



Rough

JEREMY LAZELL joins a pioneering overlanding trip through Libya, and braves sandstorms, disappearing roads, and some mind-numbingly boring company; six weeks and 10,000km later, he realises he has loved nearly every minute of it

Some of my friends were a bit unhappy that I was off to Libya. "What about Gaddafi?" they asked in the weeks before I left. In Cairo on day one, trapped in the conversation from hell with a man from my group who collected countries like they were beer mats, I began wondering if anything Gaddafi had got planned for us could possibly be as tortuous. While he ran through his list, scattering observational nuggets in his wake ("Mauritania's pretty boring, really"), I fought hard to quell the rising panic: six weeks to Tunis.

The company I was travelling with was called Ecoconner, which I thought was a good sign, but this was the first time I had done the group thing and I was having a few doubts: two's company, three's a crowd... but two Aussies, six Kiwis, seven Brits and a Canadian? Okay for a Commonwealth convention, perhaps, but for slipping quietly through the souks, moseying around the medinas?

Next day, in a dusty field no more than a snapshot away from the pyramids at Giza, we met up with our transport, and the doubts did little carnage in my mind. "Monty" (think second world war, think campaign in the Western Desert) was, for those who know these things, a 4½-ton, 4x4, double main engine Bedford. For those who don't, he was a big orange truck. Very big and very orange. Toy parking that in town without raising the odd eyebrow, which is what critics of overlanding tend to harp on about: not the parking but the eyebrow-raising. "Travel!" barked one die-hard seek-

er. I talked to at the Royal Geographic Society on the eve of my departure. "It's no more travel than a bloody stag weekend." Thing is, I've only been on one stag weekend, and I quite enjoyed that.

So, six weeks and 10,000km later, what had my money bought me that I couldn't have got just going it alone? Well, the obvious answer is in a place such as Libya is that it got me there in the first place, because unless you've got the mechanical nous and navigational bottle to drive across vast tracts of uncharted vehicle-hungry Sahara, you won't see a great deal without the likes of Monty.

Or the likes of Jeff, our all-driving, all-navigating, all-engine-fixing, all-hassle-handling and even, at times, all-musing leader. And if occasionally his spin on the historical background lacked a little detail (thus southern Libya's foremost pilgrimage site of El Sabaha became "the tombs of the dudes who spread Islam here"), most travellers would willingly part with their money just to have a Jeff around to take some of the hassle off their hands. "Ask Jeff" was usually a good enough answer to most questions, from "What time's breakfast?" to "You like go camel safari, very good?"

Self-sufficiency is a buzz word on these trips, the idea being that with 300 litres of water on board and food stocks and camping gear to see you through the millennium, the world becomes your oyster — or the Sahara, in this case, your playground.

Incidentally, self-sufficiency is another of the medina-payers filter words, as it leads, they assert, to insularity and robs the local economy of



its central market, too, of blue-black lissom beauties from Chad and Niger flashing coy, corrupting smiles of darkest indigo and chalkiest white. Of sweaty Nigerians in the torched heat of noon, reaching deep into winter cloaks, producing Walkmans and radios, technology from yesteryear to trade for sequined shirts and glittering gowns, fashion statements, I would guess, of Nigeria's tomorrow. Of a flash robbing a plaintive Koranic refrain and of

two old Arabs, swathed in yards of white cottony cool, haggling over the price of a lamb, first picking it up, now prodding its rump, then filling the air with the music of their mutual contempt. Try carting your shopping trolley round Murzuk and see just how insular you manage to remain.

In fact, self-sufficiency on our trip simply meant not having to wait long hours for a bus with bald tyres and dodgy brakes, the kind of fun I can

well live without, literally. On about day 20, it also meant magical adventure. Jeff had had some trouble finding a guide to escort us across the sea of sand between Tazirto and Waw Namus, a journey of 300-400km to a volcanic crater not far from the border with Chad, but my rules from just about anywhere else. The problem — and ask yourself how eager to test your navigational skills this now would make you feel — was

that Tazirto's menfolk, who double as the local desert rescue, were all away searching for a Tripoli businessman and son, who were last seen speeding off gaily into the shimmering middle distance, destination Waw Namus. That was 12 parched, parboiled days before. It was a salutary lesson, and one I tried hard to force to the recesses of my increasingly active imagination, when about 100km into the crossing, Monty created a dune, slewed drunkenly down the

other side and buried himself knee-deep and up to his axles in sand. We'd helped him out of this type of fix before. In fact, you grow rather fond of the chance to jump out, feel the warm, clean sand beneath your feet, dig away, and generally do that team-bonding thing, but this was different. For one thing, we'd lost the road. For another, when I say "road" I'm talking 45-pallon oil drums at 10km intervals across a largely pistacia-foreverness of

IRELAND & HOLLAND IN HALF THE TIME.

If you're driving to Ireland or Holland this August, make sure you choose Stena Line. With our selection of Special Offers and inclusive holidays, plus more routes and a wider choice of craft than any other operator, we'll make sure that your holiday gets off to a great start. You

could take the revolutionary Stena HSS and jet across to your destination in half the time of a conventional ferry. Or, take the fast Stena Lynx speeding you from Fishguard to Rosslare in just 99 minutes. So why not go with the World's leading ferry company — Stena Line.



Return crossings for a car and up to 5 passengers		Special Offer Prices from
Holyhead - Dun Laoghaire 5 Day Return*	HSS	£249
Fishguard - Rosslare New 5 Day Return*	LYNX	£249
Stranraer - Belfast 3 Day Nightrider Return	HSS	£129
Harwich - Hook of Holland 5 Day APX Return	HSS	£137

For full terms and conditions of travel see the current Fast Ferry and Ferry Guide 1998. For reservations call 0990 70 70 70 24 hrs a day, 7 days a week or see your Travel Agent.

*5 Day Return fare shown for travel out and back on any weekday (26th for Saturday and Sunday travel) until 6 September 1998. 5 Day Return price for travel via Superferry from £199 weekdays, £219 for Saturday and Sunday travel. Applies to new bookings only. Subject to availability. For details of our inclusive holidays call 0990 74 74 74.

Stena Line

The next generation of ferry companies.

ESCAPE NOW!
make the dream a reality
ASIA, AFRICA & THE AMERICAS
TREKS, SAFARIS, RAFTING, JUNGLES & OVERLANDING FROM £25 PER DAY
FREE BROCHURE
CALL **01370 6845**
www.encounter.co.uk

You're only really covered with
WORLD COVER
ONE CALL AND YOU'RE COVERED
0800 365 121
www.worldcover.com

The grand experience QE2 and New York from under a grand.

From just £995*, explore two wonders of the world. First, enjoy 6 nights of pampered luxury, superb cuisine and fabulous entertainment aboard the legendary QE2. Then spend 2 nights at the New York Hilton enjoying the city that never sleeps. Jet home. Grand value from under a grand. Departure 29 August only — so book now!

See your travel agent or call Cunard:
For a brochure
01703 634166 or 0800 000 500
quoting STVQ45

Visit us at: www.cunard.com

QUEEN ELIZABETH 2
CUNARD
Where she is the world.

CUNARD LINE, MOUNTBATTEN HOUSE, SPRINGBOURNE SQUARE, SOUTHAMPTON SO9 4PL. *FARE IS INCLUSIVE OF TAXES, PORT AND HANDLING CHARGES OF £125 PER PERSON AND ARE BASED ON 2 ADULTS SHARING AN 800 GROSS CABIN. ATOL 5623

St Lucia
A beach for every day of the year
clubs
Sept - Oct inclusive Club & Suite £899 all inc the
£899
July - Aug/Sept £1350
0171 355 1234
Cunardline - The Travel People - ATOL 3359 - IATA

DUBLIN £69.99
RYANAIR
THE LOW FARE AIRLINE
0870 333 1238
or visit travelagent
RTM

The Best of Spain & Portugal
Exclusive Hotels
Including
Paradores & Pousadas
Tailor-made holidays far from mass tourism staying at the best hotels converted from castles, palaces etc. Fly-drive (also chauffeur-driven) and ferry holidays.
Unicorn Holidays 01582 83 4400

Pack-in one year's travel insurance

- Worldwide cover including Europe
- Covers you if you are driving or flying abroad
- Individual or family cover options
- Includes 24-hour English speaking Emergency Assistance
- Discounts for AA members

Call now for an instant quote and cover on
0345 535 535
quoting reference 223 or visit your nearest AA shop

NORTHERN CYPRUS
HOT SUMMER SPECIALS
from **£299**
Here up to £300 pp!
7 nts SC in an air conditioned villa/bungalow
for reservations call **0181 688 7555**
PRESIDENT HOLIDAYS

crossing



DRIVING AMBITION

FIVE QUESTIONS YOU'LL WANT TO ASK YOUR OPERATOR

- 1 Are your trucks open-sided?**
Open-sided trucks, used by Encounter, Exodus and Guerilla, allow more contact with the outside world. Dragoman has only closed vehicles, although the windows open up and out so there's little hindrance to vision.
- 2 Is there a food kitty?**
This can add up over weeks and months, so check what's offered in the price.
- 3 Do the seats face forward or inward?**
Do you really want to look at Dale's bald patch for six weeks? On the other hand, although inward-facing seats may breed a better group dynamic, you have to suit-focus the people in front of you in order to see out.
- 4 Do you have one driver or two?**
Encounter's one-leader policy can help to encourage group participation; if you fancy driving as a map reader, for example, or maybe even a grease monkey, give them a ring. Exodus prefers two leaders for 'backup and efficiency'.
- 5 Is baggage carried in a trailer?**
Trailers give you more room, but some drivers hate manoeuvring them.

FIVE QUESTIONS YOUR OPERATOR MAY WANT TO ASK YOU

- 1 Do you have a sense of humour?**
Seeing the funny side of delays, your companions' irritating habits (loud snoring is likely to be the least offensive) and having to cook for 16 when you don't fancy it will help to get you through with your sanity more or less intact.
- 2 Are you fit?**
Sitting in the back of a truck can be hard enough, then there's the sand to dig the truck out of and/or the mud-mattings sessions when the wheels get stuck. Even putting up your tent every day takes a toll on depleted energy levels. You might want to get in training.
- 3 Do you need your creature comforts?**
If the answer is yes, you'd better stop reading now; you may need to go days without a shower.
- 4 Are you willing to pull your weight?**
"What do we put for Purpose of Visit?" asked someone, holding up their hotel registration card. "Put tourism," I said, and I do believe I've never been so proud.
- 5 Can you bite your tongue?**
Believe me, at times you'll need to (see above).

sand. Perfect. I can only assume, on days when desert winds are not kicking up great clouds of sand and blotting out the horizon. Perfect, perhaps, on any day other than this. So, while we dug in anxious silence, our guide scanned what was left of the horizon through his ancient Seltotepe telescope. With ominous snakes of the head, he started to mutter. Fortunately, we had an interpreter on board, a "gift" of the Libyan government. Less fortunately, he was at this point more interested in venting than interpreting. "If it is God's will that I should die out here," he mused loudly. "then I am blessed. But for you..."

But blessed we were, discovered by chance by the businessman's unsuccessful search party, which galloped in from every side like a posse of marauding Cherobees, rearing in on aWD Suzuki steeds. Incidentally, out here in an ocean of sand the size of Europe, Monty had come to grief a mere kilometre or two from the search party's rendezvous. Thus, for an hour or so tea was boiled, Monty freed, new guides negotiated, a hunting falcon even dispatched reluctantly into the air before plummeting back first into the sand, and 16 exhilarated overlanders commiserated with these magnificent masters of the desert.



That night, Messings counted, bellies full, we camped beneath a perfect wall of creamy sand at the perfect edge of the perfect dune. But these trips have a way of delivering surprises. First a gust, no more. Then a full Force 9's worth of desert and wind fair ripped through our happy camp, closing ranks on unsuspecting traces of moisture in its path: pots, pans, eyes, tongues. You soon find out what you're made of and for hour upon battered hour I lost all will to live, much less help rescue the tents from disappearing off to some sub-Saharan elsewhere. It was an epic, biblical calamity, paralyzing, mortifying, exhausting, and I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

(though they stung us for five whole pence to visit Leptis Magna, the best-preserved Roman ruins on the Med). Your days here are so utterly unfettered by the usual tourist that you begin, I swear, to catch glimpses of what life may well have offered before the advent of the carpet shop, the menu touristique, even the package holiday. This is what overlanding does: even in Egypt, and later in Tunisia, neither of them short of a carpet shop or two, it takes you to a place beyond the postcard — in fact, and this may be the ultimate tribute, it makes you forget you are even on holiday.

But what about The Group Thing? Well, it never got Lord of the Flies-type nasty but it's still a scintillating thing to watch yourself wrestle with the beast within, all because someone's Mom Done Their Washing Up. I also suspect that I may, on occasion, have fallen prey to the Thinkers He's Still In Britain lurch, the one afflicting travellers in large groups, making them hang on about cap finds and carry boxes, use phrases such as "In this country" when what they really mean is "In Britain", and generally forget that there's a never-to-be-viewed-again vista unfolding beyond the cosy confines of their conserved minds. There was a moment's panic in Benghazi,

when I suddenly realised that I was part of a 16-abeast souk-strolling phenomenon, but I would have to say, from the evidence of this trip, that your own space is easy enough to find. Overlanding, I noticed, has a funny way of forcing you to see the best in others, if only because six weeks of camping is no place to make enemies — even Country Collector began to grow on me after a while. I discovered, too, that group travel doesn't half put paid to

those moments of travel ennui you sometimes encounter at border crossings and on long desert drives. More than that, your world can even become 16 times richer: at El Alamein, quiet Clive had us chinking on our cocktails with a 10-minute treatise on the Allied advance, and at the Commonwealth centenary in Tobruk, Little Lucy sketched a poignant picture of Dad, wounded here, but not buried like his mates. And on it went. Dale's pee stop

unearthing a meteorite. Andy's awful Arabic coaxing a thousand smiles, and Bob's recruitment drive for the Bobbie Fowler fan club unloosening as many hearts.

You become quite close, of course. Least knows what goes on during the six-month London car to Kathmandu affairs, though "affairs" is probably the wrong word. One group managed one by our affair the fourth week, but my own affair had begun at El Alamein, with that lecture on

a bottle I had never previously bothered to wander about. Finally, six weeks on from Cairo and we were back in Cairo at Waw Namas, we reached Tunis, the end of the road. "What do we put for Purpose of Visit?" asked someone, holding up their hotel registration card. "Put tourism," I said, and I do believe I've never been so proud.

Jeremy Latzell travelled as a guest of Encounter Overland

TRAVEL BRIEF

Overlanding trips vary in length, what is included in the price, and how rough and ready they are (see R&R rating, below). You will usually be expected to share the cooking and sleeping stores. As a guide, most don't include flights; you should also add on a kitty for food. Many tour operators have shorter overland trips of a few weeks — a good baster for first-timers.

Acacia Expeditions (0171-706 4700) specialises in Africa for trips between 14 and 79 days. East African Explorer — three weeks, from Harare to Nairobi — costs £895 excluding flights plus £100 food kitty, game-park entries included. Game Parks, Gorillas and Chimps through Kenya, Uganda and Democratic Republic of Congo costs £895 for 28 days plus £216 kitty. R&R: camping at all times, but no idugs and safes on board. Vehicles: open-sided Mercedes trucks with forward seating. Group: 20 people, driver and a truck manager.

Dragoman Adventures (01728-361133) runs camping and hotel-based trips from two to 37 weeks in Africa, the Middle East, India and the Americas. Six months' travelling from Alaska to Lithuania in Argentina costs £4,740 excluding flights. The kitty is \$1,900 (about £1,200). Dragoman can arrange flights about £1,000.

A three-week Kruger, Okavango and the Falls trip starts and finishes in Harare: £950 plus about £240 for a flight and £380 kitty. R&R: all South African trips

involve a mixture of hotel and camping; African camping trips include some camp sites with shower facilities. Vehicles: Dragoman builds its own solid Mercedes vehicles, windows open up to become an open-sided vehicle but can be closed for security or during certain snow storms. Fridges on board. Seats face forwards; also rooftop seats. Group: usually 17 people plus a leader and driver. Website: www.dragoman.co.uk

Encounter Overland (0171-370 6845), Jeremy's 42-day trip from Cairo to Tunis through Libya costs about £250 per week, all-inclusive. Flights can be arranged from £300. Encounter also goes to other parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Trips are between seven days and 32 weeks. Recommended for first-time overlanders is the 15-day Morocco, High Atlas and Oases trip starting in Casablanca: £407 all-inclusive. Flights from £200. The London to Kathmandu 32-week trip, which Encounter first ran in the 1960s, is £5,540 all-inclusive, plus one-way flight from Kathmandu from £400. R&R: camping is the norm. Encounter is one of the original hippie overlanding companies and old habits die hard. Vehicles: adaptable — open-topped or covered, with inward facing seats; designed not to be too dependent on local facilities, can go three days without restocking water. Group: 12-15 people, usually multinational; the leader is also the driver.

Exodus Overland Expeditions (0181-672-5530) features Asia, Africa, the Middle East and South America, from 14 days to 29 weeks. Pick of the bunch is the eight-week China Explorer from Islamabad in Pakistan to Hong Kong, travelling through the Karakoram and the Taklimakan and Gobi deserts: £1,800 excluding flights, plus £90 food kitty, and allow £100 for occasional hotels. Flights from £330, through Exodus. A new trip — Alexander's Path — is recommended for first-timers: six weeks, from Istanbul, through Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Egypt to Cairo £360, plus £30 food kitty; there are also some optional excursions and entrance fees to historical sites that are extra. Flights through Exodus from £220. R&R: itineraries are flexible, so allow for the unexpected. Exodus also runs Truck Adventures that often mix hotels with camping, have fixed tour itineraries and can include group flights. Vehicles: new Mercedes expedition trucks; seating and storage varies. Individual secure lockers on board. Exodus is the only UK overland company allowed to take its own vehicles into China. Group: maximum 22 people; two leaders, trained on the road, accompany most expeditions. Website: www.exodus-travels.co.uk

Guerba Expeditions (01373-826611) specialises in Africa, with trips from one to 27 weeks. For first-timers, Guerba recommends Morocco, Kenya or

South Africa. But its most popular is a historic Nairobi journey through Zimbabwe, parts of Zambia and Malawi, to Tanzania and Kenya. Five weeks' costs about £1,500 including flights, plus £240 food kitty. R&R: all trips are camping (although Guerba also runs Land Cruiser and lodges trips. Some involve very rough roads. Vehicles: inward-facing seats. Group: 18-22 people. Three crew — a leader, a co-driver and a campmaster who supervises food preparation and shopping etc.

Kumaka Expeditions (0171-937 8655) runs trips in Africa and Latin America from seven days to 26 weeks. A five-week expedition from Quito, Ecuador, through Peru to La Paz, Bolivia, costs £245 plus \$400 food kitty. More than half is hotel accommodation, which doesn't include meals. Arrange own flights. A 20-day Kenya and Tanzania trip costs from £565 plus £105 food kitty. Expect to pay up to £500 for return flight to Nairobi. R&R: Shorter trips (less than four weeks) are designed for people with limited holidays to get a taste of overlanding, so there is a cook to maximise time. Camping in Africa but hotels common in South America. Vehicles: forward-facing seats in ex-German army trucks. Group: 24 people in South America, 18 in Africa; leader, driver and sometimes a cook.

Lisa Sykes

INDIA
Tailor Made & Small Group Tours
Call for our 1998 Award Winning brochure
0181 574 2727 (toll-free)
0181 566 2729

I-N-D-I-A
India offers the definitive brochure for tailor made small group India holidays. We specialise in bookings at short notice for clients worldwide.
Please call 01872 513664 (UK)
01872 513664 (USA)
Colony Travel Ltd, Tisbury, Wilt, UK
WILT 13 0A

INDIA
Tailor-made of Small Group Tours
0181 566 2729
www.india.co.uk

SERIOUSLY TURKEY DIRECT
Quality Hotels & Apartments
All Inclusive Accommodation
City Centre, Cable Beach, Elazir, Turpinlar, Marmaris, Izmir, Antalya
Flights from LGW & MAN, Friday & Mondays
Phone now for special offers
0171 750 0202
Open 7 days from 11pm
TURKEY
A Land Unique
1700-1800 hours daily 01872 759

SEAFRANCE
DOVER-CALAIS FERRIES

£99

OFFER ENDS 31st JULY 1998
CAR + 5 PEOPLE
FREE DUTY FREE VOUCHER

Going to France this summer? Sail from Dover to Calais with the Seafrance Night Saver standard return fare for just £99. Book and pay by 31st July 1998. All car bookings receive a £5 money-off voucher for duty free shopping when you spend £30 or more on your outbound journey. Fare available on selected night sailings only. All tickets are non-refundable. Booking details can be changed at a charge of £20. Other special fares are available including 3 day returns from £44. For the lowest fares from Dover to Calais call Seafrance on

0990 711 711

Visit our website at www.seafrance.com

FOR INFORMATION REGARDING ADVERTISING OPPORTUNITIES IN THE TRAVEL SECTION OF THE SUNDAY TIMES PLEASE TELEPHONE MATTHEW SUMNER 0171 782 7325