

THE SILK TRAIL EXPEDITION

In 2013 three prototype Range Rover L405 Hybrids set off on a mammoth drive from Solihull to Mumbai. One of them, Prototype 2, survives today in the Dunsfold Collection

LRM CLASSICS



Map on the bonnet was useful to show the route to interested parties

On 21 August 2013, JLR announced its first Land Rover hybrid models, the Range Rover Hybrid and the Range Rover Sport Hybrid, promising 'outstanding fuel economy and significantly lower CO₂ emissions', while retaining Land Rover's 'renowned capability and performance'. The press release added that order books in the UK would open on 10 September with first deliveries in early 2014. They were the world's first diesel-electric hybrid SUVs.

The media generally reacted positively to the 3.0-litre parallel hybrid vehicles, impressed by the 0-60mph times and top speeds – 6.7 seconds and 140mph for the Sport, and 6.9 seconds and 135mph for the full-fat Range Rover. However, if you wanted to become an SUV eco-pioneer there was a massive premium to pay. The Range Rover Hybrid was priced on a par with the top-of-the-range supercharged V8 at £98,430. Meanwhile, the TDV6 on which the Sport Hybrid was based could be yours for £71,310; the TDV8, which the Hybrid more or less matched in performance terms, was listed at £78,120.

Whichever way you looked at it, the Hybrids were between £20k and £30k more expensive than their pure ICE (internal combustion engine) siblings but offered the attraction of around 40mpg and a massive saving on road tax, down from £840 per year to just £285. But then, not that many Range Rover buyers worry about details like that...

On 26 August 2013, just five days after it released its first press release on the Range Rover Hybrid, JLR announced The Silk Trail Expedition, which suggests that someone at the company had decided some considerable time before the launch that they needed to stage something quite spectacular to prove to the world that the Hybrids were just as capable as their pure ICE counterparts.

The expedition involved three Range Rover Hybrids, suitably decorated with bespoke decals and artwork identifying them as Prototypes 1, 2 and 3, supported by four Discovery 4s. They would drive 9950 miles to Mumbai, home of JLR's owner Tata Motors.



The three Range Rover Hybrids were accompanied by Discovery 4 support vehicles, seen here leading the convoy across the desert in Uzbekistan

“They made their way through a landscape where no other vehicles, buildings or people could be seen in any direction”



Many of the 'roads' left a little to be desired

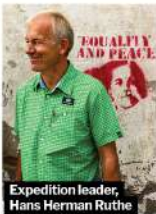


Significant rainfall made the section in Russia very muddy. This would be a no-go area now



The three Hybrids drive in formation for the camera in Odessa, Ukraine

The expedition, led by 1990 Camel Trophy competitor Hans Herman Ruthe from LRE Germany, was billed by JLR as a 'validation test and development drive' to allow the company's engineers, who were driving the vehicles, to complete testing before signing-off series production that would start later that year. It was also a press junket, with media from ten countries being invited to join for various sections along the route.



Expedition leader, Hans Herman Ruthe

Before they departed on 22 August, photographs were taken of the L405s at Gaydon, alongside two of their Range Rover ancestors that had also undertaken pioneering adventures over 40 years before - Engineering Prototype 100/G which completed a double crossing of the Sahara and Ténéré deserts in 1969, and one of the 1971 British Trans-Americas Expedition vehicles that drove from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego, crossing the Darién Gap along the way.

When the first Silk Trail Expedition press release was issued on 26 August, the convoy had already reached Berlin. Pausing there for two days, on 28 August it would depart on the second leg of its journey - the 1094-mile drive to Odessa in Ukraine - and a second press release was issued on 4 September announcing their arrival there. The next leg would see the team entering Russia and Kazakhstan.

A third update was issued on 11 September, by which point the convoy had covered around 4250 miles. 'Through Europe, the Silk Trail expedition's route has mostly followed asphalt roads, often encountering traffic congestion in towns and cities where the Hybrid's electric motor has quietly paid fuel economy dividends. In contrast, crossing the Ukraine and Russia, many hours have been spent negotiating dirt roads that

would be impassable to most other types of vehicle.

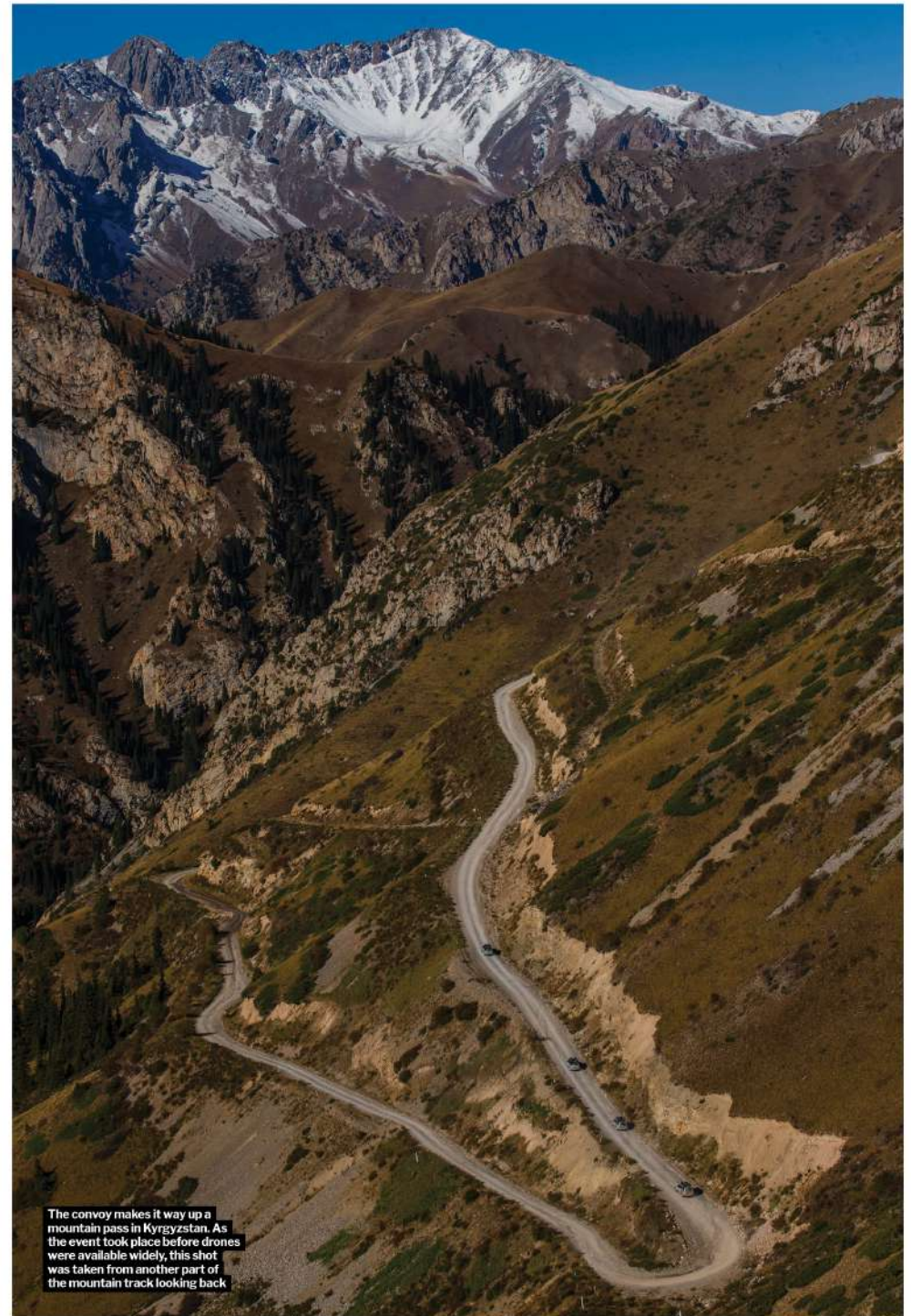
'At one of the many bays on the Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula, the three Range Rover Hybrids ventured onto wild, windswept beaches which included stretches of deep sand. Through the Kalmykiya region of Russia, traditionally farmed by nomads, the convoy crossed vast, open prairies and grasslands on roads

where the mud surface had been turned to slippery slurry by heavy rains. Here, the expedition vehicles made their way through a landscape where no other vehicles, buildings or people could be seen in any direction.

'During a stop to clean the mud-coated vehicles in the town of Astrakhan there has been time for the participants to appreciate the first signs of west meeting east. The expedition is now close to the cultural and commercial crossroads between Europe and Asia and the roads of the legendary Silk Trail.'

By the time the next press release was issued a week later, the convoy had covered 5226 miles and was pausing in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. 'The second half of this ambitious journey will feature the deserts, highlands and lowlands of Kyrgyzstan and China; winding tarmac roads climbing high into the thin cold air of the Himalaya mountain range, and a gradual descent through the lush greenness of Nepal to the hot plains of India.'

A press release dated 25 September provided a further update on progress. 'The vehicles have blazed a trail in the last week across dusty desert roads running parallel to the legendary Silk Trail trading route, before progressing eastwards through the spectacular high-altitude mountains of Kyrgyzstan.



The convoy makes it way up a mountain pass in Kyrgyzstan. As the event took place before drones were available widely, this shot was taken from another part of the mountain track looking back

“The next leg was a 127-mile stretch of road demanding eight hours of unwavering concentration”



At the top of the Tossor Pass in Kyrgyzstan



The driving in India was frequently interesting...



There was a tremendous variety of terrain encountered during the expedition

‘Here, the Range Rover Hybrids and their drivers faced the toughest tests of the expedition so far. Heading into the Fergana mountain range, the vehicles tackled narrow and rutted mud tracks in darkness. It was only 12 miles to the clearing on top of a hill where tents would be pitched for the night, but covering that short distance took several hours. Following heavy rains, the steeply inclined roads were so wet and muddy that even the most capable hybrid four-wheel drive vehicles in the world had to fight their way forward yard-by-yard.

‘The expedition’s additional test this week has been high altitudes. One day the convoy drove into icy winds above the snowline at 5875 feet, looking down on a cloud-layer and soaring eagles. Next day the road climbed higher still, to 11,000 feet, reaching a vast meadowland plateau. Two days later the expedition took rocky cattle trails to an altitude of 13,035 feet, where the team’s medical expert checked each individual’s heart rate and blood-oxygen saturation levels, in anticipation of possible altitude sickness when the convoy later crosses the Himalayas.’

On 2 October, JLR’s press department issued another communiqué. ‘Pioneering a mountainous route across north-west China never previously completed by a vehicle from outside the country, the Silk Trail 2013 expedition has successfully traversed the Xinjiang-Tibet highway, during five consecutive days and nights at altitudes of 13,000 to 17,500 feet.

‘On this toughest leg so far on the journey from Solihull to Mumbai, the expedition’s team members covered ground very few westerners

have seen before, passing through military-controlled areas close to international borders at altitudes classified by medical practitioners and mountaineers as ‘High’, ‘Very High’, and ‘Extremely High’. In the next five days, heading south-east from Kashgar to Zhangmu on the China-Nepal border, the roads climbed and fell repeatedly between altitudes of 11,500 and 17,717 feet.

‘At sea-level, 21 per cent of the air is oxygen, but at 5000 metres (16,400 feet) this is reduced to 10 per cent. The effects of altitude were experienced by the whole team, with short bursts of supplementary oxygen required occasionally. The expedition’s last night in China was spent less than a mile away from the Friendship Bridge connecting China and Nepal. On the other side of the bridge lay a journey to Kathmandu of merely 85 miles. Even so, this short distance took three hours to drive – an indication of the challenges that would lie ahead in the next week on Nepal’s hazardously busy roads.

‘The next leg of the journey, from Kathmandu to Pokhara, a town surrounded by three of the ten highest mountains in the world, was a 127-mile stretch of road demanding eight hours of unwavering concentration. Every foot of road space was contested by bicycles, tricycles, horse-drawn carts, scooters, motorbikes, cars, mini-buses, buses, trucks, roving cows, slow-moving water buffalo, loose dogs, and fearless pedestrians. The three Range Rover Hybrid prototypes then were ready to cross the bridge over the Mahakali River and into India, for the final 1000 miles to the expedition’s



Silk Trail Hybrid at its new home with the Dunsfold Collection

SEE IT AT DUNSFOLD

ALONG WITH a vast array of other interesting, rare and historically important Land Rovers and associated memorabilia, one of the three Silk Trail Range Rovers now resides at The Dunsfold Collection in Surrey.

The example in question has a problem with the hybrid battery, which is perhaps unsurprising given the use the Range Rover had early on in its life, and the number of years it stood unused for since. Currently the L405 can be started on its diesel engine but, when in motion and at the moment the electric motor would normally come into play to assist the engine, it drops into a fault state and needs to be shut off and interrogated for fault codes. Once cleared, the vehicle can be started and driven a short distance on its engine again, but the fault is consistent and the ultimate repair for this Range Rover is unfortunately likely to be a new hybrid battery.

This aside, it’s a brilliant and increasingly unusual demonstration of Land Rover using a relatively late model in such an adventurous way. Viewing it purely as a vehicle, it’s a Range Rover with great provenance, rare accessories and real off-road credibility under its belt – and you can take advantage of an opportunity to get up close and personal with it at The Dunsfold Museum, where it will be on display at the Autumn Open Day in September. Check out dunsfoldcollection.co.uk for more information and to book your tickets once the final date for the event is confirmed.



The convoy heads down the pass towards the Chinese/Nepalese border town of Zhangmu



CAPTURING THE ACTION

NICK DIMBLEBY was the official photographer on The Silk Trail 2013: "I've been fortunate enough to photograph a few amazing trips for Land Rover over my 30-year career, but when I heard in late June 2013 about the proposed drive from Birmingham to Mumbai in Range Rover Hybrids, I was very keen to make sure that I was on the trip. When I finally received the call from PR man Dave Roydon, he asked me if I would be okay with being away for two months to complete the trip. I didn't need asking twice. My friend and colleague Brad Lawson joined me to capture video, and between us we produced all the film and photo content for the expedition.

"As we took along a reasonable amount of kit and needed to operate independently, Brad and I were allocated a Discovery 4 support vehicle and a driver: Dougie Dale. Although we were part of the main convoy of vehicles on The Silk Trail, being self-contained meant that we were able to drive ahead to capture the rest of the convoy driving towards us at key locations, as well as leaving early to capture sunrise or catching up later after doing drive-by shots from a distance. Dougie's excellent driving skills meant that we were always in the right place at the right time.

The whole trip took 54 days, but there was a significant amount of preparation that had to take place beforehand. One of the hardest parts of the pre-event preparation was the acquisition of the travel visas needed from the different embassies in London. Apart from the huge number of forms that had to be completed, the final part of the visa process often takes more than a week, during which time your passport is at the embassy and not in your possession, so it is impossible to travel.

Fortunately, I had two passports for precisely this reason, but with the number of countries we were travelling through, it was a logistical challenge to have the right visa in the right passport at the right time, particularly as we didn't have every visa before we left. Because of this, I had to miss out on a section in Russia because my Russian visa was in a passport that was in the Indian embassy when the vehicles crossed from the Crimea into Russia. I had to fly back to London to collect it, after which I joined the rest of the convoy back in Russia for the entry into Kazakhstan.

"Although it's only 12 years since the Silk Trail expedition took place, it would be impossible to do the same route now. The Silk Trail was an amazing adventure that I feel very fortunate to have been part of. It was an honour to have been the person capturing these moments for posterity, and I'm very grateful for the opportunity."



The magnitude of the scenery dwarfs the hybrid convoy

destination, the city of Mumbai.'

On 14 October the convoy reached Mumbai, and JLR issued a triumphant and final press release on the Silk Trail 2013 Expedition. "Three Range Rover Diesel Hybrid prototypes have completed the ultimate engineering sign-off test by traversing 13 countries over 53 days from Solihull, UK, to Mumbai, India. It is the world's first ever hybrid expedition along the Silk Trail and one of the boldest driving adventures ever pursued by Land Rover.

'Hostile conditions on the route included asphalt roads riddled with vast and deep potholes, dusty desert trails in 43°C heat and numerous miles of mud and gravel tracks and cattle trails. Seven consecutive days were spent at altitudes between 11,000 and 17,648 feet.

'Technical setbacks reflected the roughness of the road surfaces: 15 punctures among the expedition's three Range Rover Hybrids and four support vehicles, four wheels damaged by deep potholes, and four cracked windscreens.'

Very few Range Rover Hybrids of either model were sold, and there are stories of potential buyers being actively dissuaded from doing so by

their dealer. Building a Range Rover Hybrid was something the company needed to show that it could do, and The Silk Trail Expedition was very successful in drawing attention to the new vehicles and demonstrating in great style that, despite the then new-fangled tech, they could still do what all Land Rovers are expected to do. Selling Range Rover Hybrids at scale was probably not something that JLR particularly wanted to do, a view reinforced by the fact that there was never a petrol version.

Dunsfold's Prototype 2 still starts, runs and drives, after a fashion, although Philip Bashall tells me that he thinks the battery pack has reached the end of its expected ten-year life expectancy. If you own a Range Rover Hybrid you might be interested to learn that JLR doesn't hold stocks of replacement battery packs but you can order one from the factory for £21k (yes, you read that right), doubtless considerably more than the car's worth. There are specialists who might be able to rebuild your battery pack for around £6 to £10k, which is still a very expensive repair. My guess is that, sadly, most early Hybrids will be scrapped when the battery pack fails.

