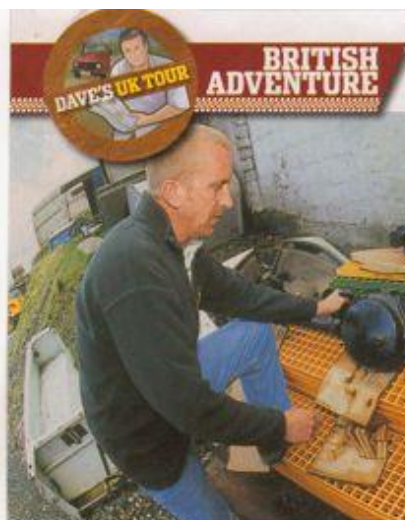




Simon inspects a heavy-duty axle casing. Note brake pipe protectors to cope with serious off-road abuse



Right cup contains wrong oil from gearbox

Simon Buck is the only European ever to have won the notorious Malaysian Rainforest Challenge



This is where Devon 4x4 creates top kit for serious off-roaders

It's raining now and a storm is clearly brewing. The panes of glass in the Tors Hotel rattle as the wind sweeps in from the north. But an old man at the bar assures me we're safe in our beds tonight. 'There's no need for concern when it's coming from the sea. It's when it's over the moor you start to worry,' he says.

Competitive spirit

This morning the Defender's gearbox is as noisy as ever. Home is more than 250 miles and it's a journey I don't fancy when something is clearly very wrong. So what do I do?

One of the best things about working on LRO for the past eight years is that I've made a lot of friends in the Land Rover trade, from all over the country. And two of them – Simon and Liz Buck of Devon 4x4 – happen to be based at South Molton, which is only 25 miles away. I duly limp across country and arrive at their premises hoping Simon will be able to help. He does.

He agrees it doesn't sound good. We get the Defender up on the ramps and drain the gearbox. To me, it looks very black. But Simon has already sniffed out the problem. 'That smells like EP80 to me,' he

says, with a plastic cup of the thick black stuff under his left nostril. 'You can't put ordinary gear oil in this gearbox – it's too thick because there's an oil pump in there. It's vital it's filled with MTF 94, as approved by Land Rover. Let's just hope too much damage hasn't been done...'

Well, for once luck is on my side. With fresh oil of the right grade in the box, normal service is resumed. It's noticeably quieter, but on the test drive Simon remarks that I could cut the engine noise, too.

'How's that?' I enquire, innocently. 'You need a GKN overdrive,' he replies. 'We've got them on special offer at the moment...'

With that long motorway drive ahead, who could resist? Simon duly sets his mechanics to work on it, while he gives me the guided tour of the premises.

Simon just happens to be one of the very best off-roaders in the country. He's won numerous, near-impossible challenges in the UK and Ireland, as well as being the only European to win the notorious Malaysian Rainforest Challenge, in 2002.

Happily for the rest of us, he has put that experience into practice. He knows the weaknesses of his Land

Rovers when under extreme stress and has used his mechanical and engineering know-how to create a great range of products that can transform an ordinary vehicle into one capable of tackling the world's most hostile terrain.

What was once a quiet, rural filling station is today buzzing with creative engineering. Devon 4x4 goodies include seriously impressive underbody armour, winch bumpers, roll cages and heavy-duty axles.

'What we make is the direct result of our own experiences out there, doing it,' says Simon. 'I'm very passionate about that and I refuse to compromise on quality.'

By now, the overdrive is in place and it's time for a test drive. The British-made GKN unit provides a 28 per cent reduction in gearing when it's engaged (electronically) via a simple switch on top of the gearknob. The difference at 70mph is remarkable – no more the constant screaming for another gear.

Simon warns me not to expect a great saving in fuel costs. 'Some people buy overdrives hoping to save money at the pumps but, in truth, it won't be more than two or three per cent. The biggest advantages of fitting an overdrive are greater comfort and a quieter drive.'

And as I head off down the M5 back towards the Midlands, I can certainly appreciate that. **LRO**

Factfile Somerset and North Devon

- LRO's first Weekender at Butlins, Minehead, was such a success that we have plans to repeat the event next year. We'll announce details soon.
- The greenlanes of Exmoor are mainly rocky and can be driven throughout the year without causing damage. But avoid any over peat moorland in wet weather.
- I stayed at the Tors Hotel, Lynmouth, where off-roaders are always welcome.

A hearty breakfast in the dining room with stunning views over the harbour is recommended. Tel: 01598 753236. Website: www.torslynmouth.co.uk

- Check out Exmoor Trim's range of products in the company's adverts in LRO, or log on to www.exmoortrim.com
- Devon 4x4's products and services can again be found in their adverts in LRO, or at www.devon4x4.com

