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Camel Trophy it ain't: but you get a lot of smiles for your guilders

# Dakar or bust. Or both

The newest low-budget alternative to Paris-Dakar is Amsterdam-Dakar – drive anything you like, so long as it costs less than £350. Linda (creatively, we admit) tries her hand in a Discovery

**T**he hot, dry wind pummels our faces. I'm in the middle of a sandstorm in Mauritania, one of the world's poorest countries and, as far as the eye can see, there is nothing – in every direction. Nothing, that is, except a Renault 19 with a problem. 'I saw one support bracket appearing,' says Remco Verweij, the driver. 'The next moment the whole roof rack came off and landed

upside down in the sand.' It's all part of the crazy adventure that is the Amsterdam-Dakar 'wreck race', where all manner of cheap, bashed, basic vehicles attempt to fight their way across some of the most unwelcoming terrain on Earth. It's a good place to be in a Land Rover.

In the standard road cars you have to wring their necks to stand a chance of making it through the deep sand, but it's amazing how capable they are.

I jump out of the Disco to hitch a lift in a Volvo 340. Driving the bumpy, featureless plains of Mauritania in this is like taking part in a long-distance rallycross event; in the Land Rover it feels like cruising. Even at 60mph the Disco dances smoothly across the desert and we don't get stuck: not once.

Despite the sterling performance of the normal cars, they do get stranded sometimes – and, boy, are they glad to have a Discovery in the convoy when it happens. It's in much demand as a tow truck.

**The organisation that isn't** 'The organisation organises nothing,' Arthur Verheijen says. 'You have to look after your own water, fuel and food. You have to find your own way and, when you get stuck in the desert, you have to think of a plan how to get out of there.' Right...

After Verheijen participated in the Plymouth-Dakar Rally in 2003 he launched a website to see if he could find some Dutch enthusiasts to for a low-budget version of the famous Paris-Dakar marathon. 'I expected a group of 10 cars for this first Amsterdam-Dakar Challenge,' Verheijen says.

'We ended up with 90. It's a joke that got totally out of hand.'

To be eligible, cars may cost no more than 500 euros (about £350) to buy, and you can spend no more than £100 modifying them. The entry fee is £170, and you're allowed sponsorship. At the end of three weeks and 4375 miles through Holland, Belgium, France, Spain,

'Nothing to lose.' 'Go with the flow.' What you might call a somewhat laid-back approach to desert rallying





**Too much on top.** The same can't be said of whoever loaded this ancient Mercedes truck

Morocco, Mauritania and Senegal to the finish in Gambia (Banjul) the participants have to sell their cars and donate the money to charity.

So it is that in November 2004, three groups of 30 cars set off from Amsterdam and head for the Sahara. Verheijen stays home as webmaster – the organisation organises nothing, right enough. Improvisation is the keyword to adventure.

### Bargain Discovery

Denny Gill, Pepijn Mathlener and I (all three of us work as instructors at Off-Road-Adventures, an off-road driving school with its roots in the Camel Trophy) are in a 1991 Discovery 200Tdi. Simon van der Velde, the owner of Elephant Off-Road swallowed hard and agreed to sell us the Disco for £1000 – about half its real value. Raoul Jacobs, our boss at ORA, sponsors us to the tune of the missing £650.

Verheijen agrees it's a £350 car. It's hardly a wreck, though: it even has air suspension at the back. Two weekends' of preparation later, we're off.

### Ready, get set...

The desert crossing is great fun: racing, getting stuck and fixing the parts that fall off the standard vehicles. Three days in, we reach

Nouakchott and camp by the beach at sunset. During the night the driver of the Renault 19 wakes us up. The tide's coming in fast and the sea has already covered his car's wheels. We tow it higher up the beach.

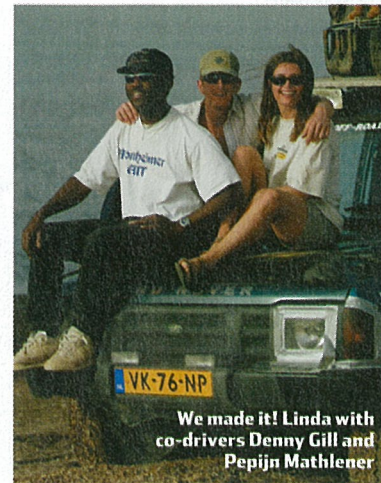
So, at 2am, we're off and running. The full moon reflects on the black water and gives us enough light to see what we are doing. It's like driving in a fairytale; and whooshing along the moonlit shore for mile after mile really is a special feeling.

### Joining up with the wounded

Later, we meet up with the rest of the group. The 'normal' cars are battered: vehicles and parts are tied together with tie-wraps and duck tape. The Land Rover survived the desert crossing without technical problems: a door handle has fallen off and the back door doesn't close too well any more, but that's it.

I see that the Fiat 127 is still with us; and the nutters in the Citroën BX are still alive. The French car's hydraulic system broke, but to reach the campsite rendezvous, they kept on for 375 miles, with no brakes and barely an inch between the car and the road. They drove at 75mph through a plague of grasshoppers ('Well, it was a straight road...').

Over the border into Senegal.



**We made it!** Linda with co-drivers Denny Gill and Pepijn Mathlener

### Amsterdam-Dakar (not)

Senegal doesn't want wrecks: you're not allowed to leave behind any cars older than five years. That's why the finish of Amsterdam-Dakar (and Plymouth-Dakar, come to that) is not actually in the Senegalese capital but in Banjul (Gambia). We spend two days in the campsite and then get an official escort along the straightest route out of the country.

By the time we board the ferry to cross the river Gambia to get to the finish, there are a lot of mechanical casualties. The Discovery does its bit by towing two cars on board at once; an Isuzu Trooper, which in turn, is mated to a Ford Fiesta belonging to two English girls.

At the entrance of the campsite stands a Reliant three-wheeler, symbol of the first Amsterdam-Dakar Challenge. Triumphantly, we drive up to it under our own steam: we made it. However much you reckon the Land Rover is worth, it's a cheap car – and it was 100 per cent reliable. Not many (if any) other finishers could say the same. **LRO**

### Hotlinks

- ★ [www.amsterdamdakar.com](http://www.amsterdamdakar.com)
- ★ [www.off-road-adventures.com](http://www.off-road-adventures.com) (off-road courses and travel)
- ★ [www.elephantoffroad.nl](http://www.elephantoffroad.nl)

**Big smiles for the camera, no doubt aided by the promise of sweets and stickers**



**Only fools and camels:** Reliant has become a symbol of the Amsterdam-Dakar Rally (and, yes, it took part...)