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Desert off-roading final frontier for women in Qatar



4x4 vehicles prepare for dune bashing, also known as desert safari, in Qatar's Sealine desert, around 63 kilometres south of the capital Doha. — AFP photos

A female 4x4 enthusiast is blazing a trail in Qatar's traditionally male sport of off-roading and in a rare move has also become a dune driving safety marshal. "As soon as my tyres touched the sand, I fell in love with the desert," said Marcelle Visser, a South African woman living in Qatar, as

"When you start off with this, you think it's a men's sport. This was keeping me away in the beginning," said Visser. But Khaled Shash, the chief safety marshal of Qatar's Dune Rider Club, a group bringing together those with a passion for the desert and 4x4 vehicles, sought to nurture Visser's

popular off-roading area in the past five years, according to interior ministry figures. Over the winter desert season, authorities have carried out a media blitz with television coverage of safety and recovery initiatives, driver education roadshows, and warning billboards dotted around desert areas. Dune Riders, like most other clubs, hosts regular workshops for newcomers to promote safety.

At one workshop, Shash, Visser and the other marshals demonstrated desert recovery techniques. Visser showed a group of young men how to be sure their cars were properly dug out before driving off to avoid spinning their tyres and digging in. "When we come out to the desert, it's four to six hours per time so it's really intensive training," she said of her marshal training, surrounded by the sides of the deep sand bowl used to demonstrate recovery techniques. "It's the same for women getting stuck as for the men, because you don't need the physical strength, you just need to follow the right steps."

a woman thing," said Shash, the chief marshal.

But Visser was not deterred, rising from an ordinary group member to a marshal in little over a year. "That raised a lot of eyebrows," she said. "When it's a big group and each one has their own way of doing it, being heard over a big group of people is very difficult." The group, which counts



South African Marcelle Visser, driving safety marshal of Qatar's Dune Rider club, train participants in off-road driving techniques in Qatar's Sealine desert.

only a handful of women as members—something Visser has sought to change by encouraging members' wives to give it a try—has come to embrace the lone female marshal. "I've been in many clubs, even back in India I used to be in all the two-wheel clubs, but I've never seen a woman who's handling this stuff alone," said group member Ram Arun. "This is the first time that I've seen a woman, who's very bold, very patient. She's really good." — AFP



4x4 vehicles prepare for dune bashing, also known as desert safari, in Qatar's Sealine desert.

her Land Cruiser bounded across the rolling sandscape. In Qatar, gender separation in social settings remains common in many areas of life, so the appointment of a woman as one of a handful of experts at a prestigious desert club has caused a stir. Men and women gather separately for prayers and most celebrations and, historically, it was the men who would gather and make camps in the desert as well as off-road together—hugely popular pastimes in Qatar.

enthusiasm. "The minute I saw how Marcelle is passionate about off-roading in general I decided to focus with her. It was a plan to make her a marshal," he said.

'Don't need physical strength'

Marshals take responsibility for the safety of group members on desert drives, training participants in off-road driving techniques and assisting those in distress. More than 4,300 accidents have been reported in Qatar's most

'Not a woman thing?'

Desert camps and off-roading will be at the forefront of Qatar's offer to fans visiting the Gulf emirate for the 2022 World Cup. Desert camps are also expected to help pick up the slack for hotels and other more conventional accommodation. Visser's expertise is clear, but she sometimes has to work to be heard over her more vocal male club members. "Off-roading always had something of an adrenaline rush, so it's always existed with men—it's not



Marcelle Visser train participants in off-road driving techniques.



Teenagers sit together ahead of dune bashing.



A girl walks with her dog ahead of dune bashing, also known as desert safari.

COVID KILLS MEN'S FASHION BUZZ IN MILAN

A year after the last Covid-free catwalk shows in Milan, men's fashion week began on Friday, but without the buzz of its traditional audience of buyers, bloggers, celebrities and media. As the pandemic continues to upend Italy's crucial luxury sector nearly 12 months after it first swept

through the country, fashion houses have turned to technology to showcase their fall/winter 2021-22 collections. Shows will be broadcast live on the fashion houses' own websites or be replaced with pre-recorded presentations, short films and other artistic projects. Others such as Dolce & Gabbana have withdrawn entirely.

The four-day men's fashion event takes place with infections rising in Italy's Lombardy region with a return a full lockdown possible as early as the weekend. Lombardy, whose capital is Milan, is one of five in Italy classified "orange" by the government, which means that stores and most schools are closed, while a curfew remains in force at night. Among those opting for live shows to be broadcast by the fashion houses are Fendi, Etrò and Kway.

Most other brands, however, including Ermenegildo Zegna, Tod's, Prada and Church's, have opted for pre-recorded choices that allow for creative freedom but lack the immediacy and drama of live shows. Dolce & Gabbana, which was originally scheduled to offer a traditional runway show on January 16, announced on Monday its decision to pull out entirely. In view of Covid-19, it said, "the conditions essential to the realisation of our fashion show are not met". For the moment, no digital presentation is planned.

Fashion in free fall

The men's fashion industry has suffered a hard blow from the pandemic. In Italy, the sector ended 2020 with revenues down by 18.6 percent, representing some two billion euros (\$2.4

billion) in lost sales. The global nature of the crisis curtailed exports, which had been on the rise but fell by 16.7 percent last year, crushing revenues by 70.8 percent. One sign of hope, however, is the beginnings of recovery in the key Asian markets, but industry experts do not expect a full return to health in the luxury sector before 2023.

Italy was the epicenter of the first European outbreak in February last year after Covid-19 first emerged late in 2019 in the Chinese city of Wuhan. Since then the virus has claimed tens of thousands of lives in Italy, making it one of the two worst-hit countries in Europe alongside Britain.—AFP



A screen shows screenings schedule of the Fall/Winter 2021 Men's fashion collections by the Italian Chamber of Italian Fashion (Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana) on Friday in downtown Milan, on the opening day of a four-day so-called "phygital fashion week".



Young men take a lunch break on a public bench as a screen displays Ermenegildo Zegna's digital Fall/Winter 2021 Men's fashion collection. — AFP photos

Funny old world: The week's offbeat news

A final leak

There was only so long the US Secret Service agents guarding Ivanka Trump and her husband Jared Kushner could hold on... Now the truth has finally dribbled out. Trump's favorite child and her millionaire partner refused to let the agents protecting them around the clock use any of the "6.5 bathrooms" in their Washington mansion. Instead the agents were forced to go to the nearby home of Barack and Michelle Obama when nature called. And when the Obamas weren't home they had to make do with a porta-potty. Eventually the Secret Service rented a studio apartment nearby for \$3,000 a month to save everyone from embarrassment, the Washington Post revealed.

You've been Trumped

In other Trump news, the departing president is reportedly refusing to pay his personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani—despite the fact that he pretty much trashed his career and reputation for him. The pair have fallen out, with Trump "offended" by Giuliani's demand for \$20,000 a day. But Giuliani got no pity from his old friend and former spin doctor Ken Frydman. He said the ex-New York mayor had repeatedly "embarrassed himself" for the President—including in an unfortunate bedroom cameo in the latest Borat film, "Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan". "Lay down with dogs. Wake up with fleas and without \$20,000 a day," Frydman quipped.

Childbirth is no excuse

South Korean authorities have issued a reminder to pregnant women to have enough pressed shirts, socks and underpants ready for their helpless husbands when they are away in hospital giving birth. They should also have sufficient pre-cooked meals set aside so the poor man, so "unfamiliar with cooking" will not starve, Seoul's local government said on its website. In another helpful hint, mothers-to-be are advised to hang their favorite skimpy dress up on a wall to "motivate" them not to eat too much during their pregnancy. "And don't put off your domestic duties like cleaning and the dishes" girls, it adds. "The exercise will help you keep your weight down..." Like in neighboring Japan, authorities wonder why fewer and fewer South Korean women are having children. But the penny may be dropping. The advice was taken down after 20,000 women expressed their fury at it in an online petition.

Keep it short, Joe

When Joe Biden is sworn in as US president on Wednesday, we hope he remembers the lesson of his unfortunate predecessor William H. Harrison in 1841. An oldie like Biden, Harrison tried to show his vigour by giving the longest inauguration speech in US history, only to expire of pneumonia a month later having talked for two hours in the freezing cold. History does not record how many of the audience also perished. — AFP



In this picture rhino caretaker Farid Mia cuddles a rhino inside an enclosure at the zoo in Dhaka. — AFP

Bangladesh zoo seeks mate for lonely Kanchi the Rhino

A lonely rhinoceros at a Bangladesh zoo is looking for new love after losing her partner seven years ago, but pandemic travel restrictions are hampering her keeper's attempts to play matchmaker. Kanchi, a star attraction at the Bangladesh National Zoo, is at her most fertile age. But since the death of her male partner in 2014, she has been living on her own in her muddy pen in the northern suburb of the capital. The malaise of Kanchi the rhino has become increasingly apparent to the two million-plus visitors a year at the Dhaka landmark. Kanchi refuses food and often snubs her carer Farid Mia, who hugs the rhino and scratches its neck and shoulders.

The one-ton vegetarian beast is served six kilograms (13 pounds) of rice bran and one kilo of chickpeas each day. "Her mood swings frequently. Sometimes she does not respond to my calls. It is mainly because she has grown up alone all these years," Mia said. "I tell her that we will soon find her a male partner. But she is restless. She needs a partner desperately." Abdul Latif, curator of the zoo, said the coronavirus pandemic had blocked recent efforts to bring in a male rhino from Africa. "We know she feels lonely and we are trying our best to buy a suitable partner," Latif told AFP. There has been more attention given to Kanchi, however, since the plight of Kaavan, the world's loneliest elephant made international headlines in November. —AFP