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A Family's Unforgettable Expedition to Prudhoe Bay



SANDSTONE SERENITY - GOING SEA TO SUMMIT - IDAHO'S MAGRUDER CORRIDOR TRAIL
IN THE SADDLE WITH ROYAL ENFIELD'S NEW HIMALAYAN - LIVIN' THE VAN LIFE
THE GREAT ESCAPE - A PHOTOGRAPHIC ADVENTURE

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ISSUE

51

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PHOTO CREDIT: ANDREW JONES

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past



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Be prepared.

As a Boy Scout, this motto was at the forefront of everything that defined what we did whether in the field or in our weekly Troop meetings. However, it wasn't until I grew older I realized how critically important its meaning is in nearly every facet of our daily lives and particularly when exploring the unknown.

Traveling into the backcountry requires proper planning. Sure, the wealth of information available online is a tremendous advantage versus the analog world of days past. However, one lesson I've learned in all my years of vehicle-based and non-motorized exploration has been this: Don't rely exclusively on technology, especially when you're in an unfamiliar area. For one, what do you do when your cell signal is beyond the nearest cell tower? If you haven't navigated ahead of time by outlining your route, you could easily get lost going/coming back from the area you're exploring. For this reason alone, I always carry an atlas and/or paper map with me as a backup just in case technology fails.

Additionally, while technology can provide instant access to information about most anything, the value of a field guide whether it's for a region you're exploring on two or four wheels, or by foot, is an extremely invaluable resource. Most overland adventurers know and respect the knowledge offered from resources such as Tom Shepard's Vehicle-dependent Expedition Guide (most recently co-authored by OutdoorX4's Overland Columnist Jonathan Hanson). While the book has probably more information than anyone may feasibly use in their lifetime, it has everything you could possibly want to expect and plan for when traveling fully self-sufficient. The same can be said about the various Falcon Guide books on a myriad of subjects whether hiking, mountain biking, fly fishing, etc. Their field guides, specifically by region and activity, offer

a wealth of knowledge you can reach into your backpack for with maps and detailed tips on the subjects they cover. Again, they're an excellent resource when...yep, you guessed it...the cell signal stops and technology isn't there to guide you along your way.

Another consideration is the mere break from technology while exploring beyond your front door. Getting outside and away is a reprieve from our daily lives including the stresses of job, family, and more. While it's good to be connected, particularly in an emergency situation when a cell signal is available, it's also nice to sometimes get away from the constant glare of a screen and enjoy the moment. Flipping through the pages of a book, or magazine, allows that break from technology while affording the same value of information you'd find online.

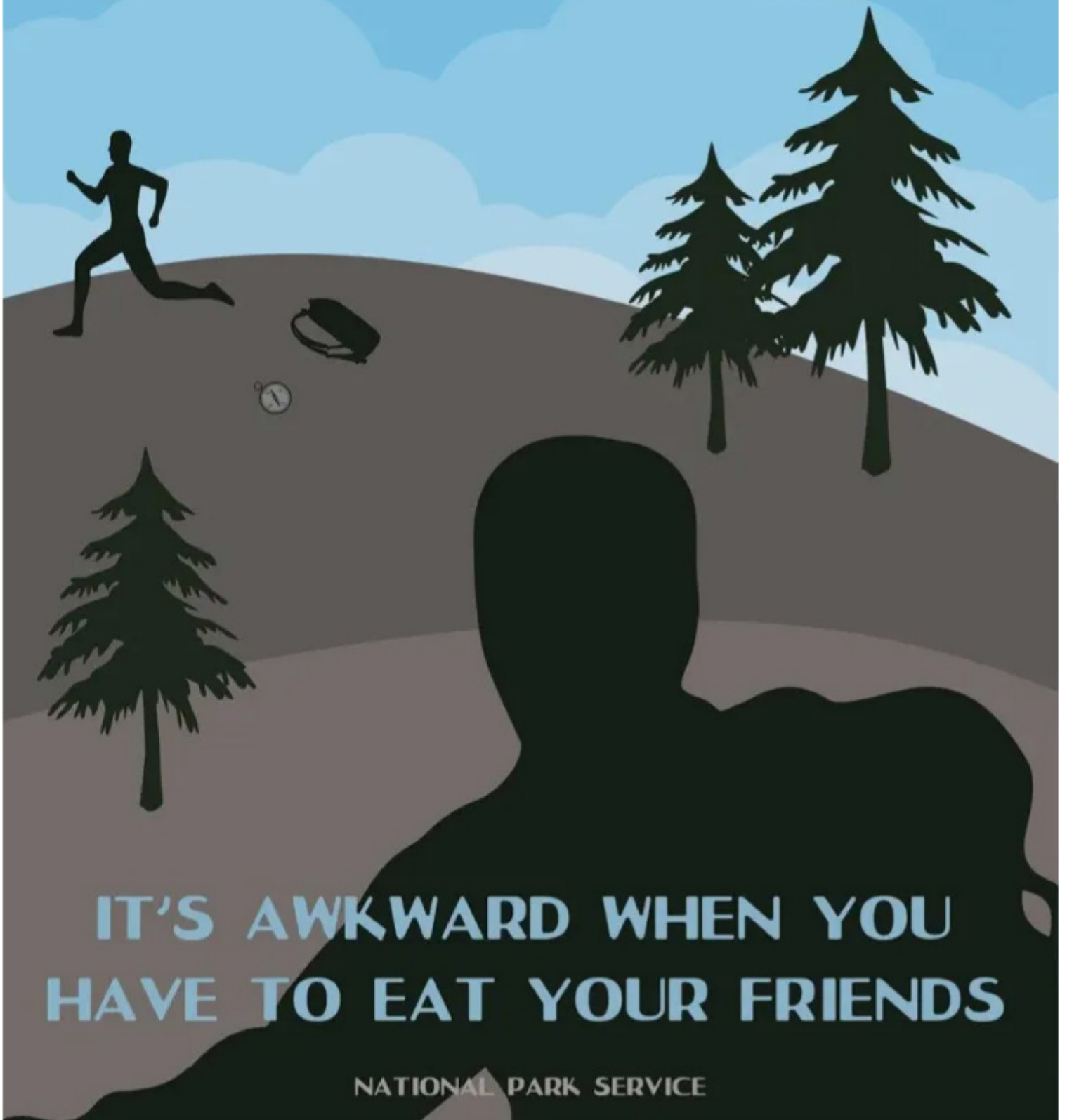
So, the next time you prepare to head out on that dream adventure or weekend excursion into the unknown, consider packing not only the technology you'll be using on your journey but also a tangible field guide and map for additional reference. You never know when ink and paper can be a blessing when things don't go as planned.

Frank Ledwell
EDITOR & PUBLISHER



X4

BRING A COMPASS



IT'S AWKWARD WHEN YOU
HAVE TO EAT YOUR FRIENDS

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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BACK COVER: Exploring Alaska
- by Patrick Van Valkenburg



67 DESIGNS INTRODUCES REVOLUTIONARY GOPRO MAGNETIC QUICK CONNECT



67 Designs, a leader in device mounting solutions, is thrilled to unveil its latest innovation: the GoPro® Magnetic Quick Connect™. Designed for adventurers, YouTubers, and social media influencers, this innovative mount revolutionizes the way GoPro™ cameras are used, offering unparalleled ease and efficiency.

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and resume filming without missing a beat. It embodies the perfect blend of simplicity and security – easy enough to separate by hand, yet robust enough to keep the GoPro securely in place during dynamic activities.

Proudly Made in the USA: This attachment point stands out with its proud American craftsmanship. Meticulously designed and manufactured in the USA, it delivers quality and durability.

Learn more by visiting the 67 Designs website at WWW.67D.COM. **X4**

RIVIAN ANNOUNCES NEW ELECTRIC R2, R3, AND R3X SUVs



Rivian has announced the debut of three new models to their electric fleet, each focused on providing a more affordable electric option with pricing expected to be significantly less than Rivian's current R1S and R1T vehicles.

According to the company, the R2 is slated for production in 2026. No pricing, specifications, or production timetable were detailed for the surprise R3 and R3X models, although Rivian's CEO said the R3 and R3X were essentially based

on the same basic platform as the R2 and will also feature a five door format. Scaringe, Rivian's CEO, did say the R3 will be five inches shorter than the R2.

Features of the new R2 model include options for a single 2WD version, plus AWD dual or triple-electric motor powertrains and up to 330 miles of range on the base battery pack. No exact horsepower, torque figures, or battery pack sizes for any of the new cars were specified at

the reveal or on Rivian's website. However, it has been said per Rivian all models would have "at least" 300 miles of range.

Rivian has also indicated vehicle-based adventuring is in mind for all of the new vehicles and said an integrated rooftop tent and rear-mounted kitchen module that runs off the cars' battery pack is in the works. A slide briefly showed a rooftop tent on the R2. Rivian also says the R2 fold-down seats were designed to allow for an in-car sleeping mattress above the wheel well level.

No specifics regarding performance or other specifications were released for the R3 models; however, the R3 looks to be influenced by others in the smaller CUV segment and will most likely appeal to those customers once it becomes available. **X4**

MEANWHILE, OVER ON OUTDOORX4.COM...

Around the Campfire with Pindrop Trailers

OutdoorX4's contributing author, Bob Theobald, recently visited with Tim Elinski of Pindrop Travel Trailers to learn more about Pindrop's beginnings, their use of raw materials from rural Arizona and building a camp trailer in the U.S., and his personal experiences on backcountry travels.

Field Review: Pelican 45 Quart Elite Cooler

One would think in a space where numerous portable, easy to use, 12-volt refrigerators reign, the days of the humble, ice laden cooler would be behind us. However, there are times where the adventure extends beyond the adventure rig. There are many of us who only go beyond a long weekend into the wild every once in a blue moon, making the luxury of mobile refrigera-

tion a needless expense. Sometimes, the need isn't only to keep what's inside cold, but to bring what's cold anywhere it needs to be. Campsite or courtside, the cooler is still king.

Going Above and Beyond

The Texas Hill Country is rugged. Drive west from Austin and you'll find yourself in limestone and granite hills half covered with yucca, prickly pear and my favorite, Live Oak. It's dry and dusty out there, and I'm not sure how often it rains on this portion of the Edwards Plateau. Hardly ever would be my guess.

Hidden Falls Adventure Park, in the Hill Country just up the road from Marble Falls, was our playground for the 2023 Land Rover TReK off-road competition. The park is a little like Moab, sans the slick rock, and covers 3,000 acres with both

moderate and extreme terrain. Two of the more prominent peaks climb 300 feet above the main road. You're likely to see a western diamond-back or a white tail deer if you get out early, which we did. I may have told one of our competitors, team Quebec, to be especially careful if they came across a Chupacabra.

Check out these stories and more by visiting www.outdoorx4.com/stories or by scanning the QR code. Also, be sure to sign-up for our eNewsletters in the section at the bottom of our website to get the latest news, features, tips, reviews, and issue release updates straight to your inbox! **X4**

what WE dig



The Van Valkenburgs Dig Their CAMERA GEAR

We always have cameras with us on our adventures, including cameras for our kids. Photography is something that allows us to capture some of the most precious moments, while encouraging our kids to stay engaged in our journeys. Our kids have learned to notice small details in nature that most miss, all thanks to giving them a tool to record it with.



Gary and Gretchen Matos Dig Their PADDLEBOARD

Gretchen and I dig our NRS Paddleboard. It's quick to inflate, lightweight, has plenty of buoyancy, and is very durable. Our model also has a pressure release valve. The complete package tucks nicely behind the driver seat of our Ram 3500 adventure truck, and our dog Lily digs it too!

Taro Zenri Digs His TRAVEL GEAR

Two absolute game-changers I've discovered for my extended travels: packing cubes and a compact clothes steamer.

First up, packing cubes. These things are a revelation. Not only do they keep my stuff neatly organized in my suitcase (no more rooting around like a madman), but they're a godsend when you're faced with minimal storage space at your destination. Who knew a little cube could turn even the tiniest closet shelf into an organized oasis?

And then there's the clothes steamer. This bad boy has saved my bacon more times than I can count. You know those button-up shirts that always come out of the suitcase looking like they've been run over by a truck? Well, with this steamer, a couple of passes and they're looking fresh as ever. Perfect for those moments when you've got a date lined up and you need to look on point.



Jenny Vigil Stays Hydrated with DOMETIC'S GO HYDRATION WATER JUG

The Dometic GO Hydration Water Jug along with the GO Hydration Water Faucet is my favorite piece of gear that accompanies us on all our travels, whether it's an epic adventure or a day trip. Filling up water bottles for yourself or water bowls for those traveling pets couldn't be easier!



IN THE FIELD WITH GMC'S 2024 CANYON AT4X AEV & SIERRA HD AT4X AEV



Canyon AT4X AEV

It's the first-ever GMC Canyon AT4X AEV edition, built to maximize off-road capability and introduce the market's most capable midsize off-road vehicle.

As the owner of a midsize truck which has many 4x4 roads under its belt, I wanted to be blown away by the Canyon. During the excursion, we tested both the Canyon AT4X and Canyon AT4X AEV editions on a remote forest service road in the Gallatin Range, about an hour from Bozeman. The road was a perfect mix of terrain for the test, with sections of loose scree, rock crawling, tight maneuvers, and exposure.

BY SHALEE SUPER

Under the big skies of Montana are jagged mountain ranges, millions of acres of remote national forests, and endless, expansive ranches. The terrain here isn't easy. In fact, it's some of the toughest in the country.

Driving through the winding valleys of sage among grazing antelope and elk in the new 2024 midsize Canyon AT4X AEV, it was easy to see why GMC chose this location to prove the durability of their off-road lineup.

My home base is just four hours away, in northwest Wyoming. This terrain here was all too familiar, as were the obstacles. Being in Montana with GMC felt like an epic playdate in my backyard. Except this playdate included hundreds of thousands of dollars in trucks and gear.

In a place where the service is sparse and the terrain unforgivable, durability can often mean survivability, and survivability in the backcountry is one of my greatest strengths. I felt in my element, ready to test GMC in the wild west.

This event featured the just released AEV editions, the newest trucks to join the GMC lineup in 2024. With the AT4X Canyon and Sierra models receiving rave reviews but missing some critical off-road features and upgrades, GMC and American Expedition Vehicles partnered to bring fully equipped off-road trucks straight to the market. The results are the Canyon AT4X AEV and Sierra 2500 HD AT4X AEV.

After three hours of careful navigation, averaging just a few miles per hour, the Canyon had made its mark. If I was in the market for a high-end off-road truck, the Canyon AT4X AEV would be at the top of my list.

I appreciated the additional bells and whistles in the AEV edition, from the 12.2" of ground clearance to the stamped-steel front and rear bumpers with added recovery points and winch provisions. The hot-stamped boron steel skid plates were one of the biggest assets, providing extra protection to critical underbody elements. As someone who has scraped many rocks in their mid-size truck (and one driving the Canyon), the upgraded skid plates are a priceless feature that adds a much-needed extra layer of protection in the wilderness.

Both the Canyon AT4X AEV and Canyon AT4X also featured a 360-degree camera system, including an underbody camera. This feature isn't necessarily uncommon in higher-end trucks but is still much appreciated when navigating sections of rock & boulders. The combination of the cameras with the skid plates, bumpers, and additional AEV off-road features, it's easy to see why the Canyon AT4X AEV comes in at a higher price point than other mid-size trucks.

With the custom build of the Canyon AT4X AEV, it's clear this truck is made for a specific type of customer. It's overkill for a dirt road hobbyist, and GMC knows that. All I have to do is look into the mirror to identify the target market. It's for people like me who live in remote sections of the country and often find



themselves on 4x4 terrain but still need a dual-purpose truck that handles pavement just as well as it rock crawls. It's made for the passionate adventurer and outdoors person, whether in overlanding, mountain climbing, or hunting. This specific group needs a small, capable, maneuverable, and tough truck. The Canyon AT4X AEV is all of those things.

Sierra 2500 HD AT4X AEV

The Sierra 2500 HD AT4X AEV is entirely different from the Canyon AT4X AEV. This truck is heavy-duty and monstrous in size – designed for ranchers, construction workers, and those who need high towing capacities.

GMC built this truck to be the biggest and best, and the size was the most apparent feature. At only 5'2", climbing into the cab was a workout itself. The truck felt much too large for me in many aspects.

But that's the thing: The truck wasn't built for me. The course designed by GMC was on a working ranch northwest of Bozeman. It wasn't long or deep in the backcountry, but it was practical. I view the Sierra 2500 HD AT4X AEV as a work truck. This is not an "I need to haul lumber across town" work truck, but instead an "I need to check the fence line on my hundred-acre ranch" work truck.

It tows a whopping 18,600 pounds but can also crawl through endless sagebrush drainages across any farm or ranch. The course tested the Sierra on the steepest terrain I've ever encountered and handled flawlessly. I call this truck 'America's truck' because it was built for the backbone of our country: The farmers and ranchers who provide for us all.

And although it's a rough-and-tough work truck, the interior is the definition of ultra-luxurious. The cab is expansive, accommodating the tallest drivers with room to spare. The driver and

passenger seats have every upgrade imaginable, from cushioning to built-in massagers. But with a price tag nearing \$100,000, the luxury additions are no surprise.

There aren't many trucks in the market to compete with the GMC Sierra, and the price is a reflection of its prestige. GMC has long been known as a higher-end manufacturer, and the Sierra is the newest addition to the luxury lineup.

At the end of the day, the Sierra 2500 HD AT4X AEV wasn't built to meander far into the wilderness down narrow forest service roads; it was built for American ranchers. That's the simplest way to put it.

Canyon AT4X AEV & Sierra HD AT4X AEV Conclusion

Both GMC AT4X Sierra and GMC Canyon ATX4 have their purposes, but the Canyon is the clear winner for outdoor exploration and overlanding. The partnership between GMC and AEV is perhaps one of the best upgrades to the GMC lineup, providing fully equipped and off-road-ready trucks straight off the lot. This saves time, money, and stress for many 4x4 expeditionists who spend valuable time and resources adding AEV upgrades themselves.

If the MSRP of \$55,000 for the Canyon is within budget, the vehicle will likely prove to be one of the best in the market in 2024. **X4**





The stories are becoming more and more common:

- A 4Runner owner attempts to drive the closed Black Bear Pass—a challenging route at the best of times, much less when it has been shut down to repair erosion damage. The ensuing recovery is dangerous and very expensive.
- The driver of a new GMC Canyon buries the truck 13,800 feet up a *hiking* trail in Colorado. Ditto on the recovery.
- Hikers on Mosquito Pass—also in Colorado—video a truck rolling off a trail. Ditto on the recovery.
- The driver of a Jeep Wrangler high-centers it longitudinally trying to follow a dangerous *mountain bike* trail up a narrow ridge. Ditto on the . . . well, you get it.

I could go on, and on. For several months I thought it was just happenstance, but recent articles in the mainstream—i.e. non-4x4—press, including one from Outside Online, makes it clear this really is a trend.

What's going on? I think several factors are at work.

For one thing, I note that many of the vehicles in these stories are new or very nearly so. It's reasonable to assume that, in many of those instances, the drivers are also new to the concept of four-wheel drive, and expect the vehicle to be able to do more than it can. However, that doesn't explain how those drivers got into such genuinely terrifying circumstances. I remember when I first got my FJ40 and went out to practice on local trails.

I encountered situations that I refused to attempt because they looked too risky, only to realize with more experience that they were utterly safe. How could someone completely new to the four-wheel-drive world wind up at 13,800 feet on a vertiginous hiking trail?

I'm tempted to put some of the responsibility—perhaps a lot of it—on vehicle manufacturers. When was the last time you saw an ad for a (fill in any four-wheel-drive model) that showed it carefully and slowly negotiating a trail? That's right—you haven't. Every one of those ads is full of sliding trucks and flying dirt—that dirt kicked right in the face of any principles of treading lightly, despite the cynical donations from those same companies to organizations purporting to endorse responsible use of the backcountry. Those ads are all about their vehicles' ability to stomp terrain into submission, to go *wherever you want to go*. Can we blame a new, inexperienced owner for thinking that, as long as he can see some sort of track, his shiny, expensive new Tacowranglebronc 250 Baja Special will power right up it?

Well, yes, of course we can. The ultimate responsibility for the vehicle and its actions lies with its owner. If you're stupid enough to consider the TV ad you saw on your new truck a comprehensive course in four-wheel-drive use, you deserve what you get. But the passengers in your vehicle, the other users of the trails who might be endangered by you, and the rescue crews who have to extract you, don't. (We frequently see the street corollary in 600-plus-horsepower Dodge Chargers and such whose new owners think themselves an instant Kyle Petty.)

An ancillary factor is at work in some cases of vehicles showing up where they don't belong: spurious GPS directions. Consider the entire parade of cars that recently followed a Google Maps "shortcut" on their way to L.A. from Las Vegas, and had to be flat-bedded out of a desert track.

There is, however, an overriding factor in almost all these cases, and it's the one that disturbs me by far the most. It's the sense of entitlement—the self-absorbed lack of respect for the land and the community; the disregard for any consequences beyond personal gratification. The big headline stories capture wide attention, but I see smaller manifestations of the attitude all the time. The guy in the modified RAM truck forging a princess trail bypass around an obstacle I've been over a dozen times testing stock vehicles, who said belligerently when I offered to marshal him through the spot, "It's public land; I can drive wherever I want." The ATV rider who motored up a game trail, saw me, rifle on my shoulder, glassing the opposite hillside, and simply rode around me. Hell, for that matter, the trucks I (and, I'll bet, you) see in parking lots taking up two, three, even four spaces.



What can be done? Obviously, education in the use and abuse of four wheel drive is paramount. If you're a newcomer to our world, don't think it's demeaning to get professional instruction, both in driving and recovery. Far from it. You'll be a better driver, the planet (and your vehicle) will thank you, and you'll be less likely to wind up in an article in Outside Online. As for the self-absorbed few who don't care, let's take the peer pressure approach I call Outing the Idiots. Call them out, spread their photos on Facebook and Instagram. Diplomacy is a good thing, but sometimes public ridicule is better. **X4**

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PADDLING WITH "PORPOISE"

WORDS & PHOTOS – SEAN JANSEN



"Ugh, a headwind," I murmured to myself. "Of course, it's a head wind." I'm at mile two-hundred, sixteen days into a trip without a single day of tailwind. The forecast for the day was for the first "El Norte," a powerful, northern wind that typically howls down the Sea of Cortez from late fall to early spring. The strong tailwind I anticipated was halted by an unforecasted south wind. And, for the first time on the trip, frustration got the best of me.

The expletives came first, then the questions. "Why?" I screamed. "What did I do to deserve this?" "What are you trying to tell me?" I am paddling the length of the Baja peninsula to raise awareness for the critically endangered Vaquita porpoise. However, standing upright at 6' on a stand-up paddleboard fully loaded with two dry bags and five gallons of water, the headwind is turning my body into a sail that refuses to help me push me southward.

I made it to a headland to help me block out the wind. A sigh of relief came over me as I could see my next goal. If I could get around this next point, I should have been able to ride the tailwind to town to enjoy a mouthful of much-deserved tacos that I'd been salivating over for two weeks. But I had a lot of open water to paddle before the point was even within my crosshairs. I took a deep breath and began paddling to the point.

Twenty minutes in, all was well. The headwind from the south turned into a crosswind and slowly started helping me angle toward the point. I got halfway into the bay when I instinctively looked back to marvel at my progress, when I saw it: A wall of white. A literal sea of whitecaps marched toward me like Orcs marching on Helms Deep from *Lord of the Rings*. Until this moment, I had never seen anything like it. El Norte not only came early and swiftly, it nearly slammed me against the rocks, and I had to paddle as hard as I could to avoid them.

I was losing. I fell to my knees and dug as hard as I could to not wash up against the urchin- and barnacle-covered boulders. More expletives came. Somehow, I was able to round the point, and for the first time in over two weeks, a tailwind pushed me southward.

I began laughing and looked far to the horizon to see my destination, ten miles down the coast, where winds would undoubtedly carry the smell of al pastor and carne asada from town. But in the meantime, I attempted to stand again to use my body as a sail to take me to town, enjoying what should have been my fastest speed of the trip. Again, all was going well, but I noticed over the next hour, the conditions began to deteriorate. Swells rose and the wind intensified. Doubt slowly crept into my mind like it has each day of the trip, but fear also took hold. With each swell seeming to rise in height, I decided once again to kneel for safety. If I were to capsize, I thought, if I were to lose my gear, the trip isn't just over, but surviving could be difficult. Now in









three-to-four-foot waves and winds of twenty-plus knots, it happened.

I caught an edge and flipped in a split second. Underwater, with my paddle in hand, I screamed, “No!”

When I surfaced, the bottom of the board lay skyward, with pressure dings, bumps, and bruises – but no breaks or lacerations. The board is a tank. Somehow, I flipped the board over to see what I lost, and miraculously, nothing was gone. The strapping system worked like a champion. I had had enough and turned my board towards shore to beach and reassess. Throwing my gear onto shore over breaking waves was very difficult, but I was able to unload, and sat on the shore with expletives yet again.

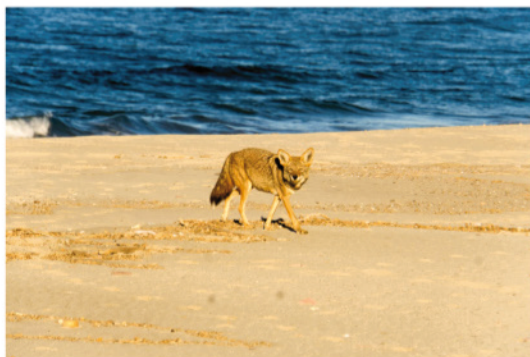
Less than two hours of paddling away from town, food, cold drinks, and comfort, Baja said no. There was a saying I learned up the coast one-hundred miles or so at the last town. “Baja is a four-letter word, like Love, but also like Hell.” Doing research and daydreaming of a trip down the near-thousand-mile peninsula, with over fifteen years of traveling in Baja, “love” was really all I knew of the place. Now on this beach, soaking wet, shivering, I am discovering the hell that Baja can also be.

My trip had various mishaps during the first four hundred miles, but, ultimately, it has been life changing.

This trip scared me. But that’s also why I was and still am attracted to it. Mexico is scary, Baja is scary, the sea is scary. I was pushed so far outside of my comfort zone that discomfort swallowed my comfortable self, digested it, then pointed and laughed at what I was before this trip.

I could have opened with the story about how my portable desalination device stopped working and how I worried about running out of water. I could’ve told you about the drug runners I had to hide from at four am, or the six days of dengue fever that stripped me of energy and body fat; the 6.2-magnitude earthquake that shook me awake and left me scrambling in the dark to find higher ground in case of a tsunami. Or I could’ve opened with how I had to hike seven miles to get food because I had run out after already rationing for ten days, eating 1,000 calories a day while burning 4,000, and another severe El Norte wind event prevented and scared me from paddling to get help.

On the other end of that spectrum, I could have opened with the blissful twenty-four miles I enjoyed without a breath of wind, and paddling water so clear even Jacques Cousteau would have had to rethink a better quote than his aquarium statement. I could mention the coves that forced me to stop and enjoy them, naked and without a soul in sight, and mention the quality of fishing without any competition other than the sea birds. The starry skies, pastel sunsets, and cool sunrises captured my



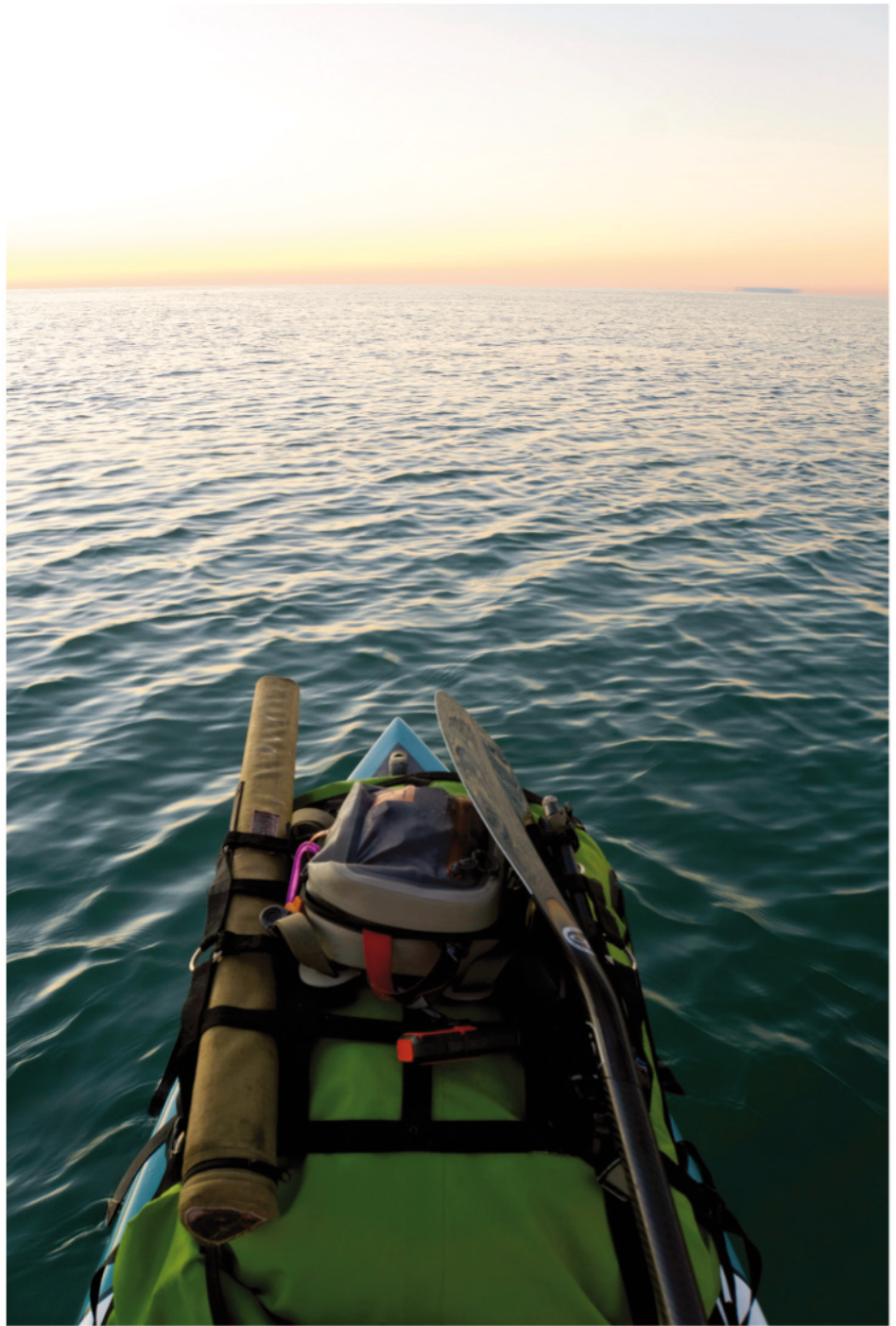
imagination. The dolphins swam up as if to greet me, sea turtles popped their heads up, and curious coyotes surveyed the scene.

It was everything I thought it would be – and everything I didn't want it to be – wrapped up in a burrito no local Mexican vendor could replicate. It came with spicy, flavorful, bland, scary, and questionable stomach sounds and issues that somehow, despite all that, pulls me back for more.

My stomach wasn't the only thing that struggled; my mind played tug of war on a daily basis. A part of me wanted to achieve the maximum number of miles in the given daylight, while the other half wanted to take rest days and just feel the sand melt between my toes.

I am halfway through my trip and winter has decided to show up. Winter in the Sea of Cortez means El Norte every day, while nighttime dominates the hours of the day.

At this point, I decided to hit the pause button and return home. I will come back in the fall to once again surrender to the drumbeat of solo paddling down the Baja peninsula. It's been thirty-six days and 397 miles of paddling, and I have the confidence to finish strong with a board that will be able to conquer any challenge the coast presents. And because of that, I can rest at night, despite my obsession of waiting for fall to arrive, as I salivate for the second attempt. **X4**



SEAN JANSEN ————— AUTHOR BIO

Sean Jansen works as a freelance writer and photographer in between summer seasons as a tour guide in Yellowstone National Park. As a kid he visited this destination and knew early on this national park would play an integral role in his life. He has built his life around never settling down in one spot too long for fear of missing out too much on either end.

Living life full time in his vehicle, currently a 2010 Subaru Forester, he feels his greatest existence is with pen, paper, and camera in hand between casts on the fly or waves on the coast. The way he sees it, a 9-5 job, a house, and a mortgage is a death sentence waiting to happen, therefore life on the road is the only option to living a fulfilling life with little regrets to show for it.

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HEADING NORTH



A FAMILY'S UNFORGETTABLE EXPEDITION TO PRUDHOE BAY

WORDS – PATRICK VAN VALKENBURG

PHOTOS – PATRICK AND AMANDA VAN VALKENBURG

In a world where adventure beckons and the road less traveled is often the most rewarding, our family dared to embark on an extraordinary expedition that would redefine the meaning of a road trip. Join us as we unravel the gripping chronicle of our two-week, 6,300-mile expedition to the mystical Prudhoe Bay, Alaska – a riveting journey filled with astonishing wildlife encounters, unexpected weather twists, and relentless gear trials.



A JOURNEY STITCHED WITH EMOTION AND ADVENTURE: THE BACK-STORY TO OUR EPIC EXPEDITION

Every journey has a story, and ours to Alaska was no different. We really wanted to explore Alaska because it's so beautiful and full of amazing sights. But there was something more. It was also about our emotions and family history. Patrick's grandfather, whom we loved dearly, passed away in August 2022. He had a special connection to Alaska, where he had worked many years ago. So, our trip to Alaska was not just a vacation; it was a way to remember him and honor his memory on the anniversary of his passing. It was a chance for us to feel close to him in a place that was once his home.

Guided by our trusty Jeep Gladiator, we ventured through rugged terrains and picturesque landscapes, a magnificent collage of rivers, mountains, and grasslands unfolding before our eyes. In homage to grandpa's spirit and to cap off our journey in grand fashion, we made a daring decision – a polar plunge into the Arctic Ocean, an exhilarating climax that perfectly embodied the spirit of our extraordinary expedition.

PREPARATION: CRAFTING THE BLUEPRINT OF ADVENTURE

Months of meticulous planning paved the way for our remarkable expedition. International travel called for meticulous attention to detail, prompting us to kickstart the passport application process a full six months prior to our departure. With six border crossings looming on our itinerary, it was absolutely crucial to guarantee our vehicle posed no compliance concerns. Beyond the standard precautions like ensuring nothing more dangerous than a camping knife was onboard, we took additional care to prevent any meat, fruits, dairy, or vegetables from crossing the borders.





In the planning of our grand expedition, we came to appreciate the necessity of improved navigation, especially considering the extended stretches of remote terrain devoid of cell phone reception. While a range of choices presented themselves, we opted to upgrade to the Garmin Tread GPS. Leveraging our prior experience with the Garmin inReach service, used on our backpacking and hiking trips, we seamlessly transitioned this valuable resource to the Tread unit. What truly captured our attention was the ability to activate an emergency response button—an invaluable feature given our intent to explore some of the most densely grizzly-populated regions we had ever ventured into.

To cater to the increased load of gear and supplies needed for our extended expedition, we made a strategic investment in a compact trailer, essential for augmenting our storage capacity. Selecting the right trailer was no small task, given the multitude of options available in the market, each offering a diverse set of features and price ranges. With our well-equipped Gladiator, we aimed to keep things streamlined and efficient. Space Trailers stood out prominently, thanks to their customizable utility cargo trailer. This blank canvas allowed us to pack our gear with Tetris-like precision, all the while accommodating a second rooftop tent where our boys would rest comfortably throughout the journey.

Effective communication is essential for any travel adventure, and we left no room for uncertainty by equipping ourselves with Midland radios. To guarantee uninterrupted contact, we mounted antennas on both our vehicle and that of our travel partner, securing seamless communication even in remote areas where cell service was nonexistent. In addition to these measures, we bolstered our connectivity further by installing a Weboost cell booster, ensuring that we had the best chance of staying connected in even the most remote locations.

Efficiently organizing and accessing our gear was high on our list of priorities, and the Front Runner Outfitters storage system emerged as the ideal solution. In a smart move, we decided to swap out our truck bed drawer system for a bed slide, which proved to be a more streamlined and effective choice. The modular Wolf Pack Pros became our trusty companions, providing both durability and weatherproof storage options that seamlessly integrated with our other Front Runner Outfitter products. Thanks to some specially designed hardware, we were able to attach some of these bins to the Front Runner roof rack, significantly expanding our available storage space within the truck bed.

In our quest to make the most of our two-week journey while attempting to stick to a tight budget, upgrading our food storage

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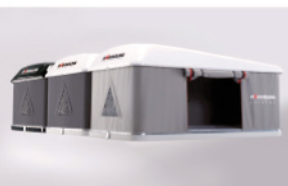
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system was a game-changer. Drawing from years of experience with Dometic products, we knew they were our go-to choice for outdoor gear. The decision to opt for two Dometic GO hard-sided bins to house all our dry food for the entire trip, along with some essential kitchen items, was a no-brainer. But the real star of our culinary setup was the Dometic dual-zone fridge. It allowed us to not only store perishables but also to freeze meat for the long haul, freeing up valuable space during stretches without a nearby grocery store. As we delved deeper into the Dometic product line, we quickly realized how their innovative gear simplified our life on the road. Our additions included two trusty water jugs, a convenient water faucet (a must-have recommendation from us), and – perhaps most notably – a rooftop tent that eliminated a lot of weight from the truck.

Lastly, ensuring the comfort and entertainment of our boys in the back seat demanded a few upgrades and a bit of rearranging. Our search led us to Amazon, where we discovered handy seat-back organizers – and to Front Runner Outfitters for a soft-sided organizer placed strategically between the boys. Let's face it: Spending two weeks in a compact truck with kids requires a little ingenuity to create some semblance of "private space." Although, truth be told, by the end of each day, the back seat often looked like it had sustained a small explosion, the organizers worked like a charm for quick clean-ups. Every morning, we had a simple routine – the boys took charge of refilling all the water bottles and restocking their snack pouches, fostering a sense of responsibility and independence during our journey.

ENTERTAINMENT ON WHEELS: A SYMPHONY OF CREATIVITY

With just over two weeks in the truck, keeping our sons engaged was a puzzle we were determined to solve. The backseat became a haven of activity as magnetic games, books, and an arsenal of drawing materials transformed into portals of imagination. The words of J.K. Rowling filled the air as audiobooks played, guiding us through five Harry Potter tales. Cameras were also a big role in keeping the boys engaged. They decided at the beginning of the trip that they wanted to document their journey with the help of a GoPro and a DJI Pocket.

We also understood the importance of breaks, especially with young explorers in tow. Our preparations included scouting short hiking trails, each a pocket-sized adventure lasting fifteen-to-twenty minutes, where the boys could stretch their legs and release pent-up energy. Picturesque lookouts became more than just a place to pause for lunch – they became platforms for shared awe and wonder. These planned and surprise pauses were the building blocks of our journey, creating moments for us to explore and connect, making our family adventure even better.

Exploring Alaska's awe-inspiring landscapes and adventures with our family was a dream come true. However, we couldn't overlook the safety concerns posed by the wild creatures, especially

the formidable grizzly bears. Unlike our outings in Washington, we needed to be extra cautious in Alaska. While nurturing our boys' curiosity and love for exploration was crucial, their safety was our top priority. We ensured they stayed close and often had our traveling companion's faithful dogs with them. Additionally, we prepared our boys by teaching them about the diverse wildlife we might encounter. This knowledge not only eased their fears but also empowered them to stay alert and respond wisely when encountering the untamed animals of Alaska's wilderness.

BEYOND THE BLUEPRINT: UNEXPECTED SURPRISES

As any explorer knows, not all paths are smooth. Gear failures became part of our journey, a testament to the trials one can expect from thousands of miles on gravel roads. Yet, innovation and local support emerged as the guardians of our progress, reminding us of the resilience inherent in the human spirit.

However, the rhythm of our expedition wasn't solely dictated by equipment repairs. The ebb and flow of our days was also influenced by something unexpected: mealtime. Amid the grandeur of our adventure, dinners often turned into hurried affairs, punctuated by our fatigue. To mitigate this challenge, we turned to Peak Refuel freeze-dried meals, offering quick and satisfying solutions during those late hours.

Crossing borders introduced yet another layer of complexity, as certain foods like fresh fruits, vegetables, and meats had to be left behind. This forced us to buy groceries each time we crossed into a new country, making meal planning a juggling act. The frequent grocery stops led us to dine out more often than anticipated, a convenience that came at a budgetary cost. Our journey, though replete with extraordinary experiences, also underscored the importance of adapting to the unforeseen and savoring the moments, whether shared around a campfire or a restaurant table.

DESTINATION HIGHLIGHTS: A TAPESTRY OF WONDERS

Each stop was a chapter in our narrative, infused with unforgettable moments. The grizzlies of Hyder, A.K., gorging on salmon in the Salmon River, offered a raw glimpse into nature's cycle. Salmon Glacier, a shimmering sentinel of ice, held us spellbound, a testament to nature's artistry. The North Pole in Alaska beckoned with holiday cheer, reminding us of the magic in every corner of the world. Chena Hot Springs in Fairbanks, A.K., added its therapeutic touch to our adventure, an oasis of warmth amid the wilds. Dawson City in the Yukon Territory welcomed us with a rustic charm and the thrill of a river ferry crossing. Liard Hot Springs in British Columbia soothed our souls as warm waters enveloped us amidst serene surroundings. Whitehorse, in the Yukon Territory, treated us to a transportation museum that







intertwined history and innovation, while the Dinosaur Museum in Wembley, Alberta, turned back the clock to an era long past. As we plunged into the Arctic Ocean, surrounded by the rare sight of a distant wall of sea ice, as we celebrated reaching our halfway point at Prudhoe Bay.

Yet, even as we indulged in these enriching experiences, our itinerary couldn't encompass every treasure. Jasper National Park's splendor and the allure of Southeast Alaska remained a promise for another journey. These uncharted territories, though unexplored, have already secured a place on the map of our future dreams.

EPILOGUE: A JOURNEY NEVER TRULY ENDS

The miles we covered were not mere distances; they were strides on the remarkable journey of family bonding, shared wonder, and unbridled curiosity. Our expedition to Prudhoe Bay, A.K. embodied the very essence of exploration and the eternal flame of adventure. It's a story not just etched in our memories but engraved in the hearts of our sons, kindling a lifelong passion for exploration. Whether you're venturing a few miles from home or thousands, it's the connections made and the memories created that will endure through time. Challenges will undoubtedly surface, but for our family, they become stepping stones to resilience and unity. We encourage you, as we encourage ourselves, to prioritize outdoor experiences with your children early on, allowing them to develop a profound appreciation for our planet from a young age. These experiences will not only enrich your lives but also leave a lasting legacy of love for adventure and the natural world. **X4**



AMANDA AND PATRICK VAN VALKENBURG

AUTHOR BIO

Amanda and Patrick, a dynamic duo of professional photographers, have been capturing the essence of the great outdoors for over seven years. Amanda's upbringing amidst the stunning landscapes of Italy, California, Oregon, Washington, and Utah instilled in her a deep appreciation for nature, while Patrick's upbringing in the bustling metropolis of West Seattle sparked his curiosity for exploration. Their journey began with a shared passion for exploration and a love for storytelling through photography. Now, with their two young boys in tow, they traverse the globe in their outfitted Jeep Gladiator. Through their lens, they aim to not only capture breathtaking landscapes but also to inspire others to connect with nature and cherish moments with loved ones. Their commitment to continuous learning and improvement has led to collaborations with notable outdoor brands and publications, where their photography has made a lasting impact. With every click of the shutter, they strive to evoke emotions and create memories that will be cherished for years to come. to show for it.

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Gateway to Adventure

Exploring Idaho's Magruder Corridor Trail

WORDS & PHOTOS – GARY AND GRETCHEN MATOS



Elk City, Idaho is a small community – much smaller than our hometown of Sisters, Oregon. The population, as of 2020, was 170. Good things come in small packages! It was once a boom town when gold was discovered in 1861. When mining played out eighty years later, timber harvesting took over and is still an economic mainstay. Elk City is less known as a gateway for the Southern Nez Perce Trail – now commonly referred to as the Magruder Corridor. The Magruder is a 120-mile primitive route over the Bitterroot Mountains that connects Idaho to Montana. It is wild, raw and scenic for overlanders.

Although a rough trail had existed through the Bitterroots since the 18th century, the current road was originally constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in 1930. Fifty years later, the corridor became an official national treasure when the Central Idaho Wilderness Act was passed. It was named after Lloyd Magruder, a miner and respected businessman of the mid-1880s, who was robbed and murdered by fellow travelers along the route. Lloyd would want us to remember to choose travel companions wisely!

Preparation: In the past, we have always traveled from Oregon to Montana via Lolo Pass or Salmon, Idaho. Either route would take us near Darby, Montana – an area rich with recreation. So, when a good friend decided to hold a rendezvous at his newly acquired Montana ranch, we started looking for a new scenic byway. We had heard of the Magruder Corridor but knew little about it. That was about to change. After a few phone calls, we had a small group of three couples and rigs – game to explore. The plan was simple. We agreed to meet near Lewiston, Idaho and head north to Grangeville. From there, we took a winding Highway 14 along the South Fork of the Clearwater River, until the pavement ended in Elk City. The ranger station gave us the latest road conditions and weather report and provided us with useful information. *The Guide to the Historic Magruder* was an especially helpful pamphlet as it identified – by milepost – lookouts, campgrounds, and other points of interest.

It is important to note that the Magruder Corridor weaves through some of the most remote wilderness in the United States. Although much of the route is easily managed by a high clearance vehicle, there are sections and side trips that require 4WD and low range to navigate its rock-strewn shelf road sections and deep ruts. Trailers are not recommended due to several very tight switchback sections. Carrying tow and extraction gear is encouraged, in addition to radio communications between rigs. A breakdown halfway through the corridor would cost a small fortune in tow services. Needless to say, make sure your rig has been recently maintained and travel with a friend... hopefully a trustworthy one!

Before leaving Grangeville, be sure to fuel up and resupply, as Elk City has limited services. Plan to take several days to complete the trip. (We took just two days and felt rushed.) Focus on the journey, not the destination. There is a lot to see, including fire lookouts, old Ranger Stations, and century old bridges. You will also find numerous trailheads, ranging from short hikes leading to vantage points or to high mountain lakes. Just be sure to bring along some bear spray or other means of protection.

The Rigs: On this trip, there was an EarthCruiser EXP, A Tundra/ Four Wheel Camper Hawk and a Dodge Ram/FWC Hawk Flatbed. All of the vehicles have spent plenty of time off-road. Both the Tundra and Dodge Ram had modified suspensions, oversized tires, air compressors and winches – all standard equipment on the very capable EarthCruiser. Each rig was also equipped with tools, tire repair kits, extraction gear, Ham radios (for short and long-distance communication). Fortunately, the vehicles performed exceptionally well – a testament to their capabilities, maintenance and drivers' skill. Our co-pilots also did a great job of navigating!

Magruder Corridor – Day 1: The official start of the Magruder is several miles southwest of Elk City. We passed green pastures and grazing cattle at the forefront of hills loosely shrouded by low lying clouds. A few homesteads parted the tree line. Bitter cold winters and hard work have a way of sparsely populating an area.

Upon leaving pavement, we were promptly greeted by a welcome sign citing mileage and a travel warning. Darby, Montana was ninety miles away via dirt that can be muddy or heavily rutted by rain. As a group, we took the time to air down. Our bodies and rigs would certainly benefit from the softer ride. After only a few miles, it was necessary to engage 4WD as the wet (and sometimes slick) road began a long ascent. It had rained just a few hours earlier. We were quickly engulfed in a dense and healthy forest with 'peak-a-boo' views at random intervals. Radios between the three rigs were constantly keyed up. Each of the couples were seeing something the others had missed. Surprisingly, the trees soon gave way to an inviting meadow, which was a prelude of what would come. One of the first primitive campsites along the corridor is aptly named Mountain Meadows. The expansive meadow of green, yellow, and orange invited us to





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stay and make camp. But the afternoon was still young and the lure of Magruder pulled us further down the road.

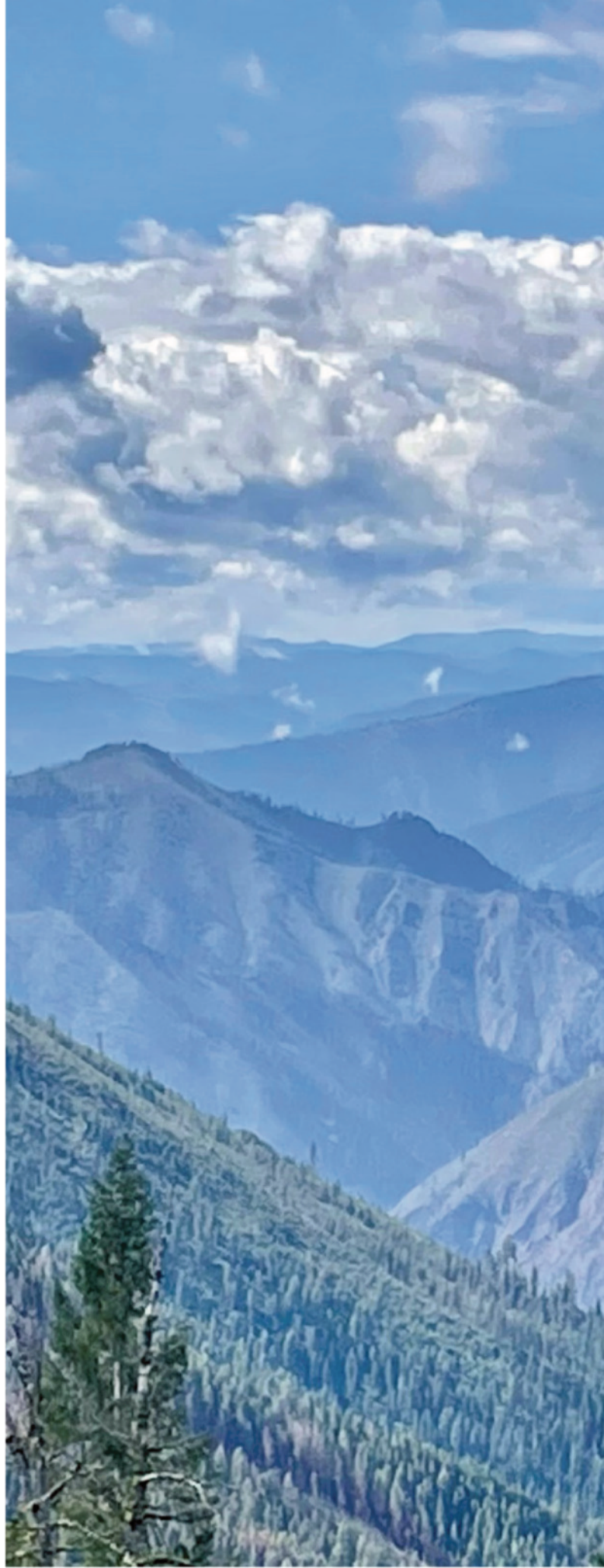
Shortly after passing Granite Springs Campground (located atop an exposed mountain saddle) we took a detour up Elk Mountain Road to the first of several lookout towers. The four-mile-long road was a little rough and required 4WD but the short hop was worth the 360-degree view from Green Mountain. Like contrasting segments of a pie, some sections bore the limbless, white ghosts from the last two decades of fires. Adjacent sections of forest displayed multiple shades of green, while fireweed provided a sprinkle of bright color at our feet. After a few photo opportunities, we turned the vehicles around with happy hour in mind.

The next ten miles offered vistas that alternated from the north and south sides of the road. We were so busy taking in the early evening layers of mountains and clouds that we hardly noticed the steep descent into Poet Creek Campground. Not until we got our rigs positioned for the evening did, I notice the smell of brakes. It was a timely reminder to take the grades slow, gear down, and use 4WD low to help brake the vehicle.

Our stay at Poet Creek Campground was lyrical. The soft, babbling creek seemed to wash away the stress that comes from a long day on the road. Three rigs, four campsites, a pit toilet, plenty of elbow room, a trailhead and no fees. We had the campsite to ourselves. The Forest Service does a very good job maintaining small primitive campsites. Even though we prefer dispersed camping, they are hard to pass up. (Every site we came across was either on a creek, in a meadow, or had an incredible view.)

After a short hike to stretch our legs, the drinks, appetizers and stories started to flow faster than the creek – and continued around a campfire. It was a perfect evening with good friends. Gretchen and I have known Brent and Cheryl for several years. We have traveled around the Southwest with them, and to Baja Mexico. They savor the journey and are one of the few EarthCruiser owners that actually use their vehicle for extensive overland trips. More recently, we met Mike and Karen at a Four Wheel Camper rally in California. Their combined wit and humor makes every trip fun. Best of all, they are capable traveling companions that always have our backs and are excellent at spotting potential obstacles.

Magruder Corridor – Day 2: Our small group left Poet Creek filled with anticipation. The road began to climb steadily and slowly deteriorated (and narrowed) over the next ten miles when we finally approached Dry Saddle Trailhead. At an elevation of 7,900', it is the highest point on the Magruder and a good spot to take a break. The vistas were simply stunning. We could see layers upon layers of mountains, each darker than the preceding range. This is the halfway point in this vast wilderness. Like flipping a light switch, the road turned from bad to worse within a few hundred yards. The narrow and rocky shelf road descended for about eight miles and then climbed back up for the same







If you opt to travel the Corridor, take the time to visit the Magruder Ranger Station. We spent nearly an hour walking the grounds and peering through windows. Constructed in 1936, again by the CCC, it is a classic example of a station from a simpler time. A shop, storage building and barn complement the main structure. There is another cabin, larger than that at Horse Heaven, which can also be reserved and rented.

We took a short lunch break at Deep Creek Campground before passing the remnants of the original CCC camp. There, the road alternated between

distance. It is not a section where you would want to meet any approaching vehicles. We had to stop and let nine adventure bikes pass, but anything larger would have required some tricky maneuvering. Except for a single SUV much further down the trail, these were the only vehicles we saw the entire day! All of us moved slowly along in 4WD low. It took two-and-a-half hours to travel nine miles – a little faster than a fast walk. We found the views at Sabe Mountain breathtaking. Nature was busy at work after a devastating fire fifteen years ago. We found ourselves surrounded by black and gray limbless trees in front of mountains of granite: A perfect black and white image that would be worthy of Ansel Adams.

Our next stop was Horse Heaven Saddle – aptly named for the plentiful gazing area. Just a stone's throw from the road is the Horse Heaven Cabin. Built in 1930 by the CCC, this one-room cabin, complete with wood stove, can be rented through Recreation.gov. At Observation Point we got a 270-degree view of the Bitterroot Mountains. It was humbling to trace the road, a thin-cut line in the mountains, from where we came and then see where we were heading. It was like dragging an endless string up and down mountains and around bends.

The final thirty miles vanished under our thirty-five-inch tires too quickly. The roads slowly began to smooth out as we lost elevation and traded shelf rock for dirt and gravel. We welcomed a brief rain shower as it eliminated all dust and made the lush forest and ferns pop with color. On the backside of the route, we passed a placard depicting the Magruder Massacre Site, descended further into the Selway River drainage, and then crossed over a bridge of the same namesake. One by one, our vehicles wove around corners under a canopy of firs and pines. The fresh smell was intoxicating.

pavement, dirt and gravel. Avoid airing up until you have passed Fales Flat Campground. The last few miles along the Bitterroot River serve as a gradual transition into Darby, Montana.

Would we drive the Magruder again? We already did! After the rendezvous in Helena, Montana, a couple of friends wanted to experience what we did just a week ago. Over the years, we have learned that you always see something new a second time through – especially when traveling in the opposite direction. And, we would be traveling with friends – something the Magruder taught us makes for a successful trip. **X4**



GARY AND GRETCHEN MATOS ——— AUTHOR BIO

After spending decades in the high tech and environmental industries, Gary and Gretchen stepped out of work and into the outdoors. They reside in Sisters, Oregon, and when not splitting or stacking wood, they enjoy backpacking, kayaking and motorcycle riding. Over the years, they have owned several pop-up campers and have made over thirty trips to Baja Mexico. Their favorite western states for overlanding are Montana, Idaho, and Utah. They currently have a Ram 3500 equipped with a Four Wheel Hawk Flatbed camper, which they custom built.



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CARRYING

BACKPACKING FOR
THE FIRST TIME

IT

ALL



WORDS – LILLY HOLLAND | PHOTOS – LILLY AND MICHAEL HOLLAND

I AM NOT GOING TO LIE. I WAS NERVOUS AND HESITANT.

Was this the right route? I questioned each decision as I cautiously placed one foot in front of the other on the steeply angled slickrock. My dad and I were high above the Escalante River in south-central Utah, hiking steep sandstone rock, and trying to find our downward route. The route was spicy! A fall wouldn't have meant death, but it would have resulted in injuries, scrapes, and perhaps broken bones. Luckily, I had experienced numerous adventures in the backcountry. But, this time, something was different. I was carrying a thirty-pound pack! I was attempting my first backpacking trip with my dad and our dog, Ruby.

I examined each foothold before I placed my Scarpa hiking shoe on it. Ruby, of course, walked along the ledge like it was no big deal. Unfortunately, my eyes scanned the ledge further ahead and noticed that it narrowed and – well – completely disappeared.

"We need to make it down about ten feet and then we are golden," my dad reassured me.

I replied, "I don't feel super comfortable."

My dad responded, "I will spot you from below."

"Okay. Here I go!" I swung my right foot over to a small slick-rock hole in hopes of gaining some kind of purchase. My dad looked up from below ready to take my weight in case I slipped. Thankfully, my foothold was solid. Steadily, we traversed to safer ground. Ruby jumped down and ran to the right, looking back as if to say: "No big deal, guys. Let's go!"

In previous years, my dad and I had hiked numerous canyons, mountains, and trails across the West. But, now, we carried thirty pounds on our backs. I was eager to experience this new type of adventure, but I felt a little nervous. Could I do it? What if I got tired? Will this be fun?

The Grand Staircase-Escalante is a vast national monument located in southern Utah. The monument comprises roughly 1.9 million acres and was created with the signature of President Clinton in 1996. It's a wild, untamed land. Canyons, rivers, mesas, and buttes crisscross this wild landscape. Miles and miles of dirt roads provide access to this country, but just a handful of roads are paved. Along the northern border of the monument is the town of Escalante, named after Father Escalante, a Franciscan priest, who explored the Colorado Plateau in the late 1700s. Today, the town of Escalante serves as the only major town with direct access to this wondrous landscape.

"I am stuffed. You?" My dad asked as we savored a fresh pizza at Escalante Outfitters Restaurant.



PACKING AND REPACKING IS DEFINITELY PART OF BACKPACKING



PARADISE? A DESERT OASIS IN THE WILDS OF UTAH



THE AUTHOR SETTING CAMP IN THE BACKCOUNTRY OF UTAH

PLANNING THE TRIP

Gear we used: The gear designed and engineered for today's backpackers is outstanding. Manufacturers are concerned about weight, packable size, and useability of the gear. Below are just a few of the items we used and can endorse.

Sea to Summit Cookware and Utensils – Sea to Summit designs and produced high quality gear. We used a variety of Sea to Summit cookware, including the X-Pot, X-Mug, and X-Bowl. The “X” series are made from BPA-free, food grade, and heat-resistant silicone. After use, each X series cookware and dinnerware collapses to about an inch in height. For dinner, we used the Alpha Pot which is made of aluminum alloy – a solid, lightweight choice. The Sea to Summit Alpha Light Spork was perfect for enjoying dehydrated meals and at .4 ounces, its weight is barely noticeable. Our Ether Lite XT mattresses provided a comfortable night's sleep. Weighing in at roughly 17 ounces and packing down to the size of a water bottle, this is the ultimate in terms of weight-to-comfort ratio. The innovative, attached pump, integrated into the pad's storage bag, worked flawlessly.

www.seatosummit.com

Nemo's Hornet Elite OSMO Ultralight Tent – It's so light! This two-person tent weighs under two pounds. A two-person backpacking tent under two pounds? Yep. The ease with which it is erected makes this tent a joy to use in the backcountry. The upper part of the tent is a screen mesh, while the bottom section is a solid, poly-nylon ripstop fabric. The tent comes with a two-person vestibule made of the same solid, poly-nylon ripstop fabric. We found the tent sturdy and comfortable for sleeping. The tent's stakes really help solidify the floor and create more space inside. While it is freestanding, the use of the stakes definitely help.

With the tent set, my dad and I climbed into our **Nemo Riff Sleeping Bags**. These down bags are cozy and comfortable and come with two front zippers to help regulate the bags' internal temperatures, which is a nice feature. Both of these bags come in women's and men's versions, as well as regular and long variations. The bags are made of 800-fill down and compress well in their included stuff sacks. At just over two pounds, these bags are light, too. We found the bags roomy – not your typical mummy bag feel while sleeping inside. The Riff bag comes with a nice, warm, and comfortable built-in down hoody.

www.nemoequipment.com

The **Lifesaver Wayfarer Filter** is an essential water backpacking and hiking tool. And, you know what? Water is heavy. Thus, the LifeSaver Wayfarer Filter is a vital piece of equipment. It allows the adventurer to carry less weight and filter as needed. This hand-held water filter is perfect for backpacking. It weighs a little over 11 ounces and can filter 1 liter of water per minute. My dad and I found it simple to set up with two hoses (input and output) and the actual pump was easy to operate. The filter itself is good for 1,320 gallons of water before it needs to be changed. Stay hydrated. Stay alive.

www.iconlifesaver.com



REFUELING IS KEY TO BACKPACKING



DON'T FORGET TO STOP AND "SMELL THE ROSES."

I responded, "One more bite." After the pizza, we topped off the truck's fuel tank and drove in search of a campsite. We found a perfect spot along the canyon rim, high above the Escalante River, and set up camp just before a thunderstorm moved through the area. The pitter-patter of the rain hitting our Four Wheel Camper top lulled us to sleep.

The following morning, we awoke to the desert in a refreshed state. Rain-filled sandstone depressions and the smell of fresh sage permeated the air. It was a lovely but unusual sixty degrees outside. We enjoyed the unusual summer cool front and packed our backpacks for the hike downward into canyon country.

I slowly followed my dad across the canyon rim. He guided me around a juniper tree so my fly rod wouldn't snap. Yes, we appeared a little out of place; we both had fly rods strapped to our packs. Even though we were in a desert, my dad promised me that we would catch fish. We stopped at the canyon rim so I could tighten my shoelaces. We savored a final look at the stunning landscape before disappearing into the depths of canyon country.

I secured both feet into the steep slickrock as my dad scouted out the route. He looked for cairns (piles of rock) that marked the route. I followed and was amazed by the "sea" of slickrock I saw. After a few miles, I spotted the Escalante River flowing at the bottom of this slickrock wonderland. My dad found the route, and we carefully placed each step down the steep slickrock. A tumble here would be painful. Ruby was in her element and enjoyed the challenges. Roughly two hours from our truck, our feet touched dirt. We said goodbye to the slickrock and prepared ourselves for the lush landscape of the Escalante River Canyon.

Pushing my way through willows along the river, rain drops trickled down my shirt and soaked in. Lighting strikes and thunder roared overhead, and the sky turned cloudy and gray, which resulted in a drop in temperature. A rain storm was upon us. Ruby jumped through the river water, panting and watching fish swim past her. My dad hiked ahead, as I stayed back to enjoy the desert landscape. High rock walls towered above the river. Was this really Utah? The area reminded me of the Florida Everglades. Willows, cottonwoods, bullrushes, and wild flowers blossomed in abundance – and impeded our progress. A little over a mile, we stopped under an enormous alcove with a waterfall cascading in front. This was the day's campsite.

After the long and hot day, we began to unpack the thirty pounds on our backs. Not being able to contain my excitement, I grabbed my fishing rod and called Ruby. We left camp to explore a fishing hole at the bottom of the falls. Cascading clear and cool water flowed over the slickrock river bottom. Would it hold fish? I cast my fly, catching a glimpse of a fish coming to take it; Ruby decided she would fish her own way – "stick" fishing. After a couple hours, my dad joined us; we'd only felt a few nibbles. However, on the river's bank, Ruby had managed to gather almost ten sticks. Was Ruby exhausted? I definitely was.





THE AUTHOR TAKING A REFRESHING PLUNGE IN
THE DESERT OASIS OF THE COLORADO PLATEAU



LILLY AND RUBY – STOKED!

My dad boiled water needed to make dinner and set up the tent while Ruby and I ran around camp and played fetch. Will Ruby ever tire? My throat felt dry, which indicated that I needed water. I searched through my bag to grab the Lifesaver Water Filter. I walked back to the river to drop the pickup tube into the relatively clean, flowing water. I gulped a liter of fresh, filtered river water and felt immediately rejuvenated.

Ouch! Boiling water bubbled out of the Jet Boil and tiny drops landed on my arm. Quickly, I turned the flame off, poured the water into the dehydrated meals, and sealed them shut. We had to wait ten minutes for our chicken and dumplings and chicken teriyaki to hydrate. By my side, Ruby pawed at my leg, letting me know she was hungry as well. I set the dehydrated meals down on a large boulder to “cook” and walked over to my backpack, pulling out Ruby’s food bag and emptied it into a bowl. Once set on the ground, she wasted no time devouring her meal.

Ten minutes later, I checked on our dinner. Backpacking is definitely a high-calorie activity, and the hot meals resupplied depleted calories and nutrients. As we enjoyed the hot and creamy meals, we enjoyed the view beneath the massive, 400’ alcove. The stars started to pop in the night sky, and I enjoyed the peace and stillness of the desert canyon. My dad and I played a word game while observing the stars high in the distant sky. I had no idea who won; I drifted into sleep.

The following morning, we ate breakfast and then decided to hike upstream. As my dad was getting his pack ready, I decided to head to the river to see if I could catch any fish. I made a few casts into the deep water. All of a sudden, a fish surfaced and gobbled the fly. I set the hook and the fight was on. My dad made his way down and snapped a few pictures of me holding a stunningly beautiful trout. Gorgeous!

My dad and I spent the next few days wandering and fishing the desert river corridor. Neither one of us caught anything monstrous or noteworthy, but the idea of catching fish in desert waters was simply awesome. Backpacking is not easy, but it allowed me to see some wild and remote country that is beautiful and mesmerizing. I have gone overlanding using a vehicle countless times with my family, but I am glad I tried overlanding with my own two feet. I was proud of myself for trying something new. Was it easy? Of course not. But aren’t most things that are good or noteworthy difficult? I learned that accessing remote and wild places with my own two feet is fun and definitely worthwhile!

**GIVE IT A TRY.
I’M GLAD I DID! ✕**



LILLY HOLLAND ————— AUTHOR BIO

Lilly is a fifteen-year-old growing up in the mountain town of Park City, Utah. She grew up adventuring with her family in the wilds of the southwest, and specifically, the canyons of Utah. Her camping and adventuring started at roughly nine months old and hasn’t stopped. The adventures Lilly enjoys the most are canyoneering in the slots of the Colorado Plateau or fly fishing remote rivers in Wyoming. At home, she likes to snowboard in the Wasatch Mountains and play softball on her local high school team.

Lilly aspires to adventure and hopes to showcase some of her adventures along the way. She values her family and friends the most and is crazy about making memories that last a lifetime.



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THE GREAT
ESCAPE

ISSUE #51

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Camping and mountain biking near Seven Springs Recreation Area - by Bret Edge





THE GREAT ESCAPE

Exploring by foot in Anza
Borrego Desert State Park
- by Nicholas Bratton

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Geysers and a Bison at
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— Royal Enfield's New Himalayan Adventure Motorcycle —

IN THE SADDLE

WORDS – FRANK LEDWELL | PHOTOS – FRANK LEDWELL AND COURTESY OF ROYAL ENFIELD



As I meandered and navigated amongst the bustle of tuk-tuks, tractors, cars, pedestrians and yes, cows, my hyper awareness of the obstacles around me were subdued by the pleasant whirl of the Sherpa 450 motor powering my way across northern India.

To say the Sherpa 450 is the crown jewel of Royal Enfield's latest generation Himalayan adventure motorcycle is only one of a host of sentiments I had during my time with the bike. Royal Enfield has brought to the world stage one of the most exciting conduits of adventure I've experienced since I first began my two-wheeled endeavors over eight years ago.

Way back at the turn of the 20th century, Royal Enfield began producing motorcycles with little requirement to evolve given the dynamics of the Indian market the company has predominantly served. The need for simplicity, where two-wheels are the norm rather than the exception, had been a priority for over a century. However, as the company expanded its lineup to adapt to a broader changing world, Royal Enfield went from being a bit of an anomaly in the western world to a company whose allure and passion, as evidenced by everyone I met while on my visit to India, has established itself as one whose vision and focus undoubtedly is guiding it to become a leading producer of motorcycles globally. The Himalayan's debut in 2016 is a testament to this vision.

So, what makes the latest iteration of the Himalayan such a compelling ride? Sid Lal, CEO of Royal Enfield and an avid motorcyclist whose presence was prominent during my time with his team in India, describes the bike perfectly: It's the Bruce Lee of motorcycles. At its core, the Himalayan is strong, agile, quick, and intelligent if not simple in its footprint. All of which are qualities that parallel successful martial artists and translate perfectly to the world of adventure motorcycling where a misperception that brute force and overwhelming power are understood to translate into an effective experience once the kickstand is up. It was these traits Sid described that were abundantly evident while I trekked amongst the highest mountain range in the world on a bike that shares little with its previous generation other than its namesake.

As noted before, the Sherpa 450 is the gem of the new Himalayan. Peak horsepower is up nearly 65% to nearly 40hps compared to its 411cc predecessor. Torque is also up nearly 25% at 29.5 lb-ft with broad torque across its bandwidth, providing a feel more akin to several 650cc bikes I've ridden, most notably the latest generation KLR 650. The engine is also liquid-cooled versus the previous generation's air-cooled variant, helping to maximize performance in a package that even at elevation was strong and responsive. Mated to its six-speed tranny also helps with how power is delivered and accessible across the powertrain's bandwidth. During my time on the bike, I never utilized the bike's sixth gear as I had all the power I needed at speeds up to 80mph with rpms hovering between 5500-6000.









Ergonomically, the bike fits a variety of riders well with two ride heights available from two adjustable seat options, a standard version and an optional low variant. At 5'9" and 160lbs, the standard seat without adjustment suited me perfectly and was comfortable while in the saddle all day, on and off-pavement.

Complimenting the bike's feel is the upgraded suspension. First off, ground clearance and wheelbase have increased to 9" above the ground and nearly 1.5" additional in length from the previous gen. Ride quality is enhanced up front with a 43mm inverted Showa fork delivering 7.9" of wheel travel while a Showa adjustable monoshock in the rear provides the same 7.9" of wheel travel. The previous generation Himalayan offered 7.1" of wheel travel and didn't feature an adjustable shock which is critical in dampening and payload. Speaking of payload, the bike can handle 436lbs so you can metaphorically carry your house and kitchen sink if need be. Stopping power is delivered via disc brakes with standard dual-channel ABS that can be turned off at the rear if tackling heavy terrain off-pavement.

Regarding electronics, I was super impressed by the singular 4" Tripper TFT display. A variety of ride modes provide variants in power delivery based on how you're riding the bike which I found easy to engage and a leap forward from the analog capability of the first generation Himalayan. The Tripper display provides simplicity with everything you want and nothing you don't. The screen's clarity and variety of display options, including an "analog" version as well as multiple "modern" options allow you to toggle amongst a suite of offerings based on what you want shown while the kickstand is up. Smartphone connectivity, along with map navigation via a proprietary Google navigation system, works wonderfully though it requires utilizing your phone's Bluetooth and I found the power draw on my phone to be quite rapid. Fortunately, there's an integrated USB-C charging port on the underside of the handlebar that's convenient and accessible when you need it on the fly.

As for my riding impressions, the new Himalayan is a bike to take notice. Compared to its first generation, which I own and enjoy because of its simplicity and analog nature and design, the new Himalayan is qualitatively better than before. Whether I was navigating the often chaotic streets of northern India or traversing water crossings and boulders in the midst of the Himalayan Mountains, I was thrilled by the bike's nimble character through the curves, along switchbacks, on the straights, through the Atal Road Tunnel, India's longest high altitude tunnel, or along the Chenab River deep in the Himalayan Mountains. The Himalayan delivers a pleasurable ride with power when needed, adequate wheel travel off-pavement, and overall responsiveness throughout all the sights and experiences I had at elevation. While there was power loss at altitude, the bike's overall bandwidth excelled and I can only imagine the bike's full power capability at sea level. Its design looks great and exhibits the qualities of strength, agility, quickness, and intelligence noted by Royal Enfield's CEO and exhibited in its overall demeanor.





While the bike isn't outfitted with the highest level components found on other bikes in this space, it's robust and truly built for all roads or no roads at all. My only complaint? The rubber on the footpegs makes for slippery occurrences when wet. I'd advise removing the rubber inserts altogether, easily achieved by unbolting the two bolts on the footpegs.

Royal Enfield's mantra for adventure is delivered without question in the new Himalayan. While I was fortunate to ride the bike where it was born, amongst the tallest mountain range in the world, it's a bike any adventurer or motorcycle enthusiast will enjoy. And while it's not the brute like many of the big bikes adventure motorcyclists have come to prefer in the U.S., I believe its likeness to Bruce Lee can provide any adventurer the thrill its designers envisioned. It certainly did for me, and I can't wait to own one. **XA**

Editor Note: At the time of this article, Royal Enfield hasn't yet released U.S. pricing on the Himalayan; however, pricing has been released for the UK and Euro markets and I've done a conversion to guestimate what to expect once the Himalayan arrives stateside.

The Himalayan is featured in three models: The base model in Kaza Brown will fetch 5,900 euro which calculates to \$1,000 USD more than the current model Himalayan. The Pass models, featured in Slate Himalayan Salt or Slate Himalayan Poppy Blue color, will be offered at 6,000 euro or approximately \$6,560. The Summit model without tubeless wheels in Hanle Black will be offered at 6,200 euro or just under \$6,800. For those seeking tubeless wheels, the Summit models in Kamet White, the bike I rode while on my Himalayan journey in India and which I absolutely fell in love with, or the Hanle Black variant, will go for 6,450 - 6,500 euro or roughly \$7,050-\$7,100 in American coin.



FRANK LEDWELL — AUTHOR BIO

Frank Ledwell is an avid explorer, adventurer, and advocate of responsible outdoor recreation and off-highway travel. Over the last 25 years, he has had the fortune of traveling throughout the world, including destinations across North and Central America, as well as through Eastern and Western Europe. When he's not cycling across Texas on his road bike or tackling the local single track or climbing a 14er in Colorado, he's out touring the backcountry in remote destinations throughout the United States and abroad, often times with his family.

Frank is an accomplished writer whose experience as a publisher began in 2005 with North America's first fully digital Jeep adventure lifestyle magazine. As a catalyst in the overland space at that time, his publishing career has been instrumental in helping to grow the overland and vehicle-based adventure segments, and his articles on off-highway travel, adventure destinations, and product/vehicle reviews have been featured globally in a myriad of online and print publications. Frank is a member of the Texas Auto Writers Association, the Texas Motor Press Association, and the Texas Outdoor Writers Association, and has been the recipient of multiple Excellence in Craft awards for writing and photography, awarded annually by the Texas Auto Writers Association.

Frank resides in Texas with his family along with his English Bulldog, Maggie and Catahoula Leopard Hound, Hank.

Please Practice LEAVE NO TRACE



Know Before You Go

- Be prepared! Remember food and water, and clothes to protect you from cold, heat and rain.
- Use maps to plan where you're going. Check them along the way so you'll stay on course and won't get lost.
- Remember to bring a leash for your pet and plastic bags to pick up your pet's waste.
- Learn about the areas you plan to visit. Read books, check online and talk to people before you go. The more you know, the more fun you'll have.

Stick To Trails and Camp Overnight Right

- Walk and ride on designated trails to protect trailside plants.
- Avoid stepping on flowers or small trees. Once damaged, they may not grow back.
- Respect private property by staying on designated trails.
- Camp only on existing or designated campsites to avoid damaging vegetation.
- Good campsites are found, not made. Don't dig trenches or build structures in your campsite.



Trash Your Trash and Pick Up Poop

- Pack it in, Pack it out. Put litter—even crumbs, peels and cores—in garbage bags and carry it home.
- Use bathrooms or outhouses when available. If not available, bury human waste in a small hole 6-8 inches deep and 200 feet or 70 big steps from water.
- Use a plastic bag to pack out your pet's poop to a garbage can.
- Keep water clean. Do not put soap, food, or human or pet waste in lakes or streams.

Leave It As You Find It

- Leave plants, rocks and historical items as you find them so others can enjoy them.
- Treat living plants with respect. Carving, hacking or peeling plants may kill them.



Be Careful With Fire

- Use a camp stove for cooking. Stoves are easier to cook on and create less impact than a fire.
- If you want to have a campfire, be sure it's permitted and safe to build a fire in the area you're visiting. Use only existing fire rings to protect the ground from heat. Keep your fire small.
- Remember, a campfire isn't a garbage can. Pack out all trash and food.
- Before gathering any firewood, check local regulations.
- Burn all wood to ash and be sure the fire is completely out and cold before you leave.

Keep Wildlife Wild

- Observe wildlife from a distance and never approach, feed or follow them.
- Human food is unhealthy for all wildlife and feeding them starts bad habits.
- Protect wildlife and your food by securely storing your meals and trash.



Share Our Trails and Manage Your Pet

- Be considerate when passing others on the trail.
- Keep your pet under control to protect it, other visitors and wildlife.
- Listen to nature. Avoid making loud noises or yelling. You will see more wildlife if you are quiet.
- Be sure the fun you have outdoors does not bother anyone else. Remember, other visitors are there to enjoy the outdoors too.



leave no trace™

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WWW.LNT.ORG

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Special thanks to  SUBARU for the printing of this poster.







WORDS — KEVIN SCHRANDT | PHOTOS — KEVIN SCHRANDT AND WILD MESA MEDIA

Going Sea to Summit

This Iconic Brand Has the Australian Outback and Mt. Everest as its Inspirational Bookends



Working daily in the outdoor adventure lifestyle space can create a condition I call *promo blind*. You become *promo blind* when you research brands online, review their products, and wade through the endless copy of promotional jargon that we in the industry call “marketing speak.” Examples of marketing speak could be phrases like “this product is a *game changer*... A *must-have*... *Revolutionary*...” And my personal favorite: “uses sustainable manufacturing practices, materials, and methods to keep Mother Nature intact, whatever that means. What do you believe if every brand is pitching its products in the same way? For instance, have you ever read the labels on wine bottles? If so, you get it. After a while, one becomes blind to all of the mumbo jumbo. There’s got to be a better way, and there is.

Acquire a sample of the product and test it yourself. Seeing is believing. On the contrary, if you cannot acquire a bunch of samples, then be a good networker to get yourself invited on a brand / product expedition for a manufacturer, and take great notes.

I was fortunate enough to receive the latter, joining a group of other media professionals in the overland space to an overnight outing on the backside of Peak 10 of the Breckenridge ski area, to Crystal Lake, CO. The invitation I received was from *Sea to Summit*, and although I knew the brand name, I knew little, if anything about its products, their quality, or their performance in different environments. To me, it was the perfect situation to drop the promo blinders and have the lens wide open.



The invitation from Sea to Summit’s PR firm was pretty simple: Show up with your mountain clothes, hiking shoes and toiletries. We’ll provide the rest, plus transportation to/from the mountain campsite. No brainer, right? Upon reaching base camp, they delivered as promised. We were all given a heap of gear that would make any child on Christmas day giddy – including dry storage bags, tents, full sleeping systems, dinnerware, and all the food and drink we could consume. We were also provided hand sanitizer and sanitizing wipes to keep clean while enjoying the outing. It was the full Monty and I was impressed already.

Here’s what I discovered, sans the marketing speak to disable your promo blindness, and if interested, more information can be found at [HTTPS://SEATOSUMMIT.COM/](https://seatosummit.com/).



Dry Bags, Sacks & Backpacks

Each camper was provided a dry bag full of gear for the night.

This was not your father's duffle bag (oversized with cheap zip-pers and two nylon straps), but a 50-liter dry backpack with fully integrated shoulder straps and waist belt for easing transport to camp. In addition to several lightweight bags in various sizes, we were given the brand's premium Big River bags, in 50- to 65-liter sizes. I now have the ability to store and transport wet shoes, clothing, dishes, fish, and probably a folding kayak. The bags even come with a replaceable buckle should one get snagged and break. Equally cool was the waterproof outer layers, whether with an air permeable base, or its eVac fabric: A 70-denier recycled nylon. The larger dry bags feature a white reflective lining, making it easier to find items within at night, especially if assisted by a flash-light or the moon. Closing the bags can be via drawstrings or buckles, whether folded atop the bag or to its sides. Honestly, Sea to Summit has a storage bag for every purpose, occasion, and destination.

TELOS TR2 Tent

When I found the aforementioned tent in the dry sack, I have to be honest, I was underwhelmed. I had carried ultra-light tents before and this was, well... *ultra-light-erer*. We were based at 11,700', and this was my protection for the night? It just seemed like such a small system, albeit well-packaged together, especially once all of its parts were strewn across the ground, but okay. Let's give her a pitch...





I liked two features right off the bat. The instructions were printed on the outside of the stuff sack, and were in clear diagrammed images to help you visually, if you didn't care to read. Parts of the system were also color-coded, so you put the same colored tent poles into its corresponding corner to ensure getting its assembly right. Yet, what if you're color-blind? Perhaps numbers would be a better match, but since I can distinguish colors, I managed.

The Tension Ridge's integrated frame allowed ease of assembly; one just unfolds the poles and the integrated elastic cords make it almost impossible to misalign. Once deployed, the frame created a high-arching opening over the main portion of the tent for increased head room to enable sitting up. I would later learn that the tent was designed by the legendary Jake Lah, a journeyman in the outdoor space in the design, modeling, and architecture of the industry's top tent systems. I was warming up to the tent's materials used – ultra light but of strong denier;

good use of fabric overlays and vents to maximize airflow; robust, two-way zippers throughout; and the stitching was excellent quality. I also discovered an ingenious feature – part of the packaging for the poles converts into a light pocket that can affix to the underside of the tent's roof, providing interior light from a flashlight or cell phone. Multiple configurations enable the ability to pitch the rainfly using a couple of extra poles as a spacious semi-enclosed shelter. This shelter is perfect for after-hours activities with enough space for four.





Sleep Systems:

Mat, Bag, Liner / Cover & Pillow

When Sea to Summit discusses their sleeping bags and associated products, they assume that they are all-inclusive – calling them ‘sleep systems.’ The reason is simple and straightforward. All parts constitute the entire experience. A comfy bag on a porous and unsupportive mat makes for a long night’s restless sleep. A wad of clothes as a night’s pillow is equally unrestful. So...

The Etherlight XT sleeping mat was the most comfortable I’ve experienced. The mat is made with Delta Coring to create 4” of

hybrid air/foam cushion for optimal comfort, and expertly prevents heat transfer between your warm body and the cold ground. To take advantage of this larger mat, the Ascent Acll sleeping bag features a wider center section and more room at the feet. Perhaps most impressive was the dual two-way zippers for venting on both sides, and additional zippers to open the foot section independently from its sides. I’m a foot-outside-the-covers-to-control-body-temperature kind of sleeper, so this bag was awesome. Its shell material is water repellent and it is filled with ultra-soft down, for ambient temperatures down to 15° F / -10° C. The bag is lightweight,

warm, and compresses down to less than seven liters. For added warmth, the bag contains snaps on its exterior to affix a Sea to Summit quilt, and we were given a Reactor Extreme bag liner made of a THERMOLITE® material for additional insulation. The night’s temperature didn’t warrant its use, but I found it to fit perfectly within the longer, wider bag.

Lastly, we were given a self-inflating Aeros pillow that was sculpted to fit within the mummy hood portion of the bag. It also had an ingenious ‘Pillowlock’ feature: A material on the underside to keep the pillow affixed to the bag and to prevent sliding from its desired head position. All components of the sleeping system combined enabled me to enjoy a restful night’s sleep.





Sea to Summit's founder, Roland Tyson, had a penchant for designing and creating cutting-edge (market-speak, sorry!) outdoor equipment. His proving grounds for products was his then-home of the Australian outback. It wasn't until he was asked to make products for a friend's mountain climbing expedition to Mt. Everest that the company name was fully realized. Today, some thirty years hence, Sea to Summit spans the globe supporting adventures and outdoor enthusiasts from sea-level to summits, and every environment in between. **X4**

Camp Dinnerware

Collapsible plates, bowls, and cups – in materials that are flexible and durable – are key, since weight-savings and packability while camping are paramount. Sea to Summit provided a set of its X-series dinnerware, including an X-cup, X-plate, and X-bowl. All pieces are constructed of a flexible, heat-resistant, food-grade silicone, and fold flat for easy storage and carrying. All three pieces combined weigh less than ten ounces.

To complete the dinnerware, we consumed food with a set of Titanium, anodized finished silverware set – a spoon, fork, and knife. All are lightweight, compact, and corrosion resistant. To help campers avoid losing the utensils, Sea to Summit anchored them together with a mini-carabiner.



Passion-Infused, Humble Beginnings

In addition to trying out each piece of gear denoted above, we enjoyed artichoke dip and flatbreads cooked in a Solo Stove pizza oven, coupled with imbibing around the campfire. The perfect nightcap for a day's ride, hike, and camp set up. It's also where we learned about the brand's humble beginnings, and how its name was founded.

KEVIN SCHRANDT

AUTHOR BIO



Kevin hails from Colorado and makes the Pacific Northwest his second home.

As a serial entrepreneur and marketing executive, Kevin has excelled in leveraging his expertise in brand and product marketing, business development, and growth strategies to create innovative solutions that drive aggressive, consistent growth in both revenue and market share for the companies he represents.

Over the years, this expertise has canvassed numerous organizations in the Automotive, Healthcare, and Internet Marketing industries. He currently operates a digital marketing agency and a SaaS application startup for the real estate market in Portland, OR.

The majority of Kevin's Automotive career was with Bestop, Inc., a vinyl soft top and accessories manufacturer in CO. He held numerous positions and assignments in both its OEM and Aftermarket divisions, both stateside and abroad. This experience was instrumental in providing a firm foundation in how to market an aspirational product for an outdoor, adventure lifestyle brand.

When not working, Kevin is an avid golfer, skier, musician, and dotes a miniature Husky as man's best friend



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A photograph of a desert landscape featuring a large, circular graphic overlay. The background shows a rugged, rocky hillside with various shades of brown and tan, and a small, dark, irregularly shaped pool of water in the foreground. The circular graphic has a white background with a subtle, wavy pattern resembling sand dunes. The title "Sandstone Serenity" is written in a large, elegant, brown serif font across the center of the circle. Below the title, the text "WORDS – NICHOLAS BRATTON" and "PHOTOS – VALENTINA VALLINOTTO" is written in a smaller, brown sans-serif font. The overall scene is bright and sunny, with a clear blue sky at the top.

Sandstone Serenity

WORDS – NICHOLAS BRATTON
PHOTOS – VALENTINA VALLINOTTO



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Thinking skinny thoughts, I gripped the sun-faded rope and eased into the vertical slot, the bulging sandstone walls of the canyon scraping against my ribs. With my friends' cameras in my backpack and a twenty-foot drop below me, I could ill-afford a slip. Fully committed to squeezing down the abrasive constriction, I realized that this wasn't the journey I had expected. It was so much better.

Painted Canyon is one of many surprises hidden in the eroded folds of southern California's desert. Our international group of travelers ventured on foot up Ladder Canyon and Ropes Canyon. John Bradley was a mountaineer from Denver who had driven down with his wife, Tinka, in their Land Rover LR3. Hitching a ride with them was geophysicist Jaana Gustafsson, who had flown over from Sweden. Frank Marley was a search and rescue specialist from Alaska. I call Seattle home and we all work together in Greenland where John met Tinka. Infusing new energy to our team was Valentina Vallinotto, a safari guide from Italy. She had traveled extensively in these deserts; her insight was invaluable for planning and navigating.

At the start of the pandemic, I had dipped my toe into the sand of this landscape on a five-month road trip with my wife, passing through for a few days in late spring. Now I was back to explore it in greater depth. Our concept was to combine a traverse of Joshua Tree National Park – both its empty corners and crowded highlights – with a loop through Anza-Borrego State Park over ten days in early November. I collected Frank and Valentina at LAX in my venerable Land Rover Discovery, now ponderous with gear. Our adventure commenced in slow motion with the congested L.A. freeway delaying our escape from pavement. Midnight approached as we reached a wind-raked campsite on B.L.M. land north of the park.

A pink sunrise glowed above the ridges and we hustled to break camp – partly to get an early start, partly to warm up in our shady camp. An abandoned mining district borders the north side of the park and we ascended its loose tracks surrounded by dark rock whose rusty tint belied a rich iron content. Cresting the Pinto Mountains, we stood between two major desert systems. The Colorado desert spread to the south, the wrinkles of its sandy arroyos leading to the distant shimmer of the Salton Sea. To the west and north, the Mojave Desert lurked in the rain shadow of the Sierra Nevada mountains, marked by rocky terrain and dispersed shrubs, the most recognizable of which is the Joshua tree. Up here along the broken, craggy tracks, we had the park to ourselves, oblivious to the thousands of visitors filling the parking lots along the paved roads.

The next morning, I peeked out of my tent to discover we had company. During the night John, Tinka, and Jaana had rolled into our camp at Chiriaco Summit. Unable to find the key to the rooftop cargo box carrying their tent, they had slept inside the LR3. I started the stove to greet them with coffee beneath the salmon-hued sky.







Reacquainted and reoriented, we set off into the park. The rocky hills gleamed in the piercing autumn morning sun. Greenland is home to vast, empty spaces, but is nothing like this arid sweep of golden outcroppings bristling with ocotillo and cacti. Tinka was enchanted by the spiny landscape and we took our time strolling through the cholla gardens, thronged with visitors. Our preference was for solitude in the remote corners of Joshua Tree, but certain attractions are simply too magnificent to miss, regardless of crowds.

We piled around a picnic table for lunch in the shadows of weathered orange granite spires. Keen to leave pavement and people behind, we headed south on the geology trail and eased into the boulders of Berdoo Canyon. Alone again, we crept over the rock shelves as the shadows spread across the steep walls above us. Exiting the park, we zigzagged through the checkerboard of irrigated fields and orchards to find the sandy tracks leading up Painted Canyon in the Mecca Hills Wilderness. At the end of the road, we made camp for the night.

Our layover day between parks was a chance to venture on foot through terrain inaccessible by vehicle. Clambering, squeezing, and scraping through the slot canyons under our own power was a welcome break from the incessant jostling in the Land Rovers. By late afternoon we were rambling south past the Salton Sea and the setting sun guided us toward our point of entry to Anza-Borrego.

Measuring over nine-hundred square miles, Anza (as it is known familiarly) is the largest state park in California. Delving into its labyrinthine arroyos, the overlander instantly feels alien. I half expected to see Jawas peering out from the shadows. Whereas the previous day we had been exploring slot canyons on foot, now we were doing the same in our Land Rovers, squeezing through gaps between giant boulders and vertical rock walls.

Thanks to Valentina's experience in the area, our planning was rewarded with complete solitude in the side canyons. The desert responded to our laughter around camp with the tinkling of rockfall trickling down the cracked faces above us. Midweek in early November was the ideal time to be here.

There is a magical sensation that only immersion in the desert can inspire. The dry air tinged with the sharp aroma of sagebrush, the flickering canopy of stars overhead, and the crunch of sand underfoot instill quietude amid the harshness of an unforgiving landscape. The scale of Anza-Borrego magnifies this tranquility with its crenellated canyons, sweeping ridgetop vistas, shifting dunes, and hidden pockets of palm oases. How easy it is to feel lost amid its rugged corners, alternately cozy in the narrow arroyos and exposed in its windblown plains.

The tracks through the undulating terrain provided a continuously engaging driving experience. Unlike the park we had left, the streets in Anza-Borrego had no names. We relied on Valentina's

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familiarity and GPS navigation to lead us through unmarked intersections and across featureless mesas punctuated with scarlet flowering ocotillo. She frequently leapt from my Discovery to run ahead and guide us over rock shelves, through tight squeezes, around boulders, or down steep descents. Two of these were marked on our route as crucial technical obstacles: Diablo Drop Off and Borrego Mountain Wash Drop Off.

These were points of no return. Creeping up to the edge of the drops, the surface vanished below the hood, and once the vehicle pitched forward, I was committed to the descent. The gradient had me hanging against my seat belt, the rocks and ruts twisted the axles to their limits of suspension travel, and off-camber slopes tipped the vehicle precariously close to the wall of the trench through which the track carved. With my eyes focused on Valentina's hand signals, I inched down the drop, nervous about gaining too much speed. Upon reaching the broad run-out at the bottom I took a deep breath and hopped out to watch Tinka effortlessly sway down, casually lifting a wheel in the air while crawling over the larger rocks.

The anxieties of demanding driving along unforgiving stretches of trail evaporated as we trundled into the town of Borrego Springs to resupply. Scrubby washes and dune remnants of prehistoric seas gave way to a verdant village green, RV parks, citrus orchards, grocery stores, and lush golf courses beneath the backdrop of rugged ridges. Disoriented from civilization whiplash, we replenished our coolers, fuel tanks, and water jugs in haste.

Coyote Canyon was the perfect antidote to this contrived landscape. Climbing through a broad basin north of town, the terrain narrowed and steepened to a boulder-strewn passage that repels the advances of vehicles with inadequate clearance. In a nook of the spur Sheep Canyon, we again marveled at having the place to ourselves. At this higher elevation the temperature was cooler, dropping as the sun dipped below the opposite ridge. A hot dinner and laughter evoked by fond reminiscences and running jokes kept spirits and toes toasty.

Eager to stretch our legs, we spent the morning hiking up nearby Indian Canyon, pausing to admire the perfect symmetry of barrel cacti and the sprinkling of desert flowers. The luxury of midweek emptiness ended, as on our descent of Coyote Canyon we encountered a steady stream of uphill travelers aiming to get a jump on the weekend. This foreshadowed more traffic on the remainder of the trip.

Heading east across the northern reaches of Anza-Borrego, we found ourselves once more in the sandy convolutions of tightly winding arroyos. Tectonic Gorge suggested the passage of time over eons, but on this day it demanded quick reflexes. Not only did we have to dodge beach ball-size boulders sprinkled over the canyon floor, the route was abuzz with motorcycles and side-by-sides zooming from the opposite direction. The hairpin turns





and short sightlines raised our anxiety. In one frustrating brush, I saw the orange flag of an approaching side-by-side around a corner and simultaneously pounded both my brakes and my horn. This warning was lost on the other driver, who couldn't hear it above the music blaring from the stereo. The look on her face was priceless – the whites of her eyes filled the opening of her helmet as she skidded to a halt feet from my Discovery. It was easy to laugh about later, but these near collisions with off-highway vehicles put an uncomfortable edge on what should have been a pleasant meander through the arroyos.

Suddenly the trail deposited us on a flat, dusty plain: the Salton Sea staging area for the Ocotillo Wells State Vehicle Recreation Area. Blasted by hot wind and the piercing drone of motorbike engines, we decided to press on after topping off our tire pressures. We retreated back to Painted Canyon for our final night in the field. In a snug notch, we made camp and celebrated the completion of our journey with a bottle of Scotch we had first shared a world away in Greenland.

Our international cadre of adventurers had gathered to forge new memories in a landscape contrasting from our familiar office on Arctic glaciers. Having the companionship of these friends was a valuable reminder that the experience of an adventure is defined more by the quality of the company than by its adversities overcome and triumphs achieved. On this expedition we could be thankful to have faced the challenges together and replenished our spirits in this magical desert, strengthening old friendships and forming new ones. It's worth getting lost in the ancient wrinkles of this landscape. **X4**

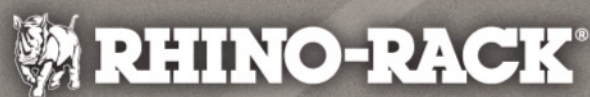
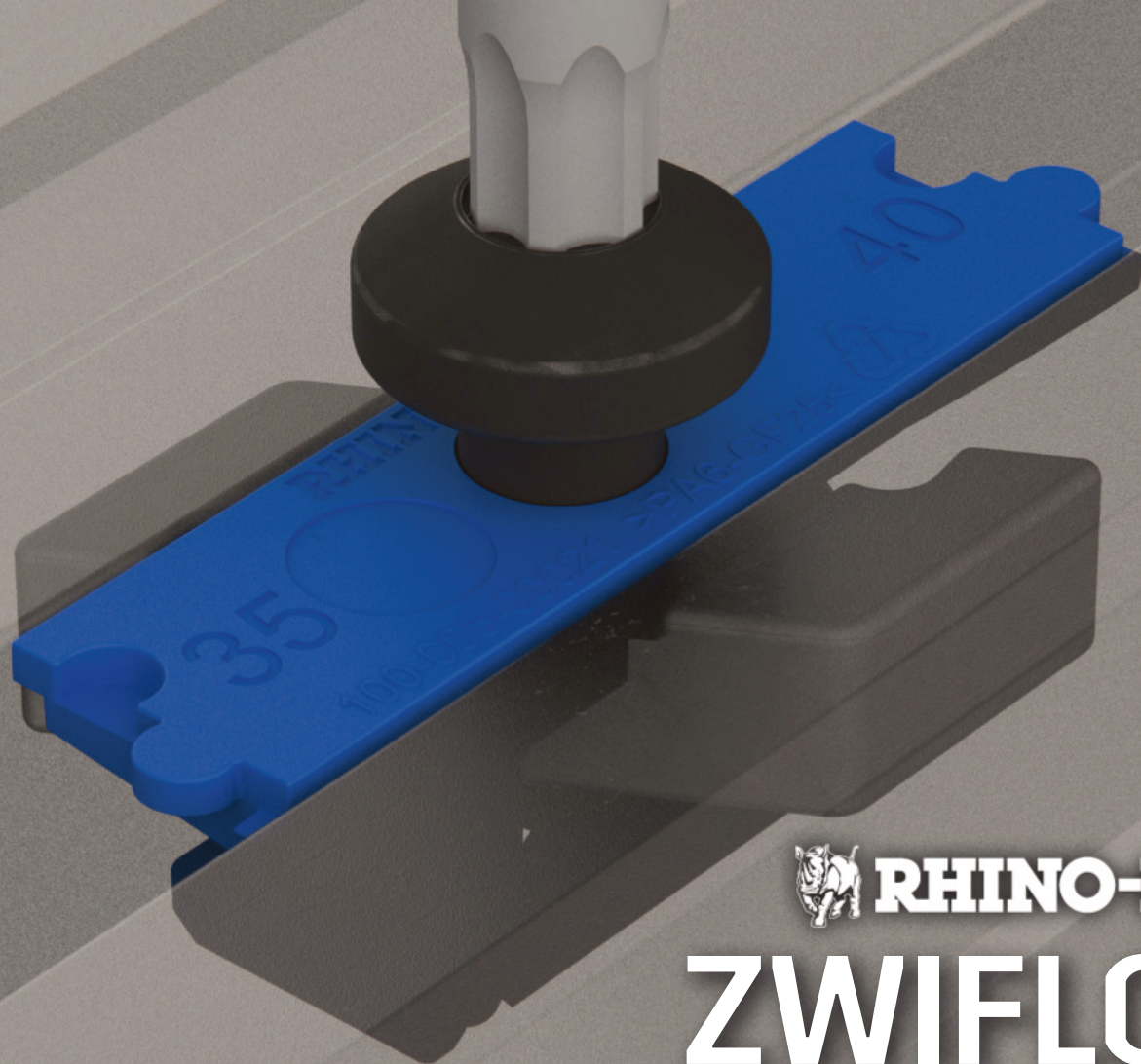


NICHOLAS BRATTON ————— AUTHOR BIO

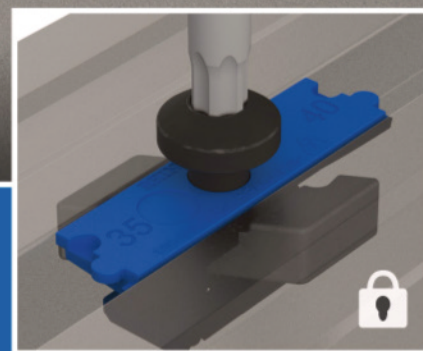
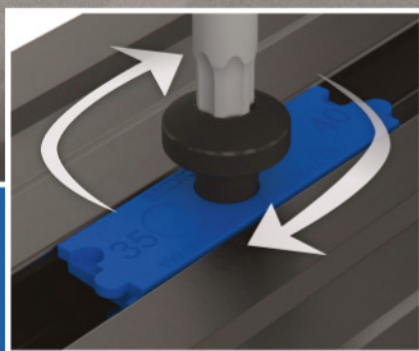
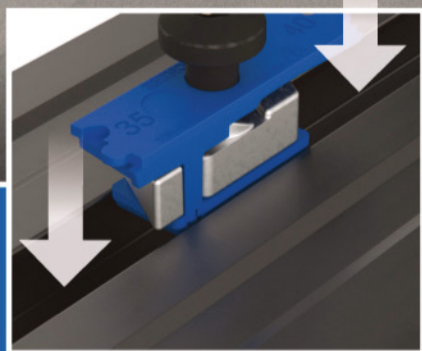
Nick is an adventure travel writer based in Seattle. He found a taste for exploration early, growing up in southern and eastern Africa. His journeys have taken him through 30 countries, ranging from deserts to Greenland's icecap. Nick has an uncanny knack for finding his way into unusual situations. Memorable experiences include appearing as a guest DJ on Zambian national radio, proposing to his girlfriend on the summit of Mt. Rainier (she said yes), volunteering on the support crew of a Baja 1000 race team, landing on an iceberg in a helicopter, being a jungle gym for lemurs in Madagascar, and dancing on stage with Sir Mix-a-Lot. Nick has worked as a mountaineering instructor in Wyoming, an alpine climbing guide in Washington's Cascades, a whitewater rafting and canyoneering guide in South Africa, and is co-founder of Global Exploration and Recovery, an international team of scientists and wilderness professionals searching for American MIAs. He is also making slow progress on a book about his adventures.

You can follow Nick's adventures and learn more about his travels by visiting nicholasbratton.com.





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TREADMARKS

Brian Cox Interview for OutdoorX4 Magazine

WORDS - BILL DRAGOO

I often speak of mentors...my own and those I've witnessed performing their art for the benefit of others. Some are deliberate in their tasks and some, perhaps the best ones, mold the young minds and hands of their mentees simply by their example. Brian Cox is a mixture of both. A special kind of character is at the core of men like him. Brian came from truly humble beginnings, developed incredible fabrication skills parallel to his extraordinary life skills and is now sharing his knowledge with those close enough to receive his instruction.

Brian is the quintessential Renaissance man, the product of a life more akin to someone raised in the coal mining community of Harlan County, Kentucky, than what we might expect in Northern California. His family was poor and, with a sick father, his early childhood home was as off the grid as it gets. His house lacked electricity, water or gas. A wood stove heated the log skid cabin and lighting was courtesy of a kerosene lantern. The bathroom? It's out back...watch for spiders.

Brian started early in everything. As a nine-year-old, he threw newspapers to help the family get by and by fourteen he split his time between working in the strawberry fields and as an apprentice in an auto body shop. He characterizes his childhood

as "basically feral with a work ethic created by my desire for new motorcycles."

At only ten years old, he acquired a Suzuki TM 75. It wasn't long before it seized a piston, as many two-stroke motorcycles of the era were prone to do. "When I seized the piston on my TM, a customer on my paper route started me on my mechanical path. His name was Greg Lebono and he built hot rods for fun. I always tried to deliver his newspaper to the shop to see what he was working on. When he realized I'd broken my new motorcycle, he told me to bring it over. I thought he was going to fix it and charge me. I was wrong. He made me tear it down, and even made me assist him in boring it for the new piston and then reassemble it myself."

Brian's life continued to race ahead of schedule. He and his girlfriend (now wife), Jennifer had their first child while he was in the 11th grade. He worked at the body shop and Jennifer at the pizza parlor next door.

"The two businesses literally sat beside each other and across the street from our trailer park. Yep, I've been 'trailer trash.' It was great, we both finished high school, got our diplomas, and started life."

An opportunity came up for Brian to work in a diatomaceous earth mine and he accepted, working long hours and saving enough money so that they could buy their first home. Their second son came along and Brian felt the need to further his education. He studied law enforcement and was accepted into the California Highway Patrol at 32 after working in the mines and on two cattle ranches. He often worked at several jobs simultaneously.

In his spare time, Brian rode mountain bikes, raced motorcycles, drove Jeeps and rode horses into the back country, all hobbies that would ultimately enhance his work in the fascinating field of undercover narcotics. Always seeking adventure, his experience in narcotics law enforcement whetted his appetite for more.

"Not only did I get to look for bad guys, I got to use helicopters and 4x4s for surveillance all over our mountains. Then, we'd get to make tactical entrances and arrests in some of these remote spots. I might be the only CHP Officer to ever ride horseback into a wilderness area in full camo and heavily armed. I also was trained in Long Line entry and egress off of helicopters."

While working with the CHP, Brian began to organize men's retreats through his church. Cowboys, loggers, firefighters, and fellow officers all benefitted from his leadership. Brian was in charge of the off-road motorcycle aspect of the events while a couple of buddies took care of the shooting and horseback riding portions. A natural-born teacher, Brian filled his mind and soul with wisdom and skills from his own mentors and then poured himself into his fellow man in ways that changed their lives.



Throughout his career as a Highway Patrol officer, Brian maintained his proficiency in the body shop, helping build custom automobiles and becoming a nearly self-taught machinist. He expanded his body working skills by learning the art of plishing metal, that is, shaping metals, mostly aluminum, into the complex forms of motorcycle gas tanks, fenders and other panels. Once retired, he began a restoration project on a 1959 BSA. It needed considerable sheet metal work so Brian decided to do

a completely custom rebuild. He sought out someone with expertise beyond his own already formidable skills and discovered another mentor, Evan Wilcox.

"Unlike some of the old school customizers who wanted to sell you a book or their specialty tools and guarded everything like it was the Treasure of Montezuma, Evan shares his knowledge and techniques freely. I like to think of Evan as a personal friend now, and I gained another mentor in metal working."

With the enhancement of his training, his creations have since won prizes at custom shows like The Handbuilt Motorcycle Show in Austin, Texas and Michael Lichter's show in Sturgis. His creations are routinely sought after by those who see his work. Now officially retired from law enforcement, Brian has expanded his sphere of influence by becoming mayor of his home town of Alturas, California. In a time when true fabrication skills are becoming rare and character is equally fleeting, men like Brian who mold minds and metal are good to know. **X4**



See more of Brian's creations at: [classicbikebuiding@instagram](https://www.instagram.com/classicbikebuiding)

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.

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A photograph taken from the interior of a van, looking out through the large rear window. The scene outside is a coastal landscape at sunset or sunrise, with a body of water in the foreground, a grassy field, and a distant shoreline with palm trees and buildings under a warm, orange sky. Inside the van, a wooden table is visible on the right, and a cushioned seat is on the left. A small, glowing lantern-style light fixture is mounted on the ceiling in the upper left corner.

Livin' the Van Life

Building out a Baby Sprinter

WORDS & PHOTOS – TARO ZENRI



I started surfing relatively late in life at the age of thirty-six. During the first few years, I was obsessed with my newfound passion. I found myself waking before the sun to drive an hour just to catch the first waves of the day. A few hours later, I'd rush back for work, only to be drawn to the beach again, kitesurfing till dusk. This was before the time that Sprinter vans became popular as the default choice for adventurers. VW Westlys, modified Econolines, and other vans parked at the local surf spots caught my eye. Their practicality was undeniable: spacious enough to slide a longboard through, a space to work, prep meals, and a cozy spot for a post-surf nap. I knew I had to have one.

Fast-forwarding a bit, I made my dream purchase a year before the pandemic hit: A sleek silver Mercedes Metris van, which had previously served as a car dealer transport in Texas. Compact and more agile than the popular Sprinter, the Metris was perfect for daily commutes, navigating tight spots and cruising drive-throughs with ease. I lovingly dubbed her "Baby Sprinter;" she was perfect for stowing all my surfboards, and even had a hitch to transport my dirt bike.



The first improvement was a suspension lift: Two-inch Eibach lift springs added clearance, while front Bilstein shocks and rear KYBs enhanced the suspension. The original alloy wheels were swapped for basic steel wheels, paired with Falken Wildpeak all-terrain tires, ensuring stability and comfort on rough terrain.

The bed platform that doubles as a desk was the next step. I opted for a pop-up table design, flanked by bench seats. It was built with extruded 80/20 aluminum framing, storage cubbies underneath, and tops made of laminated Baltic birch. To lighten the hefty wood, channels were routed out using a CNC-machine. The comfortable cushions, in cold memory foam and Sunbrella fabric, were locally upholstered. The most challenging part was finding the perfect hinges for the benches and fabricating the metal plates for connection.





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The stock audio system was lackluster and not suitable for quick trips to the grocery store, let alone long journeys down to Baja, so it was replaced with a ten-inch Pioneer touchscreen display. The original speakers were exchanged for JBL variants, and a ten-inch JL subwoofer, discreetly tucked into a custom corner enclosure, added that extra punch. Driven by an 1,100-watt, five-channel amp, the sound quality never fails to bring a smile to my face.

The crowning glory of my build? A Front Runner roof rack loaded with accessories. Installed at Front Runner HQ, it boasts an off-road LED bar and an Alucab 270° Shadow Awning. Fixed permanently on the rack are some Rotopax containers for extra fuel, surf pads, and 200-watts of solar panels, which charge an Ecoflow Delta 2 battery in the cabin. This ensures that all my devices stay charged, and the Dometic fridge keeps my drinks chilled and food fresh during extended beach stays. A few more tweaks are on the horizon, but the goal remains: To enjoy this van for many adventures ahead. If you spot me, don't forget to give a honk! **X4**

TARO ZENRI

AUTHOR BIO



Taro is a small wave hunter and outdoor cooking enthusiast from sunny Southern California. Self-employed in B2B finance, Taro spent the past decade working from the comforts of his home. In recent years, he has discovered the world of co-living spaces, where digital nomads gather to live, collaborate, and form connections. In pursuit of his passions, Taro has been immersing himself in vibrant surf communities abroad while working remotely from these co-living spaces.

Although California is where he hangs his hat, his spirit yearns for exploration, leading him to seek out perfect waves and cozy seaside towns around the globe. Taro's journeys have taken him to picturesque surf locales in Portugal, Costa Rica, and Mexico where he's cultivated a diverse tribe of friends.

Whether riding waves or satisfying his thirst for outdoor adventure with camping trips and motorcycle explorations, Taro is always eager for new experiences. Back home, you'll find him chilling with his cat, experimenting with fresh dinner recipes, and honing his language skills in both Spanish and Portuguese.





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WORDS & PHOTOS – JENNY VIGIL





“Hey babe!” There are a bunch of hogs just north of where you are,” I heard my husband call out with just a wisp of alarm. Except, I thought I heard, “dogs.”

Just hours before, we had arrived at Lake Trammell, a tiny fishing lake outside of Sweetwater, a small town in west Texas. He shouted this at the very moment I realized I was traipsing through an area strewn about with large piles of poop. “Deckard! Come!” I commanded, anxious to deter him from the company we may have had nearby. He came close, tear-

ing himself away from his highly focused examination of each of the landmines I was carefully avoiding.

The sky was just beginning to change from crisp blue to a golden rosy hue, with only an hour or so of daylight remaining. We had parked our overlanding rig, Bruce (the Boss, Synchrosteen), a 1990 Volkswagen Synchro, for the night along the south side of this pocket-sized body of water. Texas is 95% privately owned, so finding little gems like Lake Trammell, quiet and free of crowds, is what we look

for while traversing this large state. We were positioned in a clearing surrounded by tall, overwintered native grasses and, nearby, a huge pile of purposefully gathered dead bramble. The tower of thorny, brown plant matter stood roughly twelve feet high.

Despite wanting to stretch my legs and let Deckard get out some pent-up ya-yas, I would have preferred a proper trail over this scratchy swath of lakeside wilderness, a hodgepodge of scratchy vines, low cedars, and cactus. Certainly I was turned off by the pooping grounds I had stumbled upon. But we weren’t casually whiling away the hour until sundown; we were on a mission – a search party, in fact. We were, with a touch of panic in my gut, foraging for the fourth member of our family, sixteen-year-old Artemis. Our small, fiery, strong, independent cat – and a first-time camper – Artemis had darted away from me as I was securing her lead. Just as I reached out to grab hold of her narrow body, she entered the pyramid of seemingly impenetrable dead plant material.

We first met this apricot pink and dove gray feline in the office of our veterinarian in the late winter of 2007. She was quick to say hello and her wild antics were constant. Determined to find a home for this tiny tiger, the office staff elected to give her the run of the waiting room, hopeful she would entertain and charm all who entered. We were visiting the office with our deaf and blind senior dog, just one of the many appointments we ushered him to in his old age. Right away this comically fierce kitten and elderly, toothless dog became fast friends. The connection between them was immediately obvious.

Our then ten-year-old child had been petitioning for a kitten for years with no success. While I welcomed the idea with open arms, my husband was adamant: No more cats. We currently had a senior cat at home. Not even a humorous yet sincere letter from the children’s public librarian, signed and sealed, would break him down. But on that cold, February afternoon, Avery either provided a winning argument or caught my husband in



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a weak (or likely busy) moment. We left Main Street Veterinary Hospital with the wild, yellow-eyed girl whose undercarriage fur was as soft as the cotton that blows from the giant cottonwood trees in our neighborhood. Her well-suited name came quickly to the thrilled child nestled between the old guy and the gal in the backseat of our car.

I quickly backtracked to the Boss with a contained Deckard, fearing the dogs would be fast on our trail. If I could get him in the vehicle, we might avoid further pet trouble. Back at camp, my husband quickly grabbed the binoculars and peered through them in the direction he saw the dogs. "They have seven or eight babies with them," he said. I instantly thought his chosen words were odd. "Seven or eight puppies?" I asked, and a brief look of confusion crossed his face,

"Hogs. Several adults and seven or eight babies." Uh oh.

Feral pig populations in Texas have ballooned in recent decades. These groups, called sounders, can leave a trail of destruction in their path. They are powerful animals and can be aggressive when defending their piglets, of which there were seven or eight in the field just north of where our inexperienced, small warrior had disappeared. We were unwelcome guests and one of us was unaccounted for. My husband must have read my mind, assuring me, "She can climb a tree, she'll be fine." Until this moment, I had kept my worry and useless projections at bay, but knowing we were encroaching upon a land of feral pigs, my imagination began to become quite colorful and a little noisy. Have the pigs discovered us? Will they deem us too close? She was still wearing

her harness. Would it become entangled in the undergrowth, locking her down even if she was capable of fleeing up a tree? If the pigs come, would we be forced to abandon this spot and leave her here? Is she going to give it her all and head back to Oklahoma?

Just a handful of days before, we made the sudden decision to bring Artemis along on the seven-day adventure to the wild lands of west Texas. Our dog has always bounded into the van, ready for a good time as long as he's with us. However, we always believed the road was no place for a cat. In fact, until recently we never even questioned why we believed this. I guess we were just certain she would be miserable, making us miserable. She is indoor/outdoor at home, free to choose by way of a small window "cat door." I couldn't wrap my brain around

how I would contain this unconfined animal, keeping her safe and yet free to enjoy the adventure, and didn't really try. But after selling our two small businesses and shaking loose some very pot-bound roots, we found ourselves craving the open road and the comfort of our minimal home on wheels, to explore this vast country more and more. Leaving her behind began to wear on my heart. Whether she was lonely for us or not, I would be lonely for her, and felt I was letting her down by leaving her home. This internal conflict became an ongoing conversation between my husband and I. How could we include her?

The previous winter we had planned an extended trip to the Gulf of Mexico. We would be staying put in a beach bungalow and decided it would be Artemis' maiden voyage. This adventure was an absolute success. Her deep curiosity and bravery kept her entertained and she truly seemed happy to be with her family, doing the family thing wherever.

"Let's just take her," my husband blurted out. I had been lamenting the thought of her forced solitude as she lay, purr-

ing in my lap, especially considering her recent winter getaway. I know the look on my face must have been one of shock because he said again, "Let's take her. The worst case scenario is we turn around and come home." Apparently neither of us thought about her escaping or that she would seemingly want to be free of us. Now, the worst case scenario was feeling like it would be turning around and going home *without* her.

With the dog leashed and under my husband's supervision, I put on the cat backpack I had purchased not an hour after the pronouncement of her invitation, stuffed the heavy-duty welding gloves in the side pocket (she can be a real beast) and grabbed the crinkly bag of cat cookies. I started towards the south, with plans to avoid the area I was sure the hogs used as a toilet. Shaking the bag and making a near constant, "psst psst psst," it suddenly occurred to me that we might be calling her away from our camp, that she might still be within the fortress of thorns. I quickly retraced my steps and made my way back to Bruce. I focused on the spot where she disappeared, willing her return. I wasn't sure she would think of Bruce as

home, not after one day. Had we just driven her away from her trusted territory to her end days? To her doom? I was quickly losing the battle of balance between accepting reality as it was presenting itself and falling into the pain of the possibility of her never to be seen again. I could feel the see-saw of my emotions becoming heavier on the side of my fretting.

And then there she was, gracefully emerging from what looked like a small black hole, a complete void into nothingness. The dark breach, looking deafeningly quiet, was about five inches across and five at its highest point, one of many minute entrances into the formidable tower. With a bounce in her step, she jogged over to greet me with big hellos and purrs, pretty much glowing. I looked her over quickly and scooped her up and inserted her into the cat pack. She didn't resist, still humming from her adventure, happy to rest in the cozy space. I hoisted the pack to my back with a deep sigh of relief and set out to find the other members of our search and rescue party.

I have spent a lot of time recently thinking about the limits we put on ourselves;





these believed “truths” we tell ourselves which ultimately box us in. We view speculation as certainty, allowing all kinds of stories to restrict our movements through this life. For sixteen years I have *believed* that I could not travel with our cat. This has limited how long I feel comfortable being away from home, and how often. Sure, we have friends and neighbors that don’t mind checking in on her, but leaving her has always felt like abandonment to me.

That night, with all of us comfortably settled in Bruce, I found I could not sleep. I couldn’t get my mind off what could have happened. For me, nighttime has always been the time when anxieties seem larger than life. The sky falls and my usual firm footing seems slippery. I felt like we had made a terrible mistake and should turn around at daybreak and get back home to where there was no band of wild hogs and the biggest pile of bramble would be the pile of weeds I had pulled up from the garden. My comfort zone became a tiny, out of focus, fleeting feeling. I felt out of control.

Morning finally relieved me of my quiet anxiety and I was able to voice the fret I was deeply feeling. “I think we should go back home,” I said to my husband. I figured he would agree straight away, grateful for me saying it first. But, apparently he had been filing away all the talks I had given about our truly limitless nature and the power we each wield over the choices we make; ramblings about how we are never on solid ground, ever, and that the control we feel we have is but an illusion;

how we cannot know the future, and any kind of story we spin about how it could go is a sure way to forfeit the moments of the present we are currently experiencing, which are all we really have.

He did not agree. He did not think we had made a terrible mistake. He thought we should press on and take things as they came. Why imagine problems to come? He has always held a position in the C-suite of Solutions Management, but

I was still surprised by his insistence on this matter. After all, he was the one horrified at even the thought of a litter box in the van.

The thrill I felt from this important reminder was enough to shed the doubt and questioning that had kept me awake most of the night. I saw with fresh eyes the challenges of traveling with pets and felt a renewed ability and desire to welcome and work through the challenges. I fully recognized my power of decision. I decided, in that moment, to embrace the unknown and to lean into the experience we had invited ourselves into.

The next many days were an adventure, filled with new sights and new routines. Artemis, filled with curiosity, always roamed as far as her long lead allowed and became a pro at walking on a lead with the dog and me. The van became her safety zone, her home, and she jumped in and out after exploring, over and over, while at camp. She slipped into



the role of camp cat quickly, and, what seemed to me, joyfully.

There was a moment one beautiful evening at sunset, the dog asleep on his bed, the cat curled up on the passenger's seat, and my husband and I watching the sun set behind a rugged mesa in the distance, that I was filled with what I can only describe as future nostalgia. A nostalgia that will be experienced by my future self for the incredible experience I was enjoying at that moment. With tears welling up in my eyes, I expressed deep gratitude for each of the souls in the van with me, for the recognition of our limitlessness and the power we each hold over the decisions we get to make that shape our reality.

I was so very thankful we made the choice to bring the tiny tiger along for the ride. X4



Jenny has been feeding her spirit with adventure, whether grand or modest, her entire life. She spent many years of her childhood living with her family in Germany, exploring the neighboring countries and cultures. This deepened her desire to say "Yes!" to experience more and to live life with a wide-open heart.

Jenny currently travels around this country with her family and pets, constantly adding to her list of places she wants to wander. Since moving on from small business ownership (a coffee shop for her and a bicycle shop for her husband), Jenny has found more freedom to hit the road and finds she is drawn to the vast blue skies, red earth, and bountiful solitude of the American Southwest. She is an avid runner, on trail and off, cyclist, and is becoming friends with her first motorcycle, a 2-stroke dirt bike which has already expanded her adventurous heart considerably. Currently, while not soaking in the mysteriousness of somewhere else or steadily gazing with wonder and delight at her constantly evolving internal wilderness, she is a Photographer and On-Site Logistics Coordinator for Dragoo Adventure Rider Training in Norman, Oklahoma.



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KÜAT IBEX TRUCK RACK SYSTEM

Rolling into Ouray, Colorado, hauling motorcycles in our Küat-equipped Toyota Tundra, my wife Ariel and I are greeted by crisp air, red plateaus, and towering Mount Abrams. This town is dedicated to exploring the San Juan Mountains by any means possible and is our home away from home. Trucks carrying paddle boards and kayaks return from an icy run down the Uncompahgre or Animas Rivers. Dusty vehicles line the roads and pack the campgrounds, draped with traction boards, fuel cans, and canvas trash bags; many bristle with bicycles on racks and tailgate pads. Dirt bikes are hitched to bumpers or strapped on trailers. Our rig is compact and secure, with all we need for a week of touring the rocky passes on my BMW R1200GS Adventure and Ariel's Kawasaki KLX 140R. The Küat IBEX truck bed rack equips the Tundra alongside the best setups on Main Street.

Küat's sturdy, ballistic powder-coated, lightweight aluminum IBEX rack uses a rugged molded hoop design, sporting clean curves and just enough angles to produce a remarkable level of rigidity without the need for diagonal bracing, heavy materials, or excessive clamping. This design opens the entire truck bed for motorcycles, allowing for tools and gear to be mounted on both sides of the Narrow, Mid- or Full-sized MOLLE panels. The rigidity also allows simple removal of the rear crossbar, so dirt bikes and other large cargo can be loaded without having to dismantle the rack.

The truck bed system was easy to assemble and install with the provided tamper-resistant Allen wrenches. T-channels and telescoping cross bars allow endless adjustment and modularity. Motorcycle security is improved with the rear crossbar in place, barricading both bikes into the truck. We set up our rig with a driver's-side Full MOLLE panel to carry our spare motorcycle tires and Mosko Moto Wedge mounts, allowing the Backcountry saddlebags to be switched from bike to truck in seconds. Max-trax traction boards and large tools tuck inside the panel without affecting bed space.

Our passenger side configuration includes two Narrow MOLLE panels, allowing access for strapping down motorcycles and keeping the blind spot clear. The Küat Hi-Lift Jack Mount keeps the tool ready to be accessed in a pinch. Küat's Piston SR bicycle rack is mounted high enough to avoid road grime, and still within easy reach while standing beside the truck. One-tap levers and hydro-pneumatic tire arms securely clamp the bike with zero contact on the frame, ensuring effortless loading and unloading. Fit, form and function of the Piston SR is top notch, with its bronze





Kashima-coated gas shocks, and it is off-road-secure. A Kuat Grab Handle mounted on the upper passenger side rack makes climbing in and out of the bed safe and easy. And the smooth, machined Kuat Bottle Opener is ready when the “trail sodas” come out of the cooler at the end of the day.

The IBEX rack system comes in six different frame sizes and two height options, with a wide array of accessories for outdoor sports. Ample, slotted T-channels provide infinite mounting options limited only by the imagination. Cross bar risers are available to allow more room beneath. A 1,200-pound static load capacity, 600-pound dynamic load capacity and 300-pound off-road dynamic load capacity should handle any reasonable cargo.

Overall, the simplicity, design, installation, modularity, and usability of the Kuat IBEX Truck Bed Rack System and Piston SR Bicycle mount have taken our traveling Tundra to a new level. **X4**

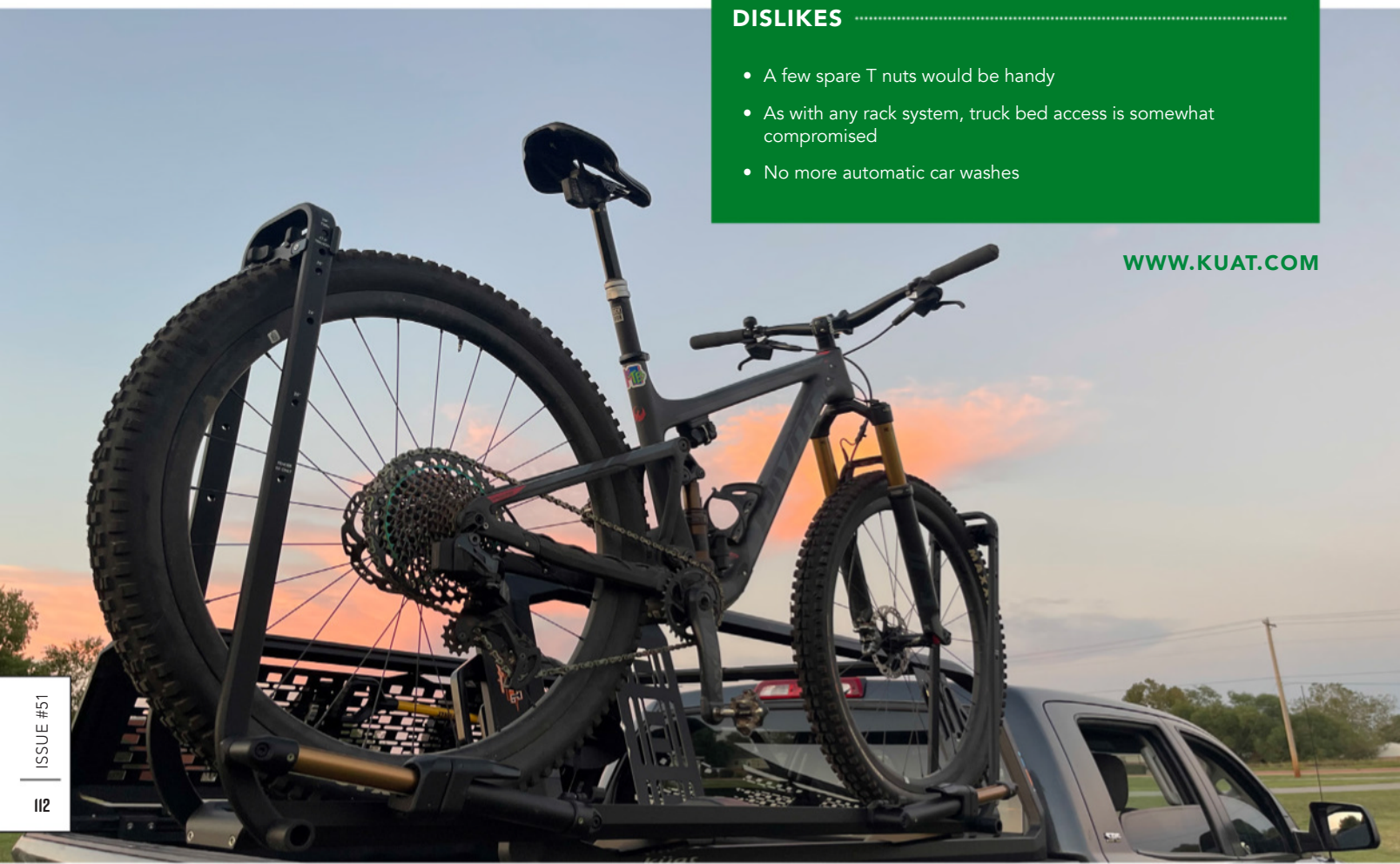
LIKES

- Sturdy, streamlined modular design
- Lightweight aluminum construction.
- Simple assembly with tamper-resistant Allen tools
- Infinitely adjustable and versatile
- Top quality accessories

DISLIKES

- A few spare T nuts would be handy
- As with any rack system, truck bed access is somewhat compromised
- No more automatic car washes

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