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THE COURSE NORTH

Having conquered Hel in South Africa, the boys prepare the Defender for its long trip north, back to the UK

By Tom James and Carl Picton



WHEN WE last wrote we were literally climbing up the mountain from Hel, diff lock and low range working in conjunction to ensure a safe and comfortable ascent back to the tarmac along the cliff-top track. Waving goodbye to countless new friends in South Africa, we went to Namibia, and Windhoek where Carl's brother Christian was arriving in just a few days' time.

Heading north for the first time on the trip when we weren't lost, we received a call from South African TV who wanted to do a feature on us for the 6pm news, having been passed our details by a local radio station.

The timing was terrible, as we were 300 miles away and about to cross the Namibian border, so it just wasn't feasible. Feeling as if we had been told by a beautiful woman that she wanted to sleep with us just as we had left the party, we were gutted. However, considering what we had come through recently and were back on the road, the disappointment didn't last long.

In Namibia, we felt closer to being back in 'real Africa'. A good indicator of this is generally the police uniform of a country. In Namibia the boys in authority have plumped for a striking chocolate and coffee brown camouflage affair, not quite

as garish as the bright blue and purple camouflage in Ethiopia and Libya respectively, but eye-catching nonetheless. As a general rule, the more garish the get-up, the more militant the men.

Blasting along the lonely desert roads of Namibia, we skipped Fish River Canyon, following Tom's geological explanation that it was 'just a big hole really', and made straight for Windhoek.

After an incredibly eventful, stressful, humbling and enjoyable one-and-a-half months in South Africa we arrived on time to meet Christian. We had set ourselves a fairly tight schedule so that we could start to make up some lost time and so that he would see as much as possible in the couple of weeks he was with us. With flights set in stone, the pressure didn't ease.

dunes and tows

Leaving the quiet, dusty Windhoek behind, we took in some of the world's largest sand dunes in Sossusvlei, being there at 4.30am to watch the world glow bright red as the sun rose. The long road to the Skeleton Coast beckoned, but not before we had encountered an American chap who, having hit a rock and been diverted off course,



Above
Carl, Christian and Tom enjoy Victoria falls in Zimbabwe.

Inset
By mistake, Tom is released from his cage before having being fed.

had planted his rented car into rocks at the side of the road. With two flats and a written-off motor, we assisted in dragging the car out and sending him to the nearest lodge to call for help.

While travelling along, we were intrigued to see the Namibian road working markings, citing "Road Rehabilitation". We can only assume the road was addicted to some kind of banned substance. (Wait for applause. Thank you.)

Following all the work in South Africa, we've been delighted by the Landy. Unfortunately though, we were soon donning the overalls again in Windhoek when the brakes suddenly became very stiff and ineffective. In the UK we had overhauled almost everything brake related (thanks Hel Performance) so were pretty miffed with the latest set-back. The vacuum pump had given up. Frustrating, but not entirely surprising seeing as it was the original part. Luckily it was a quick fix and with that pump two other things vanished; firstly the last remaining original component on our braking system (barring the pedal itself) and the only oil leak from the engine bay. A special mention here should go to the guys at LR parts, Namibia and SA's largest LR part supplier who gave us a pump free



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of charge following confusion about whether or not they had the pump we had wanted in stock. Now that's service.

From Windhoek we drove north east with the ultimate destination in mind, Victoria Falls. Entering Botswana, a boat trip to the inner reaches of the Okavango Delta was on the cards, with the diverse bird and animal life that this stunning environment supports being the major attractions. Elephants in the water, fish eagles and a crocodile were just some of the natural highlights from a day spent amid the long grass and fresh, warm waters of the delta.

In Moremi and Chobe Parks the roads were not easy going and pushed the Landy, with several river crossings negotiated, leading to deep sand for miles and miles interspersed, for the majority, with graded sun baked bone-shaking gravel tracks.

Christian camped in the ground tent while we Lorded it over him in the roof tent. There are no fences around campsites and much was made of the lions and hyenas who



Above
Christian tests the water and looks out for crocodiles.

Main
Stunning green countryside on the crossing into Gabon.

prowl the park and that, were he to be eaten, we would enjoy seeing the first 'kill' of the safari. We slept to the wild choir with hippos laughing, monkeys screaming, birds singing and insects buzzing at an impossible volume.

Christian survived the night but we were all nearly eliminated the next day following an encounter with a grumpy and charging hippo, while testing the depth of a water pool we needed to cross.

Leaving behind the safari for the last time we coughed up \$50 each for a day to enter the western section Zimbabwe and see Victoria Falls, before eventually reaching Kasane with work to do on the truck. First up was repairing a bent steering arm sustained in a collision with a palette of kerb stones, helpfully laid up in the middle of the road on the previous night. For all potential expedition goers – people will say don't drive at night in Africa and we would agree, 100 percent. It doesn't matter how slow or carefully you drive almost without fail every time we have had to drive at night something has happened.

We said goodbye to Christian, and with the Landy all fixed up, we

cracked on along the Caprivi strip back into Namibia, leaving Botswana behind and made good progress towards the Angolan border.

grinding and crushing

We continued until just short of the border, as we had been invited to stay with Phillip, a man we had met in Die Hel with the local LR club, at his grinding/crushing plant in northern Namibia. Phillip offered us a square meal, decent beds to sleep in and diesel – he knew the way to an overlander's heart.

The Angolan border confirmed that we were back into 'real' Africa. The beguiling blend of camouflage, agents, money changers, hangers-on and chaos fills one's senses and the stream of paperwork, questions and office-to-office walks begins all over again.

After a slight hitch with the Angolan visa, the paperwork was sorted, we were into Angola and going north along shoddy tarmac, shared with the customary 'crabbing' trucks. The tar was shoddy, but passable. Not for long.

After a couple of hours' drive, the tarmac stopped. In its place was

what our Africa maps describe as 'badly potholed'. We assume the word 'badly' is used here in the same way that reportage of the attack of the Light Brigade was described as having 'gone badly'.

The next few days were spent inching forward at no more than 10 mph, through ruts, over holes, into mud, out of ditches, constantly weaving from one side of the road to the other searching for a smoother bit of track. On the second day, we covered 40 miles in five hours.

An added challenge is now regularly being given to us by mother nature, with the rainy season in full flow in West Africa. Thus, large potholes are now small lakes, within which anything from holes, rocks or mud may be hiding.

Travelling through the larger city Huambo in the centre of the country, the signs of the civil war are far more visible than in the north and south. The large scale concrete housing blocks which flank the main street are pockmarked with bullet and mortar holes, while the roadsides are littered with burnt out tanks and troop carriers.

Each night, we camped near the road, as we didn't dare venture far off the road for fear of landmines. We camouflaged the car with branches to deter idle passers by from investigating further.

Despite a couple of isolated reprieves in the road where tarmac covered 100 miles or so, the potholes reigned supreme and meant we took three days to reach Luanda. So much for the 'good road all way to Luanda' that they had assured us at the border.

corruption visits

Arriving in Luanda, the beggars and the children are the first to spot the car. The stickers, the spotlights, the occupants; all draw the officials of law, order and corruption towards the truck. The mistaken place hands on the car, asking for money, for sweetsies, for help. The wing mirror now knocked out of alignment, the flanks of the car become home to several casual leaners, the windows full of blank staring faces, encouraging others to join the audience.

No money here guys, no help



Above
A lack of clearance on the sand road in Congo.

except for those who need it and deserve it. Certainly not for cops who reject our valid paperwork and ask for bribes. No, not \$700. No, not \$50 either. No, not even \$40.

Progress was slow, officials and traffic resulting in us covering just three miles in three hours, but we made it through and rocked up on the shores of the Atlantic ocean.

After a few days of paperwork and rest we made an early morning dash to get out of Luanda before traffic took hold and made steady progress out of the north of the city on the 400 mile journey to Kinshasa.

We had chosen the most direct route, a toss up between 200 miles of additional travel on tarmac or an 80 mile stretch of road the map showed as 'improved'. Undoubtedly it would not be tarmac, but gravel roads which sometimes can allow 60mph, whereas other times they allow no more than 10mph.

On good tarmac road we clocked up the distance and before we knew it had covered 150 miles. Just as the sun began to set and we began looking for a disused roadside quarry or somewhere similar to sleep,

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➤ a strange vibration from the car grabbed our attention. It was suspected to be a wheel bearing and closer inspection showed the bearing was breaking up. So we had a late start the following day after having changed the wheel bearing in a muddy cane field, trimming a tree branch to make a nice wooden block with which to hammer in the new racers and seal.

The further inland we went, the worse the roads got and blasting along at 50mph was quickly a thing of the past. We ticked off the villages against the names on the large scale Michelin map, *Tracks4Africa* offering no information for this part of the world. As we approached the border, the names on the map disappeared and we had to resort to the trusty compass – we figured following north would ultimately bring us to the Mediterranean and at least there we know where we are.

Either side of the dirt road, there were one-metre-deep ruts from the rain and we trundled along on the central relatively smooth dirt, constantly climbing or descending through the green rolling hills, speed rarely exceeding 10mph now. As well as running, jumping and screaming children, we negotiated a route past goats and chickens, pausing to deliberate the direction at each junction which presented itself.

Inset
Stuck again. Tracmats and winch come out to help get us moving.

Bottom
Wheel bearing time. Graunch, graunch, graunch tells us that we cannot go any further.

After asking countless people for 'le frontiere' we were directed down what looked like a small track to a house.

By this point, the 'road' had actually turned into a footpath and motorbike trail, one person having to walk in front to check for nasty hidden tree-stumps, so we made slow progress. Having successfully negotiated several 'bridges', consisting of makeshift wooden planks carefully organised to get the car over fast flowing streams, we came across an apparently abandoned old manor house with two UN Refugee Programme tents outside. This was the border and bang on cue the heavens opened.

let it rain down

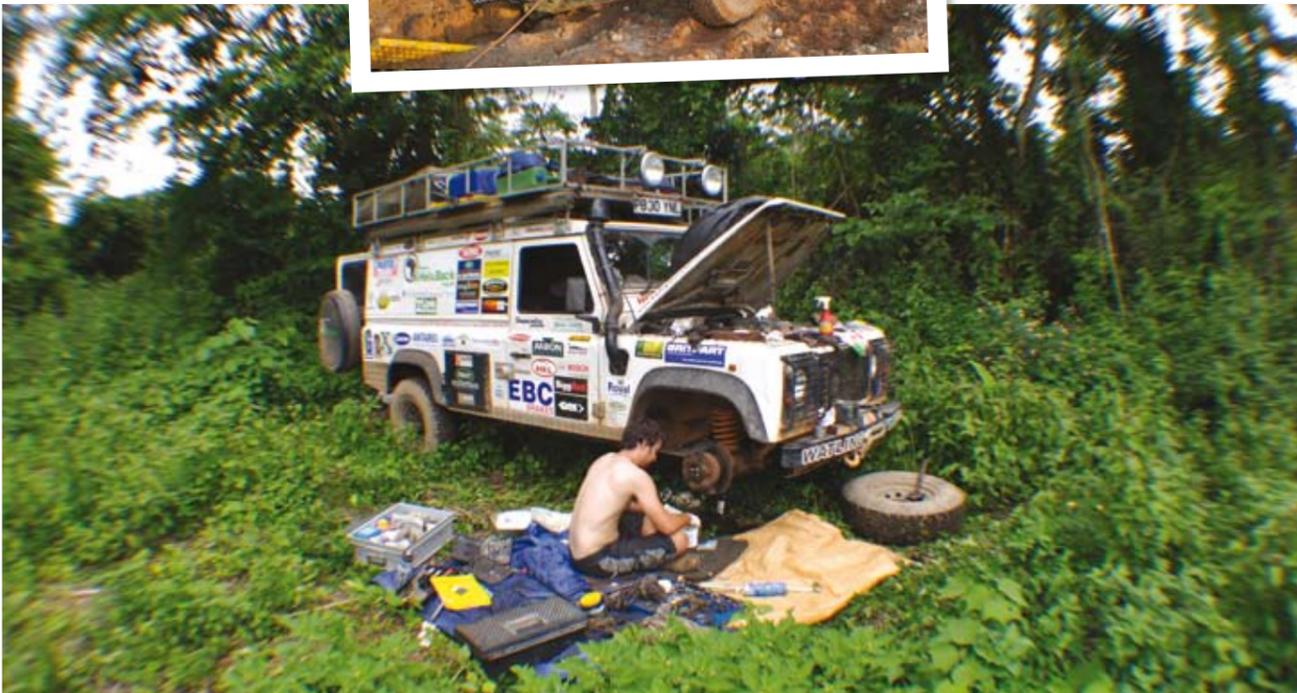
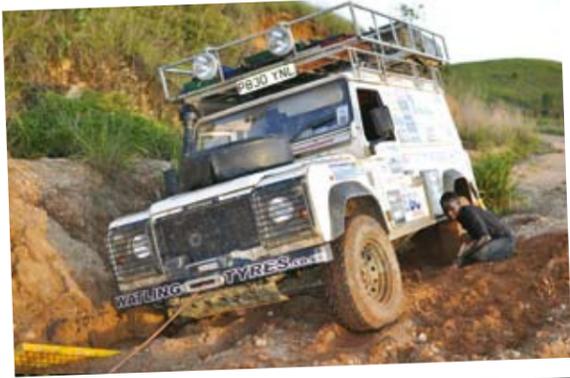
Angolan stamping complete and bribes declined, we covered 500 metres through the now biblically strong downpour. Suddenly, the right hand side of the car sunk into

apparently solid ground and we were stuck. Chucking the Landy into low range we managed to move forward a bit, then lurched even further down on the right. With only the seat belt preventing the passenger from becoming one with the driver, we figured it was time to have a look.

The first problem, we were at such an angle that the driver's door wouldn't open. No worries there, clamber out the passenger's door and note that the left rear wheel is off the floor, the duffs are barely visible in the dirt and the road has effectively collapsed on the right side, leaving the right wheels in a metre-deep rut, the sides of which are all that is keeping the car up-right.

Within seconds of being out of the car we were soaked to the skin. So it was down to just shorts and sandals and time to crack out the spades. Out came the winch gear and we dug in the land anchor some 15m in front of the car, as there was nothing else to winch off.

As the winch groaned and pulled us forward, inch by inch the car immediately righted itself as the wheels fell into our carefully crafted holes. However, as we continued forward, it began to lean back off to the right as the bank continued to collapse. After trying a few different angles and ideas, we resigned ourselves to the fact that we would have to dig out everything in the two



metres ahead of us.

Finally our track was ready and through a combination of winch and driving we managed to get the car 20m further, through a small river which all the water had been running towards and onto solid ground. It had only taken three hours and had been our first taste of getting the car 'properly stuck'. Every Land Rover owner has one of these stories and now so do we.

With no-one around we camped near the road, readying our excuses for the Congolese the following day. By 9pm, we were in bed, taking refuge in the mosquito nets, exhausted after a good bout of manual labour.

We continued along the track towards the Congolese border post where a policeman asked for a lift and, thinking he might be connected with the border, we thought this could be a good idea so welcomed him in and then began to crawl our way down a hugely rutted, steep sideslope.

Driving was tough, a foot either side could quite easily have put the car on its side or got it stuck to a degree that hours of digging would be required. On top of this the policeman constantly tried to advise on line choice, while a couple of the earlier hangers-on had taken it upon themselves to run in front of the car directing this way and that. Such was the distraction that eventually one of

us got out, ushering the others out of the way and allowing us to pick our own line.

Just as we hoped, at the border post, the policeman took up office at the 'Director General de l'Immigration' desk and started processing our paperwork without any hassle. After an hour of stamping, chatting and suggestions that, "It is good if you tek eh Congolese wife to England wit you" (just smile and nod until he finishes the stamping), we were in Congo, our 23rd country since the UK.

And as we trundled away from the border post, the track continued to border on impassable. We counted down the miles before the junction to the larger track, aware that our water supplies were beginning to run low.

During the following six days we covered a total of 100km, digging and winching every day without fail.

The following day, another five or six miles down the road, the track levelled. Finally, we were on the 'better' road. We made progress through larger and larger villages, the population increasing all the while. Motorbikes become more frequent and we even saw our first truck.

On the sixth day we reached tarmac and then took just two hours to cover 100km. Reaching Kinshasa, we recuperated and readied ourselves for the reportedly torturous ferry to Brazzaville.

Departure day arrived and after



Top
A water crossing in Moremi national park, Botswana.

Inset
Camouflaging the car by the road in Angola. Can you guess what it is yet?

realising the price was actually \$150 for the car, not \$300, and an additional \$100 demanded was simply to get the passports and carnet stamped, we finished the formalities and set about loading up.

The more they could get on, the more money they would make so it was dog eat dog, with many fist fights evident between the loaders. We struggled to comprehend the level of aggression which everyone had, to each other, to us if we were in the way. Almost fittingly, the Police moved people along using rubber whips and ropes.

Naturally a large 110 was seen as a good base against which to pile sacks. We tried to resist, but within minutes grain sacks were piled up to the roof, locals running on top of these to move around, using our ladder, roofrack, worklight or snorkel as footholds whenever convenient.

As a result we ended up sitting on the roof throughout the crossing, simply protecting our car. This was the bad side of Africa, the chaos, the lack of consideration, the non-comprehension of other people's property. It's all part of the experience though and we soaked it up, but breathed far easier once we were off.

From Brazzaville we pressed north, traversing the infamous sand road to Gabon which was mercifully good during the rains. Here we are sitting in Franceville, Gabon, enjoying smoked salmon and scrambled eggs. **LRM**