

Hold on tight: when that rope's taut, the Land Rover flies – literally



**S**ailing across the Bering Strait isn't really the most difficult bit – it's getting a vehicle to the coast in a fit state to achieve it that's the real challenge.' So says Steve Burgess who, with his partner Nicky Spinks, has been planning, designing and building just such a vehicle – for the past seven years or so.

On January 29 this year, they left their home in Mirfield, West Yorkshire to begin the mammoth journey. 'Less than half a mile down the road, one of the heavy-duty springs I'd just put on went bang. It hadn't seated properly,' says Steve. 'I thought I'd broken a spring!' After this heart-stopper, the rest of the journey to Moscow was thankfully straightforward. Nicky returned home and her place was taken by family friend, Simon Dedman.

Unfortunately, there was a major problem awaiting Steve and Simon in the capital; the Ural truck that was supposed to carry the heavy amphibious gear and specially designed tracks wasn't available. 'We had to air-freight all the gear 5600 miles to Yakutsk, at the far end of the famous Road of Bones. Simon and I jumped in the Land Rover and simply

drove across Russia, thoroughly enjoying ourselves.'

'On the way, we took a detour to Mirny – the site of the world's biggest diamond mine, at least in terms of carat output. I bought a diamond for a ring for Nicky. After meeting up with another truck, we left Yakutsk and went north for about 1000 miles to visit Oymyakon, reckoned to be the coldest place on earth; it's known as the Pole of Cold. It was minus 36°C when we were there.

'We then picked up the Kolyma river, a long-distance ice road. In Canada, they build the roads up with water to thicken the ice – but in Russia they just hope it's okay. We occasionally saw signs of where vehicles had fallen through. There's a lot of geothermal activity in the area, with hot springs bubbling up under the ice. This melts, leaving patches of open water, so you have to be careful.

'Just once did we lose the truck, which was running behind us and catching us up at night. About 19 miles from the end of the Kolyma ice road there's a big wooden stick in the snow, indicating the turn for Chukotka; we didn't see it and carried on to the next village.



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Kolyma River ice road. Just believe – that ice is thick. Almost everywhere

# ON THE HOME СТРАИТ

Steve Burgess is on the brink of realising his dream – to sail a Land Rover across the Bering Strait after driving it across the vast Russian land mass. Mark Saville catches up with him





Losing track – but gaining wheels, so that's all right, then

'After filling up, we turned around and went in search of the stick. The Kolyma river is about 20 miles wide at the turning so it took a bit of finding: we then followed a tributary for about 50 miles. The Land Rover was brilliant, even though both rear shocks were broken. We tied plasma rope around the axle and over the chassis rail to stop the Land Rover bouncing too much; it worked a treat.

'We reached Pevek and said goodbye to the first truck and its driver – it was as far as he was prepared to go. Luckily, we found a local guy, Anatoli, who was happy to use his 6x6 Ural truck to carry our gear the next 620 miles to Mys Schmidta, which was discovered by Captain Cook himself.

'Up to this point, we were still on studded Cooper road tyres – any

well-prepared Land Rover would be able to get this far.

'At Schmidta, we had no obvious means of support to get us to Uelen, our jumping-off point for the Bering Straits crossing. Talking to the locals, we learned why no one would go with us to Uelen.

'Apparently, two Russian trucks made the trip back in 1998, driving right across the sea ice to Uelen. Everybody who's been advising me in Russia has based their advice on this 1998 expedition – and so I was led to believe that we would drive on the sea ice. Everything was geared up for that – the tracks were even specially made for that.

'But, over the past five years, the north-east sea passage has remained open for longer and longer. This means that, when it begins to freeze,



Above: Anatoli (right) and Nicolai crewed the big Ural 6x6. Right: a pair of 6x6 tankers struggle on the ice – they're usually unstoppable

the winter storms are still able to break it up. It then re-freezes. This happens over and over again, making the truck route impassable.

'Our only choice was to hire a bloke called Oleg and his Vezdahod (a tracked, tank-like vehicle) to tow us over the worst sections but, like everyone else we met, he was totally unconvinced that we'd make it.

'We fitted the tracks in Schmidta, and covered the first 160 miles easily, threading our way between lumps of ice the size of Minis. One of the track hubs began to bind on the stub axle.

Parking up for the night near the deserted village of Rigol. Only one rule here: check for polar bears before answering the call of nature



Bleak remnant of Soviet era in Providenja



River crossing the easy way (also above right)



Old navigation light by the seashore



'I got out and had a look; it was steaming a bit. We still hadn't won Oleg over yet and I knew there would be far worse conditions ahead.

'Imagine driving over a car park: one track would be on the roof of one car and another would be between cars. Now imagine the gaps between the cars are covered by powdered snow that may be a few centimetres deep or six metres deep – you have no idea. That's what it was like.

'We took the tracks off and put the wheels back on and, after some gentle persuasion, Oleg agreed to come with us to Uelen, towing us whenever necessary. And he didn't drive gently!

'On sand spits, we unhitched and drove 20-25 miles. Then we hitched up again on the rough sections and he dragged us over. The effect of being towed over the huge boulders of ice was that you just got catapulted from one boulder to the next.

'The track machine went over a block of ice and then tried to pull us

through it. The rope stretched and stretched, and then we just took off and crashed into the next block.

'After every heavy landing I opened the door to make sure the axles were still on – it was *that* bad. I'm full of admiration for the strength of our Protection and Performance underbody protection and roll cage – what a feat to survive treatment like that.'

'Our worst fear was that we'd roll on to our side or on the roof, the windscreen would go in and fill the cab with snow, crushing us – and Oleg wouldn't know. We had no means of communicating with him at all. By the time we'd crossed this lagoon he was well and truly determined to get us to Uelen.

'He was so impressed we made it that he jumped out at the end and gesticulated, asking us if we were scared... From that point on, he was totally behind us!

'Before Oleg began towing us, I was so convinced he'd rip the bumper off

and rip out the hydraulic pipes to the winch that I disconnected them.

These pipes go from the spool valve behind the front seats, down through the floor, along the chassis member, and then across and in front of the engine, under the radiator.

'I thought that if he took the front bumper, he might take the pipes and the spool valve, which could whip around in the cab and take us out. If nothing else, it would take all the radiator and that would be the end. I could cope with losing the bumper but not the hydraulics.'

The Land Rover is now in a heated garage in Uelen, awaiting Steve – this time accompanied by Dan Evans – to return to make the crossing attempt.

'The sea ice has usually melted by the end of May, so Dan and I plan to be there by the second week in June.'

Stay tuned to LRO to find out how the guys get on; but if you want to find out more in the meantime, see capetocape.org.uk. **LRO**

Below (left-right): Nicolai fixes the tracks on the Vezdahod; grand village sign on the Road of Bones; at least there's no risk of him running out of fuel



'Is it me, or have you just driven past the stick?'



Amazing: the Northern Lights

