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APRILIA TUAREG 660
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THE GREAT ESCAPE - A PHOTOGRAPHIC ADVENTURE



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ISSUE

50

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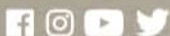


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OutdoorX4

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ISSUE 50

CELEBRATING 10 YEARS

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A lot can happen in ten years. Heck, the reality is the story goes back long before that. Long before OutdoorX4 announced its launch, entering the unknown in a space about to catapult at a time with limited media coverage. The story goes back to a time I was merely an enthusiast. An enthusiast merely seeking a break from the struggles of finding his way in a world that was evolving yet staying the same. A world running to stand still.

Throughout my college years, I thought I knew what I wanted to do. Three years as a chemistry major abruptly came to a halt when I then decided a degree in economics would suit me well. All of this after having considered journalism as a career during high school as a Features Editor of the school paper. None of it mattered though. I would later graduate and follow a career path that led to nothing more than a pocket full of money and a heart that was empty. A heart seeking more than what I found in a corporate environment dictated by politics and greed. So, I began writing again, spending weekends in the Texas hill country exploring, shooting photographs of the environments I would seek refuge from my day job. Eventually it led to an unexpected career path, that of the editor of a fledgling magazine in 2006 with little experience but an appetite for offering something different than what the masses had grown accustomed to. For six and a half years, I would discover a passion as an editor and publisher, learning on the fly, while working an unfulfilling yet lucrative day job that eventually led to OutdoorX4's first issue. During that time, I would meet the love of my life who would encourage me to follow the road less traveled. A road, more so a path, leading to a crossroads of a magazine made possible by a faithful following and the strength of a woman whose own life journey would be a guiding light to follow my own dreams.

OutdoorX4's Associate Publisher, Andrea Ledwell, made OutdoorX4 possible. Without her, these ten years of storytelling wouldn't have happened. Her strength and support, recognizing full well the risk of leaving the comfort of a good job to follow a dream, is why I am able to do what I do and why I hope each issue we have produced throughout our ten years has been worthwhile for you, our devoted readership.

I love what I do and while my path has been atypical of a publisher and editor, it's a path without regret. It's a path that has brought us to Issue 50 of a magazine whose goal has always been to inspire YOU to seek your road less traveled. It's the story of finding your place in a world that can be overbearing, cruel, yet beautiful all at the same time. It's the story of finding your way along life's path and making each moment an adventure that counts before the setting sun arrives for each of us. Cheers to you for being an integral part of OutdoorX4's story. It's a story that continues to evolve with a mantra that Adventure is Worthwhile. You just have to be willing to see what the world has to offer.

Frank Ledwell

EDITOR & PUBLISHER



X4

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LEAVING A GOOD IMPRESSION



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BACK COVER: Relaxing at basecamp with a stunning background - by Shalee Blackmer



FORD DONATES BRONCO WILDLAND FIREFIGHTING COMMAND RIG TO NATIONAL PARK SERVICE TO HELP BATTLE FIRES ON PUBLIC LANDS



As the threat of wildfires increases, Ford Motor Company and the Bronco Wild Fund are donating a Bronco Badlands® SUV with Sasquatch® off-road package to the National Park Service for use in Bandelier National Monument, where it will operate as a firefighting command vehicle.

"For more than a century Ford has supported fire response and disaster relief efforts by deploying vehicles to provide emergency

transportation and power and deliver essential goods. Bronco Wild Fund was created because of our passion for the outdoors, and we're excited to donate the Bronco wildland firefighting command rig to Bandelier to help protect this National Monument for generations to come," said Dave Rivers, Ford Enthusiast Brand Manager.

The Bronco wildland firefighting command rig follows the Bronco + Filson Wildland Fire Rig Concept and is being donated through the Ford Bronco Wild Fund, which works to increase access, preservation and stewardship of our public lands. True to Ford's commitment to building a more sustainable and inclusive future on The Road to Better, Bronco Wild Fund reflects a deep respect for our public lands and an unbridled commitment to helping those lands continue to be a world of wonder for all. To date, Bronco Wild Fund has donated more

than \$3.7 million to diverse causes, including organizations like America's State Parks, National Forest Foundation, Outward Bound and Sons of Smokey.

Other specialized hardware includes a grille guard, a factory-installed Warn winch, a set of beadlock wheels, and a roof rack fitted with a light bar, search and emergency lights and siren.

To learn more about The Road to Better and the Bronco Wild Fund visit

SUSTAINABILITY.FORD.COM. X4



TOYOTA BRINGS BACK LAND CRUISER TO U.S. MARKET

Legends never die. Toyota's off-road icon and longest-running nameplate is making a triumphant comeback to North America for the 2024 model year, returning to its rugged origin. Since its introduction in the U.S. market in 1958, the Land Cruiser evolved over the years from the legendary two-door models like the 40 Series with its fold-down front windshield, white roof, and rear jump seats to the capable yet fully loaded 200 Series, which was the last generation to be sold in the States and combined Land Cruiser's unbreakable strength with premium luxury features. Now, Land Cruiser stays true to its heritage, returning as a high-quality off-roader at a more accessible price point that will take a wider range of customers

on numerous backcountry adventures across the globe.

Built on the TNGA-F global truck platform, the new Land Cruiser is designed, engineered, and tested to survive in the harshest of environments. For this new generation, Land Cruiser is exclusively available with the range-topping i-FORCE MAX hybrid powertrain producing 326 horsepower and 465 lb.-ft. of torque. It's slightly smaller and narrower than the outgoing 200 Series model, making it nimbler on the trails, and Land Cruiser features off-road tech that has debuted on the newest generation of Toyota trucks. Limited to 5,000 units for the first two months of production, Land Cruiser

will be offered in a First Edition grade that includes two new two-tone paint colors and additional off-road equipment.

"This icon belongs in our lineup," says Toyota group vice president and general manager Dave Christ. "For 2024, Land Cruiser returns to its origin with a heritage-inspired design paired with the legendary capability and durability Land Cruiser is known for, and it will take even more customers on adventures across the globe as it has done for generations."

Read all the details and watch a video of the new Land Cruiser off-road by scanning the QR code. **X4**



OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ASSOCIATION PROVIDES HIDDEN GEMS OF HISTORY



From El Camino del Diablo along the southern border to the Lewis and Clark Trail in the far north, the American West is interlaced with historic trails. When you encounter them in the backcountry, do you ever wonder how to learn more about the origins of these story-filled paths and the thousands of historic sites scattered among them? One solution is a YouTube

channel created by the Oregon-California Trails Association (OCTA) which offers authoritative history in an easily digestible format.

OCTA protects the legacy of historic emigrant trails in the west through preservation activities and public awareness as well as research and education. Their YouTube channel provides a highly accessible platform for achieving this with entertaining video content in both short and long form by local experts with authentic first-hand knowledge. From quirky stories illuminating the odd and obscure to in-depth speaker series, the OCTA channel releases new content weekly with great ideas for day trips or

long vacations in the states of Missouri, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, Idaho, Oregon, Washington and California.

A recent series covers cyclist Scott Alumbaugh's journey across the country while bike-packing the Pony Express trail from Missouri to California. Other videos retrace the steps of the Donner Party, highlight "Can't Miss" stops along the Oregon Trail in Wyoming, and reveal what a "Hog Ranch" really was for frontier soldiers back in the day.

Find these and more hidden gems of history @octatrails on YouTube. **X4**



EPISODE 23 OF SIGNOUT PODCAST FEATURES FIRST WOMAN TO CLIMB THE SECOND HIGHEST SUMMITS ON SEVEN CONTINENTS

OutdoorX4's Daniel Thornton recently had an opportunity to visit with Jenn Drummond on The Signout Podcast whose story is truly inspirational.

Jenn is a mom to seven children and a successful entrepreneur. She recently returned from her world record climbing experience, where she became the first woman to climb the second highest summits on seven continents.

Listen to Jenn's story of miraculously surviving a car crash that led to a journey of climbing mountains and pursuing her passions, plus check out all past episodes of The Signout Podcast by scanning the QR code or by visiting www.signoutco.com/signout-co-podcast. **X4**



MEANWHILE, OVER ON OUTDOORX4.COM...

THE GAMBIT

Christopher Schnotz spent over 20 years dreaming about chasing the horizon while holding back excuses to do so because of the daily responsibilities most of us navigate through regularly. However, after years passed, Christopher decided it was time to take a chance; a desperate gambit to live life on his own terms. So, after careful consideration he decided to quit his full-time job and hit the road less traveled. This is his story.

FIVE ITEMS YOU DIDN'T KNOW YOU NEED ON THE TRAILS

Off-pavement travel is all about heading out onto a trail or into the great unknown anticipating the thrill of challenging yet beautiful land-

scape. Most of us know that to maximum the fun, it's best to go prepared. That may mean making sure your tires are in good shape, including the spare, and that all the mechanics of your adventure vehicle are in good working order. But whether you're going alone or with a group, to a familiar place or unknown, there are some things you may not think to bring along. Although there are many more items you could add to this list, here are my top five suggestions for things you didn't know you needed on the trails.

OVERLAND IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY

That galaxy far, far away isn't that far at all. It is in Death Valley National Park, where, in 1977, a young George Lucas directed one the most iconic science-fiction movies of all time, Star

Wars IV: A New Hope. It's also where we spent five incredible days overlanding with our Off Grid Trailer, powered by our spec'd-out Ford F-150 pickup. Our goal was to find the picturesque locations where some of the movie's most iconic scenes were filmed. Stargazing the Milky Way with the naked eye was an absolute bonus.

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





APRILIA TUAREG 660

BY VAL ANGELKOV

The problem with stereotypes is that most of the time they are true.

Italian bikes, like Italian cars, are beautiful to look at, exhilarating to drive and intoxicating to listen to. They stir emotion and

are eager dance partners wanting to spend their time in the twisties. They also leak oil, have confusing user interfaces, and dealer networks as sparse as a New Mexico landscape. All these are true for the Aprilia Tuareg, too.

I was probably the first customer to get the Tuareg 660 at AF1 Racing in Austin, the premier Piaggio Group dealer in Texas. I ordered mine in red (as befits an Italian model). The bike looks bigger in person; it sits taller than what I'd imagined looking at online pictures and YouTube videos, with a 21" front wheel, fairly slender body, and narrow tank. The 50/50 on/off-road tires telegraph intent and indicate the bike is not only beautiful to look at but built with purpose. It was love at first sight.

I have had the bike for over a year and have put just over 4,000 miles on it. During that time, I put about 8,000 miles on my two other bikes. I have ridden interstate highways, backroads, mountain canyons, fire roads and side-by-side trails. While I'm not an off-road expert, I also have a PanAmerica and can attest to the Aprilia Tuareg's agility and superior handling on rocky or sandy trails.

While the bike's looks are subjective, the RS660-derived engine objectively sounds amazing – the air intake under load is like Luciano Pavarotti's crescendo: It builds and builds and builds until you have to let off the throttle for fear of losing your license, or missing the turn and ending up in a ditch. I know the Aprilia V4 is supposedly the best sounding motor in all of bike-dom, but its V2 little sister is not far behind. I installed the Akrapovic slip-on and that delicious air intake tone is now paired with a throaty rumble out back.

The bike's other great virtue (apart from the engine) is its lightweight design. I believe it's slightly lighter than the Tenere and pretty much anything else out there, including the KTM 890. The bike is slender and can be flat-footed due to the very narrow seat and tank (I have 32" inseam and stand not-too-tall at 5'10"). The bike is not an RS660 but I have had as much fun carving the canyons around Park City, Utah as I did on a GSX-1000 in the French Alps near Chamonix last summer. No, it is not a sports bike, but my Calimoto app says I have lean angles in the high forties riding the Tuareg. The sensation of leaning such a tall bike is strangely satisfying.

Off-road, the bike's thin waist and light weight make it shine. You will pick it up with ease – yes, riding off-road means you will drop your bike. When you do that multiple times and find yourself in difficult terrain, the mere thought of dropping your ride is terrifying. I've grown indifferent to dropping the Tuareg. While I'm a guy in decent shape, the bike is so easy to pick up that I'm sure most any male or female rider can pick it up without fear of needing a chiropractor afterwards. The only slight negative in the otherwise excellent ergonomics department is the fact that

the narrow tank doesn't offer much leverage for knee/hip inputs while standing as would a more rotund, full-size adventure bike.

So, the bike looks and sounds great, rides great in the twisties and is very capable off-road (more capable than I am for sure). Is this a perfect bike? No. It's Italian and by definition it has flaws that are also part of its character.

The display is fairly standard and shows the speed and the gear selected which can be easily seen even on a bright, sunny day. You can scroll through the trip data and access other basic information using the left-hand controls. That's where the good bits end. The buttons are not backlit. There is no fuel gauge. There are four bars indicating how full the tank is. The bars dance up and down constantly and you never, ever can tell if you're a quarter full or three-quarters full. There is no range info. All you have is a yellow light that indicates you're in reserve. For a bike with a four-gallon tank that can be unnerving. The idiotic thing about it is that if you turn off the bike, the reserve trip gets reset to 0, so if you used half your reserve fuel before shutting the engine off you won't know how much fuel you actually have after restarting the bike. I also like to know what the oil temperature is in actual degrees, not just a four-bar gauge that never seems to work – whether I just start the bike cold or I'm wringing its neck on a hot summer day, the oil temp is always at the 50% mark. That just can't be. The throttle-by-wire can be twitchy (it's a fairly random thing – most of the time it's fine); while the neutral can be finicky to find. For all these small nuisances, I can point out counterpoints and strengths that are actually more important – the quickshifter is absolutely brilliant, and the Brembo brakes are solid and competent.

My only mechanical issue so far is a minor oil leak from a faulty water pump seal that apparently is a known issue for the RS and Tuono 660 engines. That should not be the case for a bike with barely 3,000 miles on it. To make things worse, I realized I had an oil leak while in Park City, Utah, where I'm writing this (I reside in The Woodlands, Texas, but am spending the summer in Park City). The nearest dealer is in Idaho Falls, which you may have guessed...is in Idaho. That's a solid 250-mile one-way ride. I had to go to the dealer just to 'diagnose the issue' (as if me telling the service manager the exact location where I see oil coming out is not enough). After spending twenty minutes looking at it, he confirmed what I had already told him on the phone and said they will order the parts and be ready to do the repair (replace the water pump and seal/gasket) once they get the parts from Aprilia's U.S. Piaggio HQ. That will cost me another 500-mile round trip and eight-hour ride on I-84 and I-15. The saving grace is that while interstates are not Tuareg's natural habitat (its slender stance and 21" front tire make it susceptible to cross winds and turbulence when passing the typical, endless string of semis), at least the landscape is somewhat more engaging than the one I'm accustomed to in Texas. The seat, while firm (I have the optional seat) is supportive and comfortable enough to not want to stop before I need to use the restroom. The cruise control is great (a must-have feature for any highway road trip), but the bike can get vibey above eighty-five mph. I usually cruise at 80-85 mph at about 6,000-6,200 rpm. My trip data from that day showed 52 mpg at an average speed of seventy-five mph. The bike is fairly frugal and can get two-hundred miles on a full tank. However, if you ride it with vigor, expect that mileage to drop to about forty mpg or even lower if you're carving up high mountain passes. At that point, you will have a range of 140-150 miles on a full tank.

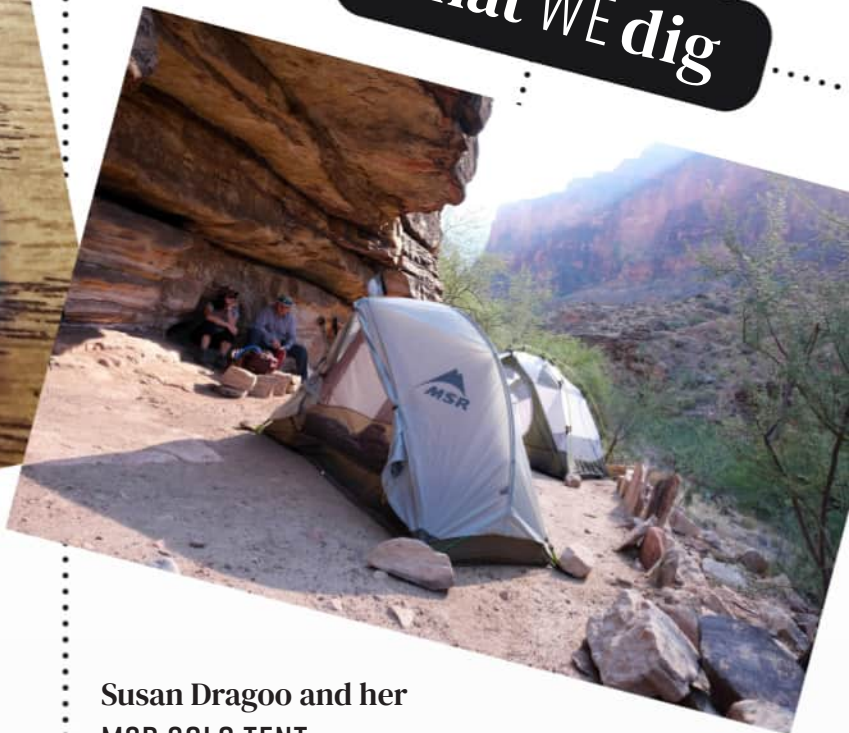
In short, the Tuareg 660 is great despite its stupid electronics and oil leak, neither of which have diminished my enjoyment of the bike. It's an Italian beauty and I plan to keep it despite its stereotypical imperfections. **XA**

Heide Brandes Never Leaves Home Without Her EARPLUGS

One thing that I've learned is to never leave home without earplugs. Inevitably, you'll sit next to a colicky baby on a plane or sleep in a hotel with a rattling AC or have birds start chirping over your tent at 4 a.m. I love these Happy Ears earplugs, a single reusable eco-friendly model made of ocean plastics and recycled plastics. The materials for Happy Ears OP were sourced from post-consumer ocean plastics in the North Pacific and North Atlantic oceans, so you can enjoy peace and quiet while helping the planet!



what WE dig



Susan Dragoo and her MSR SOLO TENT

Although my MSR Hubba Hubba 1-person tent is getting a bit long in the tooth, it is still my go-to lightweight shelter for backpacking. It fit perfectly in this idyllic camp site in the Grand Canyon's Hermit Creek campground during my memorable first backpack into the canyon in 2021. Easy and quick to set up and providing just enough room for my small frame and my backpack, it's all I need.



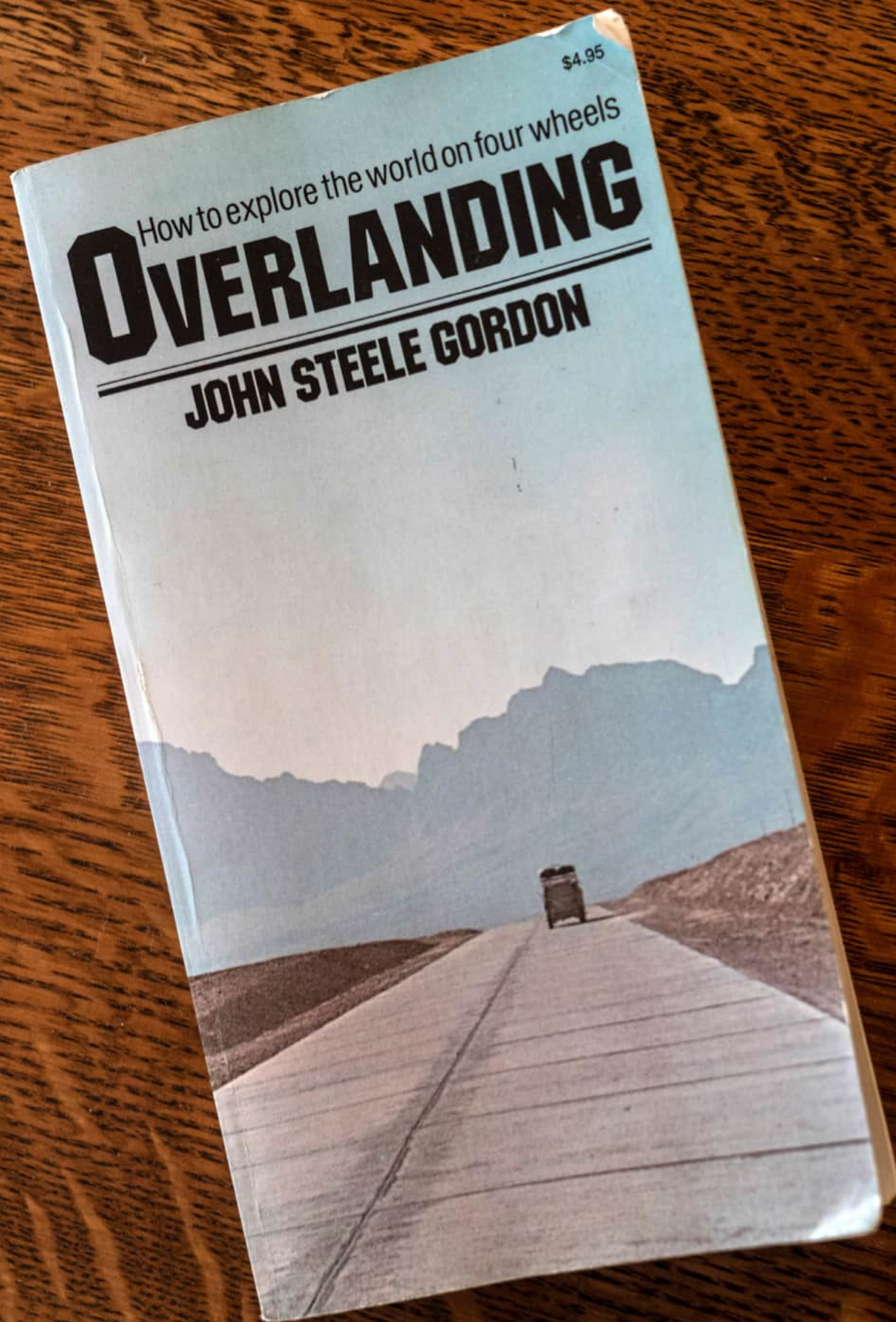
Shalee Super Digs Her LARQ WATER BOTTLE

My go-to travel item is the Larq water bottle, which self-cleans and purifies water in 60 seconds with a press of a button. One charge lasts me nearly a month! I take it everywhere, from backcountry camping trips in Wyoming to far-away countries such as Egypt.



John Holdmeier Digs His SONY A7IV

I have loved photography and video for as long as I can remember. My Sony a7iv is an item I rarely leave home without. To me, it is a powerful tool for communication and a way to tell stories through my point of view.



Have you noticed how often the words “overlander” and “overlanding” get hung with snarky air quotes or metaphorical ALL-CAP spelling? Despite the fact that I can legitimately claim to have done a good bit to popularize both the term and the activity in the U.S., I’m occasionally guilty of this, for example when I passed a Toyota Tacoma the other day that was so bristling with accessories — bed rack, MAXTRAX, Roto Pax, awning, roof tent, swing-away spare and jerry can rack, winch bumper and winch, and at least a dozen driving lamps and light bars pointed in every direction — that I could barely make out the truck underneath. *Oh my, I thought to myself, it’s an OVERLANDER.*

This rabid accessorizing — and the resultant backlash — is only natural, because it is human nature to go completely overboard with our passions, and human nature to make fun of those who do. It’s also human nature to figure out ways to make money off those passions — often with high-quality products that enhance the activity, just as often with poor or cheaply copied items designed to make a profit and nothing more. Search for “Traction boards” on Amazon and scroll through the astonishing array of \$75 knock-offs. I tried to keep track of the broken examples of these I’ve seen, but soon gave up. Each is ten pounds of plastic destined for near-eternity in a landfill.

A lot of the pushback against “overlanding” has come from the traditional four-wheel-drive community, many of whom shrug and say, “It’s just camping; what’s the big deal?” The late, lamented *Four Wheeler* magazine published a decidedly whiny editorial a decade ago, claiming, “We’ve been ‘overlanding’ for forty years!” Which, in fact, they hadn’t, aside from publishing the pioneering adventures of the Turtle Expedition, and the rare post from the Sahara by Tom Sheppard. There really is a difference between just driving to a campsite and overlanding, and the term, despite what many seem to believe, was not invented by marketing consultants early in this century.

As proof I offer you the seminal book on the subject shown here. Written by John Steele Gordon (who went on to become a well-known political commentator), it was published in 1975, a quarter century before the first edition of the current bible on the subject, the *Vehicle-dependent Expedition Guide*, and thirty-two years before I helped start *Overland Journal* or OutdoorX4’s publisher began actively publishing North America’s first-ever fully-digital vehicle-specific publication focused on the subject.

Of course, even Gordon didn’t invent the term; it was well-known already, especially in Africa where long-distance journeying was the norm, and a dozen companies offered group overland adventures in specially converted Bedfords and other large commercial vehicles—very popular among gap-year teenagers and other impecunious travelers, as they offered sometimes months-long journeys for mere dollars per day, the deal being that everyone took turns with cooking, dishwashing, maintenance, and pushing stuck vehicles.

John Steele Gordon’s *Overlanding* includes a section on these commercial trips, but most of the book is devoted to solo or small group travel. It discusses vehicle selection—among the possibilities: the Series Land Rover, Land Cruiser, Jeep, Bronco, Blazer, American vans, even the VW Thing. Gordon details possible accessories and modifications (roof racks, heavy-duty suspensions, stone guards, skid plates, etc.) and a basic tool list. Frequently the author’s opinions filter into the text—as they should—for example, in this passage on jacks:

Almost all new cars come equipped with a jack as standard equipment. Sometime these are of excellent design (Volkswagen), and sometimes they are an insult to an otherwise noble vehicle (Land Rover).

The rest of the book discusses other equipment, papers, shipping, border crossings, cooking, and health, and ends with an extensive list of world consulates and their addresses. It’s as comprehensive a guide as anyone could have assembled at the time, and still contains relevant words of wisdom.

However, the single best part of John Steele Gordon’s *Overlanding* is his one-sentence description of our activity. It has not been bettered in nearly fifty years:

“Overlanding is the landlubber’s equivalent of sailing: the long, slow crossing of large areas of the world.”

It’s true that few of us these days can take enough time off work to accomplish a “long, slow crossing of large areas of the world,” but it is the template we use for our more modest explorations, even if they last only three days and encompass no more than a hundred miles. Overlanding really is about the journey, not the destination, as someone later put it.

If that’s still a bit too woo-woo for you, I’ll leave you with the definition I once gave when challenged to define the difference between camping and “overlanding.”

Sleeping bag and tent in the back of a pickup: Camping.

Sleeping bag and tent in the back of a Land Rover: Overlanding.

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Editor Note: In addition to John Steele Gordon’s *Overlanding*, Peter Fraenkel also published a book entitled *OVERLAND* which also published in 1975. The book highlights Mr. Fraenkel’s experiences with university expeditions and travels at the time totaling over 100,000 kilometers throughout the European, African, and Asian continents. Additionally, *OVERLAND* provides insight and suggestions on planning one’s own “overland” adventure.

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THE SUMMIT OF EAST TEMPLE PEAK IN THE WIND RIVER RANGE

GAINING ELEVATION

Beginners Guide to Climbing Mountains



WORDS & PHOTOS – SHALEE SUPER

Those of us who overland often crave the same thing – a desire to get out and explore remote places in rough terrain. It's about the adventure, the journey, and the desire to see places most will never venture.

Climbing mountains and overlanding have incredible similarities, which is how I eventually paired them together after years of climbing remote mountains with my husband. If you're like us, often looking at the tallest peak sticking through the horizon & pondering what the views must look like from that angle, this piece is for you. And much like overlanding, climbing mountains requires adept navigational skills, precise planning and preparedness, and a unique challenge beyond the beaten path.

The first step to successfully claiming a summit is understanding that not all mountains are created equal. There are tall mountains that break cloud barriers, and there are low mountains made of rolling hills. There are low easy mountains and tall hard mountains, but there are also low hard mountains and tall easy mountains. For example, every Wyoming 13er (mountains higher than 13,000') is harder than nearly every Colorado 14er (mountains higher than 14,000'). Colorado's tallest mountain, Mount Elbert (14,404'), is considered a relatively easy summit, while Wyoming's tallest mountain, Gannett Peak (13,805'), requires nearly fifty miles of trekking at its easiest approach. Elevation does not equal difficulty, and there are plenty of difficult peaks under 12,000' in the United States.

Mount Jefferson, a stratovolcano located just outside of Bend, Oregon, is only 10,502', yet requires a Class 4 scramble on exposed, often ice-encrusted rock. However, anyone can drive to the summit of Mount Evans outside Denver, which tops out at 14,265'. Some are so easy our cat has been to the top, while others have never been climbed at all.

Before taking the first dusty step on a trail to a summit, one must understand routes, navigation, safety, and the climbing scale.

Safety begins with trail preparedness because some mountains have no trails at all. Similar to how iOverlander assists with navigating overlanding routes in the backcountry, climbers rely on devices and applications for navigation and route tracking. Many are familiar with AllTrails, considered the most popular hiking and climbing app for beginners, which allows users to download a wide range of offline maps. This includes AllTrails' route information, satellite maps, terrain and topographic maps. It also details round-trip mileage, elevation gain, and the class of climbing – all vital details to understand the difficulty of a potential climb.

Mountain climbing routes are defined on a climbing scale ranging from Class 1 to Class 5. Beginner climbers should stick to routes rated Class 1 to Class 2 and can progress to more advanced routes with experience.



THE SUMMIT OF STRAWBERRY PEAK IN EASTERN OREGON, A REMOTE BUT MODERATE PEAK FOR BEGINNERS



MOUNT RAINIER REFLECTION



MANY REMOTE PEAKS HAVE NO TRAILS AND REQUIRE GPS TRACKS FOR ROUTE FINDING

Class 1: A well-marked trail that is easy to navigate and low-risk. Class 1 trails are suitable for families and beginners.

Class 2: A steeper trail that is less defined and may require extra navigation or downloaded GPS tracks. Considered easy-to-moderate, Class 2 often requires travel across scree or loose rocks.

Class 3: Requires scrambling with the use of both hands and feet to ascend over rugged terrains, such as boulder fields, rock walls, steep rock gullies, or snow fields.

Class 4: Full scrambling up steep rock, with increased exposure and risk. A fall in Class 4 terrain can result in severe injury or death. This is the start of the mountaineering scale and should only be attempted with experience in mountainous terrain.

Class 5: The start of the rock climbing scale requires an ascent up vertical rock. Class 5 terrain should be traveled and climbed using rope and/or rappelling material for safety. Required gear includes rock climbing rope, helmet, climbing shoes, belay devices, climbing harnesses, and more. For experienced climbers only.

Similar to packing for an overlanding trip, a daypack for climbing a mountain is methodically planned. As a general rule of thumb, hikers need one liter of water for every two hours of hiking. If

the estimated round-trip time is six hours, three liters of water is considered a sufficient amount. One of the biggest mistakes new hikers make is not packing enough fluids for the day. Researching time, mileage, and elevation gain will help calculate each climb's recommended amount.

Additional required items for any mountain summit include an emergency GPS beacon, snacks and food, ankle-supporting hiking boots, sunscreen, a down jacket (summits are often windy and cold), a headlamp, gloves, hiking socks, sunglasses, and a small first-aid kit. Optional extras include hiking poles, electrolytes, water purification tablets, a hat, a camp knife, and a lighter.

There is a fine line between underpacking and overpacking for a mountain summit. Underpacking can result in unpreparedness, lack of essential safety equipment, or shortage of food or water. On the other hand, mountain summits always require elevation gain, and overpacking can result in heavy packs that slow progress and increase risk.

Risk can be the difference between life and death in the mountains. Nature is unforgiving, and weather can turn deadly in an instant. The higher you are in the mountains, the larger the threat.



THE SUMMIT OF CLASS III MIDDLE TETON,
WITH GRAND TETON IN THE BACKGROUND





OVERLOOKING MOUNT SHASTA IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA



THE SUMMIT OF MOUNT WHITNEY, THE TALLEST MOUNTAIN IN THE CONTINENTAL 48.

Even experienced mountaineers can be caught off guard in the pursuit of a summit. There are endless stories of this occurring. Last year Russell Jacobs, twenty-five, perished on Colorado's Long Peak after summiting and getting caught in an unexpected winter storm on the descent. As night fell and conditions deteriorated, he texted a friend he was lost and unprepared to spend the night in winter conditions. The next day, Rocky Mountain National Park rangers found his body above 13,000'.

Weather can surprise travelers anywhere, even in the tropics. Earlier this year, my husband and I set out to climb Mauna Kea, the tallest mountain in Hawaii. The Aloha state isn't known for its tall mountains, but Mauna Kea rises 13,803 feet above sea level, which is one foot lower than the tallest mountain in Wyoming. That morning we awoke at sea level, spending sunrise next to palm trees watching sea turtles glide beneath the ocean surface. A few hours later, we were alone near the summit of Mauna Kea, fighting forty mile-per-hour winds in whiteout conditions. The weather went from partly cloudy to a winter weather advisory in less than an hour. There were no other humans for miles, and we were still seven miles from the trailhead. Had we not packed appropriately with winter gear, gloves, and a GPS device that kept us on the trail, things could've turned out much differently.

Besides winter weather, lightning strikes pose a sizable threat to those in the mountains. One of the most vital rules of climbing is to start early. Especially in the summer, clouds slowly build during the day and often turn into afternoon thunderstorms. Last year, while descending Middle Teton in Grand Teton National Park, numerous inexperienced parties headed up to the summit as storms approached. The upper half of the mountain was already engulfed in clouds, light sprinkles of rain dropped on my face, and rumbles of thunder slowly came to life. Most of those parties didn't start until 9:30 a.m., over four hours later than any recommended start time in the Teton Range, which is notorious for its deadly afternoon storms. One man, in particular, was left behind by the rest of his group. He carried what I assumed was nearly fifteen pounds of gear, estimated by the size of his pack, had no downloaded GPS tracks, and had never climbed a mountain before. His friends assumed the climb was a hike, then left him in a section with no clear trail when he turned out slower than the rest of the group. He turned around and followed us back.

That group ignored nearly all of mountain climbing's golden rules: Start early, never split up inexperienced groups, and never hike into a storm.

It is impossible to eliminate risk in the mountains, and the best we can do as climbers is to respect nature and mitigate as much as possible. Beginning on easy mountains is one of the best ways to do so. No matter where you are in North America, the climbs are accessible.



OVERLOOKING THE ABSAROKA RANGE
IN NORTHWESTERN WYOMING

In the Northeast, there's Mount Mansfield, the highest mountain in Vermont. Considered an easy day hike, it requires 7.7 miles round trip and 2,893' of elevation gain. The low summit elevation and well-marked trail system make the mountain an ideal training ground for future climbs.

In the Rocky Mountains, there's Mount Elbert, the highest point in Colorado. And although it's one of the tallest mountains in the continental U.S., Mount Elbert is considered one of the easier Colorado '14ers' to climb. The 9.5-mile, well-marked trail will have dozens of climbers on any given summer day, all making their way to the 14,440' summit. This route is also ideal for acclimation training as the elevation is high, but the exposure risk is lower than many other mountains with elevations over 12,000'.

In the Southwest, Humphrey's Peak is the tallest mountain in Arizona and requires 3,400' of elevation gain and a little over ten miles round-trip. Much like Elbert, it is a popular summer day hike that keeps the trail well-maintained and safer than isolated peaks.

Standing on top of a peak is a prize, yet walking away without summiting is equally rewarding. Summit or not, climbing mountains is one more way to get out, explore, and enjoy some of the world's most remote and scenic places. On the way up, you'll sit under a shaded tree eating a tasteless protein bar and wonder why you ever thought this was a good idea. You'll struggle to catch your breath with every foot of elevation gain and rip your favorite pair of joggers. Nothing about climbing a mountain is pretty; it's not supposed to be.

But when you're down in your rig at the end of a long climb, watching the last light fade from the summit you faced, you'll feel a little flicker in your soul. That feeling – it's addictive. Good luck getting it to fade. ✕



MAVERICK THE CAT ON THE SUMMIT OF CLASS 1
WYOMING PEAK IN THE WYOMING RANGE.

SHALEE SUPER

AUTHOR BIO



Shalee Super is an adventure travel blogger, writer, and photographer based in Cody, Wyoming. After growing up camping along the Great Lakes in Michigan, Shalee began adventuring beyond the Midwest in her late teens. Ten years, 42 countries and 49 states later, she now spends most of her time adventuring around the western United States with her husband, Josh, and two adventure cats, Maverick and Aspen. Shalee focuses on showcasing the lesser-known path in her adventures, whether by backpacking or overlanding to remote locations. After a long journey in the mountains, she's always scouting out the biggest and best ice cream cone a town offers!

You can follow her adventures at [@shaleewanders](https://www.instagram.com/shaleewanders)



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Hardshell Roof Top Tent Options for Your Next Adventure

WORDS & PHOTOS – ALEX ZAPPILE, MICHAEL HOLLAND, PHIL REAGAN, AND STAN WRIGHT

They're everywhere. Roof top tents, also known as RTTs, have become so commonplace that you now see them on all types of vehicles and for good reason: They're comfortable and relatively easy to set up. They're not new, however, having been around in some form for the past 60 years. However, is a roof top tent, particularly a hardshell roof top tent, right for you?

The number of pros and cons can be overwhelming. Even after you've decided to make the investment, there are multiple styles and brands of tents to choose from. It's a great deal of information to gather before making a relatively large and expensive

You may have considered some of the costs and benefits of roof top tent ownership and already have an idea of what you like and what you don't. For many, cost is the largest determining factor. With most higher-end hardshell roof top tents pushing \$2,500-plus, you'll spend considerably more for basically just another style of camping. So why the big price disparity between ground and roof top tents? Design, materials, manufacturing and shipping are the biggest factors. A ground tent is essentially just fabric and tent poles, but a roof top tent's large volume of material and numerous design features add to both its complexity and functionality. Almost all roof top tents are made outside

purchase. Few people get to sleep in multiple tents before handing over a stack of money, so it's important to do as much research as possible before setting off for parts unknown with a big box connected to your roof.





the United States so the cost of freight is factored into the final price. There are also the size and weight to consider. You'll add 100 pounds or more to your roof and increase the overall height of your vehicle by 12 inches or more, affecting its center of gravity. All this weight and additional height mean a decrease in fuel efficiency, so that's something to consider as well. A roof top tent requires you to be with your vehicle in order to camp, so it's not always possible to get to the best camping locations.

All this being said, why in the world would you choose roof top tenting? Well, there are a number of positive attributes. First and foremost, hardshells are easy to set up and there's a lot to be said for pulling into a camp site after a long day in the vehicle, releasing a few latches, opening up the tent, pulling down a ladder, and relaxing on a sprawling mattress that's already in place and ready for use.

Most of us are not fond of sharing our sleeping quarters with things that bite, slither, crawl or sting. Being up high and out of the dirt is a significant advantage. Most of us are not dodging lions in Africa or venomous snakes in Australia, but North America

does have its fair share of dangerous wildlife. If the peace of mind offered by sleeping on top of your vehicle allows you a better night's rest, then it's worth the cost to own a roof top tent. And don't forget the variety of options now available within the roof top tent market, including integrated USB and power outlets, integrated LED lighting, and other creature comforts which almost make the experience feel like a true home away from home.

In this issue, we are featuring in-depth editorial of six hardshell roof top tents. These represent only a small sample of the hardshells available and while we had tried to review several models from brands such as Howling Moon, Camp King, Free Spirit Recreation, Roofnest, and Eezi-Awn, we were either unable to source them due to supply availability or those brands simply chose not to participate.

If your adventure lifestyle warrants the use of a roof top tent, it can be the single greatest investment made and can undoubtedly enhance your camping experience because when it comes down to it, few things are better than sleeping soundly with the sounds and smells of mother nature in the remote backcountry.



James Baroud Evasion Evolution EVO

\$4,695-\$5,395



BY PHIL REAGAN

When my wife, Shellie, and I decided to transition from a Jeep JK 4 Door pulling an AT Adventure Trailer with an EEZI-AWN Tent on the trailer to a self-contained Jeep Gladiator with a Rooftop Tent, we determined what features were important to us for the new RTT. While we liked the EEZI-AWN for our trailer, it just didn't seem appropriate for our Gladiator. It's dark inside, not as open and airy, and since the vehicle is so much taller than the trailer, it didn't seem it would work well. The RTT for the Gladiator should be:

- Low profile and aerodynamic
- Quick and easy to set up and just as easy to take down
- Open, airy and offering great visibility
- Able to integrate with a 270-degree awning
- Comfortable and offer decent interior space

As we researched, we were drawn to the Jame Baroud Evasion series. It seemed to meet most – if not all – of our requirements. We purchased the EVO series. At the time of our purchase in 2020, there were two sizes: Large and extra-large. While the XL would offer more room, it seemed it would be too large for the vehicle, so we went with the large, which seems adequate

for us, and it fit well on top of the Patriot Camper PCOR canopy we installed on the back of the Gladiator.

When closed, it is a fully hard-shell enclosure that is only 13" high and has an aerodynamic shape. There are only four clamps in each corner, making it easy to unclip and have it pop up into a cube-shaped design with rounded corners. The gas-strut supports in the corners do most of the work of raising the tent, and one only has to push the strut supports outward from the inside of the tent to lock them in place. Setup is quick and easy, requiring only about five minutes. The most difficult part in our configuration is that the tent is high off the ground due to the vehicle lift, so a separate, telescoping ladder is needed to reach each clamp. The included ladder isn't useful for this, since it is a sliding ladder with no way to maintain its height.

Once inside, it is open and spacious with a 360° view which offers good ventilation and light. Each screened opening has its own zippered panel that can be closed for privacy and weather protection. There

are three interior standard options that are nice, a rechargeable light, a solar powered exhaust fan and a ceiling mounted net for basic storage. The exhaust fan isn't really about providing the cooling effect of a fan but rather to exhaust heat. The "comfort" pad, as it is called, is somewhat comfortable but I find I need some additional cushioning to be truly comfortable. For some reason the forward facing section of the tent does not have a zipper opening. This would have been nice because it would have offered access to a box on the roof rack where we could store items such as shoes and clothes. We do like the fact that our bedding can remain on the mattress when the shell is closed for traveling. There is just enough interior height to raise up on your knees, but ample room for two when lying down.

Accessing the tent is straightforward using the ladder that is included. The ladder is the sliding variety that conveniently clips on to the exterior shell of the tent. It isn't my favorite ladder for various reasons. It is barely long enough for our vehicle, resulting in the ladder being in a mostly vertical position, and since it is a sliding ladder, the rungs end up not being evenly spaced in the middle. The tent is accessible with a ladder from both sides and the rear. I prefer the rear access but I must use my other telescoping ladder since there aren't ladder clips on the rear. So, we tend to use both ladders based on our needs. The included ladder will fit inside the collapsed tent when traveling.

We like the additional options and features that are available with the RTT, such as the 270° Falcon Awning and the associated side panels when we want full coverage and protection. There is a Tunnel option which is an add-on to the side of the tent that then connects to the top of the awning, enabling protected access into the tent from below the awning. Of course, carrying and stowing these add-on pieces takes up more space and adds weight, but are nevertheless nice features. Deploying the 270 awning is quick and easy; however, installing the side-panels is time consuming.

Taking down or stowing the tent isn't as easy as setting it up and isn't as easy as James Baroud indicates. You must be very precise in how you position items in the tent and how you tuck the tent side panels in when collapsing the shell. You must remember to unlock the corner struts and ensure no material or items impede the struts as they collapse down. It is considered to be a one-person job but it does require the extra collapsible ladder to get access to each corner. I also end up using an additional, adjustable strap to hold the back end down while clipping the front and ensuring the tent material is out of the way. What takes five minutes to set up generally takes fifteen to twenty minutes to take down. If you find yourself in a hurry, you will invariably have to start over because something will always be in the way.

All-in-all, we like the James Baroud and don't regret going with this tent. It feels very comfortable when inside, fits nicely on our Gladiator with the PCOR canopy, and for the most part, is easy to set up and take down.



ACCESSORY ITEMS:

- Shoe Bag which clips to the ladder on the exterior
- Tablet Holder
- Comfort Pad
- Falcon 270 Awning
- Awning Tunnel
- Awning Sidewalls

STANDOUTS:

- 360° view
- Quick setup
- Comfortable Interior space
- Low profile when closed
- Aerodynamic hard shell
- Able to keep bedding inside when closed
- Optional weather tunnel to awning
- Integrates with Falcon 270 Awning
- Useful accessories (*fan, Interior storage net, light, shoe bag*)

DRAWBACKS:

- Not as quick and easy to take down and stow as anticipated
- Ladder is barely long enough for our vehicle
- Ladder rung spacing is off
- No zippered opening on the front side
- Essentially requires a separate ladder to access the corner clamps

WWW.JAMESBAROUD.COM/EN/

Autohome AirTop

\$3,999/\$4,299/\$4,599



BY STAN WRIGHT

Autohome has been making roof top tents for campers since the 1950s and they have it pretty dialed in at this point. The AirTop is a fiberglass hard-shell tent that literally opens and closes in seconds. You can go from driver's seat to sleeping bag in about two minutes which, in some cases, is reason enough to spend the money for this high quality, Italian-made tent.

The shell of my version is held closed by four straps similar to what you'd find on snowboard bindings. New versions use two latches, front and rear. Simply depressing the locking tabs releases the straps and the tent raises straight up via four auto-opening gas struts. The time required to release all four straps is how long it takes to prepare your sleeping quarters. Setup can be done in about two minutes. Cut that time in half if you have a helper handling tab duties on one side.

Packing this tent away is just as easy. Rope handles make pulling the gas struts shut as simple as reaching up and pulling down. Internal bungee cords pull the tent material in as the shell closes, making for a quick and clean operation. One of the greatest features of this style of tent is that your sleeping bag or blanket can stay in place when the tent is closed. This means fewer things to unpack or stow during setup and breakdown. The AirTop even comes standard with two comfortable sleeping pillows which stay in the tent as well.

Stowing the ladder may be the most time-consuming part of

the entire setup/breakdown. The ladder is placed into a ladder bag and zipped closed to keep dirt and grime out of the sleeping area. It can then be stowed inside the tent. With three doors for entering and exiting, it's an extremely user-friendly tent with minimal wasted space or time. There are also two arched windows with mosquito mesh at the front and rear to allow cool air in and keep bugs out.

In addition to the fast setup, the list of features on the Autohome AirTop is long and impressive. The construction materials are all straight from the top shelf. The mattress is incredibly comfortable and there are two internal storage bags on each side for holding the essentials you bring into the sleeping area. There is even overhead storage made of elastic cargo netting where you can stow your next day's clothing or an extra blanket or jacket. Each door has inner and outer flaps which extend below the bottom of the door zipper. One flap directs rain away from the tent and the other tucks

under the mattress to keep the cold out. The tent features a built-in LED light that turns on and off simply by touching it. It provides plenty of interior light and allows you to read or find a phone that is stowed away in one of the interior pockets.

The unit tested was an AirTop small, which only weighs 119 pounds. It's billed as a two-person tent, but you'll need to be comfortable sleeping very close to the other person if you choose this size. At just 51 inches wide there isn't a lot of extra room, but it is just enough for two adults. The medium AirTop adds another six inches of width and is billed as a two-person plus. The down side to selecting a larger hard-shell tent is the larger footprint it occupies on the vehicle. Unlike the folding-style roof tents, what you see in terms of size on your roof is



what you get when the tent is opened. There will be zero extra room on your roof rack.

As for quality, Autohome tents are impressive. The fiberglass hardshell is handmade and tough as nails. For reference, the tent has been mounted to my 100 Series Toyota Land Cruiser and during a hail storm, with hail as large as a golf ball, the Land Cruiser was dented and required significant repair. The Autohome Airtop, on the other hand, didn't get so much as a scratch!

Separately, the ability to store your sleeping bags, pillows and even a change of clothes inside the tent when it's closed is very helpful, though. If I were taking a solo or two-person trip covering long distances, this is the tent I would carry. There are very few flaws and the few that were found were more personal preference than actual shortcomings. With a price tag of just under \$4,000 to your door, this isn't the least expensive tent on the market, but 60 years of trial and error from Autohome makes this one of the best manufactured tents available.

LIKES:

- Build quality is impeccable
- Extremely quick and easy to deploy and pack away
- Ability to leave all sleeping gear in place
- Comfortable with three entry points allowing for versatility depending on how your vehicle is setup (ie. Awning, etc)

DISLIKES:

- Large footprint utilizes most, if not all, of the roof space
- Lack of covered area when tent is deployed

WWW.AUTOHOMEUS.COM



23 Zero A2 Armadillo Tent

\$3,795-\$3,995



BY MICHAEL HOLLAND

I have long been impressed with 23 Zero gear, and I found I was just impressed with their 23 Zero's Armadillo A2 roof top tent. I have been using 23 Zero gear for years and have always appreciated their attention to detail and quality. My wife and I have used their tents, awnings, and camp chairs, and have always felt their gear is excellently designed and engineered. Over the last year, 23 Zero designed and fabricated aluminum roof tents for the overlanding market. The Armadillo A2 and A3 – as well as the Kabari and Kabari Lite models – round out their aluminum tent offerings.

The company originates in Australia; the continent that some would argue started overlanding. Australia's overlanding companies are responsible for designing and fabricating outstanding overlanding equipment. Justin Dowey offers 23 Zero products through his North American distribution center in Salt Lake City, Utah. The gear is tested and evaluated in the wilds of Australia and North America. 23 Zero's goal is to provide the highest quality overlanding equipment on the market.

FEATURES

I unlocked the stainless steel latches, gave the aluminum top a slight push, and voila: The tent opened. Louise climbed the ladder to open the windows and allow some fresh air inside. Each zipper had a bright, orange-colored plastic attachment in order to demark each zipper and make it easier to grab and unzip. We

felt this was a nice touch. Louise unzipped the door and screen and commented positively about the sleeping space (56 x 78") equipped with a two-inch rebound foam quilted mattress. This is the size of a full-size bed and the perfect size for two adults. The A3 model, slightly larger, measures 72 x 86", roughly the size of a queen bed. The tent is warm and cozy with the aluminum top quilted on the inside and two large windows on either side of the tent.

As I placed the spring rods into the tent to prop the windows open, I noticed the stainless-steel hardware and latches of the tent. The hardware should perform well and last for years. There are also two tracks on the aluminum top to mount something, such as a small solar panel or another piece of equipment or gear. Immediately to the left and right of the ladder are two shoe/personal items bags to use and minimize clutter inside the tent. Once in the tent, a rechargeable, USB light attaches to a cross bar and

provides ample light. Attention to detail is evident on the inside and outside of the Armadillo A2.

The downside to roof top tents is that when camping in the wind, tents can flap and make noise. Let's face it: The elements are out of our control. However, I have spent countless nights listening to my tent flap in the wind. No good. My wife and I did not experience high winds while testing the tent; however, the Armadillo's A2 rain fly seemed tight-fitting and conformed to the tent's structure as a whole. This design quality, along with the aluminum hard shell, seem likely to function as wind deterrents.

Want to sleep restfully? The tent's fabric consists of Light Suppression Technology (LST) Fabric which is a UV treatment along with a polyurethane coating that keeps the tent cooler and stops light penetration. The camper sleeps better and cooler. The tent easily closes with gas struts and a pull-down cord. Bedding can be stored inside. I stored two down bags inside of the tent. Pillows? More bedding? I wouldn't count on it.

With a few elastic cords to draw the tent inward, the ladder easily collapses and folds into the tent. This was my first experience using a hybrid tent (soft and hard shell), but I understand the appeal to them. The Armadillo A2 is a comfortable, well-designed, and high-quality tent. If looking for a hybrid variant, consider 23 Zero's Armadillo A2.

Final Thought: This is a high quality, thoughtfully designed hybrid tent that comes in two sizes.



STANDOUTS

- Well thought-out touches
- Warm, cozy, inviting interior
- Two mounting rails atop the tent's top allow for mounting accessories
- LSD Fabric is outstanding
- Need a larger model? Check out the A3 model

DRAWBACKS

- A little longer setup and take-down time compared to a clamshell model
- Heavy, at 200 pounds
- Adds 14" to vehicle's height

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Alu-Cab Gen 3R

\$4,399



BY ALEX ZAPPILÉ

There is no shortage of rooftop tents on the market these days. But it is easy to distinguish a quality tent from the sea of many. Alu-Cab's Gen 3R Rooftop tent is hands down one of the most well thought-out, quality crafted tents out there.

Made out of aluminum, the tent weighs in at 76 kg or 167.5 lbs. This is a decrease from Alu-Cab's prior generation, the Gen 3.1 Expedition tent, due to key design changes. The most significant change to the tent is how rigid the roof is, thanks to the stamped design that replaced the tread pattern found on the previous generation tent. That isn't the only change they made to the roof of the tent, either. Alu-Cab also extended their t-slot track the entire length of the tent, giving you more available space to mount equipment. They also added a pre-wired Anderson plug for a solar panel so you don't have wires zip tied all around the perimeter of the tent.

Alu-Cab added a side rain cover that can be swapped from side-to-side depending on your point of entry and a roll-up rear rain fly, which to me is huge. You no longer have a rain fly flapping in the wind on clear nights when you don't need one. This might seem like a small change, but it is a great one.

Another welcomed change is the addition of a heater / AC vent added to the side fabric. Folks are camping year-round these

days, and having a port that allows you to route your heater or AC tube to your sleeping quarters is such an improvement from attempting to hold the hose in place with the zippers for the door panels. You can now enter and exit your tent without having to worry about dropping your heater tube in the middle of the night when nature calls, and you have to exit your tent.

Those are just a few of the fundamental changes that make the 3R such an outstanding tent. We skipped the addition of a condensation mat under the mattress AND the new optional drop-down table and tilting backrest because there is so much to talk about still. All these changes make it easy to gloss over what makes Alu-Cab's past tents so good. The 12 volt and USB ports in the sleeping area to charge devices, lighting – and the fact that Alu-Cab's 270 and 180 awnings are mounted to the tent rather than load bars are design features that, I think, get skipped over.

How is it out in the field? Well, flip two latches, give it a shove, deploy the telescoping ladder, and you are ready to crawl inside. Your bedding can be stored in the tent full time, pillows and all, making setup that much easier. The mattress is already comfortable enough, and with the addition of the condensation mat that Alu-Cab includes, comfort is not a concern – and that is coming from a side sleeper.

I also happen to be a very light sleeper, but the dual-layer canvas does not allow any daylight to creep its way in at 5 a.m., so you will find yourself sleeping in quite a bit more than the rest of your group.

Having owned two rooftop tents before switching to the Alu-Cab Gen 3R, I can tell you that not all rooftop tents are the same. Will you be able to get out and sleep under the stars with any tent? Absolutely. But there are few tents out there that both improve your camping experience and shorten setup times, making you more excited to get out and camp more than the Alu-Cab Gen 3R rooftop tent.



STANDOUTS:

- Rigid roof allows for variety of accessories to be loaded on top
- Pre-wired for Solar
- AC and Heater vent integrated into side fabric
- Upgrade enhancements available maximize tent's functionality and utility
- Swappable side rain cover

DRAWBACKS:

- Even with aluminum shell, it's heavy at 167.5lbs

WWW.OK4WD.COM



Cascadia Vehicle Tents Mt. Hood

\$3499/\$3699/\$3999



BY MICHAEL HOLLAND

It was late, and I was tired. A few friends and I just returned from exploring the canyons in Robber's Roost (south-central Utah). I jumped onto my Land Cruiser's rear bumper, popped two latches, and gave the tent a slight, upward push. My accommodations were set! The Mt. Hood roof top tent is an amazing product by Cascadia Vehicle Tents (CVT).

FEATURES

The Mt. Hood comes in three sizes. The length of the three sizes is standard at 85"; however, the widths range from 50", 56", and 60". This aluminum tent can also be chosen as a one channel or two channel exterior shell. The choice of channels affects the overall height of the tent and the ability to store bedding and the ladder inside the tent. Therefore, I chose the two-channel exterior option. The tent is just over eight inches tall when closed.

The tough aluminum exterior allows for a small roof rack to fit atop the tent itself—a thoughtful and excellent attribute. Also, CVT offers two different types of gas struts depending on the tent's potential roof load. Knowing that I was planning to add a few gear boxes on top of the rack, I opted to upgrade to the heavy-duty version. This beefier gas strut allowed me to mount the roof rack further back on the tent and, also, to leave all my gear attached to the rack when the tent is opened. The ease of

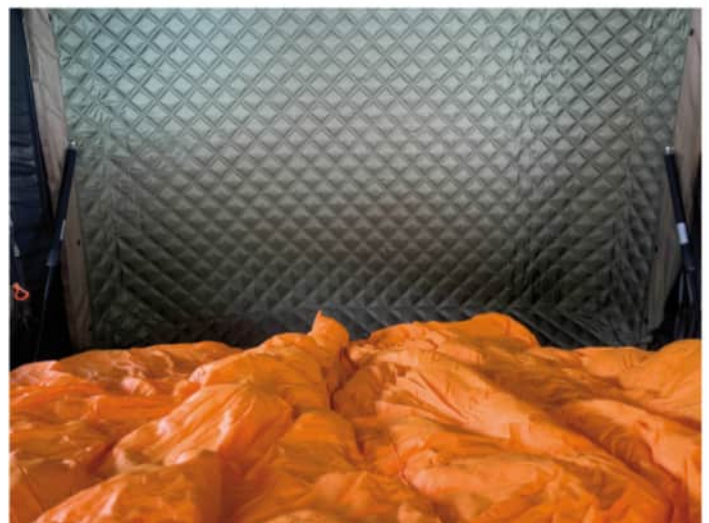
opening and closing make the Mt. Hood a standout in the clamshell tent market.

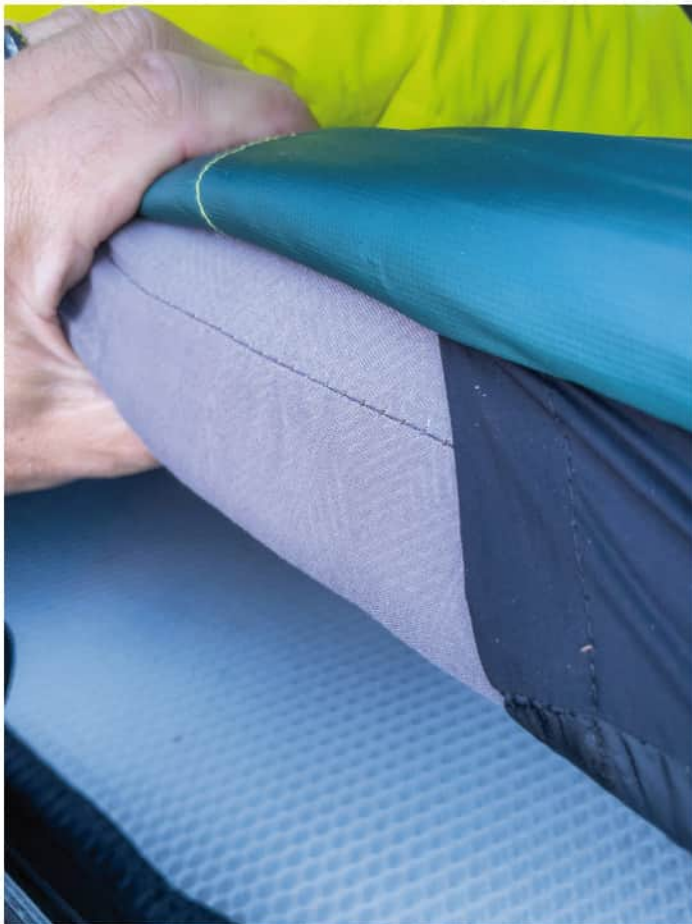
Inside, the camper sleeps on a three-inch mattress. The mattress sits atop a one-inch condensation mat and is wrapped in a poly/cotton cover. For bedding, I used a double down sleeping bag from NEMO, which exactly fits the mattress. The ceiling inside is carpeted and the attached net provides a place to store miscellaneous items. Two side pockets at the foot of the bed allow for storing an Ipad or other goodies. Numerous pockets at the head of the bed can store keys, a water bottle, a phone, and other small items. The tent is ventilated by two large side windows with screens and three additional vents at the top to allow air to escape and to prevent condensation from forming inside the tent. The screens and zippers are high quality components.

Mt. Hood closes easily. An elastic band wraps around the entire tent, which brings the walls of the tent inward. I grabbed the solid piece of webbing on the back

of the tent and pulled it downward. Done. Two latches later, I completed the closure and drove toward the next adventure. Both bedding and ladder can be stored inside of the tent. Vehicle space is a precious commodity, and this enables me to store other gear and equipment inside my Land Cruiser.

FINAL THOUGHT: For a quick setup, a comfortable mattress, and the capacity to store things atop the tent, the CVT Mt. Hood is a most viable option.





STANDOUTS

- Excellent, high quality mosquito netting and zippers
- Rack or cross bars atop the tent allow for use
- Inside pockets provide ample storage
- Supportive mattress
- Ladder and bedding stored inside the tent
- Slim design at 8" tall

DRAWBACKS

- Inside mesh is poor quality.
- Weight is an issue at roughly 190 pounds.

WWW.CASCADIATENTS.COM



iKamper Blue Dot Voyager

\$2,899-\$3,699

FEATURES

The black exterior top hides built-in aluminum crossbars. Yes, this tent can store gear on top; and the rack is already built in and part of the tent. The rack doesn't sit above the tent but rather lays within the tent's top. The tent itself is a poly/cotton canvas, gray in color. Inside, I found a 2 ¾" quilted mattress. The floor of the tent is aluminum. There are two interior pockets to store items.

After first opening the tent, I noticed a gap between the actual top of the tent and the tent's shell. Was that normal? Did something rip? However, all was well. iKamper designed the actual tent to not be directly connected to the tent's shell. The interior space was pleasant, but there was a lack of space given it's a one-person tent. The tent can be accessed from both sides as well as the rear. Large, high-quality mesh prevents bugs from entering. The rear window includes a rain fly that was propped by two spring rods.



BY MICHAEL HOLLAND

I harbored no preconceived notions before I opened the tent, but still was caught off guard by the iKamper Blue Dot Voyager. It was unique and different from other roof top tents I have seen and used—on the inside and outside. iKamper continues to innovate and fabricate tent offerings for the overland world. And, the iKamper Blue Dot Voyager (BDV) is innovative!

After a memorable camping trip, Soon Park founded iKamper. He set out to create tent options and experiences for campers. With help from Kickstarter, he raised the funds to create a standout roof top tent, the Skycamp. The tent was revolutionary because it was a combination of a soft-sided tent and a hard-sided tent. The Skycamp tent made the opening and closing of a tent efficient and fast. This past year, iKamper designed their own version of a clamshell tent in one- and two-person models and brought these to the outdoor market.

I chose the BDV Solo simply because a solo version of a roof top tent is rare. The first thing that is unique about this tent is that one can order it assembled or not. Want to save a few hundred dollars? Want to really understand the parts of your tent? Order the tent unassembled. With lack of time, I ordered the tent assembled. It arrived exceptionally packaged. The unboxing showcased a black, UV- and scratch-resistant shell that measured forty inches wide by ninety inches long.

Once I was ready to adventure somewhere else, I stowed the ladder inside the tent along with my down sleeping bag, and I closed the tent with ease. A single pull cord is attached to the top; I gave it a good tug. The two exterior gas struts allowed the tent to close easily. With the tent closed, I clamped the two latches; and within a minute or two, I was ready to move onward. The beauty of the BDV is the quick and easy opening and closing of the tent. Want bigger? Check out the BDV Duo. Both tents, when closed, are seven inches tall, so wind drag is minimal.

Overall, I found the iKamper BDV Solo an excellent and comfortable tent. I appreciate that the tent has a built-in roof rack to store extra gear. The design allows for quick deployment and closure. The tent also allows the ladder and bedding to be stored inside. iKamper pushes the roof top tent market with the BDV Solo and Duo clamshell tents.

FINAL THOUGHT: iKamper offers a unique clamshell tent offered in two sizes with a built-in roof rack. **X4**

STANDOUTS

- Comfortable and pleasant interior
- Built-in roof rack
- Availability in two sizes

DRAWBACKS

- The overall length, 90", could present issues when mounting to some roof racks.

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Black Mesa

Dusty, Ancient Mysteries in Oklahoma's Loneliest and Darkest Park

WORDS & PHOTOS – HEIDE BRANDES

It's past two a.m. and I'm happily reckless when we decide to hunt for petroglyphs, those scrawled pieces of art made more than three-thousand years ago. As the off-road vehicle my friend Jack Fowler is driving bounces over rocky and dusty dirt roads, the full moon above us on the scrubby lips of the mesa in the farthest corner of Oklahoma gives an orange glow to an impossibly big and dark sky.

Beside me, my friend Emily is giggling as much as I am, thrilled and charmed by this adventure of seeking mysterious graffiti left by people long past while charging over barely-seen desert roads in the middle of the night. At that moment, we were in the past: That wild, "no man's land" moniker that makes up the tiny corner of Oklahoma's panhandle where the shortgrass prairie meets the Rocky Mountains.

This was Black Mesa State Park and Nature Preserve, one of the most isolated and least visited state parks in Oklahoma, if not the nation. Tucked within a harsh desert-like landscape and nearly an hour from the closest town, Black Mesa State Park is a place you have to want to go to. It's not something you just stumble upon while driving down the highway, but it's a place that is steeped in Native American and outlaw history, with the blood and bodies of homesteaders who struggled in an unforgiving land. This more recent history is as heavy as the one in which the dinosaurs roamed during the Jurassic and Triassic periods and left their tracks forever in the stone here.

Black Mesa was formed from a volcanic basalt lava flow that poured out of Colorado some thirty million years ago. The soft sandstone eventually eroded over time, but that hard crust remained, creating the mesas that rolled out like ocean waves.

The tallest of the mesas is also Oklahoma's highest point, measuring at just under 4,973' above sea water. The brutal winds that buffet the hikers who take the eight-mile, round-trip Summit Trail to that high point also carved out the weird contortions called hoodoos – towering sandstone structures – that dot the landscape around the mesas.

All in all, the resulting scene is both menacing and beautiful. Under some of the darkest skies in the region, the desert is eerily quiet and starkly cold at night. During the day, the scrubby grasses, cacti, and dark, desert-varnish black rocks bake under a cowboy sun in the summer or saber-like frigid winds during the winter.

On nights when the moon is a fingernail in the sky, an explosion of stars dusts the blackness and the Milky Way is as flashy as a neon sign.

For two days, my friend Emily and I joined our friends Jeff Hargrave and Jack Fowler on a behind-the-scenes jaunt through Black Mesa, accessing private land that most visitors aren't able to explore. Many of the dinosaur tracks that are forever embedded in stone creek beds and the scrawling art of prehistoric Native Americans are found on private land out here.

If you don't have an insider guiding you, you'll likely be run off at the tip of a shotgun for trespassing, so having Jack and Jeff as our guides was an opportunity we knew we were lucky to have. And in those two days, I saw history unfold, gazed upon the century-old graves of children, and traced the art of civilizations that roamed here long before the rest of the world landed upon North America's shores.

It's a place that gets in your blood. Within those hidden dinosaur tracks and among the great sandstone hoodoos dancing around mesas is a kind of wind-thrashed beauty that seeps into your skin like the layers of dust that coat everything.



"You Need To Come Out Here"

Jack Fowler, a Western artist based in Oklahoma and a certified wildlife tracker based in Oklahoma City, was telling me yet another story about his frequent visits to Black Mesa, this time lauding the mountain lion tracks he had found.

"I've never seen him, but he's out there," he said, showing off photographs of a fat print. Jack, along with Jeff Hargrave, are frequent visitors to the Black Mesa, and through Jeff's work with the non-profit organization Native Explorers, they have access to private land and a cabin. After hearing story after story about what a unique place it was, I decided to make the long, lonely six-hour drive from Oklahoma City along back country roads to explore on my own.

My friend and always-up-for-an-adventure travel buddy, Emily Brashier, joined me, because, in her own words, "I've always wanted to go out there, but it's just so far away."

That statement is one I've heard from dozens of Oklahomans. The closest town to Black Mesa State Park and Preserve is Guymon, located nearly an hour away, or the tiny hamlet of Kenton, home to a whopping sixteen people. Until this year, you had to haul in your own food and water or journey to Guymon for a hot meal. This year, Kenton, located roughly three miles from

the preserve, opened the Kenton Mercantile, complete with a grocery store and a mighty fine restaurant and grill.

In 1959, Oklahoma created the 549-acre Black Mesa State Park, with cabins, camper hookups, a campground, a picnic area, and the two-hundred-acre Lake Carl G. Etling. The weird and fantastical natural rock formations, including Wedding Party, Wedding Cake, and Old Maid fascinate visitors, but the park is also famed for its wildlife including golden eagles, piñon jays, red-tailed hawks, and mule deer. Bird watchers flock here, as do stargazers and amateur astronomers from around the world who attend the massive Okie-Tex Star Party held near Black Mesa every September.

The Black Mesa Nature Preserve was established in 1991 when the Oklahoma Nature Conservancy purchased the mesa. The 1,600-acre preserve protects sixty percent of the mesa top where only hikers are allowed.

Jack and Jeff look like they fit in this harsh land. Jack favors dusty old cowboy hats and scuffed up boots, looking much like the nineteenth-century outlaws such as William Coe and Black-jack Ketchum, who used the region as a hideout.



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Jeff Hargrave is a bit more modern. As the executive director of Native Explorers Foundation, an organization that provides educational programs and promotes partnerships that increase the number of Native Americans in science and medicine, he often takes Native youth to help dig up dinosaur bones at Black Mesa Preserve at a private dinosaur quarry. He knows the secret places in the area that most visitors never get to see.

They are also pretty handy with a Polaris four-seater, which we used to traverse at least sixty miles of dusty backroads through Black Mesa that weekend. After Emily and I climbed the eight-mile trail to Black Mesa's highest point, gazing solemnly at a huge granite monolithic obelisk that declared – "This is the Highest Point in Oklahoma!" – we met up with them for a bit of off-roading adventure.

Maybe it was the stories or the magic of the full, orange moon that first night that made us think two a.m. was the perfect time to tear off on the Polaris to hunt for petroglyphs. With Jack at the wheel, we bounced over rough paths in the dark to find a rock near the cabin, and it wasn't hard to get caught up in the adventure of it all.

"What do you think they were trying to say?" Emily asked as we stood in front of a massive boulder that was etched with thousand-year-old graffiti. The artwork was mysterious and incomprehensible; maybe it was a coiled snake, a rudimentary owl or even - if you looked hard enough - the alien-like head of a praying mantis.

"No one really knows," Jeff said. "It could have been a way marker made from the tribes here, but it's like three-thousand years old."

From 500-800 A.D., the area was inhabited by Anasazi Indians, and in later centuries by Kiowa, Comanche, Cheyenne and Arapaho, who led a nomadic life following the thunderous herds of buffalo which roamed the Great Plains. Before the Anasazi, 250 to 300 million years ago, dinosaurs roamed this region, though the landscape was dramatically different. Hot, wet, and muggy, the Black Mesa area was a large swamp that was home to plant-eating species like the Brontosaurus and Stegosaurus and a T-Rex-like carnivorous species called the Allosaurus.

Jack and Jeff promised us more petroglyphs and dinosaur tracks by light of day, so after spending a good hour among the petroglyphs, we headed towards Robbers' Roost, a stone fortress hidden upon another mesa created by notorious outlaw William Coe and his gang. In the 1800s, Oklahoma's panhandle was considered "No Man's Land" thanks to the harsh weather and landscape, so outlaws easily avoided the long arm of the law by hiding out there.

Settlers, ranchers and coal and copper miners arrived afterwards, grazing their sheep and cattle on the mesas, but life on the desert mesa was anything but idyllic, as two graves of children still remain near the cabin we called home base attest to.

The next day, we started early with a visit to see the famous hoodoo formations of the Wedding Party and the unfortunately-named Old Maid. Carved by centuries of wind and rain, these sculpted towers of sandstone are fascinating to see and wander through. Jack showed us tracks of bear, coyote, deer and bobcat among the trickling creeks throughout the preserve and beyond, but it was the dinosaur tracks I really wanted to see.

ALL CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL

Black Mesa State Park and Preserve holds a wealth of dinosaur tracks and bones. Nowhere else in the State have so many dinosaur bones been discovered – so many, in fact, that they are only now being properly cataloged and identified at places like The Sam Noble Museum at The University of Oklahoma.

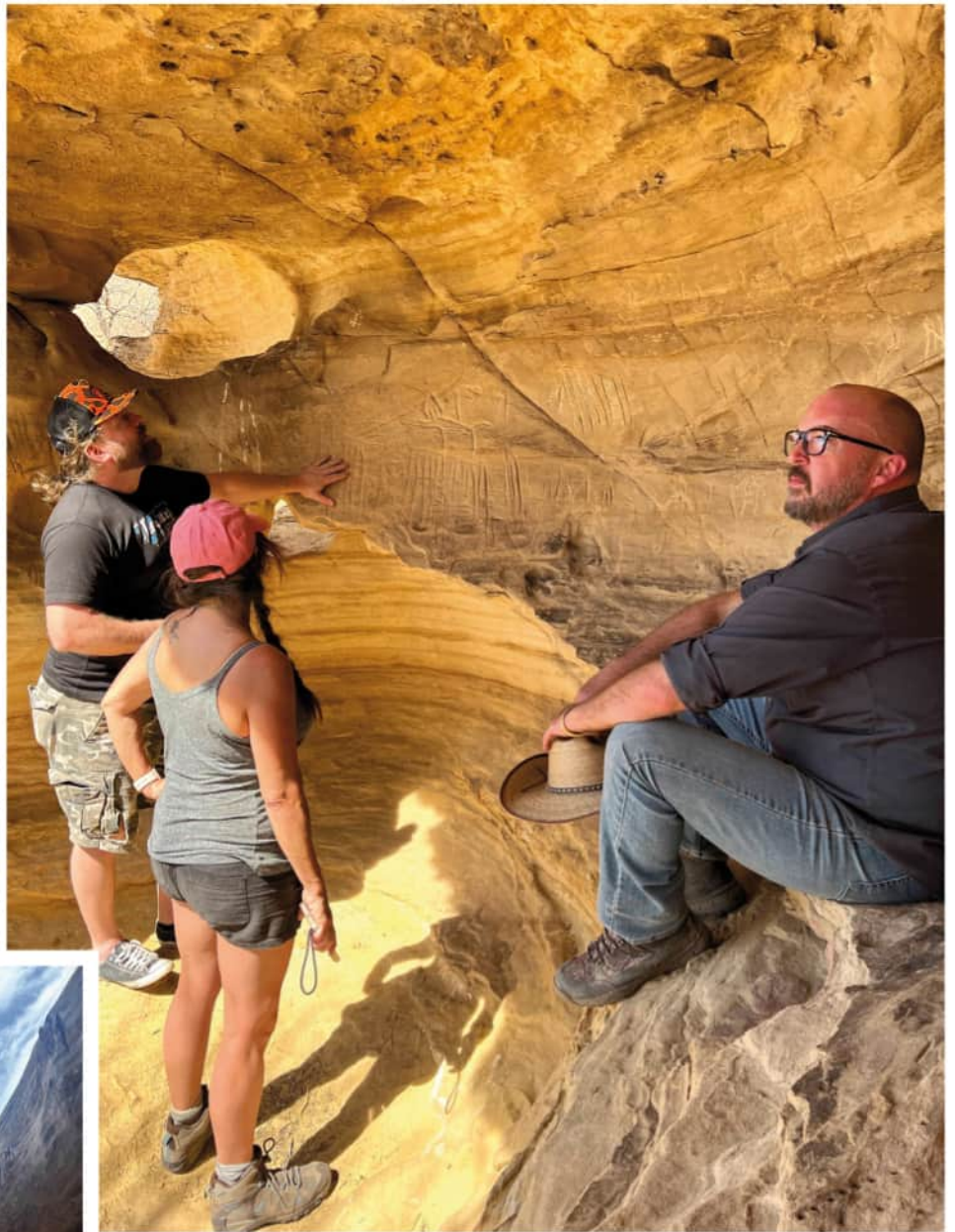
Visitors can still see the original dinosaur quarry at Black Mesa, located roughly halfway between the state park and Kenton, and marked with only a rustic, hand-painted sign. In 1934, a road construction crew unearthed a large rib along State Highway 64, and paleontologists from The University of Oklahoma converged on the area to spend the next decade excavating the site and several others near Black Mesa. By 1942, hundreds of dinosaur bones had been uncovered, including the largest *Apatosaurus* yet discovered, which now stands at The Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History in Norman.

Black Mesa State Park and Nature Preserve also contains forty-seven dinosaur prints that were originally discovered in the 1980s in a washed-out creek located across from the parking lot of the trailhead for the Black Mesa Summit Trail. To find the footprints, follow the dirt road to the end and walk down into the wash.

But Jeff knew of others. One such set of tracks were along another creek bed, a set of turkey-foot like prints that danced along a set of rocks.

"That's a *Coelophysis*. It was one of the first dinosaurs ever to roam the area," Jeff said. We also found modern pawprints of bobcat, bear and coyote on our hike. In another creek, and as we wove through dirt roads to a marker 1.4 miles north of the Summit Trail, noting the spot where Oklahoma, New Mexico and Colorado touch, we saw antelope dashing along. Mule deer, elk, black bear and bighorn sheep also prowl these mesas, though we didn't see them.







Throughout the rest of the day, we explored abandoned homesteader sites, picking up rusty nails or pieces of old wagon wheel, and imagined how hard life must have been for the settlers who braved weather, rowdy outlaws and hostile tribes. We ventured up to Anubis Cave where, depending on who you talk to, ancient Celts may or may not have left their own petroglyphs alongside ancient Native drawings.

At some point, we were in Colorado... or maybe New Mexico. This part of the world is where Oklahoma kisses both states, and as we ventured miles away through lonely roads, we discovered more ancient etchings of antelope and deer and even petrified logs tucked way up on a hill. I was glad for our guides – I was completely lost on the mesas.

For those not blessed to have local guides like we did, a guided tour of the dinosaur attractions, as well as other historic sites, is offered through the Hitching Post Lodge and Ranch in Kenton and is available for day trips. Lodging also is available at the Hitching Post Lodge & Ranch if you're not keen on camping at Black Mesa State Park, which has twenty-nine RV sites and twenty-five tent sites.

We ended our day covered in road grime and sweat at The Kenton Mercantile where I ate a homemade burger so good I nearly passed out. Already, the chill of night was pushing in, so we headed back to the cabin with memories of dinosaurs and ancient artists dancing in our heads.

Cracking open an ice-cold drink as another full moon set over the mesa, Jack asked me if I finally "got it" – if I understood the allure that these lonely, mysterious and ancient mesas had. Oh, yeah, Jack, I finally do. **X4**



HEIDE BRANDES

AUTHOR BIO



Heide Brandes is an award-winning journalist and editor with more than 18 years of experience. She regularly contributes to numerous state, regional, and national publications and has been published in Forbes, Silicon66, Bloomberg News, The Guardian UK, The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, TrailGroove Magazine, Destinations

Travel Magazine, GoNomad, New York Daily News, and the New York Times. She is also the Oklahoma correspondent for Reuters News Service.

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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A full-page background image of a night landscape. The sky is a deep teal color, filled with numerous stars and the faint, glowing band of the Milky Way galaxy. A dark silhouette of a coniferous forest stretches across the middle of the frame. Below the forest, a calm body of water reflects the stars and the forest above, creating a symmetrical effect.

THE GREAT ESCAPE



The Milky Way in all its
grandezza from Devil's Lake
- by Andy Best





THE GREAT ESCAPE

Adventure on four wheels
- by Michael Rudd

THE GREAT ESCAPE

Hiking the Chocolate Drops
in The Maze
- by Randy Langstraat



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TREADMARKS

Crappy Campsites

WORDS - BILL DRAGOO | PHOTOS - SUSAN DRAGOO

It was 100 degrees Fahrenheit when I rolled into Moab, Utah. The air conditioning on my BMW R1250GS Rallye was only a pipe dream. When I walked inside the McDonalds, I saw a fellow long-distance rider draped across the plastic bench like a slab of bacon dropped into a hot skillet. He was dehydrated, exhausted and in dire need of a good night's sleep. I wasn't much better off but I had a plan to escape the heat and camp up high in the Manti-La Sal National Forest where it would be cool. My secret spot was above 7,000 feet. I had been there many times before, up Sand Flats Road and out the spur trail leading to the Castle Valley overlook some 2,000 feet below. I offered to lead my comrade in suffering to this place of respite but he declined, dogmatically devoted to the Utah Backcountry Discovery Route. Unfortunately, In July, the beauty of southern Utah can be eclipsed by the heat. I chomped down a Big Mac, downed a giant cup of ice water, refilled my hydration pack and punched all the right buttons to cast the Bavarian beast off to somewhere cooler than Moab.

The sun was setting as I made my way along the twisty, varied terrain of Sand Flats Road through rock cuts and along sheer ledges above Fins and Things, to my right, and the Porcupine Rim mountain bike trails, off to my left. I had just enough cell service to catch up with my wife Susan as I rode along, describing the road, exclaiming when sand or a rut took me off guard



in the waning light and voicing memories of the time a herd of cattle barricaded my way to the very same campsite several years before. A wrong turn almost tricked me into taking a gnarly bike trail into unknown territory. I love technical terrain, even on the big GS, but at sunset, tired and ready for a peaceful night's sleep, I'd rather not tackle it.

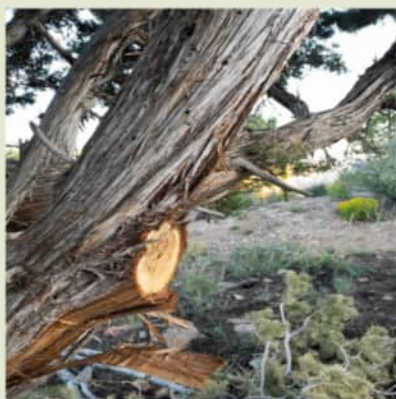


My boys were camping from the time my first son was two months old. He and his brothers were taught the ritual. After packing and loading the Jeep, their job was to police the camp. The practice was taught to me and my fellow Boy Scouts on our first outing. Every sign of our existence was to be erased to the best of our abilities. The only remnant would be our fire poker and a neatly stacked pile of kindling if any remained. Arguably, even those should have been discarded but it felt good to leave something of real value for the next person to occupy the site. We even thought it was cool to brush out our footprints like the mountain men we'd read about in Western novels by Louis L'Amour. That practice has gone by the wayside but the rest is now being taught to my grandchildren. We might not turn the tide completely but maybe, by beating the drum for those who have yet to appreciate the value of our pristine lands, we can roll up and find that favorite campsite clean and ready to share its glory one more time. It's a fine aspiration and a worthwhile legacy. **X4**

My trail came up just before the Loop Road, suddenly familiar and welcoming, like an old friend standing in the yard when you drive up to the house. I made the turn and laughed as I recalled the deep sand and scrappy ledges, teasing like a playful gauntlet to my final resting place...for the night, anyway.

Most times there is nobody else there, but on this night a couple of other campers had staked their claims on the overlook. Fortunately, I found all I needed just before the road ended. A single flat rock ledge sat a few feet from the edge. I snapped a couple of quick photos in the low light, laid down my sleeping mat (no tent on this perfect night), and sauntered over to meet my neighbors. A couple from Latvia sat in front of their Mercedes diesel van, taking in the scene. We visited briefly, commiserating about the failed engine which had left them stranded seven weeks in Albuquerque waiting on a replacement from Germany. The cost nearly upended their vacation but they decided to bite the bullet and swallow the expense in favor of the adventure. Darkness and fatigue drove me back to my bike and bed. I woke up early the next morning and cast about, checking out the area. Birds were just starting their morning songs and a light breeze escorted the first glimmers of the rising sun. It was peaceful, almost perfect, until...I discovered toilet paper scattered nearby and trash left in the firepit. Other unmentionable remnants of human occupation suggested a complete lack of concern for an otherwise magnificent place to stay. Trees in the immediate area had been cut or limbs broken off for firewood. It was not a pretty sight.

I had camped there for years. With few exceptions, other travelers had taken their refuse with them when they left. The occasional tent stake or length of paracord, maybe a bottle cap left in a hasty departure was all I'd ever discovered in times past. But nothing is sacred, even a revered campsite. Eventually the worst of humanity creeps in and leaves its ugly mark on an otherwise beautiful place. Who raised these people? How can they be so thoughtless?



ABOUT BILL DRAGOO

Bill Dragoo is founder of D.A.R.T. (Dragoo Adventure Rider Training), an internationally certified BMW Motorrad off-road motorcycle instructor, certified flight instructor, commercial seaplane and sailplane pilot, skydiver, scuba diver, overlander and adventure journalist. Always game for a challenge, Bill has won numerous competitions in motocross, cross-country mountain biking and sailboat racing. In 2010 he represented Team USA in BMW's GS Trophy competition in South Africa, Swaziland, and Mozambique. Bill and his wife Susan love to explore the American West and beyond by motorcycle and in their purpose-built Gen 5 Toyota 4Runner as they research historic trails and traditions. He is quick to tell anyone that the synergy between overlanding, riding and writing has opened doors he would never have imagined as a younger man.

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PEAK TO PEAK

WORDS & PHOTOS – SEAN JANSEN



The alarm went off and my blood-shot, sleepy eyes opened to grab my headlamp. Clothes were loosely pulled on, backpack shouldered, trail shoes laced, and a quick glance at the map illuminated the task at hand. The time was 1:30 a.m. The light emanating from my headlamp painted the trail while the nearly full moon lent a hand. Miles of trail climbing 5,700' lay ahead of me with nothing but a headlamp and a map to guide the way. The destination? San Gorgonio Peak. Southern California's highest point and a 9.4-mile one-way trail to the top. In the dark.

San Gorgonio has its history. Not only is it the most prominent point towering over San Bernardino, but it's also the highest in Southern California. Visible from Mount Whitney, the highest point in the continental U.S., it's a highlight of the Sand to Snow National Monument, a national monument created in 2016 encompassing 154,000 acres of Sonoran Desert and alpine granite bliss of the San Bernardino Mountains. San Gorgonio is its crown jewel. Frank Sinatra's mother died in a plane crash on this mountain and every year hikers who attempt to summit its peak go missing and lose their life from the elements.

With all this combined, it created an irresistible opportunity that my ADHD couldn't resist. An alpine environment towering 11,499' all the while being a stone's throw away from the Pacific Ocean, I couldn't help but think it was possible to scale the mountain while also having the time to go surfing in a single day. This would mean fulfilling my two favorite hobbies that I never imagined could be enjoyed together within a twenty-four hour period. Would it be possible to hike the highest point in Southern California while also being able to surf its most famous wave – Trestles – in a single day?

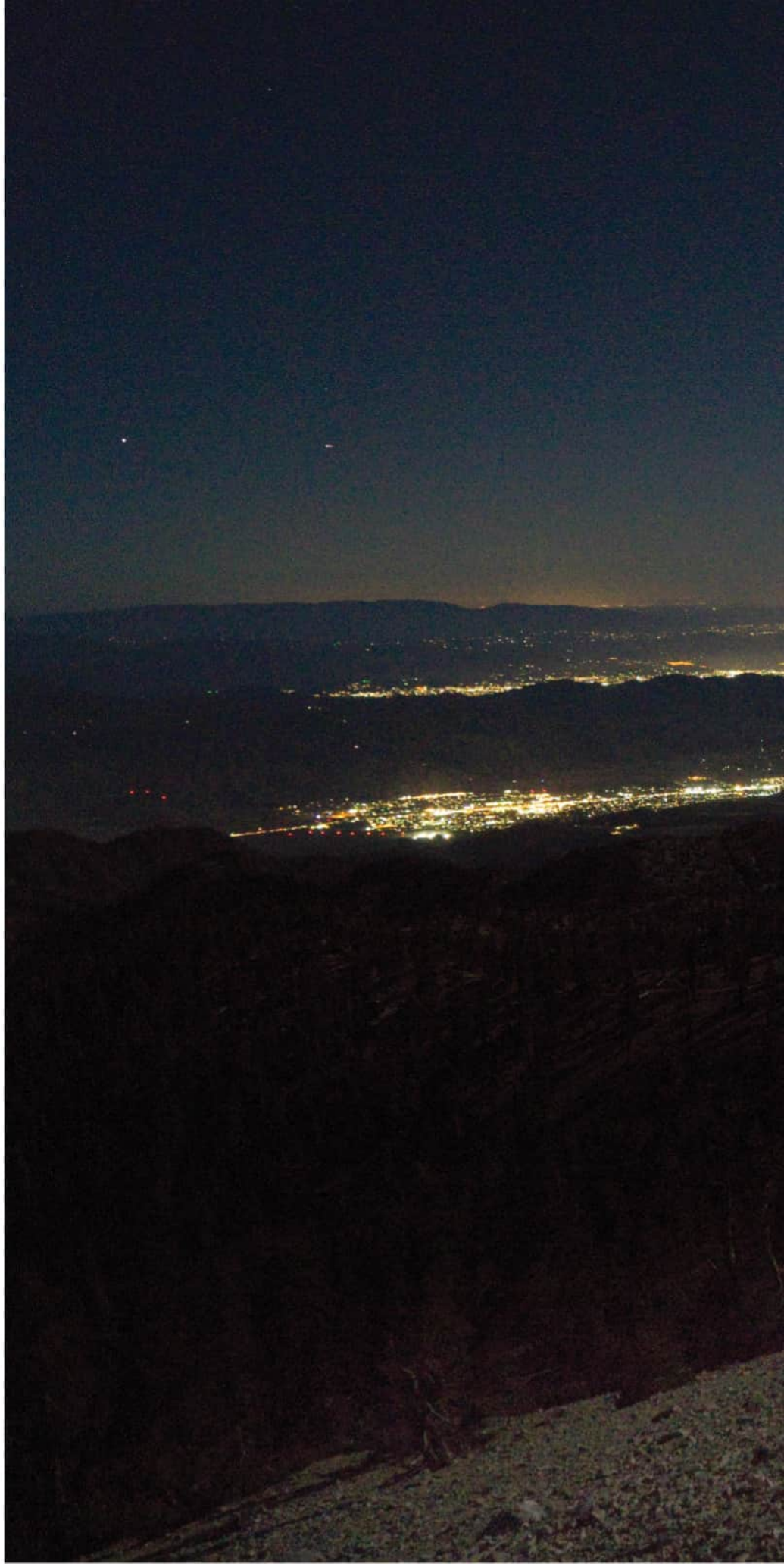
While researching, mathematically it made sense. I could wake in the predawn and begin hiking up to the peak with a headlamp and get to the summit by sunrise. Then I would hike down, drive two hours through traffic to the coast and surf around sunset. Simple enough with my hiking speed mapped out and daylight hours given – no obstacles should come up, right?

Weeks before the trip, obstacle number one loomed with a forest closure. A recent nearby fire had closed the trailhead access that I needed to hike to the summit. There were a couple trails that linked to the summit, but none were as short as Vivian Creek Trail and that was the one needed with my time allotted. As my hopes dwindled of successfully completing this challenge, the fire subsided and the trailhead was once again open a few weeks later. But now, the changing weather posed yet another threat to the day.

Snow blanketed the mountain and nearby peaks a few days prior to the hike, presenting another worrisome challenge to overcome. Luckily, the snow only lasted a day at elevation and melted shortly after. But with my ever-decreasing window of weather for the mountain, coupled with the last few remaining south swells to hit Trestles, the odds were stacked against me and time was running out. However, just as I was about to give up hope, a window presented itself. There was a small pulse of long period south-southwest swell set to hit San Clemente with some head high waves on a weekday, while presenting clear and cloudless conditions on San Geronio.

While checking multiple swell charts to get the exact forecast needed, coupled with refreshing weather channels to get the most accurate weather forecasts for the mountain, the day was decided upon and the car was packed. However, that wasn't the last obstacle to hurdle.

Hikers need a permit for San Geronio, and they also need a pass to park in the trailhead parking lot. When the car was





WELL BEFORE SUNRISE, SEAN KEEPS CLIMBING WHILE THE INLAND EMPIRE OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA SHINES BRIGHTLY IN THE BACKGROUND.

already packed, I realized that there were only a certain number of permits each day that were allotted for the trail. The permits were distributed through a non-profit called the San Geronio Wilderness Association. I jumped online and applied for a permit. Luckily there were enough slots open for me to get my permit two days before my planned hike. Step one complete, but what is this Adventure Pass needed just to park?

National forests, I thought, were already paid for through our taxes, but what appeared to be the last hurdle needed for the trip could have been easily overcome through a small purchase at a local gas station for the parking permit. Since I already had an annual National Park Pass, I had everything I needed: My trail running shoes, power bars, and bright orange sunrise light of what hopefully lay ahead.

The dark morning was cool and I could see my breath for most of the hike. The headlamp never faltered and my lungs handled the altitude surprisingly well with each step in elevation. Above the treeline, the headlamp was far from necessary, as the moon shot down rays of light bright enough to even journal by if desired. But no scribbles on a piece of paper could fully describe the sheer beauty and surprise offered by this alpine environment – less than a two-hour drive from the Pacific Ocean.

With my timing of the hike working to near perfection, I made it to the summit with forty-five minutes to spare before the first rays of sun were to even crest the horizon. Quickly unpacking, I grabbed all the layers I could to shield myself from the biting cold and brisk wind, and did my best to make coffee with my portable stove then sat back, huddled against cold granite stones as if they were ice cubes in this tall cocktail of alpine bliss.

With the sun rising into the sky and my metaphorical granite cocktail ice cubes warming with each sip of sunrise, my buzz was in full effect from the hues of color blasting the landscape and a summit



CAR CAMPING AT ALTITUDE THE NIGHT BEFORE TO ACCLIMATIZE TO THE HIGH ELEVATION OF THE NEARBY PEAKS.



WITH THE FIRST RAYS OF SUNRISE LIGHT PAINTING THE ALPINE ENVIRONMENT, SEAN ENJOYS THE WARMTH OF A BEACH TOWEL AND THE REMAINING COFFEE IN HIS THERMOS.



WITH THE AFTERNOON EXHAUSTION IN FULL EFFECT, THE PAUSE TO LET THE TRAIN GO BY BEFORE MY EVENING SURF WAS A WELCOMED RESPIRE IN THE DAY'S VENTURE.



WITH THE ACHIEVEMENT OF SUMMITTING BEFORE THE SUNRISE, THE EARLY MORNING COLORS OF THE SUNRISE WERE A WELCOMED AND REWARDING GIFT TO TAKE IN.



WITH THE CAR PACKED AND GEAR DIALED, THE LAST THING TO DO BEFORE THE HIKE IS PREPARE MENTALLY FOR THE ROUTE AHEAD WITH MAPS AS GUIDANCE.

ADMIRING THE CONDITIONS OF THE AFTERNOON AND THE EFFORT TO GET THERE, THE PAUSE TO TAKE IT ALL IN WAS ENJOYED WITH SURFERS ENJOYING THE FRUITS OF THEIR TWO-MILE LABOR WHILE I REFLECTED ON MY TWENTY FOR THE DAY.



cone painting the foreground amidst the setting moon. The cold wind was a sobering reminder of the need to begin making my way down, where I would enjoy another cup of coffee at the car for stage two of the day's adventure: The drive through Riverside to the coast.

The hike down was just as exciting as the hike up, in that it seemed like a different landscape altogether. Much of the dark and moonlit hues of what I remembered on the way up were painted very differently in my mind than what the sun exposed them as. With a three-hour descent to the car, a mad dash through San Bernardino, Riverside, Irvine, and Mission Viejo finally offered a sight of the ocean and San Clemente. The home of Trestles and a calm and clean Pacific Ocean with buoys reading three feet at fifteen seconds of the Southern Hemisphere swell at one of the most famous waves on the planet. And I had three hours of daylight to spare.

With total mileage for San Geronio coming in at just over eighteen miles, the last thing one would think of doing the rest of the day is to hike some more. But in order to get to Trestles, it is a one-way, mile and a half walk to get to the break. Surprisingly I felt great and possibly buzzing on the endorphins of the sunrise summit and the success of the day despite my doubts. Rounding the corner on the old Highway 101 that is the walkway adjacent to the busy I-5 Freeway, a one-hundred-yard walk to the beach promised a surf until the sun set below the horizon.

Standing up for my first wave, I was a little stiff, but with each wave I loosened up more and felt I had accomplished arguably the most physically demanding and rewarding journey of my athletic life. Looking around at the other surfers in the lineup, proud of the fact that none of them likely had done anything remotely close to what I had just done gave me a sense of accomplishment I have never felt before.

Never have I assumed anyone has done anything remotely close to what I did and that was originally appealing about the idea. Growing up in San Clemente, I never would have thought right in my backyard I could climb to an alpine environment above ten thousand feet anywhere outside of the Sierra. And never did I assume it was possible to do so while surfing a world class wave the same day.

I shared the lineup with a few other surfers, but with each wave caught, I began to drift. The further I drifted with each wave caught, the further away I got from other surfers. And that distance granted me reflection on the day and the astounding thought that in the ten million plus people that call Southern California home, not one of them stood on the summit with me this morning, and only a small handful shared the lineup in the ocean with me this afternoon.

The raw, stiff feeling of my face whipped by Arctic alpine wind, then later getting sunburnt from the rays bouncing off the sunset ocean, made me realize I have never been burnt this way. My body held up astonishingly well to the low oxygen alpine bliss and also performed well in the ocean's powerful surf. I was also able to reminisce on just how magical Southern California is. I have been fortunate to travel the world to chase remote and perfect waves, while also scaling some of the world's great mountain peaks and alpine environments, but little did I know that both of those rewards can be achieved not only in the populated corner of Southern California, but can also be achieved in a single day. **X4**



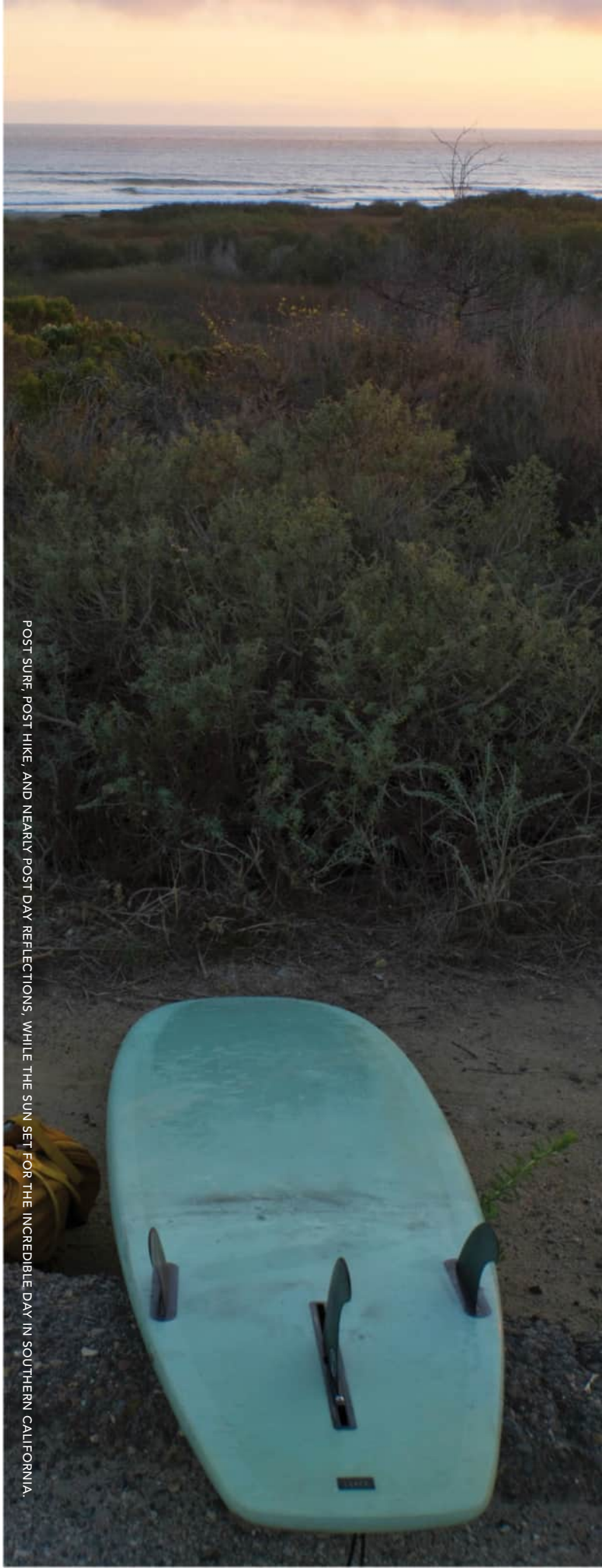
SEAN JANSEN

AUTHOR BIO

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

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

POST SURF, POST HIKE, AND NEARLY POST DAY REFLECTIONS, WHILE THE SUN SET FOR THE INCREDIBLE DAY IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA.



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FRONCOBRONCO'S FIRST EDITION 2021 BRONCO

Practical, utilitarian upgrades meet sleek design aesthetic with this multi-trick pony ready for the wild



ADV BUILT FOR ENT URE

WORDS & PHOTOS – FRANK GONNELLO



When Ford finally re-released the Ford Bronco in 2021, few would argue that they didn't knock it out of the park with a vehicle truly built with the overland and off-road enthusiast in mind. Being a brand-new vehicle platform, though, it would take aftermarket companies some time to develop products that would take the vehicle to the next level of performance and utility for the kind of horseplay avid OutdoorX4 readers seek to enjoy.

Fortunately, the "FroncoBronco" has been pioneering some of the most innovative, thoughtful, functional, and aesthetically pleasing upgrades the Bronco has seen in the two-plus years it's been around. With the most recent updates nearly complete, this wild horse is now more than deserving of the "Built for Adventure" spotlight.

Exterior Upgrades

Immediately, two things stand out about the FroncoBronco which make it instantly recognizable amongst the Bronco and overland community. First is the fact that it's one of the first (a trend throughout this article) to be running Advanced Fiberglass Concepts' 8" Fender Kit and Ram Air Hood. The second is that this wider, more aggressive body is wrapped in silky satin Supreme Defense PPF with gloss black Neo Noir PPF accents, both self-healing films by Avery Dennison. The highly identifiable and one-of-a-kind graphics designed by the owner – in collaboration with Bay Area vehicle enhancement shop SS Customs – pay homage to the First Edition branding, but with an individualized flair that better accentuates the widebody lines while also serving to protect against pinstriping and rock chips. And the underlying color, Ford's unique and dynamic Cactus Gray, shines through the satin PPF, with the aftermarket fenders color matched perfectly to the stock doors by Palladium Auto Body.

You'll also note the taller, wider stance of this truck, which is due to the completely overhauled suspension provided by RPG Offroad's mid-travel suspension kit. With these beefy upper and lower control arms, fortified tie-rods, and Fox Performance Elite 2.5" adjustable coilovers, the suspension has been significantly updated to accommodate larger tires and achieve 13" of wheel travel (equal to that of the stock Bronco Raptor). To match the new geometry, the vehicle now sits tall on 37" Falken Wildpeak A/T3W tires wrapped around Fifteen52 Metrix HD wheels.

The front of the vehicle is home to several off-road lighting solutions by Heretic Studio, wired accordingly: 40" Clear Light Bar (Aux Switch 1); 20" Amber Light Bar (Aux Switch 2); A-Pillar Quattro Clear Ditch Lights (Aux Switch 3); Fog Light Kit with each side having 1x Amber Quattro (Aux Switch 4) and 2x Clear BA-2s (Aux Switch 5). The front also has a nice little easter egg to find – a subtle 3D-printed "FRONCO" replacing the OEM grill moniker.

Housing the LED light bar is the TrailRax Modular Roof Rack and PakRax add-on, giving the roof ample storage for its Roam Adventure Co. Desperado Rooftop Tent, 270-Degree Awning, RotoPax and Heretic Studio Rock Light Grab Handles. An ax is also strapped on the PakRax for wood chopping, along with a DMOS Delta Pro Shovel for the most stylish latrine digging. The Desperado also includes rails for mounting a Yakima 4 Gallon Roadshower and/or a Roam 95L Rugged Case on top, depending on a given trip's needs. And that sleeping setup inside has been given an upgrade, too. Hest provides the pillow and mattress, with the Aeronaut Hoverquilt providing the warmth, combining to give one of the best night's sleep you've ever had away from your own bed.

On the backside, Hammer Performance is providing critical support with their Tailgate Reinforcement Plate, enabling the added weight of the big spare holding American Adventure Lab's M.A.S.S. Spare Tire Platform – perfect for holding Maxtrax recovery boards, spare RotoPax fuel cans, and another Roam 95L Rugged Case. Mounted up high, a pair of Heretic amber BA-2 chase lights (Aux Switch 6) on the roof rack provide extra visibility to trail buddies eating this Bronco's dust.

A custom black and gloss black skeleton horse badge adorns the tailgate as a reminder that this dark horse is a build that's like no other.

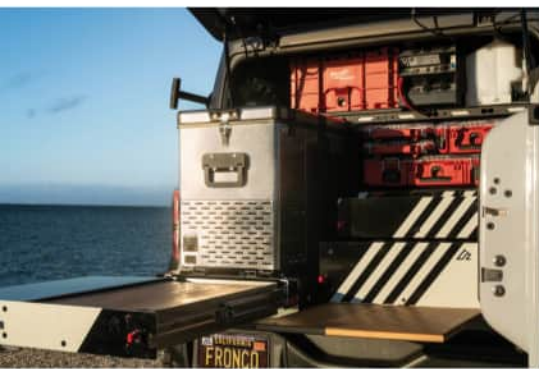
Interior Mods

While the exterior mods are already enough to garner positive attention, take a peek inside this high horse and you'll see a number of envy-inducing upgrades that optimize for comfortable long-distance travel and off-grid excursions – the hallmark of an overland rig "built for adventure".

For the captain and his passengers, a 67Designs BroncoRail™ serves as the base mounting point for a Garmin InReach, a GoPro for capturing the trails, driver and passenger phones for easy access and charging, and a Midland Radio microphone connected to a stealthily tucked away MXT575 behind the glove box. Overhead, a Step 22 Gear REEF Visor Panel keeps some basic accessories and sunglasses in easy reach of the driver.

In the back, space is absolutely maximized to its fullest potential, in large part due to American Adventure Lab's M.A.S.S. cargo systems. Their Cargo Shelf, mounted to the Bronco's roll bars, ensures all vertical cargo space is able to be utilized, and serves as a home to the National Luna DC-25 Power Station with Lion Energy Auxiliary Battery and Renogy 1000w Inverter, as well as Milwaukee Packout and SureCanUSA Mount Plates, also made by American Adventure Lab. Power, water and tools are all covered on this sturdy and well-built shelf.

Below it, American Adventure Lab's M.A.S.S. system continues to impress with its Bronco Flip n' Slide Drawer on the left, and





Duo Drawer on the right. Atop the Flip n' Slide is a National Luna 50L fridge mounted to a sturdy base plate, keeping the fridge rigidly in place without any need for straps. Inside the Flip n' Slide is a two-part cutting board and cooking surface with extra storage inside for galley gear. The Duo Drawer tucks away an additional slide-out bamboo table surface for extra counter space.

While American Adventure Lab's Bronco Swing Gate table is still in development, they have still shown the fifth door some love with a hidden mount for an onboard ARB single compressor right in the door's handle area.

Oh, and who wouldn't appreciate the Bronco's much-needed audio improvements? The FroncoBronco benefits from a complete audio overhaul, including Memphis Audio 3-Way Speakers and custom-integrated dash tweeters, as well as a Kicker 8" Sub and amplifier hidden in place of the factory B&O woofer.

Performance Upgrades

Aside from the suspension upgrades, a few additional tweaks have been made to get the most out of this 2.7L Ecoboost Engine. The vehicle runs the Roush Performance Catback Exhaust and Cold Air Intake, letting the engine breathe a bit more and reminding passengers why the audio upgrade was so impor-

tant. The Ford Performance Tune also squeezed out a bit more performance, leaving nothing to be desired when Baja Mode gets engaged on the G.O.A.T. dial. Overall, the combination of these parts with some premium (91+) fuel allows this rig to move like it did before adding all the extra weight and larger tires and footprint.

Conclusion

The FroncoBronco has undergone a myriad of functional upgrades since it made it off the production line back in July of 2021 and at this point, it's hard to pinpoint any real weak spots in terms of the build being adventure-ready. Carefully selected improvements to cargo utilization, quality of life upgrades for road trip and camping setups, and performance updates to tackle rough terrains at stunt-driver speeds all add up to a Bronco easily competing for "best in show." **X4**

Editor's Note: Follow this Bronco's adventures over on Instagram at [@froncobronco](#)

FULL THROTTLE
BATTERY

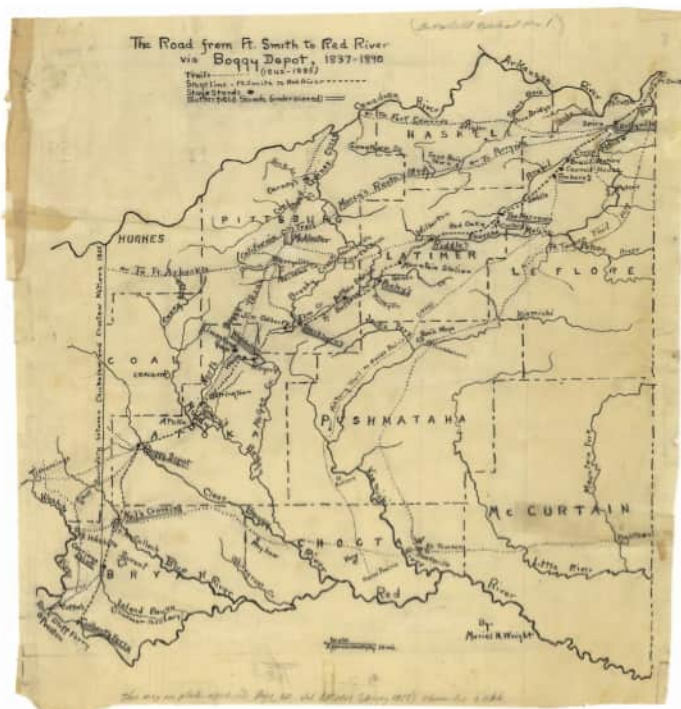
**We never stop. We never fail. You never fall behind.
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The Butterfield Trail in Indian Territory: *Time Travel on Wheels*

WORDS & PHOTOS – SUSAN DRAGOO



MAP COURTESY OF THE OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

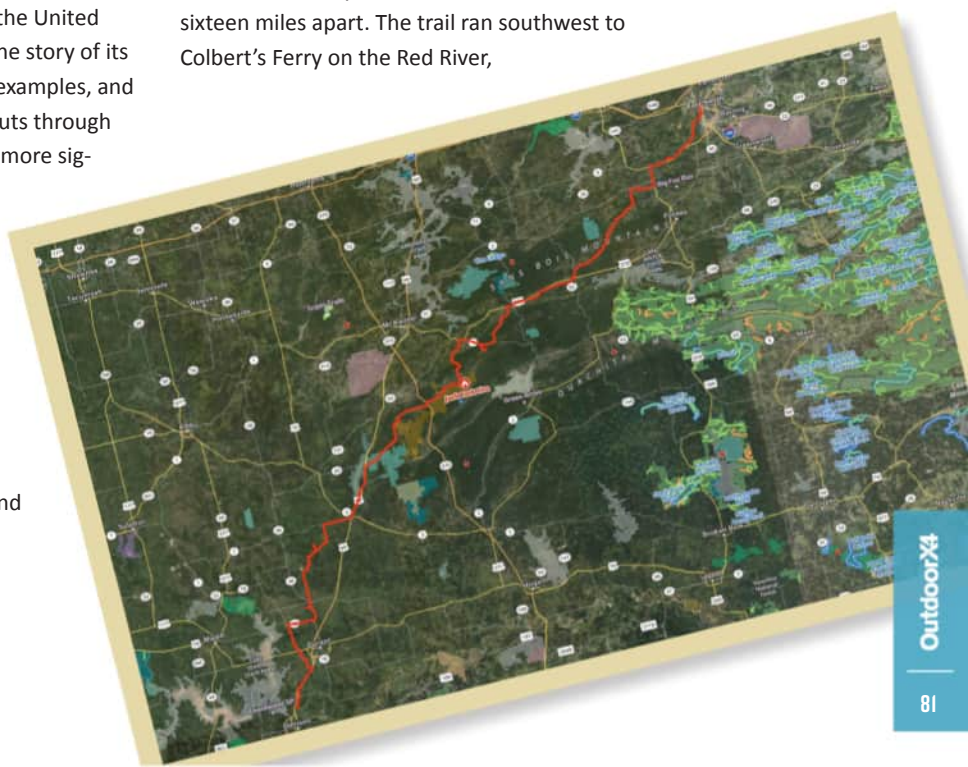
I often ponder traveling through time. And, as someone with more than just a passing interest in history, I often wish I could. Finding the stone foundation of some old building out in the woods, almost completely obscured by earth and brambles, I long to see it whole. Peering into the depths of a rock-lined well, I want to see firsthand who drew water from it when it was clean and clear. Not having yet discovered the means for such multi-dimensional transit, I find exploring old trails a useful surrogate.

The history of the world is inextricably linked with its roads and trails. Consider the Silk Road, the network of ancient trade routes that linked China with the Mediterranean Sea, and the Roman roads, paved thoroughfares built throughout the Roman empire. For the United States, young by comparison, the story of its growth is the story of its trails. The Oregon Trail and the Santa Fe Trail are prime examples, and their useful lives have been recent enough that wagon ruts through earth and stone are still evident. One of early America's more significant pathways was that used by the United States Postal Service from 1858 to 1861 to deliver the mail overland in twenty-five days or less, an unparalleled accomplishment for the time. The Butterfield Overland Mail stagecoach route ran about 2,800 miles across the frontier from Missouri to California, meeting a need prompted by the huge migration to the Pacific coast after the discovery of gold in California in 1848. Over it horse- and mule-drawn coaches and wagons traveled night and day, carrying the all-important mail and those passengers who dared undertake the journey.

"The Butterfield" had a short life and its function was superseded a few years later by the transcontinental railroad. But the Overland Mail stagecoach left its imprint on the culture of the American West, and the Butterfield name is still associated with stagecoach stations, trails, and the stagecoach itself, whether or not it was really used by the Overland Mail.

About two hundred miles of the Butterfield trail cut a diagonal through the southeastern corner of the Indian Territory, now Oklahoma. It first followed the Fort Smith-Boggy Depot Road, a path through the Sans Bois and Winding Stair mountains whose roadbed was probably used by natives long before the Indian removals to the territory in the 1830s, when it became an important thoroughfare. Near present-day Atoka, the Butterfield trail converged with the Texas Road, a major north-south highway until the coming of the railroad in 1872. Along the way, the faded scars of the old road are still worn by the land: a swale running through a pasture, a cutdown creek bank, a path worn bare through the forest. In some forgotten places, a walled spring still flows near the rubble of a rock building or a graveyard of broken stones. Although little of the trail remains accessible for driving, many modern roads are built along or upon the route. Access is complicated by fences and locked gates, sequestering trail fragments on private property. Nevertheless, remnants exist and for the past seven years I have been determined to find them.

In the 1850s Indian Territory was a semi-autonomous enclave for Native American peoples displaced by the United States government from their eastern homelands, primarily the "Five Civilized Tribes": Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole, each with its own national domain and government. The path of the Butterfield traversed the Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations where, before running the first stage, the Overland Mail Company made arrangements with Choctaw and Chickasaw citizens living on or near the road to maintain stands where teams of horses or mules could be quickly changed. In Indian Territory, there were a dozen official stations about sixteen miles apart. The trail ran southwest to Colbert's Ferry on the Red River,



then crossed into Texas. Luckily, the Oklahoma Historical Society placed roadside markers at station sites in 1959 to commemorate the trail's centennial, and most of the markers are still intact and accessible.

Any journey along the Butterfield trail should include Fort Smith, Arkansas, where the mail route entered Indian Territory by crossing the Poteau River. The first Butterfield stage—actually a celerity wagon, not a coach—forded the river into Indian Territory but a ferry was used most of the time. The celerity wagon, named for its swiftness of movement, was a smaller, lighter alternative to the taller, more bulbous Concord coach which pervades the popular imagination. The wagons were designed for the rugged country west of Arkansas and used on seventy percent of the route.

Before departure, visit the Fort Smith National Historic Site, walk down to the river and gaze across. You are looking into what was once Indian Territory, a sight full of the unknown for passengers bold enough to ride the stage across the country in 1858. The first stop in Indian Territory is Walker's Station, at Skullyville, near present-day Spiro. Here on a now-quiet country lane once sat the Choctaw Agency, established in 1832 to distribute tribal allowances to citizens of the Choctaw nation. The station was at the home of Choctaw Governor Tandy Walker, and his house stood on this hillside until it burned in 1947. Today the spot would be easy to miss, but on Spring Road a green sign for Roselawn Cemetery marks a turn-off, and a walk north along the street reveals a concrete marker and bronze plaque in a trace of the stagecoach road. Looking southwest from the marker, the depression in the earth is obvious and the spring that has long quenched the thirst of travelers still flows vigorously, piped to the road for the public to enjoy. I quaff the cold, sweet water each time I visit, enjoying this very tangible link to the past.

Visit the Skullyville Cemetery near Walker's Station, then you will find yourself zigzagging on county roads around the trace of the old road, hidden from view on farms and ranches. The second station is Trahern's, also the location of the council house of the Musholatubbee district of the Choctaw Nation, one of the three political districts established shortly after the Choctaws migrated from Mississippi. A few miles farther, on Norris Road, there's a treasure hidden on a hilltop: one of the few surviving original buildings along the Butterfield route in Oklahoma. Built around 1850, the Edwards Store, a hewn-log structure in an unusually fine state of preservation, is currently being restored. A historical marker sits at the roadside and the public is encouraged to visit. I enjoy walking to the cemetery west of the house to gaze north toward the wooded Brazil Creek valley and the hills beyond. The vista was described as "one of majesty" in 1958, and still is very much so.

County roads closely follow the path of the stagecoach road as it continues through "The Narrows," a small pass between two mountain crests where Holloway's Station stood. Drive through Red Oak, then to the Lutie Cemetery, east of the town of Wilburton. The Riddle's Station marker is located just east of the cemetery and the stone-rimmed Riddle burial plot abides near a towering oak. If it's late in the day at



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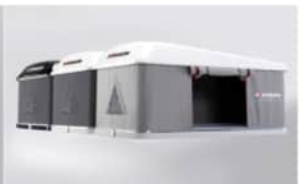
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this point in your travels, a night in one of the cliffside cabins at Robbers Cave State Park is the way to go. The park is located in the Sans Bois Mountains a short drive north of Wilburton on Highway 2.

From the Lutie Cemetery, the old trail parallels Highway 270 for about six miles then turns south, ascending to Mountain Station. Now only a cemetery, Mountain Station was a small relay station though not an official Butterfield stop. For several miles near the cemetery, the depression of the trail is evident within a few feet of the roadway. Just below the crest, the station spring still flows. Mountain Station is notable as the only place during the life of the Butterfield Overland Mail where a stagecoach accident took the life of the passenger.

Continuing southwest, the trail becomes harder to find. An obscure section line road over a low water bridge at Buffalo Creek takes you to Pusley's Station where only the base of the historical marker remains. But, sitting right in the trace of the stagecoach road leading southwest toward the creek, it still serves to mark the site. A fenced cemetery with Pusley family graves appears abandoned. Trees have fallen on the gravestones, breaking several.







At this point you will encounter a locked gate if you try to continue on the trail but the opportunity to venture off trail presents a bonus: you can visit Lime Arch Bridge, one of Oklahoma's few natural arches. From Hartshorne, travel south on Lake Road, then turn west on Arch Road. Soon, there's a small pull-out and a gate clearly intended to provide access for foot traffic and bearing the handwritten words, "Keep gate closed." A short walk takes you to a huge limestone formation where water cascades over a shelf into a pool that flows through a natural arch with an 18-foot span. It's a delightful sight the casual passer-by would never suspect.

Reconnect with the trail in Ti Valley, traveling west between limestone hills through a broad prairie. Soon your nineteenth century reverie is disrupted when you cross over the Indian Nation Turnpike. After all the miles of lollygagging along dirt roads, the rapid passage of traffic below is almost a shock. Over the bridge, a left on the county road and a sharp eye will take you to the marker for Blackburn's Station, hidden in the brambles along the roadside, its bronze plaque missing.

Turn west and splash through Brushy Creek at a low water crossing near the actual Butterfield ford, then continue along tree-shaded roads to Waddell's Station. Beyond it, you'll be driving through the Atoka Wildlife Management Area. Watch for a yellow metal sign saying "Butterfield" at a southbound turn-off. The road leads to the ruins of a stage stand at Breadstand Creek, where you can walk into the woods on a trace of the trail to see a crumbling rock wall and well. Leaving the Wildlife Management Area, you will pop out on Highway 69 near Stringtown. The back roads you have just driven wind through some of Oklahoma's most beautiful mountains and prairies, where settlements are few and other vehicles are rare. It would seem fitting to meet a stagecoach along the way.

The next station is Geary's Stand, which was inundated by the Atoka Reservoir in 1959. Go to the dam and you will find a marker for the station. Gaze to the north and you can imagine where the stand was, on the east side of North Boggy Creek, now buried in the depths. Continuing south, be sure to stop at the Atoka County Museum and Civil War Cemetery, where the Butterfield Trail is memorialized with a large granite marker alongside the cemetery.

Boggy Depot, the next station, is now a park managed by the Chickasaw Nation and another good spot for a night's rest. In 1858 it was the largest and most important settlement on the Butterfield route between Fort Smith and the Red River. Now the only evidence of the thriving community is the historic cemetery, the last residence having burned in 1952. If you camp there, you may have the place all to yourself. When we last visited, we enjoyed an eclectic symphony of cattle, chickens, owls, and coyotes at daybreak. Before breakfast I strolled the dogwood-lined nature trail to Little Cedar Lake. It's strange to think of this quiet park as the thriving community it once was.

From Boggy Depot, the road turns toward the Red River and approaches the Nail's Crossing station on the east bank of the Blue River. It's on private property, as is another historic site on the west bank,



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Fort McCulloch, which served as the main Confederate fortification in southern Indian Territory during the Civil War. Only earthworks remain there. From Fort McCulloch, the trail runs south to Fisher's Station, but a detour to Fort Washita is worth the time. Fifteen miles northwest of Durant on Highway 199, Washita was established in 1842, and during the 1850s was a busy stop for travelers headed for the California gold fields. It was supplied via the same road used by the Overland Mail. A beautiful and somewhat haunting place, Fort Washita is now owned by the Chickasaw Nation.

The Butterfield trail skirts the western edge of Durant, then ends its Oklahoma leg at Colbert's Ferry. The historical marker is on River Road, near the site of station keeper B.F. Colbert's estate, and the old road to the ferry has cut a deep recess through the earth down to the north bank of the river. A good view of the ferry site and the pilings of a toll bridge established later is available from the Highway 69 bridge across the Red River.

The Butterfield operated for only three years, until the outbreak of the Civil War. But it represented a huge leap in the speed of communications before the existence of the transcontinental telegraph or railroad, it was the longest stage line of its time, it created significant infrastructure, and was a major influence in the opening of the west. Even now its remnants offer a chance to travel through time, but nature is at work on what little is left, so do it soon. For now, the imagination finds it easy to dissolve concrete and steel into wagon ruts and stone, hewn logs and flowing springs along the old Butterfield trail. **X4**

Editor Note: In January of 2023, federal legislation designated the Butterfield Overland Mail Stagecoach Route a National Historic Trail, becoming a part of the United States' system of scenic, recreation, and historic trails, which follow as closely as possible the original trails or routes of travel.

RESOURCES:

Fort Smith National Historic Site

www.nps.gov/fosm

The Edwards Store

edwardsstore.com

Lime Arch Bridge

www.naturalarches.org/db/arches/ok3

Atoka Wildlife Management Area

www.wildlifedepartment.com/hunting/wma/southeast/atoka-wma

Atoka Museum and Civil War Cemetery

www.okhistory.org/sites/atokamuseum

Boggy Depot Park

www.chickasaw.net/Our-Nation/Locations/Boggy-Depot-Park

Fort Washita

www.chickasaw.net/Our-Nation/Locations/Fort-Washita

Susan Dragoo/Butterfield in Oklahoma Resources

susandragoo.com/butterfield-oklahoma/

SUSAN DRAGOO

AUTHOR BIO



Susan embraces adventure travel in many forms – two-wheeled, four-wheeled, and on foot. As long as it involves experiencing more of the great outdoors, she is hard-pressed to resist an opportunity. When not on a break from leading women backpackers through the Ouachita Mountains, Susan explores together with her husband, Bill, in their Toyota 4Runner.

A desire to connect contemporary explorers with the places and people of the frontier led Susan to study and travel the region of Indian Territory and the Southwest. Susan devotes much of her time to historical travel writing and outdoor photography, and is currently working on an extensive book highlighting the rich history of the Butterfield Overland Mail Route.

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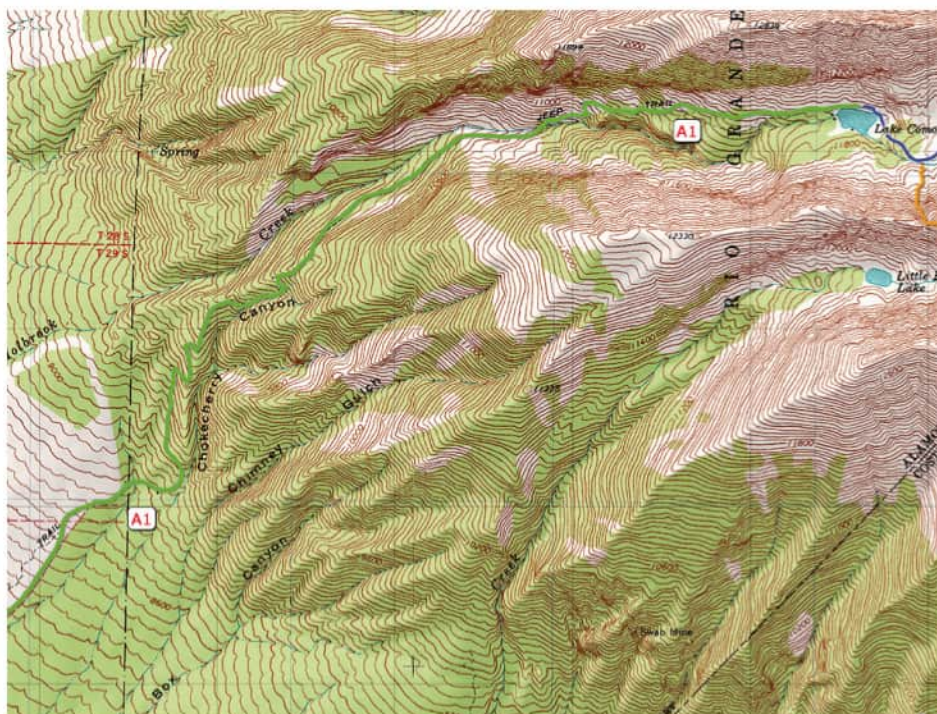


JAWS

OF THE LITTLE BEAR

WORDS – ALAN ELLIS, PHOTOS – CHEYENNE WUTHRICH





I looked up to see a dump truck load of rocks coming towards me. Someone yelled "ROCK!" and we frantically scrambled to get out of the way of the mass of rocks and debris. The thing I most feared happening on this mountain was exactly what had come to pass. My climbing partner and I were on Little Bear Peak, one of the most difficult mountains in Colorado. This would be the second time in as many days I had to deal with dangerous rocks... and it wasn't over yet.

"Am I really doing this road again?" This is what I was asking myself as I stared up the steep rocky obstacle at 10,000' in my Jeep Wrangler Rubicon. The last time I tried this section of the road, I got a sizable dent in my transfer case skid plate. Difficult and dangerous, Lake Como Road is considered the deadliest 4x4 road in all of Colorado. It is the only way to access the base of Little Bear Peak. Like Little Bear, it lives up to its notorious reputation. There are at least two plaques and memorials dedicated to people who have died trying to negotiate this road, and as recently as September of 2022, another unfortunate person died after they rolled off the mountain. Yet here we were again trying to drive the most dangerous road to climb one of the most dangerous mountains in Colorado!

Lake Como Road is in Southern Colorado near Great Sand Dunes National Park. It snakes approximately eight miles through the Holbrook Creek drainage and ends at Lake Como at over 11,000'. The lake sits in a spectacular basin below three 14,000' peaks (14ers): Blanca Peak, Ellingwood Point, and our goal: Little Bear Peak. On the road there are three major obstacles: Jaws 1, Jaws 2, and Jaws 3. All of these obstacles are hazardous, but Jaws 2 is the most dangerous and notorious for killing people and destroying vehicles. The entire area is very popular with the 4x4 community, hikers, and climbers. The 4x4 enthusiasts drive the road and camp at the lake, while the hikers and climbers use the road to access the 14ers.

The "14ers" are a collection of fifty-eight fourteen-thousand-foot peaks in Colorado. Climbing the 14ers is a popular outdoor pastime and people travel from

all over the country to climb these peaks. Our goal this trip was to climb the more difficult Little Bear Peak. Little Bear Peak is one of the most dangerous 14ers due to the exposure near the summit and the severe risk of rockfall danger on the route. Most of the 14ers in Colorado have relatively easy hiking trails to the summits, but Little Bear requires exposed scrambling and more sophisticated route-finding skills which are not commonly needed on less difficult 14ers. Little Bear is considered an advanced mountain climb and is normally attempted after extensive experience on less difficult peaks.

This would be the fourth time I've driven this road....and hopefully the last. Our loyal readers may remember a 2014 story in OutdoorX4 where we drove this road to climb Blanca Peak in the same area. The first part of the road is relatively benign, and most capable 4x4 vehicles can make it to about 10,000', which is where the notorious rocky hill begins. After 10,000', the road gets significantly rougher until reaching the Jaws series of dangerous obstacles.

Looking up the rocky hill, I felt a little better about the task ahead. On my 2014 trip, I was driving a stock Jeep Rubicon. The Jeep ultimately did fine, but that horrendous road pushed the stock Jeep to its limit. On this trip, my Jeep was armed with a Rancho three-inch lift with adjustable shocks, full skid plating, Warn Elite bumpers, Warn Moonsault wheels, and new BFG KO2 tires. I was confident the Rubicon could handle this hill. At least that's what I thought. About halfway up the rocky hill, I tried to engage the rear locker but could not get it to engage. So, I backed off and took a different line in or-







der to get around the huge boulder that was partially blocking the road. (It wasn't until I got home that I found out that both front and rear lockers were burned out after a water crossing which I did the previous year). Upon reaching Jaws 1, we decided to park and hike the remaining two miles of the road to the lake.

Jaws 1 (37.5683333, -105.5398000) is the easiest of the obstacles on this eight-mile road, but still daunting. Avoiding getting the vehicle high-centered is the biggest challenge of Jaws 1. Jaws 2 (37.5699000, -105.5311667) is the most dangerous obstacle and where at least two people have died during attempts. Without an experienced spotter, it is easy to get off-camber and roll off into the valley. And finally, Jaws 3 (37.5698667, -105.5257833) is the most technically difficult. All these require a minimum of 33" tires, 3" lift, and proper recovery equipment. A full suspension (long arm) lift is recommended for Jaws 3.

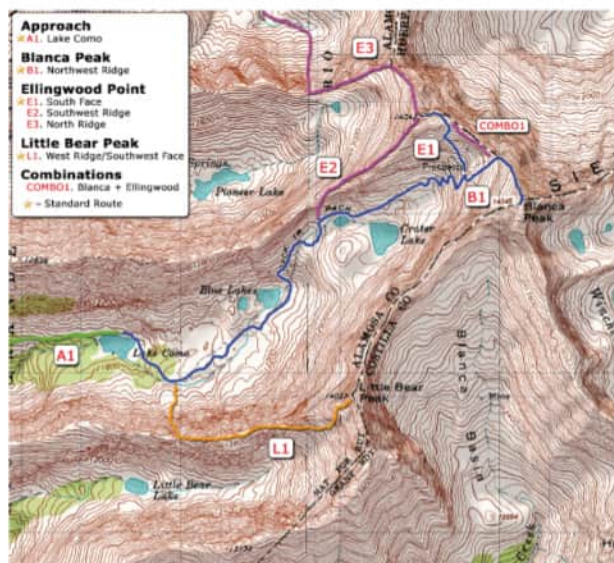
Back on the mountain, we huddled behind boulders, trying to stay as small as possible. The rocks created a cloud of

dust and sent shards of debris all over the route. Unfortunately, we were in the Hourglass Couloir on Little Bear. The Hourglass is just that – a steep ravine on the side of the mountain that funnels loose rock into a bottleneck. It was the only way up the mountain, so we were committed. After things settled down, we inched our way up and past the Hourglass, and from there it was a short scramble to the summit.

Later as we were hiking down the road out of the basin, we met with a person in a Tacoma who had slid off Jaws 1. Jaws had bitten another victim. This guy was barely off the road but was hanging precariously on the edge. It appeared as if one breath of wind would have sent him rolling into the valley. He declined my help (and the aid of my winch), instead opting for a \$500 rescue by a local 4x4 group. Once we headed down in the Jeep, another casualty of Jaws was on the side of the road in what appeared to be a recent rollover acci-

dent. This road is a serious endeavor and should not be taken lightly.

We thankfully managed the treacherous Como Lake Road and Little Bear Peak climb with relatively unscathed egos and only minor vehicle issues. After my fourth trip up this road and a successful climb of all the major peaks in the area, my Lake Como days are over. I have enjoyed many spectacular adventures in this area, and I hope you will as well. Good luck and be safe in all your outdoor adventures!



PLANNING YOUR LITTLE BEAR ADVENTURE

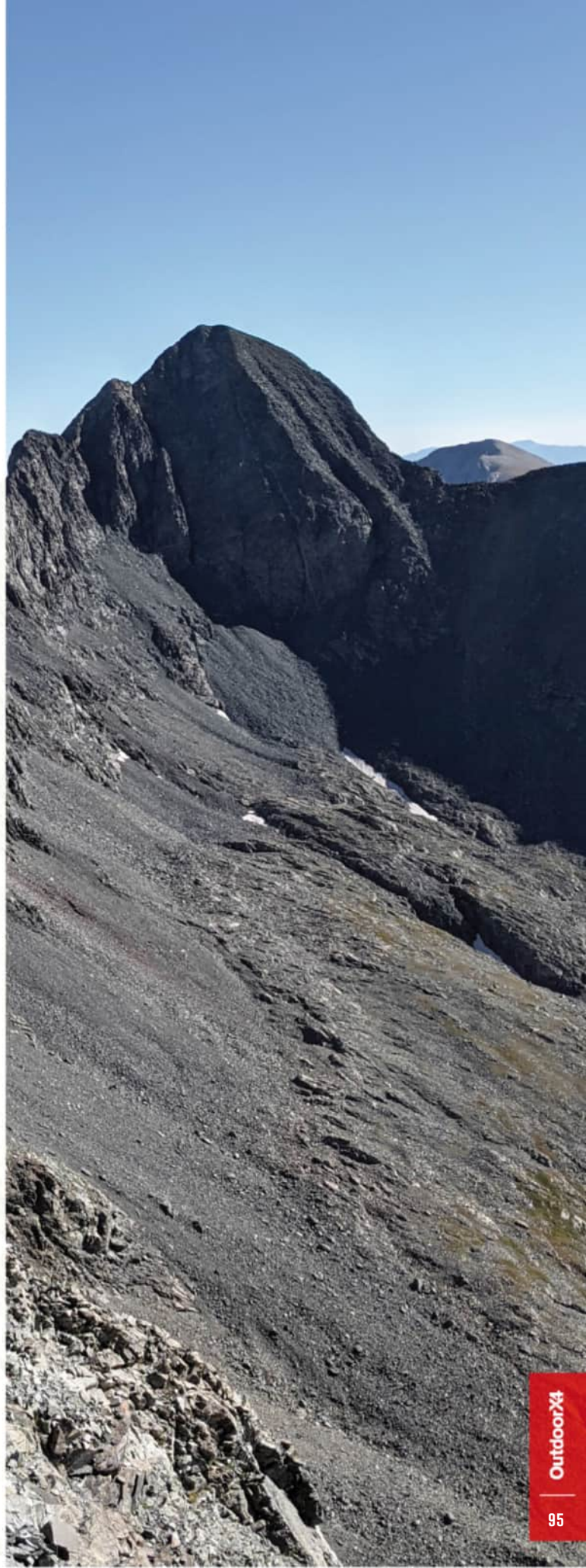
HOW TO GET THERE: This adventure begins in south central Colorado near the small town of Blanca. Blanca is twenty-one miles east of Alamosa and fifty miles west of Walsenburg, Colorado. From Blanca on Highway 160, go six miles east and turn north on CO 150. After 3.5 miles north, turn right (east) at the sign for Blanca Peak Road (Lake Como Road). Passenger cars can drive about 1.5 miles before four-wheel drive is required. Ample parking is available. (37.539799, -105.574468)

WHEN TO GO: This is a summer destination. Lake Como road is closed at around 9,000' in winter. Summer season is from mid-June to mid-October; however, snow in the higher elevations is possible as early as September.

GEAR/EQUIPMENT: For your vehicle, it is highly recommend you have a minimum 33" tires, three-inch coil (short arm) lift, locking axles, winch, Hi-Lift jack, spare tire, recovery gear, safety equipment, and some type of weather protection such as a soft or hard top. For yourself: Pack warm clothing including sturdy rain gear, plus a portable shelter, and extra food and water in case of a breakdown. Temperatures can drop rapidly with approaching storms, and it can snow at higher elevations any month of the year. Be sure to wear sturdy shoes or boots for the hike to the lake and appropriate equipment for climbing Blanca Peak. For more information on climbing Little Bear or other 14ers in the area, go to www.14ers.com.

LODGING/FOOD/SERVICES: Gas and food can be found in Alamosa and Blanca. Alamosa is a large town with almost every amenity. Blanca is a much smaller town and choices are very limited. Lodging is available in Alamosa. There is a full-service RV park with ninety sites located outside the south entrance of the national park about twenty-five miles north of the trailhead. There is a KOA campground in Alamosa and an RV park in Blanca. Open camping is allowed along Lake Como Road above 9,000'. No camping is allowed at the trailhead.

Editor Note: Thanks to WWW.14ERS.COM for the use of their maps and photos.



AREA ATTRACTIONS

A trip to southern Colorado is not complete without a visit to Great Sand Dunes National Park. It is located on CO 150 just another twenty-five miles north of the Lake Como trailhead. From there, you can do a moderate 4x4 road over Medano Pass. This is a twenty-mile trail that traverses beautiful scenery then drops you on the east side of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains near Westcliffe. Expect all types of terrain including a rocky road on the summit and deep sand on the national park side. Medano Pass is a good warm up and acclimatization day prior to tackling the Lake Como Road. After Medano Pass, take a short, yet spectacular hike to Zapata Falls near the national park.

If you want to visit the Lake Como area, there are other options besides an attempt on Little Bear peak, including a day hike to Como Lake or an even longer hike farther up into the basin. A base camp at Lake Como is a good strategy if tackling any of the three 14ers in the area. The lake is popular with off-roaders and hikers, especially on the weekends. The best campsites are on the southeast side of the lake. No cell service is available at the lake, but spotty cell service is available farther up into the basin. **X4**



ALAN ELLIS

AUTHOR BIO



Alan is an avid climber, mountaineer, writer, and longtime Jeep enthusiast. As a mountaineer, he's done over 30 of Colorado's 14ers, including many of them in winter. His experience also includes the Tetons in Wyoming, the Wind River Range, Devils Tower, and several other technical mountain routes. As a writer, he and his wife, Jackie, worked with Jeep/Chrysler as their primary adventure blogger, and contributed dozens of Jeep-related adventure and how-to articles.

Alan and Jackie currently reside in Oklahoma City where they are both enjoying the "retired" life as professional skydiving instructors. They can be also be found traveling the country in their Jeep Rubicon with their dog, Tucker.



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Around the Campfire

*with Dirk van Reenen of
MERUS Adventure Park*

WORDS – TRICIA SODERSTROM

PHOTOS – FRANK LEDWELL AND COURTESY OF MERUS ADVENTURE PARK



MERUS Adventure Park, located in the Palo Duro Canyon of west Texas, is quickly becoming the premiere adventure destination for outdoor enthusiasts. Founder and CEO Dirk van Reenen speaks with OutdoorX4 about his experience, what makes MERUS different, and his spiritual connection to the outdoors.

OX4: Tell us a bit about your personal background. Were you adventurous by nature?

DvR: I grew up in South Africa and from a very young age I was used to four-wheel drive vehicles. We were farmers and ranchers, so we had to use them just to get around. It was just part of what we did. Our family also loved camping. We went camping on the beaches of South Africa and up into Botswana and Zambia. When I immigrated to the U.S. at the age of fourteen, I worked on a farm and ranch, continuing the use of four-wheel drive vehicles for work and recreation. I have a deep love for land, the outdoors, and adventure. It's always been a part of who I am.

OX4: Talk a bit about where the initial vision for MERUS came from and your entrepreneurial experiences prior to building MERUS.

DvR: I became an entrepreneur at the age of twenty-one, owning a ski shop. But after about seven years that business failed, leaving us with tremendous debt. For the next four years we didn't have extra money for travel or adventure so the best I could do was a \$70 annual state park pass for Palo Duro Canyon State Park. I spent much of that time hiking, backpacking, and mountain biking there and developed a deep love for the canyon. I began thinking about how cool a private version of the state park would be and how to add off-roading as an option. Texas doesn't have much publicly accessible land for off-roading, even though there is incredible terrain for it here. It's just all private land.

I began really thinking about this concept and started building a vision around it. I even put together a business plan and projections, but I just didn't have the business acumen, financial resources, or connections to pull it together. I was in real estate sales at the time and owned a small auction company, so I continued to focus on that. After the business failure, I got deeply motivated to change our financial position and move our lives forward. I committed myself to studying business, team building, and how to grow companies. I began to have incredible, high-level success in the real estate industry in a short amount of time. It was a massive learning experience and a big part of

developing the knowledge, attitude, and skills needed to build successful companies and lead top producing teams.

In 2017 I started BERGflow, a consulting and training organization that helps service-based companies grow and scale. Through this venture we've worked with hundreds of companies to help them grow and scale by focusing on structure, economics, and building amazing teams.

OX4: At the core of MERUS's vision is "nourishing the adventurous spirit." Tell us what this means to you, how you put it into action, and how you arrived at the park's name.

DvR: My faith is integral to everything I do. I believe there's a spiritual component in being outdoors that nourishes and stirs your soul, inspiring and encouraging you to do something you want to do. In 2019 our family started a new overlanding build with a 2014 Jeep JKU and an off-road trailer. In January of 2020 we also started homeschooling, and our companies started going partially virtual, so when the pandemic broke out, we were already set to hit the road and go on remote adventures. I hadn't thought about the MERUS project in eight years, but one night sitting around the campfire, it came rushing back to me. I felt God told me that it was time to build the park. When I told my colleagues I was going to do this, they all thought I was crazy. I immediately started working on the project, even drag-





ging all my old materials out from 2012. We soon started looking at ranches and the MERUS property was the fourth ranch we looked at. Within twenty minutes of setting foot on that land I just knew that was it.

We opened in May 2021 then immediately started building trails. We're now at the tail end of phase one development which included thirty-eight trails over fifty-three miles, a water infrastructure, four fully functional cabins, a dry cabin, five glamping sites, ten full hook-up RV sites, an office with training center, an outdoor recreation center and events center, and sixty overlanding and camping sites.

I've leaned on my experience with BERGflow to build an amazing team that's passionate about the vision of MERUS. They're praised on a continual basis for customer service and professionalism. We focus on a high degree of connection and customer service, helping people plan their trips and have an amazing adventure. We wanted to build a team that could run this project without us being there and a team that loved what they did. It's very hard work building something like MERUS and I want to acknowledge Casey Bronson, Amy McDaniel, Molly Nailor, Joe Neely, Neill Dodge and all our trail guides and volunteers. MERUS would not exist without all of you and your hard work and dedication. Thank you for all you do – we love you!

Merus is Latin for 'pure or unadulterated.' This land is very raw, not overdeveloped, and expansive. You just cannot explain this

to somebody who hasn't been here. You feel like you're out in the middle of nowhere, but if you were to get into trouble, we have a team here that can help you out. We're seeing more and more traffic from places like Colorado. While it's not like wheeling out west, it's not like the east either. It's just unique. One minute you're in sand, the next you're in dirt, then you're in rocks. The terrain is really diverse.

OX4: In the early stages of conceptualizing the park, I'm sure you did some research into what might be out there already (in other parts of the country). How is what you were going to build different?

DvR: We love overlanding and off-roading as a family and visited multiple other parks as part of the research phase. We saw things we liked and things we didn't like. MERUS is not considered an off-road park but an adventure park. The experience here is much different from most off-road parks people visit. It's truly vast and rugged, sprawling through Palo Duro Canyon. We have worked hard to keep the trails, camping sites, and land pristine. There's not an intimidation factor here; we have very helpful, friendly staff, and due to access limitations you're not going to be waiting in lines here, and the trail system is world class. We've taken a lot of time to intentionally plan the trails to create a feeling of truly being in the backcountry.

We also made the decision early on not to allow dirt bikes or ATVs/UTVs and this has been one of the biggest differentiating factors for us. When you bring your vehicle here you experience quiet and undisturbed off-roading. You don't have side-by-sides racing around, going off trail everywhere, and tearing things up. Spending time at MERUS is truly a breath of fresh air.

This land is more colorful than the Grand Canyon. It has four different geological layers of exposed material and the different soil colors create an amazing visual sensation throughout the canyon. This land is cared for at the highest level because we have a love and respect for the land. While off-roading and over-landing make up most of the activities, we also offer hiking and backpacking, mountain biking, and caving. You can bring a stock vehicle here, drive around and see incredible things for days, or you can bring a more advanced vehicle, spend four days and still not see everything. The way the land is laid out, there's so much elevation change in the canyon that it creates a very rugged and vast feel. There's just nothing else out there quite like it.

OX4: You've stated your goal is to become one of the top private adventure parks in America; are you on pace to achieve that goal? What are some of the biggest challenges to achieving this goal?

DvR: For us, it's not about being the biggest or most traveled/visited, it's about building the adventure park that offers the best possible experience. With low noise, slow speed, and a family-friendly environment, we're doing just that. I believe we have one of the most beautiful ranches in Texas and are working hard to develop it in a way that creates a truly bucket-list worthy adventure.

Any time you take on a new kind of project, there's a steep learning curve. This is the first project of its kind that I've taken on and I've learned so much in the last two years. One of the biggest challenges is with development – the logistics, supply chain issues, labor shortages, and the cost of materials shooting through the roof. Projecting is also a challenge. Who's going to come here? How far will people travel? How do you price things appropriately? There are many questions that must be answered but that's part of the entrepreneurial journey of building something like MERUS. We're not trying to compete with national or state parks, B.L.M. land, or other public lands. Through this process, we're actually developing a model for privatized outdoor adventure, and we believe this type of model will become more prominent in the future. We plan to build six to seven large-scale adventure parks across the U.S.



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We're not actively looking at developing another park right now; our number one goal is stabilizing this project and building the model for the next property. I see getting something under contract by next year and opening the next park by 2025. Since there's so much public land in the west it doesn't make sense to expand in that direction. Other parks we develop will likely all be east of here. One of the exciting things we are working on for this fall is launching a professional off-road driving academy with courses ranging from beginner to advanced, recovery and safety, and repair and survival. Our goal is to set a new standard in off-road training and build the best off-road school in America.

OX4: How often are you a participant at your own park?

DvR: We get on the trails here every chance we get and cherish that time as a family. We love exploring the park by hiking around; that's how we found caves on the property - we actually

did not know that there were multiple cave systems when we bought the land. So much of the land is still unexplored, so we love going out and discovering cool, new things.

My wife, Kristin, will lead some off-road tours on the weekends and at events, and our kids are part of the events and sometimes work in the office. We love this property, this business, and the people we work with. It hasn't gotten old, and I hope it never does!

You can learn more about MERUS Adventure Park for your next vehicle-based adventure by visiting their website at www.merusadventure.com. **X4**

Editor Note: The Around the Campfire series is brought to you in collaboration with our friends from 67 Designs, proprietors of the finest mounting solutions for your mobile devices whether in the backcountry, around town, and at home. Learn more about 67 Designs by visiting www.67d.com.

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WORDS – JEROD FOSTER
PHOTOS – BROOKE SHAW, JUSTIN REX, AND JEROD FOSTER

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RSI SMARTCAP



When I purchased a Toyota Tundra TRD Pro in 2019, I immediately began researching camper shells. I didn't like the look or build of a traditional fiberglass topper, and I didn't want to go full-on overlanding setup on my daily driver. But since my days often include backcountry photoshoots, leading groups of students on adventures, and family camping trips, I still wanted a camper that I could tailor toward my professional and personal lifestyle. The unique-looking, ultra-rugged RSI Smartcap EVO is my solution for wanting maximum versatility and quality.

All Smartcap EVO models (mine's the Sport) ship as five stainless steel panels that you or a dealer can assemble. It took all of two hours to put the Sport topper together between three of us one morning. The short-bed Tundra model cap fits like a glove on my bed and attaches using simple but rock-solid C-clamps. It weighs in close to 200 pounds and is not going anywhere. It also has a 330-pound dynamic load rating on top which translates to 770-pounds when the vehicle isn't moving, perfect for a roof-top tent and family.

Everything about this cap is solid. The stainless-steel panels don't flex; the keyed latches are metal and confidence-inspiring; the struts on the spacious gullwing doors and rear hatch work flawlessly, and the flush-bonded slider windows on the Sport model operate with ease and haven't goofed up any during the time I've owned it. This is an extremely well-engineered and constructed product. If we're spending a lot of money on our vehicles, shouldn't we expect our accessories to be just as well made?

It's not lightweight like some fiberglass alternatives, and it will likely take three or four people to install/remove it. Combined with a full Decked system and the Tundra's lower payload, I had a noticeable rear squat until I installed Icon's Multi Rate leaf springs (otherwise, my TRD Pro has stock suspension). Likewise, I wish the window slider facing the cab was larger, but that's only because the Tundra has a rear window that fully opens. It's a minor issue that's hardly worth mentioning.

What is worth mentioning, though, is the ability to expand the Smartcap's functionality. The option to install a gullwing kitchen component to the topper was the thing that sold me on it. The kitchen comes stocked with plate and glassware, all the utensils you really need, and a foldout, two-burner gas stove. This is the most-used part of my cap, and I have cooked approximately a hundred meals on it for groups as small as two and upwards of 25. I've used it so much in the last eight months that the foam holding the utensils and mocha pot in place is beginning to come slightly unglued. I love the kitchen on the cap, even if it takes up a bit of space in the bed. I also included the stainless-steel table component which attaches to the cap's ceiling and is easily accessed and deployed. The table rounds out the kitchen setup nicely. Likewise, I added RSI's platform rack to the top for extra storage and a way to secure my rooftop tent when it's needed. I like when things work in ideal and challenging conditions, and the entire Smartcap package excels.

The Smartcap EVO Sport ranges in price from \$3,995 - \$4,295 on RSI's North American website, while the Adventure model (no windows in the gullwing doors) ranges a couple hundred less depending on your bed length. Each model comes with a three-year warranty on parts and workmanship. **X4**



WWW.RSISMARTCAP.COM



Trout and Tranquility

FLY FISHING ADVENTURES AND
OVERLAND CAMPING IN THE OZARKS

WORDS & PHOTOS – JOHN HOLDMEIER



We're about to embark on a wild ride through the Ozark Mountains. The Ozarks are a paradox of extraordinary beauty and understated simplicity. A place where people and nature converge in harmonious contradictions. Our mission? Chase trout, sleep under the stars, and embrace the local culture. So, grab your gear and hop on board as we head south, to the legendary White River in north central Arkansas.

SETTING UP CAMP

Let's set the scene: We roll into the riverside campsite, towing our new camper trailer. This rig is the real deal, folks. It boasts a super comfy rooftop tent and storage for days. We're talking about luxury in the wild. As we settle in, the first order of business is setting up the kitchen and starting in on dinner. Our crew for this trip include myself (a brown trout obsessed photographer), my partner (a curious nature lover and bad-ass fly fisherwoman) and her fish-obsessed brother. Once dinner is wrapped up, we turn our attention to prepping the drift boat and rigging the fly rods so we're ready for an early start.

Regardless of where I am in life, this part of the process – the preparation – always serves as a time to slow down and appreciate the moment. Rigging the rods and getting things sorted before fishing requires a certain level of focused attention, and it's usually happening with a million other things in the background. I also feel like the love of this process might be hard-wired into the core of my being, after having watched my dad prep and re-prep everything to perfection before every trip we took when I was a child. With everything set for the morning, all that's left to do is pop the rooftop tent. As the early summer sun dips below the horizon, we crawl up into bed, savoring the serenity of our makeshift home. There is nothing as peaceful as sleeping outside – that is, until the largest raccoon I've ever laid eyes on raids our cooler at two a.m. This giant raccoon somehow figured out how to undo the locked rubber latches and remained unbothered when I hit him with a spotlight while he was elbow-deep in tomorrow's lunch.

FINDING FLOW ON THE WHITE RIVER

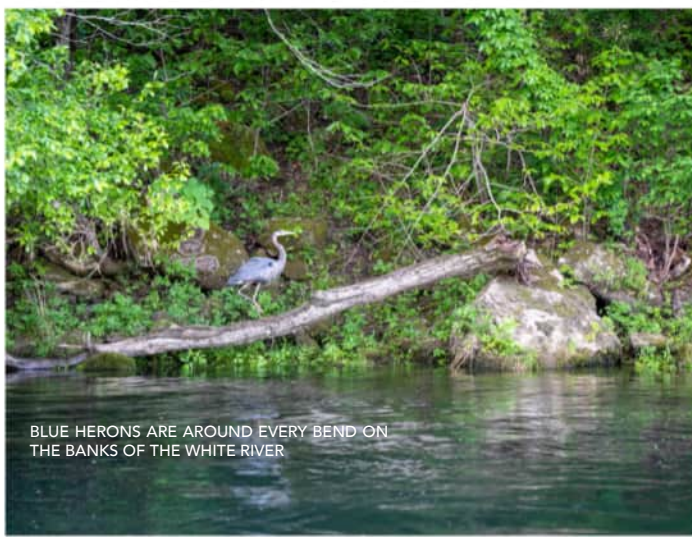
Let's get down to business — fly fishing on the legendary White River. I've been chasing trout since birth and have fished in amazing places around the world. However, there's something completely unique and unparalleled about this special spot in north central Arkansas. When most people imagine fly fishing, they conjure up images of Brad Pitt in some pristine location like in *A River Runs Through It*. The White River couldn't be further from that. It's plenty beautiful though – in its own distinct way. Mist hangs in the air as we hit the water with the sound of jet boat motors filling the auditory distance. The locals use a special type of boat here in Arkansas. These long, skinny, flat-bottom boats fly up and down the river transporting the day's guided trip customers. This river is as wide as the Mississippi in spots, and the volume of water can be similar — depending on the



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BLUE HERONS ARE AROUND EVERY BEND ON THE BANKS OF THE WHITE RIVER



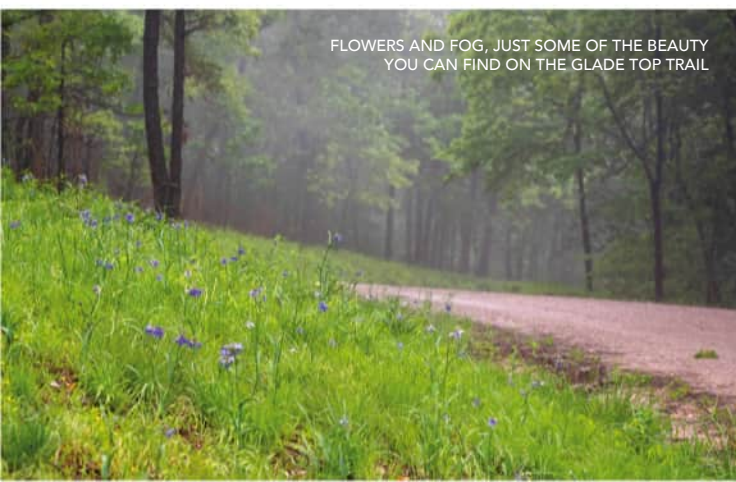
SOME DAYS THE MORNING FOG OVER
THE WHITE STICKS AROUND ALL DAY



MY TRUCK AND CAMPER TRAILER
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MY DAD (TOM HOLDMEIER) FISHING
FROM THE BOAT ABOVE THE FAMOUS
DOWNTOWN COTTER BRIDGES



FLOWERS AND FOG, JUST SOME OF THE BEAUTY
YOU CAN FIND ON THE GLADE TOP TRAIL

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MY PERSONAL BEST 30" BROWN TROUT

time of year. The size of the river, and all of the commotion, creates a completely different type of fly fishing experience than Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It* paradise. The river banks do boast stretches of breathtaking scenery, but they're often interrupted by big vacation homes and docks. This mixture of natural river features and man-made recreation opportunities often leaves fly fishing "purists" with mixed feelings about the whole experience. But in my eyes that's what is so special about the White River; the energy surrounding this river couldn't care less about that crowd.

My dad, the master prepper himself, has driven down to join us for the fishing portion of this trip. He pulls into the parking lot with rods ready. We shove off on our float and merge into the rhythm of the jet boats and swift water. Our motorless drift boat is designed specifically for fly fishing. It features oars with a rower's seat in the middle, and designated fishing

spots in the front and the back of the boat. Though the absence of a motor might concern some locals, we embrace the opportunity to go with the flow. The rowing, fishing, and humming of motors blur into a state of zen-like contentment. My dad rowed while I settled into the rhythm of casting and retrieving my fly from the front of the boat. Suddenly, a magnificent flash of gold smashes my fly. It's the fish of a lifetime, the biggest I've ever seen — a thirty-inch wild brown trout jumping, dodging and diving to the bottom of the river. Beyond all odds, we land the beautiful fish in a net designed for no such task. Cue the victory dance and a spirited round of high fives.

EMBRACING THE OZARKS' SPLENDOR

Beyond the buzz of activity on the water, the Ozarks surprise me at every turn. This place is more or less a jungle. The air here is filled with nature sounds—a chorus of chirping birds, rustling leaves, and

the bubbling of the river. There are wild turkeys, sparring squirrels and raccoons eagerly waiting for us to climb into the tent so they can raid our cooler again. This place effortlessly erases the hustle and bustle of everyday life and, in the moments of tranquility, it's easy to get lost. Bluejackets are in bloom, and they carpet the forest floor. Great blue herons gracefully guide us downstream as if we were a part of their silent river convoy. Bald eagles swoop down to grab trout off the water's surface. It's nature in all its glory, and we're lucky to witness the show.

THE SCENIC ROUTE

After several days on the water and at camp we eventually give in to thoughts of home. Packing up the site and prepping for the journey north is reliably bittersweet. As we bid farewell to the Ozarks, we opt for the scenic route home. We hit the road, cruising along the winding Glade Top Trail. There is always a delight in the details of the trip, and a road sign that says "crooked road ahead" adds immeasurable joy to our day. The views here are downright delightful. Picture deep hollers, every shade of green you can imagine, and uninterrupted forest stretching for miles. The entire area feels like an older ancestor to the Smoky Mountains. Spots like the Glade Top Trail are true hidden gems. We wave to a few other overland rigs, but it's mostly empty up here. That's the thing about the Ozarks. We have so many of these hidden spots and more often than not, we're likely to have the place to ourselves. This region contains multitudes. It has busy outdoor scenes like Bentonville and Ponca, but it also has quiet spots like the glade top trail. It is home to both extremely rural, politically conservative areas and progressive pockets like Fayetteville and the stunningly historical Eureka Springs. This part of the country surpasses expectations in some regards, while completely defying them in others. The Ozark region is a living, breathing, enigma — yet, in this moment, it's just the most perfect spot to park and savor a well-deserved picnic break on our homeward journey.

TAKE WHAT YOU WILL

As we pull back into the driveway and say our goodbyes to the trip, it's hard not to feel immediately grateful for the adventure. This most recent tour of the Ozarks was everything we could have asked for in our first extended camping trip of the season. It was a perfectly balanced whirlwind of excitement and peaceful escape from the daily grind. The memory of the fish I caught will live in my mind forever. I know I'll remember the catch, but what lingers even stronger is the feeling right after releasing the fish back into the water. It was like an immediate release of all of the chasing I've been doing for nearly a decade. About nine years ago I got sober and my life, since that day, has revolved around chasing fish. Specifically, I've been chasing the biggest wild brown trout I could find. Every time I launched the boat, the water carried with it a feeling of anticipation and possibility. There was always a feeling that each trip could be the trip that I finally caught that giant. It's a sensation of seeking that's hard to describe. I've seen pictures of others who have caught even bigger fish, but in my heart I know the odds of encountering such a fish are incredibly slim. The most skilled angler in the world can go a lifetime without landing a fish like that. That's why I'll always remember that feeling right after the release. A metaphorical weight off my shoulders immediately changed the way I felt about my favorite pastime. More importantly, I'll remember that my dad was on the oars rowing when it happened. The memories we've made camping and fishing here in the Ozarks will continue to fuel our searching and, like this fish did for me, they'll remind us that we can let go of the search and slow down as often as we'd like. So, my friends, with that in mind, I urge you to keep exploring, keep seeking those wild moments. May your journeys be filled with remarkable fish tales, the occasional downshift, and plenty of open roads. **X4**



LYNDSEY COOKING AT CAMP

JOHN HOLDMEIER

AUTHOR BIO



John Holdmeier is a lifelong outdoor enthusiast, photographer, and writer. He spent his childhood canoeing, kayaking, fly fishing and camping with his family, and hasn't looked back since. John is also an outdoor industry veteran, having worked for multiple brands and manufacturers in the outdoor industry for nearly two decades. He now puts his knowledge and skills to use as the founder of the Actual Outdoors marketing agency. He's based on the northern edge of the Missouri Ozarks and you're most likely to run into him on any of the area's stunning spring-fed rivers.

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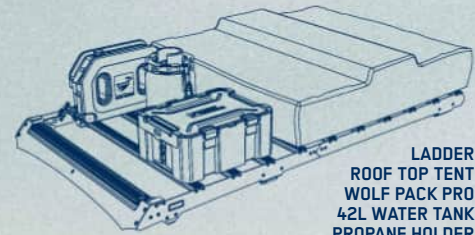
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