

What a deal: 14 countries for \$3,000

By Lark Ellen Gould
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE

NAIROBI, Kenya — If you've got half a year to kill and haven't explored Africa yet, here's a deal for you.

To get the biggest bang for the travel buck, try London to Nairobi in the back of a remodeled 1944 Bedford Army transport truck.

Less than \$3,000 plus air fare buys you 14 countries, endless villages and the adventure of a lifetime — meals, tents and taxes included.

When I left London on a cold December day, wrapped in what meager clothing I brought for the tropical torpor ahead, it didn't take long to realize that the 20 people seated with me in the truck would be my connection to reality as well as the bane of my existence for the next four months. I also realized that if I truly wanted to see Africa, this was the easiest way to do it.

I was touring with Encounter Overland, a British adventure operation. With brochures in hand, we were briefed about the details of our trip at a wine-and-cheese gathering in the firm's London headquarters two days before the launch. We were headed across the Channel to Paris, then south through Spain and across



PHOTOS / LARK ELLEN GOULD

An average day was spent like this — 10 hours in the truck.

the Straits of Gibraltar to Morocco. Our maps were marked in pencil lines of vague planning, especially where Michelin showed only camel tracks.

Algeria would be next, then a drop to Niger and downward through Nigeria. Chad was doubtful because of the 83 miles of sand-matting involved to dig the truck out of the shifting dunes. We would go south to Cameroon, instead, then

east to Central African Republic and the rain forests of Zaire. If Rwanda and Burundi weren't into massacres and coups on our arrival, we'd continue east there to Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania and onto our terminating point in Nairobi. Sixteen weeks. \$2,900.

Discovery

Armed with Andre Gide, Conrad, the "Africa on a Shoestring" bible and a stack of empty notebooks, I

set out to discover Africa and myself. I shivered through Europe half asleep to the lull of the plane's megamotor, unsuspecting that most of the trip would be just a warmer version of this.

On an overland expedition, days are spent riding from sunup to sundown; the rest of the time goes to eating, setting up tents and cots, cooking and performing designated duties. Getting across Africa in four months demands constant motion and a tight crew. What I thought would be simple transport for a journey of my own thoughts, experiences and observations quickly dissolved into a dance of eggshell treading and chores. The days turned into boot camp under the authority of our driver/drill sergeant, Annie — a presence that not even the shimmering rain in the Ituri forests could divorce from my psyche.

Annie and I parted company early on when she threatened to leave me in the middle of the Sahara. I had two choices at the time: leave the tour and set up with the Tuaregs or shut down that part of my brain that had her in it. I opted for the latter.

In the short story "Snows of Kilimanjaro," Hemingway referred to
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his trips to Africa as the act that trimmed the fat from his soul. Taking an overland trip through the Dark Continent in a Bedford truck of 20 people not only cuts the fat away, it calcifies what's left. The truck grunts and groans its way to the belly of the beast, healthy and hopeful as any Conradian Steamer. Brief rest stops in Agadez, Niger, in Kano, Nigeria, in Bagui, Central African Republic, and in Kissangani, Zaire, let us know we were travelers in another man's land and not just bobbing fixtures on an oversized pickup.

Stranger and stranger

The deeper we plunged into the secrets of the jungle, the stranger the trip became. Cliques that formed in the early advance disintegrated into individual bubbles of defensiveness. Annie treated us to nightly stories about past Encounter Overland truckers who had been eaten by lions, trampled by hippos, felled by fatal malaria, murdered by guerrillas or thrown out body and pack in the jungle for bad behavior or attempting to kill other truck mates. I could see by the end of the trip that she was not making it up.

The mind, however, is a wondrous possession. It allows the body and spirit to eventually embrace the surroundings and adapt. This I did with grace and security, finding peace with sunset walks in the desert and bush. Friendly conversations along the sorghum fields, sharing banana brew and curiosity with locals provided much-needed warmth and pathos. When local people were scarce, I talked to the moon over the sands of Algeria. I dipped in rivers and streams with mothers washing clothes as their children pounded the water like a goatskin drum. In the midnight hours, I followed the sounds of distant beats, surprising villages of heated dancers with my trusty flashlight, exposed knees and foreign face. They welcomed me like a wayward but weary Livingstone, and we circle-danced until dawn moved over the acacias.

On her own

There were times along that four-month stretch when I abandoned the truck and its people for a chance to experience the continent on its own terms. I made clear plans with Annie (and witnesses) concerning when and where we would rejoin and stepped out ahead of the chugging and gurgling Bedford, knowing I would easily make the border before the truck.

These sojourns, I found, are crucial to an overland experience of Af-

rica. In a truck, the continent comes background, an entertain image watched with distance from velveteen truck seats. Off the vehicle, separation between Africa and alien disappears.

I caught the train in Dualo, Cameroon, and set out for a six-hour ride to Younde, where I'd spend two nights wrapped in the Makosa rhythms of the country. Music is everywhere in Cameroon. Happy choruses rained from speakers on the train and shouted from cassettes on the street. I watched people dance on the boulevards until dawn. I took in the movie "Raising Arizona" dubbed into French. I slept in a comfortable and clean mosquito-ridden room at the Presbyterian mission. I breakfasted on bread dipped in chocolate with the neighborhood children.

A scary ride

On the third day, I hopped on a bush taxi bound for the border of the Central African Republic. In it, I discovered the underside of Africa. The weeks I spent hating the sterile plush seats and somewhat adequate legroom offered on the Bedford faded into the realization that moving from one place to another in Africa on anything other than feet is an extreme luxury.

After haggling in French with a number of authorities at the bus station over which car was actually going my way (and receiving a differ-

ANNIE BRADSHAW LON-NBO 05/27.



A bridge is checked out before crossing with the truck's weight.

ent story with each person I asked), I joined a ride that, at end count, had jammed 40 people into a vehicle the size of a Chevy van. I put my body in an unlikely place and braced myself for the 17-hour bush ride. A woman in front of me shook with malaria tremors. The man next to me had been in a tractor accident, which had taken off much of his face. His breath came hard as he hung onto life for the long hours of rocky motion that would eventually bring him to a hospital. The *matatu* (bush taxi) turned into a rolling suitcase of skin. I found comfort and air hanging halfway out the window as the wheels bumped over the dirt.

For days after remeeting the group, I did my chores diligently and with gusto. I had originally been Garbage Queen, but when digging holes had become too difficult in the dry soil of the Sahel, I became Light Lady and illuminated the camp with fluorescent bulbs fueled by the truck's battery.

Cooking was something we did in pairs. Each subgroup shopped and cooked for three meals about every eight days. The truck had come equipped with stores of canned goods, but we were to use these sparingly and rely on local markets for our fare. A food kitty of \$35 per day for the group was provided by the company. By Zaire, however, we were lucky if we could buy bread. Peanuts, canned sardines and manioc squash for ugali paste were in excellent supply. Rather than roast a monkey or pay a fortune for someone's sole chicken, we went mostly meatless through the rain forest and partook of passion fruits and peanuts.

Despite the dearth of food, however, every woman in the truck gained a noticeable portion of weight. The general lack of activity had a sticking effect on whatever we did eat — and even vigorous mud-matting, bridge-building and truck-cleaning efforts could not burn off the calories.

An adventure, but ...

The overland trail is advertised as an adventure, and an adventure it is. In Africa, what worked the last time has no bearing on what will come about this time. Every border and bridge is crossed anew. Yet, overland travel with a tour outfit is also the safest way to see Africa. We had heard too many stories in our crossing of marooned Land-Rovers found in the Sahara with their dead occupants shaded underneath. We saw too many travelers stranded in camel posts awaiting car parts that could take two months to arrive. We had met too many border guards eager to ask for bribes and offer trouble, but shy against our hefty numbers.

We had our share of disaster. One accident in the Sahara desert held us up for two days when the driver split the drive shaft in two and bent the front axle over a boulder. Encounter Overland drivers, however, undergo extensive training for the job, which includes tearing the truck apart and rebuilding it with extra parts attached to the vehicle.

Overlanding with an adventure-tour company is necessarily an adventure in compromise, flexibility and getting along — not with the people you're visiting, but those with whom you are traveling. Our truck had a nearly even gender division that included six Americans, two New Zealanders, two Australians, an Icelander, a French Swiss who spoke little English, a Scott, a South African, five Canadians and a 56-year-old Brit named John who helped run the truck like Annie's first lieutenant. While conversation tended to be pretty lively for the first three weeks, breakdowns inevitably occurred in people's interests. Companionship eventually eroded

into three camps; those who wanted to see Africa and milk as much as possible from the experience; those who wanted to say they saw Africa, but stay on the truck; and those who wanted to drink beer.

Unfortunately, the adventurers lost out, so attractions such as Gibbs Farm and Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania and the rich game parks of Cameroon were missed. The tour did, however, abide by the catalog and offered visits to pygmy villages, gorilla sites, an okapi (a rare half-giraffe, half-zebra species) preserve, a volcano climb, two game parks in Tanzania and the Mount Kilimanjaro climb for a group discount.

Other attractions, such as the river barge down the Congo - an experience many travelers hold as the high point of their trip to Africa - are not advertised and were duly skipped by our driver. The more adventurous among us were urged to chance the barge (which might arrive tonight or two weeks from tonight), but were warned that the truck would not wait for them. There is only one east/west road through Zaire. Getting lost isn't the concern. Getting stranded is.

Civilization again

We made it to Nairobi a day ahead of schedule and found it to be the hub of adventure-travel operators. Having been out of civilization for quite some time, we found Nairobi a shock to the senses and required a day or two to adjust to the movement and the noise of Africa's most international city. Overlanders from all sorts of outfits, many of whom we had met and camped with in the jungle, could be found at the post office, where we spent hours making our calls and putting our affairs in order before going on alone.

Most adventure-travel outfits come out of the commonwealth countries but have representatives in the United States. One domestic company in Cambridge, Overseas Ad-

venture Travel, sets up shorter, luxury trips in the bush and brings along a cook so you don't have to spend your starry evenings peeling potatoes while the lions roar. Others, such as Epulu out of New Zealand, promise a hang-loose affair with an itinerary that can be changed according to the whims of the passengers as well as the locations of diesel and brew.

Some companies, such as Encounter Overland, have set up age restrictions that can be broken with special exception. Others such as Guerba Expeditions and Tracks offer no age limit. With Encounter Overland, you are required to show proof of appropriate vaccinations. A medicine chest of various antibiotics and wrappings rides with the truck, but supplies go fast. EO provides adequate supplies of two types of daily malaria prophylactics for passengers. A food kitty included in the tariff comes as a convenience, since collecting weekly food budgets on board becomes confusing and fodder for arguments.

Overlanding is not for everyone. It requires time, patience and the proper personality. However, having explored Africa both on tour and solo, I can say that a professionally-run overland tour company can offer the safest and most efficient way to see Africa for the least amount of money and time. That does not necessarily include having the best time of it. It does guarantee some personal growth as well as excellent stories and slides.

International overland tour companies are advertised in geographical and adventure magazines such as Outside magazine, and trips can be arranged through most travel outlets. In Cambridge, call Overseas Adventure Travel at (617) 876-0533. Other adventure travel companies include Sobek International Explorers Society, (209) 736-4524; Adventure Center, 1-800-227-8747; Safari Centre International, 1-800-223-6046 and Wilderness Travel, 1-800-247-6700.

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