

off the beaten path
Paolo Rossetti

Down by the seaside

It should be a smelly swamp, but Al Dibbeiya Beach is the secret beach for the Rossetti family

“Let’s go beach camping,” exclaims my 11-year-old, with the enthusiasm – and volume – of an eager child ready to jump into the massive Hummer H3 with her boogie board and fins.

Sure, but where?
It used to be that the public had access to the marvellous beaches of the Arabian Gulf, and as a family we have wonderful memories of swimming and camping on unspoilt beaches – but, alas, construction of hotels, resorts and private weekend villas has almost completely closed access to the beautiful natural beaches of the region.

Besides lamenting the loss of public beaches, which affects all in the UAE – citizens, residents, visitors and especially future generations – those few areas of open sea access that are still available are often strewn with rubbish left by campers.

It is therefore with a bit of trepidation that I share this trip to one of the few remaining beaches my family enjoys visiting. Will I find it covered with rubbish next time I visit? Will there be a construction fence around the area?

“Dead Turtle Beach”, as we now call it since chancing across a dead sea turtle stranded up high on the sand by the tide, is a pristine wilderness site, sandwiched between an oil installation to its west and a private island to its east.

It should be a smelly, decaying mangrove swamp, filled with all sorts of bloodsucking insects and with a tidal flat beach stretching several hundred metres that would leave salty mud during low tide.

However, a fortunate stroke of engineering development for once has made a positive difference to the entire area. A narrow and deep channel has been dredged right through the swamp and along the mudflats all the way to Abu Dhabi city, around 30km away, helping to disperse the stagnant water. This has resulted in a constant flow of seawater, which feeds the mangrove forests and circulates the water. Owned by the tides, this channel is like a river within the sea, running through a shallow saltwater lake and making ideal conditions for both nature and man.

The clear blue waters are shallow and calm enough for children to play in safely, and further out this deep-blue canal is ideal for swimming.

I must repeat to you my plea of leaving this delicate ecosystem absolutely free of any sort of rubbish, including cigarette butts or other “minor” items. It is not at all difficult to arrange for a plastic rubbish bag and set a good example for the children and collect your waste into this bag, which then can be conveniently dropped off at the village trash containers.

To get there, I’m behind the wheel of a new Hummer H3, with a 295hp, 5.3L V8, more than enough power for us to deal with the soft sand by the sea.

We reach Dead Turtle Beach by leaving Abu Dhabi on the E11 motorway that leads westward to Sila, Al Ruwais and Liwa, and the turn-off to your right is clearly signposted to Al Dibbeiya and is at waypoint 1.

This strip of tarmac is shared with the oil installations but is also the public access to the village, and further on will split into two directions: one of them has restricted access and is very clearly signposted. So do not let the first sign claiming Private Road put you off; later on, the real Private Road that you can’t use will become clear, and you will naturally veer to the right (waypoint 2) continuing towards Al Biddeiya.

I would suggest you first visit Al Biddeiya, which is a friendly and quiet little town. At its northernmost tip is an Adnoc petrol station (waypoint 6) and a racing boat marina, and the beautiful main mosque has a grocery store at its side (waypoint 5).

The beach itself is south of Al Biddeiya, with access from the tarmac at waypoint 3. Its survival as an unspoilt beach has much to do with the fact that construction on that beach



Going off road, and on the beach, can lead you to rarely explored parts of the UAE. (Above) Palawadee Rossetti inspects a salt flat along the Al Biddeiya coast (From top) Courtesy Melissa Royle-Guimaraesi for The National; Paolo Rossetti for The National; map by Jun de la Cruz / The National, source Google



is impossible as it is a tidal flat. This means that the tide runs far inland, reaching different heights depending on the surge of the water.

Let us be clear – there is no stopping the tide! I strongly suggest you research the timings of the 12-hour tide cycle beforehand, so you can determine approximately where the high-tide mark will be during your visit.

If you miscalculate, it will not be a flooding swell of waves to sweep your entire camp away; it would be a gradual and smooth rise of still water of only several centimetres height – however, the danger is not in the water, but in the mud the water spreads.

When the tide is out and the beach sand exposed, thousands of little seashell crabs are busy burrowing, and you will see their handiwork in the form of little sand balls around a central hole. When the water seeps in, there are bubbles everywhere.

The sand turns to mud, and a car can get in trouble very easily in such terrain. The Hummer H3 is one of the best vehicles to drive in such circumstances: it runs very tall and aggressive tyres and it is a real 4x4 because of its locking differentials. With all four wheels locked and turning together, the H3 is almost unstoppable, even in deep mud.

mangrove forests will be to your right and front, with the road behind you. Complete peace and quiet if you want it – water mayhem if you have children with you!

The water is smooth with basically no waves, and the mangrove forest on the other side of the water is full of calling birds – it may be an unlikely place for a good beach camp-out, but it ranks high in our visits there.

When the weekend is done, and you start driving back along the way you came in, try a small diversion taking the first intersection left – again you will be warned that it is a private road, but again the real private road will be ahead and guarded by a sentry, and you will not come near it. Once turned left, you will pass through an amazing sight – pure white fields of sea salt. Perfectly flat, completely white (waypoint 7).

Continuing along that road will take you to a T-junction, where you should turn right (left would take you to the guarded private road, where access is prohibited) and connect back to the E11 Abu Dhabi-Sila motorway at waypoint 8, where you will cross the motorway in order to turn left towards Abu Dhabi.

Al Dibbeiya Beach



Source: Google

how to: drive in soft sand

Softly, softly catch the best camping spot

Soft sand presents a challenge to the off-roader: it is smooth and delicate but unforgiving.

Beach sand has its own characteristics, with the added complexity of the water table beneath it, the gentle lean of the land towards the sea and the complications of tides and deep tracks left by other vehicles, so let’s deal with that one first.

Although nowadays there are not many beaches to drive along, with a few techniques you can make sure you keep your car out of the sea and still get close enough so you can drop the cool box and tents straight out the tailgate.

There are two main approaches: inexperienced drivers and lesser vehicles usually opt for a mad rush, hoping to reach campsite destination before sinking in. Quite often they pay for it the next day when it’s time to leave and they no longer have the luxury of a run-up. Additionally, this selfish sort of driving disturbs all other people and can actually be quite dangerous.

The more mature way of driving is to realise there are two distinct areas of sand on a beach – the soft dry sand above the reach of water, and the part closer to the sea which is within the reach of tides.

A powerful enough SUV, with proper reduction of gears

through a transfer case, does not require speed to traverse deep and dry beach sand. If fully loaded, perhaps lowering the tyre pressure can help, but normally a steady and determined chug through the sand in low range is enough to reach the target area.

Turning is made difficult, since the angle of the front wheels will give a snow plough effect, so it is best to aim straight.

If the wheels lose traction and the car stops moving forward, do not gun it, but immediately reverse straight back a few metres, along your own tracks, and then try moving forward again with more push. You may have to repeat this several times, but speed is not required.

Closer to the sea itself, the packed sand at low tide is enticing as it makes driving ever so easy, but it also can have a dramatic lean towards the upcoming tide, which will have no mercy and can swallow up a car in a few minutes. Once up to the chassis in wet sand, no digging, pulling, tugging or towing will free it, and an industrial winch pulling from a lorry or crane is the only way out.

Besides, isn’t that strip of sand by the sea a place where the children play and families and friends picnic and camp out?

★ Paolo Rossetti