

by Dave Connors



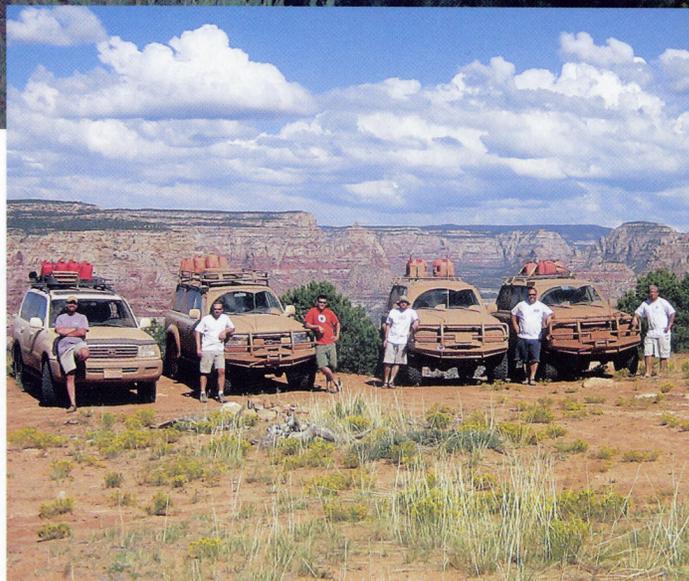
utah cruiser expedition



Sunset glows surreal on the Aquarius Plateau. Photo by Dave Connors

I blame Mark Whatley, Henry Brimmer, Todd Kaderabek and that joker Henry Cubillan for what you're about to read. It's all their fault. For years they have been using these pages to fill my head full of crazy ideas—overland expeditions are the ultimate test of a driver and his rig, Alaska, Australia, Africa, and South America offer unequalled challenge and beauty, real adventures don't include motels and restaurants, and running water is for fording, regardless of depth, current and silt content. Apparently the brain washing is ubiquitous because when I proposed the Utah Cruiser Expedition to some friends in November of 2004, not only was I not laughed at but they eagerly accepted the invitation and anxiously worked to make the trip their own.

Ten months of planning landed us in St. George, Utah, on Sept 2nd 2005, poised on the verge of a 1,200 mile, seven day off-road adventure that would exceed the expectations of everyone involved. Our plan was simple. Slither and pound our way through the beauty of the Colorado Plateau and remain as remote and self-sufficient as possible while doing so. Ideally we'd find ourselves in Colorado unscathed at the end of the week. Logistically and financially we would need to make a few stops for fuel but oth-



Paul May, Eric Cline, Will Carroll, John Curnutt, Darren Webster, and Dave Connors overlooking Dark Canyon. Photo by Heather May

erwise we were on our own. As the summer heat intensified in the Salt Lake Valley so did our preparation—let me break it down.

A Tacoma traded for an FZJ80. Four sets of custom rear drawers. Two new sets of sliders. Two pesky heater hoses. Two winches. A new set of tires. Two rebuilt front axles. Five different agendas and routes proposed and rejected. Two

back-country camping permits obtained. Roof racks, gas cans, spare parts, fluids, tools and coolers were distributed. Maps, GPS units, laptops, cameras and CB radios properly tested. Last minute oil changes finished. We even managed to have some stickers made by fellow Cruiserhead Kaleb Galbraith.

Allow me to introduce our intrepid group before I go any further. Paul and Heather May in their 1999 UZJ100. Eric Cline rode co-pilot for Will Carroll in his white 1996 FZJ80. John Curnutt braved the entire trip solo in his green 1994 FZJ80. Darren Webster and I rounded out the group in my 40th Anniversary FZJ80. Each truck brought unique talents and experience to the trip.

day 1

Southeast to the Toroweap rim of the Grand Canyon. Sand, silt and mud lay between us and the Skutumpa road which would lead us north and then east beneath the southern tip of Bryce Canyon National Park.

Right: Talcum-like dust billows near the Grand Canyon.

Photo by Dave Connors

None of us fully understood what lay before us and how it would change our way of thinking. By the end of day two, Darren was beginning to use words like "epic" to describe the trip. My mind constantly reflected upon our good fortune. The country was still in awe of the destruction recently caused by Hurricane Katrina and here we were, lost and wandering through a beautiful landscape. Our group was mindful of the crisis and thus more grateful for the fun and excitement we were having. Nature's fury in the Gulf Coast seemed incongruous with the serene and overwhelming natural beauty that surrounded us. Natural beauty that seemed out of a fairytale with names to match: Toroweap, Skutumpa, Paria, Kaiparowits, Waterpocket Fold, the Dollhouse, Dark Canyon and the Needles.



day 2

Mud, water, mud, water. Descending the Paria took more than just driving. Three winch pulls and four hours later our 20 miles of fun was over. Surrounded by lightning and rain we headed back north over Smokey Mountain and through the Kaiparowits plateau. We chose to leave the dirt behind for the legendary Highway 12 Scenic Byway. A dazzling sunset closed our day as we set up camp along the Burr Trail.

Left: Darren Webster slogs his way through the rain swollen Dirty Devil River.

Photo by Dave Connors



day 3

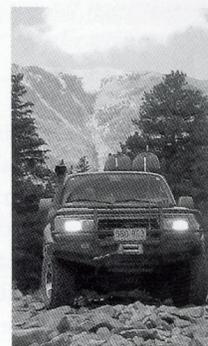
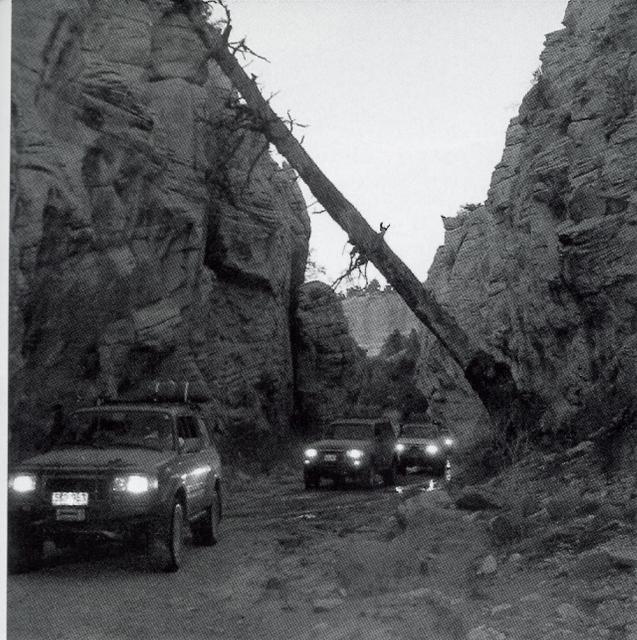
A quick dash through Capitol Reef National Park, then up the steep slopes of the Henry Mountains to the summit of our trip, 10,500 feet. Poison Spring Canyon, Dirty Devil River, some 4-low rock crawling and we settled in for a lightning filled sunset in The Dollhouse of the Maze District of Canyonlands National Park.

Left: In the shadows of Sheep Creek Wash near the end of day one.

Photo by Dave Connors

Above right: Dave Connors bumping along, far below the Henry Mountains.

Photo by Darren Webster



day 4

Trekking out of the Maze and across the Colorado River would reveal to us exactly how we looked to the outside world. About 80 Korean tourists anxiously snapped photos of our now mud colored Cruisers as we rolled into Hite. More questions and photos were waiting for us as we topped off our fuel and coolers at the marina. Our egos sufficiently stroked we headed east onto Elk Ridge and down into Dark Canyon. The guest register at the entrance to Dark Canyon contained the words "9/3, beautiful canyon, swamp buggy required in the bottom." It was partially correct. The Primitive Area did contain some of the most stark and dramatic landscape we'd ever seen. Ten foot tall silver sage shared the drainage with giant ponderosa pines. The dense foliage, however, belied the difficulty of the canyon floor. Will and I both required a winch to exit one rather soft wash bottom. None of us had been to Dark Canyon before—it will not be too long before we're back again. It was indeed the highlight of the trip. The last entry in the visitor log when we left read "9/5, beautiful canyon, swamp buggy or Land Cruiser required in the bottom."

Right: John Curnutt blending into the Elephant Hill landscape.

Photo by Darren Webster

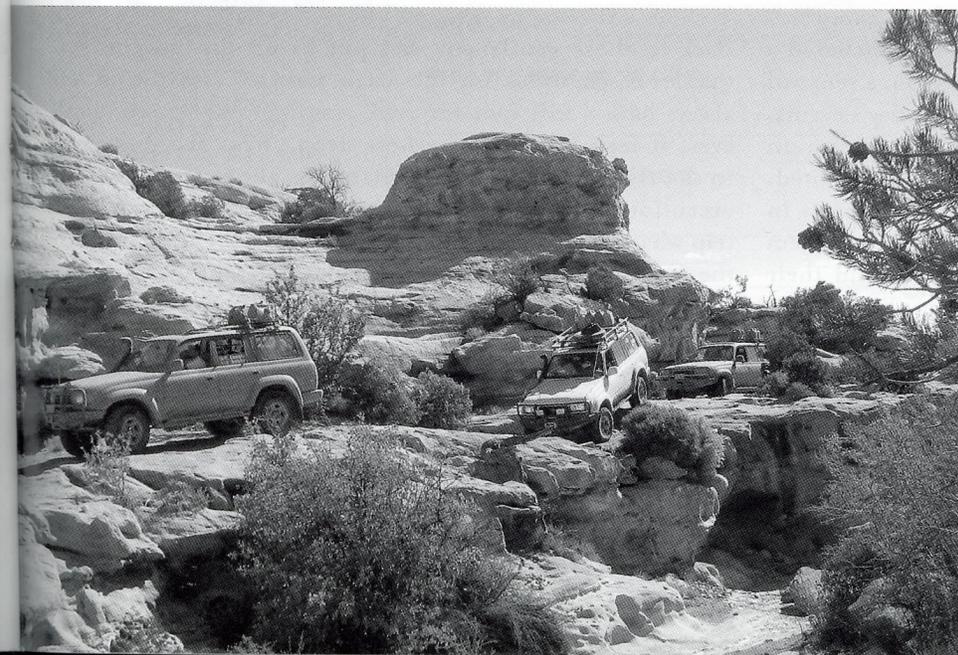


day 5

Heading north from Dark Canyon we descended into Beef Basin and the southern entrance to the Needles District of Canyonlands National Park. A quick hike through the Joint Trail, then left the park via Elephant Hill. Five days of hard driving caught up to us and we set up camp early near Lockhart Wash around 3:30 pm. We spent the night relaxing, rehashing and reclining. A very nice break to rejuvenate for the rest of our journey.

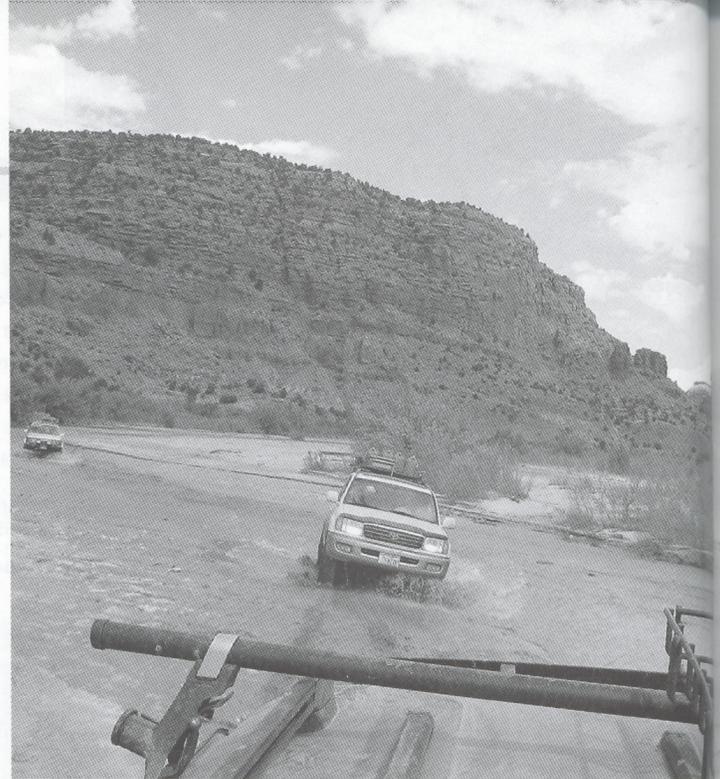
Left: Dave Connors, Will Carroll and John Curnutt crawling their way out of the Dollhouse.

Photo by Darren Webster



day 6

A very long morning through Lockhart Basin over Hurrah Pass and into Moab. Lockhart basin saw a lot of moisture through the winter. A normally easy 2 hour drive became a tortuous, rugged, tiring 4 hour journey as we crossed washed out gullies and rutted roads. After our first hot lunch at the Moab Brewery and refueling our tanks the group searched out the high alpine meadows of the LaSal Mountains east of Moab. Camp that night found us on a high mesa overlooking Fischer and Castle Valleys.



Above: One of the few stretches without a cloud a dust.

Photo by Darren Webster

day 7

A short trip down out of the mountains that morning ended the formal agenda. A casual trip back to Salt Lake City wrapped up an amazing week of wheeling.

Left: Will Carroll, up to his ears in the weeds, climbing out of a wash in Dark Canyon.

Photo by Dave Connors

In summary, a locked, lifted and winch bearing FZJ80 is a remarkable vehicle. A fact of which I was reminded over and over during the Utah Cruiser Expedition. Mud, silt, rock crawling, river crossings and some intense rallying tested the drivers, passengers and trucks over the course of the week. Some nights were lively and chipper around the campfire. Others were solemn and exhausted. Every night included a very satisfied group. A satisfaction that came from a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment. Not just in the day's events, although that was part of it, but because of the execution of the trip. Our expedition experience was pretty limited. However we were each able to draw upon other aspects in our lives that we brought to this trip and we blended them smoothly. We ate well thanks to Paul, Heather, and their love of food and preparation. Will is a Service Trainer for Toyota so all of us had confidence that any major issues with the trucks could be resolved. Eric must have felt like he was still in graduate school as he patiently answered all our geology questions about the landscape and terrain we covered. Darren and I brought the first hand knowledge of the route as well as the ability and desire to keep going and pushing late into a long day. John Curnutt? Well, he was our constant. What do you expect from a guy who did the trip solo? Every

break, every meal, every morning John was there, smile on his face, ready to go again. I really doubt his attitude ever varied from extremely content. Even when he was searing his flesh while replacing a power steering hose he seemed happy to be there.

Back to those gentlemen who put us on this adventure... thanks. Each of us on the Utah Cruiser Expedition will always have a soft spot for rock crawling. Right now, however, it feels buried somewhere deep under the dusty trail in the rear view mirror. The planning, the preparation, the execution and the camaraderie make an overland expedition trip what it is. I've done long distance trips before (see *Take the Other, J/F 2004 Toyota Trails*) but those survived on adrenaline, caffeine and youth. Hopefully this article will help many put Utah and the Colorado Plateau on the list of destination locales for a vehicle dependent expedition. I've done my best to convey the sense of adventure, excitement, and joy that comes from a trek like ours. Of course I could have saved you, me and Todd a lot of work if I would have just listened to Darren. Epic.