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ETHIOPIAN ODYSSEY

ARRIVING IN Northern Ethiopia from Sudan, in an overland convoy with three motorcycles we were busy from the off, organising accommodation for our month-long stay in Gondar, planning as we were to teach English and help children from a local orphanage move house.

Gondar, and Ethiopia in general, appeared to have moved on from five years ago when Carl was last here: the horse and carts around town had now been replaced by small TukTuks, which were everywhere. The hotels and the variety and quality of western food had also vastly improved. However some things remained the same: power had been off for the past four days when we arrived and water at the hotels was intermittent.

Throughout the afternoon many beers came and went, as did a tour of the brewery during which fidget Tom was told-off for touching too many things. Late that night, we went in search of a TukTuk back home.

Despite there being a suggested limit of three passengers in a TukTuk, the driver seemed as keen

The boys enter Ethiopia and soon find that this lush and verdant country has a lot more to offer than first thought

Words and Photos by: Carl James and Tom Picton



as we were to break the Gondar record for 'Number of People Crammed into a TukTuk' and so the seven of us clambered aboard alongside the driver, and set off into the night amid much laughter.

And so it was just minutes later, at the impromptu police checkpoint up the road, that eight people disgorged themselves from a Bajaj built for four. The police, their authority duly certified by their garish blue/purple camo and obligatory AK47s, were not impressed.

"But officer," a member of *Team ToHelAndBack* (who shall remain nameless) was heard to lament, "in the UK it is perfectly legal to carry eight people in a TukTuk." Apparently, not so in Ethiopia. Fearing trouble,

we put on our best (if slightly drunk) 'innocent Westerner' faces, which we have perfected for border guards.

We needn't have worried however, as the police chief briskly ordered us into a government pick-up truck, with instructions to the driver to take us back to our hotel, all for free. Clearly, carrying eight people in the back of a pickup is much safer than a TukTuk.

Before starting our teaching programme, we took the opportunity to visit the stunning Simien Mountains. On departure day our transport arrived: a 1980s Land Cruiser which took some considerable coaxing to start. Throughout, the majority of the dash warning lights stayed on, loose brake lines rattled and the steering arms (held together with zip-ties) jangled menacingly below. We collected our armed guard and headed into the mountain roads, most of us clenching so hard that we imprinted creases into the seats.

By the end of the first day we were above 3,600 metres, all suffering from headaches. However, it was fantastic to be in the mountains, away from the constant noise of towns and miles from the nearest street seller shoving merchandise in your face. For Carl, the exhaustion was so great that he was in bed and fast asleep by 8pm. Party animal.

Over the next few days, sitting at 4,000 metres, as you cast your gaze over the mountains in the fading light of yet another glorious African sunset, you remember why you came here. You remember why you travel to these places, with these people.



Above: On the road with the Swedish motorbike boys.

Below: Crammed with stickers, the Land Rover always attracts crowds and comments



Utterly, utterly stunning.

On our return, we got busy sorting out the truck's cooling problems. After email consultation with lovely chaps David Lovejoy, Matt Neale and TJ from Better Prepared Vehicles, we began to evermore suspect the sensor wiring.

As we dismembered the dashboard in search of divination, we found a very loose earth connection on the back of the temperature gauge staring us in the face. We were a little embarrassed, but our decision to focus on eliminating the mechanical aspects while at the side of the road with a temperature gauge in the red and ambient temperature of 50°C rather than start taking apart the wiring seemed correct.

So, the cooling system was ok all along. A big thumbs up to the guys at Aaron radiators and Twisted Performance: if that gear can survive the Sudanese desert at crazy temperatures then it's fair to say it can survive anything.

A week into our stay, Tom's birthday was upon us and resulted in us journeying to the only real nightclub in Gondar. Let us tell you, the 'Up And Above' Club is an absolute gem of a place. A good bit of drinking was done, as well as some terrible dancing. As some of the revellers fell by the wayside, we stayed on with Jan the German biker to party on into the small hours.

At this juncture, a young man befriended us as we sipped our 25p beers. Having ascertained that it was Tom's birthday, he first congratulated him and then disappeared off to 'go and find Tom a very nice girl'. Despite polite protestations, within minutes the young man reappeared and a small and very attractive young lady was deposited with Tom. Our new friend was very pleased with himself, confidently commenting that he had assurances from this girl that she would not charge Tom a Western



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price. The polite gent that he is, Tom engaged in some of his best Ethiopian small talk with this petite prostitute and, when the opportunity presented itself, promptly made swiftly for the door.

the teaching begins

That week, we began teaching, which was fantastic: the perfect tonic to forget about stresses from the road and focus on a completely different challenge. On a trip like this, in a continent such as Africa, it is a good reminder there are other things in life to think about, rather than simply concerning yourself with how the car is doing.

However, on only our second day of teaching we received word from the Swedish motorbike boys. Adam had had an accident on the road from Gorgora, hitting a pedestrian while travelling at 40mph. Adam was ok, but had seriously hurt his ankle and badly broken his bike. Meanwhile the Ethiopian chap



The endless rough roads are gradually shaking electrical connections loose resulting in some worrying moments.

concerned had been rushed to Gondar hospital and luckily nothing was broken.

The boy had stupidly run out from behind a lorry without looking, leaving Adam no room to manoeuvre on the gravel and had collected this unwitting new passenger head on. At this point, it is important to point out that, under Ethiopian law, it is always the driver's fault. Always.

Adam was still being held by the police until they received word that the boy and his family had received an adequate level of monetary compensation for the accident.

That night, we all met up and had the cold beers ready as Adam and the remnants of the bike rolled in. We stayed up and chewed over the day with Jan and Peter, who should be commended for keeping level heads throughout the affair. These older overlanding bikers have been there, seen it, done that and those are the sort of people to have by your side when it all goes pear shaped. Lessons for all of us.

By the end of the week we eventually got 'Hop-Along' Adam's bike loaded onto a ten-foot high lorry, but only after two lorries had cancelled and one doubled the price when they heard he was a 'feranji' (foreigner). Gits.

Meantime, our teaching continued. While Link Ethiopia volunteer teachers normally focus on English communication skills and principally pronunciation, we were also aiming to incorporate some practical skills.

We wanted to get the students to experience many of the benefits from sport such as leadership, teamwork and communication: the skills which are also key to a successful expedition. Among the exercises we got students to complete were 'racing chairs', whereby a team has to get from one end of a room to the other while standing on an ever decreasing number of chairs, and guiding colleagues blindfolded through improvised assault courses.

After our time with the school was

up, we left Gondar, having spent four fruitless days searching for diesel. For the trip south, we now had a temporary addition to team *To Hel And Back* in Saufi, a friend from Gondar. Saufi would travel with us for three weeks to the South of Ethiopia, before making his own way back to Gondar.

A solid couple of days were spent eating up the distance to Addis Ababa. Having covered 400kms, we dropped down into a magnificent 1,000-metre-deep gorge, pulling over half-way down to give the engine and brakes a rest.

On the valley floor, the truck regained power again and didn't throw out clouds of smoke with the thicker air. Newly re-invigorated by the drop in altitude, we flew up the first half of the gorge but slowed down as, once again, the altitude sapped all power. While stopping to admire the view, our hearts stopped as we saw the oil pressure warning light flicker on. We jumped out,

checked everything and concluded that it was yet another poor earth in the wiring.

Eventually, with blessed relief, we arrived in Addis at 9.30pm in the black of night, coupled with driving rain. It had been a hard day with the road twisting and turning all the way, Bosnian motorcycles on every bend, people and animals in the road all day long. All this had required such concentration that we needed to swap drivers every two hours.

There was however one casualty that day. Tom hit a chicken. In a three tonne Land Rover. At 45 mph. Suffice to say, it isn't looking good for the chicken. On the plus side though, Tom has learned how to kill a chicken quickly.

In Addis we had to journey to the Kenyan embassy, following rumours that visas were no longer issued at the border. On the way back, Carl was pick-pocketed on the minibus and we had our phone nicked.

Settled in Addis, we flicked



through the To-Do list. While the car wasn't due a service, we felt it needed some TLC. We stripped the cab right back to the bulkhead to sort out various earth problems because, as well as the oil light earth, the radio had begun to cut out whenever lights or horn were used. We also fitted a brand new Bearmach diff-lock switch, sourced in Addis. Amazingly, the switch worked first time and needed no adjustment, thus, coupled with the new diff-lock lever we picked up in Cairo, we now have a lovely feeling transfer box lever.

After a couple of months on the road and meeting lots of other overlanders, working on the car gave us some time for reflection about how it was holding up and made us appreciate how well some of our kit was working.

Top of the list, our refurbished Exmoor Trim seats are drawing envious glances, as they are not only →



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immensely comfortable (not once have we complained of any back pain) but also we never leave the car with sweat soaked backs, which is thanks to the climate control fabric. Considering we have been through some serious heat and the transmission tunnel constantly feels like an oven, we are damned impressed.

Almost as impressive, having covered 8,000 miles (running on African diesel) the car still feels sprightly, more than capable of pulling out and safely overtaking the doubled length artics on the single carriageway roads. This is despite us driving on the payload limit of around three tonnes, leading us to think this is in no small part thanks to the Allisport intercooler we are running, as well as our overhauled turbo.

Similarly amazing, the car still drives straight as an arrow. We figured our lovely tracking wouldn't last long on African roads but we have been very pleasantly surprised. So, huge thumbs up for the Koni shocks, Polybushes and Britpart track-rod ends.

Likewise, the double barrelled air compressor sourced from Paddocks has been a revelation. It seems to spend more time out of our car being borrowed than it does on its shelf. Thankfully though, even in the sand with lowered tyre pressures, the Trackmats haven't been needed yet.

True to form, the long life K&N air filter still looks as good as new, despite the dust clouds generated by off-road driving, so a massive thanks goes to the chaps at Challenger 4x4, who insisted we take one of the 'mushroom top' snorkels to reduce



Road surfaces range from one extreme to another. A few drinks with friends at 4,000 metres as the African sun sinks behind the mountains is a timely reminder of what the trip is all about.

the amount of dust we would suck up. The Devon 4x4 steering guard also earned its money recently, stoutly meeting a hidden rock half-buried on the crest of a sand dune.

In the towns, our Sentrysafe and Masterlock goodies have meant that we can leave the car without constantly worrying about it, an important consideration if you want the expedition to consist of more than thoughts about your car 24/7.

We also considered our culinary kit. Before we left, we debated the need for a fridge. We decided it was something we wanted to take, as we felt it would allow us to be self sufficient for longer in isolated environments, despite the detractors of lost space, extra weight and power consumption.

Having built our storage system around the low-power Waeco fridge, with the two additional batteries installed by Antares, we can't complain at all. We mounted our fridge behind the cab seats to provide access to cold drinks while on the move, which are proving more of a necessity than a luxury in 45°C heat, while the power management system allows us to run the fridge for at least four full days and nights without charging the batteries. Happy days.

As for other aspects of overland travel, the stickers on the car have been attracting a lot of interest

with the children wherever we go, as we even stand out among the other Overland tucks. In general, the interest is pleasant, as in "Who is Draper Tools? Is he your friend?".

Of considerable annoyance, the heat, dust and substantial vibration are all contributing to killing off most of the electrical connections on the car – including the newly replaced ones. Unfortunately we have struggled to find any replacement parts for such consumable items in the countries we have travelled through thus far.

This brings us on nicely to Ethiopian petrol stations and in particular Oil Libya. Whereas most stations have a side shop to the garage forecourt, often called 'My Convenience Store' or 'My Coffee Break', Oil Libya have delightfully decided to call their automotive supply shop 'My Lube'.

Thus, with our time in Addis at an end, we are heading south towards the Kenyan border and into the rainy season, where roads are often washed away in minutes and left impassable for days at a time. Recovery gear to the fore and time to remember all of our LRE training, wish us luck.

LRM

Three ton Land Rover meets chicken in 45mph collision. Suffice it to say, it isn't looking good for the chicken

