ESCAPE
Your new essential riding guide

The hard road to Dakar

Racers can't ride the famous rally route any more – but you can, as Chris Newbigging discovered

The Sahara made simple: 'Keep the revs up, keep your weight back, and don't ride in wheel tracks...'

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IT wasn't the first question I expected to be asked on a Monday morning: "Do you want to go to the Gambia and ride bikes?" But that's what MCN events editor Dave asked me, and unbelievably, I almost said no. Going to Africa requires various jabs – I have a massive fear of needles that usually results in passing out, vomiting or both. I know I'm a big jessie, but I can't help it.

Eventually I came to my senses, and dealt with the various immunisations like a man. A few weeks later I was standing outside Banjul Airport, dazed and tired from the flight and trying to communicate to a gaggle of assembled traders that I didn't want a bag of peanuts.

If I'd been chucked into this new culture alone, I'd probably have gone back into the airport and got on the next plane – it's not like visiting Europe, where you can muddle through with zero command of the language. Fortunately I was in the experienced hands of Kudu Expeditions, run by former Army bomb disposal expert and seasoned African adventurer Lee Mears.

Kudu's Paris-Dakar trips make going on a once-in-a-lifetime trip easy – no bike-buying, no months of planning, and (most comfortingly) no getting stuck in the desert without backup.

This was their Dakar-Paris journey – basically the same trip, but in reverse, with a different group of riders taking over from the people who rode down. Confusingly, the trip actually begins in the Gambia, a few miles outside Banjul, and day one is a training day. I was only joining the party as far as Dakar, but training was still essential. There is a morning lesson in basic on-the-go bike care (repairing punctures, checking fluid levels), then a few hours on the road to get used to the GPS system and familiarise yourself with the bikes.

> **I tackled the track feet-down in first**

For me, this proved a real eye-opener – the roads around the base at Sukuta Camping are well-surfaced main routes, but pass through small villages, farmland and the local jungle, so within a couple of hours I had dodged two cows, a dog and innumerable children and adults wandering in the road. Chuck in the knackered cars, vans, taxis and overloaded trucks – all of them moving on, off and all over the road unpredictably – and you've got an environment that requires at least the same level of concentration as London rush hour, despite only having a fraction of the traffic. Children in London don't carry huge machetes, either – not all of them, anyway.

A brief stop in Banjul town centre is the first time the group really gets exposed to the locals – even before my helmet is off, a teenage boy is offering us bags of sweets, priced somewhat optimistically at 50 euros. His pal is also touting his wares – a wad of counterfeit DVDs.

Despite my attempts to avoid further negotiation by mumbling 'I haven't got money with me', the gathering group of locals are friendly – something that doesn't change right throughout the Gambia.

The afternoon is the first time we are introduced to off-roading – a gentle trial through the Gambian jungle with hard, rubbly sections, dusty stretches and a bit of

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AND THERE'S MORE

Book yourself into next year's Dakar

Kudu Expeditions still has places on its next Paris Dakar trip beginning May 3, and the Autumn trip which sets off on September 20. For more details, call 01480-819364 or www.kuduexpeditions.com

Still time to book for MCN LIVE!

There are only two days to go before the start of the MCN Live! event at Butlins in Skegness, but that doesn't mean it's too late to book. For a full rundown of bands and attractions and to book go to www.motorcyclenews.com/butlins

Tour de force: an epic finish

Riding in the Gambian bush: anybody seen a monkey?

Tyre trouble: roadside puncture assistance, Senegal style

In a live minefield – honest!

Before you travel

Paris-Dakar: what you get and what you'll need

- The bikes are provided by Kudu – nearly new F650GSs on this trip, but now that the model is being discontinued, future trips are likely to use new Yamaha Tenerés.
- A 4x4 support vehicle carries all your kit – plus a Kudu staffer to help you out of trouble. The expedition is led by a guide rider.
- Many participants take a GPS system, which allows you to stop for a break and continue on the right track – even navigate your way to the next destination. The system also plots your position for the support vehicle, in case you get stuck.
- You'll need a passport, the right immunisations, plus enough malaria tablets to last the trip.
- Kudu's prices vary depending on whether you use your own bike.

If you thought US immigration was slow...

sand. Our Chilean guide is called Matt, and his off-road tips are easy to follow – all six riders get through without incident. To my slight disappointment, the jungle isn't teeming with exotic wildlife: Swedish rider Urban did see a group of monkeys, but I missed them by a few seconds, damn it!

The final ride of the day was an optional 16km trek on a sand trail through tiny villages right out in the bush – unless you're on a bike or on foot, you'd struggle to reach them. Most of the group opted to get some rest and prepare for our first day's travelling – they missed out.

The sand trail was the first time the F650GS Dakar tackled any tricky off-road work in my hands, and we got through fine. At one point, I stopped in a village to allow American rider Andy to catch up following a small fall. I was instantly mobbed by villagers keen to speak to the pasty-faced European sweating into his off-road lid. Everyone who came up just asked 'How are you?' or 'Where are you from?', with the odd 'Do you like it in The Gambia?'

After getting a bit lost, our group approached another village – but this time the track passing through was much narrower, and the soft sand several inches deep.

Usually you'd stand on the pegs and keep the throttle on, but the dozens of villagers lining our route made riding through at 30mph too dangerous. Instead, I tackled the track feet-down in first – and the resulting side-to-side slewing scared the locals back into their homes. One poor girl was forced to scream and run as 200kg of bike slid sideways towards her, with the engine screaming its head off. We managed to get through without running anyone over, though, and rode back to base for a good night's sleep.

Day two involved an early start – by half seven we were away onto the Trans Gambian Highway, heading towards the Farafenni border into Senegal. The highway starts as tarmac in decent condition, but soon turns into a dirt track covered in red sand and gravel. But it's straight, wide and largely deserted, so our speed stayed at around 50mph – in fact this slightly foolish off-road novice raced ahead to take photographs at speeds that would get you three points on a British motorway.

Police and military checkpoints are placed sporadically along the route – we got stopped a few times, mostly just for a chat with the bored-looking guards. One checked our passports, but sent us on our way after asking which direction to the UK. "North", I helpfully informed him.

The road gradually deteriorates the further you go – repair work is in very slow progress, but where tarmac is still present it's cracked, potholed and covered in dust. A huge truck overloaded with crops became an obstacle for several miles as it weaved about chucking up thick red dust, and for a while I was actually riding blind – I couldn't accelerate for fear of hitting the truck, and I didn't dare slow down or stop because I knew other riders were close behind. A two-bike crash isn't the best way to start an adventure like this.

Eventually we got through, and made it to the ferry. We were an hour early, and the approach road to the dock was lined with shacks selling what appeared to be a combination of toothbrushes, knock-off perfume and 50-Cent boxer shorts.

The ferry crossing was equally interesting – children wandered about on board, seemingly for no other purpose than to ask questions and watch what's going on.

> **One poor girl screamed and ran as 200kg of bike slid sideways towards her**

Just beyond the ferry is the border crossing – one stop to leave the Gambia, and another stop up the road to enter Senegal. According to Lee, the 90 minutes it took to get the necessary stamps for our group is quick for Africa. It may be in the same time zone as the UK, but everything here is on 'Africa Time' – it gets done when it gets done.

The border was surrounded by street traders, begging children and locals operating a currency exchange – it took fully half an hour of bartering to get the group a decent rate to convert our Gambian dalasi into Senegalese CFAs.

Unfortunately, that stop came at noon – the temperature was over 35°c, and without the cooling breeze on the move, a further stop for fuel felt almost unbearable. The road through Senegal was immediately worse than the morning route – the tarmac was littered with potholes, some several feet wide, some smaller but up to six inches deep. With temperatures now touching 40°c, standing on the pegs dodging the holes became really tough – the BMW's big wheels dealt okay with some of the holes, so I concentrated on avoiding the really dangerous ones and clattered over the rest. I don't think I'll be complaining about the state of UK roads for some time to come.

The sweltering heat means you stay cooler if you cover up – the breeze passing over you is higher than your body temperature, so zipping up your jacket keeps the heating effect away from your skin, making life much more comfortable. Even so, I got fatigued – I botched a few attempts at passing cars, and nearly got knocked off twice.

The road eventually turned to tarmac, leading us into Kaolack. For several miles now, things were much smoother – but also busier, the roads occupied mostly by the taxis that make up a large chunk of Senegalese traffic. These cabs are either battered 30-year-old French cars that would have long since been scrapped in the UK, or equally knackered Mercedes vans, crammed so full that one or two passengers stand on the rear step and cling to the doors.

On UK roads they wouldn't get five miles before being pulled over for dangerous driving, but by now I was just happy to be sharing their smooth tarmac.

We covered the last few kilometres at decent speed, hitting the outskirts of Dakar just as dusk fell. Even here, miles from the city centre, traffic was almost at a standstill, and the dilapidated vehicles jostling for space chucked out filthy fumes. Pedestrians wandered through the traffic, and yet more street traders leaped at the chance to offer their gear to the stationary cars.

Eventually we got to the hotel, and there was a real sense of accomplishment – it had been a hard day, but all the riders had survived, and the afternoon heat was a distant memory – though my wrists had turned bright red with sunburn where my motocross gloves didn't quite reach my jacket.

ONLINE

WATCH THE VIDEO

Check out Kudu's Dakar trip at motorcyclenews.com/kududakar

WHAT TO TAKE

You'll need kit to suit the trip: for a full list, visit kuduexpeditions.com.

HELMET

An adventure sport lid is the best bet here, with an off-road style shell but fitted with a visor, with the option to replace it with goggles. Arai Tour-X and Shoei's Hornet DS (below) are good options.

RIDING GEAR

Adventure suits are best – choose a waterproof one with a removable lining and closable vents. Shoulder, elbow, knee and hip armour should be fitted; a back protector is a must. One option is Hein Gericke's Tuareg range.

BOOTS

Off-road boots are a must – and make sure you're happy with the fit – they can be torture otherwise. Hein Gericke's TRG (pictured) and Alpinestars are among the options.

GLOVES

Take two pairs – a light, ventilated road set, and a waterproof set. And don't go for the cheap option – if they fall to pieces in Mauritania you won't be able to buy new ones.

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