



The 2008 road trip

RUBITHON RISING SUN

**What does it take to get 24
Coloradans to drive 2,300
miles to run the Rubicon Trail?**



The Rising Sun crew prepares to hit the trail.

Photo by Ken Romer

There are things you dream about for years and when you finally get to do them, they're a disappointment. Fortunately, Rubithon doesn't fall into this category. I'd been dreaming about Rubithon since I joined TLCA in 1996 and started devouring black and white copies of Toyota Trails. It sounded like the ultimate gathering of Toyota nuts in the state where TLCA began. Like a pilgrimage to Mecca for Muslims, like a night at CBGBs for punk music fans, like a show at the Grand Ol' Opry for country and western fans. Attending Rubithon seemed like one of those things a true Cruiserhead must do at least once.

I've been a member of Rising Sun in Colorado for eight years and it was always one of those things we talked about, in a casual sense, the way one talks about owning a BJ70 or finding an unmolested FJ25 in a barn or having a secret love affair with Scarlett Johansson. It could happen. Sure. It just didn't seem likely in the short term. (Scarlett, if you're reading this, contact



Tim Nakari reflecting upon what a great idea it was to come to Rubithon. Photo by Mike Davidson

Todd for my number. My wife says it's OK.)

Then last year, some conversations with Tony Twiddy changed things. "You know," Tony said, "2008 is going to be our Hall of Fame year. If you were ever going to come out, this would be the year." I mentioned it to Chris Hatfield who said, "My orange FJ40 will be ready. Let's do it. Besides, it will give me a goal to make sure I actually finish my 40." Chris had been working on this 40 for somewhat less than a decade and the end was in sight. Of course, he'd said this a couple of years previously but this time it was a sure thing.



When you break your truck in the campground, you get a hill named after you. *Photo by Matt Farr*

We then started asking some of the other Rising Sun guys and it was no surprise that running the famous Rubicon Trail was a common fantasy. We started a thread on the Rising Sun forum and it soon grew to more than 20 pages of discussion. The size of the group snowballed—as soon as a few guys committed, the number tripled in another few days. "This is the year," we said. "If you wait for next year, you'll probably be driving to California alone."

We planned for the trip the way our wives and mothers-in-law had planned for our weddings. We obsessed over the details. We prepared our rigs for the worst-case scenarios. We discussed menus and portable potties. We discussed who was sleeping with whom in whose tent (we have some big tents). Romer warned all concerned about my snoring, which he and Nakman got a full dose of at the first Flat Nasty. I promised to bring my own tent.

Kevin Ehrlick (Uncle Ben) became our de facto trip leader because he had actually attended Rubithon and knew the trail. Hatfield and Greg "Cheeseman" Luer had run the trail once before as well, so we weren't complete newbs. After a couple more conversations with Tony, we were assigned our own official run.

We then obsessed over every detail. Seriously—we have 57 threads in our Rubithon corner of the Rising Sun forum. Eric Vogt and Ross Woody, both long-time friends of our club from Cruise Moab, checked in from time to time to lend us advice on where to stay, what route to take and what to bring. Nearly every copilot seat was filled with Rising Sun guys who didn't want to risk their truck on the trail or simply didn't have the gas money. Kevin Kuhn, our northernmost Rising Sun member (he lives in Canmore, Alberta, Canada) bought his plane ticket to arrive in Denver several days before the departure date.

Even though most of us have solid, built trucks, we sought improvements to prepare for the Rubicon Trail. Dave Armbruster installed a new skid plate and sliders on his early 90s mini truck. Tim Nakari and I upgraded to the Slee 4" lift on our 80s. Greg Luer completely reassembled his 85 4Runner with new sheet metal, complete with fresh red paint. Dan Reinmuth ended up rebuilding his entire engine in his 93 FZJ80. Ken Romer and Kevin Ehrlick were our true heroes with new hot water showers, an upgrade we all enjoyed.

Finally, June arrived. We were ready. We lived on the forums and ignored our jobs. The days ticked off until the third weekend of June and then the exodus began, leaving Colorado slightly less populated and the Rising Sun forum far less chatty. The largest group of us assembled in Wendover, Utah, on June 16 after taking several routes to end up at the same place. We discussed getting to bed early and get-

Chris Hatfield flexes his FJ40 while navigating the Big Sluice.

Photo by Jeff Zettl



ting an early start on Tuesday morning. Then we walked across the Nevada border and tried our luck at the blackjack tables instead. Tim Nakari was the big winner, so he celebrated by buying beer for the rest of the evening. We thoroughly explored the Nevada side of town looking for trouble and finally ended up back at the hotel at 2:30 a.m. So much for an early night.

On Tuesday, we caravanned across the bleak Nevada desert in a large convoy. We put Dave Armbruster in front, figuring that no one would have a problem keeping up with the 22RE pulling a loaded truck with tons of armor. Ever aware of the escalating prices of gasoline, we attempted to draft as close as possible. I won a bet by getting a whopping 15.95 mpg from West Wendover to Battle Mountain, Nevada, mainly by drafting within 6 feet of the rest of the guys and by not having a roof rack. The entire group had Ham radios, so the chatter was constant and amusing. In honor of our Canadian member, we ended every transmission with, "Eh?"

Arrival at Lake Tahoe was beautiful. Less attractive were the fuel prices in Kyburz, the last gas station before heading up Ice House Road toward the Rubicon trailhead. \$4.99 for premium for Romer and Uncle Ben with their superchargers, \$4.89 per gallon for us regular Joe's. When we entered the bar/restaurant at Robb's Resort just after dark, the crowd cheered and there was a cold beer in my hand as fast as it could be poured. I felt like Norm on Cheers. It was the greatest feeling in the world—our friends were all there, waiting for us to arrive. The next morning we gathered for a photo at the Friends of the Rubicon building, wearing our navy blue Rising Sun Rubithon Road Trip shirts. We looked like a bunch of dorks. Happy, happy dorks.

What can I say about the trail that hasn't already been said? It's non-stop obstacles and technical driving. The dusty granite is slippery, which made for harder rock crawling than we who frequently visit Moab were used to. The trail was never scary—we're used to tippy Colorado shelf roads



Matt Farr's FZJ80 takes an optimistic look back in the driver's side mirror.

Photo by Jeff Zettl

with 1,000-foot drops—but piloting our 80s through narrow turns bordered by enormous boulders was a new challenge. Fortunately, we had David Usem from the NorCal Wagons as our leader/spotter, who walked the entire trail in front of us, revealing secret lines to avoid significant body damage. It was interesting what people would describe to us as the "exciting" parts of the trail and what we found intimidating ourselves. Towards the end of the first day, there was a series of tippy slabs we descended that David described to us as possibly unnerving. I guess we drove right through it without noticing. However, shortly after that, there was a narrow rock garden that required very precise tire placement in order to avoid sheet metal damage. This one got my full attention and managed to dent my passenger-side slider about a foot forward of the rear tire. It made the same dent on Romer and Nakman's sliders too.

We rolled into Buck Island before dusk on day one and quickly set up camp. Wednesday night's dinner theme was "Meat Night," so we grilled up steak, ate pot roast and potatoes, a little spinach salad with feta cheese, cranberries and walnuts, and finished it all up with Dutch oven peach cobbler. It was delicious and the mosquitoes had a fine dinner too—us.

The ham radios were in constant use, even in camp. We talked with Robbie

Antonson, one of our veteran members, who was leading the group of FJ Cruisers as part of the Toyota Trail Team. They had settled in near Little Sluice for the night. Chris Davis, one of our newest members, was part of the group too, in his sandstorm FJ. The only other Rising Sun members not with our group were Mike and Lindy Moore, who were on Mudrak's double locker run in their built FJ40. They rolled into Buck Island about 10 p.m. with enormous grins and empty stomachs.

The Rising Sun Road Trip Crew

Kevin "Uncle Ben" Ehrlick and Mike "Treeroot" Davidson, FZJ80

Ken and Rachel Romer, FZJ80

Matt "Mayor McCheese" Farr and Jeff Zettl, FZJ80

Mike and Drew Worth, FZJ80

Tim "Nakman" Nakari, Kevin Kuhn and Bruce Lawson, FZJ80

Dan and Jack Reinmuth, FZJ80

Dave and Kirsten Armbruster, mini truck

Greg "Cheeseman" Luer and Steve Crase, 4Runner

Loren Perlan, FJ40

Chris Hatfield and Neil Quigley, FJ40

Mike and Lindy Moore, FJ40

Chris Davis, FJ Cruiser

Robbie Antonson, on foot

Thursday was even more fun. We messed around on Gas Can Rock and tackled the various unnamed obstacles with more confidence than the day before. After waiting on the trail for repairs in the group ahead of us, we finally tackled Big Sluice. It started with an enormous boulder in the trail that required us to pivot around, leaning against our sliders. The guys in the 80s held their breath and made it through with great trepidation, while the rest of our group in their 40s, 4Runner and mini truck made it through easily. I wouldn't hesitate to run the Rubicon Trail in my 80 again, but I must say, it would've been even more fun in my 40. It's a trail made for the short wheelbase truck.

We gathered at the bridge into Rubicon Springs to get a group photo of the triumphant Colorado crew and after finding a place for the official Rising Sun base camp, we prepared for the night's feast and entertainment. Our dinner theme for the night was "South of the Border." We ate burritos and other Mexican dishes, drank ice cold Coronas with lime and

listened to Los Straitjackets. Kevin Ehrlick carefully positioned his truck and when darkness fell, we fired up his projector and awesome sound system to watch Monty Python's, *The Holy Grail*, projected on the side of one of our massive tents.

We spent the next two days in Rubicon Springs goofing off. Friday was one of the best days I've ever had. We started the morning by doing the official registration thing, including tracking down the Twiddy's to actually open registration. As a group, we dropped more than \$2,000 on raffle tickets—and we didn't win squat—do I sound bitter? In the afternoon, we hit the Springs for some rope swing madness and overloaded an inflatable raft with 12 guys, including Alvaro from the NorCal group. It wasn't pretty but it was nonstop laughter. Later, we hauled up water from the river so some could take showers courtesy of Romer and Uncle Ben. That night's dinner theme was Italian Night. The spaghetti sauce was homemade, the garlic bread had the perfect crunch and the sausage and peppers were spicy and hot. And

then to the Marauder Bar, where we met up with many old friends including Woody Swearingen and Mark Hawley. We claimed that the lower California altitudes were responsible for making us capable of being such hearty participants—it's all those extra red blood cells. In any event, we shut the bar down, then stumbled back to base camp for a late night chat session during which we solved many of the world's problems. If only we had taken notes....

On Saturday, many of us took the helicopter ride over the entire Rubicon Trail, which didn't look very long from the air. I spent a bunch of time around the campfire talking to Bob Brown and Dave Thomas from Toys On The Rocks. Did you know that there are two Dave Thomas's on the Rubithon committee? I'd been corresponding with both of them for months, thinking they were the same guy.

Chris Hatfield had been having some carb issues on his FJ40, so he spent the morning with Mark Algazy, who rebuilt his carburetor casually and

Kevin Ehrlick puts on a show by plowing his supercharged 80 over an enormous rock.

Photo by Mike Davidson



effortlessly on a camp table. When the carb was re-installed, Chris drove through the camp for a test drive and broke the studs on his driver side knuckle. The entire Rising Sun crew stood around his 40 as our best and brightest mechanics rebuilt the knuckle with borrowed parts. Naturally, Chris had broken on a narrow, hilly section of the trail through the camp and we couldn't move him until he was fixed. Mike Worth carved a sign, "Hatfield Hill," to commemorate the afternoon.

Dave Armbruster had busted one of his rear leaf springs in his mini truck coming into the Springs, so he spent most of Friday and Saturday creating new rear spring packs assembled out of donor leaves from a myriad of kind souls—FrankenSprings. Yodaman and Marlin's crew all went to great lengths to help Dave and we were all impressed once again by the spirit of the TLCA community. It surely is like no other out there.

Saturday night, we all donned our navy blue shirts and represented Rising Sun in force at the big dinner. By our count, the only group bigger than us was Mountain Transit Authority, which was in red garb for the evening. The food was tasty, the raffle prizes that we didn't win were awesome and Tony was in rare form. Many of our crew are part of the Cruise Moab committee and we saw a few ideas we may be "adopting" for our own future events.

Sunday morning it was time for Cadillac Hill. The obstacles are tight and tippy (and most of our 80s



Tim Nakari and Ken Romer follow the trail down toward Buck Island.

Photo by Matt Farr

showed a few scrapes for it) but our group made it through until Chris Hatfield busted the studs on the other knuckle on his FJ40. Fortunately, this was right by Mudrak's position as a spotter, so he jumped right in and worked his magic. What took nearly 6 hours for the Rising Sun crew to accomplish on Saturday afternoon took only 70 minutes for Mudrak. And he was blindfolded the entire time. OK, he wasn't, but that probably would have only added another 5 minutes.

Eventually, we all emerged to dry pavement and sunny Lake Tahoe. It was odd to see the regular people going about their business in their non-lifted vehicles, looking rather clean and dapper. We were covered in road dust, bug juice and river water residue with weeklong beards and sun burnt faces.

We had emerged alive, victorious and triumphant—and the rest of the world was oblivious.

We then split into several groups to head home via different routes and schedules. Three of us in 80s decided to tackle US 50, "The Loneliest Road in America," from Reno to Ely, Nevada. It roughly follows the path of the Pony Express and it's approximately 300 miles of nuthin'. I highly recommend it.

We traveled about 2,300 miles, were absent from jobs and families for 8 days, scraped and dented our trucks, donated blood to a hungry herd of mosquitoes and spent an obscene amount of money on fuel. Would we do it again? Absolutely.



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