

SURVIVING SOMALIA

The Kingsley Holgate humanitarian expedition team carries out a journey of over 12,000 kilometres to war-torn Somalia, in the all-new Discovery

Story: Patrick Cruywagen Pictures: Ross Holgate, Bruce Leslie





South African-based Land Rover Ambassadors Kingsley and Ross Holgate and their adventurous team have just completed the Extreme East geographic and humanitarian expedition – something of a world-first – in a specially kitted-out all-new Land Rover Discovery. Their mission was to reach the most-extreme east point on the African continent, a headland exotically called Ras Xaafun, and having travelled with this crazy bunch of adventurers so often before, it was good to hear that they survived their odyssey. I was equally delighted to receive these scribbles from their expedition diary, with the news that the new Discoverys did not miss a beat, in what is arguably, the greatest global test for these vehicles yet. Our Editor Patrick Cruywagen caught up with Kingsley via satellite phone.

“We couldn’t reveal the Extreme East expedition’s final destination for very serious security reasons, we had to keep it absolutely secret. We had been warned – just a single mention on social media could make us a possible target for kidnap and ransom, or an attack by Al Shabaab. Such was the threat that we even had to fabricate a story that our endpoint was the ancient walled city of Harar in Ethiopia. We are safe now however, and can give it to you straight – exactly as it happened.

“We were sad to say goodbye to our old Disco 4s that had performed so superbly on several previous expeditions, and viewed the all-new Discoverys with a bit of trepidation – they seemed a bit too state-of-the-art for the purpose of our rough and tough adventure. Knowing they would have to tackle challenging mountain and desert terrain, we fitted them with 18-inch rims and Cooper Tyres, rear-mounted winches, Front Runner roof racks and accessories that included sand mats, LED spotlights and extra jerry cans. The expedition’s mother ship, as always, was our old Defender 130, kitted out by 4x4 Megaworld, Front Runner and Alucab. She carried all the expedition supplies and humanitarian items.

“Our concerns about the capabilities of the latest Discos proved ill founded. From the start, we really put them to the test – wade them across rivers in Zimbabwe’s Gonarezhou National Park, where we set up base camp for the night under old leadwood trees below the beautiful Chiljoja Cliffs

The legendary Kingsley Holgate, a South African explorer, humanitarian and author

on the banks of the Runde River. Elephants were everywhere, massive baobabs scarred by their tusks and the dry, sandy landscape well-trodden by their enormous feet.

“In the lower Zambezi, we put them through their paces, up seldom-used, seemingly endless rocky track, all the way to the top of the escarpment to join Zambia’s Great East Road. This then lead us to Lake Malawi in Africa’s Rift Valley and later, through dust and corrugations to the banks of Tanzania’s Great Ruaha River. It is the end of the long, dry season – and there are lions in the camp, hyena cracking bones in the dry riverbed and fat crocs gorging on a dead hippo.

“In Samburuland in northern Kenya, we carried out humanitarian work with the local communities close to the sacred mountain of Olelokwe, an area suffering from one of the worst droughts ever. With our Samburu friends, we slaughtered a sacrificial goat, which thankfully coincides with the coming of the rains. And did it rain! Flash floods, bridges washed away, mud and more mud – days of winching, digging and pushing. This must be a first for these new Discos and they took it in their stride.

“By the lights of the Landies, just outside the ancient walls of Harar in Ethiopia, we met Abbas the Hyena Man, and fed camel meat dangling from short sticks held in our mouths to a cackle of nocturnal, strong-jawed creatures – not something you would necessarily do again. To get here, we travelled via the Bali Mountains – a magnificent high-altitude wilderness area known for its endangered Simian wolves – and then took a dusty, rocky road not even marked on our maps through spectacular Grand Canyon-like mountainous terrain. It was another great test for the new Discos.

“But now the real reason for our journey: our key objective from the start was to reach the headland called Ras Xaafun in Puntland, northern Somalia, which as the crow flies, lies 115 kilometres south of the tip of the Horn of Africa. Ras Xaafun is the extreme east point on the continent.

“It was bloody bad timing. Around Harar and down to Ogaden on the Horn of Africa, tensions had erupted between the Oromo and the Somalis – a so-called khat war – the name given to the hallucinogenic, narcotic weed that is traded and chewed by millions across this region. Presidential elections are happening in the self-proclaimed but internationally



Mosquito nets are distributed to areas where malaria is rife



EXTREME EAST

All Kingsley Holgate expeditions and adventures have a strong Land Rover-supported humanitarian element and this one was no exception. Both en route and in Somalia, the team distributed lifesaving mosquito nets to mothers and children in areas where malaria is rife; provided reading glasses to poor-sighted elderly villagers; and in drought-ravaged communities, handed over LifeStraw units that each provide 30,000 litres of filtered drinking water to needy families.



LifeStraw units provide over 30,000 litres of drinking water

[Extreme East Expedition]

unrecognised state of Somaliland too, there is ongoing conflict in Yemen and the Gulf of Aden, and a massive bomb blast has recently occurred in Mogadishu – the worst ever in fact – killing 400 people. Then, to add to the tension, as we were preparing to cross the border from Somaliland through a dangerous no-man’s-land stretch of disputed territory, news broke of a US military drone strike on an IS base not far from our end-goal. Shortly after, Al Shabaab executed four supposed spies.

“It is 4.00 am and we are into Puntland. Protected by 25 soldiers armed with AKs and plenty of ammo with light machine guns mounted on their trucks, we raced non-stop (except for goat meat and diesel breaks) across challenging desert and mountainous terrain. The dust was so thick you could not see the other vehicles or threat of landmines. It was high speed, nerve-wracking, adrenaline-filled driving, swerving around thorn trees and gullies that would have made ideal ambush points. Jeez, these new Discos go like the clappers, and thank goodness, our lives depended on them!

“As the sunset, our convoy slowed to negotiate a narrow, twisting, rocky mountain pass into the lowlands that stretch towards the coast. Hours later, we bounced across a 20 kilometre spit of land towards the fishing village of Xaafun, as a huge full moon rose. Exhausted, we spread out our bedrolls in a grubby compound, while our armed escort fanned out around the dust-covered, sandblasted Landies, and soldiers took guard inside the compound walls.

“Early the following morning – hearts pounding and eyes constantly scanning for threats, we tackled the final 30 kilometre stretch to the rocky headland of Ras Xaafun, boulder-hopping the new Discos and the 130 through a moonscape of limestone and coral hills and gullies littered with black volcanic debris.

“Mike Nixon, a Land Rover Cape Epic mountain bike champion who having cycled over 2000 kilometres of the journey, completed the last few kilometres tucked in behind the lead-armed vehicle.

“And there it was! Set on towering, 200 metre-high cliffs above the Indian Ocean, we didn’t expect Africa’s extreme east point to be so dramatically wild, desolate and beautiful. After 12,000 kilometres, six adventure-filled weeks and almost constant danger, imagine the adrenaline as we attached a commemorative plaque written in Somali and English to the crumbling remains of the old Italian-built lighthouse.

“Quite solemnly, we emptied the Zulu calabash of water that we had carried all the way from South Africa’s most easterly point near Kosi Bay onto a small cairn of stones that we hurriedly erected. It is now marked the most-extreme easterly point of Africa. Local dignitaries and members of our tough security detail scribbled messages of goodwill and peace in Somali in the expedition’s scroll. They too cannot believe it, this place is so raw and untouched, even they have never been here before.

“It was largely thanks to this expedition Scroll of Peace and Goodwill, with its messages of support from across Africa and previous expedition images – including the team with Nelson Mandela and other VIPs – that secured our release while in the Putland capital of Garowe.

“A contingent of high-ranking security officials accused us



Africa's extreme east point is dramatically wild



Kingsley is a Land Rover ambassador and a fan of the older models

The team, including mountain bike champ Mike Nixon, who cycled some of the route, celebrate the end of their journey

of either being spies or illegally prospecting for minerals, and threatened us with arrest. It was a scary situation. They searched the Landies, even checking that they were not bullet-proofed. The Minister of Security turned out to be a friendly chap and told us that we were very brave to visit Somalia at this time.

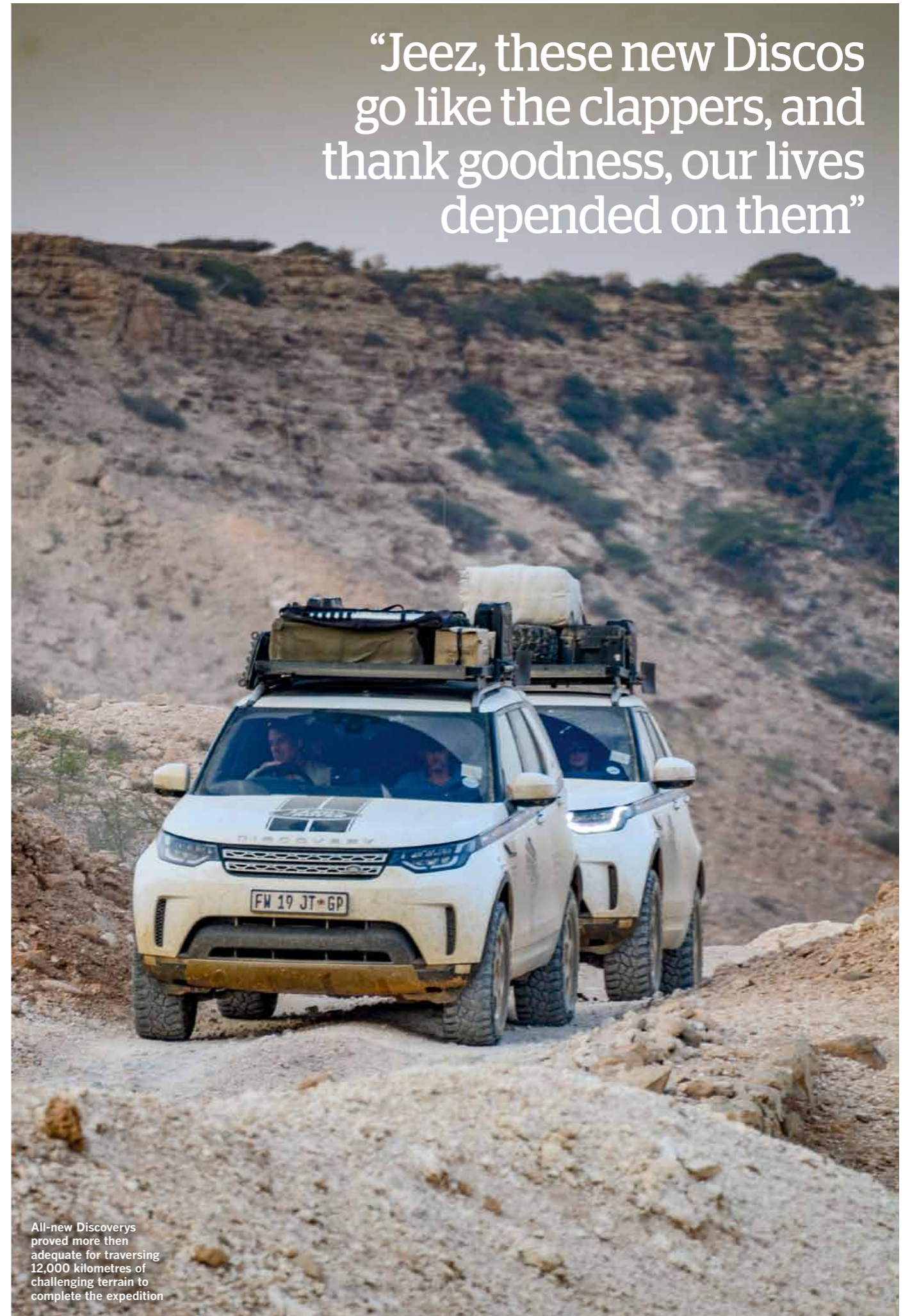
“Somehow, we made it to Africa’s most extreme easterly point. We felt emotionally drained by the danger of the journey. We must have been crazy to attempt it but it has been a lifelong dream come true.

“Getting to the extreme east point of Africa was the missing link: we have now succeeded in reaching the seven extreme geographic points of Africa – north, south, west and now east. Mt Kilimanjaro was the highest; Lake Assal the lowest; and in 2015, discovered the heart of Africa, deep in the rainforests of the Republic of Congo. It is a world-first for any expedition team.

“As always – we’d never have made it if it weren’t for the solidarity of our tight-knit team of bravehearts (Ross, King, Bruce, Sheelagh and Mike), our incredibly capable all-new Land Rover Discoverys and the wonderful people along the way who also risked their lives in this crazy humanitarian and geographical quest.”



“Jeez, these new Discos go like the clappers, and thank goodness, our lives depended on them”



All-new Discoverys proved more than adequate for traversing 12,000 kilometres of challenging terrain to complete the expedition