



Out of the Frying Pan

One obstacle presents another for the Mudrut Pyrenean adventurers, still striving to reach their destination on schedule.

Words and photographs: Ros Woodham

ANDORRA'S CAPITAL pales into the early morning haze, 1,000m below us. The ascent weaves through tight hairpins, stacked like a staircase hugging the mountainside, and the pressure in my ears is an indication of the pace at which we are gaining altitude. The TDCi powerhouse roars as we charge higher, pumping pleasantly warm air into the cab. The locals spoke of fresh snowfall on the peaks and warned us of the difficulties of leaving Andorra by this route, but our batteries are fully charged and we are up for the challenge. With 500 off-road kilometres under our tyres, the warmth of the Mediterranean coast beckons us, and we focus forwards on the third and final leg of our Pyrenean adventure.

Tarmac becomes broken track, the patches of snow thicken forming a white blanket, and a biting wind carries large flakes horizontally across our path. The stark landscape begins to look remarkably similar in every direction. Suddenly, the track forks unexpectedly. Studying the map we agree to go right and cross a bridge



Vall de Gósol, enclosed by the Serra del Cadí and Pedraforca

around the next corner. However, the wind is blowing dry snow into drifts, obscuring our landmarks and making it difficult to navigate. Our chosen route rises into bad weather and we never reach the bridge. We decide to leave the pick-ups and trailer at the bottom of the incline while the three Defenders continue ahead to rece

over the crest. The Land Rovers make easy work of the fresh snow but before long it becomes clear that we have taken the wrong turning as the track dissolves into little more than a treacherous side slope. Woolley begins to about turn and radios to the other two Defenders to do the same. The dwindling track restricts

the manoeuvre and the nearside rear tyre finds a deep, frozen rut hidden beneath a drift. The rear end slides and the front tyres grasp for traction, only succeeding in burying the truck to its axles. We set to work with shovels to clear the tyres and compact the loose snow back into the rut. Some careful consideration and

The depth of a water splash should always be measured with a stick before entry



Crossing the Andorran border the hard way



skilful driving from Woolley brings the 110 back to safety and Paul spots him around the rest of the turn. We rejoin the pick-ups in the shallower snow, where it is easier for them to turn around. However, due to the tight space, we have to unhitch Doug's trailer and spin it by hand. In reverse order we leave the exposed mountainside, correct our navigational error and proceed through a forested area where the pines shelter us from the weather. We are glad to descend away from the snow and dark clouds into the wet, mossy valleys of the Cadi-Moixeró Natural Park beyond Andorra.

While traversing the peaks of the Cadi Mountains, we have crossed the border into Spain, beginning an eastward stretch to the coast. Lower down, the bad weather continues with drizzle and poor visibility, so we use the opportunity to motor on, putting plenty of kilometres on the clock, although there are still 400 to go to our destination on the Med.

As daylight dwindles, the sun dips behind the mountains and the clouds begin to part on the horizon,

bathing the entire valley of Gósol in spectacular golden light. The world is sepia. The relentless drizzle transforms the low rays into an amazing double rainbow that appears like an illusory bridge spanning the entire valley floor. This awesome atmosphere lifts our spirits and encourages us to continue driving instead of looking for a camp. Our maps show the route ascending once more and, as darkness falls, the precipitation turns to snow. Our spotlights highlight the snowy branches like an enchanted forest. As we emerge into a clearing, still ascending, the last drops of golden light are picking out the beautiful white peaks around us; I wonder if Aslan will come bounding around the next corner.

We press on, keen to find a suitable camp. The terrain is taxing and the scenery overwhelmingly beautiful. From the tail of the convoy, Woolley and I listen to the CB commentary from those at the front who are equally inspired by our spectacular surroundings. Shortly, the convoy halts. The rutted tracks scaling the mountainside present us

with an extremely tight downward hairpin with little room for error. Tash and Paul in the lead car carefully pick their way around the bend. The track is barely two inches wider than the 110, then plummets onto darkness on the outer edge. Adam and Tony follow in the Hilux, then radio back with news of a short cut across the switchback. Chris approaches it in the 90. The slope is alarmingly steep, presenting an extreme axle twist section. Chris relishes the challenge and Paul spots him through successfully. Woolley and I also choose this route and he offers me the wheel. I accept it in a heartbeat and I ease the 110 into the slope. The headlights beam unhelpfully into the dark night sky and I rely totally on the careful instructions from Woolley in the seat beside me, and Chris's hand signals from the track in front. In first low, the brakes groan in an effort to hold the three-tonne truck at a steady and safe pace. The suspension flexes and creaks, easing us into an extreme twist. My adrenaline pumps hard and Woolley's knuckles tighten around the dash's handle

hold. Great teamwork and support sees us all safely through this exciting challenge. Onwards and downwards, we finally emerge onto bitumen, triumphant but relieved to find a campsite for the night.

An icy draft and a face-full of canvas awaken me. It is the middle of the night and the wind has lifted the tent pegs clean out of the rain-softened ground. The Tipi's centre pole had thankfully blown away from me, flattening the stove and several chairs. Woolley is already outside attempting to straighten the mess. Wrapped in my sleeping bag and still somewhat stunned, I stand up to hold the pole straight while he replaces the pegs. Before he has a chance to hammer them in again, a gust of wind whips underneath the canvas, felling the pole like a dead tree and taking me with it. I am now lying flat inside the folds of the Tipi canvas, cocooned in my Tundra bag in a sleepy despair, and listening to fits of giggles from outside the tent. Once fixed, our temporary repair holds for another couple of hours before the wind strikes again. This time, the dawn is breaking and I look across from my exposed camp bed to see Doug also chasing part of his tent across the campsite. We decide to give up and pack up.

Blue skies and warm winter sun are a complete contrast to yesterday's blizzard conditions. The red muddy tracks have largely hardened leaving some puddles and stickiness on the surface that cakes our tyres. A long descent presents some great axle twists with video and photographic opportunities. Woolley splashes sedately through a muddy trough and Paul lines up to pose for his photograph. I position myself with the camera at the side of the track. "A little bit more splash, please," I request, naively. Dutifully, but rather excessively, the Defender roars and lunges forwards. Instead of the bow wave I was expecting, the entire contents of the puddle explode into the air with a trajectory that centres me in its path. As if in slow motion, the inevitable barrage of red globules hang in the air above my head and I manage to rapid fire several shots before turning away to prevent a full lens assault. As I unfurl from a soggy crouched position, I hear roars of laughter from Woolley, who witnessed the entire event from a safe vantage point on a high rock, and from Paul who is already out of the driving seat, lying on the bank in uncontrollable hoots.

With little time left to reach Cap de Creus on the Mediterranean coast, we step up a gear on the following ▶



Cap de Creus. The easternmost point of the Iberian Peninsula

day to make up some time. Paul and Tash take over as expedition leaders and we power on through most of the day. By nightfall we are still motoring. Tash navigates, giving a running commentary over the CB and checking each waypoint with Adam, the second navigator in the middle truck, to verify the route. Suddenly, the tightly packed convoy bursts into a grassy clearing at the top of a furious climb and Tash wails over the radio. We grind to a halt. White-faced, Tash emerges from the darkness suggesting that we took a wrong turn. Their 110 is parked perilously close to a cliff edge over which we can see nothing. We had certainly not anticipated a Thelma and Louise-style ending to this adventure!

About turn and back on track, Woolley and I tuck in behind the lead car. They pause to study the terrain ahead. The muddy ruts seem to present no immediate issues so Paul accelerates forwards. We allow them some space in front of us before we follow on, but suddenly their 110 lurches unexpectedly sideways. In the darkness all we can see is the Defender wallowing in a mud bath like a hippopotamus. Paul keeps the revs up and fights with the steering to find traction. The Defender flounders for a moment longer before executing an interesting sideways manoeuvre; moving forwards but with the rear wheels following in a different set of ruts to the fronts. Stunned, Paul emerges from the vehicle to study the unanticipated obstacle wondering quite how he managed to emerge in an upright position. An exclamation of disbelief can be heard from Tash who has walked the section ahead. It is the longest, most furrowed mud run I have ever seen. It is dark, boggy and endless... and there is no way around it. We are presented with some fabulous off-



The Magic Hour brings a spectacular golden light

roading, but at the same time conscious that we may well be camping in the bog. There is no turning back so we decide to go for it and, if the worst comes to the worst, we will pop the roof tents wherever our vehicles stall and begin the rescue mission in daylight.

The next hour is as exciting as it gets. Paul attacks the boggy channel, at least half a kilometre long. The mud sucks at the underside of the Land Rover but the engine never lets up. The Defender breaks free and lunges into the next trap, the front end leaping free of each pothole and plunging into the next. The contents of the 110 are shaken up inside. Finley the Off-road Legend, our 15-month-old explorer, beams with delight from his baby seat as he surges past. Whoops and applause from the team mark a victory for the Defender. The rest of the convoy line up for their turn, encouraged by Paul's success and eager for their

piece of the excitement. With just one tug needed to help Doug's L200 through with the trailer, incredibly, we all make it, elated with our achievement. However, now it is late, dark and cold and we must find a camp. After such a long day we would prefer to find the warmth of some campsite facilities and a hot shower, however our sat nav shows no marked roads within 40km of our current location.

Eventually we hit a tarmac road but the fog is beginning to settle, drastically reducing our visibility to just several metres. Woolley and I take the lead and we decide to seek out a lay-by or some flat land to park and set up camp. The Lightforce spots are no help; they simply brighten up the dense wall of moisture obscuring our view. We proceed at a snail's pace, scouring the verges for a flat spot. Suddenly, without warning, the 110 dips dangerously sideways. We stare at each other for a moment in silence, holding our breath. The



Deeps created by rain wash present great axle twists

Defender's right wheels have been sucked into deep, wet sludge at the side of the road. The truck is in danger of tipping and a further drop into a bramble ditch would befall us if it did. We exit the vehicle carefully and the scene outside confirms that we were right to be cautious. Driving forward or reversing out of the mud would risk getting stuck further or tipping over. After weighing up the options we decide to position the other 110 in a small lay-by on the opposite side of the road to aid recovery. Suddenly, the rear end of this Defender disappears into the same kind of gloom, and the two trucks are marooned at equal and opposite angles at either side of the road in what is to become known as the 'Double Ditcher'! With two trucks out of action, Chris steps up in the 90 to winch Woolley's Defender clear. Tony uses rocks to rebuild the broken road beneath the rear wheel for a safe recovery.

Woolley then spins the recovered



110 around in order to winch the other out of the gloop. Several of the guys stand on the rear bumper of the angled Defender to prevent the vehicle from tipping as it exits. It steadily emerges from the quagmire, caked in glue-like mud. Extremely relieved and anxious not to test our luck any further, we drive into the entrance of a farm track and retire for the night.

We are close to our destination. A beautiful sunny morning sees us into the last limb of the Pyrenees mountain range, culminating at Cap de Creus. With its Daliesque landscapes and beautiful rocky coastline, the warmth of the lower ground is a welcome contrast to the last few crazy days in the icy mountains.

We break for lunch on the beach at Cadaqués, throwing stones into the crystal waters of the Med. It is a great moment to reflect on the incredible chain of events over the last two weeks and a chance to really contemplate what we

have achieved. Finley the Off-road Legend paddles in the shallows and I realise that our 15-month-old fellow explorer has been much more than a back seat driver throughout the adventure. He has been happy, warm, trusting, superbly behaved and entertaining; a measure of the confidence and competence of the group. He never wanted for anything (except perhaps a clean nappy after the cliff-edge incident) and full credit goes to his parents, Paul and Tash, who have not only taken excellent care of little Finley but have also participated 100 per cent in the adventure, fulfilling their roles as crucial team members. It is clear that the success of an adventure comes down to good preparation.

We have carried with us an exceptional amount of gear which, at the start, seemed a little excessive. However, through necessity we used all the equipment we brought. Furthermore, we



Repeating Tony's mantra: "There is no such thing as bad weather, just inadequate clothing."

have tested our trucks in extreme weather conditions at altitudes in excess of 2,000m, where they have performed outstandingly. For me, the experience of living entirely out of a truck for an extended period of time has been thoroughly empowering. You learn fast to identify the most important items, how to pack them, and to allow access to the right gear at the appropriate moment, especially when camping in sub-zero conditions.

The Pyrenees have dealt us a

rich hand of natural beauty, physical challenges and unforgettable experiences. The vast landscape with its changing features and unique characteristics has continually defined what we did and where, presenting us with unexpected and exciting encounters around every corner. The last kilometres wind around the tiny mountain road leading to Cap de Creus, a stunning vantage point marking the easternmost tip of the Iberian Peninsula, and the close of an awesome adventure. **LRW**