A Jaguar in Moose Country

An E-Type heads relentlessly north into Canada until the pavement ends

BY PETER EGAN • PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

"SO WHEN ARE WE GOING TO TAKE THE E-Type on that long road trip we've always talked about?" I asked my wife Barbara a few weeks ago, suddenly looking up from my well-thumbed copy of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a cheerful tale of death and mental derangement on a harrowing trip up the Congo River.

Barb looked at our kitchen calendar and flipped through the pages. "We have only six days left this summer with nothing scheduled," she said, "starting next Wednesday."

"That's five days from now...and we're leaving tomorrow for a three-day weekend with our friends..."

"Right."

"So we have one day to pack and get the car ready?"

"Right."

"I guess I'd better go check the tire pressures," I said, suddenly setting Conrad aside.

I concocted myself a tall pint of iced coffee in my favorite Guinness pub glass and went out to the workshop to contemplate our beige 1967 E-Type coupe.

We'd owned the car for five years, and I'd spent three dragged-out years doing a mechanical restoration from the firewall forward—new brakes, suspension bushings, clutch, transmission seals, cooling system, etc. My friend Denny Marklein's body shop had repainted the car in its original color; a place called Straight-6 in California had revamped the cylinder head; another friend, Steve Straavaldsen, had rebuilt the bottom end, and I'd installed and tuned it. At 65,322 miles, the beautiful but rather complex rear suspension was still stock and untouched. No funny noises, so I'd left it alone.

I'd done a recent oil change, but hadn't tuned the car, checked the valves, changed the points or set the timing in two years, but it was running fine nevertheless. No good reason not to embark on a big road trip.

So I set the tire pressures, checked the oil and water (fine), whacked the knock-offs with a lead hammer one last time, filled a small metal toolbox to the very top with every hand tool devised since the Bronze Age, slid it into the back of the car and shut the hatch.

"The car's ready," I told Barb.

"What are you taking for spare parts?" she asked.

"None," I said authoritatively. "Where would I start? If we take a spare water pump, the coil will fail; if I take an extra fan belt, we'll lose a wheel bearing. British cars always know instinctively what spares you're carrying. Better to take nothing."

Barb looked deeply into my eyes, as if trying to discern a rational brain buried somewhere behind them. "If you say so..." she said in a lost, slightly doomed, tone of voice.

"The car's ready," I said. "Now all we need is a place to go."

We got out our Rand McNally Road Atlas and looked at the big map of North America. It had been a dream of ours to drive the Jaguar out to Nova Scotia, but a quick glance at the map told us we'd need at least six days just to get there and back from Wisconsin—using the Interstate. Not a sports-car trip made in heaven.

We looked west at the Great Plains and the Rockies. Lots of flat, hot, empty space to burn up before we got to the mountains—which were, at that moment, on fire.

"Let's go straight north," I said in a moment of inspiration. "Drive until the paved road runs out. We've never been north of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in our lives. Let's take two-lane roads into Canada until we can't go any farther."

The more we thought about it, the better we liked the idea. It would be pure fun. No Interstates, big cities or boring roads. Just small towns, blue lakes and north woods.

"What's the last paved road straight north of here?" Barb asked.

We traced our fingers deep into Canada and found a lone secondary road that ran almost 200 miles due north from the Trans-Canada Highway into the green, empty center of Ontario. At the end of that road was a little town called Pickle Lake.

"Perfect," I said. "Let's drive to Pickle Lake."

"I wonder if they have a motel," Barb said doubtfully.

That night we drove to a Madison bookstore to shop for Canadian travel guides. Strangely, there was no mention of Pickle Lake in any of the five or six guidebooks we checked. Stranger still, there was almost no information on north Ontario in any of them. One book had the address of every gourmet coffee bar in Vancouver, but not one word about this Montana-size patch of rivers, lakes and trees.

"That's because there's absolutely nothing there," my friend Jim Wargula explained when I told him about this oversight. "Just mosquitoes and tundra."

We'd see. In any case, I liked the idea of driving into *terra incognita*. It made me feel kind of like Columbus, but with Lucas electrics.

Barb and I left on a Wednesday morning and pointed the long nose of the Jag north on small country roads. Ah, the aroma of old leather and wool, mixed with mown hay and barnyard-fresh air. It was a warm morning, so we opened the rear vent windows and turned on the ventilation fan.

The fan has two speeds, slow and fast. Slow turns at about 3000 rpm and "fast" kicks her all the way up to about 3002. The difference is almost discernible to the trained ear. Nevertheless, ventilation is surprisingly good in the Jaguar, and it takes a very hot day to make you wish for air conditioning.

We wended our way over to the Mississippi near LaCrosse, then headed north along the Scenic River Road. I made a brief stop at Bay City to visit the old fishing cabin I'd rented with two buddies one summer when we worked on a Burlington Railroad section crew.

Peering in the window of the unrented cabin, I noted that the same chrome-legged kitchen table and chairs were still there, from the summer of 1967. It was sitting around this table after work that I first heard "Light My Fire" by the Doors and "Somebody to Love" by the Jefferson Airplane. That fall, about two months later, I met Barb at college. Meanwhile, in England, our future Jaguar was coming down the assembly line, though we wouldn't buy the car for another 32 years.

We made our first fuel stop at Ellsworth, and it took 13.4 gallons and averaged 19.6 mpg. From there we drove into deep north woods and made it to Lake Superior by evening, cruising through the city of Superior and across a bay full of ore boats into the slightly superior city of Duluth, which has many swanky homes along the lakefront.

Just past Duluth, we turned onto the Scenic Shoreline Drive (shunning the Viewless Inland Truck Corridor) and checked into a lovely little yellow cabin in the pines at the Island View Resort. Dining nearby at the Bay Shore Supper Club, we sat at a window overlooking the lake and ordered a fish combo special that featured walleye, herring and lake trout. We also had a Manhattan, to celebrate a 489-mile day in which the tool kit stayed firmly closed.

I raised my glass in our traditional British car adventure toast: "So far, so good, as the sky diver said."

Just south of Grand Portage the next morning, an orange light flickered on our speedometer face.

"It's our low-fuel warning light!" I exclaimed to Barb. "It works! This is the first time I've ever run the tank this low. It's a miracle!"

The light came on at 280 miles, and we filled up with 2 gallons left in the 16¾-gal. tank. Just before the Canadian border, we stopped at Grand Portage, toured the replica fort and buildings on this famous gathering place for the French *voyageurs*, then headed for the land of the maple leaf.

We crossed the Canadian border station with a few polite questions about our intentions. "And what does the missus do for a living?" the guard asked me.

"She's a physical therapist who works with disabled school children," I said.

He smiled and waved us through. Apparently, this is a good answer in the age of drugs and terrorism.

I can't tell you why, but I always relax a bit when I drive into Canada. People are a little more polite, drivers a bit more mature, with less "attitude" (that dismal product of pop culture). On the surface, at least it feels like a calmer, more rational place. Also, you see far fewer cops everywhere. Maybe all those things are related.

We drove through rugged cliff country into the big town of Thunder Bay, then forked west on Highway 17, the famous Trans-Canada Highway. Pretty

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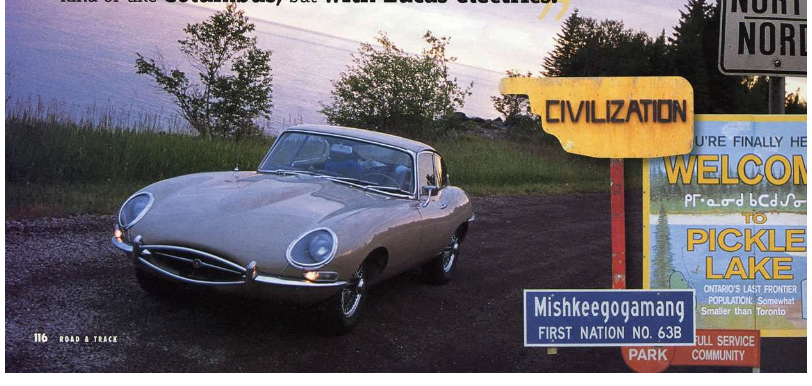


■ Top left, the *voyageur* fort and forbidding falls at Grand Portage; top right, the Jag ponders a favorite sports-car road near my old home town.

country, with big lakes, high ridges and vistas of green forest. The "towns," what there were of them, came along about every 60 miles—Raith, Upsala and English River. We drove into St. Ignace early in the evening with our low-fuel light fluttering and stopped at an Esso station. The tank soaked up 56.8 liters of fuel, for $56 Canadian. I didn't even try to figure out the mileage; it made my brain hurt.

St. Ignace was the town where Highway 599 turned straight north toward Pickle Lake for 292 kilometers, or "klickadoons," as Barb had taken to calling them, in deference to Canada's rich Scottish heritage. I asked about Pickle Lake at the gas station, and the very name seemed to make people laugh. "Lived here all my life, never drove up there," one man told me.

"Nothing there," the station owner said. "A mining town. Used to be. Fishermen go there. Why do you want to go up there with that beautiful car?"

"It's the end of the road."

"You can say that again."

A truck driver at the station had actually been there. "Couple of motels," he said. "Rough road, 10 km of gravel. Watch out for moose; they're everywhere. And bears. A friend of mine saw 10 black bears along the road last week. Don't leave any food in that Jaguar when you park it."

I was reminded of my favorite line from the old Jack Nicholson western, *The Missouri Breaks*, in which a Montana outlaw gang escapes into Canada. Riding through the dark forest, one of the outlaws looks suspiciously around himself and says, "There's things in Canada that eats your horse."

Or your Jaguar, apparently.

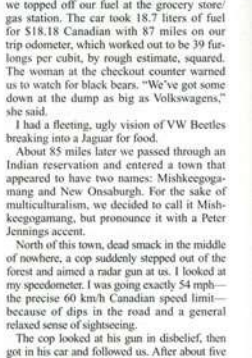
We found a motel just out of town on Lake Aginac and had excellent home-made lasagna at a restaurant attached to a gas station. As in Sweden, people this far north don't waste heated walls. A young woman at a nearby table looked out the window at our Jag and said, "What kind of car is that?"

In our two days of driving, a lot of people had asked this question. To a car buff from the '60s, this is like seeing a Julie Christie movie and wondering who she is. But the very question is proof that generations change, time passes and, as Ecclesiastes says, "all is vanity."

The next day we hit the trail to Pickle Lake. It turned out to be a lovely road, sweeping back and forth among lakes and forests, rising and dipping over granitic ridges of the glaciated Canadian Shield, some of the oldest exposed rock on earth.

This landscape, with its conifers clinging to thin turf on scoured bedrock, reminds you that, only a little more than 10,000 years ago, the whole area was buried under a white sheet of ice. In geological time, this was just minutes ago. And here we were, rushing with our Jaguar for a quick look, mere seconds before the next ice age. Which makes you wonder about the long-term collector value of cars from the 1960s.

There were a few dips and bumps in the pavement, but mostly the road was in superb shape, with one short stretch of road construction. We passed signs for five or six fishing lodges, none of which had been mentioned in our guidebooks. Traffic was light to nonexistent, except for a few lumber trucks and—of all things—a red Miata.



At the little village of Savant Lake, we topped off our fuel at the grocery store/gas station. The car took 18.7 liters of fuel for $18.18 Canadian with 87 miles on our trip odometer, which worked out to be 39 furlongs per cubit, by rough estimate, squared. The woman at the checkout counter warned us to watch for black bears. "We've got some down at the dump as big as Volkswagens," she said.

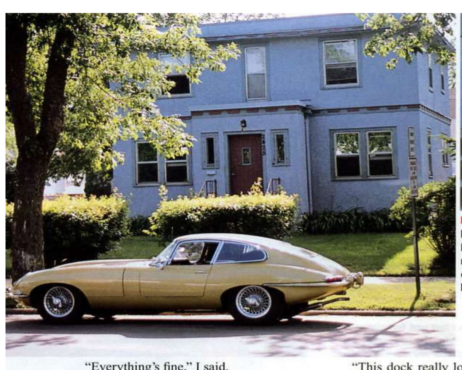
I had a fleeting, ugly vision of VW Beetles breaking into a Jaguar for food.

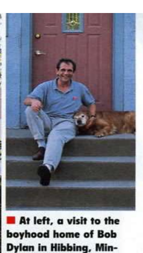
About 85 miles later we passed through an Indian reservation and entered a town that appeared to have two names: Mishkeegogamang and New Osnaburgh. For the sake of multiculturalism, we decided to call it Mishkeegogamang, but pronounce it with a Peter Jennings accent.

North of this town, dead smack in the middle of nowhere, a cop suddenly stepped out of the forest and aimed a radar gun at us. I looked at my speedometer. I was going exactly 54 mph—the precise 60 km/h Canadian speed limit—because of dips in the road and a general relaxed sense of sightseeing.

The cop looked at his gun in disbelief, then got in his car and followed us. After about five miles, his lights came on and I pulled over.

A young and very polite officer from the Ontario Provincial Police leaned in our window and said, "Sorry to stop you, sir, but we don't get many exotic cars like this up here, and I just wanted to see if everything was okay."





■ At left, a visit to the boyhood home of Bob Dylan in Hibbing, Minnesota. Above, current owner Greg French and his pal "Maxie."

"Everything's fine," I said.

"Good. May I see your registration, driver's license and proof of insurance, please?"

He looked over the papers and handed them back. "I just wanted to make sure you were the owners of the car," he said. I nodded and wondered if rings of exotic-car thieves were driving old Jags to Pickle Lake and then air-lifting them to Russia with de Havilland Beavers.

"This is a beautiful car," he said. "I don't think there's ever been an XKE on this road before. We have a T-Bird and an old Cadillac in Pickle Lake, but they never leave because of the rough roads." He then gave us advice on motels and gas stations and said, "Have fun."

As we drove away, Barb said, "I think he just stopped us to look at the car."

"If I saw this car up here, I would too. I'd set up a roadblock."

"I'll bet we really are the first E-Type on this road," Barb said, pleased with the idea.

"I think so," I said. "And, until disputed, we will stand by that claim."

A few minutes later, it started to rain so I turned on the Jag's small triple wipers, which work pretty well. Or at least they did until they suddenly stopped. As I strained to see through the rain-streaked windshield, we passed the city limits sign for Pickle Lake ("The Last Frontier") and the wipers suddenly started working again.

"Pickle Lake is the Lourdes of Lucas electrics!" I exclaimed.

When we finally got into town, Pickle Lake was better than described, but not exactly downtown Manhattan. It was a slightly tired-looking little town strung along the shore of a lovely lake, with quite a few people just standing around. There were a couple of motels, a decent airport on the hill above town and a fly-in fishing service with a Cessna 185 floatplane on the lake. A nice young couple who ran the charter flying service, Jason and Joy Bridle, came out to look at our car, and let us park it on their dock for photographs.

"This dock really looks like the end of the road," I said.

But it wasn't quite. The pavement actually ended about a mile north of Pickle Lake at the little village (i.e., convenience store) of Central Patricia. Here the pavement turned to gravel. A man at the store said the gravel road continued north for about another 100 km, and in the wintertime you could sometimes drive all the way to Hudson Bay on dirt roads and frozen lakes. That would be an adventure for another time, and another vehicle. A Morgan 3-wheeler, maybe.

We took some pictures of our car at the end of the pavement, and I noted that we'd gone exactly 1002 miles since leaving home.

As we retraced our route south in the rain, Barb got out her cellphone and called a fishing lodge whose sign we'd passed on the way up, Sac Bay Lodge Camp on Sturgeon Lake. The owner said he had a cottage available. "We're starving," Barb said. "Do you serve dinner?"

"Oh, I might be able to find something for you to eat," the owner said, in what Barb took to be a French-Canadian accent.

The camp turned out to be a beautifully restored log lodge and cabins on the lake, about a mile off the road, and the owner, Fred Wittwer, was originally from Switzerland. When we got there, he cooked us and one other couple the single best meal of the trip—smoked trout appetizer, a delicately sautéed walleye course, a salad with his own homemade dressing, steaks cooked on the grill and his own special after-dinner drinks made with coffee and some bliss-inducing mixture of spirits. Without really trying, we'd stumbled on one of the prettiest spots in Canada and the best chef north of Miami.

The next morning we slithered south on the damp curving roads toward the Trans-Canadian. The E-Type was perfectly suited to these roads and great fun to drive. With all our luggage and extra tools in the back, it felt a bit soft at the rear over big dips in the road, but was otherwise both supple and composed, with precise steering and nice feedback in the endless curves. The 3.54 diff, which sometimes made the big, torquey six seem unnecessarily busy on Interstates, put the car right in its element on winding secondary roads, with instant acceleration and great throttle response. It was whippy and quick.

Which was nice on Highway 502, the road south from Dryden, possibly the prettiest stretch of road we saw in Canada. With big, sweeping turns around marshes and lakes, it threaded its way from one isthmus to another, through much exposed granite and tall pines. Good GT car country, like the road to Pickle Lake, but with perfect pavement.

And on this road, we finally saw a bear—a large black bear standing idly by the side of the road. As we stopped to take pictures, a trundling motorhome came around the corner, holding up a parade of about 60 cars. Sight of the bear caused near pandemonium in this group—locked brakes, honking, etc. The bear fled and so did we.

We crossed Rainy River and the border at International Falls, where warning signs on the highway instantly switched from moose to deer. I don't know why, but I get the impression that no moose would ever consider leaving Canada and crossing the U.S. border. It's just a matter of style and tradition. In any case, we'd seen no moose in either country.

Before heading back into Wisconsin, we had one last travel goal, and that was to visit Hibbing, Minnesota, Bob Dylan's home town.

Biographies of Dylan have made Hibbing sound like a desolate, half-deserted mining town where the Greyhound sign creaks in the wind and young poets go mad from ennui in the wintry darkness. In reality, it's quite a lovely city with a nice downtown, shaded streets with grand old homes, great-looking public schools and proud civic architecture of brick and stone. It appeared that much iron-mining wealth had been spent on infrastructure.

With directions from a gas station, we found the old Zimmerman (Dylan) home on 7th Avenue in a nice middle-class neighborhood near the high school. It was a blue two-story, with interesting, Indian-style trim around it. As I was taking a photo of the Jag in front of the house, a Frito-Lay truck pulled up, and the driver jumped out and introduced himself.

He was Greg French, a friendly, articulate man and owner of the Bob Dylan boyhood home, just coming home from work. We apologized for standing in front of his house, but he said he didn't mind at all, and had us sign a visitor book. "We get people from all over the world," he said. French told us he'd lived down the street, needed a larger house for his growing family, 14 years ago, and found out the Zimmerman house was on the market. "We paid more than market value," he said, "but I thought the house was worth preserving."

We thought so too. Along with the iron ore that won World War II and put America on wheels, Bob Dylan was certainly Hibbing's most famous export. Barb and I had tickets to see him in Madison, two weeks after our trip.

We left Hibbing late in the afternoon and drove 200 miles south to Stillwater, on the St. Croix River, to stay overnight with our old friends, Bruce and Linda Livermore. Linda was gone for the weekend, but Bruce ran out and got us a big pizza. The Livermores' kids, Megan and Ross, were gathered around the piano in the living room singing Beatles' songs (superbly, I might add) with a bunch of their equally talented high school friends.

The old Jaguar, standing nearby in the garage, probably felt right at home. Especially since it was sharing garage space with my old Lotus Seven and Bugeye Sprite, which Bruce now owns. It was a nice little reunion of stray British spirits—"in some corner of a Minnesota garage that is for ever England," to irreverently paraphrase Rupert Brooke.

The last day of the trip we meandered lingeringly on back roads through the green hills and red barns of Wisconsin's unglaciated Driftless Zone, through my erstwhile home town of Elroy and back to our present home, south of Madison. One of the most beautiful parts of the drive, in our own back yard.

We arrived in the driveway having gone 2029 miles. The Jaguar averaged 19.1 mpg and used two quarts of oil on the trip. Except for the self-healing wiper problem, the car had run for five long days without missing a beat. I'd never opened the toolbox. It had been, truly, a grand tour.

Which is what the E-Type was built for. There's something to be said for driving an old English sports car that was actually designed with continental touring in mind, intended to go from London to Zurich or Sicily, rather than just running over the hill for a quick pint at the village pub. It's a car with seven-league boots and deep reserves of performance.

And it still works well on modern roads. Many current economy cars will cruise just as easily and comfortably at 70 mph on the highway, but very few of them will lunge effortlessly to 100 mph (or much, much more) *right now*, when you need to pass that sluggish motorhome or gravel truck in a hurry, then drop back to a smooth, muted growl, full of latent possibility.

It's this two-stage personality that makes the E-Type coupe such a good companion on a long trip. It's fast and fine-handling, but also comfortable, with compliant suspension and lots of luggage space; civilized, yet burning bright, like Blake's famous jungle cat. The old Jaguar slogan of "Grace, Pace and Space" had it exactly right.

As we unloaded the car that evening, I found myself quietly humming a song written long ago by a Canadian named Neil Young, about an old car he owned in north Ontario. It was called "Long May You Run." It has a beautiful line about "trunks of memories, still to come." ■