

The EO Memory Bank project – contribution form

Date of travel	from	1984	to	1987
Age at the time	26			
Full name	Andy John Baillie			
Continent / country / name of your trip	Kathmandu London			
Location details where your story is set	Summary of the whole trip			
Your connection with EO	Leader driver			

Bureaucracy at its best

In October 1984, Indira Gandhi was assassinated by two of her bodyguards. Continuing unrest and violence especially in the Sikh stronghold of the Punjab State enforced a closing of the Wagah Attari border crossing from India to Pakistan, except for an Indian escorted crossing once every 10 days.

This is an account to the best of my recollection of the approximately 20 days it took for myself, our truck, and our group to enter Pakistan from Delhi. I was to take over this westbound trip from Kathmandu to London as the original driver came down with hepatitis.

On arrival in Delhi after meeting my new group, my first job at hand was to obtain permits for myself as driver, our truck and home on wheels, and the rest of the group of 23 people.

I approached the home affairs office in Delhi who gave me the appropriate forms to fill out for myself, our truck and everyone in the group. I returned to the home office with the completed forms, along with 2 passport photos and their passports as requested only to be informed that the people in the group could not go and instead only myself and the truck could continue. “And what about my group?”, I asked. The reply, “Not my problem”.

Well needless to say this didn’t go down to well with my group as they would now have to fork out extra money for a flight to Lahore which would need to coincide with my arrival in Pakistan.

Meanwhile, Exodus, another overlanding tour company lead by Dave, a driver I had met in Kathmandu, arrived in Delhi. After hearing my news of the permit situation for the group, he decided to try at the home affairs office in Srinigar as they were heading up to Kashmir anyway.

While spending time in Delhi and organizing flights to Lahore in Pakistan for the group, I soon heard from Dave who informed me that he got permits for himself and all his group from the Srinigar’s home office and had no problem at the border and was now in Pakistan. Hmm. What to do? Well, we were heading to Kashmir as part of our itinerary anyway so why not try the same.

So, while the group enjoyed the exceptional beauty of the Kashmir valley, I went through the process again of obtaining permits from the home affairs office in Srinigar. No problem. Permits for everyone. Onwards to the India/Pakistan border post, not a roadblock or army escort in sight.

Now this is where it all got very confusing, but it is the only logical answer I can come up with. Facts: Home affairs in Dehli were not issuing permits for the groups. Home affairs in Srinigar who were issuing permits for the group was unaware that they were not allowed to issue permits. When the exodus group who had got their permits in Srinigar presented themselves at the Indian border, the officials let them through.

Perhaps it is at this point that the Delhi office discovered that the Srinigar Office were issuing permits and informed them to stop and then informed the border that only permits issued in Delhi were valid. During this time of communication between the two offices, we already had our permits from Srinigar and were on our way to the Indian border and on our arrival there were refused exiting India as our permits were not issued in Dehli. Trying to make some sense of the situation fell on deaf ears.

So, there we were, still in the Punjab State, facing another 10 days in India. We drove for a short while then stopped and made an evening meal. A unanimous decision was made to do an all-night drive back to Delhi and start again.

Driving in the pitch black, everyone seems to have their lights on full beam. When the opposing traffic crosses your path there’s that second of blindness until you have passed each other. And there it was. A broken-down truck in the middle of the road where it last stopped. I had brake pedal hard to the floor and stopped half a meter from it’s rear, the group rudely awakened as they were hurled to the back of the cab. After peeling the layers of bodies back to their seats, we carried on.

The next morning, we arrived back in Delhi at the Delhi tourist camp, nice place to stay. There was now another 10 days before the next convoy. I proceeded as before to get a permit for myself and the truck, and as before, I couldn’t get them for the group.

By now more overlanders were converging on Dehli. By the time we eventually left, there were two more Encounter Overland trucks, one Himalayan Bus, one more Exodus truck and two Top Deck buses. There was then about 80 people that needed to fly from Delhi to Lahore in Pakistan on a specific day which now required a special charter flight. The flight now booked and paid for and my permit in hand we now waited for the next convoy date.

At this point a Top Deck tour group arrived in Dehli. On applying for his permit, the driver was given application forms for all his group. WHAT THE FUCK. Sure enough Delhi home affairs have now decided to let the groups go with their trucks and buses. Can’t fight it, can’t hope to understand it, just suck it up and move on. Now understandably, everyone wants their money back. The Encounter Overland office in London used a Kashmiri travel agent in Dehli and they were clearly not happy when we wanted to cancel the charter flight. Ever tried getting money back of a Kashmiri once it’s in their hands? Eventually the Kashmiri travel agent threw a huge bundle of cash on the table minus the deposit of course.

Three Encounter Overland, one Himalayan Overland, one Exodus and two Top Deck buses leave for the border. On arriving at the Punjab State line, we drove off in a line following the army escort. We soon all spread out and made our own way to the border. We finally made it into Pakistan. Did the rest of the trip go smoothly?

Yeah Rite.



All converging on the border post in India.

Yeah Rite.

It was a great array of people with me in our group. Mostly Kiwis and Aussies along with South Africans, English and Canadians. Unfortunately, due to the time it took to get out of India, there was now pressure on us to catch up on lost time. After some touring around Lahore and Islamabad, we drove down to Quetta and out into the Baluchistan desert towards Iran. The corrugations in the road can be horrendous. Too slow, and you feel every bump. Too fast, and the truck can shuck to bits. So, it's a happy median that's kind of comfortable. After pulling into the compound of the Pakistani side of the border, I realized that a young lady in our group was very sick and couldn't stand on her own feet. It was late afternoon, and she really needed a hospital. No amount of diplomacy would encourage the border officials to speed up the processing of our departure from Pakistan which left us entering the Iranian compound just as they closed.

It was a long and rough night for a very sick person. She had to be carried around on one of the camp stretchers. The group rallied together and it's always thankful when there is a nurse in the group. The next day we entered Iran and headed for Zahedan, the first reasonable sized city in Iran. We nearly had a head on crash with a car coming around an opposite corner and then it nearly happened again. What's wrong with these people? I don't mind admitting that I had totally forgotten I had to swap sides of the road. Things worked out pretty good after that.

We arrived in Zahedan and went straight to a hospital. It didn't look too enticing. Fortunately, we were approached by a lady who introduced herself as a doctor and asked us if she could help. After explaining the situation of our sick young lady, she promptly told us that this hospital was not a good place to be in, and she took us to another hospital that looked 'safer', for want of a better word. They had no medicine or drugs. The pharmacy shelves were empty, but they managed to get what I think was just glucose through an IV. We came to visit each day and after 3 days she perked up and we were on our way. This of course putting us even further behind time. Each time we came to that hospital I noticed that a lot of people were coughing. Before we left, we found out it was a TB ward.

Victoria was the name given to our home on wheels. How it was chosen I don't know as it must have been chosen before I took over the trip. A Bedford 6-wheeler truck. This wasn't a 4x4 like most of the other trucks. It was a double axle with a diff lock to assist in times of getting stuck which wasn't often on the Asian Overland's. Punctures, punctures, and more punctures. I was constantly looking for a truck stop to get another puncture repaired. What seemed like constant attention was needed to keep her going but we were well set up with spare parts and tools. All you needed were some good mechanical skills, mine were average.

It was around about this time that I started developing a cough. We had an awesome time in Iran. Our 7-day visas had run out due to the 3 extra days at the hospital and to make up some more time we decided to do another all-night drive. We got totally lost in the back streets of Tehran at 3 o'clock in the morning. At least there wasn't any traffic, well except for the revolutionary guards that pulled us over, but they did help us back to the motorway. Exit Iran and into Turkey. That first Efes beer tasted pretty good.

From here we were heading down to the middle east, and it was going to get hot again. Unfortunately, our young lady who was sick had a relapse and she very bravely agreed that it wasn't a good idea to carry on, so she left our trip and flew out to London. We had a few people leave the trip, but I will get to that later. With repairs to do on the truck, a wonderful member of our group volunteered to go to Ankara and get the visas we needed for Syria. A forty-eight-hour transit visa is all we could get so it was a bit of a whirlwind tour via Krak De Chevalier, a crusader castle near the border of Lebanon.

I had faith in our truck, but it wasn't the most powerful engine by any means. The castle sits on a 650-meter-high hill and the road near the top is steep. Just how steep I was about to find out. It was a loose metal road, and I hadn't been there before. Just a straight 5 gear box, no low ratio. I went from 3rd gear to 2nd and the revs kept dropping. I got to a point where I had to go down to 1st gear. That's it, no more. And the revs kept dropping. Now I was getting worried. It just kept getting steeper and the revs kept falling until it hit that cusp where if it dropped any lower there would be no return and it sat there on that cusp for what seemed an eternity. Then I heard that slight gain, bit by bit the revs came up. Well, if that was the steepest part, I think we were going to make it. As I'm sitting here today, we surely did. Had it stalled, your guess would be as good as mine.

My cough was getting progressively worse. From here we travelled onto Jordan. It was in Aman that I was to pick up more funds for the trip as I had already run out and was being helped by the group. While in contact with London office I was asked if a certain member of our group was still on the trip as her parents hadn't heard from at all. Present and accounted for, and I was then informed that should anyone leave the trip I needed to let them know. Oh, ok. I think at that point 5 had left. After relaying this info, I believe there were a few staff at the London office shaking their heads. I could see their point. The 1st guy left before we even got out of India. It takes a bit of tolerance and compassion to live with strangers 24/7. An effort needs to be made. Others dribbled off over time, perhaps not too happy about the way the trip was going, and you must put yourself in the mix of reasons. I managed to keep the rest of our crew and we even had one join us again in Turkey.

So back through Syria non-stop and onto Istanbul. My cough was getting quite bad. It had been with me for a couple of weeks now. As we arrived in Istanbul the head gasket blew. So, my time in this beautiful city was spent taking the head of the motor and replacing the gasket. The truck was feeling tired so while the cylinders were exposed, I sought the opinion of a Turkish truck mechanic for an assessment of the motor. Would she make it back to London? Maybe, maybe not. Well, she was still going so we put it back together and headed off on our 10-day drive across Europe.



A new head gasket in Istanbul

It was the 2nd to last day of our trip, we were to get the ferry the following day at Ostend bound for England. I pulled off the motorway and up to a set of lights, and as I put the clutch in and stopped there was an all-mighty banging coming from the motor. The ferry was virtually in sight. I had to pull off the road and as I released the clutch, the whole cab shuddered. This is not good. On the phone and a discussion with the Hitchin workshops where our base in England was, I was told, if possible, to get the truck on the ferry where it could be towed off on arrival in England.

So, with a whole lot of knocking and shaking we crawled the last km down to the loading dock in 1st gear. The next day the truck started with its symphony of knocks and crawled and shuddered across to the loading ramp which unfortunately was up hill. As the truck came onto the ramp, loading came onto the motor which enhanced the sound. Port workers were looking on in horror but the only way I was going to stop was if it blew apart completely. But it made it to the top. On arrival in England the truck was towed back to Hitchin workshops where it was pulled apart and discovered that the crankshaft had snapped on either a main or crank journal. In layman's terms that truck was going no further.

So, this is overlanding. Was it adventurous? Yes! Was it an incredible experience? Yes! Was I going to do another one? I did not. My cough was bad. I was coughing up blood. Maybe I wasn't cut out for this. In the end I helped another driver relocate an empty truck from England back to Kathmandu for the start of another trip. I heard all sorts of stories from these extraordinary people as you will be reading about them now. They have my greatest admiration for dealing with and conquering far more than I did, and I'd like to thank those at Encounter Overland that gave me this opportunity.

Some years later my brother, myself and an acquaintance rode our mountain bikes from Srinigar to Leh and travelled back down to Hardiware. My cough returned with vengeance and to this day rears its ugly head periodically.