



To Hel & Back

TRANS LIBYAN EXPRESS

Trying to meet their first pressing engagement in Libya, the boys realise that the road to Hel is going to be a tough slog. However, a much needed pause in Egypt makes them realise, life isn't so bad after all.

Words and Photos by: Carl James and Tom Picton

RAS ADJIR, Libya, noon, Tuesday 6 April. This was our deadline. Our deadline of utmost importance to meet our guide and traverse the first significant African border crossing. With all we knew about Libya, which isn't exactly your normal holiday destination, coupled with the unpredictable nature of regulations and border guards, we approached with trepidation.

We aimed to camp nearby the border the night prior, however somehow we had managed to overlook the size of Tunisia. Brief glimpses of the map had shown it to be a pretty small country but we were still 200kms short of the border as darkness threatened to descend.

Over the last year, fellow overlanders had drilled into us that

driving in the dark in Africa is a huge no-no and it was plain to see why. Even in daylight, the Tunisians were scaring the life out of us, with wild overtaking manoeuvres and general wafting across the lanes. So, despite the deadline and mileage shortfall, we picked a good spot to stop while there was still light and made camp.

We awoke early to make up the distance. While pulling away we found ourselves with more problems, as our Libyan tour operator rang to say the guide price had doubled. Additionally the diff-lock indicator light on the car was stuck on, so we were unsure if the diff-lock itself was actually jammed.

Naturally driving with it in this state would badly scrub the tyres but also very possibly result in breaking



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something in the transmission. With deadlines to meet and the phone out of battery it all got horribly stressful, at which point Carl shot off to have his first 'toilet in the bush' experience and promptly returned with three huge bites on his backside. Thankfully, Tom was unable to rub in the anti-histamine, as he was otherwise engaged.

With the last juice in the phone battery we argued with the Libyans and concurrently stripped the floor out of the cab to give access to the top of the transfer box. It quickly became apparent that the problem wasn't a result of a faulty electrical switch (as we had hoped) but was in fact a broken lever. We satisfied ourselves that diff-lock was not engaged and then got on the road, aware that until we sorted a fix we would have to tread carefully each time we left the road.

We reached the border a bit late and a four-hour wait ensued as the mountains of paperwork were completed. Our guide flashed pieces of paper at us, declaring that they

were receipts for all the taxes and fees he must pay on our behalf, but being in Arabic, they could have said pretty much anything. Eventually we were in.

On this trip, Libya is unique in that a guide is required at all times. As we couldn't afford to cover the costs of a guide hiring his own 4x4 we were three up in the cab, in the country in which the hottest temperature on the planet has previously been recorded, and in a race against the time to cover 1,800kms in just four days.

Our companion for the week was Abdul Hady Abdul Gader Taher Gabriel (aka 'Eddie') and without further ado we made off for Tripoli, stopping at every police checkpoint going. It turned out that Eddie's intended hostel was full, which meant we had to venture back through central Tripoli in darkness to find somewhere to camp.

We saddled up, dodging cars with only one light or no lights. After a '20km' drive which took an hour and a half (distances weren't Eddie's strongest point) we arrived at a

Opposite left

The 110 has come in for some stick already, being bombarded by the African dust

Below main

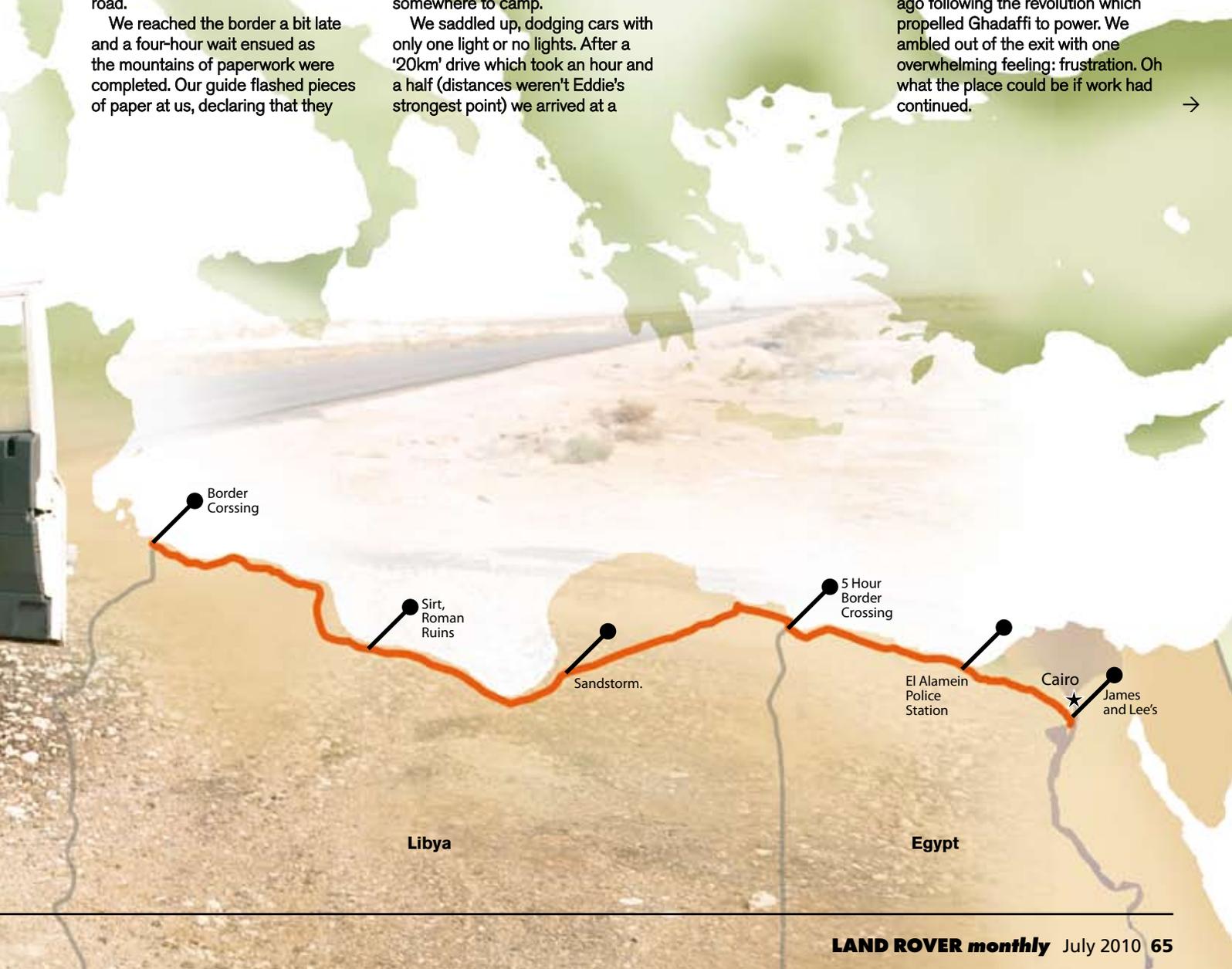
The North African section of the route is now referred to as the 'diesel and dust leg'.

secluded compound, owned by an acquaintance of our new passenger.

We were both fairly irritated at having driven in the dark and broken one of our key rules so early in the trip. Even more so, we had seen up close why it was so important to avoid. While we didn't know the country anywhere near as well as Eddie, we vowed to be far more resolute when there were decisions to be made

The following day we travelled to Leptis Magna, a world heritage site, with arguably the finest Roman ruins on the planet. The place was simply stunning, huge amphitheatres and Roman market places still 30-feet high within spitting distance of the vivid turquoise Med.

The museum gave us a flavour of the city in it's prime, but the amount still standing was remarkable. Restoration was halted 20 years ago following the revolution which propelled Ghadaffi to power. We ambled out of the exit with one overwhelming feeling: frustration. Oh what the place could be if work had continued.





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Back onto the road from Leptis, we alternated the lucky chap who sat in the middle who, apart from the discomfort, had to put up with being 'groped' by the driver during gear changes.

Bushcamping that night, we found a few trees off the road in the fading evening light, well hidden from the desert road down a sandy track, resisting any urges to go and play in the deeper sand with our diff-lock broken. We chatted long into the night with Eddie about Libya – this country whose international press revolves simply around one man – The Colonel. Opinions were mixed it seemed.

It was great to look at the camp set-up, on the sand, and it all became real. This is it, this is Africa.

Leptis had been stunning however it had eaten into our schedule so we were up at 7am and on the road by 8am the next day with a target of 400 miles. It was a long, long hot day driving through the desert along apparently never ending roads. After having time for one blog entry, two films on the laptop and a lifetime's worth of chat later, we had covered 430 miles in 11 hours.

However, that night wasn't the usual peaceful camp erection. By the time we stopped, we found ourselves in the middle of a raging sandstorm. It was dark and we were tired and hungry. We couldn't keep driving because of the darkness and we were running low on diesel.

We dug deep and set about putting up the tent and firing the cooker out in winds, which nearly

Main

The long road to Tobruk.

Panel from top

Maximus Carl XI meets

Ivan the Terrible VII at

Leptis Magna.

Camping in the Libyan desert with our wonderful G4 tent.

Doing the cultural trail in Leptis.

Tom manages to budget as the 8-pence per litre diesel flows.

1,800kms to cover in five days – we'd best get moving.



blew us over and were also having a dammed good go at ripping the tent apart. After two long hours battling the storm and cursing every zip, peg and groundsheet in sight, we had everything up, secured down and food on the go. All evening the wind howled outside and we quickly realised that, despite being as best sealed in as possible, sand was everywhere including our food. Despite this, Eddie had cooked up a feast of camel stew with sandy spaghetti.

After a night of raging wind while we vainly hoped for calm, we awoke to find sand in the mugs, plates, bowls, bags, cooker, throughout the back of the car and even covering the driver's seat and floor. Considering all doors had been locked, that probably says all that needs to be said about Defender door seals.

We took the desert road to Tobruk, leaving the coastline for the first time since being in Libya. The road was unbelievably monotonous, dead straight all the way for 350 miles.

Arriving in Tobruk, we were shown to a quiet beach cove by Eddie and we took a football down onto the beach. Just like in so many countries, we quickly had friends wanting to join in. After a time we stopped and realised that, after months of slog back at home, here we were in Libya of all places playing football with locals on a beach while the lovely green sea crashed down just feet away.

Later that evening we enjoyed a social meal with some locals we

met, drinking homemade (and illegal) vodka while sitting around on Arabic cushions. At 1am, food was served and we then downed our chicken pasta with lamb testicles and shot off to bed.

In general our Libyan experience was a slightly surreal affair, as we were behind the wheel pretty much non-stop and had few interactions with people. However, the times we did deal with people, we were struck by their generosity and warmth.

We managed to meet our schedule and said our goodbyes as we approached the Egyptian customs. We got through the first checkpoint and through the car searching section in double quick time: we thought we had it cracked and would be finished in no time. Our intended rest point was but a few miles beyond the border and we couldn't wait to get through and chill out.

However, at the next checkpoint they refused to accept that the standard Land Rover vin-plate was legit and so, using a hammer and punch, proceeded to stamp our chassis number onto the inside of the door frame. Not many ways you can argue with a man who has the power to refuse you entry to his country, so we let him get on with it.

We were then subjected to questioning about 'the stamp'. What followed was a situation so ridiculous that it would make seasoned viewers of *The Office* cringe. For the next five hours we went back and forth to different offices, securing seemingly

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random pieces of paper and paying money to all sorts of people. We had pretty much lost the will to live by the time we were completely finished, five hours later.

The whole process (and our sanity) was aided no end by top-dog, Mr Hassan in Customs, who eventually understood that we weren't sure how long we would be in Egypt after Carl had completed a five minute performance of a car driving along fine = 30 days (chug chug chug) and a car going chug chug bang = 60 days.

It had taken so long that we decided we would just find a quiet corner of the border control and stay there for the night (it was 11pm by this point). So this we did, being interrupted occasionally by the odd AK-wielding border soldier.

We were up bright and early, the intention being to make up some miles and then make camp somewhere reasonably local by midday so that we could give the car the service that it was now due. However, the Egyptian police had other ideas and, after paying a couple more 'taxes', we left the border post

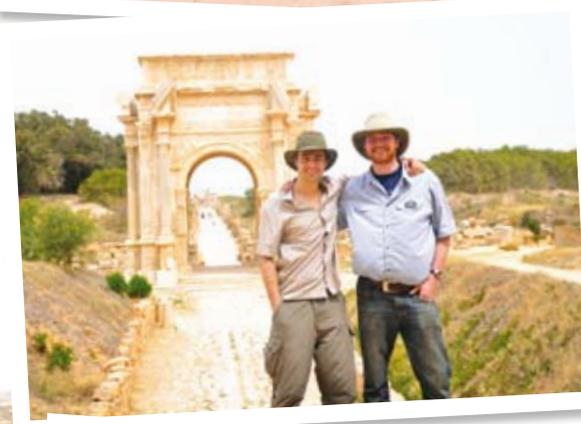
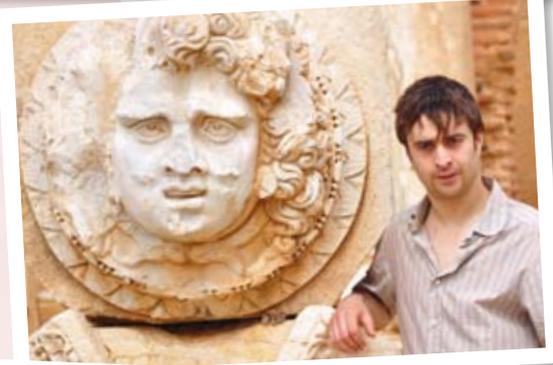
with an obligatory police escort who demanded that they hold on to our passports because we were in a restricted zone. Nuts.

Reluctantly we travelled with them in convoy for 300 miles, frustrated at feeling out of control and aware that the car needed some TLC. After being passed onto the third police car (they were effectively doing shuttles along the coast) we managed to get our passports back and within ten seconds of doing so we were off down the road as fast as the old 300Tdi would carry us.

We spent the entire afternoon looking for somewhere to camp but, for the life of us, could find nowhere: everywhere near the beach was restricted with patrols kicking everyone out at 6pm and everywhere in the other direction was littered with dwellings and excitable groups of kids who seemed intent on jumping on the car as soon as we were within reach, no matter the speed.

A local hotel insisted we should head straight for El Alamein police station. Desperate just for a little space but expecting more paperwork, passport confiscation and agitated

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policing, we approached El Alamein in a pensive mood.

We arrived at the 'cop shop' and were instantly welcomed by 'the General' to camp in the car park. A standing armed guard outside and the friendly attentions of ten or so Egyptian cops, mostly armed with assault rifles, made for as secure a nights sleep as we've had.

Offers of all the stations limited facilities were made and we were instructed to ask for anything we needed. Simply amazing, and we wondered if anything like that would ever happen in a UK station? Well, apart from Sun Hill.

After the stressful timescale of Libya and failing to find camping so far in Egypt, we longed for a proper campsite so we skipped Alexandria and headed for Cairo. After a tortuous drive dodging traffic through possibly the most popular capital in Africa, we found it. A big slap on the back for both of us was in order, as were a couple of cold beers.

We set-up camp with the pyramids visible in the distance, in an exquisitely deserted and tranquil camp and kicked back in the 40°C heat. For the first time since being on the road it felt like we were in control, setting deadlines ourselves again. Boy, it felt good.

Over the next few days we hopped between the British, Ethiopian and Sudanese embassies to secure onward passage. In three days we saw three serious accidents and were even bumped from behind while in a taxi, so felt vindicated in coughing up for taxi fares as we wouldn't run the risk of having a dent put into our Landy.

The car service went reasonably smoothly, tightening a few loose bolts and connections and noting the beginning of a couple of new oil leaks.



Inset top
Taking stock of the magnificent pyramids.

Inset above
Camels jostle the 110 for track position.

Below
The desert road – 350 miles of tarmac with not a bend in sight.

Until, that is, we re-tightened the sump plug and the oil didn't stop coming out. Ahh. In order of importance of the sump's roles, keeping oil in is pretty high up there.

The thread was fine but the sealing surface didn't look entirely flat and we realised that the standard 300Tdi sump washers we were trying to use weren't accommodating for this, as the compressible copper washer which came off had been. Reluctant to resort to sealants and start down the slippery slope to Bodge City so early in the trip, we scoured Cairo for the correct washer.

This quest led us to meeting James and Lee, a Brit and Aussie couple who live in Cairo. This lovely pair had previously completed a similar trip to ours and could not help enough, even offering us a place to stay for a few nights. Leaving the mosquitos at the campsite, we crossed the river and were spoilt by western luxuries while getting an insight into ex-pat lifestyle.

After more fruitless toil in the search for compression washers, James doubled checked an oil filter kit for his KTM and found the exact size we needed. Twenty minutes later the oil was dropped and the sump was bone dry. This served to further fuel our love for our hosts.

Meantime, we completed the obligatory trip to the Giza pyramids, only to be refused entry due to the sponsor logos on the car. Extremely disappointed that we couldn't photograph the car in front of these world famous landmarks as many

others were, we left the car wearing our Tilley hats to save us from the burning sun and mingled with the other tourists.

The pyramids themselves were quite remarkable: like Stonehenge, their appeal being simplicity itself – how on earth did they managed to build them? Sights well worth seeing but the incessant heat and constant barracking from local touts took the edge off the experience for us.

Having waved off James and Lee, we left Cairo for Luxor on the east coast route, a much quieter and more scenic road, but longer and so lead to us completing our longest daily distance in Africa, just a few miles short of 500.

Near the end of the day climbing up into a hilly area, for the first time since owning the car the temperature gauge left the centre mark – but this was after ten hours of driving at temperatures in excess of 40°C and while climbing up to 2,000 feet. Thankfully we have an additional Kenlowe fan which kicked in and felt relieved as we saw the temperature gauge fall in front of our eyes. Suffice to say, we are now big fans of the Kenlowe.

So this leaves us in Luxor, over the Nile from the Valley of the Kings. Next up, we need to reach Aswan and scale the paperwork mountain to get the ferry into Sudan.

So after months of slog, what is life on the road like? Well it's still hard work, still very expensive, but it's bloody brilliant.

LRM

