

# Outdoor

## X4

### EXPEDITION EARTH

*Navigating the Globe in a Jeep JKU*



ISSN: 2641-8258

OVERLAND THE RUBICON TRAIL - BORDER TO BORDER

BIG SKY VISTAS - FLOATING LABYRINTH CANYON

WILDERNESS EMERGENCY

THE GREAT ESCAPE - A PHOTOGRAPHIC ADVENTURE

LISTEN TO THE STORIES FROM THIS  
ISSUE BY SCANNING THE QR CODE



ISSUE

45



# TREADMARCS

## *The Curse of Knowledge or Automatic Rough and Things That Go Bump in the Night*

**WORDS - BILL DRAGOO**  
**PHOTOS - BILL DRAGOO AND GAVIN STENER**

Two hundred eighty miles of ocean separated us from our destination in Marsh Harbour, Bahamas. I banked the single engine Piper Saratoga eastward and watched the Florida coastline disappear beneath my wing. Empty blue water extended to the horizon ahead. My family filled the seats behind me. Precious cargo. As we began our 90-minute flight across the ocean, an old pilot's joke came to mind.

*“Do you know what the propeller is for?”*

*“No, what?”*

*“It’s to keep the pilot cool. If you don’t believe it, let it stop and watch him sweat.”*

I knew every detail of the inner workings of the 300 HP Lycoming IO 540 engine turning the only propeller we had. My imagination ran wild as I strained to hear the slightest imperfection in the rich, baritone drone.

In [Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance](#) Robert Pirsig writes, “Each machine has its own unique personality which probably could be defined as the intuitive sum total of everything you know and feel about it.” Listening to his engine against the rocky backdrop of South Dakota’s Badlands he muses, “This old engine has a nickels-and-dimes sound to it. As if there were a lot of loose change flying around inside. Sounds awful, but it’s just normal valve clatter. Once you get used to that sound and learn to expect it, you automatically hear any difference. If you don’t hear any, that’s good.”



Knowledge of our machines can, however, be a curse. Like Pirsig, we worry over every odd sound, real or not. Over water, pilots sometimes experience “automatic rough,” an imaginary engine miss that can make our hearts skip a beat. But that level of sensitivity can also be an asset.

Overlanding lends itself to this kind of acquaintance with our rigs. We might not fear falling thousands of feet into the ocean’s depths but we do often stray beyond the reach of AAA. Even a flat tire or busted spring can leave us marooned amongst the saguaro. That growl from the passenger front wheel at highway speeds or faint flapping sound from under the hood at idle might foretell a dry wheel bearing or a separating serpentine belt. An ear for these changes should prompt further inspection before heading off blissfully ignorant of impending doom.

But too often we take our rig’s health for granted. “It ran fine when I last drove it so surely it’ll make it over Lippincott Pass in Death Valley.”

Maybe, but would you risk your life, or at best, a long, hot walk on a hunch? Modern vehicles with their quiet cabins and infotainment systems and extended warranties lull us into a false sense of security. An ounce of preventative maintenance trumps a truckload of regretful reflection.

“It seems dealers always recommend maintenance well beyond the factory schedule. How do I know what I should do?”

Vehicle manufacturers vie for long service intervals and low maintenance costs.

Maintenance schedules are set up at minimum standards for “normal duty” use. Relatively few owners actually take their vehicles off the beaten path so many get away with the factory’s extended intervals without incident. Modern lubricants, materials and technology also help lengthen time between services but once dust, water and vibration are introduced into the workings, all bets are off.

Virtually any vehicle used for overlanding should be inspected before and after every outing. The longer and rougher the travel, the deeper the inspection. Universal joints, steering and suspension components should be lubed, checked for leaks, loose, worn or broken hardware, etc. Filters should be replaced regularly, brakes should be thoroughly inspected and the underbelly checked for impact damage. The list goes on and the philosophy should be applied to every essential component. A genuine evaluation of usage can easily dictate a more aggressive maintenance program.

Get to know your mechanic and make sure he understands how much you rely on your overlanding rig. Also, give him time to accomplish a thorough inspection and to make any needed repairs, including time to order parts well before setting off on your adventure. Your lack of planning does not constitute his emergency.

Be aware. Aside from the mechanic’s recommendations, your senses are your best line of defense against a breakdown. Notice changes in handling, engine or chassis noises, or vibrations. Don’t assume they are normal or that they will go away on their own. Make notes, take videos and present them at the next service. Roughly eighty percent of any diagnosis is driven by an accurate description of the condition.

The reliability of our machines is largely up to us. We might not all be Master Mechanics, but we do know where we’ve taken them and how they should perform. That knowledge, and how we use it, can keep us cool, no matter how far we stray from shore. ❏

## ABOUT BILL DRAGOO

Bill embraces adventure travel in many forms – two-wheeled, four-wheeled, and on foot. As long as it involves experiencing more of the great outdoors he is hard-pressed to resist an opportunity. When Bill’s not tackling the toughest trails in the Rockies on his adventure motorcycle he’s busy exploring with his wife, Susan, in their Toyota 4Runner, the “GS of Trucks.”

Among his many pursuits, Bill is an MSF-certified riding instructor and BMW Motorrad Certified Off Road Instructor, and owns/operates the DART (Dragoo Adventure Rider Training) school near the Dragoos’ hometown of Norman. Bill was a member of the 2010 BMW GS Trophy team, representing the United States in competition in Africa.

You can join Bill for one of his training classes by visiting [www.billdragoo.com](http://www.billdragoo.com).

