# Outdoor XL

## A TRAIL RUNS THROUGH IT

*Following the Brave on Idaho's Oregon and California Trails*

HAIAWATHA TRAIL

FORTY DAYS IN THE DESERT

BUILT FOR ADVENTURE NISSAN NAVARA

DEEP IN THE HEART OF TEXAS

LIVIN' THE VAN LIFE

THE GREAT ESCAPE – A PHOTOGRAPHIC ADVENTURE

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ISSN: 2641-8258

ISSUE 52

# FIND ANYWHERE

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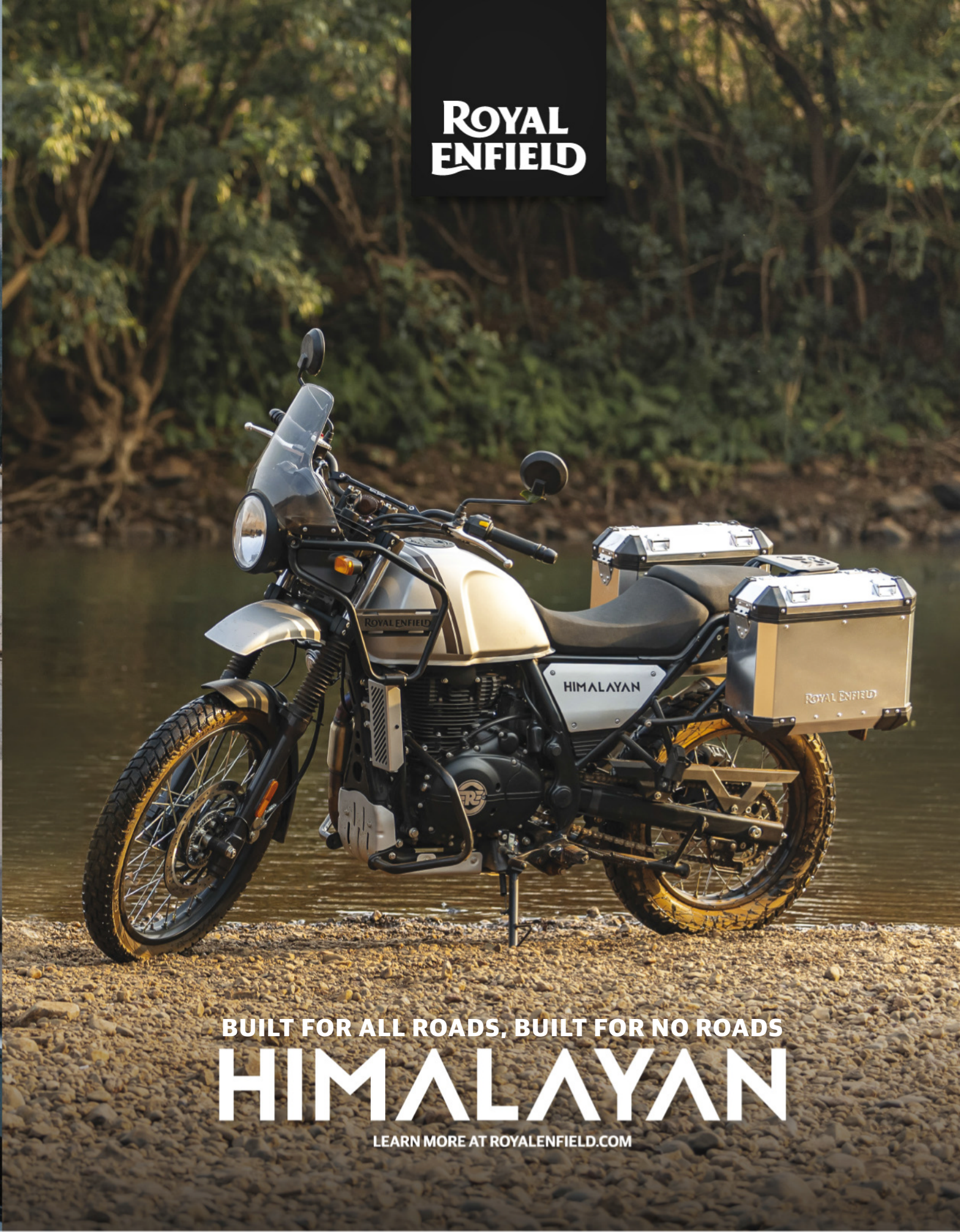
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There's freedom in self-sufficiency and Toyota Tacoma™ accessories from ARB are built to support precisely such adventures. The new Summit MKII front bumper has arrived with updated styling, fog light design, and sequential indicators. Pair it with Old Man Emu suspension and ARB air systems to explore with confidence.

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Outdoor X4
EST. 2013
ISSUE 52

### THE OUTDOORX4 TEAM

Frank Ledwell ..... Publisher & Editor-in-Chief
Andrea Ledwell ..... Associate Publisher
Jessica Blank ..... Art Director
Kris Wilson ..... Copy Editor
Stan Wright ..... Senior Editor
Jason Sakurai ..... Senior Editor
Jason Varnadoe ..... Social Media Editor
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Caleb Murphy ..... Audio Edition Editor
Randy Langstraat ..... Senior Photographer
Scott Brown ..... Senior Photographer
Jonathan Hanson ..... Overland Columnist
Bill Dragoo ..... Treadmarks Columnist

### BUSINESS

Casey Vandenoever ..... Advertising Sales Director

### CONTRIBUTORS

Andrea Johns, Bjørn Egge, Bob Theobald, Bridget Thackwray, Cheyenne Wuthrich, Heide Brandes, Jon Wilhite, Lyle Kilgore, Nicholas Bratton, Patrick Cruywagen, Retha Charette, Samuel Odio, Sean Jansen, Shalee Super

**OutdoorX4 Magazine (outdoor by 4) is published by OutdoorX4 LLC www.outdoorx4.com**

**CONTACT:**
**OutdoorX4 Magazine**
**P.O. Box 8306**
**Spring, TX 77387**
**Phone: 832-280-7950**

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ISSN: 2641-8258

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I was first introduced to the idea of cosplay in the early 2000's and recall feeling a bit conflicted. The idea of mostly grown people costuming themselves as their favorite comic book hero, sci-fi character, or the latest pop icon was not only fascinating to me but also a bit awkward. It wasn't until years later I began to understand and truly respect the passion enthusiasts felt for the stories and fictitious characters they'd come to rely on as a reprieve from the "regularity" of normal life.

Earlier in the year, OutdoorX4 hosted a booth at the annual Overland Expo, held over a three-day period in Flagstaff, as we've done for over a decade. If you've never been, the event can feel a bit like a cosplay convention. While the focus is on vehicle-based exploration rather than interstellar travel, the synergies are quite similar. Over-the-top vehicles that are impractical for daily use, (see the example of the truck we had in the OutdoorX4 booth), hundreds of variants of "essential" gear you absolutelây can't leave home without, vendor booths designed to draw crowds with all sorts of gimmicks to promote their brand, and yes…cosplay. Hundreds, if not thousands, of grown people dressed in the latest tactical gear that fits the "look" of what an overland traveler rightfully should be because a YouTube channel they saw suggests that's what vehicle-based exploration requires. Not to mention the volume of four-legged friends trying to remain calm whilst caught in the anxiety-filled expanse of what I'm sure they perceive as a level of Dante's Inferno. All this to say it's easy to feel a bit conflicted.

Of course, the event isn't completely the circus it sounds to be. Beneath the expansive shroud lined with Benjamins is, at its core, opportunities to inspire those who know nothing of vehicle-based exploration who desire to learn more. A myriad of seminars, roundtable discussions, a film festival, and happy hour events throughout the weekend still provide an element of community that compliments the fascination of the events façade.

Despite my perceptions of how the event has evolved, Overland Expo continues to be a fascination. Each spring, as enthusiasts from all over the world descend upon Flagstaff, the event undoubtedly offers a reprieve from "regularity". Expo provides a three-day break from normal life behind a desk; from home and its responsibilities; and, from the real world. Maybe, at the end of the day, that's the whole point.

Frank Ledwell
EDITOR & PUBLISHER

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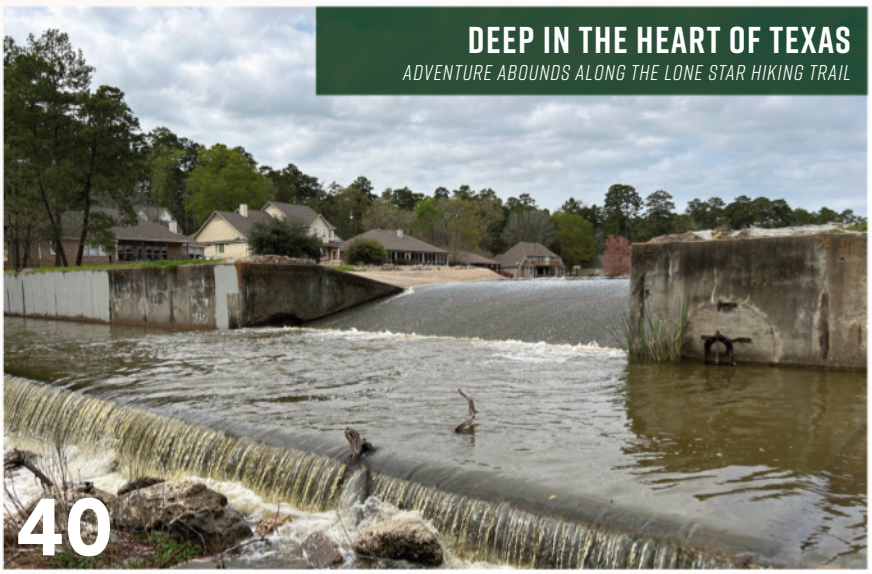

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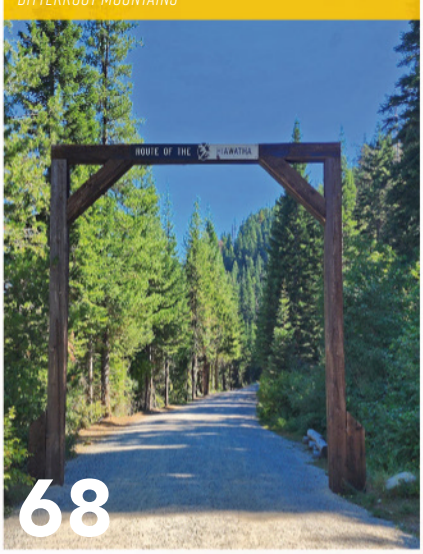


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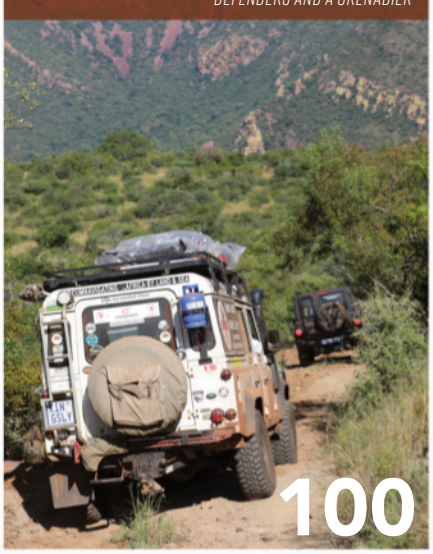

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## SIXTH GENERATION TOYOTA 4RUNNER TO DEBUT FALL 2024

The all-new 2025 Toyota 4Runner, the sixth generation of the venerable namesake, has been announced by Toyota and stays true to its original concept as an extremely capable, dynamic, and durable off-roader. The new generation introduces a bold new look and adds new technology, premium materials, options, and safety. In fact, this all-new sixth generation 4Runner raises the bar in terms of go-anywhere capability and high-end refinement. The 2025 4Runner will be built in Toyota Motor Corporation's Tahara plant in Japan and will arrive in the U.S. in the fall of 2024.

"This all-new 4Runner has incredible versatility and capability that nicely rounds out our truck family story," said Dave Christ, Toyota group vice president and general manager. "We've sold over 3 million in the 40 years it has been on sale, and this sixth-generation model offers

a cool new look and incredible features, yet retains the rugged style and capability our customers love about this icon of adventure."

4Runner is all-new from the ground up and is built on Toyota's tough TNGA-F global truck platform that is shared with Tacoma, Land Cruiser, Tundra and Sequoia. This platform utilizes a high-strength boxed, steel-ladder frame and features a multi-link coil rear and double wishbone front suspension.

The adoption of the innovative TNGA-F platform not only adds strength, but it also improves the vehicle's ride comfort and on-road manners. Passengers feel the benefits of this new platform, even when riding in the available third-row. The enhanced frame, paired with the powerful i-FORCE MAX powertrain, allows 4Runner to tow up to 6,000 pounds.

This next chapter of 4Runner offers two powerful and efficient turbocharged 2.4 liter four-cylinder powertrains including the i-FORCE engine with 278 horsepower and 317 lb.-ft. of torque that is paired to an eight-speed automatic transmission. SR5, TRD Sport, TRD Off-Road and Limited grades will come standard with the i-FORCE powertrain.

4Runner expands its grade offering to provide customers with more choices than ever before. Nine grades are available including SR5, TRD Sport, TRD Sport Premium, TRD Off Road, TRD Off Road Premium, Limited, Platinum, TRD Pro, and Trailhunter.

Visit your local Toyota dealership or learn more about the new Toyota 4Runner by scanning the QR code. X4

## BFGOODRICH ANNOUNCES ALL-TERRAIN KO3 TIRE

Building on the outstanding performance of the BFGoodrich All-Terrain T/A KO2 tire, BFGoodrich developed the KO3 tire to satisfy the evolving needs of off-road consumers by incorporating the latest tire technologies into a tire that delivers even stronger performance and benefits than the KO2 tire.

"BFGoodrich Tires' legendary toughness has been made tougher with the creation of the All-Terrain KO3 tire," said Harold Phillips, BFGoodrich Global General Manager. "We've done a lot of racing and research in the 10 years since we launched the KO2 tire, so a decade of data, feedback, technology and experience went into the development of the KO3 tire. We are our own competition, and we knew it was time to take the all-terrain tire to another level. It will be exciting to see what consumers will do – at work and at play – with the KO3 tire."

BFGoodrich will introduce more than 100 sizes over 24 months, starting with 13 sizes available in May. The phased launch will continue with 17 additional sizes in August and five more sizes in October. An additional 52 sizes arrive in 2025 and 19 sizes in 2026.
For more information, visit www.bfgoodrichtires.com or your local BFGoodrich dealer and get started on your next off-road adventure. X4

# FRONT RUNNER INTRODUCES PRO BED RACK SYSTEM

Dometic presents the highly versatile Front Runner Dometic Pro Bed Rack System which will change the way truck owners transport overlanding, camping and adventure gear by offering an easy to install, robust, accessible and lightweight load bed storage solution. The new system is available online and at select dealers.

The Pro Bed Rack System is expertly crafted to give gear accessibility to a truck's load bed area without intruding on valuable in-bed space and provides a hassle-free mounting solution for all overlanding, camping and adventure accessories.

The Pro Bed Rack System has multiple accessory channels and T-slots, which make for the quick and easy fitment of a wide range of Front Runner Dometic accessories (see the full list from the Front Runner website below). The system is reinforced with fixed top cross bars, boosting its structural integrity, while the cross-bracing at the front and rear counter torsional stresses, providing exceptional structural integrity and strength.

The Pro Bed Rack System has been designed to work with all bed liners and most drop-in liners. However, it's not compatible with a roll top or any load bed cover.

For more details and pricing, please visit **www.frontrunneroutfitters.com**. X4

# MEANWHILE, OVER ON OUTDOORX4.COM...

**Heroic Endeavours**

OutdoorX4's Associate Publisher, Andrea Ledwell, shares the story of Stacey Buckner, a true angel who is helping her community by using her Jeep vehicle to provide hospitality services for the homeless in North Carolina.

**Field Review: Toyo Open Country A/T III Tire**

"Do you think I can make it?" A man shouts out to me after lowering his driver's side window. I looked at the vehicle briefly, but concentrated on his vehicle's tires. "I think you will be okay. The water crossing isn't that deep, but your tires look a little worn and you might lose traction," I offered. We were in the wilds of Utah and miles away from help and assistance. After I offered my thoughts to the fellow adventurer, I watched him ease into the river.

In today's adventure vehicle world, everyone has everything. We buy the latest and greatest equipment to make our experiences more fun and efficient, or just to make our vehicles look "cool." However, tires are one of the best, most practical pieces of equipment for your adventure vehicle. Yes, a good set of tires can take the adventurer to many wonderful places. Today's tire manufacturers design and engineer high-quality tires to explore our world.

**Getting Loaded: Tips for How to Properly Pack Your Vehicle**

Properly packing a vehicle for your next overland adventure is more than being able to put 10 pounds of stuff in a five pound bag. Or making sure you don't look like the Clampetts from Beverly Hillbillies rolling down the highway. It is about preserving your assets. The ultimate goal is to make it back home as your vehicle is your family's lifeline. So the keys to a proper packing job have more to do with safety and performance than your Tetris skills. Here are a few tips to keep in mind next time you're getting loaded.

Check out these stories and more by visiting **www.outdoorx4.com/stories** or by scanning the QR codes above. 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

## NISSAN'S PATHFINDER ROCK CREEK EDITION

WORDS - FRANK LEDWELL

For nearly 40 years, the Pathfinder model has been a bedrock for the Nissan brand. Built to compete with the likes of the Jeep Cherokee and Toyota 4Runner, the Pathfinder has evolved from its utilitarian physique to an eight seat softlander designed to navigate the harshness of the concrete jungle.

The 2024 Rock Creek Edition is a nod to the Pathfinder's heritage in a platform that's been enhanced to traverse varied terrain for light to medium-duty off-pavement travel. Under the hood, a 3.5L V6 provides good power at 284hps and 259 lb.-ft. torque with smooth shifting from the ZF 9-speed automatic tranny. Seven driving modes, coupled with Intelligent 4WD, optimize power delivery depending on terrain and/or driving scenario. Modes includes standard, sport, eco, snow, mud, sand, and towing though I was surprised there isn't a rock mode given the model's namesake. Additionally, unlike the Kia Telluride AWD SX V6 I would note as a worthy competitor to the Pathfinder, there is no locking center differential which I feel is a substantive omission from a platform dubbed as off-road worthy.

Rock Creek models sit 0.63 inch higher off the ground and utilize a softer, more off-road-tuned suspension setup than regular Pathfinders. Standard Toyo Open Country A/T tires are well respected and provide plenty of grip in off-pavement settings while managing on-road conditions nicely without the road noise of a more aggressive A/T. I also like the affiliated Yakima Ridge Back 4 hitch-mounted bike rack, a genuine Nissan accessory available directly from Nissan at dealer or from their website. Also available is a hitch-mounted ski adapter as well as an Off-Road Adventure Kit. The kit features all the basic emergency items you may need in the backcountry including glow sticks, hand warmers, matches, water tablets, a survival wrap, flash light, duct tape, zip ties, gloves, emergency tow rope, and more. While many of you reading this magazine usually carry these items already in your adventure vehicle, it's nice to see Nissan recognize the importance of these items and offering such a comprehensive kit directly to customers who may not recognize their value until it's too late.

On the inside, seating is quite comfortable whether around town or on long jaunts on the highway and beyond. Third row seating is collapsible when extra cargo space is needed with plenty of room to stash your hiking/climbing/biking/outdoors gear to hit the trailhead or for extended vehicle-based adventures. The Intelligent Cruise Control works flawlessly, utilizing a forward-facing camera, radar, and variety of sensors to keep the Pathfinder in its lane and adapting to traffic as needed. The cockpit is easily navigable and intuitive with everything you need just a fingertip away, highlighted by a 12.3" full color digital display sized quite nicely. There are also four USB outlets across each row of seating, allowing passengers to keep devices charged when on an extended trip. About my only frustration with the interior is the volume of glossy plastic on the dash which reflects sunlight and can produce a blinding glare during certain times of the day. I would prefer more muted plastics or other materials to prevent such glare. Nonetheless, the interior is handsome, comfortable, and intelligently laid out.

At roughly $45k, the Pathfinder Rock Creek Edition is nicely priced compared to others in this space including the aforementioned Kia Telluride as well as Ford Explorer Timberline. The redesign, introduced with the 2022 model year, is refined and drew numerous positive comments during my time with the vehicle. Once a center locking differential is available, I'd be hard pressed to suggest a better softlander in this price range from what's on the market. X4

# What WE dig

## Retha Charette Never Leaves Home Without AUDIO BOOKS

As someone who loves to read, I always have an audio book – or five – downloaded on my phone. I use three different apps to maximize my listening capacity: Audible, Libby, and Spotify. Each app has its downsides – hourly listening limits, long waits to get books, etc., but by using them all I have access to a wide variety of selections and can always find a book I enjoy. Along the Lone Star HIking Trail, I listened to Tom Felton's (of Harry Potter fame) book *Beyond the Wand*. If you're an HP fan, give it a listen!

## Samuel Odio Keeps His BOG OUT STRAPS Handy

I always carry a set of Bog Out straps. They're a little-known piece of kit from Australia that, when used properly, are as effective as a winch and twenty times lighter.

## Heide Brandes Never Leaves Home Without her PROBIOTICS

I travel a lot, so that means long hours in airplanes, eating food that I normally don't eat, and imbibing more than I usually do. As I've gotten older, my digestion isn't as strong as it used to be, and I suffer from bloating, inflammation of the guts, and lethargy.

Probiotics are your friend, and while I take them daily, I especially rely on them when traveling. My favorite so far is Nucific Bio-X4, a supplement that has three key digestive enzymes — Amylase, Lipase, and Bromelain. It contains a whopping 12 billion CFUs per serving with Lactobacillus and Bifidobacterium strains of probiotics. An added bonus? It also has EGCG, a natural compound found in green tea, that has been shown in numerous studies to boost metabolism and energy: just what I need after a long plane flight!

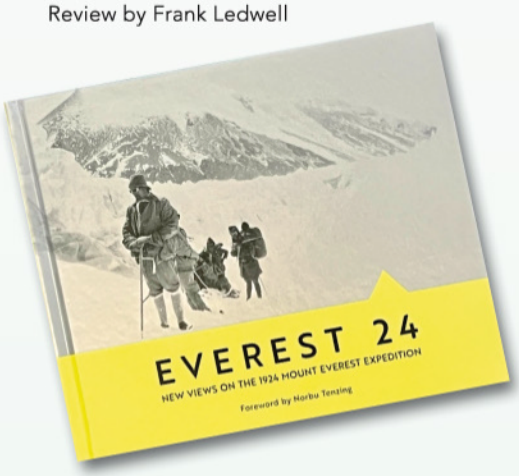
## Bjørn Egge Digs the "ELECTRIC HEART" OF HIS CAMPER SETUP

Bjørn's Goal Zero 1500x Portable Power Station gives him power for everything: diesel heater in the winter, lights, fridge, PC, and his photo equipment. It's a life saver all year round that's charged by the sun and the car when he's on adventure.

# KICKIN' BACK

## EVEREST 24

Review by Frank Ledwell




In 1924, a team of twelve men who were part of a British Mount Everest Expedition Team, recruited Indigenous peoples from the Himalayan region to provide support en route to becoming the first to summit the world's highest peak. Amongst the team was its leader, George Mallory along with compatriot Andrew Irvine, both of whom were last spotted less than 800 feet from the summit before disappearing without a trace. Mallory's body would be found 75 years later when a team that included world-renowned climber Conrad Anker stumbled across his body 2,000 feet below the summit. Irvine's body was never found.

Everest 24 highlights the expedition from 100 years ago with never published images from the collection of the Royal Geographical Society who, along with the Alpine Club of London, had sponsored the original 1924 expedition. The book also chronicles and spotlights the stories of the Indigenous peoples from the region whose role continues to be critical to modern day high mountain climbing. Additionally, the book provides new insights on the fateful 1924 expedition with historical context that's riveting and engaging, whether you're a climber or not.

If you, like me, are fascinated with man's desire to push oneself to its limits and the lore associated with the world's highest peak, I highly recommend picking up a copy of Everest 24 and adding it to your collection. You can learn more and pick-up a copy from the QR code. X4

# OVERLAND

BY JONATHAN HANSON | OVERLAND COLUMNIST

When the great Arab trading caravans, often comprising 150 or more baggage camels, were preparing for long treks across the Sahara—journeys sometimes lasting two months or more—they would first gather at an oasis for several days. This gave them time to check, redistribute, and secure loads, top up with water in their goatskin *gerbas*, gather last-minute provisions, and generally re-adjust to the physical and philosophical rhythm of life on the road.

According to Wilson MacArthur, who with his wife drove a fantastically unreliable (and diplomatically unnamed) new car from Algiers to South Africa in 1954 and told the story in his book *The Desert Watches*, this period was called the *tag-hiz*. The Wilsons adopted the strategy before their own crossing of the Sahara, having no trouble with the rhythm-of-the-road bit but gaining disturbing insight into what lay ahead with the vehicle—insight they boldly or foolishly ignored, to their later regret.

I thought about this idea of a leisurely, thorough pre-trip systems check the other day. We weren't even on a long journey, just a couple nights camping with friends in the oak-clad Dragoon Mountains of southern Arizona, where Cochise made fools of the U.S. Army in the 1860s. I was looking at our clever Front Runner spare-tire-mounted barbecue grille, which was secured to the wheel with a cable and padlock—the key to which was inexplicably missing from the Troopy's key ring. The venison burgers we'd promised our companions were suddenly in danger of substitution with cold cuts. (Not to mention that the same key operated the padlocks securing our propane bottle and jerry cans.)

*Fine*, I thought—*I'll just cut the cable and swage a new lock when we get home*. Except upon diving into the tool kit, I found the normally present heavy-duty side cutters confusingly unpresent. Face-palm as I realized I'd had them out while photographing a tool assembly for an article, and put them in the wrong place when finished. I wound up slowly chewing through the cable with Roseann's vintage first-generation Leatherman, much to her amusement slash dire warnings of the consequences should I tweak it.

On an overnight trip 60 miles from home this was all cause for nothing but minor frustration and major wifely ribbing. But it definitely reinforced the value of pre-trip checks—even simply making sure you have all the f$#@^g keys.

Fortunately, despite this lapse on my part due to oh-it's-just-a-night-or-two complacence, over the years we've been disciples of the *tag-hiz* even before we knew the term. Several days or a week prior to long trips we always deploy whatever camp setup we're using at the time—everything from a ground tent to a Four Wheel Camper and, currently, the Mulgo pop-top on our HZJ75. On one occasion this gave us the time we needed to order new hydraulic struts for the top when one sagged upon deployment. Another time a vehicle check revealed a faulty fusible link connection that randomly cut the headlamps—something that would have been much more than an annoyance had it happened on the road at night. We make sure the water system is functional; we start the fridge several days in advance to ensure the solar panels are keeping up and the house battery is as well.

On major journeys we always try to make the first days' travel short, and if possible wind up near a supply center just in case something shows up in the first few hundred miles. In Australia on our way to the Red Center's remote deserts we hugged the coast and its towns for a few days—which allowed us to discover that a shady mechanic we'd hired in Sydney to install a new timing belt had used a cheap generic oil seal for the cam, not even a Chinese copy of the factory unit, and which puked oil on the forecourt of our hotel. This brief testing period is even more valuable with rental 4x4s with whose history one is not familiar.

Finally, on a morning to morning basis, we conduct what the Brits call "first parades." This is a check of all systems—oil and radiator levels, tire pressure, wheel nuts, windscreen cleaning, with weekly crawls under the vehicle to check major components. Sometimes Toyota owners have to be cajoled into thinking these are necessary, but the reward for doing so, even if you never find anything amiss, is the knowledge that you're treating your vehicle with the respect it deserves.

However you go about it, and for whatever length trip you're starting, a *tag-hiz* will help ensure a trouble- and stress-free journey. Just don't forget to count your keys. X4

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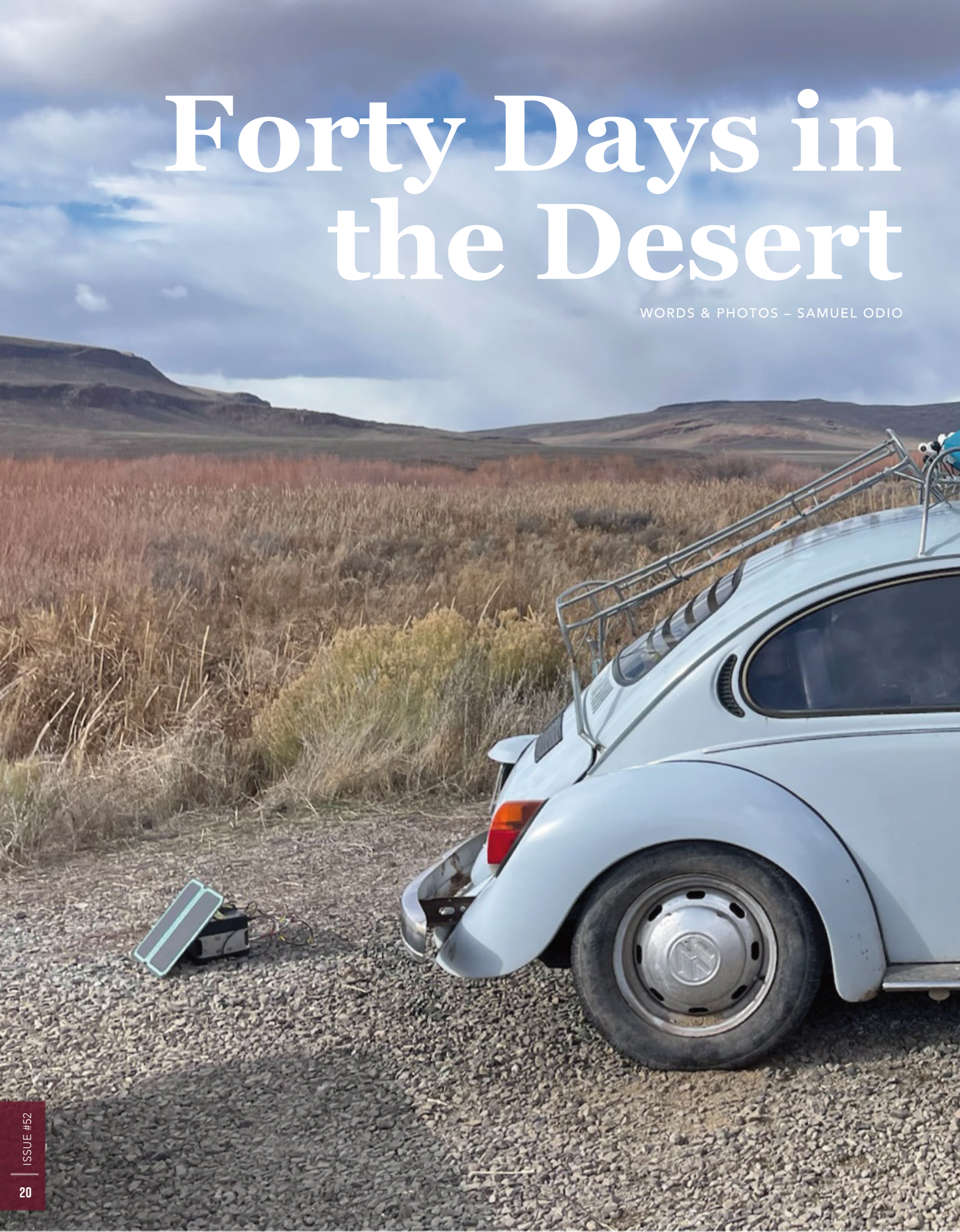
# Forty Days in the Desert

WORDS & PHOTOS – SAMUEL ODIO



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*"The truth is more likely to be found at the bottom and the edges of things than at the top or the center."*

*- Richard Rohr*

Out in the Oregon high desert, twenty-five miles of dirt track from the closest asphalt, there lives - at least momentarily - a man by the name of G.K. Milenio. I am uncertain of G.K.'s given name, for he has no driver's license, and his car has no identification other than a tattered Mexican license plate.

G.K. has made this remote public land his home for the last four months, surviving winter in one of the coldest regions of the state with only the provisions he was able to fit into – or on the roof of – his car. The roof is especially useful, as G.K. also sleeps and cooks in his car, and sleeping and cooking tend to take up precious space in a '90s-era, subcompact VW Beetle.

G.K. will soon be gone, though. A forest ranger stopped by, as they're apt to do on public lands. G.K. knows the patrol has started a clock, and he needs to "move along" before the next patrol or the interaction will be less pleasant. G.K. describes himself as a disabled hermit who goes months without interacting with others and is unable to drive without great exertion and pain, so seeing the ranger is no small event.

Nevermind the complicating detail that his Mexican plates are expired and over a decade old.

G.K. has been living nomadically for some time. Born in the United States, G.K. left the country shortly after college. In 2015, he returned to the U.S. from Sinaloa, Mexico, to get his paperwork sorted and recuperate, with the goal of becoming a citizen elsewhere. Driving north from Mexico, he landed in the Northern Basin and Range, an arid high plateau that spans four states, where precipitation is scarce and usually comes as snow. Nine years later, he's still here.

He can tell I'm questioning his intention to leave the country. "I am more American than baseball. America, to me, stands for peace, freedom, and justice for all. But I don't see many Americans here anymore," he shares, as he eases into a desolate hot spring forty steps from his campsite. I watch the steam rise as the sun sets over a distant horizon, and I begin to think this man has stories to tell. Perhaps that's always the case when one hasn't spoken for months.

The story he wants to tell me is about his injury and miraculous healing on public lands. He talks of a two-decade-long saga. During the first decade, he tried unsuccessfully to convince others - including doctors and his former wife - that he was disabled. After that, he fled society, and has spent the last nine years trying to document and share his recovery. When he describes his injury, he says, "my bones were all going the wrong direction." G.K. has had a long journey of healing through years of solitary meditation and spiritual practice in the desert, and he imagines a story that will become a best-selling documentary.

I struggle to imagine it at all.

The story I want to hear about is of the trials and thoughts of a man who has spent so long in the desert with so little.

"How do you survive the cold winter?" I wonder, knowing in this climate the winter lows average 22 degrees Fahrenheit. "How do you access remote places with a two-wheel-drive car? What if you have to leave?"

I ask these questions after spending months agonizing over different portable space heaters for my trip, some costing several thousand dollars. I see no heater in G.K.'s VW; instead, he has a blanket, kettle, and small stove. He tells stories of a January so cold he has to break the ice twice or three times a day to keep his only water source - a nearby fresh spring - flowing. I push him on the subject: "How do you stay warm?" His reply: "My matcha keeps me warm."

Despite this, he pities my plan to leave after only two nights. "I'm spending forty days solo in the desert," I share. "I guess you can call it a vision quest or maybe a mid-life crisis, but I plan on making it down to Baja." I'm sure to mention Baja so that G.K. understands how epic of a road trip this is going to be. I expect a

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reaction similar to the one I consistently received from friends back home - one best described as incredulity mixed with admiration and envy.

"What are you looking for in Mexico that you can't find here?" he asks instead. I mutter something about kayaking the Sea of Cortez, trailing off as I slowly recognize I have no real answer. He answers for me, almost rhetorically, "All that movement takes tread off your cerebral synapses." Huh? I repeat his sentence out loud, trying to put meaning to the words. Then I think about how I'm going to drive seventy hours on a trip to ostensibly find myself in stillness.

G.K. quickly discerns I'm from a big city. In my itinerary and my built-out camping rig, he sees me "hankering." He says it's "What over how, instead of how over what." I wonder 'how' to make sense of him and ask him 'what' he means. "Hankering is modern people's problem," he says. "Every moment for them is a manifestation of hankering, an embodiment of anxiety. We in modern civilization are in constant search for the 'what:' the next possession, the bucket list item, the external validation. We think the 'what' defines us, our self-worth. We think once we check off all the items on our bucket list, we'll be okay. In reality, what matters isn't the 'what,' it's the 'how.' "

As he talks, one line catches my attention: "This hankering, this search for the 'what,' it's like a twitch you can't control." I think of the many times on this trip something around me hijacked my attention and purpose. I see dirty laundry and am soon getting out the bucket and soap. An unread book reminds me of work not yet done, and soon I'm ruminating on my competence as an employee back home. Then I think of life back in civilization, away from the desert. I think of my phone, helpfully telling me I spend hours every day on it - constantly responding to and triaging the hundreds of notifications it pushes into my attention. All of this I do subconsciously; my behavior is driven by my environment. Twitches.

No thought given to the 'how.'

I drift back to the conversation. G.K., as if sensing my train of thought, quotes a German philosopher: "The hammer shapes the hand." He elaborates: "To stop the obsession over the 'what,' we can't do that through sheer force of will. We must nudge our environment to nudge ourselves. A 1% nudge every day is all we can do, but the change adds up, it compounds." I think about how our tools have shaped our culture and society; how they have shaped our collective wants and desires; how they've shaped our attention span, our tolerance for one another, and our tolerance for different ideas. I wonder, what are these changes compounding to?

G.K. leaves me with a challenge: "What if Mexico is a reward? Something you do once you've mastered the 'how' and are worthy?" I tell him I don't understand and ask for examples. G.K. talks about his diet, and how he recently added chickpeas after mastering eating only rice and beans. It still doesn't connect for me. He goes on to talk about his wife, and how he drove her away with his anger. He talks about his feelings of shame around that, and how much he wants a family. He talks about how he's working on himself now, and when the time is right, he'll consider himself worthy to pursue courtship again.

As he's talking, I slowly realize there aren't many things I abstain from because I don't consider myself worthy. If I'm going camping, I have to have the perfect setup for it. It doesn't matter if I'm spending more on the gear than the trip. If I'm driving by a fast-food joint and find myself craving it, I'll probably indulge. I think about my children and marriage, and how at my worst moments I can't control bringing frustration and judgment into those relationships. Am I worthy of them? Have I done the work? I'm slowly beginning to wonder, am I the America that G.K. doesn't recognize?

The next day I pack up and get an early start, saying goodbye to G.K. and thanking him on the way out. "Try the Alvord

Desert," he says, giving me directions to a remote campsite that's sixty miles west and no less beautiful than the one we're at. It's one of the many campsites he knows well, like rooms in a house. As he's sharing the location of this hidden gem, I imagine this man, with so little, might be wealthier than anyone I know.

I thank him sincerely and drive off, lost in thought. "Why am I on this trip?" I wonder. "What am I looking for?" "What is driving me?" As I ponder these questions, I look at the intersection ahead of me. To the west is the Alvord Desert and an opportunity to reflect in silence. An opportunity, I realize, to work on the 'how.' Fifteen-hundred miles south is Loreto, Mexico.

I turn south. A 1% change, it turns out, is all I can do. X4

## SAMUEL ODIO — AUTHOR BIO

Samuel cut his teeth in photography early in his career, building mobile photography technology and running Facebook's photo product. He began overlanding shortly after, traveling through the American West in a 1995 NAS Defender 90 and living in an Airstream trailer. This lifestyle of simplicity, creativity, and exploration quickly became a source of community and meaning. More recently, Samuel enjoys traveling with his wife and two young children across Western North America. His favorite recent memory was a three-month overland through the Mojave Desert and fifteen National Parks with his six-month-old son. In addition to Overlanding, Samuel also enjoys exploring the waters of the Puget Sound.

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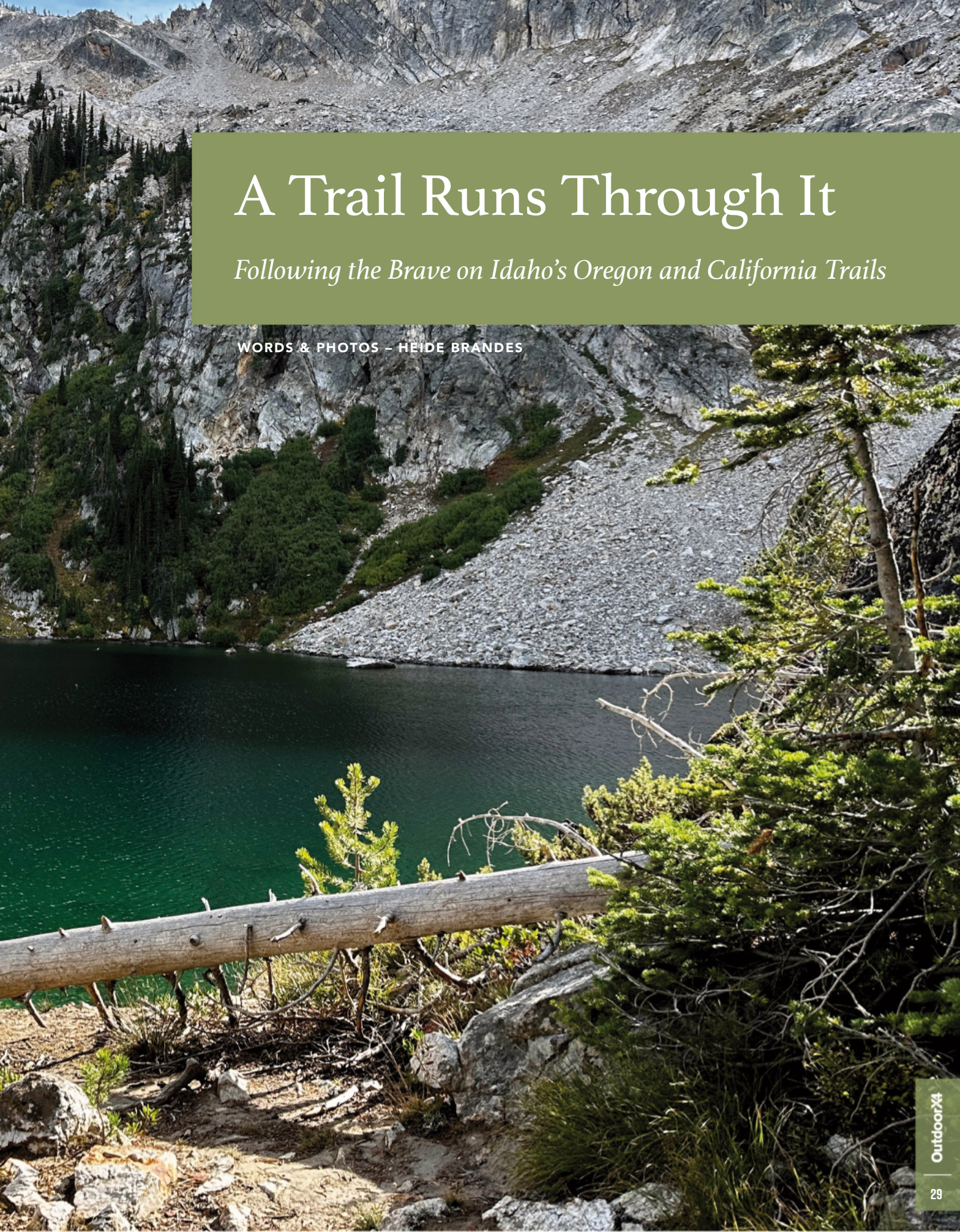
# A Trail Runs Through It

*Following the Brave on Idaho's Oregon and California Trails*

WORDS & PHOTOS – HEIDE BRANDES



Bernard J. Reid was stunned at what he was seeing that sweltering August day in 1849. He, along with a dozen or so other emigrants traveling in covered wagons, had just reached southeast Idaho to follow the gold trail to California in 1849, and challenges, danger and death seemed to follow the emigrants every step of the journey.

After weeks of battling drought, the searing pain of hunger, conflicts with Native American tribes and watching friends and family fall to disease, southern Idaho's City of Rocks National Reserve must have seemed like a fairy tale land of beauty and respite.

Reid spent weeks under a scorching sky in Wyoming, so the Bear Valley and the Bear River section of Idaho leading towards City of Rocks near Almo, Idaho was an oasis of water, wild berries, fresh grass, cottonwood trees and game like elk, deer and waterfowl.

"Another two miles (we) enter a rocky dell some 4 miles long by a winding road running among the most grotesque rocks standing out single in the valley, or grouped fantastically together," he wrote in his diary, now preserved for more than 100 years.

"There were sphinxes and statues of every size, and haystacks and wigwams and castles, and towers, and pyramids and cones and projecting turrets and canopies, and leaning columns and so on throughout a thousand varieties of fantastic shapes."

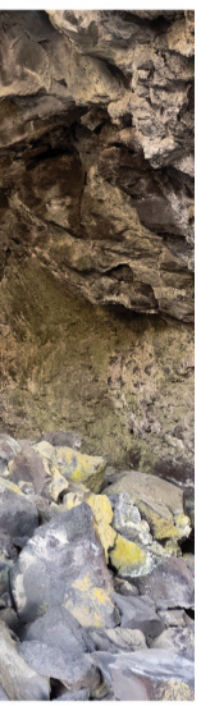
On a similar fall morning in September, my adventure buddy Lyle and I stood at that same spot where hundreds of thousands of emigrants traveling the California Trail through Idaho saw their first glimpse of City of Rocks National Preserve. After miles of flat plains with mountains smoky in the distance, to go over a hill to see a landscape of weird, towering rocks and formations had to have been mind blowing.

## *It certainly was for us.*

In the 10 days we bumped over Idaho's twisting highways and rocky backroads, the specters of those who forged forward, suffered, died and survived the famed California Gold Trail and Oregon Trail followed us, whispering history into the wind and through the gorges and even in the rushing menacing waters of the river.

During the height of the westward migration from America's eastern states to Oregon and California from about 1840 to 1869, more than 300,000 stalwart emigrants traveled the Oregon Trail to claim their own piece of the West. Another 200,000 went to seek their fortune in gold along the California Trail between 1841 and 1869.

Of the 2,000-miles of trail stretching from Missouri to the Oregon Territory, 500 miles went through Idaho, perhaps one of the harshest landscapes the emigrants tackled, besides unforgiving



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desert landscapes and the fearsome Snake River, the emigrants suffered from rampant disease, lethal river crossings, conflicts and starvation.

The California Trail wasn't much better, though cholera took its toll more severely than on the Oregon Trail.

Coming up upon a landscape of stone castles, towering granite mountains and hundreds of piles, peaks, steeples and domes must have felt like stepping into a type of Eden. Game abounded, the water was clean, and the landscape was gorgeous.

We were here to find those same routes and magic that the emigrants discovered. It wasn't hard. We found magic everywhere in Idaho.

## A TALE OF TWO TRAILS

"Idaho, what ARE you?" my friend Lyle asked for the umpteenth time since we started our journey through Idaho's southern and central region three days prior. Neither of us had been to Idaho. I came because a friend told me once it was one of the last truly wild and untamed places in the lower 48. Lyle came for the Oregon Trail… and a bit of adventure as well.

Thanks to the popularity of the series "Yellowstone" spinoff "1883," which takes place on the Oregon Trail, this westward route that helped shape the West for better or worse has found itself yet again in the spotlight.

Unlike Lyle, who had researched and read about the trail for years, I was more ignorant about the history than I cared to admit.

"I love trailing in the footsteps of the most intrepid bunch of dreamers in American history," Lyle said when I asked him about why he was so into Oregon Trail history. "Imagine… taking off from a stable homeland into the terrifying unknown of ruffage and sage brush with only the rumors of blue shores in Oregon or hopes of finding gold nuggets the size of a goat's head. That took a lot of bravery and hope."

According to the U.S. Forestry Service, the main Oregon Trail from Three Island Crossing to Boise was the primary route used for the first 10 years of the trail. Those emigrants who could not cross the Snake River were forced to follow the south side of the Snake River on a route known as the South Alternate.

While the California Trail had several different routes to the West Coast, one led California-bound pioneers through southeast Idaho while another went from Salt Lake City northward to Idaho to rejoin the main trail at the City of Rocks near Granite Pass.

The City of Rocks National Reserve was notable for more than its striking landscapes, now a playground for hikers, campers and brave-hearted rock climbers. Many migrations split from the Oregon Trail and followed the California Trail here.

Once in City of Rocks, travelers found themselves overwhelmed and impressed by the magnificent granite rock formations around them. They left their mark at places like Register Rock where they scrawled their name onto the granite in axle grease.

"A. Freeman, June 12.50; T. Tickner, June 12.50" the graffiti reads, next to more modern, shameful garish graffiti from ignorant tourists. I cast my eyes away from the present-day ugly scrawl to wonder about A. Freeman's reasons for leaving his home to brave the wild west, only to find himself on June12, 1850 right where I was standing.

## RUTS IN THE GROUND

Somehow, we lost the hiking trail from where we parked our home on wheels at the Twin Sisters Campsite at City of Rocks. Named for the two giant granite formations that served as a landmark along the California Trail, the Twin Sisters Campsite was within a short hike to Pinnacle Pass, the narrow path that the wagons used to cross over.

We meant to hike past the camp up to Pinnacle Pass where rangers told us we could still see the ruts on the granite where the wagon trains passed. Instead, we stumbled among sagebrush, climbing in and out of peaks and boulders, utterly lost except for our Twin Sisters landmarks. Our shoes soaked up the early evening drizzle that was spitting down on us, and more than once, I wondered if we were ever going to find the ruts that Lyle wanted to see so much.

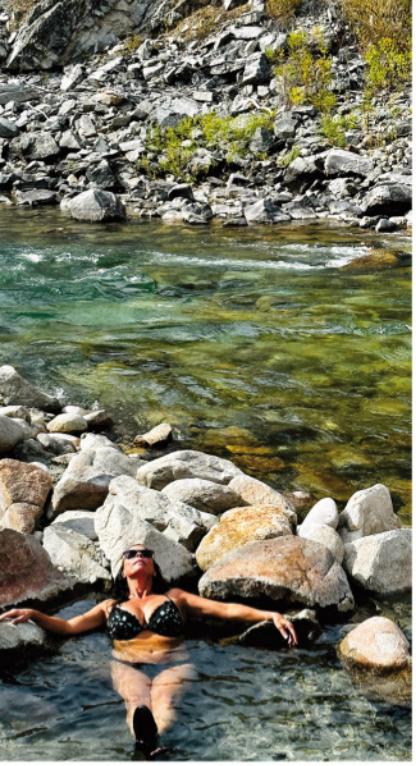
"Is that it?" I asked, as we finally found the narrow pass that could be the only passage the wagons must have taken. Along the rock "road," two faint indentions ran across the trail, ghosts of more than 200,000 people who stood in the same area we were.

"I think that's it," he said, bending down to inspect the maybe 2-foot-long marks. After more than an hour of bushwhacking through the scrub sage and slipping along the sides of mountains, the marks may have seemed anti-climactic to many. To us, it was a step back in time.

Visitors to Idaho who are searching for history must stop at the National Oregon/California Trail Center of Montpelier, Idaho. In addition to being a wealth of information about the history of the trail and filled with artifacts from brave souls, the center has an interactive exhibit where you become part of a pioneer wagon company headed West. You complete the 2,000-mile journey along the Oregon/California Trail - in just one hour.

Three Island Crossing State Park, located on the Snake River at Glenns Ferry houses the Glenns Ferry Historical Museum and The Oregon Trail History and Education Center, where visitors can learn about pioneer emigrants and Native American history.

But if you're on the road, the history of the trails can be found on two or four wheels.



## FOLLOWING THE TRAIL

U.S. Interstate 20 through Idaho cuts through some of the state's emptiest spaces, volcanic regions and looming mountain ranges, but irrigation has altered the land considerably from what the emigrants saw. These days, green crops and even vineyards have replaced the plains of sagebrush. Back in the day, this region was one of the greatest challenges to those on the Oregon Trail.

The Main Oregon Trail Back Country Byway (MOTBCB) today along I-20 follows the Oregon Trail from the crossing of the Snake River near Glenns Ferry to Bonneville Point, southeast of Boise. Oregon Trail ruts are visible along much of this route, and in several places, you can even hike along the Oregon Trail. The total distance of the byway is 102 miles, and it takes about eight hours to complete the entire route from Boise.

In Boise, Idaho's jumping and hip capital city, the Oregon Trail Reserve's 77-acre site also boasts of wagon ruts that were carved by thousands of wheels between 1843 and 1867. The interpretive sites include stories and remnants of the Oregon Trail and the challenges and experiences travelers faced in this area.

As we drove the many highways in Idaho, we made it a point to stop at every historical marker we passed. Just south of Boise on the way to surf down the massive mountains of sand at Bruneau Dunes State Park, we veered off to see the Main Oregon Trail Back Country Byway site of Bonneville Point.

After traveling through the dry and rough high desert of central Idaho, this point gave the long-suffering emigrants the first glimpse of the Boise River Valley, a green land lined with cottonwood trees and resplendent with lush grass.

At the most southeast point of the trail is Bown Creek, a large granite boulder that became known as an "emigrant post office." Like at Register Rock, emigrants wrote their names in axle grease here, though time has faded many of the names.

It was also near here that the travelers braved the Three Island Crossing, one of the most dangerous and lethal of the Snake River crossings. Because of its deadly currents, many emigrants continued down the south side of the river, and ruts are still visible to this day on the bluffs and fields.

At Hot Springs Creek, more ruts are visible on the east side of the creek, and beyond that, the Hot Springs location was mentioned in nearly every emigrant diary. Here, hot water gurgling from underground mixed with a cold-water stream, probably the first "hot bath" many of the pioneers had for weeks. Those springs are no more, however, thanks to modern-day irrigation wells.

## NOT ALL RUTS AND REMEMBERING

On our sprawling and road-filled journey through Idaho, we also saw sights the emigrants didn't. The eerie volcanic fields of Craters of the Moon National Monument, roughly three hours east of Boise, is a weird Lovecraftian landscape filled with yawning craters, deep chasms and dark lava caves. It's stark and menacing and beautiful at the same time, encompassing 750,000-acres along the Great Rift, a 52-mile-long crack in the Earth's crust. Celebrating its Centennial of being named a national monument in 2024, Craters of the Moon is simply otherworldly. I wondered if the emigrants would have thought they were on another planet if they had stumbled upon this hellish and fascinating landscape.

North of Boise along the Oregon border, we weaved along a winding road to Hell's Canyon, the deepest river gorge in North America before heading north to where the Sawtooth Mountains loom like the fangs of some great bear.

In Ponderosa State Park near the boutique tourist town of McCall, we hiked among cattails and deer and giant Ponderosa pines. We sipped whiskey among the glassy stares of an incredible deer mount collection, Native American artifacts and Ernest Hemingway collections at the Pioneer Saloon in Ketchum and we lounged in the hot waters of Idaho's many natural hot springs.

On our last day, we trekked 10 miles on the Sawtooth Lake Trail outside of historic Stanley, Idaho to Alpine Lake, a glossy, clear oasis of peaceful views of the scenic peaks of Grand Mogul and Elephant's Perch.

Though the pioneers who traveled over the Oregon Trail in the 1840s and 1850s rarely settled in Idaho, future pioneers did. Today, the state boasts the highest growth in population of any state in the U.S., though the entire state still only has barely over 1.9 million people total.

In those 10 days chasing trails in Idaho, we felt like we only scratched the surface. Next time, we will hit the snaky roads that lead to the state's wild and untamed "top hat" wilderness region where towns are tiny and scattered and the wolves and moose still rule the land. And, yes, there will be a next time.

*Idaho is just too adventurous and beautiful for just one road trip.* **X4**

## HEIDE BRANDES — AUTHOR BIO

Heide Brandes is an award-winning journalist and editor with more than 20 years of experience writing for numerous state, regional, and national publications. Her writing has appeared in National Geographic, BBC Travel, Southern Living, The Smithsonian, Cowboys & Indians, Sierra Magazine, ROVA, Roadtrippers, Garden & Gun, Forbes and more.

Besides freelancing fulltime, Heide is an avid traveler, medieval warrior, hiker, professional belly dancer and belly dance instructor and kind of a quirky chick who lives in Oklahoma City.

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# DEEP IN THE HEART OF TEXAS

## Adventure Abounds Along the Lone Star Hiking Trail

WORDS & PHOTOS – RETHA CHARETTE

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G TRAIL

As I slid my foot out of my soggy trail runners, I could feel my heartbeat pulsing in my pinky toe. Once I peeled off my toe sock liners, I saw the white, mushy bubble in all its disgusting glory sticking out like a sixth toe off my right foot. Considering this was only my first day along the Lone Star Hiking Trail (LSHT), this was not a good sign. I had 19.7 miles down, and 76.7 to go.

A month before I grew my new toe, I casually Googled, "best winter thru hikes." I needed to get out of the snow and cold. Living in Vermont provides me great access to the Appalachian Trail, the Adirondacks, and the White Mountains during the summer to hike to my heart's content. But during the winter, I'm an indoor cat. While lounging by the wood stove and apres ski is fun, by February I'm over it and ready to take my backpack on another adventure. After reading a few articles and discovering that the Lone Star Hiking Trail is north of Houston, where I have several friends, it was decided! I was Texas bound.

Like any experienced hiker, I started my planning with the most important thing: finding out what could kill me on the LSHT. Turns out, there were quite a few things: coral snakes, water moccasins, copperheads, wild boars, alligators, and the Chupacabra. I can't confirm that the Chupacabra is actually out there, but was told to keep an eye out for it by members of the Lone Star Hiking Trail Facebook group I had joined. As for all the other critters, I either saw them or found evidence of them during my hike. I kept my distance and made it out unscathed, but I was tempted to make friends with a beautiful coral snake.

A challenge I hadn't faced on any of my other long distance hikes was a lack of water; the Appalachian Trail isn't known to be very dry. I read blogs about people dropping water caches at trailheads before getting on trail. The official guide book discussed long water carries between sources that were murky and full of sediment. Thankfully, Mother Nature smiled upon me, and it rained a lot the week before my hike. I had no issues finding water, and with help from my Sawyer Squeeze water filter, that water was safe to drink.

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During my trip prep I did make a couple of mistakes. I got so excited about the hike that I went grocery shopping at my local grocery store. It's like I forgot there were stores in Texas. I still feel really stupid about that. The other big mistake I made happened because I don't usually fly with all my backpacking gear. As a result, I neglected to remove my pocket knife from my first aid kit. When the TSA guy said: "You've got a HUGE knife in your bag!" I was simultaneously embarrassed and angry at myself. I really loved that knife. I hope there's a raccoon at a garbage dump in Albany, New York, making good use of it. Thankfully, I was able to drown my tears in Tex Mex and margaritas upon arrival in Texas.

After the first day of hiking while I was inspecting my blisters, I could have used another margarita. My feet would have still been in pain, but the icy goodness would have cooled me off. The tequila would have helped too. I have hiked thousands of miles in my hiking career and have never had blisters that bad. And they were everywhere.

I wanted to soak my feet in the lake just behind my campsite, but thought I spotted an alligator. Thinking I'd rather have sore feet than no feet, I climbed into my tent. Using my backpack to elevate my feet, and some ibuprofen to dull the pain, I fell asleep listening to the wind and wondering how I was going to make the 18.6 miles I had planned for the next day.

Start. Stop. Start. Stop. All. Day. Long. I couldn't stay on my feet for very long because my sixth toe kept getting bigger and bigger. Then came the smud. It's not quite sand and it's not quite mud, and I'm not a geologist, so smud it is. It's sandy, sticky, and made me slide for a solid mile and a half. My first step onto the smud I slipped, tried to use my trekking poles to catch myself, but didn't. I ended up in a half split with one arm in the air, the other jamming my pole into the mud. I felt like a D-list figure skater.

Once I got the hang of walking through the smud it started to cake to the bottom of my shoes. At one point I think I had

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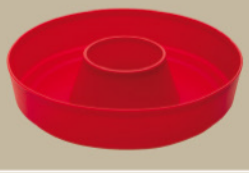

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Entering
LITTLE
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National Forest

grown two inches taller. It felt good being that tall until I used my trekking pole to try and get the smud off the bottom of my shoes which caused me to lose my balance and fall flat on my ass.

I was so frustrated that it felt like steam was coming out of my ears. I screamed a word that rhymes with duck at the top of my lungs and set up my tent in the first flat spot I could find. It wasn't even 5 pm, but I wasn't walking a single step more. My saving grace that night was the Mountain House Chicken Fajita Bowl I had for dinner and my dessert of a Hershey bar with almonds topped with peanut butter.

When things get tough on the trail I try to find my zen. I think that's what makes a long distance hiker: the ability to make hiking a walking meditation, to tune out the rest of the world and just be on the trail with your thoughts. There are many ways to do this and not a single right answer, each hiker needs to find it in themselves. In the mornings, I like to hike and listen to the birds chattering away to each other in the trees. On hot afternoons it helps to distract myself with an audio book. I especially love a book series if the trail is really long. The dorkiest thing I do is put on a playlist with the perfect balance of Broadway show tunes and songs from '90s Disney movies. This usually ends with me breaking out into song and dance on the trail. I've been told people get secondhand embarrassment when seeing this, but I couldn't care less.

I used these tactics to chill out and turn on the joy I needed to finish my hike. I spent the last three and a half days of my hike amplifying the positive aspects around me while facing the negative head on. I stopped along the trail more frequently when an area spoke to me, and took some time to geocache along the trail. Geocaching is using million dollar satellites to find tupperware hidden in the woods. You can learn all about geocaching by checking out Issue 4 of *OutdoorX4 Magazine*. One of the days I just sat trailside for a while, eyes closed, listening to everything around me.

That doesn't mean the remainder of the trail was unicorns and rainbows. When doing the water crossing at the San Jacinto River I couldn't get out of the water because the bank was steep and muddy. I ended up with my legs covered in mud, a bloody knee, and a wet butt. Thankfully the river was alligator free! My last night on the trail was spent trapped in my tent from the time I stopped walking until the next morning due to swarms of blood-sucking mosquitoes.

On my last morning, after leaving the vampire bug campsite, I heard a barred owl call. One of my random talents is that I'm pretty good at owl calls. I sat down and let out a loud, "Who cooks for you? Who cooks for youuuuuu?" No response. I did the call again, and as I finished, a barred owl landed in a tree fifty yards from me. I did the call one last time and it humored me by calling back. I'd like to think this was the trail's way of bidding me farewell.

Around 10:30 am on March 12th, I reached the Winter's Bayou parking lot and completed my thru-hike of the Lone Star Hiking Trail. I climbed atop the roadside sign marking the area, taking in the sun and airing out my feet. An old-timer pulled into the parking lot and proceeded to remove trail maintenance tools from his trunk. We had an exchange, like many lovers of the outdoors do.

"Nice day," he said. "How was your hike?"

I asked him how long he had been volunteering to do trail clean-up, and he told me over twenty years.

Something I don't think gets spoken about enough in the hiking community are the people who make thru-hiking possible. There are people who have been here before us that made it possible. In the case of the Lone Star Hiking Trail, it started with the Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club. Without their vision to bring more hiking to Texas in the late 1960s, the trail wouldn't be there today. From the trail maintenance volunteers that we may never meet – to the friends and family rooting us on at home – we couldn't have these amazing adventures without their support. As a result, while I did this hike solo, I was never truly alone. X4

## RETHA CHARETTE — AUTHOR BIO

Retha Charette is a backpacking coach, adventure traveler, long distance hiker, and blogger with over 15 years of international hiking experience. Her love of nature started at age five when she joined the Girl Scouts and has blossomed into a full-blown obsession. She has logged over 3,500 miles on trails around the world across six continents. Retha shares her passion for the outdoors on her blog RoamingNanny.com to help more women explore nature and gain the confidence to adventure on their own. She believes in making space for everyBODY in the outdoors because Mother Nature's beauty is for all to enjoy. Retha's goal is to hike 10,000 miles in her lifetime. While she has a long way to go, she's ready for the challenge!

In addition to hiking, Retha enjoys gardening, musical theater, reading fantasy novels, hand embroidery, and is a self-proclaimed Disney adult (and she's not embarrassed at all!).

# RUN YOUR TRAIL FURTHER

GORE-TEX INVISIBLE FIT **NEW FOR SPRING 2024 | FORTUX GTX** | Men's Dune/Flame

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# TREADMARKS | *Angels' Rescue*

**WORDS - BILL DRAGOO**

One should always be mindful of fuel range and status, especially when traveling. This truth came to me on Interstate 10, driving across South Texas not long after passing a Love's with 75 miles range registering on the dash of my 5.7-liter, Hemi-powered Ram 1500. Gas stops are few and far between along this unforgiving stretch of desert thoroughfare and, bucking a stiff crosswind, my rig is less than economical.

Before I knew it, 10 miles remained and the closest gas was still 30 miles away. I spied a couple stopped beside the road towing a side-by-side with their SUV. Hopeful and approaching desperation, I pulled over. They had just swapped out a flat tire on the trailer and they thanked me for stopping to help. "Actually," I confessed, "I was hoping you might have a couple of gallons of gas."

"We are only transporting our RZR," they replied, "and we left our cans at home." I drove on, praying I would not feel the dreaded death surge before my engine sputtered to a stop. I exited at a county road, hoping to make it to a ranch I could see from the highway. Approaching the closed gate I read the sign, "If you question eternity, go ahead and trespass. You will know soon." I reversed course and headed back to the highway where maybe I could at least catch a ride once the engine flamed out. My motorcycle was in the bed of the truck but it too was low on fuel and unloading there could be sketchy. Besides, I had no way to carry gas.

I spied a fellow on a Harley-Davidson who had, coincidentally, taken the same obscure exit to dig some debris from his eye. Of course, he also had no way to haul extra fuel but I offered water to flush his eye, which he declined. Back at my truck, I tried siphoning from my bike's tank but only got a couple of quarts. Tom, the Harley rider, rumbled over and offered fuel from his bike saying, "My dad would have killed me for leaving you here." We scrounged a couple of cast-off bottles and Mac-gyvered a transfer and funnel system from his bike to my truck. I soon had enough gasoline to make it on to Ozona, where I could fill my tank.

Back on the interstate I came across a Ford Super Duty and trailer with a red gas can suspended from the driver's mirror, a sure sign of another driver succumbing to the same fate as me. I pulled up and a man stepped out, almost in disbelief that I had

*"Show kindness to strangers: for by this some have entertained angels unawares."*

stopped. His name was Angel, I kid you not. "I have been waiting for help since 9 o'clock this morning," he said. It was almost 3 p.m. One driver had stopped and then drove on, saying he couldn't help. A wrecker company had offered to bring five gallons of diesel for $400. This was beyond my new friend's budget. I tossed his gas can in the bed of my truck and off we went to satisfy the thirst of both our rigs. During the drive I learned that Angel was from Cuba and worked transporting equipment cross-country. He said he loved America and had worked here for 19 years after first living a short time in Spain. He hoped soon to bring his wife here too.

Significant opportunities often arise when we are vulnerable or when we take the chance to help someone else who is in a similar predicament. In my case, I had been rescued by an angel on a Harley, only to be given the chance to rescue another Angel within minutes. Was this fate, coincidence or divine intervention? Maybe I was just lucky but I had an odd feeling as I continued to my destination, two hours late but under my own power… or was I? X4

## 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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# 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.

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Special thanks to SUBARU for the printing of this poster.

# THE GREAT ESCAPE

Climbing on in the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge in Oklahoma
- by Cheyenne Wuthrich

# THE GREAT ESCAPE

Enjoying the views from Dead Horse Point in Utah - by Jon Wilhite

# THE GREAT ESCAPE

Taking a break before setting up basecamp - by Shalee Super

# Around the Campfire

## *with SylvanSport*

### *The Nexus of Design and Innovation*

WORDS – JASON R. SAKURAI
PHOTOS – JASON SAKURAI AND COURTESY OF SYLVANSPORT

GO WILL FOLLOW YOU WHEREVER THE TRAIL LEADS. (PHOTO: SYLVANSPORT)

*It's not often that you find a company founder who is as passionate about design as Thomas Dempsey of Brevard, North Carolina's SylvanSport. Tom, a 1989 graduate of Auburn University's industrial design program, started designing Coleman pop-up campers and Perception kayaks following graduation, before founding Liquidlogic, a kayak manufacturer, in 2000.*

*We caught up with Dempsey to hear about SylvanSport, a maker of some very distinctive trailers and roof top tents, which he established in 2004. Centered around the REI customer, he had the notion that outdoor adventure should be attainable, a novel idea at the time.*

**OX4: Hi Tom, tell us a little about the state of RVs and pop up tents at the time you started SylvanSport.**

**TD:** Roof top tents (RTTs) such as AutoHome had been in existence in Italy since the '70s. I started looking at suppliers, but most were 'rough,' or unrefined. I had never compromised previously, and I wasn't about to do this with SylvanSport.

**OX4: How did GO come to fruition? What prompted you to create such a unique, versatile camper?**

**TD:** To my way of thinking, REI customers were among the first to pursue crossovers between camping and recreation. In separating gear from RVing, GO was the reinvention of pop-up campers, lightweight campers taken out of the RV space to address the REI crowd.

When we introduced it in 2008, GO was in many ways ahead of its time. Here was a trailer weighing 840 lbs. with a carrying capacity of 810 lbs. The tent pod sleeps up to four adults in multiple configurations, there's 6' 5" of standing room, and a fold-down dining table is included.

READY TO CAMP, THE TRAILOFT CAN ACCOMMODATE KAYAKS, BIKES AND MORE. (PHOTO: SYLVANSPORT)

THE LOFT IS SPACIOUS AND EASY TO USE. (PHOTO: J. SAKURAI)

SYLVANSPORT'S LOW PROFILE LOFT RTT ATOP LEITNER DESIGNS' ACS FORGED RACK. (PHOTO: J. SAKURAI)

ALL PACKED UP AND READY TO GO OFF-ROAD? (PHOTO: SYLVANSPORT)

GO EASY: THE ALTERNATIVE TO LOADING AND UNLOADING THE VAN'S ROOF RACK. (PHOTO: SYLVANSPORT)

WE MARVELED AT THE GO'S CAPACITY. (PHOTO: SYLVANSPORT)

GO was intended for young, active families or couples who are into mountain biking or kayaking. It was also targeted towards retirees or RVers who wanted to downsize from a traditional RV, and have a trailer that was less complex but still facilitated outdoor activities and adventure travel.

You can haul cargo boxes, coolers, dirt bikes, a kayak or an ATV. The GO can also accommodate furniture or anything else you may need to transport. That's the appeal of its adaptability.

In the current economy, it underscores the GO's value proposition. While it will never be a hardcore overlanding trailer, for most occasional off-roaders or off-grid campers, it works really well. It's still a very capable, robust trailer.

## OX4: What motivates you as a product designer?

**TD:** A passion for creating a 'delightful user experience.' Two college professors of mine studied Bauhaus, which combines the Arts and Crafts movement with modernism. The emphasis is on function and to bring art back into contact with everyday life. Typical Bauhaus designs feature little ornamentation and focus on balanced forms and shapes. This continues to influence my designs.

EUROLOFT LIFT IS ONE OF TWO QUEEN BEDS IN THE VAST. (PHOTO: SYLVANSPORT)

VAST'S WALL-MOUNTED KAYAK

VAST'S BATH EXPANDS TO FULL-SIZE WHEN THE KITCHEN SLIDES OUT. (PHOTO: SYLVANSPORT)

VAST OPENS UP THE CARGO AREA AND INSIDE/OUTSIDE GALLEY KITCHEN. (PHOTO: SYLVANSPORT)

S OR BOARDS ARE EASILY ACCESSED. (PHOTO: SYLVANSPORT)

WOULD YOU EXPECT ANYTHING LESS THAN A VAST AMOUNT OF STORAGE? (PHOTO: SYLVANSPORT)

**OX4: Expanding on that, where do your efforts need to be to have the best user experience?**

**TD:** Perfection is impossible to attain, but the user experience should be where you can't find 'holes' in it, whether you're an expert user or a casual camper.

We rely on near instantaneous feedback from users. We have an Owners Tab on our website where you can access our Knowledge Base, Videos & Resources Tab, learning materials and technical documentation.

The SylvanSport Owners Group (https://www.facebook.com/groups/SylvanSportOwnersGroup) is a community of owners, partners, and product experts where you may find a solution faster.

You can also use the Chat Bot on our website, email us, or call Customer Service.

**OX4: After GO, what was the next product you developed?**

**TD:** Our next development was the GO EASY, a 270-lb. micro cargo trailer capable of carrying canoes, kayaks, bicycles or other outdoor gear. It was designed for people with small vehicles that don't have the capacity or a roof rack to haul all their gear.

**OX4: Roof top tents have been in existence for a long time. At what point did you decide SylvanSport could develop a better incarnation?**

**TD:** In 2015-2016, our 117-lb. roof top tent, LOFT, came about as a companion to GO EASY. Yes, LOFT can be mounted directly to a vehicle, but when it's paired with GO EASY, you have a 387-lb. cargo trailer that carries all your gear, with a roof top tent that's easy to access and that's ready to use in under ten seconds. It's called the TRAILoft.

The TRAILoft allows you to disconnect the trailer from your vehicle without needing to pack up. It's waist high, so it makes getting in and out of the TRAILoft simple, especially at night, and you can still use the trailer to carry your gear without losing any of your tow vehicle's capacity.

**OX4: Tell us more about VAST, your most ambitious and largest product introduction to date.**

**TD:** Consumers expect the latest in technology, but they also camp to get away from excess. VAST is simple, in that everything works without surplus.

GO EASY CARRIES WHAT YOUR TRUCK OR SUV CAN'T. (PHOTO: SYLVANSPORT)

In most mid-size travel trailers, carrying gear or toys is an afterthought. VAST accommodates kayaks, bikes, and gear without sacrificing the ability to use the kitchen, bathroom, or lounge area. Kayak racks are mounted on the side, so they're easy to reach and bike or gear storage is located inside the tailgate, which opens up the entire back end of the trailer.

VAST is a big leap forward. We've applied mathematical proportions along with good design to arrive at a format that's pleasing to the eye, yet the layout of the interior is one foot narrower than most. It has a slide-out kitchen that allows you to cook inside or outside, a shell that won't leak, a shower that you can move around in, and most importantly, the ability to carry bikes, kayaks, and all your gear. While VAST is beautiful on the outside, its beauty runs all the way down to the core.

What we learned with VAST can now be applied to other trailers. It was a huge engineering lift.

**OX4: If you were to compare SylvanSport to any other company or brand, what would that be?**

**TD:** I'd like to think we're the 'Apple of the outdoors'. From concept to design, prototype to production, we never leave anything untouched. I like to think our attention to detail is second to none. All contact points are smooth and comfortable, with no sharp edges. We are conscious of this throughout the process.

There's one thing I'd like to add, a quote that applies to design aesthetics:

"For the simplicity on this side of complexity, I wouldn't give you a fig. But for the simplicity on the other side of complexity, for that I would give you anything I have." - Oliver Wendell Holmes

Thanks to Tom Dempsey for an enlightening conversation on innovative product design. You can learn more about SylvanSport and their accoutrement of products by visiting their website at www.sylvansport.com. X4

## JASON SAKURAI — AUTHOR BIO

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

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

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# The Route of the Hiawatha

WORDS & PHOTOS – BOB THEOBALD

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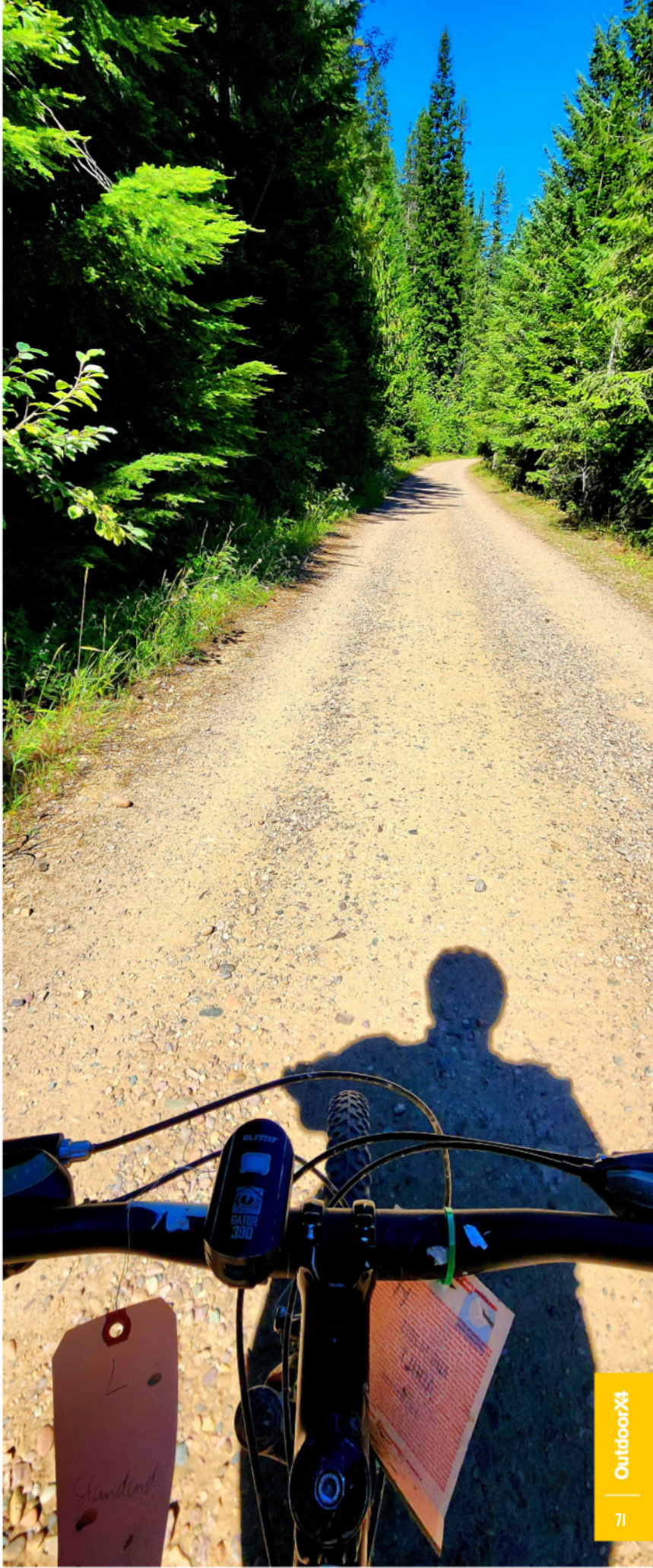
Nestled amidst the breathtaking beauty of the Bitterroot Mountains lies the Route of the Hiawatha, a bicycle trail that embraces the connection with nature and the spirit of adventure. The story of the Hiawatha Bike Trail is a tale of transformation and resilience, where cyclists experience the echoes of a bygone era. This recreational trail invites travelers to explore the stunning landscapes woven into the Bitterroot Mountains of northern Idaho and northwestern Montana.

The history of the trail starts over 110 years ago.  In the late 19th century, the railroad industry was at the forefront of progress and expansion in the United States. In 1907, the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad, commonly known as the Milwaukee Road, commenced an audacious venture to connect Chicago to the untamed beauty of the Pacific Northwest.

The Milwaukee Road was an ambitious undertaking of a railway line that would traverse the rugged and picturesque Bitterroot Mountains, making its way through to the Pacific Northwest. Building a railroad presented engineers with formidable challenges. The route was marked by steep gradients, deep canyons, and challenging terrain. To work around these foreboding obstacles, the Milwaukee Road engineers employed innovative engineering techniques, including constructing numerous tunnels and awe-inspiring trestles.

The most notable engineering marvel along the Milwaukee Road route was the St. Paul Pass Tunnel, also known as the Taft Tunnel. Completed in 1908, this remarkable feat of engineering spanned 1.66 miles through the heart of the Bitterroot Mountains. The tunnel's construction required immense manpower and perseverance, as workers meticulously carved through solid rock to create a long tunnel. The construction of the Milwaukee Road route was an epic endeavor that showcased the ingenuity and determination of the engineers and laborers involved.

There were many challenges the Milwaukee Road faced.  One of the most devastating forest fires in American history occurred in 1910, burning nearly three million acres of forest in northern Idaho and western Montana. "It was so huge that a massive cloud of smoke spread throughout Southern Canada and the northern United States, all the way to the St. Lawrence waterway. The darkness from this smoke was so bad that for five days artificial lighting had to be used from Butte, Montana to Watertown, New York. The fire completely devastated


GARMIN
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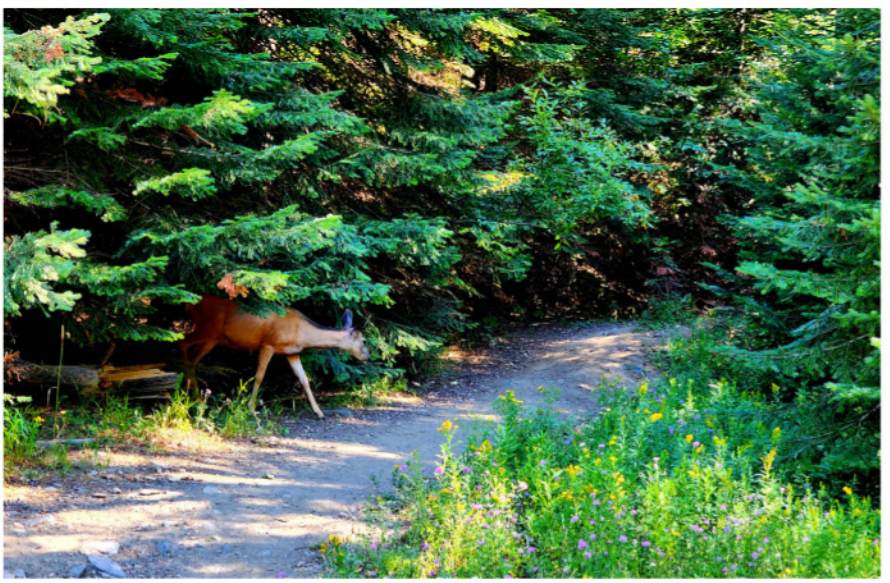
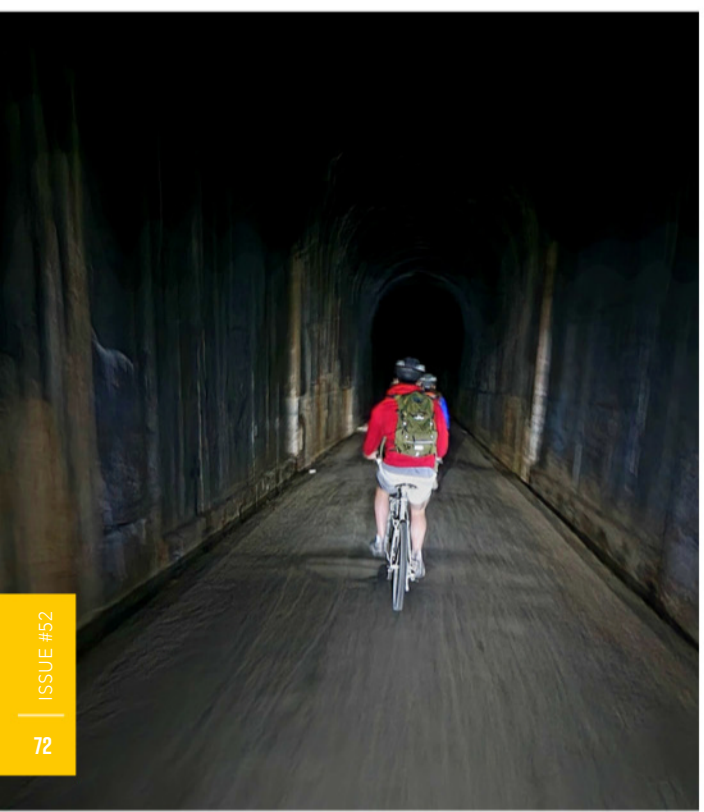
530

Rough & Tumble Camps





the St. Joe River valley and destroyed all of the towns except Avery and Marble Creek. Many of these were never rebuilt." https://www.ridethehiawatha.com/history). Train engineers were responsible not only for driving the engines, they also helped save hundreds of people by getting them to safety. As the 20th century progressed, the advent of automobiles, the development of highway infrastructure, and the emergence of air travel ushered in new modes of transportation. The golden age of rail travel gradually waned, and the demand for passenger train services diminished.

The route became known as the Route of the Hiawatha because the railroad named their trains *The Hiawatha*: *The Twin Cities Hiawatha*, *The North Woods Hiawatha*, *The Chippewa-Hiawatha*, *The Midwest Hiawatha*, and *The Olympian Hiawatha*. The first train, *The Twin Cities Hiawatha*, was named for the epic poem, *The Song of Hiawatha* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The last passenger train, *The Olympian Hiawatha*, passed through the Bitterroots in 1961, and the last train west of Butte, Montana departed in 1980, marking the end of an era. The once-thriving Milwaukee Road tracks, which had witnessed the comings and goings of countless trains, were now left abandoned.

In 1998, the first thirteen miles of the old train line was opened to the public as the Route of the Hiawatha Bike Trail. In 2001, the 1.6-mile Taft Tunnel was opened, creating a fifteen-mile trail that drops a little less than one-thousand feet over the length of the trail, making for a relatively easy and scenic ride. On the trail are ten tunnels and seven "sky high" steel trestle bridges.

A few years ago, my wife read about the Route of the Hiawatha and wanted to do the ride. We planned out our vacation to include this as part of our summer adventure. Once we had our vacation dates set, I jumped online to get tickets and rent bikes for the ride. Tickets include a shuttle back up to the end of the Taft Tunnel,

so you get to ride through the 1.6-mile long tunnel twice, once in each direction. We also had the "bike delivery" options so we could just pick up the bikes at the trailhead.

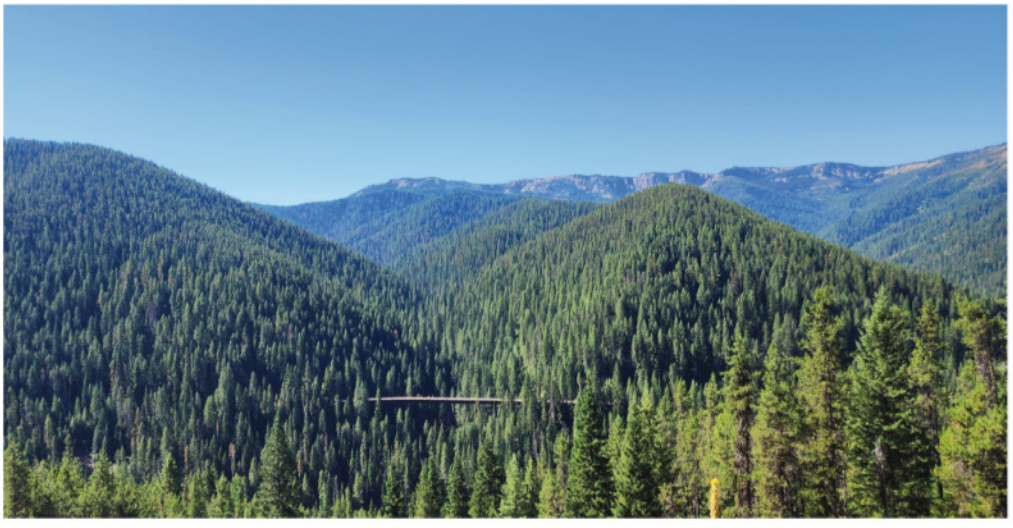
We arrived early, so we could get on the trail before the larger crowds got there. While talking with the staff that helps run the trail, they said they can see over a one-thousand people a day during the busy season, and usually a few hundred a day during most days throughout the rest of the season. We got our bikes and helmets and headed to the trail. The trail starts at the East Portal of the Taft Tunnel. Within minutes, you are in the pitch black, only seeing where your headlight is focused. We had four in our group and it created a nice stream of lights through the tunnel.

As we exited the 1.6-mile tunnel, there was a very picturesque little waterfall, where we stopped and took some pictures. Then we continued on. Winding our way through the tall pine trees, through more tunnels and over the trestle bridges, we stopped and read the history placard and stopped to take pictures of the amazing scenery. As we got to the end, we got in line for the shuttle back up. The line for the shuttle can oftentimes take upwards of an hour or two. However, while you wait, you can find a snack vendor, a game of corn hole, and some friendly guides to chat with. You can also leave your bikes in the shuttle line and head over to one of the many picnic tables and have lunch in the shade. Though there were some snacks to buy, I recommend bringing a light lunch or your own snacks to enjoy on the trail or at the end of the trail.

We learned some things on the ride. Water seeped through the mountain, so there was mud in the Taft Tunnel that got into everything; all the riders had lines of mud up their back. It was kind of funny. The rental bikes were functional, but they are not fancy – just your standard, basic mountain bike. They do have an upgrade to a "comfort" model that has nicer seats and a step-through frame. The trail and the rental bike company are managed by

Route of the
Hiawatha
Roland Trhd 1/4
Moss Cr Trhd 2
Pearson Trhd 8
506

CAUTION
Tunnel
Regraded



the Lookout Pass Ski Resort, just a few miles away. You can save some money by renting and picking up bikes at the resort. We opted for the delivery to the trailhead as we didn't have a vehicle that would work to transport the bikes to the trailhead. Next time, I would try to bring our own bikes and do some mountain biking in the surrounding areas, as well. The Silver Mountain Ski Resort is not too far away and has a mountain bike park, as well as rental bikes.

We had fun and built memories. There is a lot of history around this trail and placards on the descent share the history. Stop and read them. Last, there are a lot of cool, small towns both east and west of the trail. The night before the ride, we ended up staying in Kellogg, Idaho, and enjoyed some good food at one of the local restaurants. After the ride, we headed over to Kalispell, Montana, and then on to Glacier National Park. There are also a few ski resorts in the area that have great mountain biking. You really choose your own adventure with all the nearby activities.

The Route of the Hiawatha is a testament to the remarkable history of the Milwaukee Road Railroad and of the community that brought the abandoned rail line back to life. As adventurers start their journey through the enchanting Bitterroot Mountains, they become a part of the story that intertwines the past and the present, connecting people with nature and the enduring legacy of the Milwaukee Road. X4

## ROBERT THEOBALD — AUTHOR BIO

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

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

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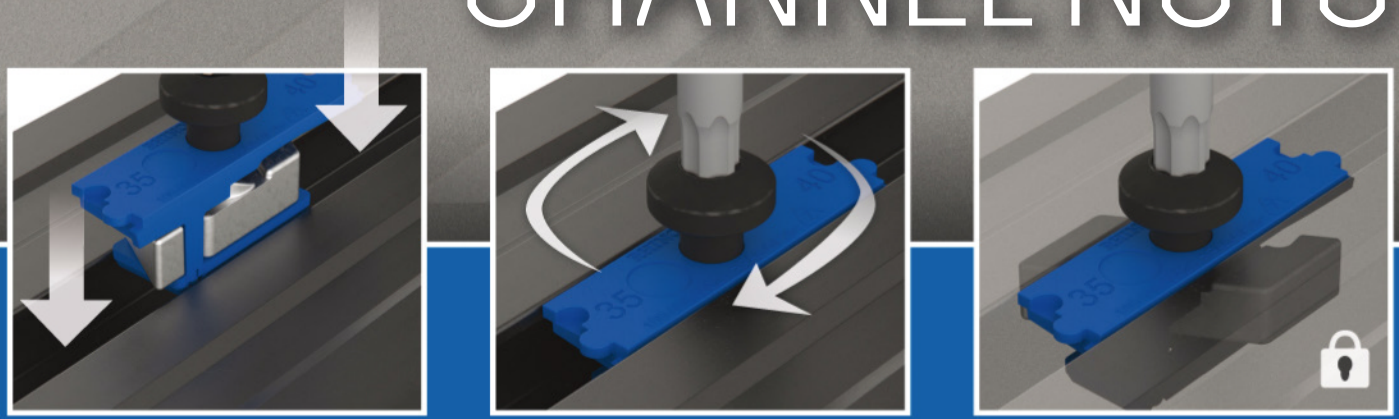

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## Home At Last

# Livin' the Van Life

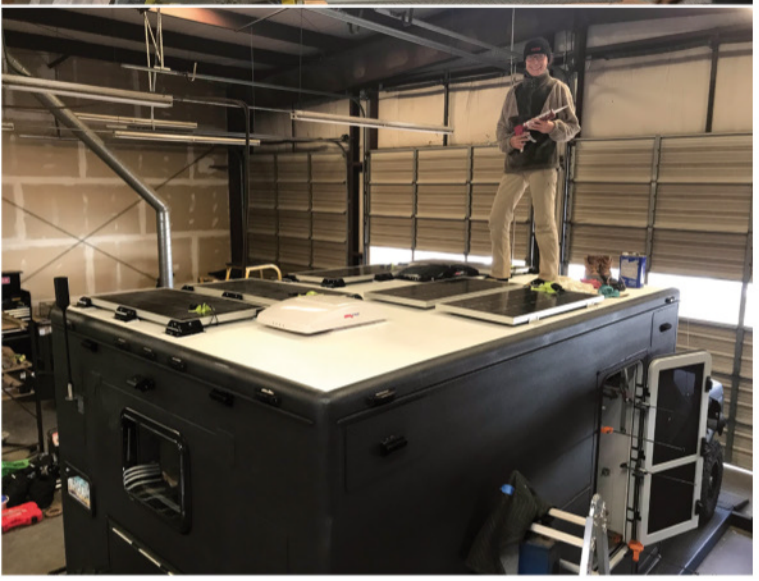
WORDS – NICHOLAS BRATTON | PHOTOS – VALENTINA VALLINOTTO

The connection between ancient Greek poetry and modern overlanding may not be obvious, but upon close inspection there is much the two share. Homer's classic, *The Odyssey*, recounts a decades-long quest to return home. Ulisse, the Latin translation of the poem's titular character (and the name of an Italian opera based on the Greek epic), is home for a couple on a decades-long quest to explore the world. This overland 4x4 camper – based on a Ford F-350 ambulance – is a different kind of ship from the craft in which Odysseus plied the Mediterranean nearly 3,000 years ago, but it has weathered its fair share of adventures.

Valentina Vallinotto and Antonio Brizzo have dedicated their lives to travel and adventure. Growing up in Italy with a father who frequently took her on 4x4 trips into the Sahara, Valentina developed a taste for overlanding at a young age. The couple have been living in Prescott, Arizona for the past several years, a mountain headquarters from which they hatched their future scheme: spend the rest of their lives on the road. Or off it, as much as possible.

Ulisse, their highly modified ambulance, emerged as the solution following a series of prior expeditions. The "aha" moment in which they realized that their path lay in this direction was driving from Connecticut to Arizona in a Toyota Tacoma. Why not do this full time? they asked, and launched a plan.

The starting point was a common Ford platform with the time-tested Powerstroke V8 turbo diesel engine. This choice was driven by a number of reasons that reflect the couple's priorities in the narrative arc of their own journey. For one, it was an economical and flexible foundation for their designs. For another, this was the most modern example they could find without complex onboard electronics. Simplicity was key, as was the ability to find spare parts and to service the truck in the field should the need arise. Remarkably, the ambulance had only covered 37,000 miles when they bought it from a fire department in Idaho.



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Beyond simplicity, size mattered. Valentina and Antonio wanted a vehicle that was large enough to live in comfortably but small enough to retain off-road driving capability. Starting in Alaska, they explored the expanses of the Arctic and made their way south to Washington's Cascades, where a few days ascending the range's rugged slopes proved Ulisse was adept at negotiating winding, steep mountain tracks.

To make a home in the wilderness, Antonio and Valentina have customized their camper with both elegance and efficiency. The interior has a heated laminate floor, a shower inside the entryway, a complete kitchen with induction stove and electric oven, television, and folding table. A 600-watt solar system charges two lithium batteries, storing 340 Ah, and electrics are connected with marine grade wiring. All interior lights are LED and the 4.5-gallon hot water system is plumbed to run through the engine compartment to capture radiant heat from the block (an electric water heater supplements if needed).

Both Valentina and Antonio work on a part-time basis and they stay connected with a Starlink satellite internet system and cellular signal booster. They have developed a routine to balance their professional obligations with their nomadic lifestyle. Antonio is available to work in his consulting role on two set days per week. Valentina operates a travel planning business and needs to respond promptly to clients' questions in time zones around the world, requiring more frequent check-ins. Valentina does most of her work during the morning and evening drives, while they typically stay put during Antonio's work days.

They have gone through the vehicle extensively to identify its mechanical gremlins, upgrade weak points, and create a versatile living space. The result is a highly capable 4x4 home that meets their specific needs. Improvements include a rear hydraulic disc brake conversion, transmission cooler and high-capacity sump, 15,000-pound winch, uprated suspension, dual fuel tanks that provide a 500-mile range, heavy duty bumpers with a custom rear swingarm to hold the spare wheel and bicycles, and custom dash gauges to track engine and transmission temperatures.

The only time Ulisse has been shipwrecked so far was when its fuel pump failed near Pemberton, British Columbia. They were able to acquire a replacement and install it themselves, exactly the kind of adaptive response for which they had prepared.

"You need to be familiar with fixing the vehicle in remote areas if you're trying to avoid civilization," Antonio explains. "Your self-confidence gets a boost when you are self-reliant."

When I met up with the couple in Washington's central Cascades, they had already spent 251 nights in Ulisse – nearly nine months. They never felt an urge to stay in a hotel and the only Wal-Mart parking lot they had camped in was in Fairbanks, Alaska, after traversing the Dalton Highway. Valentina counted seventy-six overland vehicles in the parking lot that night. As

we relaxed on a ridgetop gazing out over emerald green valleys speckled with blazing yellow larch trees, they shared their travel philosophy.

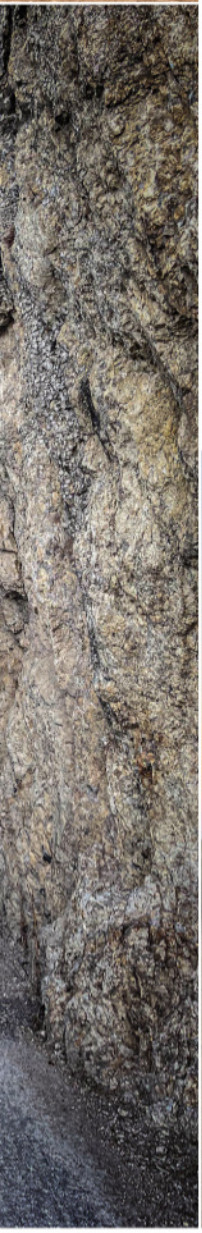
Having worked in the corporate world for thirty years, Antonio had a deeply ingrained conception of time involving deadlines, budgets, and calendars. Now that his days are free to fill as he pleases, the absence of structure has required a mental adjustment. They have no schedule other than the seasons and loose aspirations, such as spending the summer in Alaska. Decisions are informed by the weather forecast. If they like a place, why not stay put for three days to explore it? Antonio and Valentina make plans around how much water, fuel, and food they have – they never plan around time. If they are careful with their consumption, they can go ten days between resupplies. They drive slowly, take it easy, and stop wherever they want to. They have realized what is a dream for many, but how did they get here?

"People ask what lottery we won," chuckles Antonio. "We meet lots of full-time travelers who are not rich. They are simple people who saved a lot; they don't need luxuries. It's possible to do if you lead a simple life, you like camping, and you don't need much. If you lead a healthy life, know a little about personal finance, and track your spending, you can have peace of mind."

The most difficult parts of the transition to full-time travel were making the decision to pull the plug and fixing a target date for embarkation. Getting rid of their possessions was a challenge and a struggle they continue to face is the effect of remote living on their relationships. They feel guilty about not seeing their mothers frequently. Their Italian families are traditional and are attached to the land, rooted to a sense of place.

"If we want to see them, we have to go to them," says Valentina. "They speak a different language and have different priorities." Antonio illustrates the contrast from an exchange with his mother on a recent visit home. "When it was time to go, she asked, 'Aren't you sorry you are leaving?' My answer was 'No.' Our choice is unlivable for them, but they respect it." The couple keeps in touch with friends through the Internet and impromptu gatherings. Visiting or meeting up with contacts along the way, or encountering fellow explorers whose paths they cross helps to sustain a social connection.

How do they get along when all they have for company is each other? Even though they have a long history together, sharing a small space is a challenge. Antonio finds clarity in solitude, going for a run if they have an argument. Valentina reads books, but admits that disagreements are rare. She feels lucky that they have built a close rapport from their time mountaineering and camping where they shared a small tent. Their healthy bond in the confines of Ulisse also comes from trial and error. To succeed in a commitment like this, Antonio relates, you need practice. It's important for people contemplating this kind of endeavor to get to know their partners in the face of adversity, to get into trouble



and to find a way out as a team.

Just as Odysseus spent decades trying to return home across uncharted seas, Ulisse takes Valentina and Antonio on their own decades-long quest to explore their new home in the wider world. Eventually they will reach Patagonia on their journey south. Then they expect to return north via Brazil. From there? A return to the deserts of North Africa that Valentina drove across in her youth, then Turkey, the Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the Wadi Rum desert. One day they hope to traverse Siberia and reach Vladivostok.

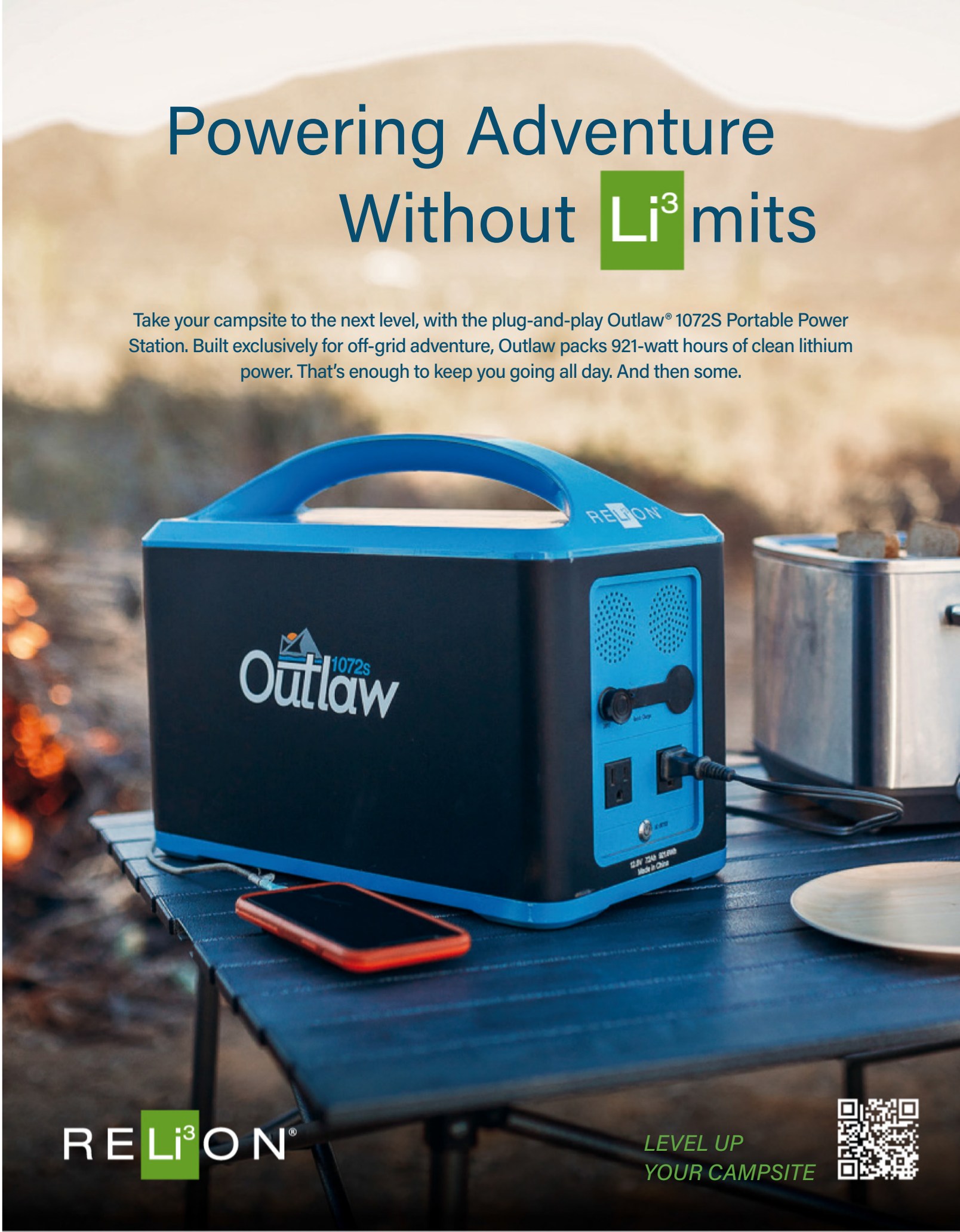
"We have aggressive plans," says Antonio, smiling mischievously. Valentina agrees about seizing opportunity, "You never know what will happen with your health." Like the Odyssey, their lives have not followed a linear path and will continue to be defined by unexpected diversions and an occasional return to Italy. They are committed to a life of travel and are prepared to encounter unexpected obstacles (although hopefully no mythological beasts) as they live out their own epic poem.

Follow their journey on Instagram @v_adventures_ulisse. 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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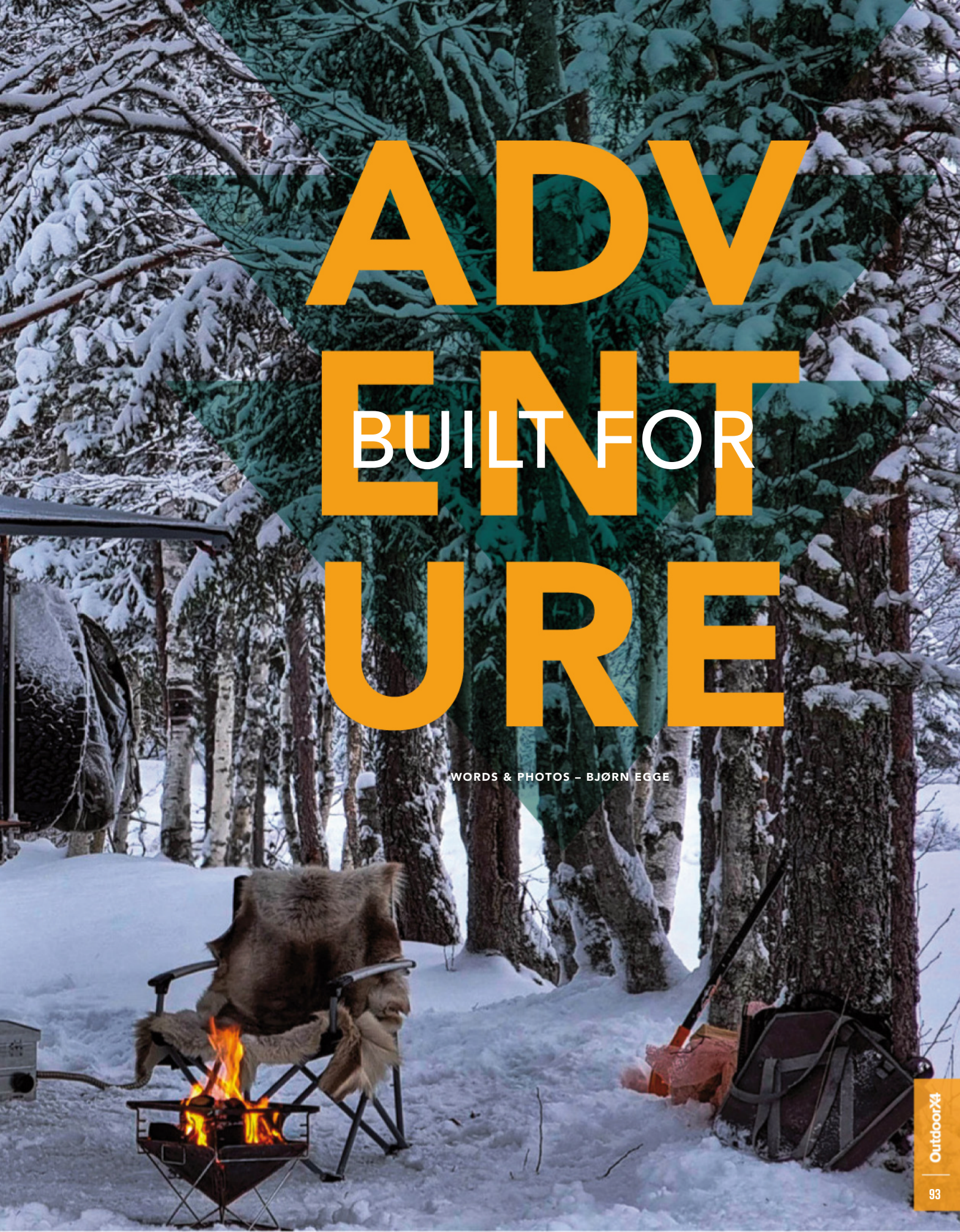

# ADVENTURE

## BUILT FOR

WORDS & PHOTOS – BJØRN EGGE

Choosing a platform for an overland build is very important. After a variety of considerations, I chose an overland rig that was a conversion of a Nissan Navara, with only minor modifications. Unfortunately, this first truck was not a vehicle that would be able to travel the world and be self-reliant over time.

I then built a second truck, also a Nissan Navara. I chose this truck because it has exceptionally good driving characteristics and very few trucks have been built to this level.

What makes this truck special is it has been outfitted by Arctic Truck in Norway. Arctic Truck was founded in Iceland, and they specialize in rebuilding vehicles to explore Arctic regions, with modifications that include larger wheels, and the modification of the chassis to widen the stance, which allows for driving on top of deep snow.

Airing down enables drivers to get a much larger contact surface and footprint on the ground. With a large wheel and low-pressure tire combination, the track left on the ground is less obvious than if a person was standing there.

The Egge Overland Navara is built to be on and off the road all the time, pushing the limits of its capability a little more each time. This vehicle has embarked on winter tours of up to ten days in -25 degrees Celsius, months-long summer trips through epic Nordic landscapes, and trips through the barren tundra of Iceland.

Later this year, I will go on a month-long excursion to Iceland. A new upgrade this year is a Safari snorkel, not only for crossing rivers, but to have better control of the air coming to the engine. Parts of Iceland are covered with very fine volcanic ash and dust; the Safari snorkel should help keep the incoming air as clean as possible. Skid plates from Rival will keep undercarriage damage to a minimum, and an on-board compressor from ARB will make airing up after driving on snow or dirt roads much easier. The Navara is also outfitted with front and rear receiver mounts to allow for moving recovery points, and has a ComeUp winch if the situation demands it.

The truck itself is built for extreme environments; it will handle blizzards of -30 degrees Celsius as well as sandstorms at 30 degrees Celsius.

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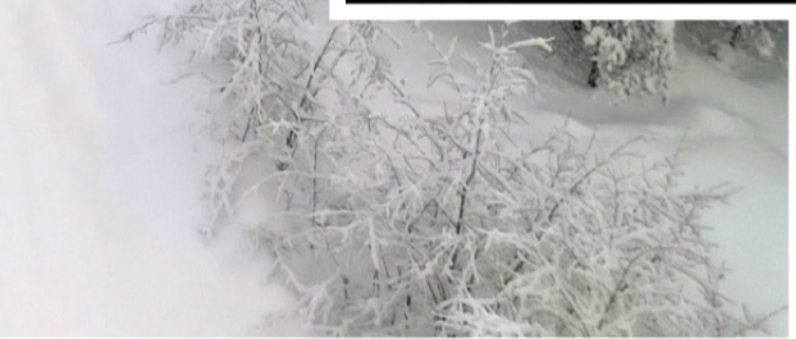
Another thing that makes this overland rig special is the Alu-Cab Canopy Camper mounted on it. While the camper is primarily for warm climates, Egge Overland has actually used this in the north for three winters, and with well over two hundred winter nights logged, this camper has proved as useful in the cold north as it is in the warm south.

I chose light furnishings to ensure that the camper has sufficient insulation. Egge Overland's diesel heater from Uro-Camper is mounted in an external box which is connected and mounted with an insulated heating hose, so if it is -25 degrees Celsius outside, it is still 20 degrees Celsius inside.

The camper is equipped with a Goal Zero 1500x power bank that powers everything electrically, and also charges all cameras and computers. Power is also generated by a solar cell on the roof, also from Goal Zero.



Our Dometic refrigerators are reliable and efficient, but also act as a bench if the need arises. Due to the cold, I cannot carry large water canisters, but a Dometic water canister – together with an electric faucet from the same supplier – ensures I have plenty of water available for trips. If it's -25 degrees Celsius outside, the food is made inside, but usually the food is made outside. I enjoy cooking meals over a gas burner from Primus, while an Omnia stove bakes bread, oven-made food, or even a cake.

I always carry extra diesel all year and in the summer, I carry extra water as well.

For me, overlanding is a lifestyle and not a hobby. I have enjoyed testing my truck and myself, and now the Nordic region's largest open-air exhibition with 25,000 visitors awaits. There, I will give lectures about the car and discuss how to build an overland vehicle that can be used all year round. Future plans involve traveling to Canada, Alaska, Greenland, and the Arctic Circle. X4

## BJØRN EGGE — AUTHOR BIO

Bjørn lives in Oslo, Norway whose passion for vehicle-based travel has gone from a hobby to becoming a way of life. Over the past four years, Bjørn has been on tour every weekend, vacation and leisure through the Nordic countries including Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland.

Bjørn is hoping to soon plan out an adventure that includes an overland journey though Greenland, Canada, and the United States (Alaska) with the focus being on all countries and points the Arctic Circle crosses as the destination.

Raised in the mountains of Norway, he was eight years old the first time he slept out alone in the forests and it was these trips into the woods and mountains that were the start of his ultimate overland-style vehicle that takes Bjørn out into the world in search of walks in and by nature.

Everything Bjørn does is to prepare himself and the car for the world waiting out there. Bjorn has one motto: We have one life, live it.

You can follow his travels on Instagram and YouTube at **@Egge_Overland**

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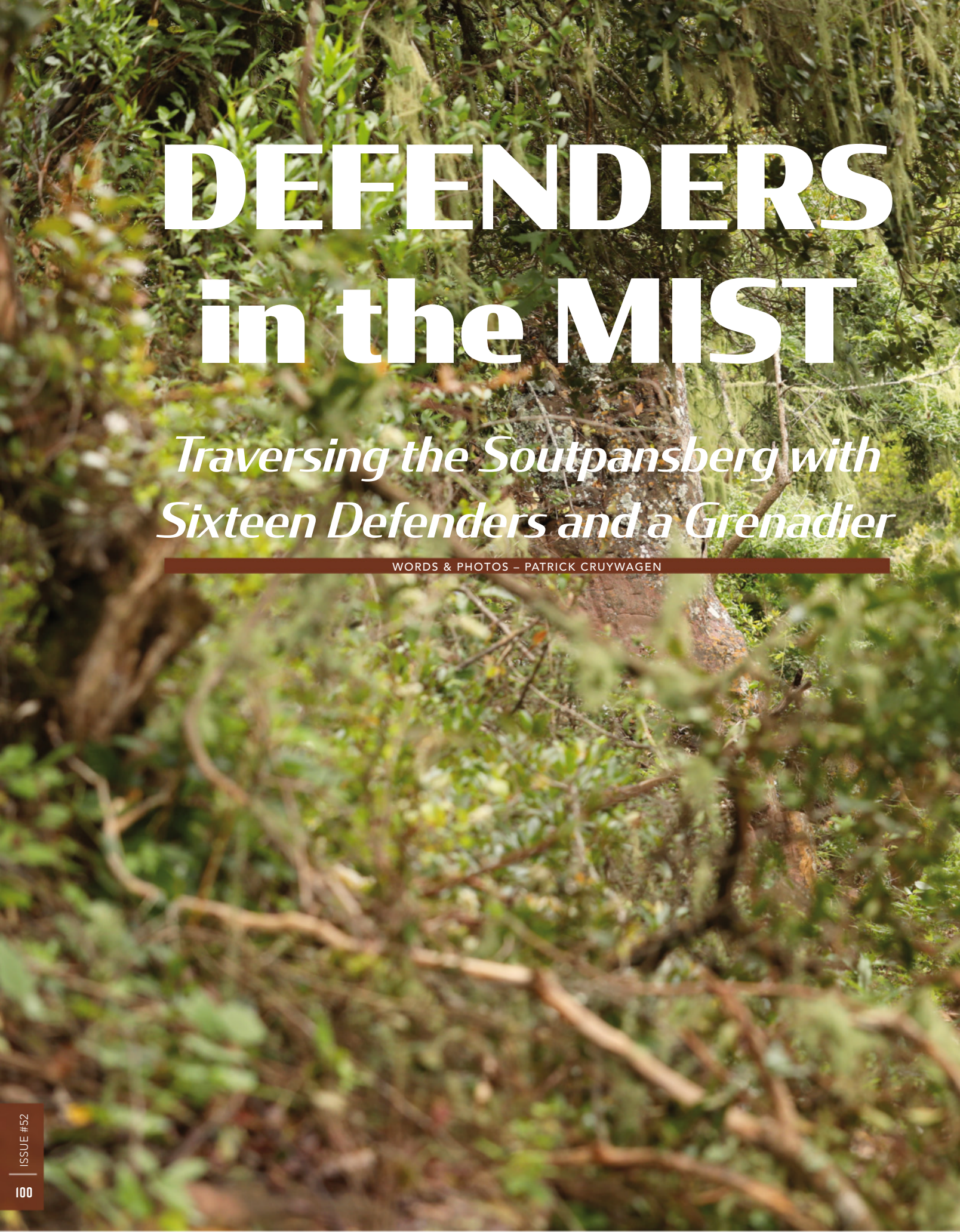

# DEFENDERS in the MIST

## *Traversing the Soutpansberg with Sixteen Defenders and a Grenadier*

WORDS & PHOTOS – PATRICK CRUYWAGEN

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## *For the Defender Trophy, sixteen Defenders and a sole Grenadier traversed one of South Africa's lesser-known treasures: The rocky Soutpansberg Mountains.*

The week-long Defender Trophy started with a leisurely Sunday afternoon reporting for duty at the South Gate Country Lodge near Polokwane, South Africa's northernmost province. For Team Front Runner (myself, Michael de Bruyn and his thirteen-year-old son, Nathan), this involved a five-hour drive north from Johannesburg in Michael's well-cared-for Defender 110 TDCi. I was not the only one who had travelled from abroad for the event: Young James Birkholtz, who works on luxury yachts in Fort Lauderdale, had flown in to join his dad, Tony.

At the check-in, we were given all sorts of goodies from the event's generous sponsors, including a spare wheel cover from Melvill and Moon, and some barbeque accessories from the event's primary sponsor, MBT Petroleum.

The first thing you do after checking in is to sticker-up your Defender; this took a while as there were loads of sponsors. I used the time to reacquaint myself with some old Trophy legends, such as Chris Ash and Nick Smart. Chris was not taking part and had driven up from Johannesburg to greet everyone. Nick and his partner Tiffany Blignaut would be bringing up the rear in his 130; they were also the Trophy mechanics, known as Land Rover royalty.

The first Defender Trophy was held in 2004 in the mountain kingdom of Lesotho, a mecca for 4x4 enthusiasts. While most subsequent events have been held in South Africa, the trophy has visited neighbouring countries such as Zimbabwe, Botswana, Swaziland, and Mozambique.

Even though this was the Defender Trophy, sponsors Melvill and Moon arrived in a diesel INEOS Grenadier, driven by founder Rob and his son James Melvill. Not one competitor bemoaned the Grenadier in our ranks; in fact, most went over to have a good look at the Defender pretender. Some remarked that this is what the new Defender should've looked like.

MBT Petroleum had another surprise in store for participants as they treated us all to a traditional sheep-on-the-spit braai – that is, African speak for barbeque – on the first evening. There was enough meat to feed the Zulu army that had fought so bravely at Rorke's Drift.

The current organiser of the event, Johan Kriek, who drives a Defender 90 Tdi, is also one of the founders of the Defender Trophy. When I heard the event was again being held in the Limpopo Province, I was sceptical; this would be the ninth time it would be visiting one of my favourite provinces. However, Johan was quick to dispel these feelings. "Trust me; I will take you to places you have never been before; we have special permission to drive some challenging 4x4 tracks on private land and in provincial nature reserves."

Before the first bit of off-roading, we had a quick breakfast stop at the Polokwane Land Rover dealership, where the only old Defenders in attendance were ours. Not far from here, we took a gravel track which ran parallel to the busy N1. Centre diff-locks were engaged, and the gaps widened between vehicles because of the dust. The Louis Trichardt Air Force base we drove past was active during the Bush Wars of the '70s and '80s. Private pilots took off in their private planes from here to assist with the war effort.

After a short tar section north on the N1, we turned off onto the Bluegumpoort Forest road. We were supposed to take

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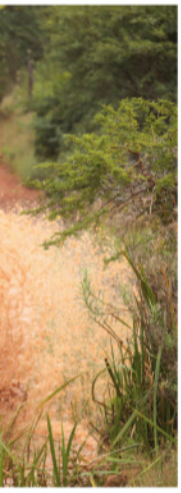

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another steeper and rockier access road into the Soutpansberg Mountains, but the rain and mist ended those plans. The Defenders and sole Grenadier were starting to look the part, thanks to a covering of red dust and mud. We entered a lane of the tallest blue gum trees I had ever seen. The mist and low light further enhanced the dramatic atmosphere of the occasion. It was like watching Grenadier in the Mist.

The wet gravel track took us through private farmlands and nature reserves; Johan had received permission from the landowners so that we could proceed through the locked gates. Eventually, one of the gates led to Happy Rest Nature Reserve, where we started to see our first wild animals, such as kudu and impala. We continued to fight through the rain and mist; the yellow media Defender, which used to be a game viewer, slid off the main track and into a ditch. Due to its high centre of gravity, things didn't look good, and it was in danger of toppling over. It took a few vehicles to secure it before we winched it out. Everyone was happy when we eventually drove to the campsite. The weather and the hills reminded me a bit of Scotland, though the big roaring fire and the smell of Karoo lamb sizzling on the coals tell me this is Africa.

We awoke to more mist and low clouds; no one was happy to pack the wet tents and gear. From Happy Rest, we wound our way to the valley floor, passing through several farm gates. The mist and clouds cleared, and the sun made a welcome appearance. Johan barked out a set of instructions over the radio: "Engage low range and brace yourselves for a long, rocky climb." Michael is a good driver, and second gear low range did the trick. Unfortunately, others were not so lucky and needed several attempts at the climb; one of the Defender's centre diffs would not engage, which made the rocky climb even harder.

This Trophy would not have been possible without the wonderful people of the EWT (Endangered Wildlife Trust), as they run the Soutpansberg Mountain Range as one

big game reserve. To do this, they need strong relationships with the farmers and landowners. We had a quick stop at the EWT rest farm before continuing towards the Sand Rover. The landscape changed in the afternoon as we made our way into the American-owned Bahiti Nature Reserve; the tracks now seemed sandier, while we saw groves of palm trees for the first time. We also started to see more wildlife, such as buffalo and wildebeest. I spotted a marshland in the valley below as we descended towards camp. The tree-filled campsite was perfect for a convoy to laager (not lager) up for a peaceful night, but barking baboons on a nearby hilltop had other ideas.

Day 3 started with a presentation by Oldrich van Schalkwyk, the M.D. of Wild Estate, home of the Bahiti Nature Reserve. He shared many interesting facts about the 210-kilometer-long Soutpansberg Mountain range, the northernmost mountain range in South Africa. He also discussed the several different microclimates on the mountain; we could attest to that as we experienced massive temperature changes as we climbed up and down the various passes. At times it felt as if one minute we were in the sunny red sands of the Kalahari, and the next in the cold misty Knysna forest. Oldrich finished his talk by emphasising that we were driving through a critical conservation area.

We departed from Bahiti and made our way to the start of the Van Collers Pass near Waterpoort. Legend has it that it was built by a local farmer who was tired of being cut off from the world when the Sand River floods. His wife used to drive the pass in her Nissan Pulsar. We stayed in low-range first gear on the long, steep decline of the pass. There was a dramatic drop-off to our left with lovely views over the river. It was slow going as we crawled down the steep pass before taking on the steep climb back towards the EWT's rest farm, our next campsite. Johan Fouche bent a trailing arm, while James struggled with his centre diff again. That evening at camp, Nick and Tiffany worked for hours to repair both vehicles. While sitting around the fire, Kath Vise from the EWT gave us a talk on how they are trying to save species, protect habitats, and serve the people of the region. "People are not aware of what is up here. We have 594 tree species, over 550 spider species, over 140 reptile species and 152 mammal species. The diversity is just off the scale."

Day four kicked off with what was undoubtedly one of my highlights of the 2023 Defender Trophy. We were the first group of 4x4s to drive the nearly completed Doug Wilson Pass. The EWT built the pass because it connects the eastern and western sections of the Madike Nature Reserve. This saves staff around three hours of driving time. Johan Kriek was quick to warn drivers of the dangers. "First gear, low range and don't touch your clutch." It was one of the most prolonged and beautiful declines I have ever driven. The red, rocky Soutpansberg mountain tops surrounded us. Once again, we had one or two technical issues, so Nick and Tiffany were kept busy. These old Defenders are certainly getting older and need a bit of TLC. After the long descent, several smaller climbs and descents lay ahead. It took the best part of the morning to complete the pass but what a special drive it was.

After a short stop at Vevo to secure essentials, we made our way to a nearby quarry, where one of the sponsors, Securetech, demonstrated the correct use of recovery equipment. From there, it was a short transit to our overnight camp at the Blouberg Nature Reserve. We were lucky enough to see a large herd of giraffes just as we stopped to set up camp. The reserve is also home to buffalo and leopards.

The final day of the trophy consisted of a drive through the Blouberg Nature Reserve; each vehicle was given a set of GPS coordinates they had to visit while completing the daily questionnaire. These questions were about the area we drove through, Land Rovers, and the event sponsors. Correct responses would help determine the eventual Trophy winners. The reserve is best known for being home to over 1,000 breeding pairs of Cape

# TEAM FRONT RUNNER

Michael de Bruyn (Front Runner Production Manager) and son Nathan (13)

## Front Runner's core business is roof racks. Tell us about yours and what you have on it.

I use my 2011 Defender 110 TDCi as an overlander, and to create extra space, I have the rugged Slimline II roof rack with a Front Runner roof top tent, which is the lightest tent on the market. It also has a low profile which helps to keep my centre of gravity low.

## What about protection against the elements?

I have the Easy-Out 2.5m awning with quick-release brackets, so taking my tent and awning off is a breeze. We recently did a family trip to the West Coast, and for that, I took along the wind/sun break, which fits nicely to the side of the awning and enabled me to create a makeshift gazebo.

## What is your favourite Front Runner accessory?

It must be the two gullwing windows. Overlanding and camping should be a pleasurable experience. Having easy access to my kitchen on the one side and my recovery gear on the other does just that. I also don't never leave home without my Dometic CFX 42L fridge.

vultures. After lunch, we drove up a 4x4 track to a viewpoint where we could observe some of these vultures. Incredibly, the whole side of the mountain was white from the vulture's droppings. Watching these nearly extinct animals soar on the thermals was a great way to finish the Trophy. All that was left to do was drive to Camp Aquila for the awards ceremony. Trevor and Helen Siebel were declared the winners and received a set of Cooper Tyres for their efforts. I have competed in ten Defender Trophies, but this was by far one of the most special, not only because of the company, but rather the privilege of being able to drive through such a unique and bio-diverse area.

To find out more, see www.defendertrophy.com.

## PATRICK CRUYWAGEN — AUTHOR BIO

Patrick has spent the last 20 years driving some of the finest 4x4 tracks in the world. He used to be the editor of Land Rover Monthly Magazine but recently joined Front Runner's global marketing team. He is at his happiest when cruising around Africa in a Land Rover, of course.

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# Dutch Oven Basics

Sitting around the campfire in deep discussion, the camp chef cracks the lid of the cast iron pot sitting in the hot coals. The aroma of the beef, onions, peppers, and cornbread flavor the air. "Almost done," he says. A few minutes later, he removes the pot from the coals, pulls off the lid, and we serve up the tamale pie.

Dutch oven cooking is a great option for camp cooking. One pot with strategic ingredients can make a simple and very tasty meal for the whole group. If you are new to Dutch oven cooking, here are some basic things to know.

What is a Dutch oven? A Dutch oven is a heavy-duty pot with a heavy duty lid. Many are made from seasoned cast iron or enameled cast iron. They can be used for all types of cooking, such as frying, searing, boiling, braising, baking, and more. Some Dutch ovens designed for camping will have legs to suspend them over the coals of a fire.

When cooking with a Dutch oven – especially when camping – keep the ingredients simple. The more ingredients you need, the more space you need to carry them, and potentially more cooler space will be needed. You also need to cook in sequence, as some items need more or less time to cook. Do not simply throw everything in together at once.

Heat placement is key when cooking. If you are baking with your Dutch oven, then a lot of heat is needed on the lid. For example, if you are using charcoal briquettes, then you want two thirds of the briquettes on the lid, evenly spaced in a circular pattern. The remaining third is evenly placed beneath the Dutch oven. If you are boiling, simmering, or frying, then you will want a large majority of the heat on the bottom.

An approximate gauge for the number of charcoal briquettes needed is to take the diameter of your Dutch oven and multiply it by two. For example, a twelve-inch Dutch oven will need twenty-four briquettes. If baking, you will need sixteen on top and eight underneath. If your cook time is going to be longer than thirty minutes, you may need to add additional briquettes throughout the cooking period.

Cleaning and seasoning is an important step. After cooking, let it cool a bit, then, while the Dutch oven is still warm, clean with hot water. If you need to use soap, then re-season the cast iron afterwards while still warm. Also, refer to your brand of Dutch oven's suggested cleaning or maintenance for the best longevity.

Alway remember: safety first. Dutch ovens get very hot as do their handles and lids. Have gloves, hot pads, hooks or other items to keep you safe when handling hot objects so you don't get burned.

As a side note, if you find an old dirty Dutch oven at a garage sale or thrift store, they can usually be restored and re-seasoned to work as good as new.

*If the tamale pie interests you, here is the recipe:*

# Tamale Pie

- 1 lb. ground beef
- 1 medium onion - diced
- 14 oz. can diced green chiles
- 1 can black bean - drained
- 1 can kidney beans - drained
- 1 can corn - drained
- 1 can diced tomatoes
- 2 cups shredded cheese
- 2 boxes of Jiffy Corn Muffin Mix
- 1 tsp. cumin
- 1 tsp. chili powder
- ½ tsp. garlic salt
- 1 tsp. pepper
- 1 tsp. oil
- 1 egg
- ¾ cup milk

Start by putting the Dutch oven on the coals or briquettes. While the Dutch oven is heating up, in a separate bowl, mix the Jiffy Corn Muffin Mix, the egg and milk and set aside.

Add the oil to the pot and then the diced onions. Saute for a couple minutes and then add the green chilies and the cumin, chili powder, garlic salt and pepper. Cook for one minute, then add the ground beef. Cover and cook until done, stirring occasionally.

Once the ground beef is browned, add each of the canned ingredients, spreading them across the top, but not stirring them in the ground beef mix. This will create mini-layers. First, add the beans, next the corn, then the diced tomatoes. Sprinkle the cheese evenly across, then, on top of the cheese, spread the Corn Muffin Mix to cover everything.

Place the lid on the Dutch oven and place two thirds of the coals/briquettes on the lid of the and distribute evenly, in circles if possible. The other third of the coals/

briquettes should be directly under the Dutch oven.

After fifteen minutes, rotate the Dutch oven 180 degrees and then rotate the lid 180 degrees to ensure even cooking. After ten minutes, check to see if the corn bread is cooked by inserting a toothpick into the bread. If it pulls out clean, it is done. If not, put the lid back on and continue to cook until the toothpick test is clean.

Carefully clear the coals off the lid, remove the lid, and dig in.

# Smaco: Smores Taco

- Fajita-size flour tortillas
- 1 bag of chocolate chips
- 1 bag of small marshmallows

For an easy dessert, flip the hot Dutch oven lid upside down on hot coals, so the clean side is facing up. Place a tortilla on the lid, then, on one half, place the chocolate morsels, and on the other half, place the marshmallows. Let it heat up, so the chocolate melts and the marshmallows soften. Fold it in half like a taco, and the result is a smores taco, known as a SMACO. X4

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