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off the beaten path Paolo Rossetti

Rocking adventure

Summer camping in the mountains may sound ill-advised but it can be a success, if you time it right

The falcon's eye view from the top of the stark hill where Wadi Al Helo forks will remain burnt in your memory forever. It's not just a wilderness camping area with great vistas and walking trails; a steep, slippery slope will bring you to a historic fort and far up above the dramatic remains of an ancient village, now an archaeological site managed by the Directorate of Antiquities of the government of Sharjah.

I must warn you it is a very steep track carved out of the mountain, extremely narrow with a nasty drop on one side, and the track surface is loose shale, so to reach the little fort on top you will need a serious 4x4 vehicle; I was in the 2011 Nissan Patrol, which has four-wheel drive and a low-range differential.

On the Sharjah-Kalba road, just before the tunnels, when you're in the thick of the Hajar Mountains, you will pass by the tidy and modern village of Al Helo. On the north side of the road, left-hand side if you're travelling towards Khor Kalba, there is an access track to Wadi Al Helo, clearly signed (waypoint 001 on the map located on *The National's* website).

It's easy to zoom past the dusty track suddenly leading off the smooth and fast tarmac motorway, so keep an eye out for it, or the double u-turn will take you forever.

Once safely off the motorway, take a few moments to soak up the landscape, get your bearings and get a good feel for the outside temperatures. In June, the daytime hours of 12pm to 3pm are killers, and I would strongly suggest you avoid them.

The locals here have long adhered to a routine where they take long, shady siestas during the hottest part of the day and focus their activities around dawn and after sunset until late at night, particularly on full-moon nights.

You may wish to ignore this suggestion and rely upon your vehicle's air-conditioning and still enjoy the trip, but I'm giving this advice with comfort in mind.

Firstly, you need a full-moon night; city dwellers will be surprised by just how much light the moon projects. For the month of July, that should be the weekend of the 15th and 16th.

The importance of the lunar calendar, except for religious occasions, has decreased in modern times as we have become disconnected from the cycles of nature, but still today you will find almanacs with farmers and fishers who follow the phases for planting crops and reading the tides.

Secondly, you need to time the drive so you arrive at the entrance to Wadi Al Helo after 4pm, but not too close to sunset that you risk driving up the steep and narrow track in the dark.

You will need to be equipped and ready for an overnight camping trip on rocky terrain, requiring either bed cots or inflatable mattresses, as thin camping mats would be like torture devices overnight on the stony ground.

In a nutshell, I would aim to arrive



The Patrol is great for exploring places like Wadi Al Helo, with its ancient ruins, fort and occasional donkey. Paolo Rossetti for The National

on top of the mountain before sunset, spend the night appreciating the full-moon views, wake early the next morning for either an exploratory drive or hike, and then leave before the daytime heat picks up. It might sound extreme to those who are not accustomed to getting out into nature but, believe me, that is how to enjoy the outdoors in summer in the UAE without suffering the heat or remaining confined to an air-conditioned car or wheels.

The dusty track will follow the wadi bed and soon, ahead of you, high on top of a rocky hill, you will spot an observation fort, used in the past as a watchtower and today still flying the Emirati flag. You will be able to drive all the way up there and you'll see the fort in the

distance from waypoint 002.

Further along the track you will come across a dying oasis (waypoint 003), a terrifying reminder of what happens when the tap runs dry. From the condition of the wadi bed and surrounding vegetation, it seems that Wadi Al Helo has not received the blessing of rain for some time now.

Continuing along the track, you will soon come to a fork; left will take you to a beautiful hiking trail and right will take you to an archaeological site and the steep climb up to the fort.

Choose depending on the time of day and your group's preference as to which you route you take. I divided the two tracks for you in the GPS download available from [www.](http://www.thenational.ae)



www.thenational.ae, so you may take one or the other – or both. There are waypoints named HIK 001-003 for the hike track (left) and ARCH 001-005 for the archaeological and fort track (right).

Points 001 for both tracks refer to the fork and if you heed my advice and sunset is a couple of hours away, take the ARCH route (right) and head past the abandoned historical village and size up the climb to the fort, to see if you will attempt it.

The village ruins are at waypoint ARCH 003 and the climb starts at ARCH 004 but please be wary of pushing your vehicle, or yourself for that matter, beyond your capabilities.

Walk the uphill track first if you are unsure. There is no penalty for wis-

dom, but there can be serious consequences for stupidity.

I drove up with my wife spotting particularly rugged terrain to avoid any nasty incidents. She's a professional at this and, frankly, without her help I don't think I would have attempted the climb in a vehicle I was driving for the first time. I know very well the off-roading pedigree of the Nissan Patrol, having owned models from as early as 1981, but the latest incarnation does look a little soft from the rounded-body design.

I need not have worried, though. The new-generation Patrol is a firehorse of an off-roading truck and we ploughed up the trail easily in a comfortable cabin.

Once camp is set up and dinner

consumed, a moonlight walk through the village ruins is a must, especially following a few campfire ghost stories. The following morning, we swung back around to the fork and took the HIK 001-003 track for a brief hike along a mule trail that snakes off to the left of the private gate at the end of the car track (HIK 003). We didn't go too far, just enough to enjoy the many wild flowers, the impressive view of the mountains and to spook a donkey before heading back onto the motorway in search of breakfast.

Summer might seem to be the wrong time for the outdoors in this region, but the night temperatures away from the coast are fresh, and the moonlight adds an entirely different dimension to a camping trip.

how to enjoy the outdoors in summer

It's time to adjust to the natural rhythm of life in the region

As the dusty winds of spring begin to fade and the full-on summer heat escalates, even the hardiest of off-roaders call it quits and stay indoors.

What a shame. It is true that the summer heat of June in the region can be brutal, but if we align our mentality to the seasons we can still enjoy venturing outdoors and have experiences that might have otherwise escaped us.

Yes, during the searing heat of summer it is best to remain indoors but we can utilise other times of day to get out, such as at dawn, dusk and into the night.

This is how desert tribes lived in the years before electric lighting and air-conditioning defeated the cycles of nature. During the hot period of the day, you hunker down in a nice shady spot and nap; come dusk, it's up and at 'em.

As the darkness falls, on full-moon nights, if not interrupted by artificial lights, you can see very clearly – enough to cover miles on foot. And once our night-vision is established you can see a great deal in the ethereal silver moonlight. A few hours of sleep and then a burst of activity at dawn, before again settling into the shade to wait out the strong sun.

If you live by the coast, you will probably be rolling your eyes now. Yeah, right, you'll be saying, temperatures are just as hot and humid as during daytime. True, but inland the nights are fresh and the early mornings crisp, even during summer. The arid desert climate means an absence of humidity and a great difference in temperature between night and day.

Take Al Ain, for instance. In June you can expect a normal 42°C to 45°C at midday, followed by a mid-night reading of under 30°C.

So as we adjust our daily routine to the reality of summer in the Middle East, our trips off-road

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cannot only continue unabated, but should transform into night-time adventures outdoors that we would otherwise miss. I mean, when was the last time you took a hike at midnight?

Take your children with you and let them appreciate what used to be the natural rhythm of life in this region.

Besides, June is a unique time to be out in nature – the Tropic of Cancer runs through the southern UAE, dissecting the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. It is one of the main circles of latitude on Earth, between the Equator and the Arctic Circle, and it marks the most northerly

position where the sun is directly overhead. This occurs once a year, at the time of the summer solstice (June 21 this year) when the northern hemisphere is tilted towards the sun to its maximum extent.

So, from short, night-time drives up to a tall dune for a cup of tea with friends, to longer walks in full moonshine and brisk, early morning hikes, summer is not necessarily a time to give up on the outdoors; it is simply a chance to adapt to the natural environment and adjust our schedule to avoid the hottest time of day.

★ Paolo Rossetti