

Enjoying the Drive

Traveling in Michigan and Surrounding States on Two Lane Roads - Part I

By Rich Wagner

Introduction

Imagine what it must have been like to own a British roadster back when they were new. Just like today, you'd still have wind blowing across your face while you drove down those two lane roads and the thrill would be yours to enjoy everyday.

Well, maybe not everyday? You see, I owned one of these cars back then, and like me, it probably would have been your only car. Driving it every day meant driving in summer rains and the bitter winter cold.

And those two lane roads? They were known as "Truck Routes" back then and if you did drive on them, you'd be sharing the beat up asphalt with all the trucks. Take it from me, some of those 'good old days' were pretty miserable.

I'VE GOT GOOD NEWS FOR YOU

The "Good old Days" could never compare with the thrill of exploring our world today. While the whole world rushes by on the interstate, those back roads have never been so lightly traveled or better maintained than they are today. Back then, expensive parts could only be gotten from your local dealer, but today, most anything is both affordable, and readily available by phone. Unlike many "American" classics, the availability of parts means these cars can easily be maintained in 'like new' condition without ever visiting a junk yard. For those who really want to drive their car, modern features can also be adapted to improve your car's comfort.

If this is your cup of tea, or you simply want to enjoy driving more than you do now? The ideas in this series can both prepare you for the unexpected as well as make your driving much more enjoyable. No special skills required.

First Things First

This will sound very much like advice given to someone about to begin an exercise program. Still, the analogy is pretty good because what I'm talking about is much the same as exercising your body. If you're a "Couch Potato," you won't be able to run very well and the same thing goes for your car if it just sits around in your garage.

"As with any exercise program, consult with your doctor before beginning." In this case, what kind of condition is your car really in? Does it start easily? Does it run well? Does everything work? If not (and this is important), does what's wrong affect your safety? Just

how well do you know your car? If you're not your car's doctor, have a mechanic check it out for you.

Is something not quite right? Be aware that if you do not take action to repair the problem, it can easily catch up with you later. Repairs are always best done in a shop or at home, but make sure they're done properly. Just like 'Junk Food,' sloppy repairs will hurt your car's reliability.

"Begin your exercise program gradually, increasing the difficulty as you progress." When is the last time you really drove your car? Was it at least 100 miles round trip? You can learn a lot about your car if you first begin driving less than 100 miles. Take the long way to the Dairy Queen and make sure you can survive a 30 mile trip first. Watch your gauges and listen to your car. Does everything feel and sound okay? These little cars make lots of noise even when everything is fine, but if there is a problem, usually you can either feel it or hear it as you gradually increase your travel distance.

IS YOUR CAR COMFORTABLE?

Come on now, you bought this car to enjoy it didn't you? If it isn't comfortable, what needs to be done? Too often this is not addressed, but if you are not comfortable driving the car, you can never really enjoy using it! When I tell others (even British car owners) about all the long distance drives that we've taken, I usually hear responses like, "That sure must have been a long, difficult drive."

Difficult? If it was, we never would have taken it in the first place! I don't care much for freeway driving, but I really do enjoy driving down tree covered country roads, and here in Michigan (and the surrounding States), we can take them most anywhere.

If you've done the required things needed to maintain your car, and have insured that everything that must work will work (not only for a moment, but as long as needed), you are now ready to begin looking at how your car performs on the road. There are common sense solutions for just about any problem, and that's something we'll cover in the next part.

Driving Comfort

Today's automobiles have features that were never imagined 40 years ago giving drivers more comfort behind the wheel than anywhere else. Many of these features can be adapted to even the oldest car. Your old bucket seat can be made better than new simply by

adding a lumbar support into the seat's padding. Suspensions can either be modernized, or worn parts can be renewed to restore the car's handling ability.

Exactly how comfortable are you sitting in your car? It's very important to have sufficient room and this can be a problem for many of us. At 6' 3", I'm much too tall to fit properly into most of the smaller British cars, but there is enough room for me to fit into my MGB or Triumph. While you may fit comfortably in an MGA or many of the other smaller cars, as much as I admire them, I know they're all too small for me to really enjoy driving.

It's not easy to increase the space within the car, but with some effort, seats can be moved further back and even lowered slightly. If you are the only driver, an option would be to remove the seat tracks and mount it directly to the floor for added headroom. Done carefully, the removed parts could be replaced in the future.

Is your car comfortable to drive? Does it have one of those big or skinny steering wheels, or does the wheel rub against your leg while driving or shifting? Is your foot comfortable operating the gas pedal? Every car is different, but improvements can usually be made.

Smaller steering wheels, leather wheel covers and/or driving gloves can help, and the gas pedal position can be adjusted. In my MGB, I've modified the gas pedal position because I always felt I was holding my leg in an uncomfortable position. After doing this, my MGB has much the same feel as modern cars do.

If your car still has a 'Positive Ground' system, most modern accessories (and common sense) require you to change it. Conversion is very simple and instructions are written up in many "Moss" parts catalogs.



Want to install a radio and speakers? Modern radios feature push button tuning that finds the station for you, much safer than how it was before. Make certain that you have room to install adequate speakers so you'll be

able to hear with the top down because it won't be much use if you cannot hear it. One trick I've learned is to keep earplugs available. Using these, especially on windy days, I'm able to hear both the radio and my passenger more clearly because earplugs block out the wind noise. If you drive with the top down (and who doesn't), they really are essential for hearing protection as well as adding real comfort to the ride.

I'd be the first to admit that I'm not a Mechanic, but I do know something about preventative maintenance and that's coming next.

Maintenance

It may seem strange, but regular drives of at least 30 miles long is probably the best preventative maintenance that you can do for your car. Just like your body, occasional exercise does little more than cause pain, but consistent exercise really develops both a sense of well being and improved fitness.

Provided that your car is road worthy, frequent drives down winding roads with the engine running between 2,000 and 3,000 RPM can add years of healthy life to the mechanical parts of your car. Harm that has been caused from extended storage can be reversed because everything has a chance to benefit from the good lubrication you should have already done to your car.

Occasional bumps and turns exercise everything that moves, both in the suspension and drive-train. Squeaks will either begin to disappear or you'll locate their source and eliminate them.

If you'll listen, your car has a lot to say. The engine, transmission, rear axle and body all have their own unique sound and regular driving is the best way to learn what needs attention while at the same time, you practice your driving.

Planning ahead is vitally important before you venture out and really begin driving. Just like with exercise, you need to have the items available that you need. In this case, you're planning for both you and the car, so you need to be ready for just about any emergency.

Being prepared is important, because having to find help when you're stranded on the road in an old British car can be both difficult and embarrassing.

Coming up next: Planning ahead.

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Look for part 2 of this multi-part article in the June Issue of Can-Am Connection

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Planning Ahead

PLANNING FOR THE WORST
(A parable to consider)

Back when I was about eleven, my friend Pete and I were always hanging out at the local shopping plaza and I still remember one day in particular when Pete became a hero.

We had come upon a woman upset because she had locked her keys in the car. The motor was still running and neither she nor anyone else that had gathered around seemed to know what to do. I sure didn't know how to shut off the car, but my friend did.

Pete opened the hood (you could do that back then) and said he could stop the car by disconnecting the battery. There was only one problem; we didn't have any tools!

You may not believe this, but Pete called out to some boys riding by on their bikes and asked if anyone had a wrench. As it turned out, one boy did have a wrench and it was just the right size to fit the bolt on the battery cable. It took him just a minute to disconnect the ground cable and as we all should know, that's the ONLY 'correct' cable to undo first.

Later as Pete told the story to his folks, I remember him saying how surprised he was that those boys had just the right size wrench. Lucky coincidence? You bet it was.

Most of us have experienced times like this where we've been lucky, but that is not the important lesson in this story.

Almost every roadside emergency has a simple solution, but if you don't have anything to work with, you sure can't do much. Lucky coincidences are great to take advantage of, but don't ever count on them!

A properly maintained vehicle, driven on a regular basis will be very reliable, but minor problems are to be expected and, trust me, they will happen! Nearly every trip we've taken has had at least one minor mishap. Most we were prepared for but we've always managed to come back on our own. Yes, we've been lucky many times to be at just the right place when we've had problems, but we were also prepared.

There are several things to consider when you plan for the worst. Of course this includes both tools and various parts, but equally important are items to have on hand to stay clean.

Let's say you're on the way to some important event and that darn MG fuel pump fails. You've got the parts and know what to do, but how dirty are you going to get when you change it on the road? If you have a small tarp, some old clothes and maybe a pair of disposable gloves, you can do the job in a few minutes and no one will know you had trouble unless you tell them. Should you get a flat, that tarp can protect your nice clean trunk as well as anything else you've put in there when the dirty tire replaces your clean spare.

Tools, spare parts, miscellaneous nuts & bolts, terminals, wire and clamps can be easily stored in many areas of the car keeping the trunk space free for when you travel. There's really lots of room, just don't forget where you put them!

If you've planned ahead, you'll be as able as anyone to do simple roadside repairs. From a broken wire to replacing a radiator hose, the problems you're likely to experience usually only require basic skills. Provided you have the tools and parts with the car, you might even be able to help someone else.

Finding the Room

Finding room to store items in your car first requires making a list of what you should have on hand for emergencies. Below is a list of what I carry when traveling in either of my cars.

1. Spare Keys, Emergency Phone Numbers, and Money If you should lose your key, where in the world do you think you're going to get another one made? If you lose your wallet, you've lost everything unless you've got some way of contacting others. I'm sure my list of numbers isn't up to date, but it should include everything from your driver's license to credit card numbers as well as phone numbers. You can make up a code system when you write down this information so someone else will not be able to use it. With some money hidden with the spare keys, you won't need to go begging for help when you need to call friends and cancel credit cards. Stored carefully, it's as good as money in the bank.

2. Fire Extinguisher Every car should have one, but very few do.

3. Oil Did you ever try to find 20/50 oil at a gas station? Today, oil comes in very easy to use containers that can easily be stored.

4. Fan Belt All cars have one, even if yours doesn't have a pulley driven fan.

5. 'Premixed' Antifreeze Any problems with the cooling system will require replacing coolant.

6. Brake Fluid Be very careful with storing this since most types will damage paint.

7. Flashlight Sometimes they're even helpful in daylight.

8. Tarp A very useful item for many reasons. Mine fits out of sight, either under my floor mat or seat.

9. Work Clothes This also includes paper towels, hand cleaner and even better, a supply of thin latex 'examine' gloves.

10. Tools These include 'wheel chocks', small ignition and regular wrenches in addition to a spark plug socket. You should also have a gap tool, SU adjusting tool, voltage tester, screwdrivers, pliers, saw blade (to cut metal) and a razor knife handy.

11. Parts Almost all common spares that you own can be kept in the car. Various hoses, clamps, spark plugs, plug wires and cap, a fused wire, terminals, tape, nuts & bolts, safety wire and perforated hanger strap won't take up hardly any space, but will be worth their weight in gold when you need them.

12. Major Parts Includes fuel & water pumps (with the necessary gaskets), a spare coil and an alternator or generator, depending on your car.

The list may sound like a lot, but except for some of the major parts, there's plenty of room to store everything out of sight in the car. While yours may not be an MGB, the following storage tips can help you to find the room too. Here's what I do.

MGB STORAGE

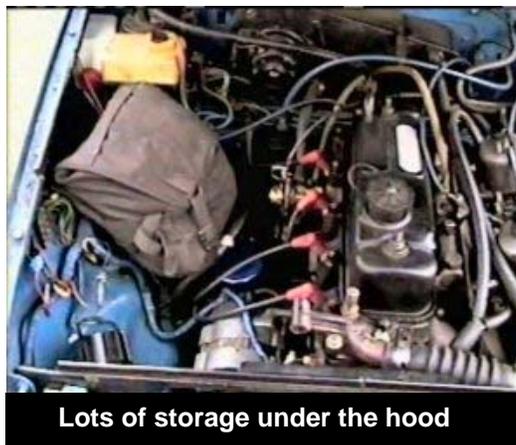
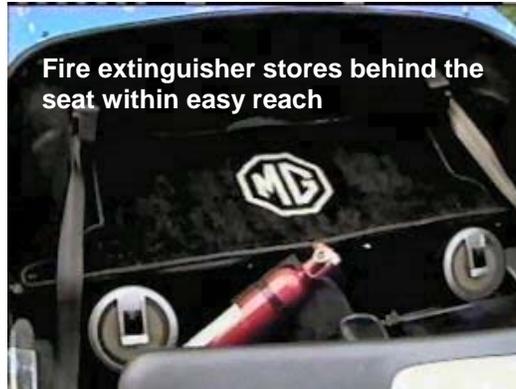
A. In the Trunk There's a cavity under the spare tire that has room for storage. This is my favorite spot to store keys, money, emergency numbers, hand cleaner, paper towels and perhaps even old work clothes. This is an area that's normally unseen and will keep these items both safe and clean. Keeping your papers in sealed plastic further insures that they won't get wet.

The area between the spare and where the end of the original fuel pump is located works perfectly for storing tire changing tools and a scissors jack (you should never risk using the car's 'original' jack). I keep mine there along with a spare fuel pump and an assortment of wrenches and screwdrivers. Another item that I store in my trunk way up high and suspended by the lid hinges is a golf umbrella. It's always accessible, stored out of the way in the trunk and useful for both rain or sun. Whenever it's needed, it's easy to get to.

B. Battery Box If you're lucky enough to have an older MG, the ones with two battery boxes, your car already has a perfect spot for storing many items. Another important thing to consider; is your battery securely fastened? If it just sits there unsupported (like mine does), at least insulate the top of the terminals with cardboard so there's no possibility of shorting out should the battery bounce when you hit a bump.

C. Under the floor mat and seat Tarps and plastic bags can easily be stored here. Small umbrellas can also be stored under the seat. In addition to the pocket located on the passenger side, you can usually find extra space behind the center radio console to store a full size Flashlight.

D. Engine Compartment There's usually lots of room here. In the cavities near the back on either side, you'll find room for storing quarts of oil and a spare fan belt. If you have one of those washer fluid bottles,



chances are it doesn't work and it can become additional storage space. While there isn't much room on the carburetor side to store items, I've attached a small bag on the spark plug side filled with small parts, tools, latex gloves and rags.

E. Front part of engine Located below the radiator, there is usually an air flow panel. It's a perfect place to store a full gallon container of premixed antifreeze. I'm not an engineer, but I believe the primary use was to prevent air flow from being sucked under the car instead of through the radiator. Regardless, using this space will not cause your car to overheat. The area around the radiator can also provide additional storage, but since it also can become very wet, carefully planning is required.

Now that you know where to put things, you can be prepared for most any problem and still have an empty trunk.

Enjoying The Drive

Driving a British car down winding tree covered roads can be simply intoxicating, especially if your car's a roadster. Both the eyes and ears can be overwhelmed by the beauty and sound all around you, and not just what you see out the windshield. Yes, it's a delightful distraction but watch out, you still need to pay attention! You can be so busy checking out the sights that you miss a turn or even worse, drive through an intersection where you were supposed to stop!

Are you Comfortable?

Driving in a small open car can be uncomfortable if you haven't planned ahead. Once again, a list to consider:

1. Clothing Is what you wear going to be blowing about your face or chest as you drive, or will the collar be slapping your face? It gets quite windy and the wrong clothing can blow up like a balloon. Ladies, will your loose fitting top keep trying to blow open in the wind?

Below the waist, if you are wearing shorts, are your legs going to be comfortable sitting on your vinyl or leather seat?

2. Towels Whenever we travel, we always have two full size towels and a hand towel with us. The smaller towel is kept behind the seat so that we always have it available to wipe our hands. The larger towels (stored in the trunk) can be a real lifesaver. On really warm days, we stay cool by sitting on them. Although our cars do stay dry when just sitting out in the rain, driving in a downpour seems to be an open invitation for water to leak in from everywhere. Those towels, draped across our legs help to keep us both dry and comfortable.

3. Hat or Sun-visor When you've got your top down, chances are your car's sun-visors will not block the sun's glare. This is especially important during midday when the sun shines down behind your sunglasses into your eyes.

4. Ear Plugs As mentioned before, these are vital for protecting your hearing as well as making the ride much more comfortable. While you may not always need them, you should have them available for when the wind comes blowing across your face as you're driving.

5. Lotion & Lip Balm Blistex or Chap Stick brand Lip Balm helps protect you from both sun & wind burn. Suntan lotion won't do you any good if it's left at home.

6. Cushion My wife uses one to elevate herself since she doesn't sit as high up as I do. Too bad they can't make a cushion to make you sit lower, because I could really use one of those. Another cushion to consider would be a small one to place behind your lower back.

7. Water We always travel with a jug of ice and water to quench our thirst. Kept right behind the passenger seat, it's there whenever we need it and in the glove box, we usually keep some hard candy. The water can also be used to freshen your face and hands when you are stopped..

8. Jackets & gloves Stored in the trunk, they come in handy and you'll always be prepared for a sudden change in the weather.

9. Maps Keep a good County map and road atlas in the car and it'll be there when ever you need to find an alternative route.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Plan your trips carefully, allow lots of extra time so that you are free to stop as often as you like. Driving from Michigan to New Mexico or Florida can seem like a long drive, but if you give yourself lots of extra time for sightseeing like we do, you'll never feel rushed or tired. Find room to take along a small gas grill and roadside parks can become your backyard away from home.

If you use just some of these ideas, you can safely begin traveling the backroads, confident that you're prepared. The drive will become the best part of your travels and you'll cherish the memories forever.

See you on the road...!