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off the beaten path
Paolo Rossetti

Roving through the dunes

In this second journey of a monthly off-road series, our intrepid explorer discovers both adventure and tranquility travelling south of Al Ain to the undulating and endless sand dunes of Al Wagan

About an hour due south of Al Ain pounds the real desert heart of the United Arab Emirates: Al Wagan.

It is a vibrant and modern town where the Bedouin spirit lives on and the Emiratis are proud of their heritage, where the water is sweet (but underground) and the large, open flats of gravel alluvial plains, called sebkha, meet the wild, untamed red sand dunes blown over from the Empty Quarter, the famed Rub al Khali desert.

I particularly chose this area because it is ideal for a trip to sand dunes for adventurers of all skill level and experience.

In the Al Wagan area, you can drive close up to unspoilt, trackless dunes of more than 30m in height without leaving the hard-packed sebkha, or you may venture a bit deeper into the desert on small rounded dunes for a gentle exploration, or you may climb up to the top of the dune range for a falcon's viewpoint over the sea of sands – you decide how much to do based on your comfort level and experience.

I was in a supercharged 2009 Range Rover Sport, and the sheer power of that fire-breathing beast almost flew me over to the other side of a dune. So please, do not push your limits unnecessarily!

We start our adventure at the Zakhir Roundabout in Al Ain (waypoint 1), which you can easily reach from Abu Dhabi and Dubai by taking the first Al Ain highway exit towards the airport. Once on the airport road, head south towards Jebel Hafeet, which you will pass on your left (east).

Al Wagan is clearly sign-posted to the next roundabout (waypoint 2), where a brief detour to the left (east) will take you to the green recreation area at the foot of Jebel Hafeet, the Green Mubazzarah. If you haven't yet driven up the UAE's second-tallest mountain, now's a good chance to do it.

Back on the original road, in a southerly direction, the next immediate stop you could consider is Ain Al Fayda (waypoint 3), which is another recreation area with a small lake, horse-riding and restaurants. From there on, it is a stretch of dual-carriageway highway towards Al Wagan, perhaps 70 km of excellent paved road, snaking through majestic dunes and crossing valleys filled with extensive date plantations and forests of trees (waypoint 4), testament to the rich water resources of the area.

The Range Rover is in its element, and the drive is motionless in its superb cabin insulation – you could drive for hours and emerge feeling refreshed, the ergonomics and luxurious interior are so soothing.

We like to stop in one of these oases for a quick break in the shade, a run-around for the kids and to say hello to the farmers, who will unequivocally welcome your visit as long as you reciprocate their friendly nature by getting out of your car to shake hands and compliment them on their agricultural prowess. At bare minimum, a friendly wave as you slowly drive through their territory is expected.

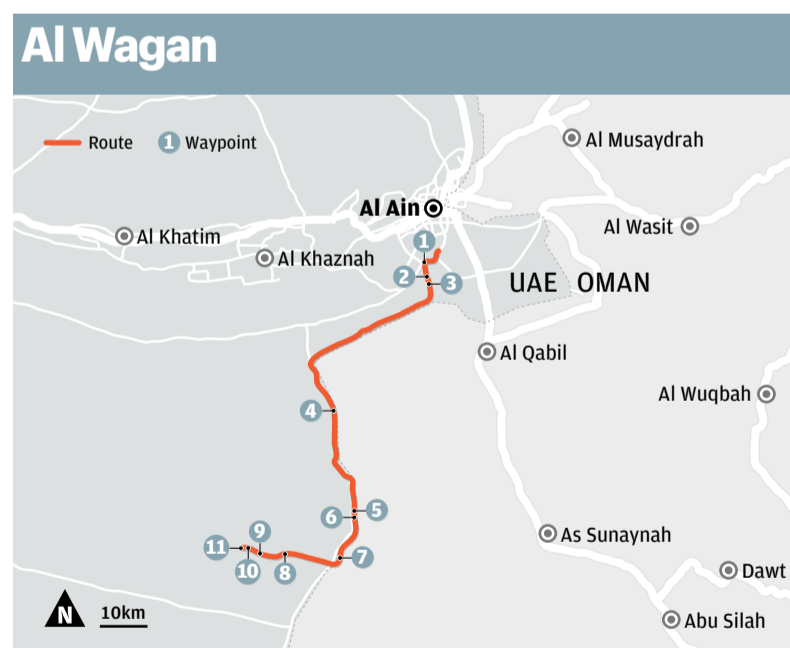
Soon, you will reach the town of Al Wagan (waypoint 5), where I would suggest you pick up any last supplies and maybe grab a bite to eat at one of the small restaurants there. Do not be surprised if a friendly local approaches your group to welcome you to Al Wagan and offer you any information you may need – this is a town where people are proud of who they are, where the sense of community that perhaps is hard to sustain in cities is ever-present, and an Al Wagan resident will feel they are host and you their guests.

From the shops area, head south on the town street parallel to the highway to get to the ADNOC petrol station, where you may want to top up your tank (waypoint 6).

Re-join the highway, and a brief drive south will take you to the entrance to one of the main sebkhas (waypoint 7), where there is a



Stretching the sand legs: once its suspension height adjusted, the Range Rover Sport Supercharged confidently negotiates the dunes of Al Wagan without any clearance issues. Paolo Rossetti for The National



Jun de la Cruz / The National

friendly grocery store on the left after the turn. The tarmac road now heads west, and you will be in camel country.

The protocol to follow when camels are present is to engage four-way flashers and slow the convoy down to walking pace. Racing camels are not only valuable in a monetary sense, but also a strong tie to a traditional way of life, and no one will appreciate visitors zooming past their animals, even if the owner himself does it.

You will pass a well-known race-track (waypoint 8) and numerous camel farms, and the following morning it will be packed with camels racing or training.

After a short while, the tarmac will give way to a hard track, and the sebkha will narrow, caught in between two dune ranges. Follow the track to the left side (south) to get around small choppy dunes (waypoint 9) where you will reach the last two farms before the sand takes over – one raises camels and the other goats (waypoint 10).

From there on, you are free to design your own route, taking into consideration that the high dune

ranges run from east to west, and that your exit will be to the east. Unless you cross the tall dune ranges, you are in an enclosed area not far from civilisation, but you will feel like you are in the middle of the deepest desert – such is Al Wagan. Just remember: exit is east.

Our preference is to first find a nice campsite spot, secluded enough but close to the track. We tend to do that early because dusk is a magical time in the desert, and we want to enjoy it without worrying about putting up tents, etc.

You may decide to go for a little exploration of the low dunes first, or even play around on the tall dunes – we like to save that for the following morning, also because we took numerous stops on the way in and are in no rush whatsoever.

Our campsite was at waypoint 11, nestled under the high dune range, but you'll probably see no record of our passage – the wind will have blown away tracks, and I was driving with the Desert Lions Off-Road Academy, a group of desert savvy individuals who know better than leaving any rubbish out in nature.

A roaring fire and succulent grilled meals (yes, several...) later, and the desert has worked its charm and we are a thousand miles away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

Take a little walk around the campsite at sunset, go sit atop a tall dune and marvel at the view – you may find your hand slip into your partner's, a tender gesture perhaps long overdue; the desert has a way of enhancing emotions in its vast expanse of lifelessness, and that in turn magnifies the essence of life itself. Or maybe I'm just a soppy old grump that melts when exposed to sand – you tell me how you feel. And, please, switch off that mobile phone!

Dawn is another magical time in the desert, so I propose you don't miss it. The limp sun breaks over the dune tops, and you'll surprise desert animals out on their forays; camel trains will be winding their way across dunes, and you will probably have mist still trapped in the dune bowls. Plus, it gets hot very quickly, so putting the tents away and packing up before breakfast is how the pros do it – then you have a full day ahead of you.

And then the Range Rover finally gets to stretch its sand legs! Despite the low-profile, high-speed tyres, which were fabulous on the highway though not ideal for sand, adjusting the suspension height enables the vehicle to confidently negotiate dunes without any clearance issues. The engine response is so dramatic you really only need to feather the accelerator.

We had a good romp around Al Wagan, and exited to the east, along the same track we had entered – it was marvellous company, a relaxing evening and definitely a bit of adrenalin in the following morning: I was off the beaten track with my good friends the Desert Lions, and we invite you to do the same.

Next month, we will travel the "Eagle's Nest" track across the Hijar Mountains, from the beaches of Bidayer (Big Red) to the beaches of Khor Kelba.

how to: negotiate steep dunes

Angle of incidents

Off-roading on level ground at sensible speeds, there's not much that can go wrong, but on the steep inclines of sand dunes the situation is different and some attention must be paid to simple laws of physics and vehicle weight displacement.

On the kind of angles that steep dunes offer, a 4x4 vehicle is safe when going straight up or down; that is, when the vehicle is perpendicular to the crest line.

You can climb as far up the steepest dune as you like, and reverse down in a straight line. And in first gear in low range you can descend a dune in safety when you drive straight down.

The problem is when the vehicle is caught sideways on an angle; that is, when it is off-camber, or parallel to the dune line.

Technically speaking, the repose angle of sand – imagine a lorry dumping sand so that it forms a conical shape: that's the angle at which sand stops sliding down the sides – is theoretically 32°.

A quick look at your car's spec sheet will reveal its roll-over, or breakover angle, and that'll see that it's pretty close to that magical 32° – too close for comfort.

Naturally, in real life, this angle will vary with the coarseness of the sand, the humidity, the weight distribution of the car's load, the number and seating of passengers, the load on the roof rack, etc.

Clearly, the vehicle is much less stable when the weight is on one side and, to make things worse, sand on the lower side will give way, worsening the angle and blocking the wheels on the downhill side. The vehicle may tip over sideways.

It's usually a very slow roll and

passengers with safety belts on are rarely injured – nothing compared to a roll off the highway at speed. However, I'm sure you will agree it is best prevented.

So, please promise me you will drive straight up or down a dune, but not attempt to turn sideways or traverse a dune sideways. Sensible co-pilots, please take note and implement executive powers to prevent over-confidence on your driver's part.

And once you've driven up straight, what's on the other side, you might ask? Well, more sand! But for now I'll limit myself to saying don't cross the sharp crests but look for passageways between the dunes – in the next few articles we'll be looking at more driving techniques, but this message is so important I wanted to get it out right away, even before talking about deflating, digging and tugging.

You might see experienced drivers running up a dune and turning around and then screaming back down, leaving nice rainbow-shaped tracks. They can do so because they know the amount of momentum they must maintain to prevent a roll.

And even then, they are taking a considerable risk. If they misjudge, or if they hit a soft spot, or if there's a hidden hard ridge, and they're caught in the wrong spot, they might roll over, too.

So for our trip to Al Wagan, those are the ground rules, unless you know better, because the number one priority for any off-road adventure off the beaten track is getting everyone home safely, and preferably without your vehicle on a tow lorry.

★ Paolo Rossetti