

Seas of sand

While studying, **STEPHEN CUNLIFFE** and his mates shared a yearning to explore the wildest and remotest corners of the African continent. Life got in the way, but years later, they finally headed out for adventure.

ABOVE: Our group camped on the leeward side of a dazzling orange sand dune along the Morocco-Algeria border.

We drove into a surreal orange ocean of sand with endless waves of rolling dunes that stretched away eastwards

Out of the blue, many years after I graduated, I received a message from an old varsity friend. Having recently resigned from his engineering firm in London, Tim had taken the initiative to put our long-awaited trans-African expedition together. It didn't take much arm-twisting for me to quit my own job and sign on for the adventure of a lifetime.

After months of planning, three couples eventually departed England in a pair of trusty, second-hand

HJ60-series Toyota Land Cruisers to embark on an incredible nine-month overland odyssey. Shunning the more established Cape-to-Cairo route along Africa's east coast, we opted for the challenges of forging a route down the

continent's seldom-visited west coast. We wanted the rewards of taking the road less travelled, but we ended up getting much more than we bargained for. Our journey took us through some of the wildest landscapes, most formidable terrain and war-ravaged countries in Africa.

The old Cruisers proved to be uncannily reliable and they took the pitfalls of Africa in their stride, allowing us to indulge in an adventure we had dreamed about for over a decade. But the expedition turned out to be no holiday jaunt. It was a journey of discovery, steep learning curves and, at times, inconceivable challenges. Friendships were tested to their limit and relationships were strained to breaking point. Even so, this epic overland adventure was the greatest of our lives. If I were to receive a similar call tomorrow, I would quit my job in a heartbeat and immediately sign up for round two. >

THE SHIFTING SANDS

After leaving England, we spent a relatively civilised month exploring western Europe. Europe, however, wasn't without its challenges. Driving across France and Spain in early spring frequently meant camping in icy rain and even snow. After an especially cold night that froze the tent zips shut, we unanimously voted to head for the dry heat of Morocco without further delay.

Once we crossed the Atlas Mountains and took a side trip to climb Jebel Toubkal (North Africa's highest peak at 4 167 metres), we had our first taste of Africa's greatest desert at Merzouga.

Morocco's notorious Erg Chebbi awaited us on the outskirts of Merzouga and provided an exciting opportunity to test our desert driving skills in the unfamiliar terrain. The term *erg* refers to the ever-shifting seas of sand. Many people not familiar with the Sahara are surprised to find out that much of this great desert is not sand dunes but a mixture of rock and gravel.

An old weathered signboard bearing the skull-and-crossbones cautioned us not to leave the sandy ruts for any reason

We drove into a surreal orange ocean of sand with endless waves of rolling dunes that stretched away eastwards before vanishing into a distant watery mirage across the Algerian border. The heat was relentless and I could feel the moisture being sucked from my parched body. We put the Toyotas through their paces in an attempt to hone our soft-sand driving skills before we reached the massive dune fields of Mauritania in the weeks ahead. >

RIGHT: Fez is a typically North Moroccan city, famed for its leather tanneries and colourful traditional dye pots.



TRAVEL ADVISORY

> **Personal preparation:** To tackle the challenges of the Sahara and enjoy the desert, you should be both healthy and mentally prepared for long days in the car.

> **Medical advice:** Overland travellers should be inoculated against yellow fever (plus carry their vaccination cards), as it is mandatory for travel to/from many African countries. Preventative jabs for typhoid, tetanus and hepatitis are highly recommended; malaria prophylactics and treatment kits are essential.

> **Vehicle preparation:** Our two 1989 HJ60-series Toyota Land Cruisers were fitted with Hannibal roof-top tents, Detroit diff lockers and extra fuel and water tanks. An affordable brand of winch performed admirably on countless occasions.

A set of top-quality tyres (with at least two spares) is essential for this unforgiving terrain, so we fitted BF Goodrich M/T 255/85 R16 tyres and Old Man Emu suspension.

We carried very few spare parts with us and found that Toyota spares and bush mechanics were readily available in Africa. We even managed to get a new master cylinder to repair our brakes in war-torn Congo.

> **Documentation pitfalls:** Make sure your passport is valid for at least six months past the end of your expedition and has plenty of blank pages for all the visas. For many African countries it is mandatory to acquire visas in your country of residence before you depart, but for lengthy trips, be aware that visas often expire after three or six months, so you need to apply for them at embassies along the way.

Having a *carnet de passage* (temporary import permit) for your vehicle is essential, making crossing borders considerably easier and saving time when clearing customs.



ABOVE: Wild camping in Morocco requires good gear and attitudes.

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Feeling confident after four days exploring the dunes around Merzouga, we embarked on an adventurous, off-piste route south along the Morocco-Algeria border. There was no road and often no track, so we depended heavily upon our GPS to navigate. The co-ordinates for the route came from a chance encounter with Hans, a friendly German, who regularly visits Morocco to explore its remote desert areas.

With seven months at our disposal and brimming with confidence and energy at this early stage, we had an insatiable lust for adventure. Hans, however, neglected to mention that his exploratory route criss-crossed the Algerian border as it meandered southwards.

A FOREIGN OCCUPATION

Morocco, with its Mediterranean-influence and comparatively well-developed tourism infrastructure entertained us royally for five weeks before itchy feet drove us south. Crossing into Moroccan-controlled western Sahara, we encountered the

first of roughly 500 military checkpoints we would be subjected to on our quest to reach South Africa. The soldiers invariably used the same format of checking our passports, the vehicle permits, our reasons for being there and, finally, our occupations. We soon discovered that our genuine professions were irrelevant and often caused unnecessary complications due to the language barrier. One of the women was a dive magazine journalist, but when the soldiers heard "journalist", they went berserk and detained us for the next five hours. We learnt a valuable lesson and by the time we reached the Mauritanian border our group of intrepid overland explorers consisted exclusively of non-threatening schoolteachers, engineers and artists.

The Mauritanian border post comprised a small wooden shack in the middle of an enormous minefield. An old weathered signboard bearing the skull-and-crossbones cautioned us (in French) not to leave the sandy ruts for any reason until we rejoined the road

to the coastal town of Nouadhibou. We were only too happy to oblige.

DESERT CAMPING

After surveying the rusty metal hulks of countless abandoned ships littering the beaches and sandbars around Nouadhibou, we detoured inland to Atar and the famous Islamic libraries at Chinguetti. Deep in the desert and hundreds of miles from the nearest light pollution, we camped under a star-festooned night sky of indescribable brilliance. We explored the great ergs of Mauritania, endless seas of sand that stretched off to the east for thousands of miles. The extreme inland heat, combined with a diet of camel-meat sandwiches, meant that we could endure only a week in the deep Sahara before we headed back to the coast.

Our journey south resumed with a spectacular four-day drive through the coastal desert of the Banc d'Arguin National Park. This arid reserve was a revelation. Each night, we pulled over to camp on a deserted beach >



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where sand foxes visited our smouldering braai fires late in the evening. During the day, huge flocks of pelicans and flamingos fed in the shallow nutrient-rich waters off the coast.

A SAFE CROSSING

Both the vehicles were equipped with 100-litre drinking water tanks, but with no settlements allowed in the park, there was nowhere to refresh our most precious resource. Having two vehicles in this harsh wasteland was imperative for peace of mind and our survival. Keeping the sea on our right, we eventually exited the park at the fishing village of Nouamghar where we negotiated, for a small fee, to fill a couple of our freshwater jerry cans from the local well.

The final stretch to the Mauritanian capital, Nouakchott, was an epic journey and hauntingly beautiful. We had been warned that the seven-hour beach drive could be accomplished only at low tide. Timing was paramount. We needed to set off while the tide was receding and at least three hours before it turned. The ocean waves had been known to prey upon hapless vehicles and there would be no escape for a 4x4 that found itself stranded midway along the beach by



the incoming tide.

Constant vigilance was essential as waves, fishing boats, anchors and (most challengingly) anchor lines would periodically materialise in the headlights, necessitating immediate evasive action. Every now and then we would pass the rusting shell of an old bus or the corroded hulk of a vehicle entombed for eternity on the beach. The Cruisers really proved their mettle in the soft beach sand.

At the Mauritanian capital, we joined a paved road and enjoyed an easy drive across the Diama border to the legendary Zebra Bar, an overlander's

TOP: The stone-pack mosque in the holy city of Chinguetti deep in the Sahara is an impressive sight.

ABOVE: Whether winching out a bogged vehicle or lending some good old-fashioned manpower to the situation, travelling in a two-vehicle convoy was an essential safety prerequisite.

paradise on the Senegal River. After two months exploring the sun-baked, alcohol-free Arabian deserts of North Africa, we were more than a little thirsty. Ice-cold beer has never tasted quite so delicious, before or since. 🚩