

## To boldly GO TO TOGO

*The* girls had never been inside a Land Rover, had never driven overland and had zilch mechanical knowledge, so it's pretty obvious that Rosie Ferguson and Cathrin Daniel should decide to drive to Togo in west Africa in an old 109. Rosie takes up the story

*The* two of us were sitting in a London sauna on a cold February day in 2008 when Cathrin talked about driving a Land Rover to Togo to donate the vehicle to an agro-forestry charity called NAIDD. She wanted an adventurous yet practical companion for the trip and we began thinking about which guys might fit the bill.

Right: Cathrin on the road to nowhere (well, through the Western Sahara actually). Below: They've only just begun – the ladies' Series III looks out to sea at Santander



It's a case of clunk, click, every trip, even in Morocco's Atlas Mountains



*'We pored over blogs and books on overlanding, trying to work out how we were going to make it happen'*

I asked why she thought she needed to take a man along at all. Good question. Men are strong (good for undoing and tightening bolts), deter unwanted attention (good at border controls) and know how to change a tyre (unlike Cathrin). However, they often snore (not so good in a shared roof tent), can get pretty smelly (ditto) and like to be in control.

So I challenged Cathrin to do the trip with another woman. Two women with no prior knowledge or understanding or even the slightest interest in cars could damn well do it themselves. How hard could it be?

The next few weeks were exciting and perplexing. We pored over blogs and books on overlanding, trying to



Above: Rosie (left) and Cathrin

work out how we were going to make it happen. The list of things we needed got longer and longer – things we'd never heard of like sand ladders, jerry cans and Jubilee clips.

One thing we knew for sure, though, was that was we'd do it in a Land Rover as the Togolese charity we were supporting had expressly asked for one. Well-made, reliable and ubiquitous in many parts of Africa, the charity workers assured us that it would best meet their needs.

My parents chanced upon a field close to their home in Nantwich, Cheshire that was full of old Land Rovers in various states of disrepair. Here they met Paul, an enthusiast who collected and fixed old military

Land Rovers on his farm. A couple of visits later we bought an ex-military, long-wheelbase Series III. To our ignorant eyes it looked a complete dump, but Paul assured us it would get us there. Despite its 28 years, the military had put just 5000 miles on the clock since it left the factory.

As we planned to do the trip in February, we had made a list of all the things we would do before we went: do first aid and mechanics courses, get some off-road driving in, buy all visas and so on. Come October we were still all hands on deck with stripping and painting the vehicle and had managed to do none of the above.

On a wet and wintry November evening, we finally got on the

# Classic LAND ROVER OWNER

road, struggling to find the windscreen wipers in the unlit interior and finding out for the first time what poor visibility the headlamps afforded. Were we really driving to Togo in *this*?

Our first night in Spain (and first experience of driving on the right) was also the first time we put up and slept in the roof tent. We had no idea how much a part of our life that routine would become. We had also underestimated the chill of a Spanish winter, often waking up to ice on the ladder in the morning.

During the day, we filled the time with trying to understand the basics of mechanics. With no stereo in the car (engine noise would have made it impossible to hear anyway), we kept ourselves entertained by our book, Perfect Pub Quiz and devouring the Haynes manual. Small victories such

as prising open the cubby box, discovering 101 uses for WD-40 and opening a jammed petrol cap seemed like huge strides.

The Land Rover chugged along at 35mph, much to the annoyance of Spanish drivers – but any faster and the water temperature gauge surged into the red. We tried everything we could think of, from turning on the whining fan heater to topping up the radiator level each day with anti-freeze. We stuck to the snail-like pace and remarked that if an overheating engine was going to be our only challenge, then this trip would be a breeze. How wrong we were!

It was when we reached Morocco that it started to get exciting. We visited the beautiful mountain town of Chefchaouen then headed south down excellent roads to Marrakech to celebrate Cathrin's birthday.

As we left the city after treating ourselves to two days in a hotel and

some sightseeing, we hit our first hurdle. Ten minutes after leaving a filling station, we were driving down a six-lane street on the road south towards Fez when we heard a huge bang, followed by lots of beeping. We came to a standstill in the middle of the road, trailing steam and rust-coloured water – well, the Land Rover did, anyway. Minutes later we were surrounded by people trying to help us (thankfully Cathrin's French

Below: Rosie climbs up the metal stairs to Bedfordshire (in this case the Series III's Overland roof tent)



*'We had no satellite navigation, and no insurance and...*



Cathrin and Rosie's route from Wales to Togo



Landmines are a big problem in Mauritania – even for a Land Rover



# Mauritania had just been subject to a military coup

was good enough to understand what was going on) and we were soon being towed away by a red truck to an unknown location.

The taciturn mechanic who looked under the bonnet told us that the water pump had broken, causing the radiator fan to break and spin off into the radiator. We'd not even reached the Sahara and were already feeling perilously out of our depth and over budget. But we learned something about the Land Rover; you can knock her down, but you can't beat her.

Our map of Morocco showed Western Sahara (once Spanish-controlled Sahara) as a long, empty strip of land with one road leading from Agadir to Dakhla. Here, to our great surprise, the Series III is King. Prized by the nomadic Sahrawi more than the camels that they live from, every third vehicle on the road was a

rather more battered version of our own. Everywhere we stopped, people offered to buy her from us and every mechanic we saw marvelled at her robust chassis and tip-top engine.

One especially ridiculous incident saw us make a detour off-piste in order to find an old Foreign Legion fort that we'd read about. Sadly, what we hadn't realised was that fuel tanks need to be reasonably full in order to drive over sand dunes and we quickly came to a halt on our quarter of a tank in between huge dunes in the middle of nowhere. Packing our emergency kit of thermals, water, tinned sardines and a Haynes manual, we abandoned the vehicle (not recommended) and set off across the desert at dusk in search of the fort.

Thankfully, we eventually managed to get some phone signal and contact a Frenchman who came and towed us

to there. From then on, we always had both tanks full and jerry cans galore.

As we went further south, our anxiety over no man's land and the road (or lack of it) through Mauritania intensified. By the time we got to Dakhla, last stop before the border, we were jittery and tense. We filled up both fuel tanks and all our jerry cans with fuel and water. This was to be the most challenging part of the journey for us – we were scared.

As well as having no satellite navigation or insurance (due to recent kidnappings of tourists, no insurers would touch us), the fact that Mauritania had been subject to its sixth military coup only three months beforehand meant our concerns were fully justified. We were also confused by conflicting reports about the state of the road through the country.



Above: Is that 24 miles to go or Togo 24 miles?



'Yer big end's gone, love...' Mechanics (and kids) get to work on the Series III in Mali



The Togolese were rightfully baffled by silly Brits living in roof on top of a vehicle

# Classic LAND ROVER OWNER



*'We learned that WD-40 attracts dust and, in the rusty roads of Africa, our doors filled up with dust'*

Thankfully, at least it was a straight road and, once again, we managed it. By the time we reached Senegal, the Land Rover was beginning to lose power regularly, often spluttering to a stop. We got used to sitting by the roadside watching someone clean out the carburettor by sucking the fuel pipe up into their mouth. Mind you, we had become pretty handy at cleaning the oil bath, flushing the radiator, tightening the fan and topping up the battery acid. We also learned the hard way that WD-40 attracts dust and so, in the rusty roads of west Africa, our impossible-to-close doors not only became stiffer but filled up with dust. In Dakar we spent a week getting to

know the mechanics in the local garage very well as they attempted to fix a number of things and instead broke a number of others.

We finally set off from Dakar with a week to get to the Mali capital, Bamako, for Christmas. This was the most wearying leg of our trip. We regularly lost power and with water temperature constantly on high, we chugged our way along the Tambacounda road, renowned for its potholes and broken tarmac. Amazingly, we made hit our Bamako deadline and were delighted to find a campsite with a swimming pool and cold beer.

The journey from Bamako to Togo was incident-free, save a missing

Below: Rosie finds some shade from the scorching African sun



slow-running screw which meant we stalled every time we slowed down for animals. Our arrival in Togo was much anticipated and a huge relief to everyone, not least to us. NAIDD is now transporting saplings to several villages so that co-operative tree nurseries can be established by local farmers, who are the main beneficiaries of their charity work.

Cathrin and I have developed a love of Land Rovers that we're both certain will never leave us. But would we recommend driving to west Africa in a Series III without any mechanical knowledge to anyone else? Definitely not. Would we have changed a second of our mammoth journey, however? No way!



Not the All-Togo Ice Dance Champions celebrating their win but Cathrin handing over the Land Rover

## Need to know

**Vehicle:** 1980 ex-MoD Series III 109.

**Distance driven:** 5900 miles.

**Countries visited:** Spain, Morocco, Western Sahara, Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso and Togo.

**Languages:** Spanish, French, Arabic and loads of local languages and dialects.

**Visas required:** For Morocco, Western Sahara, Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso and Togo – all can be bought at borders as you go along.

**Currency:** West African CEFA, Moroccan dirham, Euro,

Mauritanian ouguiya.

**Approx cost of fuel:** £1500.

**Time difference (compared to GMT):** Never more than one or two hours ahead of GMT during the entire journey.

**Things you must buy:** Headtorch, folding chairs, big quiz book.

**Recommended reading:** Ruzjard Kapinski, *Shadow of the Sun* or *Another Day of Life*; Bradt guide to *Overlanding in Africa*; Haynes workshop manual for Series III.

**Maps:** We used mainly IGN maps for each country.