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off the beaten path  
Paolo Rossetti



The long and largely deserted beaches of Oman's Indian Ocean coastline are perfect for exploring and overnight camping. Paolo Rossetti for The National

# An Omani adventure

The seemingly endless stretch of beaches between Sohar and Muscat have much to explore

Having been a UAE-based motoring journalist since 2004, I'm acutely aware of the two questions I get asked all the time – and I have my answers prepared:

Q: What is the best car you've driven?

A: 1994 Toyota Land Cruiser

Q: And what car do you drive every day?

A: 1994 Toyota Land Cruiser

In fact, the best car is the one that comes closest to suiting your needs and, for my family use, camping, off-roading and everyday city driving, nothing beats our "Elsie" – our trusty, 18-year-old Land Cruiser FJZ-80, the model that made the Land Cruiser famous.

In this edition of Off The Beaten Path, my family and I take Elsie to the Omani coast, where we drive to the beach for a night's camping, and then battle tidal conditions through a salt-water estuary to re-surface by the Sohar Fort Hotel and the adjacent public park.

February, March and early April are our favourite beach months, as the daytime sun is not too severe and the waters of both the Gulf and, in this case, the Indian Ocean have shaken off the icy grip of winter and not yet reached the soup-like temperatures of summer.

Old is gold, as they say, and this certainly applies to our Elsie, who actually turned her 300,000th kilometre on this trip: Elsie runs the venerable 4.5L in-line six cylinder engine that powered generations of Land Cruisers. But what made the 80 Series special was that it was the first to turn the vehicle into a comfortable driving machine, which meant its popularity exploded.

Consider that, for an 18-year-old car, Elsie came fitted with dual-zone A/C, a fridge and an ice-maker, front and rear differential lockers, dual petrol tanks, electric winch, sunroof, CD player with sub-woofer, seating for five and four more on benches in the cavernous back. Not bad, eh? No wonder I get stopped regularly by people ready to make an offer for her.

Plus, Elsie is basically indestructible. Last year I had the first mechanical hiccup, with a "check engine" light on. I realised that a spark plug wire needed replacing. Then I noticed the manufacture date on the wire I was removing was 1994, meaning they were still the original set of spark plug wires from the day Elsie had rolled off the

**Omani beaches tend to be open to the public and used daily by fishermen**

factory floor. But on to the beach. Whenever we have the chance, the Indian Ocean is our beach destination over the closed waters of the Gulf and its ever-diminishing access to public beaches. From the seaside town of Sohar, it's practically open beach all the way to Muscat.

We prefer to enter Oman via Al Ain, but you may also make your way in from Fujairah if you prefer. From the new Danat Resort in Al Ain (previously the Intercontinental) at waypoint 1, we head towards the mountains and then left to the UAE border post, where we are stamped out (waypoint 2).

Straight through the next roundabout, following the signs to Sohar (waypoint 3) and you will soon reach the Omani border post in between ranges of sharp, craggy mountains (waypoint 5). After the border processing, which requires visa fees and valid car insurance for Oman, there are numerous roads off the main highway entering the mountains, and these mostly lead to villages close to water sources, so if you have time to spare and are feeling adventurous, you are almost guaranteed an interesting exploratory side-trip. You could also plough ahead on the new dual-carriageway that will have you in Sohar in around 45 minutes.

At the intersection with Highway One, which would take you south towards Muscat, I simply go straight (waypoint 6) feeling my way through the residential suburbs and the various palm and banana plantations towards the sea. Waypoint 7 is a quick turn right through a group of white houses and waypoint 8 is past

a white mosque. At waypoint 9 I follow the road left, as at waypoint 10, even on to dirt tracks, such as at waypoint 11. No matter which way you follow, the bottom line is that there is a beautiful, sandy beach somewhere in front of you (to your east) and eventually you will reach it whatever path you take in that direction.

We emerged onto the sunny beach at waypoint 12, which saw us crossing a tarmac road and bounce onto an expanse of dark sand colonised entirely by marauding flocks of seabirds.

From there – waypoint 13 – we had some sort of port facility to our left (north) and so we turned right and drove along the beach at leisure. Omani beaches tend to be open to the public and used daily by fishermen. As a "working beach", we always find interesting work going on, and there are few people friendlier than the Omanis, so do feel free to interact with the people you come across – many of them are descendants of generations of fishermen and they know a thing or three about the sea and conditions locally.

On this trip, we marvelled at the home-made boats that were beached up high above the tide line. They were constructed entirely of sturdy palm fronds and a natural fibre rope, probably quite similar to boats built in that fashion centuries ago.

As you make your way along the coastline, be aware of the tide, especially just before waypoint 14. At that point, there is a creek that fills at high tide, rendering passage impossible. That is not quite a problem, since you can simply go inland and around; the issue is after

high tide, when the water recedes enough to tease you with the possibility of safe passage, only to entrap your eager 4x4 in the very wet sand. Without differential locks, which I doubt your modern vehicle is equipped with, it will be very difficult to extract yourself. Elsie managed just fine, though.

Even worse, and now a serious threat, is just before high tide. Be careful of approaching the creek estuary at this time as the tide is creeping up to its high point. Water will have seeped up and under the sand, turning it into a hidden quicksand trap and, if you get caught out and stuck, the inexorable rise of the sea will swamp your vehicle, and there is no escape from that force of nature without a winch.

Seriously, I've seen it only twice before, but it is heart-wrenching to watch in powerless despair as your car gets pounded by the sea. And when the tide retreats, don't think yowu can just drive out – it will be buried – no, sucked down into compacted sand, so you'll have several hours to battle to extract it before the next tide comes back for a second hit.

If in doubt, take the high road, and swing around inland, which requires you to backtrack a few kilometres.

Just beyond the creek estuary, at waypoint 14, will be a lovely public park, and just beyond it will be the Sohar Beach Resort, at waypoint 15, and a less-busy expanse of beach with plenty of camping spots, or you could head out to highway one, where you can turn right to return back to Al Ain or continue due north towards Fujairah.

## High sales par for the course at Mercedes

Neil Vorano

Sometimes, it takes hitting the bottom to find a way to crawl back up to the top.

For Mercedes, 2008 was a record year for sales in the Middle East. Then the financial crisis hit, and the German brand – like all car makers in the region – took a big hit. But Mercedes learnt from its hardships and changed the way it sold cars to rebound to its second-best year in sales last year, selling almost 17,000 units in the GCC and increasing its UAE's sales by 10 per cent to remain the area's largest market, at 39 per cent overall share. And the change in fortune was no fluke.

The Mercedes-Benz Middle East team hosted media last week at the Omega Dubai Desert Classic golf tournament – an event co-sponsored by Mercedes – at the Emirates Golf Club. Overlooking the 18th hole, amid a constant flux of golfers coming and going, Frank Bernthaler, the director of sales and marketing for Mercedes Middle East, described the differences between Mercedes' approach before and after the financial crisis.

"How the business was done in 2008, it was very demand driven," he says. "We sometimes surprised ourselves; what is going on with the market?"

"In 2011, the main reason for our success now is that we have new products. But it also has to do with efficiencies we are gaining in our distributor networks. We have improved after-sales services, so we are doing much more for customer satisfaction. We are much more aggressive with fleet sales; we want a good share of that business. And, you can only do that if you have a professional used-car business, so on that side we're making big steps in the right direction. And that also helps new-car sales.

"I think we came out of the crisis much stronger than anyone else."

Worldwide, last year was the company's best year ever, with 1.63 million cars sold. Here in the UAE, Bernthaler expects to see a record year for the region, with double-digit sales growth in 2012, and part of the reason for his optimism are the new products that are either here already or are on their way, offering a wider range of Mercedes for just about every market segment. A new GL SUV is expected to be a sales leader; the new C63 Black Edition has already sold out even before any of the cars have arrived in the country; and, to capitalise on the SLS victories at the Dubai 24 Hours race, the company is planning an SLS GT3 special edition (no performance upgrades are planned, though, just a paint-and-sticker job, but specific to the Middle East). Soon, the revised A-Class will arrive to compete with the BMW 1 Series and Audi A1, while a bit further off, the new B-Class is expected to rival the BMW X1 and the Audi Q3 crossovers. This year is also the 60th anniversary of the SL model, which Mercedes will also try to capitalise on.

New car sales have been strong, but Mercedes is also focusing on its pre-owned market. Sales were up 22 per cent in the UAE last year over 2010. "In the western market, you usually sell one car new, one car used," says Bernthaler. "Here's it's been four to five cars new, and one used. That has many reasons, one being that that market has been neglected. That is changing, and that's why we now work with the Proven Exclusivity brand; we offer everything you'd expect from a Mercedes-Benz, even though it's pre-owned. From a sales point of view, we're growing strongly, and this year will be a strong year."

But the biggest growth for Mercedes globally in the coming years will be in China. Perhaps most surprisingly, Bernthaler says the company will open one dealership in that country every week for the next five years.

how to choose the right 4x4

## Something old is better than something new

As much as I appreciate the latest evolution of a car model, for off-roading purposes I remain stubbornly convinced that a used vehicle is preferable.

Personally, I want my off-roader to be built like a tank, with high, metal bumpers; not soft, rounded plastic decorations hanging down and just waiting to be ripped off. I also want it easy to fix in the field, with the minimum amount of electronic parts. I want to drive it through thorny bushes and scrape it through tight gorges, and look at each scratch with pride as a seasoned battle scar. And I want it to be unique, and modified to

suit my preferences, with auxiliary lights and high-lift jacks and axes bolted to the roof rack. In other words, I want a used vehicle.

But not just any used 4x4 will do. There is a clear hierarchy of desirability based on reputation of reliability, sturdiness, performance and of weaknesses, too – some models are known to overheat, or have a low-hanging radiator, or are difficult to fit larger tyres to.

And so, here is my top list of older 4x4 vehicles: any Toyota Land Cruiser – yes, even the old tractor-engine FJ-40 (engine can be replaced); any Nissan Patrol, especially the Y60 (1987 to 1997)

short wheelbase, known as the old box-shape – the famed "capsula" in Arabic. These two models have withstood the test of time and the abuse of dune bashers. If the local boys can't break it, buy it.

Following closely behind would be the Range Rover Classic, which must be a V8 petrol, and the YJ Jeep Wrangler, up to 1995, with the venerable 4.0L in-line six engine which runs on leaf springs. I wouldn't mind an older Jeep Cherokee, either, but with the spare tyre on the back, not inside and certainly not underneath.

In any case, and beyond personal preference of the model, an older

4x4 must be inspected carefully before purchase. I would budget an extra 30 per cent on top of purchase price for repairs and a full overhaul, and carry them out immediately after the purchase. I would also budget a further 30 per cent for useful modifications to turn it into a fire-breathing desert beast (legally, of course – no turbo or other prima donna mods: reliability is not worth compromising for power).

I would inspect the engine beyond listening to it – a pressure gauge will read the compression of each cylinder, determining piston ring wear and the condition of

the head gasket. The gearbox and transfer case must be smooth, even under pressure, and the differential gears must make no creaking noises or jerking movements. The rest I can repair quite easily: radiator, water pump, driveshafts, wheel bearings, brake disks, exhaust systems, I would consider them all consumables.

In the end, a used vehicle is a bit of a gamble but, with a good inspection when purchasing, and a strong focus on repairs and maintenance, an older 4x4 will outperform and outclass most new vehicles off-road, with its mechanical simplicity and tough personality.