

# Highwaymen of the wild west

The injustice of informal tollgates in Cameroon was a bitter pill to swallow for judge Kees van Dijkhorst – and that is without considering the disaster of what was supposed to pass for roads.

**W**e are veterans of dozens of roadblocks in Angola, the DRC, the Congo and Gabon, we reassured ourselves – what could possibly go wrong on Cameroon's roads? Well, quite a bit...

We encounter the first roadblock 10km after the Gabon-Cameroon border. It comprises policemen, customs officials and "crocodile jaws" – thick planks with long protruding nails. Lain across the road to stop traffic, it is extremely effective. Our documents are examined leisurely, but there are no problems.

Just a kilometre further there are more crocodile jaws, and a dinkum toll official collecting 500 CFA francs (about R8) for using the road.

Then the blackmailers at Zamakoé – two men from the *Prévention Routière* (traffic control) – pull us over. The offence? When he pulled off the road just now, our friend Philippe failed to use his indicator. The fine? 74 000 francs (about R1 250).

One of them takes Philippe's driver's licence, stretches himself out on a bench under a lean-to and, extremely leisurely, starts writing out a so-called summons – on a standard writing pad, without carbon paper and without indicating a fine amount, court or any place of payment.

Over the next two hours there's a heated row between him and Philippe, with the traffic controller repeatedly emphasising how much he just *loves* tourists and how his president encourages tourism.

Philippe points out to him that his colleague at the roadblock is waving through apparently unroadworthy vehicles. No response.

Eventually I have had enough of the farce and I ask the man where the court is, as I want to pay *now*. He mentions a place about 100km back.

Impossible, as we have to get to the port city of Douala where we have to meet my son-in-law Thys and grandchild Nonna the next day.

When he eventually asks me what I am offering,

we settle on 10 000 francs (about R167). Obviously, I don't receive a receipt.

As an impotent goodbye, I threaten to report him (I demanded to know his name, rank and personnel number, as I wanted to report him for blackmail, but the information proved to be false.)

Yes, frequent roadblocks are exhausting and shorten your fuse, but little did we know worse was yet to come.

## Detour or no tour

From here things improve. Eleven days and a climb on Mount Cameroon and a visit to numerous crater lakes later we are in Bamenda, ready to tackle the last about 200km west to the border with Nigeria.

Having only started falling in August, the rains are later than expected and seemingly endless – with disastrous consequences for the roads.

However, our biggest fear is for the consequences of a mini war that had erupted between Cameroon and Nigeria the previous week. This incident took place on our route, and even though the Nigerian president has apologised, itchy fingers may still be curled around triggers.

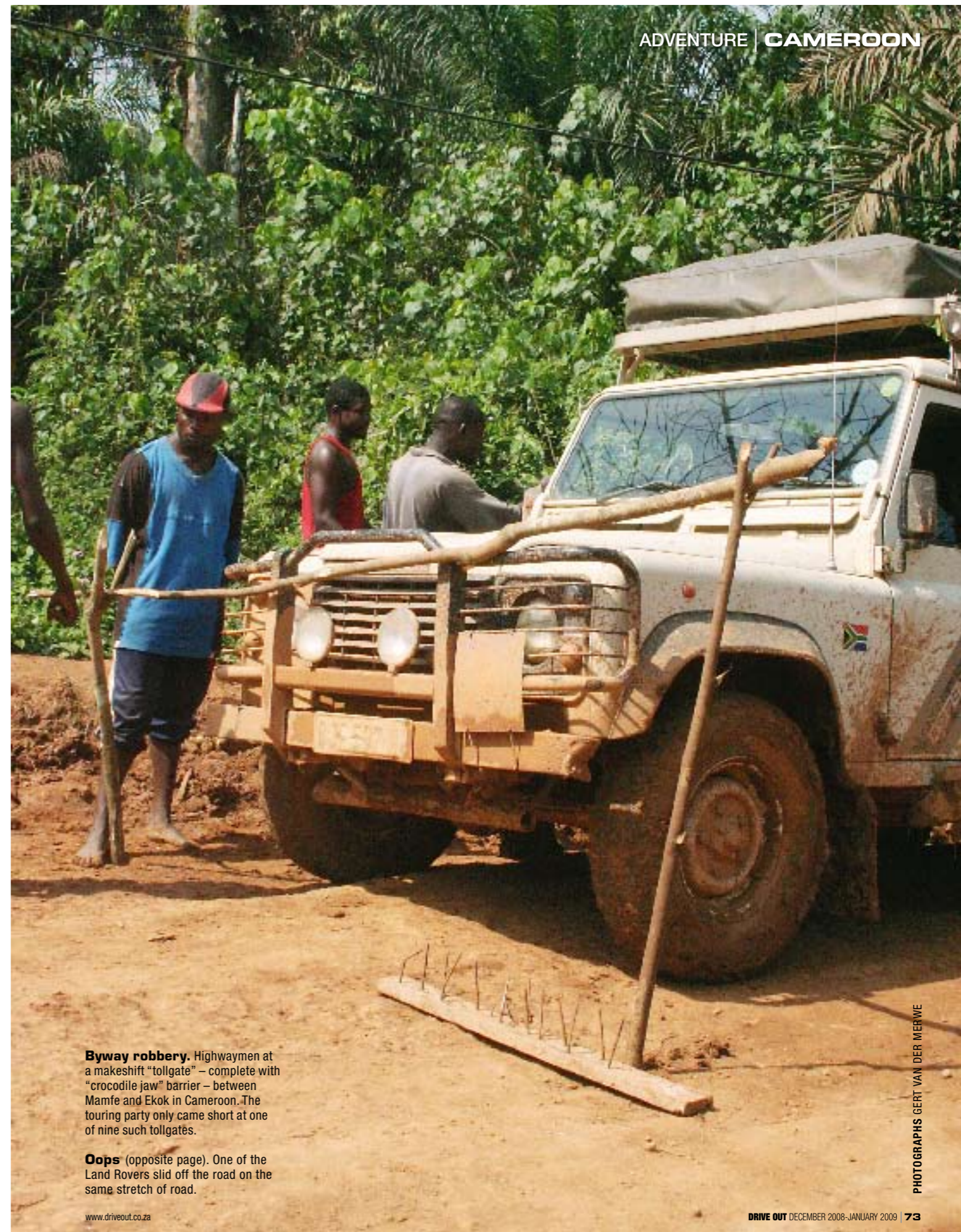
The fact that the army also chooses to have a parade in Bamenda does little to help speed up our progress.

After 45km, this "main road" to Nigeria becomes a dirt road, which deteriorates rapidly. The road is basically a mud pool – churned out so deep by trucks we keep on hanging on the central ridge – and ditches as deep as the Land Rover. We get stuck often, my bull bar gets severely bent, mud clogs the exhaust and ants attack us when we stop for lunch.

Later a fellow traveller tells us his average speed from the Nigerian border was 12 km/h.

We obviously aren't going to reach Mamfé, the next large-ish town before dark, so we overnight under a lean-to on the roadside.

It took us all day to drive a measly 113km. >



**Byway robbery.** Highwaymen at a makeshift "tollgate" – complete with "crocodile jaw" barrier – between Mamfé and Ekok in Cameroon. The touring party only came short at one of nine such tollgates.

**Oops** (opposite page). One of the Land Rovers slid off the road on the same stretch of road.



**Going down ...** One of the Land Rovers seems to drown in a river of mud on the road between Etoko and Mamfe.

PHOTOGRAPHS GERT VAN DER MERWE

The next day we continue driving on the most ghastly of roads, probably the worst of the whole tour. The dongas are as deep as the roofs of the lorries that are stuck in it. (In retrospect, I wonder if the military operations of the previous week hadn't contributed to the conditions.)

Traffic has no option but to plough through deep mud around the dongas. These detours are slippery, sloping and dangerous.

This is how we mission on. After Mamfé the road is drier, but the dongas so deep one is forced to use the detours.

Local "entrepreneurs" show remarkable initiative in taking advantage of these detours: they rig up informal roadblocks and demand toll – obviously from tourists only, not the locals.

#### Pay up, pal

The first informal "toll gate" has crocodile jaws. A big, angry face appears in the window. "Deez divation. You pay. Everybody pay," he grunts.

In other words, we have built this detour and therefore you have to pay. This is obviously ludicrous – the detour hasn't been built, but has simply been created by vehicles; it's not on the highwaymen's land; and toll is not demanded of everyone, only of the poor cash cows called tourists.

The wounds inflicted to our egos by the *Prévention Routière* are still smarting and therefore this attempted extortion is not received lightly.

The inevitable noisy and overheated verbal exchange follows without prospects of a happy ending.

Suddenly my daughter Adrie pulls the crocodile jaws away from in front of one of the Land Rover's wheels and, with an almighty heave, tosses it into a mud pool. Philippe and I charge through in the first Land Rover, but the highwaymen have a whole arsenal of jaws and produce three more that are immediately thrown in front

of Thys' wheels in the second Land Rover. An enraged Thys wants to charge over the jaws, but I stop him.

Things turn ugly and the angry parties come to blows – fists and boots fly.

A casualty on either side will have serious consequences for our trip, so I try – in vain – to cool tempers.

In desperation I pay the required 1 000 francs (about R17) to a dignified spectator, and with his help we separate the fighting parties, but not before they charge at each other a few more times.

At the next eight roadblocks, the "enemy" are less prepared – they don't have crocodile jaws,

**Ultimately, there is no dashing across the continent – Europeans may have watches, but Africans own time. Viva Africa!**

**Hard graft.** Extricating this stuck truck on the road between Etoko and Mamfé meant the driver and his crew had to dig up hard, dry soil and dump it at its wheels.

only beams. There are also not that many highwaymen. The pain of the preceding humiliation has made us determined, and what's more, we have a numerical superiority.

We also have a plan now: I video the toll gate and tell the highwaymen their operation is illegal, because the mayor of Mamfé says so.

While I distract them, Thys and Gert slip unseen around the other side, lift the boom or remove the beams and throw it far to one side. While the dumbfounded highwaymen are still dazed, the Land Rovers charge through. They are so confused by the element of surprise and our numerical

superiority, we pass before they can regroup.

It gives a rare feeling of satisfaction only to come short at one of nine tollgates.

#### A Carnet what?

At the border the bureaucracy delays (and frustrates) us for hours. First a customs official on the Cameroon side have to go look for his boss to unlock the required stamps. Then immigration officials check and write up the lot all over again. And everyone takes his task sooo seriously.

Little did we know what was waiting on the Nigerian side.

In a tiny immigration office, three officials sit in a row. The



first man copies all the passport and visa details in a book – painfully slowly. Then, equally laboriously, a woman writes the whole caboodle down in another book. The last of the trinity studies and controls the lot once more, and eventually stamps our passports.

Across the road there is a booth with no lights – the police office. A policeman holds the passports in the light outside the office window and calls the contents out to his surly colleague at

the table who copies everything in the near darkness.

The customs official on duty doesn't have his stamps, he first has to go look for it. In his years as a customs official, this is his first acquaintance with a *Carnet de Passage*. I have to teach him how it works, which takes a long time. Eventually he finds his stamps and four hours after arriving at the border, we are allowed to drive on.

Ultimately, there's no dashing across the continent – Europeans

**Playing with fire** (clockwise from left). The sun sets over Mile Six beach, one of the beautiful beaches north of Limbe in Western Cameroon; Landwards, visitors to Mile Six beach are rewarded with views over Mount Cameroon, an active volcano near the Gulf of Guinea that last erupted in 2000; The Manenguba crater lake at Bangem, 100 km from Kumba, Cameroon; The above-cloud-level view from a hut on Mount Cameroon, which rises to 4 040 m above sea-level.

may have watches, but Africans own time.

Viva Africa!

*\* For three months Kees van Dijkhorst, his daughter Adrie van der Merwe, her husband, Thys, their children Gert and Nonna, and a friend, Philippe Zilliox, travelled through Namibia, Angola, the DRC, the Congo, Gabon, Cameroon, Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal in two Land Rovers.*

PHOTOGRAPHS KEES VAN DIJKHORST



**Arrested, but what the heck ...**

**Cameroon isn't all bad.**

Don't take a jaundiced view of Cameroon just because of this story – it was only on entering and exiting that we were fleeced at roadblocks and harried at informal roadblocks.

Cameroon is a beautiful, green country with mountains, crater lakes, palm trees and bananas, and a stunning coastline. The people – even the police (in general) – are very friendly.

**How good or bad were the roads?** Some were good, some worse, frequently extremely bad,

sometimes impassable.

**What were the frustrations?**

Roadblocks, attempted blackmail, blackmail, arrest, border post delays, muddy roads, getting stuck, mosquitoes and malaria, language barriers, and breakdowns – all unavoidably part of a journey through Africa.

- We were arrested in die DRC and held up with AK-47s for camping within sight of a hydroelectric scheme.
- At Timbuktu, a ferry captain wanted to dump us in the middle of the Niger River after we refused to pay his unreasonably increased tariff.
- Despite prophylaxis, Adrie

and Thys went down with severe malaria in Benin. They recovered after treatment.

- Mechanical problems in our Land Rovers included an alternator, starter, air-conditioners and radios all breaking, clogged fuel filters, and brake pads that had to be replaced twice. We also had 13 flat tyres and one tyre was written off.
- To top it all, after being shipped from Dakar to Walvis Bay, the Land Rovers ended up in Spain.

**What will remain with you?**

Yellow-brown grassy plains stretching up to blue-purple mountains; white-bordered,

dark thunderclouds billowing against the bright blue sky; naked baobabs silhouetted against purple-red sunsets; deep-green rain forests with peeping monkeys and cawing green parrots; rusty shipwrecks on expanses of beaches with crashing waves; mighty rivers flowing seawards; the kaleidoscope of history casting its warped shadow over the present; the people of Africa – dignified in their poverty, friendly and obliging, divergent in religion, dress and language; and the evenings around the campfire under a starry heaven.