



Doha → Abu Dhabi

The cars needed in rapidly changing cities.

The Drive Project team spent a whirlwind week driving through several countries. Concentrating on the roads during our short stay, we searched for hints on how to make ever-better cars by observing the way people live their lives. Yasunari Fujii of the Lexus Body Engineering Division peppered the local drivers with questions on many topics while in the car together. The Japanese team members were not allowed to drive in Qatar due to regulations, but this did not change Fujii's approach.

"No matter if you're driving on the streets of Doha or driving in the suburbs, there's construction everywhere. They're erecting buildings and putting in a subway. With the incredible speed of change in the city, what they want from their cars must also be changing. A fleet company that came here to do market research also said that the competitors were changing virtually every day. Driving in the Middle East has made me realize that we have high market share in these countries and are well loved, but at the same time it has also driven home how we have to be constantly changing as well."

Talking with the local members overturned his assumption that road handling on poorly maintained roads would be customers' highest priority. They were interested in driving comfort, in fuel



economy, and in the smoothness of the car's response. In fact, people in the Middle East may have quite exacting expectations for cars and their performance.

Kuwait, the fourth country in the Middle Eastern leg of the Drive Project, is an Islamic country with strict customs second to Saudi Arabia, but its cities were larger and wealthier than we had pictured. We crossed the bay on the Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah Causeway, the longest sea bridge in the world spanning some 36 km, and returned to the city. There are major traffic jams in the evening as people come and go from the urban core, and there are also a lot of accidents caused by the extremely close proximity of cars to other cars. Knowing how people use cars where they live is directly connected to the work of Katsuhiro Takagi of the Advanced Vehicle Engineering Development Division. Takagi evaluates vehicle driving performance, and his job involves checking more than 2,400 performance items. Nonetheless, he says that he has not given much thought to Muslims.

“For example, take the long robes

reaching the ground that men wear. Do they get caught on the car when they're getting in and out? Or the fact that a lot of people wear sandals while driving. And in Kuwait, where sudden acceleration and braking is standard driving practice in heavy city traffic and the roads in the suburbs have rough surfaces, they still wear sandals to drive. Is that not a hazard? I know there must be points here that we should be evaluating, and that is sobering.”

Takagi was serving as the team's vice captain and riding in the lead car. While being careful of speeding violations, he also tried to have the local drivers drive like



they normally would as much as possible. A local female employee was also driving on the team, and she would sound her horn to warn other cars as she darted between lanes. She says people here want luxurious, powerful cars. She showed the Japanese team members riding with her a glimpse of what the locals drive like, and it was more than they had imagined.

People have different car cultures than Japan.

The temperatures had not been too hot on the Middle Eastern leg of the Drive

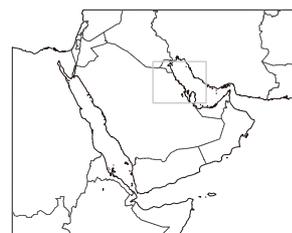




Project, but in Bahrain the mercury rose to close to 30 degrees Celsius in the daytime. In summer, the temperature is said to hit 50°C even in the shade. Local leader Nadim Eladas says that a car's air conditioner is quite obviously important.

“Toyota’s AC is the best. But if it gets over fifty degrees, it sometimes doesn’t work as well. The dashboard gets too hot and sometimes starts to creak. And then what a lot of customers comment on is road noise and vibration. Bahrain has oil fields in the south and cities in the middle and the north, and the roads are rough in some spots.”

He went on to describe some of the local feedback in detail. *“Customers love Toyotas. But they also often tell me that they’re boring.”* While abstract, this feedback is related to the central focus of the Drive Project. Customers want the cars to offer more fun moments—not only in their design but also like a feeling of excitement when you sit down in the seat. Nadim’s comments are what you might expect from Bahrain, which hosts Formula One races, and hints at the country’s mature car culture. What the people want from cars is not just performance—they also know the fun of driving on a deeper level.



Distance: 431km
 Duration: March 3-6, 2019
 Days: 4 days
 Vehicles: Land Cruiser 200, Hilux, Lexus LX570, Prado, Fortuner, RAV4, Rush