

Dubai-Al Ain Road: Slaughterhouse or highway?

Stretch of road from Al Ain to Dubai is one of the deadliest routes to drive on.



- A tanker on its side on the Dubai-AlAin highway. Many heavy vehicles overturn due to loss of control or negligence on the part of the driver.
- Image Credit: Supplied picture

Al Ain: The battered white pickup came to rest on the narrowest of shoulders on E66, its rear left tyre shredded, its load listing, its driver sitting cross-legged wrestling with jack and tyre iron.

Inches away, cars zoom by heading to Dubai, kicking up dust and grit in their backdraft.

"Can I help?" I ask. The driver, in a dirty blue salwar kameez, beams a smile. A delivery van whizzes past, drowning out his response. I take it as a "No" and return to my car, uncomfortable at leaving him to fix his flat while at the mercy of drivers.

This stretch of road winding from Al Ain to Dubai is deadly.

In the past four months alone, 18 people have died in a series of horrific crashes. Ten days ago, seven people were killed and 11 more injured when a minibus rammed another vehicle at the Lahbab turnoff.

I worry that the driver I just left will be the next: Fifteen people were injured in March when a tired minibus driver ploughed into a car parked on the hard shoulder.

Terrible

"I place my life in Allah's hands every time I drive this road," says Kunhi, an expat who works in a construction office in Dubai and lives in Al Ain. "It's cheaper to live in Al Ain but the price I have to pay is driving this road. I have seen so many terrible things and there is no end to this senselessness."

He recalls the time earlier this summer when two people died after a pickup truck carrying diesel drums collided with a car.

"The road is still black and burned from that smash," he notes, a stark reminder to drivers on the road to slow down. They don't.

The posted limit for most of the road is 100km/h. Signs warn drivers that radar cameras are activated at 120km/h. Most ignore it.

Two days before, I drove the 107km length of E66 at 120km/h, constantly tailgated and flashed at to move over. I give way. When I don't, I'm overtaken on the inside.

Tailgating, aggressive driving and overtaking on the inside are all illegal. No driver was punished.

From Al Oha on the outskirts of Al Ain to close to Al Haiyir, a stretch of roughly 45km, the road lanes are narrowed, roadworks under way on both sides, widening the E66, presumably to make it safer.

In my rear view mirror, a car speeds towards me, the outline of its driver barely visible through heavily tinted windows. I cannot move to the right, a string of traffic occupying my only possibility.

I'm looking in my rear view mirror. He is no more than a foot from my rear bumper. He stays there, mentally nudging me out of his path. Finally, I get a break and move to the right as he accelerates past me. I can feel my heart rate physically slowing down after this encounter.

At a petrol station at Al Faqa, Danny from Manchester is having his four-wheel drive filled.

"It's crazy," he says. "This road is a deathtrap. It's hard to believe that four years ago, the speed limit on this road was 160km/h."

Hard to believe indeed.

"If anything, the speed limit should be reduced even more," he says.

He's been in the UAE for six years and has worked in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait before. "Since I've come to the UAE I find that my driving is more aggressive," he says. "I don't indicate as much as I used to, and I find I take more chances. I don't have patience and I find myself copying the driving habits of others around me."

"That's one of the reasons why I bought a big car," he says, tapping the dashboard of his four-wheel drive. "I wouldn't drive a small car here."

I return to my car — a hatchback — and consciously turn the key in my suddenly inadequate vehicle.

Every few hundred metres or so, the centre median safety barrier bears the twisted evidence of close encounters of the worst kind. "It seems they've given up repairing them," my companion during one trip down E66 notes.

Speeding

In mid-July, an Emirati motorist was killed when he lost control of his vehicle, hit the road barrier and overturned. He was speeding.

A cloud of dust blows across the road, a frontloader dumping into awaiting tipper trucks. A lone worker stands before the line of trucks, waving a makeshift flag of torn construction tape at oncoming cars — as effective as a fly swat in a jungle. The vehicles speed by, barely tipping their brake lights at the hazard.

"No good," he shouts. Is he talking about the cars or his seeming deadly occupation?

Just outside Dubai at a roadside bank, Peter from Bloemfontein has just finished his business. We exchange pleasantries.

I ask his opinion on the E66. "Reckless," is his response. "I wouldn't drive that road for all the money in Dubai, né?"

I stop at a roadside mosque somewhere in the middle of nowhere. "A most bad road," Saeed says. "Many bad drivers. Many bad things. Not safe."

His friend Nasser concurs. "Most bad road."

Some goats in the back of their truck bleat in agreement. They're on their way to the slaughterhouse in Al Ain. It's hard to know which is more deadly — the road or the abattoir.

Timeline: Dubai-Al Ain crash list

04/10/09: Seven people died and 11 injured after a minibus rammed a vehicle.

20/02/09: Three Omani nationals killed when their pick-up overturned and hit a traffic signal.

7/10/08: A young Emirati and her infant daughter were killed when their car went out of control.

19/06/08: Two people were burned to death in a collision between a pick-up carrying diesel and a car.

31/03/08: Fifteen people were injured, four of them seriously, when an exhausted minibus driver rammed his vehicle into a parked car.

15/10/07: Ten people sustained injuries in a collision when a speeding car hit the metal barrier and swerved to the opposite side of the road hitting another car.

7/10/07: Three people believed to be two Colombians and an Omani were burned to death when the Omani driver lost control of the wheel and hit a car parked on the shoulder ahead of the sixth interchange.