

DON'T GO IT ALONE

Heading off into the sunset is a dream that we all experience at some point. Just pack up your kit, fill the truck with supplies and head for the horizon. Unfortunately things like work and mortgage payments often get in the way. But that doesn't mean you cannot get a flavour of the adventure. There are quite a number of specialist companies that offer guided tours in remote locations, some of which are just a day or two's drive away from home. If you live in the south of England you are actually closer to the Alps than the Scottish highlands. So why don't we go

there more often? Fear and uncertainty perhaps? It can take a lot of planning and preparation to fly solo but by joining a guided tour most of the hard work is taken away leaving you just to enjoy the drive and the scenery. Reputable companies plan ahead and scout the routes beforehand keeping an eye on any problem areas and have a list of 'plan B' options should the unforeseen arise. So if you only have two weeks in summer for your 'expedition' then get in touch with one of the companies featured here, they offer a diverse range of dates and itineraries and most cater for beginners and experts alike.



DRESS REHEARSAL

By Simon Ward-Hastelow



Photo opportunity – more mountains!

So you find yourself with a newly built Land Rover camper (based on a 130 Defender) that needs testing properly, both for travelling and camping, and we needed to try it off-road while fully loaded.

As we also have two children finding the right destination to do all that is not as easy as it sounds. Our first choice of a trip to Morocco was out as the Camper conversion took longer than expected to complete and we didn't fancy July in the desert. But then we saw an ad for an escorted trip to the Alps which seemed to fit the bill perfectly. Not too far away (from where we live in Kent we are nearer to Italy than Inverness!) it offered a fair amount of off-the-beaten-track driving with the advantage of travelling in a group and the back up that provides should anything go wrong.

I must admit to having my reservations about an escorted trip after hearing tales of people being left behind or struggling to keep up on a barn-storming hike with strict schedules to meet. There were also the kids to consider as not all companies organising these trips are as child friendly as their brochures might tell you. I'm glad to say that all of our fears were unfounded.

Rather than high-tail it to Northern Italy in one hit we decide to spend a relaxing two days driving through France to the rendezvous, cross-channel jaunts into France are a regular feature on our calendar and we love the diversity and ease of travelling it offers. An enjoyable but fairly routine two days it was too. France is very accommodating to motorhomes and campers, you are positively encouraged to stay on motorway services and dedicated facilities are provided at most of the larger 'Aires' and you will often find 'camping car' spaces in small villages along the national routes ('A' roads) a dramatic contrast to the UK where you're threatened with parking fines and clamps for staying longer than 2 hours!

After a stop-over at a lovely campsite on the



Sheep seem to demand right of way and were in no hurry to move on

French side of the Alps we were all looking forward to the drive through the 8 mile long Fréjus tunnel that would take us under the Alps into to Italy, especially the boys, who still find the Dartford tunnel under the Thames exciting.

Another Brit we'd met along the way advised that Diesel was cheaper in France than Italy so we stopped to fill up at the last service station before the Tunnel. (they were wrong, by the way, fuel was about the same) As I was brimming the tanks wifey went in search of other 'facilities', Imagine the look of surprise as she returned to find me and the camper surrounded by armed Gendarmes. Luckily they just pulled up to admire the truck (the driver was a Land Rover enthusiast).

As we reached the tunnel both boys were asleep! Do we disturb our peace and wake them or just let them miss it. We chose to keep the peace.

Eerging into the Italian sunlight we hit our first snag. We knew we had to turn off the main roadsoon after the tunnel but no-one bothered to mention that in Italy the colour of the road signs is different! In the UK and France we're used to following green signs for local roads and blue for motorways but in Italy it's the other way around which we didn't appreciate until we found ourselves on a toll-motorway to Turin!

After a slight detour we eventually get to the meeting point at Camping Gran Bosco in the Susa Valley.

Who needs scenery when you have 'Scoop the digger'

Not all rough trails, but not too much tarmac either



Didn't your mum warn you about climbing?

Even though we'd be spending the majority of time up in the mountains this would be 'base camp' for the week. It had good facilities and a bar/restaurant on site so we could delay the fend-for-yourself-in-the-wild for one more day.

THE LAY OF THE LAND

Although blessed with mile upon mile of tracks through and over the Alps, and some of the most stunning scenery that Europe has to offer, the bobble-hat fraternity have representatives in France and Italy too. Routes are being closed and restricted on an almost weekly basis. This doesn't make our guide's job any easier. Along with

changeable weather conditions they really have to be on top of their game to know what is open on any given day. It is not unusual for consecutive trips to follow completely different itineraries. For this reason I'm not going to give you a blow-by-blow account of each place visited and track driven. Unless you know the area well you're best sticking with the experts.

It is striking how little some areas have changed over the years. A trip up to the Granon area revealed a network of WWII bunkers and defences. Unused and untouched for over 60 years with reels of barbed wire still littering the landscape. We entered one such bunker installation that was said to be safe (ish) to find a labyrinth of tunnels

and underground barracks. Make sure your torch has fresh batteries! The tour of Alpine fortifications continues throughout the week. Hard to miss them in an area with such a diverse history of conflict and constantly shifting borders over the centuries.

Somehow viewing them in their abandoned and unmolested state has more of an impact than seeing a 'restored' reconstruction. As if to further define the futility of it all we came across fortifications where the armaments have clearly been swung around to point the other way and with barracks on both sides of the hill.

PATCHES OF COLOUR

To provide a perfect counterpoint to the evidence of conflict is the superbly diverse selection of flora. As we progress higher up the mountains different plant-life fades in and out of view, then at the same elevation on the other side the same plants reappear, a pretty reliable way to estimate your elevation.

We start on the valley floors with dense tree cover which gradually thins out. At higher altitudes we see little more than what you'd find in the 'rockery' section at the local garden centre. The only constant feature is the European Marmot or 'marmites' as our boys insisted on calling them.

Of course the only problem with covering such different altitudes is the change in temperatures. This is the end of July so its pretty hot and humid low down but just as we see the flora thinning out so we also see the temperature dropping, just a couple of thousand feet of elevation can turn suitable attire from t-shirt and shorts into fleece and long trousers. Never more clearly was this demonstrated than on the middle Wednesday of our trip.

We had promised our eldest boy, whose birthday it was, that we would find him some snow to play in. Not normally the easiest promise to fulfill with a birthday in July. Undeterred and with the

Breathtaking scenery just a day's drive from the UK



pre-arranged assistance of the Alpine Rovers team we set off for the highest drivable route in Europe which reportedly had some amount of snow pretty much all year round.

10,000ft above sea level is a lot further up than the tarmac reaches and well into altitude sickness zone. It is also a trail of endless hairpin bends. Just when you think you've taken all the three point turns you can manage there is another one coming, literally just around the corner!

I'm happy to say that we never had to do any more three point turns than the Defender 110 in front even though we were a fair bit longer. There were even a couple of 5 point turns thrown in for good measure!

I must admit that before this trip I would never have even considered tackling a route as tricky as this but when you're in a group you can't back down can you. Just keep looking UP!

At the summit - it was certainly chilly but nothing unbearable - we found snow and managed a few improvised sled rides and slushy snowballs.

After a leisurely lunch it was time to start the descent, this is where the policy of keep looking up becomes impossible and every hairpin bend sees you pointing your nose over the edge and looking at a drop that would certainly be worth avoiding!

A five point turn going up is easy, the same bend coming down is a real pulse-raiser - and one was tackled with only three wheels on the dirt.

My lads were thrilled with the snow, I was thrilled with the descent - but only AFTER we reached tarmac at the bottom.

That night we camped around an old disused cable car station, it was a superbly clear night which provides a good opportunity for star-gazing. There is so little light pollution and the air is so clear that

spotting satellites and shooting stars is almost mundane but Campfire banter continues well into the night.

A good mix of road and trail driving keeps the interest levels high. As wonderful as the mountains are it is nice to also visit the odd town and village. Each one seems to be notable for some event or product but we don't pass up the opportunity to sample the local produce.

One real treat that we almost missed was a hand written sign saying "la vendita di formaggio" (cheese for sale) on a farm gate. This, more than anything, illustrates the different approach to food production in the UK and in other parts of Europe. The cheese was produced on the farm, in a shed with dirt floor. It was cut and wrapped with not a hair net or plastic glove in sight. Fabulous! the way your granny used to do



Cheese, cheese and more cheese, but not a hairnet in sight!



Abandoned forts litter the mountains



Not so long ago this used to be a gun turret

Piercing blue waters of on of the many mountain reservoirs



it! The only thing we regret was buying just half a kilo rather than a whole truckle, it was the nicest cheese we'd tasted in a good many years.

HOURS IN THE SADDLE

We found that the boys were never happier than when we stuck to the tracks, only the tarmac sections got them complaining. For myself I never once tired of the driving, you have to stay on top of your game throughout and you are constantly reading the route ahead. It is not really a sit-down-and-relax holiday but the camaraderie of the rest of the group makes it all very enjoyable. We really appreciated the fact that there was no set-in-stone itinerary and that the leaders have enough local knowledge to make on-the-spot detours if something unexpected crops up.

And being Land Rover specialists they know where all the best garages and workshops are located!

In essence that's what you pay for on a guided trip. You get taken to places you'd probably never find yourself and you get the backup of someone with local knowledge. If you imagine that the total cost of this trip is about the same as a week at Butlin's it's a real no-brainer, I know where I'd rather be!

The end-of-the-road party was something of a tradition to be experienced (endured?) It centered around a large pot into which was thrown a variety of left over foodstuffs, a bit of seasoning and I swear I saw an empty EP90 bottle nearby. Thankfully being a veggie I was spared this particular trial-by-fire, but our youngest boy tried just half a teaspoon full and immediately burst into tears! No chance of any gastro bugs surviving that one.

Even though the organized part of the trip was over we were in no hurry to return home and had another 6 days to kill before the ferry home so chose to stay an extra night at Gran Bosco to chill out and take advantage of the campsite showers and laundry.

In just one short week we had really put our new camper through its paces and we were glad we chose the trip with Alpine Rovers. We never did need the backup a group trip provides but just knowing that there was never going to be the possibility of being left behind allowed us to relax and enjoy it that little bit more. We were also mightily impressed with our truck, it didn't fall apart or get stuck once.

The only real lesson we learned the hard way was that it is NOT advisable to go off-road without first emptying the onboard chemical toilet! ■

