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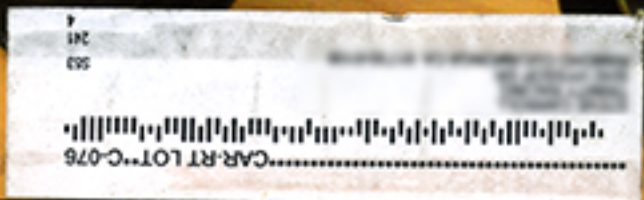
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Mighty Sands of

Abu Dhabi

Story and Pictures: Jon Crowley (DuneGuide.com)

1 received a phone call from Grant George at Funco Motorsports in early January about tagging along with him on a trip to the sand dunes near Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates. I had always wanted to go and check out the dunes there, but my first reaction was "I can't make it." My family was in the car with me and heard the whole conversation. After I hung up with Grant, my wife and kids told me that "I can't make it" wasn't an option. What a cool family I have.

Fast forward three weeks and I was on a plane headed to a country half way around the world from my home in northern California. The flights to get from Sacramento to Dubai were incredibly long, but the hospitality shown to us by our host Khaled Bin Shaiban made it all worthwhile.

Khaled owns a two seat Funco Hustler, a Funco Teryx and has a Gen 5 on order, plus he had friends and

family joining up with him in Liwa that had Rhinos, RZR's, a Redline Revolt and a bunch of ATVs.

Our group went for many rides from Liwa to Moreeb Dune where the sand drags are held (about ten miles each way). Khaled led the way in his beautiful two seat Funco Hustler and a pack of UTVs and ATVs followed along behind. There were buttery smooth dunes as far as you could see in every direction. We just touched the tip of the iceberg on the way to Moreeb Dune, and the amount of sand is beyond anything that I could describe. Moreeb Dune was quite a happening spot. If I closed my eyes I could almost imagine that I was still in California at Oldsmobile Hill in Glamis.

On two different days, I was lucky enough to ride a brand new 2009 Yamaha YFZ450R. I hadn't ridden an ATV in over a year, so I couldn't





Our host Khaled Bin Shaiban in his Funco Hustler.



About the United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a federation of seven states (emirates) - Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Ajman, Fujairah, Ras al-Khaimah, Sharjah and Umm al-Qaiwain - formed in 1971 after independence from Britain. The United Arab Emirates is a slice of land on the southeast tip of the Arabian Peninsula. Like other nations in the region, it sits on vast oil reserves. But that's where the similarity ends.

While Saudi Arabia adheres to the strictest tenets of Islam, the United Arab Emirates is much more relaxed, and, for this part of the world, extremely liberal. Alcohol is served in restaurants and hotel bars, bikinis are seen at hotel pools and on the beaches of the Arabian Gulf, and Arabs and non-Arabs mingle freely. The UAE has become a cosmopolitan nation and a melting pot of cultures. There is a large colony of expatriate Brits remaining from when the Emirates were part of the British Commonwealth, and an equally large number of Americans doing business here. Arabic is the official language, but English is widely spoken, and touring is extremely easy. I was genuinely impressed by the warmth and friendliness of the local Arab people.



It's always fun to find familiar faces! (Joe, Chris, Grant & Ed)



believe that I flew halfway around the world and ended up on such a nice ride. Grant also saddled up on a Yamaha Raptor one day and I am sure he hasn't been on an ATV in a long time. But just like he does in sand cars and UTVs, Grant was on it.

The big event while we were there is the annual hill climbs at Moreeb Dune. Moreeb Dune is loosely translated as "Scary Mountain" and has a reported 50 degree slip face, and a 300m long hill climb. With a paved road to the hill, bleachers, lights and a helipad, Moreeb Dune is the place for organized sand drag races. The Moreeb Dune Championship is organized by Abu Dhabi Motors Club and features timed hill climbs for motorcycles, ATVs, sand cars, and 4x4s. The

drags occur at night, so after our afternoon ride, we would grab a snack and then head out to the hill in street vehicles. The 25 km road out to Moreeb Dune from Liwa was built specifically to get people out to the hill and ends right at the base.

The first night at the drags, we were hanging out watching the action when up strolls a few familiar faces. Half way around the world, and we bump into Chris from CBM Motorsports, Joe from Sand Limo and Ed "Pound Sand" Niemela. And the next day out near the big hill, I ran into Todd Romano from Dragon Fire Racing. Pretty amazing to run into people you know so far from our dunes back home, but not too surprising since many U.S. businesses have taken notice of the UAE's market potential.

Mighty Sands of Abu Dhabi



The sand drags at night.

While out in the dunes one day, I had the opportunity to experience something completely different, but very cool. I was asked if I would like to go see a little falcon training, and I jumped at the chance. We left the big dune and all the activity and drove to a more secluded area where the falcon wouldn't be distracted.

After the trainer got his pheasant wing lure setup, his friend drove the falcon several hundred yards away. A few minutes later, the falcon was released, and the trainer swung the lure around in a circle to attract the bird. I could barely see the falcon flying low across the desert. Then, once he was close enough, the falcon climbed to gain a little altitude, then dove at super fast speeds at the lure. Then over and over the bird

climbed and dove until finally the trainer let the falcon capture the lure and bring it to the ground. The falcon cooled off and I was able to get a real close up look at this beautiful and powerful bird of prey. The falcon was rewarded with a chicken leg, and when he was through, they even let me hold him.

Meals at Khaled's house were also an incredible experience. Every lunch and dinner there would be 15 - 20 guys all sitting on the floor with all kinds of rice, chicken, lamb and fish in front of us. While they all ate with their hands, Grant and I attempted to use a fork. After a few tries, we both gave in and just ate with our hands too. The two nights that we went to Moreeb Dune for the drags, we had a full on dinner at 1AM. Late eating, lots of Arabic

Empty Quarter

The Rub' al Khali, or the "Empty Quarter" in English, is one of the largest sand deserts in the world, encompassing most of the southern third of the Arabian Peninsula, including southern Saudi Arabia, and areas of Oman, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. The desert covers some 250,000 square miles and is one of the most inhospitable places on earth, and entirely uninhabitable.

The Empty Quarter is 1200 km long and 650 km wide, and is among the largest continuous sand dunes in the world. About 80 percent of this area is in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and covers about a quarter of the Kingdom's land surface. Its eastern edges extend into the United Arab Emirates, and its southern margin is in the Sultanate of Oman. Parts of its southern and southwestern limits are in the Republic of Yemen.

To put the size of the Empty Quarter into perspective, the entire Imperial Sand Dunes cover an area of 45 miles by about 6 miles. This includes all of the Wilderness Area north of Highway 78 and also includes the central closure. By comparison, the Empty Quarter covers an area that is 720 miles by 390 miles. Let's just put that in simple terms. The Imperial Sand Dunes is about 0.1% the size of the Empty Quarter.

Mighty Sands of
Abu Dhabi



Camping in the dunes, with Moreeb Hill in the distance.

coffee, a few very long days, plus jet lag had my body completely upside down.

For years Bedouin tribes have looked to the desert for their livelihood and leisure. Many people today go back to the desert to rest and recuperate and indulge in a variety of desert sports like traditional falconry or camel racing. But more and more, they have seen what a little horsepower can do to make things a bit more exciting. The dunes in the UAE are an amazing sight that go forever and the people there sure have

caught on to how much fun you can have riding in the sand. The UAE has great potential for sand toy manufacturers that can figure out how to deliver product there easily and even more potential for those that spend the time to understand this distinct culture.

My trip to the other side of the world was truly a once in a lifetime opportunity, and I am thrilled I didn't miss it. I want to thank Grant for inviting me to tag along, Khaled for the wonderful food and place to stay, and my family for telling me that I had to go.



The age-old tradition of falconry is alive and well in the UAE.



The YFZ450R I rode while I was there.



Little emphasis is put on safety as these two demonstrate at a gas station in Liwa.

Mighty Sands of Abu Dhabi



Know before you go

Even though the United Arab Emirates is a modern, relatively liberal country, it is a Muslim nation, and Westerners should be sensitive to and respectful of customs in terms of dress and behavior. Here are a few tips:

- Don't photograph Muslim women
- Don't point the bottom of your feet at anyone
- Always use your right hand for eating and receiving or handing something to anyone.
- The arrival of a new guest is always an event in the Arab world. Always rise to greet a new person.

GPS Coordinates:

- Moreeb Dune - Latitude: 22.9778, Longitude: 53.7872
- Liwa Oasis - Latitude: 23.1348, Longitude: 53.8538

Hospitality

For centuries, the inhabitants of Arabia and the Gulf States were largely nomadic Bedouins who lived a simple life guided by harsh moral code, but famous for their hospitality. From what I saw during my visit, the people of Abu Dhabi are still some of the most generous hosts I have ever encountered.



Ahmed and Grant enjoy a little hookah.

Hookah

The guys we were with called it Shisha. Grant called it Hubby Bubbly, and I have heard lots of people call it Hookah. Smoking Shisha is an old Arabic tradition has been used for centuries to smoke away the day's stress, while relaxing with friends and family.



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