



Travelling light: Adventurer Gary J. Strand with one of the toughened-up Army trucks used by Overland Encounter.

H/L ● Globetrotting truckdriver loads up for the trip of a lifetime

NUMBER 23: Walsworth Road probably looks just like an ordinary house to a passer-by. But it's not. For at any one time it will hold anywhere between two and 12 young men who have decided to do something really different with their lives.

They drive truckloads of young adventurers from London across Europe and Asia to Kathmandu, or from London to Johannesburg, right across Africa, or from the northernmost to the southernmost tip of South America.

Their journeys take them across deserts, up mountains, through some of the world's most spectacular scenery and some of the world's poorest and most backward countries. They have to know how to patch up a broken-down truck when help is 100 miles away, how to talk their way through the borders of small warring states, and how to keep a group of two dozen people happy and content no matter what the circumstances.

These young men work for a company called Overland Encounter of Wren Park, Sheffield, and they have all opted out of humdrum jobs for a new life of adventure. Take Gary J. Strand for example. He's 23 and had been a fashion photographer in London and Bournemouth for three years.

"I started travelling and met a couple abroad who had just come off an Encounter trip and raved about this company. I got back to London and thought no more about it until I saw an advert in a tube station. I gave them a buzz.

"It seemed like an opportunity to travel, an opportunity to deal with people which I really enjoy doing, and it's a big challenge."

The drivers come from all walks of

ents or beneath the stars. "Camp fires are always a good time. If someone has a guitar people sing a few songs. It is gloriously hot, and you bake bread in the fire. It can be a really idyllic existence," said Gary.

After the Sahara, the green, green Niger. "The desert's beautiful, but it's lovely to get out of it and into the greenery," said Gary.

It's a journey of several weeks, starting each day at dawn, stopping early at local markets to stock up.

They climb Mount Kilimanjaro (three days up two days down); they pass through Kwanda, home of the mountain gorillas; they stop in the Ngorongoro crater, the largest in the world at ten miles by 12 miles and packed with game, and they trek down tiny jungle paths tunnelling through the undergrowth of the Ituri forests to Pigmy villages.

They cross rickety bridges over great rivers, they see game and wildlife of every description, they probably break down a couple of times, and with luck they finally reach Dar.

"It's great to have done that many miles and to have got the group across safely and enjoyed it," said Gary.

From Dar, it's an easy run back on tar-sealed roads down to Johannesburg, as they call it. "You have dealt with diplomatic situations, group situations and mechanical situations. You've had laughter, seriousness and enjoyability, and a good in-depth view of other countries."

"It's a lifestyle that suits me at the moment. You are never in one place long enough to be bored. You are seeing so many different aspects of life you can't experience in Europe. It is very demanding, which I like and with luck you are with a bunch of people who want to do the same things as you."

Doorway to a world of adventure

By Martin Fletcher

life. Gary said: "We have got a few farmers driving for us. We did have a lady lawyer. We have a vet, a scrap metal dealer, an ex-policeman, a sales rep. They just got sick of their jobs and wanted to do something more demanding."

"You don't need any qualifications, but you've got to prove yourself in the workshop and you've got to be good with people. It's a young guy's job. The life span of a driver is four to five years, then they presumably go back to their professions. A few drivers come across opportunities while they are on the road."

The drivers are as varied as the drivers. Gary's last trip included nurses, secretaries, teachers, doctors, journalists, biologists and draughtsmen of different nationalities.

"They have perhaps been working for three or four years and decided let's have a break and do something different. There's a lot of professional

At night they sleep in two-man

people, as they are the sort of people who can afford to do it."

The long-haul trips cost from about £900 to nearly £2,000. It might take 17 weeks. Preparations begin perhaps four months before the trip leaves, when ex-Army Bedford trucks arrive at Sheffield.

"When they come in from the Army, they are not as tough as we would like them to be," said Gary. Axles are reinforced, two rows of aircraft seats are inserted down the sides, cookers are fixed in, giant fuel tanks capable of taking the truck 1,600 miles at a go are attached and 101 modifications are made to safeguard the truck against any conditions it might meet.

In Africa, life is a big round of delights. They cross the Sahara in around four weeks, bouncing from volcanic rock into deep sand swamps which they "sandmat" out of.