

The Road Chose Me

Volume 1

Two years and 40,000 miles
from Alaska to Argentina

Dan Grec

THE ROAD CHOSE ME

The Road Chose Me
<http://theroadchoseme.com>

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For Mum and Dad.

When I was young, you said I could do anything.
And I believed you.

You were right.



Route through the Americas

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Introduction

Bamako, West Africa, Mali
September 2016

WHEN I set out to drive my little Jeep Wrangler from Alaska to Argentina, I had no idea how much the journey would change my life. I had no idea the people I would meet, the experiences I would have and the lessons I would learn could have such a deep and lasting impact.

I thought I was just going for a drive, but it turned into so much more. I will never be the same person, and the course of my life has been altered permanently. I can never go back to who I was or what I was doing before, so strong was the impact of the experiences that came my way.

During the journey I posted stories and photos of my adventures on my website. Through the site, I was able to show friends and family what I was doing. To my surprise, many people I had never met also joined the adventure and followed

along. I was shocked when complete strangers reached out to say how my adventures were inspiring them to get out and live their own dreams.

It has taken many years to write this book. That's because it has taken many years to fully understand the lessons I learned during the journey. This book contains my stories of adventures, experiences and the fascinating people I met. More importantly, it contains the major lessons I learned on the road. Life in Latin America is unlike the one I knew, and I was able to learn from many people who see things in a completely different way than I had ever known.

I hope this book inspires you to go out and have adventures of your own. I also hope you can take in the lessons presented to me along the way.

Like all good stories, to tell it properly, I must start from the beginning. . .

-Dan

Awakening

Lake Tahoe, California
Winter 2004/05

I N a vague kind of way, I knew how my life would go from the age of about fifteen. When finished school I would get a job and work hard for thirty or forty years until retirement. Probably I would have a wife and kids, a dog and cat. If I worked really hard, maybe even a sports car. That was the future I saw in front of me. It seemed - at the time - 'not bad'.

Growing up in a farming town in rural Australia, my family lived a middle class life. Mom and Dad were both teachers, and our family friends were either white-collar office types, or hard working salt-of-the-earth farmers. "A fair day's pay for a fair day's work" was a common slogan in Australia at the time, and everybody believed it to their very core. Working hard for life was basically a religion followed by everyone. Working full time was the goal of life.

After high school there was no question about going to University. It was simply *what you do*. So I did, and I really enjoyed it. By the end of my fifth and final year of Engineering I was exhausted - utterly fed up with eighteen straight years of schooling. My University held a job fair, where all the big employers like IBM and Oracle were scouting for talent. Too burned-out to do any schmoozing, I wandered around in a daze until I saw a huge sign:

SNOWBOARDING IN THE USA

Immediately I sensed the guy at the booth was different than everyone else in the room. And I don't just mean his long hair, jeans and skater shoes. His eyes, his smile, even the way he talked so enthusiastically with his hands - he seemed more alive than everyone else. Actually, everyone else was a zombie next to this guy. I was hooked, and as you might imagine, his was the only application I filled in that day.

Three long months later, I skip my graduation and fly to Lake Tahoe in California. On the plane I sit next to Dave, a New Zealander working as a ski patroller in Colorado. He works the winter in New Zealand, has a month or so somewhere tropical, then heads to Colorado for another winter. Back to back winters for ten straight years, and clearly loving it. Dave makes even the guy at the job fair look like a zombie, and his smile and laughter are contagious. Soon other passengers are milling about our seats to hear his stories, attempting to soak up some of whatever he has.

"Dan, after this your life will never be the same," Dave assures me with a massive grin.

I have signed up to live and work at Kirkwood Mountain Ski Resort, just outside Lake Tahoe in California. Kirkwood has on-mountain staff accommodation, and I'm randomly assigned to an apartment, already full of Americans for the season. I share a bedroom with Jeff from Oregon, who is the same age as me and has been working random jobs - mostly at ski resorts - since finishing high school. At Kirkwood he is a chef in a

restaurant, which he assures me is a piece of cake, and more importantly, has good perks. Our room joins onto a communal kitchen/living area with three other bedrooms, each with two people. Ty and Ryan (Bird) are from nearby Stockton, and have a laid-back California vibe going on. Ty is a snowboard instructor and Bird works in the rental shop. Immediately I feel welcome, with Jeff and crew showing me around and captivating me with endless stories of fun in the snow over a couple of beers that first night. When I tell them I don't have a snowboard and badly want to learn, Bird immediately lends me his spare board. Ty assures I will pick it up quickly and he will teach me everything he knows. "Have fun, it's a blast!" is all Bird says about lending me \$500 worth of gear.

My job on the mountain is 'liftie' - running the massive chair-lifts that shuttle people up the mountain. Most mornings it involves shovelling huge amounts of new snow before physically slowing each chair by hand so it does not hit people in the legs. I soon realize liftie is the lowest ranking job on the mountain, and we're not seen as the brightest bunch. Amazingly, lifties take this in stride, and are actually proud of this reputation. I think they secretly love every second outside in the mountain air, rather than being cooped up in a kitchen or retail store, a fate suffered by many of our friends on the mountain.

My boss Leah is small in stature and big on personality. There are over one hundred and twenty rowdy lifties running this massive resort, and Leah whips them into shape with her quick comments and willingness to jump in and work harder than everyone else. After almost a decade on the mountain, it's clear Leah loves the everyday chaos of mountain operations.

Soon Brandon arrives from another resort and moves into our little apartment - the resort he has come from has had zero snowfall this year, which does not meet Brandon's needs for the winter one little bit. He takes being really alive to a whole new level. A few years older than me, Brandon went

to university and had a 9-5 job before realizing that was not the life for him, and I can tell we have a lot in common. Now living out of his motor home affectionately named Sunshine, he skis in the winter and surfs in Southern California in the summer. Sometimes he works at ski resorts, sometimes he is a lifeguard in California. His energy is infectious, and he quickly joins our group of misfits looking for fun. He skis instead of snowboarding, though nobody cares at all. Everyone is just stoked he is having the time of his life.

Over the coming weeks I hang out with these guys whenever I'm not working, learning to snowboard as quickly as possible. Usually I cartwheel down the mountain before scrambling to the chairlift as fast as I possibly can, worried about being left behind. I arrive puffing and drenched in sweat, while the guys patiently wait for me. On the chairlift I listen carefully as snowboarding wisdom is shared, before the whole scenario repeats. Most days we don't even stop for lunch - we're having too much fun and simply forget.

At work I chat casually to guests getting on my chairlift. Soon I make it my goal to get a laugh from people in the fifteen seconds I have before the chair whisks them away. One of the lifts I work regularly has a couple of missing chairs - maintenance probably took them off years ago. Everyone expects the chairs to be spaced at regular intervals, and I soon develop a gag that never fails. Guests shuffle forward to get on, and are shocked when there is no chair where there should be one. I also act shocked, and ask them to look down as they are going up to see where the chair has fallen off. After a quick flash of fear, they assume I must be joking just as the next chair comes around, and laugh nervously as they are whisked off their feet and into the air.

First wake up

The first couple of times it happens, I'm really unsure.

"C'mon, it will be a riot," Jeff and Ty assure me.

They explain there is a full moon tonight, and they are hiking to the snowboard park to ride the jumps and rails by moonlight. They will ride through the park, then hike back up and do it all over again, probably until the wee hours of the morning.

For twenty minutes I think of a long list of reasons not to go. I have to work in the morning. I am not a great snowboarder. Riding in the dark will be difficult. It's cold outside. I want to sleep. I am also terrified, though trying hard not to show it. Really, it doesn't make any sense to do such a thing. Why would I?

Most of me wants to say no and stay safe at home, though another small part wants to say yes to see what this is all about.

The walk up is actually relaxing and peaceful, and we stop often to gaze at the stars. Nobody is in a rush, so we take our time, savoring every minute of the cool night air. At the top, everyone is laughing and joking as we strap on our snowboards, while I can't stop my legs from shaking. The jumps are almost all too big for me, and I barely touch a single rail, falling repeatedly. Even still, everyone smiles and offers huge encouragement every time I try.

"You'll get it Danno."

"I wasn't that good after only a few weeks."

"Almost man, almost!"

Amazingly, even though I'm failing miserably, I don't feel like a failure - actually, I feel great. Somehow, I am having a lot of fun snowboarding badly.

Not only do these guys really know how to have a good time, they are experts at making others have a great time too.

Almost falling asleep at work the next day, I think about how much fun I had, and how close I came to saying no because of

all the silly reasons I thought up beforehand. Of course, they all turned out to be complete nonsense.

I make a promise to myself - I will always say yes to whatever adventure the guys have going, no matter how scared or hesitant I feel.

Second wake up

A month later I know my snowboarding has progressed when I'm the first of the crew to arrive at the chairlift. Everyone grins like mad and looks surprised when they see me waiting for them. Now I feel like part of the team, like I really belong. To keep me in check the guys take me to a run with a notorious cliff drop, assuring me I'll be fine.

I don't get any points for style as I scoot over the four foot drop, and I can't believe my eyes when Jeff throws a front flip off the cliff right next to me, landing in the deep powder and racing past like it's nothing.

These guys know how to live!

The mountain behind our apartment is part of the ski resort, though there is no chairlift to access it. To ride the untouched powder, guests pay one hundred dollars per run to be driven to the top in a snow cat, an elitist thing to do. Of course none of us has that kind of money, but we all want to ride the powder. Being so close to our house, the powder practically calls to us in our sleep, causing the guys to come up with their own version of exclusive snowboarding.

When I hear their plan, I almost say no before I stick to my promise and say yes.

We get up at 4am - well before dawn - and put on snowshoes Bird borrowed from the mountain rental shop. Without a backpack capable of holding my snowboard I simply carry it in my hands as we skip out the door into the cool night air. The hike is mostly straight up and takes the best part of three hours. The thin air at 10,000 feet causes me to puff hard

the whole time, though again the hike is supremely peaceful. Somehow it just feels right to be out working so hard in the mountains. We all stare in awe as a spectacular sunrise comes and goes, and in the distance we hear ski patrol throwing explosive charges. The massive booms echo endlessly off the mountains that surround our tiny village, now far below.

At the top it's all smiles and high fives, and we linger as long as possible, not wanting the whole experience to come to an end. I take a conservative line with no rocks or cliffs, and it's easily the best powder snowboarding of my life. Before this I had no idea what real powder felt like on a snowboard - it's a completely different sport. The sense of floating, the silence, the flow. And the speed. I can't get enough of the speed.

We ride right to our backdoor, and again all slap high-fives as we race to grab gear and rush to our respective jobs. I'm a couple of minutes late and when I tell Leah I was out snowboarding she grins like mad and shakes her head.

"Jump on a snowmobile!" she calls as I rush to my chairlift.

Working the chairlift that day I can see my squiggly line down the adjacent mountain, and I can't wipe the huge smile off my face. When a couple of people ask and I point out what I did that morning, they slap me hard on the back. "Dude, that's awesome!"

I quickly forget about my aching legs.

Third wake up

One night I go to bed early, exhausted from a day of shovelling heavy spring snow. When the guys burst in hopping with excitement, I only want to go back to sleep.

"Danno, get up right now! There is a bear outside."

"Shut up, there is not. Let me sleep. You guys are nuts."

"Danno, seriously, get your ass out of bed and check this out!!"

Eventually they drag me over to the window and I'm awestruck

to see a real life bear wandering around the parking lot. I have never seen a bear before. They explain it's a grizzly, and it's huge. After I take a few photos from the window we realize that won't do at all, so Brandon and I head outside to get a closer look. The bear is occupied trying to get into a dumpster full of tasty trash, so we sneak closer and closer, using parked cars as shelter. My heart is racing and feels like it will explode from my chest as I stick my head up to snap photos. I'm certain the bear turns it's head in my direction when the flash goes off, so I turn tail and bolt back inside faster than I have ever run on snow.

When I race through the door everyone is rolling around laughing hysterically - they saw the whole thing. The bear has not moved and didn't so much as glance in my direction.

Ψ Ψ Ψ

My winter at Kirkwood continues for five months, always living a life I had never dreamed possible. Every day is a grand new adventure, and I love every second.

When the snow finally melts after a record-setting season, Brandon and I hit the road in Sunshine, surfing the California coast for a month. It's a fitting end to six months of fun in the USA.

I make the long trek back to Australia and can't stop thinking about The Kirkwood Crew. None of them has much money, but they're happier than anyone I have ever met.

How do they do that?

I have to know.

Growing up in small-town Australia I thought going to work for life was the only path to happiness. I thought if I worked hard and earned a good wage I would be guaranteed a happy life. Not only did The Kirkwood Crew teach me a whole new way of being happy - without lots of money - they also taught

me a whole new level of happiness I had no idea existed.

Somehow in all the years of school, lessons and studying, I had missed the classes about having fun. I missed the lessons about living right now. And I missed all the notes about how to really be alive. Luckily, these guys came along at just the right time in my life and gave me the education I had missed.

I will spend the rest of my life living the lessons I learned that winter in California.

Setting Out

Calgary, Alberta, Canada
June 2009

AFTER almost a year back in Australia, I return to North America to work at kids summer camps and ski resorts across the USA and Canada. At one resort, I stumble across a copy of *Long Way Round*¹ - Ewan McGregor and Charley Boorman's tale of their motorbike ride around the world from London to New York City. Soon I am completely engrossed and can't stop reading for two days and nights. It's one of the best books I have ever read. Ewan and Charlie journey through countries I never dreamed possible, trying new food and learning new languages. For months on end they see new places, meet new characters and set up their tents wherever they can find a quiet place. To me, this is real adventure.

¹*Long Way Round: Chasing Shadows Across the World*
Ewan McGregor and Charley Boorman, 2004

I soon realize, however, this is not an achievable adventure for an ordinary guy like me. Ewan is an international superstar, and their journey cost millions of dollars and required sponsorships, support vehicles, border helpers and years of planning and logistics. The list of hurdles is endless. When I finish reading, I am left with one powerful thought: “Too bad I can never do something like that.”



Completely out of money and backed into a corner, I suck it up and get an Engineering job in Calgary. It’s great to rent a room, have stable friends, go the gym and cook healthy food after years of transient living. My brother Mike soon follows me to Canada, and in the winter I often make weekend visits to the Rockies so we can snowboard together. During one visit Mike hands me a book that forever changes my life.

In *Jupiter’s Travels*², Ted Simon details his four year motorbike adventure around the world. From London to Cape Town through Africa, Rio De Janeiro to Vancouver in the Americas, around Australia and finally from South East Asia back to London through the heart of Central Asia, Ted really does ride around the entire world. While similar to Ewan and Charley’s book, the life-changing part for me is the realization that Ted was a completely average guy who set out to live a dream.

Ted had never ridden a motorbike and didn’t have a license. He had a tiny savings account, no sponsors and zero experience with an adventure so big. Ted was an average guy. One day he simply made the decision to do something unbelievably big.

The more I think about it, the more I realize I’m an average guy dreaming of doing something unbelievably big. I can’t stop thinking how similar to Ted I am. It hits me like a ton of bricks - the only thing stopping me is deciding to go.

² *Jupiter’s Travels: Four Years Around the World on a Triumph*
Ted Simon, 1979

With my days occupied at work, and my savings account slowly creeping up, I start daydreaming about where I want to go. Calgary is a fine place to live, though I sense I don't fit. Everyone around me is buying expensive cars and new clothes while I focus on the bottom line of my savings account - I walk to work and go to the bar wearing my old snowboarding jacket patched with duct tape.



As the months roll by, my dreams slowly develop into a concrete plan. At Kirkwood, Jeff filled my head with stories of Alaskan adventure, awakening the fascination I felt since reading Jack London's epic *White Fang*³ and *The Call of The Wild*⁴ as a young boy. Talking about my vague idea of quitting my job and driving North to Alaska for the summer, a friend suggests an extension. After Alaska I should continue South to Mexico, he says. The beaches are amazing, tacos are cheap and delicious, and it's not difficult to drive your own car.

I have previously been to *Tijuana* from San Diego and absolutely loved it, so Mexico sounds like a great idea. In the midst of a brutal Calgary winter a few months on the beach would be paradise on earth. When I buy a map of Mexico, all of Central America stretches to the South. After staring at the map for an hour, I rush out to buy another map - South America. After another hour of staring I can't wipe the smile off my face as I connect the dots and start dreaming really, really big.



For seven months my room is plastered with maps of North, Central and South America, and huge sheets of paper where I write lists of everything I need to organize, bring and plan to make the journey a reality. I have a list of Jeep work, a list of

³ *White Fang* - Jack London, 1906

⁴ *The Call Of The Wild* - Jack London, 1903

medial supplies to bring, a list of spare parts and tools I need and at one point, even a list of lists somehow grows. Every morning I wake staring at the maps, and every night I go to sleep with them in my dreams. I have a huge amount of work to do to and stuff to organize, so I aim to check one item off each day. With this approach the planning and preparation does not feel overwhelming, and the whole journey starts off feeling achievable.

After years of camping and hiking in the Rockies with a minimum of equipment, I'm confident the gear I already own will see me through. My two-man tent and small alcohol stove are well-loved, and both still function perfectly. Although I want to, I know deep down I don't need to buy anything new or fancy like a roof top tent, fridge, or winch for the Jeep. I plan to hit the road with a minimum of savings, which means the choice comes down to working longer to pay for new gear and upgrades on the Jeep, or to hit the road as soon as possible with what I already have.

I choose to hit the road sooner, of course.

My best guess puts the total distance at 30,000 miles - including the many detours I know I will make - which I think will take roughly a year. Both of those are ballpark estimates, and as long as I can make my savings of about \$10,000 USD stretch, taking more time is great. After all, this is not a vacation from my life, it is my life.

Researching the crossing from Panama to Colombia indicates that it could turn into a logistical headache, and I find it comforting to view Panama as a possible end point. If I really dislike what I'm doing, or it's too difficult, or I feel unsafe, I can sell the Jeep in Panama and do something else with my life. I find it easier not to look at the immense task as a whole, instead only to look a few days or weeks ahead. When people tell me about Peru, I immediately zone out and try not to listen - I don't want to get overwhelmed thinking about driving my Jeep to Peru.

I mean, that's crazy!
I can't do that.

I just plan to drive North to Alaska and then South to Mexico.
After that, I will see how I feel.

Ψ Ψ Ψ

The months fly by, and even after counting down the last one hundred days, I'm shocked when it is time to give notice at work and move out. Selling and giving away stuff feels great, and I do that repeatedly until everything I own fits comfortably in the Jeep.

I planned and dreamed and planned for so long, leaving Calgary turns out to be anti-climactic.

Of course, thinking about going is much harder than actually doing it. After a small goodbye party with a few friends, I get up one morning, get in the Jeep and start driving North.

And just like that, a 40,000 mile road-trip is underway.

The date is June 16, 2009.