

19 October 2008

"Instant karma's gonna get you"

I grunted and rolled over, but the knocks came again. "Knock, knock, knock!" harder this time.

I crawled down out of the berth and checked the clock. "Hmmm, too early for Steph to be back from the market. I wonder who this is?" I pondered.

I opened the door and Humberto, the campground owner, looked up at me. I rubbed my head to try and diminish my nap-head hair style, and greeted him with a "Good afternoon."

Only then did I notice the large green Mercedes 4x4 overland expedition vehicle behind him, tilted at a very odd angle.

I waved to the owner, who was standing pensively near the rear corner, and said, "Hola." He smiled weakly, waved back, and replied with, "Hello. Your winch looks great."

"Oh, thanks," I responded. I smiled quizzically, not really knowing what else to say about our winches, and then proceeded to ask Humberto about local propane suppliers. We carried on a conversation about options to fill our small propane bottle for three or four minutes, all the time with the overlander pacing back and forth near his truck.

At a break in the conversation, I rubbed my head a few more times and looked at the Mercedes again. Slowly, my groggy, nap-addled brain put the story together. Very large truck with headlights pointed up at the sky. Left rear corner nearly touching the ground. Winch.

"Oh!" I shouted to the overlander. "You're stuck!"

Both of them looked at me with expressions that all but screamed, "Welcome to planet earth, nap brain."

"Gonna knock you right on the head"

I tumbled out of the camper and surveyed the scene. It was a very stuck truck indeed.

"How much does it weigh?" I asked the overlander.

"10," he replied.

"OK," I answered. "No problem."

I didn't really know if it was a problem or not, but I was quickly rising to the call of battle. I was waking up faster than hearing someone else's thumper start while I was still in bed on a Baja morning.

This was the Fuso's chance to shine. We hadn't used either one of the winches since our High Desert Beta test in December, 2006. This was an opportunity to use them in anger for the first time. And, just imagine, the first use would be to extract a Mercedes 4x4 truck, the veritable king of the overlanding truck tribe. I rubbed my hands together in anticipation of the glory to come.

I circled the Mercedes, scouting for winch positions. The best spot for the Fuso was directly behind the Mercedes; a position on the only dry ground available, a small patch of gravel. All I needed to do was move forward out of our camp spot and drive the Fuso over there for a simple straight-line pull. I was mentally celebrating not needing to rig pulleys, shackles and line extensions as I turned back towards the trucks.

"You better get yourself together"

"I'll just be a minute, let me change clothes," I told them, and then rocketed back into the camper to fetch my keys. I had my work clothes retrieved from the garage, thrown on, and the loose stuff in the camper emergency-stowed in record time. I jumped up into the cab of the Fuso and fired it up, warming the engine for the coming rescue.

"I can't believe it," I thought, "a chance to winch an overlander out of trouble, and a Mercedes 4x4 at that!" I bounced on the air seat in excitement.

While the Fuso warmed up, I climbed out and engaged the front hubs, just in case. I knew it had rained for 15 of the previous 16 days in that area of Ecuador, and the ground was soft, spongy and oozing water. I thought putting the Fuso in 4x4 would be a good idea, probably—almost certainly—unnecessary, but a good plan nonetheless.

"Pretty soon you're gonna be dead"

I walked back around to the driver's side, nodded confidently to the other two guys, and climbed up into the cab. I flipped the switch to engage the transfer case and pulled the select lever into 4x4 low range—64:1, a gear ratio that enables the Fuso to climb anything it can get traction on. I gently engaged the clutch and the Fuso started to crawl forward. I leaned out the window, grinning broadly, anticipating the coming adulation after the rescue of the stuck Mercedes.

About the time I was working my way through my fantasy of accolades for the second time, I looked out and noticed all forward motion had stopped. I pushed in the clutch, and then let it out again. Nothing. I frowned. I looked back out the cab window and saw that Humberto and the overlander had been joined by the overlander's wife. All three shared distraught looks. I disengaged the clutch and made a spinning circle with my index finger out the window. The wife nodded sadly.

I climbed down out of the cab and walked around the Fuso. I had moved the Fuso forward less than a meter (3.3 feet) before getting stuck. Not as bad as the Mercedes, but just as immobile. Neither of us was going anywhere.

"Some rescue," I despaired.

I could not believe my eyes. Two stuck trucks. Two trucks that were incapable of movement; and both way too big to extract with any other vehicle I'd seen, up to that point, in Ecuador.

As I slowly shook my head and walked around the Fuso, I glanced at the front end of the Mercedes. Mounted below the bumper was a standard European truck tow bar.

"What in the world you thinking of?"

My words from a post I made not two hours before echoed in my head, "If I had it to do over again I would have no winches, and instead have European truck hitches front and rear, and carry a corresponding tow bar."

My reasoning was based on our experiences during 16 months of full-time living and traveling in our Fuso. We had never once even come close to needing either our front or rear winch. The winches weigh a lot, but not much compared to the very thick electrical cable required to power them. The entire winch system: two winches, cable, controllers, extension line, tree wraps, shackles, pulleys, etc., added up to a very heavy package. Everywhere we traveled there had always been a European truck, with hitches front and rear and a tow bar, come along sooner or later. It seemed to me that the winch system was a waste of weight, to say nothing of cost. A hitch front and rear and a tow bar weighed a fraction of the total winch system. Plus, the hitches and tow bar were a 10 on a one to 10 rating scale for utilization, reliability and repair.

"Laughing in the face of love"

But, not two hours after writing those words for the entire world to see, I was looking at a scenario where the Mercedes' hitches and tow bar were worthless, and the only thing that could possibly help either of us was the Fuso's winches.

I walked to the rear of the Fuso and looked at the angles again. The Fuso was almost perpendicular to the Mercedes. There was nothing sturdy enough to withstand the pulling forces to rig to within 50 meters (164 feet) of the trucks. If I pulled the Mercedes directly from where the Fuso was stuck, it would be a nearly 90 degree pull; not a good scenario in any circumstance, but it was all we had.

"What on earth you tryin' to do?"

I reached under the rear of the truck and started to pull the winch's hook off the frame-mounted tow clevis. The overlander almost jumped with joy.

"Look! They have a winch on the rear too!" he shouted.

I looked back at him from my crouch under the rear of the truck and smiled at his elation.

"Yea, we've got one back here too. No worries, I'll have you out in a minute," I assured him. I was not anywhere near that confident, but I thought it best to keep things positive until we saw how this was going to play out.

The safety tab on the hook was frozen, so we had to beat it open with his hitch pin; but we finally freed the hook and I deployed the line. We used his front hitch and pin to belay the winch hook. I looked down at the blue winch line lying in the soggy grass and eyeballed the angle again.

"This is not good," I worried.

I walked to the rear of the Fuso, plugged in the winch controller, and toggled the switch. 22 months after it last received electrons, it fired up.

"This is good," I celebrated.

"It's up to you, yeah you"

I stood up, took a step back from the Fuso, and thumbed the controller to spool up the slack in the winch line.

The overlander climbed into the Mercedes' cab and cranked up the big diesel. He put it into gear, looked at me through the windshield, and waited for the winch to start drawing.

"Instant karma's gonna get you"

"OK," I yelled, doing my best to project confidence. "Here we go!"

I thumbed the controller and the winch motor whined. The overlander released the clutch and the wheels of the big Mercedes 4x4 started spinning in the mud. The Fuso slipped back a little as the friction coefficients between the two vehicles sorted themselves out.

The winch kept turning and the Mercedes started side-slipping. The rear winch of the Fuso dragged the front end of the Mercedes over, decreasing the angle on the winch, as well as pulling the three less-stuck wheels of the chassis onto fresh ground.

"Gonna look you right in the face"

Closer and closer the Mercedes churned toward the Fuso, its full-size truck tires digging trenches across the soft turf. The big green 4x4 pivoted on its left rear wheel, which was buried down to the axle in a small ditch. The counter-clockwise rotation of the Mercedes was slowly diminishing the angle between the winch and the stuck wheel.

"Better get yourself together darling"

"This is going to get very interesting," I mused, while desperately trying to remember the maximum capacity of the winch line in kilos for a straight line pull, while simultaneously converting the overlander's stated truck weight of 10 metric tons to an actual weight. That conversion involved the use of very obscure functions from high math and quantum physics, usually referred to as the "overlander's fudge factor" and the "overlander's rounding factor." The two factors are often used when an overlander states their vehicle's weight. Both are capable of magically reducing a truck's total weight by 10 to 20 percent.

"Join the human race"

As the front end of the Mercedes stopped sliding left and the full weight of the vehicle was taken up by the Fuso's winch, I stepped back as far as the winch controller cable allowed. I ignored the winch spool, caring a lot less if the line piled up on the end than if the winch line was going to break or the winch or its mount explode from the weight.

The big Mercedes' wheels continued to churn, the winch moaned and the winch line stretched as taut as a cable on the Golden Gate Bridge.

"How in the world you gonna see"

"The moment of truth," I judged, and stepped back a little more, holding the controller out.

The Fuso slid back a little, and the Mercedes inched forward. The distance between them was only a few meters.

"Laughin' at fools like me"

I flashed on the consequences of the Mercedes popping up out of the hole and the overlander not being able to stop in time on the spongy, wet grass and mud. That horrid fantasy was interrupted by the left rear wheel of the Mercedes beginning to climb.

"Who in the hell d'you think you are?"

Instant Karma

"It's coming!" I yelled. My voice was lost in the whine of the winch gears and the rumble of the diesel.

Slowly, inexorably, the Fuso's rear winch drew the big Mercedes' wheel up out of the hole and onto flat ground. As soon as it cleared the hole there was enough traction for the truck to drive on its own.

"A super star?"

I held my hands up to signal. "Touchdown!" I cried.

"Probably should have said Goooooooooooooooooooooooooal!" I thought, remembering the obscurity of American sports to the rest of the world.

The big Mercedes was up. It was out. We all looked at each other and smiled. Triumph.

I looked back at the Fuso proudly, and then my elation waned. The Mercedes was out, but the Fuso was still mired, an embarrassing one meter from where it started.

I signaled the overlander to lock his brakes and handed the controller to his wife. I pointed to the rocker switch and showed her which switch direction spooled in the line.

I ran around to the cab and dropped the Fuso into reverse, low range. I gave her a thumbs up in the mirror, let out the clutch at idle, and the winch dragged the Fuso back to where it started. Home again.

"Well, right you are"

It was the rear winch's baptism by fire. It was unspooled and re-spooled during the build, but never used under load since then. In its first engagement, the winch extracted two stuck trucks within 20 minutes.

Those extractions happened less than two hours after I proclaimed that if I had it to do over again, I would not even put a winch on the truck, much less one on both the front and the rear.

It was ironic. It was the revenge of the winch Gods. It was instant Karma.

Instant Karma



Humberto views the Mercedes.



The challenge.

Instant Karma



Winch line in place, prior to the extraction.



The angle, prior to the extraction.

Instant Karma



Rear Mercedes trail showing the hole and the angle of rotation.



Front Mercedes trail showing the slip angle.

Instant Karma



The Fuso back home again, the ruts revealing its embarrassing one meter journey.



The Mercedes' standard-issue European truck tow bar.

Instant Karma

The overlanders are Joseph and Dorothea Mertens, from Germany. Their vehicle is a beautifully prepared 1977 Mercedes Benz 911 4x4.

They departed Germany in June 2006, and have traveled through: The Netherlands, Switzerland, France, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Malaysia, Thailand, Laos, Viet Nam, Cambodia, Australia, New Zealand, Columbia and Ecuador. They plan to explore the rest of South America and then the rest of the world.

Their favorite countries have been, for Joseph—Australia, and for Dorothea—Iran.

They travel with a wonderful Zundapp scooter that was manufactured within three months of their truck in 1977.



The Fuso's winches are Warn 16.5Ti, rated for 16,500 lbs. / 7,484 kilos. The winch line is synthetic Viking Trail Line rated at 19,600 lbs. / 8,890.4 kilos. Note that winches are only capable of generating their maximum rated pull capacity on the first wrap of the line around the drum. As the line spools onto the winch, the leverage ratio changes; the larger the wrap of line, the less the pulling power of the winch. You must always maintain the first wrap on the spool to provide enough gripping friction for the line to lock onto the winch spool.

I did not rig a double or triple line pull (two or three pulleys) because I did not anticipate coming anywhere near the maximum load capacity of the winch or the line. I was not *lifting* the Mercedes, I was just pulling it forward, or, in this case, sideways, and then forward.

"Instant Karma!" was a single released by Apple Records on 6 February 1970, with lyrics and music by John Lennon. The producer was Phil Spector.

The single featured a version of the ever-changing Plastic Ono Band — Lennon on lead vocal, acoustic guitar and electric piano, Billy Preston on grand piano, Klaus Voorman on bass and electric piano, Alan White on drums, George Harrison on electric guitar, Yoko Ono on backing vocal, Beatles assistant Mal Evans on chimes, grand piano and handclaps, as well as the whole

Instant Karma

lot of them, Beatles then-manager Allen Klein and a dozen or so late-night pub revelers from Hatchetts Pub on overdubbed backing vocals. Backed by Ono's "Who Has Seen the Wind?" (which Lennon produced), "Instant Karma!" peaked at number three on the U.S. charts and number five on the U.K. charts. The pair appeared on Britain's "Top of the Pops" to perform the song live.

The song is one of three Lennon solo songs, along with "Imagine" and "Give Peace a Chance," in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. It ranks as one of the fastest-released songs in pop music history. It was recorded at London's Abbey Road Studios the same day it was written, and was released only ten days later. Lennon remarked to the press, "I wrote it for breakfast, recorded it for lunch, and we're putting it out for dinner."

Instant Karma!

Instant karma's gonna get you
Gonna knock you right on the head
You better get yourself together
Pretty soon you're gonna be dead
What in the world you thinking of?
Laughing in the face of love
What on earth you tryin' to do?
It's up to you, yeah you

Instant karma's gonna get you
Gonna look you right in the face
Better get yourself together darlin'
Join the human race
How in the world you gonna see?
Laughin' at fools like me
Who in the hell d'you think you are?
A super star?
Well, right you are

Well we all shine on
Like the moon and the stars and the sun
Well we all shine on
Everyone come on

Instant karma's gonna get you
Gonna knock you off your feet
Better recognize your brothers
Everyone you meet
Why in the world are we here?
Surely not to live in pain and fear
Why on earth are you there?
When you're everywhere
Come and get your share

Well we all shine on
Like the moon and the stars and the sun
Yeah we all shine on
Come on and on and on on on
Yeah yeah, alright, uh huh, ah

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Well we all shine on
Like the moon and the stars and the sun
Yeah we all shine on
On and on and on on and on

Well we all shine on
Like the moon and the stars and the sun
Well we all shine on
Like the moon and the stars and the sun
Well we all shine on
Like the moon and the stars and the sun
Yeah we all shine on
Like the moon and the stars and the sun

Sources:

- Lyrics: www.lyricsfreak.com
- Information: www.wikipedia.com

All photos by Douglas Hackney



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>