

travel

Miles of milk shake smiles

How 1,000 preserved drinks became currency

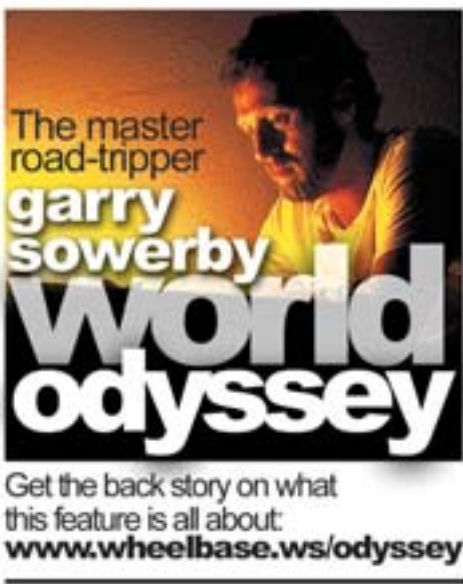
Join Garry Sowerby, a four-time Guinness World Record holder for long-distance driving, on his tales of motoring mania. Follow his accounts of 30 years of global road adventures: out-driving the clock on a race around the world; narrowly escaping bandits' bullets in Kenya; and smuggling books behind the Iron Curtain. The master road tripper hasn't slowed down yet.

I had been on airplanes between Tierra del Fuego, at the bottom of South America, and Canada for almost 24 hours. The ordeal involved a milk-run flight between Ushuaia and Buenos Aires and a red-eye to Miami, Fla. I then flew to Toronto and connected to a flight bound for Halifax, on Canada's east coast. Looking somewhat ruffled, I was just drifting off when a man in the next seat offered to buy me a drink. "Up in Toronto for a few days?" Bill MacLennan was obviously in chat mode. I explained I had been in South America working on a plan to break the existing 56-day record for the fastest drive from the bot-



When fast talking at the border is only getting you deeper into trouble, milk shakes for all seems to be a tasty icebreaker. They can also take a bit of credit for helping break a world record for driving from the bottom to the top of the Americas.

tom to the top of the Americas. My goal was to complete the 15,000-mile (24,000-kilometre) route from the southern tip of Tierra del Fuego, Argentina, to Prudhoe Bay, on Alaska's northern coast, in 25 days or less. Montana-based writer Tim Cahill and I would be driving a then-new 1988 GMC Sierra pick-up truck that had been completely re-engineered that year and General Motors was anxious to give it a real-world workout. I learned Bill MacLennan was President of Farmers Co-Operative Dairy that was about to begin marketing milk shakes in long-life Tetrapaks. "If I give you \$5,000, will you take a thousand milk shakes on your adventure?" He looked sincere. "How about 500, and ship another 500 to Panama City for us to pick up on our way through?" I countered. A deal was struck. Final preparations seemed endless. A mountain of paperwork had to be processed to obtain visas, letters of introduction, and customs documents. The Sierra was prepped with auxiliary lights, an air horn, winch and a snazzy paint job. A fiberglass cap over the pick-up bed covered a sleeping bunk, food, tools and emergency equipment. It also housed a 100-gallon (450-litre) auxiliary fuel tank capable of filling the stock tank three times with the flick of a switch in the cab.



The truck could go more than 3,000 kilometres without stopping, which was plenty of range to dodge questionable fuel stops on the back roads of South America. We would be safe when we were moving. However, one basic necessity was lacking. We couldn't figure how to get hot water into the cab of the truck at road speed, an essential to "cook" the freeze-dried food we had on board and to prepare a fundamental road-trip ingredient: coffee. The day before embarking, Tim bought a water-heating coil that plugged into the cigarette lighter. He obviously had stumbled upon a piece of gear that would enable us to dine like royalty while blasting through the jungles of South America. By the end of Day One, we realized the heating coil didn't live up to expectations. It took 20 minutes to heat a cup of water, which was deemed problematic considering the jarring driving conditions. Splish-splash. Freeze-dried curried chicken whipped up with cold water was revolting while cold instant coffee made with soda water produced a scary state of stomach turbulence. It became clear the milk shakes would be our best source of nourishment. At times, we mixed the frothy contents with instant coffee for a rudimentary version of café mocha. Later, at one of the dozens of roadside controls, we stumbled on another use for the milk shakes. While Tim and I used primitive Spanish to explain what we were up to, heavily-armed police focused on the frosty Farmers Milkshake I was drinking. Tim offered shakes to them as well as a group of wide-eyed children who had gathered. The children cheered. The officers slapped us on the back. Milk shake bribery sessions became ritual. We calculated that even if we drank 10 each a day, there would still be 300 milk shakes to get us through the checkpoints between Argentina and our supply stopover in Panama.

In Peru, the transfer pump for the auxiliary gas tank was on the blink so I crawled over the tools, supplies and equipment stored under the fiberglass cap to rectify the problem. In the process, I crushed a few cases of shakes causing the milky froth to ooze into the cargo bed. The incident proved fortuitous. At the Colombian border, an official was unimpressed with our letters of introduction. He didn't care that the Tourism Minister in Honduras saw our record attempt as a good thing for people considering a visit to Tegucigalpa, its capital city. A cute picture of my then three-year-old daughter, Lucy, strategically placed beside the insurance papers didn't phase him either. He insisted we empty the contents of the Sierra to prove we were not carrying contraband or prohibited goods into his country. When I opened the tailgate, a half dozen curious officers reeled back in disgust. The putrid smell of the souring milk shakes from the crushed cases was repulsive. "Pedazo de carne mala!" I accused Tim of



being a bad piece of meat. He returned the compliment and everyone broke up. We handed out strawberry shakes in the midst of the bizarre tailgate party and were soon on our way. Milk shakes had pulled us through again. We reached the port city of Cartagena on Colombia's Caribbean coast in time to rendezvous with a container ship that took us through the Panama Canal. Delighted with our progress, we considered the worst was behind us. As long as another 500 Farmers Milkshakes were waiting for us in Panama City. Garry Sowerby, author of Sowerby's Road, Adventures of a Driven Mind, is a four-time Guinness World Record holder for long-distance driving. His exploits, good, bad and just plain harrowing, are the subject of World Odyssey, produced in conjunction with Wheelbase Communications. Wheelbase is a worldwide provider of automotive news and features stories.



Think carefully before agreeing to take 1,000 milkshakes on a 24,000-km road trip through many countries where suspicious border police carry big guns. PHOTOS AND ILLUSTRATIONS COURTESY OF ODYSSEY INTERNATIONAL

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