

OFF ROAD & 4 WHEEL DRIVE

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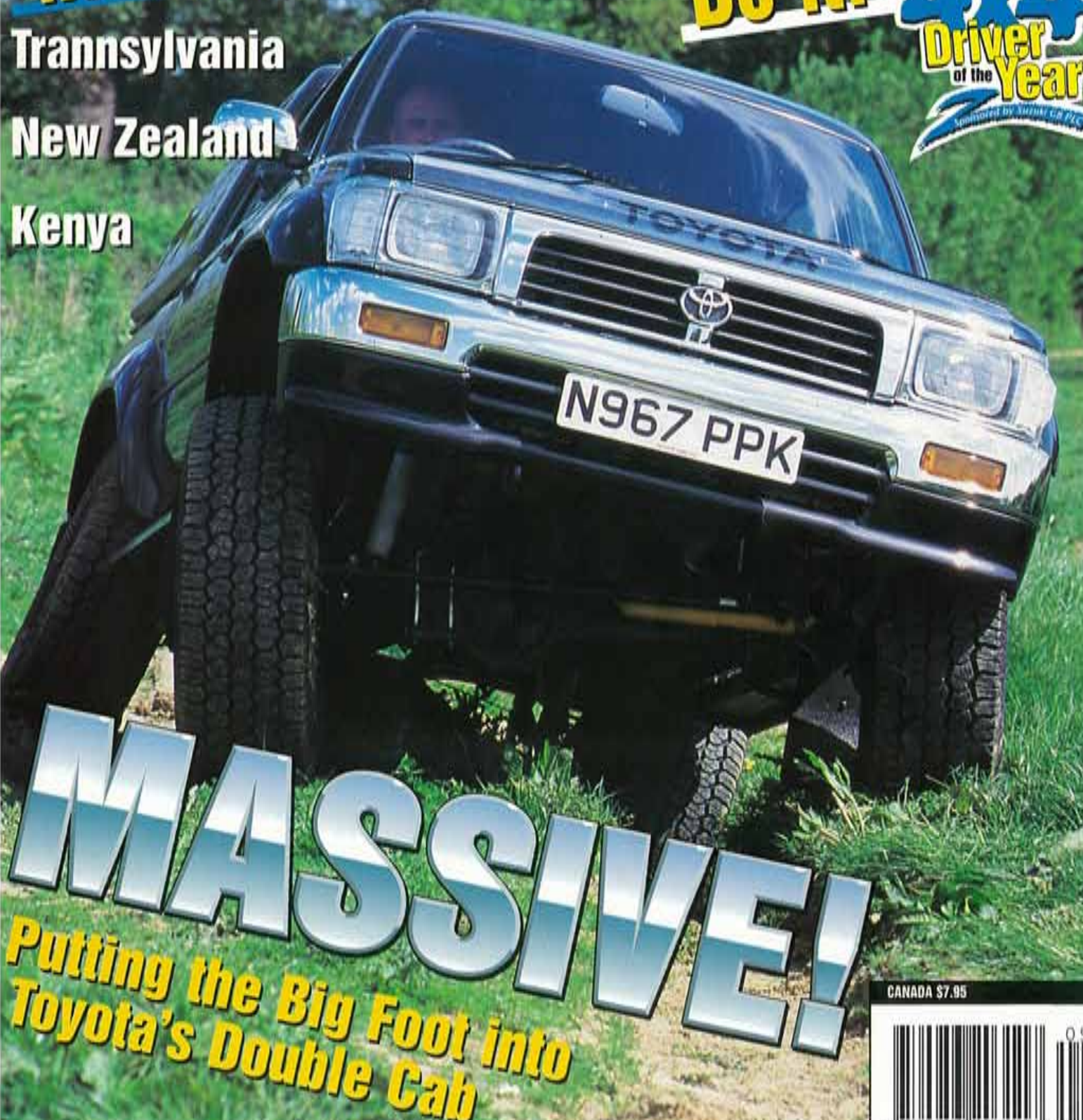
4X4 By Far

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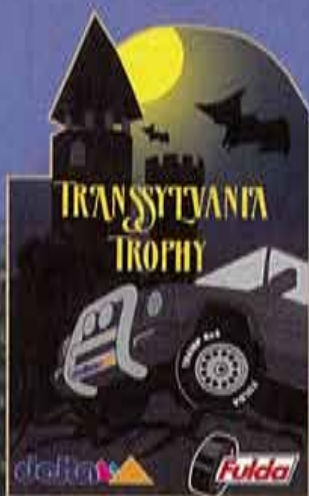
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Tough T

What used to be the Warn Trophy is now called the Transsylvania Trophy – but the mud remains the same. We follow the merciless race (no, not the Germans) through Eastern Europe





Co-driver Sandra races after her Toyota LJ73, freed from the mud



Trophy Day: a mixed bag of five teams join forces to build bridges

The German-organised Transsylvania Trophy is actually held in the Ukraine, not Romania as the name suggests, and it requires a combination of racing skills and common sense to get a vehicle through the extreme terrain. The fact that this year only half of the 82 entries finished gives you some idea of what the German definition of 'extreme' really means. There were participants from nine European nations, though sadly they didn't include a British team. The Trophy has only one class, since the varying terrain over the many stages of this six-day event favours different types of vehicles.

Before you decide that the Transsylvania Trophy could be your idea of off-roading heaven, it should be noted that it's not for people who are afraid of speed, heights or waist-deep mudholes that take five hours to winch through. It requires off-road experience, a good team, a fit co-driver who can keep cool through the moments of horror, a well-prepared car with a fast winch, a service vehicle, two helmets and a certain attitude. And before taking part, it's vital that you decide what your goal is – to win or to reach the finish. To win it's essential to take a trailer along, and competitors shouldn't expect to receive any help at all from their rivals. This event is not about team spirit, helping each

ackle

Erwin pushes the pedal to the metal. 'Too much' he realises, when he sees the steep descent ahead. He has to brake so hard that the brakepads get too hot and fail to work. The situation takes a rather serious turn for the worse when he breaks off the gearlever while trying to get the automatic gearbox back in first in an effort to slow the vehicle down. And just to finally destroy his day, the engine stalls. Now the jeep Comanche turns into a rocket and shoots down the hill. Erwin and his fellow



Dutch crew have lift-off several times, before breaking the axles on the final touchdown.

The flying Dutchmen get out of the Comanche looking quite pale – it's the end of the 1996 Transsylvania Trophy for them. A startled Erwin explains: 'I am used to off-road racing, but here your performance is assessed solely on time and I've never raced on a pipeline track with hills of 70 degrees.' He is one of those competitors who only find out during the event that it is totally different from almost any other.





The excited crowd in Uzhgorod

other or fair play. It's about winning, and the prize is not honour or glory but a good-sized wad of cash.

In cahoots with the mafia

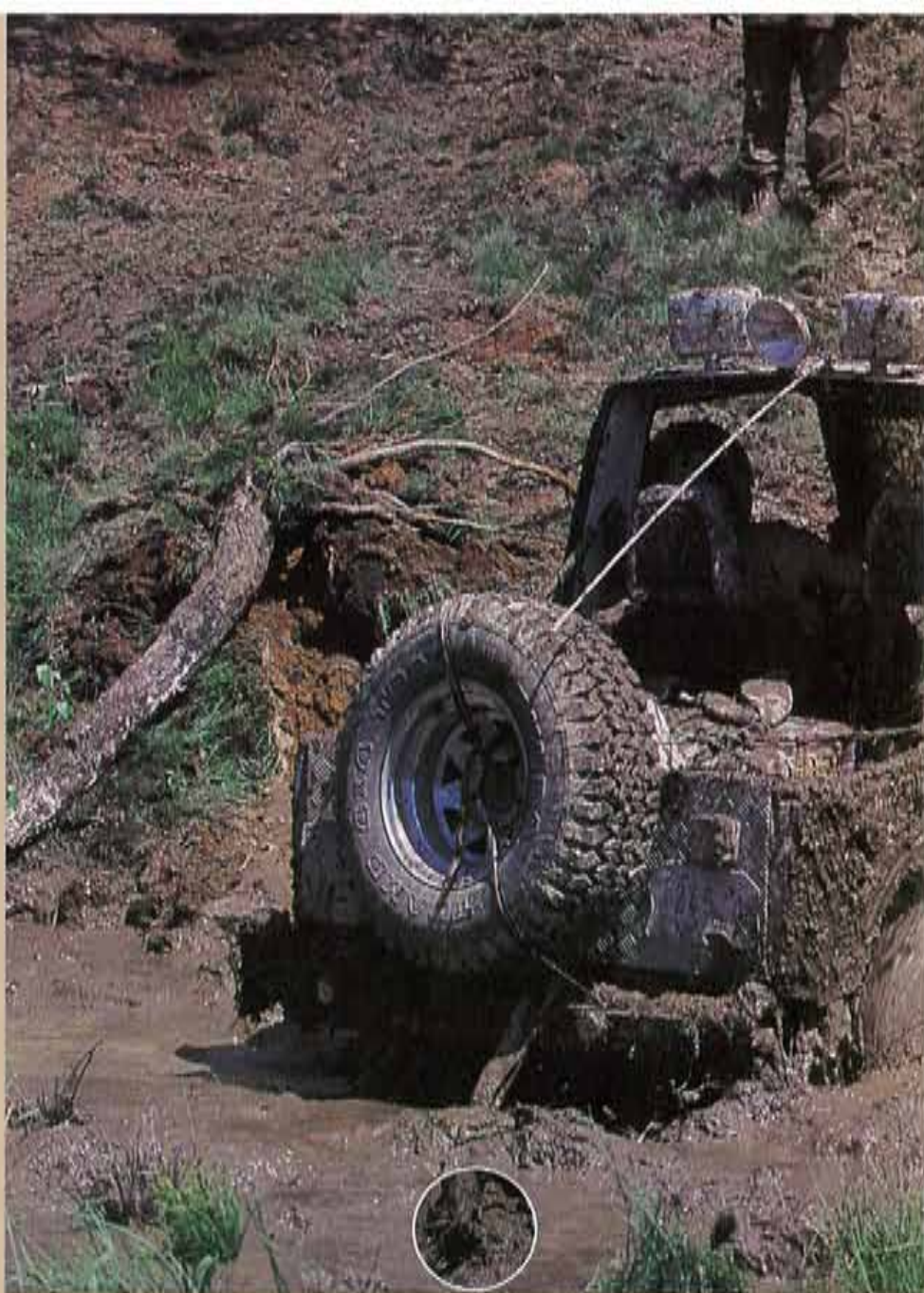
Of course, taking part in events like this doesn't just mean that you get to race in some little-known parts of the world – you also get a glimpse of another culture. The poverty in the beautiful green hills of the Ukrainian Carpathians is appalling. We see wooden houses, typical Russian women with pale dresses and headscarves, empty shops and plenty of horse wagons. All this is in stark contrast to the cavalcade of 82 modified off-road vehicles that trundles into the centre of Uzhgorod – on the border with Slovakia – where the off-roading will begin.

In order to hold the race in the Ukraine, the organisers had to strike a deal with the Russian mafia. And the mafia were very efficient partners, arranging for Trophy participants to drive past the 8km queue at the Hungarian/Russian border and organising Kalashnikov-armed guards to protect the competitors' camp. What's called the 'underworld' in the West rules large chunks of the country here.

Dracula's castle, poised on the top of a mountain in Uzhgorod, is the symbol for and, for the fourth time, the starting point of the Transsylvania Trophy. The starting order is determined at a prologue, during which the participants have to change a tyre and winch a tree trunk over a line. For the rest of the event the starting order will be determined every morning by the teams' overall positions.

The grim castle exudes just the right atmosphere for the first task, which is to conquer the hill. This extremely steep slope soon turns into a battlefield of winching cars, while co-drivers crawl on hands and knees with cables and tree-

straps. The driver of a lilac Mercedes-Benz G-Wagen is so afraid his car will fall backwards that he jumps out, leaving the German-built 4x4 to



In terrain like this, it doesn't matter what kind of mud tyres you have. Everybody gets stuck, and spends as long using the winch as the wheels



turn on its own and career back down the hill. About 20 other teams are busily trying to get up, but luckily a tree prevents the G-Wagen from causing any serious accidents.

Once the hill has been left behind, the convoy continues through a forest to an open field with a mudhole. Two Mig fighter 'planes have crashed here, and their wreckage lies scattered everywhere. After winching through the mudhole the teams continue to the campsite, to enjoy the catering of Pitt Frey. The fastest time of the

first day is one hour and 40 minutes, the slowest an amazing 15 hours. Transylvanian veterans take the first ten places – they've been here before and know the ropes. But the 'experts' aren't totally happy. After complaints about 'using the same route as last year' the organisers have to promise to map out a totally new route for 1997. They'll go to a new area, probably Poland or Litowen in Russia.

Doing things by the book

The distance to cover in a Transylvanian Trophy day is never more than 35 kilometres. All the teams follow the roadbook, and

The driver is so afraid his car will fall backwards that he jumps out, leaving the 4x4 to career down the hill to where 20 other teams are busily trying to get up

Dutchman Erwin's Jeep heads for outer space, No brakes, stalled engine - just steer and pray



Swede Kalle Fransson pulls three cars out of a mudhole simultaneously. Scandinavia is peanuts compared to Swedish off-roading, he complains



As this French Suzuki 410 nearly rolls, the co-driver judges whether to bale out or keep going regardless



have to drive by the Check Points that line the route. The highlight of the second day is a massive mudhole that stretches over three acres. Every vehicle, without fail, gets stuck. And each time this happens, the co-drivers leap into action and, with their helmets on, grab the freestrap and the winch cable and sink up to their waists in the sticky mud. It's a crazy scene, as caked red faces scream excitedly at each other while seven 4x4s are being winched out of the mire simultaneously.

There's a lot of damage done during this event, and the evening in the camp is spent repairing the vehicles. 'You're out of the race the moment you're out of spare parts' explains Vladimir from Croatia. The third day begins with a 'Le Mans-style' start of five cars at a time. After that the road continues over a pipeline track with steep hills, where Erwin and his team completely lost it.

The fourth day comprises a drive through a forest, and the fifth day is 'Trophy Day'. Here the teams have to work together in groups of five cars. These groups are arranged according to their overall scores (eg. places 1-5 and 6-10 work together), and this day doesn't affect the teams' scores. The groups have to build two bridges, one with logs and the other with three winch cables. This is followed by a



The bridge built, a mud-caked, snorkel-equipped Jeep is winched up the 45-degree slope. The five-team groups must each get one vehicle across

trial section, which follows a barren stretch at an altitude of 1400 metres. On this section, two cars roll and the Chechen team get stuck in their Tatra.

They are forced to stay the night there, and wake up with 20 centimetres of snow on their tent. A little bit further down the hill it rains. In fact, it rains so much that the traditional 11 kilometre river stage is cancelled on the sixth day. But only after Plötz's Suzuki has driven into the river, buried its nose and landed on its roof in the ice-cold water, showing only its four wheels above the waves. Heavy rain has turned the stream into a whitewater torrent. The first five cars to go in are winched back out, and the convoy has an afternoon free to prepare for the final night stage.

It's a close finish, since there's a difference of only five minutes between first place and

fifth. This means that five teams have a good chance of winning on the last stage, which involves night driving through a thick forest. Thanks to intelligent co-driving by his brother Christoph, driver Matthias Ballhaus manages to race their V8-powered CJ7 into first place.

Next year the Transylvanian Trophy will have a new route, and from Europe there will be two Belgian, one Swedish and four Dutch teams. It would be good to see the British in action again.

Results

- | | |
|---------------------|------------------------------|
| 1 Ballhaus/Ballhaus | Jeep CJ7 |
| 2 Schwarz/Monschein | Mercedes Benz G-Wagen 230 GE |
| 3 Backert/Rösch | Jeep CJ7 |