

Over and Out

Hop in the back of an overlanding truck, and the world is right at your tailpipe.

BY VICKY GOMELSKY

The instinct to pile in a car and head out on the highway has been honored by everyone from the Beats to *National Lampoon*—the road trip as the perfect antidote to the confines of home, work and routine. But instead of going cross-country in the family wagon, imagine going across continents in a converted cargo truck. Now imagine doing it with 20-plus strangers who share your passion for travel, and perhaps nothing else.

If this sounds like a cure for road fever, it is—and then some. It's how many people are seeing the world. Find yourself a dream overlanding trip and you can go all the way from Cairo to Cape Town, Anchorage to Ushuaia, or Istanbul to Kathmandu without ever setting foot inside a pressurized cabin. Since the late '60s, when travelers began migrating from the U.K. to Asia on Land Rovers along "the Hippy Trail," overseas operators have been taking groups of globe-trotters on the ultimate joyride, an extended overland adventure that can run anywhere from 2 to 32 weeks.

"You temporarily live in a fantasy world where you don't have to work, you have lots of friends and lots of people who want to eat dinner with you," says Marie Javins, a comic book colorist and overland veteran from New York City. Two years ago she took an eight-week trip from Kathmandu to Damascus, and two years before that, she went from Antigua, Guatemala, to Panama City on a monthlong camping expedition—both with London-based overland operator Dragoman. "Basically, I was looking for a way to cover a lot of distance in a small time for a reasonable amount of money."

Rather than making a beeline from one big city to another, overland trucks go from point A to point Z via the backroads of the globe. You can roll through the central African jungle, across the windblown Namib Desert, over the Karakoram Range or under the canopy of the Amazon rainforest. Needless to say, there's a lot of drive time involved, but there's plenty of exploring time, too.



High Rollers. Balcony seats and around-the-clock vistas available on the Rift Valley leg, Tanzania.

"Every day, the truck stops in an obscure little market town and everyone wanders around for 45 minutes or so," e-mails Karen Arnold, a truck convert whose traveling résumé reads like an adventure brochure. Since 1996 she has spent nearly a year on various overland trips across Asia and Africa. "The cooking groups are busy shopping," she adds, "but everyone else is just intermingling, and it's fabulous."

Typically, as dusk approaches, the truck pulls into a campground, parks in

the middle of a village (given the headman's approval) or just brakes somewhere out in the bush to set up the tents and cook dinner, which is often some version of "tuna surprise." "Since there are no doors or walls in an overlander's world," recalls Arnold, "people often dropped by our campsites, and we had wonderful times with them."

To some degree, that world is changing. Dragoman recently introduced trips that include hotel stays to its itineraries, while Guerba, another leading operator, is offering shorter journeys with more upmarket appeal. In places like India or South America, where budget accommodations are plentiful, hotel stays simply make more sense. "When we first started running overland journeys, they were rugged, unpredictable and you might or might not arrive on time," says Charlie Hopkinson, a director at Dragoman. "The trips have changed, with many more itineraries, a greater breadth of product and better backup and resources, but the challenges are the same, and the mentality required is similar."

In other words, high-maintenance types need not apply. Overlanding strikes a balance between luxury touring and backpacking, but weighs more heavily toward the latter's funky factor. It's designed to be an alternative to independent travel, not a concession to freedom. "People have such a stereotyped view of tours because they conjure up images of regimentation and inflexibility," says Richard McConnell, general manager for Adventure Center, a Northern California-based company that books prospective road-trippers on rides across Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas. "But these are trips, expeditions, safaris, adventures, with leaders who know where to take you and where not to take you."

The latter includes the byways of the lower Congo and hot spots like Sudan, southern Pakistan and the former Zaire, now off-limits. But aside from a few exceptions, overland trucks zig and zag around the most unfrequented destinations on the planet. In Javins' case, being a part of the truck tour made all the difference when she applied for her Iranian

visa. For a long time, Americans had to "overly" Iran, but Javins overwhelmed officials with documentation emphasizing that she was part of a group. When she got to the Pakistan-Iran border, the guards scrutinized her passport, whispered "U.S.A." to each other and, smiling, said "Welcome to our country."

Barring a forced flyby, all it usually takes to amend an itinerary is a majority vote, meaning that if you find yourself in a village during a tribal celebration or festival, take your time recovering from that hooch hangover. There's also the option of an elective leave of absence. "You can always walk away," confirms Javins, who took several solo excursions during her Central American odyssey. "In the meantime, your stuff is transiting itself."

Well, almost. It's actually being transited on the truck, which serves as the trip's bus, game-park cruiser, concert hall, kitchen and all-important storage space. (In India, Javins' driver bought a rickshaw decked out in faux leopard skin, dismantled it and strapped it to the roof for the journey back to London.) On most country crossings, the truck of choice is a big, souped-up Mercedes that seats between 18 and 25 people, none of whom should be averse to spending 10 or 11 hours rolling through, say, a desert sandstorm without the benefit of air, not to mention air-cushioned suspension. "These are not holidays," admits McConnell. "They're not relaxing in the same way that any challenging, interesting trip is not relaxing."

The uninitiated overlander should expect at least a few frazzling encounters, including, but not limited to, the occasional breakdown, the bogus toll station, the washed-out highway and the slippery mud bog. In short, expect to cross paths with the unexpected. And be grateful that someone else is behind the wheel.

"Driving's the easy part," says Nikki Hall, a former Dragoman group leader with three years of overland journeys under her belt. "You do it every day and it becomes automatic, so getting stuck in the sand is actually fun because it breaks up the monotony."

It also proves the old adage that whatever doesn't kill you only makes you stronger. "One group I met had an accident in India, was bogged down in

the Sudan and was about six weeks late on a five-month trip," says McConnell, who spent four years leading Guerba's truck tours across Africa. "They had been through all these horrible things, but they were such a tight bunch of people. One would start a sentence and the other would finish it."

The unavoidable sense of intimacy that develops when you're cooped up with so many people is part of the overland package. You see your travel bud-

won't be any bathing facilities save a bucket and sponge.

"There's no personality test to get you on one of these trucks," cautions Babak Dehghanpisheh after taking a three-week overland trip from Cape Town to Victoria Falls with Umkulu, a small South African company. "You're just in a bubble of Westerners."

With so many people sharing so many daily-life experiences, the on-board social studies threaten to eclipse



As the Heads Turn: Overlanders attract a crowd at this Kenyan market.

dies when you fall asleep in your tent on the savanna, and you see them when you wake up to the sight of elephants in the distance. You cook meals together, you play cards together, you even use the loo together. By the end of the trip, you've lost as many inhibitions as you've gained friends. "The camaraderie and friendships (not to mention the odd romance or two) that occur on these trips are indicative of how people enjoy themselves," confirms Hopkinson.

Of course, not all tours are made in heaven. "I swear that the trans-Africa trip was booked by Weirdos R Us, but it was all part of the fun," recalls Arnold. "Every truck should have at least one cross-dresser to liven things up a bit!"

Before signing up for an overland journey, consider your compatibility quotient. You will, after all, be compromising with your fellow passengers on everything from music selections—AC/DC or the soundtrack to *Lawrence of Arabia*?—to how to spend the kitty, a collective food-and-drink fund that's standard on most trips. And remember: When you're camping, there probably

the cultural exchange that individual travelers don't want to miss. It's up to you to forgo a night of group bonding for a more authentic cross-cultural experience. Break away for some local festivities and return to the truck with a fresh perspective and a slew of new stories to liven up the daylong drives ahead. Watch the plains of the Serengeti or the Indian subcontinent, or the peaks of Patagonia unfurl past your window and feel the magic of where you are, as well as who you are with.

"Every 20 years or so the soul needs to go into controlled free fall," says Arnold. "The trucks are the perfect place to do it." ☺

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