

# Four-armed and four-warned

**The story of one girl – Jo Thewlis – a powerful ‘Chelsea tractor’ and the rugged outdoors. Sorry about the stereotypes, but this is Top Gear territory, after all . . .**

**J**EREMY Clarkson has a lot to answer for when it comes to 4x4 driving. When the Top Gear guru and his team of gung-ho heroes set off on an epic adventure across Bolivia’s Amazon basin to the coast of Chile, the nation saw man

and machine as one. Cut to stereotypical shots of trusty Landrovers splashing through torrid riverbeds and crossing deep ravines in dense jungle. These were the images running through my mind as I nervously agreed to try a 4x4 experience. I wasn’t entirely sure I would be comfortable wrestling a pig-headed hunk of metal as I hacked my way through tranquil countryside.

I could not be more wrong.

Qualified instructors Malcolm Swan and Deborah Turpin have set up Explore 4x4, a private off-road tuition firm based in Belchamp St. Paul, near Sudbury, offering tailor-made training and courses across a number of private sites.

“The whole idea of what we are doing is to appeal to men and women,” said Deborah, a Lantra instructor with years of experience.

“It’s not just about macho guys crashing through the countryside. It’s about power and control.”

Malcolm and Deborah cater for everyone from private individuals to the MoD.

And it’s not just hacking about in Chelsea tractors.

Malcolm has a military background and now trains troops how to handle their 4x4s in life-and-death situations.

“You need to look after your car as it’s



the only thing you’ve got to get you home safely,” he said.

After a brief tour of a stunning site in the Essex countryside, Malcolm suggested I take the wheel.

Having a tame Renault Clio, the experience of taking the reins of an eager 2.6-litre Land Rover Discovery was a new experience for me.

But I loved it. These cars are amazing. They really are. As Malcolm said, let the car do the driving for you.

Unlike most vehicles, the ‘disco’ wants you to let it do its own thing.

Trustworthy does not even begin to cover the integrity of this incredible work horse.

Before I knew it, I was tackling sheer drops, crevasses and slippery hill starts with the confidence of Clarkson himself.

I couldn’t wait to climb banks and conquer craters with my trusty friend.

The secret, Deborah told me, is to stop, look and assess the terrain the car is about to face.

Rather than crashing through undergrowth with a debonair swagger, true Landy experts get out of the car and look at what’s ahead.

Test the depth of any water you are about to wade through.

Look at where it would be best to place your wheels.

Clarkson and his crew would have done well to listen to her words of wisdom.

But nervously teetering on the edge of a sheer drop Malcolm had tackled just minutes before, my nerves began to fail.

Creeping home up an icy hill during last year’s freezing winter was the extent of my off-road experience and this was something else.

But, calmly and ever cheerful, Malcolm gently talked me through the tactics I would need to get me through.

Before I knew it, grass was rushing towards the windscreen as we careered down the drop.

Amazingly, not only did we survive but the car did too.

Admittedly, my confidence did get the better of me and I left the car in second gear on my second attempt, nearly sending all my passengers through the sun roof.

But all worries of wrenching the wheel were soon gone as the car carried me safely across the rough land and rabbit holes.

This was one truck I would take into battle.

Flushed with excitement, we pulled up to find hampers laden with quails eggs, chicken curry and home-made dessert waiting for us.

Malcolm and Deborah cater for stag dos, hen parties, individuals and groups and I could not imagine a more exhilarating experience to try.

Packages are available for corporate entertainment, team building events or parties.

The firm also offers Lantra Award courses for business with two-day integrated training and assessment courses.

For more information about courses and packages offered by the pair, visit their website [www.explore-4x4.co.uk](http://www.explore-4x4.co.uk)



**TEST DRIVE:** Main picture, The Landrover Discovery tackles a hill start, left, Deborah Turpin and Malcolm Swan have launched an off-road tuition company Explore 4x4, below, Jo Thewlis gets behind the wheel of a Land Rover Discovery, below left, Jo Thewlis, Deborah Turpin and Malcolm Swan assess a daunting drop

Photos: JONATHAN SCHOFIELD

