



ON THE AFRICA ROAD SHOW.

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Overland through the continent is the ultimate adventure. Paula Snyder went independently and on a tour

"I'VE GOT a complaint to make." One look at her face and you knew Nerys was serious. "The coffee people have stolen the tea people's water." There aren't many circumstances when it is reasonable to get steamed up over a cup of hot water. To be fair to Nerys, however, this was probably one of them.

The day before we had been battling through soft sand for hours on a little-used track leading out of Chobe National Park in Botswana. It was already dark when the truck fell victim to its second flat tyre of the day and we were forced to camp on the road. We had just crawled into our tents, exhausted and grubby, when there was a blinding flash of lightning and the skies opened. It was a spectacular storm. So when Nerys got up at dawn and struggled to light a fire with wet wood, she was understandably put out when her longed-for cuppa disappeared into someone else's jug of coffee grounds.

There are plenty of lessons to be learnt travelling with 18 strangers in the back of a Bedford truck on your way from Cape Town to Harare. Boiling up enough water for everyone is just one of them.

For your average armchair traveller, going overland through Africa promises the ultimate adventure: impossible roads, deserts to cross, bridges to rebuild, mile after mile of unspoiled wilderness to explore. Most never get there. Fewer still have the chance to have the experience twice.

Six years ago my husband, Bob Swain, and I packed in our jobs, loaded our second-hand Land Rover with jerry cans and sand planks and took off on a 10-month trip from Brighton to Dar es Salaam that took us 23,000 miles through more than 20 countries. This time round we had gone for the soft option, signing up for a five-week trip with one of the tour companies that every year transports thousands of would-be adventurers in search of the trip of a lifetime, the sight of a lion at close hand, or perhaps just a glimpse of themselves.

Our driver, a good-natured Australian called Ian, had the job of keeping everyone happy while making sure there was enough fuel, food and water to get where we were going, not to mention taking care of all the paperwork.

Swapping stories about border posts, police checks and visa bureaucracy is a favourite pastime of overlanders in Africa. Guide books for budget travellers offer chirpy advice like: "The immigration official at Koro is the friendliest bloke in the whole of Africa." Or, "Avoid getting your visas here as the man in charge has been described as a right bastard." There's no point trying to work out which days these poor officials work. By the time you get there they will have been transferred, and the traveller who fingered them will be either three years into a mortgage back home or flexing their subjectivity a couple of continents further on.

The truth is, when it comes to border posts and the like, there are some guide books and attitudes best left at home. Crossing from Rwanda into Burundi in 1988 - when such things were still possible - Bob and I had been perfectly happy to wait for the customs official to finish his lunch, unlike the overlander behind us who came striding angrily out of the border post storming that, "This is no way to run a bloody country." No prizes for guessing who had the longest wait.

Travelling with an tour company removes most of the bureaucracy and a lot of the hard work you will face crossing Africa on your own. And the economies of scale that come from travelling with a big group mean the truck companies can offer overland trips more cheaply than anything you could organise in your own vehicle.

Fixed start and end dates for your journey make it easier to plan a break from work or home responsibilities, though there is no rigid timetable and truck passengers do have choices about what they see and do.

Our group found it remarkably easy to take decisions, though the democratic process was hastened by Ian's masterful presentation of the options. "OK, everyone," he would say, "we can spend two days driving on terrible roads to get to a rock painting that's not worth seeing anyway, or we can spend an extra day loafing around the game park. What do you want to do?" Or, "Do you want to spend all day driving in the truck or take a sunset cruise along the Zambezi with free beer?"

There are remarkably few rules on overland trucks and you quickly discover why they are there. For the sake of security everyone's backpacks were stored in a padlocked trailer. This was opened at the beginning and end of each day for people to stow away dirty washing and haul out whatever you needed. Rescuing a forgotten passport at a border post constituted the sort of emergency when the trailer had to be opened in the middle of the day. Running out of duty-free cigarettes did not.

Day-to-day chores are divided up, with everyone volunteering for a regular job. We had two trailer packers, three quartermasters responsible for truck stores, four on water duty, four people to share fire-lighting, two to hand out camp beds and mosquito nets, two bar staff, a secretary, a rubbish collector and a nurse. With three real-life nurses on the trip Albert, a Dutch systems analyst, soon discovered his job involved nothing more than handing out the malaria pills every morning and promptly spent the rest of the trip helping everyone else do their jobs as well.

But there is a down side to the sort of self-sufficiency you build up on a truck. Having voted for a bar on the first night of the trip, we made regular stops to stock up with beer, soft drinks and blocks of ice to keep everything chilled. This meant there was no need to stop in African bars, one of the best ways of dipping into local life, catching up on politics and just generally passing the time of day with new friends.

The sheer size of the group acts as another barrier to experiencing African life. Twenty people in a bright orange truck with an experienced guide can generally look after themselves; two people in a Land Rover pulling into a village might need help finding the market or directions to the road out of town.

Crossing Zare on our earlier trip, we stopped in Bumba, a fair-sized town on the main road east to Kenya, only to discover that the petrol stations had run dry. Instantly we were befriended by Matthew, a young student with the earphones of his Walkman permanently plugged in. The fact that it had no batteries didn't seem to affect its power as a status symbol - and at least he could hear what we were saying. He helped us buy petrol from a local trader and insisted on accompanying us to the local market to shop. In return, he asked, could we give him a lift to see his father? We were more than happy to oblige.

Matthew's father turned out to be a laboratory technician at a remote mission hospital run by Italian nuns. The sisters had never come across a single traveller in the 30 years they had been there. They gave us glasses of chilled grenadine and graciously invited us to camp on their lawn - an unbelievable luxury in a country where the best camping spots we had found were gravel pits at the side of the road.

That evening Matthew brought his father to chat to us in the gathering dusk, fingers of mist creeping slowly down through the rainforest that surrounded us. We discussed what sort of houses people lived in in England, the differences between social security in Britain and Zare and the kind of food people ate back home. Matthew's father was interested in everything we had to say about British life, but the thing he found hardest to accept was the price we paid for bananas.

Just as they were leaving, the strange muffled squawks that had punctuated our conversation were explained. "To thank you for bringing my son to see me, I have brought you a chicken," he said, holding out the unfortunate bird by its bound feet. I crossed my fingers in the dark. "I'm sorry," I said, thanking him profusely, "we haven't a big enough pot to cook it in." In truth, I couldn't bring myself to strangle my dinner.

What you end up eating every day is one of the biggest differences between travelling on your own or with an organised truck. With just the two of us there were times when we went to bed hungry as well as tired - defeated by fate, the weather or a straightforward unavailability of food. The truck carried enough stores to feed everyone for days on end; and with a cook tent, weather was never a problem. Everyone got the chance to do cooking duty on a nine-day rota that left us plenty of time to plan what to cook next for 21 people on a wood fire, not forgetting the vegetarian option. The standard of food was unbelievably high. Three square meals a day included regular cooked breakfasts, an apricot crumble, chilli con carne, beef stroganoff, spaghetti bolognese and ostrich steaks in garlic sauce. On Christmas morning we breakfasted on chilled champagne and barbecued chicken at Sossuvlei in the Namibian desert, in the shadow of the biggest sand dunes in the world.

So if you prefer your adventure to be laced with the odd luxury here and there, a truck company could be just the thing to tempt you from the safety of your armchair.

! The second edition of 'Through Africa - the Overlanders' Guide' by Bob Swain and Paula Snyder, retitled 'Africa by Road', will be published in November by Bradt Publications. Travel Notes Paula Snyder and Bob Swain travelled with **Encounter Overland** from Cape Town through Namibia and Botswana to Harare in Zimbabwe. The five-week trip costs #1,285, including all food and game park fees but excluding air fares. Encounter Overland, 267 Old Brompton Road, London SW5 9JA (0171 370 6845). Other companies offering truck tours of Africa include: Dragoman, Camp Green, Kenton Road, Debenham, Suffolk IP14 6LA (01728 861133); Exodus, 9 Weir Road, London SW12 0LT (0181 673 0859); Guerba, 101 Eden Vale Road, Westbury, Wiltshire BA13 3QX (01373 826611); and Kumuka, 40 Earls Court Road, London W8 6EJ (0171 937 8855). The best supplier of vehicles and equipment for an independent trip is: Brownchurch Ltd, Hare Row, London E2 9BY (0171 729 9437). see more of local African life (above) Drive-in diner: an organised tour camp (as here, in Namibia) never runs short of food or supplies.

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