

# Outdoor

## X4

### EXPEDITION EARTH

*Navigating the Globe in a Jeep JKU*



ISSN: 2641-8258

OVERLAND THE RUBICON TRAIL - BORDER TO BORDER  
BIG SKY VISTAS - FLOATING LABYRINTH CANYON  
WILDERNESS EMERGENCY  
THE GREAT ESCAPE - A PHOTOGRAPHIC ADVENTURE

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# Outdoor

## ISSUE 45



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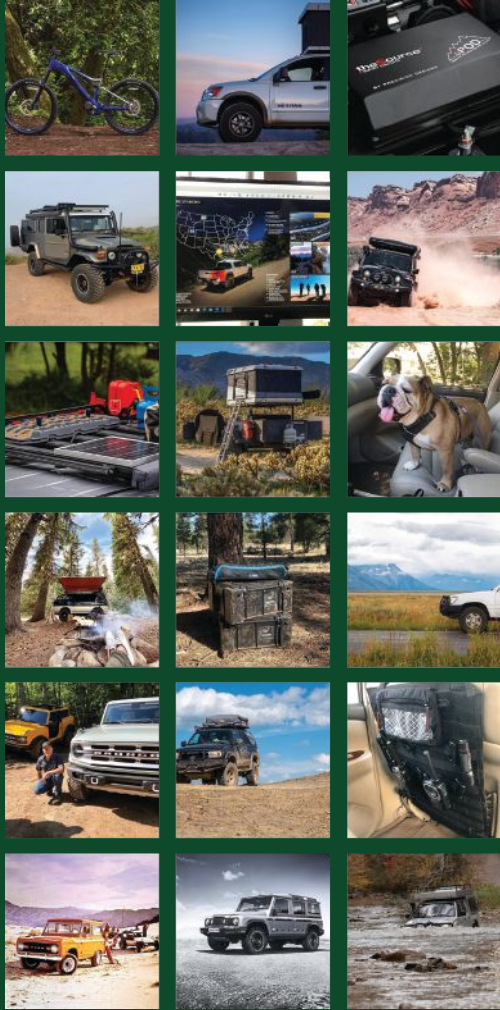
# We have issues...

*past*



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# THE DISPATCH

Life's pleasures and the experiences we have can often be taken for granted merely by virtue of not realizing just how special those experiences were until they're a distant memory.

For over 15 years, engaging with the splendor of our natural world has been a key component of how my wife and I have raised our three daughters. My two oldest daughters had their first camping trip in a roof top tent on the beach at a time when roof top tents in the U.S. hadn't yet become the status quo within the outdoors space. When my youngest was less than a year old, I carried her on my back as we hiked to Chasm Lake on Longs Peak in Rocky Mountain National Park. Each of our daughters' forays into the outdoors have been numerous ever since. Even our four-legged family members have joined us on jaunts across the state of Texas, sometimes in the misery of the summer heat but with the joy of seeing vistas as far as the eye can see. As a family, we've logged hundreds of thousands of miles in our various vehicles over the years, exploring remote destinations on four wheels, two wheels, and by foot including the time I admittedly didn't bring enough water for the five of us while hiking Palo Duro Canyon in the Texas panhandle...during the month of July.

On many of our trips, my high standards for stamina and planning created frustration, exhaustion, and often times questioning whether the decision to go was a good choice. However, each of our trips also brought joy, laughter, and engagement with our surroundings no textbook could ever provide. With sorrow, there were times when my frustrations affected our ability to really enjoy where we were, mostly due to my own inability to distance my work life from my personal life. All of this, over years and years, has had an impact which is a tough pill to swallow for a man who should understand how the outdoors experience can be transformative in a positive way.

So, what's the point in all this? That you are here. That life exists an identity. That the powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse. These are the words of Walt Whitman and as I reflect on the footprints left behind from far too many family adventures that weren't experienced to their fullest positive extent, I challenge you make each moment matter. To seize the day and cherish the experiences you have...before it's too late.

Frank Ledwell  
EDITOR & PUBLISHER





# BRING A COMPASS



**IT'S AWKWARD WHEN YOU  
HAVE TO EAT YOUR FRIENDS**

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ISSUE 45



## FLATWATER FLOAT

FLOATING SOUTHERN UTAH'S LABRINTH CANYON

20

## EXPEDITION EARTH

NAVIGATING THE GLOBE IN A JEEP JKU



30

## BORDER 2 BORDER

TRAVELING SOUTH TO NORTH ALONG HIGHWAY 89



44

## AMERICAN PRAIRIE PROTECTS BIG SKY VISTAS

CONSERVATION GROUP IMPROVES ACCESS AND RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES



64

## FEATURES

### 58 THE GREAT ESCAPE

A PHOTOGRAPHIC ADVENTURE

### 94 OVERLANDING THE RUBICON

EVERYTHING YOU WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT THE RUBICON BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK

## DEPARTMENTS

08 THE DISPATCH

13 NEWSWIRE

14 IN THE FIELD: SUBARU FORESTER WILDERNESS

15 WHAT WE DIG

16 DESTINATION: OVERLAND

54 BEYOND THE HORIZON:  
MICRO-VAN LIFE - JAPAN STYLE

74 TREADMARKS:  
THE CURSE OF KNOWLEDGE

78 BUILT FOR ADVENTURE:  
EDDIE LEE'S JEEP GLADIATOR RUBICON

87 AROUND THE CAMPFIRE:  
ADVENTURE ATHLETE SUNNY STROEER

104 OUTDOORX4 TRAINING:  
HOW TO BE FOUND IN A WILDERNESS EMERGENCY

110 FIELD REVIEW: LIFESTRAW



30

64

44

20

**COVER:** Relaxing in a Salt Pool While Exploring the World – by Topher Richwhite

**TABLE OF CONTENTS:** Exploring Colorado in a 100 Series Land Cruiser – by Stan Wright

**FINAL APPROACH:** Navigating Ophir Pass in the Summer Heat – by Will Kunasek

**BACK COVER:** Cruising Along the Bonneville Salt Flats – by Bridget Thackway



## GMC INTRODUCES 2023 CANYON AT4X



Boasting a fully redesigned exterior with a standard factory lift and widened track across the lineup, a new premium suite of advanced technology and an all-new interior design, the next-generation Canyon is built from the ground up to conquer any terrain.

Building on the success of AT4, the AT4X sub-brand is the ultimate expression of GMC's commitment to delivering serious off-road capability. First introduced on the 2022 Sierra, the AT4X trim has quickly become synonymous with robust off-road credibility.

"GMC is flexing the might of our off-road muscle," said GMC Global Vice President Duncan Aldred. "Canyon benefits from key learnings gained from our AT4 strategy to bring customers the most advanced off-road midsize truck."

With a higher factory lift than every other Canyon trim, Canyon AT4X offers serious off-road equipment and advanced technology for enhanced capability and convenience — no matter the destination.

Inspired by the Canyon AT4 concept first introduced in 2021, the Canyon AT4X boasts a factory lifted, ultra-wide track to elevate the off-road performance and capability. Canyon AT4X comes standard with 33-inch MT tires, Multimatic DSSV shocks, front and rear e-lockers, underbody skid plates and the AT4X-exclusive Baja drive mode. The Canyon AT4X's factory lift enables 10.7 inches of ground clearance standard and a 36.9-degree approach angle.

The 2023 Canyon is set to begin initial production in early 2023 with AT4X in spring 2023. Reservations for the 2023 GMC Canyon AT4X Edition 1 are open now, with MSRP starting at \$63,3505.



## EXPLORER DOCUMENTARY FEATURING SIR RANULPH FIENNES

Sir Ranulph Fiennes is credited with the sensational title of being the World's Greatest Living Explorer. Amongst his extraordinary achievements, he was the first to circumnavigate the world from pole to pole, crossed the Antarctic on foot, broke countless world records and discovered a lost city in Arabia. He has traveled to the most dangerous places on Earth, lost half his fingers to frostbite, raised millions of pounds for charity and was nearly cast as James Bond (and yes, he does happen to be a cousin to Ralph and Joseph). But who is the man who prefers to be known as just 'Ran'?

EXPLORER is a documentary that peels back the layers of Sir Ranulph's life to go beyond his record-breaking achievements and reveal the man behind the myth. The documentary feature is available exclusively on digital and on demand by visiting

[WWW.EXPLORER-MOVIE.COM/](http://WWW.EXPLORER-MOVIE.COM/)

## FRONT RUNNER LAUNCHES NEW SLIMPRO ROOF RACK SYSTEM FOR VANS



For those seeking to join the van life culture, or for those looking at evolving your overland or vehicle-based adventure van platform, a new collaboration between Front Runner Outfitters and Dometic brings to market a sleek new roof rack system to accommodate your life's adventures.

The new Slimpro Van Rack offers an additional entry point for those wishing to get

into overlanding and provides the van market a dependable and highly customizable rack system that allows you to best fit your adventure needs. The Slimpro Van Rack features an adjustable slat system, which accommodates just about any type of roof-mounted equipment such as air conditioning units, skylights and air vents. The rack is also compatible with most van sizes thanks to the adjustability of the rack's foot tail.

The Slimpro Van Rack is available to purchase now directly from the Front Runner online shop by clicking or tapping the image below, through the Experience Center in Agoura Hills, CA., or through any Front Runner official dealer. Pricing ranges from \$1,105 – \$2,135. Learn more by visiting

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## 2022 SUBARU FORESTER WILDERNESS

As a kid, I remember seeing Subaru Outback commercials featuring Crocodile Dundee navigating his way through the Outback, conquering the terrain, and arriving just in time to thwart a croc from the jaws of victory. These were fun commercials highlighting a brand that has consistently proven its capabilities and dependability the world over. So, when I had the chance to experience the 2022 Subaru Forester Wilderness over a 2,500 jaunt from Texas to Flagstaff for the annual Overland Expo, I was curious if the brand's cache could meet the demands of a vehicle-dependent journey.

The Wilderness model is the newest in Subaru's line-up. Featuring Yokohama GEOLANDAR all-terrain tires and upgraded suspension, Lineartronic® CVT with wider ratio coverage and revised final drive ratios, an advanced dual-function X-MODE® for increased capability, a DOHC 4-cylinder 2.5-liter BOXER engine with a towing capacity of 3,000 lbs., 9.2" of ground clearance, and approach and departure angles of 23.5 and 25.4 degrees respectively, the Subaru Forester Wilderness, on paper, looks legit.

My time with the Subaru Forester Wilderness was greeted with how surprisingly roomy the interior is. With the second-row seats folded down, I was able to pack our entire booth items, 1,000 copies of OutdoorX4 Magazine, and camping/clothing items for a week within the 69 cubic ft of space in the rear. Even with all the additional weight, this SUV didn't feel to be overburdened while traveling at highway speeds, averaging about 26mpg roundtrip from the Houston area to Flagstaff.

On-road handling is generally carlike but far more appropriate as a competent platform off-pavement than the Telluride I had driven and featured in a past review within OutdoorX4. With 182hps and 176 lb-ft of torque, the 2.5L BOXER motor is a bit underpowered but is so exceptionally reliable that I'd say it's a worthy platform. In short, if you want to win a race, you won't do it in the Forester Wilderness. If you want an enjoyable, comfortable ride, this is your SUV.

Off-pavement, the Wilderness model really shines particularly in mild to moderate terrains. While any competent overland-style vehicle generally requires several key upgrades depending on how the vehicle is used, I was impressed by the Symmetrical All-Wheel Drive system in the Wilderness though would like to see a locking differential (either in the center or at the rear) to allow for a bit more controlled travel along gnarly terrain. Still, the Forester Wilderness performed brilliantly along a variety of trails in Sedona and drew plenty of attention while resting at our booth during the Overland Expo in Flagstaff.

In short, the 2022 Subaru Forester Wilderness would make 'ol Crocodile Dundee proud. It's an agile, comfortable, capable vehicle that'll get you to the trailhead for just about any type of outdoors pursuit. It looks good, drives great, is generally simplistic for a modern vehicle, and at a tad over \$34k out the door, it wears the Subaru namesake proudly at an attainable price.



## TOM SHEPPARD'S THE NOBILITY OF WILDERNESS

Review by Frank Ledwell

For those of you unfamiliar with Tom Shepard, Tom has developed a reputation as an adventurer amongst adventurers. Residing in the UK, Tom's life experiences have taken him the world over and it's those experiences that have afforded Tom to become an exceptional resource for vehicle-based adventure. His book entitled Vehicle-Dependent Expedition Guide is the definitive resource for anyone engaging in backcountry travel. So, when I had the opportunity to explore his work, *The Nobility of Wilderness – Travels in Algeria*, I knew I would be in for a treat.

Algeria is a country that comprises a landmass larger than that of western Europe. It's a place of incredible solitude. It's a place

Tom is so passionate about he's made it a life mission to make it a Protected Area that he calls, "Not a National Park with its prissy overtones of fenced-in plots, but an espace de paysages – Space of Landscapes".

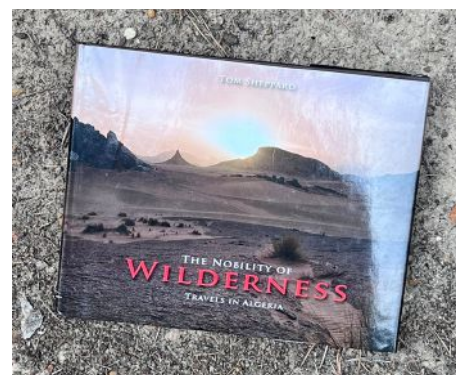
The book is half coffee table photo album and 100% resource for exploring the grandeur that comprises Algeria. Tom's wit and charm are evident in his various experiences that span 50+ years of traveling through the majestic sandscapes of the Sahara Desert.

*The Nobility of Wilderness* is an exceptional read and a must-have for anyone seeking a vicarious experience with a storyteller gifted with words.

## KICKIN' BACK



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## Harry Wagner Digs His COTTON CARRIER

Ever since a friend – who makes a living in backcountry ski photography – introduced me to the Cotton Carrier, I have used it on all my adventures. I love that it allows your hands to be free and doesn't swing from side to side. I typically have a long lens on one camera body and a short lens on a second body connected to a quarter-turn mount on my hip. The only issue I have found is that the lower camera can pivot and release if you lean down and the camera swings around on your leg.

# what WE dig



## Kris Wilson Digs Her NRS STRAPS

I use my Northwest River Supplies straps for everything – from attaching the frame to the cataraft pontoons – to securing an oversized spare tire in the back of my Land Cruiser. They function perfectly as kayak and canoe tie-downs on roof racks, as they will not damage a hull the way ratchet straps can. On my recent Utah trip, NRS straps saved the day when they enabled me to temporarily repair a broken leaf spring on my raft trailer.

The length is clearly indicated on each strap; this is especially useful when one has amassed a collection of them. The straps are sold as short as 1' and as long as 20'. They are versatile, easy to use, and tough. I only recently replaced my fifteen-year-old strap collection.



## Michael Perez Digs His ARMY SURPLUS SPOON

I never leave on a trip without my Army surplus spoon. Its size allows for large portions of soup, stew or ice cream to be eaten; there are no dainty portions like other camp spoons or – worse yet – sporks. With a knife, this spoon can even tackle a steak.

## Daniel Thornton Digs his BACKPACK

For the last few years, I have taken many trips with my Mystery Ranch Scree backpack. This 32L pack provides plenty of room for any day hiking adventure and the pack's yolk provides comfort while hiking. I really like the three-zipper system that allows quick access to the top of the pack. The webbing on the back provides various points to attach other items you may want to carry. I also found myself using this pack as my luggage for any weekend trip. This added versatility makes it my go-to pack these days.



## Jason Sakurai Digs His VAER A5 FIELD WATCH IN BLACK

Nothing compares to the durable, stylish, Vaer A5 Field Watch on my wrist. Why? I never need to search for it. Vaer makes watches for adventuring, assembled in the U.S. They started when watches they liked weren't affordable and didn't like what they could afford. That made sense to me, and it's become my go-to timepiece around town and on my travels.



## **What is the most annoying flying insect pest on earth?**

I got to thinking about this because I'm in Alaska, fixing up a cool old cabin Roseann and I bought in Fairbanks. We're just south of the Arctic Circle here—and the Arctic, of course, is famous for biblical-plague levels of mosquitos. We got our first full experience years ago on a sea kayak trip down the Mackenzie River to Tuktoyaktuk. While most of our camps were free or nearly free of them, at a couple the mozzies were thick enough that clapping your hands in front of your face would kill ten or fifteen. Toilet breaks were comical exercises in speed-voiding of whatever needed voiding.

Yet despite those encounters and others, including many in Africa, I realized that mosquitoes aren't even number two on my list of, say, the five most annoying regional insect pests. Herewith my personal ranking, based on my own travels, which are far from comprehensive. (Note also that I'm not considering potential disease transmission here, or allergic reactions – simply annoyance.)





**NUMBER 5:** Australian bush flies. The “Aussie Salute” is a well-known gesture down under: a hand waving back and forth across the face. (Watch Andrew St. Pierre White’s videos and you’ll see it often). Bush flies multiply by the billions in the outback on a seasonal basis, and they can be maddening in their persistence in landing on one’s face and ears and in catching rides – three or four dozen at a time – on one’s back and hat. The ameliorating factor here is that they don’t bite. They’re after moisture, and as distracting as that can be, at least it’s not painful or itchy. Just creepy. And they’re strictly diurnal; sunset brings relief.

**NUMBER 4:** Blackflies. At a camp in Canada one summer Roseann and I were sitting across from each other at a table, when we said simultaneously, “There’s blood running down your forehead!” Indeed there was. Unlike mosquitoes, which employ hypodermic-like mouthparts, blackflies simply chew a tiny serving dish from which to lap up one’s O positive. Their saliva anesthetizes the bite—temporarily, after which it itches like crazy for several days. Fortunately blackflies rarely reach Aussie bush fly densities, and they’re easily turned back by repellent and/or a headnet.

**NUMBER 3:** Mosquitoes. Here’s the saving grace about mosquitoes, especially the Arctic variety: They’re big, and they’re slow. So, for example, once you’ve pitched your tent—I’m presuming you have a high-quality tent with good netting over the doors—the accepted procedure is to run like crazy in a circle and wave your arms wildly to lose the immediate crowd of them, then zip open the tent door, dive inside, and zip up again. You’ll bring some mosquitoes inside, but they’re generally

easy to kill. Snatching them out of the air is something of a sport. Outside, both DEET and the much more benign picaridin work well at repelling them—as will a halfway decent breeze. Finally, the life cycle of Arctic mosquitoes is tied to caribou reproduction, which means that most areas are mosquito-free by August. On a recent drive to Prudhoe Bay in late August we collected exactly two bites.

**NUMBER 2:** Tsetse flies. If you’ve never experienced a tsetse bite, there’s an easy way to replicate it: Have a friend heat a sewing needle with a match and then sneak up and plunge it into the back of your neck unexpectedly. It’s impossible not to jump and curse vilely. Furthermore, tsetses are attracted to moving objects—such as, say a Land Rover—and given the habitat in which the flies are ac-



tive that moving Land Rover is likely to need the windows open to prevent the humans inside overheating. Tsetses hone in on the gaps like X-wing fighters on the Death Star’s exhaust port. Stop to take a look at that elephant and the horde that’s been trailing you like Messerschmitts after a B17 — if you’ll allow me to mix my metaphors — catch up and dive in. Chaos and blasphemy ensue. The only saving grace is that tsetses are slow fliers, and it’s possible to snag one every so often, pull its wings off, and fling it out the window with a snarl of short-lived triumph.

**NUMBER 1:** Jejenes. This is no contest for me. Jejenes (pronounced ‘hehennes’) are a type of sandfly, especially found near mangrove estuaries along the Gulf of California and elsewhere. On a Linnaean basis they’re members of the family Psychodidae—and a more appropriate name has never graced any member of the animal kingdom. Jejenes are tiny—gnat-sized—and arrive in clouds of no fewer than a trillion (I’ve counted). There’s no effective way to kill them, and if you try the mosquito tactic to seek refuge in your tent a squadron of roughly one million is sure to get in with you. Repellent? DEET is like cocaine to them: Slather it on, they snort it for the high. A jejene bite leaves a small red welt that *increases* in maddening itchiness over several days before tapering off. And a minute’s exposure if you land your sea kayak in the wrong spot is enough to collect dozens of bites. Ameliorating factors? They mostly stay near those estuaries. Mostly. If you’re ever unlucky enough to be caught in jejene territory you’ll soon find yourself wishing you could take off and nuke the entire site from orbit.

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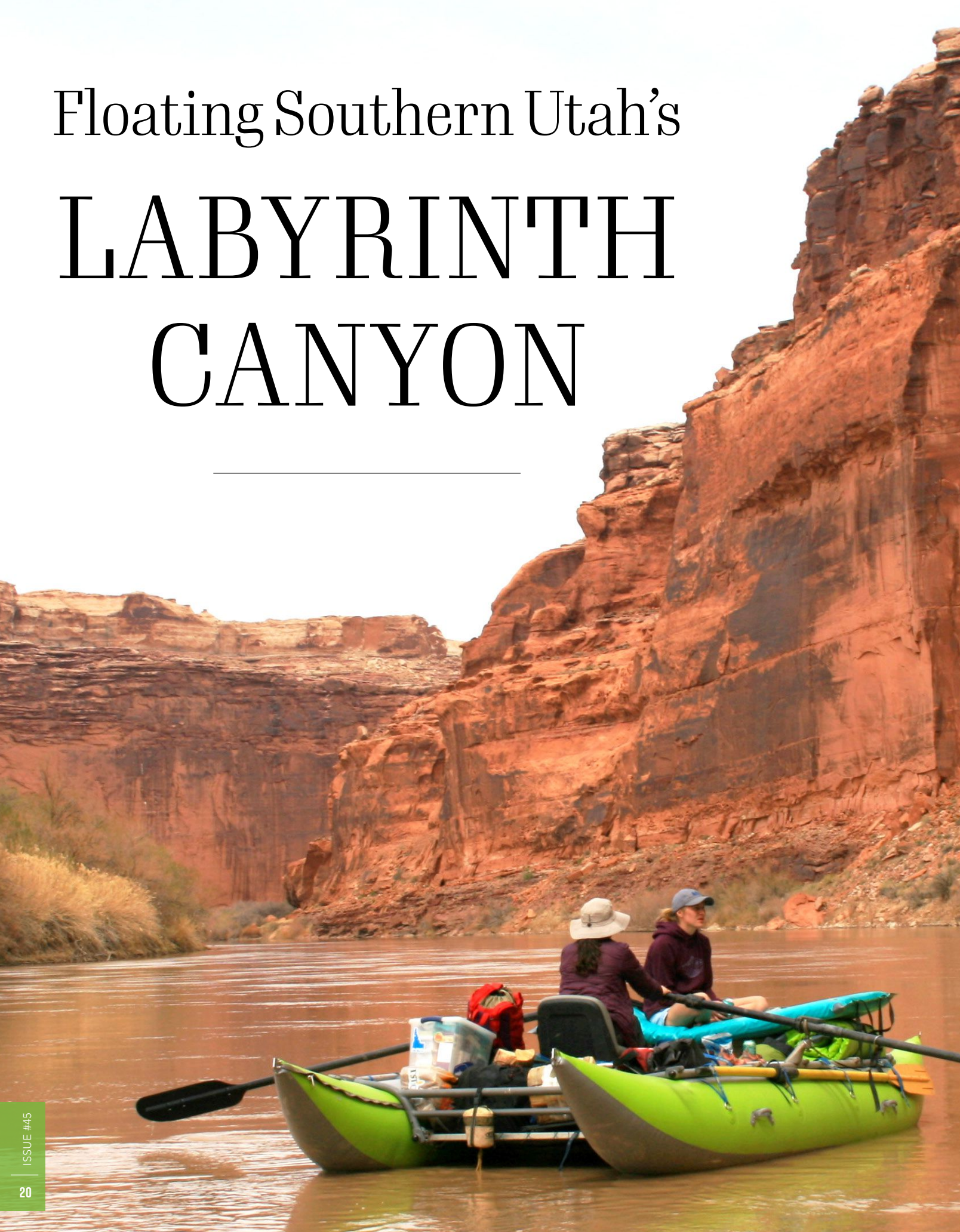
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# LABYRINTH CANYON

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## WORDS & PHOTOS – KRIS WILSON

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**L**ike many people, I experienced a difficult 2020. Teaching high school English remotely had taken a heavy toll. However, the following year proved to be even more challenging in many ways, and while there were plenty of reasons not to follow through on a trip to canyon country this past April, I really wanted to. My rationale was compelling. My best friend, Kass, a medical student at U.V.M., was running out of vacation possibilities as she went into her second year. And, perhaps more importantly, few things are more effective than the desert sun to remedy the winter blues brought on by an upstate New York winter.

Three of us – Kass, Eileen, my sister-in-law, an animator/producer, and I – would row the Green River through Labyrinth Canyon in southern Utah, a forty-five mile, flatwater float.

Spreadsheets facilitated efficient shopping trips, gear packing, and menu-creation. I secured the free permit and hired Coyote Shuttle – out of Moab – to move my vehicle downstream to the take-out. In video group chats, we discussed general logistics, and were on our way.

Eileen would drive out from Southern California, while Kass would fly into Grand Junction. Then, we would all rendezvous in Green River. I drove the gear-hauler – my 270,000-mile 2007 Land Cruiser – which towed my raft trailer. I had fresh rear brakes and a new C.V. axle rebuild thanks to my local Toyota dealership, and the Land Cruiser was predictably trouble-free during yet another cross-country venture.

The warm days and cool nights necessitated more gear than summer trips. Since the three of us would be tipping the scales in my 16' Aire Jaguarundi cataraft, I borrowed a 15' Star raft.

We picked up Eileen and her gear in Green River and headed east on I-70. Ten miles later we turned south towards Crescent Junction and soon found ourselves off pavement. We were bound for Ruby Ranch, a sprawling series of alfalfa fields on the eastern banks of the Green River. We were launching the same week Easter Jeep Safari started, so the roads leading to



the river's edge were busy with Jeeps, off-road bikes, and even R.V.s. However, we knew once we got on the river, the crowds would disappear. After driving west for miles across a gray moonscape, we came to a locked gate with a foreboding "Private Property: No Trespassing" sign. Kass and Eileen hopped out to open the gate, I drove through, then they locked it again. A few minutes later we topped a rise, then drove between rich, green alfalfa fields to the boat launch.

We unloaded the gear and inflated and rigged the boats, then took everything down to the ramp, which was soft and sandy. We placed both boats in the water so they weren't weighted down, then packed them. We cracked beers. Our float had begun.



We took turns rowing the borrowed raft and my Aire cataraft, which consists of an aluminum frame suspended above two inflated pontoons. The boats' handling proved very different, and while I preferred my "cat," it was the boat which more comfortably held two people and was easier to row, so I offered to suffer in the raft. That first day was a quintessential spring day in canyon country; the temperature soared, the wind was mild, and the canyon walls towered over the river, growing taller with every mile. We enjoyed each other's company and watched ravens soar in pairs, their croaks echoing down the canyon.

Kass and I had determined that the wind forecast deserved careful consideration – more so than the temperature. On our first night, this meant coming off the water before the wind started to kick up in the early evening, but without options for protected camping sites, this meant we spent the night on a sandbar. We were behind some tamarisk and the sandbar rose up directly behind us where the wind was swirling, so at first this was alright. However, in the middle of the night, the



wind shifted and came roaring out of the southwest, at times flattening our tents and covering us and all our gear in an ultra-fine layer of sand. I'm not sure how much sleep Kass and Eileen got, but I fretted over the boats all night. On sev-

eral occasions, I climbed out of the tent, squinting against the blowing sand, to ensure my knots had held and we would still have a couple boats to row come morning.

Waking up to Kass' pour-over coffee atoned for the sleepless night. We didn't prolong packing, though, as the breeze kicked up again as soon as the sun topped the canyon rim.

At mile seventy-seven, we arrived at the River Register, where inscriptions – some seventy years old – cover rocks at the base of the canyon wall. The Moab B.L.M. has loaded ammo cans with notebooks and pens so modern river runners can add their names without defacing the rocks.

There are two types of camps on the river: high-water and low-water. Low-water camps are typically sand-bars, which

ease camp set-up, and are low-impact camps. In Labyrinth Canyon, high-water camps are often harder to reach, up a steep bank, but usually offer shade and more privacy as there are small clearings between trees or rocks for each tent; our second camp was just such a place. Nestled within Gambel oaks, it featured views of both the river and the canyon wall behind us. We enjoyed dinner and drinks, then sat around the campfire, solving many of America's institutional problems.

The following morning, we floated a few miles to the saddle of Bowknot Bend, so named by John Wesley Powell's men on his 1869 expedition. Here, the river makes a spectacular seven-mile loop, nearly doubling back on itself, and river runners who climb to the top of the ridge are rewarded with an unparalleled vista of both sides of the river.





We started the hike to the saddle of Bowknot Bend, where we took pictures of that magnificent view, then resumed our journey. This was to be the windiest day on the river, with afternoon gusts over forty miles-per-hour, so our goal was to be off the river early, hopefully after securing a camp on the backside of Bowknot Bend. If the wind cooperated, we could hike to the uranium camp and mines tucked into the Moss Back Member of Chinle Formation, a type of sandstone. The rowing was manageable until we got about a mile above the camp, then gusts threatened to push the boats back to Ruby Ranch. To row more efficiently, Kass and I turned our boats backward and pulled hard, bracing our legs against the foot bars, each stroke deep and purposeful. We eventually got to our intended camp, and to our delight, no one was there.





We hauled our gear up the bank, then hiked to the mining camp. A large section of this bottom had burned in recent years; ghostly trunks of tamarisk and cottonwood leaned upward from charred sand. Much of the mining camp had burned, too, but enough of the structures remained to explore. In one cabin, ore samples adorn a table and windowsill, a single bed sits in the corner, and a wire coat hanger on a rafter – the structure’s roof having disintegrated – frames an impossibly beautiful view of the red rock beyond.

We ascended the ledge to investigate the decommissioned uranium mines, which the Utah Department of Natural Resources sealed in 2006. We also inspected some mining trucks, but the wind gusts were so forceful that rocks started pelting us from the ridge above, so we started down.


We enjoyed some mai tais, compliments of Eileen, then made dinner. The wind had not abated, so it was another sleepless night for me, as I checked on the boats every few hours.

The following day was bright, breezy, and cold. Eileen grilled some breakfast quesadillas, then we decamped.

On our fourth day, effortless rowing under a cloudless sky delivered us to a picturesque, high-water camp. It was to be a cold night in the twenties, but this camp would have sun well into the evening. We again enjoyed drinks crafted by Eileen, basked in the sun, and built a fire in the Solo Stove. In Labyrinth Canyon, campers are responsible for removing all waste, and the




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self-contained Solo Stove helped in this regard, as even ash must be packed out.

Our fifth and final day was another sunny, warm one, and ten quick miles took us to Mineral Bottom. After a river trip, it is always a relief to find your vehicle has been shuttled to the take-out. Coyote Shuttle has moved my vehicles countless times, and I have found them to be reliable and professional.

De-rigging can be stressful, but we deflated the boats and loaded the gear quickly and efficiently, and started the drive out of the canyon.

Mineral Canyon Road, a magnificent byway, snakes from the river to the canyon

rim and offers a dramatic vista of Canyonlands, which starts just below Labyrinth. The Moab Highway Department was grading the road, so we had to wait on some of the switchbacks for the drivers to provide us enough room to squeeze by. At one point, I heard a strange noise issue from the trailer. I investigated once we got to the canyon rim. One of the trailer's leaf springs had snapped in two; the increased weight of the additional boat was finally too much to bear. A few highway workers climbed out of their rigs to assist us. With their help, I wedged a wooden board beneath the axle to lift the wheel well off the tire. Some wire would – in theory – keep the wood in place, but I was worried that the sixteen miles of ungraded dirt road would loosen this tem-

porary fix and that if I didn't notice we'd lose the tire. Predictably, five miles later, I lost the board, which one of the highway workers found and brought to us. We now had the force of the entire highway department with us. When I pulled over, every truck in their fleet did, too. I wasn't in cell range and couldn't call my boyfriend, Aaron, who would have been able to guide me through fixing it, so the men's assistance meant a lot to us. This time I jacked up the trailer and pulled out my N.R.S. cam straps that secure the rafts to the frames. Repurposed to keep the piece of wood from dislodging, the straps enabled us to limp back to Green River, where West Winds Truck Stop installed a new leaf spring.





Trailer trouble notwithstanding, the three of us had a spectacular float down the Green River.

Utah may be some 2,100 miles from my beloved Catskills home, but time behind the oars shrinks those miles.

*I am left with the most enduring considerations: ravens soaring in their synchronized dance against the cliff wall, calling then disappearing from view over the canyon rim; the wind whispering among the rocks – the most poignant of desert sounds; or the heady, incomparable fragrance of the river itself.*

Such moments encapsulate the desert river’s irresistible pull and it is no wonder travelers like me are drawn to southern Utah’s wild places time and again. ❖

## KRIS WILSON ————— AUTHOR BIO

Kris Wilson lives in the Catskill Mountains of New York with her daughter, Katie. For the last two decades, she has found great fulfillment teaching high school English to juniors and seniors. In 2021, her essay, ‘Green Hair and Bones in Their Noses’: Teenagers’ Appreciation for No Country for Old Men, was published by the Modern Language Association in a collection entitled Approaches to Teaching the Works of Cormac McCarthy. Kris also likes to write for Toyota Trails and has two Land Cruisers. She loves her 2007 UZJ100, which she tows with and drives cross-country. However, the 1992 FJ80 she bought in 2021 has captured her heart.



She prefers to be outside, and loves to garden, kayak, horseback ride, backcountry camp, and take walks with her German Shepherd, Lucy. Kris makes annual trips to Colorado and Utah, and is happiest at the oars of her raft on multi-day trips down wilderness rivers.



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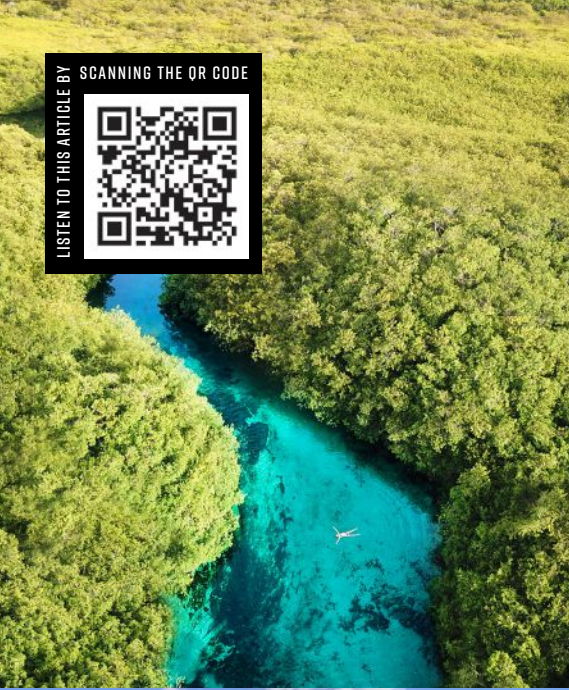
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# EXPEDITION EARTH

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## Navigating the Globe in a Jeep JKU

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WORDS - BRIDGET THACKWRAY

PHOTOS - BRIDGET THACKWRAY &  
TOPHER RICHWHITE





## Eighteen months and 134,679 kilometers (80,807 miles).

That's how far our expedition around the earth has been, starting with -30C temperatures from Arctic Alaska, then covering the world's longest road, hottest road, most dangerous road, most northern road, most southern road, highest road, and – sitting -127 meters below sea level – the world's lowest road.

For those not familiar with Expedition Earth, the journey was created first and foremost to highlight and promote environmental concerns throughout the world as well as to highlight the organizations who are working to resolve those concerns.

We had previously completed the Pan American Highway, traveling from Deadhorse in Alaska to Ushuaia in Argentina. Gunther, our Jeep Wrangler, was then loaded onto a ship to cross the gigantic Atlantic Ocean. This crossing took thirty days at sea with a week each side for paperwork. Compared to our shipment around the Darien Gap earlier that year, from Panama to Colombia, the entire process was a lot more efficient and, in all ways, easier. This was largely due to Panalpina's logistics team who helped us along every step of the way.

A month later we were all reunited on the shores of Durban in South Africa. We knew the terrain was going to be very different from America's, so the first week was spent getting Gunther re-fitted in gear to tackle Africa. The most obvious choice for us was Front Runner Outfitters, which sits at the forefront in the overlanding world. Front Runner undertook almost a complete rebuild of Gunther. On his new Front Runner roof rack, he had a forty-liter water tank, two twenty-liter fuel cans, a Front Runner table, awning – everything! Within forty-eight hours, Gunther was ready for Africa!

Our route took us from South Africa up through Namibia. The stunning empty landscapes were the perfect introduction to Africa's remote and unique paradise. Deflating and re-inflating tires became almost an hourly task, as we navigated between







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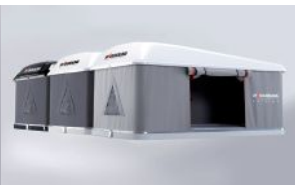
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sand dunes, rock trails and dry riverbeds. We spent almost two weeks working our way up the mainland and coastal areas of Namibia, eventually entering Botswana from the northeast.

If you've not been to Botswana, it is a truly remarkable place we've since determined is a favorite, including both the best camping spots and the most amazing wildlife experiences. Some evenings we would be camping in the wild with elephants all around our campsite, only twenty meters or so away. One night they came right in beside Gunther to check him out. It was this region of the expedition that we really enjoyed the benefits of having a Jeep. The wild trails there are unbelievable, and with the roof panels off, there is no other place on the planet like it. Every five minutes we would come across another elephant, giraffe, or safari creature.

After Botswana, we navigated through both Zambia and Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe was our first experience of traveling through a country with a fuel shortage, and it was much more difficult than we expected. Luckily, we had a kind family reach out to us through Instagram to offer us a re-fuel at their house when we reached the capital city. The family had connections with the owner of a fuel station, who had given them extra fuel to keep at their house. Every gas station we saw along our route in Zimbabwe was empty, with cars in queues up to two kilometers long parked and waiting. The drivers had left their cars there days earlier. Without the help of this kind family, we wouldn't have made our way through Zimbabwe – and would have had very little idea of what to do or where to go!

Although our route was northbound towards Europe, from Zimbabwe we began to head south and re-entered South Africa's

eastern region. We wanted to see Kruger National Park, being such an iconic African safari land. This led us back down to only three hours' drive from the port we had picked Gunther up from two months earlier.

Kruger National Park was not as impressive as the other areas we had driven through, much less wild, and more like a theme park with paved roads. We began to miss the empty and lawless land of the north, and quickly turned east towards Mozambique.

When we arrived in Mozambique, the north of the country had just been hit by a devastating cyclone. One of their largest cities had been dealing with a very serious outbreak of disease. Topher and I were careful not to touch, drink, or wash in any of the water during our time there. Unfortunately, many of the roads were blocked or flooded, meaning it was impossible to get access to help any of the locals. This also made driving north through the country nearly impossible, and we continuously debated turning around to drive all the way back up through South Africa and Zimbabwe, which would have taken days.

It wasn't long before we managed to successfully get through Mozambique and enter Malawi. The villages along the south of Lake Malawi were beautiful, and the people very kind, which was mostly the case throughout all of Africa. Topher and I hadn't seen another Jeep since we left Cape Town. I don't think the locals had ever seen a Jeep before, as there was a huge change in reaction throughout Malawi around Gunther. Everyone would turn to watch as we drove by, and if we were stopped, locals would come up just to touch him.





Navigating our way up Lake Malawi took a lot longer than expected. The roads here were the worst we had experienced throughout our Expedition Earth with Bolivia being a close second. The main highway up the west of the country was covered in crater-sized potholes. Our top speed for a day's drive would have been forty kph, with an average of around twenty kph. It was extremely hard work driving, and the road wasn't much more enjoyable as a passenger!

Most of the border crossings between the countries in Africa had been easy; not as easy as in South America, but would still only take three to five hours each. The border between Malawi to Tanzania took us over eight hours, creating frustration for us as we entered the country in total darkness. We didn't want to stop and purchase a phone SIM card so late, so we were also unable to use the internet to find a safe area to sleep or research where to go. All we knew were the two rules of Africa: One, don't drive at night; and two, don't sleep in border towns. That night we broke both of those rules.

Tanzania ended up being one of our favorite countries and felt more modern and politically secure than most. While there, we

undertook an amazing National Geographic assignment to photograph traditional lion killers. This required us to drive off-road for hours, where tribal village women and children ran from the sight of Gunther. They had never seen a car before!

As we navigated our way up through Rwanda and Uganda into Kenya, we began to feel more and more at home in Africa. We had now been there for several months and had gotten into a rhythm of what to expect while traversing the continent. However, Northern Africa introduced completely new challenges, including tribal war zones in Ethiopia, civil unrest in the Sudan, and the constant threat of terrorists in Egypt. This required Gunther to undertake yet another garage visit in Nairobi to prepare him for what lay ahead. The main modification this time was slat armor on each of the passenger windows. For months we had seen numerous cars with large mysterious holes in their sides. When we asked the driver what caused the holes, each time it was due to tribal conflict and locals in Ethiopia. We weren't so concerned about the odd hole in Gunther, but our biggest worry with this was if we lost a window behind us. Throughout Africa, the roadsides – specifically around traffic lights – are humming with people; it would be very easy for someone to reach inside and take gear resting in the backseat.

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any left. Typically, we would be fine using local currency, but the next country along our route was Sudan...and Sudan had a new jungle of problems for us to work our way around. The most difficult issue we faced was the fact that ATMs were no longer available as a result of the political conflicts. Due to sanctions on the country from the U.S., there was also no USD in Sudan either. The only way for us to cross the country was to buy enough USD cash off the Ethiopian black market to cross the entire country of Sudan. And in Sudan, we would still be buying black market fuel at unpredictable, inflated prices.

Unlike petrol, trading USD cash needed to be done out of sight, which meant in the back of a taxi cab as it circulated empty side streets within the capital city. It felt a lot more serious, and quite frightening.

Despite being pulled out of Gunther with guns at our heads and a conflict involving a knife being drawn, Ethiopia was one of the highlights on Expedition Earth. The unique landscapes, history, and culture there still remains raw and untouched. The Danakil Depression in the north of the country takes you 127 meters below sea level (approx. 400'). Temperatures reached fifty degrees Celsius – nearly 122 degrees Fahrenheit – by ten a.m., and the alien-like landscape provided an incredibly varied off-road experience!

It wasn't long before we had our slat armor installed. We also addressed other issues, including purchasing a new tire (we had torn one beyond repair in Tanzania), checking the engine, installing a new oil filter, and then we were off. Stacked high in petrol due to the shortage in Ethiopia, we drove through one of the most unstable borders along our expedition, between Kenya and Ethiopia.

The border processing went surprisingly smooth. What didn't go so well was when we traveled further into the country and ran out of fuel from our jerry cans. We didn't realize the country was out of fuel so literally. It was, truly, completely out of fuel. We arrived at a busy gas station with a group of tuk tuks pushing to the front. It was at that time we discovered there wasn't any fuel they were waiting for. Instead, it was a rush to be at the front of the line for when fuel arrives. This left us with only one choice: purchase fuel off the black market at a cost of \$300 per tank. Ethiopia, being one of the poorest countries on the planet, quickly worked its way to being one of the most expensive countries we visited during the expedition.

The other black market trade we were forced into was for USD (United States dollar) cash. Even Ethiopian banks didn't have





Sudan was also a very unique experience. The border had closed earlier that month, and there was discussion it would close again due to political conflicts. If Sudan had closed its borders, the only option for us would have been to ship Gunther around the country, as South Sudan would not have been an option worth risking. Luckily, we made it across the Ethiopian-Sudanese border and began to head north, further into the country.

Our experience in Sudan was the first where we felt less in Africa and more in the Middle East. The culture and landscape was dramatically different from that of south and east Africa. The arid desert provided a setting scattered with lost pyramids, utes driven with camels sitting in their back tray, and the local food a unique mix of flavors and ingredients.

We covered the country safely, with only a sighting of a few protests here and there in Khartoum. When we were further in the

## ABOUT GUNTHER THE JEEP JKU

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Throughout the journey, Gunther is continually being modified. He has just undertaken his fourth re-kit here in London to prepare him for the Arctic regions which lie ahead.

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- Warn M800 Synthetic Winch

### EDITOR'S NOTE:

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north of Sudan, the only option was to camp out in the desert. We drove five kilometers or so off the main road and restricted ourselves to only candle light during sunset and then no light when darkness fell. We had heard mixed stories of bandits in the desert here, so decided the safer option was to camp here with caution. Even five kilometers or so off the main road, the desert was covered in tire marks. We noticed this across the entire length of Sudan, even though we had never seen anyone driving off-road.

During our first night off the beaten path, Topher awoke at two a.m. to the sound of someone walking in the sand. He silently pushed me towards the Jeep and made me sit inside with the doors locked. There was a hot wind blowing (so hot that every hour we would wake to have a water bottle shower inside the tent) which put some doubt on if Topher had heard someone walking, or just something blowing along the desert sand. Within twenty minutes, I was back asleep in the tent, ignoring Topher's worried frustration. He spent the rest of the night perched outside the tent, awake, watching, and waiting.

Two days later we reached Egypt, through a tedious border crossing, and every news channel was broadcasting the massacre inside Sudan's capital of Khartoum. Hundreds were shot and many thrown into the Nile alive, with bricks tied to their feet. The group responsible for this were found to have been camping out in the desert whilst training, close to where we were camping! It was a nerve-wracking feeling, knowing that what Topher heard was possibly someone from this group.

Since our time in Sudan, we have covered Europe and taken a break in London. We are halfway into our three-year, eighty-country expedition. During our time in London, we've been busy preparing Gunther for the next leg of our trip through the

Arctic region. Gunther is now sitting on BFGoodrich 35" tires; our last set got us from Arizona in America to London! We have a new AEV 3.5" lift, a TeraFlex rear cargo rack for extra storage, Lightforce LED lights for the Arctic darkness, and more Front Runner gear to carry another forty liters of fuel on the roof. Once we reach Iceland, we will use two Webasto heaters going inside Gunther – one for his engine and one for the cabin area where we will be sleeping.

The journey ahead is going to be in temperatures as low as -50 degrees C, approx. -58 degrees F, and we expect to be off-road and traveling along frozen rivers for days, camping with Nenet Russian tribes, and numerous northern lights shows. We will find ourselves craving the heat of Africa.

We will travel from the Arctic regions of the north into the heat of Iran, where Gunther will lose his winter kit to enter the desert regions of the Middle East. From there, we will take a much less-expected route, working our way through Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan into Mongolia. This is to be one of the most uncharted regions of our expedition, where Gunther will not see a road for weeks. We'll be using GPS to navigate the backcountry of this stunning and remote part of the planet.

Following that will be a complete contrast, as we travel through China and Southeast Asia where we will be surrounded by dense populations and industrialization. Not until we reach the outback of Australia will we find ourselves in empty lands of arid heat.

Our end goal? To reach our finish line in New Zealand after nearly 350,000 kilometers, eighty countries, and seven continents. Stay tuned. ✖



## BRIDGET THACKWRAY

AUTHOR BIO

Bob started riding motorcycles as a kid in the late 70's, then in the early 80's in junior high he took a photography class and became hooked on visual storytelling ever since. He enjoys riding motorcycles and taking pictures, and has combined these two passions, occupying much of his spare time. He has covered Supercross, Moto Trials, and other events for a variety of publications.

On the adventure side, he likes to identify cool routes with the history on those routes, then plan adventure trips accordingly. He has presented his travels and taught classes at Overland Expo West for multiple years. Bob yearns for readers of his stories to be inspired to search out their own adventures with attainable, relatable travels designed to fit into a two or three-day weekend. Bob rides a Yamaha WR450 fully built for off road weekend adventure trips where two track and single track are welcome, and pavement is limited.







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# Border 2 Border:

*Traveling South to North  
Along Highway 89*

WORDS & PHOTOS - ROBERT THEOBALD





**2020** was supposed to be an amazing year and the start to an amazing decade. Then Covid hit. Businesses were closed, travel stopped, and the daily routine changed for everyone. Then, in late 2020 I ended up in the hospital with Covid, giving me a lot of time to think about adventures we could do. When I say “we,” I mean Travis – my cousin – and me. We have been riding motorcycles together for nearly twenty years and over the past five years have been doing some adventure riding around the Southwest.

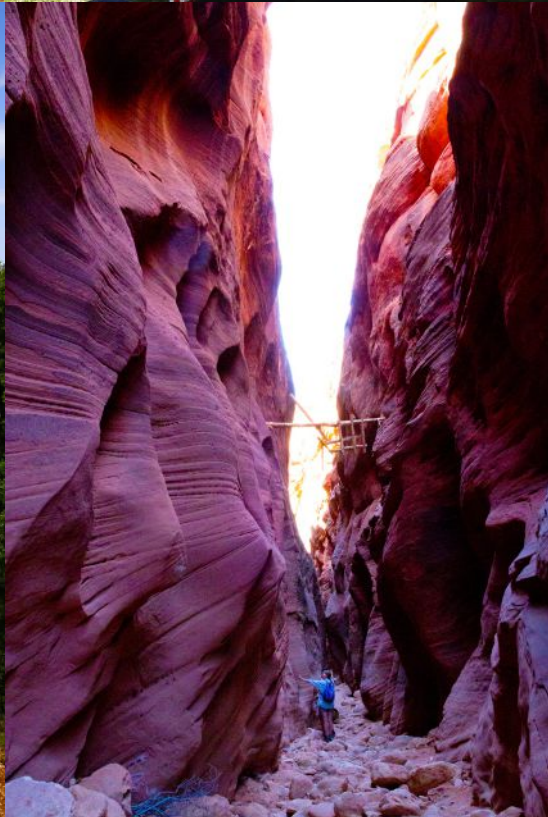
Taking months off work wouldn't work for either of us, but a week or two might. I started to think of epic trips that would fit into our time parameters. In 2021, we did

a six-hundred-mile, four-day trip around southern Arizona, exploring the history and dirt roads around Cochise County, while camping from our motorcycles.

In 2022, we wanted to do a much longer trip. When it comes to epic road trips, people think of Highway 101 or Route 66, but when I looked at the map, I found a spectacular route that very few people mention, but many have been on at some point: Highway 89. Currently, Highway 89 starts in Wickenburg, Arizona, but historically, it started at the Mexico/U.S. border in Nogales, Arizona, and ends at the Canada border just north of Babb, Montana. Between these two points, there are seven national parks and many other amazing places.

We decided this was the route: Border to border. We would follow Highway 89 from the south to the north and visit all of the national parks along the way. Some are on the highway and some are a few miles off the highway. And when possible, we would take Highway 89A. Additionally, we would include some dirt road options to mix things up a bit. As I did some additional research, I realized that there is so much to do on this route, that with only ten days, our focus would be on the national parks. Travelers could spend a week or more just on the Arizona sections of this route.

Preparing for a trip like this requires starting months in advance. First, we had to find a date that would work with



life's schedules and events. We needed to plan our stops, meals, camping spots, and more. Some of the national parks we intended to visit are very popular and the campgrounds and hotels fill up fast. For the Grand Tetons, Yellowstone, and Glacier, we made campground hotel reservations six months in advance. Some parks require permits to enter, and these go fast, too.

As we got closer to the trip, our motorcycle adventure plans fell through and some other "life stuff" occurred. Some doors closed, but then others opened. We had been working with a motorcycle manufacturer to obtain adventure bikes, but when they weren't available, a door opened and I was offered a 2021 Ford F-150 Tremor for the trip. Since it was no longer a motorcycle adventure, we made

some changes to our route and agendas at each national park.

Then, Travis was unable to take the time off as planned due to work. This presented a challenge. But other doors opened again. Instead of a Bob-and-Travis adventure ride, it became a father-and-son bonding trip. For a few days at the start, Travis and one of his boys would join the trip, and then on the second half of the trip, I would be joined by two of my boys. Things started to pan out and I knew it would be an awesome trip.

Before we knew it, it was the middle of May and time to leave. It would be a twelve-day trip; it would take ten days to go from the Nogales, Arizona border with Mexico to the Babb, Montana border with Canada. Day eleven and twelve would take us back to our home base in Arizona.

This is our breakdown of our daily travel plan.

On day one, we would travel from the border fence in Nogales, Arizona to Wickenburg, Arizona. We would visit the San Xavier Mission Del Bac and the Saguaro National Park outside of Tucson, do a short hike to view some Native American rock art, and then follow Highway 89 as it works its way through Florence, Mesa, Tempe, and Phoenix, on our way to Wickenburg.

On day two we would take Highway 89 and 89A from Wickenburg to Flagstaff. We would start on Highway 89 up through Prescott, then just outside of Prescott we would take Highway 89A through Sedona, and then to Flagstaff where we would camp at the Fort Tuthill Fairgrounds to attend Overland Expo West.



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Instead of traveling on day three, we would be sharing a presentation and teaching a class at the expo. We have been sharing our yearly trips and our creative cooking at the Overland Expo West for a few years. This year, our presentation would be about the meals we enjoyed during our border to border trip. The class, "Traveling Light While Eating Right," would cover some simple tricks and tips for packing and preparing great travel food.

On day four, we would leave Overland Expo and stop at Lee's Ferry Lodge in Marble Canyon, on Highway 89A. We would visit the east side of Grand Canyon National Park, then continue to Bitter Springs where we would again take Highway 89A and wrap up the day with a hike at Lee's Ferry before spending the night at the nice and simple Lee's Ferry Lodge at Vermillion Cliffs.

Day five would see us depart Marble Canyon via a dirt road that connects Highway 89A with Highway 89, called House Rock Road. On House Rock Road we would

stop and do a hike called Wire Pass, which requires a previously-purchased permit one must obtain at Recreation.gov. Then we would have lunch in Kanab at one of our favorite spots, Escobar's Mexican Restaurant. At this point, Travis would have to head back to Mesa and I would finish the day with a trip to Zion National Park and a short hike on the Zion Canyon Overlook trail and then camp somewhere for the night.

I would be traveling alone on day six. I planned to stop at Bryce Canyon, then, on the way back to connect with Highway 89, a side trip on Casto Canyon Road would lead to some red rock areas at the entrance to the canyon before connecting with Highway 89 in Panguitch. From Panguitch, I would follow Highway 89 north all the way into Provo, Utah, where I would spend the night.

On day seven in Provo, I would pick up my son, Christian, and we would follow Highway 89 up through Logan, Utah and into Afton, Wyoming for the night. On this part of the trip the route runs through

densely populated areas from Provo to Salt Lake, so we would take the interstate for some of the trip as it paralleled Highway 89, but without the stoplights.

We wouldn't put in a lot of miles on day eight, but it would be big on scenery, as we only had to travel a bit over an hour to get to Jackson, Wyoming, and Grand Teton National Park. We would also take a short side trip to pick up my son, Jeff. Then we would camp at the Jenny Lake Campground in the shadows of the Tetons.

Day nine would be another scenic day as we travel through the north end of the Grand Tetons National Park into Yellowstone National Park. We would visit some of the key sights of Yellowstone and then camp at the Mammoth Campground at the north end of Yellowstone.

Day ten required an early morning start as we had a long drive from Mammoth to the Canadian border just outside of Babb, Montana. We planned to do a hike or two in Glacier National Park at the Many Glacier entrance before heading south to





East Glacier Park Village for the night. On Saturday morning, day eleven, we would head back the fastest route possible to get back home by Sunday evening, allowing Memorial Day to be my rest day before returning to work.

Most of the trip went as planned. However, we did have to make some adjustments on the fly to visit some additional spots. What is an adventure if you don't make some on-the-fly changes? First, as we worked our way through Saguaro National Park, it was over one-hundred degrees, so we decided that a hike was not in the cards. Another adjustment we made on the second day was in Sedona. Downtown Sedona was very crowded and Oak Creek Canyon would have been slow going (though it is a beautiful drive). We had plenty of time, so we decided to test the off road prowess of the Ford F-150 Tremor by taking Schnebly Hill Road from Sedona to Interstate 17. Schnebly Hill Road is a minimally maintained dirt road

and the first six miles were slow and rocky, but the Tremor handled it with ease. At the road's highest elevation, it turns into a much faster dirt road until you get to the interstate. This eleven-mile side trip offered us views of the Sedona red rocks that most people don't see.

I was supposed to camp on the fifth night, but after completing one long hike and another shorter one, I was pretty tired and a bit dehydrated, so decided to get a hotel room in Panguitch, Utah for the night. On day seven, Christian and I decided we had time to visit the Golden Spike National Historic Park in Promontory, Utah, west of Ogden. This was a little further off Highway 89, but it was interesting to see and made eight national parks I would visit on this trip.

Our last set of adjustments came towards the end of the trip. When we woke up on day ten, we knew it would rain, and it did – all day. We had a break from the rain

for a moment at the Canadian border (we didn't cross), but as we headed to our hiking spot at the Many Glaciers entrance, the weather was cold and wet, so we didn't get a hike in. However, on the next day, instead of just waking up and driving back, we were determined to hike at Glacier National Park. We stayed close to the Two Medicine entrance and our host at the hotel shared a couple short hikes to waterfalls there. We got up at the crack of dawn and headed into the park. It was still cold and rainy, but we were there and wanted to see some of the national park. We did the two short hikes, and then went back to the hotel, packed up, and headed home.

Would I do it again? If I did, I would take at least two to three days per national park. Each park offers so much to see; ten days was too short. Was it worth it, driving a truck while gas prices were outrageously high? The Tremor's twin turbo V6 averaged over eighteen miles-per-gallon



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over the 2,700 miles we drove from border to border. There was amazing scenery at the seven national parks (and one historic park) on the trip. The highway passed through five states: Arizona, Utah, Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana. Desert, cactus, slot canyons, mountains, pines, rivers, waterfalls, geysers, and snow were on the route. We saw a momma grizzly with cubs in Yellowstone, and a cinnamon and a black bear in Glacier. We saw bison,

elk, moose, pronghorns, and even a fox. We went from over one-hundred degrees at Saguaro National Park – too hot to hike – to thirty-seven degrees at Glacier National Park, where we hiked over snow-covered trails. Best of all, I was able to do an adventure with my cousin, Travis, and two of my boys over the twelve days, having experiences and building memories along the entire length of Highway 89: From border to border. **X4**

## ROBERT THEOBALD

AUTHOR BIO



Bob started riding motorcycles as a kid in the late 70's, then in the early 80's in junior high he took a photography class and became hooked on visual storytelling ever since. He enjoys riding motorcycles and taking pictures, and has combined these two passions, occupying much of his spare time. He has covered Supercross, Moto Trials, and other events for a variety of publications.

On the adventure side, he likes to identify cool routes with the history on those routes, then plan adventure trips accordingly. He has presented his travels and taught classes at Overland Expo West for multiple years. Bob yearns for readers of his stories to be inspired to search out their own adventures with attainable, relatable travels designed to fit into a two or three-day weekend. Bob rides a Yamaha WR450 fully built for off road weekend adventure trips where two track and single track are welcome, and pavement is limited.








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**Micro-Van Life - Japan Style**

# BEYOND the HORIZON



WORDS & PHOTOS - DANELL LYNN



**T**he heat was rising and humidity intimidating. Summer was upon us and was forecast to be the hottest on record for the last 150 years. My original plan was to two-wheel across the mainland, but my local motorcycle was still in back-order production. What was a girl to do? Then, I saw the perfect micro-van on a community page for sale and jumped at the opportunity. I bought a manual 1996 Suzuki and was on the road adventuring by the end of the week with my rescue cat, Supai.

I did not want to waste many days doing a full conversion; it was more important to get out on the road and see as much as I could before the local summer vacation started. Crowds can be oppressive in Japan, and I wanted to take advantage of quieter places. I needed to set up my “road-house” quickly. I went to local shops and bought some new additions to my camping kit, got all the cat supplies, and even named the van. Mochi (餅, もち) is a Japanese rice cake made of mochigome, a short-grain, japonica, glutinous rice, and sometimes other ingredients – such as water, sugar, and cornstarch – are added.

A fitting name, as I had recently been to a local river picnic and the rectangular white cakes wrapped in nori were dessert. It was a perfect name for my white tin can on four wheels. With my Kokeshi doll keychain in hand, and a new, Japanese prefecture sticker on the rear door, we were ready.





I started the trip with a bucket-list campsite. In the Fuji Five Lakes Region there are amazing, waterfront sites with spectacular views of Fuji-San. It took a bit of work with translation apps, phone calls, and the internet, but we got a two-night stay with an extended check-out.

I would recommend spending at least a few days here, because Mount Fuji likes to hide under clouds when it's hot. You never know if you are going to get a view.

On our first day, a storm rolled in and created some good waves and colder weather; it was perfect for testing out new camp cooking stoves and pots. The next day, Mt. Fuji peeked a little and I almost got my 1,000-yen picture (this campsite is the view of Fuji on the back of the Japanese 1,000-yen bill). But on my extended check-out day, it was perfect! I kayaked the calm water of the lake, enjoyed views of Fuji, and Supai even came out of the van for a picture – just dreamy! However, then I had to drive back up the steep hill I descended to get to this beach.

My heart pounded as the tires slid back down the hill. I pushed the clutch in, stepped heavily on the brake, pulled the e-brake, took a deep breath, then got Mochi into first and geared up to the top of the steep exit to make it out of the magical Lake Motosu camp. It was only my second day driving manual in years, and left-handed, which I had not done since a rental in Malawi over twelve years ago. But it would get better each day, and smoother with each new test of skills.



From the Five Lakes Region, we continued on to the Izu Peninsula, where we would go into the mountains and camp in the forest with no cell service, right along the Sano River. It was the perfect spot for listening to babbling water and the sounds of birds. I enjoyed a good book in a corner spot; this camp provided the perfect location for a summer reset.

I wanted to take in the sights and journey through new lands with my four-legged adventurer. We traversed the Izu Peninsula, explored Lake Motosu, visited lighthouses, took new hikes, and more. We even tried the famed Ito Marinetown Roadside Station for a free, oceanside car camp at the marina, where we sampled yamamomo (bayberry) and honey ice cream. Each region of Japan has a variety of specialty ice cream shops!

My time on the road was a perfect mix of crowds and seclusion. I gained new skills, explored new experiences, and even had a few heart-racing moments, but we rolled back into home in one piece. I am stronger from the new challenges and ready to begin the build-out for future, fall adventures after the heat dissipates a bit. The open road is forever calling. ✕

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# THE GREAT ESCAPE





Alstrom Point in Utah  
- by Jon Willhite

# THE GREAT ESCAPE

Basecamp in Montana as  
the Northern Lights loom in  
the background - by Devon  
Barker





THE GREAT  
**ESCAPE**

ISSUE #45

82



Navigating a runoff stream while exploring Colorado in a Nissan Xterra - by Will Kunasek



# *American Prairie Protects Big Sky Vistas*

CONSERVATION GROUP IMPROVES ACCESS AND RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES



PHOTO BY AMERICAN PRAIRIE. ANTELOPE CREEK STORM.



WORDS – AMY GRISAK

PHOTOS – AMY GRISAK, BRADY ROSS, DENNIS LINGOHR, GIB MYERS, MORGAN CARDIFF AND REID MORTH

*The mountains are an easy sell, but it takes a special soul to fall in love with the almost overwhelming expanse of the prairie.*

A recent visit to the American prairie and the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge (CMR) provided a memorable time to reconnect with this wild and remote region of Montana.

There's no question we are blessed in Montana. With approximately thirty-million acres of public land, there is plenty of room to roam, particularly in the eastern part of the state. Encompassing more land than the size of Connecticut, the combination of public lands with the roughly 450,000 acres of owned or leased property of the American Prairie provides unparalleled opportunities for every level of outdoor recreation. When you're here, you understand why Montana is called "Big Sky Country." The Missouri River winds through the breaks, which are basically rugged, reversed mountains, while the sage-covered prairie and vast grasslands seemingly extend forever. You either find yourself...or feel very lost.

My family is no stranger to the CMR, what we call "the breaks." My husband Grant and I had an early camping adventure in this region during the fall. Grant assured me it would be mostly t-shirt weather, but, true to the variability of this area, we woke up to -7 degrees in the tent the next morning. Thankfully, with my standard preparation level that would make an Eagle Scout proud (beyond thawing out my contacts) the cold did not put a damper on the weekend. But it was an early lesson on the harshness of this country.

When I learned about the American Prairie several years ago, their work immediately caught my interest. One of their goals over these past couple of decades is to purchase and lease land to piece together the public and private sections. When looking at a map of this area, it's easy to notice public land that is essentially landlocked; there is no way to legally access it. The American Prairie tries to connect these pieces.



PHOTO BY DENNIS LINGOHR. ANTELOPE.

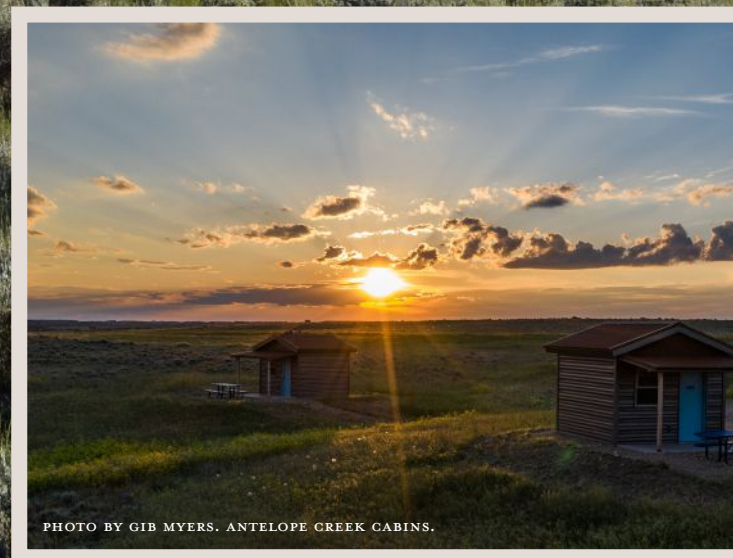


PHOTO BY GIB MYERS. ANTELOPE CREEK CABINS.



AMY GRISAK, PRAIRIE AND LITTLE ROCKIES.

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A photograph of a silver Jeep with a Bundutec rooftop tent installed on its roof rack, parked in a wooded area.

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PHOTO BY GIB MYERS, KESTREL CAMP YURTS.



AMY GRISAK, SHOVEL-NOSED STURGEON FROM MISSOURI.

Despite the size of the American Prairie, it's not like visiting a national park which consists of one contiguous land mass. Currently, there are nine units comprising their system – ranging from the PN Unit near Judith Landing in their westernmost area – to Timber Creek just north of Fort Peck Reservoir. The newly-opened American Prairie Discovery Center, located in Lewistown, is a good place to source information and is a must-see for families because of their plethora of hands-on activities, including a room that brings the lore of the night sky close to home. It helps to understand the land before you see it.

## *Trails Plowed Under*

Beyond providing more opportunities for those who wish to experience the prairie, the big-picture goal for the American Prairie is preserving one of the few remaining temperate grasslands in the world. These regions are the least-protected ecosystems, yet support an amazing variety of wildlife and plants in typically arid or, at best, semi-arid climates.

While the American Prairie supports and provides grazing leases on some of the properties, in areas where the land was never plowed, they are actively working on restoring the native grassland. Throughout this process they are improving wildlife habitat, including removing ancient barbed wire fence and replacing it with wildlife-friendly fencing where needed. Visitors to the area will notice fence lines have a smooth wire on the bottom that is typically higher than other fences in this area. This is to allow antelope to squeeze underneath, since they typically don't jump over like deer or elk. The top strand features reflective flagging so larger animals can properly judge its height.

## *Wildlife Watching and Fishing Opportunities*

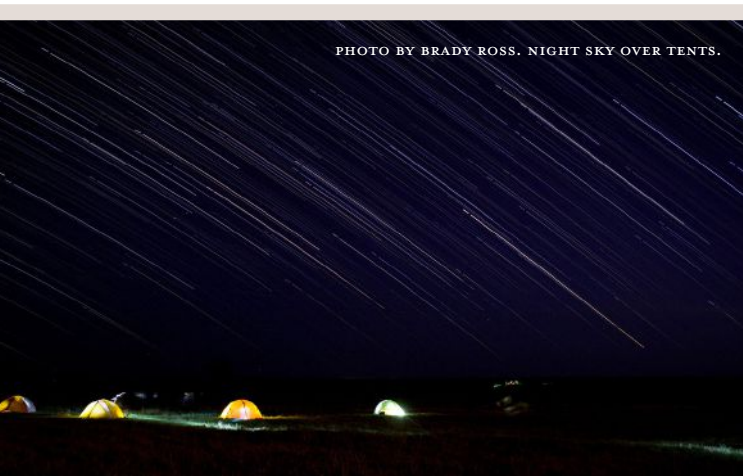
One of their most visible wildlife projects was restoring bison to this area for the first time in 120 years. Located on the Sun Prairie, Dry Fork, and White Wolf units, it's possible for visitors to view the herds traveling through these areas. This entire region is also known for healthy elk herds, so it's important to include bison back into this historic landscape.

Because of this attention to habitat, the American Prairie is an excellent area for birders and wildlife watchers, along with those fascinated with its flora. And since the Missouri River runs through the heart of the area, fishing opportunities abound. Throughout its stretch to Fort Peck Reservoir, anglers target walleye, sauger, bass, pike and catfish, along with potentially catching pallid and shovelnose sturgeon, although the endangered pallid sturgeon are always thrown back. Potentially living over fifty years old, these fish thrive in the murky waters of the Missouri River, and catching either of these species is a fascinating glimpse into their prehistoric past. Renowned paleontologist, Jack Horner, points out that these fish existed during the Cretaceous period when tyrannosaurs walked this area, which isn't difficult to imagine when you're holding a fish that is armored in bony scutes, its calcium carbonate scales giving them a much more ancient appearance.

## Logistics of the Roads

As you might gather, venturing through this area is not always easy. A high-clearance, four-wheel-drive vehicle is preferred – or even necessary – in much of the region. Even so, with any precipitation, dirt roads turn to gumbo, and the insidious bentonite clay that transforms from a powder to a greasy mess that clings to everything and mires anything that moves. The best advice is to steer clear of unpaved roads if there is rain in the forecast. There have been many instances where vehicles were buried up to their frames because they didn't skedaddle quickly enough.

If you find yourself in a situation of unexpected rain, the best course of action is to continue to move forward, but don't gun it. The more you try to muscle your way through, the more you dig yourself into the gumbo. While it's impossible to describe how every rig should handle the situation, in general, if you are stuck, stop and wait for it to dry. (Keep in mind that a wrecker won't even attempt to pull you out until the ground is solid once again. Plus, your cell phone probably won't work anyway.) Keep an eye on the forecast and stick to the gravel roads if there's any precipitation in the forecast.



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## True Remoteness

But there is beauty in the gumbo. It's a reminder of the wildness of this country. It puts life into perspective. With all of our technology, sometimes nature says, "No," and we need to respect that.

This is a big part of the appeal of the American Prairie. There are a few designated campsites — and some are quite luxurious — along with dispersed camping upon American Prairie deeded land and the adjacent public lands, but your trip is your own. I've heard it referred to as the IKEA of travel. There are not many well-marked trails, like one would find in our national parks or even national forests, and the gumbo can be unforgiving, but the expanse of the prairie greets you at every step.

## Antelope Creek Campground

Although we've traveled extensively in this area, this year we treated ourselves to a night at the Antelope Creek Campground, roughly an hour-and-twenty minutes north of Lewistown, which is one of the few larger towns in the area. If you are heading this way, this is where you want to fill your gas tank and grab any last minute items you need.

Situated on the west side of U.S. Highway 191, the four cabins and spots for RVs and tents blend into the landscape. The cabins are clean and basic with beds and a small table, along with a picnic table outdoors and a lovely little porch. There's even a heater and air conditioning unit to accommodate for chilly nights and extreme summer heat. A very clean and well-organized bathhouse is also a welcomed amenity, although it has the softest water you'll probably ever experience. About the only mineral prevalent is magnesium, which feels good on your skin, but drinking too much of it can have an unpleasant laxative effect.

After unloading gear and chatting with Rod and Brenda, the exceptionally knowledgeable and outgoing camp hosts, we took a stroll around the property on the two-mile-long nature trail to examine the remnants of an old Kendall family homestead and gawked at the early summer flowers. To the north, the Little Rocky Mountains create a beautiful backdrop, although it's impossible not to notice the unnaturally green meadow in the center of the range where the Pegasus Mine removed the mountaintop in the search for gold.

My quest was to look for burrowing owls that make their home within the prairie dog towns.

While we didn't see any during our initial walk or on another trek closer to dusk, it was still entertaining to watch the prairie dogs as they alerted each other to our presence and dove for cover when we approached.

One of the best features of this area is the night sky. Waking shortly after midnight, I headed outside to look at the stars. With no moon, the Milky Way lit up the night. It's shocking that the Milky Way is only visible to eighty percent of the United States population, and even though it's very visible at our home in Great Falls, it was particularly stunning in the pure darkness of the prairie. Stretching out on the picnic table to gaze at the cosmos put the craziness of the world into perspective.

## Additional Base Camp Options

Besides Antelope Creek Campground, there is Buffalo Camp, as well as a series of yurts and huts in different parts of the American Prairie. The Founders Hut, along with the John and Margaret Craighead Hut, consist of two thirty-foot-diameter connected yurts, while the Lewis and Clark Hut is simply a cabin perched above the Missouri River. All three are located on the PN Unit near Judith Landing. Solar panels provide power for the refrigerator, lights, and outlet to charge small appliances, while propane runs the stove. A composting toilet system in a small, nearby yurt makes "roughing it" far more comfortable.

For those who wish to stay closer to where the bison roam, Buffalo Camp in the Sun Prairie Unit is roughly fifty miles south of Malta, which is the next largest town in proximity to this remote region of the state, and offers RV and tent sites. This is more primitive with non-potable water and a vault toilet, but there is Wi-Fi and an emergency phone at the Enrico Science and Education Center a mile south of Buffalo Camp.

### AMY GRISAK

AUTHOR BIO



Prior to her freelance writing career, Amy worked as everything from bait, sound recordist and associate producer, specializing in grizzlies and mountain lions for National Geographic Television. This unique knowledge serves her well during her many adventures in the stunning landscape of her home state of Montana. She spends much of the year encouraging friends and family on hikes throughout Glacier National Park and the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex. And when she's not on the trail, she and her family are kayaking the Missouri River or fly fishing in mountain streams, far away from the crowds.

Amy is the author of *Nature Guide to Glacier and Waterton Lakes National Parks* and *Found Photos of Yellowstone*, and her articles appear in *Rails to Trails*, *Birds & Blooms*, *Rock & Gem*, *Popular Mechanics*, *Distinctly Montana*, *Farmers' Almanac*, and many more. She is also the co-host of *Front Range Outdoors* on KGPR-Great Falls, and creator of the upcoming podcast, *Montana Waypoints*. Keep up with her on Instagram @amygrisak.



PHOTO BY GIB MYERS. CAMP WITH MILKY WAY.

## *Planning a Trip*

In such a vast area, it's overwhelming to try to see everything in one outing. In reality, it would take a lifetime to experience the different seasons and moods of the region. My best advice is to pick a unit of the American Prairie and study the maps to thoroughly immerse yourself into the remaining oceans of grass and

rugged country that holds the mighty Missouri River. Whether you choose a base camp at one of the designated areas or opt to pick your own spot in this enormous landscape, you'll see the world — and the night sky — in a completely different light.

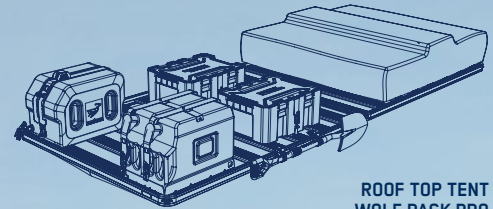
For maps and current travel information, visit [WWW.AMERICANPRAIRIE.ORG](http://WWW.AMERICANPRAIRIE.ORG). X4



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# TREDMARKS

## *The Curse of Knowledge or Automatic Rough and Things That Go Bump in the Night*

**WORDS - BILL DRAGOO**  
**PHOTOS - BILL DRAGOO AND GAVIN STENER**

Two hundred eighty miles of ocean separated us from our destination in Marsh Harbour, Bahamas. I banked the single engine Piper Saratoga eastward and watched the Florida coastline disappear beneath my wing. Empty blue water extended to the horizon ahead. My family filled the seats behind me. Precious cargo. As we began our 90-minute flight across the ocean, an old pilot's joke came to mind.

*“Do you know what the propeller is for?”*

*“No, what?”*

*“It’s to keep the pilot cool. If you don’t believe it, let it stop and watch him sweat.”*

I knew every detail of the inner workings of the 300 HP Lycoming IO 540 engine turning the only propeller we had. My imagination ran wild as I strained to hear the slightest imperfection in the rich, baritone drone.

In [Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance](#) Robert Pirsig writes, “Each machine has its own unique personality which probably could be defined as the intuitive sum total of everything you know and feel about it.” Listening to his engine against the rocky backdrop of South Dakota’s Badlands he muses, “This old engine has a nickels-and-dimes sound to it. As if there were a lot of loose change flying around inside. Sounds awful, but it’s just normal valve clatter. Once you get used to that sound and learn to expect it, you automatically hear any difference. If you don’t hear any, that’s good.”



Knowledge of our machines can, however, be a curse. Like Pirsig, we worry over every odd sound, real or not. Over water, pilots sometimes experience “automatic rough,” an imaginary engine miss that can make our hearts skip a beat. But that level of sensitivity can also be an asset.

Overlanding lends itself to this kind of acquaintance with our rigs. We might not fear falling thousands of feet into the ocean’s depths but we do often stray beyond the reach of AAA. Even a flat tire or busted spring can leave us marooned amongst the saguaro. That growl from the passenger front wheel at highway speeds or faint flapping sound from under the hood at idle might foretell a dry wheel bearing or a separating serpentine belt. An ear for these changes should prompt further inspection before heading off blissfully ignorant of impending doom.

But too often we take our rig’s health for granted. “It ran fine when I last drove it so surely it’ll make it over Lippincott Pass in Death Valley.”

Maybe, but would you risk your life, or at best, a long, hot walk on a hunch? Modern vehicles with their quiet cabins and infotainment systems and extended warranties lull us into a false sense of security. An ounce of preventative maintenance trumps a truckload of regretful reflection.

“It seems dealers always recommend maintenance well beyond the factory schedule. How do I know what I should do?”

Vehicle manufacturers vie for long service intervals and low maintenance costs.

Maintenance schedules are set up at minimum standards for “normal duty” use. Relatively few owners actually take their vehicles off the beaten path so many get away with the factory’s extended intervals without incident. Modern lubricants, materials and technology also help lengthen time between services but once dust, water and vibration are introduced into the workings, all bets are off.

Virtually any vehicle used for overlanding should be inspected before and after every outing. The longer and rougher the travel, the deeper the inspection. Universal joints, steering and suspension components should be lubed, checked for leaks, loose, worn or broken hardware, etc. Filters should be replaced regularly, brakes should be thoroughly inspected and the underbelly checked for impact damage. The list goes on and the philosophy should be applied to every essential component. A genuine evaluation of usage can easily dictate a more aggressive maintenance program.

Get to know your mechanic and make sure he understands how much you rely on your overlanding rig. Also, give him time to accomplish a thorough inspection and to make any needed repairs, including time to order parts well before setting off on your adventure. Your lack of planning does not constitute his emergency.

Be aware. Aside from the mechanic’s recommendations, your senses are your best line of defense against a breakdown. Notice changes in handling, engine or chassis noises, or vibrations. Don’t assume they are normal or that they will go away on their own. Make notes, take videos and present them at the next service. Roughly eighty percent of any diagnosis is driven by an accurate description of the condition.

The reliability of our machines is largely up to us. We might not all be Master Mechanics, but we do know where we’ve taken them and how they should perform. That knowledge, and how we use it, can keep us cool, no matter how far we stray from shore. ❏

## ABOUT BILL DRAGOO

Bill embraces adventure travel in many forms – two-wheeled, four-wheeled, and on foot. As long as it involves experiencing more of the great outdoors he is hard-pressed to resist an opportunity. When Bill’s not tackling the toughest trails in the Rockies on his adventure motorcycle he’s busy exploring with his wife, Susan, in their Toyota 4Runner, the “GS of Trucks.”

Among his many pursuits, Bill is an MSF-certified riding instructor and BMW Motorrad Certified Off Road Instructor, and owns/operates the DART (Dragoo Adventure Rider Training) school near the Dragoos’ hometown of Norman. Bill was a member of the 2010 BMW GS Trophy team, representing the United States in competition in Africa.

You can join Bill for one of his training classes by visiting [www.billdragoo.com](http://www.billdragoo.com).



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WORDS & PHOTOS - JASON R. SAKURAI



Roads  
Untraveled...  
EDDIE LEE'S JEEP  
GLADIATOR RUBICON



GO ANYWHERE YOU WANT IN THIS WELL-SORTED '20 JEEP GLADIATOR

When you own a wheel company like Titan 7 and you want to build high-end off-road wheels, you know you need to have skin in the game. Eddie Lee – whose background is in performance vehicles like BMW M3s, Honda S2000s, Ford Mustangs, and Nissan 240SXs – knew that if he was going to become a standout in the overland and off-road markets, he needed to have the right vehicle to represent his brand.

After countless hours of research, Eddie decided on a '20 Jeep Gladiator Rubicon and the myriad of parts and accessories that go with them. What began as a showcase for his forged wheels has been transformed into a truck that's become his daily driver, and the journey outgrew its promotional roots to become a love for the off-road and overland community.

Eddie's quest to build his escape vehicle was made somewhat easier by friends and associates he knew in the industry, who represented some of the best parts and accessory manufacturers. It was also helpful that his own design aesthetic leans towards keeping everything clean and functional.

Starting with an EVO Manufacturing 2" lift kit, Lee opted to use Fox Factory Race Series 3.0 internal bypass shocks with their position-sensitive damping technology. Fluid bypasses the piston moving through its initial travel, then fluid is forced through the piston at the extreme ranges of compression and rebound. This creates a more predictable ride during normal off-road driving conditions, with the ability to ramp up damping force to counteract harsh bottom-outs or top-outs.

Hard-anodized, aluminum-bodied Fox shocks are engineered with race-inspired internal valving, and designed to bolt onto 2-3" aftermarket suspension lift kits like the EVO using OEM shock pivots. New reservoir bridges were added to





EVO MANUFACTURING 2" LIFT KIT PROVIDES THE IDEAL HEIGHT FOR THE GLADIATOR

the CNC-machined, finned aluminum remote reservoirs to increase heat dissipation, maintaining optimal shock oil temperature for more consistent damping.

Off-road-racing inspired, Fox's Factory Race Series bump stops increase damping performance and bottom-out control in the last few inches of suspension travel. Threaded bodies allow for bump stop engagement fine-tuning. A floating piston separates the oil and nitrogen to prevent cavitation and bucking, while a coil spring softens initial impacts and top-outs. A Fox Air Valve is located at the bottom of the shaft for easy access, protected by a replaceable strike pad.

Incorporating Hellwig's rear sway bar for lifted Gladiators meant handling, comfort and safety were improved. Made in Visalia, California, the solid, heat-treated chromoly sway bar is stiffer than the OE bar for increased drivability and greater control in towing and hauling situations, and it bolts on.

To the front sway bar, JKS' Flex Connect tunable sway bar links were added. These sway bar end links have springs that compress and extend to allow added articulation while bestowing body roll control. Soaking up bumps, these sway bar links increase on-road comfort and off-road performance.

Titan 7 is a company that drives performance with every wheel they offer, infusing motorsport features into their T-AK1, an off-road wheel which stands for "All Terrain attack." The T-AK1 is a fully-forged wheel with anti-slip knurling for added traction and triangulated inner spoke machining to reduce unsprung weight while improving driving, handling and fuel economy. Remember, this is an off-road wheel with Titan 7's racing heritage that's also one of the world's lightest. Each wheel is vehicle-specific, and their 17 X 8.5 Jeep wheels clear all popular brake calipers, including those in Rotor's big brake kit, which is on Eddie's truck.

Toyo's Open Country 37 X 12.50R17 Rugged Terrain tires were paired with the T-AK1s. Built to take on any terrain, they offer great off-road traction, durability, aggressive styling and the ability to tackle dirt, sand and rocks. Speed-rated to ninety-nine mph, the Rugged Terrain's sidewalls offer customization with a distinct look on each side of the tire, while adding side-impact protection. Open, scalloped-shoulder blocks improve off-road traction, enhance grip in muddy, sandy, or snowy conditions, and they eject mud and snow through their open channels.

As mentioned, Eddie chose Rotor's HD Challenge brake system, which was engineered for hauling, towing and off-road use, and based on knowledge gained through years of supply-



FOX RACE SERIES 3.0 SHOCKS AND BUMP STOPS WORK WITH THE EVO MANUFACTURING LIFT KIT



FINNED FOX REMOTE SHOCK RESERVOIRS DISSIPATE HEAT FOR MORE CONSISTENT DAMPING



HELLWIG'S REAR SWAY BAR IS SOLID CHROMOLY, A LARGER DIAMETER THAN STOCK, AND U.S.-MADE

ing braking systems to armored security and military vehicle manufacturers. The HD Challenge Series is application-specific with 100% compatibility to the OE master cylinder, ABS, and traction control.

HD Challenge calipers are made of ductile iron to ensure strength and stiffness. Oversized discs increase brake torque, thermal mass, disc life and airflow for cooling under severe braking. High coefficient brake pads extend thermal capacity and prolong pad life. DOT compliant stainless steel braided brake lines improve pedal feel and prevent brake hose expansion.

A high-clearance exhaust system is essential when overlanding, and Bold Performance's mandrel-bent, 2.5" diameter Hi-Tuck Turndown T304 stainless steel exhaust with a high-flow muf-



JKS' TUNABLE FLEX CONNECT SWAY BAR LINKS



TITAN 7 T-AK1 WHEELS, TOYO OPEN COUNTRY R/T TIRES, AND ROTORA BRAKES ARE USED ALL AROUND

fler and an angle-cut exhaust outlet provides maximum ground clearance. Using the OEM hanger position, Bold provides a great solution for the 3.6L V6 Jeep Gladiator as it is a clean, cost-effective way to avoid most obstacles.

After Eddie lifted his Gladiator and added bigger tires, it was time to recalibrate the speedometer and odometer. Z Automotive's Tazer Mini Programmer for 2018-up Wrangler JLs and Gladiators supports all variants, including exports. The best part is its simple, plug-in installation. Unplug the SGW module above the OBD2 diagnostic connector and plug the Tazer JL Mini. Features are then accessed via the dash display and steering wheel buttons to navigate the menus, including reading and clearing diagnostic trouble codes (DTCs), changing tire size, gear ratios, enabling, disabling or resetting the pressure warning on the TPMS system, and a host of other helpful features.

Inside the cabin, an OEM Audio Plus Signature Edition sound solution was installed. Designed and tuned for the Gladiator, the Signature Edition surprised us with impressive sound reproduction in a package that provides seamless integration with the factory system. Listening while driving to our shoot location, our aural insight was greater clarity, loudness without distortion, and bass response which didn't impede the vocals in a range of tunes from Lee's eclectic and expansive playlist.

The Signature Edition sound solution includes a Class HD multi-channel power amp with 64-bit digital signal processing, an

BOLD PERFORMANCE'S HI-TUCK TURNDOWN T304  
STAINLESS STEEL EXHAUST IS BARELY VISIBLE



OEM AUDIO PLUS' 10" SUBWOOFER  
HAS A SEALED FIBERGLASS CABINET  
THAT USES LITTLE CARGO AREA



HEFTY SUBWOOFER MAGNET



10" SHALLOW MOUNT SUBWOOFER



ARRAY OF OEM AUDIO PLUS SPEAKERS

integration interface module, a Quick-Sync wiring harness, and a 10" Gladiator subwoofer system in a sealed fiberglass enclosure with a dedicated amplifier. OEM's Speaker Upgrade on Eddie's Jeep included two dash-mounted 1" soft dome tweeters, a pair of 4" wideband speakers in the lower dash area, and two 1" soft dome tweeters and two 4" wideband speakers in the overhead sound bar, for a total of eight speakers. Impressive as the sounds emanating from the system were, so is the superb fit and finish of OEM Audio Plus components.

The other addition inside the Gladiator was a Switch Pros SP9100 switch panel, with eight user-programmable switches controlling four 35- and four 20-amp circuits. RGB backlighting means you have unlimited color options when using the app's color picker. The Switch Pros JT mounting kit enables one to install the panel beneath the driver's grab handle, and includes a replacement cap to match the handle.

On the exterior, a Jeep Performance Parts off-road front bumper was selected for its smooth appearance sans the recesses found on the stock bumpers. Wide enough to provide fender protection but narrower than OE, the steel bumper is electrocoated and black powder-coated with red D-rings, and it works with the



THE POWER AMP IS CONCEALED BEHIND A TRIM PANEL BENEATH THE STEERING COLUMN



TWEETERS INSIDE THE DASH AND SWITCH PRO PANEL

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**WP  
WARRIOR PRODUCTS**

Jeep Performance Parts Warn winch. Baja Designs Squadron-R lights with amber lenses for inclement weather were installed in the fog light pockets.

The rear bumper is stock with the exception of the Baja Designs S1 Reverse Kit, which can light up the night when camping off-grid, or used to warn others of your location in adverse conditions such as snow, fog or dust when it would be difficult to ascertain the distance from one rig to another.

The rocker panel and doors can take a beating if not protected, especially on the long-wheelbase Gladiators. The Ace Engineering & Fab Rock Sliders Lee selected are made of 0.134" thick, 2" DOM mild steel tubing. Designed with the right angle to protect these areas, Ace Sliders attach to the body mount brackets. Their black textured powder-coat has a slight grit to help prevent slipping, they follow the Gladiator's body lines, and they look great.

The Warn winch Eddie chose features an automatic load-holding brake, a three-stage, planetary gearset, Hawse Fairlead and steel cable. A remote control with built-in flashlight and 12' lead is included. The Mopar Jeep fairlead adapter plate fits on the Jeep Performance Parts bumper nicely, and is also e-coated and powder-coated to provide impressive corrosion resistance.

Perhaps the highlight of the build is the RLD Designs cap, referred to elsewhere in the world as a canopy. RLD designs and builds for ergonomics and aesthetics, practicality and versatility, a match for Eddie's eye. All components are laser-cut, five-axis, press-bent, stainless steel to 3D CAD models, TIG welded, and finished with a textured powder-coat for durability.

RLD canopies are as useful as they are customizable, with rails integrated into the roof for superior strength, a 700-lb. dynamic load capacity, and great versatility. RLD offers a range of accessories, including the roof rack shown with this canopy. They also offer optional paint matching to any factory paint code, which was done to color-coordinate the canopy and the Jeep's factory Gator dark green-tan color.

What surprised Lee is the friendly, inclusive atmosphere prevalent among overlanders. He said his learning curve has been a lot of fun, with people willing to help out, share their adventure travel knowledge and experiences, and provide feedback about his products. He likes the outgoing nature of most overlanders and their ability to say "what's up?" to bridge any initially awkward moments.

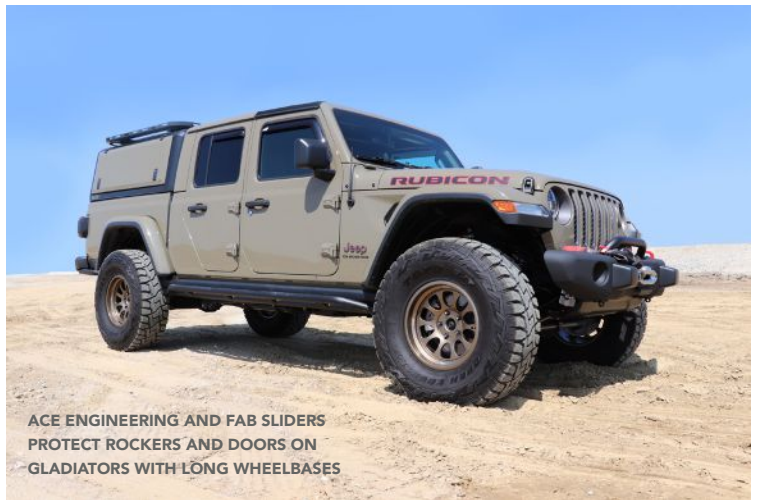
While off-road wheels are a growing segment for Titan 7, Eddie's time is occupied by many other performance endeavors – from the Pikes Peak International Hill Climb to Formula Drift



and more. Still, he has managed to log 12,000 miles on his rig, attended many local events, and got out on the trails with his friends as often as he could. Combining his enthusiasm for overland adventure and motorsports with the wheel business is how Eddie Lee rolls. **X4**



BAJA DESIGNS S1 REVERSE KIT LIGHTS UP THE NIGHT OR WARNS OTHERS IN ADVERSE CONDITIONS



ACE ENGINEERING AND FAB SLIDERS PROTECT ROCKERS AND DOORS ON GLADIATORS WITH LONG WHEELBASES



SANDY LIRAG, OEM AUDIO PLUS' FOUNDER, GAVE US THE HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SOUND SYSTEM

## JASON R. SAKURAI ————— AUTHOR BIO



Life has been quite an adventure for Jason. Eschewing corporate life with General Motors and Nissan early on, he opted instead to be the Western Advertising Manager for Four Wheeler magazine, outselling well entrenched, larger rival publications. From there, he became the first Director of Sales for the National Hot Rod Association, reviving its moribund Championship Drag Racing Series on TV with a plethora of new advertisers. Later, he excelled as Western Ad Sales Manager for Cycle World magazine, before starting his own firm, Roadhouse Marketing, specializing in the automotive aftermarket and action sports/outdoor industries.

Concurrently throughout his career, Jason has been an editor and contributor to automotive enthusiast titles in print and online too numerous to mention. He has won International Automotive Press Association (IAPA) awards for writing and photography, and more recently served as an IAPA judge. His insights on the auto industry appear regularly in business publications, and he still shoots feature stories for enthusiast magazines here as well as abroad. In his spare time, Jason is working on his latest overlanding vehicle, planning for a number of adventures once it's completed. His motto, 'If it isn't fun, why do it?', applies not only to his travels but to business as well, and for this reason is a valuable member of the OutdoorX4 staff.

# Craig's Jeep.<sup>®</sup> Craig's Adventure.



When Craig Anderson, owner of Rocky Mountain Jeep Rentals, isn't helping his customers conquer Colorado's highest peaks, he likes to get out there, change his perspective, and hang with his faithful friends – his dog Diesel and his Wrangler he calls "Monster Minion." From bumpers to body armor, Rugged Ridge helps his Jeeps slide off rocks, winch trees off trails, and climb just about anything you put in front of them – letting Craig and his customers get the most out of their Jeep adventures. **Rugged Ridge. Your Jeep. Your Adventure.™**



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# Around the Campfire

## *Adventure Athlete Sunny Stroeer*

WORDS – DANIEL THORNTON  
PHOTOS – COURTESY OF SUNNY STROEER

*Sunny is constantly pushing herself to experience many outdoor adventures. You may find her leading an all-women expedition up Aconcagua, climbing a mountain face, running an ultra-marathon, or leading hikes through southern Utah with her organization, Dreamland Tours.*

**OX4: Were outdoor activities a part of your childhood?**

**SS:** Not at all. I'd go hiking with my parents now and then, and both my parents were big into skiing, downhill skiing. So

we spent the winters in the Alps and skiing at the various resorts there, which is a very different vibe from resort skiing over here, by the way. But, yeah, I was a couch potato as a kid. I was a bit of a dork. I always had my nose in a book. I was a choir nerd. I did debate and Model United Nations and all of those things. And I really did not find the outdoors or adventure endurance sports until my twenties.

**OX4: You grew up in Germany but moved to the United States for college. What was the spark to start really enjoying the outdoors?**

**SS:** It started actually the moment that I set foot here in the U.S. when I started at Harvard as a transfer student. Part of that transfer was a six-day orientation trip that was a backpacking trip with fellow transfer students in the White Mountains. We were out there backpacking and kind of experiencing what it was like to try and be self-sufficient for a couple of days. And that was the very first time that I'd ever done anything like that. I'd never carried a backpack before. I never really camped before. I mean, maybe in my backyard as a kid, right? But I had no experience whatsoever, and I remember being absolutely miserable for part of it and then very much loving the rest of it. So that





experience was really pivotal for me, and that's what kind of set me off in wanting to spend time outside and wanting to develop my skill set in the outdoors.

**OX4: When you got into business school for your master's, you started to push yourself further into more outdoor activities and running some half and full marathons. You then spent some time volunteering in Madagascar postgraduate, which led to your first ultramarathon. Tell us about that experience.**

**SS:** While I was in Madagascar, I got the opportunity at the last minute to go and join an ultramarathon. And that ultramarathon came in three different distances. It

came as a 25-kilometer race, a 50-kilometer race, or a 100-kilometer race. I'd done marathons before, but I had no experience with ultra-running. And I looked at those distances and I said, well, that all sounds pretty hard, but the 25-kilometer run has a four-hour cut off, the 50-kilometer run has a twelve-hour cut off, and the 100 kilometer run has a thirty-six-hour cut off. So, if you do the math, every time the distance doubles, the time triples. Right? So in theory, the 100-kilometer should be the one that was the most achievable. So, I decided to sign up for the 100-kilometer race. I was like, well, one-hundred – that's essentially sixty miles. So you're looking at a little bit less than two miles-an-hour. On average. Three miles-an-hour is a regular walking pace if you're hiking. I was like, I can probably do that, right? I'm sure it'll be hard, but I can probably figure that out. And I signed up for that 100-kilometer race three weeks before the race and finished it. And that was the moment

that turned me into both an endurance athlete and an adventure junkie, I guess, because I just absolutely loved it and I decided I needed to do more of it at that point.

**OX4: After graduating from business school, you transitioned into a full-time job as a consultant. How did you balance this newfound passion for outdoor adventure and the responsibility of a full-time job?**

**SS:** You know, that was a bit of a rude awakening to start with. I ran that ultramarathon while I was traveling after business school. And I was traveling, realizing I had a gap between graduating and starting my job at Bain in Houston. I came back to Houston after running that first ultramarathon. I had had the opportunity to go

to Nepal on a shoestring budget and I just climbed my first six-thousand-meter peak and then I spent a lot of time rock climbing in various areas. It was really the month traveling before I landed in Houston that cemented the idea that I needed the mountains and I needed adventure, and that there was no way that I was giving that up. And yes, then I moved to Houston and started working at Bain. I was very much focused on the weekends. I mean, I was trying so hard all the time to just get out, go on trips, have adventures, and take a Friday and a Monday off, to try to make the weekends longer. I actually remember getting into trouble with my supervisors pretty early on, because they were like, you're brand new to the company, you're never here, you have to

do something because otherwise you're not going to have a future here. So that was hard. But I knew that I needed and wanted to excel at my job, and I did. That was really important for me. I had six-figure student loans from Harvard Business School, so I needed to pay those off while I was working and I was still doing my best to just be an excellent consultant and to make the right promotions. I was also spending a lot of time and money on making use of the excellent Houston airports and flying to various destinations around the country pretty much every weekend. I was able to maintain that pace and that rhythm for a good three or four years before I hit a point where I realized that it was just too much and not sustainable for me because I didn't have any

ties in Houston directly. I was single for a good part of the time. I didn't have family there. I never really invested the time to build a large network of friends, because I was always traveling, I was always gone. I was just really splitting the time between working super hard or being on a red-eye flight, trying to maximize my time in the outdoors.

**OX4: How do you get to the point that maybe it is time to move in a new direction and leave the corporate world behind?**

**SS:** I had no plans to give up my career. I thought that I needed to find a way to



get the outdoor and adventure craving out of my system and just become a responsible adult. I was very much trying to set myself up for a multi-year career at Bain or at a comparable company that would allow me to put some money aside, hopefully retire early, and just build the type of comfortable and responsible life that we're all taught to strive for. I was trying to do that and I think I made some moves that were somewhat reasonable. So, for example, when I got promoted

to manager, yes, I would obviously accept the promotion very gratefully, but I also negotiated that I would have two months of unpaid, legal absence every year so that I could try and do bigger things and get more of a balance between work and the passion that I had outside of work. I tried that for about a year, but it still wasn't enough. I had a project at Bain that ended up completely tipping the scales and just putting me into deep burnout. It was just one of those ridiculous

projects where you're working one hundred hours a week or more, and it seemed completely impossible. I was able to pull off the impossible with my team and at the end of the day, after the project was over, everybody was really stoked on it. The partners were happy, the clients were happy, even the team that I had worked to death was happy. But I was standing in the boardroom crying, and saying, I can't imagine this just happened and I don't ever want to do it again.

**OX4: When the project was completed you knew it was time to move on. You gave them six months' notice to wrap up work and start planning for the future. What did that next step look like?**



**SS:** I'm going to go and move into a van, and not one of those fancy \$80,000 Sprinter vans, but a little \$3,000 Chevy Astro van that was a hand me down from twenty years ago, and I'll live on a \$600 budget, and then I'm going to live very frugally in a van for as long as I can. When my money runs out, I will have to figure out what I want to do again, and that's fine. I'm totally ready for that. But I'm going to give myself permission for three months to not even think about the future now; for three months I'll take time out to essentially be on sabbatical and to do the things that I love. And that's how it all started.

**OX4:** You have accomplished so many mountaineering feats and readers should check out your website ([www.sunnystroeer.com](http://www.sunnystroeer.com)) and listen to this podcast to hear more about those adven-

**tures. What do you tell others who feel like they can't get moving to exercise and explore nature around them?**

**SS:** I am that person. I've been that person. I still struggle at times when I haven't been out and trained for a while and go for a walk with my dog and I hike up the hill and can't keep up with them. So, my advice would be if adventure seems at all appealing, it doesn't have to be a 23,000-foot mountain, right? It could be the hill next to your house. It could be a fourteener in Colorado. It could be whatever. If that sounds like something that you look at and you say, oh, man, I wish I could do that – if you want to do it, you can. It's not a question of where you are in life right now. It's not a question of having grown up as an athlete.

It's not a question of natural aptitude. I promise that when I was young, my teachers looked at me and they were certain that I had zero natural aptitude. If you find something that grabs your desire and your imagination and sparks a passion, then stop wishing and start planning. It's just a matter of saying, okay, it's not that I wish I could do this. Now it's a matter of I want to do this, I'm going to do this next year or in two years or in three years – whatever it may be – but within a reasonable time frame that actually allows you to put concrete steps into motion. And then as soon as you start talking about that plan, you're locking yourself into it with accountability because you're telling other people about it. Then you start work-





there are ups and downs and some days you're crushing it and some days you're not. That's okay as long as you keep moving forward and you keep going anyway. It's important not to allow your failures to define who you are. ❄

**Editor Note:** This edition of Around the Campfire was adapted from our interview via Episode 16 of The SignOut Podcast. You can listen to the complete interview by visiting the OutdoorX4 website at [www.outdoorx4.com](http://www.outdoorx4.com) and selecting OutdoorX4 SignOut Podcast from the Magazine link in the top toolbar or by searching for The SignOut Podcast on Apple and Spotify!

ing backwards and you say, okay, now what do I need to do to actually make this come true? And the reality is that if you want to do something, chances are you're going to be able to do it.

**OX4: I think at times people can be scared of and paralyzed by failure. How do you deal with failure?**

**SS:** Failure is a completely normal and integral part of the process. I have failed at so many things. I've failed on the main

mission and at the same time accidentally set off my outdoor career with a much smaller record, right, that then snowballed into bigger things down the road. So that's just one example. But I have failed at so many things. I've dropped out of so many races. I have turned around on so many climbs. I mean, heck, I sometimes step out my front door to walk the dog and I want to be out there for forty-five minutes, and I turn around after ten because I was just feeling like it doesn't seem like it's the day for it. So, yeah, I've turned around a lot. I failed a lot. I think what's important is to understand that

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**DANIEL THORNTON**

**AUTHOR BIO**



Daniel's ability to connect with people over a wide spectrum of backgrounds and interests has provided him unique opportunities to pursue his passions in both the financial and outdoor adventure worlds. Currently the director of operations in a wealth management firm, his true love is for traveling and exploring nature with his wife, two daughters, and many friends. Whether Daniel is camping, hiking, or off-roading in his Jeep, he finds fulfillment in shared adventures with friends both new and old. He's never met a stranger! His cherished 1973 Honda CB350 is his only solo project.

Daniel is also the founder and owner of SignOut Co., a brand created to highlight the love for outdoor adventure. Launched in 2018, SignOut was the platform which birthed the SignOut Podcast, an opportunity to hear the unique stories of individuals who are pursuing their passions in outdoor adventure. The SignOut Podcast has recently partnered with OutdoorX4 to showcase these amazing stories. Learn more by visiting [www.signoutco.com](http://www.signoutco.com).

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# Overlanding The **RUBICON**

*Everything You Wanted To Know About  
The Rubicon But Were Afraid To Ask*

**WORDS & PHOTOS – HARRY WAGNER**

When you hear the word “Rubicon” you might think of the Jeep Wrangler that comes from the factory with low gearing, locking differentials, and more. The most capable model that Jeep makes is fittingly named after the famous trail in Northern California that crosses nineteen miles of inhospitable terrain from Loon Lake to Lake Tahoe across the Sierra Nevada Range. For nearly seventy years this trail has been considered the gold standard for off-roading, but is the Rubicon an overlanding destination? We would say yes, considering the history of the area, abundance of high alpine lakes full of hungry trout, and the breathtaking scenery. Twenty years ago, the Rubicon had a reputation for being a lawless place where intoxicated drivers would pilot their buggies over the top of other vehicles through the Little Sluice. These days, though, you are more likely to find families on the trail, which is a county road that is regularly patrolled by Eldorado County Sheriff officers in Jeeps and UTVs.

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In 2012, a decision was made to alter the Little Sluice to make it passable to normal vehicles. At that time, the obstacle was nearly impossible and filled with gear oil and broken glass. Most vehicles had to bypass the Little Sluice, making numerous routes across the trail. The change was controversial, but it has prevented the Little Sluice from being a party spot filled with litter.



## HISTORY OF THE TRAIL

Mineral springs were discovered in the 1880s at Rubicon Springs. The springs were reported to have therapeutic qualities and the area quickly became a vacation destination for the nouveau riche from San Francisco. As was common in the boomtowns of the era, a hotel was erected at Rubicon Springs and guests were brought in by stagecoach. As the Great Depression hit, the resort was abandoned and fell into disrepair through two world wars. The Rubicon/McKinney Road, spanning from Georgetown to Lake Tahoe, was also unused until 1953, when Mark Smith led the first group of flatfender Jeeps through the Rubicon on what would later be known as the Jeepers Jamboree. The Rubicon's status as a county road means that there are no gates or fees, just like when Smith crossed the trail nearly seventy years ago. That designation also means that all rules of the road apply as well, including seat belt usage and drinking and driving.

## CAN YOUR VEHICLE HANDLE THE RUBICON?

People often ask, "Can my rig make it through the trail?" Not surprisingly, the answer is, "it depends." In general, the less sheet metal, more visibility, and larger tires you have, the easier time you will have navigating the Rubicon. We have seen nearly-stock Samurais on 31" tall tires navigate the trail, but wouldn't dream of piloting an Earthroamer with 38" tall tires through the trail. If you like a challenge and the goal is simply to survive, even if it means turning a few wrenches along the way, you can get most stock 4x4s through the Rubicon. If you are more interested in getting into camp before dark and doing some hiking or fishing, a few thoughtful modifications will make the trip much more enjoyable. If you have smaller tires, you will likely need skidplates, rock sliders, and similar armor to safeguard sheet metal along the way.

Regardless of size, your tires should be LT rated (not P metric) with strong sidewalls and plenty of tread depth. Vehicles with supple suspensions that keep the tires on the ground can get away with open differentials, but it does make the trail more challenging and can increase your impact as one tire digs a hole while the other remains stationary. We recommend at least one locking differential, preferably in the rear axle. Low gears (either in the differentials or the transfer case) will provide more control and generate less heat, and your steering system should be capable of turning aired-down tires on high-traction surfaces.

## WHEN TO GO

The Rubicon isn't subjected to seasonal closures, and there are some dedicated off-roaders who conquer the trail in the winter, but we don't recommend it. Off-camber hills can be icy and slick, and holes form around trees that can swallow

There are several great campsites in and around Rubicon Springs, including the Dirty Dozen site on the far side of the springs. Warm water and shade trees that are perfect to hang a hammock make Rubicon Springs an inviting place to stay for a while.



Now the bottom of the Big Sluice is one of the most difficult sections of the trail, particularly if you are running it uphill from Rubicon Springs to Buck Island. One of the aspects that makes the Rubicon such a challenge is that the obstacles never seem to subside. You need to keep your cool and use good judgment from start to finish.

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Views like this one make it easy to understand the appeal of the Rubicon beyond just the mechanical challenge. The trail is adjacent to Desolation Wilderness, and offers many of the same breathtaking views and expansive granite features. Reflective markers can be found on this section of trail to ensure you are going the right way.



While the Little Sluice is easier than it used to be, don't think that it is a cakewalk! We still regularly see people have to winch through this section of the trail. Often times it is better to check your ego and take assistance from a winch or strap rather than risk breaking critical components, particularly when you are miles from the nearest auto parts store.

rigs whole. The best time to run the Rubicon is typically June through September, depending on how severe Tahoe's winter has been. If you like crowds, show up on any weekend in July. If you're more of an introvert, your best bet is a midweek run. Typically, the Rubicon is more difficult (and mosquitos are worse) earlier in the season, particularly after a harsh winter. Later in the year, after large, organized runs, many of the holes have been filled with rocks and the trail smooths out somewhat.

On the subject of organized runs, it isn't a bad idea to join one, particularly if you are not familiar with the trail. The Jeepers Jamboree continues today, when hundreds of Jeeps cross the Rubicon in a single weekend. This trip is a full-catered party with steak dinners in Rubicon Springs and plenty of time to relax and have a good time. Jeep Jamboree is oriented more towards families and those who are new to the trail, and offers helpful staff along the way to keep you moving or assist with trail repairs. Other smaller events take place throughout the summer as well, with varying levels of organization and costs. Many events – such as the Rubithon, Zukicon, and the Marlin Crawler Roundup – cater to specific makes and models of vehicles. These present great opportunities for people who are new to the trail to experience the Rubicon in an environment where there is plenty of help along the way.

## WHAT TO BRING

If you go on Jeep Jamboree or Jeepers Jamboree, you don't need to worry about food beyond some snacks and drinks while you are on the trail. If you go it alone, though, you will want to not only bring food and water, but plates, utensils, cooking gear, and a stove. Some people eat better on the trail than they do at home, while others survive for days off cold pizza. Weather conditions on the Rubicon are highly variable. You might



While roof top tents are popular on many overland routes, a ground tent is the most common shelter found on the Rubicon. You will also want to bring sleeping bags and air mattresses for everyone in your vehicle to ensure that they get a good night's sleep. We also bring flashlights, headlamps, folding chairs, sunscreen, and bug spray on all of our adventures.



While the Rubicon can be run in a day, that misses the mark of why you would want to go in the first place. We like to spend at least one night on the trail, with two nights being even better. Note that if you plan to cook over a fire you need to check with the Forest Service first to get a permit and ensure that there are no fire restrictions. This can be done online at [preventwildfireca.org](http://preventwildfireca.org) or at the Crystal Basin Information Station on Ice House Road.

need a jacket in the morning, be sweating at midday, and be freezing after the sun goes down. We recommend planning for anything from snow to triple-digit temperatures and dressing in layers so you can easily add or remove clothing. Also remember to bring your swim trunks so you can cool off in the many high alpine lakes along the way. The water will likely be chilly, but it is invigorating after a long day on the trail.

We have seen the full spectrum – from people who only pack a cooler of beverages for the weekend to those who bring power tools and spare differentials. The sweet spot is somewhere in the middle,

depending on how many people are coming with you and how much room you have. We recommend a fire extinguisher, first aid kit, recovery points front and rear, and a recovery strap at a minimum. You will definitely want to bring a full-sized spare tire and a jack capable of lifting your vehicle, as sidewall tears are fairly common on the Rubicon. These are good ideas not only for the Rubicon, but any overland route. When it comes to tools and spare parts, if we have needed it on the trail in the past, we bring it along. If it has been in our tool box for more than a year or two and we have never used it, we leave it at home. Most people tend to overpack, but if you are going with

a group of friends with vehicles similar to yours consider dividing up tools and spare parts. Not all of you need to bring a stove and cast iron skillet or a full tool kit if you are willing to share.

## COMMUNICATIONS

You won't have cell phone service on the Rubicon regardless of who your carrier is. CBs and handheld radios are useful for communicating with other members of your group on the trail, but if you need to connect with civilization, a HAM radio is the only option. Handheld radios work reasonably well, but a vehicle-mounted radio with higher wattage and a better antenna will be much more effective. The Rubicon Repeater is located near Spider Lake and covers most of the trail; it operates on frequency 444.9875 +5.00 PL 156.7. The KA6GWY repeater (146.805 -.600 PL123.0) covers the west slope of El Dorado County and is linked into the

Rubicon Repeater. Note that you do need a license from the FCC to operate a HAM radio. This isn't particularly difficult, but must be done ahead of time.

## DIRECTIONS

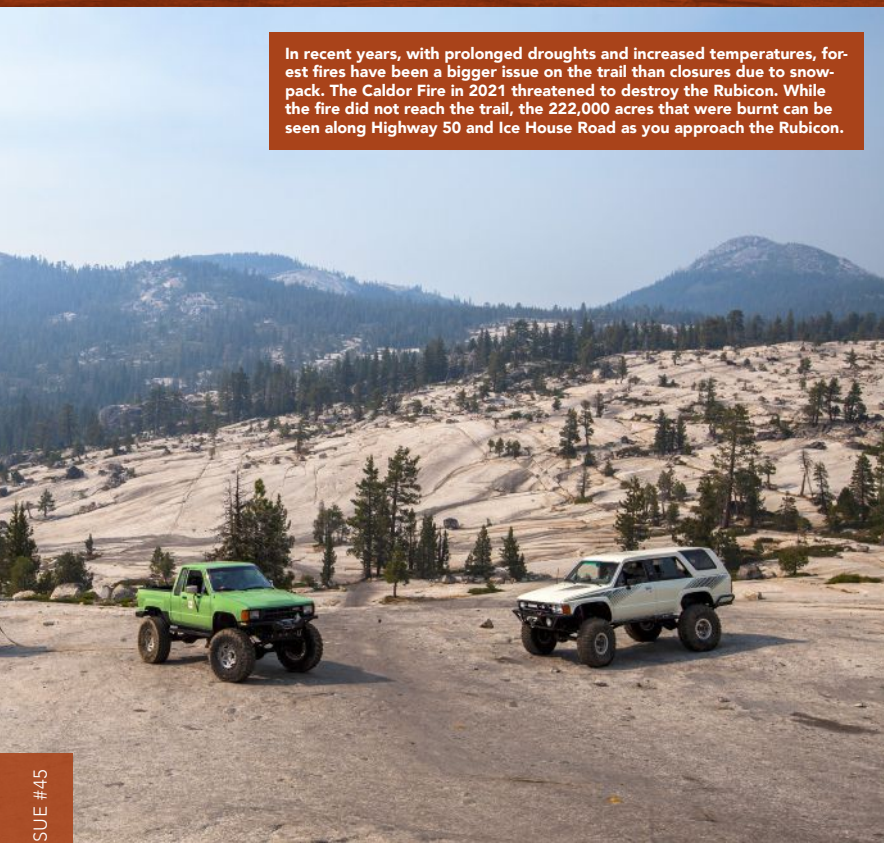
The most common direction the Rubicon is run is from west to east from Loon Lake to Lake Tahoe. An alternative (and more challenging) route starts at Wentworth Springs and meets up with the Loon Lake entrance at Ellis Creek. To get to Loon Lake, you can either go through Georgetown on Highway 193 or up Ice House Road from Highway 50. Neither route is particularly wide, flat, or straight, and we have seen many a Jeep and many a tow rig on the side of the road before they even reach the start of the Rubicon. Make certain that your steering, braking, and cooling systems are all in tip-top shape before beginning this journey. On the other end, you come out

in Tahoma on the shores of Lake Tahoe after a long, cobbled dirt road finally gives way to pavement. The trail can be run backwards, but expect traffic and be courteous when you encounter it. A little goodwill goes a long way on the Rubicon, and you never know when you might need the help of other trail users.

## WHAT TO EXPECT

Start by airing your tires down in order to increase traction and smooth out the ride over rough terrain. We recommend running half the air pressure you typically run on the street. From Loon Lake, you will enter the trees through a tight section of trail with a "gatekeeper" obstacle prior to reaching the Granite Bowl. If you are having issues at this point, reconsider your plans to run the Rubicon. There are plenty of other trails in the area that offer similar beauty with less of a challenge. If everything is going according to plan, you

In recent years, with prolonged droughts and increased temperatures, forest fires have been a bigger issue on the trail than closures due to snowpack. The Caldor Fire in 2021 threatened to destroy the Rubicon. While the fire did not reach the trail, the 222,000 acres that were burnt can be seen along Highway 50 and Ice House Road as you approach the Rubicon.



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can continue across the bowl and through a series of slabs and boulders before reaching the bridge across Ellis Creek and going up Walker Hill. There are some wonderful spots to camp near the bridge if you got a late start on the trail.

After Walker Hill you reach the optional Soup Bowl obstacle shortly before Little Sluice, which has another great campsite with an outhouse. Spider Lake is also walking distance from Little Sluice, just uphill to the east, and benefits from warm water due to its shallow depth. It makes a great place to cool off and wash off the dust from the trail. From Little Sluice, drivers traverse several unnamed obstacles before coming to a split for Old Sluice or the Indian Trail. Old Sluice is tighter and more difficult, although running it downhill is easier than coming up the opposite direction. The Indian Trail presents challenges of its own – namely some off-camber, exposed ledges that can get

uncomfortable in a top-heavy vehicle.

At the bottom of the slabs the trails reunite just before Buck Island Reservoir, the midpoint of the trail. There are numerous outhouses and camping spots at Buck Island, but note that camping sites at the west end of the lake can get rowdy on summer weekends. Continuing on, there are opportunities to camp along the shore of the lake in smaller, quieter spots. This section of the trail around Buck Island does not have any named obstacles, but there are plenty of challenges and a distinct lack of traction on the polished granite surfaces.

Continuing on, you descend Big Sluice into Rubicon Springs. After the obstacles at Buck Island you might wonder what all the hype is about with Big Sluice, but the bottom of this section has plenty of technical obstacles before reaching the bridge to Rubicon Springs. Like Buck Island, Rubicon

Springs features great camping options and outhouses, but you will want to be selective about who your neighbors are to ensure that you aren't listening to their music (or rev limiters) all night long. Fortunately, there is plenty of space for everyone.

The last major obstacle on the Rubicon is Cadillac Hill, so named for the car that you can still see the remains of in the manzanita bushes off the side of the trail. While not the most challenging obstacle on the trail, Cadillac Hill is covered with trees that make it much tighter than the western half of the trail. It also isn't uncommon for water to be running down this section of the trail, making traction a challenge. At the top of Cadillac Hill, you reach the Observation Point, where it is common to celebrate with a victory photo. From here, you only have a long, bumpy road before you reach pavement, air up your tires, and enjoy a warm meal or a hot shower in Lake Tahoe. ❦



Buck Island Reservoir is the midpoint of the trail and makes a great place to camp during the Rubicon in two days. There are several outhouses located all along the trail, including at Ellis Creek, Little Sluice, and Rubicon Springs. An abundance of waste nearly got the Rubicon closed a decade ago, but now Eldorado has a Super Duty pump truck with 41-inch tall tires to clean the outhouses.

## HARRY WAGNER

AUTHOR BIO



Harry Wagner grew up in Northern California, halfway between the Sierra Nevada Range and the Pacific Coast. He was born to parents who value nature and the environment, and some of his earliest memories are camping in places like Yosemite, where his mother spent much of her own childhood. Harry's father owned a four-wheel-drive shop in Yuba City in the 80s, so weekends in the back of the family FJ40 on trails like the Rubicon were commonplace. It wasn't until later in life that he realized just how special his childhood was, and it would set him on the trajectory that continues to this day. Harry currently calls Reno, Nevada home, but often travels throughout the western United States, and has spent a significant amount of time in Africa and Latin America, including two years living in Venezuela. While overlanding and rock crawling are his bread and butter, Harry has also raced in the Baja 1000, King of the Hammers, the Sonora Rally, and made three trips to the famous Dakar Rally.

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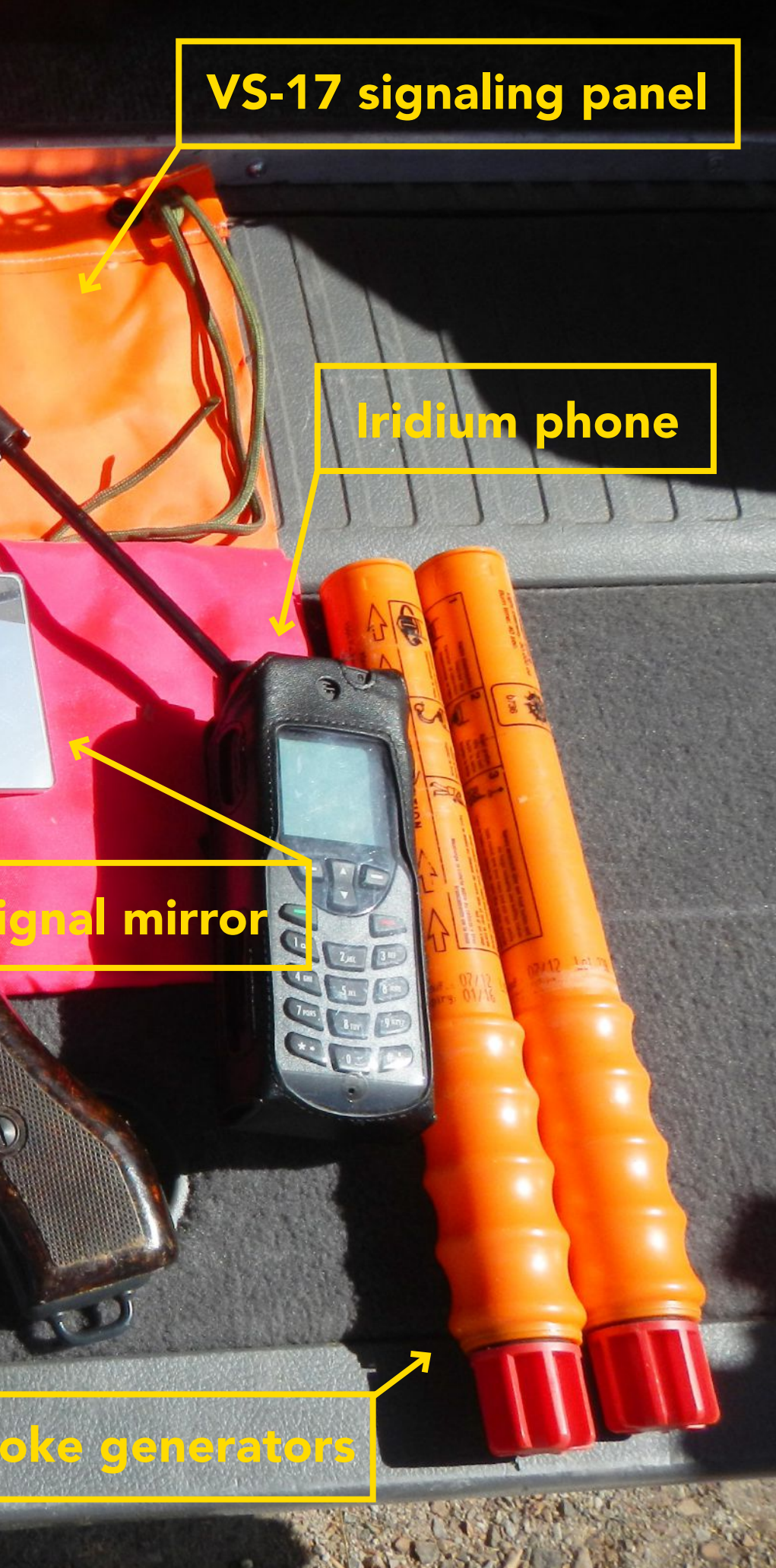
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# OUTDOOR TRAINING

How to be  
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emergency

# Breitling Emergency watch



The only downside to traveling to beautiful remote places is the lack of help should an emergency arise. Travelers need to consider how search and rescue (SAR) is going to find them after they start a rescue. While it is true that using a Spot, InReach device or cell phone with GPS will give your lat-long position, being found could be difficult due to weather and terrain. I have thought about this issue and put together a kit for just such a situation. (Note: This is a signaling kit not a survival kit.)



## MY KIT INCLUDES THE FOLLOWING:

- **Flare gun.** With an insert, this gun shoots commonly available 12-gauge flares. I also carry several extra flares. You cannot guarantee that a single attempt will be seen.
- **Smoke generators.** These are useful to allow rescuers to find your position as well as allowing a helicopter to read the wind when landing.
- **Breitling Emergency watch.** This watch has an emergency transmitter on 121.5 GUARD frequency. All aircraft monitor this frequency. This is an emergency frequency used in emergency locator transmitters in aircraft (ELT). There are newer frequencies now, but GUARD is still in use. Since I travel with an InReach, the watch is now a backup.
- **VS-17 signaling panel.** This is a military signaling panel that has bright fluorescent orange and pink colors. The panel can be placed on a vehicle or in a clearing. As most SAR pilots are former military, they will recognize the panel and know what it means.
- **Strobe light.** This is another military item, SDU-5. This strobe has a battery conversion to use civilian batteries.
- **Whistle and signal mirror**
- **Garmin inReach and an Iridium phone**

All these items are available online. There are civilian equivalents of the strobe and panel available. Orion safety is a good source for some of these items.

For those who are not familiar with the InReach device, it works on the Iridium satellite constellation. It is a two-way text messenger as well as an SOS device. Turning on the SOS feature will send a signal to Garmin. Garmin will contact their International Emergency Response Coordination Center (IERCC). The IERCC then communicates with the device holder to determine the nature of the SOS and what response is needed. If there is no response a rescue will be initiated. (Learn more here: <https://youtu.be/vEaF2Atxo-s>)

For a truly complete kit, one could add an AirBand radio. With this radio one could talk to any SAR aircraft on GUARD or set the radio to scan and listen for radio traffic (think of the movie BAT-21).

Every adventurer has their own idea of what to include should trouble arise. These are just suggestions to tailor your kit to your travel scenario. The important thing is to be both smart and prepared. If you need help, you want to make it easy for help to find you.

One last thing: if you have cell service and have started an SAR, please answer the phone even if you don't recognize the number. It could be SAR trying to contact you. Additionally, all these items are available online. There are civilian equivalents of the strobe and panel available. Orion safety is a good source for some of these items. ✕

## MICHAEL PEREZ ————— AUTHOR BIO



Michael Perez started his love of adventure when his father took the family on annual visits to his native Bolivia. Excursions throughout the world followed.

Mike joined Boy Scouts and took Outward Bound and NOLS courses to satisfy his craving for adventure. While backpacking Kenya, he discovered overlanding.

His career as a DEA Special Agent took him to the jungles of Bolivia and Peru where he experienced the Land Cruiser's legendary performance. Returning from Peru, Mike found a 1985 FJ60 that he tinkered on and drove for twenty years.

Retired after twenty-five years of federal service, and after tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, Mike and wife Lisa live in El Paso, Texas, and travel in their 200 Series Land Cruiser.

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LifeStraw ###



WORDS & PHOTOS - AMY GRISAK

# LIFESTRAW

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Those who relish their time in the backcountry understand the importance of safe water. Acquiring a waterborne illness is the last thing we want to make a trip memorable. As a water treatment leader for seventeen years, LifeStraw ups the game with their latest Peak Series, while they pursue their dedication to clean water for communities throughout the world. LifeStraw works to ensure that everyone has safe drinking water, with a special focus on eradicating the Guinea worm. LifeStraw also provides community purifiers for schools in need.

For the solo traveler, the Peak Series Straw does a fine job filtering out particulates, microplastics, bacteria, and protozoa (including Giardia and Cryptosporidium), but the 0.2 micron size is not suitable to eliminate viruses. At 2.3 ounces, it is lightweight and easy to store, and it doesn't require pumping or have additional tubes. The straw handles one-thousand gallons of water before requiring replacement, although this means one must guess to calculate that amount.

On the flipside, for backpacking or even long day-hikes, it's not ideal to have to kneel down at every water source to drink. In areas where water is not plentiful, the best option is to fill a bottle and drink it through a filter. But with a price point below \$20, it's undoubtedly one of the most economical ways to go.





Because LifeStraw recognizes the need for portable water, they also offer the 3L and 8L Peak Series Gravity Filter Systems. The durable, BPA-free water bladder packs easily and holds up to frequent use. A separate filter attaches directly to the bladder, but the best part is it can also be screwed onto a bottle to use as a personal filter. A secure plug also allows a hiker to pack water in the bag.

The 3L system weighs 8.1 ounces and the 8L option weighs 19 ounces; both reasonable weights. The 47" hose length is ideal to refill bottles, and the system couldn't be easier to use. Simply fill the bag, screw on the filter, and push on the hose. Suspend the system with the attached, strap-in carabiner, and you're ready to fill bottles.

With durable water bags and a versatile filter, LifeStraw's Peak Series definitely earns a place on any hiker or backpacker's gear list. **X4**

#### LIKES .....

- Either of Peak Series filters work well as screw-on filters for a water bottle.
- The personal straw can be carried in a pocket to keep it handy.
- Kids love the straw!
- Both filters are easy to clean.

#### DISLIKES .....

- The straw isn't the best option for those who like to drink as they go, or if water sources are infrequent.
- It could be more effective against viruses, which would be terribly detrimental in the backcountry.

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