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BILL DRAGOO

As a moto-journalist, off-road instructor, and Certified Motorcycle Safety Foundation Rider Coach, Bill Dragoo never strays far from adventure. Setting goals since his Eagle Scout days, Bill is also a certified flight instructor, has earned commercial pilot ratings in powered aircraft, seaplanes and sailplanes, is an accomplished sky diver and scuba diver, and has won numerous competitions in motocross, cross-country mountain biking, sailboat racing, and adventure riding. He has been on the podium at the Rawhide Adventure Rider's Challenge two of the three times he has competed, with first and second place finishes, and represented his country as one of three men competing with Team USA in the 2010 BMW GS Trophy held in South Africa. Bill has won two Tour de Dirt mountain bike state championships, has completed a double century bicycle ride (200 miles in a single day) and has fulfilled his dream of an

unsupported, solo transcontinental bicycle ride across the northern tier of the United States. He has ridden motorcycles on five continents and has hiked through the Himalayas to Mount Everest Base camp with his lovely wife Susan.

Among the ever growing list of magazines that have published his work are: *ADV Moto*, *Roadrunner*, *Outrider Journal*, *Overland Journal*, *Oklahoma Today*, *Overland UK*, *OutdoorX4*, *Ride Oklahoma*, and *Adventure Rider*.

"The best part of any adventure is sharing it," says Bill, and he does just that through his stories and by teaching others some of the finer points of managing a heavy dual-sport motorcycle through questionable terrain.

ELISE BENT

Elise is a passionate explorer with insatiable curiosity. She grew up in a family of outdoor sports enthusiasts who nurtured in her a thirst for learning and adventure. Elise strongly believes in "making it happen," that achievement comes from a combination of grit and simply taking the first step. Elise is a freelancer specializing in geospatial applications and web development, and also helps her husband Josh

with his business, Bomber Products. Recently, Elise co-founded Big Sky Overland Rally, the first overlanding event of its kind in Montana. When she's not ripping around the continent in an overland vehicle, you can find her hiking, skiing and kayaking in the Montana wilderness.

You can follow her travels and adventures on Instagram at @elise.bent



JIM DAVIS

Jim's love for adventure began during his Boy Scout days going on backpack trips, canoeing, and learning leadership and outdoor skills. His connection with vehicles came soon after, when at 15 his brother gave him a 1962 VW "Baja Bug." However, it had no wheels or seats, the transmission had no reverse, and the engine was in a big box of parts. After rebuilding the engine and the car, he enjoyed exploring in the southern California mountains. Jim loves introducing others to outdoor recreation and has been a Scoutmaster and Cubmaster with BSA and a "Tread Trainer" for the Tread Lightly! organization.

Jim enjoys many outdoor adventures including hiking, biking, and canoeing. He combined his love of vehicles and the outdoors when he bought a VW Vanagon Syncro and started 4-wheeling. In 1998 he began a series of adventures specifically for owners of VW Syncros. So far, these Syncro Safari trips have ventured to every western state except New Mexico. Jim and his lovely wife Deanne will host Syncro Safari this summer near Santa Fe.

Follow Jim's adventure by visiting SyncroSafari.org

WENDY BRITT-WALKER

Wendy recently renewed her desire to connect with the natural world. As a teen she earned the nickname, "The Burden" when her father took her canoeing down the Rio Grande, backpacking in Copper Canyon, camping and hiking anywhere and everywhere. She loves to get up close and intimate with nature, and has interests in rock-stacking and waterfall hunting. Wendy

married this past summer to an avid game hunter and self-proclaimed part-time mountain man, and has recently become smitten with four-wheel adventure.

Wendy feeds her creative soul as a photographer, painter, writer, baker, foodie, and mother of two teenage daughters.



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Table of Contents: Traversing a low-lying creek while exploring the Ozarks of Arkansas – by Scott Brown

Final Approach: An overlook along the Red Mountain Mining Trail in Colorado – by James Sparesus

SYNCRO

WORDS | JIM DAVIS
PHOTOS | DAVID MOISE, DEANNE DAVIS,
JIM DAVIS, JIM HOWARD, & RON CHANDLER

Safari

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→ **“All I can say is, I’m damn jealous, and I hate you guys!”**

These words greeted us near the bottom of Long Canyon while finishing the last 4x4 outing of our week together. We must be doing something right when others are so passionately jealous, but more on this exchange later...

We had started out our week-long 4x4 adventure the previous Sunday when Synchronauts arrived in Moab, Utah from across the U.S. with Syncro vans carrying 19 men, 13 women, two kids, and several dogs. Most had been on at least one previous Syncro Safari, but nearly half were first-timers. This year we were celebrating our 20th year of family-friendly four-wheeling adventures. Old friends got reacquainted and newcomers were greeted like family. This year’s group came from California, Utah, Colorado, Washington, South Dakota, South Carolina, and even upstate New York. While getting acquainted, we talked about what Monday had in store.

“Where are we going next year?”

That’s what’s always asked even before our week together is up. The answer is rarely known, because with only a few exceptions, we’ve always found new places for our adventures. Moab 2018 was an exception, being our anniversary event and having hosted our first Syncro Safari in Moab in 1998 and again in 2008. Before 1998, several of us with Syncros had gotten together a time or two, but nothing more ambitious than a long weekend. Seeing more than one Syncro at a time was unusual and exciting, so in 1996 when I saw two other Syncros at an REI parking lot in Spokane, it struck me that we should have an event where Synchronauts could share some fun. The idea developed until six Syncros and their adventure-seeking owners pulled into Moab on a snowy day in April 1998. We joined the Easter Jeep Safari and went on trails led by the Red Rock 4-Wheelers guides. We got a lot of strange looks that week, as we had grown accustomed to driving a Syncro on 4WD trails. Jeepers often asked, “How’d you get that up here?”

Sometimes, I would jest “I took the Syncro trail,” playing off the use of the term “Jeep Trail.” But, despite telling them it’s 4WD, many 4x4 owners still insist on getting on their hands and knees to check underneath for axles and a driveshaft. Before our week in 1998 was finished, our Synchronauts from Montana suggested getting together again the following year in Montana, maybe near Yellowstone. So we did, and have kept on doing it in a growing list of fun places all across the western states.

Dinosaur Tracks and Arches

Syncro Safari, being a week-long event, typically involves three day-long 4WD adventures. On Monday of our 2018 event we ventured north of town and took the “Back Route to Arches.” Leaving U.S. 191 on Willow Springs road we first visited an impressive set of dinosaur footprints and then traveled to the remote Eye of the Whale Arch. The 4WD road toward the arch is just challenging enough to keep 2WD vehicles behind and gave a couple of our novice Synchronauts a thrill, resulting in the exclamation, “I didn’t know my van could do that!” It’s great to see inexperienced owners get a taste of what their Syncro can do. From the 4WD road, it’s only a short hike to the arch and well worth it. The view through the arch was as impressive as the wind that kept us chasing after our hats.

From the Eye of the Whale Arch it was back to pavement to battle for parking spots and visit a couple of the park’s better known arches, Delicate Arch and Landscape Arch. We had a full day planned and we had to keep a quick pace on the strenuous hike up to Delicate and back. Standing at the foot of Delicate is something for the “bucket list,” and well worth the hike. It’s on Utah’s license plates after all. From there, we turned north to Landscape Arch. After emerging victorious from another round of parking lot wars, we enjoyed a leisurely walk to this amazing arch that spans over 300 feet yet is barely more than 10 feet thick at the center.

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Not just about the wheelin'

While we always have a lot of fun on 4WD roads behind the wheels of our Syncros, there's much more going on during the week. Tuesday and Thursday activities are geared to rest, other types of recreation, or all too often, repairs. In Moab some participants enjoyed horseback riding, others headed back to the trails on UTVs, and many took a thrilling and scenic jet boat trip up the river with Moab Jett. Each year we enjoy non-wheelin' adventures, often unique to the venue. Previous trips such as Lake Tahoe in 2015 allowed us to go parasailing and kayaking. In 2013, while visiting historic sites along the Lewis and Clark Trail in the Bitterroot Mountains of Idaho, our group took a river rafting trip on the Clearwater River and got to drive our Syncros in the Grangeville, Idaho 4th of July parade. In Arizona in 2012 we were treated to an authentic Navajo Pow Wow dance exhibition and even got to join in! Tuesday evening in Moab was our legendary Taco Night where we all cooperate on a group meal and afterward were treated to a historical presentation by Sara Sidwell from the Museum of Moab.

Potash, Dead Horses, and Bridges

Wanting to experience as much as we could, we packed our Wednesday full to the brim, heading southwest from Moab along Potash Road. At first, I was a little put off, knowing it is so named because the road leads to the potash mine. But the more I learned about this route the more intrigued I became. After the namesake mine, the road becomes very scenic and offers great views of the Colorado River below. The highlight of the westward portion of our route was climbing the Shafer Switchbacks. If there was ever a road-building hall of fame, this road and its builders should be included. Carved into the face of cliffs, this road hangs on a series of narrow shelves joined by 180-degree U-turns. I was simultaneously struck by the road itself and the ever-broadening vistas the increasing elevation provided. The road being narrow, and with 19 other Syncros behind, unfortunately we were not able to stop much to soak it in. This route led briefly into Canyonlands National Park, where we headed north, exiting the park before looping back east and then south to visit Dead Horse Point State Park for a lunch stop and to linger and take in the views. Despite the Dead Horse name, we found breathtaking views, with the Colorado River below and Canyonlands National Park all the way to the southern horizon; no dead horses today.

We left Dead Horse Point and headed north then east to visit Gemini Bridges. While most arches or bridges in the area you hike under or see from below, Gemini Bridges is a pair of bridges that you get to walk on top of and across. This is a very cool way to enjoy the uniqueness of this region, while listening to stories about people who foolishly attempted to jump from one bridge to the other and questionable stories about people driving their 4X4 across the bridges. After our second big day of adventures, we headed back to Camp Syncro for campfire and an evening together.

"I found my people."

Gathered around the campfire you'll find an eclectic mix of people, all belonging to the "Syncro Tribe." Several years ago, a Syncroanut leaned forward at the campfire and told the group, "It feels like I found my people." Most people yearn to connect to a group of like-minded people who share their interests and values, but might never find them. Even with many differences among us, we experience this connection within the Syncro community, an odd intersection of adventure-seekers, nerds, and hippies, sometimes all present in a single person. Adventure-seekers want to go places, see things, and have thrilling experiences. The Syncro allows this in ways no other vehicle can because of its combination of 4WD capabilities,





SO, WHAT'S A SYNCRO?

The Volkswagen Vanagon Syncro was built by Steyr-Daimler-Puch in Graz, Austria from 1986 to 1991. Specializing in 4WD vehicles, SDP has built a number of amazing vehicles over the years including the Pinzgauer, the Haflinger, and the Mercedes Geländewagen. In many parts of the world, including Canada, Syncros were available as, panel vans, single-cab pickups, and double-cab pickups as well as the passenger vans and camper models available in the USA. The camper models were fitted with a pop-top and either seating for six, or the fully equipped version with seating for four, plus cupboards, on-board water and propane, a refrigerator, stove and even a sink. With these campers you really can take the "kitchen sink" with you. All the camper models were outfitted by Westfalia and sleep two upstairs in the pop-top and two downstairs where the rear seating converts to a bed.

Syncros were originally powered by a fuel-injected, 2.1L, water-cooled, flat-four engine nicknamed the "waterboxer," mounted in VW's traditional place at the rear. While 2WD Vanagons powered only their rear wheels through a 4-speed transaxle, the Syncro also included a driveshaft conveying power from the rear transaxle to the front differential. The Syncro's transmission also got a Low "granny" gear below first gear, and most were even factory equipped with a vacuum operated rear differential. Up front, a viscous coupling allows power to be transmitted to the front differential when even a small amount of rear wheel-spin occurs. This allows smooth on-road handling as well as automatically engaging 4WD mode, whenever needed. The Syncro community has developed many upgrades over the years and Syncros are now frequently modified with larger flat-four engines, in-line gas engines, and even modern direct injection "TDI" turbodiesel engines. Drivetrain modifications have grown as well over the years adding locking front differentials, bigger tires, taller suspensions and upgraded brakes, all to suit each Synchronaut's taste and wallet. Upgrades and modifications don't stop under the vehicle though. The Syncro's body and living space really allow the owner's creativity to shine the most. Syncros seen today include custom paint, seating options, racks, bumpers, propane heaters, showers, lighting, electronics, navigation, and communication. Everything can be upgraded from the custom headliner above your head to teak flooring below your feet. An unmodified Syncro is very much like a blank canvas waiting for its Synchronaut artist to "paint" its modifications.

More information on Vanagons and Syncros is available by visiting www.vanagons.org

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compact size, spaciousness, and even a kitchen. That we select such a unique vehicle for our adventures is a manifestation of our inner nerd, not wanting to just go down to the dealer or the Craigslist advertiser two blocks over and get a “normal” 4WD. The nerd in us inspires an appeal for the uncommon things in life and this is how many of us came to own a Syncro. Finding out what fellow nerds pack into their “van-sized pocket-protector” is half the fun: an eight-inch reflecting telescope, infrared thermometer, solar oven, ultraviolet flashlights, hand-held lasers banned in 23 states, gas-fired pizza oven, water rockets, geocaches, a frightening balloon-popping game. You probably won’t find these in a typical Jeep. A “home-made folding kayak” at Syncro Safari is the perfect illustration of the adventure-seeking nerd.

Now, combine that with hippies. Not the dope-smoking, bead wearing, free-love hippies associated with older VW buses, but the spiritual, nature loving, tie-dye wearing types. This leads us to abide by and promote Tread Lightly! principles. We’d love for many future generations to be able to enjoy the places we visit today. What better reason to have such a fun vehicle than to venture to remote places, flash a “peace sign” at a fellow VW owner, enjoy a daisy-filled meadow, lie on a picnic table at midnight watching shooting stars, walk through a cascading river on a carpet of green moss, decipher ancient petroglyphs, or sing around the campfire with a guitar, flute, and violin?

Tusher Tunnel, Tombstone Rock, Secret Spire and Long Canyon

During this Moab adventure we visited one site, the Secret Spire, on Friday as a tribute our 1998 trip. One big difference was that, this time, there would be no local guides and I was on the spot. By this time, I had many years of experience guiding 4WD trips and was well prepared for the route, which started north of town at the well-preserved Mill Canyon Dinosaur Tracks, then headed south past Courthouse Rock and Determination Towers on the way to Tusher Tunnel. The tunnel is not a manmade tunnel, but rather an unusual geological formation in which large cleaves of

rock have left a triangular gap, with a wide path at the bottom and sides sloping together at the top, six to 10 feet above. The tunnel leads to an overlook on a cliff on the opposite side which adds to its uniqueness; few tunnels around lead to such a view. Leaving Tusher Tunnel, we made our way west to the solitary Tombstone Rock where we circled-up our “wagens” for lunch. From there, Secret Spire is a bit farther west, then it was south and east to Long Canyon and our “I hate you” encounter.

The route approaching Long Canyon is uneventful, as it crosses a large plain before suddenly dropping down into the top of the canyon. Long Canyon probably doesn’t even require 4WD under most conditions, but is a wonderful experience tucked between tall canyon walls and provides the opportunity to drive under a huge rock that fell from above. As we neared the bottom end of the canyon, we spotted a Jetta and a Subaru headed up the trail, stopped on the side of the road. Being the lead vehicle, it must have appeared that we were alone or perhaps just a couple of vehicles. We answered questions about where the trail leads and the location of sites they would not be able to visit with their cars as more Syncros pulled in behind us. Seeing our growing caravan, one of them just stopped talking mid-sentence and stared silently with his mouth open. After an awkward silence he gathered his words: “All I can say is, I’m damn jealous, and I hate you guys!” This is one of those moments that makes you understand how fortunate we are to be able to travel to these amazing places in the company of a stellar group of friends. Whether your trip takes you to Moab or Mojave, all of us are truly blessed.

More information about Syncro Safari is available at www.SyncroSafari.org

While Syncro Safari is an intimate event that’s big on adventure, the largest gathering of Syncros in the U.S. is the SyncroFest event, held annually near Hollister, CA.

More information is available at www.SyncroFest.com **XI**