

PUT THROUGH HEL

"SO WHAT EXACTLY is greenlaning?" is the question that greets me as I meet Carl James for the first time at his home in Buckinghamshire. "It's driving very slowly down byways taking in the countryside and enjoying the terrain. It's a tad different to circumnavigating the continent of Africa, wild camping, crossing borders, seeing wild animals and dealing with 55 degree heat; we probably won't need the land anchor," I assure them.

Carl casts a wry smile as we both hop into the Defender and make the short journey across town to pick up Tom Picton: Carl's travelling companion on their epic Hel and Back adventure.

I've planned to take the now famous Defender on a tour of some of the greenlanes in Lambourn in West Berkshire; once I'd re-briefed

After over a year on the road, Tom and Carl are back from Die Hel in South Africa. Now, they share their advice with any budding overlanders and speak of what went right and what went wrong.

Words and photography by Richard Streeton

the lads that greenlaning had subtle charms and that there would be no customs officials to bribe or jerry cans to be filled. The process of readjustment from over a year on the roads and tracks of Africa is no small feat and both Tom and Carl were once again revisiting the question they posed in the first Hel and Back article: 'so what now?'

Both university graduates two years ago, the boys decided to embark on the trip to stave off the prospect of 20 years of work, so as a final hurrah, they sat down and worked out the logistics involved in 'doing a lap of Africa'.

"We've known each other since we were about 10 or 11 and went to school together. We were both coming up

to the end of our uni degrees and I got a call from Carl saying why don't we drive to Ethiopia? We'll take a battered old car and then leave it there and fly home. We then thought, why don't we drive to South Africa? Then, *Long Way Down* came along and nicked our idea, as far as we were concerned. Once we started looking into it, we saw that the cost of flying home was almost the same as turning the vehicle round and driving home, up the west coast. It's great to be able to say that we drove there and back and so few people drive the west coast."

There is a good reason however that a lot of people don't drive back up along the west coast. Trouble spots such as Angola, Congo and Nigeria to name but a few have all experienced serious civil unrest and are not really geared up for mass tourism. In contrast, the east coast has turned into an overlanders' haven, with good routes, facilities and friendly faces.

Tom continued: "On the east coast you could regularly pull into campsites and see four or five other overland trucks, especially further south in places like Malawi, Uganda and Tanzania. Once you hit Kenya you see the big Man trucks with 30 people on them. You also see lots of bikers."

what's in a name?

The term 'overlander' in itself is a bit of a tricky one as many people will claim to 'be one'. Having driven a number of lanes and byways,



and that's the wonderful thing about Land Rover owners. There are so few brands that have such a strong enthusiast following and it's a fantastic resource. You can read step by step guides and real advice from people who've had real experience. In terms of parts, whenever somebody says 'this is the best' you generally know that they're either lying or blinkered. Our tyres, for instance, were simply brilliant and we'd recommend them to anybody (BFGoodrich All Terrains). Incredibly

A big help for us were people who could differentiate between good advice and bad advice

I can't in all honesty call myself an overlander. That title is mainly reserved for those who travel unsupported over great distances with the act of travelling being just as important as the multiple destinations you reach. I asked the pair 'when did you stop being tourists and become overlanders?'

Carl began: I think it was Libya for me although it didn't properly take off until we saw Sudan. At the end of the day Tunisia, Libya and Egypt still have tarmac roads and you don't have to carry extra supplies."

Tom added: "Sudan is when we left the tarmac for the first time and hit the sand for 200-odd miles. We didn't really see any people for a couple of days which was actually quite nice. Seeing Europe disappear over the horizon on the back of the ferry was quite big for me as there was no turning back."

enthusiastic opinions

Tom and Carl's vehicle choice and set-up in itself caused a bit of a stir within the pages of **LRM** with some commentators saying that they had too much equipment whereas other stating that they didn't have enough 'correct' equipment.

As they started this journey, Tom and Carl were complete newcomers to the Land Rover scene and, as a result, knew very little about mechanics, maintenance or indeed the joys of forum advice. As a general rule, forum advice should usually be taken with a pinch of salt, in so much that the chap on the

other end of the computer talking about crossing the Gobi desert may very well have only crossed his hallway to collect his incapacity cheque from the Department of Social Security. Sometimes the real advice from 'proper experts' can only be obtained face to face or from trusted, accredited online users, however the lads had nothing but praise for the Land Rover community as a whole: Tom said: "A big thing is being able to differentiate between good advice and bad advice. People like the Foleys were brilliant to us and they'll talk you through everything. Other companies, understandably, said 'we'll let you talk to us but we'll charge you a fee for doing so'."

"The forums were a great help

Above

Tom and Carl joined me on the greenlanes near Lambourn; a far cry from the diverse terrain experienced in Africa.

Below

Tom and Carl pictured in 2009.

we had no punctures for a whole year and the bonnet wheel has never been off. These are great but you can do it on other tyres. Advice allows you to get a good feel but it's not the be all and end all."

However, when it came to the original vehicle choice, the lads had one or two regrets about the purchase, but none about their equipment list: "In hindsight, we probably would have bought a newer vehicle with fewer miles on it. You're going to have to pay for the upkeep but there are other things that aren't classed as upkeep, like the chassis or transfer box. We were told you should be able to get it up on a ramp and go down the chassis with a hammer and check for weak spots.

[continued on page 60]

FRESH FACED AND RARING TO GO...

WE WERE FIRST introduced to Tom and Carl back in November 2009. Introductions aside, the boys quickly came clean about their limited budget and small start-up costs: "There are hundreds of adverts for £4,000 Defenders of approximately ten years old and 100,000 miles on the clock.

"But what happens when you buy a 1997 Land Rover Defender 110 for half that price?"

Those immortal words saw the beginning of a number of months spent in the UK working on the £2,000 Defender. It wasn't that the lads had bought a shocking rot-box, but there were one or two issues, namely crossmember grumbles, chassis doubts and engine issues.

The plan for Hel and Back centred around buying a cheap base vehicle and modifying it ready for 11 months in Africa, crossing some of the most inhospitable terrain imaginable.

In the December 2009 issue of **LRM**, the boys uttered the words: "We hope the rust on the chassis is superficial and while the rear crossmember has certainly seen better days, with no intention of towing anything en-route we've decided to leave it be."

The power of hindsight is a wonderful thing but as the articles progressed, Tom and Carl soon realised that the crossmember would have

to be changed. As the prep continued, so the departure date was delayed yet further. A new clutch, starter motor, suspension, brakes and other key items were all replaced and upgraded. Probably more than they'd wanted to but the base vehicle left a lot to be desired.

As we'll hear later, their early optimism on saving money on the base vehicle was wiped out when they realised the extent of the upgrades needed. The original plan as written by Tom and Carl was: "We will travel from the UK to South Africa via the east African coast and then home via the west African coast. The turning point is Die Hel in Death Valley, just outside Cape Town. We expect to cross through 40 countries over 30,000 miles, almost three times the average yearly commute in the UK, and all in 11 months on the road.

It sounded like the lads had overstretched a tad: a £2,000 base vehicle, non-mechanical backgrounds and limited off-road experience. In all honesty, few expected the trip to last the duration but, as anyone who's met Tom and Carl will know, these two have never been ones to obey conventional methods.

They left the British isles bound for Africa just in time for the June 2010 issue and triumphantly returned for the August 2011 issue.



DEFENDER 300Tdi HEL EDITION



01 Our Brownchurch roofrack was modified for the 1.6m Eazi Awning rooftop and awning.

To this we strapped our now legendary X-Eng land anchor, Hella 3000 Rallye spot lights, hi-lift jack and Tract mats.



02 Our Kryptonite rear lock is one of the objects that draws the most attention. It's made from steel and can resist prying, cutting and sawing attacks. It really takes a huge weight of your mind knowing the vehicle is secure.

Mammoth chequerplate was used on the wings and bonnet.



03 We won't forget the day we removed the chequerplate on the rear to find the crossmember crumbled away. We then fitted a new rear Britpart crossmember. The new crossmember allowed us to fit a Paddock swing-away wheel carrier and Dixon Bate recovery assembly.



04 You can now barely see the welds or the plates, but we had plates welded on all sides in Nairobi following the original welds cracking.

Additional tub supports were welded to the chassis to stop drooping on the sides.



05 EBC vented discs and 4x4 Yellow Stuff brakes. Braided lines by HEL performance. Big Red callipers with new pistons and seals. Polybush expedition mixed kit. Koni shocks, Britpart heavy duty springs. Allmakes wheel bearings and hub swivel rebuild kits. Britpart heavy duty steering arms. D44 Steering guard.



06 Twisted Performance turbo and radiator hoses. Two speed Kenlowe fan. Turbocentre turbo tune. Allisport intercooler. Aaron radiators. Challenger 4x4 snorkel. Bosch starter motor and high output alternator from a Discovery. K&N performance filter.

OE brake and clutch master cylinders, servo and Britpart vacuum pump. OE fuel lift pump and water pump.



07 Dyneema winch rope. Our Goodwinch 12,000lbs was pretty heavy duty but the main thing was that it gave us peace of mind. This was mounted in front of an Allisport intercooler and two stage Kenlowe fan.



08 Steel modular wheels with standard size BFGoodrich A/Ts from Watling tyres. It is truly unbelievable that we didn't pick up a single puncture.

GKN wheel bearings. Bearmach 500lb rear springs.

1997 DEFENDER 110 300TDI

We all became extremely accustomed to seeing the 110 grace the pages of **LRM** over the previous months. The Defender can proudly claim to have completed a lap of Africa without too many issues – albeit barring a quick engine rebuild in South Africa and some chassis plates in Kenya.

The total distance travelled over the year was 31,020 miles through 38 countries. Considering the original vehicle cost £2,000, that's not a bad return.

The sad news is that on their return home, the boys realised that although perfectly suited to Africa, they no longer had a great

need for the Landy in the UK. Some of you may have seen the vehicle in our classifieds and we're happy to say that it has recently been sold to a South African gentleman for a very good price.

The speed at which it was snapped up was not surprising. It has already proved itself and was expedition-ready, equipped to take the new owner on a new adventure at the drop of a hat.

And it seems like that hat has indeed dropped as the new owners are going overlanding. The really interesting thing is their destination; Die Hel in South Africa.

The truly amazing thing was that after circumnavigating Africa, we didn't pick up a single puncture



➤ “We originally got our Defender for £2,380 and we’ve added around £20,000 worth of parts and mods on it. These were all things we needed. There are arguments that you can get away with less kit, but when you’re doing such a large trip for the first time then you want all the options possible so that you may be carrying kit you don’t need all the time but there may well be an occasion when you do. Better to have it and not need it than need it and not have it.”

This seemed to be a real bone of contention for Tom and Carl and always seems to split the overlanding community. Travelling light allows you to be a lot more fuel efficient and cope far better off-road. You also have a far greater capacity to live in the towns and villages you stop at, instead of constantly worrying or protecting your huge stash of equipment.

The other school of thought, and one that served Tom and Carl extremely well is to keep weight in mind, but don’t let it ruin your trip. You do become slightly less mobile, less fuel efficient and the risk of theft from your vehicle increases. However, as Tom told me: “We’ve

got an X-Eng land anchor and a 12,000 lbs Goodwinch and people said we’d never need a winch with that much power. People also guaranteed that we would never need the land anchor and, for the first half of the trip, they were correct. However, in Congo and in Sudan when there are no trees in front of you, the land anchor saved our skin a couple of times.

“Going down the light weight route, we did see a lot of Land Cruisers out there bouncing through the mud, not really getting held up by anything, then we’d come along and sink to our axles. We’d say that if you are going to travel light it’s all about confidence and self-reliance. For first timers like us, we enjoyed the comfort of all our equipment.”

Lambourn lanes

Driving the lanes around Lambourn it’s easy to see how Tom and Carl coped so well on the road. Owing to the fact they took a lot of equipment, the lads told me that they were never “depressed” or “down” to come back to their vehicle after a day of sightseeing or exploring.

The Defender had a blissful comfort about it, where if there were a delay at a border crossing, the camping chairs could be deployed and a pot of tea on the boil in minutes. When travelling around Africa, there are countless other external variables to factor in, so it was a real credit that the vehicle wasn’t one of them.

I’m not entirely sure if the concept of greenlaning was completely embraced by Tom and Carl. For many it symbolises the closest most of us will ever get to overlanding, albeit on a much smaller scale. To them, the 5mph speed limit and lack of variables paled in comparison to the exotic colours and sights of the African continent.

LRM

Tom and Carl decided to keep weight in mind, but not let the worry of it ruin their trip

