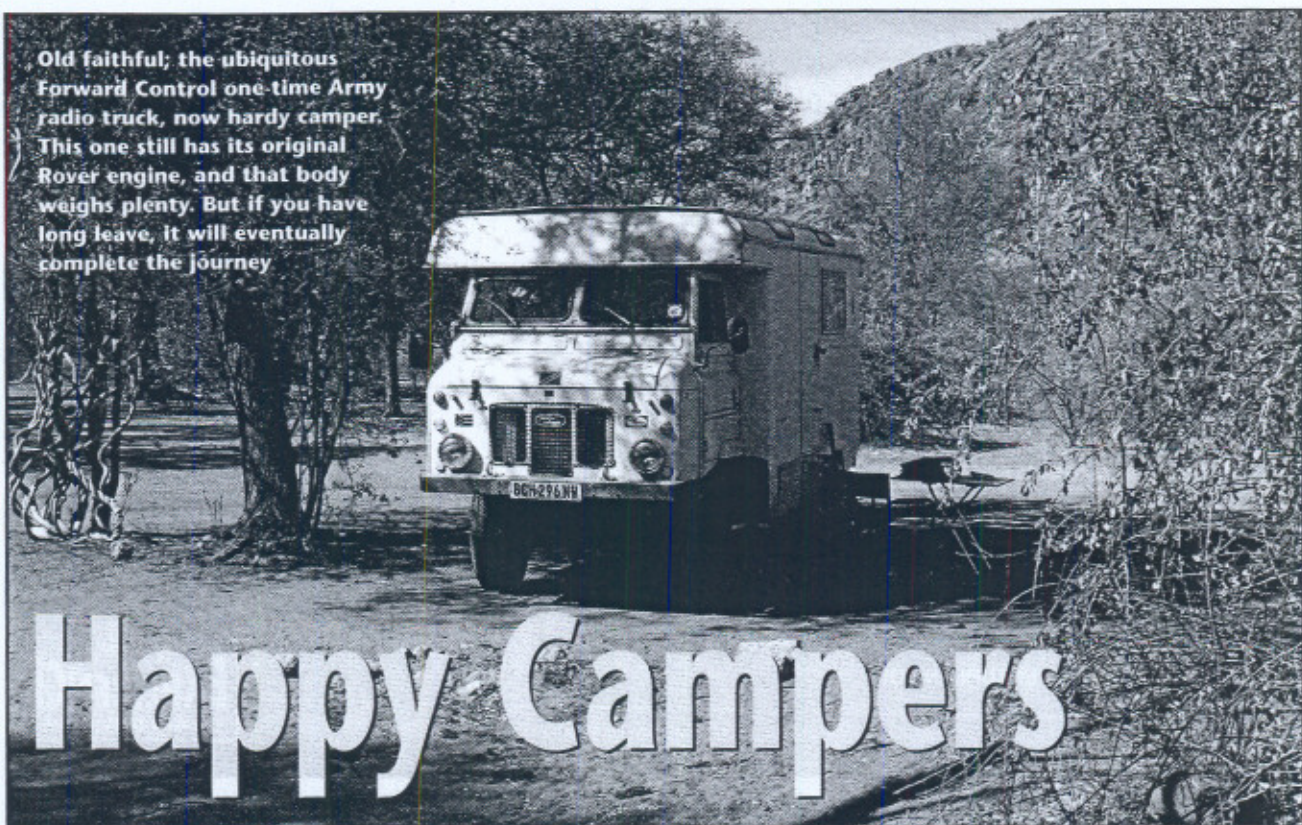


# African Atmosphere



by Southern African Representatives Tim and Christopher Race

Old faithful; the ubiquitous Forward Control one-time Army radio truck, now hardy camper. This one still has its original Rover engine, and that body weighs plenty. But if you have long leave, it will eventually complete the journey



## Happy Campers

It has to be said that camper vans have never really taken centre-stage in Africa. In view of their popularity in Europe and North America, that may seem strange – especially as Africa has so much of the outdoors about it.

Recently there has developed a small but thriving hire business, mainly directed at tourists from overseas who want to visit remote parts but who lack the locals' live-and-let-live attitude towards Africa's nocturnal livestock running about the tent. But otherwise, camper vans remain on the "what-the-hell's-that" list.

There are historically good reasons for this, not least being that most people can't afford to have a motor vehicle dedicated only to holiday or leisure trips; another is that most examples of camper vans are cumbersome, slow and



Those overhangs are too much, and so is the volume of that massive body

unsuitable for serious bush-track excursions. Also, most European-built campers simply can't handle African road or climatic conditions for long.

One good result from this has been the design and development of at

least one awesomely effective off-road caravan, numbers of which are now encountered behind 4x4s in some of the most outlandish routes on offer.

Over the years, the most effective motorised units have emerged from ex-

South African Army IIA and IIB Forward Control radio vans. Conversions generally focus on the interior arrangements, and little is done to the basic body. The end result, though satisfactory regarding accommodation, is a strong



but heavy unit, with a well-rehearsed capability of falling over sideways.

From time to time, an ex-Army Marshall-bodied 109 ambulance did appear – usually shipped out for a specific adventure holiday. They were regarded as suitable only for extreme optimists, and certainly any semi-fit cyclist would expect to overtake such an outfit, provided he or she was not carrying more than a single 200 lb grain sack on the carrier or handlebars.

Southern African drivers go for Big Beef cubic capacity, and most Forward Control and 109 campers have had their Land Rover motors replaced. The favoured beasts were the Ford V6 or a range of Perkins or Japanese diesels.

I myself have to put my hand up. I would no more have thought of making a camper out of any leaf-sprung Land Rover than I would have been found in a ladies' hair salon.

So you see, this particular branch of leisure motoring and adventure has not had much of a start where I come from. Trouble is that today's Land Rovers are a very different ball game, more than capable of adaptation as campers (as are the big Toyota Land Cruisers). And of course Africa remains one of the very best places in which to have a good 4x4 camper, properly designed for African conditions.

What are the Dos and Don'ts? Well, African terrain really does continuously present a huge range of road conditions. True, there's nothing that can't be found on other continents; it's just that here one can encounter the lot on just one decent adventure trip.

If I had to produce a first basic, golden rule, it would be that body width and length should never exceed manufacturers' maximum limits (especially width, though in serious off-road terrain, it's surprising how little tail end extension is too much). For 110s or 130s, this would mean the dimensions of the Hi-Cap body option. In my experience, most conversions (DIY or commercial) so compromise these factors that stability and off-road capacity are both adversely affected, even before internal fixtures add their toll to the Centre of Gravity.

And height comes into this too. Resulting body sway can be so bad that I've seen elephants quit the chase hopelessly dizzy.

But bodies too wide and too long create other difficulties, too. Like where to position a high-lifting jack, or negotiating tight clearances, steep river bed traverses, etc.

I guess all this means that there are two basic choices to be made when deciding on your ideal get-away-from-it-all camper. And it really is either/or. You either make sacrifices on interior space and fittings, or you accept living with a geriatric whale. In my book, the compromises are with less space and fittings.

I recently came across one of the very best camper-bodied 110s I've ever seen in Africa or elsewhere. Its external dimensions were virtually identical to the Hi-Cap, and running height was no greater than a County wagon with sensible roof rack.

It was built by Jurgens, once one of the leading

independent caravan manufacturers in South Africa.

The body was constructed of GRP and aluminium, with a pop-top roof and ingenious fold-out side that accommodated a double bed.

Storage, kitchen unit and hand basin were well located, and access steps folded neatly against the back door. Its owners, Rodney and Bridget Ubsdell, have travelled extensively through Africa, and the whole vehicle is a model of compact,

comfortable efficiency.

I gather that Jurgens no longer produce this body. A great pity, as there really is potential for a thoroughly good 4x4 camper for Africa, and the coil-sprung 110 and 130 Land Rovers are ideal base vehicles.

The Memsahib and I have just such a unit, mounted on a 130, and now with many miles under its belt. It's about to have a thorough re-furb and we are planning a little 11,000-mile personal jaunt through the bush. More on that later. ■



**This Jurgens "Trax" body in no way impairs the off-road ability of the 110. Its ingenious layout provides for a big double bed, kitchenette, and huge storage capacity. The lower body panels are tucked in to prevent snagging on rocks or vegetation, and maximise access to axles and underbody**



**Nearside wall of the "Trax" folds out to create a neat sleeping alcove with queen-sized bed**