

OUR INCREDIBLE DRIVE TO GATLINBURG

By Rich Wagner

It all began last winter at a club meeting when Lise Brown mentioned the "MG 2006" event to be held in Gatlinburg. Having been to many car events over the last fifteen years, Adrienne and I frankly weren't really interested in another car show. However, the idea of traveling the backroads down to Gatlinburg at a leisurely pace was exciting just to think about. Promising Adrienne that we'd only be going for the drive (and not registering for the show), I offered to lead others down to Gatlinburg on a two day drive through the countryside instead of taking the 650 mile freeway route.

Joe and Ellen Stuban were first to sign up, but it wasn't long before Elvin and Janet Davis decided to give the scenic drive a try. Since the six of us had been on shorter drives together, I really looked forward to driving cross country in a group instead of alone.

Early Tuesday, we got started right on schedule quickly losing sight of each other in traffic heading down I-275 to Michigan Ave, and then over to M-52 South into Ohio. Thanks to modern cell phones, we easily regrouped in Ohio just south of US-20. From then on, we were together and often the only cars traveling down these deserted roads



TAKING THE LONG WAY...After driving more than four hours, our route crossed I-75 and we took a short break. That's when Joe and Elvin first realized that after all this driving (more than four hours), we were only just an hours drive from Toledo! It looked like I was about to have a mutiny on my hands. These guys were fired up about getting to MG 2006, and wanted to get down there. At least Janet was on my side, when she smiled and said she was enjoying the ride. She had come prepared with both maps and sudoku puzzles to pass the time. Reminding everyone that we were only driving through Ohio the first day, I figured I could keep them driving at a fast pace the rest of the way down to Portsmouth.

Yes—that's Rich's car waaaay up there.

SOMETHING TO SEE...I played "Catch Me if you Can" and kept the group cruising quickly down the road but at the same time, I was mesmerized by the scenic beauty all around our route. "I'm going to come back this way again." I told Adrienne. "I could fill a photo album with pictures of all these old broken down barns and abandoned houses."



The Classic Diner

THE CLASSIC DINER...Four years ago, Adrienne and I had discovered a real Classic Diner on our trip to New Mexico and that's where we stopped for lunch early in the afternoon. The group all ordered filling lunches, but I was just so excited that all I wanted was an old fashioned shake. Yes, I was excited. We had made our first destination on time and after a quick photo opportunity, we got started again for Portsmouth, arriving somewhere around 5 o'clock,



One of the abandoned buildings

"Ten hours and we've only driven through Ohio!" Elvin exclaimed with that familiar frustrated look on his face. Well, I guess I did forget to mention to them that driving the scenic route usually takes much longer. Still, we were still right on schedule. Shortly after 6 o'clock, the group was seated together for dinner just a block from the motel. Dinner wasn't as memorable as the last time Adrienne and I were there, but soon afterwards, we parted ways agreeing to get started by 8 o'clock tomorrow. Before returning to the motel, we wanted to check out the entire 2,000 foot flood wall mural. When we stopped here last time (during a trip to Florida in our Triumph), it had only been partially completed. This time it was finished and I was able to record the entire flood wall. Awesome!

On the way back to the motel, Adrienne bought us each a soft serve ice cream. Can you believe it? Cones were 60 cents, 80 cents and a dollar for small, medium and large when just a small cone in Michigan is much more than a dollar. What a great day this had been I thought to myself. Sure, I had missed one of my turns, but we still managed to stay both on course and on schedule.



Can you tell Janet from the mural?

ON OUR WAY TO GATLINBURG...Day two began with a Continental Breakfast served pool side. While it wasn't bad for a complimentary breakfast, the warm and humid pool area had me feeling more like we were having breakfast outside in Florida's humidity. This probably was a good thing though since I had no problems getting everyone going by 8 AM, promising Janet that we should easily be in Gatlinburg around 4 o'clock.

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The last time I came through Portsmouth, it had been very easy to continue south. This time however, the old US 23 Bridge was gone so I needed to get help. The motel clerk provided instructions for finding the next bridge (about 30 miles away). Elvin and Janet (who had a real map) took the lead to help find the way out of town and soon we were driving through the hills of Kentucky.

The drive really became more of a thrill ride as we drove up the two lane road, downshifting down to second to make it to the top and then quickly downshifting again to take the hairpin turn at the bottom of the hill only to start back up another one. Leading the pack, I drove this as hard and fast as I could. After all, it was up to me to get them to Gatlinburg on time. This was a hair raising experience for all and I was awestruck watching the trucks (some were tanker trucks) driving up and down these same roads just as fast as we were.

AN EARLY LUNCH... Knowing that everyone was expecting lunch but not sure when or where, I asked a friendly gas station attendant where we could stop to eat. Because we took so long fueling our cars and stretching our legs, I had to ask him again where the restaurant was (I am 60 years old ya know). Kidding him that I couldn't see where he was pointing and look at him the same time, he told me that the uphill road would lead right back onto the highway. I decided to have some fun with the group.

I pretty much knew where to go, but since I was leading, I thought I'd deliberately lead the group the wrong way up a hill (sure that I'd find my way back to the highway). That clever idea really back fired when (after a wrong turn), angry homeowners came running out yelling at us because we were trespassing! Well, at least there weren't any guns shooting at us and when we made our next turn, just ahead was our choice between McDonald's or a nice looking restaurant. What I didn't know then (but would learn on the way back), there wasn't another place to stop to eat for at least 150 miles.

We ran into construction from time to time, and once, it was a blasting crew that kept us waiting at least 30 minutes before we began seeing the traffic getting through from the other way. This exhilarating drive up and down the hills continued most of the day until we found ourselves climbing a straight and steady uphill grade just before 4 o'clock on Wednesday.

THE FIRST BREAKDOWN... The drive up and down the hills continued most of the day until we found ourselves climbing a straight and steady uphill grade just before 4 o'clock on Wednesday.

I was just able to maintain 60 MPH on the climb and we were nearly at the top when we heard and felt a loud bang followed by the familiar thump, thump, thump (just like a car having a blowout would feel). The car was never out of control, and we coasted onto the paved shoulder and then onto the gravel beside it expecting to change the tire (no big deal). Looking back down the road, we saw Elvin stop and pick something up but I had no idea that we had dropped anything.

What I couldn't understand at first was; how could it not be a flat tire, since everything else seemed just fine before it blew. We didn't have a blowout, the four tires were just fine; it was the drive shaft that had broken in two! Broken about nine inches from the rear U-Joint, the tube literally had torn in half while we were driving 60 MPH. This wasn't at a weld or at any other part that you might expect, but then again, who could ever imagine a drive shaft breaking? Were we overloaded? Let's see; gas tank full, back seat full and the trunk full with a large suitcase on the luggage rack, it certainly was fully loaded for all that stressful uphill climbing.

We've had some close calls, but this was the first time in our fifteen years of driving, that we were not going to be able to make our destination on our own. I'm always ready for nearly every emergency; but not a broken drive shaft.

So, there we sat; three cars along route 25E, without a clue where we were! Well, at least it was daylight, no one was injured, and I knew where to have our car towed to. We sent Joe and Ellen off on their own to find their way to Gatlinburg, and after giving Elvin my Hagerty Insurance information, he and Janet left to find out exactly where we were.



The broken drive shaft under the wheel



Adrienne stuck with a broken car

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I kept thinking that this could not have happened at a better time or place. Had it happened going up or down the hills, we could have gone off the road. Perhaps even worse, if I did manage to stop, we'd surely get smashed by the next car coming over the hill. Never before have we traveled with others, or had cell phones with nationwide service. Good fortune was with us in spite of the problem.

It wasn't long and we heard from Janet that they found out our location and had called Hagerty Insurance. The next phone call moments later was from Hagerty, assuring us that help was on the way and should arrive within two hours. Elvin and Janet came back once more to make sure we were all right before they headed for Gatlinburg on their own.

Now, if you have to break down in Tennessee in a MG, there's no better time to do it than at the beginning of your trip.

I had a pocket full of money, a room waiting for us in Gatlinburg and we were heading to what just might be the largest gathering of MGs ever. I stayed focused on getting both us and the car to Gatlinburg. Everything else could wait for tomorrow.

Within two hours after Elvin and Janet left, the flatbed car hauler arrived and we were on our way with Adrienne riding in the truck cab's back seat.

Shannon, a 24 year old from Tennessee expertly handled the whole process from pickup to delivery. Ninety miles is quite the long haul, so by the time he had gotten us through both Pigeon Forge and Gatlinburg to our motel, the three of us were no longer strangers.

We told him about us and Shannon sure told us about himself. He told about the time he hauled a car all the way to California, and then there was the story how his daddy (that's right, we're not in Kansas anymore), had restored several older cars selling one of them for as much as \$35,000.00. Everyone in his family (that includes wife, ten year old daughter and yes, even his two year old son) rides their own dirt bike. He went on to tell us his boy has been walking since he was seven months old.

Was all of this true? Who knows, but it sure helped pass the time while we rode to Gatlinburg. With Shannon's help, we found a suitable spot to put the car in the parking lot and I settled up with him for the ride. My share of the more than \$300.00 towing bill (Hagerty pays for the hookup and first ten miles) was \$170.00.

We got checked in, and by 8:00, we walked the short distance for dinner at Burger King, not our usual choice. On the way back, I picked up a 12 pack for me and we settled into our room where we showered and looked forward to a really good night's sleep.

Me, I went to bed planning thinking I'd be calling a service station in the morning to come get my car.



Rich & Adrienne arrive in Gatlinburg

END OF PART ONE

These first two days of driving provided some really breathtaking views along the blue highway route. I told Adrienne I could fill a book with photos of all that I've seen. Sure we had problems, but it could have been so much worse. Everything was going to be okay.

Coming up next issue: Back On The Road Again. If you think this story was something, just wait until you read how all of this worked out and what else happened to us during the drive both down to and back up from Gatlinburg. You'll never guess what else happens. This has been our most exciting driving trip ever!



Guess who's under the car fixing a drive shaft?



You guessed it...that's Rich! Hey, isn't that a Hungry Howies box being used as a pillow?

PART 2

By Rich Wagner

Last month, I wrote about our two day drive that got interrupted by a broken drive-shaft some ninety miles short of Gatlinburg. Thanks to modern cell phones and assistance from others in our group, we still managed to arrive at our motel before dark. Although many other cars were trailered to "MG 2006," most weren't equipped with flashing lights like our trailer was. Once we were settled, I went to bed expecting to be looking for a service station in the morning. Now the story continues, and here's how everything turned out.

When I awoke, my first thought was, "I can take that drive-shaft off myself," it's just eight bolts & nuts. Since I had the tools and clothing to work on my car, I was outside before daybreak to get started. My only real concern? Doing the job safely!

Just a short distance from my car, was a building under construction. Although the gate was locked, I took the block that had been left outside to stop the gate. Through the fence, I was able to reach a short 4 X 4 timber and with that 4 X 4 under my jack, it raised the car high enough to place the cinder block next to the jack and lower the car onto it.

I used some stones to block my wheels and broke down some cardboard boxes placing them under the car. Because I expected to be under the car for a while, an empty pizza box worked well as a head rest.

Less than thirty minutes later, the parts were removed and left lying next to my car. I put the placard with the club's logo and our name on the windshield, leaving the car up on the jack. It was eight o'clock, time for breakfast.

We walked down to the Pancake House to have breakfast that morning and while waiting in line, watched the action with all the MGs on the street. We said hello to several club members including Mary and Eric Marshall and after enjoying French Crepes for my breakfast, returned to the motel to begin hunting a replacement drive-shaft.

Of course, none of the vendors had a drive-shaft, and after calling all the local junk yards, my last chance seemed to be University Motors. When John Twist couldn't help, advising us to call Moss Motors, it began to look like I'd have a real problem getting my car fixed.

Seeing no other choice, I went back to the motel office to see about renting a car. This was perfect timing, because all my problems were about to disappear.

I was on the phone calling "Hertz" in the lobby when several people came in saying they needed to contact a guest whose name was Rich Wagner. "I'm Rich Wagner" I said, and was introduced to Chuck Hamilton. Chuck had come to "MG 2006" and seeing my car, wanted to help telling me that he had a spare drive-shaft at home. He was going home that day anyway, but would return with a drive-shaft in the late afternoon. Adrienne came into the office and I was able to introduce her to Chuck and share the good news that he was going to help. He asked us where we had broken down and when I told him the area was known as "Clinch Mountain," Chuck smiled saying, "that's where I live." "What a great day," I thought to myself as we left the motel lobby. Everything would be fixed tomorrow.

Having the whole day to ourselves, Adrienne wanted to explore the area so she took the trolley into town. As for me, it was going to be really hot and I still had plenty of cold beer in the motel room fridge. Yes, it was turning out to be a very good day, and I spent it checking out the cars and watching TV in the room.

Dinner that evening was with Elvin and Janet Davis and we walked down to "Calhoun's" for chicken and ribs. Returning to the motel lobby, I discovered that just as promised, my replacement drive-shaft was there waiting for me. Not just an old part off of an old car, this drive-shaft looked like new. Wrapped in toweling, Chuck had supplied a complete set of locking nuts & bolts and even extra gloves to keep my hands clean. "The kindness of strangers," I thought to myself. As long as there wasn't something else wrong with the car, we'd be back on the road tomorrow.

Up early on Friday, I improvised a holder for my small flashlight and got busy right away installing the new drive-shaft. Just in time, Joe Stuban stopped by to see how I was doing and with him putting the car in and out of gear, I tightened all the bolts in no time. After the jack was removed, I drove the car to make certain that everything seemed okay, which thankfully it did. I put my tools away, parking the car out in front not realizing that I was about to have another incredible experience. That's when I met Jennifer.

Now don't go getting the wrong idea; it wasn't that kind of experience. My Wedding Anniversary was the following day, and yes, I am very happily married to my best friend Adrienne. Now back to my story.

Jennifer McCarter was the midnight shift clerk at our motel and she was just getting off work when we met. Stopping to say hello, she told me she had owned an MGB back in 1966. I'm always thrilled to meet others who like myself, had one of these cars back when they were nearly new, but this was the first time the owner had been a girl! I soon learned that this had been her very first car and she was just 16 years old when her father bought her a three year old, 1963 MGB. I could hardly imagine any father buying a MG for a 16 year old son, but for his daughter?

As she began relating her memories of that car and her father to me, the spontaneity was so good that I pleaded with her to allow me to record it. Thankfully she did, and for more than 15 minutes, she told about her experiences while I explained to her about my recent problem with the drive-shaft. What made this so exciting was that when I played it back later, the unrehearsed conversation was flawless.

With the car repair finished and the sun shining, it was time to wake up Adrienne. When Joe Stuban had left earlier, we agreed to meet together later for breakfast. I wanted to have my French Crepes once again, so we met them at the same Pancake House later that morning. I was just beaming as I told them of my encounter with Jennifer and how our car was good as new again. What a great day this had already been and it wasn't even ten o'clock in the morning. That evening, we had all agreed to meet for dinner but this time, the weather had changed and it was raining. What we didn't know was that most of the scheduled banquets were also nearby and the parking lot was full. Making this worse, the entrance to the parking area was "One Way" and a vehicle was blocking the exit, forcing people to attempt to drive back down against cars trying to drive up. This was crazy, especially in a downpour and when we found another place for dinner, we called the others, telling them we'd see them tomorrow.

Saturday, the six of us, The Stubans, The Davis' and Adrienne and me, headed off in our three MGBs with the Stubans in the lead for our own little road trip into the Smoky Mountains. The drive began with an ice cream stop and wanting to keep out of the sun, I parked our car in the trees with about a dozen bikers. I soon learned that these people were actually all related to one-another and had gathered in Tennessee for a family reunion on wheels. What a great idea. Saturday evening, Adrienne and I celebrated our wedding anniversary far away from the tourist areas at a hilltop restaurant. Since we had begun our life together in 1991 driving an MGB, it seemed only fitting that 15 years later, we'd still be on another driving trip.

Tomorrow, everyone is heading for home, leaving us on our own. But that's another story.

I was up early Sunday, to say good-bye to the Elvin, Janet, Joe and Ellen as they began their drive home via I-75. Our drive home started out nice but then it rained. As we entered Kentucky, the water was gushing down like small waterfalls on both sides of the road. Our car stays nice & dry sitting in the rain, but driving in it is another story. A steady drip began working it's way down the door seals and we put towels on our legs to catch the water. With the wipers running on high, I was just able to see with the windows steaming up. Still, it really wasn't so bad once we got accustomed to it.

Looking for a place to have lunch, we found ourselves right back at "Pine Mountain," the same place we had stopped going down. No sooner were we inside when the sky opened up again so we had ourselves a long leisurely lunch. While we waited for the rain to subside, we couldn't help but wonder how the others were doing driving on I-75 in all this rain?

It was late evening before we finally reached Portsmouth. No sooner had we sat down for dinner when my cell phone rang; it was Ellen Stuban calling to let us know that they were already home! It turns out they had pleasant weather all the way home and not the steady rain like we had. Wow, we thought, we're only half way home and they're already there.

Up bright and early, we were back on the road by 9:00 AM. This was a beautiful morning for a drive and since we were alone, I looked forward to stopping along the way at those dilapidated buildings we had seen going down. Badly weathered and showing much neglect, they were extremely photogenic with a beauty that can only come naturally. For us, driving these deserted byways as they cut through rural America is exactly what we enjoy most about owning a British Sports Car.

It was 1:00 PM when we stopped in Mt. Victory for lunch and pulling into the parking area, we spotted a Shelby Cobra. What a great photo opportunity I thought, "The Overpowered meets the Underpowered." Even more surprising, when Adrienne walked around the car, she discovered that it had Hawaiian license plates! Sure enough, there I was with my camcorder in hand when out comes this Hawaiian guy to say hello. It turns out that in his younger days, he had owned an Austin Healey 100/4 and he shared old memories of racing it up the mountains in Maui. He and his wife Miki had just stopped for lunch and invited us to join them. During lunch, we learned that they have traveled all over the United States and Canada in one of their two Cobras where they compete on racetracks with others in the Shelby Club. They were headed for Dearborn, so after a leisurely lunch and small talk, we got back on the road and for nearly 60 miles, they followed our MG. When we reached Findlay, we waved good-bye as their Cobra really got moving on I-75.

Already three o'clock, we decided that we needed to pick up the pace and continue the rest of the way on freeways. South of Toledo, we took I-475 towards U.S.23 and maneuvered through heavy truck traffic before finally getting into Michigan.

With just a few miles left to go and nothing in the fridge at home, we began discussing where we'd stop for dinner. Cruising along at 70 MPH, everything seemed just fine when Adrienne mentioned that it looked like we were starting to burn oil? That didn't make any sense. The exhaust was on my side of the car and I didn't notice anything even after I steadied my side view mirror for a better look. Moments later, the car began slowing down and even stepping on the gas didn't help. This time, it didn't seem to be a fuel pump problem because the engine was still running, but we were only doing 35 MPH when I pulled off the road. Though none of the gauges indicated a problem, I noticed some fresh antifreeze under the car when I walked around to open the hood. Just as I opened the hood, Adrienne called out, "Rich, the back wheel is on fire!" Seeing the flames coming right through the alloy wheel, I grabbed my fire extinguisher and put out the fire.

As I was getting out the jack to remove the wheel, Adrienne called out again saying, "Now it's burning under the car," so this time, I laid on the ground and using the remainder of the fire extinguisher as Adrienne stood there telling me not to get dirty. "Cool" I thought to myself. For fifteen years, I've carried a fire extinguisher, and now I've finally used it. With the fire out, I pulled off the rear wheel being careful to avoid getting burned. Everything was under control, at least I thought so.

Apparently a passing truck had called in the emergency and the next thing I knew, two Milan Fire Trucks arrived on the scene, the second one blocking the right lane of traffic. There I was, standing along the road waiting for this "emergency" to be done with so I could call Hagerty Insurance for a tow. The fire was apparently caused by burning brake fluid because my rear brake drum had overheated, (I would later learn from Guy St. John that the flexible brake hose connecting my rear axle had caused the problem).

While waiting for the tow truck (it arrived in under an hour), I called Guy (he has caller ID). Knowing it was me, he answers saying, "Okay, what's wrong this time?" After getting his okay to bring our disabled car to his garage, that's where we had the tow truck driver take us. Guy gave us a ride home allowing Adrienne and I to still have dinner by eight o'clock. "How lucky" I thought. Thanks to Guy, I didn't have to have a broken down car sitting in my driveway.

Back at work the next morning, I really had some story to tell; a broken drive shaft and then a car fire in Michigan after driving all the way back from Gatlinburg. In both cases, I had absolutely nothing to warn me that I was about to have a problem. Within a week, Guy had gone through my rear brakes and located the faulty brake hose that caused the rear brakes to overheat. That's easy to understand, but the broken drive-shaft? I still don't know how I managed that, even if I was (as Janet Davis said), "**A Driving Fool.**"

My story ends with our car back on the road again and since that time, I've driven to "Mad Dogs XVI" and most recently to Leamington, Ontario without incident.

Anybody want to buy a really good car?

