

A silver Land Rover SUV is parked on a rocky, brownish-yellow hillside. The vehicle is equipped with a roof rack carrying various pieces of gear, including what appears to be a camera or light. The background is a vast, snow-covered mountain range under a clear blue sky. The snow is bright white, and the sky is a deep, clear blue. The overall scene is one of a high-altitude, mountainous environment.

KINGSLEY, OUT OF AFRICA

Having wrapped up Africa, King and crew set their sights on unfamiliar climes, tackling Asia in the first of their Africa And Beyond expeditions

Story **Stephen Smith**
Photography **Bruce Leslie**



I'm sitting in The Pudding Shop in Istanbul, with delicious roast chicken in front of me, and Kingsley Holgate beside me. It's my fourth day in Istanbul, and we should have been hundreds of kilometres away by now, exploring the ancient history and magnificent landscapes of Turkey. Instead, we've been waiting, and waiting, for Turkish officials to release the two Land Rover Discoverys and the one Defender 130 from customs. And, because of other delays in shipping, Kingsley has already spent over three weeks in Turkey.

I've joined the Holgate Foundation crew on their Cape Town to Kathmandu expedition, the first of what they call their 'Africa and Beyond' journeys. Obviously, we all want to know why. Why has Kingsley decided to journey out of Africa, and why has he decided that Cape Town to Kathmandu is the answer?

"Having been to every country in Africa, traced the outside edge of Africa, travelled its major waterways, and visited its Seven Iconic points, we felt that we had wrapped up Africa – as much as

this beautiful continent can be wrapped up. So we started looking beyond its borders, and came up with the idea of expeditions that were Africa and beyond," Kingsley explains.

That was the beginning. But it was Mike Nixon, a key member of the expedition crew in the last few years, who suggested Kathmandu while they were sitting around a campfire one night, looking at an atlas. Once the destination had been decided on, things happened at speed: the route was planned and the dates set. Now, a few months later, I find myself sitting with Kingsley in Istanbul, the mysterious metropolis that was once Constantinople, and once Byzantium; the city that was the capital of three empires.

"We started on Mandela Day, 18 July 2018, in Cape Town, with the scroll of peace and goodwill signed at the Nobel Square at the Waterfront. From there, it was a three-month haul though the familiar landscapes of Africa – first up the east coast of South Africa, then into Mozambique and Tanzania. Along the way, we carried out our humanitarian work: the Right to Site campaign,

Opposite page In the shadow of the 5 193m Mt Shkhara, the highest mountain in Georgia en route to Kathmandu in Nepal, Kingsley Holgate's latest 'Africa and Beyond' Land Rover expedition tackles some of the world's highest mountain ranges.

Above With winter snows setting in, it's a race to cross the north Caucasus mountains of Georgia. Close to the border with Russia, the high-altitude, 4x4-only Zigara Pass turns to ice, snow, slush and mud; it becomes a real challenge as the pass abounds in twists and turns, the tyres sometimes precariously close to the edge in narrow sections. Two weeks later, heavy snows and avalanches closed the Zigara Pass until spring.



in which we do eye tests and distribute reading glasses to those who need them, but can't afford them, or don't have access to them. We carried on with our malaria work, distributing anti-malarial mosquito-nets and also continuing our spraying campaign. Called Tchou-Tchou Malaria in Mozambique, the spraying campaign has been incredibly successful, with over 1000 sprayers in operation. We don't do the actual spraying work, but focus on the education behind the program, along with the net distribution. Then there's the LifeStraw campaign and the Rhino Art education campaign, both of which we will continue in Asia on the way to Kathmandu.

We haven't driven all the way to Istanbul, though – we drove from Cape Town to Dar es Salaam, and the vehicles were shipped from there to Istanbul. That brings us back to Istanbul, this mysterious metropolis that was once Constantinople and before that Byzantium: the city that was the capital of three empires.

I know that most of you want to find out what Kingsley and crew are doing in Asia. (Actually, strictly speaking, we're still in Europe while I'm chatting with King – Asia only starts across the Bosphorus, in the other part of Istanbul). Doing humanitarian work in Africa is easy to understand – we have mosquitoes and malaria,

we have dirty water and water-borne diseases, we have people too poor to afford the reading glasses which would change their lives, and we have rhinos being poached every single day. Why Asia?

"We've been asked that question a lot. What good are we doing in Asia? Actually, in some parts of Asia, the people face the same problems that we see in Africa. In the desert areas, people are forced to drink whatever water they have at hand, even if it's not clean, so the life straws can play a vital role there. Rite to Sight is as important as ever in Asia, especially in the remote areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan that we'll be visiting.

"Then there's a lovely synergy between Africa and Asia when it comes to rhinos and rhino education. The Chitwan National Park, on the border of Nepal and India, hasn't lost a rhino to poaching in over three years, which is a success story that we can learn from. We'll be taking messages from South Africa and Mozambique to children there, and bringing some back, too."

Our chat is interrupted by a message from Ross – he's now confident that the vehicles will be out by the end of the day, so we might be able to leave in the morning. Kingsley is amazingly calm about the waiting (Ross less so, because he's the one responsible for keeping to the budget!) and

At 2 345m above sea level, the high-altitude villages of Ushguli with their 13th century stone-built watch towers are Europe's highest permanently inhabited settlements and are out of a medieval fairy tale – a UNESCO World Heritage site milestone for the Kingsley Holgate team.

philosophically says, “You can’t travel in Africa without patience. I don’t think you can spend a lifetime travelling in Africa without the ability to understand and practise patience. To go with the flow and the rhythm that is Africa. And, if you have that trait of arrogance and are demanding, you’ll just be kept waiting. I find that a smile and a pat on the back, just friendliness, is the way to go. We so seldom have to offer a bribe, other than when we are genuinely guilty of something, in which case it’s more of a fine. But, if you chat to people, embrace them, smile – that is key to success. But, man! it can be demanding, sitting for days while you’re trying to ship a Landy from here to there, shuffling paperwork from this desk to that one, and waiting for documents.

“I remember Bruce being caught in Brazzaville at the height of civil war, bullets flying everywhere while he tried to organise to have the vehicles shipped home. I remember an official putting his fingers together and saying, ‘Don’t worry, sir. Just five minutes.’ That ‘five minutes’

turned into five days; and eventually into five weeks. In some countries, you need a permit just to buy diesel. It could drive you insane.

“But things are getting better! Having said that, here we sit in Istanbul, having been waiting for weeks for our cars to be shipped from Dar es Salaam. It can wear you down, but smile and laugh a lot. People generally want to help you.”

It’s the language-crossing, barrier-breaking bond of Land Rovers that finally comes to the Holgates’ aid, in the form of the Land Rover Adventure Club of Turkey. Kingsley had met them earlier in his visit, and when the customs officials didn’t seem to be making any move to release the expedition vehicles, he got in touch with club captain Murat Irfan Ağcabay, who dropped whatever he was doing to come to Kingsley’s aid.

Murat and two of his Landy friends spent two days at customs, translating, arguing, and doing everything they could to get the cars cleared. At the end of the first day, it seemed that they had been successful. The shipping containers were

Bruce Leslie in the expedition’s faithful Defender 130 loaded with firewood for a night of below-zero camping stops to chat to a local farmer. Lifestyles and farming practices have changed little for centuries in the remote mountainous regions of Georgia.



THE EXPEDITION DISCOVERYS

While I was with the expedition, I chatted to Ross about their Land Rover Discoverys, because there is the perception that Land Rover has softened them up too much in their bid for luxury SUV sales, and that they're no longer suitable as expedition vehicles. But Ross has been hugely impressed with their capabilities, as well as their comfort levels, which make those months on the road that much less tiring. The Holgates told us what they had done to get their vehicles expedition-ready:

DISCOVERYS

1. We fitted the 2018 Discoverys with a Frontrunner roofrack with mud ladders, a spade, a spare wheel bracket, a front LED light bar, and two Jerry cans for spare diesel.
2. At the rear of the vehicle, we mounted a wireless Warn winch system and a removable tow bar.
3. Inside the vehicle, we have a luggage cage behind the rear seats, and a 'floating' dual-battery system with a mounted ARB air compressor.
4. The vehicle is fitted with Melvill & Moon seat covers; and, for communication, each vehicle has a VHF mobile radio system.
5. To fit 18-inch rims, we modified the brake callipers; and we are running Cooper 275/65 R18 ST Maxx tyres.
6. For suspension, we increased the ride height of the vehicle slightly, to prevent overuse of the vehicle's air compressor in off-road conditions.

THE DEFENDER 130

The vehicle is fitted with an ARB bull bar with spotlights and a winch, as well as protective plates for the front and underside.

1. The rear of the 130 is fitted with an Alu-Cab canopy system, a Frontrunner pull-out fridge and box tray, and an internal Frontrunner roofrack which serves as a loading deck for camping equipment and humanitarian items. The canopy has internal LED lights, and we have fitted a dual-battery system in the rear.
2. Above the canopy and cab, we have two Frontrunner roof-racks, fitted with a high-lift jack, a spade, a spare wheel and bracket, four Jerry cans, and a 50-litre water tank. A second spare wheel is mounted on a swing-arm system at the rear of the vehicle.
3. The vehicle is fitted with standard 16-inch Land Rover steel rims, running with Cooper ST Maxx 265/75 R16 tyres.
4. The suspension on the Defender has been replaced with Old Man Emu coils and springs



Opposite page top On the move in Armenia, or could it be Iran? An ancient transport truck ingeniously used to rope in far too many new motorbikes to mention. The packer used carpets to stop the chafing; no doubt as common in local parlance as the rest of the world's bubble wrap.

Opposite page bottom Taking roads less travelled through Armenia to reach the border with Iran. The expedition closely followed many of the ancient Silk Routes that once linked Europe to Asia on their journey from Istanbul in Turkey to Kathmandu in Nepal.

Below Testing the Land Rovers in the challenging Dasht-e Lut desert in Iran, close to the border with Pakistan and Afghanistan.

cracked open, and King's hopes rose. But, after a glance, the officials decided that while the cars had been cleared, none of the contents had been. So the steel doors of the containers swung closed again, and the dance began anew; it was another full day before we could get on the road. Who knows how long it would have taken without the help of the Land Rover brotherhood?

Unfortunately, the shipping delays had put the expedition weeks behind schedule, and the only option was to get across Turkey and into Georgia as quickly possible. Two days of flat-out driving followed, through the coastal mountains and then along the coast of the Black Sea, with a few stops for cultural highlights. Can you believe that it was here, in Turkey, that Jason and his Argonauts landed in their quest for the Golden Fleece? It's true, and there's even a Greek Orthodox Church on the spot – now unused, in this overwhelmingly Muslim country.

Then it was time for me to leave the crew and the expedition, as I was heading back to South Africa, and they were carrying on to

Georgia, Armenia, Iran, Pakistan, India – and eventually Nepal.

At the time of writing, Kingsley and crew had just arrived in Nepal, with some incredible stories of their journey thus far. There were descriptions of visiting the highest permanently-inhabited village in Europe, and of crossing snow-covered mountain passes in Georgia. They also visited the Karakoram Highway, the highest paved pass in the world, which joins Pakistan to China. It is also where the Himalayas, the Hindu Kush and the Karakoram mountains meet, and there are countless 4x4 passes that make up part of the ancient Silk Road. Then, there was the Khyber Pass, also in Pakistan, on the border with India; and crossing the deserts of Iran – where diesel is US\$0,05c per litre!

Receiving messages from Kingsley while they are en-route is like being given a bucket list of places to go and things to do: proving that, while Kingsley and his crew may be venturing out of Africa, the more things change, the more the adventure stays the same. ◉

