

Cider with Reinhard

"Um... also... *ich reitete durch die Wüste auf ein Pferd mit keinem Namen... es war schön, nicht mehr im Regen zu stehen... äh... in der Wüste kann man sich an den eigenen Namen erinnern...*"

It's times like these that make you think 'Hmm, I'm sitting in a Nissan combivan, lost in the middle of the Sahara, attempting to translate that *Horse with No Name* song into German for the benefit of a Brandenburger with a glass eye. What are the chances, eh?'. Certainly my horoscope hadn't got that one quite right, but then February is a tricky month at the best of times.

Obviously there is a perfectly reasonable explanation for all the above. I just happened to be working in Algeria, and on my way south into Niger I just happened to bump into this party of Germans heading the same direction, who just happened to be willing to give me a lift from the border as they'd just happened to find someone who just happened to want to buy a small fridge they just happened to have brought with them, which just happened to leave room for me to squeeze in next to the 50-gallon water barrel. Like I said, perfectly reasonable, and as it turned out, mutually beneficial for all concerned.

My first job as passenger and sole French speaker was to inspect said fridge on behalf of its Nigérien purchaser and reassure him in my best electrical-expert manner that, yes, it did indeed look like the kind of fridge that would work if you plugged it in (of course there were no sockets to test this theory). Once this was accomplished, I rejoined the Germans, was tucked into the space formerly known as *Kuhlschrank* and off we went.

My travelling companions turned out to be six former East German guys led by action man Rolf, who had spent years living in West Africa and now took groups of middle-aged Germans around exotic places with no more qualifications than his memory and a knack for turban-tying. The other five were Klaus, who had such a strong accent I couldn't understand a word he said; Schupi, classic leather-trousered good ol' boy; Atze, full-bearded and intellectual; Hans, Rolf's resignedly good-natured brother; and Reinhard, the man with the glass eye, a professional gardener and the group's diarist.

Somehow they'd managed to drive all the way from Berlin in two beat-up Opel saloons and a combivan, intending to sell the Opels in the Nigérien frontier town of Arlit and carry on to Ghana in the Nissan. Blow-outs and sand traps aside, they'd apparently had a pretty uneventful trip before I met them, so it really wasn't that surprising when we got lost.

To be fair, it was no-one's fault - some drifting dunes had obscured the barrels that mark the desert piste, and in trying to go round them we followed the wrong set of tyre tracks and lost the trail entirely. After about two hours of frayed tempers we were ready to admit defeat and backtrack to where we started; luckily a Tuareg tribesman appeared to rescue us.

Lawrence of Arabia it wasn't. With absolutely no common language, we resorted to looking bewildered, waving our hands and saying 'Arlit' a lot until he got the message and set off with Rolf to show him the track, leaving us his camel as a hostage (by that time it seemed like a good trade). Finally they came back, we loaded the guy with water as a thank-you, and off we went again.

We were still in the middle of nowhere when the sun started setting, so we pitched camp just off the main piste. This was when the über-organised German character came into its own. Even with two people per vehicle, all three cars were rammed full of the most incredible assortment of semi-random crap: tents, camp beds, tarpaulins, spare tyres, water barrels, tool kits, stoves, cooking utensils, shovels and planks. Within half an hour we had a fully functional mini-settlement around the campfire, sort of Heidelberg-on-Sahara; with a single rucksack and single change of clothes to last me two months, I have to say I felt a bit inadequate.

Not content with bringing enough kit to build a maximum-security stockade, my adopted chauffeurs had also packed vast quantities of canned goodies from home. No offence to African food, of course, but when you've been living on rice and grilled chicken for a while there really is nothing like suddenly being treated to a full-on vegetable broth with sausage, proper bread and potatoes.

Sadly they'd already finished the six cases of beer they set out with (no joke), so we ended up sitting around the fire drinking apple wine, shandy and dodgy rum while I translated desert songs, Reinhard read his account of the previous few days and the lights from a vast column of army vehicles lit up the horizon in the distance, just to remind us we were technically in a war zone.

I spent the next couple of days with the guys, with plenty more unusual challenges along the way: explaining to soldiers what we were doing in the middle of the desert without a guide, bargaining car prices with Nigérien mobsters, sightseeing in blacked-out brothels, bumping into Bavarians and debating fornication with an overzealous evangelist. All this confirms my suspicions that the Germans are actually a lot more adventurous than we like to give them credit for, ie a lot more adventurous than most of us. So next time you're driving through the desert, I'll be the one sticking out my thumb and shouting '*darf ich mitfahren?*'...