

Driver training and Trip report for Sunday June 22nd.

Author: Sebastien Fox

Attendees:

Ian McKinley	Holden Rodeo (Trip leader and trainer)
Stefan Zohar	Suzuki GV
Ian Bamforth	Holden Rodeo
Doug Macinger	Mitsubishi Pagero
Sebastien Fox	Toyota Prado
Brett Ingleton	Nissan Navara
Ron Mason	Nissan Patrol (Tail end Charlie and trainer)

Off to a bad start! Having asked my wife to set the alarm for 6.00am (it's nearly always on and goes off most days – she can sleep through it, but invariably I get woken up and have to switch the damn thing off!). Anyway I suspect the problem with the alarm this morning was when she knocked it off the bed side table (due maybe to the couple of extra white bubbly drinks she had finished off that evening).

So awoke in a panic at 06:45, but knowing that Lithgow was nearer than Newcastle on the map (sorry, but having spent most of my life outside Australia, my geographical location skills are somewhat limited) and, as I can get to Newcastle in about an 1hr 45min, I thought cool, I will still get there early and have breakfast upon arrival. Boy was I wrong! The road up to Katoomba just keeps going on and on and on and I ended up turning up 29 mins late to see my fellow members looking pretty miserable. The Shell petrol station on the entry to Lithgow is in an exposed position and a chilly wind was blowing that morning, so it was no doubt pretty unpleasant having to wait around in those conditions. For this I am truly sorry and have learned an important lesson.

Leave a really large margin so that if things go wrong you have lots of leeway, and also definitely don't trust the "where is" web site (this states you can get from Lane Cove to Lithgow in 1hr 36min), it took me 2hr and 15min!

The sun was shining and we set off into the wilderness and within 10 minutes turned off onto a dirt track. Following the track down through the forest lead to what looked to me like a small quarry. This is in fact a steep rocky hill into which five or six short tracks had been carved out. This was the site selected to practice our stall start. We aired down here and I decided to lower my tyre pressure to 25 psi although 22 psi had been mentioned. I was to discover later when scrabbling for traction that 22 psi would have been a better choice.

Ian walked over the tracks and pointed out wheel placement explaining the whys and wherefores of his advice. This advice was followed by a demonstration where Ian drove on both optimal and non-optimal lines. He was spot on and as he had predicted, using the wrong line, the wheels of his Rodeo rose skywards and traction was lost. On the optimal line the Rodeo drove up the steepest track with ease. With Ian and Ron's excellent advice what seemed to be quite a daunting challenge proved not that hard. The actual stall start was quite easy for me as I have an auto, but it was definitely useful to do and to see that even on a very steep hill your 4WD can be held and reversed back down a very steep slope safely.

The next stop looked to me like a lovely place to have a picnic with the road terminating at the river. I was soon to find out that we were going to drive into the river, and peering across to the other side I couldn't see an exit point! There were two entry points into the river, the first one entered the river about 30 meters before the second one. Ron was keen to attempt the longer crossing, driving through with what appeared like ease in the Patrol. Brett and I also took this route, although at one stage I was holding my breath as the water was getting deeper and deeper and rapidly approaching my open window. It was all over very quickly and it probably seemed worse then it actually was, and any way if the two Nissan's can make it, a Toyota definitely could!

Once on the other side of the river, we stopped to perform a recovery. A small trench was dug about 12" deep. Stefan drove his Suzuki forward placing his front off side wheel into the trench. Next Stefan pulled out his snatch strap. This was biggest and fattest snatch strap I had ever seen, and could probably be used to un-bog a truck! Ian explained the procedure for performing a recovery and we stood well back as Ian's Rodeo took off at a fair pace. The Suzuki jumped out of the hole like a cork from a Champagne bottle.

Stef and the Suzuki both survived ok and some discussion ensued about there not being much elasticity in the strap. Ron thought he would make the trench deeper, so using Stefan's 5ft long shovel this was quickly done.(I thought it was already quiet deep enough!) Doing the practical was very useful and is the best way to learn. Some of the things Ian pulled us up on were: not having the engine running in the bogged vehicle; front wheels should be pointing straight ahead and in the right direction and everyone needs to stay a safe distance from the recovery operation. We stopped here for a quick bite to eat and a cuppa (I will remember to pack a camp chair next time!)

A short distance further on we stopped at the base of a very long and steep climb. Here we disembarked and Ian walked us up the track, on the way explaining which line we should try to follow and the reasons for it. The track looked pretty rough to me and I was wondering whether Stefan who was the first of us to attempt it would make it in the little Suzuki. My turn and all went well at the beginning, managing to cross the most difficult section with ease thanks to the good advice on wheel placement. However a little bit further up the track on a very rocky section with the sun directly in my eyes I could no longer see the ground ahead. I had driven onto a rocky ledge and lost momentum and traction and the wheels started to spin. Ian came to the rescue and directed me back onto the better line and I made it up. I did manage to ground the car's under body on the deep ruts further up the hill. Now, considering the my Toyota has a 3" lift (thanks to Opposite Lock, I had only wanted new suspension with a 1" lift!) also the stock Prado 90 series already has good ground clearance. The ability of the other vehicles and in particular the Suzuki was very impressive. I suspect I would have done better with a bit more traction, so next time I will reduce tyre pressure a bit more (around 22 psi).

A drive through a pine forest took us back to the main road. Here we aired up and the trip can to end. It had been a great day and I think we all learnt a great deal and had a lot of fun.