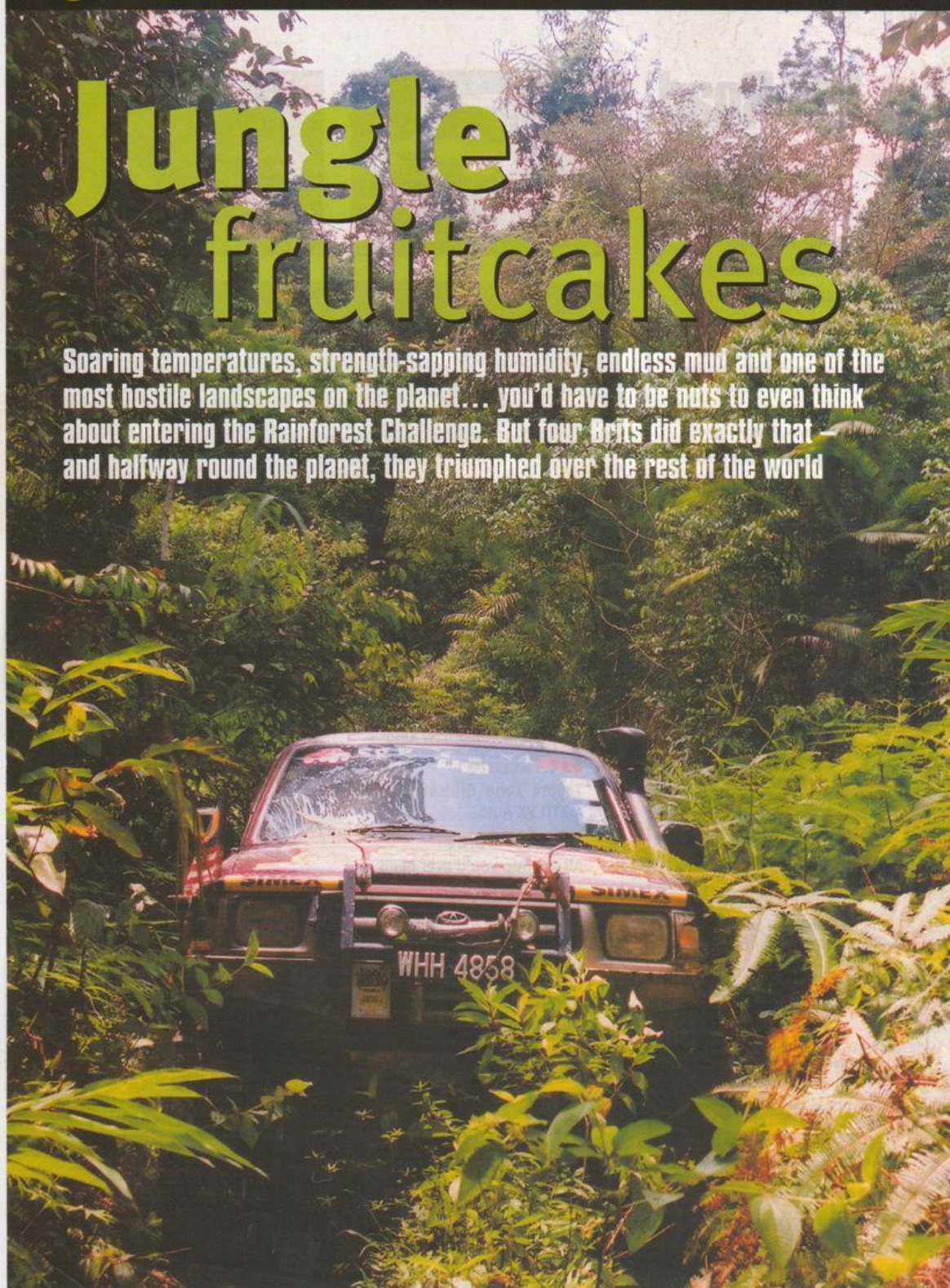


Jungle fruitcakes

Soaring temperatures, strength-sapping humidity, endless mud and one of the most hostile landscapes on the planet... you'd have to be nuts to even think about entering the Rainforest Challenge. But four Brits did exactly that — and halfway round the planet, they triumphed over the rest of the world



Britain's Simon Buck and Matt Cook, driving a 4.0-litre Range Rover, have become the first UK team to triumph in the Simex-sponsored Malaysian Rainforest Challenge. At the end of a hot, sticky, muddy and at times somewhat chaotic event, it was the crew from Devon 4x4 that emerged from the jungle to claim the title ahead of a fierce local challenge – and finally break the dominance of the previously all-conquering Australians.

One of four British vehicles shipped halfway round the world for the event by P&O Nedlloyd, the bobtail Range Rover led a UK challenge that also saw Martin Lewis and Darren Church (100-inch Land Rover Hybrid), Jacqueline Whann and Peter Codd (Suzuki SJ) and Bob Webster and Chris Daniell (Land Rover 90) collectively receive the team award after finishing 8th, 25th and 26th respectively from a starting field of fifty. And with Bob hailing from Scotland and Jacqueline from Northern Ireland, it was a truly British collection of off-road talent that went out to do battle with what's internationally renowned as the world's toughest off-road event.

As anyone who's driven off-road as part of a convoy will tell you, terrain can become a whole lot less driveable after a couple of vehicles have been over it. So it was that the Challenge started with a prologue section, where five special stages were to decide the running order.

With such a large field, the vehicles were split into five groups for the prologue, held at a site in Mentakab. As it was, the grand departure of around eighty 4x4s from the Gunung Senyum campsite, in the State of Pahang, was the last time the competitors would all be together at once until near the end of the event.

With the temperature soaring to 39°C, competitors sat and sweated as car after car went in to tackle the mud, gullies and steep slopes of the five prologue sections. It didn't start well for the local ladies' team of Norila Mahmud and Rosa Rahim, who dropped their SJ into a ditch and on to its side... with the first car off the line in distress on SS1,



the others started accepting that this might turn out to be a long day.

Veterans Wong Kock Phin and Shinichi Yoshimoto had to break out their Land Cruiser's ground anchor on the same stage, slowing things down still further, while Bob Webster had problems of another kind when another vehicle cut straight in front of him and blocked his route. He was awarded a re-run after putting in a protest, but the incident showed the danger of running wheel-to-wheel two-car sections on an event of this nature.

All this was as nothing, however, compared to the trouble Spain's Rogelio Vega got himself into. The only competitor in the ATV class, he was gunning his Yamaha quad up a steep slope on SS4 when his front wheels lifted and the vehicle fell over backwards – right on top of him. Medics rushed to help as blood poured from a wound just above his eye, before Event Doctor Saranjit Singh took him off to hospital for stitches and some precautionary check-ups.

Left: the familiar sight of Devon 4x4's team colours...

Right: ...and the equally familiar sight of a vehicle with not enough wheels on the deck

Above: Pete Codd and Jacqui Whann came second in class in their SJ – and flew the flag for Northern Ireland

It was only luck that stopped worse from happening on SS5, which had already put at least seventeen teams on to their sides when a botched recovery left the marshals feeling very sheepish indeed. As they pushed a stricken vehicle back on to its wheels on a steep slope, no-one thought to check whether it was in gear, which it wasn't – meaning that as soon as it landed the right way up, it went freewheeling off back down the hill and crashed into a tree.





With fifty teams trying to drive five special stages and so many recoveries going on, it's no great surprise that they weren't all able to finish the prologue in the allocated afternoon. Yet they all had to be at the night's campsite in time for a special team stage, in which three crews and one vehicle had to set up an arial runway and use it to get a spare wheel and tyre across a river. The Brits showed everyone else how it was done, setting a time no-one else came close to matching – and taking an early lead in the fight for the team award.

The following morning, after drivers' briefing, the Challenge proper was finally underway. At least, sort of. Some crews had to return to Mentakab to finish the prologue section, while others lined up for the start of SS6. This involved driving through the same river across which they'd been carrying tyres the night before, something Simon Buck achieved without a pause for thought.

Others followed in the same vein, until Sandro Signorini's Jeep Wrangler couldn't make it out the far side. Rather than going for the winch, he started thrashing backwards and forwards, completely annihilating the banks on both sides of the river, while a marshal simply let him get on with it. Finally, the driver waiting behind Signorini started making loud noises about what he was witnessing, whereupon the marshal put a stop to the destruction – but from here on, this was a winching section.

Having got the idea, the marshal was now very quick on his whistle to stop any excessive wheel spin. A bit late for Jacqui Whann and Peter Codd, who needed to use their waffles to get up the now-vertical bank, and not much use to Roger McKay and Blair Irwin from New Zealand, whose Hi-Lux ended up with a steering arm bent like a banana after winching itself out of the river.



total Off Road JANUARY 2003



Left: Martin Lewis and Darren Church battle to get their 100-inch hybrid through a special stage...

Above: ...and then to keep it running after the Tdi's head gasket failed

Left: Simon Buck shows that as well as being a good driver, he knows how to handle a snatch block

Below: motorsport's not normally about hard physical labour...

