when taken off the ground (carry a wooden board to place under your jack, or it will simply sink into the sand – or drive the popped wheel over a crest and dig out the sand from underneath it). In any case an air compressor will be required as you hold the tyre centred.

Injuries can be far more serious, but luckily not as bad as those that can happen on the road. From car incidents, we've had a broken nose (not wearing his seatbelt), a concussion and a cracked collarbone (roll-overs). We've also had burns from stepping on bonfire coals,

a scorpion bite to the knee and a large peanut stuck up a two-year-old's nostril (tweezers saved the day), but otherwise nothing a good first aid kit can take care of.

Only once in more than 10 years of off-roading in the UAE have we had to leave the desert by the pre-arranged emergency exit: a visitor from Europe collapsed from dehydration late at night as a result of not drinking enough water coupled with a case of diarrhoea, courtesy of a Dubai-Al Ain restaurant stop the day before. As cramps set in, we left camp and were at the hospital in just

more than an hour – the next day she was released and recovered rapidly.

Getting lost and unexpected delays are almost a regular fixture of every trip, and so being prepared emotionally is also very important. The mind can be your worst enemy, especially when placed in a stressful situation. And so choosing like-minded companions and clearly sharing expectations go a long way in making sure the trip is a pleasant experience for all. I have witnessed a grown man break down into a teary panic attack after suffering a series of difficult stucks,

and I have also dealt with fights between participants. However, by far the most common eventuality is having someone driving in a dangerous manner, with no regards for their own – and everyone else's – safety.

It is therefore a good idea to have a trip leader assigned specifically to manage any of the above incidents with fair authority. Above all else, calm and common sense will be your best friends when things go wrong.

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