

Have wheels, will travel

Driving across Africa is a challenge for the able-bodied, let alone for a tetraplegic. Franca Davenport meets a man on a mission

The road journey down the length of Africa from Cairo to Cape Town is notorious. Ever since it was first achieved in the 1920s, it has provided its assailants with a range of physical, mental and mechanical challenges. However, for Colin Javens and his "Driving Home" expedition there is one important extra challenge to be overcome – he is tetraplegic and usually confined to a wheelchair.

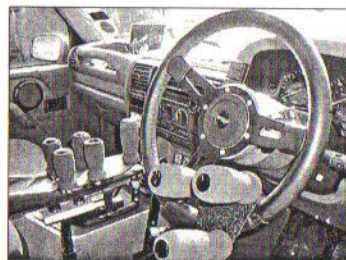
"It's not that I'm out to prove a point," Javens says. "I just want to illustrate what's possible with the technology available today and I want to raise funds for spinal research."

Javens has wanted to do the Cairo-to-Cape-Town trip since he was six. He originally planned to do it at the age of 19 but was persuaded to wait until after university. However, in his first year at agricultural college he seriously damaged three of his vertebrae when diving into the sea to rescue a friend's binoculars. The accident left him almost completely paralysed from the shoulders down.

Although his biceps are still functional, his triceps are not and he has minimal movement in his arms and hands. He drives an adapted Transit van, which has remote-control doors and a lift that allows him to wheel himself straight into the van and drive from his chair. "I don't need help doing anything," he says, "which means driving is the one part of my life that I can have full control over."

Although the van is extremely proficient, the Driving Home expedition demands a very different vehicle. "Colin's van is completely electronic," says the team mechanic, Richard Wood. "Which means it isn't easy to fix in the middle of the Sudan, especially as I'm no expert in electronics."

Colin's vehicle of choice would have been a Land Rover 110 Defender but unfortunately there is no automatic version. The team did consider fitting an automatic gearbox but eventually decided to opt for a Land Rover Discovery 300 TDI. "We know that there are plenty



of those in Africa," says Wood "It's a very simple engine to fix, and it's very reliable."

Before the vehicle was adapted, Javens underwent a strength assessment. His left arm is weaker than his right and has no wrist extension. With this hand he operates the throttle and brake by using a horizontal lever that is pushed forward to stop the car and pulled backwards to accelerate. He uses his right hand to steer, placing it in what is known as a tetra grip to keep his wrist in place. The steering has also been lightened so it doesn't require as much effort.

"At the beginning, we found the steering wheel was too big to turn the last few degrees," says Javens, "so we replaced it with a smaller wheel. It's detachable so makes it easier for the guys to get me in and out of the Land Rover with my gangly legs!"

The gears are automatic and there is a small cup on the shift lever so Javens can move it. Beside

"I just want to illustrate what's possible"

his left elbow is a touch pad that he nudges to operate ancillaries such as indicators, wipers and horn – an absolute essential in Africa. The different functions are selected depending on how long the touch pad is depressed and a beeper unit tells Javens which he has chosen: one beep for left indicator, two beeps for right, four beeps for the horns and so on. The handbrake is a flip-switch on the dashboard.

"It's just so complete now," says Javens. "In the van, I get a serious amount of kangarooing because it is so sensitive but with the Defender it's just so smooth. And I love driving from a proper seat rather than a wheelchair – it gives me so much more support."

Originally, Javens was going to have a hydraulic seat, which would have enabled him to make the transfer directly from his chair, but the Discovery is one of the few cars that cannot be fitted with the device. Instead, he is lifted out of his chair and into the vehicle by a hoist and sling that extend from the roof rack. "It's not very dignified," he says. "But it does the job."

The vehicle will also carry a rugged laptop computer with built-in GPS, so the team can send images back to the UK, while an interactive map will trace their position. Outside the vehicle, Javens will be testing the prototype of an off-road wheelchair, complete with deep-tread tyres, disc brakes and suspension. "It's pretty cool," he says. "In fact I might just do the whole expedition in that!"

In terms of the route itself, the team is clear that it is not out to break any records. They are planning to drive a maximum of seven to eight hours a day, leaving

plenty of time to set up camp and get a good night's sleep. "I think, with all the risks we've got, we don't want anything going wrong," says Javens. "And Africa provides enough challenges without having to go looking for them."

The challenge will start on Monday when the team sets off from Stoke Mandeville hospital, where Javens was hospitalised after his accident, and which is one of the beneficiaries of the funds raised by the expedition. They will drive to Italy, cross over to Tunisia and drive along the east coast to Kenya and on to Cape Town.

Javens spent the first six years of his life in Kenya, and the team are hoping to be there for Christmas and New Year. "Although, if we're still in Ethiopia," says Javens, "we might have to get some crackers sent out..."

For more information on the Driving Home expedition go to www.drivinghome.co.uk.

Mobility here we come

Erin Baker finds a new guide for disabled drivers

Get Motoring, a new guide to motoring costs for the disabled, has been published by Radar, the disability rights campaigning organisation. The booklet outlines the stages when considering buying or leasing a new car and explains the financing options such as tax arrangements that make the best use of mobility allowances, contract hire of vehicles, loans and the long-term financial considerations. There are price charts comparing the different purchase routes, practical advice on adaptations and details of other organisations that can help.

Supported by Motability Operations, which operates the eponymous car scheme for disabled people, the guide also offers practical advice for getting on the road. For example, it includes contact details for the BSM Mobility Service, which has 200 instructors for disabled learner drivers.

Get Motoring is available either directly from Radar (020 7250 3222 or minicom 020 7250 4119) or via Disability Living Centres, shopmobility centres and Motability car dealerships in the UK.

