

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 with run-off water from the Omani mountains.



The Land Rover Defender is one of my favourite vehicles. And I don't care if it's slow, square, old-fashioned and only comes with a diesel engine. I even like the brick-like aerodynamic properties. And it's okay if I hold up traffic off a green light, or keep to the 120kph speed limit - I'm in a DEFENDER, one of the finest off-road vehicles ever made!

Go drive a plasticky jelly-mold instead, see if I care.

(translation from Land Rover lingo: jelly-mold = Japanese mass-produced vehicle)

Kidding aside, it's true. The Defender is a unique breed of vehicle, second to none. But it is what it is - a pure, no-nonsense off-roading truck, capable of crossing desert and jungles, fully-loaded, and in terrain conditions

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that would leave 99% of other vehicles stranded within the first 15 minutes.

Here, if you haven't already seen this, gain an appreciation of what Land Rover vehicles are (were?) capable of:

Warning: it's an hour and a half of compulsory viewing for off-road enthusiasts, so get yourself comfortable, and keep the volume down if you're at work...



Personally, nothing beats a Defender for its versatility. I only wish the new owners, Tata, would remove all the electronics and go back to basics, bump the reliability up to invincible, and set the cost at a third of what the showrooms ask for today.



Deflating tyres is a good idea even if you feel the engine is powerful enough or the sand compact enough - the extra surface of rubber on the ground, called the footprint, will dramatically improve the flotation and the traction, which in turn means you can relax the engine and chug leisurely through the soft stuff instead of screaming along at high rpm all the time.

For how much to deflate, as a general rule of thumb, between 15-20 psi is what I aim for, closer to the lower range if I'm expecting challenging dunes.

As you can see in the photo, a few psi make a big difference in the footprint, especially when you reach the lower pressures. Interestingly enough, and something many off-roaders don't realize, a tall and narrow tyre provides a much better footprint when deflated than a wide and low tyre. Also, it offers less rolling resistance.

Land Rover knows this very well, and the Defender comes with excellent tyres.



The track out from Al Khatim is a gentle drive, and the Defender lapped it up with ease - but just off the track are fresh dunes, so either keep faithfully to the track or be prepared for open desert.

The GPS track provided will take you safely all the way to Al Ain. Additionally, it shows you exits north, in case you get creative and start to explore and make detours of your own.

Download the KML file for your GPS by clicking [here](#). Once downloaded, you can import the file into your GPS device and take it on the road, or double-click that file and it will open automatically in Google Earth if you

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have that installed (all adventurers should! [Google Earth](#)).

View [GPS device](#) in a larger map







This is camel country, and their tracks are everywhere. If you are there just before dawn, chances of spotting gazelle are high as well.



The Land Rover Defender just fits in with this terrain - it is in its element.

Many UAE drivers criticize the choice of a diesel engine, in that they are used to the high-revving petrol engines to scream through sand. The Defender requires a different approach, and one of a more mature and professional nature. When crossing deserts one does not gun it and hope for the best. Instead, caution is the

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fuel of off-roading wisdom, not flooring it and bouncing around wildly.

With this approach in mind, the Defender will cross all obstacles you may put in its path, including the soft sand dunes we find in the UAE.





The Al Khatim track at a leisurely pace is a brilliant way to enjoy a gentle romp through the desert. Easy does it, no need to race.



And with a diesel, get used to a frozen fuel gauge - even after 83.6 km the tank is still full!



View a pdf file of [the original article](#), as published in March 2011, or read the archived newspaper article on The National website [here](#).

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