

HONEYMOON HEAVEN

Having convinced Zoe that the Desert Warrior training trip would be an exciting honeymoon, they set off for Morocco...

Part One

BEN'S DAKAR RALLY TRAINING TRIP TO MOROCCO SHOWS DESERT WARRIOR TO BE MORE THAN CAPABLE

WELL, WHAT can I say, Morocco has done it to me again – I went out to test a car and write about it and instead have come back in awe of the country and its people. But, before I launch into the car and how it went, I must say if you're sat reading this and have ever considered doing a bit of an expedition in your Land Rover but keep saying 'once I have a winch fitted', 'once air lockers are in and working properly' or some other reason before I will go to the Sahara... well, forget it. Put the money towards the fuel and ferry, get some spares on 'sale or return' from your local supplier and go. Pack your Land Rover to the brim with memories as, I can promise you, it will be worth far more than the gleaming winch bolted to the bumper.

On our expedition we had a variety of vehicles; a 101 rebuilt by Mark and Rowena, a Discovery Series II owned by Richard and Anne, a 90 owned by Johnny and Nicole, a Range Rover Classic owned by Neil and Louise from Impala Adventures and, of course,

by
Ben Metcalf

Built for the desert – not for snow covered mountain passes (no heater) – the 350bhp engined Desert Warrior proved almost faultless, with just a dodgy alternator spoiling an otherwise perfect score.

us – the Desert Warrior. The trip proved it is not essential to have a vehicle spec-ed up to the hilt, only a well-serviced, reliable vehicle and to travel in good company.

The shared adventures and memories instil a great feeling of camaraderie which lends itself well to the greatest off-roading accessory available – another vehicle, so that when the going gets a bit tough, sandy, cold, dark, hot, muddy, wet (the list goes on), there is always assistance available.

So, if you're still reading and not now booking your trip, I'd better tell you how the car did.

Well, it was not flawless but it was amazing. In reality the only

issue I had was a faulty alternator, which can happen to anyone at any time. However, I did pay for my mistake of not taking a spare. I paid 360 Euros to have mine refurbished, 90 Euros for the taxi back to my hotel from where the car was being worked on and £430 to have an alternator flown into every airport en route a day after I had been there. I should have paid heed to Neil's spares list but, honestly, how often do you find your alternator fails apart from (of course) at the most inconvenient time – like coming off the ferry into Santander at the start of a 7,000km off-road trip!

Anyway, putting that aside,



the drive down through Spain was fantastic; the car performed brilliantly sitting at 120kph steady as a rock and with the intercom headphones on Zoe and I could talk easily. The only thing I would say that the car lacked, coming over the Pyrenees at night in late November, was a heater – but then this was not what the car was built for and I knew that my fingers frozen to the steering wheel and looking through my icy breath would soon be a distant memory.

adiós spain

Spain soon passed and then came the real reason for the trip: Africa. It seems odd, as it's not really a long way, but getting off the ferry at Tangier feels like a real milestone. I think it's because you have done it; driven to a new continent – or possibly it's the hustle and bustle of a different culture. Either way that holiday buzz you always used to get kicks in and the adventure begins.

After dealing with the routine chaos of the port and paying for our complimentary mint tea we were off. The alternator fiasco meant we had caught a later ferry than

expected and the first African leg was in the dark – 400km to Settat.

We easily put Tangier, Rabat and Casablanca behind us. Oh, and a moped coming at us, full-speed on the wrong side of a motorway was the only main excitement and a re-introduction to Moroccan driving!

Next day was a trip to Essaouira which is when you notice the scenery start to change, fewer cars and more donkeys. It struck me, this time more than last, that the further south you go the less material wealth people have, yet the friendlier they are.

Our first attempt at water crossing in the car came round a tight corner where we spotted the 101 below us poised to enter what can only be described as a very deep and very fast moving river. I think Mark and Rowena were pleased to see us, as they had been deciding where best to enter; as Mark and I skilfully prodded the bank with sticks, Richard and Ann arrived in the Disco. It was relief on my part that Neil called to see if anyone had made it to the river yet and to see if we had found the crossing some way down stream. Phew!

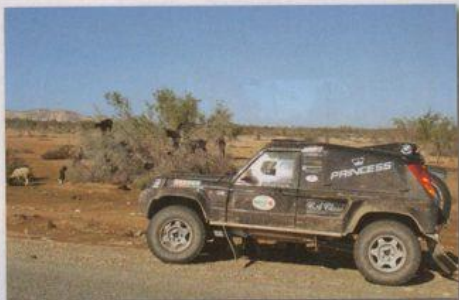
Top: Shade in the desert, one of the most sought after commodities; 101 proves the old desert adage – the bigger the vehicle, the more stuff you can cram into it. Above: Warrior in the Pyrenees, not the warmest part of the journey; knife edge sand dune and four shiny Rovers.

Although it has to be said that the water was still at bonnet height and we did suffer considerable ingress (mainly due to doing it twice so that Mark could get a better picture!). Essaouira is a lively fishing port with loads of history, fish and surfers. It is reasonably touristy (in a relaxed Moroccan type of way) and, as flights can be taken straight in, its Atlantic coast is home to some of the best wave sets and on-shore winds attracting all kinds of surfers.

adiós tarmac

After the best fish dinner I've ever had we headed out of Essaouira – and just 50km beyond you're into fantastic scenery surrounded by Argan trees (the tree of life, as seen on TV recently; the tree is literally full of goats as they use the trees as their grazing ground) and that was it, the last of the tourist trail and tarmac roads – off-road adventure ahead.

This was our first real day of using the road book and, for a first attempt, Zoe did reasonably well. According to her; the GPS was definitely wrong.



Above left: Goats swarm over a Tree of Life.

Above right: You have to wonder, how did that get there? Monster wrecked ship dwarfs the expedition vehicles.



and on two occasions the locals gave us directions as four satellites were seemingly incapable. We weaved our way through the tiniest of villages, much to the villager's amusement, doubling back on ourselves at least three times and then headed towards the coast across open fields before arriving at the Aglou Beach Hotel to hear everyone's tales of the day's navigating.

Up early we headed for our first wild camp on the Plage Blanche, we made good time so once we'd set up camp we sneaked off, let a bit of air out of the tyres and had our first drive on the sand. At 120kph the car was awesome, floating above the soft sand, but come down below 50kph and the tyres were definitely still too hard; it was amazing how the 350hp monster was suddenly reduced to having the get up and go of a 2CV.

mound of rust

Up to a misty sea morning and, once we had watched the 90 remove the Range Rover from a sand dune that had got in the way, we picked a route down the beach. Our road books told us to head for the shipwrecked boat and what a boat it was! It made for a great picture, the five vehicles parked beside this gravity defying mound of rust.

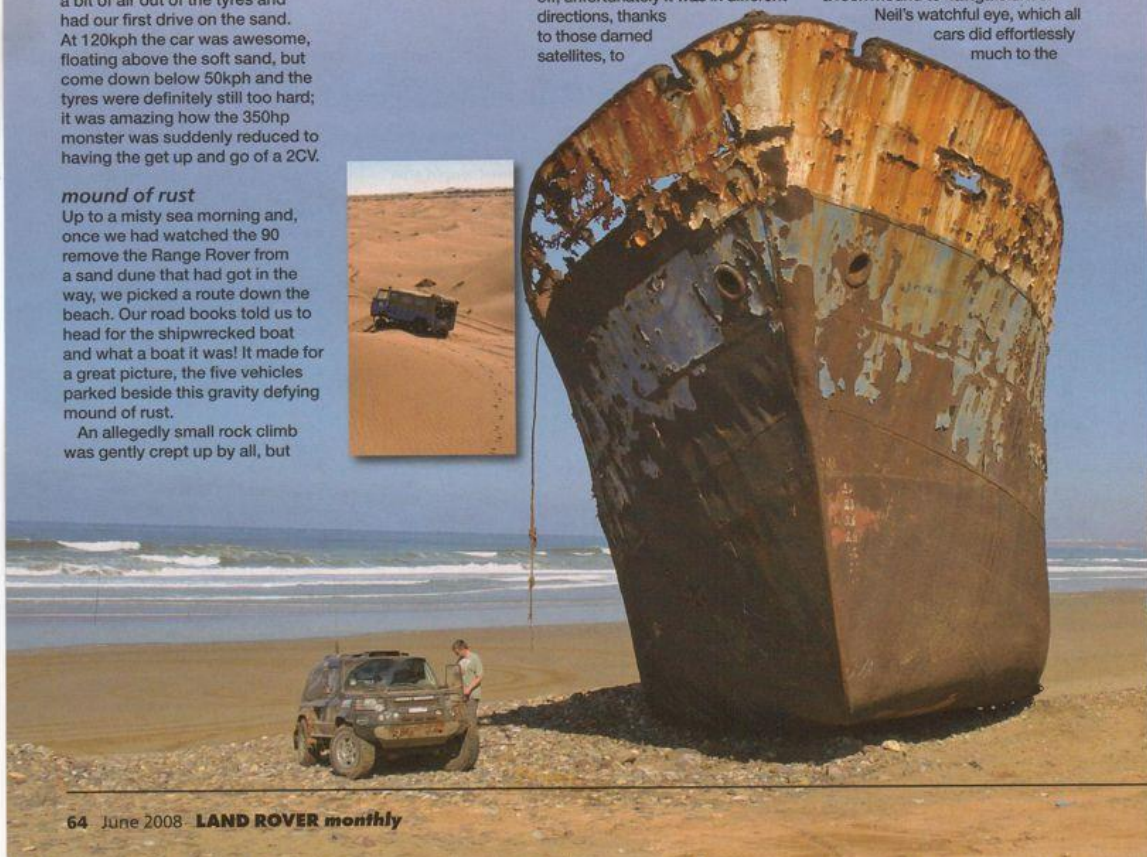
An allegedly small rock climb was gently crept up by all, but

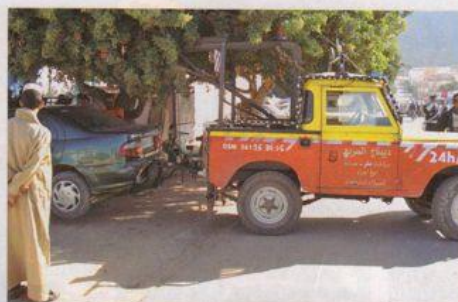
proved initially too difficult for the 101 due to its lack of low range – but after a little bit of coaxing from Mark the 101 gently strolled up to cheers from us and the gathered crowd of locals.

Neil had been given a waypoint for a deserted Fort; the drive up to it was fantastic and you could park in the Fort's entrance and explore or sit and watch the locals (no idea where they came from) bomb around on their quad bikes at brake neck speeds. Then, once we'd had enough of re-enacting *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*, we all set off; unfortunately it was in different directions, thanks to those darned satellites, to

our next waypoint – Fort Bou Jerif Hotel. The hotel was truly an oasis to the somewhat sandy traveller. The generator got switched off at 11pm so candles were provided but (and I don't know if it was the air, the heat or the excitement) most of us were happy with the curfew and hit the hay before lights out. Up early to check the cars over and then off into the sand for the day's excitement. We collected dead wood from an oasis, taking care not to disturb the meandering goats, and set the cars in the direction of the coast. There was a rock mound to navigate under

Neil's watchful eye, which all cars did effortlessly much to the





amusement of the gathered flamingos. We had lunch on the beach but with the background noise of the waves crashing onto the shore it was hard to hear precisely Neil's talk on driving on sand. If you'd been watching from the cliff you'd have thought he'd basically said, 'gun it through as much water and surf as possible' because the temptation to send plumes of water over each others vehicles was too much.

We had a fantastic hour racing along the deserted Plage Blanche and any previous thoughts of rusting cars when driving on the sand and through sea water were long gone. It is prudent to point out here, though, that when embarking on such hi-jinx all windows should be firmly shut!

We reluctantly turned off the beach and headed up a river bed to explore for a place to camp. Waking up to fog was eerily exciting and added to the feeling of remoteness well until a shepherd arrived and watched amused as we packed up camp.

Onwards to Tata we passed the border to Algeria where we had our passports duly checked and noted. Situated on the Saharan plain, Tata has a distinctly military feel to it as it is dominated by a large military fort. We stayed in somewhat salubrious digs as all other hotels seemed to be fully booked by dignitaries (due to the

King's pending visit). We were very entertained by the commotion in the town as the residents of Tata frantically painted the kerbs green and red, hoisted flags and towed, somewhat haphazardly, any vehicle in the way.

On the second attempt to find the road to Fom-Zguid (due to incorrect information offered by the multi billion dollar US military satellite system and not my navigator) we found our waypoint which indicated that we should turn right, off the main road onto the sand and find the river bed and follow it. Fantastic, put it like that and it sounds easy! Only it wasn't; the river bed was a minefield of rocks which we weren't too fond of so we tended to hug the banks which was a mixture of either very hard or very soft sand.

soupy sand

Then the inevitable happened; we got stuck – I would like to be able to blame it on the car but it was my fault... too much welly in sand that was like soup, coupled with over inflated tyres and rapid changes of direction. Of course we then got mobbed by locals who did very kindly try to assist but international rescue soon appeared (in the form of Richard and Ann in the Disco) who very calmly rocked up, hooked us up and towed us out.

Above left: And salt water does what, exactly, to your chassis?

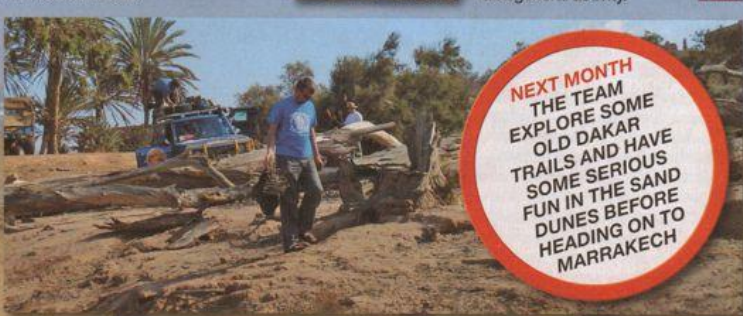
Above right: Tow-away Zone, Moroccan style.

Below: Unpleasant wild camels, river crossings and wild camping – it's the magic of an off-road trip in the Sahara.

So we were off again, zig-zagging our way across the riverbed, headed for any bit of sand we could find to try and avoid the ridiculously large and aggressive rocks that had once littered the river bed. Eventually we left the area and headed towards the waypoint for the evening's camp. This was via a particularly tricky rock climb (not in the road book), we found our way onto Lac Irti and opened the car up. Needless to say, we were last into camp that night as playing around was just far too much fun. That evening round the campfire, we pointed out the constellations and spotted a few 'incapable' satellites moving across the crystal night sky.

Our road book had warned of a Fort on the next day's route and (unfortunately), due to little else going on, a soldier hot-footed it down the mountain side and apprehended the 101 and us trying to get us to leave the sand and head for the main road. Luckily, due to our ignorance of both French and Arabic, giving him the odd biro, chocolate bar and a few Dirham was enough – he eventually gave up on us and we battled on through the sand (passing anti-social wild camels and camel trains), to the wild camp where we were met by an excited gang of local nomadic children who were very amused by our tents and general activity.

LRM



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