

CLASSIC DRIVER

First overland: The Oxford and Cambridge Far Eastern Expedition

Lead

In 1955 - after months of extensive preparation, organisation and footwork - six plucky Oxbridge students, aboard two identical Land Rovers, set off on the first truly mammoth 'overland' journey...

A successful PR stunt can boost a vehicle's commercial appeal ten-fold. And what better way to promote the yet-to-be-released 1956 Land Rover Series 1 than to send two of them on a six-month, 18,000-mile overland expedition from London to Singapore; an expedition that was previously deemed impossible.

An impossible task



The Oxford and Cambridge Far Eastern Expedition could only have been dreamt up over a late night beverage or two, in a typically ambitious university ploy. Using initiative, persuasion and very little money, the six Oxford and Cambridge students meticulously planned the journey of a lifetime - one that would stand unrivalled to this day.

The route was formidable, carving through lands where several others had tried and failed. Setting off from Hyde Park in London, the brace of Land Rovers headed through Europe, the Middle East and Asia, before arriving in Singapore from Thailand and Malaysia.

Tough terrain



Needless to say, the terrain they faced was hostile and, in some cases, near impassable. One particular challenge was the expanse of virgin desert between Damascus and Baghdad, a stretch the team slogged at for over 14 hours in the searing heat and stifling dust. They also tackled the famous Ledo road, a ruinous stretch between Burma and India interrupted by thousands of streams and several major rivers, all the while under constant threat of attack from bandits and headhunters. Significantly, it was the last recorded journey along the road before its permanent closure.

For such a demanding journey, you'd assume that the cars were extensively modified to cope with the treacherous conditions that awaited them; but no. The Series 1s were essentially straight off the production line, with small modifications including a 'safari roof' (to keep cool in the days and reduce condensation at night), spotlights, front mounted winches and extra fuel tanks. Appropriately, each car was painted in the universities' respective shades of blue.

Straight off the line



Although Land Rover was the preliminary sponsor, providing the (lightly modified) vehicles, the trip would not have been possible without equipment, supplies and cash donated or loaned by over 80 third parties both at home and along the way. From water-purification tablets and collapsible mess-tins, to whisky and food rations – anything that would make the task that little bit easier was welcomed with open arms.

After six months and six days, and 18,000 gruelling miles, the team finally arrived in Singapore. Not only did these six young men inspire a generation, they cemented Land Rover's reputation for durability and off-road prowess – characteristics that the brand has been moulded around and that have been found in every Land Rover since.

Photos: Land Rover

Gallery

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