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off the beaten path  
Paolo Rossetti

# Splendid isolation

A venture to the farthest reaches of the Arabian Peninsula is rewarded with an unforgettable sea turtle experience

Our destination is the very end of the Arabian Peninsula in Oman – a round trip of 2,000km – to a practically inaccessible beach where sea turtles nest and only the toughest of 4x4 vehicles can reach.

For this kind of trip, I needed a vehicle with pedigree; we had to be self-contained, carrying everything we needed in and out for five nights of remote camping; we had to travel long distances at speed on dodgy tarmac; and, eventually, navigate down a rough mountain, fully loaded. My previous experience with the vehicle led me to the offices of Land Rover, looking for an LR4.

For the less adventurous, there is the official turtle reserve at Ras Al Jinz, developed as a tourist resort, where access to the turtles is carefully restricted, because these shy and vulnerable animals are endangered, and so, to be fair, please appreciate Off The Beaten Path is presenting you with this destination with mixed feelings: it is a spectacular destination, and one you cannot experience in many places on this planet. It's truly out of a National Geographic special but, at the same time, I respectfully request that you understand just how precious this location is and how to behave in respect to these fragile animals.

The female sea turtles lay their eggs on the beach in the same area where they themselves hatched, digging large holes under the cover of darkness. It is a very stressful time for them, as on land they are exposed for several hours. They lay hundreds of eggs in one sitting, carefully covering them with sand, and then, completely exhausted, they make their way back to the ocean, hopefully to return the next year.

The babies hatch in their hundreds and immediately scramble towards the sea, but many are picked off by birds and foxes. Only a few reach the water – and who knows what else is waiting for a quick, easy meal in there.

For us human spectators, the main guidelines are not to interfere. There must be no lights on the beach, or the turtles will not appear, and you will need to lay low in silence.

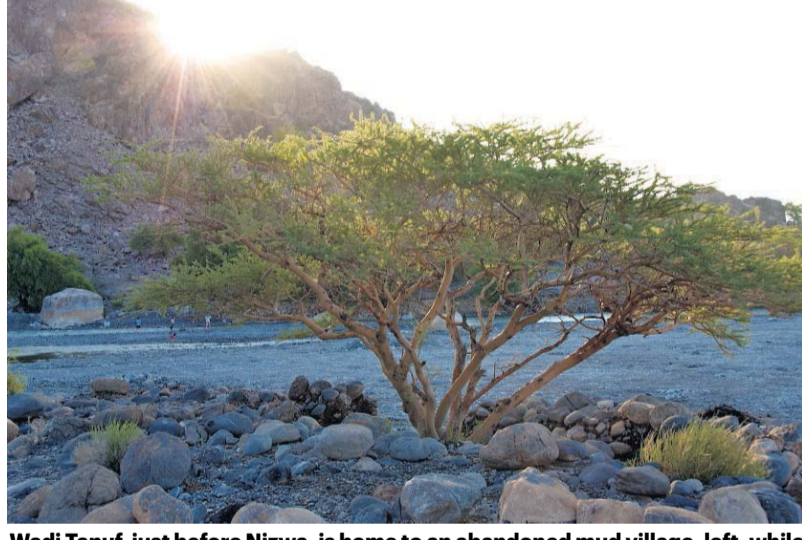
Simply bring a good mat and a sleeping bag onto the beach, and wake up as dawn breaks. Do not try spotting turtles during the night (although they are there) because your presence will disturb them and, obviously, do not use flashlights or try to take photos with a flash.

But we did actually interfere – this is not to be taken as an example, and so much for my lecture on turtles. A very old mother turtle was too exhausted to make it back to the Indian Ocean before the sun came up. She was stranded and dehydrated and so we intervened as the mid-morning sun mercilessly made the situation hopeless. We poured water over her and gave her a little help over the sand bank. Purist environmentalists would not have interfered, but we took the decision and she made it back to sea.

I also spotted a young turtle that



The Land Rover LR4 was up to the task of descending and ascending rough, steep terrain to get to the secluded beach. Photos by Paolo Rossetti for The National



Wadi Tanuf, just before Nizwa, is home to an abandoned mud village, left, while one of hundreds of hatchlings embarks on its perilous journey to the sea.



had got stuck between rocks as she tried to slide back into the waves after laying her eggs. She was wedged tightly, and the tide was rising. She'd take a deep rasping breath whenever the wave drew back, but she was doomed to drown. Again, we decided to intervene. It took five adults to drag her backwards and out of her rocky grave.

Please do recognise that your visit to such a delicate natural environment can only happen if you respect the animals that will be subject to your observation. Our children will treasure these memories, as we do,

and so it is our collective responsibility to understand why these marvellous creatures come ashore and how we should act in order not to disturb them.

We crossed the border into Oman at Mezyad, south of Al Ain with our passports, car registration documents and insurance for Oman, paying Dh85 each person. We then drove east towards Ibri.

We broke the drive for a fresh fruit juice and stroll around the fort at Bahla, and a few hours later we turned in for the evening at the abandoned mud village at Wadi

Tanuf, just before Nizwa. This is a spectacular wadi that runs out of an imposing canyon before opening up onto the plains, where the abandoned village is located. At the time of our visit the wadi was running, following recent rains, and we took the LR4 for a crossing. It was like bathing a playful elephant, and the LR4 seemed to enjoy it.

After a night under the stars, we hit Nizwa the next morning, to explore the fort and vibrant Friday market. From there, we clocked hundreds of kilometres south-east, skirting the infamous Wahiba Sands and

eventually reaching the Indian Ocean, where we turned north, on a newly built tarmac road that had already seen damage from flooding. Completely exhausted, we reached the turn-off just south of the Ras Al Jinz turtle reserve. And that was 850km, but having a comfortable vehicle makes the long trip much easier.

The turn-off is onto a dirt track that leads to a small fishing village. It is mountainous terrain and the beach we had coasted earlier was nowhere to be seen. In fact, the mountains drop abruptly into the

ocean so we didn't attempt to get any closer in the dark, opting to spend a second night on the outskirts of the village.

The coastline is one of dramatic cliffs, with a few sandy beaches nestled between promontories. Since access is so difficult, and therefore very few people visit, the turtles are able to find the solitude they need to nest. In the past they may have nested anywhere along the beach, but nowadays there are only a few secluded spots available to them.

We explored the area and found several beaches with the telltale sand holes dug by turtles, but scampering down the cliff face was treacherous – and certainly beyond the capability of any four-wheel vehicle. We visited on foot, watching the children on the loose trails.

Farther south, we spotted a long beach with what appeared to be a tight, wheelable track descending abruptly to a valley that collected water from the plateau and drained it into the sea. A large rock midway along the beach would provide shade during the day and the little estuary of the wadi exposed a flat camping area up and away from the beach.

Waves pounded the sandy shore and rocks could be seen at both ends, closing off any access by vehicle from the beachside. But, more importantly, there were turtle nests, perhaps 100 of them.

The only issue remaining was to determine whether the cars could descend the very steep track. We scouted briefly on foot and placed a pile of rocks at the more dangerous turns. This technique is important, as it's often impossible to see over the bonnet with enough precision to see where the track ends and the cliff begins, so piling up flat rocks serves as a vital reference point for the driver. I suppose I could have used the in-car cameras placed at each corner but this was not a situation to be testing new technology.

Engage low range, turn the command control dial to rocky terrain, lift the suspension to clear the bigger rocks, press the hill descent button to ensure the vehicle does not pick up speed and lock the transmission in first gear – ready? Easy does it.

I asked the family to get out, not only to keep them safe, but also because the LR4 was filled to capacity. The track was steep, uneven, composed of loose shale in parts, and required several switchback turns – my heart was pounding and my knuckles were white. I parked off to the side of the beach, away from the turtle area.

But I was amazed at how sure-footed the LR4 was. I am confident that not many other 4x4 vehicles could have negotiated that track with such precision and control. In fact, some other vehicles parked up high with the LR4 muling the gear up and down.

And so my family and friends were able to enjoy three nights camping at the secluded beach with the turtles – a truly unforgettable experience.

how to organise camping equipment

## Methodical approach is vital when packing the essentials

One of the challenges in preparing successfully for a long camping trip, besides the difficulty of navigation and keeping the discomfort and boredom of the long drive to an acceptable level, is in carrying enough equipment to provide for comfort, convenience, nutrition and recreation.

It is certainly possible to take the view that camping is supposed to be a Spartan test of endurance in nature, and therefore take only the very bare minimum to survive. However, it is equally fair to want to

make sure you and the family actually enjoy the experience enough to want to repeat it when the opportunity arises again.

Plus, since in this region we rely very much on a motorised vehicle to reach the camping area, with setting off on foot with a backpack often not a realistic option, we might as well make good use of the cargo area available.

We are a family of four and we manage without a roof rack, probably because we have elevated the task of packing the car to both an art form and scientific experiment.

The basic tenets that work for us are "first in, last out" and "light top, heavy bottom".

As we prepared for a five-night trip to see the turtles in Oman, knowing we were travelling to a very remote location, we prioritised food and water, including water for showering as well as drinking.

The heavy items we would use only at the destination went in first: tent, camping cots, gazebo for shade, foldable table, foldable camping kitchen, gas stove, barbecue, kitchen items, water in 20L cans, marine-grade cool-box and

then camping chairs and sleeping bags on top.

Our recovery and emergency boxes also went down low, but towards the back door, for easy access along the route, if needed. These contain things such as tow straps, first aid kit, tyre changing tools, et cetera. This does not help with access to the spare tyre if it's neatly hidden under the cargo floor – a feature I hate. Put it on the rear!

Our clothes bags and pillows usually do not fit in the cargo area, so they go in the middle back seat, so the kids can also lean on them

during the trip. Sometimes, they reach the roof, forming a central barrier, which is great because it also means that they can't bicker.

Other miscellaneous items, such as bodyboards and snorkelling gear, as well as camping mats and other soft, lightweight items are squeezed on top of the heavy items, filling the cargo area.

This also serves to keep the heavier items in place and to prevent them from easily flying forward in the event of a hard knock. A cargo barrier is a safety device I would highly recommend as well.

In the cabin we carry a picnic bag with our food for the drive, the camera bag and a "busy bag" with entertainment items such as iPods, CDs, binoculars, books, sketching pads and all sorts of diabolical bits and pieces to while away time during the trip.

We have found that with judicious planning and packing, a five-day trip to a remote location can be supported by enough camping paraphernalia to keep everyone happy and comfortable.

★ Paolo Rossetti