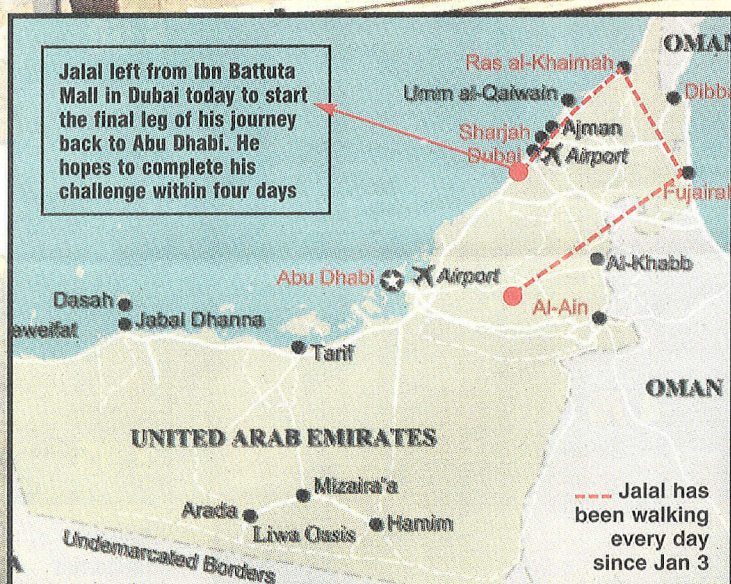


Jalal left from Ibn Battuta Mall in Dubai today to start the final leg of his journey back to Abu Dhabi. He hopes to complete his challenge within four days



# Walking the UAE

Leah Oatway meets the UAE adventurer aiming to be the first to walk across all seven emirates

Intrepid walker Jalal Bin Thaneya is well en route to becoming one of the few people to keep his New Year's resolution in 2007.

The 20-year-old Dubai-based student vowed to be the first UAE national on record to walk the 500km route across all seven emirates, for the Dubai Autism Centre.

And just two weeks, a few wolves and a lot of blisters later, he has reached Dubai, the penultimate stop on his tour.

Jalal, who set off from Sweihan in Abu Dhabi on January 3, has already walked through part of Abu Dhabi, Fujairah, Ras Al Khaimah, Umm Al Quwain, Ajman and Sharjah, and from Dubai is now heading back to Abu Dhabi to the Union Flag on the waterfront in the UAE's capital.

Yesterday as he began his walk through Dubai, having arrived at Port Rashid the following evening, he said: "I feel quite good to be honest. I've been sleeping in the back of a van for the past two weeks, so I'm a little tired as there is no bed - just a metal seat - but I will make it to the end."

It's not been an easy journey though - as Jalal's battered feet will testify. "They are obviously hurting. I've been walking 25 to 30kms a day, ten hours every day, for the past fortnight", he said. "I've been soaking them in disinfectant and very hot water every evening, to keep the skin hard and tough. Every time I get a blister I'm cutting them open with a knife, which I keep with me, and then placing them in the solution. It's painful but I need to

do it so I can walk again the next day."

Jalal, who walked from Port Rashid to the Ibn Battuta Mall yesterday, admitted parts of the walk have been dangerous but said his faith and devotion to the children at the autism centre kept him going. One of the dangers was the wild animals he encountered walking through the desert and mountains. "I did see a lot of strange things. I have seen desert dogs, for example, but I am very respectful to animals", he said. "I wasn't nervous, I just kept going, and they respected me too. "And in the mountains I saw wolves. At night, they can smell you, even when they can't see you. "But I would just look at them and keep walking. They seemed scared of people and noise and luckily

things were fine."

In fact, he said, the most dangerous encounter was walking through Dubai's Shindagha Tunnel on Saturday.

"I didn't realise I could walk over the top of it. Later my father asked what on earth I was thinking! It was a stupid thing to do. I came out of the tunnel and my arms and face were black with dirt. It was very dangerous."

While the Middlesex University student's determination is steadfast, he admits there have been moments during his trip when he has grappled to find the strength to go on.

"I have had to walk through desolate areas and at times really gets you down", Jalal admitted. "People I have met have been wonderful - when the military or police have asked me

what I am doing, and I explained, they have smiled - but there was one point when I did think everything was going to give in.

"I thought I was going to fall, in the middle of nowhere, and die. But if your heart is strong, and you remember the faces of the children you are doing it for, and your country, then you can go on. And I am."

Aside from gaining blisters, Jalal says his walk has also brought him a new perspective and appreciation for the UAE and Dubai.

He said: "I have seen the UAE from an entirely new perspective. I have seen its beauty. I think I am breaking new ground, I believe I am the first person from the UAE, on record, to do this walk since its inception and I hope that it is recognised by the government."