

WHAT KATY DID NEXT...



Katy is a 127" Land Rover who started life as a military ambulance before being turned into a camper. A camper with a ropy gearbox and transfer case, as her latest owner found out – but he wasn't about to let that stop him from making her right in preparation for a new life of overland adventures. This is what Katy did next...

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Driving to Italy in an ambulance seems rather silly on face value. When the ambulance in question is more than a quarter century old, you'd perhaps think the driver has gone a little mad.

But this ambulance, who goes by the name of Katy, has been enjoying retirement by gallivanting over to the Italian Alps to explore the countryside and continental trails. She's a big old girl, and that's because she's a Land Rover ambulance.

I'd seen a converted 127" ambulance while on a camping holiday in Iceland, while I spent two weeks in the rain in a small tent.

'What a wonderful idea,' I thought. 'How do you build one of those?' Back home, I did some research and found I didn't need to build one – they already existed.

I'd been browsing eBay for a while when we purchased Katy, our 127, on a bit of a whim. I had just attended the funeral of a good friend who was always up for an adventure and sharing some good tales over a beer, so it seemed appropriate.

That was in February 2011.

She was described as 'a Land Rover ex-military ambulance conversion with a solar panel to charge the second battery, on-board water tank, fridge, stove, toilet, hand-held shower' and as a vehicle that 'goes well and pulls like a steam train.'

That wasn't all. 'There are many, many years of happy camping here and don't forget it will go just about anywhere,' said the listing. So what could go wrong? We bought her, cleaned her up and almost immediately set off to visit family in Yorkshire.

We soon had niggles, though. Well, major issues, really. A catastrophic failure of the gearbox and transfer case on the M42 was a bit of a sign. So we went and got some nice refurbished units from Ashcroft. While we were at it, we shifted the ratio from the military 1:1.67 to the standard Defender 1:1.4. This allowed us to move out of the horse-drawn carriage lanes on





motorways and into the flow of regular vehicles with actual internal combustion engines.

A couple of tester trips in the UK were enough to persuade us to invest in a full suspension upgrade, with Azalai 130 Camper springs and new 25mm front and 28mm rear Extreme 4x4 anti-roll bars. These proved to be quite literally a life-saving upgrade on our trip to Italy.

We wanted a good introduction to proper overlanding with a view to it providing good experience for the longer trips we'd like to do in the future. I had come across Alpine Rovers on a couple of forums, and we decided to join them for a number of reasons: they only took small groups, their tour was on mainland Europe and the destination in the Alps was somewhere we

would be interested in as my wife Rhian and I are both geologists.

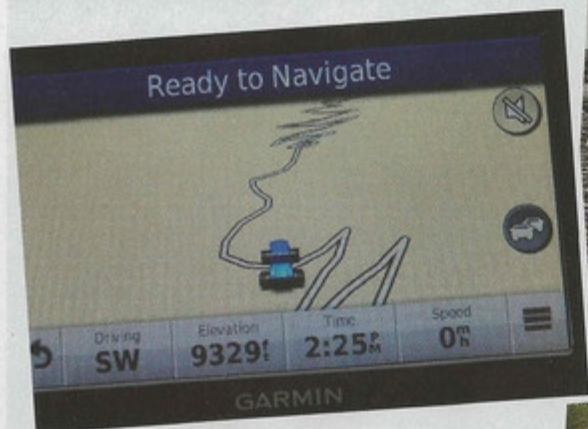
The equipment we had on board consisted of a fold-down double bed, various cupboards and a shower.

There was also a portaloos in the truck when we got her, but we've taken it out as we don't fancy driving the contents around!

Top: The majesty of the Alps is there for anyone who wants to go looking. Stick to public tracks, and the opportunities are endless

Right: This is where joining an organised tour pays for itself. River crossings can be the most dangerous part of an expedition, but when you've got a guide from Alpine Rovers who's been there before, you can point your truck into the water without fear





Katy also has a three-burner stove, 50-litre water tank with electric pump, electric hook-up, which can power the water heater and shower, large solar panel charging a leisure battery, two Calor bottles and the usual array of spare parts and manuals just in case.



When your sat nav is showing you a road like this, you know you're having fun. Unless a fully prepped Unimog motorhome comes the other way on one of the narrow bits, that is, at which point the 2000-foot drop to one side will start looking scarier than ever

We headed to the Camping Grappe d'Or at Meursault, directed by our sat nav. To our horror, though, at the gate hung a sign saying 'Complet' (full). We were out of luck... or so we thought.

says they always try to help cyclists, Volkswagen campers and Land Rovers!

We were shown into a wonderful, secluded, secure courtyard where we were able to stay the night. A nice meal with a truly superb Chardonnay white and the day ended very well.

In the morning, after a nice breakfast, Juliette showed me pictures of her and her friends out in their Land Rovers, including her 1980 Series III, and told us we would always be welcome. And on to Italy we travelled.

The Alpine Rovers team consisted of Mandy and Mike Springer in their Tomb Raider 90, and also 'German Mike' in his 109" Series III. Their first reaction to Katy was interesting: 'That's bigger than we imagined!' Clearly 127s are an uncommon sight on such trips.

'You don't wish to comment too much on a lady's size, but Katy was collecting all the trees as she passed them by'

We booked on to Alpine Rovers' one-week tour around the Susa valley in Northern Italy just to the West of Turin, but took enough leave to make it a full two-week holiday. Leaving from home in Cardiff at the end of July last year, we made our way down to Dover to catch the ferry and onwards to Arras. At this point, anything beyond the UK was considered a success.

It was a really hot day and running at 65mph meant Katy was in danger of looking like a panting dog, so we were regularly stopping at rest areas to let her cool down. According to the map we had, there were campsites in the area south of Dijon, which is a fine wine producing area – so naturally we had to investigate!

As we sat trying to decide what we could do, a nice lady (Juliette, as I later found out) came walking towards us. 'I bet you need somewhere to stay?'

Yes, we said, we did. And before we could ask if she could recommend somewhere else, she said they could find us a place to park because they have a rule there – which

To be honest, a 130 wouldn't be many people's first choice of Land Rover for mountain trails with regular tight switchbacks. But when you arrive at your camp site and, while everyone else is battling with their tents, you're already making a cup of tea, everything else is forgiven



The next day, we set off into the mountains on the north side of the Susa Valley, up to Mount Jafferau. I was very nervous as to how Katy would cope with the steep tracks to come. Mike advised second gear, low ratio and diff-lock engaged for the loose stuff, and to avoid changing gear on anything steep.

We took his advice.

By the time we had done a fair chunk of climbing and the tracks were levelling out, we were making it into third or even fourth gear (still in low box, of course) on the flatter sections and running easily with almost no smoke, even at this high altitude.

Through some more woodland, we found our first problem with Katy's proportions. You don't wish to comment too much on a lady's size, but she was collecting the trees as she passed them and the awning rail soon needing a spot of bending back into shape.

Through the rest of the tracks, though, we had no significant issues. We found ourselves able to keep up well with the group, though we did have to take a few more shunts at the tight hairpins. Mind you, with Katy's wider offset Wolf wheels, we were actually not doing much worse than German Mike's 109.

The following day took us back down from that high point and across the valley to Argentiera. Nothing too extreme in that, but the scenery remained magnificent – and there were some washed-out corners that had us carefully balancing on three wheels as we eased our way through them. I believe the Americans describe these as 'butt pickers...'



Our reward was a wonderful campsite, with no-one else in sight and a huge waterfall tumbling down the mountain in the background.

Our next leg took us along the high route from Siestre to Usseaux. Back on day one we had seen a superb Unimog that had been converted into a camper van, and guess what was coming towards us on one of the narrowest sections with a 2000ft drop to the right...? The Unimog was still superb, but the prospect of trying to squeeze past it was anything but.

I was very unsure, so I asked Rhian to step out of the vehicle while Mike came forward and started directing me as we inched closer and closer. Just as we were through and Mike said to pull forward, my rear wheel dropped into a hole on the edge of the precipice. All I could do was power on, terrified of what might be happening. It was my scariest moment – but in hindsight, it's also the one I talk about the most!

For day four, we intended to top out the trip at 10,000 feet at Rochemolles – but the weather was to

beat us. There was still late snow across the road and we were limited on time and places to turn around, so we beat a retreat at 9329 feet and headed back down to find our camp site. This involved our first river crossing, but the route was well known to the guides and proved easy.

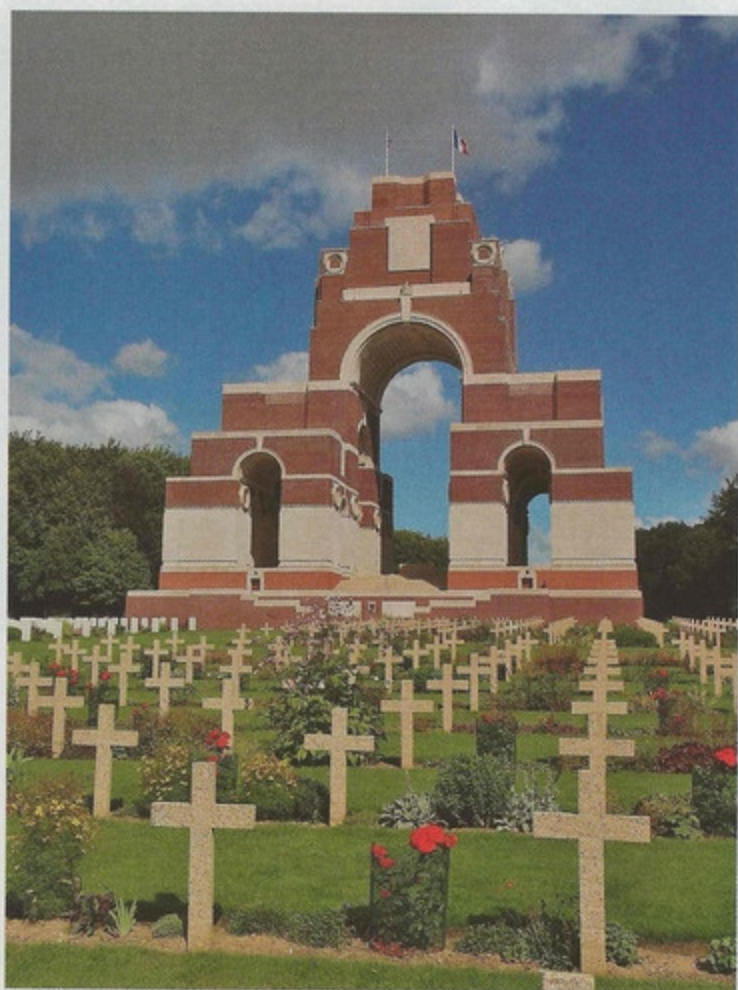
It was at this campsite that the benefits of having a 127 became clear. It was lashing down with rain and the mist had set in – and we were able to just pull up and put the kettle on while the rest of the team struggled with their tents. We did offer cups of tea all round, though!

With the rain making the high mountains rather an unpleasant place to be, we dropped down to the lower altitudes for some gentle lanes and a bit of touristy stuff. The next day we finished our adventure by doing part of a wonderful route on an old Roman road heading back towards Susa.

We only did part of that route, though, because there had been a landslide and there were rocks to climb over which our guides thought would be a problem for Katy with her extra-long wheelbase. That's clearly a compromise you have to consider in one of these vehicles.

We set off for home after several wonderful days of mountainous trail riding, having gained an immense amount of confidence both in our Land Rover and in our abilities to use it properly. The run back north through France was rather less eventful, though we did make one stop at a place I had wanted to visit for a while.

This was the Thiepval Memorial, in the Somme region. The memorial is to the 72,191 missing British and South African men who died between 1915 and 1918 in the Battles of the Somme, who have no known grave.



A poignant stop-off on the way home: the Thiepval Memorial commemorates the lives of the 72,191 British and South African soldiers who died in the Somme between 1915 and 1918 and have no known grave



I have a great uncle, Sergeant William Allison Barnett MM, remembered on the memorial. He was recommended for the medal just two days before he was killed in action on 15 September 1916, which was the first day that British tanks were used in action.

Thiepval is one of those places that everyone responsible for sending people to war should visit. Imagine if every politician were forced to sit here and think for a day on the possible consequences of their actions.

The memorial is visited by a lot of old soldiers, and we were only in the car park for about a minute before we had a crowd around us. A military ambulance seemed like an appropriate vehicle aboard which to have travelled here; it felt as if Katy was paying her respects, too.

We made it home to Cardiff in mid-August, with no issues having cropped up during our 2020-mile round trip. Katy impressed all the tour group, ourselves included – though she certainly wouldn't have managed the trip in the state she was in when we bought her.

We have things we want to do to improve Katy. But we intend to take German Mike's advice seriously: 'Only add things that add value. Knowledge of how to cope and fix things is more useful than any gadget.' I think he approved when I said the most important things I carried on-board were a tool kit and a Haynes manual for the Defender!

Do we want to go on other adventures? Clearly, yes is the answer. But there is work to do – more electrics to sort out, and the bulkhead needs repairing or replacing. I do want to make

some more improvements to the interior, too, and Katy definitely deserves a respray.

As so often happens, though, work has got in the way this year and I've had to put things on hold. My perfect adventure would be into Uganda, where my Gran lived for ten years, but we'll probably do a few more shakedown trips to places like the Pyrenees or Morocco before trying anything like that.

I'm often asked if we've taken Katy on any adventures, and now at last I feel I can look people in the eye and say yes. 'She's been over the Alps,' I tell them. 'And I don't mean on tarmac. I mean up and down the mountains. And it won't be the last adventure we have together, either.'

