



# OFF GRID

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**"LONG HOURS AND A STRESSFUL ENVIRONMENT PUT A STRAIN ON OUR MARRIAGE AND RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE FAMILY. I THOUGHT THERE MUST BE SOMETHING BETTER THAN THIS"**

We could all do with a reminder of what true freedom might look like. That there's another way to live, and it's possible to pack up your belongings and leave society to its own devices. As long as you've got the passion and 'wheel estate' to do so, the world is yours to explore. Nomad's promise.

"Dreams are just dreams until you realise they don't have to be," says Nigel Betts, 54, who's about

to set off on a permanent road trip with his wife Linda, 59, and son, Oliver, 17. Home will be wherever they park their Land Rover Defender, and each tomorrow will be unlike any other day. Free from routine and a fixed abode, they see their future through a windscreen. They'll be heading for the horizon for the rest of their lives.

"We're going to keep going for as long as we can," says Nigel, who has

always had a 'thing' about driving ambitious distances. "We'll live for the moment, we'll go round that corner to see what's there. It's the world's longest mid-life crisis. Most people just buy a motorbike, crash it, and get on with their life, but this – this is forever."

Committing to life in Nomadland meant quitting work – a decision Nigel made over four years ago. After more than two decades

working in Formula 1, for teams including Ferrari, Mercedes and Red Bull, he'd become disenchanted with the motorsport scene and felt disconnected from those he loved the most.

"You make a lot of sacrifices working in an industry like that. Long hours and a stressful environment put a strain on our marriage and relationships within the family. I thought there must be

something better than this." Nigel retired at the end of 2020.

With no bricks-and-mortar to come back to, everything the Betts family owns (aside from a few pieces of sentimental furniture) will be on the move with them. "What we've actually done is build a house on four wheels," says Nigel.

The 'house' they'll be moving into is a white-painted 1998 Land Rover Defender 300Tdi 130. It

has everything they need, but not necessarily everything a teenager might want: "I tried to lay it on as dark as possible with Oliver," chuckles Nigel. "I said 'you won't have wi-fi every day, you won't have a PlayStation, you'll be living in a tent' and he was totally on board with it."

As a self-professed life-long Landy fan, Nigel's choice of vehicle for the voyage with no end date was

an emotional decision. “People ask why I didn’t get a Toyota or Jeep, because they’re either cheaper or more reliable – but you could give me a free Land Cruiser and I’d still rather buy a Land Rover. I’ve always loved them and I’ve always wanted one.”

Take one look at Mandy the Landy (“it’s not very original, but my son came up with that, so it’s his fault”) and you’ll see that although Nigel’s reasoning might seem whimsical, his approach to getting “the beast that is Mandy” road-ready has been

by the military and designed to accommodate larger and heavier loads than previous Defender models. In her past life, Mandy was used by a German utility company and was left in “quite a state”, says Nigel. “Steering was an optional extra, and there was a complete lack of brakes at one point – the test drive was interesting,” he adds.

After establishing that fundamentally, Mandy was in good enough condition (nothing a bit of welding wouldn’t fix), Nigel parted ways with €8,500. He broke down

easier to source replacement parts, and where exceptions have been made, there’s a tactical reasoning. “We’ve got heavy-duty drive shafts and cv joints,” says Nigel. “The theory is that if the transmission breaks, it’ll do so at its weakest point – the standard-spec output flange. Everything else should withstand the shock.”

With a 3.5-tonne capacity (which might sound like a lot, but being truly self-sufficient requires a fair amount of kit) only essential spares are going to be on board. To keep

**EACH NIGHT, THE FAMILY WILL RETIRE TO THE HEIGHT OF NOMADIC LUXURY - A PENTHOUSE SUITE COMPRISING TWO SOFT-SHELL DARCHE TENTS THAT UNFOLD FROM MANDY'S ROOF**

far from it.

Nigel found Mandy three years ago. “We spent months looking across Europe. The Defender 130 is incredibly rare, because they were all special orders from the factory.” She also needed to be left-hand drive, as some countries prohibit right-hand-drive vehicles from entering.

With an ultra-long wheelbase and heavy-duty coil-sprung suspension – which Nigel has replaced, but kept as standard – the 130 (previously named the 127) was favoured

three times on the journey back to the UK – but a lot of work has been done to make sure that doesn’t happen again.

Mandy is powered by a 300Tdi diesel motor – considered the best, most dependable and most fixable of all Defender engines in the field. It has covered approximately 150,000 miles and Nigel is confident that it’s capable of at least 350,000 more before any major work will be required.

Mechanically, modifications have been kept to a minimum to make it

on top of maintenance, Nigel plans to service Mandy every 10-12,000 clicks. To further ensure smooth running, he fitted a Parker auxiliary filtration system, which spins fuel at a high speed to separate and remove contaminants, including water. At altitude, in locations where fuel quality is poor, Nigel will treat it with additives to prevent freezing.

Mandy’s “pièce de résistance” is her off-grid electrical system. Run off a Portable Power Technology lithium battery, that when fully charged can provide auxiliary



power for four days – keeping the contents of the 90-litre fridge-freezer suitably chilled – it gives the family the opportunity to reach more remote locations. They'll also carry their own drinking water and compressed air.

Each night, the family will retire to the height of nomadic luxury – a penthouse suite comprising two soft-shell Darche tents that unfold from Mandy's roof. Setup takes just a few minutes, and each one has a removable panel that enables stargazing. To compensate for the loss of storage space up top ("everything about the design is driven by the amount of people in the vehicle"), Mandy's rear bumper assembly holds spare wheels fitted with Falken Wildpeak MT/01 mud terrain expedition tyres.

To navigate their life in motion, Nigel (the analytical one), Linda (the spontaneous one), and Oliver (the level-headed one with a sense of humour) will use an all-terrain sat-nav system called GPS Globe. Featuring preloaded and downloadable topographic maps, it offers trackable off-road guidance that'll allow them to roam into the unknown – and find their way back again.

In preparation for when the lay of the land gets tricky, and to familiarise themselves with Mandy's "wallowy" driving experience, Nigel and Linda are undertaking a specialist overlanding course with Pro Trax, a UK-based off-road school. "The weight we've got up top affects the centre of gravity and the angles that we'll be able to tip the vehicle. Hopefully we won't put it on its side!"

If the worst were to happen, Mandy has been reinforced with a Safety Devices external roll cage and the family will be well versed in the art of self-recovery. "We're going to spend most of our lives on our own, so it's really important for us to have the skills to get ourselves out of trouble if we go down the wrong track. We have a Terrafirma 4x4

winch and carry Maxtrax recovery boards." To administer instant care in the event of an emergency, they'll be equipped with a survival medical kit and everyday first-aid kit as well as snake and spider bite kits.

If, or indeed when, the going does get tough, Nigel is counting on Oliver for a morale boost. "He keeps the humour going even when we're in the darkest of moments. That's really useful, because I think we're going to have plenty of them – things won't always go right."

The multitude of online forums offering support and advice for nomadic types shows that the Betts' aren't the only ones to have reassessed their lives, but Nigel credits his friend, family man and full-time overlander Graeme Bell (who has written eight books about his ongoing travels), as the guru that proves life in Nomadland is doable.

"There's a network of people out there who genuinely want to help," says Nigel. "People are always looking for some nugget of knowledge that'll make it all simple, but there isn't one. The best piece of advice Graeme gave me was the opposite of my instinct – to stop planning things. Just get the vehicle, decide where you want to go, and go. We're told that there's only one way to live, but there's another way. It's hard, but if it was easy, everybody would be doing it."

Working to a budget of \$50 a day (which factors in shipping costs and insurance) Nigel has calculated that they have enough money to fund two years on the road comfortably (subject to "no massive dramas") before they have to explore ways of generating income.

To avoid unnecessary spending, the family plans to avoid campsites, preferring instead to be sensitive to local laws and follow a philosophy that wherever they stop, they'll leave no trace of their presence – including tyre tracks.

How much has Nigel spent converting Mandy? Don't ask. "I'd

have to tell my wife," he laughs. "When we bought Mandy, she looked very sad. She was going nowhere other than the scrap heap. Now, I hope she's got another 20 or 30 years of life in her. We've already agreed we'd never sell her – she means so much to us."

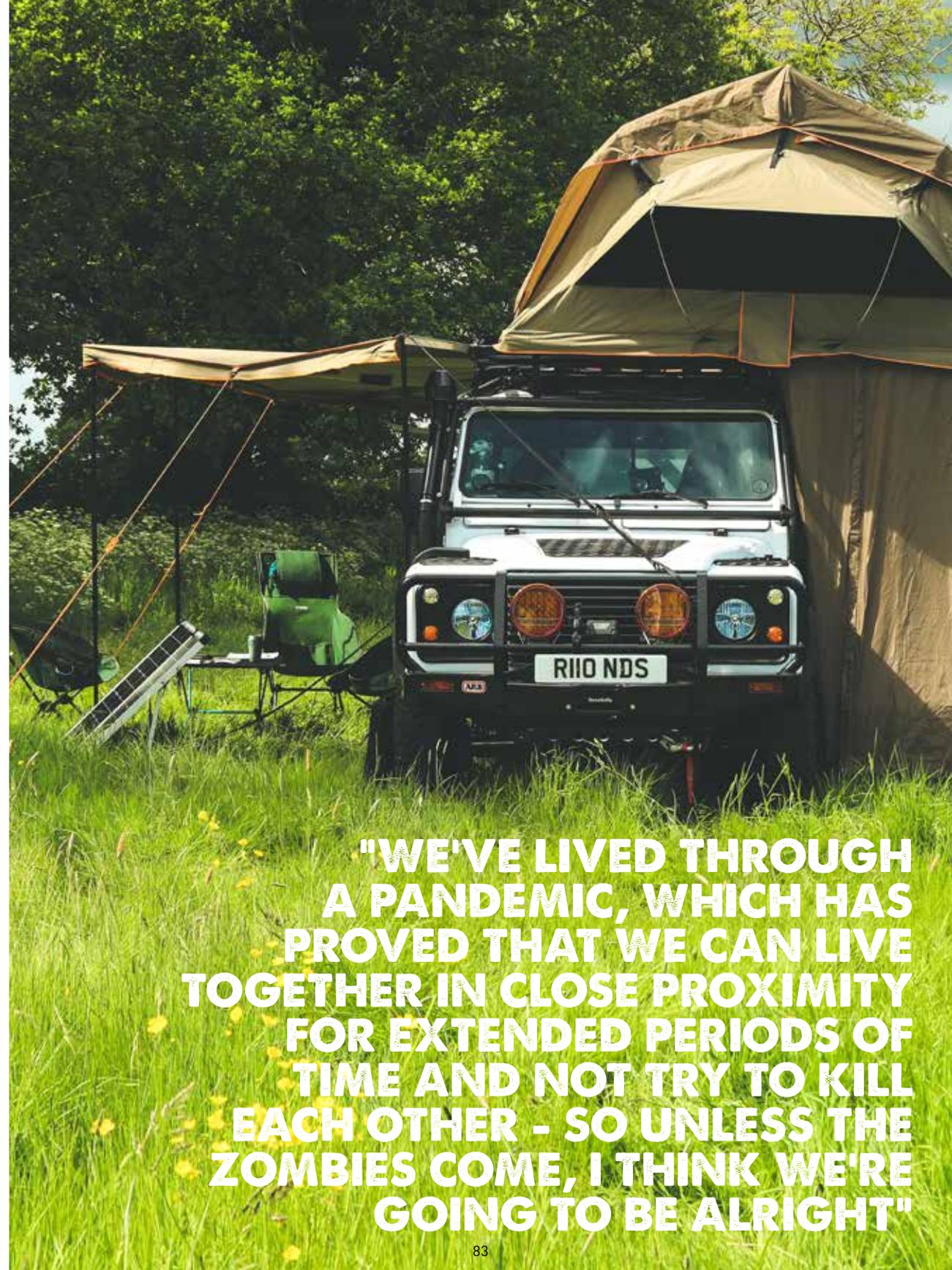
The first destination on their radar is Nordkapp, a location above the Arctic Circle and the most northerly place you can drive in Europe. Nigel considers it a test run. By the time they return to the UK, they hope borders across the globe will have started to re-open.

"The biggest problem we've got at the moment is getting visas," says Nigel, whose grand plan is to do the Pan-American Highway, then hop across to Africa, then Europe, into Asia via Russia then on to Australia and New Zealand. "We can't afford to get stuck, we have to be as sure as we can that we can travel freely along the route we want to take."

When asked what he's most worried about, Nigel replies, simply: "I'm not nervous about anything. I'm surprisingly chilled. We've lived through a pandemic, which has proved that we can live together in close proximity for extended periods of time and not try to kill each other – so unless the zombies come, I think we're going to be alright."

With an insatiable curiosity ("I'm one of those people who wants to know something about everything") Nigel hopes that liberation from the familiar will give him a new perspective on what belonging truly means. "By going to new countries and new continents, you meet new people. By going to extreme places, you meet people that live in extreme places. I can't wait to talk to those people, to have a meal with them, and try to understand their life in some way. There's so much out there in the world that I've never seen, and will never see, but I need to get out there and try."

Follow Nigel, Linda and Oliver at [instagram.com/itchyfeetoverland](https://www.instagram.com/itchyfeetoverland)



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