8 March 2008

We did our first bit of Ruta Cuarenta (Route 40) today. Surprisingly, a short section was paved, but more than a hundred miles was its normal washboard, dirt, gravel and rock.

Fortunately, our drive was blessed with a steady rain. The rain softened the washboard and ruts so the drive was a little less teeth rattling. That's the upside.

The downside was that Ruta 40 can get muddy. In our case, muddy enough to require the Fuso's four wheel drive low range. We never came close to getting stuck, but we did slide and wallow around occasionally when not rattling over washboard or banging over rocks. It was a Ruta 40 kind of day.

Ruta 40 has quite a reputation among travelers, probably qualifying as legendary. It runs North and South along the western edge of Argentina, traversing huge swaths of the empty steppes making up the flatlands of Patagonia.

The unpaved portions are all open range with no road paralleling fences to interrupt the vast open spaces. Along with no fences, there are no trees.

There isn't much else either. Fuel stops are measured in multiple hundreds of miles. There are no rest stops, no mini-marts, no villages, no towns, no cities, little to no traffic, and no other people. Other than a cattle guard every hour or so, you won't see much of anything but endless prairie.

What that adds up to is a lonely gravel road disappearing into the distance of an uninterrupted, seemingly infinite landscape.

That can be disconcerting to city folk; even scary.

But to a kid from rural Iowa, it felt a whole lot like home.

And so did the gravel road.

One of my earliest memories is lying down in the back seat of the car with my sister, tracking our progress on the gravel road to our grandparents' farm by the sounds and feel of the gravel.

My first non-tractor driving lessons were on gravel roads. In that sense, gravel was my first driving language, the foundational building blocks of my driving skill set. The smell, the feel and the textures of gravel make up my core driving DNA.

I grew up in a small Iowa town with gravel roads radiating out of it likes spokes on a wheel. Even before I got my driver's license, I was introduced to each of those roads in long, shrieking thrill rides with friends who were just enough older than me to get their licenses first.

In the Darwinian world of teenagers, the first kids to hit 16 were very popular for a time. In some cases, it was their best and only chance for popularity. It was an early lesson in natural selection.

As was driving in general, especially gravel road driving. Driving on gravel was an effective and efficient testing ground for separating the well adapted from those tottering next to the chasm of extinction.

The best could broadslide a 90 degree corner at a variety of speeds under any weather and road condition: dry, washboard, deep gravel, mud, snow or ice.

The struggle for survival was quick, brutal and ruthless. The weak were culled from the herd by Greenslade's wrecker pulling them out of the deep ditches that line the gravel roads of Iowa. The best never got towed.

I got my license in late November, just in time for snowfall. By the next Spring I'd spent more time at opposite lock than anyone since the moonshine runners who populated the initial ranks of NASCAR.

Along the way I learned how my mom's four door 1969 383 Plymouth Fury III felt on gravel at a variety of speeds under any weather and road condition. The Plymouth had typical American sedan handling of that era: underdamped, soft, mushy, slewing, rolling, pitching and yawing – all adding up to terminal understeer snapping instantly, without warning or transition, to massive oversteer. In other words, it was a teenager's perfect gravel road driver's education platform.

Between teenage rat racing, farm work and construction jobs, by the time I was in my early twenties I accumulated thousands of miles of gravel road driving in vehicles ranging from tractors to heavy trucks.

So, all in all, I feel at home on gravel roads, comfortable even, including Ruta 40.

This is different from my wife, who grew up in San Diego, where $2/10^{th}$ of an inch of rain on paved streets is cause for a county-wide shutdown of the transportation system. Before she met me and started visiting my relatives who live on gravel roads I doubt she had a lifetime accumulation of more than 150 feet on gravel. I think it's fair to say she does not feel at home on gravel roads, and definitely not comfortable.

Consequently, our run up the mucky, muddy, rocky, washboarded Ruta 40 was a little more of an adventure for her than for me. Her grab handle would probably measure at least one millimeter less in diameter today than it did yesterday morning.

In her defense, it is only fair to point out that our Fuso weighs more than three or four, if not four or five, of my mom's Plymouths. And, it most certainly follows Newton's first law of motion that states: "An object will stay at rest or continue at a constant velocity unless acted upon by an external unbalanced force", or more colloquially, "A body in motion tends to stay in motion." That means when the Fuso starts sliding, it tends to continue sliding.

In my defense, it is only fair to point out that I never once had the Fuso at complete opposite lock. Complete, of course, being the operative word.

Near the end of our run we came through a section of many miles of deep, super sticky mud. We churned through it in 4x4 low range, 2nd and 3rd gear, with the motor solidly in its peak power band the entire time. We finally cleared it, topped a steep hill and had a short, less muddy section across a plateau until we joined the paved highway into our day's destination.

Just short of the pavement I stopped the rig, put the transfer case back in high range, turned off the four wheel drive, and hopped out of the cab to disengage the front hubs. As I looked back down the muddy track I pondered the many hundreds of miles of mud, dirt, gravel and grapefruit sized rock comprising Ruta 40 that awaited us between there and Bolivia.

I climbed back into the cab and was taking a deep breath, grateful for the luxury of pavement into town, when something caught my eye. Coming down the highway, humming along at its cruising speed of 60 k.p.h. / 40 m.p.h., was a vintage Citroën 2CV, or Duck, as they are commonly called.

Entranced, I watched it slow and make the turn onto Ruta 40. It was a motley calico of different colored body panels held together by stickers from multitudes of countries. This duck was not only vintage, it was a veteran, a world veteran. As it passed, the twenty-something, long haired guy at the wheel smiled and waved. Still in shock at this apparition, I managed a jerky wave in return. I turned my head and leaned out just in time to see its Netherlands license plate hanging crookedly on the rear bumper.

In my automotive oddity brain addled state, all I could think was, "The Netherlands is a long, long ways from here."

Away the Duck putted, slowly gathering momentum, as its four inch wide, street tread tires gently squirted mud laterally into endless lace curtains that arched out and then splashed into the road. I heard the soft exhaust note change as they shifted, driving away into the belly of the beast of the mud monster, Ruta 40.

I thought of the sea of mud that awaited them, deeper than their axles. I thought of the endless chassis destroying washboard. I thought of the rutted road studded with rocks higher than their ground clearance. I wanted to run down the road, shouting warnings, firing flares.

And then I remembered, “It’s a Duck.” No single vehicle in the history of mechanized travel has been more places than the Duck, and based on its collection of country stickers alone, this one looked like it had covered most of them.

So, I stopped worrying.

Sure, the road was Ruta 40.

But this was a Duck.

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Roll: rotation around the longitudinal axis; the car rolls from side to side; the driver is lower, then the passenger

Pitch: rotation around the transverse axis; the car pitches forward and backward; the front is lower, then the rear

Yaw: rotation around the vertical axis; the car yaws around the center point of the chassis; it rotates (turns) left, then right

Understeer: you turn the steering wheel and nothing happens; you are looking at the trees when you plow into them

Oversteer: you turn the steering wheel and the back of the car skids outward and overtakes the front; you can't see the trees when you plow backwards into them

Citroën 2CV, the Duck:

(excerpted from Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citro%C3%ABn_2CV)

The Citroën 2CV (French: deux chevaux vapeur, literally "two steam horses", from the tax horsepower rating) was an economy car produced by the French automaker Citroën from 1948 to 1990. It is considered one of their most iconic cars. It was designed for low cost, simplicity, versatility, reliability and off-road driving. For this, it had a light, easily serviceable engine, extremely soft suspension, high clearance and for oversized loads a car-wide canvas sunroof. Between 1948 and 1990 3,872,583 2CVs were produced, plus 1,246,306 camionettes (small trucks).

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Photo by Jorge Valdes

Douglas and Stephanie Hackney are on a two to three year global overland expedition.
You can learn more about their travels at: http://www.hackneys.com/travel/index.htm

