

INTO ASIA

John Pearson embarks on a 5000-mile journey to remote mountain areas in Greece and Turkey, visiting places package holidaymakers never see

PHOTOS: PAT SUMMERS AND PAUL BLACKBURN

It's only a short ferry ride across the Bosphorus Strait in Istanbul, but it's a big step between continents for me and my 110. I've embarked from the European side of this historic city and 20 minutes later docked in Asia.

Behind us is Istanbul's unmistakable skyline, with the spectacular architecture of its Topkapi Palace along with the domes and minarets of countless mosques.

This narrow strip of water between the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea has been of

huge military and commercial importance since Roman times – when Istanbul was called Constantinople. Even before then, the ancient Silk Road passed through here, providing a trade route between China and Europe.

I'm not going that far, but my journey is over 5000 miles through France, Italy, Greece and Turkey. I'll be using seven ferries and seeing a fascinating mix of terrain, places and cultures.

I'm travelling with a group of enthusiasts on a reccé trip led by Paul Blackburn of OneLife Adventure. We meet at a campsite in San Marino

Days one and two

Igoumenitsa to Polikastano

Highlight: remote wild camping

We're in Northern Greece after catching a ferry from Italy to Igoumenitsa. After heading 50 miles east to Ionnina, we go north on narrow mountain roads. Just past the small town of Vovousa we turn onto a mountain track and wild camp in a rocky clearing, by the Ados river.

I'm with a small group of LRO readers. There's the Tangiers Orange Disco 1 of Ralph and Belinda Hardwick, Nick and Karen Archer are in their Td5 110, Jeff and Irene Stevenson have a Disco 2 and Ken Illingworth is in his 200Tdi 110.

Group leader Paul Blackburn launched OneLife 11 years ago using an ex-Camel Trophy 110, but in recent years he's preferred a Toyota.

The next day we continue northwards into the Pindos mountains, climbing a track through mixed woodland. There are some tough rocky sections and it's surprisingly slippery in places – suggesting recent heavy rain. Then, at 1390m(4560ft) we turn a corner to find the track has disappeared down the mountainside and we have an eight-mile drive back down to Vovousa.

After the detour we head north on gravel tracks through picturesque valleys that take us parallel to the Albanian border. We turn north-east into the Vorio Boio mountains, climbing to over 1400m (4593ft). The tracks here are mega slippery, with some hazardous deep washouts.

We plan to wild camp high up the mountain, but the track is too slippery, so we turn around.

I was at the back of the convoy, so I'm now leading – easing down very carefully in low-range first gear. Going alongside one scarily long, deep washout I feel my Defender starting to slip sideways. Dropping into the deep gaping hole could be seriously damaging, but somehow my tyres find enough grip and I'm through. Jeff Stevenson also eases past it in his Disco 2, but Ralph Hardwick is not so fortunate – his Disco 1 slips in with a worryingly loud crunch. It's a heavy Land Rover in a deep hole that is going to be tough to recover, especially as it's getting dark.

Fortunately everyone works together as a team – with shovels, winches and head-torches. Eventually we get all the vehicles through and are relieved to find a nearby clearing to camp.

Days three and four

Polikastano to west of Polikastro

Highlight: finding bear poo

Next morning Ralph gives his Discovery a checkover. It has some wounded panels, but it's not seriously damaged and he can continue.

After a stop in Neapoli to top up with provisions, we go north on the A29 before turning east just before Kastoria onto more mountain tracks. The soil is a vibrant red and the hedgerows are rich with berries.

Some of the lanes look like ones you'd find in

England. But what you wouldn't get at home is the pile of fresh bear poo that we find in the middle of one track. Brown bears inhabit these mountains and the skat contains evidence they are feasting well on the fruits of the hedgerows.

At the town of Edessa we go north, finding a clearing for wild camping. A local shepherd pulls up in his pickup; does he have a problem with us camping here? No, he's generously brought a large bag of chestnuts to roast on our campfire.

After a few miles of tarmac the following day we turn into the rocky tracks of the beech-forested Paiko mountains. There's some hunting going on and a man at the trackside in camo gear looks spookily like Rambo. Complete with a large calibre rifle over his shoulder.

Later in the afternoon we get into an area of forest where new tracks are being bulldozed into the mountainsides; the going is slow, with huge rocks and deep gloopy mud. It's like we've driven back in time to a section of the Camel Trophy.

Days five to eight

Polikastro to Istanbul

Highlight: Gallipoli Peninsula

After wild camping in a lovely scenic location we visit the bustling town of Polikastro for groceries and some tasty pastry triangles filled with feta cheese and spinach. They're still warm and we can't resist scoffing them immediately.

This is a mainly road driving day. We pass Serres

and then visit the Alistratis caves, south-west of Drama, viewing some dramatic stalactites, stalagmites and other rock formations.

At Drama we drive north into the Rodopi mountains, wild camping in a clearing among tall, dark pine trees, 3km from the Bulgarian border. It's at 1298m (4258ft) and is cold and damp – but we soon warm up by our campfire.

Next morning we drop down the track, back into beech forests, then take a bumpy, narrow ascent to 1500m (4921ft). The tracks are flanked by huge piles of logs stockpiled for winter.

Later in the day we pass through a vast tobacco-growing area. In fact, every available piece of land is used to grow the crop and we can't find anywhere to wild camp. It's getting late, so we book into a hotel on the outskirts of Xantia, feasting on souvlaki (meat skewers), washed down by cold locally-brewed beer.

Paul decides that we've driven more than enough tracks through dense forests, so the next day we are cutting short the northern Greece part of this recce and heading for Turkey.

With the extra time we'll have we're going to visit the Gallipoli Peninsula – the historic WW1 location for what was ultimately a bloody and unsuccessful invasion by Britain and its Allies.

First we have to get through the border. Although western Turkey is in Europe, it's not in the EU, so the border crossing procedure takes longer than between EU countries. You also have to buy temporary vehicle insurance for €50.

Eventually we are able to pass under the 'Welcome to Turkey' sign and go out onto the appropriately numbered D110 road. At Keşan we turn right onto the 550 towards Gallipoli.

Looking at my map it's easy to understand why this was such a strategically important location for the Allies to capture. To the east of it is the narrow Dardanelles Strait – which ships had to pass through to get to the Sea of Marmara and Constantinople (now Istanbul).

The aim of the Allies was to knock the Turkish Ottoman Empire – an ally of Germany – out of the war and open a supply route to Russia through the Black Sea. Sadly, it resulted in the deaths of many thousands of British, Australian, New Zealand and, of course, Turkish soldiers.

We visit several of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries in the area, some of which are in peaceful locations by the beaches where the soldiers landed – and many died. The beach now known as Anzac Cove is where the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps arrived on April 25 1915, and that date is now a national day of commemoration in both countries.

'Going alongside one scarily long, deep washout I feel my Defender starting to slip sideways'

GREECE NEED TO KNOW

- Language: Greek, but English spoken widely in tourist areas.
- Currency: Euro (€1= 71p).
- Jabs: None compulsory, but make sure your tetanus is up to date.
- Cost of fuel: 75-85p/litre.
- Time difference to UK? 2hrs ahead.
- Drive on the right.
- Camping: campinggreece.gr.
- Food to try: Greek salad, souvlaki (meat on skewer), tzatziki dip with bread/pitta, spanakopita (flaky pastry triangles with cheese and spinach filling). Fresh fish by the coast, of course.



Picturesque beach with a bloody past



G4 Defender drives a Camel-style section





TURKEY NEED TO KNOW

- Language: Turkish, English spoken in major towns and tourist areas.
- Currency: Turkish Lira (TL1 = 23p)
- Jobs: None compulsory, but make sure your tetanus is up to date.
- Cost of fuel: Diesel 89p/litre.
- Time difference to UK? 2 hours ahead.
- Drive on the right.
- Camping: en.camping.info/turkey (plenty of sites, but doesn't include the one we camped at on V-Beach). Note, we mostly wild-camped.
- Food: Şiş kebab (meat on skewer), meze (a range of small dishes), köfte (meat balls), baklava (flaky pastry with ground pistachios and honey/syrup – widely available from grocers and bakeries). Fresh fish by the coast.
- Drink: raki; Turkish wines are good; Efes beer; çay (pronounced chai – Turkish tea which everyone drinks socially).
- Which maps? Turkey Marco Polo, 1:800,000, stanfords.com.
- How we got there: Dover to Calais with Dover to Calais with P&O Ferries, poferris.com. 23 sailings daily for the 90-minute crossing on five ferries. Prices from £39 for up to nine passengers. On busy crossings the extra £12 for the haven of peacefulness in club class is worthwhile. All other ferries were booked by OnLife Adventure.



110 with roof tent was perfect for this trip



Then we continue to the very tip of the peninsula, to what was codenamed V-Beach at Helles, a small cove where British troops invaded. We stay at the basic campsite by a taverna on what is now an idyllic spot, with V-Beach CWGC cemetery near the water's edge.

We watch dolphins in the bay as the sun goes down, then enjoy an excellent meal of mezes followed by fresh fish the taverna.

Our journey then continues around the coast to Istanbul. It's Europe's most populated city and getting into the historic centre takes ages through heavy traffic. The plan is to camp in a car park next to the Ahirkapi Park leisure complex, by the waterside – within easy walking distance of all the major visitor attractions. Unfortunately, although the car park location is good, the leisure centre is being redeveloped, scuppering our plans to use its facilities. Instead, there is just one toilet at the car park – which is undoubtedly among the top three most stinky, unhygienic loos I've ever experienced. To make matters worse, local youngsters use the car park as a meeting place, playing loud music until 4.00am. When that stops there some dogs playing football with a plastic bottle, followed by the early morning call to prayer from the many

mosques. Sleep, what sleep? We book into an inexpensive hotel nearby for the second night.

Days 9 to 11

Istanbul to Göynük

Highlight: historic Istanbul

Historic Istanbul is a wonderful place to visit, with so many magnificent attractions, like the Blue Mosque, Hagia Sophia, Topkapi Palace, Basilica Cistern and Grand Bazaar.

Movie-makers love the city, and James Bond has visited three times. The opening scenes from Skyfall were filmed here; Daniel Craig's Bond rides a motorcycle over the Grand Bazaar's red-tiled rooftops while Moneypenney chases through traffic in a Defender 110 double-cab.

Many of the famous locations appear in From Russia with Love, and Sean Connery's Bond rows through the Basilica Cistern, the underground reservoir that used to supply the city's water.

Then in The World Is Not Enough, Pierce Brosnan's Bond thwarts a plan to explode a nuclear bomb in Istanbul and M is imprisoned in the Maiden's Tower in the Bosphorus.

It's the Bosphorus that we're crossing on the

next stage of this adventure. There is a bridge, but it seems more appropriate to go by boat.

I'd like to say that a change of continent brings us a change of scenery, but driving into the heavily forested mountains south of Düzce is very similar to driving in Northern Greece.

It's pouring with rain as we wild camp near the 1830m (6003ft) Elmacik Dağı (mountain). I'm thankful that my 110 is kitted-out for bad weather with Hannibal awning and the touring kit that attaches under my roof tent to provide respite from the rain.

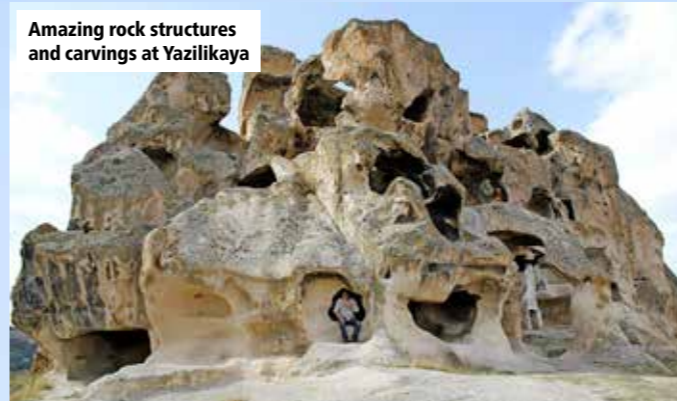
The weather is still misty and gloomy as we continue the next day along forest tracks lined by huge gunneras (like giant rhubarb).

Heading into the Kapiorman mountains north-west of Göynük, we find that the tracks are mega slippery. One is washed away, so we take an alternative. Then, after a few miles this track has also been trashed by the extreme weather and we have to turn back. It's pouring with rain and the surface is deteriorating by the minute.

One hillside has become treacherous and we spend a couple of hours winching the convoy through. I'm quite relieved to reach the tarmac.

It's getting late and there's nowhere to camp near Göynük, so we look for a hotel – and end up

Amazing rock structures and carvings at Yazilikaya



renting a delightful 200 year-old house for the night from the hotel manager. It's equipped with traditional furniture and carpets – and we love it.

Days 12 to 14

Göynük to Lake Beyşehir

Highlight: Midas City

Our vehicles are filthy after yesterday, but there's a car wash outside the town and the guys there do a very thorough job of power washing off the tenacious mud. Afterwards the owner insists upon us having a cup of çay (chai) with him.

On the move again we cross the Köroğlu mountains, a range that runs 400km across Turkey from the coast to the north of the capital Ankara. The soil is a palette of colours – red, brown, green, grey, beige. And the terrain is more open and rocky, with big views – more like we had anticipated of Turkey.

Our campsite is in an open clearing in dry grassland off some mountain tracks near the

Türkmen Dağı, south of Eskişehir. It reminds me of the Serengeti and I wouldn't be surprised to see an elephant wander across the horizon.

Sitting in a remote location like this at the end of the day, cold beer in hand while watching the sun dip behind distant hills is just perfect.

Next day we drive more mountain tracks before passing through an agricultural area. It's rich with bird life of different kinds, and a large eagle takes off from a tree at the trackside.

Apparently people have been living in this area since 2000BC, with significant expansion

'After a few miles this track has also been trashed by the extreme weather and we turn back'

by the Phrygians around the eighth century BC under King Midas. Now whether it's that King Midas with the golden touch I'm unable to ascertain – because there were three of them over the centuries. What I do know is they were industrious, because at Yazilikaya there's the wonderful historic sixth century BC Midas City hewn into nearby cliffs, with a 17-metre high rock-cut monument towering over the area.

There is also a necropolis, a cistern carved into the rocks and a stone altar. Tonight's camp is among giant boulders near Lake Emre. It's a peaceful location, but several of the group have their sleep disturbed by a helicopter circling overhead during the night. Is it a military one checking us out?

Sadly, the next day is Saturday October 10 – when tragedy strikes Turkey. In Ankara – just 170 miles to our east – two bombs explode outside the main railway station, with a death toll of 102 people and over 400 serious injuries. The government declares three days of mourning and the distinctive Turkish flags – red with white





Immense views from Karakus mountains



Aphrodisias – the best ancient city we visited



110 was a tight fit on Bodrum ferry

star and crescent – are flying at half-mast. We stock up with provisions in the small town of Ihsaniye, pointing and mooing/baaing at various pieces of meat in a butcher's shop to overcome our language deficiencies. The grocer next door has some trays of the incredibly sweet baklava pastries, which are delicious.

After turning south off the D300 at Çay we progress through an increasingly picturesque valley. Then we climb into the Karakus mountains, which are the most spectacular so far. There are dramatic granite formations and exhilarating steep drops to the side of the track as we crest the pass at 1983m (6505ft).

We descend into a vast valley towards the town of Yalvaç, then continue south into the edge of the Dedegöl mountains in Turkey's lake district. Once again we meet a dead end, and as it's getting late we camp in a convenient clearing near the town of Belcigez, west of Lake Beyşehir.

Days 15 to 18

Lake Beyşehir to Bodrum

Highlight: ancient Aphrodisias

We're late getting away the next day because Ken Illingworth's offside front hub bearings are disintegrating. He has a spare set, so Paul replaces them – while Ken tries not to worry about what could have happened if it had

'There are dramatic granite formations and exhilarating steep drops to the side of the track'

broken on a track with a sheer drop to the side.

We continue on a series of tracks before getting onto the D330, stopping for lunch at the lovely Lake Eğirdir, which is a haven for wildlife.

Then we climb a steep road with numerous hairpins to the ancient ruins of the Roman city of Sagalassos. This was abandoned after several earthquakes and lay undisturbed until 1990. Then excavation started by a team from a Belgian university – and they've done a remarkable job of exposing many significant monuments and buildings.

Our journey the next day continues east, crossing the Sogut mountains towards Pamukkale. This spectacular natural wonder has an entire hillside covered by white carbonate minerals, like a giant iced bun.

There's also an adjacent ancient city, Hierapolis, and the whole area is a World Heritage Site. It's also close enough to Turkey's beach resorts to

attract coachloads of day-trippers. Which, after spending a lot of time in remote areas, is quite a shock for us to be mingling with sunburnt and tattoo-covered holidaymakers wearing tee-shirts, shorts and flip-flops.

The plan is to camp – until we meet Hassan Ali, the owner of Hotel Dort Mevsim. His room rates are similar to the campsite fees, so we book in – and enjoy a hot shower followed by cold beer and a hearty mixed grill cooked by his wife.

Continuing south-west from Pamukkale we go through a large area of cotton fields. Then we're onto some dusty tracks through hills before arriving at another ancient city, Aphrodisias. Named after Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, this is the best we've visited. There are some wonderful buildings like the stadium, baths, council chamber, citadel, theatre and temple.

There's also an exceptional museum packed with artefacts and sculptures. But my favourite is an exhibition of remarkable photos taken here in 1958 by photojournalist Ara Güler – when locals of the town of Geyre were living among and using the ruins in their everyday lives.

After this treat, we continue south into the Gølgeli mountains, savouring the rugged terrain and big views. We wild camp in a clearing at 1295m (4248ft) then continue heading west. One track takes us to a fire-watching tower at 1758m (5767ft), where the two men there insist upon us stopping for a glass of çay.

Our final drive in Turkey is along the spectacular south coast road to Bodrum. This bustling seaside resort is a dramatic contrast to the remote, sparsely populated Turkey that we've been experiencing over the past 11 days.

Days 19 to 21

Bodrum to Patra

Highlight: Greek salad, 'shrimps' and the best chips in the world

We split into two groups of three vehicles to catch ferries to our next destination, the Greek island of Kos. I'm leading one group to the ferry that departs near Bodrum castle.

But things go awry. The ferry crew say they can only get my vehicle on today and Jeff/Irene and Nick/Karen will have to travel tomorrow.

It's a tight manoeuvre getting onto the ferry. The deckhand waves me forward, but my partner Pat shouts stop, as my roof tent is fouling against the metal roof. I drop the tyre pressures, which provides just enough clearance, although the back of the 110 is still hanging out over the ocean and they can't close the ramp.

It's a relief to get into Kos, where we drive along the northern coast to camp by the Dolphin Bar. It's an idyllic location by the Aegean, and the food is exceptional. Owners Dimitrios and Christos serve up a wonderful lunch of chilled beer, fresh Greek salad, the biggest, most succulent 'shrimps' I've ever seen – and what I vote to be the best chips in the world. Later Pat and I take a swim in the still-warm sea.

The two vehicles we left behind arrive the next morning, in plenty of time to catch the overnight Blue Star Lines ferry to Piraeus, near Athens.

As we're arriving close to the Greek capital it would be rude not to visit the Acropolis, the historic temple complex that was built by the ancient Greeks in the 5th century BC. The most famous building, the Parthenon, is currently undergoing restoration, with scaffolding around its ancient columns, but it's worth the walk up here just for the 360-degree views over the city.

From Athens we drive north-west to the Parnassos mountains. Our final wild camp is near the village of Agia Marina, and the next day we continue further into the mountains, crossing into the Gion range. It's cloudy, but we climb above it to 1700m (5577ft). Up here, rugged limestone peaks are highlighted in the bright sunshine, the fresh mountain air is perfumed by wild herbs and we're treated to wonderful views.

It's a delightful mountain drive to finish the adventure before catching our next overnight ferry from Patra to Aonconca – followed by the journey back through Italy and France to the UK.

We've visited historic Istanbul and Athens, driven scenic mountain tracks to out-of-the-way villages – and been delighted by the friendly welcome we've received from the locals.

We've had çay at almost 1800m with the fire watching men, we've stayed in a 200 year-old house, enjoyed wonderful food, wild camped in wonderful remote locations, visited significant ancient monuments – and enjoyed the company of a group of like-minded people. It's been another excellent adventure.

LRO

ONELIFE ADVENTURE

Paul Blackburn's OneLife Adventure runs a variety of expeditions in North Africa, Europe, Iceland and the UK. New for 2016 is a four- or six-week southern Africa drive, visiting Namibia, Botswana and South Africa. There's no Greece/Turkey trip in 2016, but OneLife is operating an Adventure Anytime programme for Greek adventures with our old friend Kostas Liapis of Off 4x4. Many of OneLife's 2016 trips are filling up, but Paul tells me that there are still some spaces on his Western Sahara adventure in March/April. See onelifeadventure.co.uk.



Toyota and tortoise fan Paul

