

READY TO TRAVEL

UTAH TRAVEL ADVENTURE

Our Reason for Choosing Four-Wheel Drive: Putting it to the Test on the White Rim Trail

What reason would you give for choosing 4-wheel drive in a Ram Turbo Diesel pickup? Readers of the TDR know several persuasive reasons based on the 4x4 advantage in traction and control. The truck's surefootedness in snow and bad weather; its prowess as a tow truck to haul trailers of all descriptions and to pull really big fifth wheels; its controlled power as a work truck in construction and on farm and ranch—wherever there is a demanding job to be done. Over the years TDR magazine has told the story.

But then Issue 73 published a letter from William Ryan who wrote that, with all its unrivaled coverage of the Ram Turbo Diesel pickup, the magazine has not yet told the full story of its advantage in off-road adventure—adventure such as he has experienced in many years of driving his 4x4 diesel into backcountry and wilderness. Ryan said that he'd like to see more attention to this part of the diesel story.

On reflection, we must admit that William Ryan has a valid point. There is more of that story yet to tell. Bob and I have written several travel stories for the magazine, but they featured our trailering adventures: we have yet to recount our main reason for buying this truck with 4-wheel drive. So we decided to redress the perceived neglect.

We had already planned an off-road expedition in late June to drive Canyonland's famous White Rim Trail (WRT) in southeast Utah. We would use this trip to tell our story and so respond to Ryan's request.

Canyonlands National Park is located in southeastern Utah in a vast rugged area centered on Moab, the world capital for slick-rock biking and off-road driving. The National Park region is divided into three areas: the Needles to the south, the Maze to the west, and The Island In the Sky in the north. While all three areas have off-road trails ranging from kid-stuff to mind-blowing world-class challenges, the most acclaimed is The White Rim Trail, a bona-fide four-wheel-only obstacle course which winds for a hundred miles around the lofty mesa called The Island In the Sky.

To visualize The Island In the Sky, imagine a three-layer wedding cake rising 1600 feet high, each layer narrower and more lofty than the one beneath. The bottom of this colossal cake is at the level of the two rivers, the Colorado to the east and the Green to the west, wedged in the angle north of where they converge. The trail traces an arc above their confluence at about 5000ft elevation, below Island In the Sky. The top layer of our humongous cake is a plateau at 6000ft elevation, with dizzying overlooks glowering down at the trail below, their views reaching to the far horizons. Up on top is the Visitors' Center, where you get your backcountry permit, about a mile from the head of the four-wheel trail. At tip-off,

the trail drops immediately a thousand feet, down the hair-raising Shafer switchbacks to the second layer in this imaginary super cake, the "White Rim," a layer of erosion-resistant sandstone which forms a kind of shelf midway between top and bottom, the very ledge on which our trail rides through nearly a hundred miles of wild and spectacular backcountry, winding first southward above the Colorado river gorge, then around and northward up the Green river side of Island In the Sky. You could think of the White Rim formation as the frosting on the mid-layer of our mountainous cake.



The Shafer switchbacks spiral from the top of Island In the Sky down to the WRT. Much improved since use as a cow trail in the '40s; an old cowboy dryly said of it, "When a cow fell off, we just left it there."



The Turbo Diesel takes its ease on the margin of the White Rim sandstone over the Colorado River gorge. "Slickrock" isn't slick; in fact it sticks like sandpaper, allowing safe driving that would be impossible on other surfaces.

We use the term “off road” to mean routes off public roads in rough country where low-gear four-wheel drive is required for safe and prudent driving. In our practice, “off road” is not a license for cross-country penetration without any regard to constraints of land form or good sense—for which the only appropriate rig is probably an oil-explorer’s Unimog or a gold prospector’s burro.

We have driven most of the off-road trails in Canyonlands, from those classed as “real easy” to “real rough.” But since 1994, when we switched our drive from a beat-up Ramcharger to a Ram Turbo Diesel, we’ve been more conservative, to protect our investment. Some of those cracks and holes are fit only for fanatics or teenagers driving somebody else’s truck. These days when we return to Canyonlands, we stick to “medium” trails suitable to vehicles of our size. Of all these medium trails, the perfect one for our purposes is the White Rim Trail. While it is best to have had some off-road driving experience before tackling it, on this trail you don’t need to be a pro.

In our five-day circuit on the White Rim Trail we drove all or parts of the way with four other off-road type vehicles. These included a ’86 CJ7 driven by our son Keith who had traveled from Tennessee to rendezvous with us. The WWII army-surplus Willys “jeep” was the original four-wheel rig for exploring the backcountry of the West, particularly in Canyonlands during the feverish search for uranium in the 1950s. So Keith’s CJ7 (which was still built in the old Jeep tradition) provided a time-honored baseline to measure our performance against—mile by mile across slick-rock, through sand, up and down barriers.

Besides having the CJ7 to measure ourselves against, we drove for the better part of a day with a well-worn Chevy gasoline-powered three-quarter-ton long-bed, the driver of which maintained that although his rig had spent most of its life on construction sites, it still stirs up the trail dust with any truck in its class. In the same impromptu mode, for a couple of days our little convoy included a ’96 Dodge 1500 gasoline 4x4 pickup. And at a particularly tough challenge in the route, which we long ago christened “Horrible Hill,” we talked truck for a couple of hours with the driver of a Toyota 40 Series, and quite unexpectedly, with a German couple hung up there in a strayed WV Van. We even had a chance at the beginning of the expedition to compare notes with the driver of a Unimog! Finally, our last night on the trail, we were joined around a campfire by riders of three motorcycles, admittedly an altogether different class of wheels, but useful for a really global perspective on the pluses and minuses of a Turbo Diesel as off-road recreation vehicle.

Because the real plot of this story is to tell about the trail-worthiness of our 4x4 Turbo Diesel and its advantages off road, we won’t talk about the four nights we camped under the stars, or about the astounding scenery. Rather, we’ll focus on four particularly arresting “test challenges.”

Six miles from the foot of the Shafer switchbacks, after a stretch of trail that probably could have been driven in two-wheel drive, we confronted the first of our four challenges in descending the five-mile gorge of Lathrop Canyon, down a precipitous spur trail to the Colorado river, its only access from the WRT. On the climb out, inching our way in granny gear, we had occasion to use the snatch strap we always carry, to assist a stalled ’08 Ford Explorer the final fifty yards back to the main trail—a Good Samaritan Moment which showed us the reserve power and sure traction of our vehicle in no uncertain terms.

We met the second of our four challenges on the morning of the fourth day, approximately 5 miles beyond the turnoff to White Crack campground, where we’d spent the previous night. Here the trail climbs abruptly up overlying shale with characteristic cracks and stair-steps. The height of the actual ascent here is modest, but the path is steep and tortuous, with a difficult turn to the left on its shoulder, which would make demands on vehicle power and driver finesse. This is “Horrible Hill.” As we approached the climb, we saw that the passage at the top was blocked by—*strange sight!*—the aforementioned stranded VW Van. To further complicate the picture, above the stranded van was an idled Toyota Series 40 Land Cruiser. The only solution was to wait for a beefier vehicle with a tow strap to approach from the other direction. Of course the VW Van should never have been there. But we all made the best of it. Drivers of the Toyota pitched a tarp for shade at the foot of the hill. The German tourists in the van produced a cold chest with cheeses, bread, and ice-cold Alsatian wines. Soon no one was regretting their miscalculation and mishap, merely bemoaning the appearance of a truck at the top of the hill, which handily wrenched the VW to the side and lowered it to the foot of Horrible Hill. As the Toyota made the first run through, we could see that his vehicle was liable to “bump steer,” resulting in directional instability—a tendency over which our vehicle would have a definite advantage. We made the next run, rather grandly I think, kicking up only moderate sand and stones. In a sweaty situation, our truck was cool. However, we had to suppose that any truck much longer than ours would have had problems in the turn.



A VW Van that ought never to have ventured this route got hung up and blocked the way at Horrible Hill, calling for an emergency conference among motorcyclist, ourselves, and drivers of the Toyota.



Impromptu picnic in an improbable place, sharing four-wheel lore, bread, cheese and wine at Horrible Hill, awaiting a vehicle to chance from the north. Jeannette at left, Bob at right.

We met the third of our four test challenges an hour down the trail at Murphy Hogback, looming ahead in a ragged ridge with steeply sloping sides, resembling the high, knobby spine between the shoulders of a hog. The climb is the longest and steepest grade on the entire WRT, perhaps the steepest sustained grade we've ever driven, a challenge to the power and stability of any vehicle. In situations like this Bob does the driving, I do the teeth gnashing. As everyone who rides the passenger seat knows, the toughest job is just sitting there, hanging onto thin air and stomping the floorboard where the pedals ought to be. I got out and climbed "shanks mare" (as the Scots say). Bob made the summit a full half hour before me, but I had maintained my good disposition. The ascent of Murphy Hogback established the important advantage of our truck's power and stability. Its peak torque in low range and its no-nonsense stance fastened it surely to the trail and never let up, in a straightforward, albeit quite slow, grind. The Chevy had trouble holding its gearing and stalled on a couple of scary occasions. Everybody made it safely to the top, including me on foot, but Bob was the only one who didn't break a sweat.



Our son Keith and his CJ7 at the foot of Murphy Hogback, approaching a steep, rough and demanding one-way ascent of several hundred yards to the top and the campsite.



When you hit a challenge as awesome and as much fun as the climb up Murphy Hogback, it's hard to be a mere passenger, so Jeannette ascends the trail in her own way and Bob can cuss all the way up in peace.

The next day was a long and slow progress through monumental landscape, with frequent stops to consult with our trail buddies and to take pictures. By nightfall the trail had gradually descended to the very banks of the Green River at Potato Bottom. Here we camped under a cottonwood and prepared ourselves for our final day and our last big challenge: the climb along the flank of Bighorn Mesa and the descent to Hardscrabble Bottom on a path that was precariously balanced and treacherously sandy, with stretches inching over loosely piled stones. This was probably the spookiest section of the entire trail. I felt as one might feel driving over an abandoned wooden suspension bridge with half the planks missing and sheer disaster yawning below. Along this stretch Jerry in the Dodge gasser lost his running board on the passenger side. It could be pointed out that a running board is inappropriate for off-road driving; but the real lesson here has to do with the categorical need for adequate clearance. We can appreciate the high mount of our truck, which we have never needed to modify.

As the trail crawls the bottoms along the Green River, the white rim of sandstone on which we'd driven for five days finally disappears beneath the very level of the river. (Technically, the geology in the region is pitched downwards to the north in a very gradual monocline, a geological structure in which all layers are inclined in the same direction.) Here at Mineral Bottom the trail turns eastward and climbs out of the canyon, up a set of switchbacks every bit as dizzying as the Shafer Trail on which we had descended at the beginning of our venture. All the way up the corkscrew our gauges read steady. At the head of this climb out, we shifted into two-wheel drive over the graded Mineral Bottom Road east across Horse Thief Mesa twenty miles to the BLM campground where we had left our travel trailer five days before. We cranked up our nifty 2KW Honda generator, took showers, had a pizza, and settled down in our queen-size bed.



Between a wall of rock and a step-off into the Green River: after exploring sandy Taylor Canyon we dubbed our truck "King of the (off) Road", paraphrasing Roger Miller's old anthem to the hobo life.

Having the other vehicles as trail companions gave us a better appreciation of our 4x4 Turbo Diesel. The Jeep has advantages not put to the test on the White Rim: most obvious is that it is so small and narrow that it can squeeze through passages impossible for a full-size truck and negotiate turns too tight for a single run by any longer vehicle. It passed the test of Horrible Hill with relative ease; however, throughout the five days it did not excel in any particular individual challenge. Not surprisingly the Chevy lacked the power and mechanical stamina for its weight in maintaining momentum on steep inclines, as demonstrated at Murphy Hogback. The Dodge 1500 performed as a gentleman's 4x4: it managed the expedition satisfactorily, but even on this moderate trail it was clearly out of its class. The Toyota is undoubtedly a star performer in more remote sections of Canyonlands where its particular merits could be appreciated, and Bob would love to drive a little 1980s Land Cruiser into the Maze backcountry; but on this trail it would have offered us no advantages. In summary, we had to recognize that no vehicle is "best" for all trails and all situations. But the bottom line is that on the White Rim the Turbo Diesel did very well indeed.

This brings us to the final brag we'll make on our Turbo Diesel. It is the haul truck for a little home-away-from-home, our 19ft Pioneer—*first* it pulls our whole "traveling circus" to the fields of play, and *then* it performs as our off-road recreation toy in the backcountry. This is something the motorbike certainly couldn't do for us; but neither could the venerable Jeep nor the neat Toyota. Although the Dodge 1500 could pull a trailer, we've proved to ourselves that it's a poor cousin on the trail. Undoubtedly the old Chevy could pull our trailer, if that's all we wanted—but, at the very least, it's a poor second when it comes to comfort. "Comfort"? Yes indeed; why be uncomfortable just to have fun? For us ladies at least, that's the Turbo Diesel 4x4's off-road ace in the hole.

Note that our truck is almost entirely stock, a '94, 12-valve, manual five-speed transmission, standard cab, long bed, factory trailer

package, heavy-duty suspension, four-wheel drive, BD exhaust brake, 150,000 miles and counting. At 90,000 miles Joe Donnelly did a preventive fix on the Killer Dowel Pin and replaced the exhaust manifold. At 145,000 miles Frank Pfeiffer at Desert Diesel in Tucson did a preventive replacement of the clutch. Everything else is standard OEM. If you have an equivalent truck, you ought to be able to do with your Turbo Diesel whatever we do with ours—and in particular, on the WRT in Canyonlands.

There is a bonus advantage if you do take your 4x4 Ram off road like we did in Canyonlands: in the backcountry you will prove not just your machine but yourself. It's like no other kind of driving, as William Ryan knows: when everything works together, you and your machine become One. As our motorcyclist comrade said on the last night in camp down on Potato Bottom: "Riding the trail today is Nirvana!" —motorcyclist-talk for the blissful state of being in absolute control and totally in tune with machine, trail, nature, and one's inner self. I've heard drivers call their transit of the White Rim Trail a "spiritual experience." Bob says that may sound "sappy" to the uninitiated, but when you've run the course, you should come away with a transformative respect for both your truck and your self. That's no small reason for choosing a four-wheel drive in a Ram Turbo Diesel pickup.

Jeannette and Bob Vallier
TDR Writers

SIDEBAR

The Island In the Sky district of Canyonlands National Park Visitors Center (+38° 27' 35", -109° 49' 15"), is 32 miles from Moab, Utah. In Moab you can get fuel, drinking water, provisions, lodging, and amenities. There is no fuel and no drinking water available in the Island district. Provide a gallon of water per person per day—summer daytime temperatures hover at 100°F. Provide reserve diesel: play it safe and figure on consuming diesel by a multiple of two.

High-clearance, four-wheel-drive vehicles and only street-legal motorcycles are designated for the WRT; ATVs are not allowed. No pets and no ground fires. Whatever you pack in, pack it out. "Be a TDR Traveler, not a tourist!"

Backcountry permits are required for any overnight trip, and are obtained at the Visitors Center, a mile from the trail tip-off. For overnight backcountry camping you must get reservations by mail addressed to National Park Service Reservation Office, 2282 South West Resource Blvd, Moab, Utah 84532-3298. Camping space on the WRT is extremely limited and competition is very keen, especially in peak seasons, spring and fall. Reservations are assigned in the order that requests are received after the second Monday in July for the following year. You may request reservation information from canyres@nps.gov. Bob and I are glad to respond to your email about backcountry travel in Canyonlands and southern Utah: vall@dakotacom.net.