

# One adventure too far

Christopher Westor

Are adventure holidays in exotic locations safe, or do they hold hidden dangers? EDWARD WELSH reports on one package tour to Pakistan and China which resulted in the tragic death of an unsuspecting traveller

**F**EW travellers could have arrived in Pakistan's northern mountains as knowledgeable about the area as Dennis Regensburg. For almost a decade, he had avidly collected almost 100 books on the wildlife, people and archeology to prepare for the trip. But within four days of landing at Islamabad, at the start of his holiday, Regensburg, 38, was dead. He was drowned after the Jeep in which he and two fellow holidaymakers were travelling careered off a mountain road and into a swollen river.

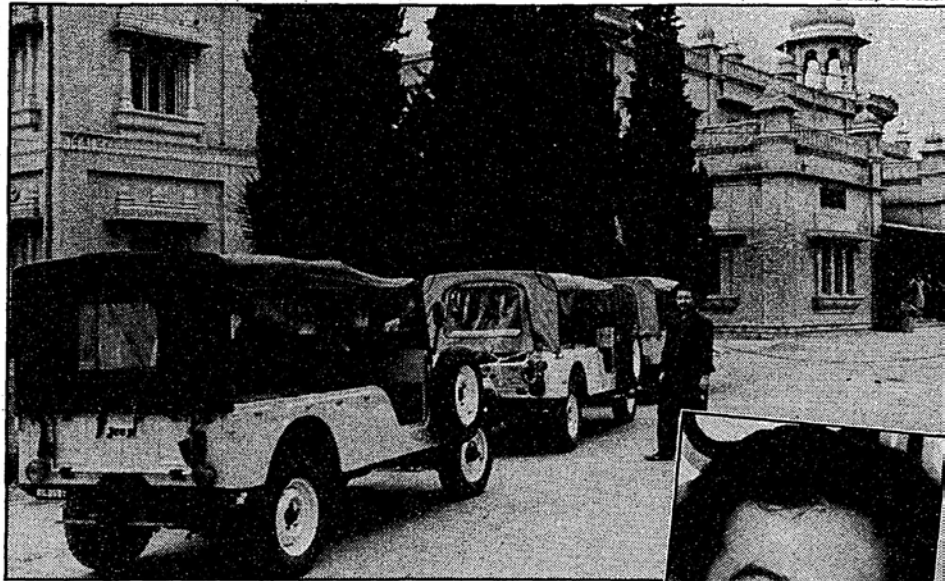
Growing numbers of British tourists are opting for trips with a stronger element of adventure than the traditional package to the Mediterranean. Most of these travellers return home safely with nothing more than a tummy bug to complain of. But Regensburg's death illustrates the potential perils of joining adventure holidays to remote parts of the world. Regensburg, a Dutchman who had lived in England for four years, booked his trip in February last year with Encounter Overland. It was to be a three-week adventure package, called by the company "To the Gates of Tartary", which would take him and nine travellers, accompanied by a tour leader, from Pakistan, over the Himalayas and into China. The cost was £605 without air fare, and the company warned that after crossing the Chinese border, travel and accommodation arrangements were to be "barely basic".

The group arrived in Pakistan in early July. After a couple of days in the heat and humidity of Islamabad and Peshawar, they headed for the cooler air of the mountains.

On July 7, the party set off on a day trip to Kalam in the Swat Valley in three Jeeps driven by local drivers, who had rolled down the roofs to make the most of the good weather. When the group returned from Kalam in the afternoon, they drove in convoy beside the river Swat, which was fast-running and swollen from melting snow. Regensburg sat in the back of the middle vehicle with two of his fellow travellers; Tony Smith was beside him and Jeremy Andrews, a financial journalist, in front. They were driving along an embankment at the top of a steep, boulder-strewn slope about 30ft above the river when the Jeep swerved off the road.

"I was facing the water," remembers Andrews. "I noticed the driver pile out of the car on my right. I realised I had to do something urgently. But I cannot remember what happened."

Chris Weston, travelling in another



This is the Jeep, above, in Peshawar, before the trip that proved fatal to Dennis Regensburg, right, who had prepared avidly for the holiday

Jeep, spotted Regensburg in the river: "He was a quarter or a third of the way across. I saw his head and shoulders and back, and then he went under." Other members of the group drove beside the river in a desperate attempt to spot Regensburg and drag him out. All they saw was baggage from the now submerged Jeep being washed along in the water.

Despite language problems, police from the nearest town were roused to mount a search, but to no avail. An officer told the group that accidents were commonplace on that road and it could take a month before a body was recovered from the river. The driver of the fatal Jeep was arrested but later released. Regensburg's body was found — surprisingly — within two days, stripped of valuables.

On the evening after the accident, the group had to decide whether to go on. Two members — Andrews, who had been injured, and his friend Weston — decided for various reasons not to proceed. "I was all of a sudden much more nervous about travelling in these vehicles than I was before," says Andrews. "I also think it was wrong that we should carry on just after this guy had died. People were in a difficult position. Did they abandon the holiday and lose all they had spent or did they carry on?" The rest opted to continue with the holiday.

Thus, when Ian Buist, Regensburg's friend, flew out to Pakistan the following week to visit the area of the accident and to find out what happened, the tour leader, Chris Hanvey, had moved on with the rest of the group, although Encounter Overland had flown out a representative from England to investigate. The expedition had moved off before it was known the body had been found, so Buist, an under-secretary at the Overseas Development Administration, told the inquest no burial arrangements had been made by the company for his friend.

When the body was found the police had packed it in ice and sent it to Peshawar, and without any further instructions the Christian Fathers had buried it in their cemetery. For almost a week, Buist struggled with Pakistani red tape before having the body exhumed and returned to Britain, as Regensburg's family wanted.

Unfortunately, the body was not in a state for a postmortem to be carried out in Britain, but an inquest was eventually held in Kingston, Surrey, with two hearings over the past two months. The coroner, John Burton, heard that the Jeep had never been recovered from the river, and so it had been impossible to ascertain what caused the accident.

Friends of Regensburg told the inquest that when he had booked his holiday Encounter Overland's literature stated that its customers would travel in Land Rovers while in Pakistan. The company literature said that the vehicles were "expertly designed, built and maintained, with years of professional experience".

However, a fortnight before the journey was to start, Regensburg and most of his fellow passengers were officially informed by Encounter Overland that they would travel in three Jeeps rather than in Land Rovers.

Hanvey explained at the inquest that he had hired the vehicles in northern Pakistan, having been instructed by Encounter to cut out the middle man and go straight to the contractor. He said: "I looked at the Jeeps to assess their condition. To me they looked well kept. As far as I was aware, each individual driver owned the vehicles." Hanvey explained that he had relied on references from other tour operators which had used the vehicles.

Although Buist told the inquest: "It is absolutely clear that there was a catastrophic breakdown of the vehicle, which was sub-standard and different from the one advertised by Encounter



Overland," what exactly caused the Jeep to veer off the road has never been fully established. The vehicle had had a burst fuel line the day before the accident, but Duncan Askew, a British policeman who was one of the holidaymakers, thought the vehicles were well maintained compared with others in Pakistan. He also said the drivers had never driven erratically.

Buist told the coroner that he had learned during his visit to Pakistan that the police blamed the accident on faulty steering caused by a broken tie rod. The inquest delivered an open verdict.

Tony Jones, managing director of Encounter Overland, told The Sunday Times that the Jeeps were ideal for the terrain across which the company's tours went. He added that the company had used the Jeeps, which were locally manufactured, on many previous trips without any problems. "Clearly, we were, and remain, distressed that such a tragedy should happen," says Jones. "But in adventure travel this eventuality cannot be ruled out."

● Just how safe are adventure holidays? Is this one an unfortunate rarity or have other travellers suffered similar accidents, albeit escaping with their lives? We would like to hear readers' experiences. Please write to the Travel Editor, The Sunday Times, 1 Pennington Street, London E1 9XW

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Edward Welsh

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