

The Journal



*Dr Duncan Bootland
Dr Austin Gibbs
Dr Giles Hazan
Dr Andrew Shawyer*

Chapter 1: Europe

Day 1: UK to Montreuil, France



The Team: Ernie, Austin, Duncan, Andy, Giles, Bert

So after 18 months of planning and preparation we were finally going. This made for rather a surreal drive as we pondered what had been achieved in the last few months and how fortunate we were to have the kind of friends, families and contacts that we do.

On arrival at Dover we hitched a lift on a ferry courtesy of P&O and were shuttled across the channel to Calais. We nearly got unstuck at this point as the ferry was temporarily blocked by a belligerent French fisherman who was objecting to some rule or other. Bold to take on a passenger ferry in a fishing tub we thought. Thankfully we landed fairly swiftly and made it to near Montreuil, near Le Mans where we set up camp for the first time.

No problems other than the realisation that camping in Europe in mid February is not for the fainthearted and that Giles snores like he is breathing his last (nothing new there then; how does Gemma put up with it?).

Day 2: Montreuil to Onzain

This was our first full day on the road and provided ourselves with the opportunity to get the Land Rovers settled in and make sure nothing was breaking loose or obviously wrong.

We made good time via the autoroutes through the sodden French countryside to

another near empty campsite in Onzain. Given the poor weather we are not exactly stopping to smell the roses or sup the onion soup as the promise of warmer climbs beckons.

Even now the beginnings of the camping routine has enabled us to speed up the time to set and break camp and get going. Culinary delights abound with chef Hazan rustling up delicate morsels to suit our palates (pasta and soup mostly).

The evening saw the opening of 'Slippy's Salon' as Giles volunteered to be the first to have his hair cut by Andy and curiously Duncan as well, I'm fairly sure that's not how it's done in Tony and Guy but who's checking..... Let's just say it's going to be considerably colder for him now.



The Slippy Salon

Day 3: Onzain to Clermont Herauld

Our good progress continued as we carried on southeast across the foothills of the Alps and encountered driving blizzards and steep, winding roads. All a little disconcerting when you know you are under canvas that night. Thankfully we wound our way down the other side of the mountains and camped by a lake near Clermont Herauld in more agreeable (but still minus temperature) conditions. The stars came out that night and gave us a good view for the first time of hopefully many. The vehicles are bearing up well although Bert seems to run a little hot, not so good given the chilly surrounds and the coming desert stages. We will keep an eye on this.

Day 4: Clermont Herault to Benicassim, Spain

Thanks to the open borders in Europe we breezed across the border showing almost exactly 1000 miles covered (only another 17000 to go.....). For the first time since departure we saw proper sunshine and were able to take our jumpers off (if only briefly), as true Brits it was all we could do to stop ourselves from putting handkerchiefs on our heads and burning horribly. We drove through some impressive Spanish countryside that really didn't look like it was used to winter and was just humoring it until it could be baked by the usual furnace conditions.

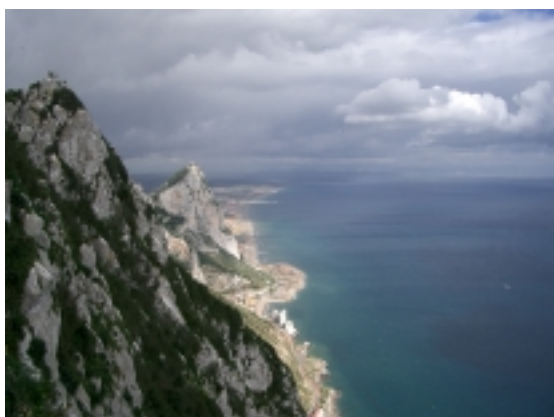


Andorra appeared mystically through the distant haze and gave us a dramatic backdrop as we drove down the less inspiring anglicised resort-laden east coast. By that evening we cut off the main road to set up camp at one of the eerily empty summer resorts of Benicassim.

The campsite owner was friendly enough though and within the hour we were dining on steak and mash whilst watching a DVD, god camping's tough.

Day 5: Benicassim to Gibraltar, GB (!)

London to Gibraltar in five days! Not too shabby for two 10-year-old land rovers, and no we didn't flog them to death, we kept at a respectable 65 miles an hour (or thereabouts....honest). The poor weather and need to check over the vehicles and get a few more bits and bobs before we hit Africa meant we were keen to hit Gibraltar before it closed for the weekend.



The approach to Gibraltar was odd in that the Spanish signposts grumpily refused to admit its presence until you almost fell off the end of Spain (politics, pah!). All of a sudden we turned a corner and saw the 'Rock' looming intimidatingly over us and we knew we had hit a small corner of Spain that will be forever England. Marvellously resolute in its refusal to believe it isn't situated just south of Tunbridge Wells it welcomed us to into its arms and we set up for the night in the Rock Hotel.

The joy of warm showers and a bed, guilty pleasure indeed. It seemed to serve Michael Palin well before he headed into Africa on his Saharan travels, and we hoped it could do us no harm.

Days 6 to 8: Gibraltar

This was our opportunity to pick up our few remaining bits of kit such as the GPS systems that were being couriered to us and get Bert looked at. It turned out that his thermostat had crumbled to the point of no return but was happily replaced at minimal cost by emailing our friendly local mechanic. Far better to have discovered this at this stage than in the midst of the desert where it could be a real nuisance.

Other than this we have fed and watered ourselves, climbed the rock, seen the apes and looked pensively across the water at Morocco.

The time has come for us to get across the water and get on with it. Deep breath, cross fingers and hopefully the next time I write in the journal it will be from Africa.....



The Straits of Gibraltar

Day 9: Gibraltar

We managed to pick up Bert from our friendly local mechanic complete with a new thermostat, the old one being knackered beyond repair, and hoped that would see the end of the overheating problems. This combined with picking up the other GPS systems meant that we were having a great day and could draw our little sojourn in the Rock to a close. As good as Gibraltar has been to us it was defiantly time to move on. So the decision was made to break for the border and get over the water the following day.

A farewell supper and we packed up ready to get going early in the morning.