

A MOUNTAIN PASS ADVENTURE THROUGH LESOTHO AND SOUTH AFRICA

Special Thanks to: Kingsley Holgate;
Thanks to: Sheelagh Antrobus (text & photo); Bruce Leslie & Shova Mike (photo)



MOUNTAINS SEEM TO HAVE A SPECIAL FASCINATION FOR LAND ROVER AMBASSADOR AND AFRICA'S WELL-KNOWN EXPLORER KINGSLEY HOLGATE AND HIS EXPEDITION CREW. IN 2016, THEY TOOK 10 HISTORIC LAND ROVER SERIES 1's DATING BACK TO 1949 RATTLING & ROARING THROUGH THE MALUTI MOUNTAINS OF LESOTHO, WHICH HAS THE HIGHEST AVERAGE ALTITUDE OF ANY COUNTRY ON EARTH, IN TRIBUTE TO THE END OF THE DEFENDER RANGE AS WE KNEW IT THEN.

TWO YEARS LATER, KINGSLEY, HIS EQUALLY DARING SON ROSS AND THEIR TEAM COMPLETED A 17,000-KILOMETRE TRANSCONTINENTAL EXPEDITION FROM CAPE TOWN TO KATHMANDU (FEATURED IN A 3-PART SERIES IN BEYOND BOUNDARIES LAST YEAR), WHICH INCLUDED TRAVERSING THE HIGH-ALTITUDE, SNOW-BOUND PASSES OF GEORGIA AND ARMENIA, PAKISTAN'S HINDU KUSH AND KARAKORAM MOUNTAIN RANGES AND THE HIMALAYAS OF NEPAL - A WORLD-FIRST JOURNEY FOR THE NEW LAND ROVER DISCOVERY.

AT THE BEGINNING OF THIS YEAR AND BC ('BEFORE COVID'), THE GREYBEARD OF AFRICAN ADVENTURE WAS AT IT AGAIN, THIS TIME IN HIS OWN BACKYARD, WITH A GOAL OF COMPLETING 100 OF SOUTHERN AFRICA'S TOUGHEST AND HIGHEST MOUNTAIN PASSES IN JUST 30 DAYS! CALLED -"RIDING HIGH ON SKY"-, IT WAS AN ADRENALINE-FILLED JOURNEY THAT HAD NEVER BEEN ATTEMPTED BEFORE. KINGSLEY TAKES UP THE STORY.

What better way to kick off a new decade than with a high-altitude Land Rover & Mountain Bike Challenge to tackle 100 of southern Africa's highest, toughest and most historic mountain passes in just 30 days... Could it be done?

Kingsley on a high point at 3240m in Lesotho

Lesotho: Discovery & Defender complete 18 tough mountain passes through the Maluti Mountains in the 1st chapter of the Riding High On Sky Challenge

The 3 monkeys of the expedition! Shova Mike, Sheelagh and Rasta Graham in Lesotho

Campsite at a mountain stream in Lesotho

Defrosting the Braai meat old Landy Defender style! Even the meat is in style: 'Kameelberg Boerewors' (camel mountain farmers sausage)



This crazy idea took shape around a campfire on a balmy African summer evening in the final days of 2019 - and before the echoes of 'Happy New Year!' had faded into the new reality of 2020, our Landies were loaded and we were heading for the Mountain Kingdom of Lesotho.

It makes an interesting change to be adventuring close to home and not in more distant African countries as we usually are. South Africa's land-locked neighbour Lesotho has always been a great favourite of ours and with it having the highest of southern Africa's mountain passes, it was, literally, a heavenly start to the 'Riding High On Sky' expedition.

Mountain journeys are nothing new to our expedition-kitted Land Rover Discovery, nicknamed 'Sheba' after the Queen of Sheba because of her exploits on the Horn of Africa during our hair-raising 2017 Extreme East expedition to reach the most easterly point of the African continent in Somalia. She's also one of the Discovery's that on the 2018 Cape Town to Kathmandu expedition, tackled the snow-bound Caucasus mountains between Georgia and Russia, the ancient, high-altitude Silk Routes across Armenia in temperatures way below freezing, then the famed Khyber Pass between Afghanistan and Pakistan and the Karakoram Highway to China, said to be one of the highest paved roads in the world.

Alongside my adventurous partner Sheelagh who travels with me on all our humanitarian & geographic expeditions, 2 other veteran team members eagerly sign up for this never-attempted-before 30-day mountain pass challenge: the swashbuckling Bruce Leslie (he survived being knifed in the neck by a bandit when we were all sailing an traditional wooden Swahili dhow up the east coast of Africa a few years ago) and the mad-cap but exceptionally tough 'Shova Mike' Nixon. Along with mountain biking all our expeditions over the past ten years, Shova Mike is one of only 4 people in the world to have completed all the 16 Cape Epic mountain bike races; he's now going to attempt to traverse every mountain pass of this 'Riding High On Sky' mission on his bike that is nicknamed 'Umbani' ('lightning' in Zulu).



Goodluck charms on the dashboard of the 1998 Defender 'Vumbi'



Rasta Graham has the shape of every early Defender model tattooed on his bicep

Kingsely at the top of Sani Pass - Lesotho

You like to read more about Lesotho !
Check out edition #18 of Beyond Boundaries!



Given that 2020 marks the year of the new Land Rover Defender, we also pull in an old, much-travelled '98 model for the Lesotho chapter of the journey. Nicknamed "Vumbi", (meaning "dust" in Swahili), her dashboard is decorated with coiled rubber snakes, a variety of good luck charms and an old toy Defender the size of a matchbox. Her equally colorful owner is Graham Cooke, a Rasta-style Landy aficionado who has the outline of every early Land Rover model tattooed around his bicep.

Heavily loaded with camping kit, a big box of 4x4 recovery gear, extra jerry cans of fuel and spare Cooper tyres, first on the list is the famous Sani Pass that links South Africa to Lesotho. It is known as the "Mother of all South African passes" as it out-distances, outperforms and out-climbs all other mountain passes with ease.

History has it that in 1950, Alwyn Bischoff (an Agricultural Officer in the-then Basotholand) was given a Series 1 to test at altitude with the invitation to, "See if you can break it". Sani Pass at that time was the domain of mule trains transporting goods into the Maluti Mountains and the corners & inclines of the pass were carved from the rock with 4-footed animals in mind, not engine-driven vehicles. Bischoff's was the first Land Rover to conquer this high-altitude pass.

Our next challenge is to reach the 3270m summit of Tlaeeng Pass, southern Africa's highest drivable mountain pass, then a further 16 passes through Lesotho, all chosen for their degree of difficulty. The Basotho people in their conical grass hats and colourfully woven blankets are incredibly friendly and for the first few days, the weather

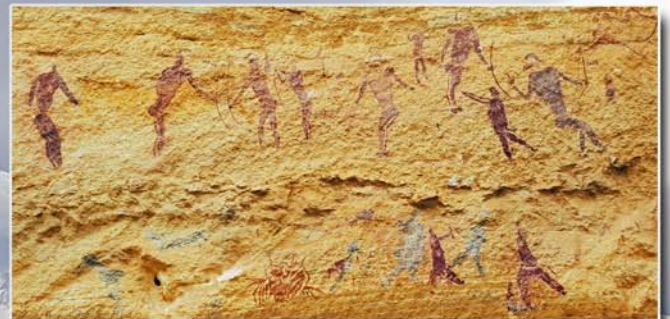


Kingsley and Shova Mike with friendly Basoto people on the Matabeng Pass



Friendly Basotho livestock herders pose for a picture with 'Sheba'

Ancient Bushman rock-art paintings in the Maluti Mountains



gods play along; we wild-camp on the banks of mountain streams or on sunny hill slopes with incredible views into the valleys below, and marvel at occasional sightings of the impressively large but critically endangered Bearded Vulture soaring the thermals overhead.

Known locally as the "Monarchs of the Mountain", sadly the Maluti-Drakensberg mountain range is their last refuge in Africa.

But then storms blow in as we set out to descend Ongeluksnek Pass ('Accident' Pass), so named in the 1860s after an early trekker died from a gunshot wound on its steep slopes. This pass has an average gradient of 1:9 and a 7/10 rating in the steepest passes listing, and the wet weather turns the narrow & twisting 4x4 track into a quagmire of mist, glutinous sludge & rain-slick rocks. It's a tricky descent, involving lots of slipping & sliding (sometimes too close for comfort to the precipitous edge of the pass) and several stops to dig the tyres out of deep muddy ruts and pack stones on the unstable sections - definitely not one for the faint-hearted. We're all soaked and covered from head-to-toe in sticky red muck when we arrive at the South African border post at the bottom.

The astonished border officials cannot believe their eyes when the Landies and a wide-eyed, equally mud-spattered mountain biker appear like apparitions from the mist, they hadn't expected anyone to travel down the pass from Lesotho in such foul weather.



Above:
In Lesotho Shova Mike celebrates his 61st birthday by 'summitting' a peak wearing a Basutho woven grass hat!



Tricky descending, involving lots of slipping and sliding, with the Discovery, nicknamed 'Sheba', the Ongeluksnek Pass in heavy rainfall and mist from Lesotho to South Africa

Onto the next set of mountain passes on our list and the beauty of the Eastern Cape Highlands literally takes our breath away; with its rolling and emerald green hills, stony peaks and verdant farming valleys, you'd be forgiven for thinking you're in Scotland.

This region is known as South Africa's 'Extreme High 5' country and is a favourite with 4x4 enthusiasts, adventure bikers, hikers, trail runners & mountain bikers, who test their skills on the 5 highest mountain passes in the country. We add them all to our list, firstly boulder-hopping the Land Rovers in howling winds and thick mist to the summit of Ben McDhui, the highest mountain pass in South Africa at 3001m.

But the continuing rains, violent thunderstorms and low cloud turn the other mountain passes into incredibly slippery affairs, the 4x4 tracks with their steep ascents & descents becoming virtual rivers at times. We're saddened to hear of a vehicle going over the edge of Naude's Nek (South Africa's 3rd highest mountain pass) - the driver killed when he misjudged a tight corner in the misty conditions.

After finishing the tricky hairpin bends of the 27 kilometre-long Bastervoetpad Pass and before yet another looming thunderstorm, our route takes us into the Karoo heartland as the sun returns, following sandy tracks to reach the remote & heat-hazed Antoiniesberg Pass. This one really knocks our socks off, with its switchback turns that snake up & down the Groot River canyon - definitely one for 4x4 enthusiasts.

Then it's on through the dramatic, sandstone-sculptured beauty of the Baviaanskloof to mountain pass nr. 51 on our list - the Prince Alfred Pass, longest in South Africa. There's just enough sunshine amongst the mist & drizzle to appreciate the forested beauty of this 153 year old pass. We stop at a tranquil spot near an old drift, where we find a memorial plaque in honour of the great mountain pass road-builder Thomas Bain and doff our hats to one of South Africa's sons, allowing



Eastern Cape Highland's breathtaking 'look-a-like' Scottish mountain scenery



Rasta Graham in his 1998 Defender crossing a boggy mountain top on route to Ongeluksnek Pass

Eastern Cape Highlands at Ben McDhui at 3001m: Kingsley, Mike and Sheelagh celebrate reaching the summit in howling winds and thick mist



Soaking wet on Naude's Nek, Rasta Graham, Sheelagh and Shova Mike

Eastern Cape Highlands: Bastervoetpad Pass boulder-hopping



At the Bastervoetpad Pass Kingsley and Bruce cross a mountain stream



the birdsong and silence to transport us back in time to when horse & cart and ox-wagons trundled past this spot in 1867.

We're inching closer every day to our goal of 100 mountain passes in 30 days. Wild camping every night, we eagerly tick them off the list by the flickering lights of the campfire. While heading south, we clock up over 40 passes through magnificent mountain ranges with fascinating names like Hogsback, Zeerburg, Tsitisikama, the famous Outeniquas & the dramatic 23 km long Swartberg Pass. Built in 1888, it's a spectacular World Heritage Site and Thomas Bain's crowning achievement, with much of the original dry-stone retaining walls supporting its hairpin bends still in place. Then it's onto the historic mountain passes of the beautiful Garden Route, Cape Peninsula & the Cedarberg mountains, before we turn north-west and head towards the Namibian border.

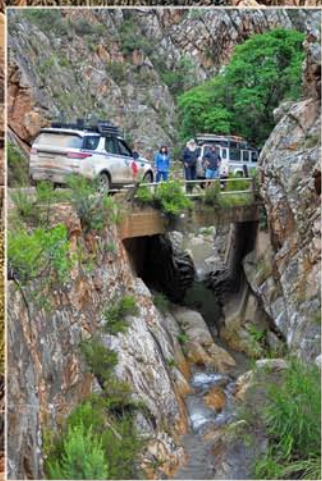
It's in the searingly hot & drought-stricken landscape of the Northern Cape that we face the toughest test of all - a mountain pass ominously called "The Road To Hell". We'd done our research beforehand and knew this was brutally tough, dead-end pass, packed with large rocks and with very steep gradients in sections. The reputation of this pass is made even more forbidding by the many stories of experienced 4x4 adventurers coming unstuck, so we had no delusions.



Above:
Swartberg Pass 1, Dwarfed by mountain grandeur
Above right page:
Swartberg Pass 2, Shova Mike leads the Land Rovers up the hairpin bends

Below:
Eastern Cape, the Prince Alfred Pass,
South Africa's longest mountain
pass built 153 years ago

The Eselbank Pass at Cedarberg Mountains,
Western Cape



Western Cape at the
Bainskloof Pass
A moment of reflection to
the roadbuilders of the 1800s



Swartberg Pass 3

Cedarberg Mountains
Eselbank Pass with sand



Getting to The Road To Hell is an adventure in itself. When we stopped to ask for directions, a tough guy called Jaapie who heads up a nearby silica mine greets us with a vice-grip handshake and furrowed brow.

In a broad Afrikaans accent, he says ominously, "Don't go there - DON'T! In this heat it will kill you - yesterday, it was over 50°C. It is very dangerous, there is no place to turn around - the track is rocky and narrow and getting worse. Believe me - I've had to fetch broken people and vehicles out of there many times." It's only after we explain our crazy mission to try and crack 100 mountain passes in 30 days that Jaapie relents and agrees to show us to the desert tracks that leads to The Road To Hell.

We camp in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by golden-red sand & giant rocky outcrops that stretch as far as the eye can see. There is the most brilliant canopy of stars above. The ground is too hard for pegs, so we use heavy stones to keep the tents from being blasted away in the desert wind, which is a godsend after another day of high temperatures.

Double-checking our water supplies, we set out just after sunrise the next morning to try beat the heat. Shova Mike on his mountain bike struggles with the soft sand but he's hell-bent on pedaling as much of The Road To Hell as possible.



Gymanshoek Pass
flashfloods in
the Karoo,
Western Cape



Road To Hell signpost,
Northern Cape

Defender fording a stream
in the Outeniqua mountains,
Eastern Cape



contains the
sandstone ramparts



The track becomes littered with loose, jagged stones on the short, steep incline towards the start of the pass and over he goes - on his back, the bike in the air on top of him. A bit bruised and battered, Shova Mike gets to his feet and pushes his bike onwards, the two Land Rovers following behind in low ratio, growling along in the intensifying heat.

You can't miss it: 'ROAD TO HELL'. On a big stone are roughly painted these words, together with some colorfully-worded 'rock messages', which leave no doubt as to how those who survived it to the bottom and back up again feel about this pass. There are pieces of broken car parts and someone with a whacky sense of humour has planted an old satellite dish on a pole offering 'Free Wifi'. But gazing down into the steep, heat-hazed valley, it's clear that there's nothing for free here - and that whilst gravity and caution might get us down to the Orange River far below, it's getting back out again that will be the real challenge.

We put the Landies into low-range and with tow ropes at the ready, slowly make our way down the twists and turns, sliding over the shifting rocks that form the bulk of the track's surface and squeezing between big boulders, the deflated Cooper tyres just millimeters from the vertical drop into the valley below. At the bottom, the track flattens out and we follow a sandy dry stream bed to reach the slow-flowing waters of the Orange River for a much-needed dip and quick 'tailgate breakfast' of bananas & peanut butter sand-wiches, before turning the Landies around for the haul back up to the top of The Road To Hell.

That's when things get hairy. Now in rock-crawl mode, it's an almost-vertical climb up the steepest part of the pass, with Shova Mike & Sheelagh packing extra stones under the tyres to give better traction on the slippery sections and "spotting" a good line around tight bends for Bruce and I as we wrestle the Land Rovers up the track. But in maneuvering up & over a big, sheer-sided boulder, the wide-bodied Discovery slides sideways and gets well and truly stuck, dangerously close to the crumbling edge of the track. We're not the first to get caught there; a pile of old water bottles, drinks cans and a discarded piece of vehicle bodywork attest to others who've also come unstuck at this point.

We get to work, building a stone rampart around the boulder and shoving mud mats under the tyres for better grip. By now it's midday, the temperature is above 40°C and still climbing - the heat bouncing off the rocks makes them hot enough to fry eggs on. Bruce is the first to go down with heat-stroke & vomiting. We pump him full of rehydrating fluids, pour water over his head and get him to sit it out in the Defender with the aircon on full blast. Sheelagh also isn't feeling too good, so we decide to stop grafting until the direct bite of the midday sun is over.



Mike tumbles on the Road To Hell



Center photo:
Road To Hell
manoeuvring
up and over big,
loose boulders

Richtersveldt
final team photo
125 passes in
30 days completed





Man vs Machine race

Later, we try again. Looping the tow ropes around rocky outcrops, contriving a pulley system to add extra power to the winch and letting the Cooper tyres down even more, inch-by-inch the Disco shifts off the boulder. With the two Landys now joined by a tow rope for safety, we tackle the final section - stones spitting from under the tyres, bouncing & jostling over the last obstacles - and finally pop out at the top.

Like many other 'crazies' before us, our hot, sunburned four-some whoop with relief, share 'high-fives' and pose for pics at the 'ROAD TO HELL' rock-pile. As the sun sets, we detour back to the silica mine to let Jaapie know we've made it out in one piece. "You were right!," Shova Mike tells him with a grin, "Definitely don't go there!" By this time we're all feeling the pace - days and weeks of mountain passes are all starting to run together. With just 48 hrs to go to the 30-day cut-off point of the Riding High On Sky challenge, we complete the final mountain passes on our list, which traverse the ruggedly beautiful and ancient desert mountains of the Richtersveldt National Park on the Namibian border. For a bit of fun, on the last pass we stage a 'Man vs Machine' race: on the final bend, 'Shova Mike' on his mountain bike flashes past the Discovery for a flying finish.



Catching up on the expedition journal and enjoying enamel mugs of 'renoster koffie' around our last expedition campfire, it's natural that the conversation comes around to the incredibly diverse geographic, climatic and vegetation zones we've journeyed through in 4 weeks. And when we tally up the final list of mountain passes, we're astonished to discover that we've completed more than 100 in 30 days - 125 in fact! Next morning, we take our time packing the grubby expedition kit into the well-travelled Landies - the

hardened crusts of mud from the rain-soaked Lesotho & Eastern Cape mountain passes now covered in a thick coat of desert dust. We've thrown every type of rough 4x4 terrain at them and they haven't missed a beat. And the tough 18" Cooper tyres are as solid as ever - not one puncture despite the hammering they've taken.

This home-grown tiny-mini-expedition showed us beyond doubt that South Africa is "a world in one country", with a huge variety of geographic terrain and some of the most beautiful yet challenging landscapes we've ever seen in all our travels. It truly is an adventurer's playground and exploring it via its multitude of mountain passes is an adrenaline-filled option for experienced 4x4 enthusiasts! 'Riding High On Sky' has also been a "last hurrah" for our gutsy Disco 5 "Sheba": having completed over 100,000-kilometres of tough expedition and humanitarian work in far-flung regions these past 3 years, she's proved to be one of our best expedition Land Rovers ever and we're sad to say goodbye. But it is time to make way for new adventures - we're excitedly looking

forward to testing the New Defender over some of the roughest & toughest terrain Africa has to offer in the months ahead ■



Center photo:
125 mountain
passes
completed,
Bruce and
Shova Mike
celebrate