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off the beaten path
Paolo Rossetti

With a sting in the tale

Al Hayer forest offers refreshing shade to both off-road campers and desert-dwelling creatures

In the middle of summer, outdoors in the UAE, there is only one thing that comes a precious second to water – shade.

And when you get several hundred ghaf trees in one nice, flat valley between sand dunes and backing into mountains, it is a welcome forest of shelter from the overpowering sun.

This is Al Hayer forest, one of my all-time favourite camping spots.

It's a perfect campground – roughly a third of the way towards Dubai from Al Ain, easily accessible on sand tracks so beginners can get right into the action without feeling left out, yet near an expanse of open sand dunes for an exciting drive for those feeling adventurous.

I visited most recently at the wheel of the GMC Acadia Denali, an all-wheel-drive SUV that's not particularly recommended for sand driving. Without a low-range differential and, indeed, not even a true split traction to all four wheels, getting stuck in the soft stuff is almost guaranteed.

However, the Al Hayer forest tracks are so forgiving that I was in and out with no issues whatsoever, proving that a rough and tough 4x4 is not absolutely required to enjoy the outdoors. In fact, the GMC Acadia Denali was perfectly fine for the job. As long as you keep moving, the Acadia speeds up and down these sand dunes with gusto.

And a good thing, too – as temperatures hit the low 50s Celsius, getting stuck is not a pleasant experience.

We start from the Adnoc petrol station at Shweib (waypoint 001), where the mountains of Wadi Sharm meet the red dunes. It used to be that the border to nearby Oman was wide open, but now from the UAE side one cannot simply descend into the large wadi, which is mostly dry and impressive when in flood. Instead, we shall have to circle around.

Upon leaving the Adnoc station, turn right and head downhill. There is an elegant blue mosque down near the shops (waypoint 002) but further down, the road is blocked, and so we turn into a well-established desert track before reaching the mosque, at waypoint 003.

This track passes through an automatic barrier and, at a quaint little farm, takes the left fork on a dirt track that runs uphill into the dunes (004 and 005). This track loops around to the left and heads down into the wadi and the border fence. Firstly, though, it passes an open mine at waypoint 006 where they extract, well, sand, I suppose.

Once you reach the open wadi, with a spectacular mountain range in front of you, follow the border fence to the right (007) on a well-used dirt track. In case you're interested, and an explorer at heart, turning left towards Shwaib will take you to a walled canal, but there is no way through.

Follow the border fence south and then west for several kilometres, past waypoint 008, until it suddenly



The GMC Acadia Denali may not be suited to sand driving, but it lets you explore Al Hayer forest in complete comfort. Paolo Rossetti for The National

Al Hayer forest



makes a 90-degree turn left at waypoint 009; look to your right, and beyond a farm you should see trees in the distance: the forest.

Waypoint 010 makes an easy entrance to the forest area.

There are two things I must caution with regards to camping at Al Hayer – firstly, if you look around you will notice that there aren't any young trees.

Not even a sapling. Not even a sprout. I asked the Abu Dhabi Conservation Rangers some time back why this is the case, and they explained it is because, in the past 30 years, there has been an explosion in the population of camels – they eat everything that tries to grow.

So once these mature trees – and there are some old grannies at Al Hayer – are gone, there is no new generation to take over.

And if you think, as I did, that perhaps fencing the young growth might help, consider that camels have very long necks, enough weight to crush rickety fences and the determination of a desert survivor to reach those juicy, fresh shoots. The only way is to fence off the entire area with a concrete-base fence, as the authorities are carrying out with dedicated conservation areas.

For us at Al Hayer, what this means is that every single tree is precious and non-renewable. Absolutely do not even consider breaking off branches for firewood – please plan in advance and bring your own wood to burn. Scavenging dead critters must be possible, as the herders cut off the top branches and leave them on the ground for the camels to forage on. Once the leaves are eaten, the branches dry out and make very good firewood. Still, please only use as much as necessary.

The second caution is that as much as Al Hayer forest seems a miracle among the dunes to us, imagine how astounded desert critters must be when they catch first glimpse of the expanse of trees!

The wooded area is, in fact, a mag-

net to all sorts of desert creatures in the area. I have spotted owls, foxes, bats, hares, and – ready? – numerous scorpions. Now, there are two kinds of reactions to scorpions: "Cool!" is one; a sharp intake of air and a gulp of fear is the other.

As a matter of fact, scorpions are just stinging insects that inhabit arid regions and, with a little due care, they are not as dangerous as you might expect. Some precautions to take: children must be taught about scorpions, and specifically urged to keep their shoes on at all times; to stay away from the trees and bushes, and to refrain from picking up objects from the ground without first turning them over with a stick.

In the morning – and I say this because it is true, not to play the sensational safari guide – do not kneel down to roll up the tent. First, lift it and move it. And have a good look to see if you can spot a little sandy feather-like scorpion scooting along the sand. No kidding – we are now past counting 20 on the times we have had a scorpion burrow under during the night.

Once only, and in Al Hayer, a member of our camp got stung on her knee as she rolled up her tent. The result was described as a very severe wasp sting, and a swollen and painful knee for the next three days. And that was through her jeans.

For children, the elderly and people who are allergic, it could be much more serious, and a prompt visit to the hospital would be in order. Our own camper didn't bother.

When we do spot a scorpion, I scoop it carefully into a cup so everyone can have a good look at it without it running all over camp. The worst thing is losing track of it as it scampers among chairs and camping gear.

Scorpion caution aside, Al Hayer is a unique camping spot and, thanks to its shady trees, it is also a good destination for the hotter months, when at night the temperatures drop to a comfortable and humidity-free level.

To leave the forest I suggest you follow the tracks to the west through the trees and along the slipface, away from the mountains.

Stay down in the valley as you may become disorientated if you climb up into the open dunes, and keep your heading towards waypoint 011, where a well-travelled sand track snakes through farms (012) until it becomes tarmac (013) and eventually joins the Al Ain-Dubai motorway at waypoint 014. The direction of travel is towards Dubai, so Abu Dhabi residents will have to take the first exit, then make an about-turn under the flyover to reverse course.

how to set up camp

The dos and don'ts of UAE camping

When camping in the desert or the mountains of the region, there is an art and science to arranging camp so that your group leaves minimal signs of your presence once you leave and also enjoys a certain level of convenience during your stay.

It's not hard to do, and veteran campers will automatically arrange themselves accordingly, but for people who are not used to camping without amenities, or new to this region, or who perhaps are camping for the first time, it would be a good idea to discuss arrangements as you arrive on location.

The campsite is normally best divided into a common sitting/bonfire area and private sleeping quar-

ters, according to where the shade is. The fire goes where the wind will not blow smoke into the tents and a semicircle of chairs forms around it. Large, black rubbish bags are set up to accommodate waste. That's the sitting and dining room.

Cooking on barbecues or gas stoves is best kept to one area only to prevent children – or adults – bumping into hot pots and kicking sand into saucepans. Hot coals must never be dumped onto the sand as they can burn bare feet even the next morning – they should be disposed of into the fire, or let to cool down in the barbecue. Tables and cool-boxes are useful close to the cooking area. And that's the kitchen.

Tents are best spread out upwind

from the fire, nicely spaced out to avoid snoring serenades and preferably on soft, flat ground. Inside the tent we place camping cots and pillows – we used to use inflatable mattresses, but they kept developing leaks so we found that foldable cots were more reliable. Sometimes we sleep in the open under the stars, confident that which is our elevated position on the cots we're out of reach of creepy crawlies.

It's wise to put the tent next to the car, too, so it can act as a windbreak. We don't mind being quite far from the central fire area, since we have never had any issues with unwanted visitors in the UAE. We feel safe and our privacy has always been respected. That's the bedroom.

Toilets can work two ways, and I'll

make my recommendation. A common way is to just select an area "across that dune" or somewhere suitably out of sight – announce its occupancy by daintily trooping off into the dark, whistling nonchalantly, shovel on your shoulder and toilet roll in your pocket.

We prefer to bring a private toilet tent, which is so simple and convenient that most people we camp with have now got one, too. It is simply a super-cheap supermarket tent with the bottom plastic sheet cut out. In it we place a solid bucket and line that with plastic bags, which are disposed of after each use. Besides privacy and comfort, the benefit is that no waste is left behind. We even wash or shower in the bathroom tent, if needed, by piercing the cap of a wa-



Camping in the desert without amenities is not hard to do as long as you've worked out the arrangements in advance. Paolo Rossetti for The National

ter bottle with numerous small holes and squeezing it to allow streams of water to flow.

Depending on numbers and ages, children are often allocated their own mini-campsite nearby, where they can be noisy, play games and keep themselves entertained. There is nothing more fun than wolf packs

of kids playing together outdoors.

Lastly, before leaving, when all is packed and ready, let's give nature thanks for her hospitality with one final check that there is no rubbish left behind – not one empty water bottle or paper napkin; nothing but footprints and memories of an enjoyable camping trip.