On Safari in a Unimog – Motoring For Fun

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Author: Rachel Henson

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Rachel

Henson describes an exhilarating adventure on the wild, beautiful Yorkshire coast – in search of history and wildlife, and made possible by a classic vehicle…

(All words and photographs by Rachel).

Wind beat at the drenched tarpaulin, making it hard to hear our guide. It was tied tightly to the sides of the Unimog due to wet and blustery weather. We were on a two-hour long safari at the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust reserve at Spurn, designed to introduce visitors to the history and wildlife of this unique stretch of land.

Spurn, on the Yorkshire coast, is now a tidal island. Managed by the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, this thin stretch of land can be entirely cut off from the mainland in high tides. Yet Spurn Point is still home to an operational RNLI lifeboat station. Until 2013, when the connecting road disintegrated, it was home to a remote community of permanent residents. The original road was built at the beginning of the First World War, but significant tide and storm damage led to its destruction in 2013. The difficult decision was made not to enter battle with the elements, and the road's remains were left unrepaired. Spurn Point can now only be accessed on foot or by a 4WD vehicle that can cope with the wet sand beneath its tyres.



Today, the RNLI's only full-time crew man Spurn Point, working six days on the 'island' before having a six day break back with their families on the mainland. They work in the exposed location during their shift, surrounded by disused military buildings and lapping waves. At one point, over 1000 members of the Armed Forces were stationed at Spurn for, amongst other duties, completing their National Service.

It therefore seemed appropriate to be travelling in a 1983 ex-military Unimog U 1300 L. The Unimog that trundles over the wet sand now was originally used by the Dutch armed forces. The Yorkshire Wildlife Trust later acquired it, and its durability and stubborn insistence that it can traverse any substrate without fail make it a good fit for the job in hand. Although its

duties are less exciting than those for which it was built, it now serves the important role of shuttling people back and forth between the Point and the visitor centre on the mainland. The trusty truck transports not only visitors on the wildlife safari, but also groups for work parties, educational visits, beach cleans and reserve management. In 2014, substantial work was undertaken to extend the chassis and fit the hunting cab, which today allows for 16 seated passengers.



When the road was lost, the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust knew that it would affect visitor access, as they could no longer drive down to the Point. It is an important spot for wildlife and offers the possibility of seeing a variety of mammals on land and sea, birds, insects, plants and fungi. It also attracts avid bird-lovers who travel here to witness large numbers of

migrating birds in the spring and autumn. Since the end of military presence on Spurn, the land has been allowed to rewild, encouraging wildlife to make use of the habitat.

Before the loss of the road, Spurn Point was also home to the Humber Pilots, a navigation service that guided vessels safely between the sandbanks of the Humber Estuary. Now, they operate from Grimsby. From the Point, Grimsby Clock Tower can be seen, even on a grey and rainy day, across the water from the derelict site left behind.

As the Unimog made its way across the soggy sand in low gear, there were several moments where it seemed that we wouldn’t be going any further, but at each hurdle it proved us wrong. Slowly and carefully, we travelled through the rain which pushed against us as we ploughed ahead. One of the more observant passengers pointed out a seal, which was barely visible through the thick plastic window panels, blurred with rain dribbles, but on peering out through an metal eyelet was certainly there, its head bobbing in the energetic waves.



It was a slow 3.5 miles to Spurn Point, but it got us there, which is more than my Toyota Starlet would have managed. As we pulled up outside the lifeboat station, the crowd huddled outside the truck, hunkering against the sides, trying to catch any snippets of commentary that weren't blown away on the wind. The unusual lie of the land came about during glaciation. Deposits built up as the ice sheets moved, creating the local boulder clay cliffs and the fragile environment that's found here today.

The mudflats are important for wading birds, such as dunlins and plovers. Smaller birds, such as meadow pipits, nest in the salt marshes, and the abundance of prey species means that birds of prey, such as kestrels and sparrow hawks, are able to make a living too. As we stood shivering, a flock of linnets carried about their business, probably wondering what all

the fuss was about. Our guide told us that the lifeboat crew have even made friends by feeding a fox, who they have named Basil, and doesn't seem fazed by living in such an exposed location.

Our nature walk was cut short, mostly because the wildlife was sheltering, and we thought that would be a good idea for us too. Piling back into the Unimog, the driver took us to visit the invitingly dry lighthouse. The original lighthouse, known as Smeeton's was built in 1776, but was getting 'a bit wobbly', and was wisely replaced in 1895 by its successor. At 39 metres high, it is the tallest lighthouse in northern England, and we were assured that in good weather there are fantastic views across the estuary. We took his word for it. A recent Heritage Lottery Fund grant has enabled a full restoration, and the public can visit at weekends. It was still in operation until 1985, when the Humber Pilots set up camp at Spurn and took on the responsibility of keeping passing ships safe.

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Attempts to defend Spurn from the sea have now come to an end. Sea defences can only do so much, and are hugely expensive, so in time it's likely that Spurn Point will eventually become completely isolated before returning to the water. It's a sad contemplation, as the Unimog trundles us back to relatively dry land, but possibly all the more reason to brave the elements and explore it whilst we still can.

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Interested in visiting Spurn Head? Contact Yorkshire Wildlife Trust as detailed below...



For more information, or to book, please visit:

https://www.ywt.org.uk/places-visit/flagship-sites/welcome-spurn-discovery-centre-spurn-national-nature-reserve

Alternatively you can ring 01904 659570 to book.

Please note that booking is essential on all Yorkshire Wildlife Trust's Spurn safaris.

Prices:
Adults £18 (£20 from 1st April 2020)

Children £9

Coming soon… Watch this space…

Inspired by Rachel's introduction to the classic Unimog and its amazing, well-respected capabilities in tough conditions, we shall very soon be covering the model in our Wheels-Alive 'Classic Profiles' series.

