Go to 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**

Cruise to the coast

A scenic, and as challenging as you want, route to Al Hamra and watch a coastal sunset by the fort

Here is a versatile drive – and those are often the best kind, since there's something for everyone.

It is a short desert drive; and it can be easy or difficult, as you please. It offers lovely picnic views in a shaded forest and, at the same time, exhilarating climbs up a long dune slipface. The drive then ends at a little-known beach, after passing through an abandoned historical village. And if that is not enough versatility for you, if you choose to spend the night you can camp freely on the beach, enjoy an inexpensive night at the nearby Bin Majid Beach Resort or sink into luxury at the even closer Al Hamra Fort Hotel and Beach Resort.

We start not far east of Umm al Qaiwain, basically on the outskirts of Ras al Khaimah. Travel towards Ras al Khaimah on the E311 (Emirates Road) and take exit 122 at waypoint 1. Be careful because it's not as simple as it sounds: the exit numbering system follows a code unknown to me and most motorists: the preceding exit is 119.

Exit 122 will allow you to swing left under the motorway, to cross to the northern side of the motorway, and then left again (waypoint 2). You will see many tyre tracks leading the way, because our first stop is an extremely popular picnicking spot. If you are out on a weekend, there will probably be Emirati and expat families out in force, and if your party is a group of gentlemen, it is respectful to avoid the immediate area they have staked out: this is simply to account for the privacy of the women, who might have removed their shavlas because they also enjoy a wild ride on a quad.

At waypoint 3, take in the layout of the land to get your bearings and understand where we're heading. The main route I propose will require a rather challenging climb up the steep dune slipface you see before you – while not too scary for the driver or passengers, it does require a powerful SUV or you will not make it up. I am driving the 60th Anniversary edition of the Toyota Land Cruiser, and its 5.7L V8 engine will be more than enough. For the lesspowerful SUVs, I provide a secondary and easy route to get up.

As you look west from waypoint 3, vou will see the motorway to your left, and a sheer dune slipface to your right, parallel to the motorway. In between will be a forested area, ideal for a picnic.

Since the drive to the beach is rather short, I would suggest you time your drive so you arrive at this area around lunch, and that you do not rush the drive. Take a rest from the motorway driving, spread out a mat under a nice clump of trees, allow the kids to explore and chill out for a while somewhere around waypoint 4 before progressing with the drive.

If you follow this schedule and aim to arrive at the beach destination an hour or two before sunset, plan to pack up and leave the forested area between 2pm and 3pm; earlier if you expect difficulties making the climb, and later if you also drive a Land Cruiser.

At the far end of the forest, at waypoint 5, is the climb. If you feel comfortable, have a go. Just remember one important piece of advice: you go up straight, and you go down straight (in reverse if necessary) –

never ever turn sideways on a steep

incline such as this one. Waypoint 6 will be the plateau at the top. Why not drop us a line at Motoring if your vehicle makes it up? We can keep tabs on what brands deliver the needed firepower, and which instead drop to a stop

short of the summit. Should you prefer the secondary and easier route up, either because of your vehicle not making it up or simply because you or your passengers do not want to drive up the slipface - which is a perfectly sensible decision, by the way – then drive back along the slipface, back through the forest, and at waypoint 3 look to your left to see a track leading up to a couple of portable cabins. This track will take you up the plateau, where you can reach way-

After taking a few moments to enjoy the view from the plateau, turn your attention to the desert heading north, towards the sea. You will need to decide whether to make the drive easy or difficult. Only you and your fellow drivers can make this decision, based on experience.

As you look west, you will notice that you will be navigating against the grain of the desert; that is, you will be driving against the slipfaces, and every dune will require you to fight up and over it. It is a short distance, but it can make for an exhilarating drive. If this route is your decision, then skip your GPS to waypoint 15 and make your own way there.

If you prefer to follow the readymade tracks, then from waypoint 6 head west looking for the beginning of a well-established sand track to the north, which will cut through the dunes, and which even first-time sand drivers will be able

Waypoints 7 and 8 will guide you west and then north to waypoint 9, which is the precise point the sand track passes through another high slipface. If you cannot find this passage, then hunt around for it because, without this sand track. the only other way is to climb the sheer slipface. Once you find the sand track, it will take you all the way through the desert and out the

At waypoint 10, you will be high enough to see the distant view of industrial plants to your left, so to avoid them follow the track down to the next forest and stay right (waypoint 11) to find the continuation of the track and passage over the next slipface, away from the factories, at

Waypoint 13 is still on the sand track, while at waypoint 14 it becomes a dirt track, and at point 15 it becomes tarmac. You will soon see buildings on the seafront ahead of

When you reach the coastal motorway, turn right at waypoint 16, and take the first U-turn left and then an immediate right (waypoint 17) to enter into the abandoned village of Al Hamra, with its stillfunctioning port (off-limits) to the east. As the road heads towards the sea, enter into the labyrinth of ruins and visit the old Al Hamra fort at waypoint 18.

Continuing towards the sea (north) you may notice how the old houses were built out of coral and cement from the collapsed walls of derelict buildings, at waypoint 19 for instance.

When you reach a green fence, at

Off the beaten path

Golf Club

Umm al Qaiwain

Abu Dhabi 🔳

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day soon it may be closed to the public; if that's the case, further east there are other stretches of public beach.

Returning to the coastal motor-

way, left would take you to Ras al Khaimah, and right would take you towards Umm al Qaiwain, and the beach resorts. If you need to reach Dubai, I would suggest you go right and then take the first intersection left, which will allow you to join Emirates Road again and bypass Sharjah city traffic.

Next month, we will stay in the northern Emirates with a trip through forests and agricultural lands, starting at one of the most famous dunes in the United Arab Emirates: Awafi.

Take a rest from the motorway driving, spread out a mat under a nice clump of trees, allow the kids to explore and chill out for a while

Source: Google



The rain in Umm al Qaiwain falls mainly on the plain

magical than rain in the sand. desert - in the past, it meant survival: green replenished aquifers underground; but even nowadays the excitement is not much less.

Depending on where the rains fall, many Emiratis and expats will drive there to enjoy the cool weather and celebrate the event. News of the exact location, quantity and intensity of the rainfall spreads like wildfire over the mobile phone

If it is deep in the mountains, the wadis heading downhill are the destination. SUVs loaded with the entire family, children galore, head to where the waters speed past, still frothy from the rough ride over rocks. Danger is near, keep the vehicle on high ground, so make sure you enjoy the view and not become part of the unfold-

Off-roaders also are drawn to the rain, as it morphs well-known offroading spots into brand-new dimensions of 4x4 fun.

In the sand dunes, water does not normally collect, because it dune ranges (the sabkha) can become mud-pits a few days after heavy rains, and the claylike no seeds for the next rains. gummy substance glues onto car tvres, making extraction a complicated endeavour without a winch. The fact is, hardly anyone little mud on the rare occasion it does present itself, and so stucks are quite common.

The sand dunes themselves immeans a vehicle can travel faster, higher and navigate places otherwise out of reach. Even two-wheel-

here is nothing more drive sedans have a shot on wet

However, if only the surface is wet, expect the usual soft sand grasses for the livestock and underneath - so it's best to keep moving.

If, instead, the sand is soaked through, then your vehicle will really impress you with its per-

One word of warning, though. Those few days of rain per year are not only a boon for off-roaders. They are a crucial period for desert plants - all year seeds have been waiting, patiently under the dry sand; and the moisture springs off an amazing transformation, where sprouts rush to the surface, in a timed challenge to mature and propagate before the mois-

ture is gone. This means seedlings only have though, and due care is required to an opportunity of a few days and so they must rush - you can literally see them growing before your eyes. It is therefore important to keep your vehicle's tyres on the tracks as much as possible during this crucial time.

You will very clearly see young green grasses covering a dune area, and none whatsoever in the tracks left by an SUV. Just keep your tyres is absorbed into the sand. In the in the same tracks and give the deep desert, the flats in between desert plants the chance they need to continue their life cycle, because if a plant cannot seed, there will be

Desert animals would normally also thrive on this abundance of water. Just as Bedouin herders would set off for a long day's trek in a 4x4 can resist experiencing a to an area where rain clouds were spotted from afar, hoping to reach the grasses while they were still green, desert animals would do the same. Nowadays, their source of mediately harden, even after a water tends to be the many farms, light sprinkling of rain, and this so they no longer rely on the rains for their survival as in the past.

* Paolo Rossetti



waypoint 20, turn right, and then left through a tight passageway at waypoint 21, to reach the public beach at waypoint 22. This stretch of beach is visited by so few people that we spotted more than 20 stingrays basking lazily in the undisturbed shallows, leading to its nickname "Stingray Beach". Because of to construction in the vicinity, one