

# Four-wheel frolics

Add together the two things that are in abundance in Abu Dhabi: sand dunes and a passion for all things petrol, and the result is some awesome off-road fun ...

MANY PEOPLE have tried the 'dune bashing' experience. But as time passes and you acclimatise to the Mad Max mentality on the roads, the idea of being chauffeured over sand dunes might start to feel a bit tame. It's time to take the challenge, get behind the wheel and learn the art of desert driving for oneself.

The best way to do this without adding to the chances of being killed in your own car is to visit the experts at the Off-Road Zone. These guys live and breathe everything all-terrain. Currently based in Dubai, but with an Abu Dhabi branch due to open before the summer, it is here that the adventure begins.

Their new purpose-built 4WD test track has just opened to the public.

It includes a dozen specially-designed obstacles to determine whether both you and your vehicle have the right stuff to make it off-road.

A variety of different 4WDs are available to hire for the day should you not possess one yourself. There was a small temptation to keep my beloved Jeep out of harm's way and (potentially) wreck one of the Off-Road Zone vehicles instead, but it was finally time to join the 4x4 fraternity proper. (This comes from someone who until recently thought Old Man Emu was an eccentric Australian mechanic in a garage somewhere in Mussaffah. It is in fact a brand of professional off-road shock absorbers ...)

The day begins with a theory lesson: how the vehicles work, basic driving and survival techniques



The large hill drive

in the desert, the terrain and the environment, and how to avoid getting stuck and getting unstuck. This knowledge inevitably proves to be essential.

Then comes the obstacle course.

Our instructor for this session was Ara Sahakian, self-confessed 4x4 fanatic and founder of the Off-Road Zone. He suggested it would

be wise to listen and learn as he first drove said beloved Jeep around the track, explaining along the way the technique used to overcome each challenge.

The basic principle is slow and steady. Negotiating the loose rock proved fairly simple, although a little more oomph is needed to get through the soft sand section. However, the 'large hill' looked daunting and the approach is not very wide at all. Select the low gear ratio, stick it into first and gently climb the near-45° slope, making sure the steering wheel is straight as all you can see is the



The rocks section

sky overhead. Once at the top we pause – it's important to get into the habit of checking that no unsuspecting Bedouin encampment is about to get ploughed under on the descent – and then we let the low gear simply ease the vehicle down.

My attempt on the track actually passed with little incident and the 'large hill' actually proved to be easier than expected. It wasn't until the 'axle articulation' exercise – a series of alternate left and right humps that has the vehicle balancing on only two opposite wheels – that my fearless instructor had to once or twice hastily correct my steering.

For the second half of the day we drive out of town to the magnificent, rolling dunes of an area called the Big Red, about 45km from Dubai. Our guide for this section was Alaa, a seasoned veteran of the UAE's sands. As we deflated the tyres to the appropriate pressure, he explained the difference between dunes that are 'coming' and 'going' – just like a wave approaching or travelling away from you – and how each one should be attempted.

Dunes that are 'coming' are almost surfed. The idea is that you basically race as high and as fast as you can in an arc up the curve of the dune. As soon as you feel you're losing power on the climb you have to really quickly turn back down into the descent. The thing is, if you don't do it quick enough you roll over.

Gradually, the afternoon wore on and we passed by a number of organised tours in their dune-bashing convoys. Despite occasionally feeling the pressure of an audience, it felt good knowing that I was actually attempting it first hand – although a big 'L' plate might have been useful.

All too quickly it was time to begin making our way home, but this presented a different challenge. The return journey was made over the 'crest' of the dunes and Alaa was clearly enjoying himself as he charged ahead in his Land Cruiser. There were a few instances where insufficient power or a slightly misjudged angle meant the Jeep began to slide sideways back down the descent of a dune. The first time this happened I could

actually feel it beginning to tip over. Thankfully, sheer terror gave way to what I'd learnt that day and by hurriedly turning back into the descent, disaster was averted. ■

Scott Snowden

**The Abu Dhabi-based branch is scheduled to open in a few weeks. Check out [www.offroad-zone.com](http://www.offroad-zone.com) for more details and prices.**

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