



Enough of dreary Britain and the reality of the daily drudge. This is what the Defender was made for – to take on Africa and win

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IS THIS A BAD TIME TO ADMIT I DON'T GET OFF-ROADING?

As a hobby, I mean. Why anyone would choose to spend their weekends drinking Bovril from a flask and trying to get stuck in puddles is a total mystery. It's like those flash-git skiers – the ones with rubber-bushed hips who insist on seeking out the virgin pow-pow and hurling themselves down rock-studded crevasses when there's a perfectly groomed piste right in front of them. Humans have learned to tame landscapes with bulldozer and plough, and yet we still find ways to throw ourselves at the unfriendliest surfaces we can find. Madness.

Why then have I packed my trusty copy of *Ray Mears: Essential Bushcraft*, painted on the factor 50 and signed myself up for an expedition across Namibia's wildest corner without any hope of seeing tarmac for three days? Excellent question. Probably because the car we're doing it in is the new Defender – the hilariously long-awaited successor to the world's most ruffy tufty off-roader. If the hype about what this car can do is to be believed, I'm about to witness something extraordinary. Without meaning to over-egg it, if you had the chance to sit courtside and watch Kobe score 81pts in a single game, you'd take it.

Our journey begins in Opuwo, the capital of Kakaoland in Namibia's North West shoulder. Home to 7,000 people, the last big settlement before the Angolan border and with a busy high street, several lively looking bars, a discount sporting goods shop and a distinct lack of clothing, it's closer to Bolton on a Friday night than you'd think. Wasn't expecting that. Semi-nomadic Himba people – the women identified by a reddish sheen to their skin, mud-covered braids and goatskin skirts – mingle with plain-clothed locals. A clash of two worlds.

At the Opuwo Lodge we get first eyes on our home for the next 72 hours and 700km. You've seen pictures, you might have seen it in person at a motor show, you may have hidden in a bush outside Gaydon and papped prototypes, but you haven't seen it like this. Illuminated in Africa's gold-blend light, it's a stonking piece of design – especially in Pangea Green (without the £2,900 satin protection film), on white 18-inch steel wheels and kitted out in a way we all know we want to, but probably won't... because we'd look like a tit in the office car park. So, a 110 fitted with optional off-road tyres, the full Explorer pack and a few extras (sand ladders, jerry can, shovel, spare wheel) lashed to the roof. It looks perfect – crisp and modern, without too many obvious design frills or retro flourishes.

I don't want to pull back the curtain on the magic of magazine production too far, but we actually drove the car in Namibia before we got our hands on one in the UK, so

my excitement as we start the 237bhp 2.0-litre diesel, roll through town and kiss goodbye to civilisation for a while is significant. For our first go in the Defender, the first go for anyone outside Land Rover, it seems almost absurd that we're submersed in such a rich cultural and visual event, while the road-test hamsters in my head are scurrying around trying to assess the most exciting new car for years.

Three kilometres in and assessment can wait, my primary focus is to keep all the major components attached to the chassis. We're barrelling down a gravel road that, in places, is fairly smooth going but punctuated at random intervals by washouts – where rivers have flowed across and eroded the surface... aka vicious dips with no warning. I collide with the first couple, slamming into the bumpstops, convinced I've blown the shocks, split a tyre or at the very least staved in the front bumper. But no, not a wobble. Then the "road" turns corduroy, the world vibrates a bit and I convince myself every nut and bolt must be working itself loose. I find comfort in the knowledge that Land Rover repeatedly drove this car at 25mph into a 200mm kerb in testing, so it'll probably be fine. And it is, but we're three clicks in, three days to go.

Night one, we camp, and as a strict Londoner I discover twinkly things in the sky. Stars apparently. I also learn there's such a thing as too much barbecued oryx, and endure a solid bout of the meat sweats. And there's a special place in hell reserved for those who bring sinus issues to campsites. Phantom snorer I shall find you, be it in this life or the next.



Page 245 of Ray Mears: *Essential Bushcraft*... "Get as high as possible to assess the situation"



The Defender, going where no vehicle has gone before. Except the preceding convoy of other Defenders



**“ENGAGE HILL DESCENT
MODE, SET THE SPEED
AND TAKE YOUR FEET
OFF EVERYTHING... A
MONKEY COULD DO IT”**

First light day two, first big challenge – the Van Zyl’s pass. Namibia’s most notorious off-road test with 35-degree slopes (essentially a black ski run of boulders), sheer drop-offs and a 600m elevation change. It’s the kind of thing that looks treacherous in magazine shoots, but I’ll spare you the fluff: with its stubby geometry, massive ground clearance and arsenal of diffs and electronics, it’s a morning stroll for the Defender. Select low range, raise the air suspension, twiddle the terrain response to rock crawl (or leave in auto if you’re feeling particularly lazy) rest your foot on the throttle and it’ll clamber up slopes with all the ease and alacrity of a mountain goat. Heading downhill is even simpler: engage hill descent mode, set the speed and take your feet off everything while covering the brake. A monkey could do it.

This means more time and brain capacity to play with your new off-road gadgets – like the invisible bonnet mode that films the ground in front of the car then delays it by a few seconds before beaming it onto the centre screen, so you can see what’s under the car

in real-time. Or the magic 360-degree cameras that create a view of the car and its surroundings from about six feet away, looking back at it, from any angle. No idea how that one works, but the kids will be impressed. Of course, the old Defender wouldn’t have had a problem here either, even without all these trinkets, but you’d be much busier behind the wheel. Less time to drink your Bovril.

Still, it’s painfully slow going – we cover 20km in three hours. After a lengthy pause for my official off-road club initiation – balancing the car on two wheels with such unexpected accuracy that I can rock it from side to side with one hand (yep, the

**Um. Is now the right
moment to ask why
everyone else is going in
the opposite direction?**



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WINCH

Capable of pulling the Defender up a vertical wall, apparently. Where's Flintoff when you need him? ETBC

BONNET GRAPHIC

Matte black '110' decal £150 on its own, or denotes you went for the Explorer pack. We'd leave it off

KNOBBLIES

Goodyear Duratrac tyres add a bit of grumble on tarmac, but unlock every terrain you can think of. Part of the £1,405 Off-road pack

RAISED AIR INTAKE

Doesn't increase the 900mm wading depth, does help keep sand and dust out of the engine. £743 or part of the £3,418 Explorer pack

ROOF RACK

Expedition roof rack causes remarkably little wind noise, can carry up to 132kg. £1,248 or part of the Explorer pack

SECOND SPARE WHEEL

Which TopGear didn't require in Namibia due to high-levels of driver skill. Er, and pure, unadulterated luck

FUEL

Never know when you're going to run out of diesel. In fact, there's a 85-litre tank so it's unlikely, even out here

SHOVEL AND SAND LADDERS

Necessary for digging ourselves out of a pickle, not for bashing lions over the head with

ACTUAL LADDER

Pull a latch to unfurl the integrated steps, perfect for getting a front row seat at sunset

PANNIER

Waterproof, lockable, replaces the optional square graphic, carries 24 litres of stuff up to 17kg. £708 or comes with Explorer pack



Nature is brutal in Africa. Carcasses line the route... including a Land Rover Series II

Defender can twerk), we reach the bottom, sign a rock to commemorate our car is still roof up and enter the magnificence of the Marienfluss valley.

This is Africa. So much sky you sense the embrace of its edges, mountains stand guard in the distance, carcasses abandoned here and there, and sand as far as you can squint, with a soft crust on top and fine powder below. I follow tracks laid by the local traffic - Toyota pickups with a narrower gait - the effect being an unnerving slinging motion from side to side, all in total silence like we're floating a foot above the surface. Then it flattens out, a chance to turn everything off, hammer it, skid and generally cock about. Powersliding a Defender? Yep, it's possible, albeit in an endless African wilderness, probably not advisable on a moist roundabout outside Milton Keynes.

Another carcass, this time a Series II Land Rover sat in the literal middle of nowhere. Did Land Rover plant it? Authentic levels of decay suggest not, either way it raises an interesting point. See that three-hole structure in the dash? Behold the inspiration behind the new Defender's interior. My worry coming into this was that Land Rover wouldn't be able to resist making another plush SUV, all leather and chrome and knurling, thus leaving the Defender with just a single differentiator from the rest of the Land/Range Rover brood... its boxy proportions.

But there's a proper sense of utility to its insides - the rivets on the doorcards are a bit naff, but that exposed magnesium alloy beam that runs the width (there's one in the Range Rover too, BTW, it's just covered up) creates the perfect



A faint trail and instructions to go towards the big rocky thing. Success assured!



place to lob, well, everything. The layout is simple – a screen in the middle and a bank of black plastic switches below it next to the gearlever. We've got the third dickie seat in the front, folded down mostly so we can use the cupholders and tray and power sockets in the back of it, but nice to know it's there. And I'm convinced our simple black fabric seats and rubber mats combo is the one you want.

The rest of the day passes in a glorious blur. Some light craft shopping at the world's loneliest and most humbling market stall – nothing for hundreds of kilometres except one family, a hut and their livelihood. Next, the landscape turns Martian and unravels to reveal a view that gives me a lump in my throat. No idea why, it's just that sort of place. Then one final sand crawl, tracking a river to our lodge in Purros, where rock and sand meet lush greenery... and giraffes. We spot one 600m away and lose our minds, only to round the next bush and find ourselves slap bang in the middle of a herd, five on either side, close enough to talk to. Magical doesn't begin to describe it.

And the car? Resilient. Resilient to sharp rocks and quicksand, being caked in dust and peppered with gravel, my immature driving style and zero mechanical sympathy and yet it's not just hanging on, it's thriving and loosening up. This is the Defender's happy place and its joy is infectious. I'm bonding here – learning the level of punishment it can take, wants to take in fact, when it's happy to arse around and when it demands to be used properly.

Day three and what can Namibia possibly give us that we haven't encountered already? Scratch that, 100 metres from the lodge and we're racing a flock

**“THIS IS THE DEFENDER'S
HAPPY PLACE AND ITS
JOY IS INFECTIOUS”**



NICK ROGERS

CHIEF ENGINEER ON THE BIRTH OF THE NEW DEFENDER

“We had a few sessions round at my house, a few curries, a few beers – always the best way to motivate engineers. The first thing we did was package studies and calculations about what the suspension needed to be, what would the approach angle need to be – all that really technical stuff. At the end of one evening, perhaps I was slightly too passionate, but we agreed we'd make one in a month.

“So we took a Range Rover Sport, attacked it heavily underneath and created the first simulator. We drove it around the Gaydon circuit and nobody could believe how good it was – so agile and such a hoot. Mike Cross took Ralf [Speth, CEO JLR] for a very exciting ride. He also took Mr Tata. Mike has a fantastic way of helping them see round Gaydon, looking out the back window.

And we also, just to clinch it, sent her over to Big Red in Dubai, to make sure it really was the best in the sand. After that there was no doubt that it was going to be absolutely incredible.”

**“ IT’S LIKE RALLYING – FAST, LOOSE,
AND DIRTY – JUST WITHOUT ANY OF THE
PRECISION OR PREREQUISITE SKILL”**

SKELETON
COAST PARK
NO ENTRY



Jack cakes the Defender in Namibia's finest mud. Wasn't worth paying the extra for Pangea Green paintwork, really





Something robust, adapted to its environment, with a large trunk... and an elephant



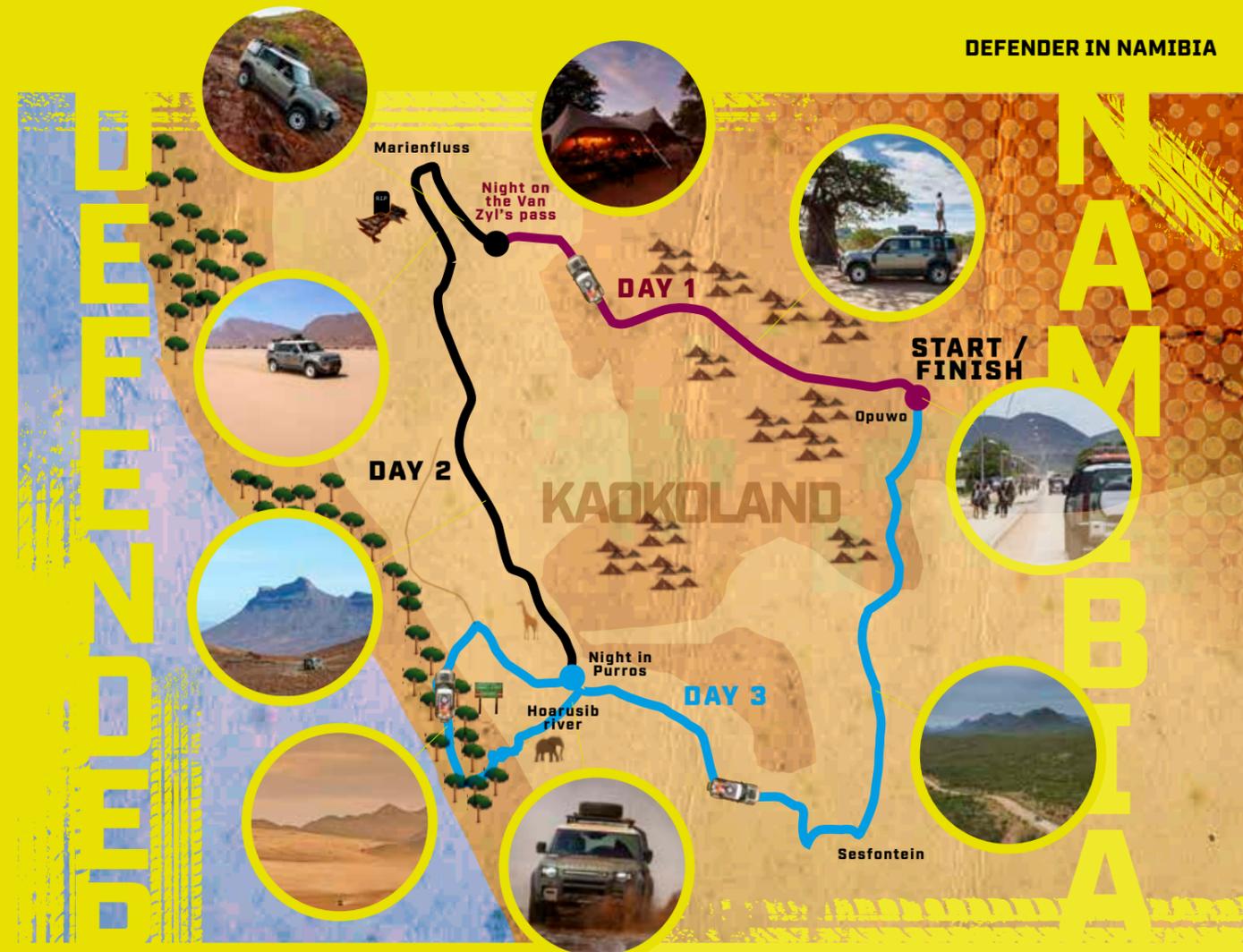
Defender laughs in the face of such a tiny water splash – its wading height is a massive 900mm



Defender sneaks into Manchester United's hot weather testing. Where are all the Range Rovers?



“YOU DON'T HAVE TO GO TO AFRICA, ANYWHERE THE TARMAC ENDS WILL DO”



of ostrich, 10 minutes later we enter the Skeleton Coast National Park and trundle through a vast plain of rolling dunes. The world loses its sense of scale and speed and we're suspended in incomprehensible size, our only reference a growing ocean on the horizon. We get close enough to smell it, run parallel for a moment then cut back into the mouth of the Hoarusib river. Flowing fast just a few days before, now it's a series of small streams and mud. Lots of mud.

Rarely do I see a wild African elephant up close and file it as the second-best thing I did that day, but what happens next is the most fun I've had in a car. Peugeot 306 around the back of the Kingston IMAX included. We smash up the riverbed following no defined path, just lobbing the car into the water, out the other side, crashing up the banks and drifting back down again. The Defender has a wading depth of up to 900mm, and a graphic on the screen to show you how close you are to drowning, but we're not worried about that. Here, the key to continued progress is sticking in low range and sending it. It's like rallying – fast, loose, sideways and dirty – just without any of the precision or prerequisite skill. And it's the car that makes it possible: it's top heavy, but tipping is never on the cards, it's rock solid beneath me, catalysing my overconfidence, soaking up impacts that would sheer lesser vehicles in half.

And then I get stuck. But only because I disengaged low range to take a photo of the dash and forgot to switch it back on. Besides, it gives me a chance to show off my finely honed survival skills/blind luck by coming off the throttle before all four wheels bury themselves completely. I gun it and back out of my own ruts. No winch required. Smug face.

And just like that I'm on the gravel road back to Opuwo. The final stretch, ESC off, everything in tune, little slides around every corner, the car still operating smoothly. Probably worth mentioning here that this is a pre-production model and we've experienced no electronic gremlins, nothing has fallen off... not even a flat tyre. In a Land Rover that's unheard of.

We caught up with Nick Rogers, engineering boss for the new Defender and he told us a little story about setting his interns a task: to find one component on the 1948 Land Rover that wasn't functional. One thing, *any* thing, that puts design before function. They couldn't. It's something he's tried to replicate here, and while design had a huge part to play, to his credit it does look and feel refreshingly gimmick free. Nick also suggests that in every great car you can feel the spirit of its engineers, and I'll go with that one too, because there's love here. When I tell him how much I enjoyed it, he's visibly emotional. Not because he cares what an oik like me thinks but because I represent the customer, the people he and his team put their heart and soul into this project for.

I'm sure you're asking what percentage of Defenders, really, will ever see action like this? Doesn't matter. It can do it all day, whether you choose to find out or not. But do me a favour, do Nick a favour; if you buy one, find out what it's capable of. You don't have to go to Africa, anywhere the tarmac ends will do. I said earlier, I don't get off-roading. I do now, this car and this place have converted me. With most cars you've got race tracks, possibly a mountain pass to really cut loose on. In the new Defender, your playground is everything else. 🌐