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off the beaten path
Paolo Rossetti

Life in the desert

Near Al Khatim, you can search for gazelles on the way to a vantage point to survey the majestic dunes

There are desert drives that leave you invigorated: fighting through challenging dunes, pedal to the metal, and then there are drives that bring peace to the soul.

Just south of Al Khatim, about halfway between Abu Dhabi and Al Ain, there is a fabulous track that meanders between untouched ranges of sand dunes, following the valleys that naturally occur where alluvial plains gently percolate underground run-off water from the Omani mountains in the direction of Abu Dhabi city.

The beauty of this area is its quiet, rolling landscape, and the openess of the desert. One feels very small, almost insignificant, in the splendour of thousands of years of shifting sands, slow growth of ghaf trees and the constant travel of gazelles.

While you might not see them, gazelles thrive in this conservation area, roaming freely across the wide-open ranges, feeding on wild grasses wherever they catch root. Just before dawn, into the early hours of the morning, and around dusk you can see small herds heading down to poach a few nibbles from the fodder unintentionally provided by the camel farmers. The camels don't seem to mind sharing.

I undertook this drive alone, in contradiction to the unwritten rule of desert off-roaders: never go out alone. I did so because I had some friends on a group drive not far away, and because I was behind the wheel of an unbeatable desert expedition vehicle, the Land Rover Defender.

Of the many qualities required of an off-road vehicle, the Defender excels at all. The turbo-diesel engine drives the lightweight chassis and aluminium body over soft sand effortlessly – it simply does not feel the tug of the sand, and it powers through the soft stuff at a relaxed pace, engine ticking over.

Where a petrol engine normally needs to rev high and force its way over dunes, the Defender chugs over nonchalantly. I believe this feeling of mechanical relaxation combined with the tranquil beauty of this area is what brought me to an almost spiritual zone on this drive – but let me direct you to the How To article that deals with the dangers and preparations for driving solo before we end up with readers going out alone, getting stuck and finding themselves in all sorts of trouble.

The route presented today with downloadable GPS track can be followed as is, resulting in a dramatically relaxing cruise through nature, or if you and your group are experienced and looking for a bit of excitement simply stay parallel to my track, up top the dunes.

We start from the roundabout directly south from Al Khatim, on the road parallel to the Abu Dhabi – Al Ain truck road (waypoint 1), heading due south where the tarmac gives way to a hard-packed dirt



The turbo-diesel engine drives the lightweight chassis and aluminium body of the Land Rover Defender, which makes driving on soft sand easy. Paolo Rossetti for The National

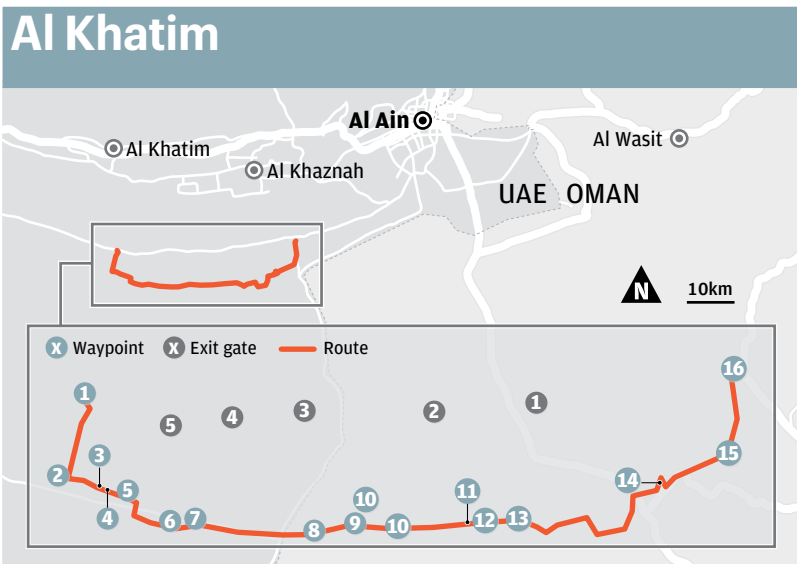
track. At the first inhabited break in the fence to your left, enter the desert through the unlocked gate (waypoint 2). If the gate is locked for whatever reason, please do not force your way in and re-direct your trip to another area.

Fences and gates are managed by Abu Dhabi Conservation officers, and they monitor the wildlife in the area, and so gates help keep the desert fauna where it belongs: in the desert and not on the motorways.

Normally, the gate is unlocked and the camel grid is sufficient to prevent livestock from crossing out into traffic. On this subject, in the GPS track you will also find the locations of four gates along the northern perimeter of the desert, in case you need to make for the nearest exit along the route.

After deflating the tyres, to better float on the sand, follow the track before you, heading due east, towards Al Ain, and specifically towards the imposing massif of Jebel Hafeet, which as you get closer will loom ahead in the distance and guide you.

The sand track connects several camel farms and it is well travelled by farm vehicles, so it should be quite easy to stay on course and not stray. However, if you are without a GPS device (which is not a particu-



Source: Google

larly good idea), then in a nutshell the proposed route will navigate around to the right/south of the first large dune range, and then stay on the left/north side of the next dune range, until you reach at the far end plots of cultivated farms to your left/south, which are traversed by a tarmac road north-south, where you will exit and end your drive.

But back at the start of the sand track (waypoint 3), as you motor along happily at a leisurely pace,

keep an eye out to the sides of the wheel tracks, glancing at the fresh unmarked sand, and you should soon come across gazelle tracks.

Led by a herd leader, in small groups from two to 12, or even 20 if you are fortunate, the tracks are narrow and pointy, and therefore easily distinguished from camel tracks, which reflect the shape of their soft and rounded pads, as opposed to the hard gazelle hoofs.

Should you chance across gazelle,

please refrain from chasing them. It might be a primal predator instinct, but chasing down desert creatures with your car can be very damaging. The balance of life in such an arid environment is very fragile, and the extra energy required to escape from your mechanical monster can lead to death, especially during the breeding season when gestation stretches the available resources to the limit.

I took my time on this route, stopping under the shade of an old tree to listen to the birds deep within the branches, and to leave a few crumbs. Observing a little plant squeezing out a minuscule flower in an effort to propagate, I felt a little tenderness at its struggle in such harsh conditions, and I poured a little water from my bottle so it would trickle down and offer a desperately needed boost; and then, simultaneously, and out of nowhere, a small lizard appeared, running out of its hole to the rivulet of pure flowing water, so close that I could see its tongue lapping greedily at the disappearing drops.

As the track continues choosing the path of least resistance down on the flat, it passes by several established camel farms, and then suddenly comes across a large dirt track directed north-south (waypoint 13). At this point you may choose to take the second track

right and head towards the perimeter of cultivated farms to coast along towards destination, or you may choose to take a direct route cross-country.

In either case, your destination is a large pyramid of sand, known as Farmview Dune to offroading expats, because of the impressive views from its peak (waypoint 14). If you are comfortable driving up large dunes, the line to take is up the northern ridge. The resulting view from the top can be compared with travelling over the dunes in a hot air balloon.

A word of caution from Farmview Dune onwards: please use the farm tracks to reach the exit gate onto tarmac, because the sands just to the north are being excavated as part of a mining operation. It was shocking to see that no warning cones or tape are in place. Unwary drivers might suddenly find the sand in front of them drop vertically 10 to 15 metres!

From the many tracks inside the farms, you will find the exit gate (waypoint 15) if you just keep going east, towards Jebel Hafeet in the distance.

Once on tarmac, head left/north to reach the truck road roundabout (waypoint 16), where turning right will take you to Al Ain, and on towards Al Khatim again.

how to go it alone

The loneliness, and danger, of the off-road driver

This contribution to the How To series might be a little controversial because one of the main tenets of driving off-road in remote areas is to never go alone, especially not on soft sand dunes and when temperatures can easily soar above 40°C.

As much as I agree with this golden rule, and I very rarely go out alone, I also cannot ignore that it does happen; and it being a topic of such importance that it can make the difference, documented on several occasions, between life and death, I prefer to address the issue openly.

Single vehicles go out into the desert sands every day: farm vehi-

cles, authorities such as the environmental agencies, oil and water resources vehicles, local people who live near the desert, border patrols, etc.

But there is a crucial difference between these drivers and the amateur off-roader: the pros are prepared in three important areas:

Communication: a mobile phone is essential, and Etisalat assures me there is complete coverage over all the UAE land territory (there are places where you might need to climb to get coverage), but relying on a single device is not at all foolproof. Government organisations in fact rely mainly on radio

communication and use mobiles as back-up.

Route: drivers who traverse sand for professional reasons do not take detours: they do not explore or go play on dunes (well, not officially!). They have their fixed route and they stick to it, and also their employers/supervisors know that route. Should they go missing, their location is normally quite easily determined. Plus, shared knowledge of their route and known landmarks make communicating their position easy. Desert agencies also utilise GPS devices for accurate location. These “commercial” routes across the desert

are also shared by all other vehicles – some are as wide as motorways – and so the chances of other vehicles passing by within a few hours are quite high. Even the farm hand delivering camel fodder is assured that someone will come looking for him if he does not arrive by a certain time because his route and destination have been pre-communicated.

Support: Having resources available to launch a deep desert recovery operation is normally beyond the capabilities of private individuals, but organisations are normally able to do so without resorting to the emergency response teams (who will

come out and find you if you need emergency assistance and call 999).

So those are some of the requirements to safely navigate the desert alone – without communication, route and support all sorted out I would certainly not advise anyone leave the tarmac alone. The weekend off-roader who goes out without a clear route, in an unfamiliar area, should certainly heed the desert rule of never going out alone.

On those rare occasions that I go out driving alone, I back myself up on all three lines: I share my route and destination, and I don't deviate from it; I have a group of friends

available to come out find me if necessary; and I carry a back-up communication device.

And it's not one single problem you need to be prepared for – it's when there are multiple simultaneous system failures, such as rolling your car onto its side, severely twisting your ankle in the process, and losing your mobile phone somewhere in the sand in the aftermath ... then what will you do?

Naturally, training and experience, proper equipment and the knowledge of local conditions also play a major role.

★ Paolo Rossetti