

May 1, 2011

Hi Friends and Family!

Ned and I are off to what we hope will be a grand adventure. Ned has spent a great deal of time and effort getting our old (famous and infamous) rock crawling jeep, The Killer Bee, ready to go DESERT RACING.

As most of you know, we go down to watch and/or help at the SCORE Baja 1000 race every year in November, and every year we say we're going to do it! But life happens and "The Thousand" has stringent rules on vehicle roll cage construction, so nothing we own fits the bill. The modern Baja 1000 has also come a long way from its roots which began in 1967 with some guys in dune buggies (one of the guys was a friend of ours, Bruce Meyers, who invented the Meyers Manx dune buggy) trying to beat the motorcycles' best time from Tijuana to La Paz. The way it was done was by checking in at the telegraph stations in each town, so they had documentation (proof) of their times. Well, the dune buggies did beat the motorcycles' time and later in 1967, the official race, The Baja 1000 was born (back then it was called the NORRA Mexican 1000)

Fast forward to today, and we find "The Thousand" (now put on by SCORE) chock full of exciting, fast, hi-tech machines like trophy trucks and class 1 buggies that eat up the rugged Baja terrain at speeds up to 100+mph without batting a fender. It is fun and high-energy, but I can never help wishing I was around for the down-home, grass roots efforts of the early pioneers of desert racing. There is a lot of money involved now with Trophy Trucks costing in the hundreds of thousands to build, loads of sponsorships (aka commercialism) big prize money, and multiple drivers trading off down the 1000+ miles of the Baja peninsula...nothing wrong there, but just not the rough-and-tumble-shoestring-budget-one guy and a co-driver kind of racing it used to be...real endurance racing (in my opinion).

Well we weren't the only ones nostalgic for the "old days." Last year NORRA decided to bring them back by organizing the first (of many, we hope) VINTAGE Mexican 1000 Rally. We went as spectators in our VW Syncro (Charlotte) and had a blast following the race all the way to La Paz. Along the way we provided help to broken racers (gas, air, winching, etc.). We loved seeing the old racers (people and cars!) come out for this cool event. There were old race trucks along with the dune buggies and scores of other awesome "dusty" racers (pre 1989). Famous drivers like Walker Evans and Parnelli Jones were there too, and Ned was able to ride with Walker for one of the legs so he could write an article on the event. All in all it was wonderful and we decided to see if the good people at NORRA would let us in with "The Bee."

So here we are, it's Sunday, May 1, and we just got done with a "test drive" with all of our gear, food, water, tools and recovery equipment loaded up and strapped on...and us in full regalia...driving suits, five-point harnesses, helmets, gloves, bandanas for dust, sun glasses and arm restraints (The Bee is an open vehicle, so safety rules require them so your arm doesn't get squashed if you roll). Wow, I wish I had a picture to show you, but there was no one around. I think we looked a little cool, and the test drive was great (nothing fell off).

*Ok, I have to admit...it's going to hurt...a lot. 1200 miles of brutal bouncing on a suspension system built for rock crawling, not racing across the desert. And it is going to be 90 to 100 degrees (really fun in driving suits, helmets, and exhaust heat wafting in around our legs). But we are so excited (you all know we're a little nuts anyway). IF we make it through the tech inspection on Wednesday, we will finally be **ON THE STARTING LINE IN BAJA ON THURSDAY!***

Unlike the "real" Baja 1000, this one is done as a rally which means that we will stop to sleep at night. IF we're still running (not broken in the middle of the desert) we will be staying in Baja de los Angeles on Thurs, Loreto on Fri, and God willing and the jeep don't break, we will finish in La Paz on Sat (my 51st Birthday).

In the true spirit of the old days, Ned and I are running solo. We have no chase crew, no support team, and we chose to not sign on with Baja Pits (an organization that provides gas and mechanical support along the way). We will be using the "Pemex" gas stations and will have everything we need (we hope) with us. Best of all, we get to drive The Bee all the way back up the 1200 miles! (Of course no helmets, driving suits and lots of time spent along (and in) the Sea of Cortez!

Please wish up happy mechanical thoughts,

Hugs,

Kat

P.S. This is a link to the NORRA website for info on the race, and I have attached a picture of The Bee in racing get-up (sans us). Will try to get pictures down there!

<http://www.norra.com/mexican1000.php>

May 16, 2011

Hola!

Well we made back it safe and sound, having accomplished our three goals:

Finish, have fun, and want to do it again!

What an adventure. Looking back now it feels like a dream...did we really do that??

Thank you for all of your warm wishes and happy mechanical thoughts...it worked!

Following is a brief tale of our adventure in raw unedited form...sorry but wanted to get it out to you before I leave town again...so here it is. I have also included an attachment in Word format in case the e-mail comes out funny and have included my first e-mail in the document. Part 2 starts on page 3.

I have also attached some pictures which we really had to scrounge for; some are photos of photos and others are simply nabbed off of websites (I have been unable to contact the owners to buy them!)...but you'll get the idea.

*Hugs,
Kat*

Ned and Kat NORRA Mexican 1000 Adventure, May 2011

Monday May 1, 2011:

Still not 100% sure we would pass the tech inspection required to be on the starting line on Thursday, we loaded the "Killer Bee" and our gear into the trailer and headed south. We drove all day to the Salton Sea area in southeast California and spent a lovely, balmy night in the bed of the pickup.

Tuesday morning we crossed the border at Calexico/Mexicali and checked into the Crown Plaza Hotel. The temperature was in the 90's, but it felt great after the nasty winter we have had. The only real tasks for the day were to register, attend a mini class on "rallying" and to figure out how to use the dreaded GPS.

My main job, as co-pilot was, of course, navigation. But there was nothing "vintage" about it. No Maps, no compass...we were to have the entire race course loaded onto a chip, which we were to then load onto the GPS which Ned had already installed in the Bee. Between the GPS and a "Tulip Book" (basically a series of mileage points and symbols depicting obstacles, hazards, turns, etc.) I was to get us all the way to La Paz. And I had no idea how to do it!

The race/rally would be three days, and each day would be divided into sections. The racing sections were dirt roads, and the "transit stages" would be on pavement. It was critical to re-set the "trip" on the GPS at the beginning of each section, so the Tulip Book would correspond to the GPS, etc. Really...no map???

Well, I was sitting in the Bee, sweating bullets, and looking at the GPS like a hog with a wrist watch, when Bob Bower from the Off-Road Motor Sports Hall of Fame came along. Bob took

pity on me, climbed in, joined my sweat-fest, and gave me a full 30 minute tutorial. Miraculously, I actually got it. I was ready.

Wednesday. “Contingency” day, Tech inspection. I sat in the jeep, in line, amazed that we were doing this. I felt so grateful to Ned for putting it all together. I had wanted to race for so long, and here we were. It was really a pre-race party, and the local, Mexican people who allow us to bombard their beautiful peninsula with our off-road races, came out to see us off with warmth, kindness, and well wishes.

It was finally our turn for tech, and those butterflies were for naught...we passed without a single issue...Ned had done an awesome job with the required modifications, and we would be on the starting line tomorrow morning!

Thursday morning found us unnaturally calm. We loaded up a dry bag with emergency food, one change of clothing each, and a couple of toiletries and strapped it onto the Bee. This was all the “luggage” we had for the next seven days. Sporting driving suits and helmets, we drove out to the starting line, where we were placed in the 76th position out of 84 cars (we told them we would be slow!). They started the cars one at a time at precisely 8:00am with one minute in between, so we had a long wait. But I was so excited it didn’t matter. I was soaking it all in. We were on our own now. No support crew, no trailer waiting in La Paz, no radio, no satellite phone...not even intercoms to talk to each other. The noise of the engine combined with our helmets would make verbal communication impossible. I was going to have to give Ned navigation cues via hand signals. And yes, I was totally excited. This was what it feels like to be alive.

It was finally our turn, and we drove up to and under the giant blow-up Tecate arch to await our 60 second countdown...we were off. I am still getting choked up thinking how happy I was, and I’d love to give you a great story for day one, but it went amazingly smoothly. As many times as we have driven the back roads of Baja, we never get tired of the stark beauty of the desert. We got the GPS, the Tulip Book, the various sections, and our hand signals all down to a nice science and drove about 300 miles in companionable silence (except for the engine roar) down to Bahia de Los Angeles on the Sea of Cortez. We even made it in time for dinner (which we would later regret).

We were greeted with shots of tequila, beer, and a great deal of fan-fare at the finish of day one. The Bee had run great and we felt good, so off we went to a restaurant we had enjoyed on a previous visit. Bahia de Los Angeles is a bit of a dive town (not our favorite in Baja) but our room was adequate. The shower was stone cold, and the bed was lumpy, but what the heck, it was only for the night, and we happily hit the hay at around 8:30.

At around 11:00 I woke up in a cold sweat with a troubling cramp in my belly. By 11:30 I was heaving violently and Ned was concerned about how day 2 would go with a sick co-pilot. By 12:00 Ned had explosive diarrhea. By 12:30 I had it coming out of both ends. By 12:45 Ned was Mount Vesuvius. We both knew it was the shrimp cocktail we had shared at dinner.

You do have to count your blessings as they show up, and I have to say that at least we were on quite the perfect rotating schedule, and never once had to fight for the toilet. It was a small comfort, but we took it. There was, of course no sleep for Team Killer Bee that night, and by 7am we were still dry heaving, completely empty, dehydrated, unable to hold anything down, and scheduled for another 8am start for 350 miles of Baja desert in 100 degree heat.

Not going was not an option. After all, food poisoning does eventually pass, right? Weak as kittens and still miserable, we literally crawled into our driving suits, and somehow managed to get our bag strapped on the jeep. Armed with diluted 7-Up in our water jugs, we heaved ourselves into our seats. There was a little different feeling about day two starting line than day one, but we were there.

Our first section was 150 miles of rugged dirt, and we were lagging behind due to unscheduled stops. I'm sure that at least half of the racers saw both of our butts that day. We knew that if the Bee broke down, we would be buzzard bait. We knew we were crazy, but we just had to keep going. At one particular stop Ned admitted that he was hallucinating and almost had me drive. But we stopped to get rid of more food (I can't believe there was still anything there!), and I looked over to see Ned lying in the sand in the fetal position under the scant shade of a cactus. I forced us to continue to take small sips of the sugar water, which thankfully stayed down, and we continued on our way.

Our halfway point that day was the quaint little town of San Ignacio. It was on a transit stage which meant we were not racing for time but had a "window" of time with a 30 minute lea-way to arrive at the next section. We got gas at the Pemex station, and crawled into the little market where we headed straight for the beverage cooler. We grabbed a couple of bottles of pedialite (sugar water with electrolytes) and sank to the floor against the back wall of the store. Leaning against each other to stay sitting up, we used our 30 minute lea-way in the relative coolness, sipping on pedialite. Everyone who came in to get a coke had to step over us, and our pathetic condition should have been embarrassing, but we simply didn't care.

We turned down the tequila at the finish of day two in Loreto. We parked the jeep, managed to check in to our hotel and fell onto the bed, still sweaty and covered in dust. After a while, I managed to get up and asked a fellow racer to help me get our bag to our room. I also stopped at the restaurant to ask for chicken soup, soda crackers and 7-Up to be sent up.

I cannot give the La Mission Hotel in Loreto any higher a recommendation. Incredibly beautiful, comfortable, and friendly. The shower was blessedly hot and perfect, the bed a huge, king-sized cloud, the view of the Sea of Cortez at sunset spectacular, and the chicken soup was just the medicine we needed. By morning we were revived.

Day three was wonderful. The scenery was fantastic and we were feeling ok. We had one near miss; on a blind, sudden downhill right turn out of San Javier, we nearly drifted (skidded) off the road...fortunately no cliffs here...just another car (a VW Bug) that had done just that. Only Ned's superb driving skills saved us all from being a Bug/Bee sandwich. Other than that, the Bee was still running well and we were now enjoying a full open air experience. Our windshield had come out of the frame during day two's ordeal, and was just barely hanging on. We had left

it under an old boat in the back parking lot of La Mission, and drove the last 300 miles without one. It was amusing to watch our fifty plus year old jowls flapping in the wind as we raced on to La Paz.

The finish line in La Paz was the perfect birthday present. I turned 51 that day and felt about 20 (except for the jowls). We all know the secret to youthfulness is to keep doing what we love, but sometimes we forget. It's why I'm so passionate about health and fitness. We would never have been able to do what we did without taking care of ourselves and staying fit. You never know what opportunity will arise to make you feel like a kid again.

If you can believe it, we ended up finishing 22nd out of 49 cars that finished and 84 that started. We even got two trophies...one for a second place finish for our class (14) and one for a second place in our category (Evolution). And we were the only ones who raced with no crew, and who were driving the race vehicle the 1100 miles back up the peninsula. Just like the old days, and the other racers told us that they were inspired.

Our drive back was very relaxing and included a few dips in the Sea of Cortez, and some great meals. Best of all, we were still happy to be cruising along in the Bee. The whole way back, we dreamed of doing the race again next year (but not in the poor old Bee). We considered this vehicle or that (Ned would have to build it of course) but one thing we absolutely agreed on...we still do it solo, and still drive it back...we want to keep feeling alive.