

The Gas Man

10 February 2008

One of the challenges of world travel is procuring fuel.

Generally, gasoline and diesel are not a problem unless you are in an area of spot shortages such as Patagonia, where we are now.

Propane, however, can be a problem. Because different countries use different physical couplings for dispensing the fuel and have different processes for doing so, some precluding direct contact with the fueling source, buying propane can quickly escalate into a Holy Grail worthy quest.

We were not yet in the red zone. We still had half of our main propane tank and a full small tank in reserve, but I was getting nervous, feeling the twinges of urgency, about finding propane before we got any further south down into the tip of Patagonia. Consequently, we started pinging every propane facility we encountered in the market towns.

Initially, our beginner level Spanish hindered us, especially when talking to watchmen tasked merely with moving the sprinklers and feeding the guard dogs. But soon we established that Argentina used a U.S. ACME connector for our main tank fill valve and a P.O.L. connector for the small tank. That was the good news. The bad news was that the only thing in the entire Argentine propane supply chain that could refill our main tank was a mobile propane delivery truck.

Any propane depot could easily refill our small tank, but to fill the main tank we required the divine sanction of stumbling on a propane depot in the exact one to two hour window the delivery truck was there refilling for its next route. That was very unlikely, and no depot we stopped at could give us anything more precise than a two day time block when their delivery truck was due back at the facility. Our quandary grew as we continued South, deeper and deeper into the empty, wind blown steppes of Patagonia.

Then, fortune smiled upon us. While stopped at a police checkpoint a truck pulled up in the bypass area, its trailing and then overtaking cloud of dust momentarily obscuring its identity. As the brown silt cloud swept forward and dissipated it revealed, beyond chance, beyond all odds, a propane delivery truck. My heart leapt, then sank, as the sentry waved the driver on and the truck roared off to the east while we were still mired in the motions of tax payer security assurance.

As quickly as we could we smiled and waved and motioned our way through the checkpoint. I could just make out the white bullet of the propane truck, no more than a dot, disappearing over the third hill.

If our rig could pull a wheelie, it would have done so. As it was, it was the closest thing to a hole shot it will probably ever experience, and definitely the closest thing to speed shifting as is possible in a Mitsubishi Fuso FG 140. I channeled Garlits. Steph called upon the Gods of Muldowney. When the clouds of white tire smoke cleared from our imaginations we pulled a lightening fast 62.48 quarter.

But now we were up to speed, all 45 m.p.h. of it.

"We're coming up on the cam, hold on honey!" I yelled over the shrieking turbocharger.

We rocketed to 49.5.

But again, luck was ours, we crested a hill and had a downhill stretch.

"Woo Hoo!" I whooped. "He'll never escape us now!"

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Steph's neck snapped back as we banged red line and I slammed it into 5th. We stormed to 52.5.

The A/T Yokohamas' whine spun up to turbine levels, the Deaver springs bump stopped and the Bilstein shocks full stroked as we rocked over the dips and buckles that make up the Argentine highways. The speedometer needle continued its inexorable climb; it was an orange blur sweeping to 58, maybe 59.

As we crested the next hill I spotted him. "Ha!" I screamed. "He's in my sights! Clear the breeches! Weapons free! Fire at will!"

Steph looked at me with concern and said, "Do we really want to do that? Won't that blow up his propane?"

"Just a figure of speech, dear," I reassured her. But he was mine now. There was no escape.

Like solid rocket boosters fueling the climb of the space shuttle, the mighty five liter turbo four cylinder pumped out the power and the Fuso rocketed like a white comet down the highway. We blew through our cruising speed of 66 and were headed for the upper reaches of the design envelope, 68.

But there was just one problem. I knew from the stickers on the back of his truck he was legally limited to a speed not to exceed 80 k.p.h. / 50 m.p.h., but I was running about as fast as I could and I was barely, ever so slowly, gaining on him. He was charging. He was running as fast as he could too. The city was rapidly approaching and if I couldn't reel him in soon, we were going lose him and be cast into the depths of Patagonian propane purgatory.

We passed the airport and I had him down to a half mile or so. He ran up on some traffic and just like Senna stalking Prost, I used it mercilessly. Now he was less than an eighth mile out and I could see him in the mirrors. More traffic. I chopped down on a crawling cab, used both lanes, clipped the apex on a roundabout and closed right up on him. Resistance was futile, we would assimilate.

Except one thing. I couldn't hold him. He knew every bump, every dip, every expansion joint, and he was rockin' it out.

A quote came back to me, slowly percolating up in my brain, fighting its way through the red fog of the chase, finally bursting into the bright light of consciousness, "You'll never beat someone coming home from work." Jimmy Sones, Baja 1000 solo ironman champion, taught me that lesson.

"He's not going to the depot or another stop, he's going home," Steph said, prescient, as always. Plus, she could see the wife and three kids stuffed into the cab through the truck's passenger mirror.

"Rats!" I cursed as I struggled to negotiate another S curve / roundabout chicane. Our rig has many positive attributes, but road course handling is not among them. It handles like an aircraft carrier on a sea of ball bearings. I slammed it down another gear and brought the duallies within kissing distance of the corner's curb. Steph tightened her grip on the grab handle, her eyes the size of saucers.

We cleared onto a straight stretch, both WFO. I caught his eyes in the mirror. He knew we were on him and he didn't know why. What he did know was that he had his entire family in the cab with him and a small nuclear bomb's worth of explosive gas 24 inches behind their heads. Neither of us lifted.

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He feinted left then dove right on a Y down into the neighborhoods. We followed. Like Ginger to Fred, we matched every barrio, every cerro, every side street, every move.

Finally, he skidded to a stop in front a new house in a huge tract housing development. The wife spilled out the door and dashed towards the house while vainly attempting to herd the three boys in the same direction. Instead, they made a beeline to our cab as we executed an All Stop in the street.

After the marathon green flag run the relative silence of the finish line was deafening as he slowly turned his head to see who had pursued him. Both diesels rumbled in their idles, panting after the long, hard run. The kids chattered hellos to Steph. The driver and I locked eyes.

"Hola," I said evenly through the open cab windows.

With the relief of a man who just avoided the mass murder of himself and his family, his grin spread slowly, like steam leaking from a cracked teapot. "Hola!" he exclaimed.

We spent the next 20 minutes in a typical travel experience - lots of broken, stumbling, train wreck language, lots of drawing in the dirt, lots of hand waving and pointing, lots of smiles, and, in the end, lots of understanding.

He was on the way home for Sunday dinner with his family. Instead, he left the family, got in his truck, led us to the propane depot where it would be legal to do so, and when we arrived there at 9 P.M., used his truck to fill our main propane tank.

On our flight into Chile we bought a couple of boxes of Godiva chocolates for gifts. We gave the first one to some new friends who helped us in Viña del Mar, Chile. We gave our last box, and a very healthy tip, to the gas man.

The moral of the story is - There are many good people in the world. Sometimes you just have to chase them down to meet them.

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Photo by Stephanie Hackney

Locked on, no escape.

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Photo by Stephanie Hackney

The dive into the neighborhoods.



Photo by Stephanie Hackney

Deep in the barrio, almost home.

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Photo by Douglas Hackney

At the propane depot.



Photo by Douglas Hackney

Drinking the good juice.

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Photo by Stephanie Hackney

The rare and elusive silver backed Patagonian large size ACME propane dispenser coupling.



Photo by Stephanie Hackney

Drawing in the dust to communicate Argentine and U.S. fill level limits for propane tanks (75% vs. 80%).

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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>