



For those in the know, dune-bashing is the term used for 4x4 driving out in the desert. It may seem simple enough, but it's actually a rather skilled sport – and one that requires teamwork and plenty of practice. Abu Dhabi Week fastens its seatbelts for a one-of-a-kind driving experience

The object of dune driving is to master the many imposing slopes and sand mountains that form the mass of open space outside the built-up areas of the UAE. The idea may seem nothing more than a tourist must-do; but for the Abu Dhabi 4x4 group, spinning the wheels on sand is not just a bumpy ride through the desert – it's an active and expanding community hobby. Abu Dhabi 4x4 was launched in May 2006 by Jeep enthusiasts Islam El Mantawi and Mohammed Hunaidi. Today it has 1,300 members and is growing fast, becoming the largest off-road club in the region.

It's growing not only in terms of members, but in recognition too. The website at www.ad4x4.com, which includes interactive forums, news and events, takes a massive 35,000 hits a month – making it one of the most visited sites in the UAE. As well as regular weekend jaunts, the group is involved each year with the Abu Dhabi Adventure Challenge and is supported by the Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority, making it especially well established within the capital.

"We're like one big family," smiles Islam. "Some people may think we're boring, with our safety rules and teaching, but we like to look out for one another and make sure everyone feels safe and welcomed while enjoying a unique and fantastic sport."

Keen to find out more about the outdoor adventurers, Abu Dhabi Week went along for the ride as the Abu Dhabi 4x4 group hit the road – an entourage of brightly-coloured and lovingly-modified vehicles.

"Everyone absolutely loves their cars," says Islam. "Some members really go to town on their vehicles." He points to a rather bold green Wrangler just in front. "See the stickers on that one? They're like badges of honour they show all the different brands used to modify car parts. We're well recognised in Abu Dhabi!"

As well as modified cars, there are plenty of personalised routes for the Abu Dhabi 4x4 group to explore. “We have 10 or so popular routes that we have explored around the UAE and Oman,” says Islam. “Today is what we call a ‘newbie trip’ so we’ll be going over some of the gentler dunes” – those out in Liwa are mountains compared to the ones in Sweihan.

“We designed a grading system to ensure that AD4x4 members join trips according to their level of experience in off-road driving; we teach first-timers all the technicalities of desert driving so they feel safe and confident.

“We plan at least one trip every weekend during the summer months and anything between four to six trips during the cool season, so there are plenty of opportunities to get involved, meet new people and learn a new skill,” he adds.

As we hit the desert, the vehicle tyres are deflated, personalised marker flags are fitted to the backs of the cars, and everyone gathers around for a quick briefing every journey is always planned carefully beforehand. The designated marshals give the final instructions and make sure everyone’s reachable on their walkie-talkies – and then it’s off to the dunes.

Whether you’ve tried dune-bashing before or it’s your first time in the desert, the experience is breathtaking every time. The jeeps roar over the dunes and send waves of sand flying into the air and cascading down the slopes. As with any sand-driving, there’s always a vehicle or two that gets stuck a few times along the way, and it’s on these occasions that a sense of team spirit really comes into action.

“There’s a real community spirit when we all come out together in the desert,” agrees Islam.

“The Abu Dhabi 4x4 group is more than big cars and sand dunes. It’s about helping and mentoring each other – you take something away from the experience.”

As the sun fades behind the dunes, the majority of the group parks up and watch on as a final few take a couple more runs up an impressive-looking dune. Finally the sand settles, and so does the group. They have a regular meeting spot by a single resilient looking tree; food supplies and chairs are pulled from the cars and everyone settles down for an evening picnic. As it grows dark, the atmosphere stays bright and lively; food is shared, jokes and stories are told. There’s a real sense of unity and friendship among such a diverse group of people – Canadian, Egyptian, Emirati, South African, Italian and more.

At the end of the day, with rather a lot of sand in our shoes, hair and ears, we leave exhilarated and exhausted.

Having originally expected the Abu Dhabi 4x4 group to be slightly eccentric group of Jeep owners with a need for speed and a lust for petrol-fuelled endeavour, we end up with a completely different impression. The group is clearly passionate about driving, and a fair bit of speed is used when mounting dunes, but the overall message of the group is far more than basic four-wheel drive fun –there’s a refreshing sense of teamwork and camaraderie in the group.

As complete newbies, we were welcomed with open arms. Making the most of the landscape around them, the Abu Dhabi 4x4 group is a shining example of bringing together a community and sharing a simple pleasure.

Dune facts

There are five basic types of sand dune:

? Crescent: Also known as barchans or transverse dunes. Crescent-shaped mounds, generally wider than they are long, with the slip face on the dune's concave side. These dunes form under winds that blow from one direction.

? Linear: Straight or slightly sinuous sand ridges, typically much longer than they are wide. They can be more than 160 kilometres long.

? Star: Pyramidal sand mounds with slip faces on three or more arms that radiate from the high centre of the mound.

? Dome: Rare. Oval or circular mounds that generally lack a slip face; they occur at the far upwind margins of sand seas.

? Parabolic: U-shaped mounds of sand with convex noses trailed by elongated arms. Unlike crescent shaped dunes, their crests point upwind.

To join the Abu Dhabi 4x4 group or find out more, go to www.ad4x4.com.

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