



DELAYED TRIP... Sonja Rissler of Germany is trying to find an engine replacement for her Mercedes-Benz truck. Rissler was planning to travel the world in the vehicle, but has only made it through B.C. and Yukon.

NEWS photo by Mike Thomas

Friendly Canadians keep couple truckin'

By Kelly Hayes
News Reporter

Mercedes-Benz. We usually associate the name with quality, luxury and dependability.

So when the engine of Sonja Rissler's Mercedes-Benz Unimog went kaput last week, she was rather surprised.

"Normally, they are quite reliable and they don't break down much," says Rissler, sipping a cup of coffee in the truck's camper.

The German military vehicle definitely does not fit in among the broken down Chevys and Fords parked outside the Petro-Canada garage on Fourth Avenue.

This vehicle looks tough. And it is.

Originally, it was designed for the German military during the latter part of the Second World War.

After the war, Germany wasn't allowed to make any military equipment, so the design was used in agricultural vehicles.

Now Unimogs are used for everything from snow plows to fire trucks to farm and utility vehicles.

Or, like Rissler, you can use one to drive around the world.

She and her husband,

Michael Nischwitz, bought their 18-year-old Unimog for around \$25,000.

Then they spent eight months, and about \$50,000, fixing it up for extended travel around the world.

The couple and their truck arrived in Canada in February, and the plan was to spend two years exploring the country.

Long-term plans included taking it to South America, Australia, and eventually to Asia before heading back to Germany.

But last week's little disaster — a blown engine — may change all that.

"We took it because it is normally very strong and nothing really happens to it," says Rissler, who's currently cooling her heels in Whitehorse.

Despite its age, the vehicle only had 50,000 kilometres on it. They are usually good for about 500,000 kilometres.

"In Germany, it is a very expensive car if you buy it new, but it will last 30 to 40 years—normally," smiles Rissler.

Sitting amidst the chaos of the service station parking lot, she still manages to joke about it.

Their problem is finding a new engine, something that is a little hard to come by in

Canada.

The couple has contacted a German dealership that has an engine for them (price: \$4,000), but the cost of shipping it here might be too high for them.

There is a chance they can find one in Canada, as there is an Unimog dealership in Vancouver, but that also depends on the price, says Rissler.

"If it is too expensive, I think we will have to sell the

"I think the decision was to see nature as it is now... because we destroy everything and northern Canada is still the way it should be."

In order to make the camper a comfortable place to live, they invested a lot of money to redesign it.

It's now equipped with a solar panel for power, running water and even a heater for those chilly northern nights.

"In Germany, it is a good

tourist, you just say hello and goodbye and you see how the people live but you don't know what they think or what their behavior is."

Their truck has been a great way to meet people, she says. "Because the vehicle is strange, a lot of people come up and ask us about it."

And most of the people they have met have been very friendly, she says.

The concept of Canadian hospitality really hit home with her when the truck broke down just outside of Braeburn, she says.

Within minutes, someone was there to help them, the tow-truck operator was very understanding, and now the gas station is letting her park there while the couple work out the details of getting the engine replaced.

This friendly attitude is what she will remember most about the Yukon when it comes time to return home, she says.

"If you have a problem, you are not alone. People care about you. They help you, they are here and that helps me a lot."

"Here you feel that people do things from you out of their heart and they don't expect anything back."

LifeStyles

truck and buy another one or take backpacks. But we don't want to go back to Germany. There must be another solution."

The trip has been a life-long dream for the pair.

Nischwitz worked as a software designer and Rissler as a travel agent, but they both quit their jobs to take the trip.

"I don't think it is our life to work the next 20 years without a change," says Rissler.

"It's too boring to look into the future and say, 'I have to work,' which is so common.

place to live in," says Rissler. "We put money in the car because we don't have a flat. We gave up everything."

Since their arrival in February, the couple has travelled through B.C. before coming to the Yukon where they have spent most of their time doing river trips.

"We met a lot of very friendly Canadian people who invited us to sit by their fire, and I think that is the most interesting part of this journey," says Rissler.

"If you are a common