

Bowyer's School of off road

We sent Kelvin Kennedy to be tutored in the art of off-road driving at the Overlander Centre in Devon



Even a ride to lunch in a 'vintage' Land Rover, with door held open by a 'vintage' Dave Bowyer!

THE first test one has to pass at the Overlander Off-road Centre in Devon is finding it. Fortunately, they had sent a detailed map and even a dullard like me got through. But without such help I doubt that all but the most determined searcher would find this idyllic valley in the heart of glorious Devon.

It's ideally suited for off-road driving and its aesthetic appeal makes it a good place for learning. So, with spirits warmed by spring sunshine, I arrived at the appointed hour of 9 o'clock only to find that some of the other students had yet to turn up. Apparently, they had stayed overnight at the local country hotel and found the hearty breakfast too enjoyable to rush.

Once mustered, we were five students each with a 4x4. It is the school's philosophy that students should train in their own vehicles, because each machine has unique characteristics which have to be mastered. The proud owner of a new Range Rover would be ill-advised to try to learn on an outdated Land Rover, for instance.

Schoolroom

By 9.30 we were assembled in the newly built schoolroom getting to know each other over coffee and biscuits. A doctor, an electronics engineer, the owner of an engineering business, and the owner of a shopfitting business with one of



Going down . . . The 100 percent slope.

his employees, were my companions.

Overland offers a one or one-and-a-half day course. According to its owner and founder, David Bowyer, most opt for the longer of the two which includes winching and recovery techniques on the second morning. Indeed, all my course-mates had signed-up for both days.

David Bowyer shares the instruction with Keith Hart who is also a seasoned off-road and Land Rover enthusiast, himself owning a well-prepared Land Rover with which he was to amply impress us later in the day.

Keith started his classroom session of about two hours with the basics of 4x4 life and safety topics.



Tackling the mill pond with feeling.



Keith Hart, course instructor, takes class.

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Motoring



wagon from David Bowyer's garage of Rovers. The Leisure Centre is also ideal for wives or family not partaking the course, because it offers swimming, squash, snooker, darts and so on, with a sauna and solarium. Alternatively, they could explore the footpaths of the surrounding lush countryside.

One and a half miles of the Overlander course awaited us after lunch and all the drivers were anxious to put into practice their new-found knowledge. David and Keith rode in turn with each to talk them through each obstacle. Then they were on their own.

As the afternoon progressed and a few circuits of the course had been made, the drivers noticeably showed greater confidence. Most testing is the 100 percent slope (45 degrees) which looks and feels fearsome until a few descents have been made successfully. Such was the drivers' eagerness, that they asked for and got the course reversed so that the slope could be climbed. After a few retreats, all eventually made it with the aid of large helpings of momentum. Good fun and confidence building.

Water, water

Apart from the hard, soft and man-made obstacles, there is the water which every off-roader will encounter and must master. Here, the earlier vehicle preparations showed their worth and not one

vehicle was drowned-out.

The longest of the water sections is designed so that the driver can't see too far ahead — excitement round every corner! *Piece de resistance* for fording, which all the drivers seemed to want to tackle, is the mill pond. This pit of dark water is as deep as any vehicle would want to be tested in, without deep-water fording preparation.

By now, their once-shiny vehicles decidedly splattered, the owners were valiantly ready to take the plunge. After several attempts all but one got out successfully. Rover readers will note with satisfaction that this one was not a Rover product! All bore the high-tide marks of their endeavour!

After our afternoon's training and fun we were ready to return to the classroom for a cup of tea and a debriefing chat. Also, the screening of off-road techniques videos allowed us all to watch with a knowing eye.

For acquiring more knowledge, this was also an opportunity to browse or buy in the Overland Off-road Bookshop which is part of the

centre and normally operates via mail-order.

Certificate

Either for the day or day-and-a-half course, the student who satisfactorily stays the course is awarded a posh certificate which will look good framed on the sideboard. He — or she — also leaves with the knowledge that whatever future off-road life throws at him/her, the same or worse has already been mastered at the Overland Centre.

The one-day course costs £57.50 inclusive of VAT, and the one-and-a-half-day course costs £86.25 inc. VAT. Students are only accepted by advance booking.

For details, contact: Overlander Ltd., East Foldhay, Zeal Monachorum, Crediton, Devon EX17 6DH. Tel. 03633 6766.

In the second part of this article in the next Land Rover Owner I shall describe the following day's winching and recovery techniques.



Using the chalkboard and actual equipment he went on to discuss points which would take years to assemble through self-discovery and trial-and-error. Student participation is encouraged and the informal atmosphere fostered discussion, with Keith fielding questions on a wide range of subjects.

To round-off the session, vehicle preparation was explained and we trooped out to see this applied in practice on the students' vehicles ready for the afternoon.

So to lunch

Our transport to lunch at the nearby Waie Inn Leisure Centre was a well-preserved 'vintage' Land Rover Series One station-



The zig-zag log road.