

Going Off The Beaten Track

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One of my favourite pastimes is simply driving off the beaten track. I can see some incredible things that I just wouldn't see on the main highways. Photographic opportunities abound.

On one recent trip, I saw all the major North American mountain ungulates (except a mountain goat) in a two hour period: moose, mule deer, white tail deer, elk, and bighorn sheep. The number of deer - a couple dozen - was outstanding, especially since it was the middle of the day! There were also cows and horses, but I think the horses may have been feral.

I'll never forget the time driving along a logging road across the south end of Vancouver island when we saw an official BC government "Stop of Interest" sign at the side of the road. In the middle of nowhere! We did, of course, stop. What we found there was the Harris Creek Spruce, a very large tree, with a trunk diameter of 8-10 feet at the base. The site was complete with gravelled paths and an interpretive sign. You just never know what you'll find off the beaten track.

In both Alberta and BC there are numerous campsites on the back roads, ranging from serviced/maintained sites complete with picnic tables, outhouses and bear-proof garbage bins, to empty clearings at the side of the road. There are many unmaintained sites (many of which do actually have outhouses - BYOTP). If there are not bear-proof garbage bins, you must pack out your garbage (I shouldn't need to say that, should I?).

If you get into trouble on a back road, help may not be nearby. There's a fair bit of traffic on some roads - particularly on holiday weekends in summer - but at other times or on other roads, you may not see another car all day. Signage may be marginal or non-existent, and you need to be more self reliant than is necessary on major roads. Here are some suggestions for safety when travelling off the beaten track:

1. You need to have a map - preferably more than one map of the area. But don't trust it implicitly as back roads are notorious for changing over time and even a brand new map is going to have some old information on it. You need detailed maps designed to show back road detail - topographical maps, for example. I'll repeat this - try to have more than one map from different sources, but even this doesn't guarantee that the same errors won't exist on different maps!
2. A GPS is nice to have but again, don't trust it implicitly and be sure you could find your way back to civilization if it died on you at an inopportune moment. If you use one, it would be good to have various waypoints (e.g. for significant intersections, or river crossings) pre-programmed for the area you will be in. This may not be necessary if you can obtain a decent map for the area which can be uploaded into the GPS. My GPS doesn't have this capability, so I like to pre-program waypoints.
3. I bring a compass, but I've never actually used it while on a road. But I've never been lost, either. In the unlikely event that you do get lost and your GPS fails, then the compass could be what points you back to civilization.
4. Have a good "feel" for the area. Maps can help out here, but you need to think too. What direction should you travel if you get lost? Remember that direction is not always N, S, E, or W, but can be uphill or downhill, upstream or downstream, or perhaps something else. You need to know where the nearest highways are - for example, if the only highway in a region runs N-S and is west of where you are, if you get lost, heading in a general westerly direction is probably good. If the highway runs beside the region's largest river, at the bottom of the valley, heading downhill should move you towards it. If the biggest river in the valley crosses the highway perpendicularly, following the river downstream should get you to the highway. Of course, the roads won't always run straight west, or downhill, and you won't always be able to see the river from the road, but keeping these ideas in mind will help you get a "feel" for what direction you should be heading.
5. A cell phone is NOT an emergency device. If you are truly off the beaten track, it won't work.
6. Be prepared for a breakdown. Have some food, water, flashlights and a sleeping bag or blankets with you. Make sure your spare tire is in good shape before you leave, and check it regularly -this is particularly true if you drive a truck with the tire hanging underneath. The tire there is susceptible to damage or theft. I recently replaced a spare that had never been used,



- after it developed a nasty hole in the sidewall. A shovel, traction aids, and a tow strap can be useful if you get stuck.
7. Plan your drive and drive your plan. One aspect of the plan must be around fuel supplies. Depending on what you drive, you might expect to go 400-800 km on a tank of gas. Know what your vehicle is good for. Know where you can buy gasoline, and make sure you can always reach it. Be prepared for a gas station to be closed or out of gas - it has happened to me! Also, a road may be inaccessible. If a bridge is washed out or under repair, blocking your access to the next gas station, can you get back to the last one? The biggest reason for making a plan in advance and sticking to it, however, is so that you can give it to someone who is not coming with you. Make arrangements to call in at certain times, such as when leaving/re-entering cell phone range, or at gas stations so if you break down or get stuck, someone will call for help on your behalf and have an idea where you are: "He called from point A, and missed his check-in at point B, so he should be somewhere in between." You could, of course, be off on a branch road, but knowing which part of the trunk road to start from should be a great help to those looking for you. And if you do this, someone *will* be looking for you!
 8. A 4x4 is *not* required. Whatever you drive, it should have all-season tires in good condition and a bit of ground clearance. You don't need massive tires and a suspension lift, but recognize that these roads can be a bit rough; smaller vehicles will have to slow down more for the bumps, but otherwise should be okay. You will have more options with a 4x4 though, as some of the branch roads heading up to more remote areas may be beyond what some people would be comfortable driving a car on.
 9. Trucks **ALWAYS** have the right of way. In my part of the world, there is activity in forestry, oil & gas, and mining. Big trucks are required to service all three of these industries. The roads were built for (actually *by*) these industries - the government didn't build a network of roads in the boonies just for people to drive around for fun! They will often drive at speeds which sane people might not consider safe. If you see one coming (either the other way towards you or from behind you), get out of its way! Always assume that there is something coming around a blind corner, so slow down and go far right. **NEVER** try to pass a truck which is turning, even if you want to pass on the side it's turning away from. This is particularly true for logging trucks as logs stick out well beyond the back wheels, and these will come into the lane away from the direction of the truck's turn. Drive with your headlights on at all times - this is a requirement on certain roads with logging or other activity, but is a good idea all the time. Trucks use VHF communication to coordinate their activities on back roads. You can't listen or transmit on these frequencies with a CB or FRS radio and you need a licence to possess or use a VHF radio. If you have such a licence and radio, great - the appropriate frequency is usually posted at the beginning of each branch road. Another point: when you get out to take pictures, be sure you're pulled right over to the side of the road, and that there is enough room for a truck to get by you - even if you haven't seen one all day. And don't park just around a corner or over the crest of a hill! While you're unlikely to see forestry or mining trucks on weekends, or between 6 pm and 6 am on weekdays, don't assume there won't be any. Oil industry trucks can be moving around 24/7.
 10. I shouldn't need to say it, but wear your seatbelt. I personally know one person who survived a 40+ foot fall down a 70° slope, doing several rolls and loops before landing in a tree. The truck was totalled, but she walked away. I very much doubt that would have been survivable without a seatbelt.
 11. The road lines on a map often look the same. In reality, you will almost always be able to tell which is the road you want to take when you reach a Y-junction. One road is usually far more travelled than the other. On the rare occasion when the two look the same, you're still not lost. If you don't know exactly where you are, it's not necessarily a problem - this is where you need to use #4 above. For example, if you know the road you want is following the river, and the river is to your left, take the left road. This is actually how I usually navigate if I don't have a GPS waypoint for the junction in question.
 12. Have a key to your vehicle attached somewhere on the outside. You don't want to accidentally lock yourself out in the boonies. Trust me on this! Don't use one of those magnetic key boxes - they might work in the city, but will quickly be knocked loose on rough roads. It's best to get a piece of stiff wire and fasten the key somewhere (e.g. under a bumper) where it can't be easily seen.
 13. Ask yourself if you really want to travel alone. I do it all the time, but I recognize that my safety margins are limited like that. On many occasions, I have elected to turn back from an interesting road which I would have gone up if I'd had a passenger. If you're alone, #7 above is even more important!

Many great photo opportunities exist off the beaten track. With proper planning and preparation, venturing into the less-travelled areas can be safe, fun and rewarding.

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