

# TRAVEL

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## Rolling on the Arabian sands

Why trying a spot of offroading on Arabian sands is the way to go

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**By Shalaka Paradkar, Special to Explore**



If Thursday-night movies are just about all the adventure in your life, a mall's parking lot has come to epitomise the great outdoors and the drivers on Shaikh Zayed Road the only encounter with Arabian wildlife you have had so far, it's time to try a spot of offroading.

You don't have to travel out of the country for an extraordinary holiday.

Spectacular scenery, desert wildlife, historical sites and heritage architecture are all within driving distance of Dubai. Since one of four cars sold these days is an SUV, an offroad trip is fun and an easily arranged break. With the onset of winter, it's time to hit the tarmac.

An offroad trip can be combined with something else that you enjoy. Heritage buffs can spend their time around the ruins in historic Nizwa, Oman.

Photographers will find plenty of inspiration in the landscapes of the northern emirates. Families with children can camp on the beaches from Dubai to Fujairah and Musandam, set up a barbecue and relax. You could go fishing or rock-climbing near Khasab.

### Getting into the set

If you are going to use your four-wheel drive off-road, it makes sense to join a club of like-minded enthusiasts or take lessons from an offroad trainer in your area. Traction Academy offers packages on offroad driving, including a half-day course at Dh250 per car.

UAE-based offroad explorer Dariush Zandi has just completed *Offroad in the Emirates*, his fourth book on the subject in the past 23 years.

The book has detailed maps and advice on tackling 14 routes. The longest one from Dubai is a trip to the magnificent Liwa Oasis – the drive through the Rub Al Khali or Empty Quarter takes in some breathtaking desert scenery but needs a lot of preparation.

“A shorter and picturesque route I would recommend to beginners is the drive to Daftah. Drive up to Masafi and go right from the roundabout, till you reach Daftah village and its main street lined with fruit and vegetable shops.

From there, head through the houses for a track that leads up the wadi to the abandoned old village of Daftah. If you explore this area, you will find that it used to be an ancient trade route for people going from Wadi Ham to

Khorfakkan and Fujairah. The route was abandoned once roads were constructed," Zandi says.

### **Post from the past**

Places such as these are great to go hiking or ride a bicycle. Zandi likes it for the diversity of terrain and sights in this small area: wadi, oasis, old buildings and burial sites.

If you carry on down the road towards Fujairah, you will reach Bitnah village. Culture buffs will like the Bitnah Fort, which can be reached through the wadi. Bitnah is also the site of a tomb from the 1st millennium BC, uncovered by Swiss archaeologists.

Another recommended destination for newbies is Wadi Hayl. On this trip, you can visit the recently restored Hayl Palace, a relatively uncrowded destination that is a good place to camp as well.

With an SUV, one can venture further afield past Hayl Palace, going deeper into the mountains.

Hayl is also a historical site, with rock paintings dating back to the 1st millennium BC all over the wadi.

### **Tips from the experts**

But before you set off to explore the mountains and deserts, Zandi and other offroad experts offer some sage advice. "Get acquainted with your four-wheel drive by trying some easy trips with an experienced friend.

Desert driving and mountain driving require different skills, so go for a trial run before setting off for a trip."

Just like deep-sea diving and mountain climbing, desert exploration is best done under expert supervision.

Until you have the necessary experience, always go offroading in a group, with expert desert drivers.

Zandi says he prefers older cars – good and sturdy vehicles with plenty of room – when he goes offroading. "Once I was stuck in a flooded river bed and had water dripping from the car for two weeks – you don't want to put an expensive car through that! Also, I prefer a shift gear rather than an automatic one."

Even experienced people can be caught unawares by the weather. Flash floods can transform dry wadis into raging torrents within minutes, making them dangerous places for camping. Sandstorms can bury vehicles in the desert.

Danger can come from other people – many a camper has escaped being mowed to death by a car while camping in the lee of a sand dune.

While planning the trip, ensure you reach the campsite in daylight hours to familiarise yourself with the place.

Camp on high ground, preferably in the shelter of trees.

### **Winds of change**

Environmentalist and ardent camper Jane Kennedy says her favourite campsites in the UAE are those where there aren't many people and nature can be experienced in peace and quiet without the hum of air-conditioners in the background.

"My ideal camping place is somewhere natural – where I cannot see any lights on the horizon at night so that you

can watch the stars, be with friends around a campfire and feel special for the experience of owning that area for the time you are there," she says.

Kennedy has gone camping in Namibia, Botswana, Mozambique, Swaziland, South Africa and Oman.

As an environmentalist, she is upset that campers litter campsites and leave rubbish in natural areas.

### **Eye on environment**

"There is a lack of control over driving offroad. People tend to wreck the desert with their 4x4s and quad bikes, making new tracks and causing terrible visual impact on an area.

"They do not understand that even though the desert looks like it does not have much life, there is plenty! Many insects, lizards, mammals, plants and lichens exist in this fragile ecosystem and can be easily disturbed or destroyed.

Driving on a beach can also disturb marine animals such as crabs and turtles," she says, adding: "I would definitely encourage environmentally friendly camping. Leave only your footprints!"

— *Shalaka Paradkar is a UAE-based freelance writer*

### **Must do**

The essentials to carry on an offroading and camping trip are:

- GPS
- Plenty of water and food
- First-aid kit
- Bags for your trash
- Shovels and spades
- Sleeping bags
- The car must be equipped with a hydraulic jack, a spare tyre, shock absorbers, winch and suspension.
- Take out prints of more detailed checklists for vehicles off the website [www.offroaduae.com](http://www.offroaduae.com) and use them to prepare for the trip

### **Dashboard**

- Follow the beaten track, rather than cut new ones.
- Leave a copy of your itinerary with friends and family. If it's your first time out in the desert, go with an experienced friend or a tour operator. Prepare a plan to deal with emergencies.
- Get a full-service tune-up for your vehicle a week before you plan to leave — don't wait until the day before.
- Extreme heat and high speeds are tough on tyres. Check the treads and maintain proper air pressure. Spare tyre (with air), jack and tyre tools should always be maintained in working condition.

- Check the radiator for leaks. Have the radiator “pressure checked” for leaks that are not obvious on a visual inspection.
- Check oil, coolant, brake fluid, power steering and automatic transmission fluid, hydraulic clutch fluid and windshield washer fluid.
- Check the cooling system's belts and hoses for cracks or leaks. Replace doubtful ones.
- When negotiating desert roads, keep watching the temperature gauge. Turn off the air conditioning if the engine temperature gets too high.
- Be certain your headlights, tail-lights, brake lights and turning signals work, and replace bulbs as necessary.
- Carry up-to-date road maps. When you stop for directions, be courteous and polite.
- Watch out for camels!

### **Gadget power to navigate your way in the wilderness**

Kenwood UAE is adding to its range of navigation products with dual DIN models based on latest technologies.

The new units use Garmin navigation technology and carry advanced mapping data of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman. Features include voice guidance that announces street names in Arabic and English, over six million points of interest and a Sirf Star 3 GPS receiver that improves accuracy. In addition, the DDX 8032 is ready for live traffic.

The DDX 7032 and DDX5032 offer highly advanced entertainment features such as USB direct control for one-touch access to iPods or other portable music players. A dedicated cable will enable fastest control of iPod audio and video files.

The DDX 8032BT features a 6.95-inch LCD touchscreen with intuitive graphical user interface, Bluetooth and customisable icons. Other features include three preouts for system expansion and two relay control outputs for touchscreen control.

The DDX5032 features a 6.1-inch LCD touchscreen with a programmable start-up, variable-colour illumination of the front panel controls and two preouts.

The DDX 7032 and DDX5032 are satellite radio-ready, HD radio-ready and Bluetooth-ready.

### **Places to get the gear**

Ace Hardware, Dubai Festival City

- 4x4 accessories, camping gear and offroad products  
Picnico, Jumeirah Beach Road, Dubai
- For camping equipment from international brands  
Carrefour and Geant hypermarkets
- For all that you need at the campsite: tents, foldable chairs, mats, icebox, thermos, barbecue equipment, etc.



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1/5

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