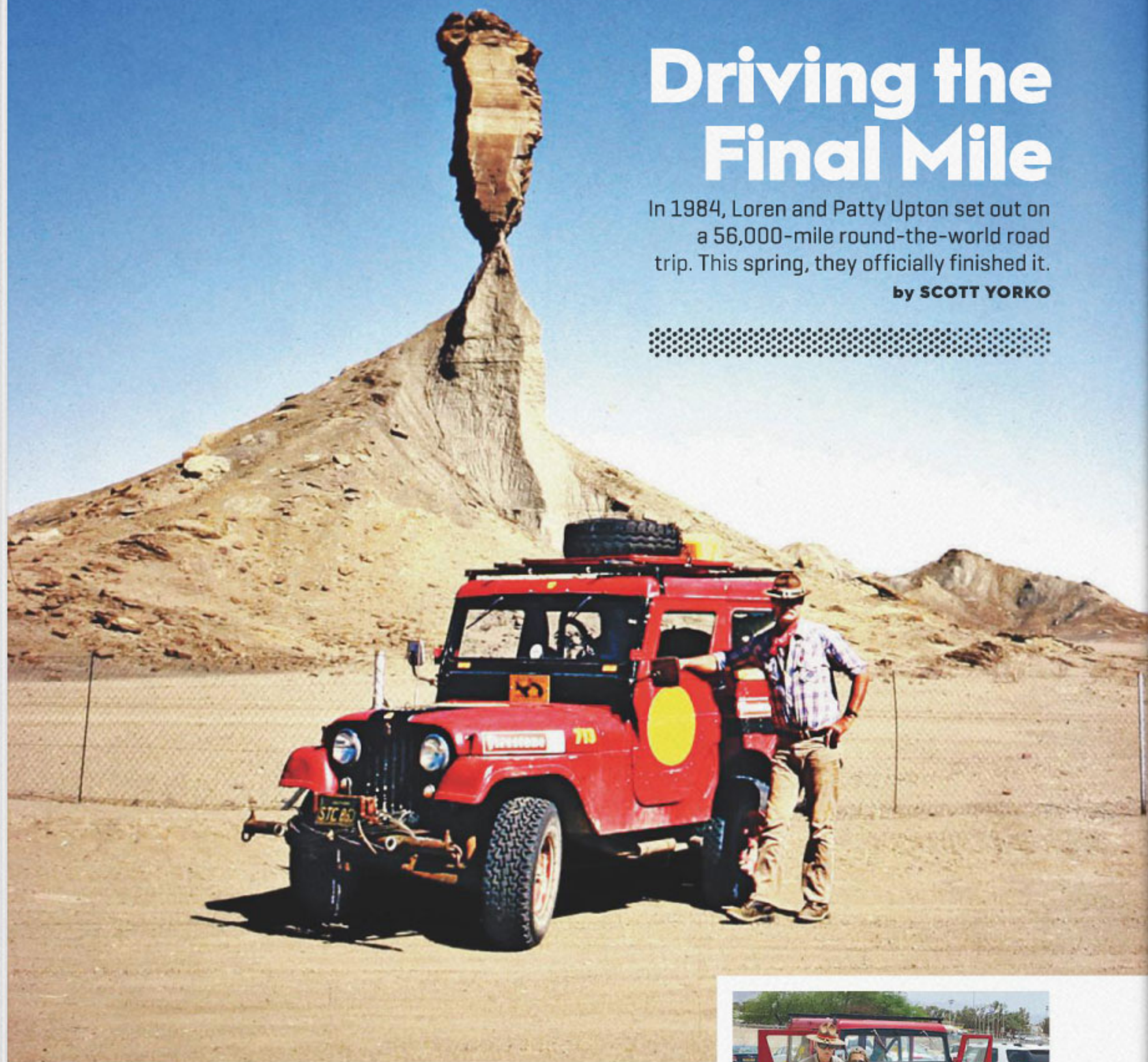


# Driving the Final Mile

In 1984, Loren and Patty Upton set out on a 56,000-mile round-the-world road trip. This spring, they officially finished it.

by SCOTT YORKO



**T**HERE ARE SOME well-worn ass marks in the cracked vinyl seat of Loren Upton's 1966 CJ-5 Jeep, dubbed the Sand Ship Discovery. That's no surprise, given that, starting in 1984, he spent five years driving it 56,000 miles, from Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, down through Panama and Colombia, to the tip of South America. Then, after sailing the Jeep across the South Atlantic, he pointed it north from Cape Agulhas and cranked

through the entire length of Africa and Europe, ending at the northernmost lighthouse on the European mainland, in Gamvik, Norway. His goal was fairly simple as far as concepts go: Drive around the world in one vehicle on a north-south course, all on land except for one boat crossing of the Atlantic. The reality proved much harder: It took him four tries and countless extra miles.

The first time he set off, in 1975 in a Ford F-250 pickup truck, his trip was derailed when an American in the area was shot and



▲ Loren Upton drove through 39 countries in his 1966 Jeep, nicknamed the Sand Ship Discovery. Above: With his wife, Patty, after finishing the final mile of their journey this spring.

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killed in Panama under mysterious circumstances. Upton was questioned by the Guardia Nacional, but he was ultimately let go, and he returned home to California. (The murder has never been solved.)

The second attempt, in 1977, was scuttled after Upton, driving with a broken windshield wiper, missed a turn on a foggy road in the Andes Mountains and rolled his CJ-7 Jeep off a cliff. He was thrown from the vehicle but uninjured before it tumbled hundreds of feet down the mountainside. Upton, a blue-collar carpenter, was still making payments on that Jeep when he got his next one in 1979, which he was ultimately forced to leave in the Darién Gap—the lawless jungle region between Panama and Colombia—after getting extorted by a corrupt Colombian official.

"There are so many good places to go in the world," he says, "but they're so screwed up."

During his many misadventures in Central America, he met an American secretary named Patty who was working in Panama City. After years of knowing her, he eventually persuaded her to become his co-pilot and, later, wife. In 1987, on Upton's fourth try through the Darién Gap—this time with Patty by his side—the pair became the first people to cross the Gap in a motor vehicle entirely on land. Working on and off, it took 741 days of slogging the Discovery through 125 miles of steep, forested ravines, but it earned the couple a Guinness World Record. "If it weren't for the help of the local Indians, we'd still be down there," Upton says.

From there the couple cruised down South America, sailed across the Atlantic, and headed up through Africa. They hardly ever had money, and sponsorship support was rare. "Loren's philosophy has always been, 'You figure out what you want, then you save your money and go do it,'" Patty says.

In Africa, Patty came down with severe dysentery and malaria and was hospitalized in Sudan. After she was released, the couple broke an axle on the Jeep and had to build a raft to float for two and a half days, in 130-degree heat down the Nile River to civilization, leaving the Jeep behind. It sat for 70 days waiting for new parts and a 15-minute repair. "That was the first time I ever saw this woman with a tear in her eye from fright and anxiety," Loren says. Somehow they stayed together through it all and finished the voyage on July 4, 1989.

And yet there was one portion that the Uptons never officially completed: In 1988, Israel and Jordan had no diplomatic relationship, and despite pleas to the Israeli government and the United Nations, they were forbidden from crossing into Jordan at the Israeli border. Instead, to finish the trip, they ferried the Jeep across the Gulf of Aqaba from Egypt, then drove back to the border crossing at which they'd been stymied. Technically, the no-man's-land between the borders left them with one unfinished mile, and 30 years later,



▲ From top: Upton and his crew in the Darién Gap in 1986; the Sand Ship Discovery in front of the Pyramids in 1988; in Red Square in 1989.



Ashdod, Israel, after four days of paperwork to get it through customs, the car wouldn't turn over. "The brand-new starter was all fouled up," says Patty, suspecting one of the many hands that had moved her from ship to ship. "Udi [the local Jeep mechanic] thinks someone tried to start it, and the electric fuel pump never shut off, overfilling the carburetor and shooting fuel into the engine where there shouldn't have been gas. We're lucky it didn't blow up!"

The weeklong delay was an odd blessing, though, as flash floods raged through the Judean Desert on the day they were supposed to leave. "Our bags were packed, and we would have been on the road that same afternoon," Patty says. The local Israeli Jeep community rallied parts, labor, and even a flatbed trailer to transport the Sand Ship Discovery almost 400 miles round-trip just so she could limp her way into history.

On May 3, rolling at the Jeep's top speed of 45 miles per hour with Loren in the unfamiliar passenger seat, the Uptons cruised down Wadi Araba Border Road and out of Israel and into Jordan. Nervous about breaking down on the wrong side of the border in the hot afternoon sun, Patty made one last U-turn without even stopping to celebrate. But the rickety old passenger door flew open, and Loren nearly fell out. "You're gonna dump me in the road!" he yelled.

With the Jeep pointed back toward Israel and no old men sprawled out on the highway, they both hooted in celebration.

Later that evening, while sipping cold drinks outside Udi's house, Loren was finally able to relax after realizing his lifelong goal. The headstrong conviction that took him around the world in the first place brought him back to close that gap and check off one piece of unfinished business. He sat back, thanked Patty for all she'd done, and announced the exact words that he wants etched onto his gravestone: "We did it." ■

Loren still couldn't let it go. "I can't say we did it unless we really did it," he says.

Which is why, in April, he and Patty shipped the same old Jeep from Salmon, Idaho, back to Israel to cross the Wadi Araba border and drive that final mile. "If it were only one foot left, I'd be back here for that one foot," Loren says.

He's the first to admit that he takes stubbornness to a whole new level. "This one mile really has nothing to do with reality," he says. "It's all between my ears. We're doing all this just to appease an old man."

Loren is 83 now and shouldn't be driving anything. His peripheral neuropathy causes him to fall down. Wet macular degeneration has left him with almost no vision in his left eye. And he's kind of cranky. But 64-year-old Patty is in good health. Despite never having taken the wheel in their previous expedition, she learned to drive the 52-year-old Jeep before rolling it onto a ship. "The lack of power steering and brakes made it really difficult," she says.

But when they met their trusty relic in