

Feel the heat: Nissan Navara in Morocco

JAMES FOSSDYKE reports from North Africa.

Drip in my psyche lies a very intense kind of hatred. Normally it's reserved for wily bad things - the MSN football referee, Christmas in November - that kind of thing. This morning, however, it's aimed squarely at an exceptionally irritating noise.

I'm sure you know it, the bubbly jingle emitted by the makers of a popular type of smartphone to be the morning call of weary travellers. Now, as the vibrant tones pierce the darkness to interrupt my dreamless sleep, the luminous bands of my watch point at the ungodly hour of 6:30am.

Still half asleep, my right arm flails wildly, searching in vain for the bedside table and the snooze button, before I realise that I'm not in my warm, comfortable bedroom, but 1,200 miles away in north-eastern Morocco.

Up at two by the legendary Atlas mountain range, the north African kingdom leaves areas of lush greenery, jagged peaks and hidden desert. It's the latter I'll be visiting today, my Nissan Navara taking me across the rocky wilderness to the shifting sands of the Erg Chigafa dunes.

I eventually dig myself out of bed and call on the morning watch of the low-thru-luxurious shower facilities to bring me to my senses. Slightly awake, I shoeen myself into my dirty clothes and head down for breakfast.

Running on nothing but outrageously strong coffee and a dry pain as alcohol, I clamber into the Navara, give the starter button a hard prod and crawl out of the hotel car park in convoy.

Apparently, though, we aren't the only ones to have risen early this morning.

Cruising through town, the market appears to be in full swing. There are people everywhere, and almost all of them seem to wear at the big orange trucks that pass through.

Eventually, the town gives way to the desert, the tarmac road surface curving through the barren landscape. But after a few miles, I turn off the road, following a well-worn but unmarked track into the wilderness.

When you say 'desert', most people think of the pale sands of Arabia, but this part of the Sahara is more Marican than that. Small, sharp stones and jagged rocks sit on a bed of rusty red sand, and they pepper the underside of the Navara as it ruses through the desert, clacking and clanging as they hit the solid metal of the chassis and running gear.

Sometimes the track, which is well worn by the passing of so many beasts before me, meanders around an outcrop of rock the size of a bungalow, and I turn in, to give the throttle and feel the Navara's back end come into play in my mind. I'm going full-on black, but I suspect the rest of the convoy just sees a Navara being a little

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'moment in the middle of every career

As the stones grow a little sparser, and the sand turns slightly less red in colour, my fun is cut short. The surface is getting softer, so I reduce my pace and engage the four-wheel drive system. My driving days are over, for now.

Nissan says the Navara I'm driving is a standard Spanish-spec vehicle, and a quick poke around the engine bay and suspension suggests that the company is more or less telling the truth.

That the truck can tackle deep, drag-out sand beds is easily, then, an immensely impressive. Of course, it'll face greater challenges than this later today, but it just doesn't bear an eyelid as it plunges down what was once a river bank and cheerfully augments the sandy 'roof' flow without so much as a quarter-ton of wheelspin.

On climbing back out of the dunes river bed, I see my first dune looming. At maybe 300 tall, it looks pretty sizable, but the view from the top confirms my fears: this is a hilder compared with what I'm about to face.

Ahead of me, the dunes seem to grow even larger, their wind-sculpted peaks reaching into the blue-grey sky, and the sand I'm driving over becomes deeper and clanger. The wind whips with predatory gale unrelenting, with a thin mist of sand, that combines with the dust thrown up by the other half-dunes whistles in the convoy to dramatically reduce visibility.

It causes problems inside the car, too: a burst of yellowish-grey plastic has ended camp on the Navara's cab grounds and nestled into the stitching of the seats - I can feel it get between my teeth and toes.

With little to see besides the anaemic but leeching dunes beside us, we let almost all of the air out of our tyres, switch the gearbox into

low-range and set off. Driving on sand dunes isn't especially difficult, but once it starts to go wrong it can become very tough to recover. Deflating our tyres not only gives us more grip, it also spreads the vehicle's weight more evenly, helping prevent it from sinking into the sand.

The real trick, though, is to settle into a rhythm - using power on the approach and gradually easing off towards the crest. It sounds simple, but it's actually something of a balancing act. Go too fast and you jump over the crest, making damage to the vehicle, but go too slowly and you'll end up beached halfway up the dune.

My attempt was, in my opinion, very successful, and, as the dunes grow, so does my confidence. On one occasion, though, my

confidence flirts dangerously with arrogance and I almost overtook it, sending the Navara into a four-wheel drift at about 30mph.

After that small non-crash, I tune it down a notch, and that proves to be my downfall. As I approach the crest of the dune, I meet with a relatively minor crest. For a moment, all I can see is sand as the Navara crosses towards the dune, but a massed crest later the windscreen is filled with sky. The tyres start to claw at the loose surface, progress slows, and I realise what's happening. This dune is outrageously steep, and I've used too little power. Instantly, I lift off the throttle and let the Navara coast to its natural

halt, before reversing imperceptibly back down the dune, ready for a second attempt. Giving myself what looks like a suitable run-up, I take a deep breath and gun it.

The Navara hurtles towards the dune. The wall of sand looms, there's a loud crack, a plume of sand smashes the vehicle and my windscreen is once more full of sky. As I climb, I don't move my feet away from the footwell - even a millimeter. The tyres slip half a turn, but the tongue pulls me over the crest. Just.

On the other side I stop to see how my truck has fared. A glance at the underside reveals a sheet of protective plastic has been torn clean



Just desert-tackling requires a skilful balancing act - and a capable car such as the Nissan Navara



away from its position in front of the axle. It's no worse than a paper cut as far as the car's concerned, but with less underbody protection at my disposal I might have to be a little more careful from now on.

The trip back to civilisation was a far easier experience, with the dunes getting smaller before giving way to the rocky Moroccan desert. Forgetful about my new lack of underbody protection for a moment, I switch back to my drive and start swiveling the back end about like a Labrador's tail, as do the rest of the convoy.

But even with our wily deflating two-tonne trucks, all that marks to cut is more than a speck on this enormous landscape is the huge dust cloud that engulfs us.

Despite the scale of this inhospitable wilderness, the sharp stones that have peppered the car's now-rivulet-underside, the sand that has covered the car's cabs in an unacceptably gritty coating, and the intense heat, the car has come through practically unscathed. Its only moment of hesitation (and damage) was as a result of my incompetence, and the only fault I can find is a slightly noisy air intake.

Parting about in the Sahara isn't a comprehensive test of a pickup truck - but if you're wondering whether a Navara's going to cope with traversing a muddy field or snowy pass, the answer is yes.