

DRIVING TO UAE...

DON'T FALL FOR THE UAE INSURANCE SCAM!

By Club Member Brian

If you've ever had a yen to drive to the Emirates across a little corner of the Empty Quarter, don't hesitate for one moment. From Riyadh to downtown Dubai is almost exactly 1,000km, but the drive is easy and pleasant and to be recommended if you aren't in too much of a hurry.

And contrary to many people's perceived 'wisdom', you don't have to travel great distances from one petrol station to another. Fill up stations are never more than 120km apart and the entire journey - even allowing for rest stops - is not going to take you much more than ten hours, and that's if you stick to the speed limits (recommended on speed-camera-strewn UAE roads!).

Leave Riyadh on the Eastern ring road and go down to Al Kharj. Avoiding the morning rush hour is to be recommended and if you leave at first light, you'll be comfortably clear of all heavy traffic well before 'breakfast time'. After passing the famous water tower, you take the next left turn and drive past Prince Sultan Air Base and on past the many farms in the direction of Haradh.

Once past Almarai's processing plant (approx 150km from Riyadh) you're not going to see any petrol station for about 116km, so if you are getting low, fill up at one of the three located near here.

Around 260km from Riyadh you go through another check point and here is where the sands begin, albeit very low key at this point. Railway buffs might well be rewarded with a sight of one of the cargo trains that take this southern route through



to Dammam, trailing a swirling mass of sand behind them.

If you need to fill up around Haradh, stay on the main road but look for a station about 300m to your right at a road junction - see waypoints below. (You'll know you're approaching Haradh when you can pick up the two Aramco radio stations on 103.8 and 107.9 MHz. It's about three hours drive from Riyadh.) From here on in you're officially in the Empty Quarter, though the road is an easy drive. There are very few cars that take this route, but the lorry drivers regularly move out of your way to let you pass and even use their indicators to indicate when it is safe to do so.

Because of the cross winds drifting sand over the road, there is a veritable army of bulldozers keeping the way clear, as well as teams of tar sprayers who cover the sandy road borders in a black topping to stop it blowing away. The dunes aren't that spectacular, if the truth be known, though there are some lovely bowl shaped dunes at regular intervals, and you will no doubt be glad of the warning signs strategically placed every 10km or so which tell you there are sand dunes!

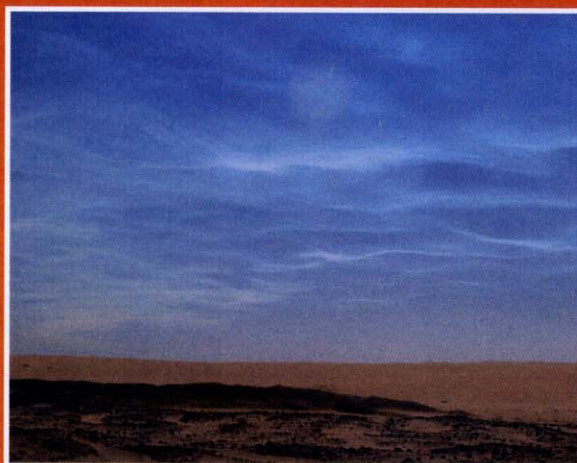
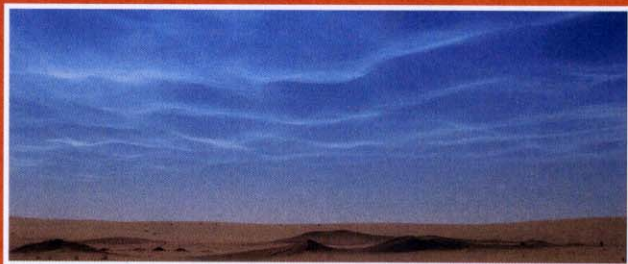
You'll know when you are approaching the border as suddenly there are trucks everywhere - most of them having come via the Hofuf road. Fill up at the large Sasco filling station since petrol is over two and a half times as expensive across the border. (Incidentally, UAE petrol is sold by the imperial gallon - 4.5lt approx - which may have you scratching your head when you first encounter this phenomenon.)

Leaving Saudi is perfectly straight forward. Entering UAE is not. The Emiratee border officials couldn't be less helpful if they tried (this happened in both directions) and you may well find yourself shuttling backwards and forwards to get your bits of paper stamped in the proper order. (Clue: there is an immigration building on your left where you need to go to get your passport stamped. No one tells you this and there are no direction signs. You are just expected to know!)

Being a Riyadh Rover, you will have prepared for everything, including sorting out your insurance before you leave. DON'T

STRANGE CLOUD FORMATIONS

Whist driving last December on the same Haradh-UAE road as Brian, en route to Qatar's White Sands, club members were witness to some very unusual cloud formations looking south into the emptiness of the EQ. At high altitude, undulating wisps of clouds could be seen, almost liquid like in their wavy formations. The EQ land mass clearly has its own unique propensity to influence climatic conditions affording on occasional mysterious looking results such as these strange cloud formations!



BOTHER! Saudi insurance may be fine, but you need a stamp from a UAE insurance agent on the border to get into the Emirates. They will charge you SR100 or Dhs100 for 10 days' insurance, and it doesn't matter how much you wave around your piece of Saudi paper stating you're insured to drive in UAE. No UAE insurance stamp, no entry. So save your money and sort out your insurance at the border itself.

Once through into UAE, the roads are excellent, but for the first 100km or so you will find a maximum speed limit of 100km/hr, rising to 120km/hr later on. Beware the speed cameras that are well camouflaged - both forwards and backward-looking all the way to Dubai.

The moment you hit UAE territory you will find a plethora of FM radio stations - many in English - including BBC World Service. You may find they will relieve the boredom of the road which is somewhat uninspiring for most of the journey, save for some spectacular mosques in the vicinity of Abu Dhabi.

Abu Dhabi itself is some 360km from the border, and Dubai another 120km after that. But if you have time, keep on going to Sharjah, Al Ajman, Umm Al Qaiwain and Ras Al Khemein. The further north you go, the nicer the scenery!

There is, actually, another draw to visiting the northern Emirates. One of the reasons I am told that certain people visit Dubai is to sample the various watering holes to be found across the city. Now, that's fine if you're on a good salary. But did you know that were you to search for an outlet for Mr Walker's or Mr Gordon's products you would have to pay around Dhs80 each, plus tax of 30% (yes, that is thirty percent!) plus a one-off annual licence of Dhs120. Total cost around Dhs240!

Go to Al Ajman however, and things look a bit different. Base price Dhs50, no tax, no licence. Keep on going to Umm Al Qaiwain and it's even better. An Indian cousin of Mr Walker will set you back a mere Dhs8 (yes,

Emiratees, for some unfathomable reason, don't rate Saudi drivers particularly highly so you may well find your car being shunned by others with spaces on either side of you since those 'in the know' try to reduce the possibility of getting their cars scratched!

If you have time whilst you're in the UAE, take a trip up to the pools of Hatta, near the Omani border. A lovely route through red sands, and you even drive 20km through a little spur of Oman itself, though there are no border crossings to worry about. You only know you're in Oman because of the flags, car licence plates, different currency in the shops, and the occasional sign.

The return journey to Riyadh is as easy as the outward way. Once again at the border the Emiratees couldn't be less helpful. Again, you are expected to know about going to a building to get your passport stamped. You are also expected to know to pick up a pink card, to fill it out (take a pen with you!) and to take it to a cash desk and part with Dhs20 exit tax before going to the passport desk.

If you are driving through the Empty Quarter in the afternoon, you may well experience a phenomenon that is caused by hot dry weather affecting the ionosphere. VHF radio signals bounce back and forth between the earth and this invisible layer, causing very long distance FM radio reception. On my journey I picked up two Iranian stations coming in loud and clear as if they were local transmissions; I picked up Turkish TRT Radio 3 coming from Yiniz; but pride of place must be the station broadcasting in Mandarin Chinese which I picked up for well over 20 minutes.

Now that's something to tell your friends back home: driving through the desert in Saudi Arabia listening to the news in Chinese. Whatever next?



that's eight dirhams!) which sure makes a lovely 'Indian coffee' as well as being very good on the rocks.

This latter outlet can be found at the Barracuda resort on the main road from Umm al Qaiwain to Ras Al Khaimah - a mere 70km from Dubai. Look for the Antonov aircraft that has been converted into a hotel, and it's right next door. Of course, you won't be able to get a visa to take Messrs Walker and Gordon back into Saudi, so enjoy their company while you can!

One thing you might notice as you park your car in the overcrowded car parks:

USEFUL WAYPOINTS & DISTANCES

For members' benefit, Brian has taken the trouble to note for us some key distance milestones and grid references en route. So, the next time you travel this route, here is now no excuse at running out of gas before reaching the UAE border!

| | Location | Km |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|-------|
| Al Kharj Water Tower | 24° 09.73'N 47° 17.87'E | 95 |
| Check Point | 24° 09.35N 48° 57.14E | 263 |
| Last petrol before Haradh | 24° 15.12'N 47° 53.79'E | 371 |
| Haradh petrol | 24° 08.17'N 49° 01.98'E | 487 |
| Petrol | 24° 08.54'N 49° 39.71'E | 551 |
| Petrol | 24° 08.49'N 49° 52.98'E | 573 |
| Petrol | 24° 08.46'N 50° 39.67'E | 653 |
| Border crossing | 24° 07.79'N 51° 34.35'E | 745 |
| Dubai World Trade Centre | 25° 13.69'N 55° 17.41'E | 1,141 |
| Jumeirah Beach Hotel | 25° 08.54'N 55° 11.52'E | 1,154 |
| Hatta Heritage Village | 24° 47.82'N 56° 07.07'E | n/a |

