

WE WROTE OFF

30

DEFENDERS IN 25 YEARS

Charles Norwood, the former owner of a self-drive African safari company, tells the tales of when things didn't go quite to plan

PHOTOS CHARLES NORWOOD

It's 4:50 in the afternoon on a Friday before the May Bank Holiday in the Safari Drive UK offices and we're looking forward to taking a break. Then the phone rings; it's Mike, our operations manager in Namibia. 'Are you sitting down, Charles?' My heart sinks. After many years of operating self-drive safaris in Africa this dread never left me.

'Is everyone okay?' I ask, instinctively knowing that there had been an accident. 'Yes, we have just heard from the Reynolds family and they are all fine but unfortunately they've rolled Burton.'

At this stage we had a well-oiled plan of action: 1. Get the clients to safety. 2. Get them medically checked. 3. Arrange accommodation so they can recover and regroup. 4. Get them a replacement Land Rover. 5. Re-book their scheduled journey so they can finish their holiday, if they wish to.

Then comes the heartbreaking task of recovering the Land Rover and the expensive equipment the vehicles carried. This included satellite phones, fridges, roof tents and catering kit, much of which we often lost to opportunistic theft while the vehicle was unattended.

The recovery might be from 300 miles away; and without any national breakdown services to call on, we had to send a vehicle and trailer. Eventually the wreck would arrive back at our base so that we could assess the damage.

Sadly, the fact is that even if you only put a Defender on its side, every single panel can get distorted beyond repair and effectively the vehicle is written off.

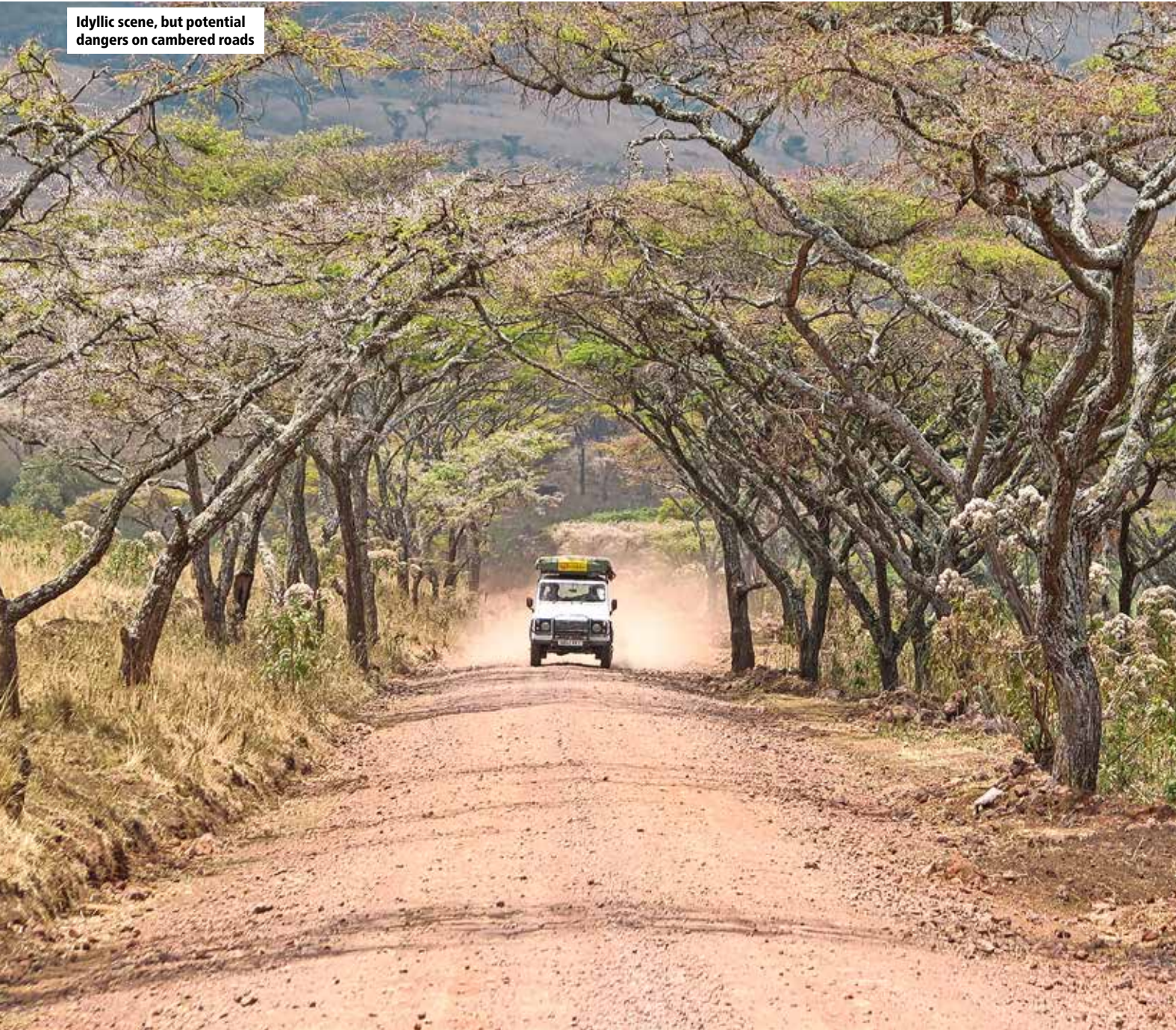
Then came the client debrief, followed by reports for the insurance company and the vow to try to stop accidents happening again.

When we started Safari Drive in 1993, we set up a fleet of fully equipped Land Rover Defenders for self-drivers to explore Africa and its National Parks, but we often met with many misconceptions about Africa. The first question that we were always asked was: 'Is it dangerous?'

In reality, the most dangerous thing for the overlander in Africa is poor driving skills on its unpredictable roads. In fact, the first rolled Land Rover that I was involved with was in Tanzania before the days of Safari Drive. I was asked to lead a small group of fundraisers for the benefit of the Samaritans, on an expedition from the most northerly point in Europe, Nordkapp in Norway, to the most southerly point of Africa, Cape Agulhas in South Africa. We were taking a Dennis fire engine, with a One Ten Turbo as support vehicle for the fund-raising journey.

No crashes on the daunting Van Zyl's Pass – which is just as well





Idyllic scene, but potential dangers on cambered roads



Another one bites the dust – and on a seemingly safe road

We were creating journeys that took clients over some of the harshest terrain in the continent

It was a nearly-new customer demonstrator lent to us by the factory. When the accident happened it was lightly loaded inside, but had a full rack of jerry cans on the roof.

The Land Rover's driver had been delayed and was trying to catch up the fire engine, but never made it. When it failed to arrive, we drove back in the dark and came upon the devastating scene of it on its side, kit strewn across the road and shattered glass everywhere. There was no sign of driver and passenger, Jim and Jamie, but ominously there was the chilling sight of blood in the interior. Locals at the scene told us they had been taken to a nearby hospital. With dread we went to find them, and were relieved to discover that they had been discharged with severe lacerations. The vehicle had rolled several times.

We were able to pull the wreck on to its wheels, straightened the mangled trailing arms as best we could and then drive it to the nearby city of Dar es Salaam. The dealer there was very helpful but had no replacement panels so, with little choice, we asked them to cut the roof off and turn it into an open vehicle with the windscreen of a Series III 109 grafted on. It made a fun convertible overland vehicle – apart from it being the rainy season and the drivers ended up getting very wet over the last leg of the journey.

Months later when we returned the vehicle to Land Rover at Solihull it was a very shame-faced experience because I had to drive through

the factory gates while the workers were all streaming out at the end of their shift.

The lesson from this was that too much weight on the roof severely upsets the handling of a Land Rover, and from then on we always limited the amount of weight on top. In fact, over the years we investigated the reasons why so many of our Defenders ended up on their roofs, but just when we thought we had found the main cause and resolved it, another would crash and highlight a different reason for the accident.

In 25 years we lost 30 Land Rovers, and after every accident we tried yet another tack to stop the destruction. The telling feature is that there were no other vehicles involved in any of these accidents. While the loss of 30 vehicles is a huge

number it needs to be put into the context of operating a total of 70 or more Land Rovers over the years, and probably having up to 20 Safari Drive journeys on the road at any one time of year. That added up to a huge number of miles covered on very demanding roads, with drivers that were often new to Africa. We were creating journeys that took clients over some of the harshest terrain in the continent, and even the sort of places that Land Rover themselves chose to launch and demonstrate the ability of the new 2020 Defender in Namibia earlier this year.

To try and stop the accidents we embarked on a programme of preparation and training of the clients so they were fully aware of the dangers those seemingly benign roads could pose.

DRIVER TRAINING COURSES

We encouraged pre-departure driving courses with the off-road training schools of BORDA (British Off-Road Driving Association) and worked with them on developing an Africa driving course covering the likely conditions that would be encountered. The problem with many off-road driving courses is that they highlight the 4x4's capability but do little to prepare drivers for the dangers of the African roads.

Patterns emerged after a while, so we would try to fix what we perceived to be the problem. We started in-country driver training at the start of the clients' adventure, which definitely helped. However, one day the phone rang on another Friday afternoon: 'Hello, Charles. Are you sitting down... I'm afraid the driver training went wrong today and the vehicle rolled.' In trying to prepare people for the gravel roads that made the back end of the vehicle break away (or, even worse, the front end) we had rolled yet another.

AVOIDING DANGER ROADS

So, it was back to the drawing board. We now examined every road where accidents had happened and discovered that the C24 road out of Rehoboth in Namibia was responsible for four wrecked Defenders, and the C16 and C38 were also taking their toll. As these roads were often at the start of journeys when drivers were not very experienced on the Namibian roads we changed itineraries around so that they were encountered later on their holiday when the



A rolled Defender will always be extensively damaged



A little T-Cut and it'll be good as new...

Charles Norwood



Charles's long-standing love of Land Rovers started when his father bought a brand-new Series IIA in 1966.

After working as a volunteer for an aid organisation in Sierra

Leone, he joined Encounter Overland, the pioneers of group overland travel in Africa. From 1980 to 1987 he led major expeditions in India and Africa.

Running Land Rover One Ten and Defender vehicles for private expeditions and film crews followed between 1987 and 1993.

In '93 Safari Drive was formed as the first self-drive safari tour operator. 'We supplied an expedition-equipped Defender for clients to drive through the best bits of Africa, planned the routes and supported them on the ground.'

'One reason we used Defenders was that they were the best able to handle the road conditions in Africa. We rarely had stuck vehicles until Land Rover stopped making the Defender and we used Land Cruisers. Their heavier weight tended to bog them down – although we never had another rollover.'

'The other reason was that the image of the Defender fitted our marketing image. Selling the dream of driving across the plains of the Serengeti at the wheel of a fully equipped Land Rover and camping in the bush was not available elsewhere.'

Charles sold Safari Drive in 2018 and now runs the Self Drive Safari Resource (selfdrivesafari.co.uk) helping people plan and run their own private self-drive expeditions.

He still has Stanley, one of Safari Drive's early Defender Td5s. It's based in Windhoek, Namibia, as a personal vehicle.

Defender, I presume...?

All of our Safari Drive Defenders were given names, mostly of famous explorers: Livingstone, Burton, Stanley, Scott, Cecil, Grant, Mungo, Caitlin, Sussie, Oswell, Darwin, Ranulph, Galton, Baines.

Later, they were named after polar explorers or space explorers, or people we admired like David Attenborough. We never re-used vehicle names if they were rolled.

faster gravel conditions – and the vehicles – had become more familiar to the drivers.

UPGRADING THE SUSPENSION

But there were other factors involved. So we tried everything, including upgrading the dampers from standard. Old Man Emus are a favourite in Southern Africa, but fitting them still didn't stop the rolling. In Tanzania we tried the twin damper set-up favoured by the locals to cope with the brutal corrugations found on roads in the National Parks, but these non-standard suspension conversions were never ideal.

ROOF RACK LOADS

As previously mentioned, we had been aware right from the start of the vehicle instability which was mainly due to weight on the roof. So we kept the roof rack load to a minimum, using lightweight roof racks or roof bars, and always within manufacturers specifications of 75kg all up. But even this reduced roof load was still proving detrimental to the handling.

TYRE PRESSURES

Tyre pressures were crucial in helping the performance on the loose gravel roads, but whenever there was a change of surface we often discovered that tyres were not being re-inflated correctly. So drivers needed educating.

We tended to stick with standard tyres in the early days, but especially on the stony roads of Namibia moved on to brands with more reinforced walls and a mixed-use tread pattern. Carrying second spare wheels added additional unwanted weight, which may be justified on a trans-Africa expedition but not so much on a commercial trip in southern Africa with back-up.

EXCESS SPEED

But no matter what we tried, still the accidents kept happening. And when the Defender was comprehensively updated by Land Rover in 2007 to the four-cylinder TDCi engine the vehicles had a bit more speed, which created more problems. In fact 14 of our rolled vehicles were these later, TDCi-engined Defenders.

We concluded that the only way of cutting down the accident rate was to brief clients personally before they arrived in Africa, encouraging them to take driving courses before departure; and then, when they arrived, more preparation and briefing.

We had safety videos made by experienced 4x4 vehicle builder Paul Marsh, and overland broadcaster and author Andrew St Pierre White (4xoverland.com). They highlighted the dangers of too much speed on gravel roads.

On a lighter note, we did get to hear almost every excuse in the book.

'My husband did not fall asleep.'



Not only would the vehicle be damaged, but kit as well

'I was trying to overtake a lorry.'
'The wind pushed us off the road.'
'An unseen metal pipe appeared in the middle of a bend.'

'Your advisory speed limit was too slow.'
'I let the wife have a drive on the last day.'
'I was trying to catch up with my mate.'
'A tyre burst.'

'There was a fault with the steering.'
'The road camber was wrong.'
'I was watching a troop of baboons and a wheel dropped off the edge off the road.'

Only once in all those years do I remember someone saying, 'I am sorry it was my fault.' That's human nature.

We learned that the main cause of all the accidents was how good (or not) the driver was

Interestingly, in 25 years we never had an issue with wild animals of any kind. Everyone naturally has concerns about being on their own without a guide in the game parks, but we never had anyone bitten by snakes or stung by scorpions, no vehicles were charged by elephants or rhinos, no lions or hyenas attacked anyone.

Predictably the most dangerous creature was the mosquito, with a couple of cases of malaria. The near-misses included people falling off roof racks, and the man who had jacked up a vehicle while underneath it. It fell off the jack, amazingly without injuring him. Only one couple was ever held up at gunpoint. But they lived in Jamaica, and they were unfazed by the incident.

We only had one minor collision with another vehicle in 25 years of operations. This occurred on the twisty sandy tracks of Botswana's Chobe National Park and a guide's fast traveling vehicle came around a blind bend for a fender bender with our client's Defender.

WHAT WE LEARNED

The main cause of all the accidents was how good (or not) the driver was, but there were other factors such as the vehicle loading and limiting weight on the roof. Keeping dampers and suspension bushes in good condition is key – older vehicles were more prone to accidents.

Driver training helped, especially gravel road preparation and the use of the centre diff lock. Other factors such as tyre pressures and driving when tired all had an impact. And I haven't even mentioned the engines lost to river crossings without checking the water depth.

CONCLUSION

The average accident rate was below 1.5 per year, which – considering the number of miles covered and the conditions the vehicles were being driven in – wasn't as bad as it might have been. But drivers coming from the highly regulated and over-signposted roads of the developed world aren't fully prepared for the largely unsigned hazards on African roads.

Undoubtedly, heavily laden Defenders had some instability issues and all we could do was to prepare the inexperienced drivers as best we could. Namibian gravel roads with steep cambers at the edges were also part of the problem, hence the high attrition rate with rolled vehicles from other manufacturers used by the other fleet car hire operators.

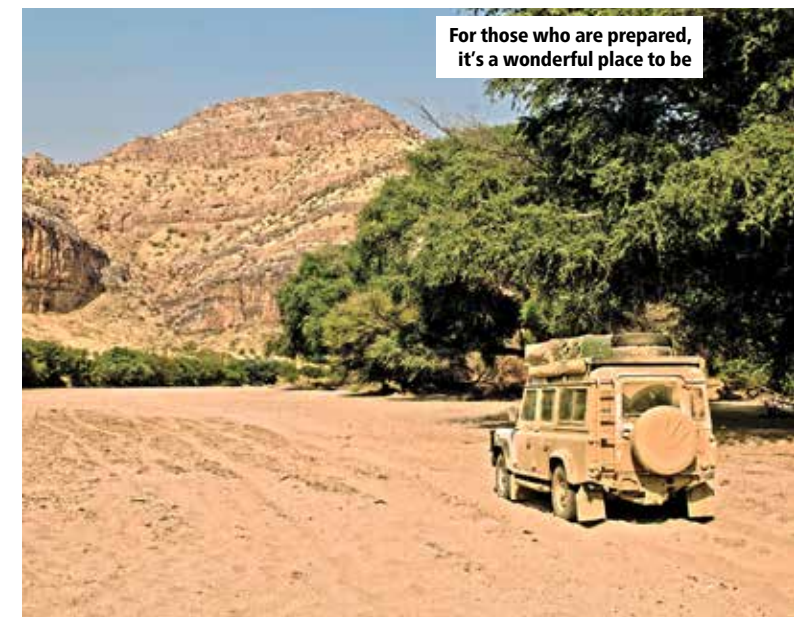
We discovered that Africa will always throw the unexpected curved ball at you but we learned that how you make a plan and fix it is what matters more. **LRO**



For most clients it was a memorable, and safe, trip



African tracks provide some great driving experiences



For those who are prepared, it's a wonderful place to be