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off the beaten path
Paolo Rossetti

The road to distraction

Moving off the tarmac on the way to Hatta, it's time to head towards the spectacular coastal town of Khor Kalba

This month's itinerary is a real treat, especially for visitors or new arrivals – we go from red dunes, up and over high mountains, and then down the other side ending up at the beach of Khor Kalba.

The route does not require expertise in off-road driving, but the focus will be on navigating the different terrains.

We like to take things easy, so we spend the night camping on the beach as well: Khor Kalba is a fantastic destination and one of the last open beaches on the UAE's east coast. Since it is located further south than any other UAE beach, it also has the added advantage of better access to the wild Indian Ocean rather than the enclosed Arabian Gulf, and so the wave action is a bit more exciting, if that's your sort of thing. Do bear in mind that Khor Kalba is part of the emirate of Sharjah and, as such, Sharjah's decency laws apply.

But, before the destination, the drive. We start from Al Bidayer, also known as Big Red, which has the dubious good fortune of being the closest large dune formation to Dubai and Sharjah with a gentle slope that is quite easy to climb in a 4x4 vehicle.

It is a madhouse of duning activity, with sometimes more than a hundred cars dangerously criss-crossing each other up and down and all around – I stay far away when the weekend crowds and safari companies take the place over, but on a lazy Friday morning, I'll give it a good shot to the top as well.

The Mercedes ML 350 I was driving made it seem easy, powering up with horsepower to spare after I disabled the advanced traction control system – I knew Mercedes made super luxury cars, but I was surprised at how well they transferred S-Class technology and its unique suave feel to an off-road application.

Bidayer is our waypoint 1 on the road heading towards Hatta from the Dubai-Al Ain highway, just before the Madam roundabout, and you will see what is becoming a desert amusement park, with quad bike rental tracks, horse riding, falcon exhibitions and even entrepreneurial condos going up.

The desert we are interested in entering is on our left side (north) as we approach Madam roundabout, so, assuming we are heading towards Hatta, we will have to make a U-turn and head back towards a break in the fence (waypoint 2).

Now, before we jump into this adventure, some words of caution. If you have downloaded my GPS track from the website, then you can be reasonably sure you can follow my every footstep, but if not, then you will need to understand the lay of the land.

So, please jump out of your vehicle at waypoint 2 and see where you are heading. Facing north, with your back to the tarmac, you will see in the distance ahead of you a line of red sand dunes to your left (west) and a line of stark hills to your right (east) – you will want to head in the northerly direction staying in the valley between the dunes and hills.

There will be a number of tracks, numerous farms and all sorts of distractions. If you want to spice it up a bit, then swing around to the dunes a bit; if you want it tamer, then stay closer to the hills. All tracks heading north are your friend.

You may decide to deflate the tyres at this point. As a rule of thumb, 18-20 psi for a full-size SUV, and 15 psi for a lighter short-wheelbase model. I was feeling lucky in the Mercedes ML 350, and so I didn't bother to deflate at all and was not punished for such arrogance.

Waypoints 3 and 4 guide you along a line of electricity poles – a very useful line of landmarks – until you reach a break in the hills that allow you to turn 90° to the right (east) at waypoint 5, and cross the hills to the other side, where you will pass an excellent fossil-hunting site (waypoint 6) that consists of the collapse of an entire face of an escarpment. It's a nice place for a rest, a snack and for the kids to run around.

Our first leg of the journey ends further east, where there is tarmac and a petrol station where you can



The recently constructed border fence track will make sure you don't accidentally stray into Oman on your travels. Paolo Rossetti for The National

reinflate your tyres (waypoint 7) at a small roundabout that signposts the town of Fili.

You are now off the sands and on the alluvial plain, with the impressive silhouette of the Hajar Mountains ahead of you.

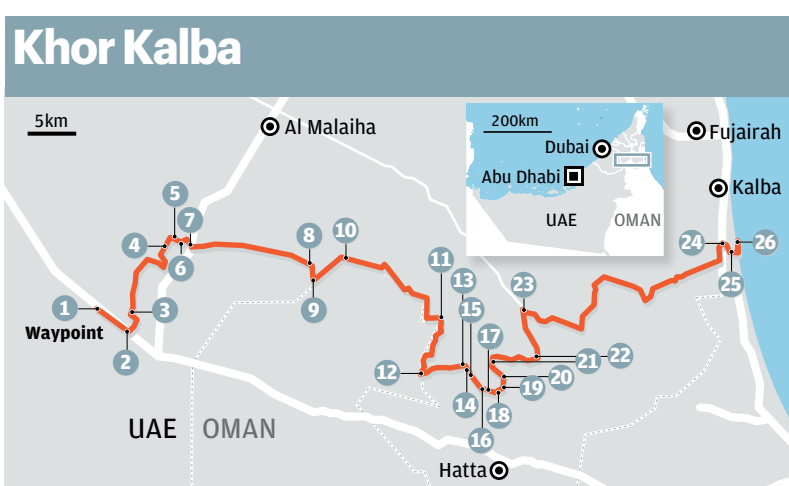
Just after passing a fort turret on your left, at the roundabout (waypoint 8), leave tarmac to enter a dirt track to your right, swinging around the farms to your left, until you reach a formidable border fence with concrete base and barbed wire (waypoint 9) – you can't miss it.

This is the newly installed border fence which goes all around the UAE's land borders. It is a very useful landmark and it prevents accidentally straying across the border. To top off its brilliance, there is a well-maintained track that parallels the fence all the way. Turn left onto the border track and head east, towards the tall peaks and the sea beyond.

Staying on the border track at speed, you will feel just how good your car's suspension system works, and if it's a bit too harsh for your liking, you may want to deflate to around 25psi to soften the ride a tad further.

The Mercedes ML 350, with its full-time four-wheel-drive system and independent suspension, just ate up the track and provided a ride quality that was impressively supple. Again, I declined to let the air out of the tyres and didn't regret it.

Along the track you will find two graded viewpoints, where a stop gives a well-earned lookout over the sharp mountain peaks (waypoints 10 and 11). Take good care when the



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track begins its sharp climb, and please be prepared for any oncoming traffic, as rare as that may be.

The border track will take you to the roof of the mountain range – in off-roader parlance this route is called "the Eagle's Nest" – and then down again to the other side, where it will be time to part with the border fence (waypoint 12), and make your own way through the wadis, heading east, on the third leg of our exploration.

As you leave the border fence along a well-established track, it will soon turn to tarmac and a roundabout will appear (waypoint 13). Turn right there and a few hundred metres later, turn left onto a faded track by a white house (waypoint 14). This track will head through the valley, passing by a farm on your left (waypoint 15), and will eventually head

down into the wadi, where the going will slow down as the track deteriorates into large stones.

You will now be in the middle of craggy hills and totally disoriented – know that you are not as far from civilisation as it may seem, and that all tracks will lead to tarmac and habitation. The worst enemy can be your own fear and lack of confidence, which can lead people to commit strange acts, like attempting to walk up a sheer cliff-face to "get my bearings" and then slip and turn what was a simple drive into an emergency situation.

One exception is rainy weather – that's not to be messed with in these tight wadi gorges. Any sign of rain, and even rain clouds: abandon trip, and make haste back to tarmac the way you came in. If caught in heavy rain, drive up to high ground and

park. If caught in a flood, immediately abandon the car and rush to high ground and sit and wait.

Luckily for us, the track I chose follows electricity pylons in points, and so you will always have a visual reference of the direction you should be heading (waypoint 16).

Waypoints 17-20 guide through tight wadis and around farms, either along the track or the line of pylons, until you emerge onto tarmac in front of a loud pink house (waypoint 21) where you will turn right, and then left at the T-junction (waypoint 22), and finally right onto the Khor Kalba highway (waypoint 23).

A few tunnels later, you will see the sea in the distance.

Khor Kalba is a friendly town, with a spectacular lagoon of mangrove forest. The corniche (waypoint 24) is an inviting picnic spot if you are not fond of the ocean although you may not camp there overnight.

The access to the open beach is further down the corniche, where a roundabout gives onto a narrow bridge (waypoint 25).

The beach is long and the waves hit the shore with abandon. Not many people swim, preferring instead to drive their cars up and down the surf. We tend to enjoy the energy of the sea, but we also pitch our tent far inland, and circle the wagons using the cars as barriers.

Last trip, however, we were the only campers and after dark had the beach to ourselves.

Next issue we switch gears to quad bikes with a romp through Al Ain's lake district.

how to:
navigate

You're never far from a way out

The United Arab Emirates is roughly the size of Portugal or the state of Maine, with a coastline of 700km and a breadth from north to south at around 500km – it's not a big country, but it contains some of the remotest and most extreme off-roading terrain in the world.

Due care therefore is required in preparing for off-road trips, and smart decisions while underway can make the difference between a memorable adventure and a disaster.

First in line is the fact that the UAE offers mobile phone connectivity throughout the territory – yes, even in the remotest corner. However, you may have to work your way to high ground for the signal to be strong enough.

Secondly, the UAE is fully explored and there are no "unknown" corners – farms and villages, fenced nature reserves and private lands, lines of electricity pylons and tracks are everywhere. Any track will eventually lead to civilisation, be it a desolate farm or strip of tarmac.

Therefore, it is really difficult to be truly lost in the UAE.

Due to the nature of the terrain, however, it is easy to be temporarily lost and disoriented. In fact, I get "lost" almost every trip, but I always find my way again. There are many tools and techniques that can aid the navigator. I spent the first few years without a GPS system and can vouch that it is the most useful – I'd even say essential – piece of kit for off-road travel.

Focus on a unit that can communicate and transfer data with your PC at home. Google Earth is hard to beat for the quality of their maps, so all that is missing is being able to link it to a GPS unit, and then you will have your waypoints and routes there in Google Earth, both for the preparation of a trip (downloading data to the GPS unit) and to review the past trip (uploading where you went to the PC).

Naturally, GPS is also vital in giving your location in case of emergency (try explaining to rescue services: "Well, we're in the sand, we passed a farm with some camels ... there's a big dune shaped like a banana to my right...")

Besides the wonders of GPS, there still is a lot left on your shoulders. The most important is your ability to stay calm under pressure and make rational decisions – the worst off-roading disasters are normally attributable to poor decision making.

The bottom line is that in the UAE you are never far away from a way out. You look for tracks, and follow them in your car. You notice Etisalat or electricity pylons and follow them. Farms are down in the flats in between dunes, not on top of them. Wadis flow downhill towards the flats. Vegetation means water, which in turn means someone's pumping it, and there will be a track.

Despite this, you must always travel in a group to be safe.

In the past, Bedouin tribes would cross entire deserts on foot (camels would carry cargo) navigating solely by the stars. Even with our modern devices, we still need to keep a level head when things get dicey.