

Off on a trip that just 'can't be done'

IT can't be done — that is what seasoned travellers with many years' experience of exploring difficult country all over the world have said of the latest venture of the Shefford-based organisation Encounter Overland: an expedition from London to Johannesburg, spanning the entire length of Africa.

Encounter Overland, operating from headquarters at Wren Park, just outside Shefford, run expeditions which take adventurous people into many of the most interesting parts of Asia and Africa.

Their regular runs include a three-month expedition to India, Kashmir and Nepal, and shorter ones to Asia Minor and the northern Sahara and High Atlas; also special expeditions trans-Sahara, to the salt and sand deserts of Iran, and to Nuristan and the Hindu Kush.

Travellers with Encounter Overland see places and meet people that the ordinary tourist never goes anywhere near.

The new expedition to South Africa, due to start on January 31, is a reconnaissance venture. The route takes them through France to

Spain and North Africa, following the Mediterranean coast to Algiers before striking due south, straight across the desert.

Crossing into northern Nigeria, they pass through Kano, turn west to go down to Lagos on the coast, and return east to pass the top of Lake Chad, going on in a series of dog-legs to Stanleyville, Congo, and due east to Uganda before striking south again.

They pass through Zambia and Rhodesia before reaching South Africa.

"The biggest difficulties," says Robert Rumball, one of the expedition's organisers, "will be political rather than geographical."

Some of the country is going to be tough — very tough, particularly the desert crossing from Algiers to Kano. But a lot of uncertainties exist about the political aspects of the journey.

Will borders be open to them? How will trigger-happy officials in troubled states view the expedition? Will small tribal conflicts endanger them? Will they be allowed through Nigeria?

They will soon find out.