

**May, 2002**

## HOW I SPENT MY SUMMER VACATION

### A REPORT

My father died last summer, on June 2 1st. His heart stopped beating while he slept in the cardiac unit at St. Joseph's Hospital in London. He was born in Russia and immigrated to Canada as a boy. He lived a rich and successful life. As my mother says, the life the two of them found in Canada had exceeded their wildest expectations. He died peacefully, both physically and spiritually.

One of the legacies that my father left behind is a Toyota Land-Cruiser. Built in 1978, it is the Japanese version of a Jeep. My brothers and I gave it to my father for Fathers' Day in 1984. Being typically loutish sons, we had a tendency to overlook Fathers Day, and had done so for a number of years. This resulted in a considerable build up of collective guilt. The Land Cruiser was intended to offset some portion of our accumulated neglect.

My parents had a summer cottage near Sundridge, close to the western boundary of Algonquin Park. Dad loved fishing, and used to explore old logging roads in search of little known streams and the elusive speckled trout. He did this in his full sized Oldsmobile 88. He often went off alone, and it was just a matter of time before he drove into a situation, deep in the woods, that he would not be able to drive out of again. And so we got him the Land Cruiser. It had high mileage, had been attacked by salt and was fairly rough; but it ran well. Equipped with aggressive tires and four-wheel drive, it could churn through remarkable depths of northern quagmire and keep on going: the perfect vehicle for those logging roads. It stayed at the cottage, and Dad drove it happily for the next eight years, terrorizing his friends by showing off the vehicle's outrageous capabilities, and finding fishing holes that he could only dream about before. Finally, in 1992, his left knee began to let go, making the use of the clutch too difficult. I came to an arrangement with my brothers and took over possession of the Land Cruiser.

Once home, the doors and roof came off, permanently. It has been my warm weather transportation ever since. Nick Komandanski, auto body guy and patient, has helped to solve the major problems brought on by corrosion. Tom Cosgrove, mechanic and patient, has over the years completely rebuilt the mechanicals. Outwardly it is still a bit rough<sup>1</sup>, but underneath the mechanism glistens. It is a fine machine, and is on the road from May until October. If it rains, there are raincoats aboard.

A gravel road has been pushed through the middle of Labrador. It is about 1200 kilometres long and extends from the St. Lawrence up to Labrador City and then across to Goose Bay. Two motorcyclists went down this road and wrote about it in a Canadian cycling magazine. They said that in spite of grand vistas, it was, in fact, the worst ride of their lives and should never, never be undertaken on a motorcycle. A friend pointed this article out and suggested that the Land Cruiser might be a fine alternative for this road: an open touring vehicle with four wheels that is able to deal with the rocks, ruts and washouts that the road presents.

The route was mapped out: up the St. Lawrence to Baie Comeau, turn north to Labrador City, east to Goose Bay, hop on a ferry for two days and arrive in Newfoundland, tour for a couple of weeks and head home via Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Quebec. Not wanting this to feel rushed, time was booked off

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<sup>1</sup>Nick Komandanski and I have come to an understanding. The vehicle should be functional, but not beautiful. We use flat paint instead of shiny and it is OK for patches to be visible. This way when you are flogging down some abandoned road or rail bed, every scratch and dent is not traumatic.

from Labour Day until Thanksgiving<sup>2</sup>. Fall seemed like a good time for a vintage Canadian adventure - cold is easier to deal with than black flies and mosquitoes. Besides, things are quieting down and accommodations are more available and welcoming. A box (trunk) was constructed to keep belongings out of the weather and out of sight. Two spare gas cans, tools and a sleeping bag were packed and the journey began.

Day 1 September 9: Set off at 10:00. A hot, windy day. The tire noise from passing vehicles is fairly deafening, especially the big trucks (and they all pass - my speed is about 95 km per hour, 100 downwind). Once past Toronto, traffic calms down and the trip begins to develop its long-term rhythm. It is a perfect end of summer day, hot and humid. It may be the last such day before the coming decline into cold and darkness. At Gananoque, the 401 is traded for the 1000 Island Parkway. The road winds along the side of the St. Lawrence, past water, islands and summer places. There is almost no one else on this road. It leads through some of the earliest settlements in our province, communities still relatively intact due to their location in what is now economic backwater. A motel room in Morrisburg costs \$45, half the price of two weeks before. Another good reason for off-season travel.

Day 2: The great wind out of the west continues to blow, but it has grown cold, with low heavy clouds. Picked up a hitchhiker outside of Montreal and drove him to Quebec City in time for his evening journalism class at Laval University. Asked if he wanted to wait for a covered vehicle, he thought that my passenger seat would be just fine. Stuck in traffic getting into Quebec City, the rain went from occasional showers to a full-blown thunderstorm. We survived. Dropped him off and continued on, spending the night at a B&B in Petite Riviere de St. Francoise on the shore of the St. Lawrence. The village recently celebrated its 325th anniversary. Lizet, the proprietess, had a fine Quebecois stew waiting.

Day 3: Cool and sunny. The St. Lawrence broadens and the south shore begins to disappear. Drove to Baie Comeau and stopped for the night. Tomorrow the journey leaves the St. Lawrence and heads north up to Labrador City. A call back to Lizet at my B&B from last night regarding a cell phone left on a dresser confirmed it was there. Lizet then wondered if I had heard about the airplane flying into the building in New York City. I hadn't, but picturing a Cessna flying into a skyscraper, I turned on the television. It wasn't a Cessna. I reeled down to the motel restaurant. Everyone inside was mesmerized by the repeating images of those planes and those buildings on the French language television station. We talked, my marginal French and their marginal English. Horror was our common language.

Day 4: The great drive: 600 km up a gravel road, through wilderness, to Labrador City - away from civilization and its chaos and into the peace of endless forest. The road heads north relentlessly, through low mountains, over rivers. There are two fuelling spots along the way, otherwise nothing. Very occasionally a vehicle passes going the other way. It is getting cold, and in spite of the sun, I am wearing gloves. Two thirds of the way along the spruce forest begins the transition into tundra, with heavy lichen ground cover and widely spaced and stunted trees. I have not seen this before. The departure from Baie Comeau took place before sunrise and the Labrador border was reached at sunset. The only available room in town is at the Carol Inn (Carolyn?), for \$89 per night, a reasonable price considering the alternatives.

Day 5: At first light it is pouring rain. Several calls to Goose Bay inform me that every room in town is booked by trans-Atlantic travellers whose planes were diverted there by the World Trade Centre events,

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<sup>2</sup>Thanks to my associate Dr. Zogheib who kept dental concerns at bay in my absence and thanks, of course, to the staff without whom, neither Dr. Z nor I could do much of anything.

so I stay in Labrador City an extra day. Not being on the road isn't all bad. At 10:00 in the morning the rain turns to snow - not auspicious weather for a topless, doorless Land Cruiser. It is September 13. Labrador City is a mining town (iron ore). All the buildings are prefabricated and look ready to take down as soon as the ore body is depleted. Things are bleak, muddy and charmless.

Day 6: Off to Goose Bay with a departure before dawn. An ice scraper is needed to clean the windshield (inside and out) and the driver's seat. Daylight grows and the road leads through early morning mists. A rough road, again, and relentless. A big country. Nothing out there but hills, lakes, trees, near tundra. Lots of washboard. The spare tire loosened from the body from repeated jarring. Stopped in Churchill Falls for gas, warmth, soup and a hamburger.

Day 7: Goose Bay feels more permanent than Labrador City but seems to have no centre. Housing and commercial space are scattered here and there without any discernable pattern and with lots of forest in between. The only functioning bank machine is down a couple of back streets, well away from anywhere else. The last trans-Atlantic jets flew out yesterday. NATO conducts much of its low altitude training here. The German headquarters has a sign in front: German Air Force, Tactical Training Centre, Goose Bay, Taktisches Ausbildungskommando, Der Luftwaffe, Kanada. Hmmm.

4:00 PM is loading time for the Sir Robert Bond, the boat that connects central Labrador to Newfoundland. It is a 40 hour passage to Newfoundland. Hurricane Erin is winding down somewhere offshore.

Day 8: Big swells come in from the Atlantic, churned by the remnants of Hurricane Erin. The Sir Robert Bond was built in Port Weller in 1975. It carries 235 passengers but is limited to 44 passengers when transporting propane, and 12 passengers when moving dynamite. Lots of time to read. A chicken dinner with potatoes and vegetables costs \$6.99. Whales are visible in the distance. Lots of time to read.

Day 9: Some days are small and difficult but, today was expansive and joyous. The ship arrived in Lewisport at first light and we were off-loaded by 7:00. Newfoundland and not a cloud in the sky. Drove the islands and connecting causeways around Twillingate. Poked around fishing harbours and villages. Newfoundland is amazing. It is by the people and for the people - tourism is a very small part of the whole - unlike most of the good places just about anywhere else. Took the ferry to the Change Islands. The general store here is located down a wooden walkway over the harbour. It has no signs or windows to indicate that it exists, but inside it is exceptionally well stocked with the survival and living needs of the community. Nearby Fogo Island is one of the last places in the world where one can still hear an Elizabethan accent, a relic from Shakespeare's time.

Day 11: Woke up in the B&B in Bonavista with torrential rain hammering the house. We are enjoying the remnants of Hurricane Gabrielle. The rain stops by breakfast but the clouds are low and moving quickly. An old friend, John Koop<sup>3</sup>, is waiting for me in St. John's. Crosswinds hit velocities of 110 kph in the early afternoon. The road heads over a low mountain range on its way to St. John's. There is no shelter and the wind wants not only to blow the Land Cruiser into the ditch, but also to blow me out of the Land Cruiser. When I get to St. John's, there is major damage resulting from 4 inches of rain in 6 hours. This is reported as the worst flooding in 20 years. By evening the sun is out. St. John's feels like a down-home version of San Francisco on a much smaller scale. It has 125,000 residents but has the feel of a place 10 times its size.

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<sup>3</sup>Son of Henry Koop, the Virgil pharmacist some 30 years ago, back when the village of Virgil had a pharmacy.

Day 12: John and I explore the shoreline below St. John's: Witless Bay, Petty Harbour, Maddox Cove. At Cape Spear, the most easterly point in North America, massive waves are rolling in, remnants of Gabrielle.

Days 13 - 15: Took leave of John and slowly drove across Newfoundland, visiting gannet (seabirds) colonies, fishing villages, traversing sections of the old Newfie Bullet rail bed and finally driving four hours down a logging road (a road well suited to the Land Cruiser's abilities) to Burgeo, a remote fishing community on the south coast.

Day 16: Took a coastal supply boat from Burgeo to Francoise. The Land Cruiser remains in Burgeo. Francoise is four hours down the coast and located at the end of a fjord. It has 250 inhabitants and no cars or roads. Paths connect the community. I am staying at Edith Green's guesthouse, the only commercial accommodation in town. She has one rental space, a second floor built on overtop of her house, consisting of a living room, kitchen, three bedrooms and a bathroom. Access is up a particularly steep and rickety set of stairs. She cooks lunch and dinner, but I am on my own for breakfast. She points out that this is a guesthouse and not a bed and breakfast. There are eggs and bacon in the refrigerator, so all should be fine. After Edith's excellent cod dinner I stroll through the community. Leaning against a railing on the main boardwalk, I look over the harbour and watch darkness replace daylight. An old-timer comes over and leans against the railing and watches as well. We start talking and the attack on the World Trade Centre comes up. He stares out for a while and then he says that he reckons that it isn't too likely that an airliner will thread its way up the fjord, targeting Francoise. It is very peaceful here. It is completely dark when I return to my dwelling.

Day 17: Went hiking through the hills behind Francoise. They go on without limits. I met Roland who was out with his Gordon/English Setter cross: a very high energy dog that never stops running. Roland and I apparently both speak English, and, when I listen closely, about one of his words in three is comprehensible to my mid-eastern Canadian ear. (Out here, when two Newfoundlanders are talking between themselves, they may as well be conversing in ancient Aramaic, for all that I am able to understand.) Roland finished school last year and spends his time fishing with his uncle. He would like to continue his education, perhaps with a view to joining the RCMP, but finances are an issue. We hike to a high point overlooking Francoise far down at the end of the fiord. Dinner, again, is cod. Edith tells of one of her guests, a social worker from Toronto: he came to stay overnight and finally left eight months later. I can understand: Francoise feels timeless, a different world than the rest of us inhabit. A place with no roads, no cars, and four hours by boat from anywhere else. Children wander the paths of the village at all hours, alone. The entire village is a part of their living room. We have forgotten that such places could exist. Edith's rates are \$45 per night, including lunch and dinner.

Day 18: Return to Burgeo and drive for six hours to reach Gros Morne. The last four hours are spent in the backwash of Hurricane Hubert. Newfoundland is a beautiful place, but it sure seems to have a lot of serious weather. Gros Morne is reported to be breathtaking, but I can't say, I saw mostly fog. A magnificent moose appeared out of the mists, standing on the shoulder of the road. He chose not to step in front of the Land Cruiser, which was descending a long, steep hill. We were both better off for that decision. The next morning it was still foggy and pouring. After some reflection, it became apparent that this was a sign that it was time to depart Newfoundland for sunnier parts.

Days 19 to 23: Took the overnight ferry to Cape Breton, off to Halifax, across New Brunswick, around the Gaspé Peninsula (a one day absolutely spectacular drive - with not a cloud in the sky - a meaningful event) and home. The last day's drive started well before dawn, an hour east of Rimouski, with stars and northern lights overhead. The sun set an hour and a half before Toronto and I rolled into Port Dalhousie about 9:00. A long day's drive, but satisfying.

Final Thoughts: Would I do this again and the same way? Without hesitation. What was the most lasting impression? The flow of the world about and past the openness of the Land Cruiser. I felt as though I had become a part of the landscape and weather, pulling one horizon closer, leaving another behind. What was the distance travelled? Eight thousand kilometres by road and one thousand by sea.

(Thanks to James Strecker, writing professor at Sheridan College, for his recommendation to keep a journal of the trip.)