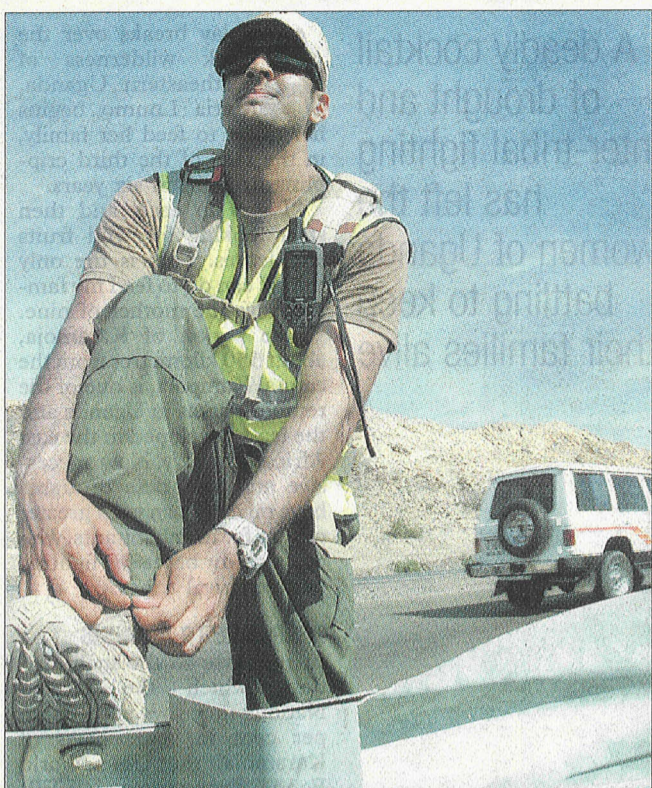


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UNsung HERO

UPDATE

David Tusing talks to Jalal bin Thaneya as he nears the end of his epic trek through the seven emirates

After walking all alone, covering a distance of more than 400km across the UAE, Jalal bin Thaneya is not quite sure what turn his life will take when he completes the arduous 550km journey.

"I don't know how I will integrate into society," he says on the phone, taking a break on the outskirts of Dubai. "I have learnt so many things that you don't learn in the city."

Emirates Today has been actively following the 20-year-old Emarati on his solitary trek across the UAE.

"I will go back to the university and study. Then maybe, when I get another holiday, I will campaign for another cause," he says. "I will continue to do it as long as I am healthy and good."

MATTER OF ROUTINE

From Sweihan to Sharjah, the Emarati has encountered packs of wild dogs, unfriendly locals and of course, the challenge of keeping his body going. Now, he says his body has grown used to the daily grind.

"Everything has been quite routine now," he says.

While specialists at the Emirates Technical Innovation Centre continue to stop by to monitor his diet and health condition, Jalal was visited last week – while walking in Hatta – by his proud father, Jamal bin Thaneya, the CEO of ports authority DP World.

"He is very happy about the whole thing," he says, adding: "My sister will also meet me in Dubai."

His mother, who lives in the United Kingdom, has also been constantly in touch with

him. "She keeps checking on me," he reports.

Jamal will spend the night in the all-purpose van that trails him, somewhere near Dubai's Port Rashid, before heading to Abu Dhabi – his final destination.

A stop at the Union Flag at the capital's corniche will signal the end of the eventful journey. "I don't want to attract too much attention in Dubai," he says. "I just want to move quietly through."

AUTISM ON THE MAP

Dubai Autism Center, the charity Jalal is supporting, is reporting an increased number of enquiries about the centre and Jalal.

"He wanted to put autism on the map and I think he has successfully done that," says Mohammad Al Emadi, the director general of Dubai Autism Center.

"I really don't like the fact that it [Dubai Autism Centre] is put away behind the scenes," says Jalal. "And I really don't like the fact that it is privately funded."

"The UAE has always given the best and the centre deserves the best," he continues. "Everyone is equal and everyone deserves the love."

With fewer than 150km left to cover, Jalal is on the last leg of his journey – the first by an Emarati in the UAE. When quizzed about what he thinks his reception will be like at the end of the trek, he says he does not know.

"I am not the type of person who expects too much," he says. "I didn't cheat myself. I took every painful step. And that is all that matters."