

FROM HERE TO EXTREMITY

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We all dream of travelling the world. But how about doing it in a Transporter? With 22,000 miles and 22 countries

on the clock, we join Helen Simpson and Michael Broadwith on a remarkable road trip via their blog

CATALYST

IT ALL STARTED in August 2004 when we were driving back to London after a weekend away. We spotted an old VW camper and spent the rest of the journey musing about how great it would be to jump in a van and keep on driving. That was it. We made an on-the-spot decision to head off on a global adventure, with our mission being to visit the 'extreme' tourist sites of the world. After months of planning, one wedding, one van purchase and two test runs, Helen left her job as a lawyer, I gave up teaching and we finally drove off into the sunset in April 2007.



WHEELS

We spent ages deciding which vehicle to buy, and eventually opted for the VW T5, with a few minor changes to the standard spec (really exciting stuff like losing the grill in favour of an extra drawer and adding diesel air heating for the cold months in Russia).

We got our hands on it, played around with its features and got so excited about spending our first night in the van that we set off on a test drive to... Southend-on-Sea.

We loved the van. It was a dream to drive. We managed to cook both dinner and breakfast the next day in comfort, and warmed to our new home-on-wheels straight away. Now for the big test. It could take on Southend, but could it take on the world?

SNAPSHOTS

— 18 May 2007: Baltic States' death wish

The van is working like a dream and we're saving money by camping as often as possible. But on the driving front, an 'I'm-on-a-death-wish' overtaking philosophy has established itself. The main skill required in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania isn't finding a gap in the traffic or a clear view of the oncoming lane, but balls of steel. Amazingly, we have only seen one head-on collision.

— 29 May 2007: A visit to Birkenau

We drive the van out to Oswiecim (or Auschwitz in German) to look around the Nazi concentration camps. This is a sombre affair, but very interesting and in beautiful weather. We go to both the main Auschwitz camp and the Birkenau camp, which is dubbed Auschwitz II, and is even more striking. Birkenau is less of a museum than Auschwitz and has more of the original camp, barracks, watchtowers and railway than Auschwitz itself.

'AN I'M-ON-A-DEATH-WISH OVERTAKING PHILOSOPHY HAS ESTABLISHED ITSELF'

— 25 June 2007: Chernobyl

Partly out of our own interest, but partly due to our mission to visit the 'extreme tourism' sites of the world, we book a trip to the world's worst nuclear disaster – Chernobyl. Well, why wouldn't you? On arrival in the 10km exclusion zone, we're surprised at how many people work in Chernobyl. It's a 'normal' Ukrainian town, with 20 to 30 people on the streets, chatting, smoking or driving old Ladas. We'd expected the only people here to be scientists. First stop is a memorial to the firefighters who died trying to put out the fire that resulted from the explosion. Already we are realising this isn't going to be the most uplifting day trip. From there, we head off towards Kopachi, a village so badly hit by the nuclear fallout after the accident that the authorities flattened it and buried all of the buildings under ground. A triangular yellow nuclear marker now stands on the site of each of the houses destroyed. We pause to take photos of ourselves in front of Reactor 4. The scary thing is that Reactors 3 and 4 are joined together and used the same chimney – but even after Reactor 4 exploded they carried on using Reactor 3 (until 2000).

— 28 June 2007: Uzbekistan

We proceed down the road before being stopped by the police for registration (which we'd already done at the border... twice). Another two kilometres and we're stopped again, this time by a policeman who tries to 'arrest' our vehicle and insists we drive no further. First, we have a right-hand-drive vehicle. 'This is not allowed in Uzbekistan,' he says. We point out that we have just had our vehicle inspected by customs officials, who didn't mention anything about this. So he changes tack. His second attempt is to say we are not allowed tinted windows. We point out that other cars on the road have rear tinting. Instead, he tries to get his mate to fine us for not having an 'ecological permit'. We've already been told we don't need one, point this out, say we won't pay and, eventually, his mate gets bored and waves us on.

01 Kazakh's vast plains: one man's loneliness is another couple's motoring joy

02 Us and our trusty T5

03 Local traffic moves off in Kazakhstan

04 What, no hotel? Pitching up at Lake Issyk-Kul, Kyrgyzstan

'THINK INDIANA JONES IN PAKISTAN WITH A TWO-TON VAN BUT FEWER SNAKES'



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— 28 July 2007: Disaster strikes

After the Tajik border post, we realise the road has been washed away, so we have no alternative but to follow a detour across the riverbed. Then the van stops. No revs, no power, no movement and an ominous hissing noise from behind the engine. No mobile reception, no villages, no houses, no people, no passing cars. Oh sh*t. We're 28km from the nearest village. A Kyrgyz army bloke turns up and, instead of helping us, takes our passports, inspects our van and refuses to give our passports back. At that moment, the only Western vehicle we've seen for days starts to cross the riverbed. The driver is French and he's a star. After much stressful towing, we arrive in the mountain village of Sary Tash. So now we wait.

— 30 July 2007: The rescue

We are finally helped by a rescue party sent out by the British Embassy, comprising local energy worker Aziz and 'The Master', who it turns out is the local European car specialist. Aziz and his family are fantastic. We spend the next two days camped in their garden while The Master assesses the situation and siphons off the bad diesel by parking us on a slope and getting his little helpers to suck out mouthfuls of diesel through a tube.

— 16 August 2007: Hello China

We're now in Kashgar, having made it safely over the Torugart Pass, which is pretty spectacular. This crossing had been in the planning ever since Christmas due to the vast amounts of paperwork required – and we're glad we did it in advance. Some poor Belgians turned up in a Land Rover and couldn't get in, as they had no permits. They had to abandon their vehicle and will now spend days on a train to Beijing to sort the fiasco out.



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05 Making friends after getting a push in Pakistan

06 Taking on the Karakoram Highway, the highest paved road in the world



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— 25 August 2007: Welcome to Pakistan

From Karimabad we head to Gilgit, via a brush with a landslide caused by recent heavy rain. It's a bad one. There's a route round for cars and buses, but it involves a rickety old bridge. The bridge wavers worryingly in front of us as the van creeps onto it: think Indiana Jones, but in Pakistan and with a two-ton van and fewer snakes. Of course, we get stuck. No problem. The minibus behind us stops and out jump around 20 men and boys, all of whom push the van through the mud until we can reverse onto flat land, get a bigger run up and have another go. Everyone cheers and shouts, 'Welcome to Pakistan!' repeatedly.

— 7 September 2007: Bombs and bashes

Having sounded smug in our last blog posting about the easy life we were having, things have gone a little downhill. We have been stranded overnight on a stretch of road that the British Embassy had told us to steer clear of except in broad daylight, a jeep has crashed into the back of our van and dented the boot panel, I have developed an eye infection and two suicide bombs have gone off in Rawalpindi, just down the road from where we're staying.

— 5 October 2007: The Taj Mahal

We roll into Agra just as the sun is setting and have our first glimpse of the Taj Mahal across the river. The building is beautiful, spectacular – one of those views that literally takes your breath away. The next morning I go to the other side of the river just in time for sunrise. The view from the other side, with the building reflected in the water, is beautiful and I don't have to share it with anyone. For me, that moment sums up the contradictions of India: I'm standing in front of a stunning picture-postcard view, but have to trudge around in rubbish and human waste just to be there. Strange that they never show you that bit in the guidebooks.

— 8 December 2007: Indian cannonballs

The driving here is the worst either of us has ever seen. And really terrible, even by Indian standards. A very long, thin, single lane is dominated by incredibly dangerous, crazy buses – with names like 'Superspeed' and 'Cannonball' – that plough up and down the wrong side of the road, often veering onto two wheels due to the bounciest suspension imaginable, with the horn blaring continuously to make sure that every other vehicle jumps out of the way, its driver in fear of his life.

— 9 February 2008: Still driving

We're still on the road and aim to finish our T5 trip at some point in April. To see how the story ends, visit: www.roundtheworld2007.co.uk THE WORKS



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07 Some of the friendlier policemen we encountered along the way

08 Relishing the sea views at Agonda Beach, Goa

09 Big grins and celebrations to mark our arrival in southern India



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