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off the beaten path
Paolo Rossetti

Escape inside the city

An electric bicycle proves ideal for a relaxing yet energising adventure in the heart of central Al Ain

With a shift of gears – and the method of propulsion – this edition of Off The Beaten Path took a turn into the future with an electric romp through the heart of Al Ain – baby stroller and wheelchair accessible – and a delightful ride for the family during the winter months.

The 8km circuit will take you along pavements and through parks, offering stops to visit some of Al Ain's best and least-known attractions: Jahili Fort, its nearby public park, Sheikh Zayed's birthplace and Al Ain Palace Museum, traversing the oasis and swinging by the Al Ain National Museum and Sultan Fort, before circling back to the starting point along the old souq.

I came across my vehicle by chance, at the Yamaha showroom as I picked up a screaming Raptor quad bike – a desert beast, soon to be featured here. The clever marketing man at Al Yousuf Motors pointed to it: “Why don't you take this as well? I'd like to know what you think.” It looked like a girl's bicycle; I was not amused. Me? Self-proclaimed Motorhead Supreme being offered a pedal-driven contraption basically unchanged in mechanical design from the 1800s? And even then, with a large basket hanging off the handlebars?

But then I noticed the unusually thick pillar under the saddle and realised it contained a battery, and I slowly understood there was an electric motor hidden somewhere in the rear wheel hub; well, as long as there's a motor involved, I'm game.

Out on the streets, I did raise a few eyebrows. People double-backed when they realised I was gliding along without pedalling, like riding a magic carpet, in complete silence. Believe me, I was impressed by the range and speed; electric bikes are no longer the future – they are here and now.

The manufacturer of the Phoenix claims a range of 27km on a single battery charge and a top speed of 25kph under ideal conditions. I rode it like a demon, fully loaded plus my adult daughter on the back, stop-and-go over cobblestones and up and down pavements, and managed an average of 6kph including stops, top speed of 24kph with a little downhill help, and the battery remained on the green light showing full available power even after one and a half hours of heavy use over a distance of

9km. Add to that the fact that you zip along in wonderful silence, consuming no combustible fuel and emitting no toxic gases.

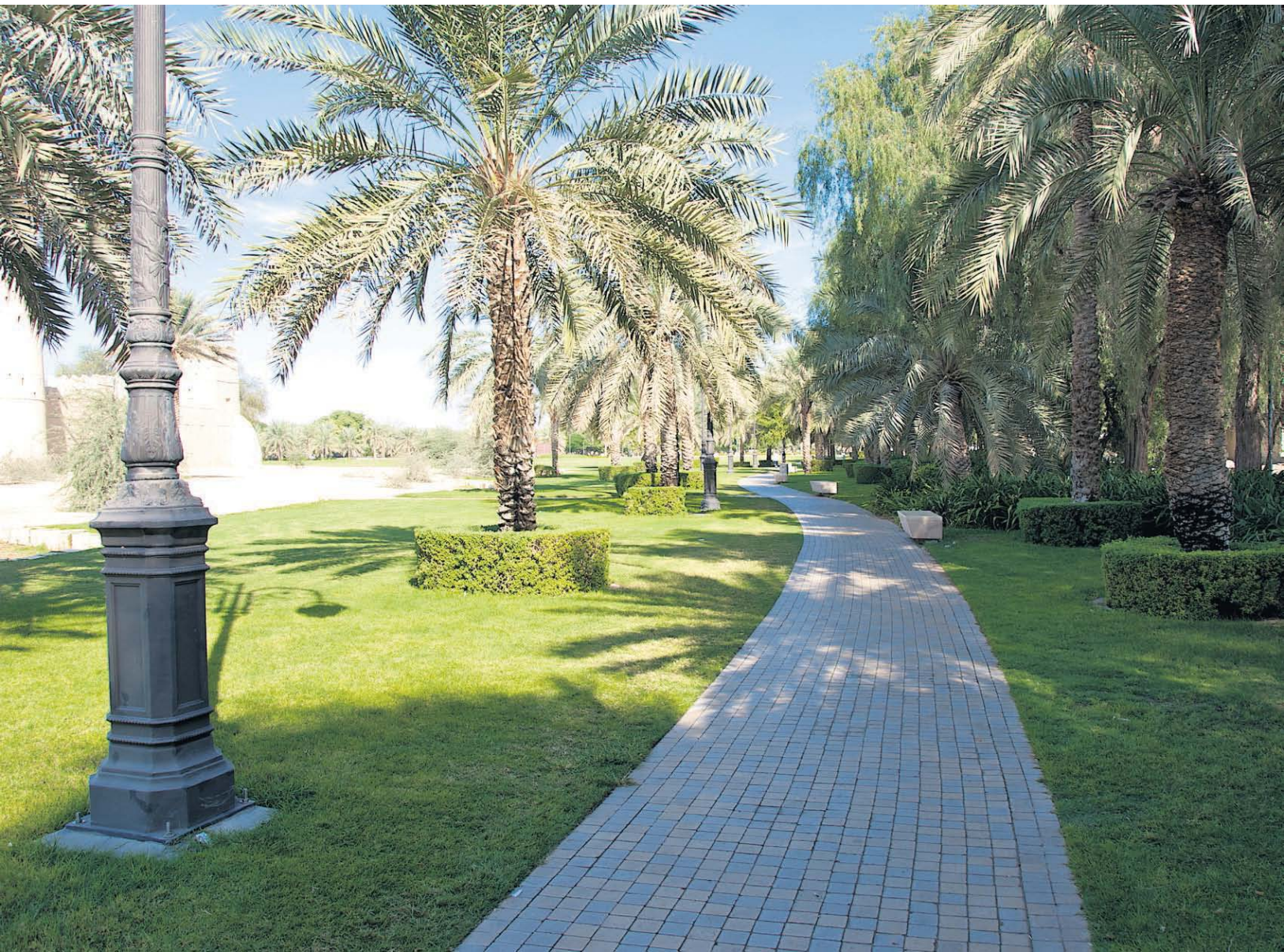
For our trip, we start from the Al Ain Rotana Hotel, where a bottle of local water will cost you 15 times the regular retail price, but where the car park is free and an ideal location to off-load bikes and leave the car. Directly out of the large lot, at waypoint 1, and facing away from the hotel, we head right (east) along the pavement, towards Jebel Hafeet mountain, which can be seen in the distance.

About halfway to the first set of traffic lights, you will clearly see the imposing Jahili Fort across the road, with a raised zebra crossing to protect pedestrian traffic. Do not be lulled by this – approach all street crossings with suspicion as motorists are neither used to nor trained to deal with cyclists, so especially if you have children with you, please be very careful. This proposed route is actually ideal for families with young children on bikes, even on training wheels, and there are very few such routes in the Emirates, but just keep an eagle-eye on them at the street crossings, as these are the only potentially hazardous points.

Jahili Fort, at waypoint 2, is open to the public and well-staffed with a visitors' centre. Although it may appear a bit empty as you peak through the large front gate, do venture in for a little exploratory detour; it will be well worth it.

Continue east along the footpath, now on the northern side of the road, and circle around Jahili Fort away from the street and into the public gardens, on the pathway and back around behind the fort, entering the adjacent Jahili Park and then keeping right in order to traverse it

It's hard to believe you are in a modern city, as the noise and bustle of urban life gives way to songbird tweets



Jahili Park offers the shade of mature trees and safety from city traffic. Below, the Phoenix electric bike makes the trip easier. Photos by Paolo Rossetti for The National



completely and exit at the back gate, at waypoint 3.

From there, cross the road and navigate a quiet side street to reach the pavement of Al Ain Street, where you can travel safely there in the shade of mature trees and along a row of shops as you head again east, towards Jebel Hafeet. At the first set of lights, dismount and cross the street, to arrive at waypoint 4, the Al Ain Palace Museum, built in 1937 and birthplace of the founder of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan.

After visiting the Al Ain Palace historical complex, continue east until the fortress wall ends and an opening into the oasis presents itself, at waypoint 5. You will soon find yourself on a car-free cobblestone path that meanders through timeless date palm groves.

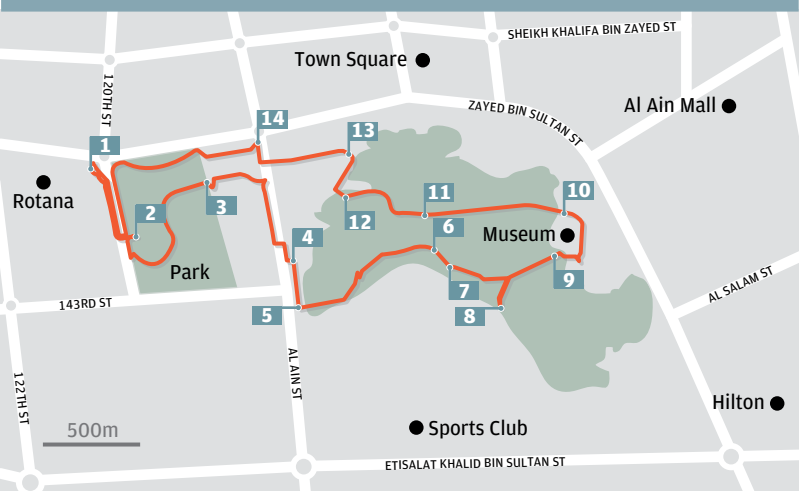
The Al Ain oasis has been fed by a clever irrigation system for generations and, indeed, Al Ain exists as a city because of these oases, which provided very rare permanent cultivation and opportunity for human settlement dating back thousands of years. As you will see, the

allotments are very precisely divided among the plot owners, who share the irrigated water. Under the palms you will notice cultivations of other plants, such as banana, and every so often you will come across a towering mango tree. It is hard to believe you are in a modern city, as the noise and bustle of urban life gives way to songbird tweets.

The path I propose is one of many, so feel free to make your own way, but aim to cross the oasis to exit at the east. If you have a GPS, follow my path, which will take you past the ancient Obaid Mosque, waypoint 7, and farther along, the elegant Sheikh Khalifa Mosque at waypoint 8, where you can also catch a glimpse downhill to the Al Ain Wadi, which originates in the nearby Omani mountains and crosses Al Ain completely east-to-west. When in full flood, it is an impressive sight indeed, and if you happen to be on mountain bikes, why not take a diversion along it for a while? It follows the oasis southeastward, where you can then join back onto the oasis trails.

Continue east towards an exit gate (waypoint 9), which will be behind

Off the beaten path



Source: Google

the Al Ain National Museum and the Sultan Fort, built in 1910. Circle around them and do take the time to visit the museum as it contains all sorts of artefacts of both archaeological and ethnographic importance.

As you emerge on the northern side of the museum complex, keep circling around anti-clockwise to re-enter the oasis at waypoint 10 and, now heading back towards the west, follow the oasis pathway straight through and out the other end, at an abandoned heritage restaurant at waypoint 12.

Head right/north, towards the roundabout, where you will cross carefully to the left at waypoint 13, and continue along the footpath, past various delicious tea shops (but not the family sit-down kind – ask for the spiced “masala” tea in a plastic cup, mentioning “par-sell” to indicate you want it to go). This area used to be part of the old downtown souq before the advent of shopping malls in Al Ain, so the tea shops have seen better economic times, but thankfully the tea is still as delicious as it used to be decades ago.

You will soon reach the same busy

road that you had after you left Jahili Park, but you are now farther north. Cross carefully at the traffic lights at waypoint 14 and then scoot into the side street if you prefer to stay away from the busy road (although you would be on the pavement), and you will soon emerge at the north-eastern corner of Jahili Park, where the jasmine gardens will greet your return.

Past the park will be the Rotana car park, although to cross safely we rode all the way back down to the fort and then back up on the other side. With an electric bike it's easy to put in an extra detour since the motor does all the work.

This 9km circuit on the electric bike was both relaxing and energising. I feel that we are heading in the right direction with developing electric vehicles and for this sort of gentle cruise through parks, historical and cultivated areas nothing with an engine could have performed better or cleaner than the 200W motor on this electric bike: no noise or exhaust pollution makes a big difference. Quick, who wants to start an electric bike rental service in Al Ain?

how to make off-roading greener

Treading lightly doesn't mean stop having fun outdoors

Off-roaders often get the end of the stick when the discussion turns to environmental issues – wasting fossil fuel, generating exhaust pollution, killing fauna, and all for just selfish personal entertainment. It's too much of a disastrous carbon footprint to justify the ego trip of motoring over natural terrain for no good reason, some people scream.

Well, guilty as charged, I suppose. I love the rumble of a petrol V8 engine, especially up a quiet mountain trail. I don't mind a smoke-belching diesel, either, especially through deep mud and water passages. And I absolutely

reach motoring heaven on my two-stroke, 350cc quad bike on the sand dunes.

There is no doubt compromises need to be made and, indeed, will be forced upon us eventually. Hopefully we will soon be offered zero-emission, solar-powered 4x4 vehicles with comparable torque, and we can play the sound of rally car engines on our audio systems if we miss the sound stimulation of a roaring combustion engine.

In the meantime, here are some things we can do to minimise our effect on the environment.

Petrol consumption is normally quite dramatic off-road, but staying out of the low gearset is a use-

ful step: the engine will rev less in the high gears and the gears will range longer, requiring less frequent shifts. Engage low only when really needed, such as when escaping from a stuck situation, or on a steep descent, then shift back into high gear right away.

On soft sand, tyres are deflated to increase footprint, and when the drive ends back on tarmac a decision is taken whether to inflate with a portable compressor (slow, and has you standing in the sun) or to just drive slowly to a nearby petrol station. If you carry an air compressor, better use it, to save both gas and wear on the tyres; driving with deflated tyres on tar-

mac is also dangerous. Heavy acceleration, and subsequent braking, make a big difference to the economy you'll get out of your vehicle; on remote expeditions, where the amount of fuel is limited, one of the golden rules is to maintain a steady speed.

If you're out to play on the dunes, you'll likely not want to be too gentle with your right foot, but saving it for when it's required by the terrain is a fair compromise: avoid spinning wheels unnecessarily when on the flat.

Littering, I believe, we can do away with immediately, as there can be no valid reason for dumping rubbish in natural surroundings.

Engage low only when really needed, such as when escaping from a stuck situation

Most desert animals stay far away from loud vehicles and hide in the bushes and underground, so there is little chance of killing them. But plants definitely can be damaged, even killed, by heavy-duty off-road wheels, so staying off the green stuff as much as possible is a fair rule. If you've ever driven on the sand dunes after rain, you'll know that wherever tyres pass, the fresh green grasses don't survive.

Are our off-road trips defensible in a world of dwindling resources and delicate ecological survival? I'll let you decide that one, but they can definitely be made easier on our environment without losing all the fun.