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off the beaten path
Paolo Rossetti

Adventure land

Riding the 'mechanical dragon' through the mountains of Oman provided a feeling of freedom

It has two wheels, and they spin. And you'll die.

Such is the two-liner I received from my daughter as I talked about the upcoming trip. Fully correct, I suppose, including the last chilling premonition, one day as far away as possible, hopefully; but what struck me was the stark contrast with the comment of a biker friend at the news I would be test-riding the KTM 990 Adventure along the back roads to Hatta: "Awesome freedom road."

It is true; it is a feeling one must experience: flying on a mechanical dragon. Wind in the ears, side-scenery a blur, mountains towering over the thin strip of windy tarmac, g-forces leaning you over, right hand controlling the dragon's pace - riding the big KTM enduro that weekend was both exhilarating and unforgettable. Bikers, I understand you. Drivers, I sympathise with your confinement.

Let's see how the trip pans out. Starting from the Al Ain-Buraimi border, up on well-maintained tarmac through the mountains to the tiny village of Al Ruwayf (for a refreshing splash in the wadi if you're lucky enough to be riding an enduro and not a bike restricted only to pavement), and then farther north on twisty smooth tarmac to join the motorway to Hatta, ending up sipping tea overlooking the imposing lake created by the Hatta Dam - incredible scenery, especially in this arid region.

At waypoint 1, the border post going from Al Ain into Buraimi in Oman, show your passport with valid GCC visa without even descending from the bike, and turn left at the second roundabout, through the urban centre of Buraimi. Keep straight heading out on the road to Sohar, until waypoint 2, a roundabout signposted Mahdah, where you should turn left.

As the outskirts drop by and the road speeds up, the imposing height of the KTM 990, which was so useful in city traffic, seems to melt away, and the electronically-fuel-injected twin-cylinder engine is plenty to cruise comfortably at highway speeds. Cross-winds remain an issue, though, but I assure you the moment a dirt track breaks out from the river of tarmac, you'll be very glad indeed that you are riding the enduro bike that has been built for cross-continental crossings such as Cairo-Cape Town.

In fact, the KTM 990 Adventure excels on wide-open dirt tracks - the adaptable suspension absorbs even the worst potholes, and the optimal sequential fuel injection has two throttles per cylinder giving astounding response when needed, and the ABS can be deactivated to match the sporty nature of the off-road chassis design - if you don't slide, hang up your boots.

Just before the town of Mahdah, at waypoint 3, notice a sign for Dubai breaking out to the left, and you'll be heading due north into the sharp mountains.



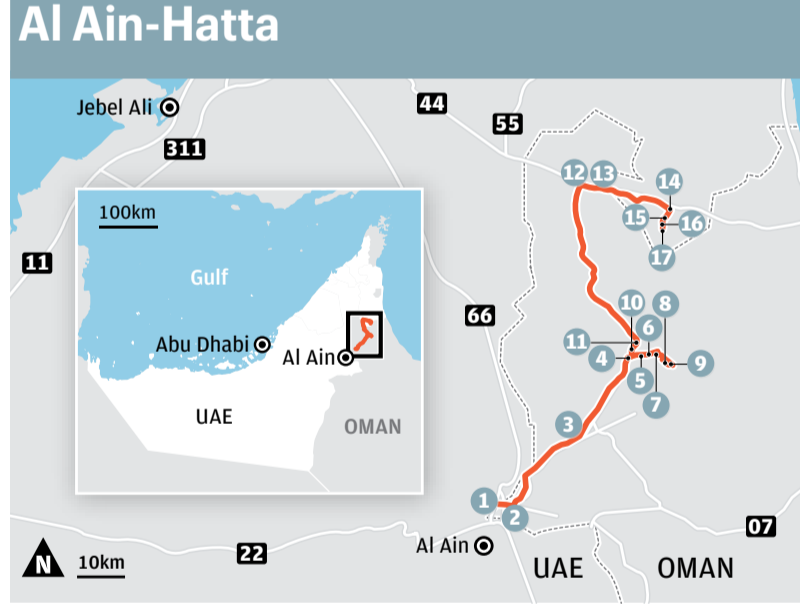
Riding the KTM 990 Adventure was "exhilarating and unforgettable" experience on a trip from Al Ain to Hatta through Oman. Paolo Rossetti for The National

The tarmac will soon rollercoaster over and under as it runs parallel to wadi canyons, descending into a crossing and then climbing up over a ridge - during and after rains the rounded stones you see on the wadi bed will be covered with frothing floodwaters, and fatalities from incautious onlookers are recorded regularly, so keep an eye on the weather but proceed with confidence as it is a well-travelled route.

A road will soon branch out to the right, clearly signposted to Al Juwayf, at waypoint 4, and a detour into this tiny village is well worth it as you will find a picturesque Omani village, hospitable and welcoming to respectful visitors, which leads into myriad off-road tracks that network out into the surrounding area.

We'll visit a well-known freshwater wadi, where shade and a man-made reservoir the size of a small swimming pool is usually overflowing with cool running water: once entered the village of Al Juwayf, at waypoint 5, take a U-turn to your right, off the tarmac - sorry, street bikes - and follow back along the wide dirt track, heading to waypoint 6, where you will join a larger dirt track heading due south.

Stay on the track as it swoops around to the left/east, cresting a tarmac section, and soon enough



Source: Google

Bikers, I understand you. Drivers, I sympathise with your confinement

you will reach an intersection with another established dirt track, waypoint 7, where you should turn right/south. The track will soon drop dramatically into a wadi, where you can turn left/east to reach waypoint 8, the water pool.

From there, I ran amok on the KTM 990, and true to its name, Adventure was my game. I explored every trail, like a spider inspecting its web: zoom to the end, check out the view, zoom back.



By the way, if you're wondering about the effects of the oppressive heat of summer on the bike... what heat? It was hot? As long as I was moving, I hardly thought about it, and I was wearing the required full-face helmet, and the recommended chest protector and gloves, articles of safety I would not compromise on. As a long-term resident in the UAE I have mourned the passing of several biker friends, and I was initially very conscious of being so

exposed on a two-wheeler I didn't regularly ride; however, over the course of the trip I realised the inherent danger lies not so much with the vehicle, but with the person controlling the machine. And the high visibility and imposing presence of the KTM 990 Adventure is a reassurance: I felt that other motorists both noticed and respected my presence on the roads we shared, and that perhaps was the best feature of the bike.

Once refreshed by the marvellous natural stream, return back up the same track, but keep going straight instead of turning off the way you came in - head towards waypoint 9, which will take you through the village residences to the main street (paved) where turning left/west will return you to the point you originally arrived into the village, and where you will come across a grocery store should you require rehydration (waypoint 10).

Continuing west along the tarmac road, Al Juwayf behind you, at the first intersection turn right/north, at waypoint 11, where you will also come across a Shell petrol station where you can top up your tank. From there, enjoy the road north, through another border post, where again your passport and vehicle insurance will be checked, until you reach the roundabout at waypoint 12 and turn right - this is the highway that runs from the Dubai-Al Ain highway, through Madam Roundabout, to Hatta.

You may want to stop at the shops on the right at waypoint 13 if you are interested in all sorts of terracotta creations, but otherwise continue until waypoint 14 where you turn right and follow the road towards the Hatta Dam. At the T-junction in front of the main mosque at waypoint 15 buy some tea if you like because soon you will arrive at a most amazing sight at waypoint 16: the catchment lake of the Hatta Dam is a brilliant destination to a day's ride and it is served by a well-engineered road right up to the top edge, and my favorite tea-sipping spot in the entire UAE.

If you still have time and the weather has cooled off, a stroll through the Hill Park at waypoint 17 is a pleasure before embarking on the trip back. If you want to head directly to Dubai, simply stay straight once on the main highway and you will be delivered onto the Dubai-Al Ain highway.

All in all, riding the KTM 990 Adventure from Al Ain up to Hatta on the back roads was an unforgettable trip of intense, almost emotional exhilaration - and what's even better; I made it back home for dinner unscathed, heart still thumping and the words of my buddy whirling through my mind: awesome freedom road!

Next month we will take one of the region's most rewarding drives - 1,200 kilometers of flat desolation that leads to the green paradise of Salalah during the monsoon season.

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how to ride a motorbike

Confidence, visibility and simple physics

If you want to hear a few entertaining horror stories, ask a seasoned biker if s/he has ever come off...

I know I have, on numerous occasions.

Ask a group of bikers the same question, and you'll wonder why any sensible person would ever throw a leg over a saddle.

The truth of the matter is riding a motorbike is just plain fun (as well as a number of other positive attributes) and so the obvious drawback of exposure to injury is dwarfed and millions of people worldwide make motorcycles their preferred mode of transportation.

In the UAE, bike riders are few and far between, although their numbers have been rising steadily; and since the rate of accidents involving cars and trucks on UAE roads is so dramatically high, one would suppose riding a motorbike is a leading method of suicide.

However, bike riders do have several mechanical attributes on their side, as well as riding techniques that can help keep them safe while riding their motorbikes.

Firstly, a look at physics. A motorbike is far more agile than a car - it accelerates out of trouble faster, it can swerve rapidly to change direction, and it can stop on the pro-

verbial dime. A biker should trust and exploit the bike's mechanical prowess not to speed and weave through traffic, but when needed to avoid danger.

Secondly, consider the psychological aspect. A confident rider will demand presence on the road - a two-wheeled vehicle is entitled to a full lane just like its four-wheeled cousins, and as such it should occupy the centre of the lane and not mouse along on the side, allowing other vehicles to squeeze dangerously past. Demanding respect from other motorists results in respect being granted.

Thirdly, visibility is key. Assum-

ing that car drivers do not intentionally hunt down motorbikes, it is clear that the number one reason a car might crash into a bike is when the driver did not see the rider. Therefore it is vital for bike riders to make themselves as visible as possible: keep your headlight on, sit up nice and straight, make eye contact, wear a colourful kit (why all the black leather?), and use that horn when needed - being seen is consistently touted as the number one way to reduce motorbike accidents on roads, with a 2003 New Zealand study concluding that "wearing reflective or fluorescent clothing reduced the risk

of a crash injury by 37 per cent, a white helmet by 24 per cent, and riding with headlights on by 27 per cent."

Fourthly, wear protection. A full-face helmet is a must - and, no, you won't boil to death in it: purchase one designed for hot weather and a cooling breeze will pass through it when you're riding - and a bike suit, or at least jacket, boots and gloves can greatly reduce injuries. Look for plastic inserts in elbows, knees and along the spine, and again select designs for the hot UAE weather and not cold/wet environments.

Lastly, training is vital. How many

car drivers are formally taught to be aware of motorcyclists? Do the theoretical and practical driving tests include defensive driving specifically aimed at deterring accidents with two-wheeled vehicles? Do bike riders themselves undergo training directed at sharing the road with other traffic, or is mastery of the mechanicals enough to release an eager young rider onto the highway?

Overall riding safety starts with the rider - and a cautious approach can make a very big difference to both riders and drivers.