



Dream tour of Africa

Ute and Henry Schwarz from Dresden have achieved what others only dream of: They've spent two years on an epic journey through Africa in their expedition vehicle.

“Six kilometres ahead turn right at the burnt-out VW camper van,” – at first these directions might seem worrying. Especially when the route leads through a stretch of minefield marked only with piles of rocks. “But this,” Ute and Henry Schwarz say, “is just something you have to come to terms with when travelling through the Sahara.”

The tales of these globe-trotting Dresdners are full of episodes like this one, experienced near the Moroccan border with Mauritania. In two years, the pair completed an anticlockwise journey around the entire African continent. They set out from Morocco, following a path that took them along the west coast to the southernmost point of their trek, the fabled Cape of Good Hope in South

Africa. From there, they continued north along the east coast.

Once around the continent

The couple worked diligently to make this dream tour a reality. They put in long hours at their business, pinching every penny along the way. They also put in extensive preparation. They had previously toured Australia, America and China and were familiar with several African countries. They had visited Namibia once before and traversed Morocco in their expedition vehicle, a machine they contracted Action Mobil of Austria, a manufacturer specialising in customised off-road motor homes, to assemble on an MAN M2000 14-284 LEAC chassis back in 2001.



In March 2005 it was finally time to hit the road. Armed with a cine camera, photo cameras, laptop, colour printer, a stack of travel guides, maps and sophisticated navigation software, Mr and Mrs Schwarz embarked on their once in a lifetime adventure – with their expedition vehicle, fondly referred to as Freddy.

Mingling with the natives

They were able to prove that they possess the aplomb characteristics of truly seasoned travellers right at the outset of their African odyssey. Two young men tried to get their hands on the motorbike strapped to the back of the MAN truck. With all their might the globe-trotters valiantly fended off the would-be thieves. Thankfully, they abandoned their ill-gotten plans and disappeared.

Apart from a few rare instances such as this, Ute and Henry's experiences with the locals were overwhelmingly positive, irrespective of tribe and culture – and they invariably put themselves right in the thick of things.

To get as closely acquainted with the local community as possible, and to ensure they had a safe place to sleep, they made a habit of setting up camp in villages. Such as one near Lomé, the capital of Togo: “After reporting to the chief of the village,” said Henry, “we received a warm welcome. Word of our arrival spread like wildfire. We were immediately surrounded by locals, children in particular. They were proud to show us around their village.”

“We received a warm welcome in every village we came to”

After a while, scenes like this became part of a normal day in the life of the Schwarzes – even if a “normal day” is really nothing more than a figure of speech. On the tour each day was different from the next. One moment they were bouncing along over unpaved roads and narrow paths meant for donkey carts in their ten-tonne MAN; the next >>



Ethiopia (left): Apart from two blown-out tyres, every flat along the way could be repaired. Botswana (right): A meeting with members of the San tribe in a camp on the edge of the Kalahari Desert.

they were attempting to find their way over endless, sweltering steppes, yielding sandy deserts and rugged rocky badlands or misty rainforests. The rainy season, with water washing away the roads and rising over one metre high – right up to the cab doors – posed the biggest challenge.

From roadways to rivers

Most of the locals' vehicles are not up to coping with the rainy season. Completely overloaded, with antiquated equipment and no working brakes, they are little more than death traps. In Ghana, for instance, the couple's itinerary took them on a horrendous route through the rainforest that more resembled a car graveyard. Dozens of trucks, many already ripe for the scrap heap, come off the road here and tip over. "We have never seen so many smashed-up vehicles in one place as we saw there," says Ute Schwarz.

In Cameroon the roadway was so waterlogged that a heavily loaded truck sank down metres right in front of them. They had to wait over an hour before they could continue their journey. They too were forced to use shovels, stones, pieces of wood and sand ladders to get their own vehicle out the mud and back on track. But, in Africa, no one is ever left to their own devices when stuck in such situations. It seldom took long for the first locals to show up and help them get back on the road. Ute and Henry always made a point of showing their gratitude with gifts. Their African rescuers were particularly grateful for clothes from Europe, although penknives and writing implements were also highly

coveted. Giving the women small sewing kits and the children sweets was an easy and very effective way to make friends.

Africa, an enticing and mysterious world

Anyone willing to risk the trials and tribulations of a trip to Africa will be more than duly compensated. The Shwarzes spent almost a week in Hoanib Canyon in Namibia, one of

"We evaded a charging elephant with a quick ten-yard dash"

the world's largest canyons. This breathtakingly beautiful and pristine area is completely uninhabited and is the Schwarzes' personal recommendation to visit. They saw only two vehicles in their time there, and instead feasted their eyes on vast numbers of wild animals. "It was like in the film 'Out of Africa'" said Ute, "we drove past peacefully grazing giraffes and antelopes, and even the elephants let us get up close to them and their offspring."

But even the natural world wouldn't spare the intrepid travellers from a close call. In Namibia they were only just able to save themselves from a charging elephant with a quick ten-yard dash in the truck. Sadly, they didn't dare fetch the running cine camera until after the elephant had sauntered off. But, thankfully, the otherwise perilous situation ended quite harmlessly.



Malawi (left): The warmth of inhabitants on the entire continent overwhelmed the two travellers from Saxony. **Angola (right):** Along the way nothing brings you closer to the people than spending the night in their village



Cameroon: No need to wait long for help when you are in a bind, it comes of its own accord.

The flora and fauna were not the only things that fascinated them; the people, particularly their traditions and rituals, were of great interest. In Fouban, a city in Cameroon, Ute and Henry were accorded a special honour. As luck would have it, they happened to be there on the day Sultan Ibrahim Mbombo Njoya, the 19th king of the Bamum dynasty, was holding a public ceremony to anoint a prince. They employed a great deal of tenacity and persistently pestered the authorities until they finally received permission to film the ceremony. Although the dynasty's heyday passed some years ago, the Schwarzes were treated to a parade of dancers, musicians and cavalry. It was one of the highlights of their long, arduous journey.

40 countries in two years

After a little more than two years plus (including three interruptions – one lasting five months) the adventure came to an end in May 2007. On their eventful tour the couple visited 40 countries, drove 66,418 kilometres and used 15,866 litres of diesel. These sobering statistics do not reveal the unforgettable experiences they shared. They became acquainted with people from a wide range of tribes and cultures and were lucky to have the opportunity to see hundreds of wild animals in their natural environment. The impressions are so varied that the partners are loath to specify what they enjoyed most on their adventure. The

tranquillity of the desert? Herds of wild animals a mere arm's length away? The fascinating people? Although they are still busy processing everything they encountered on the trip, Ute and Henry are already preparing for their next tour; an expedition that will lead through Russia, over the Bering Strait to Alaska and across the entire American continent. ■■■

Info	Vehicles
------	----------

Vehicles for expeditions and world tours

Motorhomes like Ute and Henry Schwarz's do not come off the assembly line. Vehicle designers usually mount them on an all-wheel-drive truck chassis. With dependable technology that has triumphed time and time again at the Dakar Rally, MAN has been the undisputed market leader in this class for many years – expedition vehicles have long been part of the MAN family of vehicles. A small but select group of individual customising companies handcraft these machines according to the wishes (and the finances) of their clients, using carefully chosen and tried-and-tested components. The base price is around 120,000 euros.

The L2000 and the M2000 used to be the most commonly modified models, but heavy-duty truck series, including four-axle vehicles with 8x8 drive are also used. Long-distance travellers currently prefer the mid-size TGM series of 13 or 18-tonne trucks, adding a double cab if more space is required. If the vehicle requires a wider range of equipment, an MAN TGS is recommended to support the increased load.