

A SPORT UTILITY VS. ANYTHING ELSE

Can owning a sport ute change your life?

by Gina Goss

One woman's experience suggests that once you're into the lifestyle, you may find it hard to believe you ever lived without an SUV.

There seems to be a high level of fascination with the world of sport-utility vehicles and the people who drive them. For some, an SUV is simply just another mode of transportation – a vehicle that will be driven for two or three years and then discarded for something bigger and better. For others, however, it is much more than a way of getting around – it is a way of life.

When you choose to drive an SUV instead of a regular car, people sometimes feel compelled to ask you why. The “outsider’s” expectation is that SUV drivers are fulfilling some type of childhood fantasy. Well, I hate to disappoint anyone, but I for one do not have any psychological reasons for owning an SUV. I’m just your normal (depending on who you talk to) 38-year-old female, with one husband and one Airedale terrier. The relationship I have with my SUV is based on a very practical foundation that can be summed up in one word – Freedom.

Before life with an SUV, I always felt that I was an independent person. Looking back, though, I realize my actions did not support my feelings. In reality, I lacked the confidence one needs to be truly independent. It might sound crazy, but owning an SUV helped build my confidence and ultimately create my own freedom.

It didn’t happen overnight, though. Like any good, strong relationship, it took time and patience to develop, not to mention a little help from two Jeep Cherokees, a Land Rover Discovery and a Land Rover Defender 90. It began seven years ago, but I remember it just like it was yesterday.

“The Mountain”

I’ll never forget the day I decided to give up my ordinary car for a sport utility vehicle. It was January, 1993, and New Jersey felt more like the Arctic, rather than “The Garden State.” Other than the forecast for six to 12 inches of snow, it was a pretty typical workday. The alarm went off at 5:30 a.m., and my husband, Wright, and I enjoyed a cup of coffee while watching his favorite television station – The Weather Channel.

Since part of Wright’s job as an excavator was snow-plowing in the winter, he had already been fully briefed on the upcoming “Blizzard of ‘93” – the sensational name the media was using to describe what residents in northern Michigan probably called flurries.

On this particular day, the weatherman didn’t seem any more confident with his forecast than normal, so I shrugged off the forecast and the idea of digging my boots out of the attic. I ventured off to work in my stockings and heels – choosing to deal with the less than likely consequences later.

By 3:00 p.m., snow was falling at a steady pace. The roads were covered and there were reports that traffic was starting to back up on the highways. Those of us who lived in “the boondocks” were told we could



go home early. Two hours later as I crawled along in my car, death grip on the steering wheel, I realized that Mother Nature had her own definition of “early.”

When I finally reached my exit off the interstate, it was snowing so hard that I could barely see 10 feet in front of my car. The snow had really piled up on the secondary roads, and I could feel my wheels slipping and sliding with each turn. Somehow, though, I managed to maintain control of the car and my fear, until I remembered “The Mountain.”

Most every town has its claim to fame, and ours was an eighth-mile stretch of pavement with a 55-percent incline. When the road was dry, it presented nothing more than added stress on a vehicle’s engine. Add a little snow and ice to the picture, and it might as well be straight up.

It had only snowed three times in the four years we had been living in Hunterdon County, NJ, and each time the snowfall was extremely manageable. This time things were different. The temperature was below freezing and the snow was falling too fast for the plows to keep up.

As I headed up “The Mountain,” I tried to remember all of the driving tips Wright had lectured me on over the years, but my mind went blank. All I could hear was the spinning of my tires and the pounding of my heart. After the eighth attempt at ascending, I unwillingly conceded, allowing my car to park itself wherever its final skid ended. As I climbed “The Mountain” in my stockings and heels, desperately grabbing on to the limbs of trees and bushes, my home and warm slippers seemed like a million miles away.

Never Again

It took Wright an hour and a half to dig out my car from the snow bank the plows had created around it. Unfortunately, during our seven years of marriage, there had been other storms and other snow banks. In fact, Wright was baffled by the predicament I had gotten myself into. After all,

snow was his business and having a wife that couldn't drive in it – well, that didn't exactly sit too well with him. Honestly, I'd be lying if I didn't admit that I, too, was completely embarrassed by the episode. With more snow in the forecast, I needed to take drastic measures that would prevent a repeat of my performance and perhaps most important a "guest appearance" in my hometown paper. It was finally time to graduate to a "big girl" vehicle.

To say I never looked back would be an understatement. I thought I'd at least experience a moment or two of remorse when I traded in my car for an SUV. The trust had been broken, though. There would be no reconciliation. And as I drove home from the dealership in my new 4x4, all of my reservations and fears subsided. It was hard to believe, but I felt a confidence I had never experienced before. I thought to myself, this is ridiculous – it's only a car... or an SUV. But something happened that day. I really felt different, and I liked it. I knew I had made the right choice.

For about a month after I bought my SUV, I was like a member of a newfound cult. I had never experienced such enthusiasm for an automobile, and it was a bit disturbing to me – and to most of my family and friends. I couldn't help it, though. I had been driving a car for 14 years and never knew what I had been missing. I wanted to shout it to the whole world.

Furthermore, I wondered why the car companies weren't communicating this feeling of confidence and freedom to the buying public. I had seen the macho TV ads that showed SUVs speeding through the mud and snow, and I always thought they were nothing more than a fancy version of my husband's utility truck (which, of course, I had little fondness for). It wasn't until I actually drove an SUV that I truly appreciated the concept. And while I'm not much good at predicting the future, there was one thing I was willing to bet my life on – I knew I'd never again own an ordinary car.



The Long Way Home

The winter of '93 was probably one of New Jersey's worst in years. By the end of the season, I had perfected my winter driving skills and I truly didn't want to say goodbye to the snow. For the first time in my life, I was able to experience the beauty of winter...the kind of beauty I had only seen in picture books and movies. One of my fondest memories is the first storm after I bought my SUV. From a weather perspective, it was almost a repeat performance of early January. From a personal perspective, and this may sound a bit dramatic, it was the storm that changed my life.

It was a Friday afternoon, and the snow had started falling around 1 p.m. By 3:30, the parking lot at work was a winter wonderland. The snow was coming down hard and fast, and by the time I brushed off my SUV, the color of my long black coat was barely visible.

After turning the ignition over, I put the car in gear and gingerly exited the parking lot. I stopped a couple of times to check out the ABS brakes and to get a feel for the vehicle's responsiveness in snow. My heart was pounding with anticipation. After all, this was it. I had prayed for this storm and for the opportunity to be impressed by my new four-wheel-drive partner. I was not prepared for disappointment. I was ready to hit the highway and climb "The Mountain" by my house.

The highway was a parking lot as usual. Unless your transportation of choice was a helicopter, you were not in control of your own destiny.

Several cars had skidded off the road and were stuck. Things did not



appear to be moving at all. Depression was quickly setting in, when all of a sudden I saw the faint glow of headlights moving up the right-hand shoulder of the road in my rearview mirror. I smiled when the vehicle passed by and I saw what it was – an SUV. I thought to myself, “Should I?” At this point, I was only a novice SUV driver, and although I was feeling confident, I was well aware of my limitations and lack of experience.

I quickly looked around at all of the miserable faces, hands tightly gripped on their steering wheels, waiting for the moment their vehicles would progress an inch or two. I bit my lip, turned the steering wheel towards the shoulder and tapped the accelerator lightly. The plows had created a barrier of snow between the road and the shoulder, which all of a sudden seemed like Mt. Everest.

Fear was quickly starting to take over, and in the pit of my stomach I had that nervous feeling, the one I'd always get just before it was time to jump off the ski lift at the top of a mountain. I tapped the accelerator again, closed my eyes (only for a second) and broke out of the line of traffic. I turned off at the first exit, and for the first time in my life, I took the long way home.

An hour later when I finally arrived at “The Mountain” by my house, a funny thing happened – I realized it wasn't a mountain after all.

A Whole New Perspective

The winter of '93 may have changed my life, but it was the spring that opened the door to a whole new world of adventure. The personality of my SUV was quickly rubbing off on me and started to seriously affect the way I was spending my free time. Without a second thought,



I found myself frequenting antique auctions in Pennsylvania and retail outlets in New England on the weekends. And when it came time for Wright's birthday, the annual shopping spree at Banana Republic was replaced by buying a mulching lawn mower, which I conveniently loaded into the back of my SUV and proudly presented to him.

Wright began wondering if soon I'd be moving us out to the Rockies, when we received an interesting invitation from my best friend and her husband (fellow SUV owners). They had recently purchased a home on a lake in Pennsylvania and had been begging us to come for a weekend visit. With the SUV, there was now plenty of room for Chaps (our Airedale) to travel comfortably, so we embarked on our first family adventure. Traveling had never been one of our dog's favorite pastimes. It was always a bit difficult for him to fit his large 80-lb. frame on the back seat of my car, and his hyper personality wasn't well suited for the open air freedom of the back of Wright's pickup truck.

The lake was about a two-hour drive from our home in New Jersey, and the route we took was filled with breathtaking sights. By now, I was used to the increased height of our SUV, but it was really the first time I realized how much it enhanced the view of





a country drive. Chaps was in heaven, sprawled out on his doggie bed, wind in his fur and sunshine on his belly.

We probably did more driving and sightseeing in that one weekend than we had done the entire time we had been married. We fell in love with the lake and the peacefulness and tranquility of the whole area. We even found a little cabin that would make the perfect weekend getaway. When we returned home that Sunday evening, we were both thinking the same thing – we couldn't wait to return. A few weeks later, we made an offer on the cabin and soon we were spending every weekend at the lake.

By the end of the next summer, we were true outdoor enthusiasts and had a whole new perspective on life. Depending on the season, our weekends were filled with everything from sailing and water skiing to ice-skating and snow skiing. In two short years we had gone from spending our free time in restaurants and movie theaters, to enjoying sunset boat rides and late-night campfires. Some might call it a coincidence – I call it an SUV.

Three Little Words

It wasn't long before our enthusiasm for the "off the beaten path" lifestyle started influencing our vacation choices. After enjoying a summer of sunset cruises and early morning water skiing, somehow a week in the Caribbean sipping pina colodas didn't seem all that exciting.

As the summer of '97 was nearing its close, Wright and I decided we were not quite ready for fall. We still had some vacation time left, so we decided to

explore the possibility of a trip to the Outer Banks in North Carolina. Wright had grown up vacationing there and remembered that the beaches were really beautiful – and desolate after Labor Day. We phoned our lake friends to see if they were up for an adventure, and they quickly signed on.

With a little help from the Internet, we found a real estate company with on-line photos of rentals. Properties were classified into four categories: beachfront, semi-beachfront, bay front and four-wheel drive. Naturally, we gravitated to the four-wheel-drive properties.

The weekend after Labor Day we packed up our SUVs and headed south for the shores of North Carolina. None of us knew what to expect. All we knew was that the house was five miles up the beach,

and in order to get there you needed four-wheel drive. Piece of cake, right?

Nine hours of highway driving later, we were deflating our tires and wondering if the sign that warned of wild horses was some type of joke the locals played on tourists. It took us half an hour to drive five miles up the beach to our house. It was the first time any of us had driven in sand, and it was a bit more challenging than we had expected. Fortunately, there was not a soul on the beach, so all we had to contend with were the waves and the seagulls.

By the end of our vacation, we had spent 95 percent of our time in a world that had no concept of what blacktop was or what convenience stores sold. And when it was time to pack up our SUVs and head for the interstate and the civilization we called home, we knew we had experienced a new level of freedom.

Before we ever made it to the house that first day, we knew we would be returning to the Outer Banks for many years to come. There were many things we fell in love with during our time there – the private beaches, the magnificent sunrises and sunsets, the wild horses (it wasn't a joke). Nothing left a bigger impression on us, though, than the endless miles of sand dunes and marshes that formed a protective barrier between the ocean and the bay. Nestled in those dunes, we discovered a world that few people know exists. I'd like to say we discovered it because we were looking for it. The truth is, we discovered it because of three little words – "sport-utility vehicle."

Gina Goss has 15 years experience writing advertising and marketing copy for a variety of industries, including automotive, healthcare and insurance. She currently drives a Land Rover Discovery.

