Notes From A Small Car — Part One

Ever fancied travelling 4500 km in a Mini? Find out why this is best avoided as Minimag's answer to Bill Bryson sets off on a mammoth journey.



Two not terribly handy guys, a handful of tools, an unknown 30-year-old car and 4500 km to drive home. Sounds a bit crazy, doesn't it?

The story traces its origins back to around 1976 when Dave Slaughter, my father-in-law, purchased a new Austin Mini. The family drove the car for a few years until it met a tragic demise, rear-ended by a careless driver.

Back in the present, I was looking for a project car. My wife Joanne suggested I got a Mini as she had fond memories of the one they had when she was young. Dave caught wind of the idea and decided he'd like one as well. We found a relatively rust-free car in Vancouver for him and Joe out with the intention of driving it back.

The car we chose was a 1972 Austin Mini 1000 saloon. We bought the car sight unseen, well, unless you count a few blurry images from the online ad posting. The following is a rundown on the trip and the people who helped us along the way.

Friday, May 21 — Vancouver

After a leisurely 300 km trip to Toronto in my sister's Camry (comfortable but mind-numbing, the thing is so quiet you don't realize you're speeding until it starts to shake a bit at 150 kph), we arrived at the airport in two-and-a-half hours at 7 am. We discovered that Mini spares, in spite of their noble purpose, are still subject to excess baggage fees to the tune of $105 (£45) — roughly the spare tyre, expertly packaged in a tatty old cardboard box and wrapped in 25 ft of rope got itself jammed in the baggage conveyor, eventually requiring three people to dislodge it. The slightly mangled package was then taken to 'oversize'.



Noon Vancouver time, our friend Chris Grabowski picked us up and took us to lunch, then we went to pick up the car in West Vancouver. The car, a 1972 Mini 1000, was a 'driven to church on Sunday by a little old lady' special, complete with the standard parking lot bumps, scrapes and abrasions you would expect in a car of this vintage that still has its original paint.

On the road the car feels tight, like a brand new car. We have a 40 minute drive across the city to Craig's Auto and discover a few problems along the way. The horn doesn't work, the choke cable hangs limply out of the dashboard, the mechanical washer pump doesn't wash and the left outer CV joint is a bit crunchy. A roadside inspection of the CV reveals a bit of bad news, the boot clip has gone astray and a squeeze of the boot produces a gush of rusty water — not a very good sign.

At Craig's we took a good look at the CV. As 6 pm was quickly approaching our options were diminishing, none of the local Mini-friendly mechanics were open late (or on the weekend) so we hoped out the CV with WD-40 and repacked it with fresh grease.

Into The Foothills

We throw a new CV joint in the boot along with our sack of consumables (points, condenser, radiator hoses etc), check that we have our list of emergency numbers and hit the road.

Hmmm, the signal lights become intermittent, then die completely. We pop into Canadian Tire (like Halfords) to score a packet of fuses and some brake fluid. A bit of wire wiggling and a whack on the flasher unit gets things going but very slowly — curious.

Uh-oh — we turn the car off at a roadside rest stop and have to push start to get going again. As we drive, electrical power is slowly fading away; the car begins to misfire. The next town, Hope, is 26 km away and darkness is falling. We put the hoses to it to keep the revs up and head for town with no headlights or signal lights. Cars flash us with their high (main) beams as twilight turns to darkness. Hope is fading as the misfire gets worse, we push it to 75 mph and the car still sputters but carries on.

Slowing as we enter Hope, the car gasps its last breath as we coast into a gas station. A couple of locals give us a hoose and point us in the direction of the Shell station which has an attached garage — unfortunately for us the mechanics have all gone home.

We can buy a new battery for $130 (£55) but no one can tell us if our battery or alternator is the culprit. We leave the battery to charge for an hour and walk into town. A quick call to Marcel Chichak in Edmonton gets us an educated guess on our problem — dead alternator. Marcel has spares, but he is 15 hours away in Edmonton.

Following Marcel's advice we pull the end cover off the alternator to discover a badly scored stator and one of the brushes worn to a useless nub. Rooting through the luggage nets us a nail file, which we use to dress the stator and the one serviceable brush. In the meantime the gas station attendant load-tests our freshly charged battery and declares it fit — hooray, we save $130.

Rummaging through the garage we find a soldering gun and a short

Words and photography by Tod Andiliste



Above. Malakwa BC. A meltwater waterfall near Malakwa British Columbia.



Above. Yellowhead trail sign.





Left. The Mini in the previous owner's driveway when we went and picked it up. It really is stunningly beautiful here, makes you want to go and look at real-estate.

Signs all along the road warn of the avalanche threat

length of flexible wire. After a couple of attempts we graft a bit of extra wire onto the brush assembly and stretch its spring, bodging it to the point where it will at least make contact with the stator. (The gas station attendant at the Shell in Hope, Steve Cameron, went above and beyond the call of duty in order to help us, recharging our dead battery and allowing us, with supervision, to use the tools in the garage.)

After reinstalling the battery and alternator we test it by starting the car and disconnecting the battery cable — it dies straight away. Momentarily puzzled we discover we haven't reconnected the alternator electrics. Reconnect, retest — it works a treat.

Midnight, on the road again. This is our first hard slog through the mountains, passing through the 1400 m Coquihalla pass. As we near the top, 15 ft embankments of snow flank the road (it's nearly June) and signs all along the road warn against stopping due to the avalanche threat.

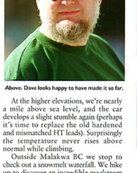
The higher we get the more the Mini struggles until eventually we're lugging along at 25 mph in second gear. Pulling out the choke owes the engine a reprieve and we creep back up to 60. As we begin levelling off the car starts to sing again, cheerfully bombing along at 80 mph at elevation. At 2 am we're at a night after travelling only 240 km, stopping in Merritt BC.

Saturday, Climb Every Mountain

While adequately quick for pooling around town, the stock 1000 lacks the oomph necessary for an all-out assault on the mountain passes. Climbing the steeper grades is a second gear slog at times, but we're able to carry fourth for most of the drive.



Above. Still in Vancouver, the city is bordered by the Pacific on one side, mountains on the other. Here we're marvelling at the fact that the Mini was actually working at this point.



Above. Dave looks happy to have made it so far.



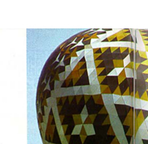
Above. Dave gets some exercise pushing the Mini through the snow at Rogers Pass.



Above. Monument at Rogers Pass BC marking the completion point of the Trans-Canada Highway in 1962.



Above. Marcel Chichak reassembles the front suspension on our Mini after fitting a new outer CV joint.



Above. Marcel Chichak with two of his Minis, 'Hugo' (center) and 'Mr-Dressup' outside of his shop in Edmonton. Marcel is a bit of a Mini expert and a good person to bump into.

At the higher elevations, we're nearly a mile above sea level, and the car develops a slight stumble again (perhaps it's time to replace the old hardened and mismatched HT leads). Surprisingly the temperature never rises above normal while climbing.

Outside Malakwa BC we stop to check out a snowmelt waterfall. We hike up to discover an incredible maelstrom of swirling wind and spray created by the cold falling water.

As we get back to the car a massive caravan pulls to a screeching halt behind the Mini. Two enthusiastic New Zealanders leave the caravan on one of them lugging the car as he reaches it, overjoyed as this is the first Mini they've seen since their arrival in Canada a few days ago.

Tim Neal and Lis Gibbs have put their Minis in storage and sold their home in Wellington New Zealand to finance a world tour, culminating in a trip to England for the 40th birthday celebrations and possibly the purchase of an Italian Job. A quick rummage through the caravan produces their Mini photo album with restoration photos of Lis's tweaked Mini and Neal's Cooper S and Gem. We exchange e-mail addresses to keep in touch.

Coming down the mountain passes, four in total, we make up for time wasted plodding our way up. On the steepest, Kicking Horse Pass, we touch 95 while coasting. The pass is so steep that the national railway borrowed massive spiral tunnels through the sides of two mountains at the turn of the century to reduce the severity of the grades facing the train. The highway follows



Above. Ted Andiliste reinstalls the grille after jury-rigging the alternator in the Hope BC Shell station parking lot. At around midnight, he preferred this to being tucked up in bed.



Above. A surprise meeting in a lay-by near Malakwa BC. Tim Neal and Lis Gibbs, Mini enthusiasts from Wellington New Zealand found us at the side of the road and stopped for a chat. The pair had put their Minis in storage and embarked on a world tour.

Coffee stretched into a three hour chat, so it's 1 am Sunday by the time we're back on the road to Edmonton. We're cured by this point and chatting incessantly at each other in order to stay alert, unfortunately this distracts us a bit. The jury-rigged alternator is holding up well and the car runs like a top until we near the Pomeda off-ramp where it suddenly cuts out. Dave and I look at each other and draw the same horrifying conclusion simultaneously — we're out of gas!

With a little weaving back and forth like a F1 driver nearing the finish on fumes we soldier on, for about 200 m.

The exit is handy so we begin pushing the car toward Pomeda, thank goodness we freed the sticky brake drum yesterday before leaving Craig's. After about 2 km we reach a sign which



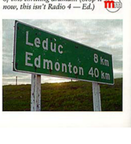
Above. A Richardson's Ground Squirrel or 'gopher' in the local parlance. (Below:) Dave befriended a group of them while I was off getting some photographs elsewhere. I thought it was cute until I realized he was bribing the rodents with my lunch...



announces our destination is 5 km further up the road. Giddy with exhaustion we keep pushing, riding the car like a giant skateboard on the downhill bits.

Once in town we flag down a passing motorist, the first we'd seen in an hour of pushing. He offers us a tow. Declining faced with a wall of beer fumes, we ask for directions to an all-night gas station. Another couple of kilometres of pushing nets us a full tank. It is 4.30 am now, and the sun is just starting to crack on the horizon. At quarter to six we arrive at our stop in LeDuc, just outside Edmonton. We've travelled 920 km, and except for the lack of sleep we're back on schedule.

Will they make it, or will they get seduced by the bright lights and plush loveliness of the next flight home? Tune in next month for the final installment of this thrilling drama... (Stop it now, this isn't Radio 4 — Ed.)



Above. Somewhere in Saskatchewan...

Notes From A Small Car — Part Two

Travelling 4500 km in a used Mini? Bad idea. We go and catch up with our pair of Bill Bryson wannabees...

Last month we met Ted and Dave, who bought a Mini, sight-unseen, and then flew across Canada to pick it up. Only problem being, the Mini wasn't in the greatest condition and they had 4500 km of best Canadian countryside to cover before getting it home.

Last month's gripping installment saw them dealing with more mechanical glitches and gremlins than you could imagine, while grappling with bad weather, steep hills and inadequate Mini stores. This month we finish the journey and see if they actually make it home...

Sunday May 23, What's Sleep?

Dave grabs a few hours of shut-eye while I catch up with my relatives in LeDuc. It's been about 10 years since we've had a chance to visit so there is a lot of ground to cover. We eventually start talking about this Auto-expo-expo pyramid-scheme travel agency my cousin is considering. I'm nearly reaching for my wallet myself until the fourth cup of coffee jars my good sense back into motion.

Today's priority is maintenance so we travel to Edmonton to Marcel Chichak's. Marcel gives the car a quick once-over and we go out to grab some lunch before we start. First item on the agenda is a drive in Marcel's 1969 998 Cooper vintage rally car known as Hugo. We take in the scenery and blast through a few roundabouts on our way to lunch.

The car is taut and responsive even with three of us on board. Unlike many racecars the Cooper is in pristine shape from the spotless interior complete with full works-style dashboard to the gorgeous red and white paintwork. This working classic is capable of winning at shows or on the gravel stages. Marcel's current project car is 'Paddy', a 1965 Cooper S, which has been stripped to bare metal for three years in his garage while he completes the sub-assemblies, with nary a sign of corrosion. A testament to the dry Alberta climate.

On the way back to the shop we go trawling for parts cars in the backstreets and alleys. Today we're on the lookout for an Austin America he saw a few weeks ago. No luck finding it so back to the shop we go.

Back at the shop Marcel gets to work on the left outer CV joint, Dave changes the oil and retrofits a canister-style oil filter housing (so we can find filters more readily) and I replace the alternator brushes and get to work cutting and fitting a new set of plug wires.

Marcel also sets the 'Edmonton Parts Network' in motion looking for a fuel sender unit to replace the smashed one which is currently in the car. After about 20 minutes one is located and Marcel pops out to get it while we press on finishing our respective tasks.

The car runs smoother, he and Dave install the new seatbelt anchor while I re-install the grill. We tidy up the shop and get ready to head out, but a quick check shows no headlamps.

Not to be deterred, Marcel reaches into the harness behind the distributor shield and within moments discovers a bullet connector I've managed to go and knock loose while fitting the new plug wires. We quickly pop the grill off, fit it up and everything is wonderfully bright and cheery again.

We say our goodbyes and arrange for Marcel to keep his eye out for another rust-free car (for my rally car project).

Words and photography by Tod Andiliste



Above. Easter 2005 and are heroes are still ploughing on. Actually it's the world's largest Easter egg, to be planted in Vegreville Alberta.

Monday May 24, Into The Prairies

On the road again, we're headed through Saskatchewan today. It's about 900 km wide — and it's flat enough that you can see all the way across it on a clear day.

Yikes — I spoke too soon. A few km before leaving Alberta for Saskatchewan a tyre packs it in a big way, blowing out the entire sidewall.

Well we've plenty of spare tyres but the stock jack is useless to us, as some clod has welded over the lugs that last time the sills were done. Luckily a passing truck takes pity on us and lends us a scissor jack.

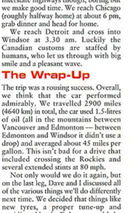
Finally we're in Saskatchewan, a place called Eloydminster actually, which straddles the Alberta/Saskatchewan border. We stop at the Canadian Tire (roughly the equivalent of Halfords — the home of moderate quality pattern parts and pine-scented air fresheners. There is one in every town of more than a couple of 100 people in Canada), to have two spares made up from the bits we're carrying.

We come back in an hour — one won't seal and the humfisted apprentice has managed to go and tear the bead out of the other. We head off with one weather-checked bias-ply, a slowly leaking radial and a tin of spare-in-a-can, keeping our fingers crossed.



Above. Marshall, Saskatchewan. Traditional square grain elevators punctuate the Saskatchewan landscape, but are slowly being replaced by more modern concrete silos.

We stop and phone ahead to Gary Metcalfe, aircraft mechanic and president of the Winnipeg Mini club, the Mid-Canada Mini Group. Gary sets



Above. Interstate Highway 94, Michigan. "Now's my hair Dave?" "Dunno, the mirrors are missing. Have a look in that hubcap."



Four customs agents swarm the Mini with tweezers

to work finding new tyres for us while we nurse the car along the 1000 km of Yellowhead trail to Gary's.

Monday — Tuesday, With Much Swapping...

The plan was to drive about half-way, pitch our tent and continue on to meet Gary for lunch in Winnipeg. Unfortunately, layboys are few and far between and it had rained all week in Manitoba turning the roadside into marshland.

Driving straight through we reach Portage La Prairie (French for 'get out and carry the canoe you lazy sod'), where Gary suggested we call ahead from at 7.30 am.

A bit surprised (we were expected around noon), Gary directs us to his house. Like any true Minisc, Gary's shop dwarfs his home, it's plenty big enough to house a whole 10 cars with room to work on each.

Gary has convinced a friend whose project car is currently housed in his shop to part with a new set of Pirelli's (mounted on a nice set of sandblasted and repainted rims) to help us along our way home. In Canada 10 in tires are terribly scarce — a few Mini specialists stock them but to obtain a good selection we import them from England.

Gary gives us a quick tour of the shop. His current projects include a Traveller, five saloons and an A30 with a big lincup, a van, two A30s and a couple of rarpid up mystery cars in the side yard, awaiting their turn in the shop.

We're trading our worn out and leaking tyres for the new rubber and wheels on Gary's friend's car and head off, thanking him profusely.

After a brief visit in Winnipeg with a photographer friend, Keith Morison, we head South in order to cut through the states on the way home.

Crossing the border into North Dakota proves interesting. Apparently two big bearded guys in a clapped out 27-year-old Mini with temporary tags are an uncommon sight at the border. We are welcomed to the USA with the full 'rubber hose and bare bulb' treatment. Four customs agents swarm the Mini (packed to the gills with luggage and spare parts). One armed with a pair of tweezers and a plastic evidence bag sifts through the carpet, the others take



Above. Raw determination has set in and there's no turning back or part-exchanging the Mini for a flight home. With this in mind, Gary Metcalfe installs a set of new tyres in hope of a better ride.

turns rooting through the luggage extracting suspicious looking items and conferring amongst themselves.

While our crack team of forensic experts has a go at the car, two other customs agents interrogate Dave and I. Dave apparently has a reasonable one, I unfortunately get stuck with a pint-sized cross between Cracker and Yosemite Sam. Apparently he has some short term memory loss as he asks my occupation four separate times. From the way he's hitching up his gun-belt every couple of minutes I figure he's fixing to blast me if I say "photojournalist" one more time.

Eventually he gets around to the loaded questions. I manage to sidestep the standard "are you now or have you ever been a member of the communist party", and "have you ever visited any countries 'unfriendly' to the United States", but eventually I get tripped up.

"Have you ever been arrested?"

"Yes" — what self-respecting photojournalist hasn't?

"Oh — really?"

Having determined that I am a dangerous felon, he ships me off to be vetted by his supervisor. We chat cheerfully for a few minutes about nothing in particular and after an appropriate delay I am allowed to go back to the car. Wheresupon I am confronted with the smoking gun.

Err, empty syringe actually (at 18 stone I'm often mistaken for a heroine addict — it's a cross I have to bear). I respond with a treatise on the efficacy of ATF versus 30 weight oil in the carb dashpot. I'm just getting to the good part when the last of the customs agents hit the floor snoring — I shake Dave awake and we sneak out the back way.

We quickly pass through North Dakota into Minnesota, an altogether more civilised locale. Driving through the Chippewa national forest is spectacular but deer, both live and in carcass form, are plentiful along Highway 2. The thought of hitting one in the Mini gives us reason to slow and use the high (main) beams wherever possible.

We hit Duluth around 11 pm — we are both too tired to continue and the car has once again developed a misfire which threatens to stall us whenever we drop to idle. We stop at the first motel displaying a vacancy sign and decide to worry about the car the next morning. We've travelled 2000 km since we last slept on Sunday.

Wednesday, Life Isn't So Complex

The car refuses to start. Check the points, fine. Pull a plug — looks a bit lean. We squirt a bit of gas into the carb and finally get it started after about 25 minutes of fiddling. It will won't idle and the misfire is worse but we blame it on the cold and head for breakfast. I loose the idle speed after a hairy run through city traffic, cutting out at each intersection. We begin to suspect a dying fuel pump but for now it seems to run OK.

About an hour outside Duluth we find an auto parts store. I grab a clear fuel filter and swap it in place of the tin one so I can see how well the fuel pump is working. Easy as pie, other than a few tense moments as I spill raw fuel onto the hot exhaust manifold before getting the clips back into place. Surprise, the misfire miraculously disappears and she pulls smartly to 85 up a grade — perhaps we should have changed the filter in Vancouver.

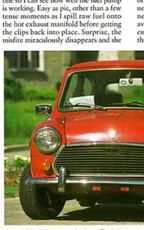
Well, Dave needs to be at work tomorrow, darn those blasted people with day jobs, so we've got a lot of territory (a little over 1200 km) to cover today. Most of it is a slog across the Interstate highways though, boring but we make good time. We reach Chicago (roughly halfway home) at about 6 pm, grab dinner and head for home.

We reach Detroit and cross into Windsor at 3.30 am. Luckily the Canadian customs are staffed by humans, who let us through with big smile and a pleasant wave.

The Wrap-Up

The trip was a rousing success. Overall, we think that the car performed admirably. We travelled 2900 miles (4640 km) in total, the car used 1.5-litres of oil (all in the mountains between Vancouver and Edmonton — between Edmonton and Windsor it didn't use a drop) and averaged about 45 miles per gallon. This isn't bad for a drive that included crossing the Rockies and several extended stints at 80 mph.

Not only would we do it again, but on the last leg, Dave and I discussed all of the various things we'll do differently next time. We decided that things like new tyres, a proper tune-up and avoiding North Dakota would be essential ways to put ourselves through all this again!



Above. The fuel filter, replaced on the road in Wisconsin, cured low speed stalling and increased the top-end substantially.



Above. Alternator and HT leads, subject to minor repair and replacement along the way.



Above. All hail the conquering hero. Finally home, the Mini sits in Dave's driveway.