



ADVENTURE

Rumble in the jungle



Days of winching, impossible mud slides and insects to eat you alive – the Malaysian Rainforest Challenge really is for the toughest off-roaders



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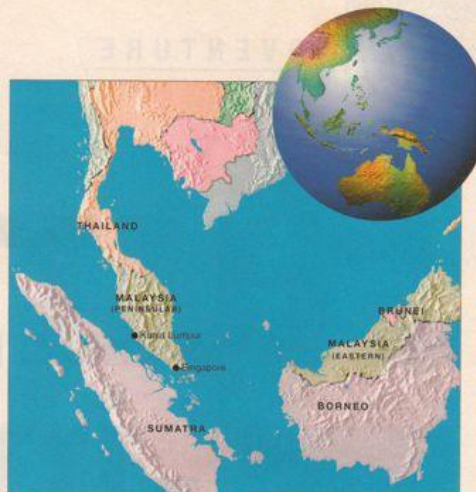
The construction workers are surprised to see us as they finish their dinner. Our convoy of red Land Rovers swings into the muddy yard where their canteen is based, as the relentless drizzle falls.

We noisily climb out of the filthy vehicles and pick our way across the mud, under intense scrutiny. Up here, in this remote part of the forest, they don't get many foreign journalists in Land Rovers.

Inside, Hindus and Chinese sit at long trestle tables on opposite sides of the open-sided shed. There's a Chinese film playing from a TV screen with Chinese music, and Chinese food is served by Chinese cooks. On the other side, Indian food is prepared by Indians, to the frenetic activity of a Hindu movie. We sit in the middle. But this isn't about racial antipathy, rather an illustration of the diversity of Malaysian culture.

The Rainforest Challenge scores highly on cultural diversity as well. The idea is to take a bunch of four-wheel drives through some of the most demanding off-road terrain in the world – the Malaysian rainforest. Now in its third year, it's fast turning into a true international event, attracting teams from 20 countries and a score of media. It also benefits from the support of the Malaysian government, which sees it as a very useful promotional tool for the country's tourism. Land Rovers get a good outing on the 2000 event, with seven competing and plenty of others providing back-up. The Australians are out in force, and hoping to do the triple, having won two RFCs already. Their great white hope is father-and-son team Michael and Wayne Smith, driving a 4.7-litre Range Rover. The

Malaysia boasts some of the most demanding off-road terrain in the world – the perfect venue for the Rainforest Challenge



Martin Lewis and Peter Codd head for the challenge in their 4.6-litre V8 Ibis

Brits are represented by a bunch of Rovers. Veterans Martin Lewis and Peter Codd have an Ibis, equipped with a 4.6-litre V8 and a semi-auto 'box. Simon Buck is back with co-driver Matthew Cook, with a hand-built Range Rover never before used in anger.

And the event takes place during monsoon season, which means a deluge. Arriving in Kuala Lumpur, I'm greeted by rain hammering down from a cloud base so low it obscures

the top of the world's tallest building, the Petronas Twin Towers. I discover that Malaysia is experiencing its worst flooding for five years, with thousands of people displaced, roads closed and landslides all over the place. In a country where the average rainfall makes the UK's flood problems look like a paddling pool, this is serious.

But we start the event in bright, hot sunshine, leaving the Perak state capital of Ipoh under police escort. I met my transport for the event that morning – a 1983 109-inch Station Wagon. Visions of an air-conditioned



Malaysia's lead convoy vehicle heads the procession flying the flag for Britain

110 vanish as I confront the reality of a leaf-sprung Land Rover, fully loaded and with five people on board. There's no glamour in this job.

We cause chaos on the roads that afternoon as the convoy of 80-odd vehicles charges through the city centre, traffic lights held and junctions closed to keep us moving. People stop what they're doing and come out of their offices to watch the procession of heavy-duty four-wheel drives wind through the streets. We're heading for the prologue stage, the results of which will determine the competitors' starting position. This, apparently, is merely a tame version of what's to come. Plenty of locals turn up to spectate, arriving on a variety of rickety mopeds, packed

The Australians are going all out for a hat-trick after winning two RFC's already. All eyes are on father and son team Michael and Wayne Smith

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS: DAN STEVENS



inside battered Protons or just plain walking. It goes off smoothly, and then we set off for the jungle, and our first night under the stars.

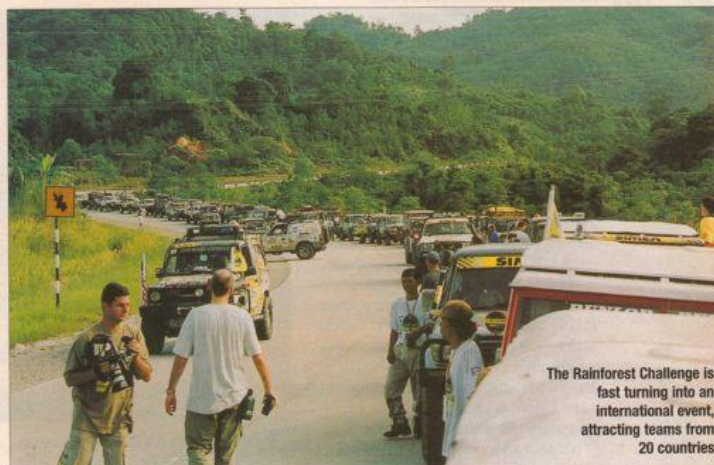
The first campsite is also the setting for the first special stage, held at night. It's a team building exercise, involving getting vehicles from one side of a river to the other. The teams are driving well into the night, some not returning until 3am, and others stay up until dawn working on damaged vehicles. It's a strange experience to wander around thick jungle in the middle of the night to the sound of welding, compressors and plenty of multi-national shouting.

The threatened rain holds off for the next day, as we assemble the growing convoy of vehicles on the road to make for the next campsite in the mountains. We climb through the hills to the Cameron Highlands, where the air becomes much fresher as the humidity gives way to the cooler mountain atmosphere.

By now we've assembled a little convoy of our own, made up of international media transported in a variety of old Series Land Rovers. We're with the Malaysian Land Rover Owners Club, who have supplied five vehicles to cart us around in, including the oldest vehicle in the event (a 1964 Series IIA 109-inch, nicknamed Old Man). Our driver is the ebullient Vikneswaran, although everyone calls him Vicky. He runs a Land Rover workshop in Kuala Lumpur, and built the four Series IIs, which incorporate some unique and highly effective modifications of his own (see panel, page 91).

Despite my earlier reservations, I'm thoroughly enjoying the ride. We were certainly the slowest machines, always bringing up the rear, but where's the point in hurrying? There's something deeply satisfying about riding in ancient, creaky Rovers when the competitors are tooling around in purpose-built machinery. It also means we get to stop at a fascinating Land Rover workshop in the Highlands to fix up our vehicles, as this was the last chance we will have before we got into the jungle proper.

The RFC traverses Malaysia from east to west, and by now we were entering into the jungle, crossing the main mountain range. Up here the roads are logging tracks, varying from compacted earth surfaces to thick heavy mud, three feet deep and with the ability to stick to anything it touches. We set up camp, next to a river, in a cleared piece of jungle, and the competitors ready themselves for the second special stage. Basically a hill climb, with the added twist of having to come back down, the



The Rainforest Challenge is fast turning into an international event, attracting teams from 20 countries

officials reckon it should be done in around eight minutes. Some teams take this as a challenge, and overcook it on the way down. Result: two rolls which hold up progress for hours. The British teams take it slowly and steadily, which means respectable times and no damage. It's 1am before the last team sets off up the hill, but plenty are again working late into the night to repair damage. The deafening noise of the jungle at night, as thousands of cicadas and insects struck up a chorus, is almost drowned out by the noise of hammering and grinding as the competitors fix bent suspension and replace any weak links.

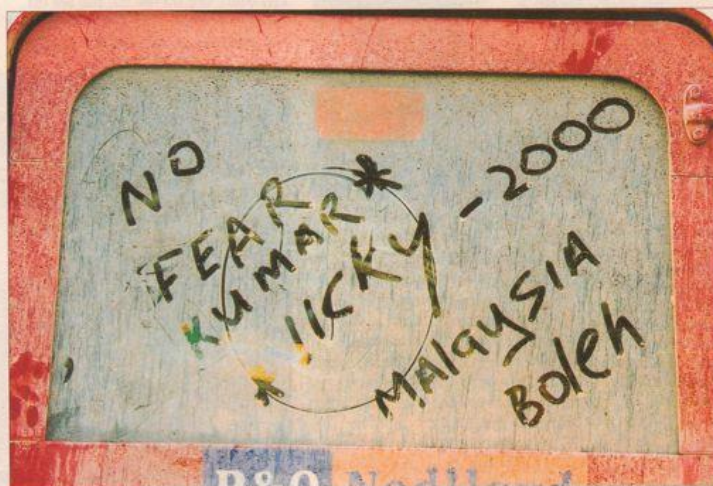
The RFC is not just about special stages though. The major part of the event is completing the journey under your own steam, battling with severe conditions en route. Mud, heat and sheer hard work take their toll, and it's possible to spend a whole day winching, only to move a couple of

"Rain clouds are so low that they obscure the top of the world's tallest building"

miles. This is where the team spirit element comes into play. When you're bogged in five feet of Malaysia's finest clag, you need the help of your fellow competitors to get you out.

The rain, however, mostly holds off. This might sound like a good thing, but you develop a strange love/hate relationship with rain on this sort of event. You don't want it because

Below: Muddy windows are a source of amusement even in Malaysia!





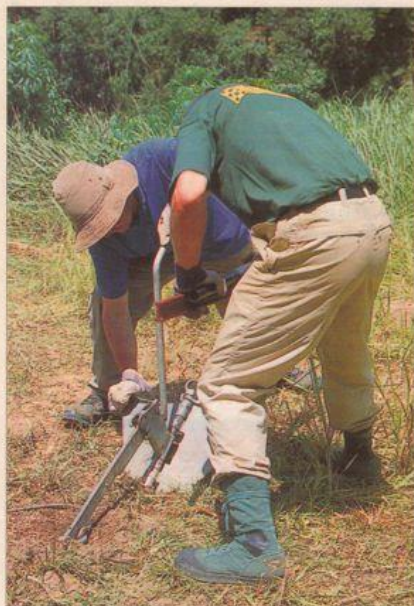
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Right: Thick, solid drizzle has saturated everything by the time competitors reach the campsite

when it comes it's torrential, turning a gravel path into a mud slide in minutes. But, without it, an off-road event becomes much less interesting. One afternoon's heavy, persistent drizzle transforms the logging tracks into a slippery morass of thick mud, the colour and consistency of fudge. Rain keeps the dust down as well and, when you're travelling in a Land Rover with no windows, that's quite useful. If you don't mind getting wet.

And when the sun comes out, it's blistering. There's a special stage that involves one of those faintly pointless tasks – winching a dead vehicle using a high-lift jack and man power. It's hard work, and the sun is shining. Men sweat, vehicles inch forward, everyone takes shelter from the heat.

It's also an interesting illustration of how different teams work. They can attach the jack to the vehicle however they want, using any combination of chains, straps and ground anchors to pull it along. There's no time limit, and the first one to cross the line wins.



Above: Simon Buck and Matthew Cook of Britain try winching with a high-lift jack. The ground is so full of rocks that it proves impossible to get the ground anchor in

Some teams are natural problem solvers, using a metal brace to fix the jack to the vehicle which keeps it rigid and avoids wasting energy. Some aren't, and are making a mess of things. The more resourceful teams spot that the slack in a four-wheel drive transmission causes the vehicle to roll back when the handbrake's applied, and chock the back wheels to avoid losing precious ground. The RFC isn't a gung-ho adventure for no-brainers – you need grey matter more than an over-keen right foot.



Striking camp, it's time to move on to the next campsite. The sky is starting to darken, and people are muttering about the possibility of rain at last. Then it comes, first a patter of drops on the Land Rover's roof, followed by thick, solid drizzle. Vicky flicks on the Series III's wipers which are hopeless against the volume of falling water, and we press on into the gloom of the late afternoon.

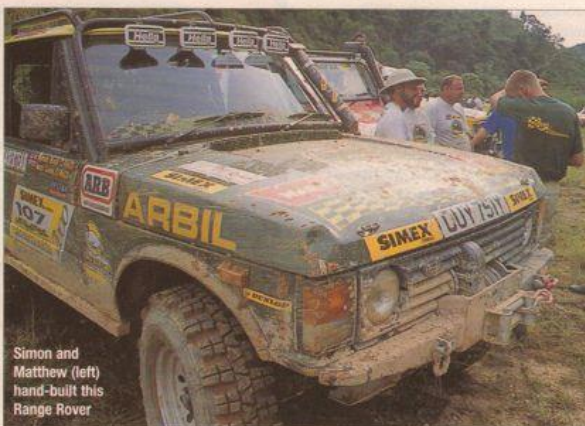
By the time we arrive at the campsite, the rain has stopped, but everything is saturated. But between us and the site is a very, very steep hill, which has stopped a little Daihatsu FJ40 just short of the summit. It's flailing in the mud, digging itself into a hole. "Idiots," says Travis Krause, co-driver of Marc Spring's V8 90, waiting with us to climb the hill. "They're just making it worse for the rest of us. I don't think they've even got it in four-wheel drive."

Something appears at the crest of the hill and extricates the bogged Daihatsu, hauling it to the top. Travis and Marc fire up the 90, and set off towards the hill. They bounce down into the hole at the bottom, and then

gun the V8 hard as the 90 shoots up and round the bend at the top.

We don't have speed – we have a 2.25 engine. "No worries," says Vicky, as the 109 crawls to the base of the hill. "It's a Land Rover." He floors the four-pot, and we grind up the ascent, just making it to the top before the power runs out. But not over the top. Vicky drops the Land Rover back down, about a quarter of the way, and tries again. This time we make it, tyres scrabbling to haul the vehicle on to the flat.

Watching the other Land Rovers make the climb, I can't help but think that maybe some of the more serious machinery is a bit over equipped. Sure, we don't have the speed or power, but these old workhorses are every bit as competent in a challenging situation as the competition vehicles. Shah, who never seems to lose his cool, brings Old Man up the hill in one go. It's an inspiring sight, this old battlewagon ploughing through the mud in the dark. Shah leans out of the window, cigarette dangling from one corner of his mouth. "Two-wheel drive," he says, smiling.



Simon and Matthew (left) hand-built this Range Rover



"Persistent drizzle transforms the logging tracks into a slippery morass of thick mud, the colour and consistency of fudge"

That's not to say that the competition vehicles aren't hugely impressive. These machines are about as serious as it gets at this level, before you start spending big money in the style of the Paris-Dakar. A lot of time, effort and sheer graft has gone into building them, and the determination of the drivers to keep them in the event is admirable. Simon Buck's Range Rover was unfinished when it arrived in Malaysia - he was up most of the first night with co-driver Matthew Cook sorting out the 4.6-litre V8's fiendishly complicated electrics.

And it's the vehicles that are at the heart of the RFC. Its slogan is 'live your passion in 4x4 adventure', and organiser Luis Wee is adamant that

this passion is most obvious in people's vehicles. "We don't want the event to be dominated by one make of vehicle, like the Camel Trophy. We're similar to the Camel in the adventurous spirit, and we're open to sponsorship, but the competitors love their vehicles."

Which is why they've put so much effort into getting the cars here. We'd been wondering what had happened to the Filipino team, who eventually arrive on the fourth night, having missed the prologue and the first special stage. They got held up at the port of Kelang when it emerged they didn't have the right paperwork for their Land Cruiser to enter Malaysia. When they show up, they get placed last, but they're just

pleased to be there.

The jungle is another key player in the RFC. Luis reckons the jungle gives the event, and Malaysia, a natural advantage in the world of international off-roading. The terrain is ideally suited to serious off-road work, and even the mighty Camel Trophy came to the Malaysian state of Sabah in 1993. It's a fantastic place to be, although sadly there's precious little real rainforest left. That's all been cut down, courtesy of the British, who logged the ancient forests into extinction when Malaysia was a colony. We're driving through regrowth, under 50 years old, and sticking to logging tracks. There's

Above: This Series III is completely standard and didn't even have diff locks. Needless to say it had to be towed out of this sticky situation



Husband and wife team Wallis (left) and Shah Zain of the Malaysian LR Club



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Above: Never have truer words been said!

strict rules about not venturing off the tracks and causing damage to the vegetation.

By now we're halfway through the Challenge, although people keep telling me this is nothing on what's to come. This is a shame, because I've got to fly back to the UK due to work commitments, and I'll miss the best bits in the second week, including the final special stage on the beach at Kuala Terengganu, where Malaysia meets the South China Seas.

But there's still another night in the



jungle, and another night in the hammock, strung between two Land Rovers. Or not. Arriving at the Highlanders campsite, we're confronted with an enormous Tenko style hut, all palm leaves and



bamboo. Inside, the floor is three inches deep in mud, and we're sleeping on raised platforms. It's hot, damp and somebody says they've seen a giant rat scuttling around in the dark. It's brilliant.

I know I shouldn't be leaving, and it turns out that I'm right. After refuelling and re-supplying, the convoy makes for the next campsite, and things get harder. A succession of blocked tracks and landslides slows progress to the point where covering seven kilometres takes 12 hours. By the time they reach the appropriately named Terminator Hill, with its accompanying mud hole, there's only

29 teams left, and just 15 of these actually attempt the full length of the stage. The rest of them never make it to the area.

After this, the organisers decide that it's too risky to send the remaining competitors into the jungle, and

Bug's life



The rainforest is stuffed with a variety of unpleasant creatures whose sole reason for existence seems to be to attack humans. Here's a few of the less savoury

Ants

Giant ants are everywhere, and grow to about an inch in length. The soldier ants will attach themselves to anything that moves, locking their sizeable jaws on to vulnerable human flesh. One bit me and left a 1cm cut in my finger that bled profusely for 10 minutes. It hurt like hell.



Leeches

Not just loathsome creations, leeches are technologically adept as well. They inject an anti-coagulant into the skin when they stick to you, which results in plenty of blood flow when you remove them by stubbing a lit cigarette out on the nasty little buggers.



A bizarre selection of flying beasties

Giant mutant crane flies with a five-inch wingspan, scary black flying ants and a family-pack size selection of weird creatures flock to anything with a light on it - like your head torch. They all look lethal.

Elephant grass

It doesn't come after you, but it will rapidly turn your legs into a stinging rash of welts.

The long thin blades are covered with fine, sharp bristles that catch on skin. The stuff is everywhere.

Tigers

Not really a threat because there are so few left, but should you encounter one, you'd be forgiven for swallowing your own tongue. Beautiful, rare and probably more scared of you than you are of it.

Durian fruit

Okay, so it's only a fruit and it probably won't kill you unless one falls on your head. But it stinks like a blocked drain, although apparently tastes quite nice.

Mosquitoes

Ranging in size from something that would rival a light aircraft for air space to the ubiquitous midges, mosquitoes are a constant irritation. Most prolific at night, which means covering yourself in powerful insect repellent before bed, but miss a patch of skin and you'll wake up looking like an acne-ridden teenager. You might get malaria as well.



everyone bails out. Everyone except the Malaysian Land Rover Owners Club, two Spanish teams in Suzuki SJs, and the Italians in a Toyota CJ5. They battle on, encountering washed out bridges, landslides and fallen trees. At one point they have to build their own track, where a landslide covering 100ft of track has completely blocked the path. Six feet of mud is bridged using fallen trees and bamboo, with the first vehicle crossing at 10.30pm. Seven hours later the last vehicle – Old Man – makes it across.

The decades-old Land Rovers, along with the Suzukis and the Toyota, were the only vehicles to complete the whole event. If that's not enough, the overall winners of the RFC 2000 were Michael and Wayne Smith in a Range Rover. Next time, I'm going all the way. **RFC**

Results:

1st: Michael and Wayne Smith, Australia, Range Rover

2nd: Loo Fu Siong and Chong Yoke Sang, Malaysia, Toyota Land Cruiser

Special awards: Martin Lewis and Peter Codd, UK, Ilex. Marc Spring and Travis Krause, Switzerland/South Africa, V8 90 Malaysian Land Rover Owners



Insect repellent test

THE SECOND MOST important thing to carry in the jungle after drinking water to keep those nasty bugs at bay

Ibis Products Repel 55 £3.99 for 60ml

Contains 52.5 per cent DEET, the most effective insect repellent known to man. It's mild enough to apply liberally to skin, and although it smells a little toxic, it didn't cause any problems. Easily good enough for just about any environment.

Ibis Products Repel 100 £4.99 for 60ml

This is 95 per cent DEET, and it's too strong to apply to sensitive areas. Not really suitable for your face, because it smells very strong, and if you get it on your lips it stings. It works superbly, although you're probably better off restricting its use to mosquito nets and clothing.

Herbal Armor Insect Repellent £5.99 for 120ml

Natural ingredients ensure compatibility with kids and very sensitive skin, but not toxic enough for the more persistent beasts. You'll need to apply it regularly to keep the mozzies away. Water-resistant, and not tested on animals.

Mosi-Guard Natural £5.99 for 100ml

The best all-rounder – strong enough to see off anything with designs on your flesh, but without any nasty odours or toxic ingredients. In fact it smells quite nice, with a fresh minty aroma. Lasts for hours, and you don't need much of it. It's the best value of the four, and definitely the most pleasant to use.

All products tested are available from Safariquip, The Stones, Castleton, Hope Valley S33 8WX, England.
Tel: +44 (0)1433 620061 Website: www.safariquip.co.uk



Tricked up for the jungle

They may look a bit home-made, but these old Land Rovers are a force to be reckoned with. Built by expedition leader Vikneswaran in his Kuala Lumpur workshop, they've been designed for jungle use.

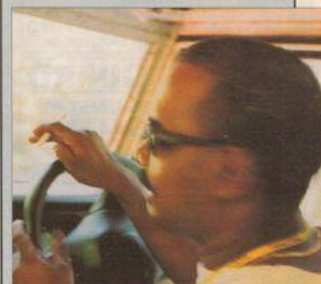
The massive ground clearance is due to axles from a Volvo Laplander, the Swedish equivalent to the Forward Control. These portal axles fit straight on, with a bit of modification to the spring mounts on the axle casing, and enable the Rovers to go just about anywhere they're pointed. The Laplander axles have diff locks, which are operated via two handbrake levers inside the cab.

To cope with the size of the wheels, power steering is fitted, normally using Toyota or Nissan pumps gleaned off saloon cars. Mounted at the front of the engine bay, the unit is connected to the steering column and the track rods with an extensive selection of rods and links. You'd think it wouldn't work, but it seems to. Incredibly, all the dampers are from Volvo cars, 240 items on the front and 740 units at the back. They're cheap, easy to find, and don't break.

Vicky got so fed up with the useless performance of the Zenith carbs that he fitted a Stromberg from, you guessed it, a Volvo. Other than that the engines are standard 2.25 petrol lumps, which cope well with the enormous axles. The gearboxes are less happy though, and tend to disintegrate under the pressure. Old Man, the 1964 SIIA, has a Laplander gearbox, which is considerably tougher

than the standard 'box. Ancient PTO winches keep going when electric ones have burnt out, which is useful when you're having to pull dozens of bogged vehicles out of the tenacious mud.

The MLRO are a vital part of the RFC. They carry out the pre-event reconnaissance, provide an important part of the marshalling and generally keep the whole thing running smoothly. Chief scout and course master Rate de Silva puts in a long day, finishing only when the last competitor has completed their run on the special stage, and starting before anyone else to set up at the next campsite. There was a certain amount of scepticism from some competitors about their effectiveness, and maybe even some snobbery about their vehicles, but in the end they were among the few people to complete the entire event.



Our driver on the event, and president of the Malaysian Land Rover Club, Vicky