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Last updated 1 minute ago**NEWS****'The world is a very small place'**

Dubai off-roaders on a unique road trip are struck by a seamless connect between countries despite disparities

By Sharmila Dhal, Chief Reporter

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Three cheers: Jamal Khan with Haris Anwar and Shamim Ahmad toured 15 countries over 21 days.
Image Credit:supplied

Dubai: In an age of super jets when you can fly around the globe in a matter of hours, it should seem odd that it took a 10,000km road trip spanning 15 countries over 21 days for three men to realise that "the world is a very small place".

Yet, that's precisely how Jamal Khan, an Indian expat who works with Dubai Islamic Bank, described as his biggest takeaway after returning from a grand cross-continent drive with two friends Haris Anwar and Shamim Ahmad in a Dubai-registered Toyota FJ Cruiser TRD last month. The trip, which began from Dubai on August 29, was undertaken as part of Let's Drive, an initiative set up by Khan and two other off-roaders Abdul Rafey and Farhan Kafil.

No man's land

Khan said what struck him the most was the seamless connect between different countries despite their apparent disparities in culture, language, food, landscape and other aspects.

As the black Toyota with the number plate F4036 crossed several milestones and border checkpoints, Khan said he was intrigued by the fleeting corridors – often referred to as 'no man's land' – in between countries. "The border crossings were an awesome experience. It's amazing how everything changes on either side of these short stretches of 'no man's land' which last barely three to four minutes. It really sets you thinking."

He said although his team planned to travel through 10 countries, they ended up covering 15. Having set out from the UAE to Bandar Abbas by ferry, they then hit the road to Iran, Azerbaijan, Russia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, France, Luxembourg, Belgium and the Netherlands. For the most part, Anwar said things went as planned – “we were accurate even with the estimated mileage as we clocked 9,980km” – but there were challenges too.

'Unfamiliar with us'

“It’s not common for a Dubai registration car to be travelling so far, so officials at many border checkpoints didn’t quite know how to deal with us. We had to face a lot of questions, let our car and belongings be screened and wait long hours before they could get the necessary clearances to let us pass.” Recalling his experience at the Russian border, Khan said, “Though we had all our paperwork in place, they were not familiar with people like us.

Come to think of it, it’s not every day you have someone with an Indian passport and a UAE registered vehicle coming from Azerbaijan, entering Russia and heading to Switzerland. It took seven hours to get the go-ahead. We faced similar delays when we crossed Iran.” This meant that the off-roaders took an extra day to complete their trip on September 18. “We also drove 17-18 hours a day on a couple of occasions to make up for the lost time.” He said the team was joined by 15 others from Dubai at Zurich to do a 1,600km Grand Tour of Switzerland.

Ahmad said the car with a map of the tour route and flags from different countries attracted much attention. “We met a lot of curious people and handed them souvenirs of Dubai landmarks to promote Dubai as a destination. Also, in support of the UAE’s Year of Reading 2016, we donated books to them.”

Most of the books were on travel, the most authentic source of all education, said the team, adding there’s an essential “human connection” and love for freedom and peace between people of all countries which longs to be embraced.

For details of the adventure, visit: www.letsdrivegroup.com

