

Roadside Distractions: *Bears, Borders, Backroads*

Every five years East Meets West, so new MC2 contributor George Olson packed his classic and went in search of an adventure on the way to the Can-Am races and Mini meet...

■ Story and photos by George Olson



A road trip in a Mini is a bit like road trips I remember as a little kid: no air conditioning, no music reception on the AM radio, a stick shift, and no such thing as high speed cruising, the rolling-past-yesterday ribbons of road, and life along the way captured for a black and white album.

My trip began in my own 1979 Mini along a route from Portland, OR to Radium Hot Springs, BC, an eleven-hour drive. As I slipped from Oregon into Washington, from four-lane Interstate to two-lane state routes, I saw evidence of other road trips. First was a string of '50s Fords and Chevys, shined for a show somewhere. Next was a troupe of teardrop travel trailers, again, right out of the '40s or '50s. And then along came several very, very muddy pick-ups on trailers, going to some kind of mud-fest. Just a cool reminder that road trips mean different things to different people, but they were all enjoying their wheels!

I slipped back onto I-90 and into Idaho, and came upon a dozen or so police cars blocking the entire west-

bound lanes, with yellow tape everywhere. Googling around later, I discovered it was the scene of a shoot-out! Talk about the Wild West, there it was in the opposite lanes. I motored on.

In Radium for the night, I was warned not to stop for

bears along the highway en route to and beyond Banff National Park. I sort of scoffed, but then noticed a large display sign at the hardware store offering bear repellent! On the way over the Rockies through Banff and on to Calgary, I did see a bear, a small herd of mountain goats, and some deer. Somehow all those animals look bigger when you're in a Mini.

Arriving in Calgary, I went directly to Murray O'Shea's shop to check on the race car we'd be towing to Mid-Ohio for the Can-Am Mini Challenge Races. As usual, some work was yet to be done, but the car was loaded on the trailer and we set off to collect the Mini woodie,

stow my car, and hit the Trans-Canada Highway, past the giant moose statue at Moose Jaw, World's Tallest Tepee at Medicine Hat, and eastward.



We got as far as Regina and came to the economic realization that we were pouring dollars worth of gasoline into the woodie every 150 miles, whereas if we put it on the trailer with the race car, it would not change the mileage of the tow van appreciably. At this point, we'd named the tow vehicle Savannah White, as a goofy nod to the TV hostess as well as the Chevy model!

Then came the drama of the border crossing into North Dakota. We were pulled aside for secondary inspection, all because Murray had set off the radiation detector when pulling up to the border checkpoint. Seems he'd had a stress test over a week before our trip and the material used in the test showed up! I had to stand apart from Murray on the tarmac, the border agent pointing a Geiger counter at me with no reaction. As he walked toward Murray, it came to life. After a thorough explanation of Murray's medical tests, we were on our way, into North Dakota for my first time, one of the last states to be checked off my list.

After that, it was mile after mile (no longer kilometer after kilometer) of corn and wheat and farmhouses and barns, not forgetting the abundance of oil rigs and huge trucks, tankers and long freight trains of Bakken shale oil. North Dakota is no longer the barren, flat, farming out-back of America, but the beating heart of oil field employment!



Racing, however, may not be very well known in North Dakota. At a gas station, a fellow filling his pick-up tank wandered over and asked what kind of car we had on the trailer. Told it was a race car (hello? Numbers? Roll cage? Five-point belts?) he said, "Oh, so like Baja?" I made hand motions along with an explanation to describe a road course, he then said, "Like forest paths?" He's probably still wondering about that little car and how or where it could "race." (Editor's note: He obviously has not seen the Prodrive-built MINI Countryman in action!)

As anyone on the road in a classic Mini knows, many passing cars—and there are many that are passing—mean cell phone photos, waving kids, smiling



adults, and even laughter. At stoplights, sometimes there was the inevitable, "I had one of those when I lived in England." At one point when I was following the van and trailer, we were passed by an old stretch limo with a spare tire tied to the roof, and later an SUV with what looked to be 24" rims. Both pretty odd from a ten-inch-wheeled Mini perspective!

On the last legs to the Mid-Ohio Sports Car Course for the Can-Am Mini Challenge races, we pulled one 19-hour day, interrupted only by finding any Starbucks with a big parking lot. Fuel doesn't just go in the gas tank on a road trip like

this. We explored the menu at many a Mcd's for nutritional value beyond burgers.

Arriving at Mid-Ohio, we found ourselves among more than fifty classic Minis at the event put on by the Ohio Mini Owners, so no novelty there. The story of the

Can-Am race weekend follows, and after such we headed back west, through Amish country, to almost retrace our tracks, but this time to Milwaukee, for the East Meets West Mini Meet reported on in the next issue of MC2.

With a disappointment in Kenosha, WI., the home of Snap-On Tools, as the museum and gift shop were closed for renovation, we motored through more small towns, tree-lined brick streets, corn fields, red barns and silos, rain storms, thunder and lightning, and a billboard advertising "The next generation of fertilizer." Ah, the Midwest! We also crossed the Continental Divide in North Dakota, at the dizzying altitude of 1,490 feet.

At one town, a mere dot in the road,

a sign announced Sykeston, Home of Travis Hafner. A Google search reveals that as a Cleveland Indian, he became the first player in Major League history to hit five grand slam home runs before the All-Star break. The things you learn on a road trip, not only about baseball, but small-town pride!

Once again, as our woodie sat untouched, secondary inspection at the border of the van was ordered, this time for a questionable logbook for the race car to prove its purpose in the U. S. We clicked off the kilometers with woodie loaded on the trailer again, the van covering 4,500 miles and the woodie 1,800 miles on Interstates, two-lane roads, one toll road near Chicago, pot-holed city streets, through burning sun and pelting rain and dark of night, apparently as impervious as a postman, both having no problems the entire distance.



The final chapter in the story was getting behind the wheel of my own Mini again, from Calgary

to Walla Walla, WA in thirteen hours, through the rolling golden wheat fields and near 100-degree heat of eastern Washington's Palouse, arriving at a friend's for a welcome dip in his pool, and a short drive the next day to Portland, totaling 1,700 trouble-free miles on my car. All in all, a great adventure driving two classic Minis to get to two great Mini events! ■