

To the ends of the earth and back

The ice-cool Paul Marsh is a seasoned overlander and is an authority on all things expedition oriented. This recreational pastime has spiked in popularity, especially in the key USA market, with South African and Australian products and experts cashing in on their knowledge.



Marsh has done it all, from the ultimate Camel Man experience of the Camel Trophy in the 90s, to an epic Siberian adventure in frigid conditions, before trekking through 60-degree deserts and muddy jungles, all in the name of exploration.

He currently consults for the international market from Cape Town, giving a plethora of preparatory advice from overland modifications through to better driving and risk management. I met him at R&D Offroad in Cape Town, where he consults on the latest overland conversions. Arriving in Brackenfell where the workshop is situated, I was surprised to see three or four other aftermarket 4x4 suppliers in the same industrial park, showing that business is indeed booming. And that is true of Marsh's car park that is littered with a mouthwatering selection of the most delectable Toyota Land Cruisers that I've ever seen. I'd certainly come to the right place.

Please tell us more about your background and storied history in overlanding?

It's a passion that started when I was about 19, when I was asked to go to Botswana by a company called Penduka Safaris and a man

called Isak Barnard. He gave me the old 45 series Land Cruiser for a couple of years doing backup support and eventually guiding with him into the remote parts of Botswana. He's a legend, he taught me so much, he gave me a real inspiration for the bush and for wildlife—it was a great experience.

Since I was 10 years old, it was my dream to drive through Africa. I was going to do that with a woman, build a vehicle up and I did this as Mandela came into power and everything opened up. The sanctions were dropped and we spent one-and-a-half years driving through Africa. That gives you great opportunities to meet people and explore places. We must have driven 70 000 kilometres in one-and-a-half years, it was a lot of driving. I destroyed a Hilux, broke chassis, I can give you countless valuable lessons I learnt along the way. Additionally, you meet interesting people, which for me, is really a passion.

That took me to England and there, I set up a business called Footloose 4x4, and we started importing expedition equipment from South Africa. South Africa is one of the leaders in expedition equipment for overland four-wheel drive vehicles. We've led the market, along with Australia, and it's given us a unique position

and it certainly gave me a great start in England. More people came to me for my knowledge of and experience in building vehicles and I developed a whole business in England for about 15 years, where we built vehicles, serviced them and maintained them.

But it wasn't just about adding equipment to the vehicle; it was about a person's dream. On average, about 80% of my clients brought a dream to me and I took that dream. It's a real privilege to have someone give you their dream and to facilitate that dream from the vehicle to training, to giving them support on their trip to after their trip, hearing their stories, seeing their photos and then learning what went wrong and what we can improve on. That led me to Australia for a couple of years—a short stay in Perth—which has a very developed, interesting market. However, my passion and yearning to come back to Africa brought me back here five years ago. It's a lifestyle and a great way to live your life.

In terms of the logistics of moving the vehicles around, is that a problem?

Not really, I will actually go and drive some of the vehicles for clients, I've got clients from different parts of the world, and they will ask



“It wasn't just about adding equipment to the vehicle; it was about a person's dream”

me to drop a vehicle off somewhere. It's a great opportunity to jump in a vehicle, head off to somewhere in Africa and go and drop it off for them. I've been very privileged, I have driven expeditions around the world and I have built some amazing vehicles. We did a documentary series for Shell in England (we built two vehicles) called Driven to Extremes, which took us to the extremes with two Nissan Patrols, Hollywood celebrities, and these vehicles went to minus 60 degrees in Russia.

It's incredible when you go out there—I remember we once had dinner with some locals in their very small, humble home and they shared something with us, which looked like cubes of chocolate. So, of course, I popped one in my mouth and I had to retain the expression because it certainly wasn't chocolate. I made sure the rest of the guys in the team took some, it was frozen horse liver. We went from the world's coldest inhabited city to the world's coldest inhabited place.

What modifications did you need for that trip?

That was extensive—you strip out the entire vehicle, and you essentially insulate the vehicle shell because that's the capsule that's

going to keep you warm. The windscreens get laminated with a second windscreen, like double-glazing, the same with the side windows, and then all the fuel, fuel hoses and electrical components are brought into the vehicle so that you can actually maintain the warmth. The whole focus is to keep the engine warm, which, when you start it, it runs on arctic diesel—it's not like any diesel we get here, it's designed for very cold temperatures.

Being able to live your dream every day must be rewarding?

Yes, but it's challenging. People don't realise that when you go on an expedition, it's not a holiday, its tough work, you might change your environment but the stresses are the same. On an expedition, you have to adapt to different scenarios, different challenges and different problems. I've done support for big expeditions where we've taken 100 vehicles, classic cars and four-wheel drives right around South America, which lasted three months. Then, we drove from London to Sydney in 2005. That was through Iran, Pakistan and across the Karakoram Highway before the earthquakes. That was an incredible trip all the way down through to Singapore, and then we shipped the

vehicles into Darwin and drove down through the middle of Australia. My ex-wife was a doctor, so we used to run trips together for many years where we would give support medically and mechanically on big expeditions.

It's a big responsibility because things can often go wrong. I've had some serious incidents on trips and expeditions, it's not fun at times. But you plan, you learn from that, you learn how to prepare yourself better, what to do, what you would do in the event of a situation—you wrap all those experiences up into training again. To me, mainly about sharing my knowledge with people who are going to go out on trips. Sometimes, I get youngsters who want to do a trip to Africa. That spirit is fantastic, but I want them to know that they're well-prepared, so they actually feel as though they can cope with the situations thrown at them.

Overlanders are often the first western tourists to venture to great unknown destinations that people are often afraid to go into. How has overlanding developed?

People have always travelled overland, this dates right back to early times, and you can't take away from some of the trips people have done, they have done some incredible trips in



“I’ve had friends who have gone on trips and it’s all fallen apart because they didn’t discuss scenarios”

quite arduous conditions. But that was seen as ‘people over there do it’, and not as something that’s easy for us to do. Nowadays, we’ve made it more accessible for people, and I’ve always believed the important thing is to see the full picture. If you’re going to prepare yourself or work with me to prepare, you need to prepare yourself completely.

It’s not just about a vehicle. Choosing where you’re going to go is also important because you’ve got to build up your experience. You take big risks when you travel—it can be dangerous if you’re inexperienced and you take risks. But you mitigate a lot of risks and danger by actually just following simple rules. Take scuba diving, for instance. It can be deemed the most dangerous sport, but I believe it’s one of the safest sports until you break a rule. Driving at night is really dangerous and anyone who has lived in Africa will tell you, you don’t do it at all costs, you avoid it. Expeditions have become more accessible for people but it’s how you do it that counts. There are many people who have climbed Everest well-prepared and there are some who have climbed it ill-prepared, and they paid the price.

The ultimate price.

The ultimate price can sometimes be paid. You go on an expedition unprepared and then you

expect someone else who is prepared to come and dig you out, to help you and rescue you. It’s about taking responsibility for yourself and your partner, and going with the right attitude. That’s really important, as is having a lot of fun. People often tell me border crossings are one of the scariest times for them. I love border crossings, they give me the chance to chat to the guys and if you go with the right attitude, you’re prepared to treat them as equals, and you’re going to have an enjoyable conversation. It’s not a scary place, it’s actually a lot of fun and a lot of the situations people find themselves in, awkwardly, are due to a lack of understanding, a bad attitude and nervousness or fear—you can resolve a lot of that by preparing yourself properly.

Do you find common dreams coming through from different clients?

Yes, absolutely; you’d be surprised, living in England, a lot of people wanted to drive back to South Africa. Sometimes I’d actually say to people, ‘Let’s just ship your vehicle to Cape Town, why don’t you do a route from Cape Town, back up into Africa, into East Africa and come back down to Cape Town’. That way, you start off in a country that’s fairly easy to learn, you get comfortable with your gear, your vehicle, and you build your experience. By the time you reach East Africa and the more remote places,

you’re more experienced. Then you double-back down and you can bypass some of the more difficult places to get through. Some of it is more bureaucracy than difficult driving.

The dream has to be flexible. I believe that, because situations change, you have to understand and manage your expectations.

There’s a couple we built a vehicle for, they’ve been travelling around the world for four years and it’s fascinating when you understand what people are doing and why they’re doing it. They really need to focus on their actual processes so they’re clear about what they want.

I see a Camel Trophy picture on your wall, that’s legendary. What helped launch the 4x4 SUV segment globally?

The Camel Trophy is something I’ve always dreamt of getting involved in. I did two events and it was challenging but, overall, it was a fantastic experience. Camel Trophy led the way with quite extreme expeditions, which were not for everyone, but it certainly opened people’s eyes. Overland travel has been in people’s blood for a long time, it’s just now becoming more of an industry. It’s not really well-controlled and there are lots of people doing lots of things to vehicles. In Australia, it’s a bit more regulated—what you can and can’t do to vehicles—so, it’s a question of where you’re going, what you

need, what you don’t need and more often than not, I’m telling clients to take less kit and more experience, keep it simple, if you need it, buy it and if you don’t need it, get rid of it.

Are you seeing more high-net-worth individuals getting involved in overlanding?

I see more people who are looking at a lifestyle, people who have actually decided that there are more things they want to do in life. For some, working and retiring at 65/70 is a reality but for others, they’re saying, ‘I can afford to retire a bit earlier and I want to do something with my life, I actually want to do something and plan something’. Always, when I build a vehicle, both partners have to be involved. The one will drive the dream and I need to understand that relationship. I need to understand what the two of them are trying to get out of the experience, who needs to be working on it in different ways and what they want to achieve. Sometimes, you will find that relationships develop into a whole new era and some couples have reinvented themselves.

When you are leading an expedition, what are the key leadership qualities that come to the fore that are essential in different situations?

A lot of it centres around communication. If you’re going to take a group of people, you’ve absolutely got to understand your group. You need to know where you’re going, you need to know the safety elements, you need to be well-prepared—in my book, those are the basics. The big thing people get wrong—I certainly did in the early days—is not meeting people’s expectations or not managing expectations and group dynamics. Any person who has led a number of groups will tell you that group dynamics change on a daily basis and you’ve got to be a people’s person to manage the group dynamics in a professional way. It is about a value system, it is about being very clear with people. We teach people how to treat us and it’s important that we do that clearly by discussing the roles and responsibilities before going on a trip. I’ve had friends who have gone on trips and it’s all fallen apart because they didn’t discuss scenarios. Scenario-based situations are a big part of my training, and we talk about it. So, you’ve had an accident? Okay. You’ve knocked someone over? Let’s talk about it. Through these discussions,

the reality sets in and you’ve actually got that programmed in your mind. It simply gives one that much more confidence, but few people get that right.

In South America, on a big trip, I was travelling with a friend of mine, a prominent Orthopaedic Surgeon from Johannesburg, and I owe my life to him. We had been driving for three months, we had three days without proper sleep, if any, going through Uruguay on the back roads, trying to catch the rally. We were the final sweep vehicle. I was driving too fast, I was too tired and I flipped the car, and rolled it six times. I broke my neck so badly that I’ve now got plates in the front and back of my neck. In that instance, I wasn’t supposed to survive because 2mm more, and I would have been paralysed from the neck down.

Mark’s a satellite phone was put in the glove box that day—we always carry a satellite phone—and I owe my life to that satellite phone.

We got a military helicopter to a hospital where a plastic surgeon walked in on a Sunday morning and stitched me to a point where

the best neck surgeon in the whole of South America operated on me, Mark Human, a man ahead of his time. My entire focus for the next year was to get back to doing everything I used to do: bungee jumping, para-motoring, scuba diving, you name it I do it. So, with that mental focus, a month later, I was driving a car. But the experience was a life wake-up call: what do we want out of our lives, where do we want to go with it?

Overland expeditions offer a great platform for people to experience life in a different way, life in a way where it’s going to give them some meaning; it’s going to give them far more real experiences. It’s not buttered up, it’s not made pretty. Some of the places you’ll stay will be horrific, some of them will be amazing, people will take you into their homes and people will humble you to your knees. Few people would do it for their own countrymen. When you’re a stranger, they stop to help you, they’re there for you. It’s incredible. ▲

Greg Simpson, images courtesy of Paul Marsh



“More often than not, I’m telling clients to take less kit and more experience”