



Land Rover supports Earthwatch

Oct 5 2006



A Tangiers Orange Land Rover Defender used on the recent Land Rover G4 Challenge has been donated to international environmental charity **Earthwatch**.

Their mission is to 'engage people worldwide in scientific field research and education to promote the understanding and action necessary for a sustainable environment'.

The vehicle is en-route to the Samburu region of Kenya to provide support to scientists and volunteers based at the Earthwatch Field Research Centre in Wamba. They are working on a range of projects that will benefit the local habitat, wildlife and communities, including:

- Wildlife Habitats – field surveys of wildlife and vegetation types are being conducted to help promote the coexistence of humans and wildlife.
- Communities, Water and Wildlife – focusing on the conflict between the local community and wildlife over scarce water resources in the dry season, leading to a decline in the water quality. A digital map of the region is being created to detail the water resources, seasonal variations and aquatic biodiversity.
- Grevy's Zebras – driving over savannah, mapping locations, habitat, movements and interactions, will help conserve the most endangered member of the horse family. Eighty per cent of its global population of 2,000 live in the Samburu region.
- Carnivores in Conflict – ranging from the wild dog through to the lion, collecting carnivore scats, recording footprints and taking photos with camera traps will help determine predator population dynamics and areas of conflict.
- Medicinal Plants – exploring the use and location of wild plant resources used as a botanical medical source by the local Samburu people, will help determine the effectiveness of traditional medicines and the sustainable use of these valuable resources.

Land Rover's support of Earthwatch continues the company's policy of supporting wildlife and environmental conservation charities.

To find out more about Earthwatch visit www.earthwatch.org.

Image - Left to right: Phillip Smart, Director of Development for Earthwatch; Sarah Batten from Land Rover; Gareth Price, Chief Operating Officer of Earthwatch. Photo courtesy of Steve Gray, Earthwatch.



Land Rover's balanced approach towards a sustainable future.

Oct 3 2006



As part of an ongoing commitment to address the challenges of climate change, Land Rover is launching a CO2 Offset Programme. This unique initiative, to be managed by **Climate Care**, includes a commitment from Land Rover to offset its manufacturing assembly CO2 emissions and a customer vehicle package to enable customers to offset their CO2 emissions whilst driving a Land Rover.

All UK Land Rover vehicles from 07 Model Year will be offered to customers with a CO2 Offset package (based on the average CO2 produced by the vehicle over the first 45,000 miles).

The 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge also forms part of this CO2 Offset programme, and all CO2 emissions produced throughout the 2006 programme have been offset and invested alongside Land Rover's manufacturing programme.

What are CO2 offsets?

CO2 offsetting is about funding (investment) in projects across the world which avoids or reduces CO2 emissions ensuring that the amount saved balances the original emissions. CO2 offsetting provides a mechanism to take action and responsibility for the CO2 that we produce.

We are partnering with a specialist organisation, Climate Care to offset our own CO2 emissions from our manufacturing assembly and to offer our customers an offset programme at point of sale through our dealerships. Our offset programme will focus on 3 key offset project types:

- a) Renewable energy – replacing non renewable fossil fuels such as oil, coal which when burnt produce CO2 by renewable energies such as solar and wind which produce no CO2
- b) Technology change – new technologies which avoid or reduce CO2 such as clean burning charcoal stoves
- c) Energy efficiency – improving efficiency to reduce the amount of energy needed, such as using energy efficient lighting.

Many of these projects deliver additional environmental and social benefits such as conserving wildlife habitats and species, and providing employment for communities. All of the projects go through a rigorous process of verification and validation to ensure and demonstrate the CO2 emissions saved.

For further information on this please visit **Climate Care**.



Life after the Challenge...

Jul 27 2006



How do you get back 'into the swing of things' after four action-packed weeks of solid activity taking-in some of the worlds most diverse and stunning landscapes? 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge Winner - Martin Dreyer and Team Spirit Award Winner - Brian Reynolds keep us updated with their 'life after the Challenge'...

Martin Dreyer

The Land Rover G4 Challenge was the best experience of my life. Now I ask myself "What next?" To be honest, I can't imagine that any future indulgence in the great outdoors could emulate what us lucky eighteen competitors experienced.

Is it time to retire....I wonder!

Requests to participate, motivate and compete are coming in to me from all directions - which is wonderful. Lots of new experiences to come, but nothing will compare with the challenges, vast spaces, camaraderie, competition and focus of the G4.

I spent the week after my return from the Challenge relaxing, meeting friends and sharing the stories of my G4 journey. When back in my home environment it seemed hard for me to believe how I had just spent the last four weeks – I think if the whole thing hadn't been captured by the media, my friends may not have believed the intensity of the whole experience either.

As my body began to forgive me I started to build up my exercise regime again. I then received an invite to be part of a four person team in the Primal Quest® Adventure Race, which was taking place in Utah, USA. The race covers over 800km and lasts for 10 days. With this type of race there is no time for enjoyment - it is solid racing with sleep deprivation all the way. I took up the offer and flew out to Colorado for some pre-race training with my team-mates in the Rockies. Our team came 10th out of 90 – we were pleased with the outcome but it obviously felt pretty strange after the emotional finish I experienced at the end of the Challenge.

Now, I'm back home and making the most of the high rivers we currently have in Cape Town – I've blown the cobwebs out of my kayak and I'm spending a lot of time paddling. When on dry land I am honing my vocal skills, I have been working with Land Rover in order to share my G4 experiences with a number of audiences and building momentum with motivational speaking is now very much part of my plan going forward.

My short-term goal though is to focus on an adventure race that takes place in Bloemfontein in a couple of week's time. The race intends to open up adventure racing to a wider audience; I'll be racing with some great athletes who are perhaps not always presented with the same opportunities as a lot of us.

So, all in all life is pretty busy and with this will come lots of new experiences. However, I can't imagine anything comparing with the challenges, vast space, camaraderie,

competition and focus of the Land Rover G4 Challenge. It really was the best experience of my life. I can't imagine that any future indulgence in the great outdoors could emulate what us lucky eighteen competitors experienced.

One closing comment though – the only thing that we didn't get trained for was how to deal with this post-Challenge depression, which seems to take a hold of me every time I reminisce about the intense friendships that were made before we all dispersed back to our homes across the globe. I'll just keep my fingers crossed that our paths will cross some time soon.

Brian Reynolds

The initial return from the Challenge started with an emotional reunion with my wife and 8 month old daughter. The first week back was a complete reversal of the rigors of the Challenge and my body was rather confused about what was happening. I took mid-morning snoozes and mid afternoon naps - most unlike me, as I normally can't force myself to sit down at all.

Since settling down and returning to work life seems different somehow. The gossip around the company, along the route from Edinburgh in the North and Kings Cross in the South, has been of the Challenge and everyone was captivated by the web coverage and how I got on while we were away.

Apart from being awarded with the title "3rd place in the ladies race!" by certain colleagues – who obviously haven't had first-hand experience of the power and determination of Nora and Alina, my family friends and colleagues were all very proud of my Team Spirit Award. This will certainly have pride of place on my mantle piece... when I get round to building one in our new home!

As for Challenges to look forward to, in reality my 'long' races are over for quite some time, but I'll certainly find time for some "weekend warrior" adventure races. I'll keep my hand in with Mountain Biking Orienteering and have been looking at which Triathlons to do later this year, the off-road/adventure type hold the most draw for me, it's a matter of juggling the diaries to fit it all in.

The biggest challenge will be raising my daughter and any other children we are blessed with, but our kids will be hardened adventurers - they won't have any choice!

The Land Rover G4 Challenge has been life changing to say the least. My G4 journey has been long – from the disappointment of the 2003 UK National Selection to actually making it to finally representing my country in 2006... I can still hardly believe that I lived my dream. I have changed as a person physically and mentally. I've had to work on my technical and emotional weaknesses and become a more rounded person, it's all been positive and I don't regret a moment of it.

The prize of winning a place on the Challenge was an obvious target but having my daughter arrive 7 weeks before the National selections for 2006 proved to be the strongest motivation - I kept going past my limits in training and the race because of her and the wish to make her proud.



A day in the life....of the Telecommunications Team

Jun 1 2006



It's just another night for Adie Collins. He's in the middle of the Southeast Asian jungle with abnormally large insects fluttering around his head torch and abnormally flustered journalists fluttering around his vehicle. The hacks may be down a muddy track with no telephone network for hundreds of miles, but they're slipping from panic into mild hysteria as the high-speed Internet connection suffers a temporary go-slow.

It's unpleasantly humid, sheet lightning is illuminating the mountains and the temperature is nudging a sticky 30°C, but Adie remains cool, calm and collected as he tackles the stubborn technology. His approach is not only admirable, it's essential: the 39-year-old is at the hub of one of the most remarkable mobile media operations on the planet. As the remote unit of the 4-man Challenge telecommunications team (including Richard Mumford, Ray Davey and Allan Shaw), he provides 200 writers and broadcasters with the opportunity to file stories on a daily basis from the heart of spectacularly remote wilderness.

The tools of his trade – two Range Rover 4.4 HSEs bristling with hi-tech equipment; one in Laos, the other in South America – glow like Christmas trees at the convoy's campsites. Each contains two systems – VSAT and BGAN – providing a satellite link, with the signal connecting into standard networks through land earth stations, allowing text and photographs to be sent by email. 'It's belt and braces,' Adie explains. 'They can each back the other up if needed.'

The 'Comms Car' also provides a wireless network for the camp allowing people to log onto the Internet from laptops, along with a LAN connection so bigger files can be hard-wired at speed through local networks, two VHF radios and an HF radio for longer distance. 'We're in Laos but it lets us talk to someone in Brazil.'

The kit also includes a repeater to boost the range of hand held radios, and a small PA system for camp. There's a 240-volt charging facility, a generator for periods of high demand - around 15 people are hoping to charge their laptops tonight - and iridium satellite phones 'which work in the middle of jungle or desert.' Adie's unique Range Rover also has Airband to contact choppers for medivac should there be a medical emergency.

His route to twiddling knobs in the bush started with a degree in radio communications at Southampton University. It was combined with a passion for rallying, and the work on global adventure events kicked off in the early 1990s. 'My first experience was in at the deep end,' he recalls, 'in the Amazon jungle near Manaus. I was in a Defender with a satellite system that came up through a telescopic mast. Voice and fax messages were sent back to base to be written up. This was the early days.'

He has since notched up a formidable roll call of locations, allowing reports to be sent back from diverse places including Tonga, Brazil, Tierra del Fuego and the Australian outback. 'It has been a phenomenal experience,' he says. 'I've had my eyes opened about how people live and how little they survive on. It's very humbling.'

A little more understanding for his task wouldn't go amiss with some of the journalists he has dealt with over the years. 'Some come up and demand "you must send this now" or "you have to get a link". They expect it to be the same as in an hotel or office.

'Well we try to help and yes, when we can get a link. But take last night in Northern Laos: mountains were in the way, and there was atmospheric interference from thunderstorms. There are some things you can't overcome – even with high technology.

'That said, it's a pleasure to work with media who are totally up for it and incredulous that we can provide this service for them – the "wow" reaction.'

Adie, who once provided a live link between an event's finishing ceremony in Belize and its recce team researching the following year's event in Kalimantan, is still amazed at the juxtaposition of technology and wilderness. 'It's bizarre,' he says. 'We take this incredible kit into developing countries. We're sitting in a paddy field in Laos and have a wireless network linked to the rest of the world – from one Range Rover.

'It's great to have these facilities so people can bring a laptop and send stories home. But does it give us better quality of life? Is technology chasing us? I don't know.'



Team Spirit Award Winner

May 21 2006



For the second time, the British competitor on the Land Rover G4 Challenge has won the event's prestigious Team Spirit Award. The prize is the one where the 18 competitors vote for the participant they think showed the greatest amount of team spirit in the month-long adventure.

Brian Reynolds, a train engineer from Chesterfield in northern England, beat overall winner Martin Dreyer to the honour in an emotional show of support from the other competitors at the Challenge awards ceremony in Tarija, Bolivia.

"I am a little surprised to have won the Team Spirit Award," admitted Brian, who takes over temporary possession of the globe-shaped trophy from 2003 winner Tim Pickering. "I think the reason I won it is that I had a lot of bad luck in the competition but was able to keep a positive attitude. To have your peers give you a positive pat on the back means as much to me as winning the Land Rover G4 Challenge itself."



Final Competitor Ranking

May 20 2006



Individual rankings following the completion of the Challenge are as follows:

1st – Martin Dreyer - South Africa

2nd – Kris Janssens – Belgium

3rd – Jean-Baptiste Calais – France

4th – Dmitry Timokhin – Russia

5th – Eleonora Audra - Brazil

6th – Alina McMaster – Australia

7th – Pablo Burratini - Argentina

8th – Tolga Senefe - Turkey

9th – Gabriel Maldonado - Spain

10th – Gary Robertson – Ireland

– Brian Reynolds – UK

12th – Michael Tsautos - Greece

13th – Claribett Vega - Costa Rica

– Thijs Maartense – Netherlands

15th – Takashi Sugiyama – Japan

16th – Robert Schweiger – Germany

17th – Marco Martinuzzi – Italy

18th – Victor Huang – Taiwan



Stage 4 - Day 28 - Challenge Final report

May 20 2006



South African superstar adventure athlete, Martin Dreyer, today won the 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge. Beating off 17 of the world's toughest adventure racers in the 4x4-based global Challenge, Dreyer took home a brand new Range Rover after a nail-biting climax to the 28 day marathon that spanned across four countries on two continents.

The culmination of the month-long Challenge using Land Rovers, kayaks, mountain bikes, abseiling, jumaring and orienteering was a punishing 25 minute Challenge Final staged in a river bed on the Bolivia/Argentina border.

Only the top four scorers - calculated after four hellishly hard stages in Thailand, Laos, Brazil and Bolivia – made it into the Challenge Final. Of those narrowly missing the cut were two of the three women in the Challenge; Alina McMaster of Australia and Eleonora Audra of Brazil.

"If you had told me a month ago I would have been fifth in the Land Rover G4 Challenge then I would not have believed you," said Nora as the siren to signal the start of the Challenge Final blew. "I am proud to have done this for me and Brazil and for the girls. Now let's see who will win the big prize."

The four finalists, in order of points scored, were Martin Dreyer (749), Kris Janssens of Belgium (709), Dmitry Timokhin of Russia (694) and Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Calais (643).

With a second a point issued as a penalty, the gap between Dreyer's start time and Calais' start time was 1 minute 46 seconds – potentially 10% of the total time expected for the multi-discipline test.

"It'll be hard to make that up, but I'll try," said J-B.

Crowds of media, support drivers and the remaining 14 competitors lined the canyon side and river bank to cheer the finalists on. Dreyer was first off, plunging down a zip wire to the far side of the river.

As he hit the far bank, Kris fired off in hot pursuit, followed fifteen seconds behind by Dmitry. The second task was a maze – a memorisation of a colour-coded chart corresponding to a grid of national flags. At the bottom of the correct flags was a number and letter combination. Get the code right and on the finalist could go to the next task.

Martin pinballed through the maze and onto task three as strong as an ox. There was no sign of the painful leg injury that had troubled him over the past few weeks.

Kris too managed the maze OK but both Dmitry and J-B forgot they had to add up the number element in the quiz and lost almost a minute apiece. The final was now effectively a two-man race.

Martin's speciality is kayaking. He has won Africa's hardest kayak/run even many times and is a national legend. So as the pair came down river it was no surprise he had made up 3 seconds over Kris.

Then the tables turned. Kris hunted down Martin like prey. Slowly catching him over a 200 metre run back across the fast-flowing river, Kris clawed the seconds back. The same again on a sapping mountain bike sprint up the sandy river bank. The gap now; 38 seconds. And by the time the two had driven Land Rover Discovery 3's down the river the gap was barely half a minute.

A jumar and abseil task from a hot air balloon had to be cancelled because of a strong breeze so the last chance for Kris to catch up was with brain not brawn. The pair had to solve a mental riddle of putting the first name of each competitor in alphabetical order.

"It was at this point I thought I had lost it," said Martin, whose stress levels appeared to reach Andean heights. "I could remember about 13 and then could not think of the last few."

The Belgian too was using his little grey cells to beat the African ironman. But Martin's memory finally came good and he shot off back to the river to wade breathlessly towards his prize – a shiny new Range Rover parked midstream. Slapping the bonnet like an old friend earned him the keys and the Land Rover G4 Challenge title.

"This is one of the happiest moments of my life. I cannot believe I have won," he cheered, as the fellow competitors hugged and pawed him. "Normally the events I do are a few days. This has been a month of build up."

"The final was tough. But the toughest part was the mental tasks. I so thought I had lost it. Then the next thing I knew I was slapping the bonnet. I never thought I would win the Land Rover G4 Challenge. I pictured myself crossing the winning line as a way to psyche myself up but to really think I would win before today would have been arrogant. Kris was a tough opponent, right to the end. I am not sure what happened to Dimi and J-B but they did good too."

Kris crossed the finish line as Martin was being besieged by media. He was philosophical in defeat – at the end of a week when he appeared to be getting stronger and stronger.

"I think everyone had such a good chance of winning this. I pushed myself hard but the time to Marti was just too big. I am disappointed not to win but it will not colour my 4 weeks. They have been life changing."

"We are delighted with the way the Challenge has gone," said Challenge Event Director Niki Davies, "and we couldn't have asked for a better finish. I know there are 17 disappointed competitors here today, but in the end we all end up taking home fantastic memories and amazing friendships. The 2006 Challenge has been a fantastic journey in every sense of the word."



South African Victory!

May 20 2006



Martin Dreyer from South Africa wins the 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge.

1st - Martin Dreyer - South Africa

2nd - Kris Janssens - Belgium

3rd - Jean-Baptiste Calais - France

4th - Dmitry Timokhin - Russia



A message from the outgoing champion...

May 19 2006



Ex-Belgian Air Force F16 pilot Rudi Thoelen was the first winner of the Land Rover G4 Challenge. Winning the 2003 Challenge changed his life so much he gave up fast jets and now imports 4x4 equipment.

This weekend Rudi will hand over his title as Challenge champion to one of four competitors who make it into Saturday's Challenge Final in southern Bolivia.

As he prepares to relinquish his crown, Rudi talked about how the event has changed in the last 3 years and what he thinks of the likely candidates for 2006 champion – including another Belgian!

"It is great to be back on the Challenge as a support driver. I have had so much fun I have stayed longer than the two weeks I was originally due to come out. I'll have to make the peace with my wife when I get home I guess.

"The event has changed a fair bit since 2003. People asked for more 4x4 driving and they have certainly been given that. The competitive element has also been simplified which is important so that everyone can more easily understand how that element of the competition works.

"I think, on an endurance level this year has been less challenging. The tasks have been shorter, sharper shocks. We had endurance events of over 2 hours and this year they have been less than an hour. It means the pace this year has been more fierce and at the end the competitors are fresher, which will make for a more exciting Challenge Final. Last time, we could barely move!

"The shorter competitions also mean it is easier for the media attendees to follow the event. Last time we would disappear into the mountains and people would not see what we had been doing. The other thing is that the 2006 event has been much more remote and has used the extremes of nature much better. Laos and Bolivia have been awesome.

"As for the four guys most likely to be in the Challenge Final (Rudi's choices were made before the final four were announced), this is what I think of them;

Dmitry is very focused and very strong and is a very good navigator. If he is in the top four he will be a strong fighter. The only thing is I would say that he is not really a team player.

Martin is a tough guy. He'd cut off his arm and still be able to compete. He wants to win badly but also has a very human touch. I wonder if his leg injury will affect him in the Challenge Final.

Kris is strong and seems to be getting stronger. However he does make mistakes. In a straight fight he'd be a favourite. And being Belgian, of course I'd quite like to see him win. Mind you I like being the only Belgian winner....

If Jean-Baptiste makes the last four he too will be strong. He really wants to win but for my liking he surfs too close to the edge. He pushes rules to the limit.

“May the best man win and enjoy the Range Rover....”



Stage 4 - Day 27 report

May 19 2006



On Friday afternoon, in a deep gorge outside the Bolivian town of Tupiza, four of the 18 competitors in the Land Rover G4 Challenge sealed their places in Saturday's Challenge Final – which will be the culmination of a month of extreme 4x4 driving and adventure sports in Southeast Asia and South America. Trouble is, until Saturday, none of them will know if they have been successful or not.

None of the competitors will know who has made the cut off for the four places in a head-to-head grand finale until just minutes before the start of the Challenge Final on Saturday morning. All 18 competitors will be asked to line up as if they are all in the final – before the overall scores to date are called out in reverse order – leaving the best four standing and ready to fight for the keys to a brand new Range Rover.

"The idea is to keep the suspense boiling to the last possible moment," said Event Director Niki Davies.

Friday's Stage Final, the last event of the Challenge's last stage, through southern Bolivia from Sucre to Tarija, was the competitors' only chance this week to score individually and put some distance between them and their partners of the last six days.

At least one and maybe two of the top four places were still up for grabs at the start of the Stage Final – a punishing elimination event where the competitors had to race on a mountain bike and on foot through a oven-hot valley of 200 metre high sandstone walls.

Current leader Dmitry Timokhin has lost many points this week through careless mistakes. Jean-Baptiste Calais of France has been very sick, he had oxygen administered on Thursday night and said he was only operating at 80% as the first round of the Stage Final got underway.

All 18 competed in the first round – a 300 metre downhill mountain bike race in deep gravel, before a 500 metre run and climb back towards the start to collect their national flag and place it in a hole on the finish line. The rule was that the last three over the line would drop out until the final three remained for the last round.

"This race is purely physical and being the oldest competitor is a big disadvantage so I am not surprised to be one of the first out," said Takashi Sugiyama of Japan. Joining him on the sidelines were Claribett Vega of Costa Rica and Gabriel Maldonado of Spain.

In race 2, Michael Tsaoutos of Greece, Victor Huang of Taiwan and Eleonora Audra of Brazil failed to make the cut-off. Nora was distraught. She had not been able to reach her flag and missed the last spot by milliseconds.

"It will be hard now to make the top four," cried the possible Challenge Final contender. "I hope now that my team mate Alina (McMaster) will make it so we can have one woman finalist."

As race 3 started with the last dozen competitors, it dawned on Michael that the odds

were now slim of him making the Challenge Final and so his Challenge would now be over.

"It will be hard getting back to real life of mobile phones, meetings and home life," said the Athens businessman. "This has been the most amazing month of my life. A real dream."

Alina McMaster's hopes of reaching the final six in the Stage Final were shredded as she lost power in the thin air and was beaten to the line by a late-charging Brian Reynolds of the UK.

"Sorry, sorry," she said, collapsed in a heap on the finish line. "I screwed up."

Alina's chances of a top four place on Saturday are still wide open although she dismissed those chances as miniscule. As Australia's third reserve, she has consistently performed as the strongest of the three women and stronger than most of the men.

"I could not have done better," she said. "And if I do make it into the top four I will give the boys a run for their money."

Reynolds, Thijs Maartense and current leader Dmitry Timokhin were the fallers in the semi final – leaving Jean-Baptiste, Kris Janssens and Martin Dreyer to fight it out for in the final run – their sixth in one hour in the searing heat.

"I'd expected a rebellion by now," said competitions director Simon Day. "But if you think we're going to make winning a Range Rover easy, you'd better think again."

Kris Janssens seems to have found energy in this last week as all the others are losing theirs and he left the other two standing as he almost sprinted the Stage Final. Still suffering from his illness, Jean-Baptiste decided to back right off and take third place.

Of the three the only one almost certain of a place in Saturday's Challenge Final is Martin Dreyer. Despite winning the Stage Final, Kris Janssens says he is still doubtful of making the cut.

"I have had a good week but so have others like Alina. I hope one of the girls makes it through. Not as much as I hope I make it through though!"

Six days ago the title contenders knew that the final round of Team Partner Selections in Sucre would be the most critical choice of colleague so far. In the last three weeks Team Partner Selection has been an intriguing mix of picking the strongest and the most complimentary buddy for the demanding activities. But as some of the potentially perfect marriages have ended in tears, the politics of the adventure have come into play.

The most successful competitors so far were quickly snapped up by others determined to use the most powerful team mates for a helping hand up the leader board.

Pablo Burattini of Argentina was first to pick. And he chose South African Martin Dreyer – a regular feature in the top 3. "I am hoping that Martin will help me get into the top four," admitted Pablo.

Martin said he was just glad the selection was over. "It is the most stressed part of the week for me," he said. Dreyer still has niggling leg problems from an injury sustained in Laos.

Takashi Sugiyama, second to choose, nabbed the current event leader Dmitry Timokhin of Russia. "Pablo made my choice easy. Dmitry is a very strong partner," said the Japanese. The final pairing to come together was one with a proven track record; the all girl team of Brazilian Eleonora Audra and Australian Alina McMaster. The two were happy to be back together but, mathematically, it will be hard for one of them to make the all-important top four at the end of Stage 4. The top four at the end of the Stage 4 will go head-to-head in the Challenge Final on Saturday to determine the eventual winner.



Go Beyond - but not that far Ken...

May 18 2006



Over three million readers of The Sun newspaper in Britain will wake up this morning to read that their legendary motoring writer Ken Gibson is able to write that day's story from the Land Rover G4 Challenge because of the strength of the Range Rover Sport in which he was driving.

Earlier this week, Gibson's vehicle veered off a narrow mountain road high in the Bolivian Andes - outside Potosi, the highest city in the world. Three times the Range Rover Sport flipped over and down a cliff face that had its base over 400 metres below.

Inside the car was Gibson, Land Rover PR James Andrew and LRG4C event PR Waldo van der Waal. As the car tumbled over and over the three of them were protected by the rapid explosion of the car's air bag system – including its roll-over airbag.

In the few seconds they were rolling, all three understandably feared for the worst. But, amazingly, the tumbling Range Rover was stopped from its fall by a narrow ledge - coming to a rest on its wheels less than a metre from the precipice and a further fall of more than 300 metres.

None of the three occupants suffered anything more than a few bruises and the Range Rover Sport had only one broken window and (once recovered back to the road) could be started up and driven.

"We'd have rather Ken had not found out the strength of the Range Rover Sport like this but it says a huge amount for the safety features built into Land Rovers," said Phil Jones, the lead instructor on the Challenge, from the Land Rover Experience. "In many of the countries we sell Land Rover's these are everyday roads so we build the cars to withstand the worst."

All 134 Range Rover, Discovery 3, Freelander and Defender vehicles used on the month-long Land Rover G4 Challenge are standard – fitted only with genuine Land Rover Parts Accessories such as expedition roof racks and also extra under body protection.

"The cars have been incredibly strong," says Turkish competitor Tolga Senefe. "In Laos it was mud and rain and rough roads. "In Bolivia it has been altitude, dust and really hard rough roads. But still the vehicles keep going."

Land Rover has a team of workshop mechanics on the event to repair any damage caused in the course of the unrelenting 4x4 adventure. Some days the vehicles are being driven off road for over 12 hours at a time – often in extreme conditions such as rock-hopping and the relentless deep mud that greeted the Challenge competitors in northern Laos.

"The cars just kept going and going," said Victor Huang of Taiwan.

In addition to the team and support vehicles - Discovery 3 and Range Rover Sport - there are a number of specialist vehicles on the Land Rover G4 Challenge; including specially kitted out ambulances with stretcher section and room for an accompanying

nurse or doctor. There is also a communications car fitted with satellite dish, wifi and VHF and HF radios.

There is good news if you fancy getting your hands on a genuine Challenge veteran. Many of the vehicles will be sold after the event. Not Ken Gibson's Range Rover Sport however.



Stage 4 - Day 26 report

May 18 2006



Just under a month since the first pairs of 18 international adventurers came together before a crowd of thousands in Bangkok's Sanam Luang Park for the opening day of competitions on the Land Rover G4 Challenge, the same 18 paired up for the last time on the other side of the world in very different conditions.

Hundreds of miles from the nearest city, watched only by a handful of llama grazing on the Bolivian Altiplano, a 4444 metre escarpment nicknamed Kill Hill was the venue for the final team task in the 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge.

It is the competitors' last chance to work in pairs before they go it alone on Friday's Stage Final; itself the last opportunity for the 15 men and 3 women to make the top four positions - the ticket into Saturday's grand finale; the Challenge Final.

Kill Hill – a straight race up a crumbling volcanic cliff – was the compulsory competition in a long day that had the adventurers fighting stress, fatigue, illness, injury and an ignorance of how well they have scored in this last week of the Challenge.

"There is no way of telling how we have done," said Alina McMaster – one half of the all female pair with Eleonora Audra. "We have given 100% all the time and there is nothing more you can do."

Their goal all week has been the fourth place held by France's Jean-Baptiste Calais. Calais has been paired for Stage 4 with the third female entry – Claribett Vega of Costa Rica.

Calais is concerned that this week has not gone to plan and the likes of McMaster and Audra might have had a chance to catch him and take his ticket into the Challenge Final.

"I have not been well. I was up all night," he complained. "I feel as if the girls are catching me up."

Not even the competitions staff has a day-to-day update on the scores but competitions manager Rikard Beckman gave this insight into how he thought the positions might look ahead of Friday's official revelation of the Challenge Final entries.

"The gap from J-B in fourth to the fifth placed competitor and below was quite big but a lot of the guys have had a good week. The girls, for instance, seemed to have had a very strong Stage 4. Anyone who thinks they can make a big difference in the last week might be disappointed. Everyone is so tired, trying to make a big push now is hard.

Thursday's tasks were held near the small village of San Vincente – known outside Bolivia for one thing only; the place where the real-life Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid met their end. Unlike La Higuera, the Bolivian village where Che Guevara met his end, there is very little to show that the celebrated outlaws were caught by the law, here in this snow-capped mountain lair.

The mix of tasks on Thursday included winching and a phenomenal run up, and then down, a 100 metre high sand dune nicknamed the Bolivian Sahara. "It was two steps forward and three back in the deep sand," puffed super-fit South African Martin Dreyer. "But I had to give it all. There is a real sense of urgency today as the chances to score run out."

Rumours of the severity of Kill Hill had been circulating all day. So when the teams turned up to see a massive monolith rising from the Bolivian high plains, and a pair of Challenge ambulances in waiting, their fears were realised.

"There are 22 flags with numbers on, dotted all the way up to the summit. The flag with the highest number and score is the one at the top. One of you can take just one flag back down. And the team with the highest aggregate score are the winners," explained a marshal to the assembled competitors.

Then, with the cut off time for teams ticking by, everyone realised that two teams were missing; the Russia/Japan and Britain/Italy pairs. With 39 seconds to spare, Dmitry and Tak pulled up in their Land Rover Discovery.

"We got a bit lost" said Dmitry, for whom the loss of more points today would have almost certainly dropped him from the all-important top four.

Less fortunate were Brian Reynolds and Venetian lifeguard Marco Martinuzzi. They arrived too late after getting stuck and lost. "Can I have permission to cry," said Marco, aware that the penalty for not making the compulsory competition will almost certainly have cost him the chance to make the final four and win the 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge.

Following on from his victory in Wednesday's compulsory event, Kris Janssens made it two-from-two, reaching the top flag in a head to head with Martin Dreyer. Kris' team mate Gary Robertson of Ireland took flag number 16 of 22 to give them the highest joint score.

"It was a close thing. I had flag 16 in my hand but saw flag 19 and was going to go for it. I am glad I did not. Alina was right by me and did not get a flag and had to settle for flag 7 instead. Right now things like that could make a difference to the overall scores tomorrow."



Stage 4 - Day 25 report

May 17 2006



Twelve hours after being penalised a whole days score for losing his electronic dibber – or time key - Land Rover G4 Challenge leader Dmitry Timokhin has been given a replacement dibber but also a warning from the event competitions staff. Lose another and you are out of the event.

Dmitry estimates he lost up to 50 points after losing the dibber on Tuesday. The day before he left the dibber behind at a time control on the world's largest salt lake but was able to retrieve it.

"It has given the other competitors a big chance," he admitted after knuckling down on Wednesday to try and catch up the lead he reckons he has almost certainly lost. "I think Martin (Dreyer, of South Africa) has probably passed me but I will give everything to stay in the top four and make the Challenge Final on Saturday."

Dmitry is likely to still be in the top four at this point, having set up a sizeable lead over the last three weeks. But the rest of the field have sensed that the tough Muscovite has a chink in his armour and are ramping up the pressure with just one more day of team competitions on Thursday and the individually-scored Stage Final on Friday.

Smelling a chance to pull out the lead almost certainly handed to him by Timokhin, Dreyer set the benchmark for all competitors on Wednesday, scoring on five optional and the one compulsory competitions held on the Bolivia/Chile/Argentina border. No other team managed so many scores.

"Some people think Dmitry should not have been given another dibber and excluded but I am not going to worry about that. I have enough to think about. I am not going to rally people up. I would be happy to see him in the final. We can see then who is best," challenged the Capetonian.

The competitions today were all based on mountain biking and orienteering/running. The backdrops were stunning. This corner of Bolivia is a mix of Wild West and The Moon. The locations for the events - with names such as Agoraphobia - were as harsh as they were beautiful.

"We had to ride up a river bed and it was hard as hell," said Claribett Vega of Costa Rica.

Alina McMaster of Australia agreed. "It is a very physical day, one of the most physical so far. We are tired. It is cold. It is high up. The mix is tough."

Greece's Michael Tsaoutos said he would have liked more rest time on the event. "Even the so-called rest days have been busy with school projects and convoys. I know the event is meant to be tough but we are always on our feet."

Today not only tested the competitors physical attributes but their driving too. A few teams got stuck in a glutinous river bed, only narrowly making the 4pm cut-off for the compulsory competition. "I thought we were going to miss it," said Tolga of Turkey.

The compulsory competition was a mountain bike eliminator - from which the last rider in 17 races had to drop out. A similar event was held in the rice paddy fields of Laos.

"I am not sure which is tougher," said Spain's Gabriel Mondado.

Dmitry's team mate Takashi Sugiyama, was first to drop out – victim of a crash involving Greece and Italy.

The racing got more and more furious as the numbers of riders went down. The final two riders left standing were Jean-Baptiste Calais and Kris Janssens. Janssens is a vastly experienced mountain biker and edged the Frenchman out to take victory.

"I hope this will help me hang onto third place overall," said the Belgian. "That and helping my team mate Gary (Roberston, of Ireland) climb up the order are my goals this week."



Stage 4 - Day 24 report

May 16 2006



The current leader of the Land Rover G4 Challenge, Dmitry Timokhin, is in danger of losing his hold on the top spot after losing his electronic scoring key (or dibber) during Tuesday's round of competitions in far southwest Bolivia.

"I had it after the running competition but not when we arrived at the next, compulsory competition," he explained.

Having to drive over an hour back to try and find the dibber cost Dmitry and his Japanese team mate, Takashi Sugiyama, all of the points scored on Tuesday as they failed to make the start of the day's compulsory competition. In the end, Dmitry failed to find the dibber.

"It had been a great day," said Tak, head in hands. "We did really well, getting to three competitions. But then we had one disaster - a really big disaster. We forgot to check each other's dibbers and when we got to the compulsory competition we found that Dmitry did not have his dibber. So now we have no points from today."

Unless a replacement is available for Wednesday's competition Dmitry and Tak might also lose all points from that day too. Regardless, the loss of an estimated 50 points from Tuesday will have almost certainly handed Dmitry's lead to South African Martin Dreyer.

"I must not think about not scoring on Wednesday," revealed Dmitry. "I must only think about fighting back. It was a stupid mistake and I was the one saying before this event that making mistakes would be costly. This is the second mistake in two days."

None of Dmitry's closest rivals will know until the end of Stage 4 on Friday if his mistakes today and on Monday will give them a chance of squeezing into the top four.

"We just have to keep going flat out," said Michael Tsaoutos of Greece. "It shows that after even almost a month, this competition is still open."

Both Thijs Maartense and Robert Schweiger, who dropped out of Monday's Stage Start due to altitude sickness, were back in the competition today. Neither thought they were firing on all cylinders as they rejoined the competition.

"Last night I thought I was not going to be able to rejoin the G4. I felt freezing and my whole body was weak but the doctors did a great job and this morning I felt well enough to try my luck," said Robert. "I've definitely not been 100% but I am glad I made the effort. Not just for me but my team mate Gabriel."

Flooding at the south end of the world's largest salt lake - Salar de Uyuni - forced the Challenge to re-route around the lake for Tuesday's six competitions - held in stunning valleys littered with massive formations of volcanic rock near the isolated village of Sanaugustin.

As usual, the pairs of national competitors had to choose the greatest number of

competitions they thought they could complete in the allotted time - before then heading to the compulsory competition at Valle de Rocas (Valley of the Rocks).

Advantage went to the first teams out of the morning's Strategy Pit – held in a yard of ageing Bolivian steam trains. With as much as a half hour lead on the last team away, the Irish/Belgian team of Gary Robertson and Kris Janssens should have been able to notch up at least three competitions before the compulsory competition.

"That was the idea but we lost a lot of time when one of our bikes had a problem with the pedals," said Janssens – one of the current top four.

The other two competitors in the current top four, Martin Dreyer of South Africa and Jean-Baptiste Calais of France both managed to score three times before the compulsory competition. Martin and his partner Pablo Burattini of Argentina picked as one of their tests a dramatic mountain bike ride up to the top of a towering cliff.

"I thought my chest was going to explode," said Martin after the pounding climb at 4000 metres.

The South African/South American duo then picked a hill run called Apfelstrudel (in which Martin physically pushed Pablo up a slope) before one of a number of driving tests on offer.

"It was a hard but really good day," concluded Martin. "The compulsory competition, with high wires, abseiling, jumaring, mountain biking and running was awesome, especially in the canyon they found as a venue."

Jean-Baptiste Calais and his partner Claribett Vega of Costa Rica opted for two driving tests and the run before the compulsory competition. The Slick Rock Tech Drive was, as the title suggested, a highly technical test of driving skill on a field of slippery boulders. With one team member out navigating the route and the other behind the wheel, the pair had to get one of the Land Rover's wheels on up to 18 orange plates. Penalties were issued for any part of the car, other than the tyres, scraping the rocks.

"It was really really tricky," said Claribett, who leapt like a gazelle between rocks as she tried to keep ahead of J-B.

The scores of today's tests will be added to Wednesday and Thursday's competitions on the Bolivia/Argentina border. The Stage Final will be held on Friday. It will be the last chance for the competitors to get into the all-important top four for Saturday's Challenge Final – the decider of this year's Land Rover G4 Challenge winner.



Altitude Sickness

May 15 2006



Altitude sickness is no respecter of age or gender, height and not even fitness. At any height above 2500 metres, the atmosphere is so starved of oxygen that the human body has to fight hard to acclimatise. Sometimes successfully, sometimes not.

Most of Bolivia is above 2500 metres and the region of the country near Potosi on the Chilean/Argentinean border where the Andes scream skywards to over 5000 metres. Too high for man to survive without oxygen.

In the last few days the Land Rover G4 Challenge has been perched on the roof of the world at heights in excess of 4000 metres. It is the ultimate test of man and machine.

The vehicles have been running on around 20% less power in the mountains but it is the humans who have been feeling the effects of the altitude the worst. On Monday morning, the Challenge medical team had to attend to half a dozen people on the convoy – all suffering altitude sickness.

“Across the board, all sorts have been affected,” said doctor Dominik Doerrs. “Many have been people who arrived straight into this height from sea level. But we have had two competitors have to pull out of today’s competition because of altitude sickness. Those are the fittest guys you can imagine.

“Basically what happens to the body is that you do not get enough oxygen and then overcompensate by hyperventilating. Your kidneys then work hard to rid the body of the excess carbon dioxide you are then producing and you get very dehydrated. But why it does not affect everyone, no one knows.”

The medical team – operating from a fleet of specially-adapted Land Rover Defenders - have been busy since the Land Rover G4 Challenge began almost a month ago – dealing with sports injuries sustained by the competitors to daily ailments like stomach problems. Their emergency skills have been called into action a number of times.

“This week has been the busiest of the event,” said veteran expedition doctor Mike Irani. “But most of those have been altitude sickness. We hope that these are the only things we have to deal with this week. It’s a harsh climate.”



Stage 4 - Day 23 report

May 15 2006



It's one of the highest points on the planet but not all the competitors in Land Rover's G4 Challenge are feeling on top of the world. Two of the eighteen fighting for victory, Thijs Maartense of the Netherlands and Robert Schweiger, had to pull out of Monday's Stage Start Competition because of altitude sickness - suffered as the adventure climbs to 4 kilometres (2.5 miles) above sea level for Stage 4 - its final and most gruelling element. "I could barely see straight my head hurts so much," said the Dutchman.

With the two big Europeans disabled by the effects of the thin mountain air, the rest of the competitors voted for their partners Victor of Taiwan and Gabriel Maldonado of Spain to not be allowed to score in their absence.

Knowing that he would not score, Victor decided to endure the pain of the Stage Start competition regardless. "This is really special scenery," he said of the world's largest salt lake - Salar de Uyuni - on which the competition by mountain bike, Land Rover vehicles and on foot was held. "But more importantly I want to do every part of the Challenge. I have come all this way. I want to do it."

A shimmering flat of salt up to 4 metres deep, peppered with cacti-impregnated islands including the oddly named Isla del Pescador (Fisherman's Island), the salt lake does occasionally flood as subterranean Andean aquifers force water up to the surface. On Monday though, the lake was dry and crusty.

"The aim of the task today is for the teams to cycle to one of the islands, collect the keys for their car and the electronic dibbers (scoring markers) and meet their partner (who had to climb another island, memorise the shape of four more distant islands before driving out onto the lake to identify the islands from memory. First one back is the winner," explained Competitions Director Simon Day.

Despite the thin air, the 16 remaining competitors blasted off at breakneck speed – half haring across the Hollywood smile-white salt and half scrabbling up the crumbling volcanic rock of the island – trying to avoid the razor-sharp cacti.

Australian Alina McMaster was the first biker back but she had to wait for Eleonora Audra of Brazil to climb back down the mountain before they could start the memory test out on the lake.

All eyes were then on the event's current Number 2, Martin Dreyer of South Africa. He had done the heart-splitting mountain climb and now had to wait for Pablo Burattini to come back on his bike.

Across the salt pedalled Pablo like a mirage, cheered on by the throng of support staff and media, before flinging down his bike and clambering into their Discovery 3.

"Where are the keys," shouted Martin, starting to panic. Pablo's face turned ashen. "I had them, right here," he snapped back, patting his pocket. He feared he had dropped them somewhere out on the salt. But just as Martin was about to pedal off to find them,

Pablo found them in the car.

Seconds later there was more drama for the top competitors. Dmitry Timokhin, the event leader, failed to collect both dibbers out on the far-flung island so then had to make the 10km return cycle ride a second time in the blazing afternoon sun. It meant he and team mate Takashi Sugiyama of Japan dropped crucial points on the double-scoring event as the Challenge comes to a head. "I think my place in the top four is safe but it was a stupid mistake. We cannot afford any more mistakes like that," said the Russian.

Overall winners of the Stage Start were Alina and Nora – the all girl team back together once again. "Its great to have won today but its going to take a lot to make a difference to the overall scores," said Alina. "We need not for Dmitry or Martin to make mistakes but Kris (Janssens) or J-B (Jean Baptiste Calais) to trip up or go down. That does not sound very nice but that's competition."

The lasting memory for all competitors was how hard it was to race in such thin air. Martin Dreyer believed that the lack of oxygen meant he could only operate at 45% compared to 100% at sea level in Rio last week. "I even had to walk for a while...." admitted the iron man.



Stage 3 - Day 22 report

May 14 2006



In one week's time the winner of the 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge will be known. The blood, sweat and even tears of a month's unrelenting physical and mental exertion on two continents will have sifted just one victor from a pool of eighteen.

With six days to go and the most physically challenging conditions still to endure in the frigid and oxygen-starved Bolivian Andes, half of the competitors have a real chance at walking away with a brand new Range Rover.

"I have to believe I can still win and will do everything to make sure that chance is kept alive right to the very end," said the UK entrant Brian Reynolds on the eve of the Challenge leaving the beautiful whitewashed colonial city of Sucre for Stage 4.

The title contenders knew that the final round of Team Partner Selection in Sucre would be the most critical choice of colleague so far. To get the best chance at the title, they knew that they must have the strongest possible team mate for the high altitude and potentially high drama - last push to the finish line.

In the last three weeks Team Partner Selection has been an intriguing mix of picking the strongest and the most complimentary buddy for the demanding activities. But as some of the potentially perfect marriages have ended in tears, the politics of the adventure have come into play.

At least one of the top contenders is not particularly popular, and rumour and counter-rumour circulated as the competitors gathered on stage in a majestic Sucre courtyard that some partner selections might be strategic to alter the balance of power at this critical point.

"Pick carefully," advised Event Director Niki Davies. "You have worked hard to get to this stage. It is crucial who you pick. You will have to work, drive, cook and even share a tent with them. I know a lot of plotting has been going on. This last Stage will determine the winner."

In the end, as the competitors in positions 11-18 each picked one of those in positions 1-10, any cunning went out of the window as the most successful competitors so far were quickly snapped up by others - determined to use the most powerful team mates for a helping hand up the leader board.

Pablo Burattini of Argentina was first to pick. And he chose South African Martin Dreyer – a regular feature in the top 3. "I am hoping that Martin will help me get into the top four," admitted Pablo.

Martin said he was just glad the selection was over. "It is the most stressful part of the week for me," he said. Dreyer still has niggling leg problems from an injury sustained in Laos.

Takashi Sugiyama, second to choose, selected the current Yellow Jersey bearer Dmitry

Timokhin of Russia. "Pablo made my choice easy. Dmitry is a very strong partner," said Tak. The final pairing to come together was one with a proven track record; the all girl team of Brazilian Eleonora Audra and Australian Alina McMaster. The two were happy to be back together but, mathematically, it will be hard for one of them to make the all-important top four at the end of Stage 4. The top four at the end of Stage 4 will go head-to-head in the Challenge Final on Saturday to determine the eventual winner.

After 48 hours in Sucre, the convoy of over 60 Tangiers Orange Land Rover vehicles pulled out of town on Sunday heading even higher into the Andes on a transit leg to get even deeper into the Bolivian Altiplano, ready for Monday's first competitive events.

The transit drive followed a stunning mountain road west to Potosi, at 4100 metres (13,500 feet) the highest city in the world. In the seventeenth century, the silver-rich city was bigger than Madrid or London.

From Potosi, the convoy swung off the sealed highway into the barren cacti-strewn high desert that swathes southern Bolivia. Settlements are few and far between up here and humans are almost outnumbered by llamas.

So it was a bit of a shock to see the whole village of Ticatica turn out to welcome the Challenge, blocking the road with bands playing pan pipes and parading 3 metre-high decorations wrapped in alpaca. The competitors ended up dancing down the main street before the onset of dusk prompted a reluctant departure for the overnight camp.

On Monday the largest salt lake in the world beckons. So do -14 degree temperatures and the start of Stage 4 - the Stage which will determine the 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge winner.



Stage 3 - Day 21 report

May 13 2006



It was time to take a break. At the end of one of the toughest weeks of competition thus far on the Land Rover G4 Challenge, the teams finally got the opportunity to rest up in Sucre before the final push to the end.

'It is great just to be able to clear the head,' said Australia's Alina McMaster. 'We really need the time off, just to step back from the competition a bit.'

But the time off, however, didn't mean that the 18 men and women could sit around the cafes and restaurants of Sucre. They gave up their rest in order to complete the second of two community projects initiated by Land Rover.

The first took place at the end of Stage 1, when the competitors helped to complete a school project at Ban Nahai in Laos. This time it was the turn of the Escuela Granja, which was originally built in 1938. Situated in the village of Tarabuco, approximately 60 kilometres from Sucre, the school is one of two in the area.

However, the main school in town is funded by the government, whereas the Escuela Granja, which serves mainly the nearby farming community, relies solely on contributions from the parents of the children who not only go to school there, but are also served their main daily meal by the school.

In recent times, however, the school has fallen on hard times, and was in dire need of support. Land Rover offered to contribute with funds, expertise – and the many hands of its 18 competitors in the 2006 Challenge.

'I'm really excited to go and help at another school,' said Ireland's Gary Robertson. 'After the project in Laos I had to wonder if we really helped or not. I mean, skilled local artisans could probably have done a better job, but it was just great to get our hands dirty and pitch in.'

But even though most of the competitors claimed that the visit to Escuela Granja was a good opportunity to 'clear their minds', the Challenge was never far from their minds. 'We all do think about the Team Partner Selection that is coming tonight,' said Alina. 'This is the worst time in the Challenge – waiting for Selections to take place again.'

With the sounds of a local band cheering them on, the competitors got on – not with the Challenge, but rather with the business of helping other people. 'In the end it is great for us to have a rest,' said Dmitry Timokhin of Russia, 'but it is doubly great because we are really helping people. One day for us is almost nothing, but for them it can make all the difference.'

One of the competitors missed out on today's activities. South Africa's Martin Dreyer is still nursing his injured thigh, and Competitions Director Simon Day decided to give him a day off. 'The injury hasn't gotten worse, but then again it hasn't gotten any better either. The swelling is gone, but the pain is still the same,' said the South African.

In the end the competitors got a day that offered a change of pace. The school was painted, furniture was assembled and a new kitchen and toilets were constructed by the Land Rover team. With the competitors applying the final touches today, the children of Escuela Granja can now look forward to decent meals and hygienic toilets. The school may have been constructed in 1938, but the pupils and parents will never forget the contribution of the men and women of the 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge.



Stage 4 - Team Partner Selection

May 13 2006

The Team Partner Selection for Stage 4 of the 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge is as follows, in the order that the choices were made:

Argentina Pablo Burratini - **South Africa** Martin Dreyer

Japan Takashi Sugiyama - **Russia** Dmitry Timokhin **YJ**

Ireland Gary Robertson - **Belgium** Kris Janssens

Costa Rica Claribett Vega - **France** John-Baptiste Calais

Greece Michael Tsouatos - **Turkey** Tolga Senefe

Germany Robert Schweiger - **Spain** Gabriel Maldonado

Italy Marco Martinuzzi - **United Kingdom** Brian Reynolds

Taiwan Victor Huang - **Netherlands** Thijs Maartense

Brazil Eleonora Audra - **Australia** Alina McMaster



Stage 3 - Day 20 report

May 12 2006



The final day of Stage 3 dawned over the massive expanse of a sandy river beach, with the colossal span of the Santa Rosa Bridge in the background. 'I don't know what we have to do today, but I can see loads of ropes dangling off the bridge, and that looks exciting,' said Belgium's Kris Janssens as he surveyed the structure.

His assessment was right on the money as far as excitement went. The competitors had to complete a bridge swing en-mass, before jumaring (climbing) back up the same ropes. Next up was a short mountain bike section, followed by a run, kayak and final scramble up a rocky ridge to

the finish.

If any of the competitors were still asleep by the time the Stage Final kicked off, the spurt of adrenaline they received when they stepped backwards into the void would've certainly woken them up. This was their opportunity to score points as individuals rather than teams, and with only one Stage to go, their performances here this morning could prove absolutely critical.

'That jump was just crazy,' said France's Jean-Baptiste Calais after the competition. 'I love rope work and climbing, but just jumping into the unknown was wild. I did it because it was a competition, but I'd never have done it out of choice.' His performance belied his misgivings about the jump, however, as he powered to yet another second place in the Stage Final.

Another potent performance came from the UK's Brian Reynolds, who managed to bounce back from extreme fatigue after partnering Belgium's Kris Janssens during the week, to finish third in the Stage Final. 'I was so tired yesterday. Kris is so much stronger and faster than me, so he pushed me to the point of collapse,' he said. 'I think much of my success in this competition was thanks to good preparation, and just getting on with it.' Brian started his climb up the rope long before he stopped swinging, giving him an edge over many of the others.

But there were two performances that really shone today. The first belonged to Alina McMaster from Australia, whose inspiring performance secured a fourth place in the competition. 'I wanted to make it into the top four of today's competition,' she explained, 'and if I didn't struggle so much with the splash cover on my kayak, I may even have made third. I'm a girl and I struggled to get my skirt on! Can you believe it?'

The other shining star was that of Russia's Dmitry Timokhin, who shimmied up the rope after the bridge swing at high speed. He made the jumar look easy, while many others struggled to untwist their ropes and make their way to the top of the bridge. 'I love anything to do with climbing,' reckoned Dmitry, 'I thought that if I could get a bit of a lead by getting back onto the bridge quickly, I might just win today's competition.'

And that is exactly what he did. Dmitry reached the bridge and the changeover to the mountain bike first, and built up a lead of nearly 250 metres over Jean-Baptiste. But as the Frenchman reached the bridge, there was a look of grim determination on his face. The race was on.

J-B, as he is known on the Challenge, put in an immense effort to chase down the Russian, and by the time they reached the end of the kayaking, with only a short scramble up a rocky ridge to go, the lead was down to 10 metres. But catching someone as he scrambles up a loose incline is almost impossible, and the Frenchman had to settle for second place. At the top of the bridge, Dmitry collapsed in a heap. J-B, however, simply stood there waiting for Dmitry to get up so he could congratulate him. It was clear that there is still a lot of fight left in Team France.

Another rousing performance came from Martin Dreyer of South Africa. 'I really struggled with the jumar,' he said. 'I'm not used to the way that the equipment was set up, and my rope also got badly twisted.' Martin was all but last off the bridge and onto the mountain bike, but he overhauled 11 competitors on his charge to the finish. 'I just pushed as hard as I could, and ended up in sixth place. I really wanted to finish in the top three today, but in the end I am very pleased with the result.'

He had good reason to be pleased – his performance on Stage 3 meant that Martin retained the number two spot in the overall leader board, right behind Russia's Dmitry Timokhin. Kris Janssens of Belgium is currently in third place overall, with France's Jean-Baptiste Calais completing the top four. In fifth place overall, however, is Brazil's Eleonora Audra, who partnered South Africa's Martin Dreyer in Stage 3.

Her third place in Stage 3 pushed her up from eleventh position all the way into the top five, and she is now also the leading female competitor having overtaken her former team mate, Australian Alina McMaster. 'I just can't believe it,' she gushed when the results were announced. 'I know it is still a long way to go, and a lot hinges on tomorrow's Team Partner Selection, but I am just so glad to be in this position.'

Another big mover has been England's Brian Reynolds, who shot up from thirteenth position to the seventh spot. He also achieved the fourth best score for Stage 3. 'I was hoping to make it into the top three for the Stage, but I am still very pleased,' he said.

But it was Russia's Dmitry Timokhin who retained the leader's Yellow Jersey: 'This morning I wasn't sure that I'd be able to hang onto it, but now that it has happened, I am very happy.' The compact Russian competitor jumped up and down in celebration when the results were announced, and he is very positive about the final Stage. 'I think the key for Team Partner Tolga (Senefe, from Turkey) and I was to tackle each day with the aim of not making mistakes,' he said. 'We wanted to score well, yes, but we weren't willing to take risks. It has paid off for us.'



Stage 3 Results - Competitor Ranking

May 12 2006



Individual scores following the completion of Stage 3 result in the competitor ranking as follows:

1st - Dmitry Timokhin - Russia - Yellow Jersey

2nd - Martin Dreyer - South Africa

3rd - Kris Janssens - Belgium

4th - Jean-Baptiste Calais - France

5th - Eleonora Audra - Brazil

6th - Alina McMaster - Australia

7th - Brian Reynolds - UK

8th - Tolga Senefe - Turkey

9th - Gabriel Maldonado - Spain

10th - Thijs Maartense - Netherlands

11th - Pablo Burratini - Argentina

12th - Takashi Sugiyama - Japan

13th - Gary Robertson - Ireland

14th - Claribett Vega - Costa Rica

15th - Michael Tsautos - Greece

16th - Robert Schweiger - Germany

17th - Marco Martinuzzi - Italy

18th - Victor Huang - Taiwan



Stage 3 - Day 19 report

May 11 2006



It was in a little village called La Higuera that the famous revolutionary, Che Guevara was finally captured and executed. And it was in this same little village that France's Jean-Baptiste Calais and his team partner, Costa Rica's Claribett Vega, considerably increased their points tally in Stage 3 of the Land Rover G4 Challenge.

'We were the only teams to visit the location, I think,' said the Frenchman. 'But we didn't visit it for any nostalgic reasons. I like Che and all he stood for, but for us it was just another competition location.'

Since they were the only team to visit La Higuera, they earned maximum points at the location in a day marked by long distance driving, tough competitions and the final chance to score points as a team before the end of the Stage. But the driving conditions and vast distances proved to be the undoing of some teams. 'We only managed to score at three locations today, where most other teams managed four,' said South Africa's Martin Dreyer. 'This was one of the worst days so far on the Challenge for me.'

Other teams were more upbeat, having not only visited more locations, but also stopping to enjoy more of the scenery. 'This place is so beautiful. Every time you come around a bend in the road, the scenery changes,' said Claribett Vega, 'it is always breathtaking and never predictable.'

She did, however, point out that the heat of Laos is sorely missed in the high Bolivian mountains. 'It was so cold last night,' she continued. 'We had ice on our tent in the morning, and it was absolutely freezing during the night.'

But while the climate may have less warmth on offer – especially at night - there is no shortage of heat in the competition itself. Today teams again had the opportunity to visit up to six scoring locations, but winding tracks fringed by gaping chasms ensured that their progress was slow at best. 'We wanted to visit the Che Guevara Competition site, but since the roads are so bad we decided not to gamble by pushing too hard,' said Turkey's Tolga Senefe. 'In the end we visited fewer competitions, but at least we are safe and our vehicle is in one piece.'

The barren and unforgiving landscape also served as the backdrop for one of the most exhilarating team competitions so far on the Challenge. It was called Downhill Madness, and saw teams mountain biking down a ragged track from an elevation of 2,200 metres. The trail consisted of scores of switchback turns, littered with pieces of rock and other natural debris. With sheer drops and yawning washouts a constant worry, teams had to push themselves as hard as they dared down the 15 kilometre course, which dropped more than 1,000 metres vertically. 'What a great course,' said Ireland's Gary Robertson, 'the scenery was awe-inspiring. Pity we had to concentrate so hard on keeping the bikes on the track.'

The course soon showed that anybody who lost concentration for even a single second was going to pay the price. Ironically it was Gary Robertson who first felt the wrath of the mountain: 'I was maybe one kilometre into the course when I got a puncture.' But

he wasn't the only one – in the end all but three competitors ended up having to repair punctures, but some found it tougher than others. 'I also got a puncture early on,' said Australia's Alina McMaster, 'but my pump wouldn't work! In the end I picked up my bike and started running down the mountain with it.' Luck smiled on the tough Australian, as she came upon Thijs Maartense of the Netherlands who was also busy mending a tyre. 'Thijs loaned me his pump, and after that I got back on the road pretty quickly,' said Alina.

But punctures weren't the biggest worry during the spectacular descent. 'For us, this was an extremely high risk activity,' said Event Medical Director Mike Irani. 'Thankfully we planned it very well, briefed the competitors to race sensibly and had every eventuality covered.' This included having a helicopter on standby for a possible medical evacuation. In the end the only damage was to the tyres – and some egos.

'It started quite well for me, and after the first couple of kilometres I had already pulled out quite a big lead,' said Belgium's Kris Janssens, who is quite a serious mountain biker. 'But then my rear tyre blew. At the same time the camera bag that I had strapped to my seat came loose and got caught between the rear wheel and the frame.' Kris tried to continue despite the problems, but the vibrations caused the rear wheel to drop out from under the bike and he had to stop for repairs. In the end he had to settle for 7th place.

Jean-Baptiste Calais was first down the mountain, followed by Brian Reynolds from the UK and Russia's Dmitry Timokhin. The tough mountain bike race was the last of the team competitions for Stage 3. All that remains is tomorrow's Stage Final, where each competitor scores points as an individual. Kris Janssens has a very balanced view on his future in the Challenge: 'I expect to drop out of the Top Four after tomorrow's Final, but I hope to get back into the top bunch before the end of next week. It will be tough – but nothing is impossible.'

Tolga Senefe has a completely different take on the situation: 'I know I don't realistically stand a chance of winning the Challenge anymore,' he said, 'but I am still looking forward to Stage 4. I will push hard, and try to be a good team partner, but above all I will enjoy it.'



Stage 3 - Day 18 report

May 11 2006



Controversy marked the end of one of the most physical days to date on the Challenge. It all kicked off when two teams – France/Costa Rica and Netherlands/Italy arrived at the Geofalls competition location – where a spectacular waterfall cascaded down a gash in the mountain like a bridal veil - within minutes of the cut-off time. There was some discussion between the teams and the marshal at the site, after which they were allowed to start the climbing and abseiling competition.

The tranquillity of the sandy riverbank below the falls was shattered, however, when two teams who had arrived earlier completed the competition. 'We thought we were the only teams that could arrive here in time,' said Ireland's Gary Robertson who, together with team partner Takashi Sugiyama braved the bitterly cold water of the pool below the falls first. 'I think these teams may have arrived too late, and they shouldn't be allowed to compete.'

His anger was well justified, as allowing the two late arrivals to complete the task would have a direct influence on all four the team's points tally for the day. But it all turned to nothing a short while later, when the marshals were forced to close down the competition for safety reasons. 'It was nothing major,' said Competitions Director Simon Day. 'One of the ropes started showing some signs of wear, and we deemed it safer to stop the competition rather than risk serious injury.'

As a result, both the teams that arrived near the cut-off time failed to complete the event, and earned no points despite their heroic efforts. 'I'm very disappointed,' said Costa Rica's Claribett Vega. 'We had worked so hard, and pushed so hard to get here in time, and now it is all for nothing.' Her team partner, France's Jean-Baptiste Calais, had a much more fiery response: 'Why did they let us compete – getting freezing cold and soaking wet – if we couldn't get the points?'

And Jean-Baptiste had reason to be disappointed, because if ever there was a day on the Challenge for scoring points, and lots of it, today was it. Teams awoke to a perfect day with not a cloud in the cool Bolivian sky, but the peace of the morning didn't last long as they fired up their V8s and headed off to haul in as many points as daylight would allow.

First stop for all of the teams was a competition site called Sketchy Bridge, where they had to abseil, jummar, kayak, run and navigate their way around a spectacular river gorge. As with most of the competitions in this year's Challenge, the action turned into a sharp sprint, rather than the longer endurance-style events that marked the 2003 Challenge. 'I've been doing adventure racing for six years now,' said Claribett Vega, 'but this is totally different. It is really hard to get into a rhythm when the competitions are so short and sharp.'

Something else that the competitors have found hard in Bolivia has been navigating. The landscape has changed dramatically over the last two days, as the Challenge moves from jungle to mountain and on through to the high plains for which the country is famous. Yet there are certain elements that remain the same throughout the country, and none of them help with navigation.

'It is really hard to navigate in this country,' said Russia's Dmitry Timokhin. 'Many villages and roads aren't on any of the maps, and all the roads look the same. It is almost impossible to find your way.' He may be exaggerating a little, but most of the other teams agree that Bolivia is a lot tougher than Laos. 'Yes, there are many roads on the ground that aren't on the maps, but just think how hard it would've been if there were many roads on the maps that didn't exist,' added Thijs Maartense from the Netherlands.

Navigation isn't the only thing that has gotten a lot tougher now that the Challenge is in South America. 'The competitions have been stepped up a gear,' reckoned Martin Dreyer from South Africa. 'It is just getting tougher and tougher, and we haven't even reached high altitude yet.'

In the mean time most teams are quite happy with their pairings, and even language problems seem to be a thing of the past. A notable exception would be that of Victor Huang of Taiwan, who injured his leg on a horse riding competition yesterday. During a running/navigation competition today, he complained bitterly about the state of his leg to team partner Gabriel Maldonado from Spain. 'I thought Victor was telling me that he couldn't continue, so we stopped,' explained Gabriel. 'But he was just saying that his leg was sore and that we should take it slow. I misunderstood and it cost us some points.'



Stage 3 - Day 17 report

May 9 2006



With the Stage Start in Rio taken care of, the time had come for the competitors to settle back into the familiar rhythm of the Challenge: The metronome-like beat of camping and competing that is set to continue almost un-interrupted until the end. And for most of them it was a welcome return to the cockpit of their orange vehicles – almost as welcome as the about-face in the climate, which has changed the fashion of the Challenge from T-

shirts and shorts to long trousers and the occasional fleece.

But shortly after sunrise it was fleeces off and bathing suits on for the opening competition in Bolivia. Competitions Director Simon Day had cooked up a sadistic brain teaser for the teams' Strategy Pit competition, combining a swim across a lake together with a memory test. Competitors had to swim across the frigid water to a board with a list of places they had either already visited on the Challenge, or will visit in the next couple of weeks. They had to memorise the list, swim back across the lake and write them all down in the correct order from North to South.

It was the team from Ireland/Japan that emerged with the correct answers first, and with bands of cloud lit in yellow across the sky, Takashi Sugiyama recorded his second victory in Strategy Pit competitions. 'It is great for me, and for our team,' said Tak of their result, 'I was lucky to win it with Claribett Vega (Costa Rica) on the first Stage, and I am very glad we'll be leaving first again each morning on this Stage.'

Next to crack the tough mental and physical nut was Spain/Taiwan, followed by Costa Rica/France and South Africa/Brazil. For South Africa's Martin Dreyer, their result this morning was encouraging: 'School was never my strong point, so I'm surprised we didn't come last. But being in the middle of the pack suits us – it gives us some time to sort out our plans and navigation in the mornings.'

Team Australia/Greece came through next, with Italy/Netherlands right behind them. The remaining teams of Russia/Turkey and Germany/Argentina were literally left standing in the dust as team after team departed. Tolga Senefe of Turkey returned to the lake for a third time to check on some names, but his team partner, Dmitry Tomkhin, noticed a spelling error in one of the names, fixing the last problem and earning them the right to depart from camp – but Tolga was out of earshot by the time Dmitry found the error, and ended up swimming for nothing.

After the Strategy Pit competition, it was all systems go for the competitors. They had six competition locations to visit – or as many of them as they could fit into the day. But the lush Bolivian forest had a surprise in store for them: Powdery soft sand that soon trapped some unwary competitors. The first to fall foul was Brazil's Eleonora Audra, who got bogged down to the point where they had to winch the Discovery 3 out of the deep sand. The team lost a lot of time, ultimately paying the price later in the afternoon when they failed to reach a competition site due to missing the cut-off time by mere Later in the day, team Russia/Turkey also experienced just how cruel the Bolivian sand can be, when one after the other their vehicles got stuck. 'First it was our Team Support vehicle, and then we got stuck ourselves,' said Tolga Senefe of Turkey. 'We winched each other out and started moving again, but then our media vehicles were trapped in the sand.' It turned into a comedy of errors that cost them nearly two hours – and stripped them of

the chance to score points at a fourth location, something all of the other teams managed to do.

In addition to swimming and memorising, today's competitions also included driving and navigation tasks, as well as mountain biking and orienteering. The driving proved entertaining in the soft sand, especially with the steering wheels now on the other side of the vehicles. 'I must admit that it hasn't bothered me all that much,' said Alina McMaster from Australia, 'except that I end up getting in on the wrong side every now and again.'

There was also a bit of local flavour in the mix at a competition called Puddles Rodeo – a compulsory task that saw competitors riding horses to a variety of checkpoints and back, earning points for time and accuracy. Many competitors had very little or no experience with horses, while others seemed to be at one with the animals.

Brazil's Eleonora Audra was one of the competitors who had either watched *The Horse Whisperer*, or really grew up on a farm with her own horse as she claimed. 'It was one of the most amazing events so far,' she gushed after her powerful performance. 'The horse did all the work and we rested a bit. It was great.'

She not only blitzed the course, but also had to push her partner – Martin Dreyer, who usually does the pushing – to keep up. 'I'm more tired than the horse,' he said. 'I thought this was going to be easy, but I chose to wear shorts and now I have a blister on my leg.'

The proudest moment of the day, however, had to belong to Victor Huang of Taiwan. Having never ridden a horse before in his life, he bravely mounted a medium-sized palomino and inelegantly galloped off behind his team partner Gabriel Maldonado from Spain. His bravery didn't last long, however, as his mount unceremoniously toppled over – leaving Victor with a slight injury on his leg. 'It was fun until I fell,' said Victor of his ride, 'and I'm disappointed that I didn't do better.' While he may have looked a bit like Don Quixote when he first rode off, but unlike the fictional character, Victor faced his windmills – and won.



Stage 3 - Day 16 report

May 8 2006



The sounds of a typical Bolivian brass band may have had the competitors tapping their feet as they arrived in Santa Cruz, but beneath the veneer cast by the relaxed atmosphere at Viru Viru airport, they all had the same thought: Let's get it on!

After the marathon flight from Bangkok to Rio, the brief visit to Brazil's famous city offered only a short respite. Only 16 hours after the Stage Start, it was time to board yet another flight – this time headed for the fourth and final country in this year's Challenge – a country that will not only host the event during the last two Stages, but also the country where the overall winner will be crowned at the end of next week.

'The Challenge is all about the journey,' said front-runner Martin Dreyer (South Africa), 'not only physically, but also mentally. It is almost a pity that there is such a great prize at the end, because you should really want to take part in this just for the mental rewards.'

The tough South African will be hoping to cement his position near the top of the leader board, as all the top competitors will use Stage 3 to jostle for position. 'This is really the last chance for anybody to make a big move,' said Competition Director Simon Day. 'All the Stages are important, but while Stages 1 and 2 give you the opportunity to build a good base; it is Stage 3 that really sets you up for a big push towards the end.'

But maximising points in Stage 3 may prove difficult for some teams, as they adjust to a new country and new team partner. Once again the language of the host country has changed – from Thai and Lao in Stage 1 and 2, Portuguese in Rio to Spanish in Bolivia. The teams have also exchanged their Range Rover Sport for Land Rover Discovery 3 vehicles and the steering wheels are now on the left, rather than the right – all things that are new, and add another dimension to the already frenetic pace of the Challenge.

'The climate has also changed significantly,' said Challenge Medical Director Mike Irani, 'and it is going to get a lot tougher as we near the end of the Challenge.' It is not only the weather that has become a lot cooler and less humid than in Asia, but the altitude will also soon become another element to factor in. 'We are at 400m above sea level now,' continued Irani. 'By the end of the week we'll be at 3600m, with another massive push to 4600m to come in the final Stage.'

According to the highly experienced doctor, the gradual ascent this week will be good for acclimatisation, but even so the altitude will take its toll on the competitors. 'The thin air will make them feel even more tired, and they may struggle to get enough air into their lungs. Headaches and nausea are the trademarks of high altitude sickness.'

However, it is the rapid ascent in the final Stage that promises to have the greatest impact on the competitors. 'Going up slowly, like this week, hardly ever causes any problems,' said Irani. 'But the fast climb next week may be a different story – we'll have to keep a close eye on everybody, and react as soon as any symptoms of altitude sickness appear.'

But that is next week. This week the competitors face new roads, new conditions and a whole new set of challenges, that promises to deliver even more excitement and adrenaline than those in Laos. Bolivia, for some, offers great rewards and the promises of a shot at the final. Others may find the going much tougher, and end up seeing their precious points dissolve into the thin mountain air.



Stage 3 - Day 15 report

May 7 2006



It was a dream start to Stage 3 of the Land Rover G4 Challenge for the home team. Even though Brazil's Eleonora Audra hails from Sao Paulo rather than Rio de Janeiro, her victory in the Stage Start together with Martin Dreyer from South Africa, had the local crowd on Copacabana Beach on their feet.

With cheers of 'Brazil, Brazil' ringing throughout the purpose-built arena, the 27-year old Graphic Designer sprinted to the finish, narrowly beating her former team mate, Alina McMaster from Australia. 'We just looked across at each other during the race and wished each other good luck,' said Eleonora. 'But it wasn't easy to compete against my former team mate like that. We are still great friends.'

The all-girl team of Brazil and Australia had been together during the first half of the Challenge, but even though Eleonora had the first choice during the morning's Team Partner Selection, and could've chosen Alina again, she opted instead for Martin Dreyer – one of the most powerful and respected competitors on the Challenge. 'Both Alina and I realised that we had to split up if either of us wanted a shot at making it into the top four at the end of the Challenge,' said Nora of her choice.

Alina – the only female in the top ten – was selected by Michael Tsaoutos from Greece. 'I only chose her to make my wife jealous,' he quipped. 'Seriously though, she is much faster than me, so I will have to push myself to keep up.'

For Martin Dreyer, it was a dream come true: 'Nora and I had spoken about the possibility of teaming up three days ago, so it didn't come as a surprise. Even so I'm glad not to be paired with someone from the back of the bunch – I really need to score some points this Stage, and I believe Nora and I will make a fantastic team.'

Team Partner Selection was just the beginning of an all-action day on the beach for the Challenge. Under threatening skies the competitors lined up for the crucial selection, where Eleonora had the first pick. Next up was Turkey's Tolga Senefe, who opted for the current holder of the Yellow Jersey – Russia's Dmitry Timokhin. Their partnership also proved immediately successful, as they comfortably won their heat in the Stage Start competition.

'It was an amazing race,' said Dmitry. 'I was only chosen by Tolga a few minutes before the start, but he is a very strong competitor – and a great swimmer. Our partnership worked immediately.'

Britain's Brian Reynolds got next pick, and as a birthday present to himself decided to team up with Belgium's Kris Janssens - who had shot up the leader board after his highly successful partnership with Dmitry Timokhin in Stage 2. They came last in their heat today, however, after Brian had a tough time with the strong current and big surf on Copacabana Beach: 'Unfortunately the competition was structured in such a way that the swimming could make it or break it. I got badly mauled by the waves, and ended up not even knowing which way was up.'

He finally managed to make his way out to the marker buoy and safely back to the

beach, but by then both Team Russia/Turkey – who won the heat - and France/Costa Rica had already finished the race.

Despite narrowly losing to Russia/Turkey, France's Jean-Baptiste Calais was pleased with his team's performance. 'I was really happy when Claribett Vega (from Costa Rica) selected me this morning,' he said, 'because she is very intelligent and strong. We may not have won our heat, but we did beat Team England/Belgium, who are a really tough pair.'

Claribett was surprised to find Jean-Baptiste still free for selection this morning, as she was fourth to choose: 'I have no idea where I will end up in the rankings at the end of Stage 3, but teaming up with Jean-Baptiste can only improve my position. But I also feel some pressure to perform, because I don't want him to lose ground because of me.'

Germany's Robert Schweiger chose Pablo Burattini from Argentina, while Marco Martinuzzi from Italy teamed up with Thijs Maartense from the Netherlands. Once again the final decision was made by Victor Huang from Taiwan, who chose Gabriel Maldonado from Spain for himself – leaving Ireland's Gary Robertson and Japan's Takashi Sugiyama to form the remaining team.

'I really hope that choosing Gabriel will help me to improve my ranking,' said Victor of his decision. 'Getting off the bottom of the table is my priority, but I also selected him because we got to know each other very well during International Selections in England earlier this year.'

With four more days of competition in Stage 3, the teams are cautious to read anything into today's results. 'It was great to win here today,' said Martin Dreyer, who was treated like a long-lost friend by his partner's family who came to watch today, 'but there are still nearly two weeks to go, and a lot can happen.' The South African is still nursing an injury to his thigh, sustained during Stage 1, but claims that it is getting better each day.

The undoubted star of the day, however, was Nora Audra. 'Wow! I am the happiest woman in the world,' she said after winning the Stage Start competition with Martin, 'Winning here in Brazil, with the crowd cheering me on was amazing. I will never forget it.'



Stage 3 Start Competition Results - Day 15 May 7 2006



FINAL HEAT 4 - Head-to-head for winners of Heats 1-3 (Below)

1st Overall Brazil – South Africa

2nd Overall Australia - Greece

3rd Overall Russia - Turkey

Heat 1

1st Greece - Australia

2nd Germany - Argentina

3rd Spain – Taiwan

Heat 2

1st Brazil – South Africa

2nd Netherlands - Italy

3rd Japan - Ireland

Heat 3

1st Russia - Turkey

2nd France – Costa Rica

3rd Belgium – United Kingdom



Stage 3 - Team Partner Selection

May 7 2006



The Team Partner Selection for **Stage 3** of the 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge is as follows, in the order that the choices were made:

Brazil Eleonora Audra - **South Africa** Martin Dreyer

Turkey Tolga Senefe - **Russia** Dmitry Timokhin **YJ**

United Kingdom Brian Reynolds - **Belgium** Kris Janssens

Greece Michael Tsouatos - **Australia** Alina McMaster

Costa Rica Claribett Vega - **France** John-Baptiste Calais

Germany Robert Schweiger - **Argentina** Pablo Burratini

Italy Marco Martinuzzi - **Netherlands** Thijs Maartense

Taiwan Victor Huang - **Spain** Gabriel Maldonado

Ireland Gary Robertson - **Japan** Takashi Sugiyama



From the far side of the World...

May 6 2006



After two weeks of relentless competition in Thailand and Laos, proceedings came to a halt when the Land Rover G4 Challenge reached the halfway mark after Stage 2. The second half of the global Challenge is set to start on Rio de Janeiro's iconic Copacabana Beach on Sunday, but getting there from the far side of the world proved a challenge in itself.

Leaving behind the lush forests and gigantic limestone mountains surrounding Luang Prabang in Northern Laos, the group travelled back to the city where it all began two weeks ago – Bangkok, Thailand. But there was no time to visit the famous markets or temples this time - they boarded a charter flight bound for Rio de Janeiro via Johannesburg in South Africa.

The flight was scheduled to take 21 hours, including the refuelling stop in Johannesburg but complications with excess baggage and adverse flying conditions significantly delayed the flight in South Africa.

'In the end we were on the plane for nearly 27 hours,' said Britain's Brian Reynolds. 'It would've been more bearable if they had at least let us off the aircraft for a bit in Johannesburg, but we had to stay on board.'

For many competitors the mammoth stint aboard the Boeing 767-300 was their longest flight to date, and everybody felt the effects of sitting in a cramped seat for more than a full day.

'On the Challenge, we pride ourselves on making sure that each competitor will do at least one thing that he or she has never done before,' said Challenge Event Director Niki Davies. 'I don't think any of us expected the flight from Bangkok to be quite as long as this, but at least we've delivered on our promise.'

But there was a positive side to the time spent on board too. 'I desperately needed to rest the injury on my thigh,' said Martin Dreyer from South Africa, who had injured his leg during a mountain bike competition earlier in the week. 'The gruelling Stage Final in Laos didn't help the situation, but at least all the hours in the air helped with the healing process.'

And then there was the all-important issue of Team Partner Selections, which is due to take place on Rio de Janeiro's Copacabana Beach on Sunday morning. While the flight crew served drinks and meals throughout the flight, the competitors took the time to discuss their tactics.

'I've seen lots of people having serious discussions,' said Australia's Alina McMaster, 'but don't bank on finding out any details before Sunday morning's Selections.'

One of the big questions will be if Brazil's Eleonora Audra will pick the Ozzie for the third time in a row. The all-girl team had surprised everyone with their gutsy performances in the first two Stages, but Eleonora was non-committal when pushed on the issue: 'We'll have to wait and see how things develop,' was all she was willing to say.

While the Brazilian is keeping her cards close to her chest – she gets to pick first thanks to her 11th position overall – some competitors are clearly hot property, and Britain's Brian Reynolds is considered one of the strongest competitors not currently in the top ten.

But Reynolds has been struggling with problems of his own. 'I've struggled with a stomach bug for quite some time now,' he said. 'Every time it seems to settle, but then as soon as I eat something, it all starts again.' Even so, many of the top-ranked competitors are hoping that Reynolds will choose them, come Sunday morning.

While the competition itself may have been put on hold during the transfer time, the competitors are clearly focussed on the Stage ahead. And soon enough it will be back to drama and adrenaline, as the Challenge continues – this time on Rio's famous Copacabana Beach, with Sugarloaf Mountain and Cristo Redentor in the background.



Stage 2 - Day 12 report

May 4 2006



Russia's Dmitry Timokhin crowned a week of relentless team success by claiming the individual top spot in Luang Prabang today.

The lean Russian claimed the leader's Yellow Jersey from South Africa's Martin Dreyer, who slipped to second place - despite a week of gritty performances while carrying an injured thigh.

And the dramatic results, announced on a sweltering night in the Northern Lao city, saw Dmitry's team-mate, Kris Janssens, rocket up the table from twelfth to third place.

'I expected this result,' said Dmitry. 'Kris has really really helped me. We were physically and mentally together – I couldn't have come second once I was partnered with him.'

'He is stronger than me and has done more adventure racing, while I have experience of navigation. We helped each other and I'm so happy that he is in the top four.'

But he admitted there would be a price to pay for taking over the lead. 'First place is very pressured,' he said. 'But I'm not so sure it will be that important because at this stage everyone is trying to take advantage of each other.'

'The gap between Martin and myself is 41 points – or about 25 seconds. It's nothing. He won by a minute and twenty-five seconds in the Stage Final today. He is very strong.'

'I'll try to get the best possible results on the next Stage to get as big a distance as possible between me and the other guys. If there's less kayaking and swimming, and more climbing and abseiling, it should suit me.'

Martin Dreyer said Dmitry's victory, along with the raised ranking of Kris Janssens, underlined what a strong team they had been. 'They obviously did super well. I've lost the Yellow Jersey which means I'm not in the lead, but it's good not to feel a target any more.'

Martin, whose injury is continuing to improve, said he would be happy to partner Takashi Sugiyama again, but hoped the UK's Brian Reynolds might choose him. 'He needs to select the strongest person to stand a chance of getting into the top four. If he selects someone around fourth, he'll be shooting himself in the foot – he shouldn't help them, he should nail them.'

And the highly competitive Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Calais, stressed he was happy with his result, despite slipping from third to fourth place following a week of partnership with Argentina's Pablo Burattini. 'When I was picked by Pablo last week I thought I would end up seventh, so I'm happy with fourth. But I hope nobody good picks Dmitry because he got points this week from his partnership with Kris.'

Earlier in the day a tense Stage Final had once again seen the French competitor take the South African to the wire – and narrowly lose. The stunning combination of rope traverse, kayaking, mountain biking and an exhausting run across soft sand beneath a

300 metre high limestone rock face, saw Jean-Baptiste close the gap during the mountain biking, but fall back in the final sprint.

'I now know he is stronger than me,' he said. 'It's impossible. There was nothing I could do.'



Stage 2 Results - Competitor Ranking

May 4 2006



Individual scores following the completion of Stage 2 result in the competitor ranking as follows:

1st - Dmitry Timokhin - Russia - Yellow Jersey

2nd - Martin Dreyer - South Africa

3rd - Kris Janssens - Belgium

4th - Jean-Baptiste Calais - France

5th - Thijs Maartense - Netherlands

6th - Alina McMaster - Australia

7th - Gabriel Maldonado - Spain

8th - Pablo Burratini - Argentina

9th - Takashi Sugiyama - Japan

10th - Gary Robertson - Ireland

11th - Eleonora Audra - Brazil

12th - Tolga Senefe - Turkey

13th - Brian Reynolds - UK

14th - Michael Tsaoutos - Greece

15th - Claribett Vega - Costa Rica

16th - Robert Schweiger - Germany

17th - Marco Martinuzzi - Italy

18th - Victor Huang - Taiwan



Stage 2 - Day 11 report

May 3 2006



Russia and Belgium cemented their position as runaway Stage two leaders on a final mud-splattered day of team competition in Southeast Asia.

The power couple that have excelled across the board put on a virtually flawless display in five activities. They followed up a strong opening in the driving, where they hit four of the scoring gates – a tally only beaten by France and Argentina – with outstanding performances in climbing, running and the 'special task' of constructing a water pipe system.

A final triumph in the compulsory mountain biking - a gruelling eliminator around grazing water buffalo in the shadow of forested hills – rounded off a magnificent day and storming week for the pairing of Dmitry Timokhin and Kris Janssens.

'It was a very good day,' said Dmitry. 'I'd like to say grand things to Kris because he has been a real partner for me. I have good experience of navigating but not enough energy – and he is a very strong, very cool guy. I think his next partner will be really happy.'

'We've had great discussions between every competition. Today we couldn't work out whether to kayak or do the special task. We went from one to the other and back again, before deciding on the task. That was a good move – the kayaking took 45 minutes which would have worn us out before the mountain biking. There has been excellent communication between us.'

Their domination would have been even more complete if they'd tackled six activities as on the day before. 'We tried but it just wasn't theoretically possible today,' explained Kris. 'After the first three events we had made up 33 minutes, but there was such a big drive between the last two competitions.'

The leaders have pulled away despite a magnificent effort from the chasing pack. South Africa's Martin Dreyer and Japan's Takashi Sugiyama turned up the heat in the climbing - where they joined the top pair in completing the three toughest climbs in a good time. They also put in strong performances in the kayaking and mountain biking, where Martin's individual win placed the team second.

'Dmitry has been really lucky to have Kris as a partner,' he said. 'They've smoked every competition. But Tak has been phenomenal for me. I was very fortunate to get him out of the competitors placed 11 to 18. This week he may even end up in the top ten. That would be sweet: these couch potatoes are going to have to wake up unless they want to be beaten by a 50-year-old.'

And the competition promises to hot up next week with the news that Martin's injury is on the mend. 'It's not as bad as yesterday; I'm over the worst. If I last tomorrow I have three days off and I'm laughing.'

'Dmitry will get the Yellow Jersey for the next stage, but I'll be happy to be in the top

three. My goal is to get into the top four for the final head to head.'

Another of the hot chasing teams, Jean-Baptiste Calais and Argentina's Pablo Burattini, scored well in the driving, running – where they finished two minutes behind the leaders – and mountain biking, where the Frenchman's narrow individual defeat meant his team finished third.

But all today's sweat and grind has made little impact on the team rankings after a strategic error by Jean-Baptiste. In a bid to tackle six activities, the experienced mountaineer rushed away from the spectacular climbing competition after just two ascents, not wanting to waste time in the queue for the ropes. His haste carried an expensive price with the rules stating any less than three climbs fails to score.

'I was mad when I realised,' he said. 'We only completed four activities in the end. It was a big mistake, but I had to try.'

The day that ended in glorious sunshine had started with a torrent from the heavens. After competitors had buried their rivalry to help dig the convoy out of a muddy camp, they went straight into a driving event called Paddy Dash - quickly re-christened Paddy Splash.

With conditions rapidly deteriorating, the event again underlined the value of success in the weekly Strategy Pit Competition - which provides an early exit from camp and first go at the competitions. By the time the third team had left, today's paddy field had become a muddy skating rink punctuated by deep pools of water. Of the later departures only Ireland and Holland managed it with any kind of finesse.

Germany and Greece suffered particularly badly. They were still stuck there an hour after starting. 'It might have been fun to watch but it was hard,' said Robert Schweiger. We ended up being winched twice and winching our winchers. What a start!'



Flying Doctors

May 2 2006



As the Challenge heads towards the end of its second stage, there has been a catalogue of minor injuries including bruised ribs, strained muscles and bleeding legs – and that's exactly the way the Medical Director likes it. 'We have lots of cuts, abrasions, sunburn and insect bites,' says Dr Mike Irani. 'We can handle those easily.'

'The trouble is we're going through big injury country. I'm more worried about this event than any other I've worked on. I say this every time but Laos and Bolivia trump all the others for risk of serious injury.'

His cautious, slightly gloomy forecast reflects both destinations' dangerous cocktail of inaccessibility and limited medical facilities. 'Look in Lonely Planet,' he says. 'For serious medical injury in Laos it says go to Thailand – and in Bolivia it says go to Brazil.'

'Isolation and adventure are always hazardous; you can't have one without the other. Our competitions for the Challenge are designed to discover if the participants are up to it – and then we try to be as prepared as possible.'

For the 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge, preparation includes the most comprehensive event team ever assembled. Along with Dr. Irani, a consultant rheumatologist and general physician who recently returned from working at the Commonwealth Games in Melbourne, there is a consultant neurosurgeon, Professor Nik Patel, who also performs general surgery. 'I don't know of any other event that takes a neurosurgical consultant,' stresses Irani. 'But with brain and spinal injuries, time is vital.'

The two men are working alongside trauma and orthopaedic specialist Hans Bhinda, airomedical repatriation expert Dr Dominik Doerr, and leading dental doctor, Martin Joergens. Between them they've provided care in every corner of the world from Australia to Siberia to Argentina.

They're backed up by a formidable range of facilities: two ambulances, two medical cars with drivers able to double up as basic paramedics, two expandable canopy theatres for 'serious minor' injuries, including cuts, tears and setting bones, and a Llama helicopter on call.

For the first time the team are bringing along two amputation bags where severed limbs can be kept 'for a reasonable period of time' for sewing back in place.

And it's not just the experts who will be on call – every participant will play their part. 'We know everyone's blood group and eligibility to act as a donor,' he continues. 'There's no substitute for blood. You can provide short term care with fluid and plasma expanders but you have to give people blood to get oxygen to tissues.' As an extra back-up, a European company is on standby to fly in blood on the first available flight.

Competitors are certain to face what he describes as 'lamentable' road conditions, with wandering animals, erratic drivers and potholed surfaces, but extreme heat and humidity intensify the problem. It's reflected in the appalling road-accident figures for the

countries we are visiting – 25,000 people are killed each year on Thailand's roads and 5,000 in Laos.

'We know the cars can cope,' says Irani. 'But are the drivers up to it? I don't care about the results of the competition if someone does something stupid or is seriously injured, the whole event will be compromised. If people don't drive carefully we will warn them, then ground them if they continue to do it.'

Stirred into this intimidating brew is an additional worry about unexploded ordnance from the fighting in the 1960s and early 1970s, along with concern about some lethal insects and snakes in the wilderness.

Should a serious situation arise, Dr Dominik Doerr, an air repatriation expert, will step up to the plate. He rates conditions in Laos as 'the most extreme I've seen in twenty years, including Africa, which could be awful. One Thai trauma unit is just five miles from the route through Laos, but it takes seven hours to reach it by road.'

Bolivia presents less of a dilemma for air evacuation with emergency facilities in Santa Cruz and La Paz. 'The major concern is the altitude,' says Doerr. 'If a problem occurs at the route's highest point of 4,200 metres it may be too high for a helicopter. But 3,500 metres is usually possible so we'd have to make part of the descent by car.'

'I want people to go home with memories, not injuries. Enjoy the Challenge, just don't be complacent. We're not going to say, "You can't do this". Adventure is the spirit of the event. It's what drives us.'



Stage 2 - Day 10 report

May 2 2006



Tuesday. Groundhog Day. The Challenge served up another generous helping of the high energy, appetising fare dished out 24 hours earlier: more blazing sunshine, more competition points, more jaw dropping scenery – and more throbbing pain for South Africa's Martin Dreyer.

The hard as nails professional kayaker woke up to find the haematoma (blood clot on the muscle) on his thigh – had swollen further, requiring heavy strapping. One event later and the ambulance was called into action, providing a tighter wrapping – this time in bright yellow duct tape – for the expanding red lump. 'It's painful,' he admits. 'But it hasn't been a problem today. I'm still competing at a fast pace.'

It didn't look that comfortable in the final event of the day. Martin, who normally drives 50-year-old Takashi Sugiyama to faster times, appeared to limp some way behind him across the paddy fields. And he later revealed the angry purple bruise that started on the inside of his thigh had spread up the right side of his groin.

Away from the injury that's generating much interest on the Challenge, competitors continued to plunder points. With the competition locations easily reached from one principal road, the pressure switched to performance.

And they didn't disappoint. Most teams started off successfully on a stunning caving competition. As early morning ribbons of mist clung to the jungle-covered mountain face, competitors entered a gaping limestone cave to climb and abseil past dripping stalactite and rock sculptures worthy of an art gallery. From far below, their torches shone like pinpricks in an inky night sky.

The location set the tone for a day of superb driving and memorable competition. After crossing the Nam Lik River, where vehicles were winched up a muddy bank to relieve a growing tailback, most teams took on the test of kayaking and navigation on the Nam Ngun River.

While one competitor paddled around water punctuated by eerie dead tree trunks, the other provided directions from the shore. It gave the event a feel of the United Nations. Different variations on the English language – Taiwanese from Victor Huange, Turkish from Tolga Senefe and Brazilian from Eleonara Audra – mingled with the Spanish instructions of Claribett Vega.

'I couldn't help that much,' said Claribett. 'We'd drawn a map before starting, but once Gabriel was 400 metres away, he couldn't hear me. I tried sign language but he couldn't see it.'

After that teams drove into an ever more dramatic landscape of the jagged mountain ranges that surround Vang Vieng. The 4x4 competition might have been called Top Heavy, but the Range Rover Sport vehicles, laden down with kayaks and bikes, showed their true mettle on a seriously steep dirt track riddled with deep ruts.

'It was the best day so far,' said Germany's Robert Schweiger, as he sat in the vehicle under a shady palm. 'The two caving activities went well, and this driving is really enjoyable, with incredible views – although it's harder higher up.'

The relaxation didn't last. He and team mate Michael Tsaoutos of Greece spent 25 minutes trying to work out the strategy for the kayaking competition, allowing three teams to pass through ahead of them. And after the final event, Robert slumped, head in hands, over the bonnet of his vehicle.

By contrast it was, once again, a more profitable day for the Russian Belgium team that has taken the second Stage by the scruff of its neck. They completed a remarkable six competitions throughout the day, one more than anyone else, despite scoring zero points on the morning kayak after mistakenly checking in at a wrong location, and coming a disappointing fourth in the last activity of the day.

'It's still been a very good day despite that,' said Belgium's Kris Janssens. 'At the start of the day we knew that the estimated competition lengths and starting time controls meant we could tackle six competitions if we kept up to schedule. It underlines the importance of a good ranking in the Strategy Pit.'

However, today's two less than perfect results promise to make only a small dent in their week's impressive total score – and their main rivals both completed one less competition. France's Jean-Baptiste Calais again drove his less powerful team-mate, Argentina's Pablo Burattini, very hard but gave him credit for their victory in the late afternoon compulsory event. 'He spent an hour before working on the strategy; all I had to do was navigate. It was a good end to the day. I think we can still come in the top three teams.'

Martin Dreyer and Takashi Sugiyama also completed five competitions, missing the opportunity to do six after running out of time at the start of the 4x4 driving. It appeared to throw Martin a little and the normally focused South African forgot his helmet at the kayaking and had to be corrected before heading off in the wrong direction.

Their second slip of the day in the compulsory activity, when they needlessly used a car jack that sank into the paddy field, saw them finish in eight place. 'It was a screw up,' said Martin. 'But it has been a good day overall. We move on, look ahead and focus on tomorrow.'

And the fighting competitor has obviously won the respect of his Japanese team mate, Tak. 'I said I expected enlightenment on the Challenge – and being in a team with Martin is certainly that. He is one of the world's best adventure racers and partnering him is like partnering David Beckham in football. I'll remember it for the rest of my life.'



Stage 2 - Day 9 report

May 1 2006



Day nine and the Challenge witnessed blazing sun, teams filling their boots with competition points – and the power-couple of Russia and Belgium building relentlessly on the foundations they laid 24 hours earlier.

The most intensely competitive day of the event so far followed a far from an ideal night's sleep - after disturbances from a lost and lonely heifer wandering around the tents, mooring a high decibel 5am alarm call.

She wasn't the only one having problems with navigation. Italy's Marco Martinuzzi and Turkey's Tolga Senefe struggled to reach their first competition - ironically it was orienteering – and at one point ended up in thick, sloppy mud as orange as their Range Rover, with a tailback of media and support vehicles.

But other teams had more luck combining their GPS with 22-year-old Lao maps and prominent landmarks. By camp, most had managed to complete five competitions, including the spectacular final compulsory event - a combination of running, zip wiring across the generous expanse of the Nam Lik River, swimming and finally kayaking in front of hundreds of mesmerised locals.

'We were last to leave camp with our Strategy Pit ranking,' said Spain's Gabriel Maldonado. 'Then we did the mountain bike orienteering, where we ran through paddy fields carrying our bikes, which was crazy - it took one and a quarter hours. But we still had time to easily complete five competitions.'

A sharp contrast to the relatively small number attempted on Stage One, the extra activity meant a major change of focus for the teams. 'With less strategy needed to get around, there was more pressure on the actual event,' said Japan's Takashi Sugiyama. 'It meant you had to go flat out.'

And one team took full advantage. Russia's Dmitry Timokhin and Belgium's Kris Janssens followed up their strong opening to Stage two by producing the fastest performances in nearly all their chosen competitions, from kayaking to mountain biking to orienteering.

'It was a good day,' said Kris. 'All five were very physical and that suits us. Apart from Dmitry capsizing on the last one, which cost us a little time, it went really well. It was a lot better than last week where I was stressed and a lot of things went wrong.'

But the impressive performances were matched by the emergence of some remarkable teamwork. The faster, more powerful competitors in several of the pairings helped – and sometimes dragged – their new partners to the finish line. Spain's Gabriel Maldonado reached the top of a wicked hill, ditched his mountain bike and charged back to carry that of his tiring partner, Costa Rica's Claribett Vega. Similarly South Africa's Martin Dreyer could be seen running up the steep incline with his own bike on his back and his free hand pushing Tak's.

And France's Jean-Baptiste Calais, who constantly offered vocal encouragement to Argentina's Pablo Burattini, brought both mountain bikes up the hill and later placed his hand on his partner's back to speed him over Nam Lik Bridge. 'I'm doing just about everything, although Pablo is driving' he said. 'He's exhausted after every competition, but he's giving his all and you can't ask for anything more. I'm happy. We're doing OK.'

There was one surprising piece of role reversal in the UK and Taiwan team. Victor Huang, 18th after the first Stage, navigated his weakened partner, Brian Reynolds – the victim of a tummy bug – to a strong time in the orienteering. 'He is an awesome navigator,' said Brian. 'He could be in the top five if it weren't for the language barrier. I don't know why people have written him off.'

The UK competitor was far from the last injury of the day. Gary Robertson also had a tummy bug, Brazil's Eleonora Audra cut her shin and Martin Dreyer, already nursing a 'roastie' – a major graze - that became infected on his left leg, suffered a separate blow. After flying over the handlebars of his mountain bike and landing on his GPS, a huge swelling appeared on the inside of right thigh, and is now heavily bandaged.

'At least it's not a muscle injury,' he said, holding an ice pack over the serious protrusion before the final competition. 'It's just pain and you can put that to one side. They don't build South Africans like they used to.'" The man is too modest. He carried and pushed the two mountain bikes up the hill just a short time after sustaining the agonising injury – the most heroic moment of the Challenge to date.



Stage 2 - Day 8 report

Apr 30 2006



Competitors' fears about the supremacy of the new Russian Belgian partnership proved to be well-founded in spectacular fashion on the first day of the Challenge's second Stage, with a crushing double victory for the super fit, compact duo.

As evil rain clouds gave way to burning sunshine Dmitry Timokhin and Kris Janssens produced a high octane performance to triumph in the opening event – a fusion of running, swimming, kayaking and driving around the Mekong River's vast sand flats. In the shadow of a golden Stupa above the jungle outside Vientiane, their performance sent an ominous warning to close rivals.

Their chosen tactics to move heavy equipment – two kayaks, a tyre and a full jerry can – spread hundreds of yards apart, either side of the fast flowing river, showed their intimidating speed to full effect. While other competitors opted to transport their tyres in or alongside their kayaks, avoiding two exhausting 500-yard sprints, Dmitry and Kris were happy to put in the extra distance and drop theirs off, before turning to other tasks.

'We played to our strengths,' said Dmitry, who hardly broke into a sweat, despite the sweltering heat. 'We had lots of energy, dry shoes and dry clothes. We could run fast so why not do it? It's a very short race, like a sprint, so you should go flat out. When you get a chance like this, you give 100 per cent, maybe more.'

'When we saw the flow of the river, we decided to do the tyre first, then kayak to the jerry can. I'm not big so there was a lot of space between my legs, but it was very risky, I nearly overbalanced into the river.'

And Dmitry, part of the first-Stage winning team, who was breathing down leader Martin Dreyer's neck before the event, praised his new double act. 'We did some competitions together at International Selections. We understand each other – how the other half works.'

Meanwhile Martin, who last night pretended to offer his Yellow Jersey to the Russian – 'it'll be yours next week so take it' – came in third with his new team mate, Japan's Takashi Sugiyama. 'We couldn't have done three separate sprints like Kris and Dmitry,' he explained. 'They're far faster than us – so we worked to our strong points and brought the tyre back with the kayaks, before dropping it off and going to fetch the jerry can.'

'Tak's rib injury didn't hinder us and we didn't do too badly for a team with a combined age of nearly 90! We're pleased. The Stage Start offers good points and we only got ten less than Kris and Dmitry.'

Jean-Baptiste, currently third in the individual rankings, came in eighth with new partner, Pablo Burattini of Argentina – an escaped kayak was only retrieved after it had floated 100 yards – while the re-united pairing of Australia and Brazil also found the competition tough going.

'It's going to be harder if it's a heavy, physical event,' said Alina McMaster. 'So we obviously need to be cleverer. But there wasn't much scope for that in this race. It was fairly simple.'

It was a better day, however, for Victor Huang, who came in sixth place – his highest so far - along with new partner, the UK's Brian Reynolds. 'I did a lot of the physical work,' said Brian. 'But Victor's very strong and I need to give credit for that and use it more, otherwise I'll tire too quickly.'

One of the day's most impressive performances was the superb second place for the Irish Dutch alliance. 'We're delighted,' said Gary Robertson. 'We work well together; it's going to be good. Like any relationship you bite your tongue occasionally and you learn. This event was good for strength and Thijs is so strong he could carry me.'

An hour after the sand had settled, with the heavens about to open, there was a second victory for Dmitry and Kris in a Strategy Pit battle that tested brains not brawn. The teams faced a challenge worthy of Ray Mears: how do you lift part of a tree trunk off the ground using only a winch, rope and pulley, three logs and a length of webbing? The first to get it off the ground, grab their electronic control device and clock-in, earned the right to the earliest morning departures from camp.

Last week's Stage Final showed the importance of this event, when South Africa earned the narrowest of victories over France, thanks to the position of their vehicle – a reflection of their Strategy Pit ranking. And it's likely to become more valuable this week with a grim forecast of rain resulting in more extreme driving conditions.

On the final convoy journey to camp, after the medical team helped out at a civilian car crash, torrential rain signalled a return to canvas and boil in the bag meals. With the new teams sharing tents, strategies and smelly feet for the first time, we're set for a wet week of intense competition.



Stage 1 - Day 7 report

Apr 29 2006



Russia's Dmitry Timokhin emerged in a savagely strong position after a tense, nervous second round of Team Partner Selection in the Lao capital Vientiane today.

The wiry 29-year-old, who sits just one point behind current leader, South Africa's Martin Dreyer, will team up with Belgium's Kris Janssens in a formidable double act. 'Perhaps he read my mind,' said Dmitry. 'I'm very happy with the partnership. We got to know each other at International Selections, and he would have been my choice.'

Displaying immediate focus, he said the team must ensure they get into the top three in tomorrow's Strategy Pit – the competition kicking off each Stage which determines your daily start time – and which is a major influence in how many activities you fit into your day.

His reaction, in the warm night air swirling around the Plaza Hotel's rooftop swimming pool, contrasted with the cold disappointment of Martin Dreyer. He was selected by Japan's Takashi Sugiyama, the oldest competitor in the Challenge, who finished 16th on the first Stage.

'The curse of the Yellow Jersey strikes again,' he sighed. 'The only person it looks good on is Lance Armstrong. It's nice to have a partner who complements you, but I score points from racing hard, and Tak has just told me he doesn't run fast – and he's injured.'

'Strategy is everything for him, so we're going to have to strategise. He's the person who selected me so we're going to have to make it work. He's a very nice guy but he's not the partner I'd have chosen and there are some very strong teams out there like Dmitry and Kris. Although both have formidable experience, it's clearly not a match made in heaven. The South African also wasn't Takashi's first choice, but the 50-year-old executive now looked forward to being pushed hard and improving on his disappointing first stage result. 'My only worry is that Martin's very fit. I'm fit for my age but slower, and have the injury. It's going to give him the opportunity to develop a strategy other than physical fitness.'

The less than ecstatic reaction to the night's news was matched by France's Jean-Baptiste Calais, currently in third place. After being selected by Argentina's Pablo Burattini, he suggested he'd been the victim of tactical selection.

'I thought there were three other people who could have picked me, but perhaps they thought it would be better for them if I were with someone else. I don't have good English so perhaps that also influenced the choice.'

'But I'm happy to be here and the partnership is okay. I knew when I came to this selection that no matter what happened, the important thing is to make the new team work.'

On a night of fascinating Challenge politics, one of the most harmonious relationships from Stage one was re-united after Brazil's Eleonara Audra re-selected Australia's Alina

McMaster.

'This is women power,' said Eleonora. 'We know each other's strengths and best activities – kayaking, running and orienteering. Also, this isn't just about competition, it's about having fun, a spirit of adventure and sharing experiences.'

Her decision delighted Alina, who, in seventh position, was the highest placed woman on Stage one. 'It's just what I hoped for. I thought she would pick Martin, but we'll make a stronger team than they would have been. We've worked together and that counts for a lot. Other teams have to work each other out, while we can improve on what we already have.'

The Team Partner Selection saw Germany paired with Greece, Costa Rica with Spain, Italy with Turkey, and Netherlands with Ireland. The UK's Brian Reynolds was looking on the bright side of being picked by the lowest ranked competitor on the first stage, Taiwan's Victor Huang.

'We'll have a good week,' said the 31-year-old who came sixth in Friday's first Stage Final event. 'The scenery's going to be better and the driving more challenging. It's more remote so I'm hoping for a good Stage where we can enjoy the activities.'

Earlier in the day the atmosphere had been considerably more relaxed as competitors swapped their GPS for paintbrushes and hammered nails rather than bodies. They were finishing the renovation of the Ban Nahai primary school, 30 minutes from Vientiane - one of three community projects commissioned by Land Rover as part of the Challenge.

After Martin Dreyer, sporting a yellow flower garland rather than his new Yellow Jersey, presented a commemorative plaque to a local dignitary, there was a traditional Baci welcoming ceremony with sacred string tied alongside competitors' Challenge wristbands. A school theatrical production, including traditional dance sparked rumours that the fiendishly difficult hand movements may appear in next week's remote competitions.

The celebrations were the starting gun for the 18 athletes to paint walls, cut wood for the school veranda's new bench and install a front drain – final flourishes in a revamp that has seen classrooms built, plastered and painted, roofs fixed and electricity and ceiling fans installed. After the competitor's voluntary donation of their 'down' day, 125 children will enjoy a much brighter education.

'It's great to have contact with the local people and be able to help,' said Brazil's Eleonora Audra, who spent a month helping build a friend's deck last year. 'We've been cruising through their country all week and met so many friendly people and today they've made us feel really important. We admire them too, and it's an honour and a pleasure to contribute. We're helping them and they us.'

As the busy team of Land Rover builders discussed timber length and joint angles with the same enthusiasm they display for plotting a day's competition strategy, one person brought much needed experience to the proceedings. 'I've worked on construction sites at home, and built log houses in Colorado,' said Ireland's Gary Robertson. 'I haven't built anything apart from my garage for years, but it'll soon come back to me – although I haven't tried wearing flowers on a British building site.'

Similarly Argentina's Pablo Burattini admitted to being pretty handy with tools, although only as a hobby. 'It's important that we return something to local people,' he said. 'We've had a lot of help from them so far; even if it's just a smile and a wave. They have

very little, yet it's lovely that we can put something back, no matter how minimal.'

As well as construction work, Land Rover's medical team also made one young pupil very happy when they carried out a minor operation. If the rest of Sunday was about giving something back to Laos, this was about taking something out – a piece of glass that had buried into her foot.

But for all the goodwill and enthusiasm for Land Rover's community project, an air of unavoidable tension hung over the day with the impending Team Partner Selection. 'It's necessary to have downtime and forget the competition,' said Eleonora, as she temporarily became a dinner lady for the Ban Nahai school children. 'At the same time, everybody was thinking about strategy and decisions, so it was a physical rather than mental rest.'

Now that the tension is over, the competitors know their partners for the second Stage, and five days of remote competition lie ahead. The weather forecast is suggesting biblical rain – the tail end of a tropical cyclone – conditions could be dreadful. Let the fun begin.



Stage 2 - Team Partner Selection

Apr 29 2006



The Team Partner Selection for Stage 2 of the 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge is as follows, in the order that the choices were made:

Brazil Eleonora Audra - **Australia** Alina McMaster

Belgium Kris Janssens - **Russia** Dmitry Timokhin

Germany Robert Schweiger - **Greece** Michael Tsouatos

Costa Rica Claribett Vega - **Spain** Gabriel Maldonado

Argentina Pablo Burratini - **France** John-Baptiste Calais

Japan Takashi Sugiyama - **South Africa** Martin Dreyer **YJ**

Italy Marco Martinuzzi - **Turkey** Tolga Senefe

Taiwan Victor Huang - **United Kingdom** Brian Reynolds

Netherlands Thijs Maartense - **Ireland** Gary Robertson



Stage 1 Results - competitor ranking

Apr 29 2006



Individual scores following the completion of Stage 1 result in the competitor ranking as follows:

- 1st - **Martin Dreyer** - South Africa - Yellow Jersey
- 2nd - **Dmitry Timokhin** - Russia
- 3rd - **Jean-Baptiste Calais** - France
- 4th - **Michael Tsaoutos** - Greece
- 5th - **Thijs Maartense** - Netherlands
- 6th - **Gabriel Maldonado** - Spain
- 7th - **Alina McMaster** - Australia
- 8th - **Tolga Senefe** - Turkey
- 9th - **Gary Robertson** - Ireland
- 10th - **Brian Reynolds** - UK
- 11th - **Eleonora Audra** - Brazil
- 12th - **Kris Janssens** - Belgium
- 13th - **Robert Schweiger** - Germany
- 14th - **Claribett Vega** - Costa Rica
- 15th - **Pablo Burratini** - Argentina
- 16th - **Takashi Sugiyama** - Japan
- 17th - **Marco Martinuzzi** - Italy
- 18th - **Victor Huang** - Taiwan



Stage 1 - Day 6 report

Apr 28 2006



South Africa's Martin Dreyer will proudly sport the leader's mud-splattered Yellow Jersey next week, after triumphing in the Challenge's fiercely contested first stage.

The result, announced to a packed audience in Vientiane, was the climax to a day that began with flickers of sheet lightning and bass notes of thunder – a suitably theatrical backdrop to a gripping head to head Stage Final followed by the dramatic revelation of the week's winners.

Martin, who finished a single point ahead of Russia's Dmitry Timokhin and 13 points ahead of France's Jean-Baptiste Calais, said he was surprised at his victory as he and team mate, Holland's Thijs Maartense, had made several mistakes over the week. 'Obviously everyone else did too, you just don't realise. What matters is how you deal with it. You have to put it behind you. I'm learning every day.'

By contrast Thijs had predicted his partner's success. 'He's experienced in adventure racing and kayaking, and he's very determined. We've been up studying maps late every night when everyone else is asleep. Being with him has definitely helped my own position go up from eleventh to fifth over the week.'

But second place Dmitry was clearly pleased to be on the South African's shoulder, rather than in his sights. 'I'm really happy to be second,' he said. 'No Yellow Jersey, no pressure. I think I'm going to get better. Swimming and kayaking aren't my strengths and there will be less of those in the later stages.'

His cautious view of the Yellow Jersey was echoed by Competition Director, Simon Day. 'Martin was a worthy winner because over the last four days he showed good resolve, determination and obvious good team and social skills. He's well positioned to take on Stage two.

'But a new partner means a whole lot of learning has to go on. And, of course, he's now being chased. There will be blocking tactics and all sorts of subterfuge going on. An early lead may or may not be a good thing. Time will tell.'

Otherwise there was huge disappointment for the Challenge's first Yellow Jersey, Marco Martinuzzi of Italy, who finished 17th after a difficult week with Taiwan's Victor Huang. More successful partnerships saw Greece and Russia emerge as the leading team, followed by South Africa and Holland, then France and Spain.

The announcement of these results was the day's second dose of high drama however. Earlier, as morning rain mutated into searing heat, the Stage Final delivered a hair's breadth finish amidst the jaw dropping scenery of a tributary of the Mekong River. With ribbons of cloud suspended alongside lush mountains, the 18 competitors went head to head in a burst of adrenaline.

The competition kicked off with a 30-metre abseil into a gathering of kayaks, with some missing the target and dangling precariously, while others tangled in each other's

ropes. Victor Huang and Costa Rica's Claribett Vega formed a particularly complex knot. After kayaking to specified points, Jean-Baptiste was narrowly ahead of his South African rival.

The lead changed during the swim, and swung back to the Frenchman during the run. But although he went into the mountain biking with a lead around 45 seconds, he was pegged back and beaten by a spectacular final surge to the next activity by Martin, who couldn't be overtaken on the final four-wheel drive leg of the competition.

An absolute showstopper of a finish, it proved the Strategy Pit has more importance than just deciding which order teams will depart from camp. The South African's Range Rover Sport was in a better position – the decisive factor in the final result - due to his higher Strategy Pit ranking. 'Its importance goes well beyond your departure time,' said Martin. 'If it's bad weather and muddy ground, the third car out may get stuck, hold all the others up and only the first two compete in the day's activities. The trouble with the Strategy Pit is that it is a cerebral exercise and school wasn't really my thing.'

'There were no tactics for me in the race today – I just went as hard as possible. I had a problem checking in at the kayak points, but it only made a few seconds difference. Jean Baptiste's very competitive and was cunning on the run. I tried to do it as the crow flies and was slowed down, but he chose the path of least resistance instead.'

'At the finish we both said it would be really good to make it into the final top four. We don't want to take each other out prematurely. I'll be very happy if he wins and I'm second next time. Nice and steady is what's required.'

Jean-Baptiste admitted the close finish had left him steaming – until he had the Strategy Pit position of the vehicles explained to him. 'I was screaming in the car. I was so angry, I went into the water to calm down. I'm crazy when I'm racing. We are very close. It would be very interesting if we were on the same team.'

The Stage Final competition also saw a superb comeback from Dmitry who rose from 17th after the kayak leg to finish third. 'I made early mistakes, but caught up in the swimming, maybe 15 seconds on the run and 15 more on the mountain biking. I'm very experienced at navigation, I have been doing it since I was eight.'

And Australia's Alina McMaster also came in strongly in fourth position. 'I do a lot of adventure racing but thought I may be coming eighth. I made a bad start and couldn't get into the kayak but after that I just picked people off.'

It was also a better day for the UK's Brian Reynolds, who has struggled so far in partnership with Germany's Robert Schweiger. Despite losing places in the mountain biking, he came home sixth. 'I feel I proved a point,' he said. 'It shows I'm physically up to it. I had previously assessed myself in the middle of the 18 and it shows I'm actually above that. It was a good psychological springboard for things to get better.'

'Our team communication hasn't been good this week. We didn't gel. It's a surprise - it all made sense in the clinical environment of a hotel in Bangkok, but it was different when the reality of camp life and competition set in.'

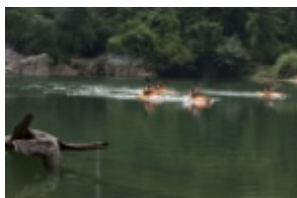
But that's all in the past. Tomorrow sees the second Team Partner Selection when competitors from the lower ranks of the table pick team mates from the top half for the next stage. All the present leaders admit they're nervous about who'll they'll end up with.

If present form continues, we can expect more successful bonding and spectacular fall-outs over coming days. And there's the intriguing possibility that eleventh placed Eleonara Audra of Brazil may again choose seventh-placed Alina McMaster to be her team mate. 'We had a great time together and she's one of the strongest pickers,' said Alina. 'I've no idea whether she'll go for me, or for someone stronger. Do you go for someone you know or take a risk? Who can tell?'



Stage 1 - Day 5 report

Apr 27 2006



The teams awoke in the dark early hours of day five to blaring rock music, abandoned munitions and a long, misty river journey into the heart of darkness.

It wasn't 'Nam. It was Laos 2006 and the Land Rover G4 Challenge's most spectacular event so far – a head-to-head kayak race along a seven-kilometre underground stretch of the Nam Hinboun River. Watched by locals from boats fashioned out of old B52 fuel tanks, the competitors paddled furiously into the pitch blackness of Konglor Cave, passing rocks like limestone icebergs, vast overhead caverns and cascades of water.

They navigated rapid narrow stretches, shallows requiring portage and a white subterranean beach, before emerging below a dramatic mountain into an emerald lagoon, where Australia's Alina McMaster and Brazil's Eleonora Audra claimed first place.

'It was one of the most incredible things I've ever done,' said Eleonora. 'The two of us are working really well together. We were overtaking and being overtaken by the guys the whole way through. We paddled so hard near the end, and there was a big mess as we crashed into other boats. We didn't even know we'd won.'

Second place Martin Dreyer, a professional South African kayaker who has competed all over the world, described it as the paddle of a lifetime. 'It was truly spectacular. I'm glad it was a compulsory competition and not something to do if we could fit it in. It would be a crime to miss it.'

For the second time in two days, the canny South African displayed a blend of experience and tactical astuteness, attaching his kayak to his team mate's, by a bungee cord. 'It's something I've learnt over years of racing,' he said. 'It lets the person behind stay on the downside of the wave behind your kayak – and that means 15 per cent less effort to keep up.'

It was one of several gruelling events setting this year's Challenge aside from its 2003 predecessor. 'We wanted things to be tougher this time in terms of driving and the competitor's environment,' said Event Director, Niki Davies. 'Last time there was a lot of tarmac and burger joints. This is different. You recce it, hope you get it right, and I think we have. The feedback from competitors and media is tough event, tough driving. I'm happy.'

The trying conditions were in evidence today with deep mud that sent vehicles sliding, wicked ruts and precarious wooden bridges. Costa Rica's Claribett Vega struggled to control her Range Rover Sport, regularly sliding sideways and eventually had to use the snatch strap to get back on track. After a late afternoon puncture, they completed just one further competition before returning to camp.

They weren't suffering alone. Other teams were held up by navigation. Turkey and Ireland spent well over an hour trying to locate Stock Take, an event where competitors had to run between points, locating clues that would reveal the price of a local chicken. They changed direction three times after finding one route blocked by building sand and

following a false trail that ended in a paddy field. 'When the tak-tak track went to single lane, we knew it wasn't going to happen,' said Ireland's Gary Robertson.

The team finally abandoned the event for another after discovering their visa – a time control system to stop competitor's speeding between competitions – meant they couldn't take part for another hour. Several other teams were held up by their visas, which, given the demanding travel conditions and limited maps, helps explain the small number of competitions attempted during the day.

But Stock Take did produce one sterling performance. Argentina's Pablo Burattini and Belgium's Kris Janssens split up to look for clues and found the answer within six minutes, well below the predicted time, after realising it wasn't necessary to visit all locations – a smart move in 35°C temperatures. 'This is the muscle you really need to train,' said Pablo, pointing to his head.

Stock Take also saw the first points of the Challenge for Taiwan's Victor Huang. After being left to fend for himself in the kayaking by Italian team-mate, Marco Martinuzzi – a disastrous strategy when partners have to finish together – he put in a strong performance. 'I'm very excited,' he said. 'We learnt from yesterday. Even if we hadn't completed this, we would have abandoned it to return to camp on time. But we did – in ten minutes. Each day is getting better.'

They were over twice as fast as the British German team. Regarded as strong individual competitors, they've struggled to gel as a team and were involved in heated confrontations during yesterday's tak-tak challenge. Tomorrow's Stage Final – an individual head-to-head – should be very interesting. It's their chance to prove themselves – and the Challenge is waiting.



Making Laos a safer place

Apr 26 2006



Putting together a successful Challenge is an epic logistical marathon run over several years – but staging it in Laos requires an extra degree of meticulous preparation. Its hauntingly beautiful landscape is riddled with unexploded bombs, and every campsite and remote competition arena has had to be thoroughly scoured for high explosive.

The lethal litter – known as UXO or unexploded ordnance – is the legacy of a war fought between 1964 and 1973. Laos was used as a supply and travel artery known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and became a target as a result. During the years of assault, nearly two million tonnes of explosive rained down – half a tonne for every man, woman and child – making Laos the most heavily bombed country per head of population in the history of warfare.

With the Challenge driving along slugs of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Land Rover turned to Phoenix Clearance. The land mine and bomb disposal experts have employed ten men for 100 days to check every inch of potentially hazardous soil with state of the art Ebinger metal detectors. Their target being unexploded bombs ranging from 100 lbs to 3,000 lbs. Find one of the larger variety and they'll move all humans and livestock within a kilometre and a half, put them behind a hard shield, and carry out a controlled explosion.

The bombs contain around 670 cluster bombs known as Blue 26s - small bomblets the size of tennis balls - each containing high explosive and a further 300 ball bearings. 'They were designed to blow you in half,' explains Paul Stanford, Phoenix Technical Operations Manager. 'People are amazed when they come from Cambodia and there are no amputees on crutches. That's because landmines there were meant to maim, the bombs in Laos were there to kill.'

And they're still doing that today. Research in a single province in the north of the country shows one person still dies every week from UXO. 'The reporting is rudimentary,' says Paul. 'No one really knows how many are hurt or killed. All we can say is it's too many.'

Paul has been working in Laos since 1995, when bombs could still be found lying by the side of the road where farmers had moved them to from the fields. 'You can check hectare after hectare of land and find nothing, and then move one foot to the right and find hundreds or thousands of bomblets. We like our technicians to find something because it's a mundane job and we don't want them to get complacent.'

The searched areas have been marked with blue posts, and, given the threat's random nature, it is imperative that competitors, staff and attending media don't wander a fraction outside the safety boundaries. 'You don't know what's immediately outside that line,' says Paul, who spent 22 years as an RAF bomb disposal expert. 'Use your head. Don't wander off the beaten track.'

There are knock-on benefits to the painstaking work carried out for the Challenge. Once the event has moved on, it's locals who will be able to lead their daily life more safely as a result of the Phoenix search.

And that's not the Challenge's only legacy. Land Rover also wanted to fund a local humanitarian project and chose to finance the clearance of the Mahaxai Kang School playing field. Two potentially deadly bomblets were found and destroyed with controlled explosions.

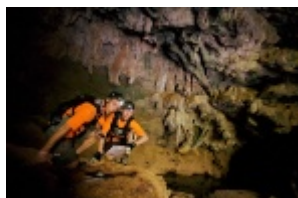
'The villagers probably didn't know who Land Rover is,' said Paul. 'But they'll certainly remember them now because they paid for the clearance. The school's a low priority, and it's highly unlikely it would have been cleared in the next year. Now the kids can play football safely. 'It doesn't matter who pays for it. Let's get Laos cleared. Work like this has to be good for the country.'

And this week, as The Challenge spent its second remote night in the wilderness, competitors received a sobering reminder of the terrible legacy of a war that ended over 30 years ago. Blue flags and posts marked the safe perimeter of the camp, while in the middle, surrounded by a gaggle of orange tents, were two deep, menacing bomb craters.



Unusual Training

Apr 26 2006



Steam rooms, multiple layers of clothing and foreign deserts have all been used by competitors to replicate the spectacular terrain, extreme weather and unique demands of the Land Rover G4 Challenge. Training for the global event, which is currently passing through the humid jungles of South East Asia, before moving onto the wildly fluctuating temperatures of the Bolivian Altiplano, inspired some impressive ingenuity among the competitors – particularly those emerging from a long Northern Hemisphere winter.

Irishman Gary Robertson found the most novel way of recreating heat and humidity on a level rarely found in his home town, Enniskillen. 'I got my local gym to move an exercise bike into the steam room,' he explains. 'They looked at me like I was crazy – it's usually used for fifteen minutes relaxation not a hard workout – but they soon came round to it. I don't think a physician would recommend it, but it was a good way to get used to the conditions out here.'

A different form of temperature preparation featured in the build-up of UK competitor Brian Reynolds. To get a taste of physical exercise in the furnace like heat of Thailand and Laos, he went out running weighed down with several extra layers of clothing. 'I'm not good in heat, I felt the difference when our temperature recently rose to 13°C,' he says. 'Obviously the extra layers made me sweat more. But it has been a very long winter and there's only so much you can do. We had snow on the ground until two weeks ago.'

And he wasn't the only competitor practicing on unusual forms of transport. German firefighter Robert Schweiger spent many hours on his trail bike. 'It's very good all-round conditioning for strength, stamina and co-ordination. Going uphill on a mountain bike might be great training but it can be a bit boring.'

For others, the event's hugely varied and extreme challenges necessitated a change of scenery - or even country. Italian lifeguard, Marco Martinuzzi, who starts off wearing the prized yellow leader's jersey, headed down to the Tunisian desert for 'perfect training' on a Land Rover group trip. 'It was hot and we were driving on desert tracks and in the mountains,' he says. 'I'm not good on technical stuff but every time someone had a mechanical problem they would shout: "G4 man, over here". It taught me a lot.'

Not everyone had to travel so far. Spanish competitor, Gabriel Maldonado, left Madrid for an athletics complex in the Sierra Nevada Mountains and a workout at 2,300 metres. 'I know it's not as high as Bolivia where we'll be at 4,000 metres,' he stresses. 'But it was getting me used to higher altitude.' South African professional sportsman, Martin Dreyer, also stayed in his own country. But he spent recent summer months away from his Cape Town home competing in kayak races in hot, sticky Natal – a spot-on replacement for humid South East Asia. Meanwhile Taiwan's Victor Huang took extreme measures to boost his stamina, running three marathons in one month. 'I was so tired by the end of March,' he says. 'I eased off in April. Now I hope I have the energy to complete the Challenge. It's the first time Taiwan has entered and I feel very proud.'



Stage 1 - Day 4 report

Apr 26 2006



You learn to expect the unexpected on the Land Rover G4 Challenge. After a blisteringly hot first day, including a severe test of their 4x4 ability, the teams swapped their Range Rover Sports for tak-taks, the local farmer's motor of choice.

No amount of tuition could have prepared them for what lay ahead. The tak-tak is the poor man's Easy Rider – a set of ludicrously long handlebars connecting an engine on two wheels to a back trailer. Instead of a 4.4 litre V8 engine and terrain response, they now had a deafening one cylinder 500cc diesel engine and the gearbox from hell.

Their task, the compulsory competition in the second remote day of the Challenge including kayaking, driving and rope skills, was known as Xien's Tak-Tak. It sounded deceptively simple: negotiate a set of gates spread around a paddy field, pick up a couple of bundles of firewood, and use only first or reverse gear to finish in the shortest possible time.

Cue motorised mayhem, cheered on by a crowd of bemused locals. South Africa's Martin Dreyer and Holland's Thijs Maartense set the pace, heading dangerously towards an official's vehicle and then demolishing the first gate.

Pablo Burattini of Argentina was more successful – until gate six when his tak-tak suddenly stopped, whacked him in the back as he stood up, then veered wildly to one side, into a dyke. Voices were raised and hands waved as he and partner Kris Janssens tried to reverse.

'It should be so simple,' said Pablo. 'There's just a throttle and a couple of levers but it takes a lot of movement to control it. The gearbox jumps and it stops, you put it back in gear and it shoots off. It's hard to keep your balance. I prefer a Range Rover Sport.'

Kris was in agreement. 'The tak-tak is so hard to make short turns. It has a mind of its own and it's very stubborn.'

But the day's comedy award went to Australia's Alina McMaster, who hit raised ground fast in second gear, flew in the air, landed painfully, almost overbalanced and ended up stuck behind a dyke. 'We've got to get points for entertainment,' she said. 'I didn't know whether I was going to go over the handlebar or under the wheels. The Range Rover Sport is a far heavier vehicle but compared to this it's a feather.'

Japan's Takashi Sugiyama and Costa Rica's Claribett Vega appeared to have far more success. A bright future clearly awaits them in the Laos farming industry after the Challenge, should they choose to pursue it.

'I helped with steering and directions,' explained Claribett. 'But I've got a strapped thumb and it's big machinery, so Tak did most of the work. The tak-tak takes off with a real pull, but we didn't lose control at all.'

Fifty-year-old Tak, and 25-year-old Claribett, the oldest and youngest competitors, are

proving quite a team. 'The secret's to enjoy it,' she said. 'Sometimes we stop to look at the scenery. We both contribute different things; I drive, Tak navigates. It's working well.'

The job share is good news for Tak who is still nursing sore ribs after falling in yesterday's caving competition and finds driving painful. 'Today's tasks weren't bad for me,' he said. 'There was nothing too physical to strain the injury further.'

But they have identified one problem – their lack of planning and strategy early in the day. 'We're the first team away in the morning and in our rush to get off, we didn't read all the competition's instructions. It cost us today.' The price was that they spent two hours on the first competition – off-road driving to 11 co-ordinates on a dramatic rocky plain – and only completed two of five possible competitions.

And they weren't alone. Several teams struggled to the same total, and Italy's Marco Martinuzzi and Taiwan's Victor Huang, who failed to notch up any points yesterday after returning to camp past the deadline, again failed to trouble the scorer. Not only did they abandon their first task, they also missed the compulsory competition. Worse was to come though, they again failed to meet the camp deadline and have now had two non-point scoring days, a disaster for Marco who started the Challenge wearing the Yellow Jersey.

While no obvious front-runner has yet emerged at the other end of the table, it's already clear good strategy is going to be every bit as important as physical fitness or technical prowess. Teams that put in time with maps and the GPS before setting off into the beautiful but confusing Laos wilderness are proving more successful at reaching the competition points in time.

Tactics are also starting to rear their head. At today's kayaking, the South Africa and Dutch team held back from starting, despite the day's tight schedule, and entered the water seconds after the all-women team of Australia and Brazil. It may have been good manners, but it also gave them the opportunity to follow closely behind and see where the others located marker points. France's Jean-Baptiste Calais also dedicated valuable time to closely studying the techniques of other competitors in the tak-taks.

It seemed to pay off. He and Spanish team-mate Gabriel Maldonado were able to complete three competitions, including spectacular Dicky's Forest. The high-level rope course, spread around a lush rainforest, included jumaring (a method of rope climbing), abseiling and crossing between trees in front of hundreds of amazed locals.

'I'm used to canyoning and caving – activities involving ropes – in the Southern Alps,' he explained. 'This was really hard; you had to manage so many things. Perhaps nine of the competitors could have done it – and it may have taken them two hours. It took me twenty five minutes.'

They may have missed the stunning test of their rope skills but there was ample compensation for the 16 other competitors in a superb four-hour drive to camp, past lush tropical mountains, towering hardwood trees and classic villages. As the jungle closed in and creepers scratched the kayaks and bikes on top of vehicles, they arrived at a muddy campsite soaked by large drops of hot rain. After days of sunshine and easy roads, the Challenge is properly on its way.



Respecting the Environment

Apr 25 2006



As the Land Rover G4 Challenge heads northeast through Laos away from Tha Khaek on the first of its 18 remote days, a unique environmental protocol will kick in, minimizing impact on the spectacular and often fragile landscape.

It's a tough task. Take 134 vehicles and around 180 people through some of the most remote spots on earth and you're certain to raise eco-eyebrows. But with its strict guidelines on waste, water and 4x4 driving, along with a groundbreaking promise to totally offset its carbon usage, the Challenge has raised the environmental bar higher than any previous event of a similar nature.

'Land Rover has gone way beyond any requirements of the four countries it's visiting,' stresses freelance environmental consultant, Clare Fothergill, a key figure in establishing green credentials for the Challenge. 'It's very different to the 2003 Challenge which travelled through countries with legislation and infrastructures designed to protect the environment. This time that often doesn't exist, but we want to maintain the same high standards – to set something in concrete. I don't know any other organisation like Land Rover that is doing this.'

That has meant taking some major steps. For the first time, the company has comprehensively assessed the emission producing activities of the Challenge and guaranteed to offset them by investing in renewable energy and energy efficiency.

The exhaustive calculation covered everything from the manufacture of documents and fuel consumption to hotel stays, vehicle delivery and flights. Of which, 85 per cent originates from air travel, and just five per cent from vehicle petrol and diesel.

'It's brilliant that Land Rover is doing this,' says Clare, who has also worked as an adventure instructor in Southern Africa. 'This is a huge step forward. Land Rover is saying, "This is what we do. Let's do it responsibly."'

The same goes for its 'Tread Lightly' approach to off road driving. Best practices (taught at Land Rover Experience centres around the globe) have been drilled into competitors through extensive training, including the use of the Terrain Response™ technology, and correct winching techniques. 'People often assume it will cause damage,' says Clare, 'but if you're responsible, that just isn't the case.'

The environmental protocol also covers other elements: fire – one main spark-up for each campsite – and water. Avoiding what would be up to 15,000 empty plastic bottles, this year's event will be supplied through 20-litre jerry cans, re-filled on route. And precious liquid won't be used for washing and showering. If people want to clean up, there is the river and biodegradable, ph-neutral soap to protect local drinking sources.

There's also an innovative waste policy. With Laos and Bolivia lacking recycling facilities,

the Challenge is taking along its own waste compactor, crushing rubbish into manageable bricks, destined for landfill sites at the main city at the end of each stage. Human waste will be collected in the revolutionary Bio Toi system of biodegradable bags, pioneered by the Norwegian army in the Arctic.

The meticulous attention to detail even carries into the urban driving. Copacabana Beach provides a sexy, dramatic backdrop to the activities in Rio, but no tyre should actually touch the sand during the competitive element of the day. 'We use a flat pack course,' explains Clare. 'It's designed to keep the ground intact, and has involved a huge amount of skilled, expensive engineering. This isn't just lip service to green issues.'

'When I ran through Land Rover's environmental protocol at International Selections, several competitors told me how re-assuring they found it. Any uncomfortable feelings about the Challenge had vanished.'

UK competitor Brian Reynolds is in full agreement. 'The Tread Lightly policy is about respect for the environment. I love the fact that Land Rover lead by example.'



Stage 1 - Day 3 report

Apr 25 2006



It was the calm before the storm. Day three began on the banks of the misty Mekong with a Buddhist blessing at the 6th century Sikhottabong Temple. Then, as the first remote competitions kicked in, spirituality changed to raw physicality, serenity to sweat and chanting to cheering - it was game on.

However, before they could work up the first bead of perspiration, competitors got an immediate taste of driving in Laos: blinding 'red outs' on dusty tracks, wandering animals and navigational trauma. Several teams lost precious time trying to find an alternative route after maps and GPS failed to show that an impassable river blocked their road.

Once located, however, the competitions offered pumping adrenaline with six challenges ranging from navigation to climbing to kayaking, in the middle of awesome scenery and stifling heat. The challenge at Sabaidee Pinnacles, mixed driving and running with climbing one of the area's immense limestone pinnacles. This was followed by a showstopper 50-metre abseil.

'It wasn't just great, it was also quick,' said Turkey's Tolga Senefe, partner of Ireland's Gary Robertson. 'We're both big guys and our main strength is our power. We're fast on the climbing and abseiling.'

Equally spectacular was the competition known as Hidden Star, where competitors had to locate points inside and around the vast cathedral of Tham Xiangliab Cave; home to bats, turtles and hanging shards of rock-like dripping candle wax.

Ironically, the hypnotic scenery produced the Challenge's first injury for Japan's Takashi Sugiyama as he climbed through the cave. 'I was looking up and thinking, "Wow, this is amazing", when I fell backwards onto a rocky ridge. My ribs are bruised and the events since then have been quite painful, particularly climbing and running. It will teach me to pay more attention in future.'

Other competitors also struggled at Hidden Star, with their satellite navigation useless around the cave and nearby mountains. 'Without the GPS we made a lot of mistakes. We got them all in the end but it took longer than it should have,' said Russia's Dmitry Timokhin. 'But the scenery was just amazing. It looked like Jurassic Park. I was half expecting to see dinosaurs'.

A tough 4x4 driving course, where the Range Rover Sport vehicles had to be steered through narrow gaps on rocky sloping terrain with penalties for hitting markers, also formed part of the Challenge in this location – and it caused some problems. 'There was one obstacle that was really difficult,' said Australia's Alina McMaster. 'It was hard to judge and we kept slipping back. We should just have said "damn it", hit the marker and taken the penalty. We ended up clipping it anyway.'

But the biggest nightmare occurred to the UK and Germany team. After a branch flicked up, caught in the tyre and wrecked the chain of Brian Reynolds' mountain bike, he was forced to complete the course on foot.

Failing to spot a cave that would have lead them to a marker point, he and German partner Robert Schweiger spent 45 minutes fighting their way through dense jungle, before realising their mistake.

On the way back, Brian slipped in the cave water, cutting his leg. And, when he finally thought he had finished – the team's first event of the day – he discovered he had to fetch the damaged bike by foot, a one and quarter mile run in searing heat. He then had to jog back with it. The team only finished two of the six competitions. 'Tomorrow's another day,' shrugged Brian. 'It can only get better.'

But it was a less testing time in the vehicle for the Taiwanese / Italian team, who completed the driving course with just one penalty. 'That was quite easy,' said Marco Martinuzzi, as he parked up and wiped sweat from his brow. 'Victor and I struggled a little to understand each other, but it's only the first remote day - it's improving.'

Their language situation may have improved during the day, but their strategic planning and navigation let them down in a big way. After making a poor decision in terms of which competitions to visit first, the team made a navigational error en route to the camp. They missed the critical cut-off time of 18:00, losing all their hard-earned points in the process.

British competitor Brian Reynolds may not have had nearly as tough a day as the Italian / Taiwanese team, but even so the atmosphere in his camp was slightly less than rosy. 'I'm really keen and hyped up,' said Brian, as they finally arrived into the night's camp. 'But I think Robert is taking a slightly more relaxed approach.'

Still, it's only the beginning. Teams are feeling their way, the temperature is rising and another day's fierce competition waits in the lush Laos wilderness.



Stage 1 - Day 2 report

Apr 24 2006



After the searing temperatures and red-hot technical driving competition of Bangkok, day two saw the Challenge's 60-strong convoy head east across the legendary Mekong River into the secretive communist country of Laos.

Under brooding skies, punctuated by forks of lightning, with a hot wind whipping up a distant sandstorm, the Range Rover Sport vehicles were ferried across the muscular, chocolate coloured river by ferry. Awaiting them were hammer and sickle flags, old American army trucks and two weeks of mental and physical challenges in the dramatic landscape of jungle covered mountains.

For the competitors, this was the real beginning of the Challenge. 'The Mekong is the true starting line,' said French competitor Jean-Baptiste Calais. 'It's the end of just travelling, the end of the highway and the start of racing.'

Michael Tsaoutos of Greece, who only found out he was competing a fortnight ago, after the country's first choice quit due to work commitments, said he was finally starting to believe he had arrived. 'We don't know what it will be like, and with a forecast of rain, the going could get really tough. The first main junction marked in our Laos road book wasn't even paved.'

As Alina McMaster of Australia sorted out her equipment and tents, she shared his uncertainty. 'It's a mix of excitement and apprehension,' she said. 'Now each day will be a test of fitness, skill and strategy.'

But the competitors' mixed emotions were mixed with awe at the dramatic scenery. They approached the Mekong through the Jurassic region of Thailand, once populated by dinosaurs but now revealing a mix of pineapple fields, thickly forested hills, water buffalo and monks in mustard coloured robes.

'When I first looked across the river from Thailand and saw the mountains of Laos, I said "Wow!"' said Brazil's Eleonora Audra, who spent the long journey honing tactics and promoting South American music to team mate Alina. 'It was a mix of nerves and great views.'

Similarly Russia's Dmitry Timokhin, who triumphed in Bangkok's urban driving challenge with his Greek team mate, was mesmerised at the thought of what lay ahead. 'It was amazing. It's been road trip, road trip, road trip and then suddenly you arrive at the great river and mountains. You're aware that over the other side is another country and another culture. But who knows exactly what we'll find.'

But as well as memorable views, the 8-hour drive also produced the first tensions in partnerships selected on Saturday. Italy's Marco Martinuzzi had spent the entire journey with team mate, Victor Huang, and a journalist from the same country. 'All they did was talk in Taiwanese,' sighed the lifeguard 'not a word of English.'

Still Marco, current holder of the coveted yellow leader's jersey, is confident they won't

have any communication problems by the time the remote competitions kick off tomorrow - and he'll have an Italian journalist in his Range Rover Sport.

By nightfall, the competitors, staff and 54 media had swapped air-conditioned luxury Thai hotels, for Norwegian biodegradable toilets, boil in the bag food and a campsite on the Lao bank of the Mekong. Let the remote competition begin!



Stage 1 - Day 1 report

Apr 23 2006



For the 18 competitors there was no gentle ease into the Land Rover G4 Challenge - this was 100%, full-on, 'take us to the limit' stuff from the G of the word GO!

In record temperatures on a baking hard but beautiful arena set up in the heart of Bangkok – the gateway to Southeast Asia - the 18 competitors in the Land Rover G4 Challenge got their first taste of competition with a punishing but rewarding start event in Sanam Luang Park.

At a gala banquet on Saturday night, the 18 individual competitors had paired up, with the top scorers from International Selections being picked by the rest of the crew. The start event was the first test of these pairings, which will remain for the first week of the month-long event.

A separate ballot saw the nine pairs draw for three heats of the clever but hellishly physical demands of the opening competition; where the teams had to mountain bike the length of the 150 metre course and then drag their Range Rover Sport from its shipping container. One team member had to then pull a kayak on wires high above the ground to a Thai-style hut from where he or she then guided their partner across a set of narrow logs in the Range Rover Sport. The most physical part of the test was to then hand-winch a 600kg Tuk Tuk (three wheel Bangkok taxi) up off the ground.

The second half of the competition was to drive over axle-articulating metal beams, stop whilst one wheel sat suspended high in the air and then drive the Range Rover Sport onto a giant Thai ox cart – pushing it along for 30 metres before driving the vehicle off again. Finally, the pairs had to run back to the hut - both shin up the framework of the huts and release a firework to signal the end!

Two of the three heats were extremely close. In Heat 1, the all-girl pairing of Alina McMaster (Australia) and Eleonora Audra (Brazil) had the lead until the final element - Marco Martinuzzi (Italy) and Victor Huang (Taiwan) managing to climb up to the firework faster than the girls.

There was even more drama in Heat 2. Dmitry Tomokhin (Russia) and Michael Tsaoutos (Greece) reached the hut first but they mistakenly thought only one of them had to climb to the fireworks. Dmitry fired off the explosion only for the judges to tell him that Michael must climb too. At this point, on the far side of the course, Gary Robertson (Ireland) had also climbed to release his firework and also believed he did not need to get his partner Tolga Senefe (Turkey) onto the platform. The race then became one to get the second man the 4 metres up to the hut. By a hair's breadth, the Greek IT expert managed to reach Dmitry and secure the second spot in the final.

"We did not think we had to get the second man up," said Dmitry . "So it was a close thing." Joining Russia/Greece and Italy/Taiwan in the final (a repeat of the same course) was the British/German double act of Brian Reynolds and Robert Josef Schweiger.

Marco and Victor struggled a little at the start of the final, leaving the others in a

gripping head-to-head. Right up to the Thai cart drive there was nothing in it between the British/German and Greek/Russian pairs. But Dmitry and Michael got a better exit off the cart – giving them an extra edge on a frantic run back to the hut – and eventual victory.

“To win the first event of the 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge is excellent,” said Michael. “It takes a lot of pressure off and shows that Dmitry and I are a good pair. I feel much more confident about the rest of this week.”

The runners-up were not too disappointed. Only a week ago Brian Reynolds was training in snow at home. To nearly win the opening competition in almost 40 degree temperatures was a real achievement, he said.

“This was a perfect start to the event for me and knowing now that Robert and I are a good team is really exciting,” he said. “I can’t wait to get into Laos and get our teeth into the next competition.”



Stage 1 - Day 1 - Challenge Start Results

Apr 23 2006



Stage 1 Start Competition Results

FINAL HEAT 4 - Head-to-head for winners of Heats 1-3 (Below)

1st Overall Greece - Russia

2nd Overall UK - Germany

3rd Overall Italy - Taiwan

Heat 1

1st Italy - Taiwan

2nd Australia - Brazil

3rd Costa Rica - Japan

Heat 2

1st Greece - Russia

2nd Belgium - Argentina

3rd Turkey - Ireland

Heat 3

1st UK - Germany

2nd South Africa - Netherlands

3rd France - Spain



Team Partner Selection - Stage 1

Apr 22 2006



In advance of the Challenge start at the Sanam Luang Park tomorrow, the 18 competitors took centre stage this evening as they selected their team-mate for Stage 1 of the Challenge.

The Team Partner Selection for Stage 1 is as follows:

Netherlands Thijs Maartense - **South Africa** Martin Dreyer

Germany Robert Schweiger - **United Kingdom** Brian Reynolds

Argentina Pablo Burattini - **Belgium** Kris Janssens

Ireland Gary Robertson - **Turkey** Tolga Seneffe

Spain Gabriel Maldonado - **France** Jean-Baptiste Calais

Japan Takashi Sugiyama - **Costa Rica** Claribett Vega

Brazil Eleonora Audra - **Australia** Alina McMaster

Russia Dmitry Timokhin - **Greece** Michael Tsautos

Italy Marco Martinuzzi - **Taiwan** Victor Huang



Australian competitor forced to withdraw before start of Challenge

Apr 21 2006



Australian competitor Tom Landon-Smith (36) has been forced to withdraw from the 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge less than 48 hours before the start of the event. He will be replaced on the Challenge by his wife Alina McMaster, who was one of the reserve competitors for Australia – the other reserve, John Jacoby recently fractured his wrist during an adventure race, and is still unable to compete.

Landon-Smith cut his right foot while running on the beach during a recent holiday in New South Wales. The injury required stitches, but doctors in Australia assured the plucky Event Manager that he would be fit by the time the event starts in Bangkok, Thailand, on 23 April.

Unfortunately for the Australian, his injury didn't heal as quickly as expected, and after a fitness assessment by Challenge Medical Director Mike Irani, the decision was made for Landon-Smith to withdraw. "He is obviously bitterly disappointed," explained the surgeon, "but the decision is not only for his own health and safety, but also that of his fellow competitors."

"I cannot believe that I have come so close to the Challenge, yet I am unable to compete," says Landon-Smith, "the disappointment is massive, but I wish my wife all the best and I truly believe that she has what it takes to win this year's Challenge."

McMaster started her career as a cross-country skier, winning numerous sport scholarships. She competed in the Australian cross-country ski team for many years before making the Olympic Squad in 1994. She then moved into multi-sport where she has won every major race in Australia. Her adventure-racing career has been extensive and successful. McMaster is the captain of Team AROC, Australia's top adventure racing team and one of the world's best.

As a result of her husband's misfortune, McMaster will now be one of 18 competitors on the start line of the Challenge. She stands a chance of winning a brand new Range Rover as a prize, as well as becoming only the second winner of the ultimate global adventure. However, between her and victory lies two continents, four countries, a month of tough competition – and 17 other people who have exactly the same thirst for victory.



Telling the world!

Apr 17 2006



Approximately three hundred journalists will be attending various Stages of the 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge. Each journalist has a commitment to feedback their experiences – often to deadlines and despite being miles from civilisation. Therefore, the Land Rover G4 Challenge team have been hard at work preparing two communications vehicles, enabling journalists to connect with the outside world from the comfort of their own tent!

The vehicles, one for each continent, have been fully kitted out with equipment that is securely bolted to the chassis of the Ranger Rover vehicles - in place of the double rear seats. The vehicle transformation took approximately 12 days to complete.

As competitors and journalists put up their tent and prepare their boil-in-the-bag dinner each night, the Communications Team will be busy setting up the contents of their vehicle. Thus providing a wireless internet hotspot that would comfortably rival any building-based press centre, enabling:

- journalists to file their stories
- radio reporters to transmit broadcast quality voice transmissions
- photographers to file their images of the day
- writers to update the Land Rover G4 Challenge press site
- on-site Management Team to report back to HQ via radio, e.mail or voice over IP

The XTC Telecoms team is headed up by Richard Mumford. Richard is no stranger to Land Rover and has the experience of seven Camel Trophies under his belt as well as supporting the inaugural Challenge in 2003. XTC also provide communications and support to Land Rover Experience for Vehicle launches and promotional events.

Richard's extensive communications shopping list for the Challenge in addition to the dedicated vehicles includes:

- 60 hand-held radios with chargers
- 130 vehicle-fitted mobile radios
- 50 Satellite telephones
- 80 GPS units
- 2 VSAT Satellite broadband terminals
- 2 BGAN Satellite broadband terminals
- 1 RBGAN Satellite broadband terminal

The Comms team are also responsible for providing IT facilities for HQ press offices and for shipping over a ton of AV, sound and lighting equipment for use at the numerous briefings, ceremonies and of course, the final party!



Clearing the un-exploded

Mar 21 2006



Due to the 1960's and 1970's conflicts, Laos became the most heavily bombed nation on earth, witnessing over 580,000 bombing missions. Over thirty years later, the government's 10 year target is to clear unexploded ordnance from 18,000 hectares of land. A vast mission for one of the least developed countries in the world.

During the years of conflict, entire towns were left in ruin, including Mahaxai – a small town 400 km south of Vientiane, inland from the Mekong River.

"The bombing got so bad that people stopped living in the town," one village elder recounts. "We went to live in the caves in the mountains nearby. There were maybe 40 families in there. The only time we would come out was at night, and only when the moon was full, to tend to our fields. Even that was not safe. Bombs were everywhere."

A haunting blackened skeleton of a once grand house is a reminder of how the whole village looked after almost a decade of destruction at the end of the 1970's. Its concrete ribs are buckled and twisted. Craters scar the land all around.

Thirteen year old schoolboy Khoun Souk and his mates are sat in one crater, about six feet across, on the edge of their village school football pitch. Craters are good. They show where ordnance has exploded.

"There has been no reports of bombs appearing here but with time, they work their way to the surface and that's when they can go off," warns British munitions expert Paul Stanford whose Phoenix Clearance organisation have the risky job of sweeping and destroying UXO (Unexploded Ordnance) from the playing field. "By the time we are finished here, the football pitch will look like a scene out of the Somme. But at least then the kids, and their families, will know that the area is clear."

Stanford's team from Phoenix Clearance is doing the job in Mahaxai as a part of an extensive clearance programme supported by the Land Rover G4 Challenge. Most of the clearance work Phoenix has been doing on behalf of Land Rover has not only been in towns but also at the dozens of remote areas in Laos, where the event will be staged in April and May.

For the first two weeks of the Land Rover G4 Challenge, 18 competitors from across the globe will travel extensively in Laos by Land Rover, kayak, mountain bike and on foot. On route they will compete against the clock and against each other in a series of adventure sports and off-road driving. Laos' stunning natural landscape of Limestone Mountains, thick jungle and the mighty Mekong River provide a spectacular setting for the Challenge and the remote simple villages provide a unique cultural experience.

Through this lush landscape and around villages and rice paddies, the Phoenix team have spent months exhaustively checking and where necessary, clearing the campsites

and competition venues. The cleared areas have now been marked as safe, contributing to the government's target. Finally, when the Land Rover G4 Challenge competitors and support personnel arrive in Laos on the 24th of April, Stanford and his Lao team will provide a final safety briefing on UXO etiquette and precautions.

"We can't have competitors just wandering about the place, and certainly not digging holes," says Stanford. "You don't put a shovel in the ground anywhere in Laos unless you know it is safe to do so. Lighting fires is another no-no. There are many stories of Lao setting off bombs with a campfire. But this is not like Cambodia where mines are the biggest problem. You can drive over the bombs in Laos and not set them off."

The clearance of the school playing field is a thank you to the town, which will host the Land Rover G4 Challenge for a day. Without Land Rover's input, the playing field is just one of the areas that would remain un-cleared and each day would remain uncertain for the kids and their parents.

Sappers scan the field methodically with giant blue metal detectors. With each beep the team mark the ground with a wooden stake, before making a closer inspection with a more penetrating detector.

During the playing field clearance operation the deep ground detector emits a range of shrieks and whines. An experienced operator can tell by the sound, not only how big an object might be, but also its shape too. A Laotian sapper is on his knees, long-handled trowel in one hand, clawing at the sun-baked earth.

In the distance, a cockerel and a chain saw compete noisily. But it is silence that envelopes the football field. After about five minutes, the soldier raises his hand. The uninitiated don't know whether to dive to the ground or breathe a sigh of relief. But Stanford's purposeful walk towards the pitch indicates all is well.

"It is just a piece of junk metal," he declares. "But it might not have been a piece of junk. We'll keep clearing until we are sure that it is only junk and not bombs below this football pitch."



The countdown has begun...

Mar 20 2006



Preparations for the 2006 Challenge are well under way. The sixteen-strong set-up team arrived in Southeast Asia and South America this week to prepare over 100 sites for competition and camping. The set-up team are just 16 of the 120 staff that will travel with the Challenge, including competitions team, logistics team, film crews, photographers, telecoms specialists, doctors and dentists.

As final checklists are prepared, some impressive facts are unearthed that demonstrate the scale of the Challenge:

- 86 shipping containers of vehicles & kit
- 938 Goodyear off-road tyres
- 75 Pyranha kayaks & kayaking kit
- 75 specially designed mountain bikes from Land Rover bikes
- 5km of rope & 600 karabiners
- 300 Lazer helmets - kayaking, climbing & mountain biking
- 8,000 pieces of clothing from Nike ACG
- Over 20,000 boil-in-the-bag meals will be eaten
- Over 25,000 litres of water will be drunk.



Let the strategy begin...

Mar 20 2006



As 18 finalists celebrated their success on the International Selections podium, they got their first look at the 17 adventure enthusiasts that would become their companions, friends, teammates and ... opponents.

During the 28 days of competition, competitors will complete each stage paired together to form nine bi-national teams. Team Partner Selection will take place at the commencement of the Land Rover G4 Challenge and subsequently, at the start of each of the following week-long competitive Stages.

Partnerships will be determined through a selection process whereby the 8 lowest ranked competitors select their team mate from those ranked in the top 10. The suspense will increase as each partner is selected until the lowest ranked competitor is left with a final choice of three. The remaining two competitors will then pair together to make the final team.

With partnerships formed, the bi-national pairs will complete the following Stage together, aiming to accumulate as many points as possible as they undertake both Compulsory and Optional Competitions.

All competitors will be aware of their rankings. Therefore the lowest 8 have the opportunity to apply strategy to their selection. Not only will this be based on the current rankings but also the physical strengths, personalities and the social bonds that will be formed between competitors along the way.

And, the strategy game has already begun ...all 18 finalists are in regular e-mail contact, with the objective of sharing their excitement, anxiety and advice and to build up an understanding of who they predict to be their ideal team-mate.



Land Rover G4 Challenge crowned by LAZER

Mar 19 2006



LAZER has confirmed its support of the 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge, as 'Marketing Partner and Official Helmet Supplier'. LAZER helmets will be worn by all competitors as they compete in mountain bike, kayak and climbing competitions throughout the Challenge.

LAZER Helmets have over 80 years of experience in developing helmets that produce a synergy between safety, comfort and design. Their helmets are developed for both top sport and recreational activities - making them the ideal protection for competitors as they experience a multitude of tough adventure-sport competitions including mountain biking, kayaking and climbing throughout the 28 day Challenge.

"We have some extreme activity lined-up for our 18 competitors; therefore we wanted to provide them with re-assurance that their head protection is of the highest quality." said Niki Davies, event director. "The proven experience and innovation that LAZER offers was confirmation that they were the right partner brand for the Challenge"

"We have a history of working with top athletes and top sports men and women who share the same passion for performance as we do, therefore the Land Rover G4 Challenge seemed the perfect platform for us to showcase what we've achieved with our products." said Mike Van Cleven, International PR, Events and Sponsoring Manager for LAZER.



The Challenge - dates and route maps

Feb 15 2006



The 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge begins in Bangkok, Thailand on **April 23**, traverses Laos for 10 days before relocating 10,000 miles away to Rio de Janeiro for the 2-week South American Stage in Brazil and Bolivia.

The diverse scenery and culture offered by each of the four countries will be an unforgettable experience for all that touch it.

Stage One 23rd – 29th April. The Stage opens in Bangkok, a chaotic, bustling, noisy, vibrant and cosmopolitan city where gold temples and saffron robed monks sit alongside city sky scrapers. Once the Mekong River is crossed and the Challenge convoy arrives into Laos, the untouched remoteness is evident. It is a lowland region with lots of paddy rice fields, river crossings, log bridges, mud and ruts and then some amazing limestone pinnacles and rock formations. There is little or no Western influence in Laos and village life is very traditional. The Stage finishes in Vientiane – the capital of Laos.

Stage Two 30th April – 5th May. Departing Vientiane, the route heads through heavily forested jungle type scenery before reaching Vang Vieng, with its huge limestone bunts. The scenery from Vang Vieng up into the Annamite Mountains and into Luang Prabang is the most striking in Laos. Luang Prabang is the cultural highlight of this Stage, a city of gleaming temple roofs and crumbling French provincial architecture. Laos Hill Tribe people can be seen walking the markets and Monks, in their bright orange robes, are heavily present.

Stage Three 6th – 13th May. Stage Three opens in Rio de Janeiro, with the urban competitions. Rio is a stunningly beautiful, bustling, cosmopolitan city where beach culture prevails. Bolivia offers a stark contrast with remote landscapes, broken sporadically with small villages – often with Spanish influence. The Stage Finish is in the small colonial city of Sucre, at an altitude of nearly 3000 metres. Indigenous Indian habitants prevail in Sucre. The colourful shawls and ladies in bowler hats create a unique and memorable picture.

Stage Four 14th - 20th May. The Stage Start includes a convoy to Potosi, which is the highest city in the world, at over 4000 metres altitude. The scenery on this Stage is dramatic and incredibly varied – canyons, butts, sand and salt lakes. The remote Altiplano villages are inhabited by friendly locals in the bowler hats and brightly coloured blankets. The stage highlight is definitely The Salar de Uyuni – the world's largest salt lake. The 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge Final takes place on the last day of competition. This is when the top four competitors go head-to-head to find the ultimate winner!



International Selections - how do the final 18 feel?

Feb 15 2006



Argentina (Pablo Burattini) "A mixture of different sensations flooded through me when they made the announcement. At first there was happiness, but also disappointment on behalf of my team mates. I immediately thought of my family, and my fiancée who I am marrying in twenty-one days."

Australia (Tom Landon-Smith) "When they first read my name, I was immediately disappointed for my team mates. But as soon as it all sunk in, I was absolutely over the moon. I'm not sure if I will win in the Challenge, but as long as I'm on the start line of a race, I always stand a chance. I now have a ticket to the start line."

Belgium (Kris Janssens) "I immediately realised that I was still in the game – I now have a shot at the Challenge itself. I haven't started thinking of the final result of the Challenge yet; I am just looking forward to living my dream. You can always save money and buy yourself a Range Rover [rather than win one in the Challenge] but you can never buy yourself the Challenge!"

Brazil (Eleonora Audra) "For months I have thought of nothing else. Every time I trained, I imagined being on the Land Rover G4 Challenge. Now I am in it I am like 'Wow, I did it'. It is a dream to represent Brazil and to have a chance to be the first woman to win the G4 Challenge. I am the happiest woman in the world!"

Chile & Costa Rica (Claribett Vega) "I truly didn't expect it, I am amazed! The worst is that I may have to quit my job in order to take part, but at the end of the day it is worth it. I will do whatever it takes, and I really hope to do very well in the Challenge!"

France (Jean-Baptiste Calais) "There's a lot of emotion today. The three of us were stood holding hands as they announced my name. I feel for them but am very happy for myself. I will be going for the win. I believe I can get it."

Germany (Robert Josef Schweiger) "I feel very emotional. I did not get much sleep. They tested us mentally and physically and now I am feeling that. These selections were tough but the event will be even tougher so I will spend the next two months training hard."

Greece (Lambros Argyris) "All of us at the International selections were very good. Knowing that, all I could do was try my very best and keep looking ahead. To go through to the event itself is a dream. But it is still hard to believe this."

Ireland (Gary Robertson) "I am a little surprised to tell you the truth. But I am

delighted. I thought I performed quite well but my team was very strong and so there was no clear favourite. Now I have a lot to do before the event. This is the start of something much bigger and preparation is key. I want to win for Ireland."

Italy (Marco Martinuzzi) "I was totally surprised when I heard it was me, since we are all on a very similar level. It must've been very hard for the organizers to choose between us, but I'm just really glad that it was me they picked."

Japan (Takashi Sugiyama) "My first thought was for my colleagues at home, and what I was going to tell them. I am a bit older than most of my competitors, but I think that my age may be a benefit on the Challenge. My team mates can learn from my experience, and hopefully they will help me too."

Netherlands (Thijs Maartense) "We came here as three very different people, but ended up as one team. Yet, despite our friendship, only one goes on to the Challenge; and I am elated to be that one. I cannot wait for Bangkok, and the start of the Challenge."

Russia (Dmitry Timokhin) "For the last two days I thought I had lost it. I had three good first days and then the last few tasks did not go so well for me. But I managed to keep in there. Now my focus is to win. Every second, every minute I will be thinking about how to win."

South africa (Martin Dreyer) "I think it was real close between me and Marijke (Nel). I never thought that it would be me that got through. I just gave my best knowing that I had a chance. This is just the start. It gets really hard from here and to have a chance of winning I must train hard and focus. Nothing else matters from now to the start!"

Spain (Gabriel Maldonado) "I think they chose me because I was the most balanced member of my team. There might also have been some luck involved, but overall I think I managed to deal with the pressure. The organizers managed to get the best from me, despite making the event very tough."

Taiwan (Victor Huang) "When my name was called, it was truly wonderful. It was brilliant and beyond my own expectations. I can't believe that this is happening to me, and I just hope that I can do really well in the Challenge itself."

Turkey (Tolga Senefe) "I am so excited. I believed 100% all the way through that, if I did my best I might have a chance. Adventure has always been part of my life and so this is an event I want to win."

United Kingdom (Brian Reynolds) "This is awesome – I'm just blown away! I've been training for this for three years, and I managed to perform at 100 % all of the time. Just working to the best of my abilities was enough, and I'm delighted to be through to the Challenge."



International Selections - Day 5 - FINAL RESULTS

Feb 3 2006



Representing their country in the 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge is, in country alphabetical order:

Argentina – **Pablo Burattini**

Australia – **Tom Landon-Smith**

Belgium & Luxembourg – **Kris Janssens**

Brazil – **Eleonora Audra**

Chile & Costa Rica – **Claribett Vega**

France – **Jean-Baptiste Calais**

Germany – **Robert Josef Schweiger**

Greece – **Lambros Argyris**

Ireland – **Gary Robertson**

Italy – **Marco Martinuzzi**

Japan – **Takashi Sugiyama**

Netherlands – **Thijs Maartense**

South Africa – **Martin Dreyer**

Spain – **Gabriel Maldonado**

Russia – **Dmitry Timokhin**

Taiwan – **Victor Huang**

Turkey – **Tolga Senefe**

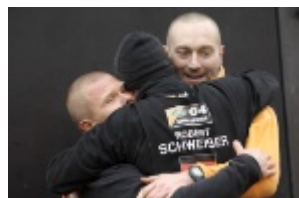
United Kingdom – **Brian Reynolds**

Congratulations to all the 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge competitors, and indeed to all 54 fantastic participants.



International Selections - Day Four - daily report

Feb 2 2006



There is now less than one day to go of the week-long 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge International Selections. Competitions Manager Rikard Beckman has declared that the last few hours of tasks could still determine who gets picked for the event itself and who does not. With the points starting to be added up, Rikard has advised competitors to keep their 'foot on the accelerator' if they want to avoid a last-minute disappointment.

"There are some countries where we think it is too close to call," says Rikard. "And we are not just saying it is two of the three contestants who are in with a chance, but all three of them. That's incredible after almost five days of hard competition."

On Thursday morning, the competitors were woken at 4am for a raft-building exercise around Eastnor Castle's frozen lake. Not until 9pm did the 54 finalists get a chance to rest. During those 17 hours of unrelenting pressure and physical stress, competitors endured initiative tests, extreme driving trials and muscle-wrenching physical assessment.

The sense of competition closure drove them on when their bodies and minds might have been having other ideas. "Now is not the time to lose hope or to give up. In the Greek team we are all still working to win," said Michael Tsautos.

Some teams, decimated by injury, are down to just two competitors. On Wednesday, South African Richard Kolbe had to retire with a shoulder injury. Germany too is down to two men, giving Frank Zeigler and Robert Schweiger an equal shot at the German team place.

"Of course we both want to win and we are both pushing like crazy now," said Frank. "It would be awful to lose out because I did not give 100% in the last few tasks. The pressure is really on."



International Selections - Day Three - Teamwork

Feb 1 2006



One for all and all for one was the Three Musketeers' famous call, signifying unity in adversity. The same concept of bonding through ups and downs is the code for most of the 54 international adventurers, three from each of 18 different nations, vying for the chance to represent their country in the Challenge itself.

Only one person from each country will leave the International Selections week in Eastnor, England on Friday with the prize of being able to represent their nation on the Land Rover G4 Challenge when it starts from Bangkok, Thailand. The best the other two finalists can hope for is a position as reserve. Yet, rather than try and undermine each other's chances, many of the trios have decided to join under their common flag and push each other towards selection.

"We all know there is just one place and that only one of us will this chance to compete for our country," says Turkish competitor Tolga Senefe, a businessman and adventure racer from Istanbul. "But fighting amongst ourselves is not good. We have enough of a battle in such a strong arena, support is important."

Tolga's fellow Turks are Sertac Boztepe, an event manager and Burcu Aslanagi, one of many women in the running for the Land Rover G4 Challenge. Turkey has a strong history in Land Rover's adventure competitions, winning Camel Trophy previously and showing strongly in the first Challenge three years ago.

"We want Turkey to win the Challenge this year and so the best competitor must go through from here," says Sertac. "This is no place for selfishness. If I saw that Burcu or Tolga had dropped their map, I would not pretend I had not seen it. I would pick it up. The spirit of this event is as important as winning."



International Selections - Day Three - daily report

Feb 1 2006



"I'm not sure why they bothered with a ramp between the top of the Land Rover Defender and the ground," says Dutchman Bram Oostvogel, shaking his head. "Riding a mountain bike off the edge of the Defender's roof is like skiing off the summit of a mountain. There's just air between you and the ground!"

Day three of the week-long Land Rover G4 Challenge International Selections, and the 54 hopefuls, competing for 18 places on the global adventure, are faced with their most daunting and potentially dangerous challenge yet, a terrifying mountain bike trial.

Off vehicles, over see-saws, across rickety bridges and at full speed through frosty cold forests, the hard men and women of the Challenge got a full shot of adrenaline just as the succession of sleepless nights in ice-coated tents has started to drain them of reserves.

In the same day, the competitors had obstacle courses, off road driving tasks, navigation tests and orienteering as well. But the mountain biking was the challenge that took the greatest toll. 50 year old Japanese Takashi Sugiyama, head-butted the hard English soil after barrelling down a hill and over a jump. Two doctors were on hand and immediately checked him for injury. Burcu Aslanagi suffered the same fate, but again was unhurt. (To see a video clip of this spectacular 'off' please flick through the 'related videos' to the right.)

"These guys are pushing themselves hard, so it is natural to have a few scrapes," acknowledged the Challenge Medical Director Dr. Mike Irani. "Fortunately we have only had to deal with a few bruises."

Australian Tom Landon-Smith was one of the most accomplished riders on the course. His fear was not for himself but his wife and fellow Aussie team competitor Alina McMaster. He looked tense as she tackled the course and she later looked emotional to see how his worry had affected him. It was a moment of tenderness amid a flurry of adrenaline.

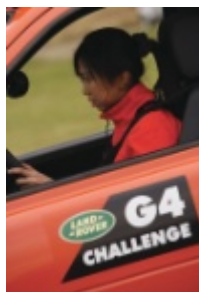
Not everyone came away from the intense physical challenges without injury. South African competitor Richard Kolbe dislocated his shoulder on the climbing wall, and had to withdraw from the event. "Initially I thought that I might carry on, but the medical director ruled that I should end my Challenge here", says the highly competitive Civil Engineer from Johannesburg. "But while I may have one bad arm, I still have a good voice – so I'll stay over here and support my team mates"

There is one more day of physically and mentally demanding tasks before the grand finale on Friday; the day when 18 of the 54 competitors will find out who is bound for Bangkok in just 12 weeks' time.



International Selections - Day Two - daily report

Jan 31 2006



Language differences surfaced in the heat of training and competition today, as 54 highly motivated individuals from 18 diverse countries fought for a final place during the Land Rover G4 Challenge International Selections.

The second day of the event saw competitors honing their off-road skills by driving a Land Rover Discovery 3 and Range Rover Sport through the woods of Eastnor Castle in Herefordshire. Linguistic difficulties arose as instructors explained safe, skilful driving on tracks that Competitions Director Simon Day claims are 'as hard as anywhere in the world.'

With some of the teams initially taking time to compute English instructions, it proved a slow start to the exercise. After three hours training, the teams had grown in confidence, controlling the vehicles on muddy forest trails that resemble those they may encounter during the Challenge, in South East Asia during the rainy season.

National differences also surfaced in the use of hand signals to direct the vehicles' drivers. Spanish outdoor instructor Eric Vila signalled steering changes to driver Monica Aguilera, a sports video producer, by raising his thumbs and flicking them in the required direction – a change from the normal hand signals.

'I'm sure that means everything's OK,' said instructor Mike Chambers. 'But it doesn't matter as long as you both understand. He stressed the important thing is to do nothing if you can't read another competitor's signal – you'll then communicate in another way.

For Erik Vila it was the second disorientating experience in 24 hours. On the previous night's navigation exercise competitors were required to locate 40 lights flashing on a dark hillside like a surreal airport runway, without maps or GPS. 'After four lights you had no idea where you were. It wasn't easy.'



International Selections - Day Two

Jan 31 2006



As the pace hots up on day two of the Land Rover G4 Challenge International Selections one finalist is revelling in the competition – at an age when most people are contemplating a quiet retirement rather than cold camping and vigorous adventure.

Fifty-year-old Takashi Sugiyama from Japan is the oldest of the 54 hopefuls – most are in their twenties and thirties - fighting for a place on the Challenge that kicks off in Bangkok on April 23rd. 'It's not hard being older,' he said, as he dried off after rolling his kayak in the bitterly cold water of Eastnor Castle lake. 'You don't have the speed or power but it's the experience that really counts and the will-power not to give up.'

'The older you get the more events you've tried and the more chance you have to do well. I've done adventure races, orienteering, skiing, hang gliding, windsurfing... the whole deck. And the G4 lets me do many of them in one week. It's the complete event.'

He believes 2006 could be his best chance of winning a place on the Challenge. 'This is my golden opportunity. I've been training with the Japanese orienteering team, who are mostly in their twenties and thirties, and I'm very fit. It won't be the same in two years time.'

If he does find glory in the international trials, Takashi hopes he will inspire others of the same age to get up and compete. 'I want to be a role model to other 50-year-olds, even 60-year-olds,' he said. 'I think it's a bad thing that people get to these ages and won't think about doing these things. They're nearly all hearty and fit, they should be doing more.'

'Last year I was passed at an orienteering event by a 60-year-old Norwegian woman. She ran so fast. And I've seen 80-year-olds competing. People shouldn't give up when they get older.'

The Land Rover G4 Challenge in chilly Herefordshire has already bought back a few memories for the Japanese student who studied engineering science at Oxford University around thirty years ago. 'I used to do orienteering in the Lake District and Scotland. I love Britain in this cold weather. It's like coming home!'



International Selections - Day One

Jan 30 2006



Raw weather, zero degrees and high quality competition greeted the 54 finalists from 18 countries today, at the 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge International Selections.

Having spent a cold night under canvas in the grounds of Eastnor Castle, competitors (including a German fireman, Costa Rican nutritionist and French ski director) were all eager to get started on their first day of competition. Having been chosen from thousands, they're aiming to represent their countries in the ultimate global adventure that crosses Southeast Asian jungle, Brazilian beaches and Bolivian salt lakes in April and May.

The morning revolved around driving - the core of the Challenge - with competitors controlling the Land Rover Freelander over a combination of steep ramps and inclines. There were wide eyes and alarmed expressions at the vehicle's spectacular angles.

'It was more extreme than I expected,' said 27-year-old British doctor Andrew Grieve. 'It was a good burst of adrenaline to kick off the week.' While Liesbeth Breesch, 25, a Belgian PhD student, said 'It's good to scare yourself once every day. It teaches you blind faith in the person guiding you over the ramps.'

Basic mechanical instruction, including the South Africans changing their brake pads at what their instructor called 'F1 speed', was complemented by a road safety session - vital given the varied journey around the globe for 18 successful competitors.

Impressive climbing, navigation and abseiling activities have been spread around the grounds of Eastnor Castle, along with kayaking on the lake. As the temperature remained just above freezing, the real awakening activity was a bracing 'eskimo' roll described as 'A bit of a shocker,' by 37-year-old Irish construction manager, Paul Mahon.

Motivation is clearly sky high at this early stage. For Hajime Kobayashi, a 35-year-old Japanese graphic artist who has earned the nickname 'Jimmy', it's a 'fantastic dream to compete at the spiritual home of Land Rover. I own a Discovery and I've always wanted to come here.' For Paul Mahon, it's the chance 'to represent my country and pull on the green,

white and gold'.

Two of the three Australian finalists Alina McMaster and Tom Landon-Smith are also highly competitive. Unusual, considering that they're husband and wife, both keen to make the finals. 'It's cool,' said Alina. 'If one of us makes the final selection, they can discover the really great places, then take the other back later.'



International Selections - Day Zero

Jan 29 2006



Years of preparation have come down to months, weeks and finally days. And suddenly it is "go-time". International Selections for the 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge is finally underway, and Eastnor Castle, the "spiritual home of Land Rover" has been transformed into a hub of lively activity.

Long before the competitors arrived, Challenge staff worked around the clock to get everything in order. Vehicles have been prepared, camp sites selected, activities designed and obstacles built. The competitions team, along with all the staff involved have slaved for many hours to get each of the activities exactly right. Mountain bikes, GPS units and other equipment have been counted, tested and prepared; while every eventuality and outcome was discussed and planned for by the management team.

The staff are well briefed on every aspect of the event, and the arrival of the first competitors signaled the end of their months of preparation, and the start of something special. Soon the main marquee was filled with the buzz of the voices from many nations, adding some international spice to the already cosmopolitan mix of staff members.

For the 54 competitors, representing 18 nations, it is the start of an event that could lead them on to a place on the ultimate global adventure. The 3 competitors chosen in each nation's individual Selection events have already endured some very tough tests, but International Selections promises to take them beyond anything they have experienced before, and test them in some of the most challenging conditions imaginable.

The English weather also promises to play its role, with temperatures hovering around zero degrees Celsius for most of "Day Zero" – and more cold predicted for the rest of the week. Camping in weather like this is challenging even for Europeans, but for competitors from the Southern Hemisphere, like those from Chile and Costa Rica, South Africa and Brazil, it will be even tougher.

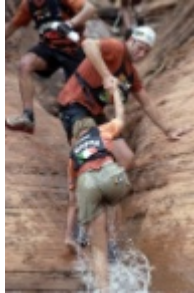
But before they left the relative comfort of the main Challenge Centre at the castle, the competitors were briefed on a wide variety of topics in preparation for the Selections event. Their clothing and equipment was handed to them, together with their Event Guides, and they finally got to meet their fellow competitors from all over the world.

And then, all too soon, it was time to move to the first night's camp at Lake View, within sight of the magnificent Eastnor Castle. Thankfully their visit to the camp was a brief one, as the competitors enjoyed dinner on their first night within the castle itself, before returning to their tents filled with thoughts of what's to come.



The Experience of a lifetime

Oct 26 2005



The 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge promises to be a once in a life time experience for the 18 successful competitors that make it through the demands of National and International Selections. The schedule of 4x4 driving and multi-sport activities will test physical and mental abilities to the limit in breathtaking environments.

We caught up with some of the 2003 Challenge competitors in order to find out what they really thought of the Land Rover G4 Challenge and what's in store for 2006 competitors:

Why did you enter the Land Rover G4 Challenge?

Chris Perry (UAE): Because it was different. I wasn't interested in a race where the fittest person wins. I was drawn to the Challenge because of the multi-skill events and the international teamwork concept that it incorporated.

Dirk Ostertag (Germany): I was looking for a new challenge that would bring in brain power as well as physical strength.

Rudi Thoelen (Belgium): The Challenge combined adventure and travel and my passion for mountain biking, running, climbing and 4x4 driving activities.

Tim Pickering (UK): I wanted to be part of one of the biggest adventure races in the world, I have always loved Land Rovers since I passed my driving test age 17 in a Defender Series II, and the idea of Land Rover and adventure racing was very exciting.

Cuneyt Gazioglu (Turkey): I have followed Camel Trophy for years, so when the Land Rover G4 Challenge was launched I was in the right point in my life to go for it and make my dreams come true.

What was your training schedule for the Challenge?

Chris Perry (UAE): I swam, ran and paddled regularly. I play in different sporting leagues as well as coach wrestling throughout the year. I continued doing the same things but with a bit more intensity. I read heavily about the different name plates and spent time driving them all in various conditions as well as becoming proficient in the basic mechanics of each.

Dirk Ostertag (Germany): A 60km run and 250km cycle in a week! In addition, I practiced orienteering and had some kayak lessons.

Rudi Thoelen (Belgium): Luckily I could use the training needed to do my daily job as a fighter pilot. I also ensured I scheduled running into my daily fitness regime and cycled three times a week.

Tim Pickering (UK): I had my training devised by Tony Wade who trained Kirsty Wade the Commonwealth 1500 medal winner, it was a mix of running, mountain biking and

sea-kayaking. There were certain specifics to develop my upper body strength but mostly it was just lots and lots of miles on mixed terrain.

Cuneyt Gazioglu (Turkey): I started to train hard from the beginning. Towards the last two months before the event I was training as a professional athlete would with a daily four hour schedule.

Has the Challenge changed your life? If so, how?

Chris Perry (UAE): The Challenge has given me 15 friends that I would do anything for.

Dirk Ostertag (Germany): Yes, it made my life more global, meeting people from all over the world gave me a taste of exploring new countries. It has also enabled me to get involved in many events in the 4x4 business.

Rudi Thoelen (Belgium): After the challenge I quit my job and started my own business centred around the outdoors life!

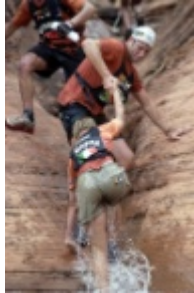
Tim Pickering (UK): It has made me more confident; you can achieve anything you want. At almost 40 I had thought my competitive days were over and suddenly I was representing my country! Now I have expanded my adventure business dramatically and have won a travel writing competition.

Cuneyt Gazioglu (Turkey): My career took a 180 degree change after the Challenge. I quit working in my area of profession which was Finance & Banking and established an outdoor sports organization which, after two years, I sold to another company. Currently I'm working in a world-renowned beverage company as a Sport & Event Manager which perfectly suits my lifestyle.



The Experience of a lifetime

Oct 26 2005



What was the hardest part of the Challenge?

Chris Perry (UAE): Leaving.

Dirk Ostertag (Germany): Definitely the bungee jump from the Gouritz Bridge in South Africa.

Rudi Thoelen (Belgium): The end, going home.

Tim Pickering (UK): Finishing. I did not want the incredible adventure to end.

Cuneyt Gazioglu (Turkey): The strategy element of the Challenge – I lost too many points trying to figure out the perfect strategy.

What did you learn about yourself?

Chris Perry (UAE): The Challenge reinforced things I already believed. I always felt that attitude plays a large role in the outcome of everything and the Challenge reiterated this.

Dirk Ostertag (Germany): To keep patience in very tricky and stressful moments in order to achieve the best decision.

Rudi Thoelen (Belgium): I found out that I was not the most physically strong competitor but by using my brains and relying on the strength of my partners I could make up for this shortcoming. You are a small part in a big challenge and you will never make it to the finish if you don't work together – even with your competitors.

Tim Pickering (UK): There are no limits!

Cuneyt Gazioglu (Turkey): That I can adapt to the environment a lot faster than I always thought possible.

What preparation would you recommend for future competitors?

Chris Perry (UAE): Train to compete in events that are about an hour to an hour and a half long. Be proficient in map reading and driving...know the cars. Most importantly be aware of the relationships that must be built and maintained, you never know who your next teammate may be! Recognize strengths and weaknesses of all the competitors as you may be paired with any of them at some point in time.

Dirk Ostertag (Germany): Basic fitness is absolutely necessary. Just imagine carrying a kayak for about 1 mile in an impassible environment. Can you imagine? Good! If not.....start training!!

Rudi Thoelen (Belgium): Ensure you have a good knowledge of maps and how to read co-ordinate and how to use a GPS and compass. Train to run up-hill in difficult terrain. Combine biking, kayaking and running. It's not the fast runner and bad navigator that finishes first but the good navigator, so try to combine running exercises with navigation.

Tim Pickering (UK): Run, run, run! - there is no substitute for miles and read up on game theory.

Cuneyt Gazioglu (Turkey): Try to simulate the activity – 4x4 drive and bike, 4x4 drive and run, 4x4 drive and kayak etc. Always remember that it is all about saving energy and maintaining yourself till the end.



Ultimate Bikes

Oct 25 2005



The locations of the Land Rover G4 Challenge provide some spectacular and demanding mountain biking routes; in Laos competitors will face jungle tracks and deep mud - in Bolivia the trails will be steep and rocky.

The activities will range from short hectic downhill sections - which are very fast, to longer more demanding routes that will require more endurance and stamina. There will be a focus on tight/narrow/steep and rocky trails, where competitor's skills will really be tested to the limit. In some cases, parts of the course may be constructed to include more technical obstacles.

Competitors will undertake all biking challenges on the unique and specially prepared Land Rover G4 Challenge mountain bike. Constructed by the manufacturers of Land Rover Bikes, the race-ready machine is based around a 7005 alloy frame with custom profile tube sections to maximise strength and keep weight to a minimum. They also come with highly-specified equipment including adjustable Rock Shox Pike forks, SRAM Gears and disc brakes.

The geometry of the frame is such that it is a fantastic bike for making tight turns and manouvering over obstacles due to its low centre of gravity and a more upright 'freeride' riding position. The pounding the bikes will take during the Challenge is more than most bikes will take during their lifetime! This is testament to their design and quality of build, and will allow competitors to push the bikes and themselves to the limit. The bikes are up to it, but with high humidity and a distinct decrease in oxygen on the altiplano in Bolivia at over 4000m, the competitors may find the going more challenging!



A Technological Challenge!

Sep 28 2005



When in 1970 two Land Rovers became the first vehicles to traverse the Darien Gap swamplands between North America and South America, the expedition relied on good old fashioned maps and compasses. It wasn't until the intrepid explorers reached their destination that they could tell the world of their trials and tribulations, sometimes months after they set out.

Times and technology have changed, and nowadays the Land Rover G4 Challenge utilises cutting edge technology to establish event routes, map locations, score the competition and provide stories, images and vision around the globe, all in real time. Never has global communication been faster or more versatile.

Plotting the routes...

The rural stages of the Challenge take competitors through remote areas of Laos and Bolivia, where the only maps in existence are old military maps that have not been updated for over 20 years. Neither reliable nor dynamic enough for the Challenge competitors, the competitions team have been working their way through these areas charting their own new maps, using GPS (Global Positioning System) technology and the very latest Garmin 60C and 60CS portable GPS units as they go.

These maps will provide the basis of the route and the required co-ordinates for competition locations on the Challenge. Like much new technology, the GPS system originated from military use and every GPS unit is licensed to the US military. Twenty-four satellites around the globe provide positioning information, with only three satellite links required at any one time to provide an accurate position reading and four to calculate altitude.

In addition to this fundamental information the Garmin GPS units provide air temperature, speed, distance, and even sunrise and sunset times.

The competitions team track their routes marking co-ordinates of competition points, distances of travel, altitudes and travel times for all Challenge activities; 4x4 driving, mountain biking, kayaking, running and climbing. From this information they are able to produce accurate and precise event maps for the competition.

Finding the routes...

But competitors will not be given all this information, locating the routes is all part of the Challenge! Instead they will be provided with a number of co-ordinates of the start point, various route checkpoints, and of the finish, an estimated activity time, and a basic description of the activity, the rest is up to them.

Their task is to plot the locations on a map, determine how to get there, assess routes for obstacles and accessibility (such as river crossings, winches and bridges), calculate

travel times and then set off to locate and complete as many competition locations as they can each day.

Arriving at a competition start location, competitors will register their arrival by inserting a specially designed key (known as a 'dibber') containing a microchip into the docking station. This will register the start of the activity and time their progress. As they continue through the activity, 4x4 driving, biking and kayaking their way to locate the other checkpoints, they will 'dib' in at each and then finally at the finish location. More reliable than human timekeepers, this system ensures the greatest accuracy amid the complexity of timing 9 two-person teams as they all scramble to complete up to 6 tasks at any given time during a Challenge activity.

Collecting the scores...

At the end of the day the dibbers are collected and the information downloaded to provide a complete report of the activities, times, and results achieved by each team for the day of competition.

With results collated and scores assigned, the information is summarised in daily reports - produced in the field on laptop computers and sent via a satellite web connection through to the event HQ, based in the nearest large urban area. From the densest jungle to the highest Bolivian peak, the technology allows complete reliability and flexibility. Accessible anywhere on the globe, it is perhaps the ultimate in freedom of communication.

A fully equipped Communications vehicle provides the facilities to create a wireless network encompassing the campsite. This enables competition results, media reports, photographic images, voice files and video images to be transmitted back to HQ for compilation, web upload and editing, before being distributed globally to awaiting media outlets, all within minutes of completion of an activity.

The Communications vehicle also plays a vital safety role, providing a link to the event through any network, anywhere, anytime to provide vital communications in an emergency situation, using HF and VHF radio technology to ensure constant communication. A far cry from the isolation and distinct lack of communication for weeks on end faced by the explorers of only 3 decades ago



Nike support the Challenge

Sep 27 2005



Competitors can be confident in their clothing during the 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge as Nike ACG has recently committed to supplying a range of innovative outdoor wear for the event.

The Nike ACG range has been designed for the outdoor activist. The apparel range is fronted by lightweight materials that will perform with style during every athletic outdoor activity in all weather - making it the ideal wear for the Challenge competitors.

During the four weeks of action competitors will experience a variety of environments and temperature ranging from +40°C humidity in Laos to -20°C at altitude in Bolivia. Under normal circumstances these conditions would require clothing that needs to be both flexible and adaptive, however it becomes even more important for the 2006 competitors as they undertake rugged mountain bike descents, tricky physical navigational challenges, steep 4x4 rock crawls and extreme white water kayaking.



Bangkok Uncovered

Sep 27 2005



Bangkok is often described as sprawling, chaotic and exhausting; it is a city that never sleeps; a city of contrasts. Western shopping malls stand tall aside ancient temples; local street vendors sell traditional cuisine to business men in tailored suits. This steamy Asian metropolis throbs with life, its energy and bustle provides a vibrant backdrop that will set the scene for the opening stage of the 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge.

With a population of 6 million people, Bangkok is the cultural, political and economic centre of Thailand – the social hub. Justifiably world famous for its hustle and bustle the city is still undeniably Thai at heart. Hidden amongst fast-food outlets and modern concrete skyscrapers you'll find forgotten streets and glittering temples. A waft of incense will draw you in to these havens of serene calm, where orange-robed monks say their daily prayers.

The Chao Phraya River winds its way through the centre of the city with lively streets and expressway flyovers reflected in the still calm of its water. When the Challenge commences next year a display of Tangiers orange vehicles on a local barge will transport the competitors down-river to the iconic location of the Grand Palace. Once the Royal residence, it is now used only for occasional ceremonial purposes. Use of the grounds nearby this esteemed location is considered a great privilege and locals may even hope to catch a glimpse of the highly regarded Royals.

This unique and treasured landmark will set the stage for the first of our driving activities. Presenting 4x4 vehicles to an inner city audience is sure to get crowds buzzing. Daytime temperatures rarely drop below 30 degrees centigrade in the city centre and competitors are sure to feel the heat. They must keep a cool head and a steady hand to complete the technical driving course with the accuracy, speed and control that is required.

As night falls in this frenetic city the streets transform into a throng of dazzling night markets, selling everything from hand-made fans to Gucci watches, it's a shopper's paradise. Friendly bartering is the name of the game as vendors are sure to have a 'special price for you'. Amongst the stalls, neon lights burn brightly and people spill out of bars and into the streets. It is a hive of activity until the small hours of the morning.

For our competitors, sadly, this will be no more than a distant blur in their rear view mirror as our 60 vehicle convoy will head off north. The next river they will encounter is of a much greater magnitude, they must cross the expansive Mekong River to continue their journey into Laos. Bangkok will be left behind but not forgotten. It is a city not for the faint of heart but for those with a sense of adventure. Just like the Land Rover G4 Challenge it offers a unique and culturally rich experience that is totally unforgettable.



WARN commits to 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge

Sep 5 2005



Land Rover is pleased to announce Warn Industries, one of the world's most recognized off-road companies, as an Official Partner in the 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge. WARN® winches and lights will be equipped on all G4 Challenge vehicles as competitors navigate their way through some of the world's most exciting terrain.

Warn Industries has more than 50 years of heritage in supplying high-performance, quality off-road products. The company's winches and lights were tried and tested on the inaugural Land Rover G4 Challenge in 2003. In 2006, Warn Industries will showcase its 9.5xp winch, which has 9,500 lbs. of pulling power and features an all-new, High Output Parallel Series Wound motor that's the strongest and most durable in the industry. In addition, WARN off-road lights, which are renowned for their reliability and durability, will be used on all participating vehicles.

"WARN products ensure our competitors can push themselves and their Land Rover vehicles to the limit, with the knowledge that they have a robust recovery solution," said Niki Davies, Land Rover G4 Challenge Project Director.

"We are delighted to have Warn Industries as a partner and its products secured for the 2006 Challenge."



Captured on Camera

Aug 23 2005



On July 11, Land Rover G4 Challenge photographer, Nick Dimbleby, returned from bone-jolting Bolivian dirt to pebble-smooth British tarmac following the completion of the second of two photographic shoots. Together with the images shot by Neil Emmerson - fellow Challenge photographer – in Bangkok and Laos in May, there is now a spectacular catalogue of imagery on the 2006 Challenge locations, vehicles and activities.

In stark contrast to the horse-drawn carts of Bolivia and the precarious wooden huts of Laos, Nick and Neil were equipped with the most technologically advanced digital cameras on the market. 'The transition from film to digital has increased the immediacy of photography,' said Nick. 'It means we can edit as we go; provide media [attending a recce] with an image edit before they leave; and it even allows the possibility of emailing photography back-to-base by satellite phone.'

In addition to their state-of-the-art digital cameras, the two Challenge photographers each forego an extensive travel wardrobe to make room for all the additional kit they have to carry with them: computer equipment; external hard drives; chargers; compact flash cards; flash equipment; back-up film cameras; rolls of film; spare lenses; spare cables... in fact, spare everything.

The photographic rewards, however, far exceed any operational challenges. Each of the carefully selected 2006 Challenge locations offers striking and contrasting terrain, colour and culture – from the iridescent gold temples of Bangkok and Rio's world-famous Cristo Redentor to the forest-coated mountains of Laos and the brightly coloured dress of the native Bolivians. It is, however, arguably the Salar de Uyuni that steals the photographic crown.

Sitting high on Bolivia's Altiplano at an impressive 3,653 metres above sea level, the Salar de Uyuni covers 12,106 sq km making it the world's largest salt flat. 'The salt creates a huge white expanse for light to bounce off,' said Nick. 'Added to that, being at extremely high altitude means the air is clean and the light fantastic. It's a photographer's paradise.'



A Day in the life...Competitions Team

Aug 22 2005



Pole-to-pole adventurer, helicopter rescuer, ice climbing fanatic, deep sea diver and IT consultant are just a few of the credentials boasted by the Land Rover G4 Challenge Competitions Team. Competitions Manager, Rikard Beckman, and his four-strong team of multinational adventure professionals are tasked with identifying, trialling and planning the competition locations and activities for the 2006 Challenge.

In all the Competitions Team will have spent over three months scouting and exploring the diverse and testing terrain set to host the 2006 Challenge – from the remote and lush forests of Laos to the rugged and high altitude plains of Bolivia. Whilst an enviable job for any adventure enthusiast, the task of the Competitions Team demands a great deal of resourcefulness, dexterity and patience.

In its bid to find suitable locations, the team deploys a number of tactics. As a first port of call, contour lines and legends on maps - indicating caves, rivers, lakes, cliffs and sharp gradients – are used to identify sites of potential interest.

The maps available in Bolivia and Laos are however out-of-date and far from complete. 'In Bolivia we have sourced maps from the military, and in Laos the only maps available were produced by the Russians in 1981 and have not been updated since,' said Rikard. 'In effect, as we plot the locations and tracks we find on our recces, we are creating new maps from scratch that don't exist elsewhere.'

Subsequently unable to rely on maps alone, the team is constantly on the look out for any promising tracks that might warrant further exploration. Any location deserving further attention is plotted onto the team's GPS and fully scouted to ascertain its potential for driving and multi-sport activity as well as being weighed up against a whole host of other considerations.

'Each team member has a different role,' said Devlin Fogg, former 2003 International Selections competitor for South Africa. 'I evaluate the location from a competitor's point of view; Serge considers it from a safety perspective; Brennie is the master of off-road driving; Pontus is the multi-sport equipment specialist; and Rikard takes a big picture view looking at accessibility, environmental impact, the overall balance of activities and so on.'

In addition to plotting the coordinates – known as 'waypoints' - onto the GPS, the team write a report on each location including photographs, map sketches, weather conditions and potential activity. With up to 1000 waypoints already plotted across Laos and Bolivia, and at least 10,000km of dirt tracks under their belt, this data logging process is paramount to enable the team to review and short-list the best portfolio of locations that will ultimately put the 2006 Challenge competitors to the test.



Goodyear fit for second Challenge

Aug 10 2005



Goodyear has renewed its presence as the official tyre supplier to the Land Rover G4 Challenge. Commencing in Bangkok on 23rd April 2006, the Land Rover G4 Challenge will travel through Thailand, Laos and Brazil before finishing in Bolivia on 20th May 2006.

"The Goodyear Wrangler MT/R tyre displayed outstanding performance on the inaugural Land Rover G4 Challenge in 2003" said Matthew Taylor, Land Rover, managing director, "we are delighted to have Goodyear's expertise to assist competitors as they 4x4 drive their way through some of the world's most exciting terrain."

Goodyear Wrangler MT/R tyres will be fitted to all the Land Rover G4 Challenge vehicles including the new Range Rover Sport and Discovery 3 as well as the Freelander, Range Rover and Defender.

Specially designed features in the Wrangler MT/R make it the ideal tyre for the extreme off-road driving that Challenge competitors will encounter. The special block tread design provides for additional traction and grip, while Dura-wall technology protects against sidewall penetration.

"The Land Rover G4 Challenge is an excellent fit for our 4x4 tyres, which deliver class-leading performance in all conditions," said James Bailey, manager of Corporate Communications at Goodyear. "The global aspect of the Challenge is integral to our brand message in new and important markets. In 2003 the Challenge also provided an invaluable platform for us from which to support a new product launch. We look forward to further successes from the 2006 Challenge."



'Standing by...Turning over...Action!'

Jul 24 2005



The Land Rover G4 Challenge film team has been capturing the sights and sounds of Southeast Asia and South America. The footage generated from these shoots will be used around the globe to stimulate excitement for the ultimate global adventure. We take a closer look at life behind the camera...

As soon as the commands 'Standing by...Turning over...Action!' are heard crackling through the VHF radio, the production team working behind-the-scenes of the film shoot fall immediately to silence. Instead the authentic sounds of 2006 Challenge locations flood the camera microphone: tuk tuks buzzing through chaotic Bangkok traffic; local Rio de Janeiro 'Cariocas' selling their ware on the dazzling white sands of Copacabana beach; villagers drifting home from the rice paddy fields in the remotest wilds of Laos.

The production is an incredibly slender operation. A two-person film crew operates as a single camera unit with Simon Fitzgerald playing the dual role of director/camera operator and Brad Lawson as producer/editor.

Almost permanently attached to the view finder of his camera, Simon has already found himself in a host of different filming situations: crouched in the front of a Thai long boat negotiating water traffic in Dam Nan Saduak floating market; harnessed into the back of a Defender (minus its back door!) in Laos tracking a Range Rover Sport mastering sand driving; legs dangling from the side of a helicopter sky-pirouetting around the head of Rio's Cristor Redentor and skimming the waters of Guanabara Bay.

Once the shoot is over and the team hit UK turf, the film crew goes straight into the edit suite. Brad Lawson's first task is to transfer the footage to a computer hard drive and select and log the best sections of footage – a process known as 'digitising'. 'My main challenge is to come up with a fresh and new creative direction,' said Brad. After digitising the footage, Brad edits sequences of footage to a music track specifically composed for the Land Rover G4 Challenge.

The end product will be distributed and shown around the world as eighteen countries prepare to select their national competitor and many more prepare to follow the action and adventure that is the Land Rover G4 Challenge.



Laos uncovered

Jun 21 2005



The Land Rover G4 Challenge recce team has an enviable job for those adventure enthusiasts amongst us. They travel to far-flung destinations to kayak, climb and 4x4 drive in search of competition sites and routes that will make up the 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge. During May the recce team traveled to Southeast Asia to delve deeper into the gems that Laos has to offer the Challenge.

The three weeks of tiring schedules covered approximately 4500km of Laos terrain and identified 80 potential competition sites for further investigation. Among them, a mountain-logging track revealed a challenging driving route through aggressive jungle-like flora made up primarily of dense bamboo. Dehydrated rice paddys exposed an orienteering playground and a network of mountain caves make for a perfect traverse and climb activity. The culture, scenery and people of Laos promise a fascinating, challenging and colourful journey for the eighteen competitors in 2006.

Freelance journalist John Arlidge accompanied this recce for a few days, and tells his own story...

The Land Rover G4 Challenge recce team are on a mission, they are in Laos – host country for the second Stage of the 2006 Challenge. They are searching for a route that will take them north through the jungle to the Se Noy River, a tributary of the Mekong. John Arlidge joins them at the Savannakhet border post in the heart of Asia's Golden Triangle to find out what it takes to identify the locations that make up the Challenge.

The man standing on the border between Thailand and Laos asks to see our passports. He examines them as if they are as valuable as the opium that is still grown in misty jungle clearings. But Vong Athit, 35, is not a border guard. He is a former mathematics teacher who gave up the classroom to help guide the handful of tourists who visit the highly secretive Communist state each year. "Can you take us to the river?" I ask. "I cannot lie. I'll try," he grins.



Laos uncovered

Jun 21 2005



Guided by Vong and our GPS we start our journey through the rice paddies and over collapsing timber bridges. It soon becomes clear we are going nowhere, so we stop at the Asaphone market to ask directions. Kong, the 38-year-old butcher, tells us to "go on the road". Yes, but which road? "The road that goes to the village." Which village? "The village."

An hour later we reach "a" village but decide against asking directions. The GPS puts us at 20 miles away from Se Noy, so we carry on but in a tropical minute, the weather turns against us. Rain drops that sound and feel like water bullets clang-clatter off the roof and turn the track we're navigating into a flash flood. I raise the suspension and switch the terrain response from gravel to mud ruts. I'm informed by the map-reader we're getting close now. Then, disaster the road ends.

By now I'm wondering whether we will ever make it to the river. We head back to Asaphone and ask directions again. A rice farmer scratches a route in the dust with a stick. We've been driving for seven hours without a break but we are determined to get to the river by nightfall. We lunch on the move and head on north, repeating our question from village to village: "Can you take me to the river?" Finally, we arrive in Nabaka where we meet Dongsan, a fisherman. "Oh, the river Se Noy. I can show you," he says.

The first crossing is way too deep for the Land Rovers to cross but we ask a fisherman, drying his green nets, whether the river narrows and shallows. "Kaenjon," he says. It's a village upstream, says Vong. The track to the Kaenjon crossing is steep and rutted and it takes five minutes for the Discovery 3 to crawl to the water's edge. "Turn the terrain response knob to rock crawl mode and give it a go," the vehicle's axles flex and twist over each rock. After two sodden minutes the massive low-ratio torque powers the car over the last rock and on to the sandy shore on the other side.

From Kaenjon the road opens out into the Mahaxai valley. The wooden bridges on this side of the Se Noy are so rickety that I take the Discovery around the detours designed for logging trucks. After refuelling at a chemist's shop where the local medicine man dispenses red-coloured petrol out of a giant glass jar, we cross the final jungly upper reaches of the Mekong Delta, where we see the Mekong Hotel.

The giant colonnaded Soviet-style building rises next to the border crossing from western Thailand to eastern Laos. At the check-in the Vietnamese receptionist asks: Purpose of Visit. I write: "River." The receptionist smiles and points through the window at ol' man Mekong, rolling along. "Sir," she smiles, "You've found it."



What's in a recce?

Jun 20 2005



The purpose of the recce is to gain a more in-depth understanding of the routes, activity locations and campsites that will form the Land Rover G4 Challenge schedule. It is crucial that each location is assessed for minimal environmental impact and the relevant permission is sought for all areas. Many weeks of technical planning back at base and on-the-ground exploration is carried out before the full programme of the Challenge can be

confirmed.

Read on for a behind-the-scenes recce summary...

Phase one: The initial feasibility study acts as a strategic overview for the Challenge. It identifies areas of the host country that will provide a broad mix of extreme driving, diverse and challenging terrain for competition sites, authentic culture and dramatic scenery for the competition team to explore further. This is only part of the equation however; as at the same time we need to study the logistical infrastructure available to us, including medical support and environmental reports. Governmental liaison is also a critical part of this time, as we could not achieve all that we do without the full support of a wide range of governmental departments.

Phase two: The competition recce team record all possible route options and activity locations applying a priority listing to each. GPS (Global Positioning System) and photographic recordings are taken of each location and added to the main competition database. On return to base they then analyse the locations and routes in more detail, plotting distances, travel timings and fuel requirements for each one.

Phase three: On the ground once again, the competition recce team concentrate their efforts on recording every element of each key location in detail. Then the fun bits begin as they design and test the competition activities, mountain biking, abseiling, traversing, kayaking and driving their way to design a competition task that will test and exhilarate the Challengers.

Phase four: Video and film requirements are specified and the detailed behind-the-scenes process of ensuring that the Land Rover G4 Challenge is authentically and realistically captured on film begins. **Phase five: Set-up.** The competition team begins the enormous logistical exercise of setting up every venue, facility, vehicle and competition in readiness for the Challenge to begin.



Bolivia's Death Road

May 4 2005



Among the many sights revealed to the recce team preparing for the 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge is what ranks as the world's most dangerous road: El Camino de la Muerte in Bolivia. Nick Garton tells us more...

The road is a fraction under 70km in length, winding through the Andean mountains between La Paz and Coroico. Leaving La Paz, the world's highest capital city at just under 4,000m above sea level, the road climbs up another 1000m into the mountains. It then plunges headlong down through rainforest to the green plains and farm land some 3,200m below.

Recce team leader Rikard Beckman has become very familiar with the so-called 'Death Road' as he seeks out the best sites for spectacle and drama when the Challenge arrives in May 2006. "It's absolutely crazy," he says. "The traffic has to stay on the left, but the holes are so bad that staying anywhere for long is pretty impossible. The drops are stomach-turning, you can look out of your window and see down a thousand metres."

The roadside is littered with plain wooden crosses in remembrance of the 100 people who perish each year. Cars, lorries, buses and bikes have all plummeted off the road whether through bad weather, bad driving or natural hazards such as waterfalls that catch out the unwary. "We won't be driving Death Road on the 2006 Challenge," says Rikard with some relief.

"Although we have driven it in our Defenders, the Discovery 3 and Range Rover Sport – often having to stop and pull people out of mud or other trouble – it's just too great a risk. Adventure has to be fun and our competitors will come here to experience life. We've found other ways up and through the mountains that probably only Land Rovers could manage, and it's going to be really spectacular up there."



Discovering Rio

Mar 1 2005



As the cultural and emotional capital of Brazil, Rio de Janeiro is a dazzling mix of white sand, bronzed beauty and the colour of carnival. This vibrant city will provide a colourful backdrop when Stage 3 of the Land Rover G4 Challenge arrives in May 2006. Julie Haywood reports...

Rio de Janeiro was named accidentally by Portuguese explorers who mistook Guanabara Bay for a river mouth (a rio) in January 1502 (Janeiro).

It became the central shipping port for diamonds and gold, and was the capital city until the creation of Brasilia in 1960. Today Rio has almost 6 million inhabitants in a city nestling between a magnificent bay and dazzling beaches on one side and an abruptly rising mountain range, covered by a luxuriant tropical forest, on the other.

The most vibrant districts such as Ipanema and Copacabana are filled with life. The locals, known as Carioca, are renowned for their 'flexible' concept of time – half an hour late means perfectly on time. Cariocas are extremely friendly and are happy to engage in conversation with perfect strangers. The Brazilian attitude is encapsulated in a word called 'juito'. It means 'the secret': the secret that gives their women a roll to their hips, their men a confident swagger and their footballers and racing drivers the skills to master the world.

Rio has a very bohemian attitude where learning to share space with people of different cultural and social values is a survival skill. Beauty is to be celebrated, however – hence Brazil has more plastic surgeons per capita than anywhere else on earth!

Like all Brazilians, the people of Rio have perfected the ability to combine the art of working and playing to the maximum and the explosive celebration of Carnival is world renowned, with Rio's celebrations standing as the biggest and most explosive of the lot. Even when carnival is not in town the little squares, the baixos, throng with life from its pavement bars and cafes.

Centro is the commercial and economic centre of Rio. Beyond the skyscrapers and towering office blocks are examples of the city's elegant colonial and neoclassical architecture. Fancy entrances finished in copper, cast iron, alabaster, and Italian marble is evident on many of the public buildings.

In Rio you can do a thousand different things, try your hand at samba in the gafieiras but among the most memorable are visiting the beach and drinking caipirinha, a potent cocktail of cachaça, the local sugar cane brandy, blended with lime and sugar.

When the Land Rover G4 Challenge hits these South American shores in May 2006, however, there are guaranteed to be sights, sounds and excitement that even the Carioca will never have seen before.



Discovery 3 visits Bolivia

Feb 14 2005



You would be forgiven if you haven't heard of Terevinto, adrift on the high plains of Bolivia. It is, after all, just four scant years since telephone lines were brought here, so there is plenty of catching up to do with the outside world. Jeremy Hart tells us more...

The arrival of telephones fuelled Terevinto's passion for football ("It meant we could find out the results the same day!" village elder Elvio Rivero beamed). The arrival of the Land Rover G4 Challenge reconnaissance team, however, brings an altogether different form of competition.

In early 2006 the second Land Rover G4 Challenge will blend extreme sports and 4x4 driving on an epic adventure. Its 18 international competitors will journey from the streets of Bangkok, through the jungle of Laos to the Copacabana beach in Rio de Janeiro before the ten-day trek through Bolivia from Santa Cruz to Sucre that brought the recce team to tranquil Terevinto.

The team's five-day search for the ideal route included identifying not only the most challenging route up into the Andes but also finding suitable locations to stage the Challenge competitions – principally mountain biking, climbing and kayaking. The search meant covering 1300 km with time very much of the essence, with temperatures hovering at a sultry 35°C even at altitude.

En route the sight of the new Discovery 3 leading the recce party was met with enthusiasm by villagers and road gangs, mostly indigenous Amerindians who speak only Quechua not Spanish. Theirs is a thankless task, trying to keep the roads passable ("we never finish, there is always somewhere that needs fixing," one road worker said from the bottom of a hole that was deeper than he was tall).

The Andes seem to rush at you, the change from open plains to mountain range as dramatic as flying from clear sky into cloud. This is first time that the Discovery 3 has been tested against the rigours of the Bolivian terrain, and the new car fords rivers deep enough to wash the bonnet, brushing aside currents fast enough to sweep away less imposing machines and scaling 35% hills with brawn.

The Discovery 3 will be the mainstay of the South American leg of the 2006 Land Rover G4 Challenge. It will ferry the 18 competitors, their kayaks, mountain bikes and all their camping equipment throughout the route from Santa Cruz to Terevinto and on to the Spanish colonial farming town of Samaipata, a rustic spot whose name means 'rest in the highlands' in Quechua.

Next the route plummets south, then climbs hard to the west in search of Sucre and is known as the Ruta del Che, named after the Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara – who spent the last weeks of his life in Bolivia. This is the route down which the recce team sets off, knowing nothing of the conditions that lie ahead.

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Is there a doctor in the house?!

Nov 22 2004



Doctors, dentists, brain surgeons, plastic surgeons, reconstruction specialists...

Preparation is the key to the success of the Land Rover G4 Challenge, and taking their place among the event staff are experts in medical support who are as vital as any other component of this global adventure.

During the 2003 Challenge, modified Tangiers Orange Land Rover Defender 110 ambulances accompanied the main group on each stage. The rear seats were removed, making enough space for the installation of a full-size stretcher and a raft of up-to-the-minute medical and dental equipment, including compressed gas and air. The rear windows were obscured, ensuring privacy at all times, and the iconic blue flashing light strip adorned the roof. The 'Ambulance' graphics along the side left absolutely no doubt about the vehicle's function.

The ambulance was staffed by some of the world's leading medical experts – Medical Director Dr. Mike Irani oversaw the team, having had decades of experience working as a consultant physician in the UK. The rest of his team comprised of Dr. Martin Joergens, an oral facial specialist from Germany (who also doubled as a dentist), Hans Bhinder, a specialist in Trauma and Orthopaedics and Nik Patel, a leading Neurosurgeon. If you ever get a chance to meet any of this team, they certainly are not what you would expect!

So, what would the average day for a member of the Medical team look like? Thankfully, most of the time the doctors had little to tend to other than blisters, aching muscles and minor skin abrasion: a real testament to the hard work that had gone into ensuring that the Land Rover G4 Challenge's physically and mentally punishing schedule is also as safe as possible. However, there was one particularly unfortunate incident in South Africa that saw Canadian competitor, Jim Kuhn retire. Jim took a bad fall on a downhill mountain bike section in a particularly gruelling urban group-activity, and required 45 stitches to his arm and leg.

The Medical team was on-site in minutes, making full use of the Challenge's emergency communications systems and the Defender's off-road ability. The team put the Land Rover ambulance's capabilities to the test in providing Jim with every care he needed. Regrettably, an emotional Jim left the Challenge a few days later, having been replaced by Kit Stringer, the reserve for Canada.

Fortunately the ambulance was not called upon again on the 2003 event, but remained a constant presence following the action across continents. As the official 'MASH' team the medics found ways to while away the hours – Dr. Martin Joergens would often perform essential dentistry on support staff and competitors alike...even the Event Director found the time for a quick clean and polish!

In 2006 the Land Rover ambulance and its dedicated team of experts will again venture out into the unknown on the Land Rover G4 Challenge, a reassuring sight and an admirable team.



Spotlight on Rudi Thoelen

Nov 9 2004



The inaugural Land Rover G4 Challenge was won by Belgian fighter pilot Rudi Thoelen.

Find out what Rudi has to say about his experience and prepare your training schedule for the 2006 Challenge with Rudi's top training tips.

Why did you enter the Land Rover G4 Challenge?

I am always looking for adventure. I love to mountain bike and climb. I run for fitness and also enjoy off-road driving. Therefore, the opportunity to combine all of these activities with my passion for travelling was something I could not miss.

What was your training schedule for the Challenge?

As I am a fighter pilot, I am required to maintain a high level of fitness, which includes a daily run/training and mountain biking three times each week. Therefore my training schedule did not change dramatically.

Has the Challenge changed your life, if so, how?

The Challenge encouraged me to explore other career opportunities, which initially resulted in me leaving my job as a fighter pilot. I then took the decision to start my own business in expedition equipment as well as 4x4 training. I also continue to work with Land Rover, as I instruct for the Land Rover Experience centre.

What was the hardest part of the Challenge?

The hardest part was the realisation that the Challenge had come to an end. Returning home was a huge anti-climax.

What was the best example of camaraderie / team work throughout the Challenge?

The teamwork shown amongst all competitors was outstanding. If you had a difficult moment the other competitors helped you out, even if it meant them losing some extra points through time lost. We all encouraged each other when necessary, but still managed to maintain a level of healthy competitiveness.

What was your most memorable part of the Challenge?

The last 30 seconds of the Challenge. I was running up the hill towards the finish line and the Range Rover, my adrenalin was pumping - I knew it was nearly over, everyone was cheering. Then, as I hit the bonnet, all the stress in my body drained out in a split second...I dropped to my knees as I was absolutely exhausted....the whole experience was over.

What was the most exhausting activity?

The Maximisers were the toughest as they required so much running, particularly up-hill. The South African Maximisers were the worst.

Where were your favourite locations and why?

The scenery in West USA, the last stage, was stunning - we were surrounded by the most beautiful landscapes. South Africa came a close second, due to the diversity of the terrain and the nice weather.

What did you learn about yourself?

The event required both physical and mental ability, therefore I discovered I was not the most physically strong competitor but by using my brains and relying on the strength of my partners I could make up for this shortcoming. I also found that my general level of fitness stood me in good stead as after exerting myself my body had a fairly quick recovery time. I enjoyed working together with my partners. Instead of using my strengths or weaknesses individually I found that mixing them with those of my partner delivered real results. I was only a small part of a big Challenge, it would have been extremely difficult to make it to the finish if the whole group had not learnt how to work together!

What preparation would you recommend for future competitors?

A good knowledge of maps, how to use a GPS and compass, and how to read coordinates. Train to run up hill in difficult terrain with a maximum distance of about one hour. Endurance cycling, speed cycling for one-two hours Speed kayaking. Good background knowledge on all adventure sports.

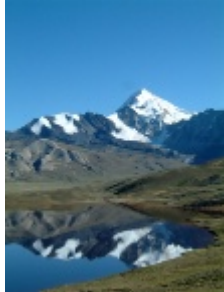
Rudi's final tip:

It's not the fast runner and bad navigator that finishes first but the good navigator. So try to combine running exercises with navigation.



High on Bolivia

Jun 29 2004



Bolivia is a rich country. Maybe not in monetary terms, but when it comes to culture, history and nature, it must count amongst the richest in the world. Striking salt plains and snow-capped Andean summits; smiling locals that wear brightly-colour clothes and bowler hats – it is a country filled with contrast, and is undoubtedly a fitting backdrop for the Land Rover G4 Challenge. Julie Haywood takes a closer look...

With its high plains and desolate mountains, it comes as no surprise that Bolivia is known as the Tibet of Latin America. Sharing borders with Peru, Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina and Chile, Bolivia is completely landlocked – a fact that has undoubtedly contributed to the preservation of the traditional lifestyles of the Bolivian people.

The country is distinguished by regions; the highest is the striking terrain of the altiplano - the high plains of the Andes, set in the southwestern part of the country. Rising 3500-4000 metres above sea level, the altitude is breathtaking in more than one sense: The views are simply stunning, but the thin air makes it hard for visitors to fill their lungs, causing strain and fatigue. Isolated volcano summits tower above miles of open savannah grasslands - broken occasionally by the eerie white expanses of salty wastelands.

This region is home to most Bolivians, as the governmental capital city of La Paz – home to more than a million people - is also located here. Views of snow-capped peaks provide a backdrop for the bustle of commerce, finance and industry in the highest capital city in the world. These first-world sights are a stark contrast to the realities of the surrounding neighbourhoods. And as if the general spartan living isn't enough, the locals also have to organise their lives around the biting cold air and drenching summer rains that are the trademarks of this area.

Highland (inter-Andean) Valleys surround the mountain peaks, where the most hospitable living conditions and rich, fertile soils can be found. Situated in the south, this region benefits from a comfortable Mediterranean-like climate, where a patchwork of scrambled fields support the cultivation of olives, nuts, wheat, maize and grapes. Whitewashed buildings are one of the key features of Sucre, Bolivia's judicial capital, where 100,000 Bolivians live.

Parts of Bolivia are located in the Amazon basin. These areas are divided from the arid, higher plains by a massive rift, known as the Yungas, which stretches from the northwest all the way to the Chaco region in the southeast. Rising steam from the Amazon is halted here and turned into near-perpetual rainfall. Vegetation is abundant with tropical fruit, coffee and sugar all thriving on the stifling temperatures and moisture in the air.

Although the landscapes are awe-inspiring, it is the people of Bolivia that present the

most colourful scenes. Friendly, smiling locals dressed in coloured blankets and bowler hats often welcome visitors. The images of these strong-spirited and hard-working people are sure to be etched in the minds of anybody that visits the country.

Street carnivals and Fiestas are another regular sight, with noise levels that often peak even higher than the surrounding mountains. An excuse to party is not usually required, but most of these happy occasions are the result of religious or political happenings. Festivities typically include folk music, dancing processions, food and alcohol and are much unrestrained. Despite these regular frivolities, rural tasks dominate the lifestyles of a hard-working nation.

The natives are extremely traditional in terms of their values and beliefs, therefore making the country culturally rich. This richness, however, extends no further than the culture, as Bolivia is one of the poorest and least developed of the Latin American countries. Cotton, soy and natural gas are starting to emerge as exports, but it is still the illegal cocoa exports that dominate the country's economy.

Bolivia is a dream find for any traveller. A diverse land that is packed with character and bursting with culture. One can only admire the cheeriness of the people when they live in such poverty. This admiration is partnered with envy, for the natural beauty of their country makes them one of the richest peoples in the world. It is now we can see why the Bolivian's always smile.



A Kingdom of smiles - Thailand revealed

Jun 6 2004



With a reputation as a fun-loving, happy-go-lucky nation, Thailand has been dubbed the 'Land of Smiles'. And the Thai people sure have a lot to smile about, as their kingdom has it all: Frenetic street bustle; palm-fringed beaches; and breathtaking natural beauty. Lucy Searle recently visited the country, and found lots of reasons to smile herself...

Thailand is similar in size to France and thanks to its irregular 'elephant head' shape, it not only shares borders with Myanmar (Burma), Cambodia, Laos & Malaysia, but it also has an impressive 3,219 km of coastline to spare.

Sandy white bays, palm-fringed shores and an aquamarine sea are undoubtedly images popularised by the blockbuster movie *The Beach*. Even without Leonardo DiCaprio, Thailand's two southern coastlines and countless islands live up to all expectations: Diving and snorkelling amongst some of the world's most spectacular coral reefs; kayaking and swimming in silky smooth waters; indulging in a Thai massage in an open-sided shack; or simply basking in the sun with stunning picture-postcard views.

Beyond its promise of rest and recuperation, inspiring temples, ancient ruins, and shimmering rice paddies, Thailand fully delivers when it comes to natural beauty. The striking forested highlands of the north provide the ultimate escape from high-strung city life.

Raging rivers, stunning waterfalls and all manner of giant-sized greenery all invite the nature-loving traveller. The coolness of a refreshing stream and the shelter of a giant leaf-'parasol' are always welcome sights in Thailand's sauna-like climate. And as if beautiful jungle scenes aren't enough, the evenings will see trekkers rewarded for their tough and sweaty days with the local hill tribe's fiery home-brew whiskey.

Stilted bamboo huts perch like giant spiders amongst the greenery, where candle light and squat toilets are still part of the hill tribe tradition. In the northern hills of Thailand life lives on as it has done for thousands of years.

It's not only the accommodation that is traditional in this area – tough-skinned and hairy Asian elephants still trek along steep and precarious paths, so narrow it's hard to imagine a creature so huge squeezing through. Bamboo rafts allow transportation even in the shallowest waters, where they float downstream past grazing water buffalo and traverse a cross-section of remote river life.

With its reputation as a decadent beach haven and remote jungle retreat, it comes as no surprise that Thailand is the most visited country in Southeast Asia. And the 9 million foreigners that visit the country each year have played a significant part in the country's recent development.

With 87.5% of the population above the poverty line, a GDP per capita of US\$7000, 96% literacy rate, and 63000 km of paved roads, Thailand is significantly ahead of its Cambodian, Lao and Burmese neighbours. It comes as no surprise that Thailand now counts as one of the Tiger States, together with economic giants like Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan. It is a country with influence, bustling trade and busy people - illustrated nowhere better than in its capital city of Bangkok.

A huge and sprawling metropolis, Bangkok is home to 6 million of Thailand's 64.2 million people. Interestingly, most Thai people have never even heard of the name "Bangkok". To them, their capital is Krung-Thep-Mahanakorn or Krung Thep for short. This shortened name translates to "City of Angels" - a lot easier on the tongue than the full name for the city, which is listed by the Guinness Book of World Records as the longest city name in the world.

Renowned for being noisy, polluted, intimidating and chaotic, many visitors arrive in Bangkok with a feeling of trepidation. However, a patient temperament, honed street-survival skills and an abundance of energy should be all that is needed to turn what may at first be daunting into fabulous fun.

Although influenced by the western world, Thai tradition remains dominant, and shapes even modern city life. As a result Bangkok is a city of contrasts. Traditional temples and palaces stand alongside modern skyscrapers. Western-style shopping malls cohabit with traditional street markets. And four fifths of the nation's cars fight the traffic against their tuk-tuk rivals.

Named after their noisy engines, tuk-tuks are traditional three-wheeler Thai taxis. They can squeeze through the narrowest gaps and career around the tightest corners. As long as visitors manage to avoid being bullied into a jewellery shop en route to their destination and hold on for dear life, tackling Bangkok's streets as if a grand prix circuit can be an adrenalin-fuelled rush.

Unfortunately outrageous jewellery shops are not the only scams that prevail in the streets of Bangkok. As a rule of thumb visitors should never believe that a popular attraction is closed for a holiday – they will be conned; never accept a python from a stranger – they will pay; and never accept a 'too-good-to-be-true' tuk-tuk fare – they will be forced to browse through shop after shop.

The Thai people are culturally programmed to ask thousands of questions over and above what would normally be considered the need-to-know requirement. Visitors' self-defence mechanisms kick in and quickly they find themselves wearing a reinforced, metal-plated scam-proof vest in a bid to ward off all evil. More often than not the reality is that the Thai people are extremely friendly and inquisitive folk, and their questions are nothing more than amicable banter. Sometimes visitors even leave a five minute conversation with an address and telephone number in hand.

Once a traveller learns to negotiate with cunning conmen, deal with the tuk-tuk madness and survive on the heaving pavements, they should be ready to face just about anything Thailand can throw at them. Even the numerous and diverse shopping opportunities: from the western-style World Trade Centre to the classic Chatuchak Park Weekend Market; antiques, crafts and textiles to tailor-made suits and rip-off designer clothing. Bangkok is a shopoholic's paradise. In fact, although shopping of an entirely different kind, not even river life is spared.

As if pickled in the finest quality preserve, traditional floating markets continue to thrive, trading fresh produce between river dwellers. Here 'traffic jam' takes on a different meaning. The river becomes choc-a-bloc with a solid blanket of boats. The air is filled with a hum of activity. Yet the gentle and calming tempo of the river prevails. Each river merchant gently manoeuvres their long-tail boat through the traffic in search of their next customer. Some pull up alongside floating 'café' rafts moored to the riverside, and serve up local cuisine freshly cooked in their boats. If buying from a river or street vendor, visitors should be sure to choose carefully, or brace their taste buds for chilli that sends them into a feverish sweat.

But then that's the beauty of Thailand. Once visitors are over the initial apprehension of the "Bangkokian" red hot chilli pepper, and have taken a confident bite of all Thailand has to offer, they will be rewarded with an exotic and culturally rich experience that blows their mind.