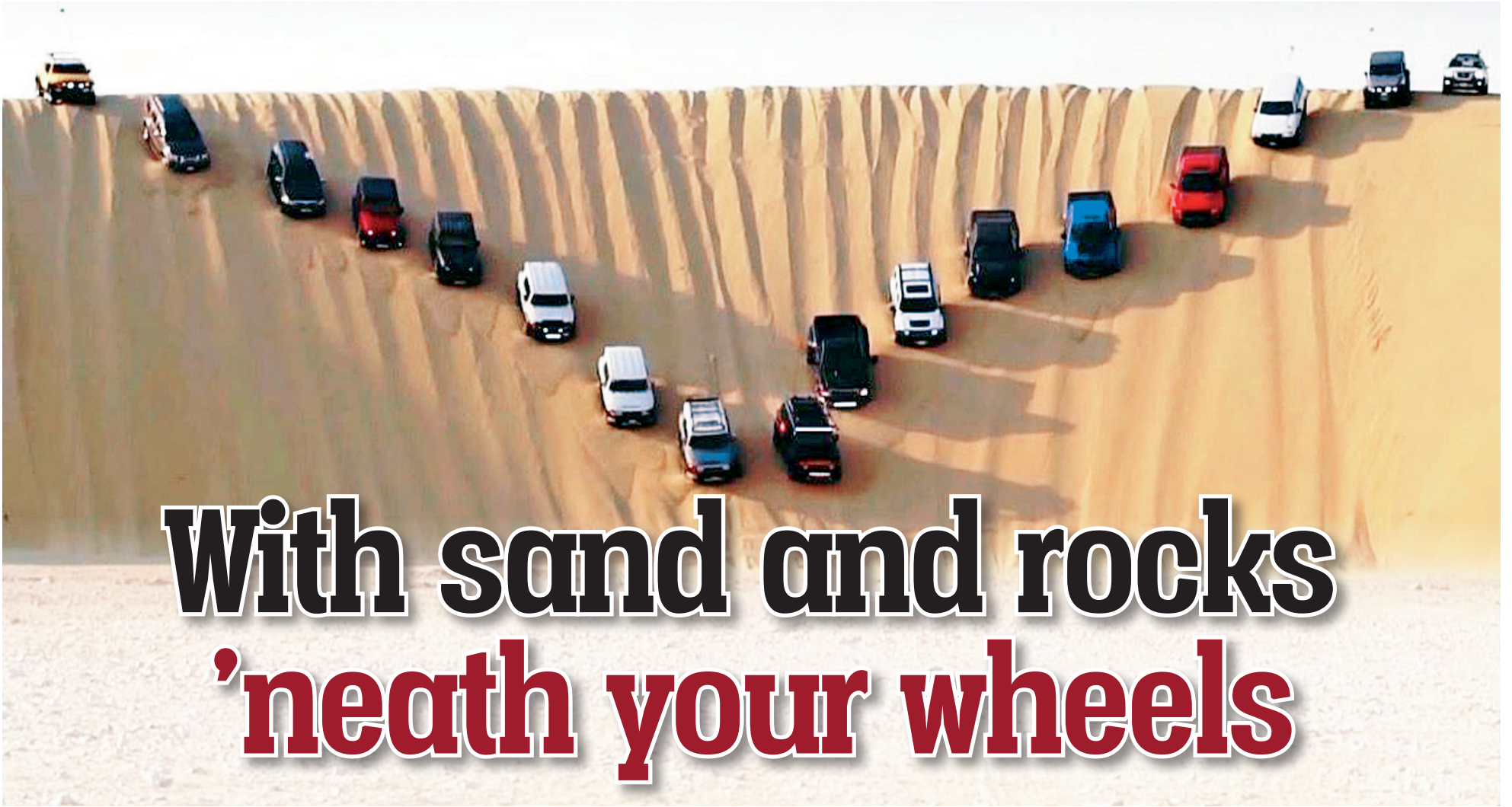


Chill Out



**With sand and rocks
'neath your wheels**



COVER STORY
PG 2&3

A taste of South Africa at QIFF **PG 4** ▶

Fashion tips for men to look dapper
this summer **PG 10** ▶



The dangers and thrills of *off-roading in the Peninsula*

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OFF-ROADING is one of the most popular outdoor activities in Qatar. Engrained in its culture, it is among the Peninsula's tourist attractions. But while the mix of four-wheel drives, buddies and sand, rocks or beaches translates into an exhilarating experience, it can also be dangerous.

Besides private agencies which provide off-road tours, many community groups engage in the activity – as a necessity, members are mostly four-wheel-drive owners. Two such groups are Qatar Offroaders and Qatar 4Wheelers. They promote off-roading in Qatar not just as a thrilling activity, but as a way to connect with nature, and familiarise oneself with the country's biodiversity and environment.



Alaa Ibrahim (right) with a friend while off-roading.

Qatar Offroaders was established five years ago by Mohammad al Ashari and Amar Aloubi. Alaa Ibrahim, group administrator said, "Qatar Offroaders was founded as a community service before anything else. We wanted people

to drive in the dessert, go for camping, go off-roading, enjoy it and stay safe at the same time. We don't want them to hurt themselves or their cars."

Qatar 4Wheelers is a much younger group established only in mid-2017. One of its founders Caleb Ruth said the group was established because they wanted to "find friends who like to explore the desert."

"The mission of 4Wheelers is to help people who don't have that experience to learn how to drive off-road and also just keep our friends together and go and have adventures in the desert."

Both groups are open to anyone interested in off-roading and it's easy becoming a member. "We don't require a lot of skill to join the group. You just need to be willing to be a friendly person and follow basic safety rules," said Ruth. Obviously, you need to have a four-wheel vehicle.

They conduct open rides regularly.

The route is usually from Sealine into the dunes and back. In these rides, they welcome people who wish to drive or ride as passengers with them. The drives serve as learning opportunities for those interested in off-roading as well as an appraisal period on whether or not an enthusiast can be admitted to the group.

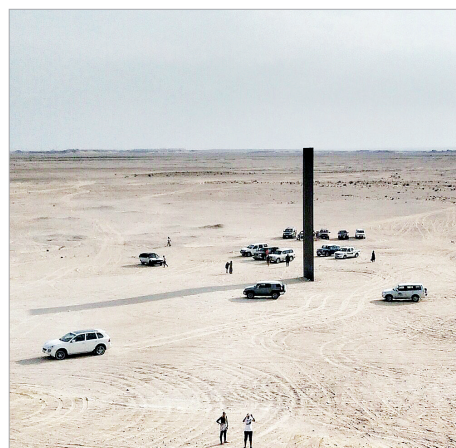
"We need to test their skills. We cannot have someone who is afraid to drive in the desert," explained Ibrahim.

During these rides, the groups give people an introduction about the desert, inform them of the tools they need when off-roading, provide safety instructions and share driving techniques. "Once they pass, they will be registered as Beginners. The new members are then required to have full safety equipment in their cars. This includes a good quality air compressor that attaches to the car battery, a kinetic recovery strap (snatch strap), tyre deflator, jack, battery jumper cable, first-aid kit, spare tyre and a shovel.

According to Ruth, a complete safety and recovery kit can cost about QR1,000. But it shows a driver's commitment to safety. "It means you can help yourself get unstuck. Instead of relying on other people, either strangers outside the group or other people's equipment in the group, you are saying I have everything I need for someone else to help me when I get stuck," he explained. "And also, we want to be equipped to help other people who may be in trouble. It happens every single trip, where we'll be driving along and someone will be stuck and a couple of our group will peel off to help them."

Both groups follow the same level of hierarchy in driving skills: Beginner, Intermediate, Advanced and Marshall. Beginners being those who have just joined the group, the Intermediates are members whose skill in off-road driving has been fully established and are capable of rescuing people who get stuck. The Advanced drivers "are the ones who do the crazy stuff," said Ibrahim amused. An example of 'crazy stuff' – or more appropriately 'sophisticated maneuvers' – is side sloping on a dune. "Without rolling over or colliding with other cars," Ibrahim and Ruth quickly added.

The Marshalls are those who lead the drive. "They can take people some place interesting, deal with emergency situations and get everybody back safely. You need to rise in the ranks before you can do that," said Ruth. "That's a whole other level of



responsibility because when you are a marshal you are responsible for the 10 or 20 cars (people) following you. A lot of the people who are Advanced never want to be a Marshall because they just want to go out for the excitement and the marshalls can't be going for the excitement. They have to be level-headed, responsible and trustworthy."

Rides differ and depend on the terrain and the level of the skill of drivers within the ride. "Rocks, sand, beaches, Qatar has all of these," said Ruth.

The way Ibrahim and Ruth talk about off-roading can make one want to rush into an SUV and drive out of the city into the wilderness. But is it as easy as that?

The two do not deny the dangers associated with off-roading and that is why commitment to safety is one of the qualities they look for in their would-be members.

There are safety measures that should be strictly adhered to. First, the vehicle's

condition and capability – it has to be in good condition and 4-wheel-drive capable. Not all SUVs are 4-wheel drives. Enough water should be ensured both for the people in the car and for the car, complete safety equipment must be at hand, a first aid kit and a drive into the desert should never be taken alone (single car). Also, the number of passengers should equal the number of available seatbelts. And speaking of passengers, they too must have come along any of the group's open drives at least once.

"That is to ensure that they don't pose any danger to the driver," said Ibrahim. They compared driving from a high point down a dune to a roller coaster ride, which can be frightening and passengers, when they panic, can put the driver in a critical situation. One rule of thumb they follow: Don't put together an inexperienced driver and an inexperienced passenger.

Danger, Ruth said, depends on the driver. "The risk that you take are the risks

you make." He talked about a famous dune in Qatar called Al Attiya. He said a big group of off-roaders gather on the dune every weekend and almost every weekend a serious accident happens. "People crash into each other because there are a lot of people coming from all directions side sloping on this big dune," he said.

One way he avoids an accident? "I don't play on that dune on Fridays," he said laughing.

But he stated, "The great thing about the desert is that it's free, it's open. There are people who go to the desert just for fun, for the adrenalin. I fully support them. It's a good thing for people to have the freedom that if they want to take a risk like that, there's a place that they can go and do that."

According to Ibrahim, before 2006, while he was working at Hamad Hospital, he remembers seeing choppers bring in five to six cases of accidents from the desert during weekends. But it does not happen as often now. "Statistically speaking, these accidents have been reduced by more than 40 percent since 2006. You can say that people are learning to drive," he stated.

Ruth said there are about 500 to 600 drivers that have been trained on how to drive safely in the desert between the two group's open drives. They are taught techniques in driving on sand, recovering a vehicle, side crossing, and drifting. "Hopefully, our contribution make people safer."

