

Time Out

London

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the Routemaster*

The end of the road

Since it first rolled into service in 1956, the Routemaster bus has become a definitive feature of the capital's landscape. As its final journey approaches, **Ben Walters** bids a fond farewell, and we present a fascinating set of photographs by **Ralf Obergfell** and **Jet** that pay tribute to a London icon



Route 19 conductor Kelvin Platt likes Routemasters so much, he's bought a pair of them

When the last 38 trundled into Clapton garage on October 28, it left the 159 as the last bus route in London to be served by the Routemaster – and that's only until December 9, when the old girl will be withdrawn from regular service altogether after half a century on the job. In less than a month, then, the sight of London's most iconic bit of street furniture gliding over the Thames past Big Ben will be history. Two 'heritage' routes will still run north of the river – from Tower Hill to Trafalgar Square and from Aldwych to the Albert Hall – but only during the tourist-friendly hours of 9.30am and 6.30pm.

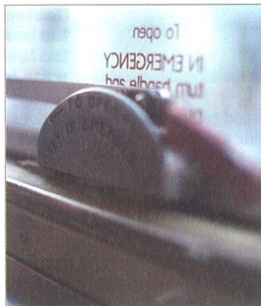
Despite the best efforts of Transport for London to downplay the RM's phasing-out, it refuses to go quietly. Dozens of mourners have turned out to mark the final voyages of the 18 earlier routes to be phased out while Travis Elborough's new book 'The Bus We Loved' offers a chatty, discursive history of the vehicle. Lobbying efforts on the RM's behalf have ranged from the long-running 'Save the Routemaster' website and its 12,000-strong petition, to a pamphlet from the Policy Exchange think-tank that unashamedly rides to the defence of 'London's best ever bus'. Arguments over pollution, congestion and ease of use remain contentious but such concerns hardly account for the visceral strength of feeling the classic bus arouses; it's hard, to say the least, to imagine Londoners learning to love the bendy bus with anything like the affection the Routemaster inspires.

One of the most striking tributes is 'LastStop!', a website set up by photographers Ralf Obergfell and Jet to showcase images gathered over this final year of the RM's working life. Rather than taking an activist stance, the surprisingly moving site lets the images do the talking; accompanied by ethereal music, it revels in the RM's classic ►

1925 London's first covered double-decker buses take to the streets. 1939 The RT bus – forerunner of the Routemaster – briefly appears before the war, rejoining the service in 1947 and running until



Route 19 conductor Mark Lawal



1979. 1952 Routemaster plan developed with designer Douglas Scott. 1956 The RM1 joins the service, running from Golders Green to Crystal Palace. 1968 The last RM is built, two years after ▶



Route 19 conductor Michael Raymond



► look, but also forms a document of the bus in use, a record of its interaction with contemporary London – an interaction that depends on elements absent from the replacement models, such as the open platform and the conductors themselves.

The photographers' different experiences of the bus are telling. Londoner Jet had a personal connection but an unsentimental approach. 'My grandfather – although he didn't live in London – was a bus driver all his life,' she says. 'I remember

as a kid going on his buses and getting a kick out of a: not paying and b: being able to talk to him about driving, like a little kid thing. I'm not a trainspotter – I don't know that much about them – but the idea that they're not going to be here any more made me go, "Actually, I am quite bothered about it."

Obergfell, on the other hand, grew up in Freiburg, Germany. 'As teenagers we always looked over to England and London, being quite

Keep on running

It doesn't have to mean goodbye

The last bus

On December 9, the last 159 will be rolling into Streatham Garage from Marble Arch, marking the final drive for a working Routemaster. Hundreds of devotees from around the world are expected to turn out to pay tribute.

Heritage Routemasters

The Routemaster won't be entirely disappearing from London's streets as, from November 14, TfL will be running two special routes. The No 9 will run between Aldwych and the Royal Albert Hall, while the No 15 will run between Tower Hill and Trafalgar Square. They're aimed at tourists, running every 15 minutes between 9.30am and 6.30pm.

The London Transport Museum

This fantastic museum in Covent Garden is closed for redevelopment, but the collections can still be seen at the Museum Depot in Acton. With over 370,000 exhibits ranging from vehicles (including the Routemaster) to engineering drawings, it's one of the most complete records of urban transport in the world. Access is only through guided tours and the Depot's regular open weekends.

Museum Depot, 118-120 Gunnersbury Lane, W3 (020 7379 6344/www.ltmuseum.co.uk) Acton Town tube.

Buying a Routemaster

They're hard to get hold of (or to park), but you can pick up a Routemaster for as little as £5,000. Head for the Routemaster Association website, where for 50p you can also pick up a 'My other car is a Routemaster' sticker. www.routemaster.org.uk

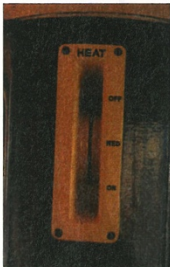
Buses on the telly

On December 10, the day after the last ride, BBC4 will be screening a special 'Arena' theme night on the Routemaster, including a celebration of the bus conductor, and a screening of the first ever episode of 'On the Buses'. www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour

envious of the music, fashion and the design industry. It all seemed so rock 'n' roll. That's what made me want to move to London and the Routemaster was clearly part of that. There was nothing like that in Germany.' So when he started the collaboration with Jet, after meeting her through the photographers' collective Photodebut, 'I approached it like a foreigner who has lived in London for 13 years, with a half-London, half-foreign eye.' ►

plans for one-man and single-decker buses are announced. **1982** The first mass withdrawal of RMs, reducing the fleet to around 600 by 1990. **1992** Refurbishment and re-engineering of the ►

Farewell Routemaster



Route 19 conductor Didier Okou



► When he started shooting en route, Obergfell was drawn to the RM's unique design features: the smiling bug-eye headlamps and the solid, chunky heft of the ticket machine; the warm red leather and nicotine-yellow paint; the bulbous porthole of the convex stair-top mirror and the natural-looking metal knobs of the railings. Favouring lived-in textiles over wipe-clean plastic mouldings, natural colours over neons, curves over corners, the look has a welcoming feel that makes a Routemaster heaving out of the dusk like the arrival of a friend.

The almost organic fluidity of the RM's design chimes with the way we use them – what one recent contributor to the *TO* letters page, Simon Evans, nicely articulated as the 'difference... between digital and analogue. The new bus acknowledges only two states – on or off. One or zero. Open or shut. Bus stop or not. The Routemaster, meanwhile, can conceive of intermediary states.' The most obvious of these, of course, is the ability to hop on and off between stops but the open platform provides a more general sense of interaction between inside and outside, a free-flowing spatial conversation that both mirrors the city's adaptability and offers a sense of empowerment. As Travis Elborough puts it, 'Standing on the rear platform with the wind in your face, you could imagine that London really did belong to you.' It also lets the conductor chat to cabbies at the lights.

The conductors will of course be the major human casualty of the RM's demise, taking with them the social fluidity that matched the fluidity of the buses' design and relation with its environment. From 'Duke' Baysee's harmonica serenades on the number 38, to the simple ability to help someone with shopping, the conductor's presence is a catalyst for conversation – it's good to talk. While Obergfell's en-route shots capture moments of interaction between conductors and passengers, Jet – who mainly worked at depots – has collated a series of portrait shots that show conductors posed with their vehicles. There's a sense of proprietary pride to many of them, the sort of affectionate mastery Gainsborough might have found in a man with his horse. The range of ethnicities is also striking – another part of the RM's heritage, as its conductors were among the earliest, and most visible, of the capital's West Indian immigrant workers in the mid-'50s.

'LastStop!' has proved a plumline to the reservoir of emotions associated with the RM – one visitor to the website describes blinking back tears – and its creators are aiming to develop it as both an exhibition and a book. The demise of the Routemaster is more than the shelving of a bit of kit; it's the end of a living nexus of social, environmental and design elements that has no obvious substitute. Perhaps one reason people resent its passing is that it still feels flourishing and current, its tank still full and far from the end of its line. To Jet, 'it's a funny thing to be into, a dirty old bus. What it really is is a clapped-out banger that just carries on going.'

'LastStop!' is at www.routemasters.co.uk, designed by Emotional Designers. Travis Elborough's 'The Bus We Loved' is published by Granta.

remaining RMs begins. **2000** TfL created; 50 RMs join the fleet. **2004** TfL announces withdrawal of RMs from all 17 routes it still serves. **2005** Last regular RM service, on the 159 route, ends Dec 9.