

Homeward bound in a bug



The year was 1965 and Mariano Castrillon and Dieter Baumeister decided they'd had enough of South Africa and wanted to return home to Europe, so they climbed in their Volkswagen Beetle and headed north.

Text and photographs: Mariano Castrillon

Main: Always heading north. **Below:** Killing time in Kenya. **Opposite page:** Mariano (left) and Dieter pose alongside the trusty 1963 Beetle.





DIETER and I were mates, we both came to South Africa in 1963 – him from Munich and me from Barcelona – but we soon got fed up. Hillbrow was the only place for youngsters to go at night and I didn't like it so I decided to return to Europe. We could have sold our possessions and bought plane tickets but Dieter was in the mood for an adventure and initially suggested he would join me in returning back home, provided we hitchhike back.

At the time, I had a 1963 1100cc Volkswagen Beetle which, because it didn't take water, could go pretty much wherever we wanted without fear. Instead of hitchhiking, we decided to take the car.

I knew nothing about cars and still don't so when I initially wanted to purchase one, I was reluctant to go to a second-hand trader; even then, they had a bit of a reputation. Instead, I went to Burchmore's

Auctioneers. My friends said this was a risky move because they don't let you test drive cars before bidding but to me it made no difference; if it worked and drove, it was perfect in my book. I liked the look of the car and it was in great condition. I used all my savings and bought it for £275.

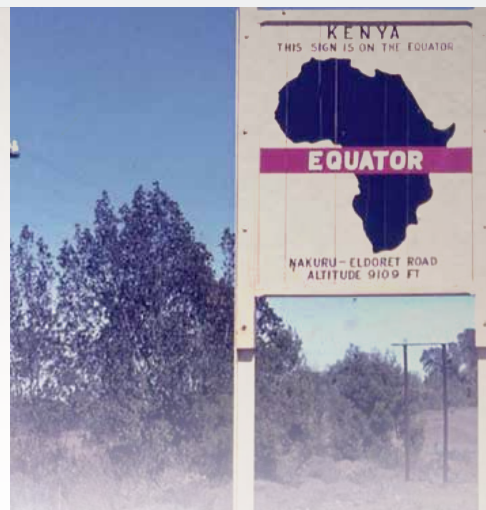
Our preparations were fairly limited. I became a member of the Spanish AA and was issued with the *Carnet de Passage*, which was necessary to cross all the borders.

I was advised to take a supply of spare parts but we didn't really know what to do with them. I went to the person who used to service the car and he gave me a list. All I remember is the breaker or points inside the distributor because they used to get dirty, but it was just a few things.

We were not really worried as we figured there would always be people around who fix cars.

We had a spade in case we got stuck in sand or mud but

This page, top to bottom: There was often only one road and it was not always in the best condition. ● Taking a breather somewhere in Africa. ● The pair had a limited budget, sleeping alongside or inside the car. **Opposite page, top:** Crossing the equator. **Opposite page, bottom:** Looking for game from the highest point in the convoy.



never used it. We had two stretchers to sleep on. We had a handmade tent but it broke after just two days so instead we used the canvas to cover the luggage on the roof rack.

We left Johannesburg in December 1965 and travelled as cheaply as possible, with no budget for restaurants or hotels; we slept in the car or next to it under the stars. The idea was to go from South Africa up to Egypt, then on to Europe via the south of Spain.

We travelled through Mozambique, Rhodesia (now called Zimbabwe) and Zambia, which were still under British or Portuguese colonial rule. Nobody bothered us, we met people who spoke Afrikaans and who were glad to see people from South Africa. There was no real danger at all and there were always villages where we could get food.

We followed the only road that existed, which was not always in the best condition. Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania and Uganda were beautiful and the people friendly. Once we reached Uganda we could not go any further north because there were wars, unrest or we required visas. We needed to make an alternative plan. We backtracked to Kenya and spent

a few days there plotting our next move. We weren't finished with our adventure just yet.

In Nairobi, we met two guys travelling from Cape Town to Cape Hammerfest in Finland, the southernmost Cape to the northernmost Cape in Europe with a Volkswagen Kombi and they were good mechanics, so we teamed up and camped in Mombasa. Soon we met a young nurse who had finished her stint in Africa and wanted to head back to Europe. She hopped in the back of the Kombi and our travelling party was complete.

Together, we decided we were going to put the cars on the boat that travels via the Suez Canal to Europe but it was terribly expensive and we couldn't afford it. We camped in Kenya and then got wind that there was a ship leaving for Bombay the following week.

The boat to India was considerably cheaper for people and cars although we had to travel in bunk class: 300 people in a dormitory-style layout. It was really uncomfortable and right at the bottom of the ship. In the end we slept on the deck where it was cooler. Because we were European, they treated us well but the buffalo meat was just as tough as it was for everyone else.

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Once we docked, we toured India for over a month, visiting all the tourist attractions which were incredible. In those days, there was a lucrative black market for currency, there was always somebody who wanted to buy our currency. They would then resell it to the wealthy people who sent it to their children studying in Europe. Even then, the difference between the impoverished and the wealthy was apparent.

We met a Swedish couple driving a Citroën 2CV and they advised if we had any problems with our cars, we should just look for a person who knew how to fix sewing machines as they would probably know how to fix a car. Fortunately, that was never necessary. Despite so many travellers, it was a coincidence to encounter others as the areas are so vast.

We always aimed north as our intention was to head to Pakistan. The people there were just as friendly and hospitable, everyone looked after us and many invited us into their homes. At one stage we were very close to the border with Afghanistan and could have headed that way but again, we were not able to get visas.

We decided to go through Iran. There are two options, via the mountains or the desert. We travelled the Khyber Pass and the little Beetle never let us down. At one stage, our friends in the Kombi got stuck in a

river and we pulled them out with the Beetle.

There was no guerilla warfare in Iran, just people selling carpets. Their attitude was as good as everywhere else but it was not as overcrowded. They made the best tea in the world and leave you alone to do your own thing, which was a welcome change after being inundated in India. We went to the Caspian Sea as we wanted to try caviar but it was already May so we were in a bit of a hurry.

Next up was Turkey, where we had our first puncture. Turkey was beautiful, with fields of amazing colour of opium poppies and tulips covering vast expanses. We visited Constantinople and saw two beautiful mosques and the capital city.

One night we were sleeping in the car because it was cold and Dieter woke up to the car rocking. Somebody had stolen one of the suitcases from the roof rack and was trying to take another. He started chasing the person but returned quickly as he realised that in the panic, he had forgotten to put on his glasses and couldn't see where he was going.

From Turkey we went into Greece and hit another roadblock. In those years, my Spanish passport did not allow me to go into any communist country, so we couldn't continue north. Our travelling companions in the

Kombi continued onwards to Finland but our only option was to load the car onto a boat to Italy. Once in Italy, we travelled through Austria and Germany. Ironically in the home of the Volkswagen we had our first run in with the police who stopped us because we had lost a hubcap. They told us it had to be fixed as they believed the hubcap clips could rip a pedestrian to pieces. After they heard where we had been, they let us go.

I dropped Dieter off at his house in Munich and spent one day there. We went to a beer hall with 20 metre-long tables where lots of beer was consumed. Dieter was in his element as he was back home and he loved the atmosphere.

Now travelling solo, I got lost on the highways but eventually made my way to Barcelona,

arriving home exactly six months after departing Joburg.

My documentation still allowed me to drive the car, on South African number plates, for six months. During that time, the ZA sticker on the rear and the Joburg number plates saved me from a couple of parking tickets in the city.

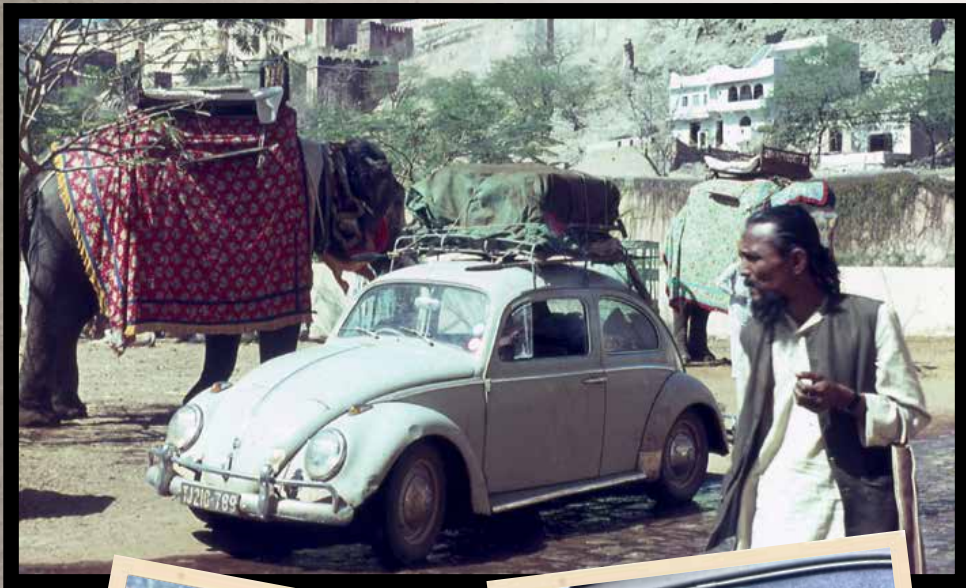
After six months, I was obliged to register the vehicle and pay import duties but instead, I drove to Andorra to sell the car. I went from



Opposite page: Crossing one of the many ferries in Africa. **Top:** A typical wild camping scene. **Right:** The pair saw some incredible places and met some friendly people along the way. **Below:** Changing the points inside the distributor in India.



"The Beetle was a tough car; the roads in Africa are no joke but it sailed through without any hassles"



dealer to dealer but nobody was interested, eventually a man offered to buy it for spare parts even though the only real damage was the missing hubcap and one of the exhaust tips that had fallen off near the Afghanistan border.

I got the same amount for the car as when I had bought it originally in South Africa, despite a bit of wear and tear. I was happy with that and like a gentleman, I took a taxi to Barcelona.

The Beetle was a tough car; the roads in Africa are no joke but it sailed through without any hassles, even crossing deep rivers thanks to its flat floor pan, while the rear engine, rear-wheel-drive configuration ensured excellent traction and the fuel consumption was fantastic.

We had one major problem

when a stone hit the windscreen on the way to Nairobi, completely shattering it and leaving a hole on the passenger side. I had to make another hole with my shoe so that we could see where we were driving. Fortunately we were able to replace the windscreen at a Volkswagen dealer not long after and we had the car serviced there, too.

But the allure of Africa was strong. I met and married my wife in Spain. She was originally from Rhodesia and, in 1969, we returned to South Africa. The people and the weather are fantastic and with my wife being ex-Rhodesian, it was a natural decision. Dieter relocated to Togo, in West Africa, not long after and still lives there today. 🇺🇲

Opposite page, main: Two travelling stalwarts: a Beetle and an Elephant, both with luggage-carrying capacity on top. **Opposite page, bottom:** The only major incident on the whole trip was a shattered windscreen near Nairobi. **Top:** Water crossings were easy thanks to the flat floorpan. **Above:** Refuelling from a jerry can. **Below:** The road was tarred in places but not always in the best condition.

