



ON THE KOKOPELLI TRAIL

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text: Gustaf Kupetz
photos: Ben Edmonson

Gustaf Kupetz was most recently the Gear and Field Specialist for Land Rover Lifestyle magazine. An avid off-roader, he headed for the Rockies last summer. Here's his story –ed.



It's been a personal goal to search out the quintessential overland trail. The perfect trail would have sufficient length and difficulty to test you and your vehicle, and require significant planning, but should you be stranded, would not require a satellite phone or medical kit for survival. At the time of this trip, this seemed like quite the challenge; now looking back it proved to me more a lesson in finding any kinks in your armor should you desire to do something more challenging.

My "perfect trail" list eventually grew to include camping, water crossings, and rock climbs, as well as physically demanding and dramatic scenery. Kokopelli's Trail runs from Loma, CO, to Moab, UT. At 142 miles, with elevations from 4,000–8,000 feet, it has achieved near mythic status in the mountain bike world. Indeed, our biggest challenge came from Amy Hermes and her "Team High Maintenance," female mountain bike racers all, who claimed that her fleet of cycles could complete the course ahead of our fleet of Land Rovers.

With the gauntlet tossed down, I searched for compatriots. Cory Paulger looked grim at the prospect of denting his stock Land Rover, but I promised a safe expedition (ignoring the fact that the last time I led a group with stock Rovers somebody broke their differential).

Doug Evilsizor joined us in an LR3, as well as photographer Ben Edmonson, Eric Dalton in his rough and tumble Defender 90, and Randy Tuggle in his Defender.

The start line was Rabbit Valley, just outside of Fruita, CO. Being polite as well as vain, we let Team High Maintenance have a head start while we took photos; once we got going, we promptly passed them. The trail started off at I-70 and wound its way through a dried riverbed. The easy trail popped out at a rather stunning overlook featuring the Colorado River. The view down the river went on forever; we could actually see some of the rocks of Moab and the La Sal Mountains. Incredibly we would pass at the foot of them in two or three days.

Turning back onto the trail from the lookout, I turned just a little bit wrong. "Err, ah, yes I know where we are going," I snapped back in an effort to thwart peoples' questions about my supreme navigational skills. I figured I had navigated through here before and it should be a cinch. River on the left? Check. Highway several miles off to the right? Check.

Well, not quite. My detour led us to the bottom of this rather long uphill sand dune. Now naturally by this time I had determined we were not lost, but that the trail "had indeed moved." I was just sure we needed to get to the





Two members of Team High Maintenance

top of the hill to return to the trail. Moving overloaded Rovers up sand can be fun, a “psssst” of the tires airing down and a “whee” of the winch turning, and we were up. To my relief, the Kokopelli Trail sign appeared in front of us. Only one thing, it had an LRL sticker on it... Hmm Team High Maintenance had passed through already.

The LR3 really does handle all conditions better than the previous coil spring Rovers, as I found out when I made my “Top Gear” effort to pass Team High Maintenance. In the end I made Fish Ford to get them some water, but the women had smoked us by 6.5 minutes. As we made camp, mountain-climber Ben Clark joined us in his new Range Rover. Later, drifting off into sleep, the humiliation of losing to a bike got the better of me. I couldn’t help thinking trucks don’t get tired, human bodies do. Good luck, High Maintenance, it’s a long trail.

The day broke with a “too cold to get out of bed” chill. Team High Maintenance left before we finished breakfast. We packed up fast to take advantage of two optional side trips, one to “Top of the World” and the other at the water crossing on the Dolores River. These added a few miles, but with one extra fuel can, experience taught me we could make it. However, “Top of the World” seemingly eats low profile tires, but from this spectacular view you can see almost the whole trail—bonus points for driving your truck out on the overhang!

The Dolores River crossing has its own warning as well. Call ahead to the Moab BLM (Bureau of Land Management) office for daily river conditions and do scout

your route across—the river may look shallow, but can hide deep underwater holes. The second crossing is tricky as well; you cannot see the exit on the other side. You essentially hug the left bank, go up river, cross to a sand bar, drive the bar’s length and then cross. We ended up “volunteering” a scout on the roof rack to keep us away from the deep water.

We camped overnight at the nearby Cowskin campground and left early in morning. Our goal was to make it to the Hideout campground by nightfall. Hideout is a sweet gem of place hidden just over a small saddle from Fisher Valley, and the furthest from civilization. Typically, Rover fuel tanks will be near empty, with only a spare 5 gallon can on the roof. This lends itself to fingers-crossed, tense drives the rest of the way. I must say, it would be a rather long walk.

At that moment, the campfire rose “only slightly larger” than what the BLM advises and the marinated steaks grilled deliciously. The tall tales grew larger than life and with newfound friends, you could say you hadn’t any cares in the world. Isn’t that why we all seek expeditions in our lives?

As our marinated steaks grilled deliciously and all worries about losing our race with those talented bikers, or fuel tank capacities, or difficult off road terrain, fell by the wayside. We’re at a campsite with our Land Rovers and friends, sharing tall tales and letting our cares fall by the wayside. Expeditions provide us with special moments in our lives, when fulfillment is everything and the competition is within ourselves, not others.