

BEHIND THE SCENES OF OVERLAND

What's behind the countdown to an Encounter Overland expedition.

Once an expedition sets off people are in no doubt of the **extent** to which all depends on them, on looking after one another and of putting a lot more into it all, than just the money they've already paid.

But this requirement itself needs to be based on thorough preparation so that we can say to people with complete confidence before they set off "all the hardware, funds and know-how are here to take full advantage of, from now on it's really very much up to all of you".

What then goes into reaching this moment of truth ? Our workshops are in Bedfordshire (where **else!**) at Shefford some 10 miles from where the vehicles are manufactured. We deal direct with the manufacturer's main agents, our ourselves Vauxhall/Bedford agents and have to access to the factory testing grounds and as the Bedford Magazine said of us in an article last month "vehicles are the lifeblood of the operation so they receive rigorous preparation for their tough duties".

Just what is this rigorous preparation ?

Although we like to think that we can sometimes improve on the basic design and specifications of the manufacturer - lengthening, shortening, different gear ratios, hybrid power unit etc, we have found over the years, the answer is to find a vehicle that is the nearest thing to what we want and to alter the manufactured vehicle as little as possible. However, having said that, we promptly pull the whole thing apart !

"Expedition Proof Equipment"

There is a lot of equipment about that is built with the experimental weekend camper in mind. It's easily spotted. Less easily spotted are things which look pretty expedition proof but aren't. Tents using good, non-perishable material but seamed with cotton ! Gas stoves and jets that lose all pressure above 10,000 ft ! Cutlery that rusts ! Tube lighting that shorts in the dark ! The best answer we've found to the dirt-harbours qualities of plastic plates is to take china ones ! Yes really - "what all the way across Africa and back?" "Yes, that's right."

We've still found no total solution to tent pegs that bend (even though we use quarter-inch steel) or camp beds for two (though there have been some interesting attempts!) and the adage that "any fool can be uncomfortable" applies just as much to the disinterested use of good equipment as it does to brave attempts with bad equipment.

Our tents are manufactured by expedition specialists to a design arrived at using their best brains, experience and techniques and ours exclusively for us.

And our camp beds are the only relatively expedition proof ones built in Britain and are obtained direct from the manufacturer.

The vehicles soft-top tilts are manufactured to our pattern under supervision.

Axes, mattocks, picks, saws, metal road (sandmats) go aboard, some vehicles will have a £100 fuel bill filling up before starting ! £500 worth of medical supplies will be aboard covering eventualities from dhobi-itch to cholera and other fevers, malaria, food-poisoning, conjunctivitis, boils, cuts, bruises and scratches.

There's not much change out of £100 per tyre, and there's not much change out of £1000 for the purchase from the shelves of one of Britain's largest cash and carries, dehydrated and tinned meats and fish, vegetables, soups and fruit, etc, cereals, pastas, oats (oat cuisine!), conserves, spices, milk powder, etc.

These stores combine with whatever is available locally along the way for pretty decent meals.

All is checked against inventories,ropes, washers, torch batteries, tablecloths, maps, araldite, workshop manual with part numbers, tent repair kits, tourniquets, etc, etc, etc. And the whole "rig" truck, trailer, camping gear, domestic equipment, tools, spares and stores is recorded on a standardised pre-departure report form. This report is the first stage of a simple reporting system that continues routinely until the final End of Expedition Report months later.

CAPS [(In passing it is perhaps worth mentioning that Encounter Overland has a saying clearly illustrating the independence and autonomy of these expeditions, subject simply to us back here knowing what's going on. And that is "if you tell us what you're doing, we won't have to tell you".

The reporting system is the key to this and so it is very important and fundamental to EO.)

The man in the end responsible is the expedition leader and it is essential that he is fully involved in at least the last weeks of departure preparations. It is he who has been right through the checklist with Rob Rumball the workshop manager, and he and other expedition drivers are at considerable disadvantage if they do not know exactly where to lay their hands on every item aboard that rig - not to mention what it is for and how to use it !

The Man Whose Show It Is

From one's own impressions of overland as well as remarks made here it must be made apparent that an expedition leader is a fairly remarkable person. What's behind him ?

In EO he is a mature man or most certainly between 24 and 32. First of all he is a careful, methodical, consistent driver, schooled to Heavy Goods and/or Passenger Service licence (often done during the early days of joining EO). By inclination and aptitude he is a mechanic ; he may not have come to us fully trained but theory and apprenticeship training conditions are not necessarily the stamping ground of the expedition mechanic.

The essence of safety is prevention not cure and thus great emphasis is placed on maintenance and always working within the equipment's and group's capacities. However, on expeditions the one thing, and perhaps only one thing you can be sure you would best not go on expeditions unless you recognise it. It is simply that something is bound to go wrong !

And provision needs to be made for this. The expedition leader needs maximum awareness of the circumstances that influence the contingency plans of a cool head, in everyone's interest he needs to involve co-operation of all expedition members and he needs to keep them and EO in London in the picture. It is quite amazing how often London is useful in support and can help, especially on the diplomatic front, and it is very satisfying sometimes to watch how prompt feedback from one expedition can assist others either in the preparation or in the travelling.

Meanwhile in London

Good, solid, well-prepared trucks are the lynch-pin to the modus operandi, but they are not an end in themselves and are simply one essential part of what EO is all about : that's to say gutsy people going to off-beat places.

Who precisely, and how come ? Trailfinders in London and Sydney and Melbourne as well as their associates elsewhere and Encounter Overland in London and Johannesburg and San Francisco and their associates elsewhere earn their crust by working to contact people who might be interested. So already it is cosmopolitan. By polite discouragement also young - anyone over 35 joining is very rare, and it is usual to form a group fairly equally men and women.

In various ways, someone who might be interested is told and shown what to expect - and what not to expect. If he decides he is interested he completes a booking/application form and is asked quote "put some money where his mouth is" by including a deposit (£50 is typical).

Then the paperwork begins. Passports, personal insurance, tabs and certificates, photos, visas, clothing lists and advice on personal equipment, receiving mail en route, and the all important carnet de passage for the vehicle. Small amounts of funds in a kaleidoscope of foreign currencies and the bulk in greenbacks. Duplicate lists of group details easing border crossings, lists of cameras etc and the

precaution of a Next of Kin List, En Route Report forms, and a copy of the constantly up-dated EO handbook for Asia, Africa or South America. Individual queries on connecting travel etc are dealt with over the phone, through the post and at the group pre-departure meeting. A second part payment is made by everyone two month before departure and the balance arrives one month before we go.

Like the truck preparation it is all ready several days before the date of departure. The EO team that's going have a few days to themselves and then one morning early in the Old Brompton Road the threads are drawn together, it takes no more than half an hour for all personal equipment to be stowed, the group to climb aboard, and for the expedition to be under way.

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