

DESERT POWER



two Range Rovers battle through the dunes of Tunisia, but not without their share of problems



WE SET off from Vienna around noon on December 28 towards the Italian port of Genoa, where the *Carthage* would take us across the Mediterranean to Tunis. Slowly starting to settle down from the stressful last minute vehicle preparation and packing, as well as the usual Christmas stress, we were looking forward to the calm and beauty of the desert and three weeks away from it all.

Slowly, the roar of the V8, together with the rumble of mud terrain tyres on the Autobahn, helped settle our minds into our travel routine.

We were planning to reach a well-known lake just south of Ksar Ghilane in the Tunisian desert. We'd heard various reports of very difficult sand conditions and fuel consumptions of 100 litres per 100kms from fellow V8 drivers, so we were looking forward to a great adventure. Once we reached the lake, we planned to go all the way to the south and

by
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Top: First camp in the beauty of the Tunisian desert.

Above: You never can be sure what's on the other side of a sand dune.

Inset: Navigation equipment.

drive along the Algerian border up to El Borma.

Adventure caught up with us earlier than we wanted, however – after about 60kms the brown Range Rover reported problems with one of its front wheels – it seemed to temporarily block. We stopped and found that the disc was very hot and thought that the brake must have become stuck.

Limping to the next garage, we diagnosed a broken wheel bearing instead. We managed to locate a new one at the next Land Rover dealer and were hoping to be back on the road quickly.

Unfortunately, it proved to be impossible to remove the wheel hub from the stub axle since it was pretty much welded together from the heat generated by the broken bearing. A used assembly needed to be brought in from Vienna and the repair was eventually finished by 10pm. We were left facing a long drive through the night in order to reach the ferry on time the next day.

We managed to reach Genoa in time despite pouring rain and were able to enjoy the spectacle of watching the cars of the Tunisians working in Europe, driving onto the ferry. They are always heavily loaded, taking all sorts of things from Europe back to their friends and families.

The winner of the packing contest this year was clearly a Volkswagen Golf which, in addition to being fully packed inside, had an American-size fridge and two motor scooters somehow tied on top of its roof.

The ferry takes one and a half days and is quite relaxing, especially after the long drive to Genoa. Most of the immigration paperwork can be done on board so the actual border procedure on land is normally quite fast.

arrival on land

We arrived in Tunis the next day and, even there, it was raining heavily. After clearing customs and immigration, we headed



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towards Kairouran where we stayed at a hotel. The next day we drove south towards Douz where we obtained permits for the south, as well as stocking up our supplies. The local gas station seemed happy to see two Range Rovers filling up all our tanks, totalling about 600 litres.

After reaching the Café au Port du Désert and drinking the obligatory thé à la menthe (mint tea), we finally reached the dunes and arrived at the oasis Ksar Ghilane by nightfall. We spent New Year's Eve there and the next morning, after taking a swim in the hot springs, we set off for the lake.

First heading south on an easy piste, we turned west towards the first dunes. The first ridge is about 100 metres high and consists of small dunes requiring constant changes of direction. Driving steep inclines was made more difficult by the very fine, powder-like sand. Since we found some recent tracks, we managed to cross the first ridge without too

much difficulty and decided to call it a day.

Setting up camp in the middle of the desert is always a very beautiful experience, the total silence and the beauty of the dunes shining in the red light of the sun going down makes a very lasting impression. At night time we experimented with baking bread on the fire, but the results turned out to be rather sandy.

We were woken in the middle of the night by the sound of heavy rain, something not uncommon at this time of the year. The next morning we packed up ready to leave, but the orange Range Rover refused to start. We quickly diagnosed a malfunctioning ignition coil – once replaced we continued our trip to the lake.

Total distance to the lake from the start of the dunes is about 50kms to the south west, but it would take us a full three days to get there. The dunes towards the west looked rather difficult, so we decided to set out heading

north, hoping to be able to drive around them.

We soon realised that, because of the prevailing wind direction, driving north would always be the easiest way, but in order to get to the lake we had to head east. So we turned around in a circle, coming back to our campsite and then started to tackle the dunes head on.

We had lost the tracks and were making our own. We got stuck numerous times, but with two cars and winches, it was easy to recover – we didn't need to use shovels or sand ladders.

dunes can be deceiving

Inside the car when driving in that kind of terrain, it is hard to visualise what lies behind a dune. It's advisable to stop on top of a dune with the front angling slightly downwards, otherwise one may get stuck just by stopping. For that reason, it is always a bit of a gamble to drive up a dune not knowing what is on

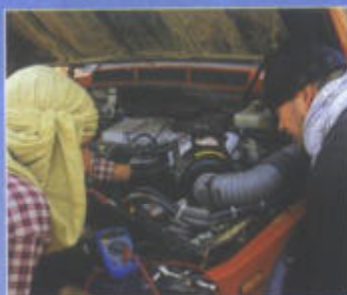
Top left: Recovery operation as the brown Range Rover pulls its orange companion out of a hole.

Top right: Finding a route through these small dunes can be very tricky.

Above: Stuck in the powdery sand calls for hard shovelling under the vehicle before recovery.

ORANGE RANGE ROVER

Model	1988 Range Rover Classic
Engine	Rpi 4.6 V8, Stage 1, Janspeed sport exhaust and manifolds
Gearbox	Automatic
Tyres	285/75 16 BFG MT on Mach 5 wheels
Suspension/lift	Two inch OME HD and three inch body lift
Axles	Front: Detroit True Trac; Rear: Detroit Locker, Ashcroft halfshafts, Ashcroft 4.11 ring and pinions
Roll cage	Made by Welding-Experts.de
Winch	Warn HS 9500 with wireless remote control
Fuel	200-litre fuel tank in load area
Roof rack/tent	Hannibal, howling moon tourer
Navigation	Garmin GPS V, laptop, TTQV moving map programme, digital maps
Miscellaneous	Vehicle spares, snorkel, flares and lightbar



the other side.

In holes where the loose, powdery-like sand was collected by the wind, a car would immediately get stuck. The trick we learnt was always to climb the dunes on the hard, windward side and to keep out of the holes, which is easier said than done. We reverted to walking the more difficult sections before driving them to find a passable way through.

The small dunes, along with the fine sand, are quite challenging since they require constant sharp turns, as well as traversing inclines sideways with a danger of tipping the car over. Even a slight angle can become problematic once the tyres start to dig – the downhill wheels will invariably dig themselves deeper making the angle steeper than it actually is. We found these small dunes a lot harder to drive than the large ones, which we would encounter on the second part of our trip along the Algerian border.

That day, we managed to cover about 25kms in seven hours of driving, so we were hoping to reach the lake within 24 hours. Driving got easier towards the end of the day, as our route traversed some table

Top left: Changing yet another ignition coil.

Top right: The lake – man-made and fed by underground hot water springs.

Above right: Getting carried away – a bit too much throttle.

Above: Descending into one of the round valleys about 10kms from the lake.

Below: Kitchen table, big tyres and a five inch lift makes a perfect working height.



mountains and rock formations with the soil covered with gravel rather than sand.

We stopped before the next ridge of dunes, again enjoying a beautiful sunset and an evening beside the camp fire. A nomad dropped by out of nowhere, he lived there with his wife and son who came by the next morning. They offered some local artefacts and we gave them some chocolates in return.

We set off, first crossing some easier dunes and then again reaching table mountains and gravel, making quite good progress. From one mountain top we had a great view of the Grand Erg and the route to come, which looked very sandy and quite challenging.

The terrain consisted of dunes broken up by round valleys. Surfing down the steep inclines into the valleys was rather fun, but getting out of them often required full throttle and clever manoeuvring. The closer we got towards the lake, the steeper and longer the ramps became.

The largest danger is in descending the dunes, as the vehicle may

veer to the side and turn over, especially in very soft sand. To prevent this, the car needs to be straightened out with short bursts on the throttle, but without becoming too fast and hitting the bottom at too great a speed. Luckily, we soon discovered some existing tracks which made route finding a lot easier, and we managed to reach the lake before evening.

stunning surrealism

The lake is absolutely stunning. Water in the middle of the desert has a sense of surrealism to it and the blue water makes a stark contrast to the ever-present sand colours. It is actually man-made, created by prospectors drilling for oil, but finding hot water instead.

We camped right next to the lake, a nice change from the desert. Packing the next morning, the orange Range Rover again refused to start with a malfunctioning coil. Since we were running out of spare coils, (we carried three, more by

BROWN RANGE ROVER

Model	1987 Range Rover Classic
Engine	3.9 V8, Stage 1, EFI Flapper Type, Janspeed sport exhaust and manifolds
Gearbox	Automatic
Tyres	35 x 12.5 15 Goodyear Wrangler MTR
Suspension/lift	One and a half inch OME MD and six inch body lift
Axles	Front: Detroit True Trac; Rear: Detroit Locker, Ashcroft halfshafts, Great Basin Rovers 4.7 ring and pinion
Roll cage	Custom
Winch	Warn HS 9500
Fuel	Rack for ten fuel canisters in rear load bed
Roof rack/tent	Brownchurch, Hannibal
Navigation	Garmin Etrex
Miscellaneous	Vehicle spares and snorkel



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accident than intent) we decided to investigate the problem. It was caused by a broken ignition amplifier which, for some reason, would only work with brand new coils.

Taking the distributor out, we replaced the amplifier with the help of a Viennese car mechanic, who happened to pop out of the bushes just when we needed him (Michl, thanks again). After finishing our repair we took a bath in the lake, just next to warm water coming out of the ground, pretty much heaven on earth.

There were some nomads and wild donkeys around the lake as well as group of travellers going from Es Sabria to Bir Aouine on camels – surely a great way to experience the desert, as well.

Having been delayed by our repairs, we left late afternoon following some fresh tracks which we soon lost due to the wind, and camped two valleys beyond the lake. Next day the terrain became progressively easier and we managed to reach Tembain by early afternoon. The year before, we had looked out on the Great Erg from its summit, and it was a great feeling to

arrive there from the other side.

From there it was only piste and some easier sandy passages on the route to Douz. After three days in low range it was good doing some normal driving again. On the way out, the brown Range Rover started to develop a misfire, a problem which we weren't able to solve for the rest of the trip, so we had frequent stops messing about with ignition coils, plug wires and so on.

Half way towards Douz we found a Toyota Land Cruiser with a broken front axle stuck in the sand, having two-wheel-drive only. We were more than happy to help that praised example of Japanese precision engineering back to civilisation by pulling it through the sand behind the orange Range Rover.

The misfire on the brown Range Rover got worse and it was hardly making it through the sand; later the problem miraculously disappeared, allowing for a rally finish on the last stretch of piste to Douz. We found the first hotel, showered off the dust and enjoyed a nice meal devouring large portions of roasted lamb, couscous and vegetables.

The local kitchen is very good

and, despite the usual warnings of not eating salad or anything else washed in water, we ate everything on offer and did not encounter any problems. For the next part of the trip, we also stocked up on fresh vegetables and meat bought from the local markets – a much better diet than the convenience food we brought from home.

All-in-all, the Range Rovers proved themselves well, the combination of lots of V8 torque, together with the automatic gearbox, excelled in the dunes. Fuel consumption averaged 60 litres per 100kms on the trip to the lake, not surprising as about half of the distance covered was in low range in deep sand constantly going up and down. On a normal piste, fuel consumption would average at about 18-20 litres, not too bad for a heavily loaded expedition vehicle.

the next step

The next part of the trip will lead us back to Ksar Ghilane and then further on to the very south of Tunisia, along the Algerian border up to El Borma, the largest oil field of Tunisia.

Top: Recovery of Toyota with broken front axle.

Above right: Market at Douz.

Above left: Going down is actually more tricky than going up.

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