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# BE A BILLING RECORD BREAKER!

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# DESERT

*Diary*

**Desert off-roading isn't all sun and dunes, as *LRO's* Simon Hulber and Nick Dibleby found while teaming up with a Land Rover group in America's barren Moab. We follow their trail in the first of a two-part adventure**

Every year a group of die-hard Land Rover enthusiasts put their daily transport through one of the most punishing off-road terrains in the world - the Moab desert in Utah, USA.

Peter and Marian Taylor are British ex-patriots who settled in America 15 years ago, where they have established their thriving Decon company which produces industrial cleaners. They are also Solihull nuts and are the proud owners of an extremely tidy SE Range Rover. Doesn't look like the kind of vehicle that spends any time off-road. But this one certainly does.

Their Land Rover desire has rubbed off on their American friends who also appreciate that a

4x4 vehicle with the green oval on it is the machine to be seen with.

The annual trek the Taylors and their colleagues make from their home town of Breckenridge, Colorado to the Moab is in itself a bit of a grand tour. But, as Peter told us, the desert driving is unsurpassable.

So when he invited *LRO* to sample an off-road trip of a lifetime, who were we to refuse?

Simon even kept a diary to remind us of the good times, plus the rough and tumble with our US neighbours. Well, of course it would be impolite not to share it with you.





Left, negotiating one  
of the tougher  
inclines in the Moab  
desert's Poison  
Spider Pass



Above, the 350 mile journey from Colorado to the Moab desert, Utah, proves to be a delight, thanks to uncluttered highways

### Day 1

Arrived at Peter and Marian Taylor's House in Breckenridge, Colorado, feeling like we'd done a few rounds with Mike Tyson after a 12 hour plane journey (10 from Gatwick to Houston; two from Houston to Denver). Breckenridge by night was gorgeous, with Christmas tree lights decorating the exterior of most of the pretty colonial-style houses. Snow was light on the ground, but had stopped falling.

Tomorrow we are heading to Moab in Utah in our V8 Discovery auto loaned to us by Land Rover North America - it's a US-spec auto with the big 4-litre motor from the SE Range Rover.

Peter says the desert temperatures in April reach a pleasant 65-70 degrees C; but at the moment daytime temperatures have plummeted to around 50 degrees daytime, which means the anticipated camping out at night could be a problem.

We are booked in for the four

nights of our stay at the Canyonlands Inn, Moab, should the weather be too severe for sleeping bags and tents. It was heartening to know that die-hard off-roaders like Peter and Marian were realistic about outdoor life and Land Rovers - a sub-zero night in a desert could suddenly make a wet weekend in Wales look mighty tempting.

Marian warned us about the effects of Breckenridge's altitude on the body as she offered me and Nick a bottle of mineral water.

"We are at 9500 feet above sea level and the lack of air means you dehydrate very quickly and lose vital minerals. You can start to feel quite grotty."

Peter says tomorrow we will be heading from Breckenridge on the Interstate 70, then on to Highway 6, where we are meeting the first group at Frisco, then on to Vail Pass, Grand Junction, veering off the main Interstate at Cisco on to a provincial ranch highway (mega greenlane), and on to Moab.

### Day 2

It had evidently snowed overnight, as a thick white carpet now adorned the streets of Breckenridge. Curtains drawn after a restful night's sleep (I was too tired to be agitated by Nick's farmyard-like snoring) revealed a picture-postcard scene of the snow-capped Rocky mountains from our bedroom window.

After scoffing breakfast - pancakes with Maple syrup of course - I charged down stairs with my gear, totally ignoring the warning about altitude that Marian had offered last night. When I dashed back up again to get one final view of the mountains from the Taylors' second floor lounge, I found myself puffing like a 60-a-day geriatric who's taken on Linford Christie for the Golden Mile...

Nick and Peter have already left in the Disco for the nearby town of Silverthorne to try and trace a sleeping bag that we believe our airport transfer company has mysteriously mislaid - ie 'Lost'. Oh dear, it wouldn't have been so bad had it not belonged to the editor.

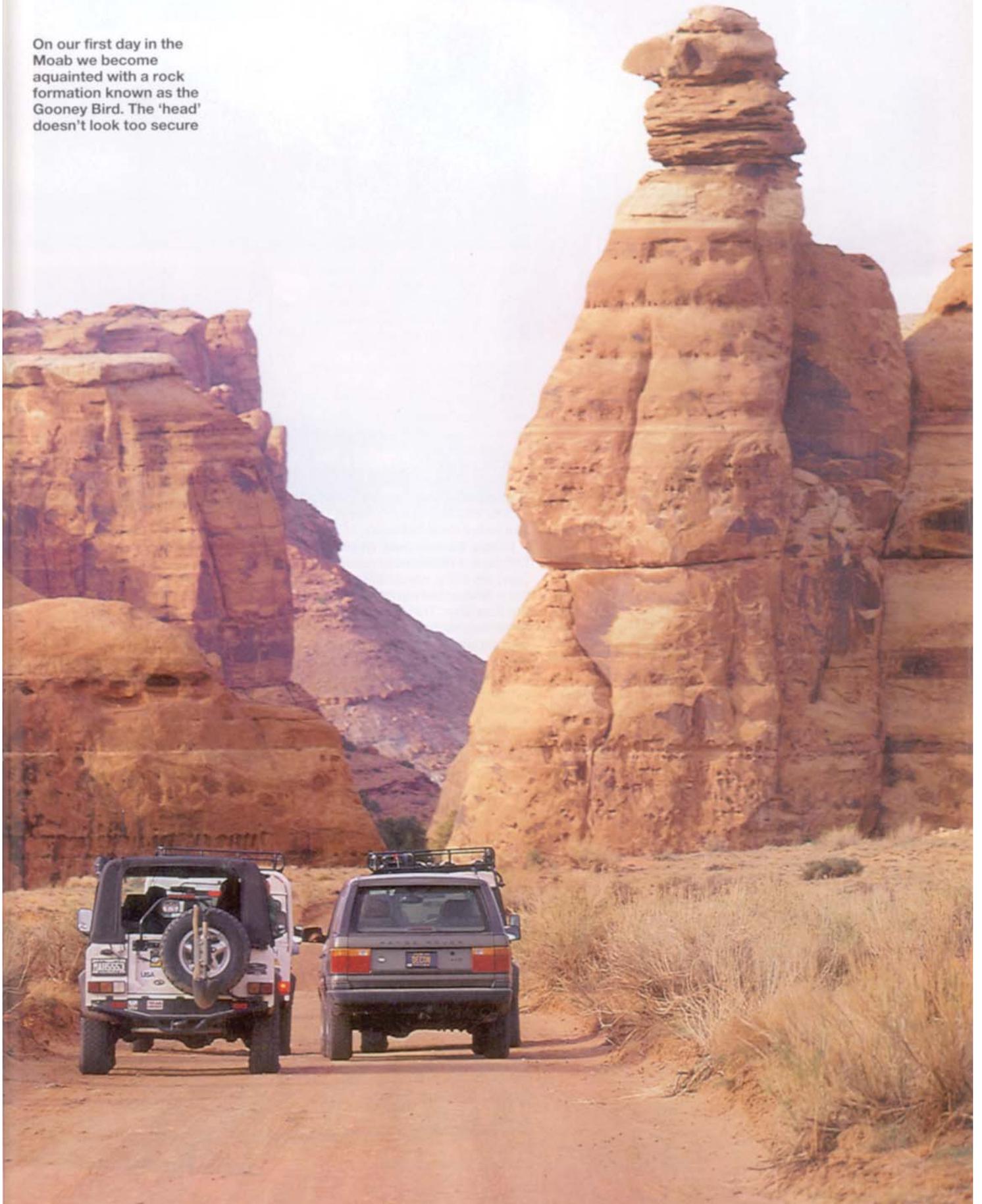
Marian gives me a lift to Frisco, which lies about 10 miles west of Breckenridge and looks like it has been invented for a Hollywood movie-set. It really is jaw-droppingly beautiful. Quaint really is the all-American word to sum it up; snow hangs from the brightly coloured wooden stores and houses that look like they have been specially designed for a 30s musical.

My home city, Peterborough,

Below, the crew meet up in the snowbound town of Frisco on the morning of departure. The weather would be a different story just six hours down the road from here



On our first day in the Moab we become acquainted with a rock formation known as the Gooney Bird. The 'head' doesn't look too secure





## Simon's Scrapbook



*Above, yeeha! I soon had this smile wiped off my face after taking part in my first serious downhill rock climb*

*Right, funny names, funny food in the US — but it's cheap!*



*Above, the gang take a well-earned lunch break after another day on the range*

*Left, everywhere we go there seems to be a drop of at least 1000 feet!*



*Right, everyone signs their first dent, so here I go...*



**Above, nearly there. Our host, Peter Taylor, checks out the route with Simon on one of Utah's endless desert roads. Right, The sign says it all**

suddenly looks a little washed out and staid.

We eat at the Butterhorn Bakery and Deli in Frisco, where we also meet the initial group joining us for our five day Moab trek.

In a US-spec 110, of which only 500 have been made, and which features a 3.9-litre Efi engine, is Scott Morris and his partner Cheryl Hornaday from Nebraska.

Joining them in their V8-powered D90 (as the Defender is known out here) are Moab regulars Jim and Mary Molter, also from Breckenridge. They have been traversing these desert tracks for the past decade and know the area pretty well.

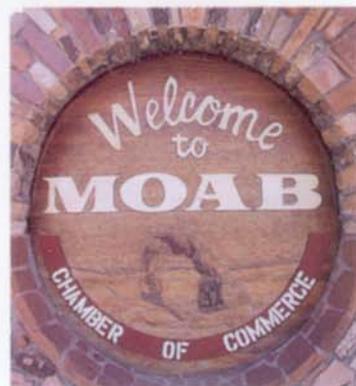
Their capable vehicle gets vital extra inches of ground clearance, thanks to the high performance Old Man Emu suspension system.

But as we discover later on, this area is so massive that even the Molters are passing across routes they have not witnessed before.

Finally, from Land Rover dealership, Denver East, are Land Rover technician Rob Dassler and service manager Craig Dennis in Rob's 1994 US-spec D90. Again it has the torquey 3.9 Efi V8 and Old Man Emu springs and shocks. Why, oh why, I keep asking myself, can't we get this kit as a factory option in the UK?

This hardy bunch of off-roaders are members of the Rover Riders Club, of which Rob is the president.

The club has very much sprung up from the work of Denver East which runs regular off-road training weekends for buyers of new Land Rovers from it. Most of the crew on this jaunt have met via these



weekends and have since carried on with their passion for dirt treks.

Nick and Peter return — sleeping-bagless — and our Discovery is loaded up with supplies. Three ice boxes have been loaded up with water and sandwiches. We are reminded that dehydration is a perpetual problem at this altitude. Each vehicle is issued with a walkie-talkie, which turns out to be essential for our desert expedition.

Our intrepid group sets off westbound for the Moab in a six hour, 350 mile trek that traverses the Interstate

Highway 70 for most of the route. It has started to snow heavily as we leave Frisco and we are told by Mary that a spot we have just past on the winding highway was the site of an avalanche last year that





buried seven cars. No one was hurt in the incident and they were dug out in 45 minutes, using special snow trucks that are left stationed near Vail Pass for that very purpose. We pass the famous ski resort of Vail on the way. We plan to re-fuel at the town of Grand Junction, Colorado, which forms the halfway point of our journey.

Both me and Nick are very impressed by the Discovery's on-road performance. The 4-litre V8 is incredibly smooth - we just stick the auto box in drive and take it easy. Kick-down offers reasonable acceleration. The lump feels more refined than the British market's Tdi, but then again, is half as economical. Expect 15mpg, says Denver East's Rob Dassler. Stick it on the cruise control at 70mph and you might wring out a bit more, he

offers. The standard air-conditioning (an optional extra in the UK) keeps us refreshed, but not chilly. After a few miles the snow flurries stop and the sun breaks through.

Keeping our eyes peeled for State Troopers is imperative as they tend to come down pretty hard on speeding motorists here. But the once Draconian 55mph maximum limit imposed across the US has now been relaxed and we pass signs denoting a maximum speed of 75mph. This can change again as quickly on the same stretch of open highway when signs for 65mph or 55mph suddenly appear. For a country with such great, straight, open roads, it's got some funny speeding laws.

There is a rapid change in the scenery as

we head towards the Flat Top mountains in Dotsero, where the snow-peaked mountains of the Rockies start to change to red desert hills. 'Like something out of a western,' I note on my tape recorder. In the distance a brooding dark weather front has appeared over the flat tops. We are heading towards a snow or rain band again.

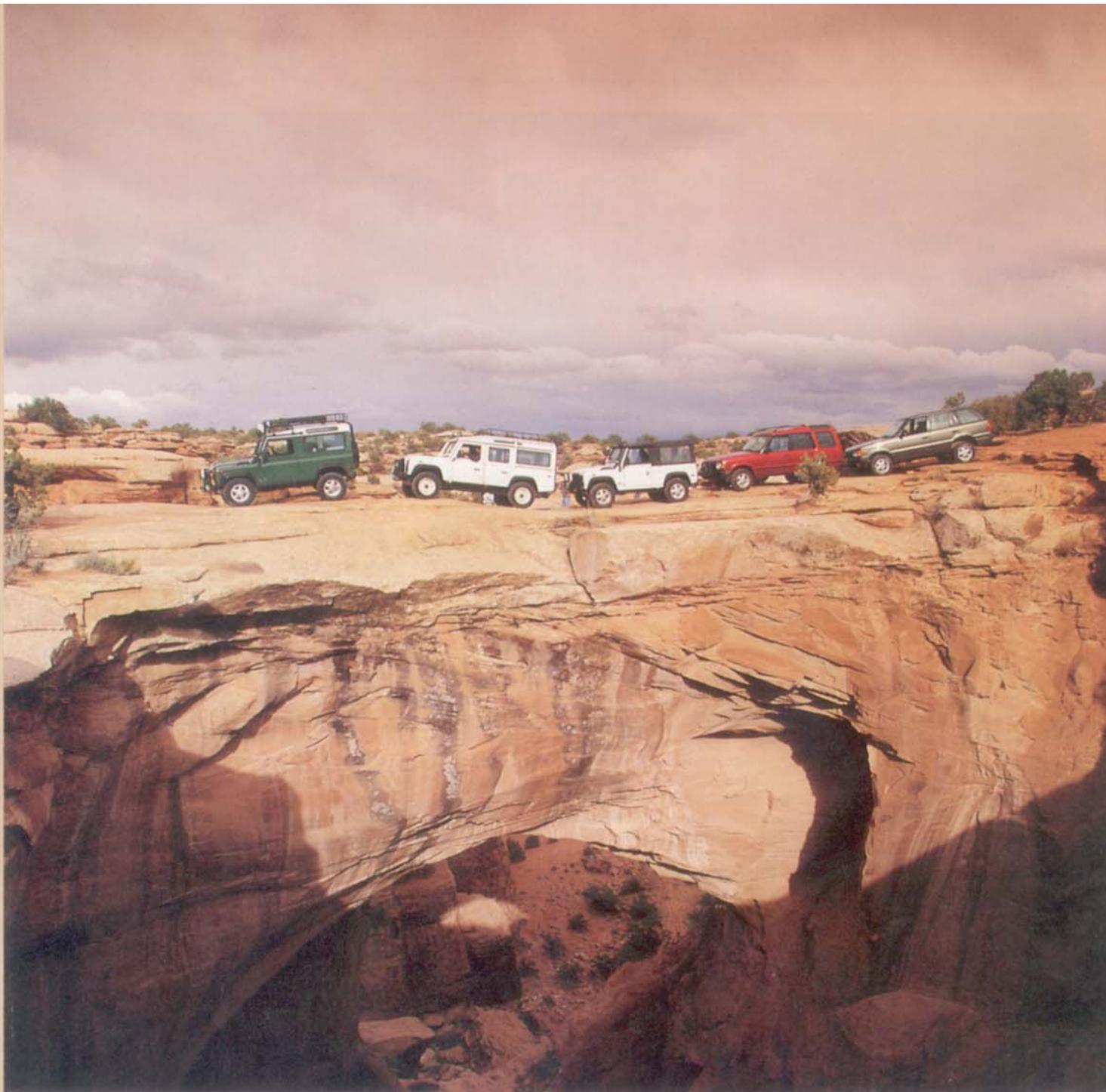
Our party winds on through the staggeringly beautiful Glenfield Canyon in Garfield County. The twisty Interstate has been skilfully cut through rock face and affords the first of many fine dry scenic views we are to encounter on this trip. The Discovery passes a water-filled ravine on our left-hand side known as White River, which actually looks pretty green with the heavy vegetation around it. A railway track runs parallel to it, freight wagons scattered along it. Yes, this was definitely a scene from the 1890s west. Peter radios through to tell us this stretch of water, which gets quite rough further down the route, is often used by white water rafters. As we enter the grey clouds, just as I predicted earlier the rain pours down - and heavily.

On the continuing journey to Grand Junction, we pass such typically American names as Grizzly Creek and Hanging Lake. Passing Glenwood Springs, the rain continues to bucket down. But the

**Above, Craig Dennis guides Greg Chernushin and his V8-powered 110 down one of the countless slopes we were to encounter**



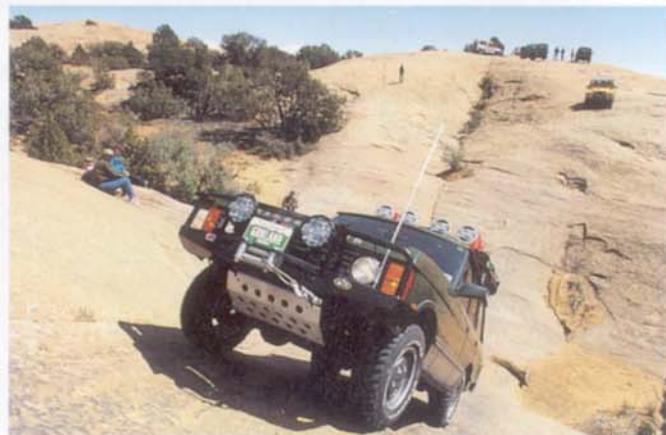
**Left, Jim and Mary Molter's 90 made light work of most obstacles, thanks to front and rear air lockers**



Above, Gemini Bridges is a natural rock formation that has partly collapsed after millions of years of erosion



After a sweltering day spent in the cab, it's good to relax and enjoy a barbecue and a beer under the clear desert skies



Above, we soon learn that the Moab desert slick rock can be potentially lethal if you are too sharp with the throttle

amazing scenery isn't spoiled by the torrential onslaught. Another mountain we pass is called Storm King and the group tells us that it was the site of a huge fire four years ago in which 14 firemen lost their lives.

We pass a massive all-American motor home towing a car. It's a fairly common sight in the US. What a waste of fuel, I thought, before Nick reminds me it's exactly the same in Britain, but the other way around. True, I muse. Easter weekends back home are not worth getting out of bed for – simply because the entire road network has been invaded by an army of caravans on their way to clutter up our damp coastlines. Motor homes in America are a means to an end – drive in the comfort of your own lounge to your desired location, then un-hitch the 4x4 for some more localised exploring. It simply highlights the sheer size of America as a continent – not a country.

As we pass a series of huge mud flats and sand hills near Grand Junction, Craig Dennis calls from the Defender 90 to tell us that this was the site used by last year's American teams in training for the Camel Trophy selections. It certainly looks intimidating, but later I wasn't so sure that crawling over the Moab desert was any easier! The Colorado river which has been shadowing us by the roadside for much of the trip, seems to be spread out on our right hand side and becomes a dominant part of the wild landscape. It follows us and widens through a vast and imposing canyon that seems to tower miles above our heads. The troupe of Land Rovers now look like ants busying up a sandhill.

One point of annoyance about the Discovery is revealed at this point though, as Nick tries to squeeze himself out of the sunroof, while I drive, to get some photos of the vehicles behind us.

"I can't squeeze through it," says Nick.



"You shouldn't have had seconds on the plane," I snigger.

"No, the sunroof doesn't open all the way out."

He was right. It goes halfway open...and that's it. Not so great on an otherwise well kitted out vehicle. Other standard items on this Disco are neat polished wood facia, with the same treatment on the gear knob, electronic control for your classic American automatic garage door and a dual pull out drinks holder on the centre console. The latter turns out to be a godsend, as having a bottle of water at hand is a necessity at this point above sea level. It is such a simple but handy feature, so come on Solihull, let's have them as standard please.

As we enter Utah, we pass Rabbit Valley, famous for its dinosaur bones and fossils. Millions of years ago before Land Rovers and men

themselves, these canyons and valleys were several hundred feet under the sea. Huge areas are today being excavated for the remnants of our past, and throughout our remaining trek through Utah we see signs for dinosaur museums which our tight schedule unfortunately prevents us from visiting. Our next mountain range that we encounter is the Lasal, which means 'salt.' We pass the 20th century ghost town of Cisco then turn from the long Interstate 70 onto Route 128 south. This final 50 mile stretch proves to offer some of the most dramatic Canyonland scenery of the journey down. The roads wind deep into desert territory and I feel pretty humble. Like the size of an ant to be precise. A final turn onto Highway 191 and we are just two miles away from Moab. A big sign on the side of the road welcomes us in to what was once Red Indian territory.

The team check into the motel in the centre of Moab – essentially a two-street town – and we get ready for our first desert assault in the late afternoon. We've hardly had time to put our bags down and we're off! Despite its diminutive size, this former trading post is now pretty affluent, with a big tourist industry hung on river rafting and mountain biking. I see a host of cyclists as we pull into town – the first of many we will meet on our desert voyage. The movie industry has also moved into the area and several films – including the 'Indiana Jones' series – have been made in the desert. It's certainly a lot more convincing than a Hollywood backdrop.

**Above, the ultimate off-roading routes for the ultimate off-roaders**

**Left, there was plenty of counter-weighting going on in a bid to stop Land Rovers tipping over on particularly steep downhill cambers**



Right, haven't we crossed this before? It's easy to get lost in a place like Moab

We ventured out for a spot of gentle off-roading. It's not a technical piece, but it gives us an idea of what is to come tomorrow, when according to Peter, things are going to get a lot tougher. Gulp... My first serious off-road foray for some time has left me a little rusty. Fact is, I nearly wrote off the Discovery's front bumper while trying to climb a series of rock steps rather too quickly and at the wrong angle. There is a salutary lesson to be learnt here; *always* pay close attention to your spotter. It is something I am going to realise as this trip progresses. I assumed I knew what I was doing. Wrong. So I reversed, looked closely at Jim Molter's flailing arms and with just the right amount of gas hopped over the obstacle.

On the way back to the motel, we spot a twisty track on a particularly magnificent looking hillside.

"Are we going up that?" inquires Nick on the walkie-talkie.

"Nah," responds Mary. "It's tarmac. That's far too wussy!"

The latter word is apparently American for pussy – as in weak.

On the way back out of the desert, we stop by a huge rock, not dissimilar in appearance to a giant cockerel. It's known as the Gooney bird, and certainly looks impressive, towering hundreds of feet above us. Like many of the rock formations around here, the top boulders look none to safe. One day it will come rolling down. I just hope no one's standing there when it happens.

That evening we go to a local restaurant, tuck into a fine Mexican meal and get a chance to reminisce on the day's events. At the meal we meet up with another off-roader and member of the Rover Riders, Greg Chernushin and his four-year-old daughter Mackenzie. They will be joining up with our team tomorrow. Greg, who has been venturing in the Moab for the past 12 years, comes from Colorado and is driving his



fine, green, German-spec 110 with carburetted V8 engine. It's rare over here, to say the least. He has the biggest grin on his face I have ever seen on a person, as did his delightful daughter. This smile remains plastered there for the rest of the evening and, true to form, for the rest of the event!

This was one long day. Time for sleep and thoughts of what our first full day in the desert will bring.

### Day 3

We wake in the motel room at 7.10am the next morning to find – to my horror – that it has been raining overnight.

This doesn't happen. Not in the desert.

I was dreaming all night of a dusty landscape, Land Rovers charging over sand dunes and rocks as tall as skyscrapers.

That had been our previous day's introduction to the Moab. But now I was looking out of our bedroom window at a wet car park.

The saving grace though was that the surrounding skies now look fairly clear. I pray they will stay that

way for the day. The room feels chilly, but I am warmed by a fantastic view of the desert mountains in the background. The early morning sun has cast a warming glow across the red rock face.

Me and LRO photographer Nick Dimpleby polish off a curious American breakfast of donuts and Danish pastries with the now 10-strong team, before loading up the American-spec Disco that has been our smooth soulmate for the past 350 miles.

We are both amazed by the amount of dark red sand that has clung to the bottom of the vehicle and mudflaps from the previous evening's tentative venture into the Moab desert. Hardly worth washing, we decide, as plenty of miles are going to be notched up today.

Both of us are suffering from severe congestion, which we both attribute to the high altitude we are still travelling at. We remind ourselves to drink plenty of water.

In the motel car park we are met by new arrivals, Matt and Debbie



Left, our hosts Peter and Marian Taylor with their 4.0 litre SE Range Rover. Below, Matt and Debbie Tanner drove their extremely visual Series IIA



Left, Rob Dassler and Craig Dennis with Rob's trick 90. Below, Mary and Jim Molter brought their V8-powered 90

# WHO'S WHO



Tanner, from Durango, south Colorado.

If you think his yellow 1970 Series IIA looks familiar, you're right. It appeared on the November 1996 issue of *LRO* and remains original, apart from demon front and rear air-lockers. The husband and wife team have plenty of experience in US off-roading and just the kind of crew a novice like me welcomes.

The awesome sandstone mountains light up as we gun the Discovery along the town's main road to the first gas-stop (I have to stop saying "petrol station") in preparation for some serious off-roading.

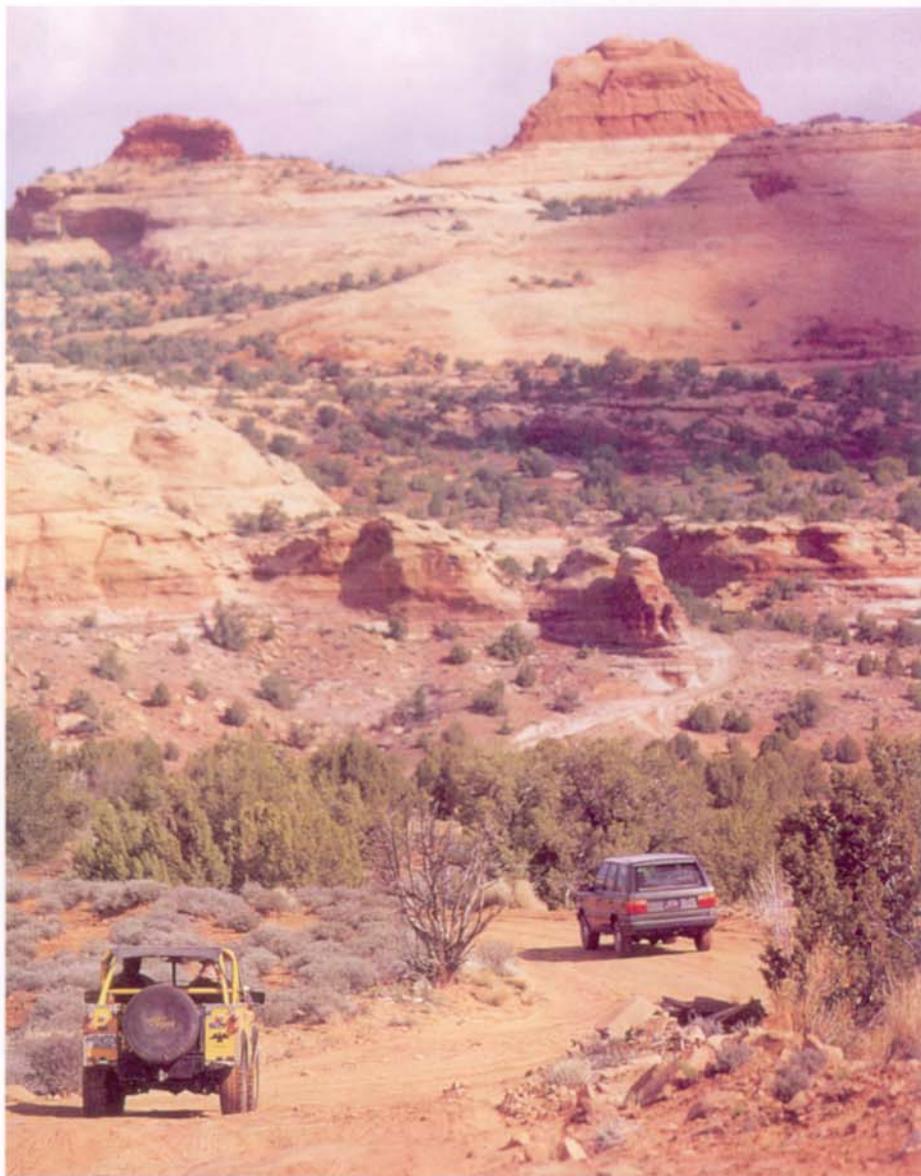
Nick reckons the power steering on the Discovery feels a little stiff, but it seems okay to me, and I don't change my opinion on this for the rest of the trip. Anyway, it costs a paltry \$13 to half fill the Discovery's tank – to you and me that's a mere £8! Now I suddenly appreciate why the big block V8 rules America. Who cares if it only manages 15mpg, it's more expensive to buy orange juice!

We meet up with the rest of the group at the local supermarket to stock up on food and top up our water supplies – with plenty of ice. Soon our cooler box is jingling with the stuff. Everything in American supermarkets is sold in massive Tetra-Packs. I guess they like to make fewer return journeys than us.

We meet up outside at 8.40am and are told by our host and British ex-patriot, Peter Taylor, that we will be traversing the Pritchett Canyon area of the Moab desert today.

Says Peter: "It's extreme, very technical, with very slow progress and lots of road building to get over it. We'll be doing lots of downhill work and winching."

"The potential for disaster is extreme and potential for body damage is also fairly high. If



you watch the spotter you tend to get through – if not you bang it underneath."

Sound advice from someone who knows more about the territory than this part-time

off-road wimp. I know things are going to get tougher, and glance at the distant mountains with trepidation. **LRO**

•Next month, I get my first taste of hard-core off-roading in the desert.

Above, staggering scenery makes this an off-roader's paradise

Right, Pat Laurie and fiancée Megan Hornaday did well in their Classic Range Rover Below, Jed Tallman and his fiancée Libby Kucera with their auto 90



Right, Greg Chernushin with his daughter Mackenzie and V8-powered 110



Above, Scott Morris and Cheryl Hornaday completed the trek in their 110, despite breaking a CV joint



# ROCKY RIDE

**LRO's Simon Hulber and Nick Dimbley continue their epic journey across the Mars-like Moab desert in Utah, USA**

## DAY 3

As we walk back into the supermarket car park in Moab the rain has now dried up and our host and ex-pat Peter Taylor lets some air out of our tyres to provide us with extra grip for the sheer rock faces we will soon be facing. The front goes down to 20psi and the rear to 25psi. This simple tip proves to be invaluable for the obstacles we are about to encounter.

"You can go a bit lower, but you run the risk of rolling the tyre off the rim if you do," says Peter.



**Above, the V8 powered Defender 90 of Land Rover technician Rob Dassler leads the group to the rock formation, Picture Frame Arch**

Loaded up with our classic American 'Durango pastrami' rolls, Nick and I follow the convoy towards the wilds beyond Moab. Re-charged walkie-talkies again keep us in touch with the group's plans every step of the way.

The journey to our first desert trail takes just 10 minutes and offers the most dramatic scenery so far. On our right are the red mountain peaks of the desert and further back, on the opposite side of the highway, are the freezing snowcaps of the imposing Rocky Mountains. It's like driving through a dramatic oil

painting. As we push the American-spec Disco along the desert highway at 55mph, the V8 motor is spinning at just under 2000rpm and feels very relaxed indeed. It shows the Discovery really can cut it as an American long-distance cruiser with the right kind of engine in it.

As Nick points out: "In kick-down it's not blisteringly fast, but it's reasonable."

At mile-marker 113 we make our turn off, across a cattle grid, through beautiful green prairie lands that have one small off-road track cut through them. We are heading for the heart of the desert.

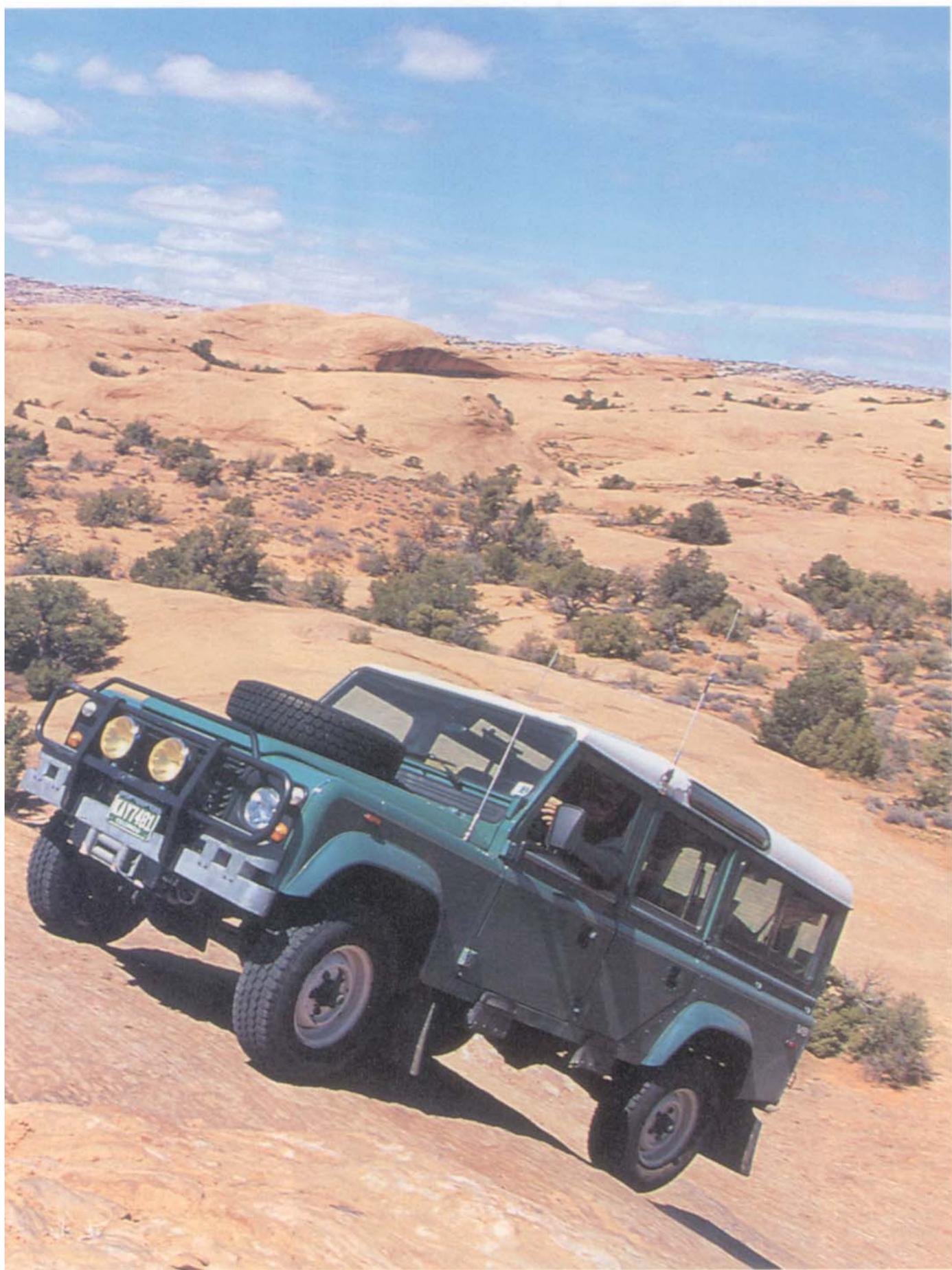
"All present and accounted for," comes the announcement from the lead D90 of Rob Dassler, technician from the Denver East dealership, along with Craig Dennis, the dealership's product service manager.

We are following the D90 of Jim and Mary Molter, and I notice the dramatic effect the reduced air pressure has had on their tyres as the sidewalls spread out against the side of boulders we pass.

As the team finally venture into the desert proper, it's definitely not as I imagined it. Forget towering cacti – the only ones we come across are the size of the ones that sit in plant pots on my windowsill at home. These tiddlers are hidden by the sides of the track.

The main features of the desert are the red sand and rock floor, surrounded by massive rock formations and shrub bushes. The latter turn out to be mainly juniper, which are some of the hardest plants in these arid conditions. We are told that these tenacious evergreens actually kill off parts of themselves to conserve water







Above, rear wheel of Peter Taylor's Range Rover SE paws the air. Take-off point on some of these descents can be very unpredictable

during particularly harsh droughts.

The temperature today has risen to a moderate 65 degrees F, so fleeces stay firmly attached. Nick needs to get to the front of the procession for some shots of the group and gives the Disco full gas on the relatively flat dirt track.

"This is how it's done on the Camel Trophy," he yells maniacally. I struggle to keep my breakfast donuts down.

On our way, we come across a prehistoric rock formation known as Picture Frame Arch, which is a towering rock with a massive hole in the top half. It's amazing what millions of years of erosion can do.

Our company heads towards another landmark near the canyon, called Pritchett Arch, which was once half blocked by a large boulder. Then, back in the 40s, this giant rock gave up the ghost and came tumbling down the hillside,

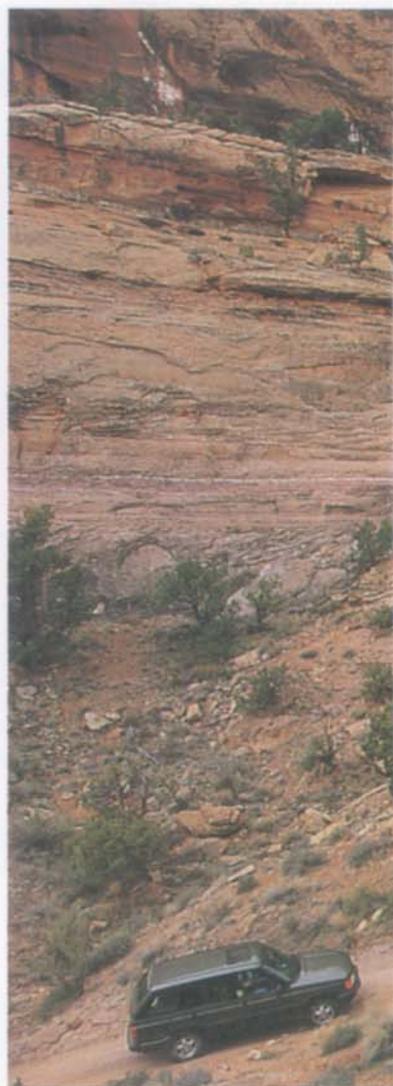
leaving the arch completely clear on the skyline.

On the way we encounter more dark skies in the distance.

"It's a surreal experience," I tell Nick, as we drive in bright sunshine towards this glowering blanket of gloom. Rob and Craig, in front in their white D90, appear strangely lit up against this black and brooding weather front.

On the left is a huge ravine that seems to dip down to the centre of the earth. It reminds us that Moab is the beginning of something far more impressive: the Grand Canyon. We don't get down that far, but our American counterparts tell us that that is the mother of all views.

I get a caution from 110 owner, Scott Morris, that flash floods are prevalent in the area, but at least the lack of soil means that you don't have to concern yourself with quagmires when this happens. The

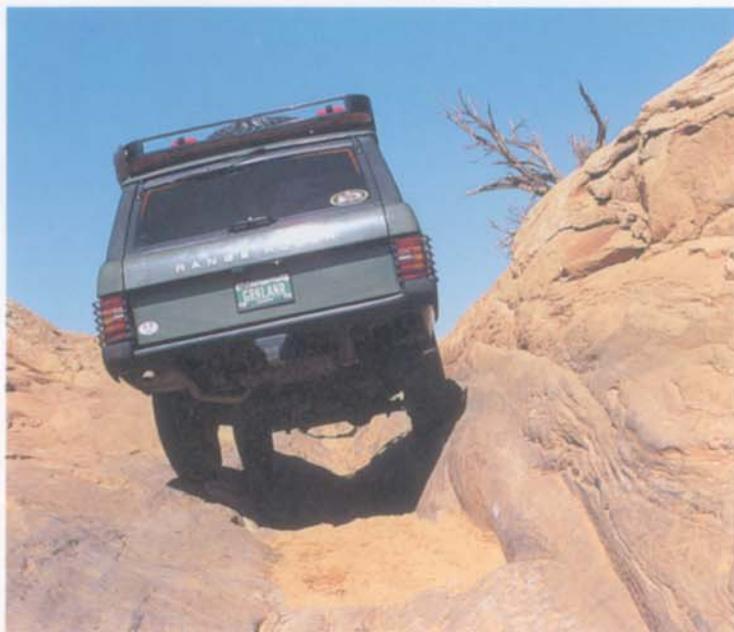


smooth rocks can get dangerous to climb, however.

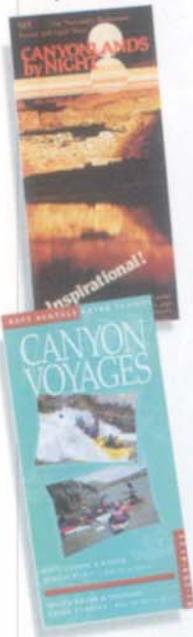
As we meet the edge of the storm, the rain starts to spit down on us and the red sand floor disappears beneath the tyres as we drive across a much more rocky area. The huge slabs of stone lay across each other in great sheets, as if we've stumbled across an ancient Roman road. The suspension starts dipping in and it feels as though we are undergoing some serious axle twisters. I suspect it isn't as dramatic as it feels at this stage, though.

"We should be down in the valley in time for a flash flood," says Mary Molter, with what I can only hope is sarcasm and not wishful thinking...

As the party negotiates another upward trail, I become aware of piles of small stones by the side of the track. These are 'cairns' that have been laid down by previous off-roaders as a guide to what route to take over the barren terrain. Sometimes any vehicle-made tracks simply disappear over this expanse and it becomes confusing to know where to go.



Right, Pat Laurie demonstrates that his Range Rover Classic is as capable at climbing up an incline as the Series Land Rovers





We get as close as we can to Pritchett Arch and park the vehicles up in its foothills to have lunch. Food expert and all round big-eater, Nick Dimpleby, says the pastrami fails to deliver the taste he hoped for. Still, we need the vital grub break to charge ourselves up for the afternoon's challenging activities.

After lunch I encounter my first serious shelf-climb on the trip, which Craig spots me with. It takes me three attempts, but it's the first in a rapid learning curve on how to tackle the tough terrain of the Moab. At least I managed to crawl the Discovery over without denting the vehicle – or too much of my pride. The next rock face proves to be even more daunting as I gaze up at a slope that must be around 50 degrees. I think to myself an unprintable word. Nick gleefully runs to the top with his camera, ready to catch me cock it up on film. Great bloke...

Rob Dassler takes his D90 high up the slope with relative ease as I follow. Diff-lock in, I get cross-axled and the tyres still fail to grip, so



Craig throws some more rocks down for me to climb over. I make it, much to everyone's delight and general applause (I'm a hero now) but worse is to come.

Next we are travelling downhill and this is very, very steep. It gets even more broken up and ragged near the base of this incline, which

runs down one side at the opening neck of the awe-inspiring Pritchett Canyon.

I don't wear a cowboy hat, borrowed from Scott, in the vain belief that it will make me a more skillful pilot. But I remind myself this is not the time or place to drive like a rodeo rider. This is going to take a keen eye and a

Above, mountain tracks are best tackled in convoy. All kinds of traps, including potholes and sudden drop-offs can await the unwary. Right, Greg Chernushin makes light work of rock crawling thanks to the torque of his V8 110



**Above, the Range Rover Classic got plenty of admiring glances from all the off-roaders and proved you can tackle the harshest of environments in relative comfort**

whole lot of patience. To make matters worse, the rain has started to pelt down again and the rock is very slippery. I just pray the tyres will grip and not slid sideways off the frightening shelf as I dab the brakes on the way down.

Nick kindly encourages me, like a trainer in the corner of a world title fight: "Nice and slow, foot on the brake, no sudden movements and you'll be fine."

Thanks to some great spotting from Matt, I get down the most frightening incline I have tackled in my life. But I don't get off the hook that easily.

Next there is a shelf to get off, which has a 90 degree three-foot drop. A few rocks have been scattered at the bottom from previous off-road groups, so at least I'm confident others have tackled this before.

Rob reckons he can drive the drop without the use of a winch. Was it the testosterone talking, or was he simply a genius?

Well, a genius and a lunatic in one, I guess, as he literally launched his D90 over the edge after the careful placement of a few extra rocks. The vehicle bounces big-style as it lands, but no bodywork or chassis touches down as he edges himself over with some more skillful spotting from Matt. Jim Molter successfully follows suit, but after that everyone else sensibly elects to use the winch of a vehicle behind to get down. It's obvious that the Disco's front bumper is going to dig in, so we get the vehicle's rear end firmly hitched up to the nose of Greg Chernushin's 110, who firmly takes up the strain, with feet firmly on the brakes, as the Disco starts edging over the end of this mini cliff.

For a desert virgin like me, it's a little frightening at first as the front end seems to hover mid-air. But it's – thankfully – an anti-climax, as a combination of winch and heavy brake pressure on the Disco lower it slowly over the edge. Piece of cake, I think, rather too confidently.

Yes, an even tougher broken-up slope is awaiting at the next incline. Some of the vehicles go in at slightly the wrong angle, resulting in the Land Rovers tipping heavily to the right with three wheels hoisted in the air! To our left is a drop of some 150 feet. People jump on the rear passenger side of the bumper on some vehicles here, in order to keep as much weight on the airborne side as possible. In the Disco I can feel it going very light on one side, but previous experience now gives me a cooler head. The incline down Pritchett Canyon is conquered.

But it is still all downhill as we tackle another tough incline, known as Scorpion Hill, so-called because our intrepid team has unearthed the odd scorpion here and there, nestling under rocks. Great, I think, as I resolve to stay firmly inside the Discovery at this point. The choice between rolling over on this tricky course or getting stung by a scorpion, leaves me with no option but to risk severe bruising.



This is the point where disaster first strikes the team. Rob Dassler charges over the lip of a sharp rock in the D90 and, bang, he tears the sidewall of his front tyre. It takes the team just a few minutes to get the spare on, although it's no longer a matching BF Goodrich All Terrain tyre.

The rest of the day's off-roading is, in comparison, relatively mild. It comes as a relief, as we now have more time to potter around and soak up this fantastic scenery. If any place deserves to be dubbed God's country, this is it.

On the way out of the desert today we come across a group of youngsters whose caravan has slid off the side of the road into a ditch. Teamwork has been the name of the game for us all day, so we stop off to help them.

A particularly attractive American girl in the group yells out: "Wow! Look at all those Land Rovers. That's cool." Nick and I immediately adopt the I've-got-the-biggest-chest routine. Sad, but true.

One of the stranded guys gets his jack under the tow bar as we all heave the hefty, ramshackle caravan back onto the dirt track. We send



them on their way with a wave, then it's back to the motel to recount tales of heroism and skill.

In Jim and Mary Molter's room, the entire group is invited up to watch the day's activities on the tiny screen of their camcorder. I go on an ego trip watching my antics on telly. Was I really that cool? Of course I was – even if that was because of the sage advice and doubtless experience of the others in the group who got me through in one piece.

We are met by the latest recruits to the group – Jed Tallman, regional operations manager for Land Rover North America, and his fiancée Libby Kucera, in her new D90 auto. It has the 3.9 Efi V8 in it and I couldn't wait to get my hands on it. Jed would be showing off his considerable off-road knowledge in the coming days. He knew the Discovery we were driving pretty well – it was his company vehicle on loan to us. Thanks Jed.

Above, Scott Morris and Cheryl Hornaday get a helping hand with their 110

Left, Peter Taylor goes for a spin without diff-lock and discovers what loss of traction is all about in the adults' giant sand pit

Right, Rob saves the day by removing a broken driveshaft on Scott's 110 in the middle of nowhere

#### DAY 4

Pulling back the curtains of our bedroom, I notice the final Land Rover people in our contingent have arrived.

Standing in the car park is the beautiful green Range Rover Classic belonging to Pat Laurie from Denver, who is joined by his fiancée Megan Hornaday. Megan is group member Cheryl Hornaday's daughter. Again, the couple had been introduced through a special off-road day held by the Denver East dealership. Romance and off-roading clearly do go hand in hand.

Another quick fuel and supermarket stop and we head off into brilliant blue skies again.

Former cop, Mike Weaver, and his wife CJ, from Durango, Colorado, join us in their Mercedes G-Wagon. Nice people, but we reckon a D90 would have been a real class act. Mike reckons one could be on his shopping list. I say: get one soon!

Tonight we are going to try to be hard by camping out, although the way the temperatures have been dropping, I'm visualising the warmth of the motel room already.

We follow signs off the highway to a place called Potash, which denotes the potash works out in the desert.

On the left we pass a disused uranium processing plant. It's the relic of what was once a thriving industry for the nuclear age out here in the Moab. A green substance called malachite runs around the edges of many sandy rock formations; an indication for the former uranium miners that the radioactive metal was present. There's a lot of this stuff to see. Jed reckons it's not a good idea to get too close to it.

Thumbs up from Simon. It was a different picture the day before!



Our track today takes us to a rather dodgy-sounding area known as Poison Spider Mesa. The ever-winding Colorado river follows us on the side of a deep ravine as we trek deeper in. Each day we have been covering around eight to 10 miles, but it feels a lot further due to the slow and tortuous routes we have been following.

We pass campers in unmentionable 4x4s and more cyclists punishing themselves in the middle of nowhere. We bump into a group of official Moab tour Jeeps, but they don't look like they are taking the punishing route we are.

At Poison Spider Pass we clamber the Land Rovers over sheet rock. It's smooth and pretty steep, but we all manage. Scott's 110's rear wheels spin momentarily in the sand, but he's soon up.

Jim Molter kindly vacates the cab of his 90 for me to try out. With rear air lockers switched in, it makes amazingly light work of the steepest and rockiest slopes. Suddenly the very competent Discovery takes

second place. If the rear wheels start spinning on this 90, just give it some gas and it

picks up.

"It's just like a tractor," says Mary. The front air lockers are only used in areas of loose shale or sand.

We cross a tricky V-shaped gully, just wide enough to accept the vehicles. I decide to crawl Jim and Mary's 90 across it, rather than go up the dangerously-angled side slope.

At a lunch stop, Rob and Craig unwrap burritos that have been cooking in tinfoil on their engine. Apparently they taste the business!

Now we head for what has become known, infamously, as the Launch Pad. It's virtually a stone hillside with the kind of angle that will have your vehicle tipping up end over end if you don't crawl down hard on the brakes.

The rule for going up is to feather it into the gully at the bottom in first, then gas it in second. Sounds easy until you see it.

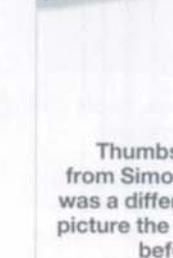
And here I have to make a confession: I opt not to do it. Matt Tanner, owner of the robust IIA, is made of sterner stuff and goes for it. I still say, sooner him than me. I was reminded by Jed that people have died here.

We estimate it slopes down to 45 degrees. There were a few scary moments – especially for Peter Taylor, who averted a potential sideways slide in his Range.

We camp out at a former Red Indian camp at the mouth of a large cave in the Poison Spider basin. Too bad about the brain-dead yobs who have left their modern graffiti marks on this historic cave mouth.

It transpires that Scott has sheared a CV joint on the front passenger side driveshaft. It probably happened earlier while we were all grinding our way across slick rock.

Rob shows his engineering skills by propping up the wheel on a jack and removing the offending driveshaft. Hey presto, Scott can now run three-wheel drive with





Above, accurate spotting is the key to off-roading in Moab

front and rear lockers engaged.

We gather juniper wood for a campfire and watch dusk fall over the crackling flames.

Nick and I can't be bothered to pitch a tent, preferring the warmth of the Disco instead. It would have been fine if we hadn't left the sunroof open all night...

#### DAY 5

We tuck into bacon and scrambled eggs at Peter and Marion's camp – what a great start to the day. Nick shows great public relations spirit by visiting other tents for more bacon and eggs.

The day's off-roading will take us to the Golden Spike Trail. It got this name because uranium miners used to drive a railroad spike into the ground and paint it yellow to mark out their route. Today yellow spikes are painted onto the rocks. We meet more campers along with a massive Hummer and Chevy Blazer.

More rocks are thrown down an incline to stop the Discovery's belly dragging as we crawl down it.

Cairns guide us on a route to the Golden Rim – a massive, flat mountain top that overlooks Arches National Park on one side and Canyonlands National Park on the other.

Toughest of the day's obstacles is The Crack. The name says it all; it's a yawning gap between two massive rock faces that we need to cross. Matt leaps across in his IIA – no problem – while tyres are laid in the gap for the remaining cars. I call it a day on this one, and Craig Dennis, parts and service manager for Denver East, eases it across and bends the rear bumper slightly. Pat puts a small dent into the back quarter panel of his classic, but we all make it.

On the last tricky climb of the day

The 'Launch Pad' is an almost vertical drop and is plain frightening. Greg takes it easy



there is a sickening bang from the front of Peter Taylor's SE Range Rover.

He has broken a driveshaft and we are forced to get down to some serious winching for the remainder of the day's uphill sections to get him and his wife Marian out of a potentially sticky situation.

Just as well it's the last day's off-roading for us, as it's back to Breckenridge tomorrow before a drive to Denver East to check out their displays.

Back at the motel, I reflect on a tough but immensely enjoyable week in what was probably the toughest environment I will ever experience.

Colorado and Utah provided

some of the most stimulating scenery ever to have passed my starry eyes. And the off-road challenges are as tough as they come. If you can cut it here, you can do it anywhere.

The memories will last for ever, as will the friendships that have been forged.

● **Special thanks to:** Peter and Marian Taylor for their kind invitation and the big welcome we received from them, Jed Tallman for the use of the Discovery, Rob Dassler and Craig Dennis for arranging our vehicle for the trip, Keith and Teri Herbert of A-Bear's in Breckenridge: Land Rover fans and producers of the best Cajun grub bar none.