

To the land of the Maasai

A lodge on, a Tanzanian coffee plantation lodge was the starting point of the African Drive Project. Local team members took the first leg of the drive through the city of Arusha. The roads of Tanzania seemed quite punishing even for team members from other African countries like South Africa and Mauritius. Goats and dairy cows walked along the shoulder of paved roads, and people set up street-side stalls. Pedestrians would suddenly step out and cross the road, and motorcycles would approach driving toward you in your own lane. Even after getting through the hustle and bustle of downtown and out onto country roads, the driving conditions did not improve much. In fact, there were now more animals to watch out for. As our caravan drove through the area where the Maasai lived, they stared at us while tending to their grazing goats.

Treacherous but truly African roads

In the Ngorongoro Conservation Area, the drivers carefully descended some 600 meters down the precipice of a crater by switching the transfer switch to L4 mode and driving in second gear. A Land Cruiser being used on a safari tour passed them on one side. Charles from TSAM in South Africa seemed faster than anyone at spotting animals, and he would tell the passengers in his car things like, “A buffalo is over there” and “Look down, there’s a cobra” as he was driving. This also meant that he was skilled at predicting danger. Telling team members to watch out for animals that might run out into the road is a point of caution with real-world consequences here. After driving by a herd of zebras leisurely grazing on grass, we reached the pond that was our designated rest stop and ate

lunch nearby. A herd of hippos was next to the pond, and Charles warned everyone in a loud voice, “Don’t get too close, because hippos are dangerous.”

The road taking us from the high-elevation Ngorongoro Conservation Area enveloped in fog to Serengeti National Park in the savannah was marked by an unending series of undulations that shook the cars violently. According to Imai, a managing officer who had worked and lived in Africa for a





long time, the corrugated roads and dust dancing up were truly African conditions. The harsh washboard road lasted for over an hour. At the next rest stop, Sawataishi of Vehicle Engineering Development Division. checked the cars over and found oil leaking from the shock absorbers of a Hilux. Matsumoto of the CV Chassis Engineering Division was called over right away. According to Matsumoto, this was a frequently reported problem in Africa and one matter of concern for the team.

“I’m just glad that it happened while I was here. Only reading reports doesn’t give me a true sense of the local conditions, but now it’s happened while I’m right here myself. The Hilux wasn’t being

driven in any unusual way, and this kind of road is typical of Africa. I plan to investigate the cause and do something about it.”

It was just like Matsumoto, who engaged with the engineers as an enthusiastic leader in the Drive Project, to give a resolute response.

Learning where to focus awareness of danger

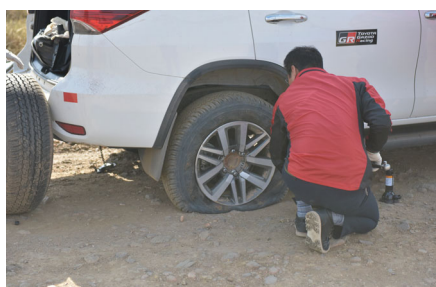
Just after spotting a lion on the road back from the Serengeti, the Fortuner drove over a big rock and got a flat tire. It made the team members appreciate how these things could happen even when you’re taking every precaution. While the team was changing the tire, Charles kept an eye out for any animals that might be approaching. After all, this was the savannah—the home of the lion. The team was learning where to focus their awareness. Vehicle QDR is so important in the African bush.

The punishing road conditions continued, and riding together provided a good opportunity for the more

experienced drivers to give the less experienced drivers some tips. Maruyama of Vehicle Engineering Development Division told Charles to leave more following distance with the car in front of him. Even though the team was driving in a caravan, safety was still the driver’s responsibility. The drivers needed to always keep enough distance between cars so that the ground could be seen amid the dust. With surface conditions worthy of the rough road label, the team needed to ensure their safety as much as possible. The advice was exactly what you’d expect from Maruyama, whose field of expertise was collision safety.

The benefit of not being an expert on the road

On Friday, the team drove on a special stage (SS), part of which had been used in the former WRC East African Safari Classic Rally course. The team embarked on the pre-designated route using a road map that detailed the road features and which way to go and a GPS device that tracked their



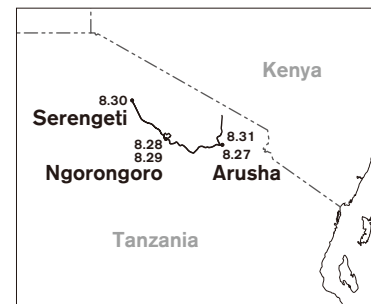


driving distance. Following the instructions of their navigators in the passenger seat, the drivers went deeper into the savannah. The team members' character would also be tested—how would they make decisions when they weren't sure what to do? The Japanese members communicated with the local members in stilted English. To reach the finish line, they would have to read the road conditions and choose the right way to go. The SS was truly emblematic of the Drive Project itself, and the team members found it both exciting and

challenging at the same time.

Shiratsuka of the Finance Division was the youngest member on the team. The SS was his first off-road experience that wasn't a test course. He listened to the directions of his peers riding in the same car and focused intently on his driving. But thinking back on it, he said, *"My driving perception may be close to what customers feel."* He continued, *"Where my teammates would drive in second gear, I would drive in first gear. I felt like second gear didn't give me enough torque, which maybe is not only due to my lack of skill. It would be nice if I could put this ordinary perspective to use in making cars."*

Even if you hardly know anything about cars and are an inexperienced driver, you can still find ways to be useful. When you come down to it, this is proof of his growing love of cars, and one benefit gained over this week of getting covered in dust.



Distance: 918km
Duration: August 27-31, 2018
Days: 5 days
Vehicles: Fortuner, Land Cruiser 200,
Land Cruiser Prado,
Hilux Double Cab

