

OFF ROAD

PACKED WITH
LISTINGS & GUIDES ON
EVERYTHING OFF-ROAD

YEARBOOK

ALL THE ESSENTIAL OFF ROAD INFO IN ONE PLACE!

2010

OVER
200
MILES OF
ROADBOOKS
INSIDE!

OFF ROAD CHAOS!

STUCK! ROLLED!
UNDER WATER!

JOIN A 4X4 CLUB
GO GREEN LANTING
DRIVE OFF ROAD

BURSTING WITH MUST-READ ARTICLES

MODIFY YOUR 4X4

PRACTICAL WORKSHOP GUIDE

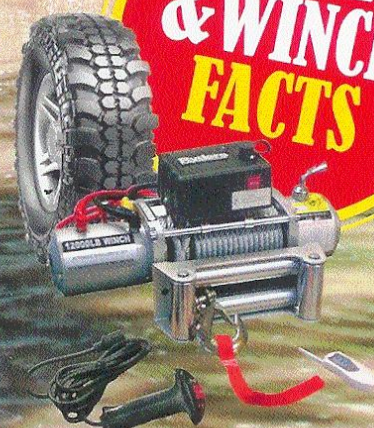
WHERE TO TRAVEL

25 UNMISSABLE ADVENTURES!

BAG YOURSELF A BARGAIN

AFFORDABLE REAL-WORLD 4X4S

TYRE
& WINCH
FACTS

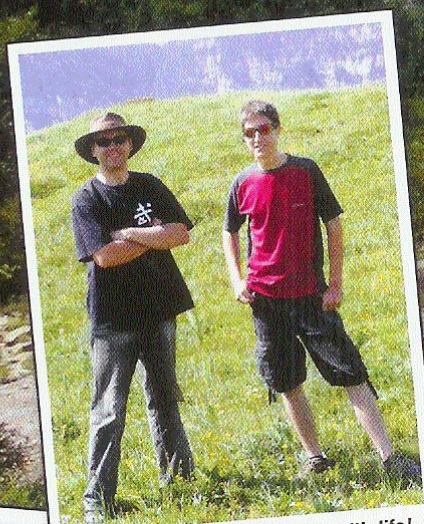


4X4 SPECIALISTS | CENTRES / PLAYDAYS | INSURANCE | EVENTS

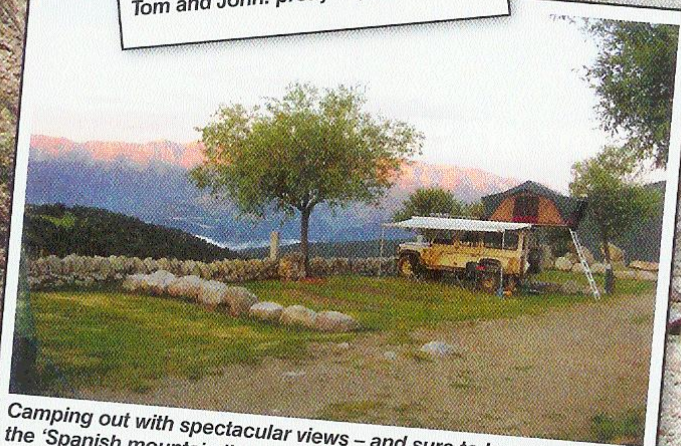
THE HIGH LIFE

Imagine driving beneath blue skies along Pyrenean mountain passes, taking in the fresh scent of alpine flowers, with stunning snowcapped peaks in the distance, challenging tracks in front of you and guidance from experts close at hand. Your only worry is which patch of stars you're going to camp under that night and where to buy your cold beer and sausages. Some might say you'd be pretty lucky – and even luckier still if you'd won the trip scot-free!

WORDS AND PICTURES: TOM HALL



Tom and John: pretty happy with life!



Camping out with spectacular views – and sure to be safe from the 'Spanish mountain lions' up in the roof tent...



I've been called many things in my twenty-one years, one of the nicest being that I am a lucky little sod. My passion for 4x4s began when I was a 'wee' lad, and led to two things taking place which are important for this story: firstly, I had become the proud owner of a little red Ford Maverick which I was dying to drive abroad, and secondly, I was wandering around the British Indoor 4x4 Show at Donington with my mate John last year.

The luck came into it when I entered a prize draw to win a trip to the Pyrenees with One Life Adventure – and I was the winner! The trip dates were in summer 2008 but I had them moved forward to 2009 which gave me just over a year to prepare my Maverick. I didn't have a huge budget but I got the basics done and made a new internal storage system too. I found myself a companion for the trip too: my mate John. He'd got some off-road experience, he drives a TD5 90, and he's the one who gave me a lift to the show in the first place!

The last week before leaving was a mad frenzy of preparation, including a last minute replacement of a prop-shaft UJ, but on the Saturday morning we were on the road to Dover then we set sail; goodbye UK, hello France!

We spent most of the day driving from Calais to Tours, where we found ourselves a campsite. As Sunday morning broke over France, we did some pre-journey checks, but when John opened the radiator, we were horrified to find it almost empty, along with the expansion tank! Panic set in. The only thing we could do at this point was to refill everything and hope it would hold. On refilling the radiator we were greeted by a leak from radiator overflow pipe. On closer inspection, it looked like the power steering pump pulley had sliced through the pipe. A quick brainstorm and we managed to rob a section of clear pipe (from my solar shower) and splice it into the severed rubber pipe with two jubilee clips. Hoping this would hold, we left Tours later than expected, but at lunchtime we checked the radiator to find that our botched repair was holding up well! With our confidence restored in the little Mav, we started to make some headway and eventually pulled onto the site at Sunbilla where we were to meet our fellow travelling companions.

Firstly there was, of course, organiser Paul Blackburn and his daughter, Charlotte; next were Paul and Jane in their recently purchased Defender 110; and lastly Brian and Anne in their Kia Sorento. We had a quick natter with everyone and then caught another early night.

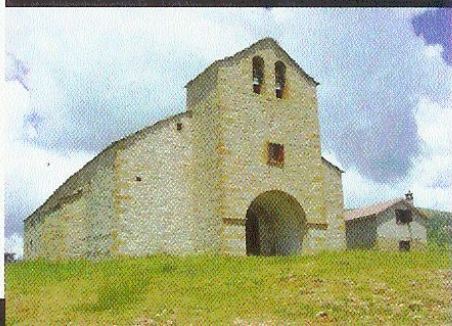
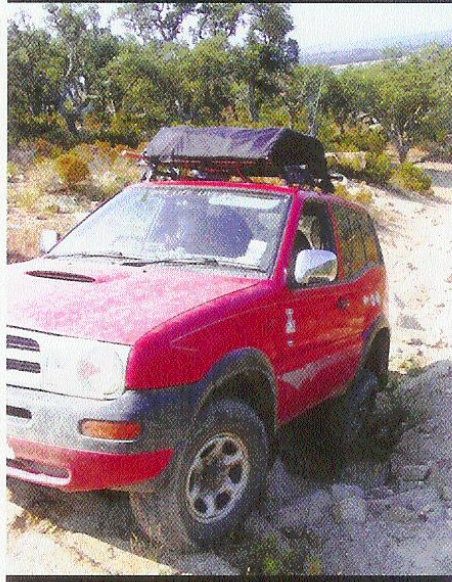
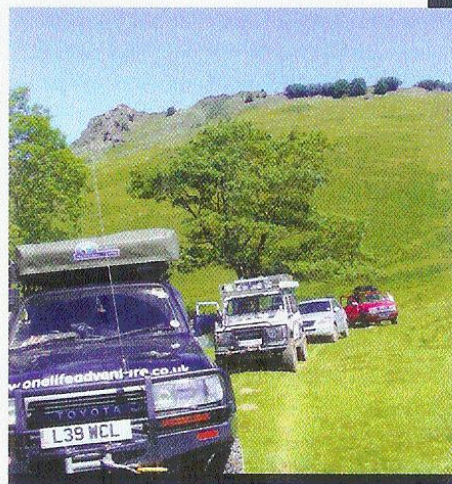
On Monday morning just before we were due to leave, Paul went through the route with us and gave us an idea of what to expect from the trip. Within the first half an hour of driving I'd put the car into low range; the altitude and heat were starting to affect the engine, plus we started traversing some rocks. A few minutes later we had to make our first recovery: Brian had misjudged a gully and his nearside front wheel had dropped into it, leaving the Sorento suspended off a valley edge. Out came the strop and shackle so I could extract him. Further down the track we crossed a small stream before zigzagging up a hillside to where Brian got into some more trouble. The 'delicate' touch of my spade was used to remove his rear wheel from another gully! During the rest of the day we climbed up to 1600 metres before making our way through the foothills to our next stop at Ochagavia. Throughout the day we'd noticed that my 'pusher' electric fans weren't able to cope with the Spanish heat so I refitted the viscous fan in the hope that it would keep the engine running cooler.

Local Delicacies

Tuesday morning we all headed into the pretty town of Ochagavia to get some shopping, namely milk and fresh meat, preferably some mince. Jane knew some Spanish and told us what 'I'd like...' is before I looked up 'mince' in my dictionary. We walked into the butchers and said what I had just been reciting; to which I received a blank look! Embarrassed, I just pointed to a random sausage underneath the counter, which turned out to cost a meaty €10.20 – which impressed the others who'd managed to get one for about €2! Everyone was intrigued to find out what was so special about our 'sausage'; I guessed we would find out later. We set off into the hills again where we were greeted by lots of dust and some of the most dramatic scenery we had seen so far. The last track of the day was unfortunately made inaccessible by a closed road so we rolled into camp at Anso unusually early. That night we tried our 'sausage' in a casserole and found out that seasoning it was rather unnecessary; strongly flavoured was an understatement, and provoked many theories about which part of the pig it was from!

Wednesday was our first rest day. We all walked into the town of Anso where we enjoyed the architecture and did some shopping, then lazed about reading magazines and having a very relaxing day.

The following day we were heading to Hecho. We climbed into the hills again where we admired the view of the valley



of the river Aragon. The descent from the valley side was rocky and steep in places but we enjoyed the challenge it provided. Once onto the valley floor we drove past an old fortified town and glared up at a large group of vultures circling the town's 'dump'. On meeting a main road we headed into the mountains again via a stunning gorge and into a valley. Paul had informed us that the valley would be a dead end but the views would be well worth it. Despite the storm clouds looming and the long drive, he proved to be very right. We set up camp in Hecho in the dry, knowing that we were in for a wet night.

A Good Soaking

We all survived the night's storms, but it turned out that John's new fangled pop-up tent, while making him quite smug when he set it up with a quick flourish, had one vital design flaw: it wasn't waterproof! Not so easy to be smug when you've got a soaking wet sleeping bag. The first port of call for the morning would be the small town of Hecho before we drove out onto the plains and into the larger town of Jaca. By mid afternoon we had travelled through some forested valleys to the abandoned and dilapidated village of Sasa, then it was time for our first bit of rock crawling! John was at the helm and with my guidance we made it through. Brian also made it through with only a minor loss of underbody paintwork to a few rocks...

On Saturday morning I asked Paul what to expect and he told us that we were heading into the high Pyrenees with the possibility of 'bumping' into some snow. We left the highway and headed up, admiring some breathtaking scenery before we descended into the valley on the other side, where we drove over steep slate and limestone tracks. This is where the sidewalls on my Kumhos would be most at risk. Paul, in his 110, looked like he was enjoying himself, especially when we had to

make a minor detour up an embankment! The afternoon was cut slightly short by a knocking from my front suspension and by Brian clouting a rock. The impact had permanently set off his windscreen wipers and heated seats! Paul decided it would be best to make for camp at Plan. Once on site, I whipped out the jack to determine the origin of the noise. Both front wheel bearings were loose so I tightened them, while Brian found his stuck wipers and dodgy heated seats were down to a combination of a loose relay connection and a blown fuse. Hopefully that would be our problems solved! After a tough day we all relaxed by spending the evening around the barbecue. We listened to stories and joked about how people who sleep in ground tents are 'lion bait'... there aren't any lions in Spain though, are there?!

Going Off Piste

I was glad to wake up on Sunday to find that nobody got mauled by a lion during the night. We were intact and soon back on the road again, passing through a long tunnel before emerging into the town of Vielha. After a spot of shopping and a coffee we headed for the hills, climbing up a tarmac track, until we got to the crest. The descent was long but the valley was incredibly picturesque, and in the afternoon there was more fun as we went with Paul to recce another track. We rallied through the mountains for a few hours, taking in some amazing sights up at 2500 metres; at one point we could see the mountains bordering Andorra which were still over 40km away! It was starting to get dark and hunger had struck so we headed back – but we did manage to drive some snow on the way, which was great!

While out with Paul, the knocking from the suspension made a return so it was time for the jack to come out again. We had eliminated the wheel bearings so we checked over the suspension and steering with Paul's pry-bar. The anti-roll bar links turned out to have slack in them, so the spanners came out and after a quick tighten it was time for a shower and some tea.

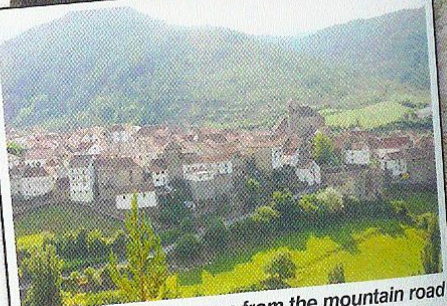
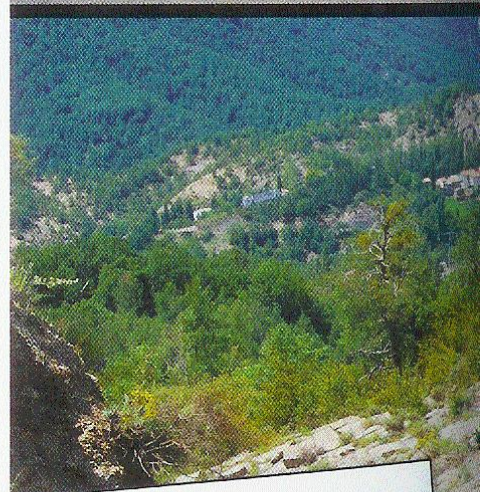
We were now only a stone's throw away from Andorra, and would soon be passing through the shopping mecca of Europe, which was meant to be pretty chaotic. Before we crossed the border though, we took a scenic drive through a forested valley, fording a couple of streams. We stopped at the top of the valley for a group photo before descending towards Andorra, occasionally stopping to glance at the car wrecks. After a quick play on the hillside outside of the border, we headed in. Not long after, with



Paul and Jane with their Defender

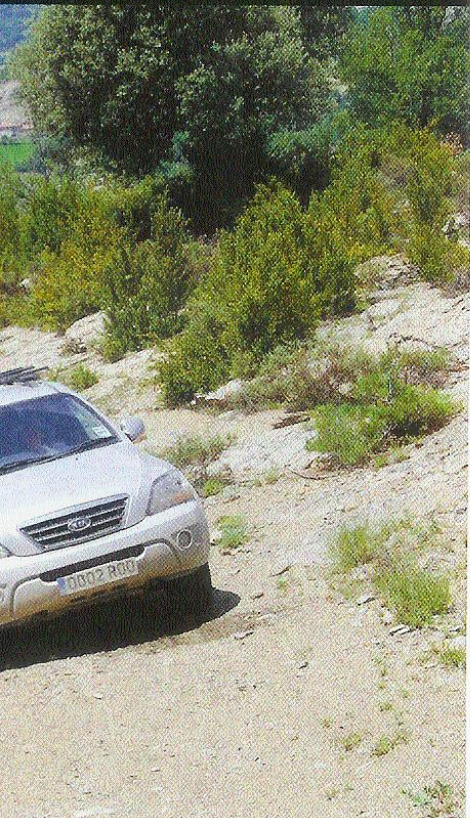
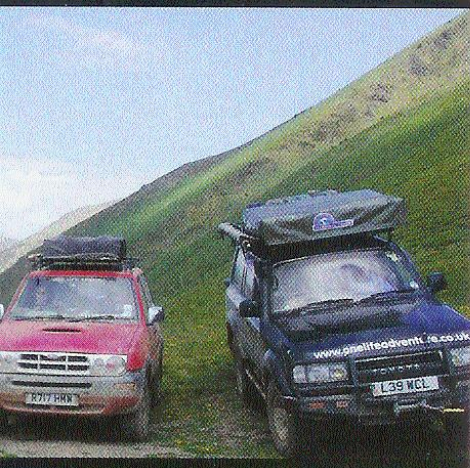


Organiser Paul Blackburn and daughter Charlotte joined in the fun



The town of Anso seen from the mountain road

We rallied through
the mountains
for a few hours,
taking in some
amazing sights up
at 2500 metres



lunch eaten and seats bought, we quickly headed back out. Here, Paul's rear wheel caught a nasty rock, slicing a large hole in his tyre, and to make matters worse, we had a storm chasing us from across Andorra! He managed to change his wheel just in time as the first spots of rain began to fall, which lasted until we had reached our camp at Lles de Cerdanya. Paul was yet again right when he said that 'you'll never get bored of the view' – what a view it was!

Come Tuesday morning the rain had all cleared up allowing the sunshine to flood across the valley in front of us. It soon became overcast though; another wet day ahead. Paul's plans for the morning were scuppered when a couple of tracks were closed off, and his improvisation was tested to the limit. After lunch, we did a small recce on a mountain track; unfortunately it was a dead end. We all managed to turn around despite the added complication of another Pyrenean storm – the heavy rain soon turned our track into a river! We safely descended the hill before Paul decided it was probably best to call it a day. Our campsite for the next two nights would be at Oix, as Wednesday would be our second rest day. Despite the damp weather, the barbecue came out again and so we all spent another pleasant communal evening together.

A Slippery Slope

On Thursday, after a late start to recover from a fun night, we said goodbye to Brian and Anne who had to leave the tour here, and set on our way. The heavens opened on our second route, an old smugglers' track up to the border with France, but we made the rocky ascent making use of low range. At the top of the valley, lightening was crackling only a few hundred metres above our heads and it felt very much like Wales, but minus the sheep! The fields we were crossing had become very slippery; at one point the Mav was crabbing sideways down a hill! After a French lunch we were back in Spain, detouring to take advantage of a steep, rocky track down a hillside, before arriving at our last campsite, at Capmany. Typically Mediterranean, the campsite was dry and arid – perfect for lots of army ants!

Friday was our last morning, and Paul had informed us that today would be the climax of the tour, so we soon set off into the Spanish wilderness. After a short track and a 'tight' experience in a local town we turned onto the pinnacle route, where we were greeted by some of the most extreme gradients and rock climbs of the tour – 35% or 40% doesn't sound a lot but when all you can see is the bonnet it sure feels it! John was driving for most of it but after sliding the

Maverick into a deep gully he handed the reins over to me for the last climb.

Paul got up the first stage in his Cruiser, but on the hard climb the car bottomed out on a rather large rock, so he gave in and took the easier route. Next it was Paul and Jane in their Defender. The 110's wheels were spinning and scrapping all over the place but with help from the other Paul he made it up the easier route.

A Different Approach...

Now it was my turn. Even in first low range, the engine was struggling because of the heat and minor altitude. A fine balance between clutch and accelerator was needed and after a bit of fuss from the wheels I was up, but on descending the nearside front wheel dropped into the gully I'd so carefully avoided on the way up. The offside rear wheel was hovering a good few inches off the ground as the rear suspension fully articulated. Paul assured me it was okay, so with John hanging off the car I carried on, and the back wheel touched back down – phew, panic over!

We all had a quick natter about the climbs so far, during which John asked Paul if he had his difflock engaged on the 110, his reply was 'No, was I supposed to?'

Oh how we laughed – no wonder he was struggling to get up! We then looked ahead of us at the last climb. It looked menacing but was optional! Paul obviously had a go in the Toyota. A third of the way up though he lost traction and had to reverse down a small section before setting off again. It was truly huge; at least five stories high with 40% gradient for most of it! Paul and I decided to give it a miss, instead choosing to watch Paul descend without the aid of engine braking! Slowly but surely, Paul got to the bottom. After another quick chat we were soon on the road again. Not long after we had our last lunch together on a hill overlooking the Med: absolutely fantastic! We then wound our way down to the road and into Port de la Selva, where we all said our goodbyes and parted company.

We completed just over 2600 miles in total. The car performed flawlessly despite the severed radiator hose, four blown fuses (from the fridge) and a clogged air filter (from the dust). I'd like to say a huge thank you to Paul Blackburn for his hospitality! Also to Paul and Jane, Brian and Anne, Charlotte and of course John for their company over the two week period. And lastly, a massive thank you to all who helped with the car, especially my dad, Richard. What's in store for me and my little red Maverick now? Hopefully Norway. Then Morocco. I've got the travelling bug – all I need now is another competition to win...