

# OVERLAND

## JOURNAL



Pamir Highway

Camp Table Comparison

Northern Lights

Jack Pine Triumph

## LIVING LEGENDS

Interviewed by Lois Pryce

Images narrated by Tom Sheppard



# TOM SHEPPARD

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The Doyen of the Desert shares five decades of Sahara expeditions.



The name Tom Sheppard will doubtless be familiar to all *Overland Journal* readers. You have read his sagely desert tales in these very pages, or absorbed yourself in his classic book, *The Vehicle Dependent Expedition Guide*. Described by Michael Palin in his Sahara BBC TV series as the “Doyen of the Desert,” Tom Sheppard has been exploring the Sahara for nearly fifty years. In those five decades he has notched up an incredible 30 expeditions, mostly in four-wheeled vehicles, but occasionally by motorcycle too. Despite having been born in what he slyly refers to as the *Pleistocene* era, he still approaches his travels with the passion and awe of a schoolboy, describing himself as a “born enthusiast.” This fresh sense of wonder is evident in his books, *Quiet for a Tuesday* and *The Nobility of Wilderness*. But this boyish zeal belies a man of great determination and application, who lives by the motto, “Life is about detail.”

Born in remote northeast India where his father was a tea-planter, Tom spent the first 12 years of his life making forays into the Indian jungles and the Himalayas until his family returned home to England. Back in Blighty, he had his first taste of formal education at Bristol Grammar School. From there he joined the Royal Air Force (RAF), training as an officer and pilot. Postings on jets, fighters, and a stint at the test pilot school followed, and his time as Station Commander in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, earned him a Masters in Business and Engineering (MBE). But a less thrilling placement found him at the Ministry of Defence. In 1976, after 24 years in the air force, he left to work as a four-wheel-drive consultant to General Motors.

By this time, Tom had already gained a reputation as a desert expedition leader, culminating in him being awarded the Royal Geographical Society’s Ness Award for his role in the 1975, Joint Services West East Saharan Expedition (JSWESE)—the first lateral crossing of the Sahara. Since then he has been back to the Sahara almost every year until 2006, when his maps were confiscated by the Algerian authorities, mistaking his “harmless wanderings” for suspicious activity. Subsequent requests for visas have been refused, but one can only hope that the men with the rubber stamps will see sense and that the “Doyen of the Desert” will soon be permitted to return to his natural habitat.

**You first visited the Sahara in 1960 on a RAF expedition to Libya. Was it an instant love affair with the Sahara?**

Yes, the love affair was sparked by the magic of seeing dawn break over Jebel Uweinat in southeast Libya from the air the year before. That first trip was ecstatic; the scale, the sweep of the landscape, the beauty of the dunes, the impeccable purity and sheer perfection of it all. In truth, despite it being my first trip I was learning a lot about what not to do. *Life is about detail* was chiming in early. We were in brave little Series 1 Land Rovers, but all the weight was over the back axle; we had duff cross-ply tyres, no pressure gauges, blankets instead of sleeping bags and frighteningly low fuel reserves. But it was still all so beautiful and uplifting to the spirit.

**Had you travelled much as a youngster before joining the RAF?**

Not a lot of pre-RAF travel. Trips into the Indian jungle of course, Darjeeling and the Himalayas, and the train trip across India from Calcutta to Bombay where we shipped home to the U.K.. Waking up in the carriage to see dawn over the Rajasthan desert certainly left its mark.

The majority of your expeditions have been in North Africa and the Middle East, with some excursions into southern Africa. Have you ever been tempted to travel further afield to other deserts of the world? Central Asia, South America, etc.?

To be honest, I always found the Indian jungles claustrophobic and a bit intimidating, so I've always gravitated towards wide open spaces, which tended to rule out South America *et al*, although the Atacama would be nice.

So, are you a general desert enthusiast, or is it *all* about the Sahara for you? Can you explain your fascination? Why, for the last 45 years or so, has it kept pulling you back again and again?

I think there's desert and there's desert. It's like finding your last love. The Algerian Sahara is so all-consumingly magnificent that I don't know of anywhere that would hold a candle to it. Tranquillity, solitude, purity, taking time to aim for perfection, the Sahara is truly wonder-full; the majestic landscapes, the scale, the space, the light, the geology, and the stars when you bed down for the night...the miracle of life forms...vegetation, animals, birds and insects...well-spaced and in tiny doses. And encounters with the Touareg and their camels...in the 21st century...amazing people.

As the "Doyen of the Desert," can you imagine ever making your home in Algiers or even in Tamanrasset? Or will England always be home to you?

You have to be realistic. I really don't like being in London, but it is effective. There seems to be nothing you can't get done in London. The over-population, crowding, low standards and general unreliability of people you encounter in the U.K. get me crawling up the wall. But for the most part, you can get done

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**Opposite:** With maps and satellite pictures confiscated, my navigation—if that's the right word—had been a series of flying leaps between waypoints on old nav logs, much too spaced-out for comfort (about 380 miles since the last tarmac). Finally finding the Wadi through the mountains, the previous 10 miles had still been heavy with heart stoppers. Then I broke out ... to this. Complete with exuberant sky! **Opening page:** If you want the definition of perfect, exhilarating freedom, this is probably it! Limitless clean pace, a big sky and a nimble 4x4. Game little Series 1 Land Rovers of the RAF Desert Rescue Team, gulping fuel at low-teen mpg, made it through the Libyan Sand Sea down to Kufra Oasis with frighteningly little in reserve. "Get your knees brown," the old hands told the newbies. November, 1960.

what you want to get done. There are pockets of admirable expertise and, even if you dig, some really good people who want to do the right thing. Overseas I think you might find even these aspects and facilities were absent to a degree, and the bureaucracy would be four times worse.

You have made an amazing 30 expeditions. Is the majority of your time at home spent plotting and planning your next trip? Can you give us a snapshot of a day in the life of Tom Sheppard at home in Britain?

I'm a helpless workaholic, 24/7, including the discipline of the gym, walking or cycling to my local town of Hitchin (and talking to the lovely horses en route!). I'm always pecking away at something with my wonderful Apple Mac and its big HD screen. The books keep me busy, especially this latest edition of the 4x4 book; a huge amount of revision to the original. I love the designing bit, using the amazing Quark XPress (who puts that software together? Brilliant!). Two reprints to get the print quality right. And then I have to do the short notice press ads, trot to the post office with the orders, etc.

Something that comes across in your books is your ability to still marvel at the natural beauty of the Sahara as if it were your first time in the desert. You seem to have regained a boyish, almost naïve (in the nicest sense of the word) enthusiasm for your travels.

Yes. To be honest I don't think I ever lost it. I'm a born enthusiast. I have, and value very highly, the sense of wonder of a ten-year-old. How lucky I am. We take so much for granted. *Life is about detail*—again! In my book, *The Nobility of Wilderness*, I reference a memorable editorial in this very magazine by Jonathan Hanson. He made a profound observation on fractals, meaning, in this case, the re-examination, in greater detail, of landscape we thought we knew. "Smaller bites of the world examined more closely." I sense that not everyone shares this delight, and that's part of why I like to be on my own with no one around to say, or think, "Good heavens, what's he doing now...?"

How has the culture in the North African Arab countries changed in the time you have been visiting the region?

Depends who you meet. The authorities seem to have become less trusting. The ordinary people are just as nice, especially the further

away from *civilisation* you are. In Libya, in the Kufra oasis, the kids were charming, polite, respectful, eager to please, obedient to their parents. In Algeria (Arak gorge) it took me no more than 10 minutes to tow a bogged Peugeot 404 pickup out of soft sand, and the man instantly gave me his address and asked me to a meal with his family at In Salah.

In both books you go into detail about your proposal for a protected area in the Algerian Sahara. Can you tell us if any progress is being made with this project?

Alas, apart from a delightful letter, bravely penned in excruciating English from the Minister of Environment in Algiers, congratulating me on *The Nobility of Wilderness*, nothing has been heard. Andy Henderson, our excellent Ambassador in Algiers up till last year, was very supportive and pushed my proposal and books to all the appropriate recipients, but inertia won the day. I was very careful not to appear as another smartass westerner telling them what to do, but I think they just didn't get the idea.

While the benefits of the protected area are obvious, is there a danger that this plan could actually increase red tape and put off younger, less affluent travellers, i.e. the next generation of Saharan experts? The next Tom Sheppard, even?

That, as I said in my paper, has to be addressed. You have a valid point. Simple as the proposal is in principal, I don't think, realistically, the Algerian authorities' organising and administration abilities are capable of making it work. As you probably recall, even their wacky guides' policy changes from one *milaya* (Algerian province) to another and seems to be made up on the spot; and, of course, it's not actually disseminated to those it would affect.

Your early trips were often in groups, most notably, the famous Joint Services West East Sahara Expedition in 1975. What did you learn, not just about the desert, but also personally, on that expedition?

I learned about filmmaking in the Sahara. Yes, old-fashioned, heavyweight, limited reel size, 16mm film—not digital. I remember getting the impression that the 7,000-mile West East Sahara crossing was being made on foot. Not just the on-foot recce for every dodgy bit of terrain the vehicles had to negotiate, but making a TV movie of it. I seemed to spend most of my time not only as leader, director,



To quote John Denver: "You fill up my senses...like a storm in the desert." With that much thermal energy and temperature gradient, horizontal and vertical, when it rains in the Sahara, you get the full works. Pretty spectacular and seemingly all at once. Here having just picked up a tarmac road, I couldn't help thinking that if this had happened 24 hours earlier, I'd probably still be digging.





soundman and cameraman trying to avoid leaving telltale footprints on the virgin sand. So a shot with the vehicles coming towards the camera meant a long detour away from the intended track and then back towards it to the eventual camera position.

I was mesmerised by that David Lean shot in *Lawrence of Arabia* where Omar Sharif, black-clad and mounted on a superb camel, emerges at last from a shimmering mirage. I wanted a similar telephoto shot of the vehicles coming towards me out of the distant haze. We had no inter-vehicle radios, so, burdened with a robust tripod, heavy pan-and-tilt

Yes, you've seen this shot before but I still chuckle at the absurdity of arbitrary national frontiers in such a breathtaking expanse as the Sahara. Then again, you have to observe the formalities. Passport? Insurance? *D'accord*. This leg was a 900-mile, 1979, no-tracks, solo, tightrope-walk from Tombouctou to Reggan; the farthest out on a limb I've ever been. No radio, no sat-phone, no GPS; just sun compass and astro nav. For a Range Rover, the trailer was there, of course, for the fuel! **Opposite:** I was there to learn on my first trip. And learnt a lot about what NOT to do; like having no pressure gauges! Michelin's radially XSs had yet to be invented, and the Dunlop cross-plies were there to highlight the need.

fluid head and the even heavier 16mm Beaulieu pro camera with a measly 200-foot reel on board, I set off north, then east, then south, having synchronised our watches and told co-driver Phil Maye to give me exactly 20 minutes before setting off. Eventually reaching the *hopefully* right spot, I set up, aimed at the western horizon, crossed my fingers and set the camera whirring on the 20-minute tick.

Lovely shot of nothing, I thought. Yes, really good. The camera whirred on through the precious film reel. My God, how long is this going to be? Phil, have you started yet? Still nothing. I began to sweat even more than the temperature was demanding, my finger moist of the trigger. Were they even aligned on the right track? Would they zoom past to my left or right? Then I thought I saw something in the reflex viewfinder. A flutter? Red? What the...? Yes, by God, Mick Pearce's Red Ensign, pole-mounted, a souvenir from the good ship Fian that brought us from Tilbury to Dakar. Slowly the red blob emerged above the horizon, beautifully mid-frame. Would the film run out before I got all the vehicles? The flag-pole appeared, the top of the first vehicle, then another... I had what turned out to be the opening sequence of the film *The Widest Beach in the World*.

But that expedition was also where I learned about the heartbreaking generosity of desert folk. There were eight of us; we had vehicles, supplies and water. But over the dune a little Mauritanian boy, no more than six years old, walked carefully towards our camp, concentrating hard on not spilling his precious gift—a bowl of camel's milk. Even as I write, all these years later, I am moved to tears...

Others seem to share your focused, meticulous approach that you talk about in your book, and also a refreshing lack of macho *Marlboro Man* heroics. Is this a classic personality type that is attracted to desert exploration? What makes a good *Sahara Traveller*?

The meticulous approach is partly how I am and partly the pilot training. If you don't pay attention to planning, training, and detail, you won't last long as a pilot...or a desert person! You need the ability to plan, to doublecheck, to admit when you may have got it wrong or don't know (when was the last time you heard anyone admit they didn't know?). Being sensitive and careful as opposed to a fudger is important.



**Are you comfortable in the role of leader or do you find solo travel more rewarding?**

When I was in the Air Force, and by the time the West East took place, I was used to leadership; and presumably made a reasonable fist of it with the MBE, etc. I never was a bull-necked, competitive, elbowing-to-the-front kind of leader. I was given particular postings and did them as well as I could. I knew the names and jobs of all 240 people under my command at Sharjah. Now, with no one to post me to assignments as happened in the Royal Air Force, I still do things as well as I can with probably even more infuriating nit-picking perfectionism (ask the printers of the new 4 by 4 edition), but still don't do much in the way of elbowing. Quite happy to stay solo.

**Your *Vehicle Dependent Expedition Guide* has become something of a classic. Are you surprised by this?**

Yes, I am surprised. And delighted that there seems to be a genuine regard and perceived value for what's there. I had an awful feeling that there was a kind of mass hysteria about the book; everybody wanted one because everybody wanted one. But I'm glad folks find it useful, and make a point of commenting

favourably on the detail treatment. There've been five reprints so I haven't kept count of numbers sold. I keep thinking everyone on the planet who wants one has already got one. Wrong again, it seems, and the enquiries still trickle in.

**Has being an MBE made any difference to your life?**

None at all. But privately I value it enormously as endorsement of the standards I have tried to adopt over the years. When I went to the Investiture to meet the Queen, I went through the Palace gates in my 1988 Series II. Highly polished, of course!

**You have fully embraced technology and celebrate it quite joyously. Do you harbour any kind of nostalgia for the old days of maps and compasses or are you thrusting ahead into the future?**

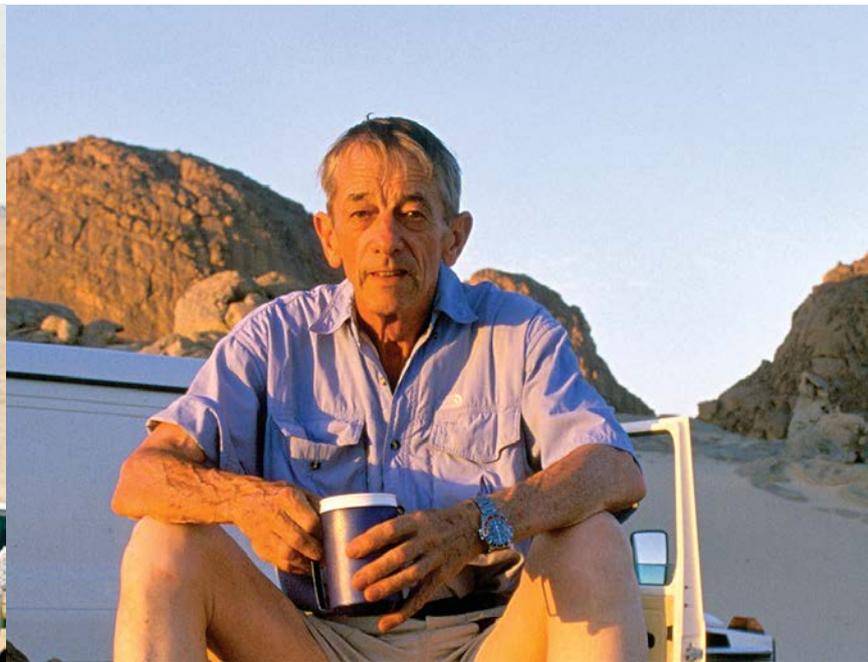
The old days of maps and compasses haven't gone away. As I'm always saying, GPS is only as good as the map you use it with. I'm talking here about remote areas where GPS just gives you latitude and longitude rather than the GPS-position-on-a-ready-made-digital-map that people have in their cars. And Google

Earth satellite images with the dead-accurate lat/long overlay are quite simply worth their weight in diamonds. But even this does not have place names or annotations like the superb French IGN maps. So it's map, compass, Google-Earth, GPS and a dead reckoning written log with positions plotted on the map or Google pic as often as possible. Total failure of the GPS at any time then does not leave you lost. You have your last position and heading on paper.

Having said all that, necessity is the mother of invention; even more so when dealing with an obdurate Gendarmerie. On my last Algerian trip in 2006, I had no maps or satellite pictures after their confiscation. And rather than give up the venture, I waypoint-hopped, with GPS alone, to points from earlier trips, albeit there were quite large gaps between old waypoints—220-odd and 125-miles in a couple of cases.

**Some of your trips have been by motorcycle. What are your opinions on exploring the Sahara by motorcycle vs. 4WD?**

Apart from cost and the considerable satisfaction of minimalist travel, I can't think of too many pros to motorcycle travel. Range is



limited, just about everything else is limited—equipment, especially photographic gear. You do get closer to people on a bike and the discipline of the planning and making it work is undoubtedly rewarding (I'm sure I don't have to tell you of all people!). You have to have a certain level of confidence in your off-road riding ability, which reached for me, as high as it would go on a 600cc Yamaha Ténéré trip down to Amadel-n-Anir Northwest of Tamanrasset. I was getting the hang of it and relaxing by the time I'd finished. On a subsequent lightweight trip I was convinced the SuzU.K.i DR350 was trying to kill me. On the crash I had it nearly did!

**The Algerian authorities did eventually return your maps, but you suspect you may have been put on some sort of visa blacklist. Is this the case?**

It happened to me once before in Libya when a similar incident took place, so yes, I'm pretty sure I'm on a list somewhere. I tried for 22 months to get another Algeria visa. It was eventually, when I finally managed to extract an answer, turned down. My request for a reason or any changes I could make to my plan went unanswered.

I'm bitter, no...extremely bitter and angry, that some mid-level bureaucrat in Algiers, who probably has no idea of the beauty of his own country, has, at a stroke, expunged the passion of my life. Harmlessly wandering quietly in the desert clearly a threat to national security!

**Any regrets in your years of desert travel?**

Just south of In Salah by 100 miles or so, we came across a solo German motorcyclist heading north. He was stationary, facing a deep, churned sand drift over the tarmac. We offered him water but he said he was OK. He said his friend had had an accident and broken his thighbone. We expressed our sympathy and, there seemingly being nothing further to say or do, drove on. It was not till later I became convinced the man, badly shaken by his friend's accident, had been frightened, very frightened, of tackling the churned loose sand, something that required considerable confidence on a heavy bike. I wish I had realised it sooner. He could have paddled through with us steadying the bike and pushing through the couple of hundred yards of sand and he'd then have been clear all through to Algiers. I regretted not realising that sooner, and have thought about it many times since.

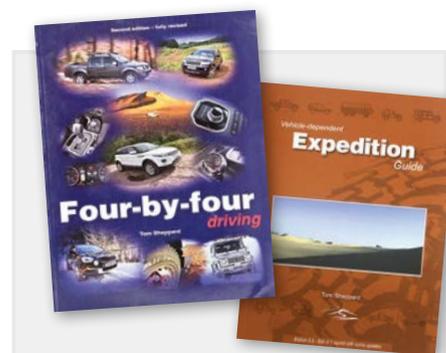
**What does the future hold?**

When you lose your last and best love, you have to change gear and move on. I have discovered cycling and have plans to explore the U.K. and possibly Europe under canvas correction, as in the Sahara, in my bivvy bag under the stars if possible...provided it is not in an organised campsite!

And I have tentatively mooted a camel trip based on Tamanrasset, optimistically hoping that as a straight tourist I might get a visa for

it. Camels are amazing and wonderful creatures. I love them and respect them almost as much as I love horses. But in the meantime the books are keeping me more than busy. 🌍

**Left:** July, 1970 on the Gulf coast; Fahrenheit and humidity were both around 95. Here the tape recorder of the DR log had succumbed to sand ingestion so it was remember-and-write every 10 minutes. The route, UK-Iran-Oman-UAE-Bahrain, the latter leg before there was any road... it was back to dead-reckoning navigation on the sun compass. **Right:** Contentment? Perfection is the better word. Tidikmar's extraordinary geology; pure, firm crunchy sand, crisp side-lighting for photography, still air, a vast clear sky soon to be studded with diamond-sharp stars, and a brew of lemon tea.



### Inspiration

Tom Sheppard's books, *Quite for a Tuesday*, *Vehicle-dependent Expedition Guide*, *The Nobility of Wilderness*, and *Four-by-Four Driving* (2nd edition), can be found at [desertwinds.co.uk](http://desertwinds.co.uk)



adventure