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off the beaten path
Paolo Rossetti

Search sands of time

A desert treasure hunt brings history, geography and adventure together to make for a captivating family day out

There are few things more exciting than finding something valuable on a desert trip – this could be an emotional memory, such as a rare glimpse of a gazelle giving birth, or something of material value, such as a chest of gold coins hurriedly buried by a Bedouin trader a century ago.

And not only is the find itself incredibly satisfying, the hunt and search, and even just the remote possibility of finding something, has often transformed an average trip into an adventure.

In fact, nothing will stir children to action more than a well-told story of ancient thieves and caravans burying treasure, and the possibility of it lying right under their feet. Bring a metal detector with you on the trip, but you had better have replacement batteries because, if I know my children well enough, they will comb the entire campsite, in professional grid pattern, leaving no square foot of sand undisturbed, until either they find that treasure or they are called away because it has got dark.

On this trip, we will visit one of the abandoned stopover wells on the old caravan route that connected Dubai to Al Ain – it is a well-known and well-researched area, but every trip we manage to find a coin, a bullet casing, a bronze arrowhead, a bead from a necklace or bracelet, a seashell or ornament that the Bedu women would adorn their clothing with.

Based on the fact that it used to take three days to cover the 130km from desert oasis to coast, it can be deduced that this permanent water well would be the first night on the journey seaward, or the second night on the journey inland.

I recently explored the area in a modern-day camel of the desert: the new Jeep Wrangler. It has a new, all-aluminium, 3.6L Pentastar V6, with 83 more horsepower than the previous model. This means the driver will have extra available power on tap when required and the result is that the Wrangler can now slow down and relax over dunes,

without worries of getting stuck – just blip the right foot and power out of tough spots with ease, rather than revving around at sustained speed in order to keep momentum on your side should a soft patch of sand appear.

Our destination – the abandoned well – is well within reach of Dubai and Sharjah-based off-roaders, as we will start from exit 50 of the Al Ain–Dubai motorway (waypoint 1), which is between the towns of Al Faqa and Al Hayer.

If you are travelling from Dubai to Al Ain, the exit will be to your right; and if you are coming in the other direction, there is an underpass that will take you onto the western side of the road.

The exit quickly turns into an area populated by cultivated farms, the largest of which will be directly in front of the exit and which you will navigate around to the right/north.

Waypoints 2 and 3 will guide you westward, as you snake through numerous small farms. You will be heading towards a large camel race track, so be careful of the many trains of exercising camels in the area.

The track you are on, and the minefield of roaming camels, will continue past waypoint 4, always westward, until you reach the camel race track. In fact, the road will enter directly into the inner circle of the race track, where during the races the camel owners can follow the race by driving their vehicles alongside the racing beasts and control the jockey robots with radio in hand.

I accidentally drove into the race track road (no gate) and ended up driving the entire round. It was actually a pleasant experience getting that perspective of the race, and so I left it on the GPS track which you can download at *The National* website; should you wish to avoid entering the race track, then be sure to stay right at waypoint 5, and to navigate to the outside of the race track and run parallel to it.

At the end of the race track, where it curves left, stay straight in order to pass through the open gate of a green mesh fence, at waypoint 6, and then turn left/south immediately and follow the fence, on a sand track.

To your right will be the old staging area near the well, covering roughly a square mile. I suggest you first establish the boundaries of the search area, by driving the perimeter – continue southward alongside the fence to waypoint 7, turn in west towards a white house with a green roof at waypoint 8. There, turn right again, heading north, and follow the electricity poles until you reach a well-established dirt track, at waypoint 9.

At the heart of your destination are two very old circles of concrete, which used to cover the rim of the wells, at waypoint 10, just south of the dirt track. They are roughly one metre in circumference and 30cm in height, and laying on the hard flat sebkha, in between low dunes.

The wells were carefully guarded and traded with friendly travellers,

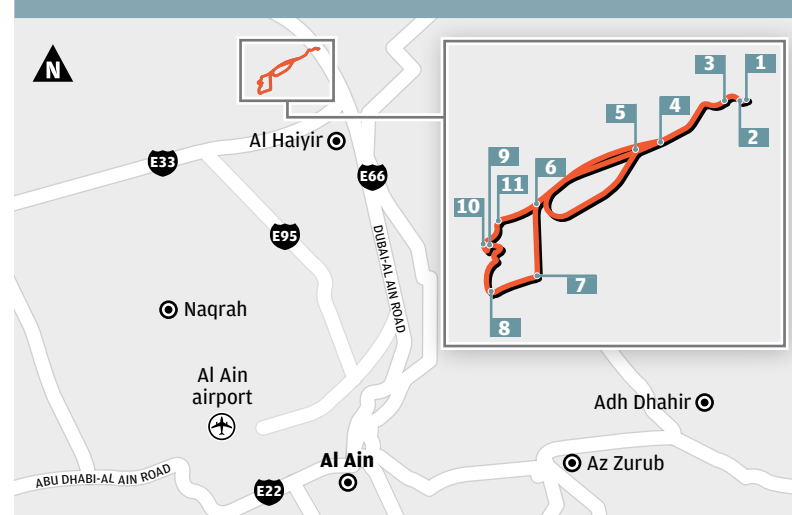


The extra horsepower in the new Wrangler means it can slow down over dunes, instead of relying on speedy momentum. Photos by Paolo Rossetti for The National



You may get lucky and spot some camels in training at the race track you pass.

Treasure trail



Source: Google

Nothing will stir children to action more than a well-told story of ancient thieves and caravans burying treasure

so one can imagine the sort of coming and going that went on over the years.

All around the wells would have been campsites at a reasonable distance from each other, scattered all over the area, for the various caravans to settle for the night, rest and feed and water the camels, put a pot

on the fire for some supper and get a good night's rest in their tents.

Based on the finds of different sorts of artefacts, I am told the women would tend to gather directly to the north of where the wells were. In modern terms, this means crossing the dirt track, while the sort of artefacts the men left behind

(bullet casings, et cetera) are more often found towards the east.

During this Off The Beaten Path visit, we found a handful of artefacts, including a very green bronze arrowhead, two halves of the same ornamental bead, an old coin, various pieces of pottery and a few bullet casings.

While not quite the famed buried jewellery chest of the rich merchant's wife, the families on the trip thoroughly enjoyed the day out in the desert, and searching and actually finding a few bits of history made what would have been a normal trip into an exciting adventure for all.

how to seek out trinkets

Many artefacts lurk in the desert; finding them is the hard part

Finders keepers might very well become looters weepers if unaware of UAE laws on finding artefacts of archaeological and cultural significance.

The UAE, as most other countries, is very keen to document and protect its heritage, and since the first archaeological survey in the 1950s, numerous sites have unveiled remnants of inhabitation as far back as 7,000 years ago. Understandably, private attempts to uncover evidence of historical significance are very much discouraged, and scores of protected areas have

been determined. It doesn't help that the rapid pace of development has for the most part meant that modern settlements have been built on the same sites as earlier settlements, and that the protected areas have really only been established in the past few years.

Very often these protected areas are poorly signposted and not fenced, so there is a possibility of confusion on the amateur explorer's part, who might assume that since the find was in an open area, it now belongs to the finder.

So it's important to note that any artefact found in any land or water

area of the United Arab Emirates officially belongs to the nation, and it is not allowed to leave the country.

Naturally, this only applies to the hard-core Indiana Joneses among us, as most families out to look for trinkets are quite happy to turn over their finds to the authorities by simply driving up to the nearest museum and handing over their discoveries.

I am more interested in the fun of the finding than the actual find, even though my glass coffee table at home now is full of bullet casings and all sorts of souvenirs from

years of desert trips (none of which are of any real historical value), and so here are a few tips on maximising your chances of a find:

First, if you want to find interesting things while you drive in a promising area, you must slow down and keep your eyes scanning the ground just outside your window. The desert is a vast area, even when you can narrow it down to a square mile, and screaming along at speed will only guarantee that you'll fly past any artefact.

Secondly, the trick is to catch the glint of sun reflecting off glass or metal, and so the best hours for a

motorised search are when the sun is low in the sky, but not too close to sunset or sunrise, when it is best to search on foot due to the cooler weather.

Since the sand is constantly being blown by the wind, lost pieces are continuously being exposed; in fact, this is a major difference between a real search and an amateur just messing about – an archaeologist will excavate a site where ancient people lived or were buried, an amateur will just luck out on something that was accidentally dropped into the sand years ago.

Using a metal detector can be

very useful when on foot and concentrating on a specific area, as now you not only scan the surface but also a foot or so beneath the ground; but be warned that once the instruments come out you are now crossing over from amateur enthusiast to potential tomb raider.

Naturally, the chances of finding something are much greater if you look in areas or on trails that used to be frequently used in the past, and, for desert areas, this means where there used to be water.

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