

Where Was My Mind?

I drove into Natural Bridges, Utah looking for a campsite. It was about 7pm on a clear June night so I shouldn't have had any great expectations, but was PO'ed when I couldn't find one. I drove back into the National Forest and found a side road where I found a nice spot about 3 miles up. It was a good site with a fire ring and plenty of stray wood about, so I decided to settle in for the night.

The night was incredible! The sky was so clear and dark so it seemed that every star in the universe was in plain sight. As the fire died out I was overwhelmed. The sky was so thick with stars that it was scary. Like nothing I had ever seen before. There was no moon but the ground still illuminated with a soft blue light. The thick carpet of stars overhead made me feel claustrophobic as if they were pushing down on me from all directions.

The next morning, I still had a resentment as I skipped Bridges and decided to push on to Canyonlands, one of the planned highlights of my 6 week voyage. I thought I would see what direction my little Garmin Navigator might point me and to my glee, I found the forest road I was on would lead to the South Entrance of Canyonlands through 50 miles of backcountry. I thought to myself that this would be the first real test of "Spurty" My Quigley 4-wheel drive supersized Ford van rigged out by a company called "Sportsmobile". Little did I know how much of a test was to come!

Off I went up Elk Mountain Road through "Bears Ears" (a rock formation as such...). As I continued down this remote road, I was surprised that such a dirt path would actually show up on my Garmin Navigator. The road began to narrow and was strewn with bare rock while it wound it's way around various mountains with sharp switchbacks. I was in seventh heaven and percolating with joy as I worked my way around curves with only twelve inches between my truck and cliff edge with a thousand foot plunge. Alas! I was FINALLY getting to see the REAL outback of Utah that I drove from Maryland to see.

The only concern that was entering my mind was how narrow the road was and that there was no room to turn around a vehicle the size



of My beloved Spurty.

As I passed over some large protruding rock, I thought I might scrape my undersides because I have an extended wheel base that couldn't span the rock like a little jeep. Thankfully I had enough clearance and was having no problems. As I descended into Pinion Valley (?) I was becoming a bit more concerned. The road was getting much rougher and there was NO place that I could turn around in case of impasse. If I ran into trouble, I would have to BACK UP through these narrow passes for miles and around these cliff edges only using my mirrors for guidance? My predominant thought became that, "I just need to keep moving forward, and when I get to Canyonlands (The National Park) that I would hit asphalt again and be off on my "merry way".

The sights were incredible! I had to stop at every steep switchback to photograph another panoramic of the vast ranges of the rock and boulder maze that spread out before me. I was doing everything I had set out to do. This was fabulous! I was not even conscious of what dangers could be in the deserted outback as I clicked away enough pictures to fill yet another hard drive. I felt safe that "REAL" road would be ahead of me. Or, maybe I should say, this is what I WANTED to believe. I knew that I was passing beyond the point of no return but the south entrance to Canyonlands was only a few miles away!

Then a BIG ONE came! A steep embankment of about 150 feet with loose rock and a few boulders. Standing on the summit, surveying the situation, I thought "Well, I can't turn around now, and I just need to make it to the South Entrance. I didn't drive 40+ miles down dirty bumpy path to turn around now!" I knew that going down this embankment might put me beyond the point of no return, but if in trouble I MIGHT find some place to turn around below. When I got to the bottom, a nagging fear began to set in... I hoped I had not gotten myself "in too deep". I said a little prayer and pushed on...

I saw some signs saying "Travel At Your Own Risk" and for "4x4 vehicles only. The anxiety was escalating, but I kept telling myself, "Only

a couple more miles to South Entrance". With goal in "sight", I was like the monkey reaching into a jar to get the banana. I couldn't get it out because I was unwilling to unclench my hand. I was hell-bent to reach my goal.

All my fears came to fruition when I stood at the top of a 300 foot embankment strewn with rock and boulder at about a 45 degree angle. I was really scared and totally blanking on what I should do. I was wondering how much it would cost to airlift a 9,000 pound van out of the Utah outback. Then I thought, "how am I, going to get out of the Utah outback! It was getting late in the day and I thought I could hike to the South Entrance without being eaten but how far would I then have to go before actually reaching any civilization. I was well armed with a rifle and then loaded a couple of pistols. The thought occurred to me once again, that, once I hit the South Entrance I will be on my merry way. If I have to airlift the truck I can either GIVE UP and do it here, or make the descent and if broken down, do it from down there! I surveyed the best descent and went over the precipice with sweat rolling from my temples and a strong scent of under arm odor. I couldn't stop thinking how crazy this is and if I snap an axle I'm spending the next few days with Mountain Lions and Rattlesnakes.

I got to the bottom unscathed and breathed a large sigh of relief, but knew that I was still in deep doo-doo. What if there was another embankment even worse than this ahead? What else was there to do, but keep pushing ahead?

I almost wet myself when I came upon a closed, large, unobtrusive, metal gate across the path. "Oh My God! What do I do now? Did I bring those Bolt cutters???" Fortunately, the gate was only MADE to look locked and I was able to get through. It was then, that fate hit me squarely in the eyes.

The sign read "Welcome to Canyonlands!", "**You are about to enter the most treacherous territory in the entire state of Utah!**" , "Only for EXPERIENCED 4-wheel vehicles with SHORT WHEEL BASES" , "Extreme Danger, Travel at your OWN RISK!". Well, I say, lets' go see what this is about. About a half mile down the path I encounter a BOULDER about the size of a High Rise in the downtown of my beloved Baltimore! All I could say was "AWWWww, S#&T" in rapid succession about 200 times spinning in circles like a dog chasing it's tail. "WHAT

WAS I THINKING!!!!" , "HOW DID I GET MYSELF INTO THIS MESS".
"HOW AM I GONNA GET MYSELF OUT OF THIS ?!!!", "AWWW S#&t,
AWW S#&T, AWWWWWWwwwwww.....I holstered my pistol, checked
my water supply, and for some crazy reason looked to see if I had cell
phone reception. I climbed up the nearest precipice and saw that I was
in the middle of NO F'ING WHERE and that this was the end of my ride. I
started to think about how glad I was my Mom and Dad had passed so
they wouldn't have to get the dire news that their son met his demise
with a Mountain Lion some 2000 miles away. I pulled up some of the
desert grasses in the small valley I was now in, wondering if it was dry
enough to start a fire for the night or even if absolutely necessary, to
start a brush fire so any plane/helicopter might notice my location. No
Luck, The valley provided enough moisture to keep these grasses green.
Everything else was ROCK. SOOOO MUCH ROCCCCCKKKK!!!

I was able to turn the truck around, headed back through the gate
and up to the base of the 300 foot embankment. After I could stop
saying "AWW S@&T" long enough to think straight and stopped pacing
in circles, I began to surmise the situation. I thought to myself, just like
before, "Well...I can GIVE UP and "die" here or I can try to climb this
embankment, most likely lose an axle in the middle, and "die" there! I
got a little chuckle thinking if stuck in the middle, at least none of those
stinkin' short based 4 wheel jeeps will get around me, although it may
take a week or two for one to show up! It would cost the same to airlift
me off this slope as it would on flat road. This, ONLY IF I can get to
civilization alive to let'em know where my precious Spurdy lay in ruins!

I locked my hubs, dropped into first gear, put on the over-drive
and began knocking my way up the slope. My cries of "AWW S@&T"
could probably be heard in Montana by now and it took me a few
seconds to understand why my horn kept blasting off. I was getting
thrown around so hard that my chest was pounding into the steering
wheel. The CLANKS, whining and grinding noises filled the air and I
could feel the truck teetering on the boulders until the wheels could
take, pushing yet another inch up Utah's finest. I thought it would never
end. Much of the time I couldn't see what was in front of me because the
front end was so far in the air working it's way over another major
hump. The smell of burning rubber told me I was near my end and stood
ready to "Abandon Ship" at any moment before the gas tank ruptured
and I go up in flames. I am suddenly stopped and I realize that I am

teetering on the top precipice just inches from freedom. If I fall back, I will probably roll end over end all the way back down. I spew out another repertoire of "AHH S@&T's". Who was it that said "So Close, But Yet So Far." I'll shoot 'em dead with my .45-70 Buffalo rifle! I see one last glimmer of hope with a large rock very close to the front wheel. I get out a crow bar and pry this sucker over inch by inch to bring it contact with rubber. I rev the engine and pop into first gear. More smoke and stench and then the front wheel takes hold and lurches me forward enough to level me off so the back wheels take ground. With gnarling and scraping I finally push myself over the top and miraculously come to a safe stop. It took minutes for me to unclench my white knuckles off the steering wheel and step out onto the level dirt road. The sense of relief was still deafened by the pounding of my heart. I stepped to survey the damage and realize that the last boulder had removed my air conditioning unit, but incredibly everything seemed to be intact. I got on my knees and thanked GOD for giving the Quigley 4 wheel drive system enoughchutzpah to pull me out of this episode of HELL. I was shaking and trembling but got back in and started on the trek out. The next embankment was peanuts (compared) and I made it up with only getting stuck once. Once again the crowbar came to the rescue. Don't travel Utah without one!

At this point, I thought I was home free. I decided that I had to follow the exact path I had taken to get there. Any other direction might take me into another, even worse scenario. As I reached some highlands I could see dark clouds on the horizon but didn't think much about it. Out of nowhere, a bearded, rustic old codger, comes up to me in a Subaru wagon! I tell him that he shouldn't proceed to far forward and tell a quick version of my woe. He tells me the same. I look at him quizzically and he says there "is one hell of a thunderstorm ahead" and the road is too slick to be passable". I think that my bold 4 wheeled boss monster van can get me through anything at this point. The storm rolls quickly by, dropping about 2 inches of rain in about 2 minutes. As I proceed, I can see where the Subaru had skidded over the dirt on and off the path that now was a brown river of mud. Just at the point where I could see he had traveled sideways, my wheels began to spin and I found myself moving backwards. I am now stuck in the ditch that runs along the "road" and I KNOW I am not going anywhere for the night. I see bears in the distance approaching me and I load the .45-70 with

about ten canon rounds and put a Jimi Hendrix CD in the player at full blast. One bear stops about 50 feet from me and is scratching himself on a tree. He sits and watches me, perhaps with amusement over this eastern knucklehead stuck in the mud. The Jimi Hendrix CD finishes up and I put in Carlos Santana. The Bear snorts and decides to move away. He makes it about 30 feet by the time I can get another Hendrix back in there. The bear stops and plops down for some more hard rockin electric guitar. I am dumbfounded and laughing out loud. Bears like Hendrix? Go figure...

I realize that I am in one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen. The lush green against a mountain background and setting sun. I was completely at peace when I heard A LOUD SCREECH reminiscent of a cat in heat. Back in the van I go and have my face pressed to the rear window while fingering a .40 caliber Glock. Then there are two screeches, then three, four. I am thinking aliens have come to take me away until this city-slickin' rookie realizes that these are Coyotes. It makes for a VERY unsettling nights sleep.

About ten o'clock I am shocked when I hear a familiar sound. My cell phone beeps that it has a connection! I first call my girlfriend who hasn't heard from me in three days to tell her I am still alive. I next call the police and give my GPS co-ordinates. I tell them that I don't call them by sundown the next day to please send somebody out to drag my lame ass home. They chuckle and agree. About an hour later I loose the signal. I decide this is one of those GOD things that happens only occasionally in life.

Next morning I cut masses of wild Rosemary growing next to the road and shove it under my wheels. I wait a couple of hours for the rising sun to dry the mud out and I make a successful escape. My hands reek of Rosemary for days to come. A pleasant reminder of a not so pleasant experience.

When I get back to Natural Bridges I get out and KISS the first piece of asphalt I encounter. My blood pressure comes back down but I feel marred by the experience. I am ready to leave now to get back to the familiar surroundings of Maryland but still have 2 weeks of planned journey. I get to Moab without incident and spend a few days in Arches National Park. My next stop was to Yellowstone but I am unsure if I want to drive the 5-600 miles to get there. When I get up Route 70 I get

out and start pacing in circles again. I've been on the road for 4 weeks now and realize I just ain't "feeling it" now and make a right.