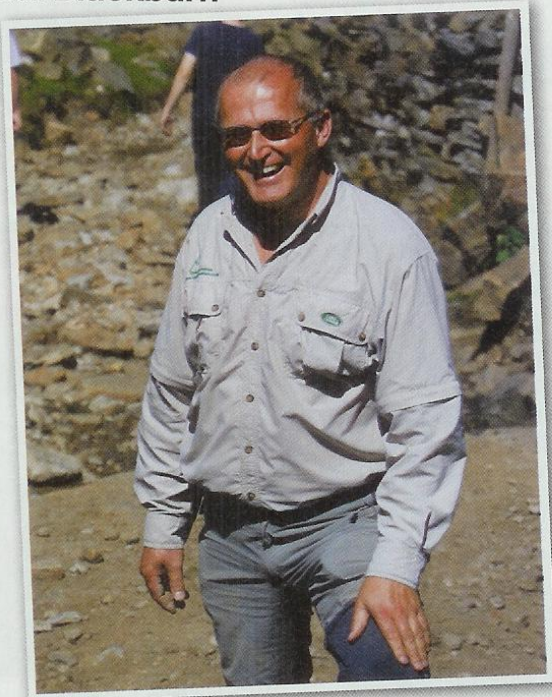


ONE LIFE, LIVE IT!

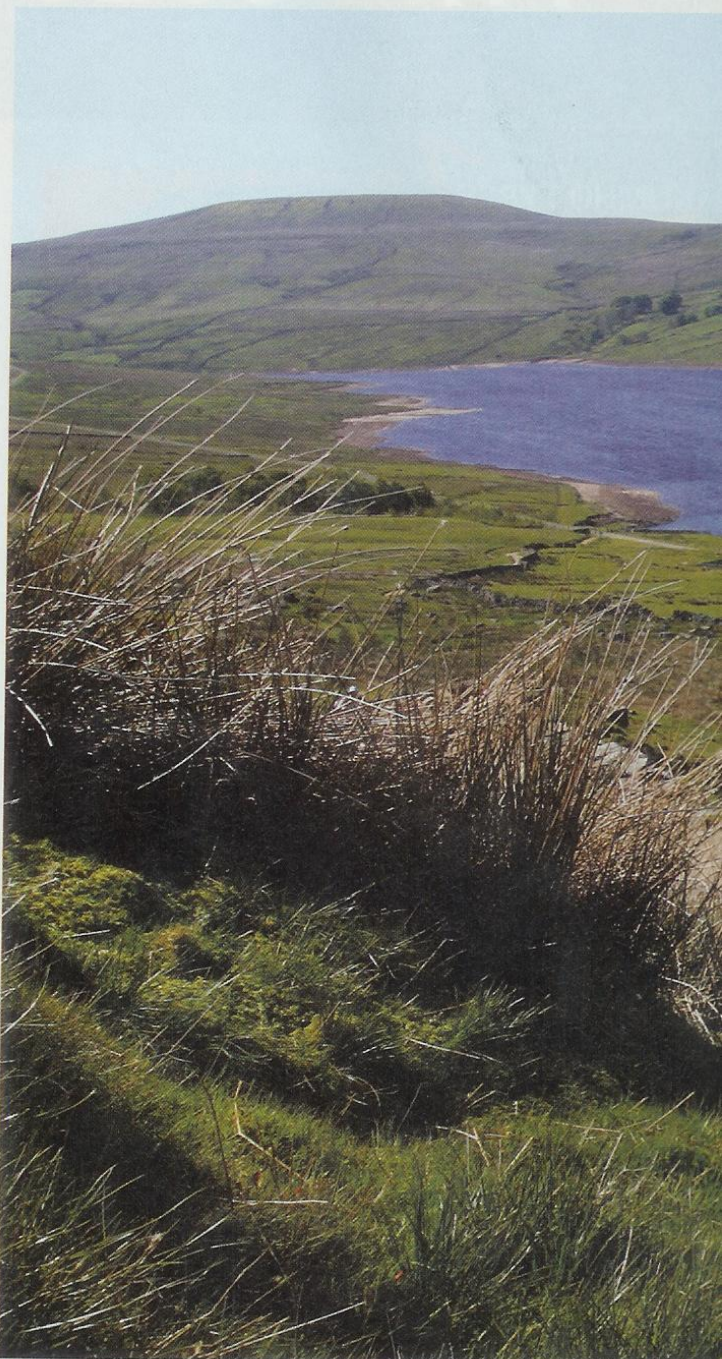
Leaving the corporate rat race with no idea what was in store for him, Paul Blackburn found himself creating an overland travel company – thanks to some transportation slip-ups in Africa – One Life Adventure. So is this the ‘dream job?’

Words: Kevin Baldwin; photos: Hils Everitt & Paul Blackburn



Paul Blackburn is celebrating. His One Life Adventure 4x4 tour company has just filled the final empty slot of its tour itinerary for 2010. That's pretty impressive, as, at the time of writing, we were only just into February, but it's a glowing endorsement of a relatively young company that's gained an enviable reputation in just a few short years of starting up. And it also shows that you have to book early if you want to join in.

Paul Blackburn has what many 4x4 enthusiasts would class a 'dream job'. He would, of course, argue that the logistical headaches and people skills required in organising and running multiple adventures throughout the year mean this is not a job for the faint-hearted, but leading parties of like-minded souls to overland dream destinations is a year-round perk of which it's hard not to be a teensy bit envious. The success of One Life Adventure isn't something that happened overnight. Paul once had a 'proper job' as European technical director for an Agri-Chemical company. That job also involved lots of travel; the major difference being his experience of the world was usually staring out of a taxi, hotel or boardroom window. "I decided to walk out of my job when I realised I just didn't enjoy doing it anymore. I'm a great believer in when the day comes when you stop enjoying something it's time to move on," explains Paul. The choice of name for his company comes from an old PR slogan used by Land Rover on its Camel trophy events 'One life, live it' and Paul is the perfect embodiment of that sentiment.



It's not all about exotic trips abroad – the Yorkshire weekends are also highly popular



When the Land Cruiser finally gets sent to the wrecker's yard, it will probably be replaced by a Land Rover as nothing else on the market is suitable these days

Without the shackles of a day job and no real idea of what he was going to do next, Paul decided he would take time out to do something HE wanted to do. "I knew I wanted to travel, and since I've always been fascinated with Africa I came up with a plan to go exploring so bought myself an ex-Camel Trophy Defender 110 from Nene Overland. I wasn't into Land Rovers or Camel Trophy but the 110 offered an expedition-ready vehicle that fell well within my budget. Ironically, although I've been involved in farming and agriculture all my life it was the first 4x4 I'd ever owned myself!" he laughs.

DURBAN BOUND

The Camel was put onto a ship at Tilbury bound for Durban and four weeks later Paul flew out to be repatriated with his vehicle in time for the ship landing in South Africa...or at least that had been the plan. Paul takes up the story, rolling his eyes.

"The moment I arrived in Durban and checked in with the shipping agent the trip of a lifetime suddenly turned into a complete nightmare. The agent told me the ship had been delayed and was still in the Suez Canal. It got worse. Due to a rescheduling of the ship's route I was told my car would now have to be unloaded in Mombasa – some 2000 miles away! After some negotiation that inevitably involved a sum of money changing hands I managed to have the 110 reshipped from Mombasa to Durban. Only trouble was, it would be six weeks before the ship ►



Kit includes rock sliders, Safari snorkel and Old Man Emu suspension – a tough act



The well-travelled 80 Series Toyota is powered by a standard 4.2-litre diesel



The DIY storage system works well and packs all the kit in and is easily accessible

would arrive, which left me with a helluva lot of time to kill. While kicking my heels wondering what to do I contacted an old friend in Durban who told me he'd heard there might be job driving tourist trucks out of Cape Town to Victoria Falls. I had a HGV licence so I thought: 'why not?' I was told: "If you can get yourself to Cape Town tomorrow the job's yours. It wasn't quite how I'd imagined my big adventure starting but I thought: 'what the hell' and the next day I was driving a six-wheeled MAN truck taking students up to Vic' Falls and bringing any load I could find back to Cape Town."

In his 'temporary' tour guide/truck driver role, Paul relished his newfound freedom away from the corporate rat race. "I absolutely loved it. Driving a truck-load of pretty student girls every day – who wouldn't?"

With news that the Camel had finally arrived in Durban, the keys of the MAN were swapped for his Land Rover 110. The chattering accompaniment of giddy gap-year students was now replaced by the ever-present rattle of the Land Rover that would be Paul's home for the following 13 months. With the whole of the African continent in front of him and no set plan or itinerary in mind he began the long drive home. Paul was in no rush. The drive home took him over a year!

He reels off the memorable places and events on a 13-month trip that have provided him with a lifetime's worth of experiences and stories. The break-downs; the getting stuck; the one robbery (the Camel Trophy axe off the back of the truck); the weird moment on a dusty trail somewhere in the middle of Africa when he came across another ex-Camel 110; and the mad Germans taking their pet lizard for swim on a flip-flop; but, best of all, the being alone in the 'wilder bits of Africa' he'd often dreamed of when stuck in some boring meeting. "I spent three months exploring Ethiopia just because I didn't want to leave the place and the people," he reminisces with a wistful look in his eye.



The 80 Series is One Life's third vehicle, after the last Toyota met an untimely 'death'

TAKE A BREAK

Thirteen months on the road with only the gearstick to talk to leaves you with lots of time for thinking and it was during this time that Paul started to wonder whether he could make a living combining business with pleasure. And so the seeds for One Life Adventure were sown. Back home, Paul got a lucky break when Frogs Island 4x4 invited One Life to run a greenlane weekend in Wales for its customers. "That was the real start for the company," Paul explains. "That first weekend led to follow-ups and, before long, I was in Wales every month with Frogs's customers." With a growing client base keen to venture further afield, One Life began running overseas tours to the Alps, Pyrenees and Morocco.

Paul's inevitable sense of wanderlust soon had him looking for destinations further afield that other companies were ignoring. Iceland, one of his favourite destinations – "for the sheer drama and mad contrasts" – was added, and then Libya, Algeria, Mauretania and Romania, which, according to Paul, is hugely underrated as a destination. "We try to focus on the whole adventure experience rather than a flat-out drive to and from a destination. Somewhere like Romania is a perfect example. It's the wild edge of Europe unlike any other country but it's ignored as a 4x4 destination." Extended trips of up to five or six weeks became annual features with the One Life expeditions allowing Paul the luxury of being self-indulgent in his choice of destination.



Ubari Sand Sea, Libya. This signalled the end of a four-day crossing

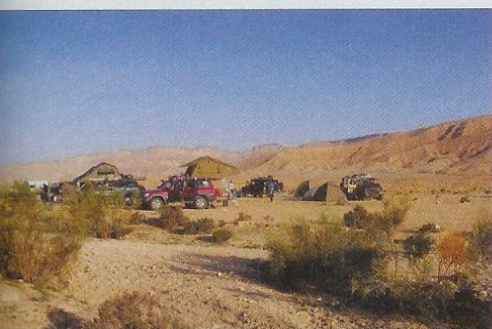
It was the increase in the number of long distance trips on the One Life calendar that highlighted the limitations of the Camel Defender. "The 110 was great once you've got to, say, Morocco, but the 2500kms through Europe were hard!" he says. So what does an expedition leader buy instead of a Land Rover? Well, that's easy; enter a 4.2-litre 80 series Toyota Cruiser. Problem solved. "A few years ago the 80 series was the real bargain. Clean, low-mileage Japanese imports with front and rear diff locks could be had for little money, but as the imports dry up and the UK vehicles start to show their age they're now getting harder and harder to find," he explains.

The Land Cruiser you see here is actually Paul's second truck. The first one met a

premature death on a remote Romanian mountain track as a result of a one-in-a-million landslip. In a scene straight out of the movies, Paul managed to jump clear of the Toyota as it began a rolling descent into a steep-sided valley. He giggles telling how, despite a head injury, he stripped the ARB bumper – "it survived without a scratch!" – off the truck before abandoning the remains as pickings for the locals. Although he laughs while recounting the story, he acknowledges he was lucky to escape with his life that day. Never let it be said that Paul's campfire stories are ever dull!

THIRD TIME LUCKY

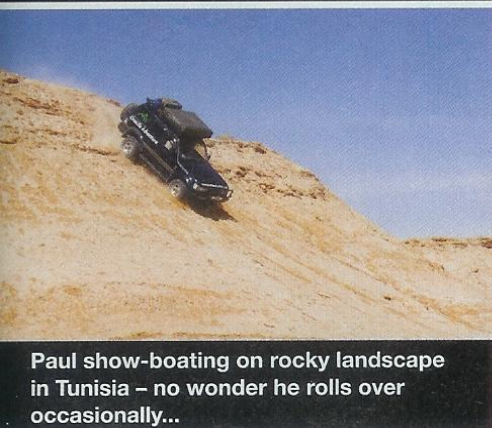
The replacement vehicle – another Japanese import – was sourced and the subtle



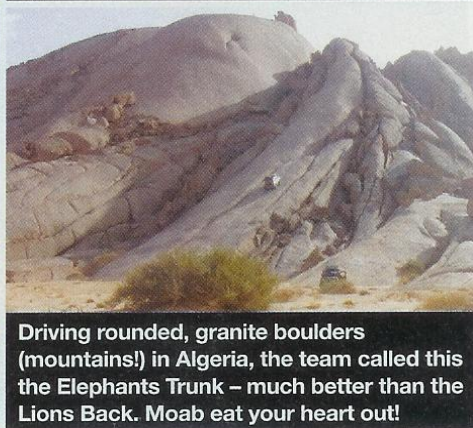
A wild camp at the foot of the Jebel Asker, overlooking the Chott el Jerid – the biggest salt flat in the Sahara, Tunisia



He was too busy trying to persuade a Moroccan child to get out of the Cruiser when suddenly the track dropped away and Paul drove over the edge



Paul show-boating on rocky landscape in Tunisia – no wonder he rolls over occasionally...



Driving rounded, granite boulders (mountains!) in Algeria, the team called this the Elephants Trunk – much better than the Lions Back. Moab eat your heart out!



Camel trains, near Chinguetti, are still used to transport goods rather than the tourists in Mauritania



From Paul's 'World Explorers' album of long distance expeditions. This is the Hamer tribe, SW Ethiopia, with girls in everyday, traditional goatskins, beads and shells

modifications were carried out to make it expedition-ready. The salvage ARB bumper was fitted together with 2in lift Old Man Emu suspension, Safari Snorkel and Frogs Island 4x4 rock sliders. It's not a massive amount of work but one advantage of the TLC, Paul reckons, is the need for fewer parts to make it tougher. "With a Land Rover you have to bolt on a lot of extra kit which all adds weight to protect the steering and suspension components, but the 'Cruiser is built tough from the factory. If it has a weakness I'd say it's the front axle but, providing you keep an eye on the front wheel bearings and look out for leaks, they're OK."

A Warn 16.5 Ti winch offers heavyweight winching capability – "it's surprising how often you find yourself towing Unimogs and old Bedfords in the desert!" – while the on-board compressor is useful for reinflating tyres following low-pressure desert piste sections. An auxiliary 40-litre fuel tank was a one-in-a-million eBay purchase. "It's a factory part," Pauls tells us, "that Toyota offered for the Malaysian market. We offered it up and it bolted straight in. With both tanks full the truck has a range of 600kms. Fill up the four Jerry cans and we're good for 1000kms." Internally, a homemade storage system keeps everything in its place and provides a place for everything. Dual batteries provide additional power and the Hannibal roof tent and side awning offers night time shelter. A Garmin GPS is linked to a Panasonic Toughbook laptop running OziExplorer and Fugawi mapping software, while CB radio and sat phone look after the comms. A Spot Satellite Messenger tracking and location device (www.findmespot.eu/en/) is the latest piece of kit that Paul is trialling. By linking the Spot to the One Life Adventure website you and friends and families can follow the One Life convoy wherever it is in the world.

As you read this, Paul, his Land Cruiser and a group of lucky clients will be somewhere in the Sahara on his annual big trip. OK, I'm sure Paul's right when he says it's not the dream job we all like to think it is, but even Paul will admit, it comes pretty close... ■