

How an Iranian architect charted the wilds of the emirates

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Dariush Zandi, who has lived in the UAE for nearly 30 years, has recently updated his off-roading guide.



Fran Healey
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When Dariush Zandi first came to the UAE in 1980, maps of the emirates were scarce. "There were hardly any city maps, let alone maps of the wilderness," he says, "so finding routes through the desert region were hit and miss and gave you the feeling that you were really exploring unknown territory." Readers of his newly updated and reprinted guidebooks, *Off-Road in the Emirates* and *Off-Road in the Emirates II*, from Motivate Publishing in Dubai, have been able to explore the region with relative ease since the first book was published in 1991.

The guide has been updated four times because, like many other things in Dubai, places have changed through development. The last update came out earlier this year, and Zandi is already in the process of yet another update. "What were small tracks in the 1980s are now highways," says Zandi. "Some routes have been redrawn while others have been abandoned. "The biggest change from the originals was the introduction of GPS," he says. "As I'm an architect, I drew up the original maps myself from my hand-sketches and then improved on them when I eventually got hold of aerial and satellite maps. Later on, the GPS gave me a more accurate map which I downloaded and overlaid with the contours of the terrain. Before I would write 'go 100 metres this way or 500 metres that way', but now the latest edition of the guides have the GPS co-ordinates, so the routes are more precise."

The routes in the guides have been worked out as round trips, so you avoid the boredom of returning the same way, though sometimes you may reach a dead-end and have to double back for part of the route. If you have more time, Zandi suggests you couple routes together to encounter different terrain. "From Al Ain you can get to A'Subaitah, a very small and secluded oasis which you can only reach on foot for the last part of the route," he says. "Then you can go further to Kitnah where you see a lot of waterfalls and pools, and from there you can continue onto Madbah, with its high waterfall."

There was not a lot to do at weekends back in the early 1980s, so Zandi would take his Range Rover out into the desert, exploring and indulging in his passion for photography. "I didn't want to take anyone with me and get them lost," he says. "Besides, you wouldn't get that sense of exploring when there were people with you." Working as an architect in Dubai Municipality's Town Planning department, the Tehran native taught evening classes in photography at the Arts Centre in Jumeirah. People knew he went off-roading and would ask his advice on how to get to places. Then he teamed up with journalist Asha Bhatia to publish articles on off-roading in newspapers, using his maps and photographs.

"In those days, there weren't many books being published about the UAE," explains Zandi. "So when a book about off-roading was suggested, it was 'oh, great, let's do it!' and that's was the beauty about the UAE, and still is, that there's no inhibition about doing things." In 1996, Zandi designed and built one of the first art galleries in

Dubai, the Total Arts Gallery in Al Quoz. He combines his curatorial work with architectural commissions, but still travels outside of the city at weekends with his wife, Shaghayegh, who is an artist.

Zandi admits that off-roading is different nowadays. "I had a lot of fun going to unknown places, over rocky and difficult terrain, and meeting Bedouin people living in cave dwellings in the mountains or in tent dwellings in the desert, who would be surprised to see me, saying 'how did you get here?', but most places are known now, from my exploration and others like myself," he says. "The government has also developed a lot of areas, bringing in electricity and water, plus new roads, which I've included in my new guides."

The new roads hold the key to exploring new areas in the UAE, says Zandi. "There was a route that I had walked to many, many years ago, but once they made the track, I managed to see the village, the oasis that I always imagined was there, because I could see old people walking there, with a donkey or horse, and now you can drive to it." Just returned from a tour of Yemen, Zandi is keen to explore its unspoilt regions but will continue to enjoy the UAE desert on weekends and encourages those who are intrigued about the UAE to get out there.

"The routes I've mapped out are not the only ones," says Zandi. "It's up to the individual to explore other areas along the routes and have fun discovering."

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