

They were the best of times – just ask any trans-Asia or trans-Europe bus traveller of the '60s and '70s. It has all changed (they'll tell you that, too). Yet the excitement of overlanding lives on, as **Melanie Ball** reports.



On the track: West Africa. Overlanding survives because travellers can visit places that otherwise they would never see. Below: left, centre of attention, Ethiopia; right, natural shower in West Africa. Pictures: MELANIE BALL

The overlanders

Mosquito nets make wonderful tents and sand a perfect stage. And pirotechnics and leaps never deserved more enthusiastic applause than those performed 200 kilometres south of Timbuktu 15 years ago. Choreographed behind bushes, costumed by invention, and set against blue sky and desert, the African ballet was the final act in a variety show that opened with two royal speeches – one bounced off a satellite to our shortwave radio and another off our own Queen Geoffrey's balloon breasts. A goat roasted all day over a fire, followed by timed plum puddings excavated from a dusty locker, ended a day that began with presents under a thorn tree festooned with tinsel and beer cans. Celebrating Christmas 1985 in a west African country at war with its neighbor was a highlight of my seven-month truck journey from London to Johannesburg, an overland odyssey that changed my life.

Traditionally it is extended group travel on less-beaten tracks through countries culturally, economically and politically distant from Australia. Travel that throws strangers together to face what the world throws back. An experience that can be more than you ever dreamed and a mother's worst nightmare. (I met an Australian exploring Africa just a year after his brother's body was found with other male passengers murdered after rebels hijacked their truck.)

Overlanders don't need to be reckless, a member of the great unwashed or even under 35, but tolerance, pluck and a sense of humor come in handy. It is not for everyone.

Commercial overlanding was a 1960s love child of Asian hippy trails. Several companies were operating between Katmandu and London by 1969.

By the mid-'70s, travellers in ex-army trucks and coaches were trailing dust across the continent. Africa was next. Then South America.

Early overlanding opened huge areas of the world to other styles of travel, particularly in Asia, says Michael "Max" Roche, Peregrine's marketing manager. Small-group travel followed the trailblazing hippies, and mainstream coaches/resort travel followed in their wake, a pattern Roche sees being repeated in Vietnam now. Overlanding has endured because it takes people to places they otherwise could not reach – but not without change and companies falling by the wayside.

Self-proclaimed senior surviving overlander – and proof that old drivers don't just lose their bearings – Phil Normington is the overland program manager at Exodus, in Britain. He says the Iranian revolution in 1978 cleaned out the trans-Asia business, leaving only Exodus, Encounter Overland and Top Deck.

Encounter Overland ceased trading only late last year but Dragoman has relaunched it as "Encounter", a product pitched at younger, more independent travellers. Dragoman (and adventure company Explore) rose from the ashes of overlanding pioneer Penworld. Exodus, Guerba and Dragoman are the modern industry's triumvirate but there are dozens of other companies, particularly in Africa. Top Deck still runs trans-Asia trips, but now in air-conditioned coaches rather than their famous double-deckers (driven off European roads by bureaucracy).

Overlanding originally involved months-long commitments but companies were already offering four-week sectors in the mid-'80s and now short trips (that can be linked into longer journeys) are common. This season there has been a dramatic rise in demand, after a slump, for London-Katmandu seats, at least on Exodus trucks, and while this might herald a comeback for older style trips, Phil Normington says it probably just indicates that "it has finally dawned on the travelling public that Iran is safe".

Alan Alcock, Adventure World's marketing manager, believes economic climate has had the most impact on overlanding. "Early travellers were pretty confident of getting a job when they came home after a year or more away, but this has all changed. People now take less time off for holidays."

He thinks shorter trips have raised the standards of overland travel and forced drivers to be guides instead of "just the person at the wheel". But trip prices reflect these changes. Average weekly earnings have slightly more than doubled since the mid-'80s, while prices for comparable journeys (routes having changed) have nearly quadrupled. Alcock sees these shorter journeys as not without adventure, just more comfortable. Some trucks even have fridges. But even that change has, perhaps, been at the cost of something less tangible.

After spending nine of my 16 months away in 1985-1986 travelling by truck to London and then through Africa, I recently revisited the overlanding world for three weeks in Ethiopia. My companions were a mix of people who had left Johannesburg months earlier and made their way north on



In the Kitty

Overland expeditions range from about \$300 to \$700 a week, inclusive of the "kitty" paid in cash on the road. When comparing trips with different companies, check what the trip cost covers and what comes out of kitty. Some prices include less, to give passengers more freedom to choose activities. Kitties variously cover food only, park fees, accommodation or everything but the truck.

Best Vehicle?

Most companies operate Mercedes trucks customised to specific requirements. Some companies have front and back-facing bus seats and a rear locker for luggage and stores; others in-facing bench seats and under-seat lockers. Each design has advantages over another. Every company

the passengers and crew define it. He stepped from the advertising world into guiding in Europe when the only tour he had heard of was the Women's Weekly/World Discovery variety. Guiding eventually led to him driving across Asia for Top Deck from 1984 to 1987.

Roche describes his trips like storms, saying, "God knows what we left in our wake. We never looked." Travelling was more important than the destination and having fun the major goal. Many of his passengers parted through India without seeing the Taj Mahal. There was a lawlessness about his trips. With no pressure on them to behave, passengers rarely acted responsibly.

"Early overlanding at its worst verged on exploitation," Roche says, but people have become much more aware of cultural sensitivity and the environment. Cultural interaction is now as important in selling overland journeys as adventure. Companies adopt environmental and responsible tourism policies that include supporting charities and wildlife organisations and visiting local tourism initiatives.

Roche suggests overlanding has also become less collaborative. There are more rules and the crews are more dictatorial. "Early passengers paid their money and took their chances," he says. "Now they pack many more expectations."

"I could never be a leader again," says another ex-driver still involved in the industry. "The clients are so demanding these days. I was five weeks late to Johannesburg on my first trans-Africa trip in 1981 and no one batted an eyelid. We almost ran out of food in Sudan, were ambushed by bandits, spent days stuck in the desert and still had fun. Nowadays, I imagine we would be sued."

Roche agrees. He says legal risks prohibit companies running overland expeditions as they used to, when drivers drove all day, drank all night. But some drivers are living in the past. A friend recently embarked on a four-week trip with a major company, only to leave several days later because kitty money kept disappearing and the drivers drank tequila to the point of paralysis each night.

The adventure travel industry is full of ex-drivers (and passengers) who all know each other. A ring of metal symbolised this fraternity in the 1980s. Recognisable across a room, a Sikh's bangle became overlanding's club tie. Removing a bottle top with one could earn the wearer more than a "thank you" from an impressed member of the opposite sex.

Top Deck's overland community is probably the strongest. Annual reunions held in Australia or New Zealand attract 100-200 ex-drivers and couriers/leaders. One is Bev Hornbrook, a pioneer among female overland drivers.

She had driven a "little truck" with a seismic crew working out of Broome before applying to work for Top Deck in England, but the men still laughed at her. Hornbrook had to prove herself again and again as courier and back-up driver before getting her own trip in 1983.

Sentiment against female drivers was not limited to Top Deck and the companies she later worked for in Africa. One male passenger "felt cheated" on discovering her at the helm, but Hornbrook's worst critics were female passengers, some of whom only accepted her when she proved herself, perhaps by coping with male border guards or changing a flat tyre. (A back injury finally forced her to stop driving in 1998 and she is now studying Arts.)

So where does overlanding head next? Phil Normington sees its future involving more hotels, more comfortable vehicles, more cooks and less adventure, because that's what travellers want. Max Roche thinks the changes have been driven more by the industry than passengers.

While acknowledging a growing demand for "high perceived risk and low real risk, so people can talk about their adventures at parties", he believes there are lots more prospective passengers who would love a wilder, less controlled adventure than today's offerings. Coming with me?

Ten overlanding websites

- by CAROLINE CASEY
- Africa Guide** ★★★
www.africaguide.com/overland.htm
The Africa Guide links to maps, overland tour companies and equipment. Choose a mode of transport from VW beetles, 4WDs or trucks.
 - Go Overland** ★★★
www.go-overland.com/indy
Go Overland is the ultimate guide to overlanding. Take a virtual tour via email, learn about health issues and visa requirements or research your destination. Head to the forums for a travel discussion.
 - Outdoor Holidays** ★★★
www.outdoorholidays.com/overlanding.html
Kenya, Tibet, Jordan or Cambodia. Outdoor Holidays provides a simple guide to the best overland tours on offer. Use the adventure navigator to track down the perfect escape.
 - Sahara Overland** ★★★
www.sahara-overland.com
Sahara Overland is not for the faint hearted. The website is not the easiest to navigate, but persistence reveals a wealth of information. The well-visited discussion forum provides up-to-date news from the road.
 - Dragoman** ★★★
www.dragoman.co.uk
Dragoman is one of the most renowned overland operators. Explore the range of outback trips, click through to a virtual tour of the trucks or take advantage of special offers.
 - Overland Travel in Central America** ★★★
www.independenttraveler.com/community/article_report.cfm?ID=59&count=6
Log in to tales from the road. This interesting story takes the reader overland from Guatemala through Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica to Panama. Learn more about the realities and costs.
 - Truck Africa** ★★★
www.truckafrica.com
Forget the luxury coach, Truck Africa is the real deal. These are price-conscious outback explorations of Africa. Truck Africa offers tours that take a few weeks to five-month adventures – exploring the continent.
 - Intrepid World** ★★★
www.intrepidworld.com.au
Intrepid World runs cross-country exploratory tours around the globe, mixing adventure with learning about the local culture. This agency website provides access to tour proposals, pricing and booking facilities, along with stunning images.
 - The African Overland Network** ★★★
www.africa-overland.net
Can't escape? Take a virtual journey cross-country. The African Overland Network provides links to online documentation of current overland trips. Enjoy the stories – and research your next holiday.
E-mail: ccasoy@theage.fairfax.com.au

different trucks, passengers who joined in Nairobi, and a handful exploring just Ethiopia.

We got on well, with only minor skirmishes, but three weeks together did not foster the sense of "family" I felt on my original African trip which grew out of a border war, theft, wasps, a smashed gearbox and self-important officials in every Mall town stamping and writing all over our rapidly filling passports – events we accepted as part of the African experience and that put us into Johannesburg three weeks late.

If we measure the success of a trip by lasting friendships, then Daryl and Erica Povey's Asian overland with Penworld in 1977 was a triumph. They have held three reunions since, one tempting a past passenger out from Canada, and established a Web page to contact others.

The consensus is that the greater challenges – inherent in journeying through Africa and South America, compared with Asia, foster stronger friendships. The only hardships my Asian overland group faced were stomach upsets of varying severity, yet we made Labor Party faction fighting look like friendly banter. One of Alcock's men "literally pushed our truck through southern Sudan into the Central African Republic for five weeks after heavy rain, an incredible hardship that

bonded my passengers into a team". His next journey on a now-dry, graded road, took one week and the group just whinged.

Reasons for doing a trip may also influence commitment to it. Many people have probably embarked on an Asian overland because it is an interesting alternative to flying to or from Europe, but you have to want to visit Africa and South America because they are not on the road to anywhere. My going to Africa fulfilled a dream born when I read my first Wilbur Smith novel as a teenager. It was both a journey of personal discovery any hippy would be proud of and an adventure that inspired me to write about travel.

By their very nature, no two overland journeys are the same. Passenger mixes, weather, bureaucracy, breakdowns, politics, illness – everything about this kind of travel – ensures each trip is different, including the companies.

I remember thinking Guerba was posh and onboard cooks, while we shopped using year-10 French in west Africa and cooked without help. (Dragoman and Exodus now also employ cooks on most of their shorter African journeys.)

But Max Roche believes companies set only a part of the culture of overland travel.