

TRAVELS

WITH ANNIE

IT WAS THE FLIES that warned me, the noise of their frenzied eating. I covered my mouth and nose with my hand, and as my camel rounded a corner I saw a man lying in the sand, naked apart from a loin cloth. At first I thought he was dead but as my camel plodded by he pushed his elbow through the cloud of flies and opened an eye.

I will never forget the look of desperation he gave me. Not far behind was my Sudanese camel-man. By sign language I indicated we should do something – but death was inevitable. The flies coupled with dehydration would complete his fate.

There were 15 of us in a Bedford truck heading from Kathmandu to London across Asia and the Middle East and completing a circle of Africa before heading north to London. Our Great Overland Encounter scheduled for 32-plus weeks was the first trip to be run in one vehicle with one driver – who happened to be me.

We were all Kiwis and Aussies punctuated with an American and Canadian. I'd worked for Encounter Overland for just over two years and looked on the opportunity of running this trip as an ultimate challenge.

The living-dead man being eaten by flies was a reminder of the harshness of Africa's food shortage. Although he was dying on a main nomad route, not one person had helped him. Food was scarce and you looked after your own people first.

Three days later I passed by him again. He had died and his bloated body was covered by even more flies, though someone had turned him around. I assumed it was so he would die facing Mecca.

AS WE ARRIVED in Sudan, so did the rains. They were welcome, for the country had suffered a seven-year dry spell and starvation was widespread. However, a rainy season in Sudan means that all traffic, apart from camels and donkeys, ceases for three to four months. We had left Khartoum knowing the rains had come with a vengeance and our chances of making it into Central Africa would be limited. As we drove south west through Southern Darfur, walking and clearing muddy bogs, scouting routes through rising rivers became a daily routine.

At Wadi Bulbul we came across a convoy of Super Hippo trucks. You could smell the sorghum rotting inside their sacks. The grain



JOHN McDERMOTT

Courage, ingenuity, humanity and a spirit of adventure sum up Annie Bradshaw's extraordinary character.

It has just been announced that she will be a location manager for the New Zealand-inspired first complete circumnavigation of the Arctic Circle.

These travel notes are from a recent expedition across the Middle East and Africa.

by Annie Bradshaw

had been sent from the US and was destined for the more isolated regions we were heading for, but rain had prevented their progress.

We communicated with the drivers through sign-language and books, and decided to join forces to try to cross the wadi. The Super Hippos had been waiting for over a week.

The wadi was about half a kilometre across, so we cleared obstructions as best we could and prepared ourselves with sandmats. A Sudanese driver drove his Super Hippo as far as he could, until it sank into the sand. It was then our job to dig and sandmat it to the other side.

It's amazing what can be achieved when people work together. Between about 40 of us we managed to get the truck to the other side. We then drove the next truck as far into the wadi as it would go and towed it out with the truck waiting on the far side.

After three days, our convoy of seven trucks got across Wadi Bulbul. But for the Super Hippos the effort was in vain. Aid co-ordinators arrived in a Landrover and tractor, and they were told to abandon any attempts at further progress.

The American co-ordinator told me he had been in Bulbul only two weeks earlier and would not have recognised the place, as the rains had allowed the dormant vegetation to emerge in full bloom. According to their reports, all Sudanese trucks had stopped running for the wet season, and although they shook their heads in a solemn way and told us we would not make our destination, we decided to press on towards Central Africa. I could not call the trip off on hearsay – the facts were something we would have to discover for ourselves.

EARLIER ON we had suffered a set-back in Pakistan which had delayed our trip by almost a fortnight. To be two weeks late in a rainy season can be critical.

In Pakistan there is a constant flow of traffic on both sides of the road. It consists of everything from bicycles and rickshaws to trucks. If you don't overtake under these circumstances, you can find yourself crossing Asia at five kilometres an hour.

It's also common for Pakistanis to play "chicken" – especially with tourists. This is a game of staying in the centre of the road for as long as you dare, as another truck comes towards you.



Slow progress across a muddy bog.

I had been overtaking a truck, facing an on-coming tractor. I wasn't worried, even when the tractor pulled into the middle of the road and, as I expected, drifted back onto its side of the road. Then just as I was drawing level, the driver suddenly pulled back into the middle of the road and we met virtually head-on.

The tractor snapped in two and the truck's front axle was torn from the U-bolts and forced back, tearing the sump off and scraping the big-end bearings as it went. We finally came to rest under a tree on the wrong side of the road.

We were still upright but I was considerably closer to the ground than I wanted to be and the engine oil, which had been used for only 35 kilometres, formed a pool beneath us.

No one on the truck was injured but the tractor driver, who had obviously been smoking something a little stronger than tobacco, had a broken leg. The smile on his face told us he was in no pain.

A crowd gathered, made up mostly of women who wailed at the top of their voices. It was difficult to hear yourself speak. The more I tried to tell them the Pakistani driver was okay, the louder they wailed. They weren't even in tune.

It took four days of intense negotiations to retrieve our truck. Because we were foreigners (which equals wealth) the Pakistani tractor owners wanted \$US4,500 for damage to their vehicle, even though it wasn't our fault.

The police said we shouldn't pay, but every time we went to collect the truck the locals knew we were coming and threatened to burn it if we didn't come up with the money. I asked for police protection, but they gave me only one or two armed men who were terrified of the locals and who assured me that the truck would indeed be burnt if the money wasn't paid.

I told the police I needed a truck-load of armed men but they would not do this unless I registered a case. If I did register a case they told me it would probably take a year before it was heard and the damaged truck had to be produced as evidence. Obviously this was out of the question.

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An arbitrator finally suggested I pay them and be done with it. I nominated \$US400. The arbitrator simply said, "And that is all you will pay?" I believe if I'd said four dollars I would have paid just that.

Four days later, a mechanic fixed the truck with nothing more than hammer and heat, and to top it off presented me with a certificate which made me an Honorary Life Member of the Pakistan Transport and Workers Union. I bet I'm the only Western woman to hold the honour.



Putting the truck through a test of temperament.

THIS ACCIDENT made me a little nervous, so when I went to Iran I took the advice of a fellow driver and headed through the southern part of the country. While we were looking at the map I pointed out that the road seemed to be a little close to Iraq, and as they were at war it might be dangerous. He assured me it wasn't and I believed him.

As it turned out, the road was indeed too close to Iraq and at about 6.00pm one evening we were arrested at gunpoint, and after spending a night at an army post we were escorted by five jeeps equipped with anti-aircraft guns back to a town called Sardenaj, where we were checked out by Interpol for being spies.

In a stressed moment I told a soldier to "Shut-up and go away". I hadn't realised he was a *general*, as he was dressed in the same desert uniform as other soldiers.

After hours of questions and checks the general told me to gather my group as he had something to say. Despite my repeated questions he kept me in suspense the whole time. When he eventually told us we could go he half-smiled and looked at me sideways and said, "I haven't forgotten you told me to shut-up and go away." I just smiled and thought, thank God I hadn't been more explicit.

Our visas expired the next day and they told us we had to back-track to the main road via Esfahan. Although I drove solidly from 3.00pm until 10.00am the following morning, we arrived late, but they seemed to know we were coming and let us into Turkey without any problems. However, the incident made us even later for the rainy season.



"I took the fuel system apart from tank to injectors."

THE RAIN continued to fill every dent in the earth's surface. Deep down inside I knew our chances of making it were very, very slim.

The border between Sudan and Central Africa was called Um Dafog and we had been told that during the rainy season it becomes encircled by a huge swamp preventing any access by vehicle. So in Rahed El Berdi I decided to send scouts to see if this was true. If the way was clear they would wait for us at Um Dafog, and if not they were to go on to Bangui, the capital of Central Africa and the nearest place ahead, with a communication to the outside world.

It was over 1000 kilometres away and the only transport was a camel. The administrator in Rahed told us there was a mission plane that flew once a week from Birao, just over the Central African border, and if our scouts were lucky they would be able to hitch a ride. This would halve the distance.

There was only one man on the truck who I thought could accomplish this formidable journey. There were no maps. He would have to rely entirely on his initiative and he had to have the will to carry on when every-

thing looked hopeless. His name was John Martens, an Australian chef and he agreed to undertake the challenge.

He chose a travelling companion, who would have to wait in Birao while John undertook the second part of the journey alone.

Smugglers heading south with empty loads were plentiful so they were quite happy to take two paying passengers as far as the border. I think everyone had a lump in their throats as we waved goodbye to our friends. No one really knew what lay ahead of them.

By the end of the day, the river which separated us from our road to the border had grown from an ankle-deep stream to a river we had to swim across. The administrator said the road was closed anyway, so he organised a guide to help us find a way to the border. We would truly be going overland.

Our guide was an old Sudanese man and we spent a lot of time waiting while he walked around finding the best route. It was a frustrating time for all of us as our relationship was based on trust. The language barrier allowed no explanations.

However, our frustrations were to deepen, for early on July 24 the truck decided to stop for no obvious reason. Although we didn't know it at the time we were to remain abandoned for the next 28 days. The guide decided he had a family to look after, and left us.

I took the fuel system apart from tank to injectors and replaced it with every spare part I had. Nothing was obviously wrong except for one thing: I'd flattened the batteries.

We could not push the truck — it simply sank and every other trick to start it failed. As I went to bed that night the seriousness of the problem stole a few hours of my sleep.

Bush telegraph is extremely efficient and it didn't take long for hungry people to arrive at our camp. There were a lot of aid vehicles in Sudan and these people didn't know we were merely travellers.

It's funny how people react under stress. Some of the group shared their food and others gorged themselves on second and third helpings, oblivious to the silent hunger or indeed our own circumstances. Eventually the famished people moved on.

I decided to leave the truck in search of a battery charger, so we flagged down a camel, loaded the two batteries and started walking to the fabled town of Um Dafog.

Camel men can walk tirelessly all day and exist on virtually no food. We couldn't. One night we stopped, as usual, near a nomad camp. Hunger had taken its grip and I brought out my very last six Sudanese pounds and indicated to the camel-man we needed something — anything to eat.

He returned five minutes later carrying a brown, mangy, ancient, male goat. It looked absolutely delicious. He slaughtered it where we sat with such skill it didn't bleat a murmur and we threaded its flesh onto sticks, cooked it around the fire and ate every single bit — inside and out.

Just before we reached Um Dafog we discovered that it was, indeed, surrounded by a swamp. Camels have smooth flat feet and are not equipped to walk through water. They had to be forced through the mud and fell on a number of occasions.

At the village my heart sank. There was nothing in Um Dafog except for a well and an empty souk. It didn't take long to discover that our scouts had gone on to Central Africa.

But we found a battery charger. It was unbelievable — especially when they showed us they even had petrol to run it. Two days later we had charged the batteries and regenerated our bodies by eating intestines and doughnuts.

Three days later, back again in camp I checked the engine. Satisfied that it should

go I tried once — nothing. I tried again — still nothing. An awful silence fell. I was so devastated I couldn't even cry. After a while, a card game started up and, with a stoicism that seems to come only from adversity, the group carried on as normal.

There was nothing to do but try again. This time I went alone, though rain made it a slower trip.

Once again I arrived in Um Dafog, where the Sudanese were as sympathetic and friendly as usual.

Then, one afternoon, when I was returning from the well, someone shouted, "Hey, Bradshaw!"

I couldn't believe my senses. Wandering along the track with a stick and a loaded donkey were the scouts and another driver, called Dave Robertson. They were bearded, dirty and looked as though they'd come from a long way away — as indeed they had. It was a month, almost to the day, since they'd left. I promptly burst into tears.

They had stories to tell of strange people, little and no food, wrong paths and faithful donkeys. When Johnno had flown back to Birao he'd found the smugglers were loaded with bounty so wouldn't carry them unless they paid an outrageous sum of money.

"Difficult times ... often create a bond which lasts a lifetime."

Any other person would have agreed to pay the money, but not Johnno. He bought a donkey and decided to walk.

The Sudanese decided to lend us the battery charger and told us to leave it in the next town. This meant we wouldn't have to lose yet another week. I can't begin to describe the generosity of the Sudanese people. Although outwardly poor, they are surely the richest of all people on the inside.

We returned to the truck, which seemed to agree that it was time to go, for after a lot of whining and wheezing it burst into life. We celebrated by swapping our dwindling supplies of tea and sugar for a goat and some chickens and had a banquet.

IT WOULD have been fatalistic to wait for the dry season so we agreed that we should try to return to Khartoum.

Our return journey was successful only because we had a fortnight's dry spell. We still had to dig and push, and at one stage, although we were close enough to a village

to walk to it each night, it took us three days to get the truck there.

One person left the truck to make his way into Central Africa by camel. We never saw him again but heard later that he'd made it.

Three people suffered badly from tropical fevers and during the return journey were flown to Khartoum by an aid helicopter which we met by chance dropping food to villages.

A year later, while heading south, Dave Robertson died from cerebral malaria in Cameroon.

Most of the others are married now and some have even produced offspring.

When you share difficult times with people it can often create a bond which lasts a lifetime. I was a lucky person to have a lot of stoical, enterprising people with me — especially Johnno.

I remember an ancient, dirty calendar, three years out of date, hanging lop-sided on the wall of an Indian border-guard's office. It simply said, "Do not pray for an easy life, pray to be a stronger person." I thought it a useful message. ■

ANOTHER ADVENTURE

Annie Bradshaw (34) has been travelling all her life. Her adoptive parents, two brothers and sisters moved around the country every three or four years, as dad changed jobs. "We no sooner made friends and settled in than we'd have to uproot and move again. It was hard, but in a way it's good for you I think."

After finishing high school, Bradshaw did a journalism course in Wellington, then worked stints on the *Manawatu Evening Standard* and the *Rotorua Daily Post*.

But what she really wanted was to go overseas. "I'd always wanted to travel. I never, ever thought about anything else." She had a plan. "I thought I'd put 10 years aside to see the rest of the world. Because 10 years out of a lifetime isn't much. You educate yourself, say, from zero to 20 years old. Then 20 to 30 are the only years you really have as your own person. And even if you get married at say, 30, 35-plus, it's still over half your life married."

So at 21, Bradshaw and her boyfriend headed off to London. "Lived in London for three years. Bought a van, went round Europe and stuff like that. And then, when I was 25, we got engaged. That was sort of like a big turning point. I went away to Africa to think about whether or not I really wanted to get married."

She didn't. She fell in love with Africa and, as soon as she got back to London, applied for any job that could get her back there. Encounter Overland accepted her as a trainee leader/driver. She had a difficult time learning to become a competent diesel mechanic. "Essentially I lied about my driving and mechanical experience. I was the most useless, spastic trainee you could ever come across." But she survived, and ended up

working for the company for seven years, guiding groups through Africa, Asia and South America, gathering lots of good stories "to tell in the pub afterwards".

She came back to New Zealand about 18 months ago, because "it was a really transient way of life. You got to know people for three months and then they disappeared. You're always living out of the cab of your truck or a tent. There's no hot water, and you can't eat what you want to. It's just...just the luxuries."

She also decided to contact her birth mother. "It's really good. I'm quite close to her now. She's special. I could say I've got two mothers!" Returning home meant settling down. "You have to think about buying a house, getting a bit behind you. And I never earned enough to pay tax for the whole time I worked for EO. You don't do it for the money, that's for sure."

Despite all the best intentions, settling down will have to wait a while. There's another adventure. This month she starts her job as location manager for Graeme Dingle's Expedition Artikos — a complete circumnavigation of the Arctic Circle.

"We fly out in three weeks and I haven't even seen the radio. I'm running round saying, 'Can I listen to your radio? What are you supposed to say?' It's a nightmare!" A nightmare she's really looking forward to. "Travelling stirs something from within you that nothing else does. I thought I'd gotten over it. I thought nothing would ever make me go away again."

She'll be back in New Zealand towards the end of the year. After that? "I'm not going anywhere. Ever again." Though she does have very fond memories of Zaire...
Shelley Howells