

off the beaten path  
Paolo Rossetti

# Wild about the wadi

A dramatic series of crystal clear pools and 100m-high cliffs make Wadi Dhum worth the adventure

Wadi Dhum (pronounced Da-Hum) is probably the most spectacular freshwater wadi in the region, and it ranks highly even on an international scale: imagine a dramatic canyon with 100m-high cliff walls, populated with numerous large and deep pools of scintillating, crystal-clear water, home to fish and a multitude of cascading ferns.

It is around a 500km round trip from the Mezyad border post in Al Ain, and so it is definitely an overnight destination. At the wheel of a Volvo XC90 and in the company of family and friends, the drive on the way presents the explorer with breath-taking views, imposing mountains – and a few more surprises.

The new XC90 sports a V8 engine and enough ground clearance to be perfect for negotiating the rocky tracks in the Omani mountains behind Ibri.

From the Mezyad border at the southern tip of Al Ain (waypoint 1) we dispense with immigration formalities with Dh50 per head for both exiting the UAE and entering Oman, plus car insurance for Oman.

The road zooms straight along the plain, coasting the desert sands to your left and the mountains to your right, and soon enough you will be surprised by a large football stadium looming ahead in the flat plain: the city of Ibri.

At the fourth roundabout, turn left, signposted to a flurry of destinations, including Al Murtafa (waypoint 2), and follow the single-lane road as it winds through the town and eventually open countryside. You could be content to stay on that strip of tarmac, but if you are feeling adventurous and willing to engage in a side-trip – like me – then keep a look-out for the colourful Sun Rest House on your right (waypoint 3) and the turn-off right after it.

This track will lead into the mountains off-road and will re-connect you with the tarmac road farther ahead after some brilliant surprises.

You will now be on a hard dirt track carved out of a live alluvial plain and used mainly for the marble mines which you will soon see on several mountain tops, where white rocks are scattered on the escarpment (waypoint 4). We found an open gate up one of the mine tracks and eagerly climbed up in the sure-footed Volvo to soak in incredible views from the top (waypoint 5).

Should the gate be firmly closed on your visit – it is a working mine site so due care is required for any encounters with heavy machinery – try and find another one, but as long as the gate is open I will poke my head inside. In fact, the mining crew was welcoming and not at all perturbed by us showing up, families and all. Naturally, we respected their working procedures and drove at a walking pace with hazard lights engaged, and stayed far away from any moving machinery, as is appropriate on working sites.

From our vantage point, we were able to scout out a route that would take us through an interesting-looking formation of eroded rocks in a low-lying area, and specifically



Wadi Dhum, Oman, is a 500km round trip from the Mezyad border, with a 30-minute trek at the destination to take hikers across a dramatic wadi bed to reach the larger water pools. Photos by Paolo Rossetti for The National, illustration source: Google

we were able to pinpoint where we would circumnavigate a large masif around to its left. We returned back down the mine track and veered to the right (waypoint 6), snaking past what must be the workers' offices and accommodations.

The track took us past a recently flooded area, where the stones were still fresh and a large uprooted tree bears testimony to the force of the wadi flood waters (waypoint 7) and where two older trees were spared. Birds could be seen and heard fluffing about in the dense foliage.

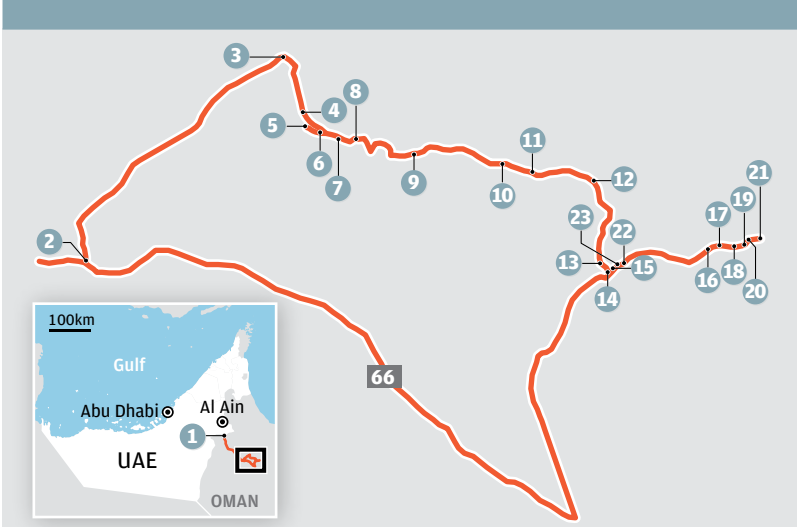
Further along the track, and squeezing past our landmark

mountain to the left, we chanced upon a water spring that had built an interesting elevated channel for the trickle of water (waypoint 8). We spotted a pair of large eagles and startled a hare in the "badlands" where small canyon formations twist and turn.

The going got tough as we slowly worked our way through the rough wadi channels, but the Volvo proved to be quite versatile in its off-roader role, carefully but steadily overcoming rather large boulders without scraping its belly even once.

Eventually you will find a tarmac road (waypoint 9) on which

## Wadi Dhum



you should turn left and follow, through the large Omani mountains. You will pass plenty of good spots for another quick exploration, but we preferred to push forward to our destination so we could enjoy the pools in the remaining daylight. Of particular interest is an immense massif at waypoint 10, and a wonderful oasis at waypoint 11, which you will pass on your left and is easily recognised by a light blue minaret next to an ancient fort with a tall tower.

Still not there, but not far now, take a right turn at a roundabout, after the sign to Wadi Hajar (way-

point 12), pass another amazing saw-topped mountain at waypoint 13, and another left at waypoint 14 which will take you right past that distinctive mountain formation. It is called Jebel Misht, which translates as Comb Mountain, and at its feet heralds a conglomerate of ancient tombs built out of flat stones (waypoint 15). We will save an exploration on foot for the next day, and continue to the now much-awaited destination of Wadi Dhum.

Straight through a little roundabout (waypoint 16) and then follow the sign to Wadi Dhum to the right (waypoint 17) and turn right into

the wadi bed at waypoint 18, slowly crawling over the rocky track until you enter the wadi proper at waypoint 19. And you have made it to the mouth of Wadi Dhum.

We set up camp quickly near the oasis at waypoint 20 and, bursting with pent-up energy, launched ourselves up the wadi.

Before you set out, a quick description to help your progress. Some climbing will be required so please wear good shoes, which should also be waterproof as in the heat of the late afternoon you will be unable to resist from plunging into the water as you work your way towards the final and most impressive pool, about a 20-minute hike up the wadi. Hat and sunscreen are highly recommended, as is a supply of water.

The layout of the wadi is a clear-cut canyon, but as you start the approach from the wadi mouth, following perhaps the fallaj irrigation channel on the left, you will immediately come to a large dam. The best way is to climb up to the small foot-trail you can see high along the ridge to your right. Otherwise you will have to work your way over boulders and drops if you stay down in the wadi.

From up high on the right, you will start to see sparkling, freshwater pools. If you reckon daylight is failing and want to reach the final pool, then stay up on the path and bypass all the tantalisingly fresh pools down in the gorge; otherwise, as we did, descend at your leisure and where you find it safe to do so, and wallow in every pool along the way. In summer, I would advise you not to push forward too hard, especially if accompanied by children or anybody prone to suffering from the heat. There's always tomorrow to reach the final pool, and I find it's a shame to not enjoy the trip for the sake of reaching the destination.

The pools progressively become more delightful, and clambering up to the next one is part of the fun. At one place, the only way over is with the use of a rope, placed between boulders by a thoughtful visitor.

Eventually you will reach the final pool, after passing by a small forest of flowering bushes. A large mature tree marks the final pool, and ferns drop into the water along the shaded side of the deep pool, making you forget that you are in the middle of a mountainous desert.

Please make sure you leave enough time to trek back in daylight, and this time I suggest taking the high trail, now on the left and at the foot of the canyon wall.

After a pleasant barbecue, campfire conversation and a good night's sleep, the next morning we again hiked out into the wadi before making our way back to explore Jebel Misht's tomb village (waypoint 22), where you can drive around the left of the oasis (waypoint 23) and easily walk up to the tombs.

On the way back, either follow the same road as you came in, or take a slightly faster but uneventful route as we did – either way will take you back to Ibri.

Next month we will take a fabulous drive – actually, a ride, as this route is perfect for a two-wheeler – from Mahda up to Hatta, the back way.

★ Paolo Rossetti

## how to travel with children and pets

# Camping trips can be fun for all the family, even the animals

Children are natural outdoors fans, though reflecting the attitudes of their parents towards our natural environment, and with a little stimulus they can learn to appreciate the great outdoors and the many activities that can take place there.

As city dwellers, our children learn of nature from school, books, TV and the Internet, but many of them sadly do not get the chance to experience the many beauties of nature first-hand; this need not be the case in the UAE, as there are many fantastic destinations within an easy drive.

Our mantra with children is to keep them busy – safe, but busy; as there's nothing worse than a young-

ster sitting on a camping chair doing nothing and moping about not having his or her video games.

We have a toy bag in which all sorts of equipment is stored: Frisbee, Pétanque (a French game of bowls, particularly interesting on sand dunes), all sorts of ball and racket games, beach toys, etc.

Camp crafts are a favourite with the kids we often camp with, and they will spend hours happily working as a team to build a shelter, or an animal trap (never caught anything to this day), and we usually let them set up their own little campfire.

Safety rules include always wearing their shoes, never straying from camp, always staying with a buddy,

and never lifting up rocks or sticks with their bare hands. Also, a zero-littering rule is strictly enforced, starting with the adults.

Often the parents will prepare an interesting game or activity: an insect trap is a popular one, where some tasty morsel of food is left in an empty tissue box, which is then buried flush with the ground, so that the insects can drop in but not get out again; or a light can be set above a white sheet to attract dozens of marvelous different flying bugs.

Binoculars are part of the kit, as is a blunt knife for them to carve bits of wood – also, what's wrong with getting on with school work while camping? It might not be their

maths homework, but we've had great success with children practising their musical instrument (seems every music teacher favours the recorder) and also bringing paints and a small hardboard canvas for them to portray a scene from history class, or the landscape scene that is before their eyes.

And when was the last time you, your partner, your kids and your friends laughed yourselves silly trying to play badminton or other games of your youth?

Pets also revel in the outdoors, and we often bring our dogs with us. If your pet is a little rambunctious or you are unsure if it will stray, loop the leash onto a long

rope tied taut between trees or cars, and your pet will be able to run up and down this rope happily without being able to move far off. Our own dogs are trained not to stray so they can run free and also serve as useful guards of the campsite.

A note on pets and other people where you might camp: many local villagers do not have experience dealing with pet dogs, and so due care and respect should be enforced so that your pet does not disturb their livestock or farms. I once had an elderly farmer hobble out of his hut carrying a rifle, reacting to calls from his wife that a fire-breathing dragon-wolf beast had emerged from the vehicle (a tail-wagging

puppy) so in all fairness what is a harmless pet to its owner can be interpreted in a very different light by a farmer, particularly if his prized camels or goats are in the vicinity.

A friend also brings his cat on trips, so that is also possible, keeping it on a long leash at all times. The feline hunter instinct soon emerges and it has a great time. Another time a pet iguana prowled around camp and basked in the sun.

All in all, the outdoors are a connection to the world we live in, and with a little planning and creativity our children and pets need not only experience life in our cities.