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off the beaten path
Paolo Rossetti

Red dawn

Get up before the sun to make the most of a quad bike ride across the unspoilt dunes of Al Ain

The best quad rides are at dawn, a good friend of mine is fond of saying.

I tend to try and minimise how often I waken when, in my book, it's technically still night; yet even an old grump such as myself must admit that at least once a year you should do a pre-dawn ride in the dunes.

Just like my dad would take me fishing (another pre-dawn insanity) as a kid, getting out into nature at that magical time when the gloom melts away under an emerging sun is refreshing to both the body and soul.

And if you happen to be riding pristine sand dunes on a Kawasaki 700KFX, all the better.

So my daughter and I went to bed early the night before; our gear neatly laid out at the foot of our beds so we could just descend into it all in the morning, and we managed to put in our annual pre-dawn raid.

Approaching the teen years in the fast lane at 12 years of age, I wondered how many more rides we'd have together like this, since I know well from her older sister that the happy "Yes, Daddy!" times will soon become the grungy teenager "what-evah" roll of the eyes.

Our itinerary is a fabulous area of untouched dunes north of Al Ain, bordered to the south by a large walled conservation area, with the town of Nahil to the far north.

The dune range runs east-west, and if you get up high, you can see forever while enjoying side-slope after side-slope of top-quality red sand. This is the equivalent of surfers hitting high surf, or skiers running on powder: the red dunes carve around valleys devoid of any bushes or drops.

The Kawasaki 700cc twin-cylinder machine provides power on demand, and the fully automatic transmission ensures your focus stays totally on the ride and the feel of the quad rush. It is a big quad, and very comfortable, but, with twin discs up front, it has the best stopping power I've experienced on one.

Towing the quads behind the car, we start from the northern ring road, which connects the Dubai-Al Ain motorway to the Abu Dhabi-Al Ain motorway without running through the roundabouts in town. If you come from either coastal city, follow the signs to Al Ain Airport.

From the ring road, which has been under construction for eons, seek out the roundabout that signposts to Nahil, heading north into the dunes (waypoint 1) towards what used to be a popular off-roading hotspot for Al Ain youth before it was fenced off: Bida Bint Saud.

The new tarmac road connects Al Ain to Nahil, and Bida Bint Saud has become a side roundabout. It consists of a mysterious rocky hill of archaeological importance that has been fenced off to the public for years, while the nearby dunes have been walled in by large summer houses. The remaining area, especially those valleys blessed with forests of mature ghaf trees, have been claimed as conservation areas and are also off-limits.

This has lead to the off-roading enthusiasts moving elsewhere, and so the route we propose is probably Al



The Kawasaki 700KFX proved a good machine for a desert sojourn early in the morning, especially for the deep bowls found in between the dunes. Paolo Rossetti for The National

Ain's best-kept secret.

At the Bida Bint Saud roundabout (waypoint 2) swing around to the west, and perhaps pause to read the big sign that explains the archaeological importance of the bald hill. Find a hard dirt track that heads towards a line of electricity poles, flanked by a continuation of the hard track (waypoints 3 and 4).

You should follow this line of electricity poles, staying on the dirt track, with green fencing of the conservation area to your left and the Bida Bint Saud hill to your right.

At one point you will squeeze past right next to the green fence (waypoint 5) but keep going until, at waypoint 6, the green fence takes an abrupt 90-degree turn left. That is a good place to off-load the quads and leave the car and trailer.

As you look west, running parallel to the conservation area fence, you will see a large and high range of red sand dunes – these are the ones we will ride, staying up on the peaks. If the idea of riding high does not appeal to you, then there is a well-established sand track down in the valley, coasting the fence. This is also a useful and easy way out and back to the car should there be any trouble.

You are about 10km from the town of Al Ain, yet you are in a remote stretch of desert and so you should

take appropriate precautions by carrying communication equipment, GPS and leaving your intended route and expected return time with someone trustworthy.

Any sand track heading north-south has a good chance of seeing some traffic, while not the east-west ones, so if a ride out is needed, hedge your bets on the tracks heading towards Al Ain.

From the corner of the conservation area, our destination is a high grouping of dunes, known as Gazelle Dune by many Al Ain expats because of the consistency of gazelle sightings in the area (hence the conservation area, by the way). On our trip we crossed numerous fresh gazelle tracks.

If you do get out there for sunrise, then once up the range, you are in for a treat. As the darkness retreats, the views slowly expand, until you realise you are riding the highest dune range for miles around (waypoint 7).

The morning air is fresh and invigorating, and if you're lucky the lower valleys will be filled with fog. If you don't find yourself grinning from ear to ear as you carve up the dunes, there is no hope for you, and you should give up riding quads.

Set your heading due west, staying up on the dune range, and you will soon see your turning point in

the distance: Gazelle Dune. It is the highest dune ahead of you, and nowadays it is blocked off by a double fence, courtesy of a new water pipeline (waypoint 8).

If you wish to cross the pipeline fence, there is a passageway a little to the south, but I haven't included it as the detour can be complicated.

I suggest you skirt the pipeline fence to the north (waypoint 9) without crossing it, and take a wide and lazy U-turn to return back towards your car on the northern side on the same dune range you surfed on the way in (waypoint 10). By now the sun will have fully risen, and the northern slopes now give the best views (waypoint 11).

You will come across giant bowls in between the dunes, and if a car is with you, then these bowls might cause some difficulties if caught out in the soft bottom. No such worry on the Kawasaki 700, by the way, which can counter-steer along steep slip-faces with good control and plenty of torque.

Heading east will return you to the track, a little north of where you parked your car and trailer – if you did not enjoy your dawn ride, then skip it next year; but do give it a shot if you haven't yet experienced the fresh exhilaration of a dawn in the desert on quads.



Aston enters as the Indian luxury car market ‘comes of age’

Neil Vorano

Among the barometers of a country's rise in wealth is its proliferation of high-end luxury cars. India's ascension in the past five years has seen only a few luxury car makers enter the scene, but that is changing quickly; Rolls-Royce and BMW are already there and now Aston Martin has officially entered the country.

The first Aston dealership has opened in Mumbai, with another about to open in New Delhi. Lalit

Chaudary, the official importer in Mumbai, feels the time is now right for the UK sports car company to finally enter the market.

"The luxury car market is slowly coming of age," says Chaudary. "And you see the emergence of customers looking into the more exotic space. Thusly it's been only a couple of high-end brands in the last seven, eight years here, and people are jaded as a result; there's nothing new. So with the onset of new brands and with ourselves coming in, there is a renewed enthusiasm for the segment."

Part of the problem for manufacturers has been the country's exorbitant taxes; the government imposes a 110 per cent duty on high-end cars imported into the country, and local registration costs could add another 15 per cent to 20 per cent on top of that. Chaudary, who also owns a BMW dealership and a luxury yacht franchise, says his range will start at US\$300,000 (Dh1.1 million) for the V8 Vantage and go all the way up to \$650,000 (Dh2.4m) for the top-end DBS with all the taxes included. Still, he believes he can sell 30 cars this year

despite the high prices. "The clients want something to differentiate themselves from their peers."

Aston Martin has not entered the market lightly; the company has been doing its research for the past two years. Mark Kenworth, the general manager for Aston Martin for the Middle East and North Africa, says the signs pointed to making a move now.

"We're a UK-based manufacturer, and you have a lot of high-net-worth people in India who have second homes in the UK, and as a consequence of that they are familiar with

Aston Martin.

"We've also seen the grey market of Aston has dictated that there is demand for our products, and we have a responsibility to supply service and warranty within the region. So the combination, the fact that sales are there and we want to be there, it made a sensible business case for the dealers."

Ferrari will be officially entering India in the next month, and other manufacturers are looking at the market seriously, but Kenworth says that was not a factor for his company's decision.

"We didn't feel pressured to get in now. It's got to be commercially right; there's no point in putting Aston Martin in there just for vanity. It makes sense, and as a consequence of that we spent the best part of 18 months sifting through people who want to represent the brand there, and we feel we have the right partners."

"There's a lot of interest in Aston Martin there already. The high-end luxury segment is growing, and when new players come in, it widens the net and creates more awareness."