

SECURITY OFF THE ROAD

Be streetwise on the back roads, else you'll end up dead or broke. By Tony Weaver and Liz Fish (Out There, Jan. 1997)

The most common question we were asked after two years of overlanding through Africa was “weren’t you scared?” Our answer is “yes, the day we drove into Johannesburg”. Fear of the unknown and an exaggerated picture of ‘The Dark Continent’ deter many South Africans from overlanding through Africa, but the rest of the continent, with the exception of war torn areas and areas haunted by bandits, is generally far safer for travel than much of South Africa.

It makes sense though to take elementary precautions. We previously outlined how to go about making your vehicle thief-resistant. A secure vehicle is half the battle won. The rest is largely common sense.

Camping Security

Through much of your journey you will be in areas where there are no formal camp sites. You have two options – find a secure compound, or make a bush camp.

Secure compounds are everywhere - you just have to ask. If there is a village, find the chairperson or chief, and negotiate a camping fee. You will be mobbed and stared at, but never robbed, as long as you are under the protection of the village.

Mission stations and churches will usually let you camp in their grounds, as will schools – teachers love the opportunity to practise English. Police posts are almost always obliging, and many small bush hotels have compounds where you can camp. Foreign aid compounds are also a good bet, especially in countries like Ethiopia.

If you want to make a bush camp, leave the road as close too sunset as possible. If you find an excellent bush camp an hour or two before sunset, it is worth driving a bit further along the road before returning to the camp site, to ensure that there are no settlements nearby, and to avoid being seen when you enter the bush.

Conceal your tracks where you leave the road and drive far enough off the road not to be seen. Keep lights low and avoid fires, unless you are certain there is no danger in the area.

On major roads, look for old roadworks, camps and gravel pits. If there are electric pylons running parallel to the road, there is bound to be a service track leading to them. Generally, though, it is better to avoid bush camping on main roads – rather head for the nearest town.

Lay out your camp to limit access as much as possible. Using one side of the vehicle as a wall, park against a large bush or rock as a second wall. If you have two vehicles, park them nose to nose in an L-shape, with a rock or bush forming a third arm to make a U. Never leave loose objects out of sight of your laager.

Apart from sleeping inside a locked vehicle, rooftop tents offer the best security – if someone tries to get into the vehicle or climb up to the tent, the vehicle motion should wake you. If you are in a ground tent and there are intruders in your camp, never jump out or open the tent to look outside. Rather stay in the middle of your tent and make a lot of noise.

We were camped in Malindi, Kenya, when we heard terrible screaming at three in the morning. A lone overlander camped near us heard someone tampering with this Land Rover. He stuck his head out and was stabbed three times: in the head, neck and chest. One thief had cut out the window of his Land Rover, the other stood over the tent and stabbed him as he emerged. He was so unnerved by the attack that he abandoned his trip through Africa.

No matter how secure your camp site seems to be, never go to bed without packing away absolutely everything of any value, and checking that all your doors are locked. In two years of travelling the only items we had stolen were a torch, a duvet cover and an empty wallet – all left out by mistake at night in ostensibly safe camp sites.

The other major reason for packing away at night is that you may be forced to pack and leave in a hurry. A Guerba overland truck was bush-camped outside the Serengeti when they were attacked by a band of men with bows and arrows, pangas and spears. They flung everything they could into the back of their truck, abandoning their tents. One passenger was hit in the leg by an arrow, and they rushed him to a mission station and hour away, but he was dead when they arrived – the arrow was poisoned.

If you are confronted by armed robbers, give them everything they want.

Weapons

You would be insane to carry a firearm. Even with the necessary permits, you can end up in deep trouble.

Rather carry a few low tech weapons. Hunting catapults (available from gun shops) loaded with marbles are potent, and useful for chasing away baboons. They are also essential as part of your survival kit. A kierie or sjambok, or both, make very effective weapons. Small mace or teargas canisters are useful at close quarters.

We sleep with a rechargeable halogen hunting spotlight in our tent if we are in insecure areas (or in a wildlife area). A blast of this in the eyes of attackers is enough to blind them for several seconds, and is psychologically unnerving.

Some Rules

Never leave anything in your tent if you are away for the day: a lock on the tent is a deterrent only – it takes seconds to slash open a tent and steal the contents.

Kids, especially little boys, are notorious for pilfering. There is nothing particularly malicious about it, it's simply a bit of fun. Spotlight covers make trendy hats; stretchy tie-downs catapult elastics; bumper stickers become hunting trophies; radio aerials can be twisted into toys. So keep an eye open when kids are around, especially street kids in Kenya and Ethiopia.

In deep rural areas where travellers are rare, you will always attract a crowd if you camp near a settlement. Most people are just curious, want to practise some English or see if they can get a gift from you. As charming as the kids may be, keep them at a distance from your camp – make a game of it.

City Security

All major cities should be treated as security threats.

Park in the grounds of international hotels, which are always patrolled by security guards. Otherwise, park outside a bank (always guarded), or in a main street in full view of pedestrians. Never park in back streets or deserted parking lots.

In almost every city, you will have space salesmen rushing up when you park. Hire one. Pay them half their fee when parking and the remainder when you return. If you are in a city for a few days always return to the same spot and develop a relationship with one.

Make sure you have all the money you need on you before parking – never open your safe or strong box where you can be seen. Never wear moonbags or any other kind of strap-on belly or hip bag for carrying valuables – they are very easy to cut or rip off. Carry passports (if needed) and money; and never a large amount, in a button down, top shirt pocket. If you have to make major purchases try to do them with the vehicle parked outside the shop, or else carry money in two or three different pockets, all of them secure. Money belts are only secure if they are totally invisible – a snatch thief cutting a money belt off your waist is not fussy about cutting you as well.

If you are robbed, think twice before shouting “stop thief.. In many countries you could be sentencing the thief to death. In 1995, more than 400 robbers were beaten to death by angry crowds in Kenya. Rather find a police officer.

City Driving

Keep your doors locked at all times when driving in cities. On old Land Rovers which can only be locked with a key, simply rivet on an internal sliding bolt to act as a stopper. Avoid driving at night which is when carjackers are the most active.

If someone bumps you from behind, be very ware of a hijack – this is a favourite Nairobi trick. Robbers bump you, you stop, they come around full of apologies and then stick a gun under your nose and make off with your vehicle.

Another favourite trick, which is extensively practised around Dar es Salaam, Lusaka, Nairobi, and especially Nakuru in Kenya, is for someone standing by the roadside to point agitatedly at your wheels as you drive by. When you stop, the rest of the gang leaps out of the bushes and hijacks your vehicle.

Be very wary if you come back to your car and find someone examining a puddle of oil under your engine or wheels. They will tell you with great sincerity how they noticed this fault, and luckily have a brother/friend who is an expert mechanic. Chances are they put the oil there, and are either potential hijackers or car part thieves.

In Kenya, be very wary when approaching what seems to be police road blocks at night. Lock all your doors. There have been several instances of bogus policemen robbing travellers at these road blocks.

Changing money

Never change money on the street: chances are the ‘money changer’ will either be a cop or a con artist. The cops will arrest you, and let you off with a warning, but ‘confiscate’ your foreign currency. Don’t ask for a receipt – you will end up in a cell. Con artists will produce a roll of money, flash through it, take your money, then say “watch out, police”, and disappear. The roll of money will either be padded with scrap paper, be counterfeit, or contain a mass of low denomination bills to pad out the bigger ones. Stay legal.

When changing money in big cities, try to park your vehicle outside the bank or Bureau de Change. Try to find banks in the suburbs rather than in the city.

A favourite trick in Nairobi is for a well dressed person to sit in the banking hall, watch out for tourists changing large amounts of money, leave before them, then tip off a gang waiting outside as they leave. Be aware of anyone who seems to be following you out of a bank – most thieves will back off if they know they have been spotted.

Hitch Hikers

Simple. Don’t pick them up. You maybe desperate for company, or feel sorry for them, but watch it. If you do carry hitch hikers, never ferry them across borders. If they are smuggling gold or drugs or other

contraband, they are liable to hide them in your vehicle for the crossing, and you become the guilty party.

A very small minority of backpackers actively traffic drugs and other contraband to finance their travels, and also routinely prey on other travellers. One overland truck we met up with picked up a very pleasant British guy in West Africa. They agreed he could travel with them in exchange for petrol money and doing some work around the camp. He was quite charming and soon became friends with everyone on the truck. After three weeks, he left the truck in Ghana. Four days later, the tour leader opened the vehicle safe to discover that more than US\$ 4000 of the passengers' personal spending money, in cash, was gone