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off the beaten path
Paolo Rossetti

Delight on the dunes of Salamat

Quad biking on the sand can be exhilarating but it requires concentration, supreme skill and a sense of fearlessness

This is a hardcore edition of Off The Beaten Path, so if you want to know what the falcon sees as he skims effortlessly over dune-tops and immediately follow that by creating your own insane roller-coaster ride, skimming the dune crest and dropping several hundred feet down to ground level in a breathtaking but controlled skid, then keep reading.

Please do note that you will need advanced dune-riding skills and a powerful quad bike for this terrain; a car will not cut it, although you may take a different approach and avoid the high dune tops.

I was test riding the new Yamaha Raptor 700R and so lack of power was not my concern – riding the edge while trying to avoid being thrown off was. When on what are termed “technical” dunes, the stress is intense, and I could hardly blink from the concentration I was exerting.

I would advise you to take the same approach at the Salamat dunes, an area of enormous dunes on the western outskirts of Al Ain, behind its airport.

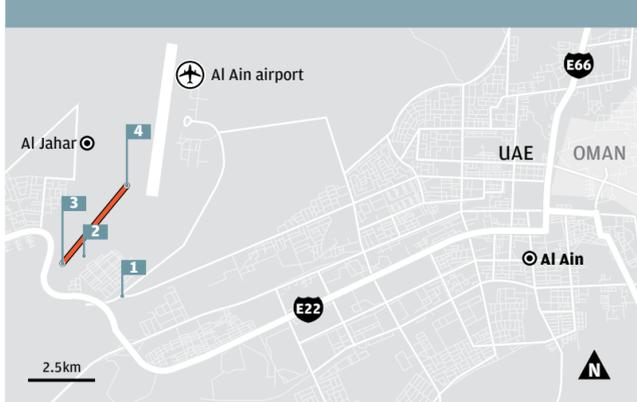
There are several areas in the Emirates where dune riding enthusiasts gather; such as Big Red (Al Bidayer), which is the closest for Dubai and Sharjah-based riders; Ras Al Khaimah has Awafi; and Abu Dhabi residents either travel towards Al Ain or down south to the great sand playground of Liwa and the Empty Quarter. But those in Al Ain have it easy; they open the house door and red sand blows in.

Salamat is a small township on the outskirts of Al Ain, and historically important as the village facing Abu Dhabi – either the first step of the journey seaward, or the point of arrival on the way inland towards the oasis.

In modern times, nestled between the Al Ain Airport and the motorway leading from Al Ain to Abu Dhabi, it is a tranquil park setting with residential development under way – tranquil until the weekend, that is.

In fact, Salamat is crowned by an impressive dune range which runs east to west, split by the motorway, and along the neighbouring towns of Al Yaher and Al Saad, where an annual hill climb challenge is held.

Daredevil dunes



Source: Google



Instead of a pathway for you to follow, in the downloadable GPS file found on *The National* website, you will have a starting point and a finishing point. It will be up to you and your fellow riders to choose the exact path of navigation according to your assessment of the terrain, your riding skills, the conditions on the day and the capabilities of the machine you're riding.

On the new Yamaha Raptor, the limits were purely from my side – it will climb anything you point it at, with gusto.

Before we start, a little primer: as with any extreme sport, you are putting your safety and trust in the

machine and any mechanical failure can lead to severe injury, or worse. So, the quad must be in top condition. Maintenance on many of the quads you see roaming the dunes is close to non-existent. The machines are run into the ground and only fixed following a breakdown.

Just as you don't run tyres until they burst, preventative maintenance is crucial, particularly with machines pushed to their limits.

At the technical level offered by the Salamat dunes, safety gear is a must: helmet, chest and back protector, gloves, boots, at the minimum. I had forgotten my gloves and very almost paid the price for it as I came over a



The Yamaha Raptor 700R has enough power to scale even the sharpest of inclines of the sand dunes that dwarf the little township of Salamat, left, on the outskirts of Al Ain, next to the airport. Paolo Rossetti for The National

tight crest. Crossing over at a 45-degree angle, I landed the front tyre a little harder than expected on the other side, and my downhill hand slipped, launching my body forward and very closely tipping me over. It was close, but luckily I escaped from punishment for my mistake – had I been wearing gloves, my hand might not have slipped.

It is the little things that count when pushing hard over “technical” terrain. Shifting the rider's weight from one footrest to the other, swinging the hips out a few inches, aiming the wheel just over the crest, giving petrol at the precise split-second to spin the rear around – and indeed it is that precision in execution that makes a hardcore ride an intensely fun experience.

If you follow the GPS file online, I guarantee you that you will emerge at the end of the ride breathless and speechless – and safe and sound, hopefully.

So, from Abu Dhabi, reaching the Salamat main roundabout (waypoint 1) is very easy: the very first

exit from the motorway as you reach Al Ain is signposted to Salamat and the airport. And after you swing over the exit ramp, the first roundabout is Salamat.

From Dubai, you will need to avoid entering central Al Ain so, as you enter the city, keep in the left lanes, following signs to the airport. Once you reach the airport roundabout, follow the sign to Salamat on your left.

From the Salamat roundabout – waypoint 1 – you will certainly notice the towering dunes to the north – that's your destination. There are numerous places to park your trailer; I simply offload the quad and park the trailer at waypoint 2.

Now, as you gaze at the dune tops and realise the steepness of the slipfaces and the intricate crossing-over of the crests, you know you are about to enter quad paradise.

The dune range is the line of tall-est peaks, running east-west, and to your left (west) will be the motorway, closed off by a fence, of course. To your far right (east) will be the airport, also fenced off, and in be-

tween is around 10km of beautiful dunes (waypoints 3 to 4). You are closed in by civilisation, so there is no need to worry about getting lost; instead, focus on the terrain, as it is tricky and will require skill.

Another consideration to think about is that, if it is the weekend, you are not going to be the only rider in the area, and the local boys know every centimetre of those dunes, so they push hard and fast. In short, stay out of their way. You'll spot them right away – black balaclavas instead of helmets, and extremely fast.

I would advise you not to engage in any racing with them as you'll struggle to keep up. If you thought you were a good rider, think again – these guys have been riding these dunes fearlessly since they first learnt to sit upright. Friday mornings are excellent if you prefer a solitary ride for your group.

And if you are about to give Salamat a go, you are an experienced rider and therefore do not need further directions or instructions – ride hard, and stay safe.

how to maintain your vehicle

A well looked-after car is safer and retains its value better

A motor vehicle, be it a car, motorbike or all-terrain vehicle (quad bike), is a marvel of modern engineering.

Consider that the rpm gauge measures the number of complete cycles the pistons move in the engine. At idle, let's say 800rpm, the pistons inside the engine move up and down 800 times in one minute, which means every second the pistons and all the attached parts turn 13 complete cycles – and that's just at idle. Imagine the forces at play and the conditions required to keep those metal parts blasting up and down at that rate.

Then engage the gears and off you go to the redline, with all the other mechanical and electronic systems in support: it's almost a miracle that our vehicles work at all. Yet, we take all this engineering magic for granted, and the average driver is hardly aware of the stresses on these moving parts.

One aspect of motoring that requires constant care is the preventative maintenance of our vehicles. Not only can cleaning, lubricating and replacing parts be important to assure continuous operation, but also to maintain value, increase safety and even reduce costs.

A car is most people's second-

largest investment, after a house, and sometimes purchase loans are taken out for considerable amounts. Therefore, keeping your vehicle in tip-top condition is simply minimising the depreciation of the monetary value of the vehicle. It makes business sense. And besides value in a financial arena, since our vehicles are also an important reflection of our perceived status in society, a worn-out car can also be interpreted as representing the driver's personality.

A well-maintained vehicle is also safer to drive. Very often I see cars running tyres that are well past their expiration date; the owners

tell me that they're fine, still running OK. That may be true, but waiting until they explode before replacing them is hardly a good plan if the life and safety of yourself, your passengers and other motorists are depending on tyres to run until they self-disintegrate on the motorway.

And the same applies to brake pads, shock absorbers and each of the estimated 30,000 individual parts that make up our cars. You might say that if the average shock absorber's lifespan is 24 months, there is no perceivable difference in handling to run it another year or two, but it might be that its drop

in performance is measurable only under stress. And that stress would occur at the very split-second in which the driver simultaneously swerves hard and slams on the brakes, perhaps to avoid a parked lorry that suddenly appears before us on the motorway. It might make the difference between avoiding impact and a nasty crash.

Lastly, preventative maintenance actually can save money, which runs counter to the credo of letting parts run longer than their stated lifespan in order to postpone the expense. The reasoning is that each part depends on another part. It is, in fact, the precision of the

relationship between parts that make the vehicle function smoothly as a whole. And so, for example, if the radiator rubber hoses are not changed preventatively to save Dh100, then if a hose fails and a coolant leak occurs and overheats the engine, the age-old saying of penny-savvy-pound-foolish proves its point when the bill for a new engine gasket hits.

All in all, it makes good sense to maintain a motor vehicle according to the preventative schedule of maintenance issued by the engineers who built the vehicle.

★ Paolo Rossetti