



Our lives as Overlanders

When Mike and I met 12 years ago in Zürich, Switzerland, we found out pretty quickly that we shared one dream: to travel the globe in our own vehicle.

Since then, we have explored over 50 countries in two completely different vehicles covering around 180'000km (111'846 miles). We have tried to summarize 10 years of overloading across the globe in this article, highlighting different experiences we have had throughout our journey.

Only a year after we met, we had sold everything we owned and shipped our Land Rover Defender from Switzerland to Boston where we started a three-year journey through the Americas.

We started out with a roof top tent which we sold on Craigslist once we reached Seattle and started sleeping in the Defender instead. This change happened due to one evening in Utah where we were just climbing into our roof top tent and Aimée, our dog, smelled something in the bushes, growled and something growled back. We have never climbed that ladder faster. In the future, we didn't want to encounter a situation where we would have to get out of the tent in order to get into the driver's seat. To this day though, we don't know what animal growled back.

We drove along the Rockies all the way to Prudhoe Bay in Alaska. The weather wasn't very pleasant, and we



kept switching seats to cover the distance. It was summer and the days were really long, it was hard to keep track of time. One day, I remember driving, the watch was showing 3 o'clock but we didn't know if it was pm or am. So, we had to force ourselves to pull over for a break and tried to sleep a little. Nature up north totally amazed us. We encountered plenty of moose, bears, eagles, caribous and arctic foxes.

We looped back through Canada, visited several national parks in the States. To this day, Moab is one of our favorite places on the globe. We could not get enough of the seemingly infinite red rocks and sand. Also being allowed to drive trails though this landscape was fascinating. Coming from Switzerland, we are not used to being allowed to drive off-road. So, we really enjoyed those liberties in the US.

From the West Coast we crossed the border to Baja California and took a ferry to the mainland. Then we continued through Central America and shipped the Defender in a container from Panama to Ecuador.

In Ecuador, the Defender got stuck at 4'263m alt. (13'986 ft) which made the task of shoveling mud for hours really exhausting. In the end we used a dead man anchor for the first time, by burying our spare wheel since at that height there were no trees to attach our winch. The vast landscape of South America fascinated us. Finally, there were no fences or „keep off“ signs and we could explore freely.

We spent a night in the middle of the Salar de Uyuni, Bolivia. You could lay on the ground and see the sun just over the horizon on one side while on the other side, the sky was already dark and the first stars were emerging.

Driving to the Laguna Colorada we reached 5'300m asl (17'388 ft), the highest we have been, but we felt good, no signs of altitude sickness. Aimée even attempted to hunt some Vincuñas. We loved driving the Carretera Austral in Chile with its wild nature and on Tierra del Fuego we paid a visit to the then just discovered colony of King Penguins (the only one on mainland) and drove all the way to the „end of the world“ in Ushuaia.



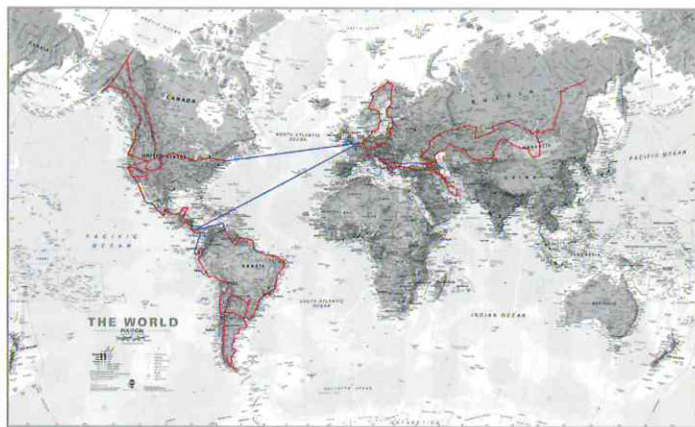
In Mar del Plata we witnessed the start of the Dakar Race 2012 which was a mind-blowing experience and I think, that was where the seed of having a bigger truck was planted in Mike's mind.

We continued our journey through the north of Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay and along the coast of Brazil. Reaching the Amazon river, we decided to cross its delta on a ferry. We spent three days on a boat where the passengers lingered in hammocks on the deck.

Shortly after, we crossed the equator again. We had last crossed it heading south in Quito, Ecuador and now we were on the opposite side of the continent, heading north. In French Guyana, we were welcomed home. This little piece of South America belongs to France, which is a Schengen country, so we could technically have stayed

for as long as we wanted. French Guyana has a spaceport ESA and per chance there was a rocket launch planned just a few days later. Of course, we would wait around for that! The rocket launch was exhilarating! We could see it flying into space until it was too small to identify in the blue sky.

We continued through Suriname and Guyana, drove through the jungle to the border to Brazil and then headed north to Venezuela.



A few days into Venezuela, we had one of the worst days in our lives. A lady smashed into us with her car, our Defender was totaled, the trip was over, time to go home. This happened very far south in the country, where it was hard to get in touch with anyone or even organize a tow truck. Luckily a very sweet family invited us into their home from where we could make daily trips with the local taxis into town to at least have access to the internet and phones. A tow truck then took us to Caracas which was a three-day drive away.

Long story short, a day before our 3-month visa expired, we were finally able to leave the country, having put the Defender in a container, made dreadfully long trips to the port, banks, offices or Swiss embassy on a daily basis. Our feelings were in turmoil, we had to get through this super complicated export process before we could even start to process our feelings about the crash.

We returned to Switzerland ruined financially, but the desire to keep traveling had not vanished. That idea of a bigger truck had now grown into a plan and we knew what our next goal was.

Five years later we were able to start a project which took us to the coldest inhabited and hottest place on earth within one year. The biggest challenge of the concept of the new truck was, that it had to work in both extreme climates, cold and hot.

We headed off in our ex-(German) military truck with a 10sqm (107 sq ft) living unit on the back which would keep us comfortable in every climate zone.



Through the Balkan states and Turkey, we reached Iran, where our first extreme destination awaited us in the Lut desert. This desert has unique sandstone formations, through which we drove until we saw no further tracks.

The average temperature we experienced in the Lut desert was +65°C (149°F), the record temperature is +70.7°C (161,06°F). We used our air-condition the keep the unit at a cool 40°C (104°F) so we could at least sleep.

From Iran we drove through Armenia and Georgia, through the south of Russia, across Kazakhstan, to the Gobi Desert in Mongolia and then headed north to the coldest inhabited town on the globe, Oimjakon, Russia.

To reach the pole of cold we had to cross several frozen rivers. The sound of the cracking ice when driving over it with our 13-ton diesel truck definitely gave us an adrenaline rush. According to locals, we visited during a „warm“period, the temperature only dropped down to -52°C (-61,6°F) plus windchill, which was cold enough for us. The record temperature though is -71.2°C (-96,16°F).

We spent around 2 months in temperatures below -20°C (-4°F) and one month at temperatures below -30°C (-22°F) down to those -52°C (-61,6°F). Throughout 5 weeks the engine of our Mercedes Axor was running 24/7. If we would have turned it off, within a few hours the liquids in



the system would have frozen and there would have been no way of turning it back on without outside help.


After reaching the pole of cold, our mindset completely changed in regard of the conditions ahead of us. We knew that it would not get any colder than it did in Oimjakon, the most difficult part was behind us and we now knew what our truck was really capable of.

Our next journey was delayed two months due to Corona. We planned to drive around the world within three years. Mid-summer we were at least able to start our route through Europe. In the last five months we have explored northern Europe extensively and are now planning our next move. In between the shutdowns and possible daily changes, we have to stay flexible. We don't really mind where our next destination is, as long as our wheels are rolling.



Andrea and Mike with Aimée the dog

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