

A Sidecar in the San Juans

Monkeying around in the mountains

Words & Photos: Susan Dragoo



I was distracted while my husband Bill and I loaded the 2024 Ural Gear Up motorcycle and sidecar for a multi-day ride in the Colorado mountains. I was thinking about Eva Rupert's words after she and her partner Sterling Noren had first ridden the bike.

"This thing wants to kill you and it's not ashamed of it!" she said, which gave me little comfort. After all, Eva was the project co-ordinator for the build at Overland Expo's Ultimate Motorcycle Build for 2024. It's an annual tradition for the Expo organization which, for each of the past four years, has outfitted both a two-wheeled and four-wheeled vehicle with a selection of products tailored for overlanding.



Despite Eva's indictment, I climbed into the sidecar, Bill mounted the pilot's seat and off we went on the Ural, rolling south from our base camp near Lake City and into the San Juan mountain range. Located in southwestern Colorado and northwestern New Mexico, the San Juan's highest peak is Mount Uncompahgre at 14,321 feet, with a dozen more peaks higher than 14,000 feet.

It was not my first experience with a motorcycle sidecar, but my previous jaunts had been short-lived and well contained. They were usually at relatively slow speeds around the grounds at an Overland Expo either as the "monkey" (sidecar passenger) while Bill "flew the chair," or dangling from the machine as one of a dozen or so others playing the game of "How many women can fit on a Ural?" Pretty mild adventures compared to exploring mountain passes and twisty highways, testing the Ural's capabilities, limits and idiosyncrasies.

Steering a Ural is unlike anything else. On a motorcycle, a gentle push on the handlebar in the direction you want

to go initiates the turn: push right, go right. We know it as counter-steering. But the heavy, three-wheeled Ural does not lean or countersteer. You heave and twist the handlebars in the direction you want to go. In right-hand turns, the sidecar, attached to the right side of the motorcycle, tends to lift. This can be unnerving for the pilot, and it's especially so for the monkey. Without practice and deliberate effort, taking corrective action in this situation may straighten the bike's path in an undesirable way, such as pointing it into oncoming traffic, which is never a good thing. This is exactly what Eva was talking about when she said it wants to kill you. When letting off the throttle, it turns left. When shifting, well, it depends on where you are in the process – it could go either way.

But Bill figured out the machine quickly, and with the weight of me and our gear in the sidecar, the tendency to lift was mitigated to a great degree. We tested the Ural on a short, scrappy trail on County Road 14 just outside Lake City. The machine has a selectable two-wheel drive mode that engages an axle shaft, sending power to the



wheel on the sidecar, but we found it was not enough. Traction was not the issue. With a gross vehicle weight of around 1,100 pounds, but just 40 horsepower (at sea level) and no low-speed transmission, even without me in the sidecar the Ural could not conquer the steep ledges. The clutch would clearly be sacrificed if we persisted.

We'd wanted to ride over 12,800-foot Engineer Pass, which connects Lake City with Ouray, but that short test ruled it out. After all, Engineer is steep and rocky, requiring low range and high clearance in four-wheel-drive vehicles. Originally built as a stagecoach and freight route, Engineer is part of the Alpine Loop; it's popular with Jeeps, dirt bikes and dual-sport motorcycles, and it's increasingly congested with side-by-sides.

Instead, we decided to try the approach to the somewhat milder Cinnamon Pass, also part of the Loop. The views were beautiful along the shoreline of Castle Lakes and the road was indeed more in line with the Ural's capabilities. There, we found our groove and soon I took a turn at the helm, but keeping the sidecar (and Bill) out of the ditch was challenging for me as pilot. I would avoid rocks and holes in my immediate path, leaving Bill to more or less fend for himself in the sidecar a few feet to my right.

After several miles of relatively smooth, wide, dirt road, the path began to narrow and climb, becoming more rocky and busy with side-by-side and Jeep traffic. I was reaching the edge of my comfort threshold as pilot and turned it back over to Bill. Settling back into the sidecar seat, I relaxed as he accelerated on a smoother section of road, taking turns at a brisk, fun pace. Suddenly, WHAM! We hit a brutally abrupt water bar and my body briefly levitated then slammed back down. It felt like my spine was driven up into my brain. The seat and suspension in the sidecar are reasonably cushioned but we had exceeded their limits, and my back absorbed the remaining brunt.

"I am ruined," I thought.

Thankfully, I was not. Bill gently reversed course, leaving Cinnamon for another day.

Our return to Lake City was slow and easy, and we stopped for dinner at the Packer Saloon and Cannibal Grill, one of many quirky establishments in the town's historic district. The Packer is named for Alfred Packer, whose grisly murder and consumption of his five companions took place just two miles southeast of Lake City in the winter of 1874.

TOP: AT LEAST ON A STRAIGHT ROAD, THERE ARE LESS THINGS TO WORRY ABOUT WHEN PILOTING THE SIDECAR. IT WAS OUR CHANCE TO FOCUS ON THE VIEW

THE SAN JUANS

After a handful of ibuprofen, I had surprisingly little soreness the next day and we got an early start, seeking out just the right setting for the Ural in milder forms of exploration. Heading north on Colorado Highway 149 this time, we enjoyed easy dirt and gravel on county roads that took us up to U.S. Highway 50 then west to Cimarron Road, leading us past Silver Jack Reservoir and over Owl Creek Pass into Ridgway. This 120-mile route was perfect now we had learned to work with the unique handling characteristics of the Ural. Oncoming drivers and construction workers along the way gave us thumbs-ups when they saw us, making us feel like celebrities on vacation.

The well-maintained gravel road through the Uncompahgre National Forest to 10,114-foot Owl Creek Pass is easy driving even for standard passenger cars. Scenes from the films *How the West Was Won* and *True Grit* were filmed along this 1885 cattle trail, flanked by stands of spruce, fir and aspen and offering spectacular mountain

views. Bill was now adept with the Ural and I began to relax as he took full advantage of the winding, graded, gravel track, dipping a wheel to the low side on right turns and tapping a brake to initiate a skid on the left-hand sweepers. The awkwardness of the rig was melting away and being replaced by a flowing agreement between riders and machine.

Returning from Ridgway on Blue Mesa Cutoff, we noticed a sign on a side road reading "Landslide Ahead." Curiosity led us in that direction, where we stumbled upon the stunning Lake Fork of the Gunnison River. Bill stopped to talk with a fly fisherman, who was pleased to be catching some brown trout. The angler invited us back to his camp for dinner and we took note, riding on after a short conversation. We soon noticed interpretive signs along the flat dirt road leading north. It turned out our path was actually the railroad



FACING PAGE: MOUNTAINS, FORESTS AND RESERVOIRS KEPT THE SCENERY ALIVE AS WE WEAVED OUR WAY THROUGH THE WEST

THE SAN JUANS





bed of the Lake Fork Spur of the Denver and Rio Grande, a narrow-gauge railroad that ran from the Gunnison River at Sapinero to Lake City from 1889 to 1933. Ruins of railroad workers' camps remain on the roadside and we marveled at the harsh and dangerous conditions these men must have experienced blasting a path through the canyon and building the railroad.

We explored to the end of the road, beyond which the creek enters the impounded waters of Blue Mesa Reservoir. It was twilight by the time we turned back toward our cabin, the remaining light glistening off the surface of the river as it made its way to the lake a few miles on. Along the way, we passed the fisherman's encampment, where he and eight of his friends waved for us to stop. We couldn't resist, and the delicious fajita dinner and fellowship of these gentlemen from Texas and Florida provided a great payoff after a long day. One of the group even serenaded us, singing and playing his guitar and harmonica as night closed in around the camp.

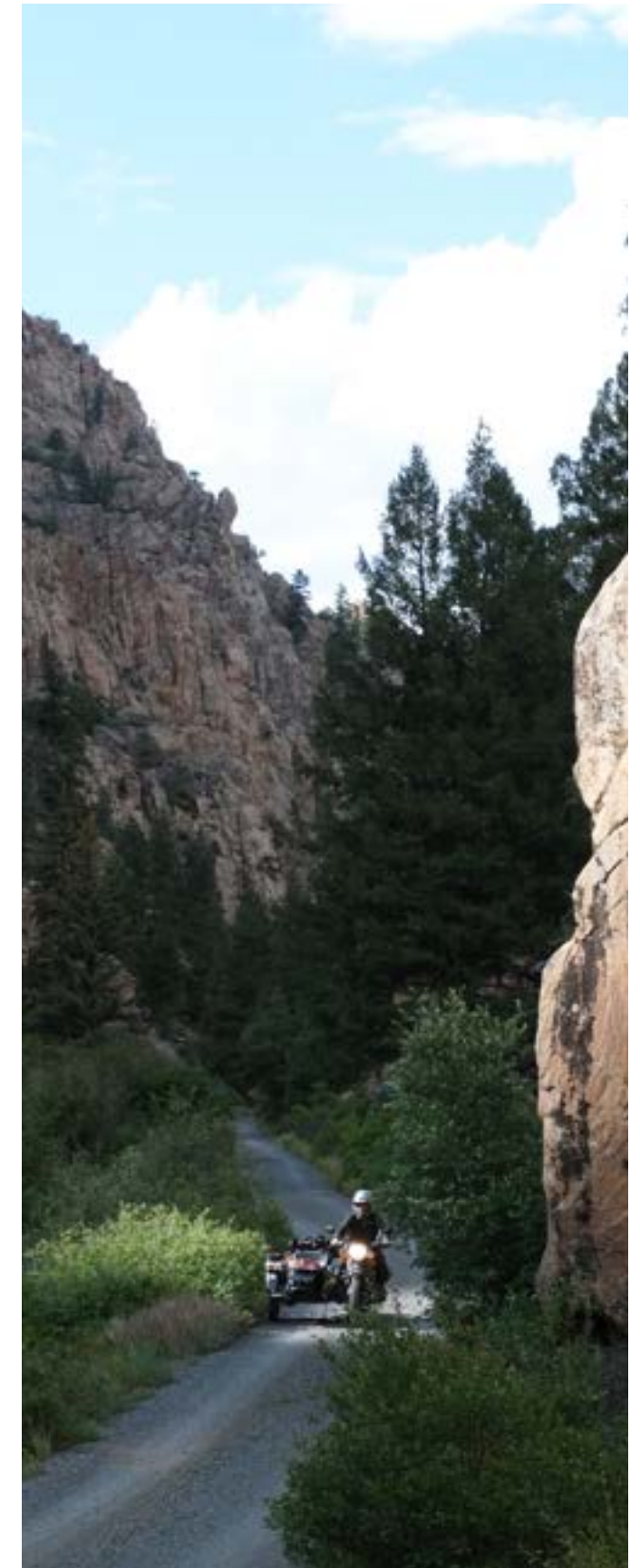
We said our goodbyes and I hunkered down in the sidecar to escape the night's chill as we made our way the last few miles to our cabin. Bill rode slowly as if to savor the final moments we would have together on this odd machine.

After all, the Ural's quirks had become a big part of its charm. The tugging left when braking and pulling right under power were now worked seamlessly into the plan and it led us around turns like a skillful dancer, putting smiles on our faces as we cooperated with its whimsical nature.

Clearly, it prefers the backroads to the highways, where we often pulled over to let others pass as we climbed grades at 40 miles per hour. It is a machine for moderate terrain and big adventure, best-suited for smooth, uncongested dirt and capable on rough terrain as long as you learn to work within its limitations.

We zipped through broad, sweeping turns and crawled through the occasional muddy or loose section. On those slower stretches, engaging two-wheel-drive would push us along with authority and then gently remind us to disengage the third wheel so we could make a turn.

With just enough of the old and a fair sprinkling of modern technology, we found the Ural Gear Up a relaxing way to ride when not in a hurry and a conversation piece when stopping for gas. Like that crabby old horse that bucks and bites, just scratch its ears a little, give it an apple now and then and let it have its head. If you are lucky enough to win it over, maybe you'll discover it never really wanted to kill you after all.



FACING PAGE: ONCE WE LEARNED THE URAL'S QUIRKS, IT WAS A TRUSTWORTHY STEED FOR OUR EXPEDITION