



ROMANIA BY RANGE ROVER

JOHN PEARSON SPENDS A DAY
AMONG A PACK OF HUMVEES ON
A GENERAL TIRE ADVENTURE IN
ROMANIA'S BANAT MOUNTAINS



Range Rover Classic looks so much more stylish than the Humvees



The locals seem friendly everywhere

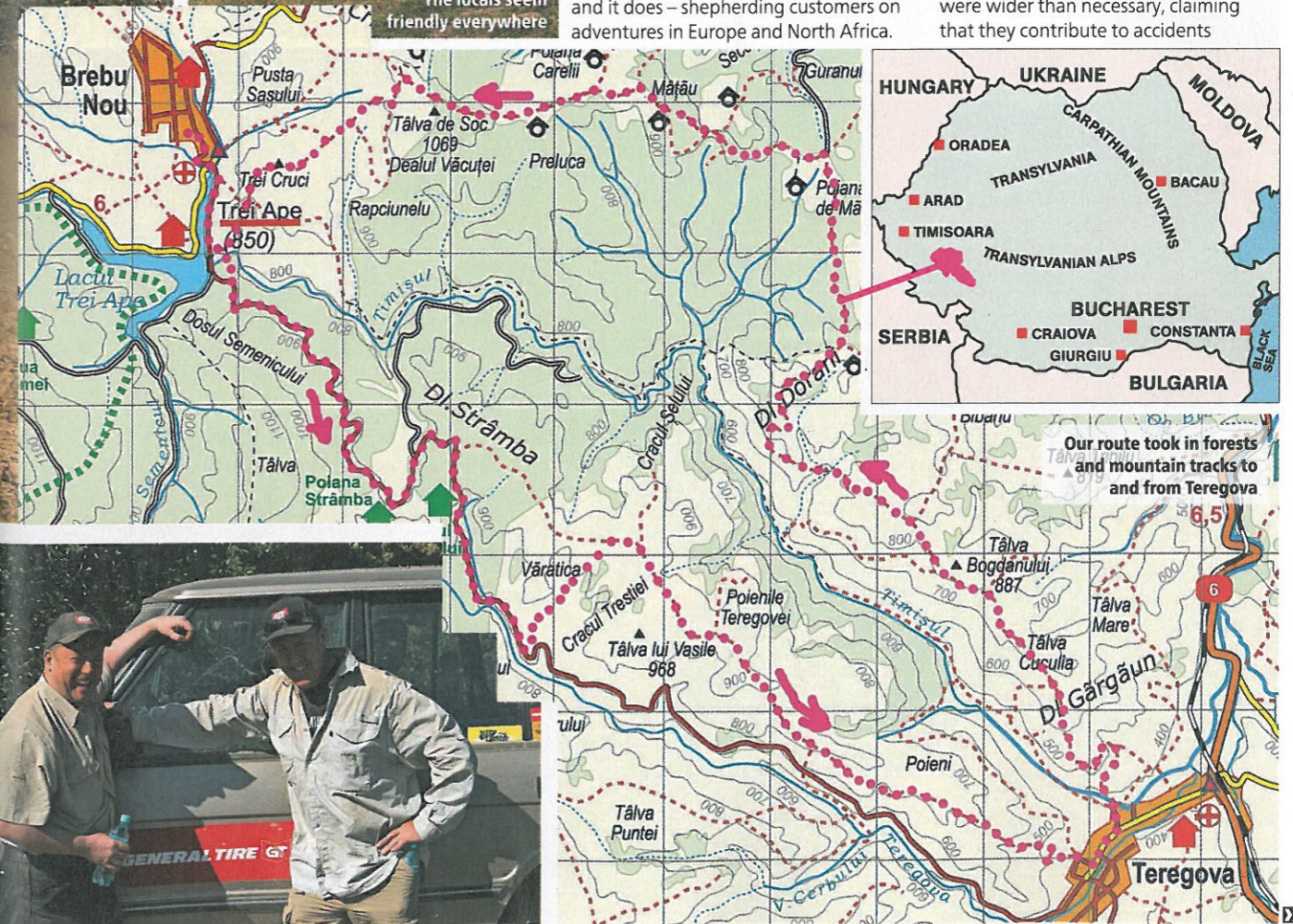
and underbody protection (steering guard and diff guards). Walter has also modified the bonnet for better engine cooling by using a panel from a discarded domestic fridge.

Walter is a real fan of Range Rovers, having owned several in the past. He has had this one for just over a year.

It looks like it works hard for a living, and it does – shepherding customers on adventures in Europe and North Africa.

I haven't driven a Classic off-tarmac for a while, but I felt immediately at home as I settled behind the wheel. A quick look around reminded me of how light and airy the Range Rover's cabin is, with slim windscreen pillars and small mirrors allowing good visibility.

The late Spen King, who masterminded the Range Rover, decried pillars that were wider than necessary, claiming that they contribute to accidents



Our route took in forests and mountain tracks to and from Teregovă

Romania is a land of contrasts. Not too far away from the chic restaurants, designer shops and nightlife of big cities like Timisoara and Bucharest, there are farmers living in the mountains using horse and carts as transport and with guard dogs with nail-studded collars protecting their sheep from wolf attacks.

It's a country that doesn't have any motorways, and the tarmac roads reach only so far from the towns before giving over to gravel or unsurfaced tracks, especially in the mountains.

And Romania is big on mountains. The Carpathians sweep south-easterly

down towards the capital Bucharest from the Ukraine, before linking to make the shape of a bent arm with the Transylvanian Alps that run east to west across the middle of the country.

I recently spent an enjoyable day driving in the Banat mountains, in the county of the same name on the south-western border with Serbia, courtesy of Continental Tyres. I was invited along with a group of UK 4x4 tyre dealers who were in Romania to visit the Continental factory in Timisoara and to evaluate some of their products.

I was a guest of Alan Baldwin and Dave Dineen of Southam Tyres, the UK

importer of General tyres, one of the Continental brands that's best known for producing 4x4 tyres. The dealers were driving ex-US military Humvees fitted with General Grabber AT2s (no Humvee sizes yet in the new AT pattern), but Alan and Dave had arranged suitable transport for me. It was a Range Rover, the 1994 200Tdi Classic belonging to Walter Kühn and Ute Albersdorfer of 4x4 Adventures, the German company that was running the trip.

It was nicely kitted-out for the job too, also fitted with Grabber AT2s along with a winch, Britpart uprated springs and dampers, side-exiting exhaust

Dave Dineen (left) and Alan Baldwin of Southam Tyres enjoyed their Romanian adventure, despite the choking dust. Southam Tyres import General tyres into the UK and distribute through the 4Site 4x4 network: 4site4x4.co.uk, 0870 112 9401





Above: local farming ladies working hard at raking up the hay into cone-shaped stacks ready to feed their livestock during the cold winter months. Right: it's a completely different way of life in the mountains from the bars and restaurants of downtown Timisoara. We enjoyed both experiences.



through poor visibility. As I drove away from our accommodation at Sergio Morariu's EnduRoMania base in Brebu Nou towards the first track of the day, I couldn't help thinking of how Spen would have hated the new Range Rover Evoque's fat pillars and huge mirrors, both of which are dictated by legislation as well as modern design.

The route we were due to drive was roughly triangular, heading south-east over the hills towards Teregovă before sweeping back over a north-westerly route through thickly forested mountains.

The Humvee convoy must have looked quite menacing cruising in a dust cloud

past the holidaymakers alongside the giant Lake Trei Ape (translated, it means three waters, from the three streams that flow into it). This is a popular destination with the Romanians, who wild-camp among the pine trees around the banks.

Humvees (High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle, aka HMMWV) came into use with the US military in 1984 as a go-anywhere cargo- or troop-carrying 4WD vehicle. They're mighty beasts, which have seen service in various conflicts around the world. Power is by a 6.5-litre V8 diesel engine, with auto transmission and a transfer box.

About 17 body shapes were produced by the manufacturer AM General, and there's a fair mix in the convoy here today. They've got a widescreen look to them, measuring more than seven feet from flank to flank – and there's a very good reason for this. It's so that the wheels can fit into tank tracks when going into battle.

From the lake, we drive up a forest highway that's used regularly by logging trucks and forestry machinery. It's rutted and could get tricky in wet weather, but the main hazard today is the billowing dust caused by lack of rain recently. We have to keep the windows closed.

Next we turn sharply left, almost back on ourselves off the logging track and on to one that climbs steeply over a series of rocks. The Range Rover trundles up in low-range first gear, the Grabber AT2s

providing reassuring grip, and we head out of the forest into bright sunshine.

Now we get a look at what life is like for the local farmers. A man trundles past on his horse-drawn cart, smiling and waving at our convoy. Further along, two weather-beaten women are raking up hay, which is then put into conical-shaped stacks to be used as vital animal feed during the winter.

We started the day at 905 metres altitude and the highest point we reach during the morning is 1100 metres (3608ft). The highest peak in the area is the 2200-metre Munti Godeanu, but that's further east and sited in a National Park, which is no-go for vehicles.

The halfway point of our journey is the small town of Teregovă. We zig-zag down some dusty, hairpin-strewn tracks before halting the convoy for an ice-cream. The sight of the dusty war machines trundling down the main street doesn't seem to worry the locals.

Then we head north out of Teregovă, crossing the Timisul river as we climb back up again through more delightful scenery. Flecks of silica sparkle in the sandy soil, reflecting the bright sunshine.

I'm really enjoying the Range Rover, which is dealing effortlessly with the steep climbs. It may be 17 years old, but it's in good order and Walter has it set up nicely. As always when I spend some time driving a capable vehicle, I wish that I were taking it home with me.



ROMANIA – NEED TO KNOW

- Language: Romanian, some Hungarian. English is spoken in the bigger towns.
- Visa: not necessary for UK passport holders up to 90 days.
- Currency: Romanian new Leu (1 = approx 20p).
- Jobs: None compulsory. Make sure your tetanus is up to date.
- Approx cost of diesel: £1.07.
- Time difference to UK: + 3hr.
- Drive on the right.
- Fancy trying it? Walter Kühn and Ute Albersdorfer's company 4x4 Adventures Offroad Tours, who I drove with, organises trips in Romania among its many destinations (see 4x4-adventures.de). The distance from LRO HQ in Peterborough to Brebu Nou is about 1400 miles, or roughly the same as driving to Marrakech in Morocco.
- Where we stayed: our accommodation was at EnduRoMania in Brebu Nou, a company that runs motor cycle and 4x4 activities, but the hotel accommodation and

restaurant are available for all – and there's camping at the rear. Visit enduromania.net for more information, contact simina@enduromania.net. Phone/fax: 0040-356-102815; mobile: (0040) 722 392884 or (0040) 722 392884. Basic accommodation costs €18 a night (about £15), with extras for breakfast and evening meal. Camping starts from €10 (about £8.75). They can supply permits and maps of the region's tracks, showing legal routes.

■ Food to try? We had the tasty traditional dishes of supă de pui cu galuste de gris (vegetable soup with dumplings) and pui cu smintina si mamaliguta (chicken in cream sauce with polenta) at the above restaurant.

■ Alcohol? The local Timisoreana and Ursus beers certainly quench your thirst after a hard day on dusty tracks. Romania is big wine producer and the local cabernet

sauvignon was good. Romanians also enjoy their tzuika, which is like a plum schnapps.

■ Anything else I should know? You need a vignette – obtainable from booths at the border – to drive on Romanian tarmac roads. These cost: week/€3 (£2.60), month/€7 (£6), year/€28 (£24). It's also necessary to carry your Land Rover's original registration document in the vehicle. If driving from the UK you'll also need a windscreen vignette for Austria – 10 days/€7.90 (£6.80), two months/€23 (£20), year/€76.50 (£66) – and an e-vignette for Hungary – four days/5.64 (£4.90), seven days/€9.40 (£8), month/€15.38 (£13.39), year/€136.70 (£119).

Obtained from fuel stations and other outlets in neighbouring countries, or in advance through the internet (tolltickets.com does them both, but we have no experience of using it). There are big fines for vignette-dodging.

Every so often we pass a tractor and trailer laden with wood, hay or livestock – and everyone is friendly, giving big smiles and returning our waves.

Further on we head on to tracks that pass through dense pine forests. Some are fairly muddy and you know that they will become impassable in really bad weather. A really tight section through trees and stumps tests the Humvees' turning ability, but the Range Rover slips through without fuss.

There are no signs of wildlife with all of these vehicles around but, apart from the previously mentioned wolves (population estimated at 2500), there are around 5000 brown bears, and even 1500 lynxes in the Romanian forests.

Then we head out of the dark forest on to grassland once more and, after a few miles, the track drops steeply back towards Lake Trei Ape.

The driving part of our adventure is over. We've encountered some tough terrain and some of the Humvee drivers aren't experienced off-roaders, but the tyres have stood up well, despite the conditions and weight of the vehicles.

After another night of excellent food and hospitality in Brebu Nou



Range Rover was so much more nimble than the Humvees



The accommodation and restaurant at EnduRoMania



Not a very comfortable ride to market

RANGE ROVER CLASSIC IN ROMANIA



we head back to Timisoara for a look around the city – with its splendid mix of architecture – and make a visit to Continental's massive factory there. It's one of the company's 27 production and research and development locations in 16 countries, and currently turns out 14,000,000 tyres annually. Continental supplies tyres to most major manufacturers, including Land Rover, and the 4x4 market is a big one for them.

It's fascinating watching a tyre proceed from its raw materials through to the finished product.

I was impressed by the intensive process of checking the tyre quality – from visual through to x-rays of the internal cords. If there's any doubt, the tyre is rejected and recycled, being used to fuel cement production instead of coal, or as a base layer in road building.

Timisoara is the place where a significant event took place in December 1989 that led to the downfall and execution of Communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu. The government had attempted to evict a dissident pastor and the locals objected. This escalated throughout the country, which was tired

WHERE CAN I DRIVE IN ROMANIA?

Knowing where you can and can't drive is more complicated than it used to be, even compared to just a couple of years ago when LRO's Neil Watterson visited.

Permits are required for most forest and mountain tracks, including the ones we drove from Brebu Nou to Teregovia. According to expat Briton Paul White, who used to run the Transylvania 4x4 Tours company and these days is a director of the Transylvanian Wildlife Project, to avoid trespass it's best to get local help with routes and permissions or go on an organised trip.

'The laws have changed significantly regarding off-road driving, and it's far more restricted these days. Without the relevant permissions arranged locally, and in advance, it's virtually impossible to know who owns what land and where one can drive. This applies to all areas of forests and mountains away from tarmac.

'Many Romanian citizens have now laid claim to what was once private land, confiscated from them by the Ceausescu communist regime.'

To drive the tracks we went on, you can pay EnduRoMania

an annual fee of €60 (£52), which includes the necessary permission, rules and regs for drivers, and detailed maps showing where you can drive. Another €20 (£17) buys a sticker, recognised as a 'passport' for the forest roads by the police and other authorities. EnduRoMania also runs a number of adventures for bikes and 4x4s. Check out its website for further details.

If you take an organised trip with a company such as 4x4 Adventures Offroad Tours, it will arrange your permits. Contact details for both are in the Need to Know panel on page 93.

of Ceausescu's draconian regime, and the rest, as they say, is history. Romania joined the EU in 2007 – although it hasn't joined the Euro, which bearing in mind the current problems with that currency, is maybe no bad thing.

It's been a short but very sweet visit to Romania, and it has whetted my appetite for further adventures in the country. In fact, I've already agreed to join Walter and Ute on one of their adventures next July. And I can't wait.

THANKS TO: Alan Baldwin and Dave Dineen of Southam Tyres, Dennis Belmund of Continental Tyres, Walter Kühn and Ute Albersdorfer of 4x4 Adventures, and Sergio Morariu of EnduRoMania. **LRO**



Ute and Walter of 4x4 Adventures

