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HD Fearless Traveler Overlanding: The Bargain Of Adventure Travel By James T. Yenckel

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"Overlanding," a relatively new kind of organized travel that has been popular in Europe for the past two decades, is attracting growing numbers of Americans. Since participants camp instead of staying in hotels, its appeal is to bargain-hunting wanderers with a taste for adventure.

The basic idea is that a small group of travelers under the leadership of an experienced guide explores a country (or continent) on a flexible itinerary, going by minibus, full-size coach or -- if the terrain is especially difficult -- by four-wheel-drive truck. The group pitches tents in parks along the way and cooks its own food to cut costs.

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Outfitters in the United States and abroad offer trips as exotic as a five-month London-to-South Africa safari or as close to home as a 12-day jaunt down the Atlantic or Pacific coast. It is one of the cheapest, and friendliest, ways to see large parts of North and South America, Europe, Africa and Asia.

Obviously, the traveler must be easy-going, since overlanders spend much of their time together. And, says Pete Fiske, 29, of Allentown, Pa., who has been a Trekamerica guide for four years, they should have stamina, endurance -- and a tolerance for bugs and rainy nights in a tent.

Fiske's firm, headquartered in London, has been arranging overland excursions for 12 years in Europe (as Trek Europa) and in the United States, but until this year the trips had been sold primarily to Europeans and other nationalities. Now the trips are being promoted to Americans, in part because the U.S. dollar goes a long way in Europe.

Europeans accepted overlanding quickly, Fiske speculates, because they are more accustomed to mass travel. Americans tend to vacation in their own cars with family and friends. But bookings are growing here, according to Fiske and to Merle Friedenber of the Adventure Center in Oakland, Calif., an organization that represents several outfitters with overlanding tours to Asia, Africa and South America.

One problem, says Fiske, who doubles as a Trekamerica sales official in the winter, is that most Americans -- and travel agents, for that matter -- "aren't even aware these opportunities are available." Last year the firm, which has a fleet of 100 13-passenger minibuses, carried 10,000 travelers on its U.S. and European tours. Among its 14 U.S. and eight European itineraries this year are:

"The Discoverer": A four-week, 12-country European ramble departing from London. It takes in several alpine countries as well as Belgium, Holland and northern Spain at a cost of about \$700, or approximately \$25 a day for land transportation and tent accommodations. Shared food costs and personal expenses -- an evening at a pub, an occasional restaurant meal or night in a hotel -- might total another \$25 a day.

"The Red Star": A three-week peek behind the Iron Curtain into East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, as well as visits to Belgium, Luxembourg, West Germany and Austria. About \$550, or \$25 a day for transportation and camping. Additional food and personal expenses are estimated at \$25 a day.

"The Rocky Mountaineer": A three-week tour of Canadian and American national parks between Seattle/Vancouver and Yellowstone in Wyoming. About \$600, or under \$30 a day for transportation and camping. Food and personal expenses: \$20 a day.

Fiske's most-recent trip was in October, a 5,000-mile transcontinental swing across the northern tier of states -- "The Northerner" -- from New York City to San Francisco, with stops in Chicago, the Dakota Badlands, Yellowstone, Salt Lake City and Lake Tahoe in the California and Nevada Sierras. His job is to drive and to shepherd his 13 paying passengers, some of whom initially are apprehensive at the idea of camping.

But, he says, they soon find it is fairly easy to set up a tent, and after three weeks they are experts. The chores are done on a rotating basis. One group shops and cooks (food cost is about \$25 a week each), another cleans up and a third tidies the interior of the bus. Usually the tallest and strongest male is detailed to load and unload luggage from the top of the bus.

The quality of the campfire meals ranges widely; the menu is as varied as the nationalities of the cooks. Once he averted a goof when he spotted a woman from Holland who thought she was buying cans of tuna for dinner: it was cat food.

Trekamerica and Trek Europe try to arrange a "50-50 mix" of sexes and balance the nationalities so none dominates. English, however, is the universal language. The firm, unlike some overlanding operators, has an age requirement, taking only travelers from 20 to 38 years old.

The under-20s can't participate in the pub life, explains Fiske, and the over-38s often don't want to.

On the U.S. trips, the favorite camp is in state and national parks, but sometimes the group will stay in a commercial campground, especially near a big city. Along the way, there are plenty of stops for hikes, a swim in a mountain lake, a picnic in a pretty spot, an afternoon or evening at a rodeo. Ice-cream halts are an almost daily must.

Much of the mood of a group of strangers is set by the tour leader, Fiske believes, so he makes a special effort to participate in both the recreational activities and the chores. In four years, he has never experienced a quarrelsome busload. Once, a six-week journey started off with five Germans and three Israelis who refused to share a seat; after a while, they were "singing and dancing together."

The best passengers, Fiske says, "are the ones who say, 'Let's do anything and everything. Whatever you've got lined up for us, let's do it.' They have an open mind." Occasional loners "sometimes come right out of their shells."

The hardest part of any trip, he says, are the goodbyes after weeks of shared activity. Some group members form close friendships, and once in awhile a romance blossoms.

Somewhat more rigorous are the far-flung expeditions of London-based **Encounter Overland**, one of the oldest overlanding outfitters, launching 21-passenger trucks across Asia, Africa and South America since 1963.

At the outset, the firm warns potential travelers: "At times on some trips heat and humidity will make real demands, and at others the sole comfort is that everyone is subjected to the same mud and dust. There is no air-conditioned splendor, luxurious baths or space-age ovens, and you could say that the room service is lousy."

But that is balanced with the opportunity to reach unusual destinations -- "vibrant, scenic, historic" -- with time to explore them in depth. Part of the fun is shopping at local markets for each day's meals and ending the day around a campfire reading or getting to know fellow overlanders from several countries.

Encounter Overland limits its shorter trips -- "brief encounters" -- to ages 18 to 40 and its transcontinental tours to ages 18 to 38. Among the firm's upcoming trips:

"The Great Safari": London-to-Johannesburg, South Africa, a 17-week adventure by truck that crosses Algeria, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroun, Central African Republic, Zaire, Rwanda, Tanzania, Zambia and Botswana. \$3,160 for land costs, plus an estimated \$6 a day for personal expenses.

"Peru & the Incas": A brief encounter. Four weeks in a circle tour from Lima into the Andes to Cuzco, Machu Picchu and Lake Titicaca. \$920 for land costs, and \$6 a day personal expenses.

"Goa & South India": A brief encounter. A four-week drive from Bombay to the former Portuguese colony of Goa (with superb beaches) and on to Madras. \$745, and \$6 a day personal expenses.

Another overlanding outfitter offering similar truck tours of Africa, Asia and South America is Exodus Expeditions, founded in 1974. The maximum age is 40. Itineraries of from one month to half a year average about \$150 a week.

A couple of years ago, the Adventure Center's Merle Friedenberg, who is 30, chose a Guerba Expeditions trip, "Trans-Africa Slowly," a five-month London-to-Nairobi expedition by four-wheel-drive truck. (A September '84 departure is \$3,270 for land costs, plus a food-kitty fee of \$530 and personal expenses.) Her most-vivid memories are of meeting the village people on a "one-to-one" basis along the way.

On any trip through remote areas of the underdeveloped and often politically unstable countries of the Third World, there is the possibility of delay and even danger. "It is essential," says Guerba, a firm which specializes in African trips (two weeks to 37 weeks), that overlanders "understand that in Africa local conditions are not always predictable, and such occurrences as border closures, delayed ferry sailings, poor road conditions, etc., can and do from time to time cause delays, frustrations and diversions from our planned route."

But on her trip, says Friedenberg, delays were minimal and there were no political hassles. Sometimes a border agent might take five hours to stamp passports instead of five minutes "because he hadn't seen anybody for a long time." And once they got stuck in the mud for 24 hours in Upper Volta.

Fortunately, a kilometer or so ahead was "the first pub we'd seen in six weeks." The group made up for the drought and then hired a tractor to help dig them out.

At no time on her trip did she feel "danger for my physical well-being." The trucks carry fuel for up to 3,000 miles of travel and about a week's supply of drinking water, with enough left over for quick showers.

One surprise was that despite the amount of time the group was forced to spend together, there was plenty of opportunity to be alone. In the cities, especially, individuals could explore on their own. As for the people -- who ranged in age from 22 to 72 -- she came to like many, and there were none she disliked.

"It was potluck in personalities," she says, but you realize "you're in it together, so people do make an effort to get along." A sense of humor and "a willingness to pitch in" are big helps.

A somewhat more comfortable version of overlanding is offered by Himalaya Overland, a 20-year-old firm that operates 42-passenger motor coaches on a 54-day run from London to Katmandu in Nepal (or vice versa). Accommodations include campsites, hostels and hotels in Western Europe and economic hotels in India. Meals are either at the campsite or in restaurants. There is no age restriction.

Called the "Nomad," the route traces the caravan trails of ancient times, crossing Belgium, West Germany, Austria, Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and India. (An alternate version includes a flight over Iran to avoid that country, and travelers can join for a portion of the itinerary.) The land cost is \$1,375, which includes breakfast and most dinners. Personal expenses are estimated at \$10 a day.

Another unusual itinerary is the 50-day "Cossack" from London to Athens (or back) via Scandinavia, the Soviet Union -- south from Leningrad to Moscow, Kiev and Odessa -- Bulgaria and Turkey. About \$1,400 for land arrangements, plus some additional food costs and \$10 a day for personal expenses.

Even the motor coach trips, however, are far from the kind of vacation that attracts people who want to be pampered. With the proper spirit, though -- and a thorough understanding of the tour contract -- an overlanding expedition could quite properly rank as a trip of a lifetime.

For more information, contact a travel agent or these organizations specializing in overlanding trips:

Trekamerica/Trek Europa: Trek Tours of America Corp., Box 127, Staten Island, New York City, N.Y. 10309, (800) 221-0596.

Adventure Center: 5540 College Ave., Oakland, Calif. 94618, (800) 227-8747. The firm represents the following overlanding outfitters: Encounter Overland, Guerba Expeditions, Exodus Expeditions, Himalaya Overland.

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