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off the beaten path
Paolo Rossetti

Woodland drive

Awafi, near Ras al Khaimah, offers steep dunes, lush forests, wildlife and perfect picnic spots

Ras al Khaimah, translated as "the head of the tent", is well-known for its wild mountains and the many driveable tracks that criss-cross them, often tapering off into spectacular and challenging hiking trails. However, for this edition of Off the Beaten Path, we'll take a different and surprising look at the territory of Ras al Khaimah – the forest side.

The itinerary proposed is a gentle meander on well-worn sand tracks, although more adventurous drivers simply need to make their own track a few hundred metres to the right. In the 2011 Honda Pilot, we enjoyed a very smooth motorway run and were happy to feel this jack-of-all-trades also keep up the performance off-road. It is perhaps an underestimated SUV in a very tight competitive market segment, but it shines in many regards.

We start the drive from the famed Awafi dune, a dramatic and sheer slipface host to the annual dune-climbing festival, and centre of attraction for dune drivers in the entire region. The seating stands are off-limits except during events, but the slipface itself is open to the public, and most visitors in a 4x4 cannot resist trying their mettle and seeing how far they can climb up.

Do not be disappointed if your pride and joy chugs up but a few metres. Awafi is unique in the sharpness of its gradient, and only highly-modified cars stand a chance. Quads and motorbikes are a different species, with much higher power-to-weight ratios, and so they fare much better in the quest to conquer Awafi.

From Awafi we then head south, skirting Ras al Khaimah airport on a delightful route first through forested areas dotted with camel farms, and later through agricultural lands. Particularly in early spring, after some good rains, this route is so different from any other in the UAE that you'll think you've been transported to greener lands – hundreds of trees will offer welcome shade and flowering grasses might carpet the ground. But like the weather man, I make no guarantees: try and time your visit for a week or so after a major rainfall in that area.

So, let us begin from waypoint 1 on our interactive map and its downloadable GPS track, from Airport Road in Ras al Khaimah, where the entrance to Awafi is marked with a bright red street sign, just after a handy Emarat petrol station.

The tarmac road snakes through a residential area, so following it and waypoints 2 to 5 will bring you to the foot of Awafi at waypoint 6. Directly in front of the spectator stands lies the beast, and waypoint 7 is the precise starting point for the racers. While Awafi is not the tallest of dunes, it is certainly one of the steepest. The slipface is short and stark – a straight run-up to the sky.

If you choose to drive on such steep inclines, please make sure your vehicle remains pointing straight up or down, never sideways. This is be-

cause a car will not usually be able to topple over forwards or backwards even at very sharp angles, but sideways an angle of around 35 degrees is sufficient to send it roly-polly down the hill.

Once you have satisfied your curiosity at Awafi, circle around it anti-clockwise towards waypoint 8, which will bring you to an area of quad rentals at waypoint 9, should you and your children like to ride. We have read quite extensively on the dangers of quad rentals, but I maintain that the danger lies more with the renters than the quads themselves – so take a few minutes to instruct your children and teach them at least the very basic safety points of staying on the given track, riding all in the same direction, and limiting speed to a rate where you can comfortably stop should you have to.

Besides quad rentals, the area south of Awafi has blossomed into a family attraction of sorts, and horse riding, animal petting zoos and all other kinds of entrepreneurial kiosks have sprung up as a response to the steady flow of visitors.

We plan to navigate on any given track in a southerly direction – destination, the Ras al Khaimah camel racetrack. But for your convenience, the marked waypoints can guide you. Do not worry if you stray from the track as long as you are heading south. At waypoint 11, skirt left around the large villa before you, and waypoint 12 and 13 runs you along one of the main tracks.

At waypoint 14 you will have reached the camel race track, around which you can navigate to the right, following waypoint 15, to bring you still in a southerly direction, coasting a large continuous slipface on your right. Many tracks lead up if you wish to leave the track and find your own way across the desert. Waypoint 16 signals one such climb, where you'll see a lookout tower and will have to seek permission to pass through the farm to the desert beyond. Further south, marked waypoint 17 is a lovely picnic spot and another opportunity to drive up the slipface to the open dunes above.

We normally take our time at spots that appeal to us, and we carry enough gear to make a stay of a couple of hours very comfortable. Folding tables and camping chairs keep us off the ground, which in these forested areas can be covered in sharp twigs and all sorts of ravenous insects. Along similar lines, the children have strict instructions not to pick up anything with their bare hands – if they really must pick something up, first roll it over a few times with a stick and only then touch it with the hands. Shoes on at all times is another smart rule.

As a matter of interest, you might notice that all trees are cropped flat both at the lower and higher branches – this is because foraging camels will trim the lower branches up to the point they can reach with their necks fully extended; and the



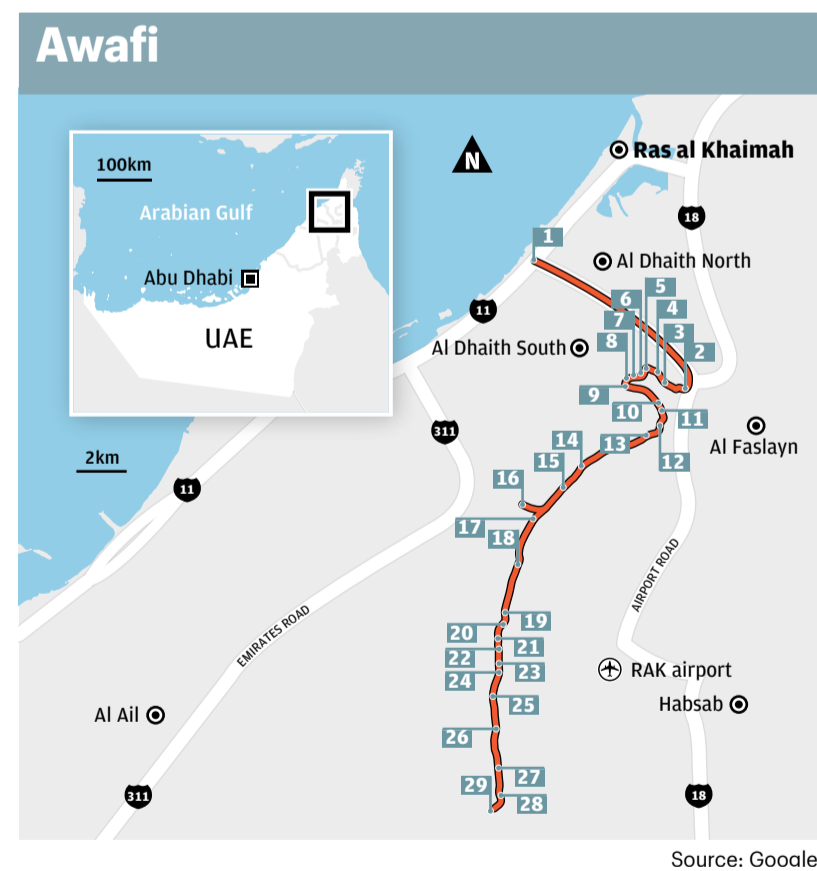
Paolo Rossetti was behind the wheel of a Honda Pilot on his off-road drive around Awafi. Paolo Rossetti for The National



tops are cut off by the camel farmers, either climbing up long ladders or scrambling up best they can, to then drop the cut-offs down to the ground below for the camels to feast on.

As you work your way south, either along the given path or making your own way, your interim destination is waypoint 18, where you will have to

leave the camel racetrack and head deep into a forested area, which will eventually give way to agricultural land of green cultivated fields, following waypoints 19 to 27, which will deliver you onto a tarmac road, where right will connect you to Emirates Road, and left will take you towards Ras al Khaimah airport.



Source: Google

how to picnic like royalty

Making food fit for a king using prehistoric methods

Eating outdoors at a scenic spot is one of the most enjoyable activities in the United Arab Emirates for my family. We camp a lot, and we explore in our 4x4 twice as much, and so we constantly plan food for our trips.

We generally deploy one of three plans, or a combination, depending on the type of trip and how we're feeling: cook on location; precook at home and heat on location; and forget it: no cooking, no heating.

The last option is useful for busy trips, when time is tight; and it is also less costly. We simply stop by our favourite Biryani restaurant, or

Mendi (a Yemeni traditional way of slow-roasting mutton in a pit, and served with platters of rice and a spicy tomato-based sauce and yoghurt) and for Dh25 a pair, we're set.

Since we don't normally cook this kind of food at home, nor do we eat out often, it is a real treat for us. Occasionally, we substitute sandwiches, but the children complain bitterly and clamour for their platter of "Arabic food", as they call it. Other types of restaurant food easily available in the UAE we found didn't keep as well – like the grilled kebabs, or Indian dishes, or anything with flat bread. But the Biryani and Mendi rice stays

delicious and filling even after a day bouncing around in the car.

Normally, this choice goes with daytrips where we don't plan to set up camp in one place, so we bring a large mat and eat straight out of the takeaway containers, with disposable spoons and forks, so there's nothing to do at the end of the meal but put everything back in the plastic bag it came in, and that goes into a black rubbish bag and is thrown into the back of the car to be disposed of when we get home.

The second option is to precook some or all the food at home, and then either throw it on the coals from

a campfire or reheat it on a portable gas stove. This technique works well with foods that are hard to cook on the grill, like potatoes, or spaghetti. It also does not require a barbecue grill, and its accompanying coal. We rarely camp overnight without bringing wood for a fire – what are we going to do? Sit in the dark? – and so heating pre-cooked food using the campfire coals is our main method.

Simply dig a shallow hole a little bigger than the food, carefully scoop in some campfire coals, and there you have a ready-made camping oven. Plonk in the food items wrapped in aluminium foil, or in the pot that was

used at home, and it will soon be hot and ready. Cover the hole with a foil lid if you need to trap the heat.

Pasta we precook until two minutes shy of al dente and then drain and rinse cold. When we reheat it at the campsite, we drop it in hot water for a few minutes. The sauce is also cooked from home and sautéed over the portable stove in a frying pan to make an excellent dish in less than 10 minutes – just add some parmesan reggiano grated cheese.

For our longer stays and trips that focus more on the time at destination rather than the adventure of getting there, we grill on coals. This

is the real thing, and both other options are almost cheating.

Marinate the meats from home, keep them in the coolbox, let the coals calm down until there's a fine layer of ash on them, and let's cook like prehistoric man.

For us and many of our friends, grilling epitomises cooking while camping; and very often our memories of a certain trip will connect to "that tenderloin that melted in your mouth" or the "time you dropped the chicken in the sand" In the next instalment, we focus on grilling perfection.

★ Paolo Rossetti