



WILDRoads

Hey Honey, Have You Seen The Road Lately?

By CHARLES GRAEBER

IMAGINE A CLASSIC ROAD TRIP. THEN TAKE AWAY THE INTERSTATES, REST STOPS, FAST FOOD, ROAD SIGNS, AND TRAFFIC. WHAT'S LEFT? THE PERFECT AMERICAN JOURNEY: CANADA TO MEXICO BY DIRT.

Way way up on the top left-hand corner of the map, where the skinny screw-driver end of the Idaho Panhandle abuts the forested border with Canada, you'll find a road, marked U.S. Route 95. It's a perfectly good stretch of graded blacktop, and a Sunday drive might follow it down from the Canadian woods, cross the trestle bridge over the Moyie River, and proceed through the quaint lumber towns nestled in the Idaho wilderness. Given Monday, you might even continue on 95 south through Boise, Las Vegas, and Yuma, Arizona. It's a straight shot, just 1,700 highway miles, and you'd be in Mexico by

Photography by BREE FITZGERALD

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC
ADVENTURE

OFF ROAD BUT EN ROUTE: Eastern Oregon's Alvord Desert, midway through the author's Canada-to-Mexico pavement-free odyssey



Tuesday evening. That's one way to do it.

Last October, my girlfriend, Bree, and I tried it another way. We started at the Canadian border at dawn, crossed the trestle, then steered our spanking new borrowed Jeep off that perfectly good paved road and into the Kaniksu National Forest. This was a logging trail, which yielded to a dirt forestry road up and over Copper Mountain. The wind through the windows came fragrant and cool, then cold, the lodgepoles turned to cedars, and by noon we had crested Canuck Peak on a track of muddy snow. The world dropped off only feet from our tires; the mountain view behind us was Canada, the land below us had become Montana.

We traversed a shelf running with snow-melt, then steered left up a rocky ridgeline that sent our vehicle bucking and creaking like a metal mustang and transformed our trunkload of gear into a lurching percussion section. Bottle jack and hand-winch, water jug and jerry can, lantern, ax, and saw—each was a drummer, and we marched to them all, up one side of the Coeur d'Alene Mountains, then down the other, wind in our ears, bugs in our teeth, rumbling and shaking like a plane in turbulence. Until dusk, when we landed in a valley and glided along a smooth stretch of pavement up to one of those big red government octagons that mean STOP. So we stopped. Suddenly, it was very quiet.

"That," Bree said, "is the first time we've been told what to do all day."

She pulled out the map and traced our last ten hours in green highlighter. "We started here," she said, indicating a dot, "and now we're here." Her finger had barely moved. On a map of Idaho, a single splotch of ketchup could eclipse our entire day's progress; on a map of North America, we hadn't moved at all.

Beneath our position, the map was veined with thousands of dotted red lines,

representing thousands of dirt trails through the American West. Some were forestry roads or stagecoach routes, others access trails to logging areas or mines or power lines. Several would prove to be no better than goat paths and no wider than our wheels, and a few would be no road at all. At the bottom of these routes was the Mexican border. We had 20 days—the time we could manage away from work—to get there.

THE BITTERROOTS

(IN WHICH WE SAVOR THE
SUPERIORITY OF HORSE-
POWER OVER HORSES)

Two hundred years after Lewis and Clark crossed these mountains with the Corps of Discovery, Bree and I find ourselves gunning the same maze of peaks and alpine meadows, sleeping beside the same sparkling rivers. The view is green and endless. We drive all day, then one more, living the miles through the windshield, peek-a-booing out from the big green blanket of trees only to find gas or groceries. It's all new, uncharted, unsigned, and uncertain. Learning the rules of the unpaved road is real work. Gray clouds behind us could bury our tracks till spring, wildfires ahead threaten to block our route with lumber. I jerk our ride around rocks and trees like a horse through a steeplechase, trying not to blink; Bree studies our well-thumbed stack of dog-eared DeLorme topos like a modern Sacagawea. We have updated the pioneer's horses and grass for horsepower and gas, but to novices like us, each mile is a fresh and uncertain discovery.

"Bree," I say finally. "Don't you think it's funny that Lewis and Clark never gave Sacagawea a nickname?"

She looks up from the map. "What?" she says.

"Can you imagine? 'Good morning,

*5,000-STAR ACCOMMODATIONS

CAMPING DOESN'T GET MORE LUXURIOUS THAN THIS

Just because your car is roughing it doesn't mean that you have to. Here are a few hints on making the most of your cargo space.

■ **Go plush.** Plenty of back-country luxury items come in compressible sizes. The Intex Supreme inflatable mattress (\$50; www.intexcorp.com) fits into a handy duffel. The Travel Chair Deluxe back-country seat (\$35; www.rei.com)

boasts foot rests and easy stowability.

■ **Power on.** A Rayovac inverter (\$50; available at electronics stores) can transform your cigarette adapter into a regular outlet, for use with digital cameras, satellite radios, and inflatable-mattress pumps.

■ **Get clean.** Add a hook to the handle of a garden watering can and a string to the spout. Then pour in hot water,

hang from a tree, and pull down to shower.

■ **Pack smart.** Large plastic bins will cut down on clutter, and keeping tools handy will minimize headaches when you're in a pinch.

■ **Cook up.** Bring a two-burner Coleman Camp Stove (\$71; www.coleman.com), a cooler, steaks, fresh veggies, wine, and all the treats you'd never take backpacking. —Mark Kirby



THE CAR, LIKE THE ROAD, IS NEW TO US:
AS OFF-ROADERS WE'RE ADOLESCENTS,
SLOWLY COMING TO UNDERSTAND OUR
SIZE, POWER, AND LIMITATIONS.



GETTING CAMPY: The author and Bree Fitzgerald (above) set up shop in Idaho's Clearwater Forest, three days into their border-to-border overland journey. Below, from left: tools of the car-camping trade; Montana snowballs would soon be chilling desert cocktails; on the road again, above the Snake River in Oregon.





Sacagawea. Care for some jerky, Sacagawea? It's exhausting."

She just looks at me.

"You know, like Sacky, or something."

Bree looks back at her maps. "It's a mystery," she says.

In places, the mountain switchbacks are smooth and fine, and autumnal larches confetti our progress with golden needles. In others, the mountaintop topography is as obtuse as the crown of a molar. Each time trail meets trail we confront a fresh riddle. The roads become smaller and grassier until, finally, they don't look like roads at all.

I stop the car. Bree looks from the GPS to the map to the almost-road. "What's the word, Sacky?" I ask.

Bree looks over. "Is that me, now?"

"Just trying it out," I say.

"Well anyway, I think this is the track we wanted. At least on paper."

"OK," I say. "Sacky."

"I think Clark was the quiet type."

I proceed until the trail narrows to a rock ledge with waterfall washouts. It's too thin to turn, too hairy to reverse. The view from my window is straight down. I steer hard against the mountainside. Saplings scream against the doors, knocking the mirrors flat as ears. The fact is that we're not going to tip, and the Jeep can fit, barely. But that's abstract math right now. The car, like the road, is new to us; as off-roaders we're adolescents, slowly coming to understand our size, power, and limitations.

Then, finally, I do it—turn a corner, miss it, and stick a wheel over the cliff edge. The situation strikes us as an emergency, and we kill the engine. It's quiet then, just my heartbeat and the creaks of giant trees swaying in wind. This is a novel scenario for us. Obviously, there's some correct course of action here, but whatever it is, that's new to us as well. My view through the windshield is the void, and next to it Bree, assessing the situation by pressing her palms to her temples and making

I UNCRAMP MY THIGH, WHICH HAS BEEN MUSCLING THE BRAKE, FRED FLINTSTONE STYLE. THEN WE START TO LAUGH. SUDDENLY, WE REALLY NEED A BEER.

a doughnut shape with her mouth. She's been taking pictures constantly, but she's not taking pictures of this—maybe, I think, in case it goes tragically wrong and she needs to forget it. So when I turn the key, lock the hubs, and simply back out, it seems heroic.

"I've got a deal for you," Bree says, clutching the map. "I'll promise to keep us on the right track to Mexico if you promise to keep us on the road."

Like the empires of antiquity, America depends on a network of good, standardized roads to define itself as united and whole. The modern traveler can cross the country in just a few days, insulated from the ground by layers of tar and shielded from the countryside by alleys of concrete. Engineers and dynamite have leveled the hills; plows and salt make snow a temporary inconvenience. Most miles are traveled in traffic, patrolled by police, and well-described by signs and Michelin guides. On virtually any whim you can stop for gas or supplies, usually in rest stops with familiar franchises.

Over the miles, the accents and uniforms change, some truck stops are more charismatic than others, but the most striking thing about these cross-country journeys

is their essential sameness. American roads are perfect for hauling California lettuce to Maine, or for weekending in some isolated island of parkland. But traveling cross-country in 21st-century America hardly constitutes an adventure in itself.

Or so we thought, until we met Jerry Counts and Dave Hutchens. Jerry is a Boeing aerospace engineer, Dave a retired fireman. Both share a passion for motorcycles, and American dirt. For the past decade, they've spent most of their free time tooling around the unpaved expanses of the American West. In the process, they've discovered a sort of rural Shangri-la, hidden within the sprawling grids of the modern-day U.S.A.

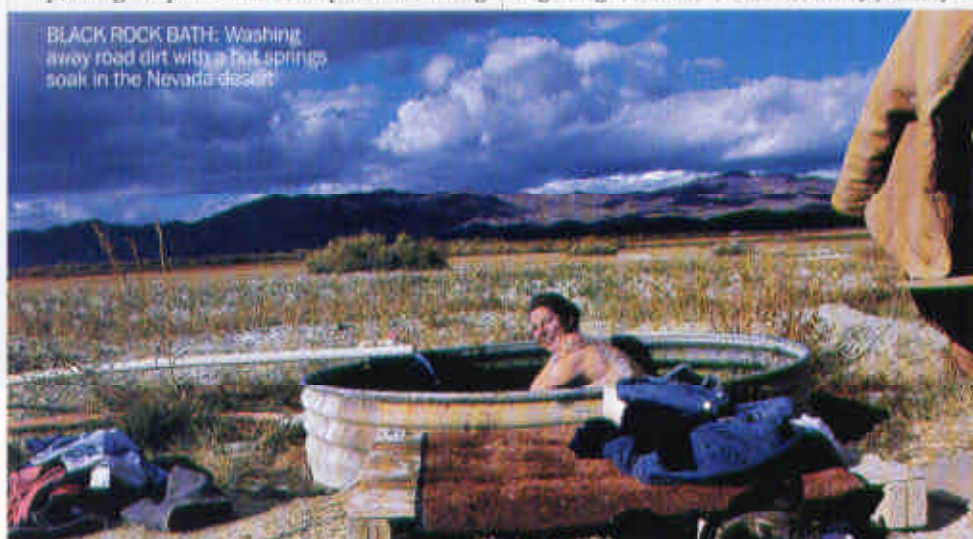
Isolated stretches of legal, drivable dirt are scattered all across this country; Jerry and Dave's innovation was to piece these wild roads into a cohesive border-to-border corridor—from the Canadian line above Idaho and Montana, over to Eastern Oregon, and finally south across Nevada and Southern California to Mexico. Essentially, Jerry and Dave had Magellan'd a way to traverse the country on dirt.

The concept struck me as a revelation. I'd assumed that dirt roads belonged to a pioneer nation—a nostalgic, untamed America that existed only in the drive-in theater screen of the heart. But I was wrong. Not only did this unpaved America exist, it was drivable, too—Jerry and Dave had made the trek several times with a team of bikers. Some of the stretches were too isolated, rocky, or thin for anything bigger than a motorcycle, they cautioned, but in theory, it might be possible to combine their GPS coordinates with my maps and navigate a similar border-to-border dirt odyssey in a four-wheeled vehicle. What was out there? The only way to know was to go.

Perhaps the most famous dirt road in North America crosses between Powell Junction and Canyon Junction along the high ridges above Idaho's Lochsa River. It's a high trail flanked by fireweed and endless vistas of the Bitterroot mountains that most maps label "Forest Road 500" and most folks know by the 1930s Forest Service moniker "Lolo Motorway."

"Motorway" is a deceiving term; the desolate, unpaved grade is actually an only slightly improved version of the 19th-century Bird-Truax route, which was used by prospectors as a land bridge between rumors back East and the hard facts of the northern Idaho goldfields. The miners themselves were simply following a trail

BLACK ROCK BATH: Washing away road dirt with a hot springs soak in the Nevada desert

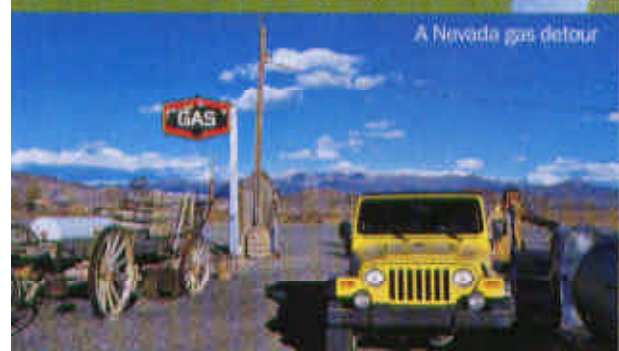




Near Wallace, Idaho



Black Rock Desert, Nevada



A Nevada gas detour



Inyo Mountains, California



Saline Valley, California



The All American Canal

*DIRT DRIVER'S ED

DON'T TRY THIS ON THE INTERSTATE

The unmarked roads, narrow lanes, jagged rocks, and muddy sinkholes of backcountry driving routes require a special skill set.

■ **Brake for climbers.** Vehicles traveling uphill have the right of way—it's easier to get started again when driving downhill.

■ **Use your feet.** If you can't see over your hood, get out and scout, or have your passenger step out and direct you.

■ **Aim high.** When driving irregular roads, steer your tires high. Tracking rubber over the tallest objects will protect your underside from scrapes and bangs.

■ **Be prepared.** Bring a shovel, tow straps, an all-terrain spare, tire sealant, a jerry can full of gas, engine oil, a foldable saw, and a basic tool kit (with extra hose clamps and other parts that could rattle off). Pack plenty of water and a ready-to-go backpack for an emergency hike out.

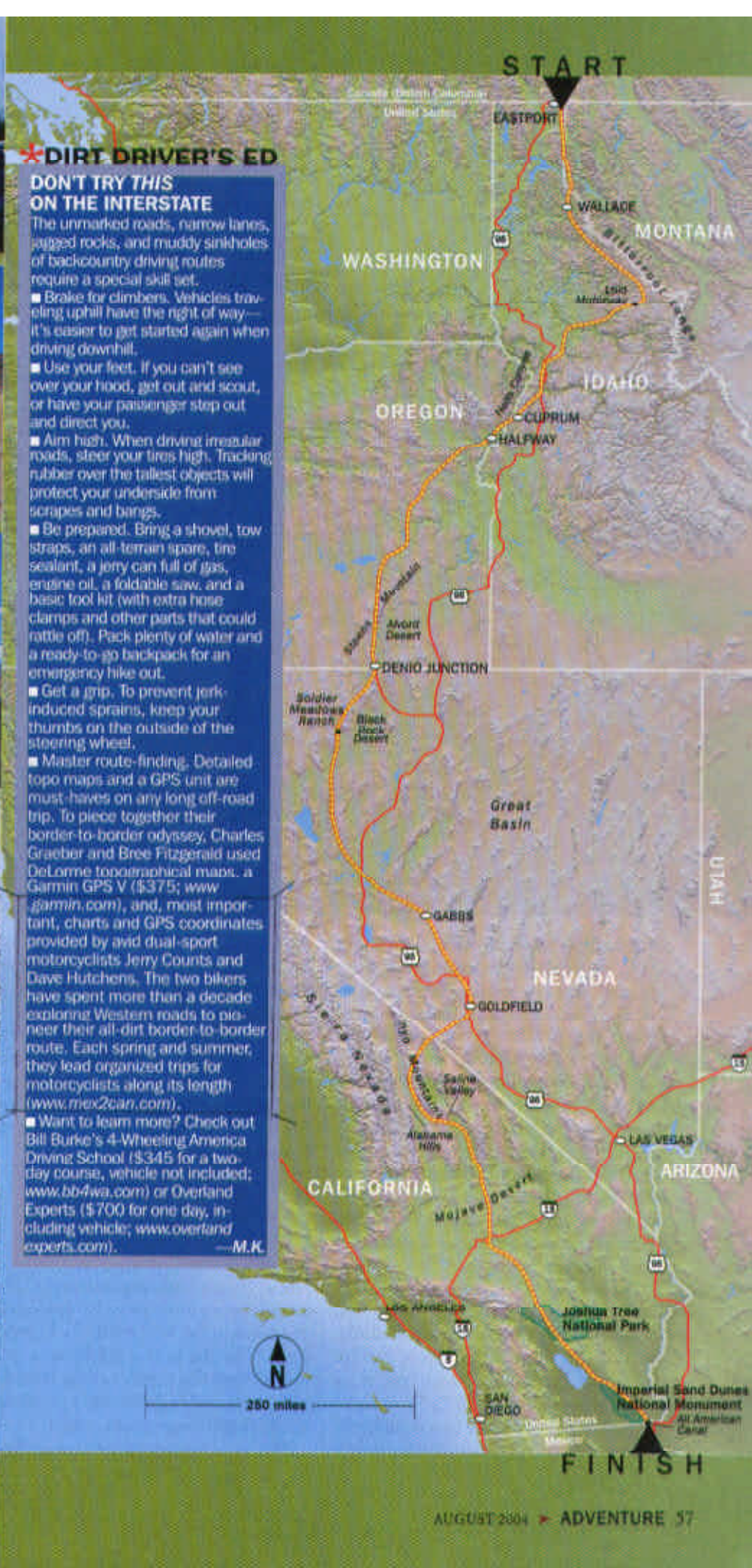
■ **Get a grip.** To prevent jerk-induced sprains, keep your thumbs on the outside of the steering wheel.

■ **Master route-finding.** Detailed topo maps and a GPS unit are must-haves on any long off-road trip. To piece together their border-to-border odyssey, Charles Graeber and Bree Fitzgerald used DeLorme topographical maps, a Garmin GPS V (\$375; www.garmin.com), and, most important,

charts and GPS coordinates provided by avid dual-sport motorcyclists Jerry Counts and Dave Hutchens. The two bikers have spent more than a decade exploring Western roads to pioneer their all-dirt border-to-border route. Each spring and summer, they lead organized trips for motorcyclists along its length (www.mex2can.com).

■ **Want to learn more?** Check out Bill Burke's 4-Wheeling America Driving School (\$345 for a two-day course, vehicle not included; www.bb4wa.com) or Overland Experts (\$700 for one day, including vehicle; www.overlandexperts.com).

—M.K.



**SOMETIMES, ROAD TRIPS ARE AN ADVENTURE.
AND SOMETIMES, THEY'RE JUST TWO PEOPLE TRAPPED
IN A SMALL METAL ROOM WITHOUT COFFEE.**



described 60 years earlier by Lewis and Clark, whose 12-day ordeal through snow, hail, and rain saw them exhausted, then lost, and finally hungry enough to eat their packhorses. Oddly, the boys chose the same route for their return east in 1806.

At Horse Sweat Pass, we ride above the trail that Lewis described as "excessively dangerous . . . being a narrow rocky path generally on the side of steep precipice, from which in many places if either man or horse were precipitated they would inevitably be dashed in pieces," and we pass Dry Camp, where, as Clark wrote, "a coal . . . fell a Prey to our appetites."

The route was a window into their adventure, both important and unpleasant. But, for us, it was also a simple and beautiful ride, the kind that doesn't always give itself to description. I think Clark said it best, in his journal of September 16, 1805: "To describe the road of this day would be a repetition of yesterday except the Snow which made it

much worse. . . ." The fact is, aside from some engineering tweaks and the invention of spell check, the Lolo hasn't changed much in the past 200 years. Changed more is the way we travel it. Lewis and Clark made the journey in a week and a half, starving and shivering and bitching the whole way. Bree and I bomb over the Lolo in one brilliant afternoon. We see less Lolo than the Corps of Discovery did. But our trip has just begun.

HELLS CANYON

(WHERE WE FIRST FIND THAT
"JUST A FEW MORE MILES"
ISN'T ALWAYS

Not all state borders are meaningful. Many are just survey lines drawn for convenience or politics or the land grant of a European king, lines which, to a driver on a cross-country road trip, signify nothing more than a new state bird or flower. On a paved road, borders mark progress, not terrain.

But some borders follow geological con-

tours; these are meaningful, especially to a dirt-driver. To wit: Oregon's northeastern border, which bulges into Idaho like an aneurysm. This is Hells Canyon, a basalt labyrinth etched over eons by the thundering Snake River.

It was already dark when Bree and I pulled into Cuprum, Idaho, population 11. The town felt too high and weird to make a good camp, so Bree flicked on the dome light and ran her finger along to the next dot on our map, Oxbow, perhaps ten miles ahead, just over the Oregon border. In deciding to cross the state line, we had unwittingly chosen to traverse the deepest river gorge in North America, in the dark, along a precipitous mule track cut a century ago to haul copper ore down to the Snake River. Sitting in the dark, in a dead town in a green woods, we had no way of knowing just how close to hell we were.

We leave Cuprum in a blink, blink a few more times through a peaceful woods, then

*ROAD RULES

TAKE THE HIGH ROAD WITH THESE ENVIRONMENT-PROTECTING TIPS

While all-terrain tires will never be as gentle on the earth as rubber soles, careful planning and wise driving can minimize the impact of backroad travel.

■ **Know where to go.** Most Forest Service, National Park, and BLM dirt roads are open to vehicular traffic, but make sure to check with local ranger stations for closures. Wilderness Areas and Wilderness Study Areas are off-limits.

■ **Stay on track.** Travel on established routes and bring a compass and DeLorme Gazetteer (\$20 each; www.delorme.com) to plan your course.

■ **Lose the spin.** Tractionless tire spins just dig you in deeper and create headaches for future drivers. Carry three-foot-long carpet strips to place under your wheels as gripping aids on soft terrain.

■ **Keep out of the water.** Tire

tracks erode stream banks, stir up sediment, and crush fragile streambed ecosystems. If you must cross, use an established ford.

■ **Embrace leave-no-trace.** Set up your campsite where others have camped before. Use preexisting fire rings and leave your site looking better than you found it by taking all garbage (yours and others') with you. —M.K.

shines into space, illuminating only dust. It must be a corner, so I turn, slowly, turn a little more, see more road, more blasted rock wall: good. I pump the brake, the speedometer needle jerks like a heartbeat. Only 20 more miles and we're down.

"Charlie, you have to see this!" Bree says. "Can you see this?"

"Not looking," I say. "Really?"

It's as if the atmosphere has disappeared and left us naked to space. Gusts whistle and push at our vehicle, but the car is slightly too heavy to fly. Despite the bitter cold, my hands are wet on the wheel.

"Let's try the radio, huh?" I say. "Something cool," Bree's on program. She flicks the switch and finds a station. Johnny Cash. Willy Waylon. Sure voices mingling with the heat from the vents. They're cool. I'll be cool, too.

Forty-five minutes later we arrive at the bottom. We know it's the bottom because suddenly there's nowhere to fall to. I uncramp my thigh, which has been muscling the brake, Fred Flintstone style. Then we start to laugh. Suddenly, we really need a beer.

The Hells Canyon Inn is a parking lot of pickups leading to a bar full of dusty beards and baseball caps. Dwaine's beard is longer and grayer than the others, his cap more weathered. His fingers, wrapped around a Bud longneck, are flattened and caked with the mountain.

Like everyone else in the bar, Dwaine's working on the power lines. It's a nasty job that nobody wanted, building foundations for support towers to carry juice up and over these mountains, so Dwaine's company was the only bid. He describes this job proudly as "drilling holes in the devil's head."

We follow his brake lights out of the parking lot, zooming and swerving in the dark. The drill swamper's camp is around the bend from the sluice gates of the Brownlee Dam, and Dwaine has a trailer and a blow heater and enough beer and stories to last us until dawn.

Dwaine was raised by his father in the logging camps, and he likes his life, moving job to job, dirt under his nails, his stuff in bags. It's hard work, work he's good at, and he likes that, too. Likes it more now that his sister Sue and her dog have come to live with him after her last divorce.

"Did I beat Mom's record?" Sue asks. No, Dwaine says. He tilts his beer, brings it back. Tied her. Mom was married four times. Last Sue saw of her number four was over a shotgun barrel, him running naked through the trailer court, still covered in



WHAT A WEENIE: The author sorts his franks from his beans in the Nevada desert. Below: Way, way off the interstate. Opposite: Driver and navigator enjoy the view from atop Oregon's Steens Mountain.



begin a downhill. It starts gently. A moment later, we find ourselves on a steep, rock-strewn slope where free fall begins just half a foot from our hubcaps. It seems to drop forever; in reality the distance is closer to five Empire State Buildings stacked end on end. But in the dark, our keenest observations about the surprising scale and geology are chiefly profane and scatological and shouted over and over by Bree, who by now has pressed her face incredulously to her window.

"OK, you have to stop that," I say. "I'm not looking. I'm trying to stay cool."

"You have to see this!" Bree says.

"Staying cool," I say. "Not looking."

To our left is a blasted basalt face. Ahead, the high beams catch a few feet of gravelly slope, then nothing; to the right, the light

soap. Now she's here, cooking three squares a day for 20 hungry drillers.

As a beer drinker, as a driller, Dwaine's all first gear, plowing slowly ahead like a tractor turning earth, and he can go all night. But after 14 hours in the saddle Bree and I are wiped. Dwaine's got a tent all set up, the stand-up Kmart kind with an inflatable mattress and its own blow heater. This overwhelming generosity is like a lullaby, and we crawl under his Coca-Cola blanket and close our eyes. The darkness has a bass. Somewhere beyond the camp, the Brownlee turbines are chucking megawatts off the Snake River.

I wake with the better part of a 12-pack pounding in my temples. Dwaine's already gassing up the trucks for another big day on the basalt, and Sue's been cooking for hours.



GETTING THE DIRT: Consulting with Mark (left) and Bill at the Halfway Bend and Fred

There's coffee on in the barn, and a camp's worth of pancakes and bacon and eggs and more bacon. I wash in one of those public toilets where you have to wave your arms to keep the lights on; I comb my hair, shave even. When I return for breakfast, the dog barks at me like a stranger.

GREAT BASIN

(A PLACE WHERE GETTING IN IS FAR EASIER THAN GETTING OUT)

The Great Basin of the American West is the fifth largest desert on Earth, only a sandbox smaller than the Ar Rub' al Khali of Saudi Arabia. It's distinctly framed on the map by the Wasatch Mountains and the Sierra Nevada, east and west, and less obviously by the tributary canyons of the Colorado River to the south. We approach, of course, from the north, via the high ridges of Oregon's Snake River Plains. It's obvious that way, too.

No stream or river that enters this vast sink ever reaches the ocean. No water leaves the basin, except through evaporation. If you were a raindrop, you might consider the

BACKROAD

DON'T HAVE A MONTH OR AN OBSSIVE PERSONALITY? TRY ONE OF

CALIFORNIA'S LOST COAST



Difficulty: ★★☆☆
Vehicle: High-clearance 2WD or 4WD
Length: 100 miles; 2 to 3 days

Generations after steep North Coast mountains deflected the route of the Pacific Coast Highway inland, California's Lost Coast remains the state's most isolated shore. From the point where State Route 1 cowers eastward, follow Usal Road a few miles to Usal Beach, in Sinkyone Wilderness State Park, and explore the southern terminus of the 52-mile Lost Coast Trail. From the beach, the old wagon road snakes through second-growth forest to County Road 435, which descends to a marine terrace. The Needle Rock Trail will lead you to two miles of solitary sand and surf. Drive south of Needle Rock toward misty Bear Harbor and camp near one of the region's old "doghole" lumber ports.

In the morning, Chernise Mountain Road will lure you deep into the King Range, known for its steep hiking trails. (From King Range Road, take the two-mile hike up King Peak.) By afternoon, you'll be driving beneath King Peak Road's forest canopy on your way north to a campsite at A.W. Way Campground.

Before nightfall, hit the beach at the river-to-estuary, the northern reach of the Lost Coast. Drive to Windy Point, then hike the beach south for a mile and a half—past tide pools, sea lions, and rocky surf—to reach the abandoned Punta Gorda Lighthouse in time for sunset.

Camping along the Lost Coast Trail, California

WASHINGTON'S SLIDE RIDGE ROAD



Difficulty: ★★☆☆
Vehicle: High-clearance 2WD or 4WD
Length: 60 miles; 3 to 4 days

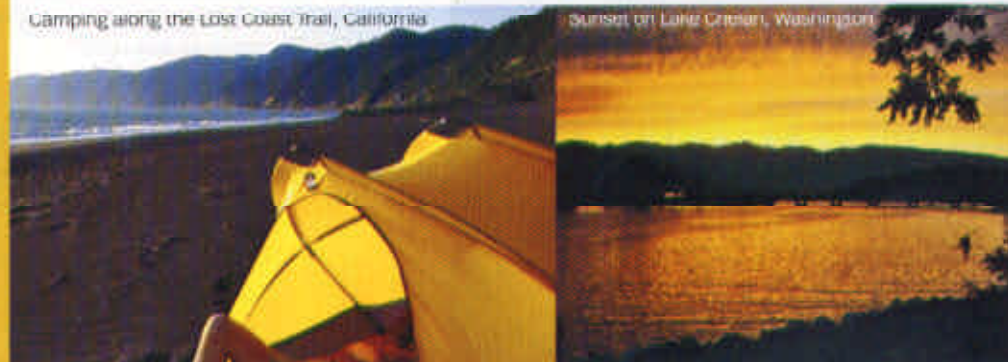
The Cascades have shaped the Evergreen State in many ways, notably by robbing eastern Washington of the Pacific moisture that keeps western Washington, well, ever green. The contrast is on display as you drive out of the tawny Columbia Basin, near Entiat, and ascend into the piney mountains west of Lake Chelan.

From Entiat River Road, follow Mud Creek Road 5.8 miles to Forest Road 8410, which becomes Slide Ridge Road as it climbs north. By the time you cross the crest known as the Devil's Backbone, you'll be above 6,000 feet and enjoying vistas across countless ridges and peaks, below swimmers the glacial trough of 55-mile-long, fjordlike Lake Chelan, and to the east spreads the Columbia Basin, with its irrigated wheat fields, hydroelectric dams, and dry skies.

After 36 miles, you'll reach Lake Chelan. Claim a campsite at Twenty-Five Mile Creek State Park, and in the morning drive south-east to the town of Chelan, unload your bike, and board the Lady of the Lake II passenger ferry for the uptake cruise. Your destination: Lake Chelan National Recreation Area and the village of Stehekin, which has no roads to the outside world.

Grab a snack at the Stehekin Pastry Company before hopping the shuttle to a site at Manequin Campground. In the morning, grab your fly rod and bike nine miles along Stehekin River Road, stopping to hook a few rainbow trout along the way. Before boarding the ferry back down the lake, be sure to hike the steep 4.4-mile Rainbow Loop Trail, which has views deep into the North Cascades.

Sunset on Lake Chelan, Washington



Great Basin a sort of Hotel California. Or, if you were a Buddhist raindrop, you might consider the frustrating cycle of forming in the clouds, falling to Earth here, and evaporating again a sort of hydrological dharma. One day, if the wind were blowing right, you might leave this earthly plain.

Until then, you're stuck in a big, blond-shouldered country of hills and cattle farms, where eons of water over ancient lava have etched out a rolling landscape that has depth, but not height. These soft hills appear, from a distance, like piles of sleeping greyhounds. After a week in the jagged green peaks of the great northern Rockies, this smooth dry world is a fresh discovery. In the Bitterroots, we grew accustomed to driving blindly toward places either looming menacingly above us or lost in trees staggeringly far below. In Oregon's Great Basin, the land rolls out lazily in every direction, like an unspooling map. You need to know where you're going, or you need to find somebody who does.

We find the regulars sitting over coffee around a card table at the Halfway Seed and Food. Do they know this trailer country? Mack used to sluice-box and pan the creeks out that way in the forties; Bill worked as a ranch hand in the area. They know. I flop down the map and pass Bill the highlighter.

"That's big ranch territory," Bill says. "Lovely stuff." He wipes his hands on his hard blue jeans and hitches a thumb on a rodeo buckle. "You'll see critters out there for sure. Elk. Wild horses."

"I seen a deer out there as big as my horse," Mack says. The old guy has a new U.S.A. ball cap perched jauntily on his gray head, now shaking with excitement. "You sure don't forget a thing like that."

"Thing is, it might rain," Bill says. He glances out the window. "If it does, just stop and wait. It's all dusty clay out there. Your tires get bigger and bigger and you can't go through it."

"I've been there," Mack says.

"And if you break down outside of anywhere, sit tight," Bill says. "There'll probably be someone by in a couple days."

"That census taker got lost outside of Juntura for—how long was it, Bill?"



FREEWHEELIN' BLM lands throughout the West offer plenty of open space to score a no-fee campsite.

"Four days," Bill says. "Of course, if you do run into anyone, you'll have a hard time getting going again. Those boys stay on those ranches all year, and they'll want to stop and visit."

"All the way to Mexico on those roads," Mack says. He shakes his head. "Boy, that sounds real good."

We trace the soft banks above the broad Snake River, where the earth has sloughed in thousand-foot scarps toward the water's edge like a child's sand castle caving to the tide. Beyond that is the big-ranch landscape Bill and Mack described—days of sun and fences and miles and miles of rolling scrub. In it, our car feels no bigger than a matchbox. Some roads crisscross to the horizon, others wind and eddy like an old stream. At the crossroads the wooden signs lie like skeletons in desiccated piles, pointing only at the sky. We stop, straining to name the buttes, comparing the road ahead against the lines on our map. Nothing quite fits. So we guess and go, noodling in the dust for hours, watching the gas needle, then guess again.

One of the benefits of traveling empty territory with camp gear is that you can bed down whenever the sun gets too low to navigate. By now, we have the beginnings of a routine; Bree assembles the tent and sleeping arrangement in the dying light while I unpack

the gear and set the fire. We find a stream to wash the dust from our faces and arms; we have a propane lantern to cook by, a fire grate and stove to cook on, and a cooler full of Bitterroot snowballs, cocktails, and dinner du jour. Sleep comes early; dawn chews frost on the windshield. Then, usually, we make coffee and breakfast, pack up, and move on.

But today we're cold, and close enough to pavement for a hot breakfast. In Juntura the Oasis diner—everything in a desert is named Oasis—has biscuits and sausage gravy on the menu, horse trailers in the parking lot, and notices for runaway teens and roping tournaments and pedigree pointers on the message board. And one sad, hand-lettered flyer that reads: "Wanted: Like to travel and be a truck driver's companion. Ask for Roy." When the waitress clears our plates, we clutch our

empty coffee mugs like life preservers.

THE SLUMGULLION

(WHERE WE DISCOVER THAT THERE'S SOMETHING TO NOTHING)

Nevada's mostly nothing. The maps here are so full of nothing that they're on a different scale, four miles to the inch. They look like big coloring books, except that they've already been colored in with one sepia crayon. A big black dot on a Nevada map means even less than it did in Oregon or Idaho, which is saying a lot. A ranch gets a dot. A house gets a dot. Anyplace that used to have a house gets a dot. Sometimes, a broken-down bus someone used as target practice gets a dot. And a thin red line on such a map, the kind that might signify an expressway in Rhode Island, can mean two desert tracks no thicker than those a covered wagon might make, and quite possibly did make, once, a long time ago. Or it might mean nothing.

We cross into Nevada along a rough track south to Denio Junction, where on our map a red line follows Alder Creek along the Pine Forest Range, then climbs the Black Rock mountains. From the creek, we follow along a clear track through the sagebrush. A mile later the route ends at the gates of a cattle ranch.

"We must have" (Continued on page 86)

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HAVE YOU SEEN THE ROAD LATELY?

(Continued from page 62)

missed a turnoff," Bree says. "Turn around." We do and, after driving back and forth several times, finally spot two more faint tracks that lead into the sage and, 40 feet later, disappear. We need another road.

So we drive back and forth some more, raising a lot of dust. Then a couple of Mexican guys drive out from the ranch in an El Camino. Both wear clean floral-print town shirts and white cowboy hats. Our conversation goes something like this:

"We're looking for a dirt road into the mountains."

"Yes, those are mountains."

"Well, we're looking for a road."

"Yes, this is a road."



**THERE'S BLUE SKY
THROUGH THE WIND-
SHIELD AND THEN A
PAUSE, LIKE A
ROLLER COASTER
BETWEEN THE
CLICKITY-CLICK AND
THE BIG PLUNGE.**



"But we're looking for a road—into the mountains."

"Yes, those are mountains."

And so on. Finally we simply thank each other. Their dust trails into the featureless distance.

"Remember Montana?" Bree says.

I stare out at the horizon. "Huh."

By this point the sunset has become something resembling rhubarb pie with peach ice cream. It is beautiful. Soon it will be dark—too dark to follow the damned road if we found it. So we double back to Denio Junction, which is effectively a gas station, but marked on the Nevada map with the same big black dot and hearty 18-point font reserved on other maps for, say, Cleveland.

We set out again before dawn to make up

for lost time. But of course it's as dark before the sun comes up as it is after it sets, and soon I just pull over and wait for light. It's a long wait. Sometimes, road trips are an adventure. And sometimes, they're just two people trapped in a small metal room without coffee.

The rising sun illuminates a good gravel track through a peaceful desert canyon. On the horizon are the Black Rocks, looming in swells of fractured basalt and rhyolite like a sea of melted Hershey's Kisses. The trail that crosses them is a spine-shattering route of ups and downs that follows a drainage strewn with streams and logs and boulders that's called the Slumgullion. We have no idea how much distance we have to cover, nor whether we have daylight or gas enough to cover it. So we go fast, sledding the hills wildly, filling the car with dust and atomized sage at every turn. Each time we bridge another peak, the car points up like a rocket and there's blue sky through the windshield and then a pause, like a roller coaster between the *clickity-click* and the big plunge. The sun rises, the gas needle sinks, and boulders smash against the skid plate like meteors.

By afternoon we're following the bed of Slumgullion Creek down toward a distant patch of green meadow fronting an arched iron gate. In the 1860s, this was the winter camp of old Fort McGarry, where two companies of the former Union Army defended the denizens of the Applegate section of the California Trail against Indian raids; by the 1890s, cowboys replaced soldiers, and McGarry became the ranch that today is run as the Soldier Meadows dude ranch. Their welcome sign sends a cheer through the car. Both vehicle and passengers are desperate for refueling.

Bree and I hunch over the long common tables in the mess hall while Tosh, a cowgirl cook with blond pigtails and a white apron fitted around her curves, fixes us up with cold plates of meatloaf and salad and big glasses of iced tea. "The ranch's working cowboys won't be back until late," she tells us. Like many desert dwellers, Tosh is a refugee from the normal workaday world; you'd never know she was once a promoter for rap acts like Tone Loc, except maybe for the neck tattoo. Most days her only company is Eddie. As we wolf the last of our caramel apple pie, the excitable prospector turned 12-stepper turned kitchen hand traces the route from Denio Junction for us on the ranch's 3-D topo model. "You came

this way," he explains, dragging a cracked nail through a level, two-lane gravel track through the valley. "And it's no fun."

"No, no," I correct him. I draw my finger over the ridges of the model and recognize the sharpness immediately. "We came this way, over the mountains."

"Naaaaw," Eddie says. He looks from us to the map and back again with a cartoonlike expression of surprise. "The Slumgullion?" he asks. "What the hell did you do that for?"

We couldn't say.

These were good people—good people with good food and hot showers and ready access to horses and trails and soft beds afterwards. Only a few miles away we could find soothing hot springs and aspen trees carved with inscriptions from generations of cowboys and ranch hands. The McGarry grounds were littered with old soldiers' dugouts and cowboy lore, but we only had eight days to make it to Mexico, and more than half of our route still ahead. So we pushed back out into the sagebrush between the Black Rocks and the Calico Mountains, bathed quickly in a hot spring, and set camp 30 miles south, in the ghost town of Hardin City. It was only about three stones together in the desert. But on the map it got a big black dot.

THE BLACK ROCK

(IN WHICH TIME AND SPEED
MEAN NOTHING—FROZEN
GROCERIES, EVERYTHING)

The only thing more empty than the state of Nevada is the playa of the Black Rock Desert. The land before your squinting, red-rimmed eyes is as white and featureless as the map, and the ancient lake sediment beneath your feet runs 2,000 feet deep. Because there are no bumps, or roads, or reference points, speed becomes abstract. The Earth curves visibly around the horizon, and you navigate by compass, as you would in a boat. My needle is pegged at 95 miles an hour. The fastest a human on wheels has traveled here is 763 miles an hour. At that speed, I imagine, it would look much the same.

Since Nevada's mountains run north-south, our route beyond the Black Rock will be a 48-hour lightning bolt, striking south between the ranges (Fox and Selenite, Nightingale and Saltak, West Humboldt and Trinity), west through flats, washes, and canyons (Hualapai, Stonehouse, Sage Hen),

and through the Carson Sink. It's a path that offers little choice but to camp in the high desert, despite the forecast of snow and freezing temperatures.

We pull into in the mining town of Gabbs, looking for provisions, and find a shelf of liquor, another of beans, a shopping cart full of sewing patterns, and a freezer full of frozen meat.

The cashier looks from our clothes to our faces and knows we're traveling the desert. And what direction are we headed, just in case? Our answer gets her laughing so hard that her bangs, which are curled and sprayed vertically like an erect mullet, fan the air like antennae. In this cold? So I

**AFTER DRIVING
BACK AND FORTH A
FEW TIMES WITHOUT
FINDING A ROAD, WE
JUST MAKE ONE
OURSELVES. THE
COMPASS READS,
SIMPLY: S.**

reach back and add a bottle of rum to our bean-and-weenie groceries. Which gets her laughing again, as only a woman who sells frozen groceries in a desert can.

We drive dusty hours through hills leaching mineral reds and acid greens. The view is a geologic junkyard of volcano cones and lava turds and toothy spires with names like Purgatory and Luxor. There is no time here, or none that seems to matter. The feeling is not so much that we have driven back in time, but that we have entered a place where the past has not ceased to exist. In empty spaces like this, the past is not self-conscious, something marked with a plaque and framed behind museum glass. It's traveling with us, between the ghost towns, memorialized only by mine holes and rusted bean tins, and the

new claims staked with a wooden post and a note. We're driving on tracks, maybe wagon, maybe Jeep; if our engine quits, if we run out of gas, then the car becomes garbage and we are nowhere, just here.

We set our tent that night in the soft sand of a dry creek bed, collect juniper branches, and set to thawing our groceries. Gabbs weenies and beans might not sound like much, but in such a setting, and accompanied by some decent rum spiced over a snapping juniper fire, it's an existentially happy meal.

The setting sun takes 30 degrees down with it, leaving a crystalline night and a firmament of diamonds. Then I notice the darkness nibbling at Orion's toes and, as I look further, a storm front massing on the northern horizon. Instead of sleeping, I ruminate over our choice to bed down in a dry creek bed, and I wonder what sort of eulogy you give two people who drown in a desert during a drought.

Is there any question more disingenuous than "Hey, are you awake?" To Bree's great credit, she opens her eyes and finds her shoes. In fact, during the ten minutes we spend dragging the tent around in the freezing dark indulging my paranoia, she only mentions the drought twice.

We wake to delicate snowflakes parachuting into the eggs. It's lovely, but there's real snow behind it, so we take the cue to leave the high desert for somewhere warm, and possibly indoors. We dress in all our laundry, boil coffee, and drive.

In desert spaces, people congregate around liquid. In Goldfield, that liquid is found at the Santa Fe Saloon, with a mannequin of Wyatt Earp near the bar and the ghost of Jack Dempsey staring down from the wooden walls. A hundred years ago, the town was literally an \$85 million goldfield, with enough prosperous residents and fancy hotels to be in the running for regional capital. Now the hotels are boarded up and many of the remaining residents live in something metal, with wheels. It's the sort of place where the kids trick-or-treat at the town bar, where a guy buys his friend's tattered cowboy hat for \$500 and change because the old cool's too proud for a loan. And where the sexy bartender who serves you too many whiskeys in the bar at night is also the haggard café waitress who undoes it with eggs and black coffee the next morning. Essentially, the Santa Fe's the only show in town. In a snowstorm, on

Halloween, it's a good place to sit by the woodstove and talk to guys like Big Jim.

Before Big Jim moved to Goldfield, he put in 30 years as a cop, commanding a SWAT team in suburban California. Two years ago he traded the ulcers for a retirement with a solid gold honorary sheriff's badge and a deluxe trailer home. Twice a year he parks it here, near the Santa Fe, to sit in a dead town, order a Jameson, and think over the stack of cold case homicides he's taken on.

It only takes a couple of rounds before Jim recounts the clues—the stray hairs, the bullet holes, the lost evidence and partial fingerprints. Bree and I feel deputized by the riddle. There's a reason cold cases go cold, but tonight I'm convinced that if we just squint hard enough, the fragments will fit themselves into a clean story, one that starts with a random encounter and ends with a young woman lying on her floor with a bullet in her temple.

"What about the toothpick the cops found in her ashtray?" Bree asks. "Maybe it wasn't hers—it doesn't seem ladylike."

"If it's in evidence, maybe you could test for DNA," I say.

"Yeeees," Jim says. His fingers tap his glass, his eyes sparkle with whiskey and fresh inspiration. "You know, you might just have something there." He motions to the bartender. "Hey, Laurel. Can I get a pen?"

"Sure, Jim," Laurel says. She puts her toothpick in an ashtray and looks for a Bic.

"Aw hell," Jim says. He shakes his head. "I sure wish Wyatt Earp was still with us. He'd know what to do."

CALIFORN-I-AY!

(WHERE WE AT LAST DISTINGUISH STUPID FROM SCARY, AND THEN TRY BOTH.)

First you're in scrubby high desert, then you're in piñon pines, and soon those piñons are snowcapped and the dirt road has turned into a surprisingly vertical stack of rocky, ice-caked switchbacks. Desert driving had made us soft; the rugged Inyo Mountains snap us to attention. Up top, sage and juniper bushes stud the snow like cloves on a Christmas ham, and above that are granite outcrops shingled with plates of fractured rock that tinkle underfoot like china. The driftwoodlike trunks of the bristlecone pines that push up between the rock slabs are, at 4,500 years old, the most ancient trees on Earth. Each gnarled wrist clutch-

es a garland of fresh snow, like an elderly bride.

The trip through the Inyos would take two days and plenty of fuel, so we boogied back down an alluvial fan to gas up in the Owens Valley, beneath the Alabama Hills. For cops, while their taller Sierra cousins fractured in the elements, the Alabama Hills sank charismatically into the soil. They look familiar, because they are: Since the invention of celluloid, these rocks have been stage dressing for everything from *Gunga Din* and *Hopalong Cassidy* to *Gladiator*. In a sense, in crossing the California border from Nevada, Bree and I have gone from living American pioneer history to living an edited version of that history, starring John Wayne.

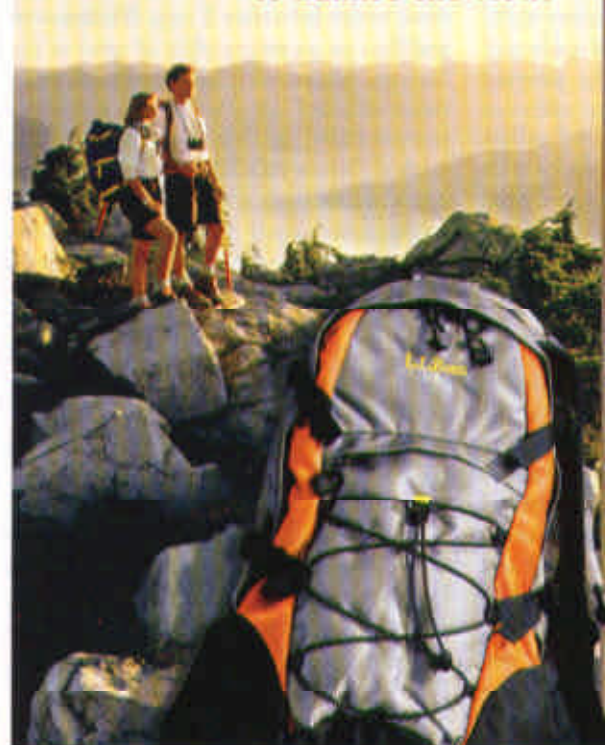
Dawn bathes the Sierra in 24-karat sunshine as we retread the sagebrush to complete our Inyos journey south. Our access trail is called the Swansea Road, and it passes parts of a tramline built in 1913 to haul salt from the Saline Valley. It's essentially a sheer wall of loose boulders and dirt, rutted so deeply in places that the median might strand the vehicle like a bug on a pin. Four-wheel enthusiasts call this "getting high-centered," and it's the

reason that they approach these hills with high-rigs, tow ropes, come-alongs, and hi-lift jacks. To the owner of such a rig, the Swansea is a classic driving challenge; to me it looks like a dry waterfall. I have to get out of the car, kneel, and squint up at it, the way you might a difficult golf shot.

By now Bree and I understand the difference between stupid and scary, and this road is definitely doable. Here's how: Get back in the car. Dry my hands on my pants. Buckle up tight. Put it in four-wheel low, and straight-arm the steering wheel. Then crank the radio, something inspiring like the Rolling Stones' "Bitch," and begin bucking and crashing up the trail like a dingy in a stormy sea. With each drop-off, each rut and hole, my head and pots and pans and tools smash cacophonously together, and our rear-view mirror bouquet of Idaho balsam and Oregon sage and Nevada desert flowers crumbles into snow on the dashboard.

Bree yells from somewhere ahead. "Five more feet!" She's navigating this section from the ground, since all I can see from the

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seat is the hood and sky. "Then left! Hard!"

"My left?" I yell. Through the passenger window, valley topography is already as abstract as a picture taken from space. "Like, nine o'clock?"

"Don't make it eight!" she says. "Trust me, you really don't want to go straight!"

We proceed this way through the day, punching the gas, digging into gear, grunting higher up the mountain along rocks, then snow, then deep snow, then a windswept saddle 5,000 feet above the desert floor. We crest the range at the ghost town of Cerro Gordo, then start our descent on a steady diet of brake and gas, the former smoking, the latter burning its way to zero. In the valley, young Joshua trees spike the low desert like millions of happy green feather dusters.

Around noon we drive past the tailing piles of abandoned talc mines and cross State Route 190 in a quick purr of pavement. We pass the dead mine holes of Darwin, rattle down Darwin Canyon, and emerge, in darkness, south of Panamint Valley. We're exhausted, and surrounded by the bombing ranges of the China Lake Naval Weapons Center. We have no choice but to drive off dirt and into town.

For the last thousand miles we have traveled like a bat out of hell, ducked snow and forest fire, bridged mountains and deserts and one-track nightmares. And we've grown used to it. But now we're in a proper town, on paved, monitored government roads, and I'm spooked. I hunch over the steering wheel like an old man, trying to maintain legal speed between the white and yellow lines. The urban landscape explodes with the fireworks of advertisements and road signs, each with an instruction for how fast I should drive, and in what lane, where I should go and what I might want to consume once I get there. Then we reach a flashing red light that tells me to stop. So, grudgingly, I stop, and make my intention to take a left turn public information. The signal noise sounds crisp and foreign. It's the only thing on the car that's still brand new.

We turn left at the promise of hot tubs and free HBO, then give our names and license plate number to a woman with a beehive and a name tag that reads ROSE. "I've lived near the bombing range all my life," she says, handing us the keys. "I won't get out of bed for anything less than six on the Richter

scale." Right now, Bree and I could sleep through anything. Our room is bigger than the car, smaller than the open road, and smells vaguely of disinfectant and strangers. We're glad to be there, and as happy to leave. We pile back into the car before dawn, bumping absentmindedly over the curb and back to our native dirt and the Mojave Desert.

With 24 hours left on our clock, and dirt—not snow or clouds but just dirt—beneath the wheels, a driver can finally unclench his shoulders, flex his right calf, and let fly. For the first time all trip we have a clear idea of where we're going. And so we bomb, screaming along with the radio, drifting wildly through the corners, using momentum as an accelerator and the accelerator as a brake and the clutch as rarely as possible. I have never driven so fast.

We choose a route through the balloon-animal rocks and numbered port-o-lets of Joshua Tree National Park, headed toward the Arizona border. We connect to a service road for the Colorado River Aqueduct, cross Interstate 10, then hit the old Bradshaw stagecoach trail between the Chuckwalla Mountains and another military bombing range, where faded signs warn that trespassers are, essentially, subject to explosion. This connects to a tougher road, paralleling the power and gas lines, that hits a series of whoop-de-doo dirt-buggy tracks that lead all the way to the Imperial Sand Dunes. We cross under Interstate 8 near Winterhaven and find an empty plain of sand to the horizon. After driving back and forth a few times without finding a road, we just make one ourselves. The compass reads, simply: S.

And, then, at mile 3,168 of our journey, we mount a final berm and, suddenly, *abi esta*—a strange man-made river, what they call the All American Canal, with a couple of ducks bobbing among the cattails and a deflated inner tube lying on the bank. Beyond that is a low country of woodsmoke and shacks and two shirtless guys on undersize BMXs, watching for the Border Patrol.

"Well, that's it," Bree says. We hop up on the hood and pop the last of our Canadian beer. The cap explodes like champagne.

"I guess so," I say. We stare out at this new country. So, this is Mexico. On our map, it's a large, sepia mass veined with dotted red lines, representing thousands of miles of dirt tracks between here and the border with Guatemala. Who knows what they're like? ▲

(Continued from page 71)

men scratch their heads and finally go home.

Somehow, they've lost a hundred elephants. It didn't seem possible.

I offer Rajeshwari a chunk of dried molasses, but her daughter, Nagini, swipes the treat with her trunk, prompting Hussein to swat the teenager and triggering great laughter among the assembled children. We're in the village of Kataki Chuburi photographing the three kunkies that have toiled so diligently of late. Rajeshwari just wants breakfast. Her feet are chained to those of her offspring—Nagini and Suman—but she simply reaches out with her trunk, uproots a nearby banana tree, strips the bark, and devours the snowy white center. If the 45-year-old elephant were still wild, she'd need at least 40 square miles of forest to satisfy her colossal diet—300 to 650 pounds of vegetation daily, plus 60 gallons of water.

Hussein and two other mahouts unchain the elephants and saddle them with thick burlap pads. Then, in one graceful motion, Hussein somehow levitates onto his standing mount and positions his bare feet behind her ears. He's taking the elephants to the river for a bath this morning, and, with two dozen children in tow, the kunkies parade past the colorful adobe houses of Kataki Chuburi. Everyone nods appreciatively at Hussein and his kunki. Assamese mahouts are the Marlboro Men of India: rugged, individualistic cowboys roaming an uncertain frontier, masters of all elephant lore. They're icons of a glorious elephant culture that reaches back 5,000 years.

The earliest evidence of elephant taming appeared in the third millennium B.C., when the Harappan civilization of what is now Pakistan and northwest India produced stone engravings depicting elephants draped in cloth. Later, the Vedic texts and epic poems of early Hinduism describe kings riding fabulously ornamented elephants. More than status symbols, the animals were also the first weapons of mass destruction. The Mauryan dynasty of the fourth century B.C. employed 9,000 war elephants, the largest force ever assembled. Elephants were used to steamroll opposing infantry, although they were sometimes a terrifying source of friendly fire. When Alexander the Great attacked the forces of King Porus in present-day Pakistan in 326 B.C., Alexander's arrows so infuriated Porus's 200 elephants that they went berserk, squashing friend and foe alike.