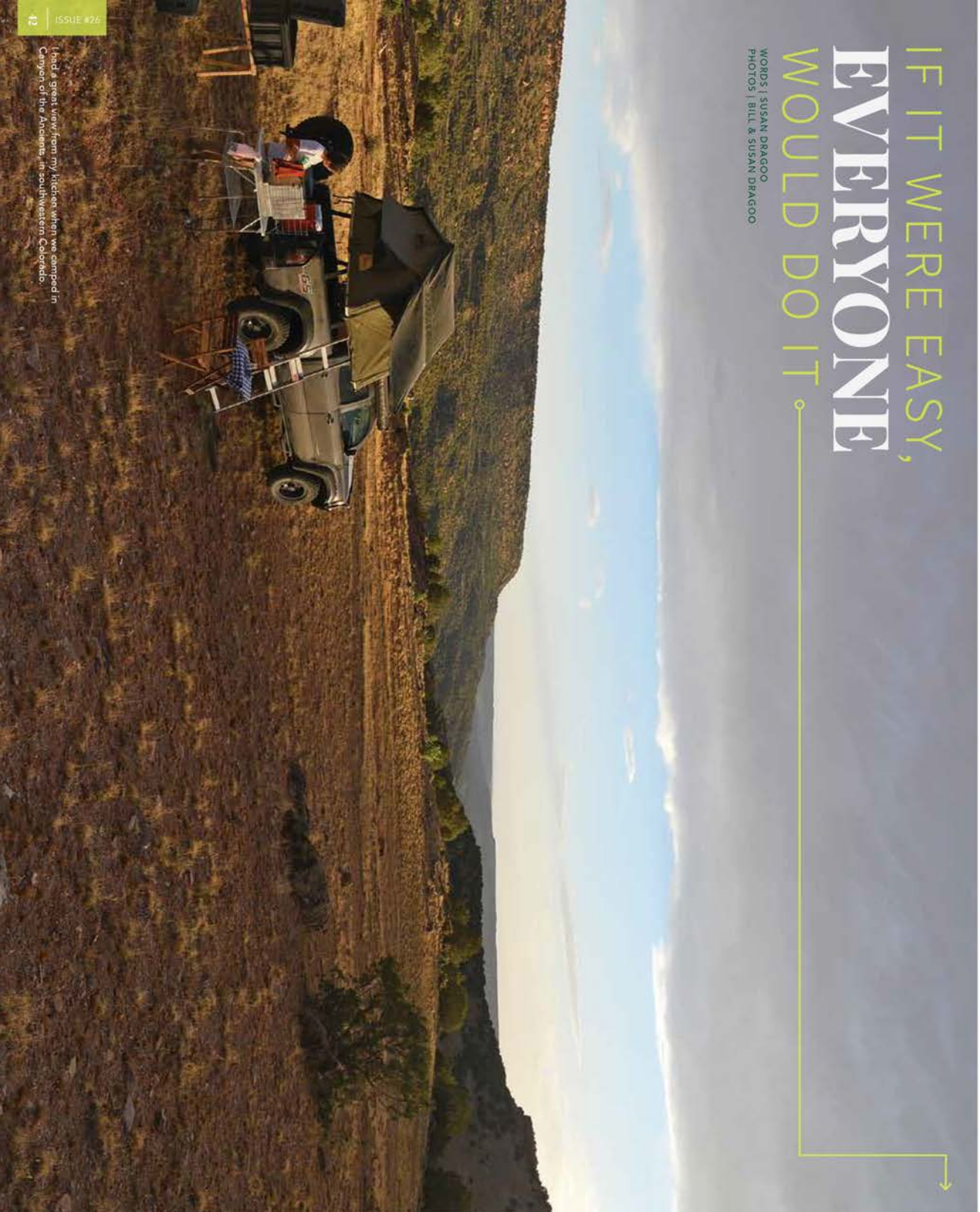


# IF IT WERE EASY, EVERYONE WOULD DO IT.

WORDS | SUSAN DRAGOO  
PHOTOS | BILL & SUSAN DRAGOO



I find a great view from my kitchen when we camped in Canyon of the Ancients, in southwestern Colorado.

One of the reasons adventure travelers are a very small minority is that it's not what most people consider easy. It's often uncomfortable, and sometimes it's downright difficult. Camping is dirty, sleeping in a tent can be inconvenient, and four-wheeling is frequently scary.

Women (and I can say this because I am one) seem, in my experience, to be less interested than men in traveling into the wilderness, sleeping on the ground who-knows-where, and cooking in the rain on a tiny propane stove. This is, of course, a generalization, and like most generalizations it has both a kernel of truth and many exceptions. I backpack with some pretty hardcore women who can go a week without a shower and not lose their minds. And there are plenty of courageous women who have done solo motorcycle adventures in remote parts of the world. Besides that, there are a lot of men who aren't willing to get out of their recliners.

Still, I suspect there are many men who want to pursue outdoor adventures and would love to have their wives or girlfriends go along (cheerfully), and many women for whom it just sounds too daunting and, well, uncomfortable. I also believe there is a group of women who would love to pursue these things on their own but don't know where to start. I don't pretend to have all the answers, but having had some experience backpacking, motorcycle camping, and four-wheeled overlanding, I have some suggestions. My thoughts are aimed primarily at women, but who's to say some gentlemen might not benefit as well?

## 1 Don't assume camping is always uncomfortable.

Camping can be quite comfortable, although it requires practice and the right gear. A good tent, a sleeping bag that is warm enough, and a ground pad with plenty of cushion are the critical elements for good sleep in the great outdoors. My biggest challenge when sleeping in a tent is keeping warm. This is not an exact science. A sleeping bag may be rated at 45 degrees but whether you sleep comfortably in a 45-degree bag when it's 45 degrees outside depends on several factors, including the insulating properties of your ground pad and tent. I take a 15-degree bag and a full-length Thermo-Rest Neo-Air mattress when I backpack. Sleeping in appropriate clothing, I can stay warm in freezing weather, but much below 32 degrees, I will be cold. That's why I have a zero-degree bag (although I don't backpack when it's that cold, nor would I want to carry that big sleeping bag in my backpack). But when you are traveling on four wheels, you have more room for luxuries and can carry a plush ground pad, your warmest sleeping bag, and perhaps an extra blanket. For those of you who camp in hot weather, I can only ask, "Why?"

## 2 Overplanning can be your enemy.

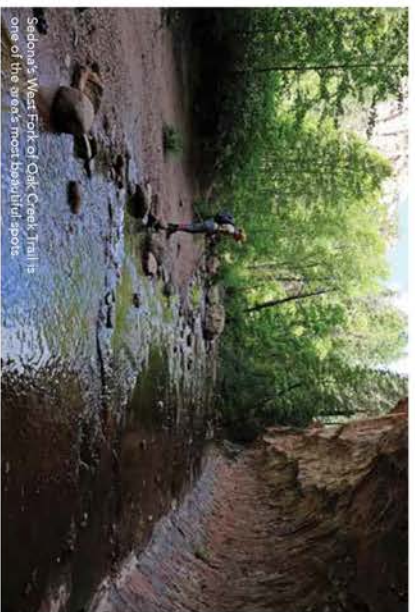
It's reasonable to want to plan where you're going to sleep each night, but it's just not possible to always know how far you will travel in a day when you are overlanding, on two wheels or four. Being too fixated on keeping a schedule can create unnecessary stress. Several years ago, my husband Bill and I were riding motorcycles in New England. We are from Oklahoma, where it's perfectly reasonable to expect to drive 200 miles in three hours. I planned our ride through Pennsylvania, New York, Vermont, and New Hampshire accordingly. Big mistake. Riding through village after village at 25 miles per hour is different than swooping across the plains on the interstate. Wanting to stay in a nice, and rather expensive, inn in North Conway, New Hampshire, I made a reservation there and paid in advance. But we were delayed, and rather than being able to stop at a decent hour and find a motel or a spot to camp, we rode through the White Mountains in the dark. I was on my BMW F50GS and I hate riding in the dark. I am even less a fan of riding twisty mountain roads in the dark. Add the caution signs about potential moose collisions and I was a basket case by the time we made it to North Conway at 11 p.m. It was not pretty. The remainder of the trip, we made no reservations. The most wonderful places to stay or camp appeared along the way, and I didn't have to ride after dark anymore. This philosophy has continued to serve us well over the years.

## 3 Ever heard of a chamber pot?

Tollfree is one of the biggest concerns I hear from women who are about to go camping. Lucky for me, I became proficient at squatting in the woods as a young age. But that doesn't help when you are sleeping in a tent atop your truck, which is our usual mode of camping these days. Of course, you can climb down the ladder in the middle of the night to empty your bladder but it's not what anyone wants to do and trying to sleep with a full bladder is miserable. The answer is The Pee Bottle, sort of a modern-day camping equivalent of a chamber pot, and it's handy to have in a ground tent, as well. I won't go into detail about its usage here, but it's not really that hard to figure out. Some women use a "Go Girl" or similar device which allows you to urinate standing up. I haven't mastered that, yet but I'm sure it's worthwhile. You just don't want to try it for the first time on a hike when you aren't carrying a change of clothes.

## 4 Nobody cares.

If you're worried about wearing the same clothes for several days in a row, stop it. When you're camping, no one cares (except if you get too smelly). Pack light and take clothing you can hand wash and air dry. More than likely, you'll be going several days without a shower when you are out on an adventure, unless you are lucky enough to have an on-board shower. Many campers use cleansing wipes to stay at least moderately fresh, but I like the "spit bath" approach. Heat a couple of cups of water in your JetBoil, use a wash cloth and a few drops of soap, and you'll be surprised how clean you can get. (Be sure to let the water cool a bit or dilute it with cold water after heating it in the JetBoil.)



Sedona's West Fork of Oak Creek trail is one of the area's most beautiful spots.



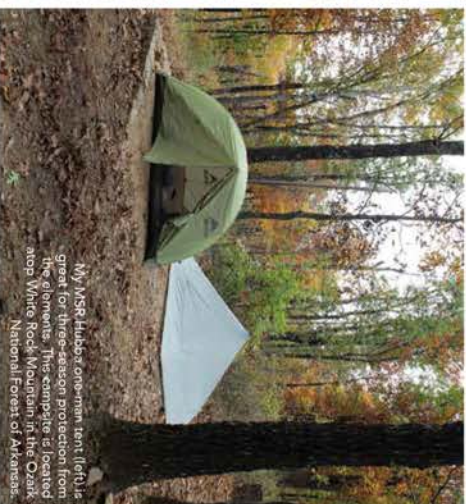
John Whitacre takes a break near the summit of Sedona, Arizona's Bear Mountain. Steep trails like this one require good physical conditioning.



Janet Hamlin and Pam Frank scramble over and under deadfall on the Ozark Highlands Trail in northwest Arkansas.



John Whitacre keeps an eye on an approaching rain storm as he descends Sedona's Bear Mountain.



My MSR Hubba's one-man tent (left) is great for three-season protection from the elements. The campsite is located atop White Rock Mountain in the Ozark National Forest of Arkansas.






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## 5 Keep it simple but not too much so.

I was a backpacker before I was much of a car camper so I used to think dehydrated backpacker meals were the only thing to take camping, even when I had plenty of carrying capacity for food and cooking equipment in our truck. Eventually I realized it would be quite easy to enjoy tastier meals while still keeping it simple. We have an Engel fridge/freezer for keeping food fresh, a two-burner propane stove, and a compact grill, and now enjoy meals like grilled steak and sauteed vegetables when camping. I also like to make one-pan meals in the skillet with a meat, vegetable and grain, and there are plenty of recipes available on the Internet. When we are overlanding, we rarely cook anything other than our evening meal. Breakfast is usually coffee and instant oatmeal or granola/yogurt/fruit, and lunch, if we don't stop in a town, is a sandwich. Of course, there are some really good dehydrated meals on the market from vendors such as Good to Go, Mountain House and Great Grub Camp Food. See the Backcountry Diner article in this issue for more on that subject.

## 6 Get out and walk.

My husband likes to drive our truck on narrow, steep mountain trails with precipitous drop-offs. It's not my favorite thing, although each such experience I survive does toughen me up a bit. A few years ago we were in Colorado doing Schofield Pass in our Toyota Tacoma. This required descending the "Devil's Punchbowl," a difficult and infamous section of road with no margin for error. It's probably a good thing I didn't know about its reputation ahead of time because I was sufficiently terrified without the exacerbation of dread. A good coping mechanism in such situations for me, anyway, is to get out and walk. When I can keep my wits about me I take photos and, when Bill insists, I will spot for him. That's what I did on Devil's Punchbowl and we were both happy when we got through it, since Bill thoroughly enjoys such experiences and I was relieved it was over (and had gotten a little exercise). We dove on down into Marble, Colorado and had lunch, during which Bill surprised me by suggesting we go back the same way. I knew perfectly well there were other options and, although I am normally quite agreeable, flatly refused to go back through Devil's Punchbowl. You have to draw the line somewhere.

## 7 Heed the advice of experienced adventurers.

Books and articles are nice, but experience is the best teacher, or at least a very convincing one. I have often invited new hikers to join me on backpacking trips, and Bill and I enjoy bringing other couples along camping. But too often, those who are inexperienced don't really believe they need to listen to and apply your well-intentioned advice about gear and preparation. And they are adults, so how can you force them to do anything? One friend told me before a backpacking trip, "I really like the outdoors so I will be fine backpacking." That was a red flag and, in spite of my efforts to get her to train for the hike and my detailed advice about food and pack weight, I ended up carrying about half her gear up a mountain because her pack was too heavy, she was not in condition, she wasn't eating properly, and as



With a little creativity, you can enjoy a civilized meal anywhere.



Bill eased highway through boulders on the old stagecoach road which leads to the edge of Mills Canyon in northeastern New Mexico.



The Moab Dugway is a series of tight switchbacks climbing the side of southeastern Utah's Cedar Mesa. Here I am ascending the dugway on my BMW F650GS.

a consequence she began feeling ill. She had such a terrible experience that she won't backpack again, which is unfortunate because that's the kind of experience you can learn the most from. Be respectful of sage adventurers who try to help you prepare. They clearly know something you don't.

## 8 Start small.

If you are planning a big adventure, test your gear and your preparedness on some small adventures close to home beforehand. It's a lot better to learn the ropes on overnight or weekend trips at a nearby state park, where the penalty for poor judgment or inexperience is minimal, than to embark on a long trip untested.

Sometimes I chuckle at the apparent irony of leaving my comfortable home and walking 15 miles a day through the woods with 30 pounds on my back, doing all the work of setting up camp, disinfecting water, cooking food, sleeping on the ground, and then repeating the process for several days in a row. And I do it because life is not just about comfort. Adventure creates competence and self-sufficiency and a true empowerment difficult to achieve without venturing away from the typical bubble of 21st Century civilization. Breathe some fresh air. Clear your mind. Test yourself. Go. **X**

EDITOR'S NOTE: You can follow Susan's varying adventures by visiting her website at [www.susandugway.com](http://www.susandugway.com)



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