

# USA 2005: How the West Was Driven

There are three areas where a se7en excels: as a track weapon, a stress reliever, and...a touring car. A non-se7en owner will probably fixate on that last claim and scratch his head. *How can a car that small, with marginal weather protection, and no A/C or stereo possibly excel at touring?* But it does – provided the roads are lightly traveled, preferably twisty ribbons of asphalt that lead you to beautiful scenery and out of the way places. A se7en involves you in your surroundings like no other car. It's like a motorcycle in that regard, just a lot harder to tip over at a stop light.

UK se7en owners are no stranger to this capacity for taking two people on an adventure. In fact, the Se7ens.net club sponsors at least one major tour in Europe each year and they are so well organized they even have their own support truck. Shortly after I bought the Westfield in 2001, someone on the Se7ens list posed the bold question "Why not conduct a tour in the States?" Now my recollection of facts may be off a bit here, but through my hazy memory the idea was quickly abandoned once shipping costs were calculated. Fast forward about a year and the shipping cost situation was magically resolved. Through the tireless efforts of a small group of dedicated enthusiasts, the monumental task of logistics was conquered and the tour plan began to magically evolve from dream to reality. USA2005 was now on!

In early September, forty-one Se7ens boarded a ship headed for the States and landed in Houston during the lull between hurricanes Katrina and Rita. An advance group unloaded the containers and the cars were picked up the next day by their eager owners who hadn't seen their cars for about 3 weeks. Some people let their enthusiasm for the reunion get the best of them, and were quickly admonished by the Houston police department. Apparently some of the locals had a problem with acts of selflessness such as free alarm sensitivity testing of cars parked in the hotel garage, and using the rear tires to paint large rubber concentric circles on the roads in an attempt to increase grip for other drivers.

After leaving Houston, the group set out for a couple of days in Austin, followed by a day in Midland, TX, two days in Ruidoso, NM, a day in Santa Fe, two days in Durango, CO, and then off to Vail. Our original plan was to join up the second day in Durango, but our dog was a little under the weather, so we delayed our start by a day to make sure he was okay and instead joined the party in Vail.

When I look back at our version of the tour, it breaks up into three discrete legs: The 1270 mile trek to Vail, the 1700 mile journey with the tour from Vail to San Francisco, and the 830 mile drive home to Seattle.

## Leg 1: Getting there

There was a lot of preparation work completed over the 2 weeks leading up to our departure. In addition to the standard safety check items to ensure the Westfield was road worthy, we had to get a little creative on the packing front. After all, a se7en doesn't suffer from wasted space, nor weight adding measures like weatherproofing of the passenger or storage compartments. Consequently we had to pack like we were going camping. For my wife this meant keeping it down to only five pairs of shoes (no, really, just five...I was so proud) and for me, it meant that it was a good thing I like to wear shorts and don't mind being cold. We did some damage to the credit cards at REI buying various stuff sacks, dry bags, and space saver bags with one-way valves that enable you to crush high loft clothing into fairly small packages. When all was said and done, we managed to pack the car to a degree that almost inspired pride and definitely inspired fear; *How the hell was I going to replicate this feat do this every morning?*

From a mechanical perspective, my biggest concern was engine temp. The Duratec with Golf alloy radiator seemed to run very hot at idle and I wasn't sure how it would cope in the desert where the temperatures could potentially reach flesh searing highs. In preparation I flushed the system twice, added Redline Water Wetter, and fabricated fan and radiator shrouds. The only other mechanical issue was a slight oil leak that seemed to originate from the Raceline adapter that repositions the oil filter from vertical to horizontal. Between that leak and the slow one from the gearbox, I knew the Westfield would continue to mark its territory when parked for any length of time, but this was more of an inconvenience for whoever owns/maintains those spots, than it was for me. Note: that last line is what literary types refer to as foreshadowing.

In anticipation of the trip I made a custom boot box out of aluminum that was approximately 20% bigger than stock. It housed all the electronics (laptop, GPS receiver, and power adapters for the laptop, camera, and cell phone), clothes, some toiletries, spares, shoes, empty plastic bags and other miscellaneous items. The remaining toiletries, shoes, spares, and empty bags were stowed behind the seats along with the camel backs (one per seat) first aid kit, extra quart of oil, and wind wings. The tools were under the bonnet, and the remaining key items (sunglasses, tripod, camera, lighter, flashlight, maps, etc) were either in the glove box or in the day pack that shared space in the footwell with my wife's legs. The car cover was in a stuff sack that doubled as a leg rest in front of the driver's seat. Like I wrote, the car was packed.

### *Friday*

Our departure day started early and included a stop at the local Starbuck's for some much needed Seattle gold: coffee. Julie played biometric cup holder as we jumped on I-90, and set out on our little adventure. As we passed through Snoqualmie pass, a big sign informed us that the temperature was only 36 degrees. Suddenly I understood why there was no feeling in my fingertips. Time to don the driving gloves, and reconsider my earlier decision to forgo installing a heater during the rebuild.

About 1-1/2 hours later we stopped in Ellensburg to pay the tax on our earlier Starbucks run and topped up the tank as long as we were there. This led to the discovery of our first problem: a gas leak. The previous week I had installed a new capacitance style fuel sender with adjustable output for a low fuel warning light. For some reason fuel was seeping up through the threads of the sender's retaining bolts and then rolling down the side of the tank. Obviously this was only a problem when the tank was filled to capacity, so we decided to stop filling it all the way until I

could fix it that night. Before leaving town I picked up some gasoline-safe liquid gasket which I planed to apply to the bolt threads after we arrived at the hotel in Caldwell, Idaho.

We continued through Washington State and entered North Eastern Oregon later that day. The trip through Eastern Oregon was not what I would call a visual feast. In fact looking at the barren scenery, I conclude that the original settlers only picked that spot because they lost a bet.

The second problem reared its ugly head towards the end of day one as we made our way out of Oregon. Going around some long bends on the freeway, the mechanical oil pressure gauge began rapidly fluctuating between 60-70 psi. I had never noticed this behavior before, so I began to watch the gauge more closely to see if we were having a more serious problem. A little later, we hit Idaho where the speed limit rose to a more enlightened 75mph. The oil pressure was now showing the 10psi fluctuation while traveling in a straight line. This didn't seem good.

The rate of fluctuation was exactly what I would expect from a faulty electrical sender, which was strange since the Racetech gauge is mechanical. A little experimentation followed and revealed that by lowering my speed by 10 mph the fluctuation diminished from a 10-12psi swing to a 1-2psi variance. After we arrived at the hotel I tried revving the engine to the rpm we saw on the freeway at both speeds and discovered that the pressure was rock steady. At that stage the popular theory among my friends with whom I conferred via e-mail was that the gauge was susceptible to the cabin air pressure variations occurring at higher speeds. The interior of the car is very drafty and with the added component of high winds, there was a lot of buffeting throughout the cabin, including the area behind the dash.

Speaking of wind, it was blowing very, very hard by the time we arrived at the hotel that afternoon. It was so strong that I had to track down some rope to tie the cover to the car! When we awoke the next morning the car and its cover were still there, so I began what was to become a ritual on each new leg of the tour – repacking the car. This process was akin to Tantalus and his big rock. Every morning I would get the car completely packed and discover that I had a piece of luggage leftover, so I would need to start the process all over again. Although our total number of belongings never changed, the way they were distributed among the various space-saver bags did, and because space was so tight, there was generally only one way they would all fit in the car. There is nothing like tackling a brain teaser every morning without the aid of caffeine.

### *Saturday*

From a weather and scenic perspective, the trip to Provo was very similar to the second half of day one. We experienced some rain, strong winds, barren vistas, and unfortunately an increase in oil spraying back into the cockpit. At high speeds, the airflow appeared to spray the oil leaking from the oil filter mounting plate into a fine mist that came around the back of the car and then forward onto the windshield. And of course, since we were positioned between the back of the car and the windshield, it was spraying a bit on us as well.

During this leg I confirmed that a very light, minimalist, aerodynamically challenged car isn't particularly fond of strong cross winds, nor is it at its best during sustained high speed travel on wide, straight interstates. Fortunately day 3 would see us enter Colorado where the roads

change for the better, but before we got there, we had to pass through Provo, UT. I wasn't expecting much from this college town, but much to our surprise we found a great little Italian restaurant and some pleasant scenery. That night I checked the oil level and discovered that we had used another ½ quart, so it appeared the oil leak was constant and would require attention. At this point I began cursing myself for not replacing the flimsy looking Ford gasket that sits between the block and the oil filter housing with a good liquid gasket when I had the sump off last month. Oh well, I always wanted to perform an oil change in a ski resort...

### *Sunday*

We got an early start out of Provo and hit the mountains outside of town by 7am. The air temperature felt much colder than the 36 degrees we hit when leaving Seattle, and is best described as downright frigid. Fortunately the oil spraying back into the cockpit helped to insulate us a bit from the bitter cold and delay the onset of frostbite. In fact not only were we insulated, er covered, with Redline's finest, but so were the windshield, rear view mirror, my glasses, and as we later discovered, the lens of the camera. This was definitely something that I had to fix during the layover in Vail.

The scenery on this leg became more and more breathtaking as we made our way east and climbed the Rockies. The golden yellow leaves of the Aspen trees dominated the landscape and were a sharp departure from the barren views of Eastern Oregon. Although I didn't have time to install a MAP sensor in the Westfield before we left, the engine still ran surprisingly well. Yes, it was a bit rich, and yes this fact coupled with the thinning air conspired to rob power, but the car still had surprising pull in 5th gear at speed. We also saw some corners that day, which was a nice contrast to the arrow straight roads that made up most of the previous two days.

At approximately 2:15pm we exited the freeway and turned onto the surface streets of Vail. Almost immediately, we spotted a gentleman wearing a British Racing Green polo shirt waving us down. I was about to return the wave with my best imitation of the Queen recognizing her subjects – elbow, elbow, wrists, wrist – but before I could respond, I saw the little Lotus emblem on his shirt. This required further investigation, so we stopped and learned that some of the local Lotus club members had volunteered to play corner worker and help flag everyone to the hotel parking area. Upon our arrival I saw two other se7ens parked in the garage, one of which was a Westfield. A red Westfield. Given that I had never before seen another Westfield in the flesh, let alone a red one, I had to take the spot next to that particular example of the genre. It was at this stage that the tour officially began for us.

### Leg 2: The trip of a lifetime

As we exited the car, the excitement began to build. We were really here! A hotel employee greeted us and give us directions to the front desk for check in. As we entered the lobby, we realized that this was a very, very nice hotel. In fact it was so nice that I couldn't quite understand how it made the itinerary. After all, most of the hotels on the route fall into the Holiday Inn Express/Quality Inn category – i.e. clean and safe, but not places that would ever advertise for a concierge in the help wanted section of Hotels Magazine. We soon learned that we were originally booked at different hotel in town, but their garage was subsequently condemned (I'm sure that is a good story) so they worked out a deal with the Lodge at Vail to accommodate our little entourage.

Vail is a typical upscale ski town, which means things aren't a just little pricey, they are flat out expensive. Case in point: We went into a seemingly innocuous clothing store and my wife picked up a pair of glittery socks. Price tag? \$69. Okay, glitter is expensive. I'm sure each flake was painstakingly attached to the sock by a seasoned artisan whose craft had been handed down through his family from generation to generation, so perhaps this price was not too absurd. We then moved onto a pair of normal looking socks, the kind you would find in any dresser drawer of any home in the States. Price tag? \$72!! A little later we entered a Western store and looked at the large assortment of cowboy boots. The first ones we picked up? \$5200! Okay, okay, so they were incredibly ornate, obviously handcrafted by a seasoned artisan whose craft was handed down through his family from generation to generation. In that context I guess that price wasn't too out of line. Next I looked at some plain boots. No artwork, very little tooling marks, just a nice well-made pair of boots. Price tag? \$6050. Do you know how many pairs of socks you can buy for \$6050? Even in Vail??

That afternoon we began meeting several of our fellow tourers and quickly discovered that we had latched on to a wonderfully varied, very interesting, and genuinely friendly group. Occupations included IT specialists, marketers, physicians, entrepreneurs, and even a couple of neurobiologists. Before the tour I couldn't even spell neurobiologist without the aid of a spellchecker, but now I could say I knew not one, but two!

#### *Monday*

The next morning I headed down to the garage to begin work on the car and discovered that I was not alone in the fettling department. Cars were in various sates of disassembly, including a Sylva missing its head and turbo – I don't think the poor hotel staff was prepared for this onslaught. I was able to get a hold of the communal floor jack and jackstands pretty early on which enabled me to diagnose the problem before my caffeine had worn off. As expected, the oil was leaking from the area of the oil filter adapter, so after borrowing some liquid gasket, I headed out to Napa to pick up some oil and an oil pan. On the way my rear view mirror finally tired of the constant oil bath and attempted suicide by leaping off the windscreen, so I also picked up a two part epoxy for rear view mirrors -- it didn't work.

Upon my return, I jumped back in the queue for the jack and jackstands and began the repair once my number came up. Before buttoning things up at 1pm, I spoke briefly with the owner of the RSTV8-powered Caterham. The 2.4L V8 puts out 400hp, redlines at over 10,000rpm, and sounds like a Cosworth DFV from an older F1 car. Simply amazing and something that was quickly added to my Christmas wish list. *Now if I sell my tintop and my wife's tintop and eat peanut butter and jelly...no, better make that just peanut butter sandwiches for lunch for the next ten years, then maybe I can afford the conversion!*

While I spent time under the Westfield, my wife was establishing a reputation as the unofficial tour photographer. That morning she took over 300 photos in the garage and made friends with virtually everyone on the tour. After that day I simply introduced myself as the photographer's assistant and folks immediately know who I was. *"Oh, you're Julie's husband!"*

#### *Tuesday*

That evening after the liquid gasket cured, I added the oil and fired up the engine. No leak was immediately apparent so I shut it off and then returned in the morning to give the engine a proper shake down before we left for Moab. Although it withstood the rev-it-in-neutral test, it

failed the down-to-the-gas-station-and-back test. Looking more closely I realized that the leak was not coming from the reseal, but rather from the unused port on the top of the oil filter adapter. It turns out that the plug was the source of the leak! Unfortunately the starter motor blocks wrench access to the plug, so I had to remove that item first, which was proving difficult given that my ½" ratchet had decided to seize up at the start of the repair. After scrounging up tools from various tourers, I finished the repair and finally eliminated our oil spray problem.

As we prepared to leave Vail, we decided to throw the side curtains in the support truck and rely on the half-hood and wind wings for protection. Guess what combination I failed to test before leaving? Yep, that one. It turned out that at any speed over 20mph the half-hood went into convulsions, rising and falling, and in doing so it rocked the windscreen back and forth. I couldn't imagine that motion was a good thing to do for hours on end, so we pulled off the freeway, removed the half-hood, and then jumped back on I-70 to catch up to the Birkin we had followed out of town. Colorado shares Utah's enlightened approach to speed limits, and sets them at 75mph. Since we were trying to catch up, I kept the speedometer at...hmm, my insurance agent may read this, so let's call it "*just a bit higher*" until we came across a school bus that was trying to pass a garbage truck. I write "trying to pass" because the garbage truck was traveling at 75mph and the school bus was doing *maybe* 75.1mph. After 6 miles the school bus driver finally completed one of the longest passes in recorded history, and had effectively killed our chances of catching the Birkin. We then slowed things down to a more sensible rate and continued on our own to Grand Junction to meet everyone for lunch at the Sonic drive-in. The Sonic was chosen as a group side trip since it represents a real piece of Americana: drive-in greasy burger joint with a wait staff on wheels.

On the way there, the heavens opened up and pelted us with raindrops the size of ferrets with a thyroid condition. Visibility was reduced to zero which was not a good thing given that we were traveling at 75mph and there was no shoulder on this particular section of freeway. Although the wipers appeared to do their job on the outside of the windscreen, we didn't have a pair for the inside (remember, we took off the half-hood) nor did we have a set for my eyeglasses. Somehow we made it to an exit and holed up at a covered gas station until the rain lifted. While there I searched the inventory for something we could use as a makeshift support to span the distance between the transmission tunnel and the top and hopefully stop the oscillations. I found some odd looking device that seemed perfect for the job. It was the right length, had a hooked tip at one end, and a wide handle at the other. It was a little pricey, but it was made from aluminum, and as we have already established, se7ening is all about reducing weight, so I had to buy it. The gas station owner, however, thought that spending \$15 for that item was crazy and proceeded to walk me through the various back rooms in search of a free substitute. Now I appreciated his thoughtfulness, and was trying to be polite, but I was also trying not to miss my chance to buy a cool piece of aluminum. After all, as a se7en owner it is my duty to ~~waste~~ spend money in an effort to save precious ounces of weight. He soon gave up his quest and took money for my new toy. As soon as the storm cleared we were off for the Sonic. After exiting the freeway in Grand Junction we became lost (the directions said turn right when we should have turned left -- I guess it is a British thing), finally found the restaurant, had lunch and then hooked up with two other cars (both with GPS) and set off for Moab. In our little three-car convoy were two red Westfields, each owned by a guy named John. Weird. Our route took us through Monument National Park, which was spectacular. Neither words, nor photographs can describe the beauty so I won't even try.

Although the road through the park was made for blatting, we took our time, stopping often for photographs. After leaving the confines of the park, we continued on back roads that were seemingly in the middle of nowhere (120 miles between gas stations). The thunder storms continued, and although they contained some hail, they were thankfully brief and proved nothing more than an inconvenience. As we moved closer to Moab, we picked up a road that followed the contours of the Colorado River and hooked up with some other tourers. In our convoy were 2 Westfields, 2 Caterhams, and 2 Ultralites (Texas made se7ens powered by Honda S2000 motors). More proof that the US is still a melting pot. ;-)

For dinner that night, my wife and I decided the car would stay holed up under the cover and we would find a place within walking distance of the hotel, so we headed up the road to Chuck's Grill and both had the Elk Stew. It was probably the best meal of the trip and definitely an unexpected find. That evening marked the completion of the first real tour day for us, and it also marked the single best day of vacation I had ever experienced to date -- even though it began with me swearing under the bonnet and ended with me discovering the horn wasn't working. Oh well, what is a se7ens tour without the need for evening fettling?

### *Wednesday*

The next morning we once again teamed up with the other red Westfield. John and Esther were great company and shared our preferred pace and desire to stop often for photographs. Moab to Page, AZ took us through a section of this country that was made famous by Hollywood. It has served as the backdrop for a number of Westerns and if you squinted your eyes just right you could almost make out John Wayne firing his Winchester at the bad guy while riding his horse at full gallop. During that morning's coffee stop in the middle of nowhere, John and Esther shared a secret. They were getting hitched in Vegas and invited us to the drive-in chapel to be part of the ceremony. It turns out that another couple on tour was also planning to marry there, but they wanted to keep their nuptials a secret and had asked John & Esther to do the same.

Later during one of our frequent fuel stops, I noted a sheriff's SUV parked between the pumps and the cashier. As I headed towards the cashier to pay his window ominously lowered and he summoned me over for a chat. Uh oh... I knew that he wasn't after me for speeding, but I feared that other tourers had already traveled through these parts at warp speed and I was about to gain first-hand experience at the joy of guilt by association. Sure enough, his first words were "I've seen a lot of those cars going through here." His remaining words though quickly assuaged my fear that I would spend the next couple of years sharing a cell with a lonely 300lb guy named Bubba who affectionately refers to me as Sweet Cheeks. The sheriff proceeded to ask all the usual civilian questions and commented that the cars looked like fun. Whew!

Before reaching Page, we stopped off at a Native American jewelry stand that looked like it came straight from the set of a Hollywood ghost town. As plain and depressing as the stand appeared, the goods displayed under the leaning roof were vibrant and beautiful. Esther bought a few things for the wedding and my wife did the same. I, however, stuck to more manly interests and bought an arrow head.

As we arrived at the hotel we learned that a group shot was planned to coincide with the sun set. The cars slowly poured around to the back of the hotel to take up positions for the photo.

The last car to arrive, and hence the car on point for the picture, was a yellow V8-powered Westfield. At that point I heard a photographer remark “how are we going to get this onto the cover of BlatChat (the Caterham club magazine) with a Westfield in front?” It was brilliant 😊

#### *Thursday*

John and Esther needed to arrive early in Las Vegas to take care of paperwork, so we hooked up with the two Ultralites and a crossflow-powered Caterham for the day. We agreed to an early start and headed out for the Grand Canyon around 6:00am. The weather was pretty mild for that hour, but as we made the ascent from 4000' to 9000' the temperature dropped to something more suited for my heavier jacket stowed behind the seat, and not for the light windbreaker I donned at the outset of the day. The road though was breathtaking and featured some very nice twisty sections. When we arrived at the Grand Canyon, we were simply blown away by the sight before us. Everyone I know who has visited here before has remarked that you really can't appreciate the sheer breadth and visual impact until you have seen it with your own eyes. Film, whether still or movies, just doesn't capture the scale. Those people are right.

While sitting near the cars and taking in the scenery, Julie & I amused ourselves by eavesdropping on all the comments made by passing tourists who weren't aware that one of the funny little cars belonged to us. Most reactions were the normal sort like “wow those are tiny” “Looks like fun” and “What the hell are those?” but my favorite was the guy who said “Those have to be owned by old rich people who have too much time on their hands.” I then pulled out my bottle of Geritol, raised it in a toast to him, and took a swig.

The trip out of the Grand Canyon was superb. We traversed mile after mile of corners, mostly marked at 45mph, but taken at about 75mph. A very sane speed, but still highly enjoyable. The last 150 miles of the day, however, were not so pleasant. Approaching Las Vegas the scenery became unattractive, the temperatures high, and the testosterone of Camry and minivan drivers rose to dangerous levels. Why did drivers of those vehicles always want to race us? We kept it between 75-95mph most of the way and hit 100+ in some of the corners as we tried to separate ourselves from traffic – and the Camry and minivan driving idiots. The stretch provided the engine with a real workout, which it took in stride.

The arrival in Vegas was a little comedic. Wwe ran into rush hour traffic which made it difficult to stay in anything that even remotely resembled a convoy. The lead car of Stephen and Jeanette was out of site, so we followed the #2 car driven by Chuck and Barb. Since they had been to Vegas before, we decided that there chance of finding the hotel was better than ours. We made a couple of wrong turns along the way and had to drive a little aggressively when approaching intersections to stay together, but we made it to the breathtaking Imperial Palace Hotel & Casino. And by breathtaking, I don't mean the good kind that describes a spontaneous ear-to-ear grin, but rather the kind that results from a vicious blow to the gut. When we found the hotel, we started the long route through the garage to locate our parking area on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor. In hindsight I think the hotel regretted placing us so far from the garage entrance because any time you put a group of se7ens together in an enclosed garage, you invariably will end up with a game of How Many Car Alarms Can I Set Off? If I still had the crossflow with the packed out exhaust, I think I would have been in the running, but the Duratec/Raceco combination left me feeling pretty inadequate in this area. Consequently I tried to compensate for lack of exhaust decibels by increasing tire squeal.



John & Esther and Mav & Vivien were planning to wed that afternoon. The plan was to meet in the hotel lobby at 4pm and then head out en mass to the chapel in our se7ens. By the time we arrived in Vegas through rush hour traffic, and checked into our room, it was after 5pm, so we assumed we had missed the event. About 30 minutes later the phone rang and Esther was on the line telling us that everyone was at their cars in the garage and if could make it, they would love for us to join them. Julie and I raced out of the hotel and began the arduous process of finding our car. This hotel was an absolute nightmare to navigate and it appears the design was intentional. I guess they concluded that if guests can never find their way out, then they will just stay in the casino and gamble until their bank accounts are empty and their credit cards are maxed out. Apparently the architect was a fan of the Eagle's song Hotel California. *You can check out any time you want, but you can never leave...*

As we raced outside and tried to figure where we were parked in the large complex, we heard se7ens taking off as se7ens typically do – lots of rpm and lots of tire squeal. Using those noises as well as the resulting sounds of car alarms going off (remember the game) to locate our garage and floor, we finally reached our car. On it we found a note indicating the location of the chapel. We raced through the Strip with lots of tire squeal thanks to roads seemingly made from teflon and made a few wrong turns before finally stumbling upon the chapel. The ceremony itself was pretty interesting. It was a drive through venue so we lined up our six support se7ens in two rows behind the pair of wedding se7ens and then walked around to the front to view the nuptials. I thought it was particularly fitting that one couple was married in a Westfield, while the other was married in a Caterham.

The drive back was similar to the drive there, except now we were no longer alone. The cars raced through traffic, evoking a lot of finger pointing and smiles from the normally jaded Vegas crowd, and finally reached the garage where a new game of How Many Car Alarms Can I Set Off began. Because Julie was taking pictures of everyone leaving the chapel, we were the last se7en in the train, so I was a little surprised as we made our way up the serpentine ramps of the garage to hear tires squealing behind us. A quick glance revealed someone in an old Bronco was trying to play with us. I guess he also had a Camry or minivan back home.

### *Friday*

Following the wedding and associated reception, we had an off day to explore magical, enchanting, serene Las Vegas. The Brits have a tendency to claim that Americans don't do sarcasm, so consider that last line as my answer to that groundless assertion. Vegas. Yeuch!! My wife put it best when she said that it was impossible to take a good picture here because it is so overwhelmingly fake. We spent the day dodging casinos and hucksters trying to sell us timeshares, and trying to figure out why so many people are drawn to this place. Part of me is afraid to ever discover the answer to that last question.

### *Saturday*

That morning we bid good riddance to Vegas and drove the long, boring, hot route to Tehachapi. The only improvement over the trip into town, was that we were headed away from it. About 15 miles before reaching the hotel we stopped off at Willow Springs for the Historic races and to participate in the parade laps at noon. When we arrived at the track I was surprised by the lack of cars. Other than about 12 tourers, there were perhaps 10 other cars including race cars, and no spectators. I'm not sure how they can call this a race or why people would pay \$10 to see it, but they do, and we did.

After speaking with a few other tourers, it appeared that everyone was confused about the lapping situation. The little old lady on the bicycle who seemed to be in charge was giving different stories to everyone who asked, but eventually settled on this: for \$25 we get 30 minutes of open lapping, or we can do 2 parade laps after the open lapping session ends for free. Given that we had no helmets, there was no drivers meeting, this crew can get a little crazy, and I still had about 1500 miles to go, I declined the open lapping session. After people started passing each other, spinning, and going really, really fast, someone sent out the pace car to slow everyone down. To put the speed in perspective, one tourer later told me that he was taking the high speed corner in 5<sup>th</sup>, but thought that with a little more practice he could take it in 6<sup>th</sup>. You have to love the tour mentality.

A bit later I realized that folks had come in from the track and were forming up for the parade laps, so Julie and I ran to the car, raced to the starting area, and reached it after all the other cars had already departed. We pulled up to the starter who looked down at us and as I prepared to hear him say "Sorry, but you'll have to wait here until they come around again." he yelled "just go catch up!" Um, okay. Open track ahead of me, I started to push on and realize two things: most of the corners are blind when your butt is 4" off the ground, and I had absolutely no idea of the track layout. I managed to catch up in about one lap and we spent lap two going very slowly.

While in the pits I discovered that the mounting tabs that hold my exhaust secondaries to the rear collector had broken. The only reason my exhaust hasn't fallen off is that the rear mount is very sturdy and won't allow the silencer to move backward far enough to let the secondaries slide out. A couple of days into the tour I noticed that the exhaust note had become a little more prominent – in a good way. I originally attributed to the silencer wadding packing out, but I guess it was a result of the high temp silicone that sealed those joints tearing from the displacement. Oh well, one more thing to fix when I get back to Seattle.

That evening I joined a large group of tourers in the bar and heard a number of great stories that I can't recount here, because I don't think the statute of limitations on some of the driving behavior has expired. Let's just say that some people had a lot of fun, and a few people had a little bit too much fun – until they ended up spread eagle over their bonnets while the local police decided what to do with them.

### *Sunday*

We left Tehachapi early in the morning and headed straight for Cambria so we could arrive in time to tour Hearst Castle. I went there many years ago after visiting Europe and was amazed how it imparted the feeling of being on that side of the pond. Since Julie hasn't been to Europe yet, I really wanted to make sure she saw it to get some idea of what awaits her when we make the trip in a couple of years. This marked the first day since hooking up with the tour that we spent the day driving solo. While we missed the camaraderie that came from driving with others, it was a nice change to set our own pace. Because we were now in California, and we had been reeeeeally lucky so far, we kept to the speed limit almost the entire trip. Along the way we passed the site where James Dean lost his life while driving his Lil' Bastard, his beloved Porsche 550. I am not sure if it was a coincidence or if he was trying to prove a point from beyond the grave, but I narrowly missed being rear ended by a pick up driving inbred as I approached the stop sign at the infamous intersection.

Upon our arrival at Hearst Castle we saw Ed parked in his very trick Caterham. We hadn't spent a lot of time with Ed to date, but he seemed like a very nice guy, so were looking forward to joining up with him to tour the castle. After seeing what one man can accomplish with a vision, an unlimited budget, and an accomplished team, we spent a little time walking around Cambria before finding a little ocean front restaurant for an early dinner. The next morning, we hooked up with Ed and had an early start for San Francisco. The plan was to arrive at the Monterey Bay Aquarium about 10:15-10:30 to beat the crowds and ensure that we would arrive in San Francisco ahead of traffic. The early part of Highway 1 was magical. No traffic, tight, flowing corners, and spectacular scenery. The only things putting a damper on the fun were rocks littering the tarmac. At one point I came around a right hander and saw a softball sized boulder in the outer 1/3 of my lane. My choice was to either swerve into the oncoming lane, and hope no one was coming the other way, or point the car into the shoulder – all 6" of it -- and squeeze the car between the rock and the side of the cliff. The second option seemed a little safer, but I took it anyway. Obviously Julie didn't have any warning that I was about to whip the car to the right, and so it marked only the second time on the entire trip when I think she was genuinely frightened. The other occasion occurred a day earlier as we headed down the very windy road from Hearst Castle in the tour bus. The corners were very tight, the drop offs were very, very steep, and the driver was very, very, very old. Talk about an E-ticket ride!

On the way back from the Castle my turn signal fuse blew, which is something that continued to happen the next morning as we made our way up the coast. The problem stemmed from my attempt to diagnose the earlier horn problem. When I reinstalled the steering wheel I had inadvertently pinched a wire leading from one of the turn signal buttons and so that was occasionally grounding out on the aluminum hub. Unfortunately the allen head bolts that attach the wheel are SAE and my tools were metric. In Vegas I had borrowed the proper allen key from Simon, a fellow Duratec driver, but I had returned it so no longer had a way to remove the steering wheel and correct the problem. Further, I was out of 8 amp fuses and was substituting 2 amp versions that weren't up to the task even if there was not a short. The attendant at a small gas station along the way told us to keep heading north to Big Sur and look for Jolly's Garage. He believed we could find the correct fuses and wrench there, so we continued up the coast for another 40 miles until we came upon that sleepy little village. Although the garage didn't have the 8 amp inline fuses I needed, they did have some 5 amp units and also an allen key that was nearly the correct size. Actually, it was the correct size, but it was a really cheap tool and the tolerances were such that it barely fit. After attempting the

repair I asked the shop if I could buy the allen key since it was part of an incomplete set. Apparently he had loaned the missing keys to other motorists in the past who had confused the word "borrow" with "keep." He said that he normally charges \$10 for tool rentals (hey, maybe that's why people keep them – for \$10 you should get something more out of the deal than 5 minutes use), and \$0.85 per fuse, so I could buy the 5 fuses and the key for a mere \$15. Being desperate, I bent over and silently squealed like that character in Deliverance, and then got back in the car and headed up the coast to Monterey.

The Monterey Bay Aquarium was something I had looked forward to seeing for years. I've always heard that it is a stunning display and yet for some reason I've never been able to stop by and see it for myself when in the area. As it often does, my anticipation had set expectations that reality simply could not meet. Yes, it was a nice aquarium, but I've seen better.

The new 5 amp fuses were doing a better job than the 2 amp versions, but they still continued to blow along the way. When we reached Half moon bay, we stopped at an Ace hardware where I finally had an opportunity to buy nearly the right fuses (7 amp) and an allen wrench that fit properly – and the total was a lot less than \$15.

The fuse delays and trip to Monterey meant we didn't get into San Francisco until 4:15pm. Now San Francisco on a Monday afternoon sounds like a terrible thing for a se7en, but the traffic was amazingly light, and apart from a woman nearly hitting us as she backed her Camry out of a diagonal parking place on the side of the street (what is it with Camry drivers and se7ens?) it was uneventful. That night we had a relaxing dinner with Ed at a nearby Italian restaurant and then headed back to the hotel where we went our separate ways in search of much needed rest.

The next morning Julie and I spent the day walking around San Francisco and had a very nice goodbye dinner with John, Esther, and Ed, our most frequent traveling companions.

### Leg 3: Why can't we still be on the tour?

#### *Wednesday*

We had a relaxing morning in San Francisco and then headed out to my mom's house located about 20 miles away in the East Bay.

#### *Thursday*

We left my mom's house at 5:20am with the goal of making it as close to home as possible. About 25 minutes into our journey we were running through a dark stretch of bumpy freeway, when things turned a little south. I was watching the road surface intently looking for particularly bad bumps when I saw something dark with silver or white lines directly in front of the left front wheel. I didn't even have time to think about reacting before I heard a sickening "crash!" Based on the noise and the unknown size/density of the object, my immediate thought was that we had lost the left front suspension and that things were going to quickly worsen. I remember loosening my grip on the wheel and preparing to make a correction, but in that same instant I saw that the front end was still there and not wobbling.

Easing the car over to the shoulder, I jumped out and surveyed the damage. The front wheel looked fine, and a few hard tugs showed that nothing was loose, so I decided to get off that dangerous section of freeway and head for the exit 1/4 mile up the road for a more detailed inspection. I found a place with some light and pulled over to have a closer look at the front end and tire. Much to my relief everything looked normal, so I turned around to get back in the car and instantly muttered an involuntary "shit..." The front third of the left rear fender was gone. I then looked down at the side of the car and saw the telltale rubber streaks of a tire carcass hit. Looking more closely at their pattern on the body and on the lexan wind wing, it was obvious that the latter saved me from taking a direct hit at 70mph. The tub also sustained some damage with a dime sized divot where the rear most bolt attaches the fender to the body and a 6" long, half-moon shaped, hairline crack just below the scuttle. Later when checking over the car in my own garage I also noticed that the left headlight was broken. Given the placement of the hole and the fact that the turn signal lens immediately below it was undamaged even though it extends forward about 2", it appears that break was the result of a rock hit. It probably occurred before the tire incident and is one reason I didn't pick it up in time.

Given that the damage was cosmetic, we pressed on. The next several hundred miles were uneventful, but as we passed through Portland we hit rush hour traffic and the notorious rain of the Pacific Northwest. The wet stuff was getting heavier as we passed the state line and was quickly becoming a safety issue given that I could no longer see the road due to a combination of wet glasses, a wet inner windscreen, and rapidly decreasing ambient light. We decided to do the smart thing and end our 640 mile journey at the Quality Inn in Vancouver. The next morning, we drove the final 170 miles home. Upon our arrival at home, we were pleased to see that the house was still standing, and that we hadn't been robbed. However, we were less pleased to see that during our absence we had been invaded by rats, but that is another story...

### **Parting Thoughts**

As I look at the bottom of my computer screen, I see that I am deep into my thirteenth page of prose. That is a lot of writing for me, and a lot of reading for you – unless of course you are one of those smart people who skipped directly to this section. However, everything I've written above hardly scratches the surface of this extraordinary two week adventure. It was quite simply the best trip of my life. The company, the scenery, and the experience were without peer and exceeded my wildest expectations. Along the way I learned a few important things that I would like to share. First, my wife is a great traveling companion and helped make this a fantastic trip. I can't imagine looking back at this experience with the same longing to relive it if she had stayed at home. Second, there are certain hobbies in life that require a certain personality type, which is a very nice way of saying that some hobbies require a person to be a little screwed up in the head to actually enjoy them. With these pursuits, the fact that someone else shares the same passion is generally a good indicator that you two will get along well. I can't imagine any hobby, any shared passion, where this is truer than with se7en ownership. This was quite simply the best group of people with whom I have ever spent time. Given that there were approximately 100 of us, I fully expected to come across a few whose company I didn't particularly enjoy, but that was never the case. Third, the Westfield is a brilliant little car and now officially part of the family. Sure, there is room for improvement in some areas. After all, what car couldn't use a little more power, a little less weight, or a little sharper handling? The overall package, however, was thrilling. Whether dropping down to third gear to blast past a slower car, diving for a late apex on a challenging road, or flying down narrow, undivided roads

in the middle of the desert where the closing speed to the approaching 18 wheelers is over 160mph, the car never failed to thrill, to challenge, and most importantly, to involve.

I think that last descriptor best sums up this entire experience. Involvement. From a driving perspective, the Westfield is an undiluted, visceral extravaganza. Everything happens right now. Turn the wheel, and you immediately change direction. Tap the brake pedal or the accelerator and you immediately feel the resulting g-forces. If the road surface subtly changes, then you feel it through the tiny steering wheel. Nothing escapes your senses. From a touring perspective, the lack of roof, doors, and any creature comforts ensures you are part of your surroundings, even at those times when you don't wish to be (think Vegas). The surrounding environment constantly bombards you with sights, smells, and sensations that burrow into your memory banks in a way that I have never experienced before. I can't think of any car that could even come close to enabling this kind of feeling or the lasting memories it creates. Unless of course it was another se7en.

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