There's a gap in your life and you fancy a spot of adventure? **Steve Hide** meets

Beware guns and naked cattle rustlers

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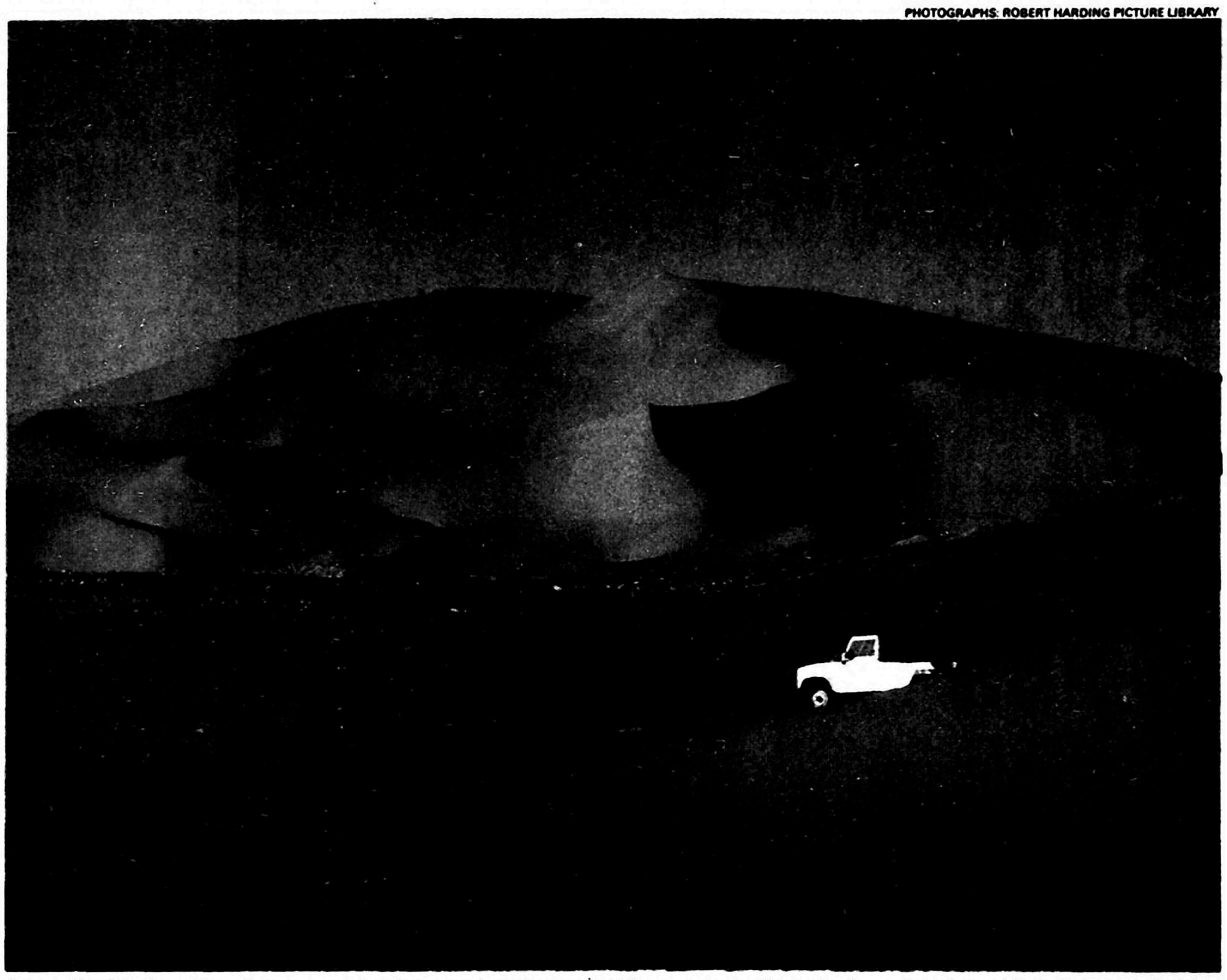


Across Algeria's dunes Campfire yarns are of sticky moments such as armed tribesmen waving down a truck — only to demand their photographs be taken

DRIVING overland trucks used to be a bit like joining the French Foreign Legion. Recruits, fleeing the obligatory life trauma of such escapees, ran off instead to a chilly countryside training camp for a brief induction, followed by a bucket-shop flight to a sticky Third World hotspot.

There, in true Legion fashion, they would be told to "démerde-toi" — "just get on with it" — in a second-hand truck into which were crammed tents, equipment and 20 passengers.

Off they would go into a world of adventurous hardship, frequently getting nowhere fast in conditions that were either too hot or too cold.

John Brogue, former driver and founder of Africa Explored, recalls crossing the sandhills of Chad at the princely speed of three miles a day, while Exodus's operations manager, Phil Normington, a veteran of a decade on the road, was once bogged down for 53 hours on the salt flats of Bolivia.

But the traditional image of a roll-up-smoking, beer-swilling truckie who plays *Good Morning, Vietnam* full blast on the truck stereo at 6am, and collects tropical diseases like trophies, is dying fast.

Today's overland driver is as likely to be a woman as a man, with an interest in the environment, a sound knowledge of the developing world and an awareness of the fact that e-mail isn't a drug sent in the post but a useful way of keeping in touch with the rest of the world.

The "driver" title has gone out the window. They are now known as "project leaders", "expedition personnel" or "crew". And the people bouncing around in the back of the truck, formerly known as passengers, are reverently referred to as "clients", "customers" or "project members".

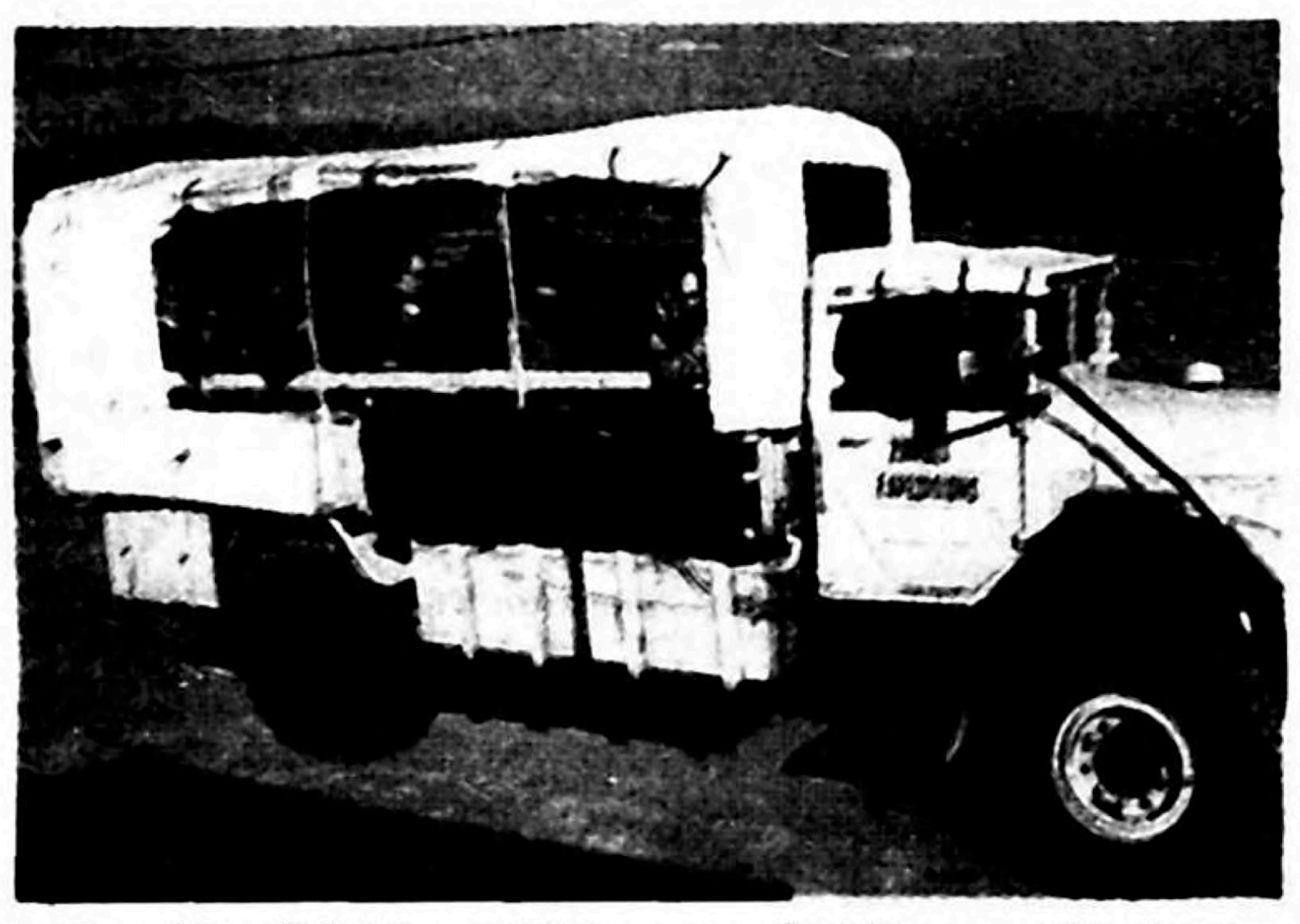
OVERLAND companies, once the mavericks of the travel business, have been closing the gap with more upmarket safari outfits over recent years. Although many still offer the same six-month mud-plugging missions from London to Cape Town that they always have, most of their revenue comes from short trips catering for professional people taking a month's leave.

"Clients expect more, so we have to offer more," says Charlie Hopkinson, of Dragoman. "It's a harder job today but staff get more back-up from the company. They are kicked out if they don't come up to scratch."

Would-be overlanders must be licensed bus or truck drivers (and pay the £800 training and test fees themselves) but can come from any walk of life. Some have worked in law firms or the City — "they are out of their pinstripes and five months later roughing it in the bush," says Encounter's Warren Burton — while a survey of Exodus drivers reveals a former farmer, an architect, an airline hostess, a psychiatric nurse, a classical music composer, a hairdresser and a physicist.

The established companies — Exodus, Dragoman, Encounter — each employ about 40 drivers. Most trucks carry two, paired where possible. Most are British, many Antipodean and a few European. There is now increasing emphasis on employing local people with expert knowledge of their own regions. Guerba Expeditions, for instance, has been employing African drivers for the past 10 years. Half of its field staff are now Kenyans.

Companies today also prefer their drivers to have had a taste of overland life as a passenger. Jez Tombs, a 34-year-old designer, did a five-month South American trip as an Exodus passenger before training with the company for a 12-month stint in Africa. His job includes inducting passengers into the ways of life on the road — putting up tents, digging latrines, bartering in local markets and cooking for 20 on an open fire. On top of which there is keeping the truck running, dealing with border bureacracy, keeping accounts, organising the side-trips, and being a part-time wildlife guide and instant expert on a dozen different countries. "Sometimes you feel a bit like a mother hen," says Jez.



Roughing it in Kenya 'Drivers can feel like a mother hen'

Making overlanding "legitimate" has not been embraced by every outfit. Some say it's a contradiction in terms. There are many old-timers, some still driving, who mourn the days of dodgy paperwork, forged visas, and charging across borders into countries just as the UN is pulling out. Some say the game is losing its adventure. "There's a lot of softies out there now," says one managing director.

Truck groups, the pioneers of organised tourism, have always been the first in and last out of trouble zones. Groups were driving through Rwanda in 1996 (18 months after the brutal civil war there), braving the Shining Path guerrillas in Peru in the 1980s, and dodging Mauritanian minefields to get through West Africa when Algeria closed its borders to outsiders.

Understandably, overland companies are reluctant to discuss their hairiest moments but they will admit that things do still go wrong.

TRUCKS get shot at, people get attacked, raped or die of malaria. Whole trucks have been stolen and the group left in the desert with only their passports. The overland trail is always buzzing with the latest horror story passed from campsite to campsite, often exaggerated Chinese-whisper style. Sometimes it is an old incident being endlessly reworked.

Experienced hands say the biggest risk in overlanding is a vehicle crash, and there have been some. But run-ins with guns make for more durable campfire yarns. Sometimes these tell of near-escapes. Phil Normington once drove his Exodus truck through a roadblock of Sudanese cattle rustlers who were stark naked except for their automatic weapons. "We drove as fast as we could and told everyone in the back to lie on the floor." On that occasion, no shots followed.

Sometimes the fireside tales are of sticky moments that end in smiles, such as when a band of Kalashnikov-waving Afghan tribesmen chased down a fleeing truck — only to demand that their photographs be taken.

Warren Burton has clocked up 40 trips in 10 years and still goes out on the road at least once a year. He recalls the time a group of drunken soldiers wandered into his Tanzanian campsite waving machine guns. Incidents such as these are impossible to train for, he says. "How can you? You only learn how to react when it happens to you. Then it's a matter of common sense, staying calm and keeping everyone together." That particular situation ended amicably with handshakes.

The rewards of the job are varied. Janice Aldridge, 34, who retired this year after seven years on the road for Encounter in Africa, Asia and South America, has emerged with an aversion to tomato paste (the common ingredient in most group meals) but a great deal more self-confidence. "It does improve you. You learn to cope with just about anything."

"It's not a free ride," cautions Warren. "Who would want to work 24 hours a day for months on end for £150 a week? When you're on the road you can never switch off.

"But there's nothing better than driving up to a ridge overlooking the Himalayas and 20 people saying 'this is the most wonderful moment of my life'. And you took them there."

Essentials

Prospective overland drivers should get in touch with Encounter Overland (0171 370 6845), Exodus (0181 675 5550), Dragoman (01728 861133), Africa Explored (01633 880224) or Guerba Expeditions (01373 826611).

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