



Ultimate OVERLANDER

Designing your own custom-prepared Defender is many people's dream, Russ Brown meets a couple who've done just that. PHOTOS: BOB ATKINS



On the roof
Maggiolina roof tent and front and side awnings sit on roof bars, not a rack, to reduce weight

Side lockers
Rather than removing storage boxes to get to forward kit, side lockers allow easy access.

Storage boxes
Keith and Heather use 35-litre Really Useful Boxes to store their gear – they're strong and cheap

Rear racking
The rear racking and load area guard has been built specifically to secure the Really Useful Boxes

Door trim
The rear door is an ideal place for a torch, RAC emergency warning light and other small kit

Designing your own Land Rover overlander to suit your needs and ambitions can be a huge responsibility. Decisions that you may have made months – maybe even years – before the project is finished can only really be tested fully in the field. That ‘field’ may be the other side of the world, so you need to make the right choices. Heather and Keith Parkinson from Bedfordshire, creators of this superb overland-equipped 110, certainly got it right with this one.

Using the experiences they gained from their first overlander, Darleen – a 300Tdi 110 – that took them on expeditions to the Alps, the Massif Central and Normandy, the couple were ready to build a new vehicle.

Inspired by the racking systems they’d seen in vehicles in Morocco, they decided to use Safari-Equip (safari-equip.co.uk) to build one for them. The company’s Adrian and Tom listened carefully to the brief; and by the time the Parkinsons delivered the Defender to Safari-Equip’s Bradford workshop, there was already a cardboard mock-up of the rack to check out the design.

As well as the racking, Safari-Equip installed a bespoke stainless steel water tank (for which space was created by removing the second-row seats), the Big Country external lockers, rock sliders, a rear-wing auxiliary fuel tank and a custom-made spare wheel carrier with a high-lift-jack mount. The total bill came in at about £6000, including fitting.

There was still one question that was taking up a lot of the Parkinsons’ time – a big question. Which roof tent to buy? They spent a day at a Land Rover show testing every roof tent they could find for robustness and ease of operation. They chose an AutoHome Maggolina Safari XL. The XL is 20cm longer than the standard Safari, which is ideal – Heather and Keith are tall. Another big selling point is that it can be put up in 15 seconds. Many consider the Maggolina to be the Rolls-Royce of roof tents; at £2500, it should be too.

And, how much has it cost?

It was time to get some mileage on the clock and see how everything worked, so they signed up for the 2011 Mac 4x4 event, which included a leg in Ireland.

All their modifications appeared to work fine, but the Irish mist revealed a weakness with the standard lighting; the white Defender all but disappeared in the murk. This was solved by fitting LED lights all-round, including a pair of £900 headlights – a wedding anniversary present to themselves. They also upgraded to a set of 235/85 BF Goodrich All-Terrain tyres on steel modular wheels.

While unpacking back at home, they were dismayed to find that the floor of the roof tent was very wet. A bit of research revealed that because the tent is designed for hotter countries, condensation is a common problem when camping in more temperate zones. The solution is to introduce a layer under the mattress that allows air to circulate. There were a number of expensive, off-the-shelf

options, but Keith found a cheaper way. He discovered the same problem occurs on boats – so he visited a boat chandler’s and bought a foam mat resembling a kitchen scouring pad. A huge saving. In conjunction with raising the mattress up on roof bars every few days on longer expeditions to allow it to air, the problem has been solved.

The Irish jaunt helped them refine a few minor details, such as where to store stuff and where to fit power sockets. An external socket that I assumed was for lighting is in fact for Heather’s hair straighteners. ‘Well, a girl has to look her best, doesn’t she?’ she says.

Other minor mods included raising the rear of the front seat rail to enable both seats to slide further back for more legroom, which was further improved by fitting a smaller aftermarket steering wheel.

With the 110 now fully loaded Keith could modify the suspension to accommodate the extra weight. All four dampers were replaced with Old Man Emus and the rear springs upgraded to plus-500kg capacity. Plus-50kg springs were fitted to the front but this raised it too much so he reverted to standard. Parked

‘An external socket that I assumed was for lighting is in fact for Heather’s hair straighteners’



Navigation

Tablet and GPS holders sit on top of the dash for easy navigation and in-car entertainment.

DAB radio

Philips DAB radio with USB input provides the sounds. Rear speakers are relocated to the bulkhead so they're not hidden by storage boxes.

Split charge

The Defender runs on twin batteries, with the second powering the fridge and accessories. Dash display shows battery health.

Cubby box

The locking cubby box keeps all of the documentation secure and has external net pockets to store maps and other overland essentials.

Extra switches

You need some way of switching all the lights. Unused switch blanks are repurposed and extra switches fill the side panel.

Steering wheel

Smaller Moto-Lita wheel gives valuable extra room in the cab, especially when used with custom-made, low-rise seat bases.

Protection

Rock sliders double up as steps for raising/lowering the tent. Steering, fuel tank and diff guards keep all the vulnerable bits well-protected.

Air intake

Not for driving through deep water, but for reducing the amount of dust drawn in. Axle and gearbox breathers end at the top of the snorkel.

LED illumination

You've got to love LEDs... As well as headlights, all the sidelights are LED. There are also bumper-mounted foglights and work lamps all around.

All-terrain tyres

The 110 is shod with 235/85 R16 BF Goodrich All-Terrains on modular wheels – a strong combination that's neither too wide nor aggressive.



Been there, done that (or, vehicle prep advice you can trust)

1. Think about what you need on your vehicle – not what other overlanders or suppliers say you need.
2. Work out where you're going to live and cook during bad weather.
3. Have somewhere you can get out of the bad weather in a hurry (Keith and Heather use a pop-up tent, erected in two seconds).
4. Tailor your design to the regions of the world you plan to visit.
5. Buy bedding and outer-layer clothing appropriate to the region – being cold at night will ruin your trip.
6. Be aware of roof tent under-mattress condensation in cold climates.
7. Have a place for everything and put it back in exactly the right place.
8. Think about the weight and size of everything you pack in.
9. Do modifications in plenty of time and test them well in advance of a big trip – don't wire up the split-charge system on the morning you're leaving for a three-week trip!
10. Do a fairly local shakedown trip after major changes – it's easier to sort out problems in your own language, using experts you know well.

MODIFIED DEFENDER 110 UTILITY

on their drive, the rear now sits about 20mm higher than standard and drops 40mm when fully loaded.

They've visited the Orkneys and last year ventured even further north to Norway, the Faroe Islands and Iceland, where they met LRO's Mark Saville in his Series I (no great surprise – you're more likely to meet Mark in Iceland than not).

After each trip they've made minor changes, such as modifying the toggles on the tent

to stop them rattling in the wind. This might seem pedantic to anyone who has not had to sleep in it for the 100 nights the Parkinsons have now clocked up.

The couple have tweaked their awning design to make it easier to get in the roof tent without being rained on, and now carry a pop-up base tent for temporary shelter when they arrive at a campsite in a monsoon.

Keith admits there's one structural element he'd have designed differently. 'I should

have included a fold-out table in the racking system for lunch stops, but I get around that by pulling a couple of the lower boxes out.' He also says he should have fitted Wolf rims when replacing the wheels as they'd be more appropriate to the weight of the vehicle.

So, what's it like to drive?

I took it for a spin around country roads and was surprised by how well it handled. There's a bit more body roll than on a standard 110 – hardly surprising given the 75kg of tent on the roof. It feels slightly sluggish going up hills but Keith is considering having the 2.4 TDCi engine chipped to compensate for the vehicle's extra weight.

And, how much has it cost?

Heather and Keith's self-imposed brief was to do the job well but with an eye on the finances. On top of the £23k spent on the donor Defender, Keith reckons they've spent another £15k on the project. However, they've had a bit of cash back from selling the rear seats, the original wheels and tyres, and the steering wheel. Comparing notes with other owners of overlanders, he reckons they've saved up to £10k by designing and managing the project themselves.

Heather and Keith are looking forward to some more European overlanding, with Spain and Portugal next on their agenda. Wherever they go, they won't be slumming it. **LRO**



Kit the Parkinsons couldn't do without

- Roof tent – regardless of where we are in the world and no matter the ground conditions, we have a safe, comfortable bedroom
- Water supply – tank and pump
- Jetboil – for a brew or hot soup when on the move. This really lives up to its name; it's super-quick!
- USB and 12v power outlets – for charging and powering various electronic devices. An inverter isn't a necessity as computers can go straight to required voltage from 12v with the correct adaptor
- Coleman dual-fuel stove and lamp. You can buy petrol everywhere
- Bag of bags – large bag to put all bags and straps in when setting up camp, so we can easily find everything when breaking camp
- Fridge – ice-cold beer always available. Say no more.



'They've tweaked their awning design to make it easier to get in the roof tent without being rained on'

Rear carrier

The spare-wheel carrier also includes a high-lift-jack carrier. Rear bumperettes protect the corners, and an additional 40-litre fuel tank sits in the wing.

Window grilles

An internal grille protects the rear window, which has ventilation grilles. The middle-row doors have Xtenders, allowing them to open fully.

Security first

Keith has used security fixings extensively and has fitted several anti-theft devices. I could tell you what they all are – but mum's the word, eh?

TECH SPEC

- Model: 110 Utility Wagon
- Engine: 2.4-litre TDCi
- Transmission: Ford MT82 Getrag 6-speed
- Suspension: Standard front springs, + 500kg rear springs, Old Man Emu dampers
- Wheels/tyres: Modular steel, 235/85 BF Goodrich All-Terrains