

The rough, tough overland holiday



JOHN TAYLOR talks to the men who run safari-type vacations 14,000 and more miles across Africa, Asia and South America through country where a truck takes a beating ten times more fierce than anywhere else in the world.

"YOU CAN'T RING UP THE AA on our job — you've got to make it, so we carry everything with us." Not many tour operators have cause to make such a remark, but then not many tour operators go cross-country to Africa, Asia and South America in four-wheel-drive trucks.

There have been several companies in recent years who have offered adventure holidays to Africa and India, but these are usually in specially built or adapted motor coaches, running on whatever roads there are. One London-based company has built a thriving business on going the hard way and using specially adapted off-the-road commercials to ensure that their passengers really see the country as few tourists are able to see it.

Encounter Overland Ltd operates from the Old Brompton Road, in London, just round the corner from Earls Court, and it has now had 13 years' solid experience in meeting the understandable desire for adventure that many younger people feel in these all-too-safe days of welfare states and the like.

It all started when Tony Lindsay Jones, an ex-army Lieutenant, began running parties to South East Asia. The first journeys were made with Land Rovers but, suitable though they were in many ways, there was an obvious need for a bigger vehicle, able to take more passengers and equipment to make the proposition viable. Progressing through ex-WD Austins, Encounter Overland eventually hit on what has proved to be the nearest vehicle to meet their ideals that is available — the Bedford 4 x 4.

Since those early days they have had many RLs and, more recently, the M-type Bedford and now the fleet of 20 vehicles consists of seven M-types, 11 R-types and a couple of American-built vehicles based in South America.

The world may have become more civilised with the onward rush of the 20th century, but the third world where Encounter Overland goes is still often very primitive. Take the 14,000-mile run to Johannesburg for example. This still includes some 6000 miles of dirt and mud tracks, or no road at all across the Sahara. Asia, too, has its share of such conditions, while South America abounds in them.

This makes enormous demands on the vehicle, its crew and the passengers.

Vehicles are the lifeblood of the business and so they receive rigorous preparation for their tough duties. The company has its own fully equipped workshops at Shefford in Bedfordshire, only a few miles from Bedford's Dunstable factory. The 4 x 4 trucks are bought new, or from oil companies or the army through Vass, the well-known military vehicle specialist dealer at nearby Ampthill.

The company has found by experience what is needed to adapt and prepare the chassis-cabs for their new role. Axles, springs and cabs are reinforced, transfer boxes remounted and other details attended to on the mechanical side. The open steel bodies are fitted with canvas tilts and a split tailgate, and the interior equipped with coach-type perimeter seating and stowable tables.

The absence of regular fuelling points en route dictates the addition of one 100 and one 60-gallon diesel fuel tanks, plus a 50-gallon fresh-water tank. Special racks take jerricans for oil — the average trip includes five oil changes — and stowage for a goodly quantity of spares including replacement springs. The conversion is completed by the addition of a two-wheel trailer to take tents and baggage. The whole vehicle is smartly finished in orange and blue and is ready for the road — or track.

Such attention should, you might think, take care of everything. Yet as Ray Wolfe, director of Encounter Overland (John Taylor is the third director), says: "However many precautions you take, you still get it all to look through the very detailed and itemised report sheets, completed by the drivers at various stages of the journey, bears the weight out. Such comments as: "Nairobi — broken trailer axle, welded cab arch and driver's door, replaced fan belt and track-rod and fitted new differential cover, rewired indicators", make typical reading.

Yet, despite such routine problems, Wolfe points out that the Bedford is an ideal truck for length and width and is still the nearest to their demands for perfection. Both the older R and the current M models have their relative pros and cons for this sort of work; the M has a much better cab (the R cab) and can take three occupants, while the R suffers less from overheating due to having a front-mounted radiator; not the sort of trouble normally encountered, but across the Sahara where the ambient temperature can reach 135° F it is a different matter.

The expertise with vehicle reconstruction has led to two unusual 6-wheel Bedfords being built for the Asian run. One was a 6 x 2 KM converted at Shefford to full-time wheel-drive by adding another drive shaft which worked very well. The other was a 6 x 4 which they fitted with a Boughton axle and transfer box. Vauxhall's Millbrook test track is used extensively and a good liaison is maintained between maker and user. Shefford and Kilburn at Luton also come in for praise for their efficient spares department and general technical assistance.

Even robust vehicles have a comparatively limited life on this work, far below conventional standards. Taking an RL as an example, it will do six round trips to Africa and two to Asia, by which time it is a worn

and is usually stripped for any serviceable components before scrapping. As might be expected, tyres take a terrific pasting. After a great deal of experiment, Encounter Overland found the best cover for their work is the Kelly Springfield 11.00 x 20. These were bought in Johannesburg and will do two return journeys – say 40,000 miles.

It takes a special sort of person to want to be one of 20 in a party for thousands of miles across the equator. The average party is made up of equal numbers of men and women, aged between 18 and 35 (the oldest so far is a 49-year-old New Zealander) and drawn from between eight and 12 nationalities. Often they are making a journey home from one hemisphere to the other, or simply taking the adventure trip of a lifetime.

Health and hygiene are vitally important, while full first-aid equipment is carried – everything from aspirin to snake-bite serum – and the driver is experienced in its use. The company usually manages to include a doctor or nurse in the passenger complement.

They seem to like this sort of travel", says Mr Wolfe. "They are often very useful, though once we had seven together and that was confusing!" A touch of malaria is nothing untoward and usually lasts for three days despite the usual inoculations and precautions. Party drivers – or leaders, as they are known – continually stress the importance of hygiene – personal, on the vehicle and for all utensils.

These leaders are an interesting selection of characters. Invariably single – they are married to the job, for no-one else would want a man who is away for months on end – they are also of varied nationality. The company trains them up so that they are qualified mechanics, have hgv licences and are psv as well, and speak French and English. If there is any trend in origin, it is that they are often drawn from social or working backgrounds and this makes them



"Even robust vehicles have a comparatively limited life on this work . . ." Left, an M-type copes with the mud of the famous Serengeti animal reserve; right, another M-type toils over the tyre-killing rocks of a mountain pass. As John Taylor says, "Tyres take a terrific pasting . . ."

adept at understanding and handling people. This year, Encounter Overland is running 16 vehicle journeys through Asia, 18 in Africa and five in South America. The African and Asian journeys start from the London offices, but the South American journeys originate out there, the travellers generally flying in to Barranquilla for the 15-week tour to Buenos Aires.

London to Johannesburg takes 15 to 16 weeks, major mishaps excepted. On arrival, the crew rest for three or four weeks and service the vehicle before returning with another party. On return to England, the vehicle has a complete refit at Shefford. Such a one-way journey will cost £725 to £775 according to season, which works out to approximately £52 a week including travel, food and stops en route to see the sights and rest awhile.

You can see it all on these trips and there are certainly unexpected adventures, ranging from marauding lions and other wild animals to diversions due to washed-out river crossings or political troubles. "A leader never says 'I can't'", said Ray Wolfe and gives an example of how one group had to make a 115 km detour lasting three days to by-pass a collapsed bridge. "In that time", says the report, "we built four causeways over swamps".

Encounter Overland is proud of the fact

that it is the only overland company in ACTO (the Association of Camping Tour Operators – the business's equivalent of ABTA) and fully guarantees its operations. It has offices in San Francisco and Johannesburg, as well as overseas agents, and usually two of the three directors are abroad at one of these, a trade fair, or actually leading a trip – "it's the only way we can understand drivers' problems". The company was at last year's Holiday Exhibition at Olympia and went on to a similar show in Utrecht directly afterwards.

Much of their custom comes by word-of-mouth recommendation though they do some advertising. A popular attraction is the weekly film show at the London office on Tuesday evenings, which does a great deal to sell the trips. After booking, the formative party meets at the office to check documents and vaccinations and generally get to know each other, while the company gets visas, deals with all administration and answers questions.

Encounter Overland journeys can be anything but dull. The journey changes people and makes them more understanding and self-sufficient. Some go two or three times. As Ray Wolfe said: "We do have a good time – if we didn't, the drivers wouldn't do it!"

JOHN TAYLOR



... going on this ride – vehicles and passengers have to be ferried across an arm of Lake Victoria.