

UNCONVENTIONAL wisdom

Everybody knows that if you're going to use a Land Rover for expedition travel, it needs to be a 110. Gareth Griffiths, on the other hand, knew different – and set about creating a short-wheelbase overlander that proves size isn't everything

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WE'RE A FICKLE LOT, us humans. Forever changing everything from the ringtones on our mobiles to the style of clothes we wear, just about the only thing you can be sure of with Modern Man is that you can't be sure of anything.

Modern Woman, of course, is more likely to change her shoes twenty times before venturing out of the house, but us blokes like nothing more than to find a car we like, get it the way we want it... then change it for another one. We've all got friends who can't resist the lure of that nice looking Skyline or MX-5 they drive past on a dealer's forecourt every night on the way home, and the off-road world is full of people who spend their lives in the workshop building the ultimate off-roader then, having finished the job, sell it and start building an even more ultimate off-roader.

Our very own editor has the distinction of having owned a Corvette for all of two weeks before getting bored, and he once even managed to buy, own and sell a car without ever once even setting eyes on it. At the last count, he'd owned sixteen different cars from ten different manufacturers.

Gareth Griffiths is not like that. A geotechnical engineer from Swansea, he's only ever owned three cars in his life – and they've all been Land Rovers. The first was an early 90 ('I learned a lot about fixing Land Rovers at this point,' he says), and he still owns the other two.

One of these is a Series IIA Lightweight, currently snuggled up in the garage at home. The other is the 90 you're looking at here – which is a rare example of a short-wheelbase Land prepped for overland expeditions.

Gareth, for whom off-roading was a natural progression from mountain biking, really started getting into it when he joined the North Somerset Land Rover Club. 'I'd been out a few times in the family Trooper when I was younger. But it was these guys that got me interested and out green laning, and helped me out along the way. These days, we either travel as a solo vehicle or with a small group of very good mates.'

Having served his time in the original 90, Gareth knew he wanted to progress to something with power steering and a more reliable engine. Even then, his intention was to use it for overlanding – so a 90 van might not have been the most obvious choice. It's not one he's ever regretted, though, having settled on a 300 Tdi County hard-top from 1996 of which he's the fourth owner.

'The vehicle was bought from new and owned for most of its life by a lady who wanted something to take her dogs about in,' he explains. 'I still have the original receipt. Dealer maintained and serviced, and only genuine parts fitted, it then went through two chaps in the space of three or four years who didn't use it much but looked after it well – at which point I bought it.'

That was in May 2008, and Gareth didn't waste any time in getting to grips with his new expedition truck. Before the engine had even cooled down from the drive home, he'd stripped off the roof rack, side steps and County decals – and by October of that year, when he took his first solo trip to Morocco, it was more or less the way you see it now.

Aside from the roll cage, a Blue-Band job which was made and fitted by Whitbread Off-Road, everything on the 90 has been put there by Gareth himself. Having replaced the original springs and shocks with a two-inch Terraforma lift, he was able to slide 255x85R16 BFGs on Wolf rims under the wheelarches, and he followed this up with a modified Warn M8000 on an ARB front bumper. 'The internals,' he continues, 'all happened around these and continued after.'

And what would those internals be? 'Where do we start? You name it, we carry it!' Here, we're getting into the reason why 110s are a much more common sight than 90s on the overland trail, but Gareth's happy that with the mods he's made, the shorter vehicle has enough space to be a fully functional home-from-home for him and travelling companion Lisa. As is always the case with real-world expedition vehicles (as opposed to the kind you see at shows), it's not all pretty, or in any way high-tech, but it's very much about fitness for purpose and making the most of every scrap of space.

Hence the dog guard behind the seats, which is home to a 300 Watt inverter, first aid kit, fire extinguisher and bug-out bag. Should you be wondering (and we were), the latter isn't anything to do with keeping insects at bay; in fact, it's a self-contained survival kit designed to keep you alive in the event of an emergency. The phrase was first coined by survivalists in the USA during the years when it seemed like a mere question of time before the nuclear posturing stopped and the missiles started to fly, but in terms of people who are ever likely to actually use one overlanders have got to be near the top of the list.



Gareth Griffiths





MOROCCO 2008



ALPS 2001



1] The only mod Gareth didn't do himself was the roll cage, which he had supplied and fitted by Whitbread Off-Road. This is a full exo design, and there are two very good reasons for that: one, it doesn't take up any valuable space inside the vehicle, and two, it doubles up as a platform for the roof tent

2] Anyone who's driven a Defender over a long period of time with anything more than a pizza cutter on the back door will be used to the incessant rattling you get as the spare wheel mount slowly pulls the door skin to pieces. A swing-away carrier is the answer – and it also provides a handy mounting point for a high-lift jack

3] Box-section tree sliders, built out with tubular nerf bars, protect the sills and in turn the doors from inevitable damage. Running up to them from underneath, what you're looking at here is one of two fuel tank guards...

4] ...and here you're looking at the other. You hear horrendous stories of Landies getting hung up on rocks which get wedged between the back axle and rear crossmember, but the chances of this happening here seem slim at worst

5] Gareth lists the addition of a second fuel tank as the modification he's been happiest with, quoting an on-board capacity of 110 litres and a new range of 650-700 miles before he even has to look at his jerry cans. The additional tank, from a TD5, is mounted on the rear anti-roll bar mounts – a job that meant making a slight alteration to the rear crossmember to make space. It backs up the standard tank via a 12-volt solid-state pump: 'I wanted to keep this system simple and not interfere with original fuel lines and tank,' says Gareth. 'If it does go wrong, the original set-up has not been compromised.' The Y-piece filler you see here is on the list for a rethink, though, explaining that it's tricky to direct fuel to the auxiliary tank and, worse, on severe hills fuel can flow from one to another. A dedicated filler neck is the obvious answer here, and the one he intends to go with

6] The last thing you want to do when there's a herd of zebras to follow, or a pride of lions to run away from, is take out a diff pan on a rock. A brace of Qt guards helps out here – and won't do any harm on a common-or-garden laning trip, either

7] As you'd expect on an expedition truck, the 300 Tdi engine has been left well alone and is in completely standard condition. As you'd also expect, it breathes through a raised air intake, minimising the danger of catastrophic damage if a river crossing goes wrong. The presence of the cage means this has to be mounted forward of its ideal position, hence the ugly double-bend – this certainly won't help the vehicle's performance, though whether you'd notice the difference in a heavily laden overland warrior with a roof tent and 33-inch tyres is debatable

8] Piggy-backing on to the thing which in 300 Tdi Defenders passed for a dashboard, a Mud-UK instrument console carries the original clock as well as Carling switches for items like the winch, rear worklight, air compressor and PIAA spots. There's even a slot there for a Sony head unit



People talking about vehicle-dependant travel often ask questions about what's going to happen if the vehicle in question breaks down in the middle of the desert; well, you summon help, stay with your truck and then wait for it to arrive. But what if something happens that's so bad, it calls for a full-on evacuation? Summoning help is still a brilliant idea – but with your vehicle now on fire, under water or being driven away triumphantly by guerrillas, a bug-out bag is your passport to the land of non-death happiness.

Less likely to save any lives, but equally valuable in their own way, the original seats have been re-foamed and then trimmed with Outlast fabric from Exmoor Trim. The cabin is further augmented by a 14-inch Mountney steering wheel, while a Mud-UK dash console and Mobile Storage Systems cubby box look after extra gauges and general oddments respectively. Strapped to the dash is a Hewlett Packard Tablet PC which runs various mapping packages as well as playing music, DVDs and computer games – ideal for those long nights under canvas.





Morecco 2008



Out back, there's a neat storage system made up using Mantec load slides, with a shelf mounted on aluminium channel to just clear a slide-out Engel fridge. Gareth finished off the sides using plywood and marine grade carpeting, adding extra cargo nets at the same time. Up top, another shelf carries a pair of loudspeakers and everyday clothes.

Needless to say, the 90 also carries a thorough suite of recovery kit, whether it's blazing trails overseas or just pottering around the lanes back home. Recovery kit lives in a pair of canvas holdalls, electronic equipment is stored in Peli cases, camping gear goes in a pair of Zarges boxes and everything else is housed in a variety of heavy-duty plastic containers from Plastor.

If that sounds a bit ad hoc to you, don't believe your ears. Gareth rates the Plastor boxes for their modularity, with so many different sizes and other options being available, and points out that this set-up is infinitely adaptable to suit every expedition. 'As we use a boxed system over fixed drawers,' he says, 'we have an adaptable approach to each trip and therefore do not carry any unnecessary weight.' He doesn't take any unnecessary risks, either – protecting it all, which is pretty essential when overlanders are all too often seen as easy prey, is a set of MSS window grilles.

As you'll have worked out by now, Gareth's 90 is very much a home-grown, self-made-to-measure expedition truck. There's plenty about it that's been bought in from suppliers, but the way it's been put together is what makes it unique, with all its owner's quirks and preferences built in. Ask even the best expedition prep specialist to build you a chequebook overland vehicle and however hard they try, that's something you'll never get.

You'll not get a 90, either, unless that's what you specifically ask for. But Gareth has no regrets at all about his choice of base vehicle, and there's nothing significant he says he'd do differently. 'If I don't like it now or it no longer works for me,' he says, 'I just change it to suit current needs.'

That's why future plans are generally modest, with stiffer dampers and a Detroit Locker in the rear diff sharing the list with, of all things, a new orange colour scheme.

But there is still one further item on his shopping list. Since Morocco, he's been on a three-week trip to the Alps and now he's got his eye on Pakistan, Mongolia and North-Eastern Siberia. So, time to do the sensible thing and get a 110, then? No fear. 'We're likely to go down the overland trailer route and keep the 90.'

And this from a man who says he's willing to change anything on his vehicle if it no longer suits. Which proves what we were saying all along. Gareth might not be one for following conventional wisdom. But whatever else he is, he's certainly not fickle.

We photographed Gareth's vehicle at Minety 4x4, a woodland site just west of Swindon that promises a good day out for the family as well as all the challenging terrain the more adventurous driver could ever ask for. For more info visit the website at www.minety4x4.co.uk or give Gary a call on 01666 860938



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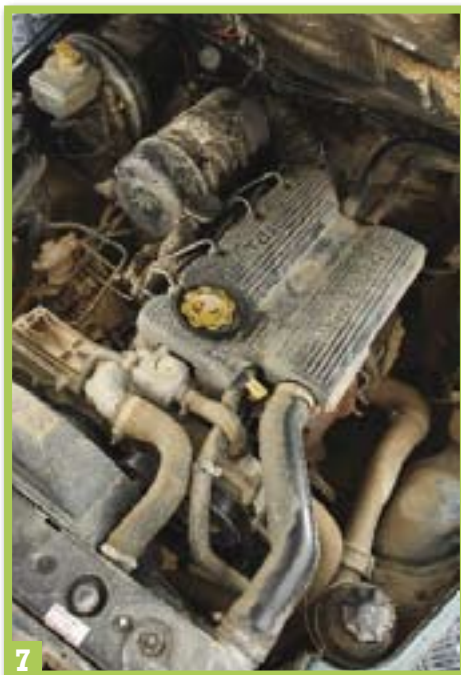
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Cast of thousands

As always, Gareth has a long list of helpers to applaud for their role in bringing the vehicle to life. 'Thanks to Jonathan Buckley for showing us some little known lanes in Wales and generally being a good buddy. David Lovejoy for fixing my winch and general good advice, and Wickenden and Woodhead for preventing panic. 'And lastly, most thanks to Lisa for being my (travel) companion and putting up with me through the endless days and nights I spent in the garage!'

Alps 2009



Morocco 2008



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- 1] With the Mud-UK console providing additional space for clocks, the original instrument binnacle now hosts a separate fuel gauge for each tank. The temperature gauge between them is a high-sensitivity unit giving exact readings
- 2] Strapped to the dash on the passenger's side is a Hewlett Packard TC1100 10-inch Tablet PC powered off a dedicated 12-volt laptop supply. This runs Memory Map, Garmin Mapsource, Autoroute and Fugawi navigational software, which should just about cover most eventualities, and also plays music through an external hard drive using Windows media player. It even lets Gareth and Lisa watch DVDs and play computer games in their tent of an evening
- 3] Like all good vans, the 90's been fitted out in the back with a tailored storage system. Unlike most vans, good or otherwise, this includes a slide-out Engel fridge. Immediately above this is a shelf mounted on ally channel, while kit in general is stored in Peli cases, Zarges camping boxes and Plator containers of varying sizes
- 4] Just about visible above the upper bank of storage cases is a 'top shelf' Gareth installed which carries everyday grab-and-go clothing as well as a hefty pair of loudspeakers. Note also here the MSS window grill on the back door – one of the greatest pleasures in travelling to exotic lands is getting to know the people who live there, but there'll always be a few for whom the lure of an impossibly expensive foreign 4x4 laden with treasures is too great to resist
- 5] You cover thousands of miles off-road on an expedition without ever having to tackle a genuinely extreme terrain, but anyone who's ever tried to do a failed hillclimb in a 300 Tdi will know that the exhaust is about as well protected as the bloke who believes that thing people say about cling film. A side-exit Infinity unit, on the other hand, looks like a sure-fire way of avoiding any dramas – like the snorkel at the other end of the system, it's there as a just-in-case measure, but the sort of peace of mind it provides means Gareth can get on with the serious business of exploring the world without worrying about something avoidable punching a hole in his adventure
- 6] This is the kind of kit stowage you won't see in any glossy brochures. Lashed to a dog guard behind the seats are a fire extinguisher and first aid kit, as well as a bug-out bag – a self-contained survival kit to be grabbed on exit when abandoning the vehicle for good in one-off situations of the greatest gravity
- 7] Note the absence of any fancy bolt-on bits, luridly coloured turbo hoses or shiny aftermarket intercoolers. This is a 300 Tdi looking the way it did when it left Solihull (plus muddy water, obviously) – it might not perform the way a turned-up one will, but it stands the best possible chance of not breaking down and, importantly, it'll keep running on a diet of dodgy diesel from questionable sources
- 8] There are many winch bumpers available for the Defender, and a full-house ARB unit complete with bull bar might not be the most obvious choice. But its structure is a genuine advantage in safari situations, and as well as providing a home for a pair of PIAA spotlights it keeps the Warn M8000 well tucked away and protected from sticky fingers. Given that the winch is fitted with an uprated Bowmotor and Albright solenoid pack, and spooled with 100 feet of Dyneema Bowrope, Gareth has more than one reason for not wanting to see it go walkies. Further good stuff here includes a secondary battery backing up the standard unit, with an X-Eng split-charge system and National Luna twin voltmeter
- 9] BFG's new Mud-Terrain KM2 is still a pretty new sight, and it's not every day that you see a set of 255/85R16s going round, either. Equating to about 33 inches in height and 10 in width, these are wrapped round a set of Land Rover's own heavy-duty Wolf rims – it's all about strength and durability here
- 10] You don't want to mess with an expedition vehicle's standard set-up any more than you have to, so a two-inch suspension lift is as far as you'd want to go. Made up using heavy-duty Terrafirma springs and shocks and located up top using D44 towers, this creates the clearance necessary for a step up in tyre size and is also better suited to the weight of all the kit the vehicle carries on a long trip. Even this has led Gareth to fit a TD5 wide-yoke front propshaft, though he's adamant that it's only there for lift, not extra flexibility