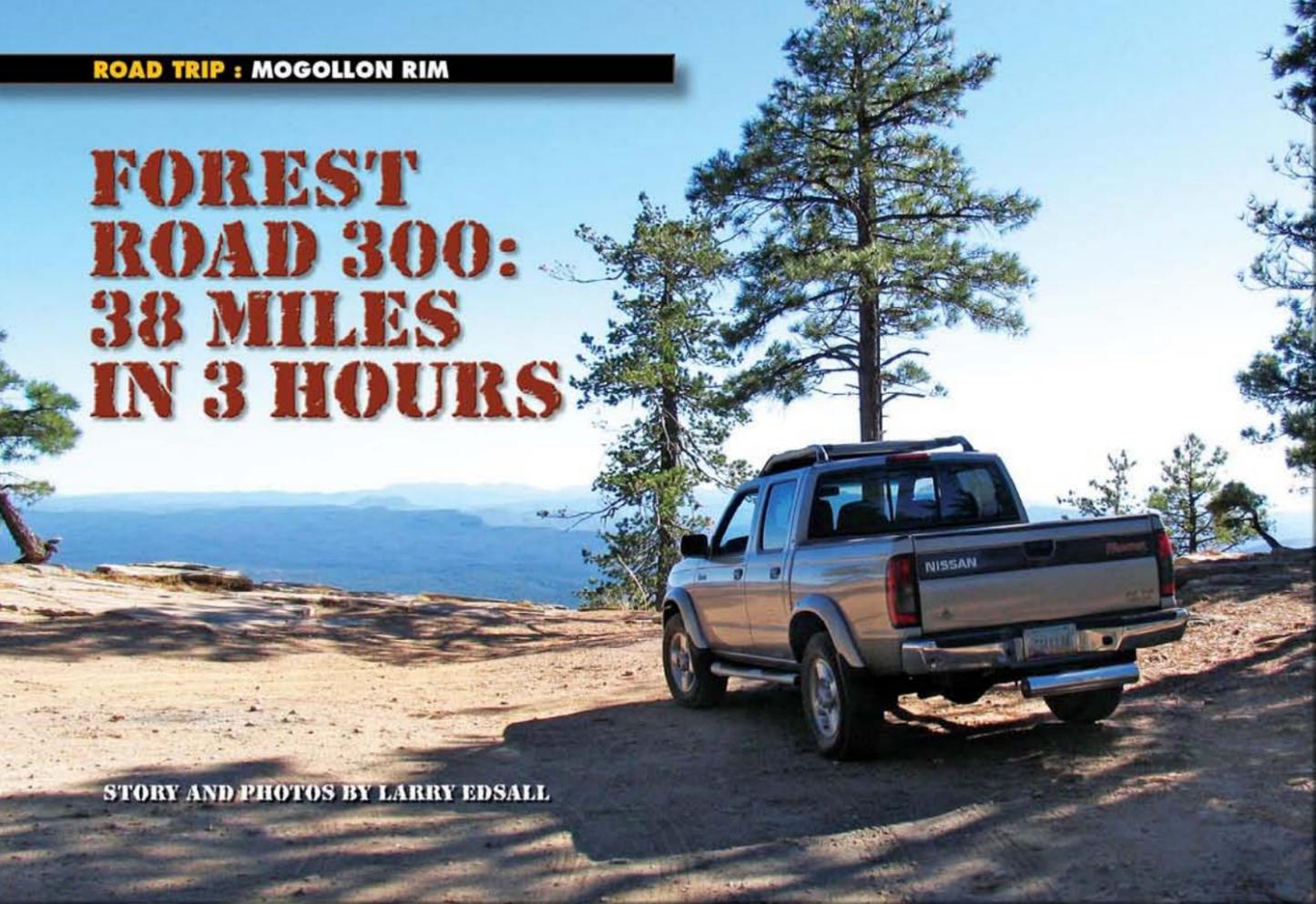


FOREST ROAD 300: 38 MILES IN 3 HOURS

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LARRY EDSALL



Forest Road 300 runs along the edge of the Mogollon Rim above Payson. From the unpaved road's eastern end, you can look down on those traveling at a much faster pace on the pavement of state highway 260.

Do the math: 38.1 miles in 3 hours. But that's like 12-point-something miles per hour! A good marathon runner could cover that distance on foot. So could most people who ride bicycles. And yet the route book says we should plan on three hours to cover a mere 38.1 miles of what it rates as the easiest of all unpaved surfaces?

That's right, because while you could drive Forest Road 300 in a standard, family-style passenger car, we'd really recommend doing so only in a rental because this road, while offering none of the typical off-pavement obstacles of rocks to straddle or boulders to climb, is somewhere between washboard rough and paint can shaker for much of its distance. And speaking of that 3-hour estimated time for travel, you'll want to take longer because you'll want to stop every so often, get as close to the edge as you dare go, to stare at some stunning vistas.

We who live in Phoenix's Valley of the Sun are spoiled, because we don't have to drive far, or even all that far from pavement, to take in some of the best vistas available. Consider Schnebly Road as it

descends into Sedona. Or the Apache Trail along the Salt River to Roosevelt Dam.

Or Forest Road 300, first blazed by Gen. George Crook's military men as part of their supply route between Fort Whipple in Prescott and Fort Apache in Arizona's White Mountains.

Today, you can drive east out of Prescott on highways 69 and 169, then make a quick hop north on Interstate 17 to Camp Verde, exiting east on 260 and following that road as it works its way up toward the Mogollon Rim before plunging south and east toward Payson and following the base of the rim on toward Show Low and the White Mountains.

Or, like Gen. Crook's supply team, from just east of where 260 now intersects 87, you can follow the dusty, graveled Mogollon Rim Road, cutting the distance, though by only some 20 miles, but greatly enhancing the views out the windows of your sport or crossover utility vehicle, pickup truck or (rental) car.

Gen. Crook's supply troops drove horse- or mule-drawn wagons. We drove a modern 4x4 crew cab pickup truck, though we never needed to shift the transmission

out of 2-wheel-drive mode, not even when we took the side trail to see the General Springs cabin, a half-mile each-way dirt road that's rough enough that you likely won't be able to travel it in anything but a high-clearance vehicle.

While we didn't reach for the transfer case lever, we did often downshift into second and even first gear to employ engine-braking on some of the steeper downhill grades along the way. There are occasional "25 mph" speed limit signs along the way. Unless you're in a rally car or Baja racer, there are only a few flat and straight stretches where you'll even think about approaching, let alone exceeding, that limit.

So plan on taking your time and taking in the view. And what a view it is.

The rim towers some 3000 feet above Payson, some 4000 higher than Rye, the Tonto Basin and Roosevelt Lake. There are places where the road winds through forests of tall pine trees; other places where those pines were incinerated by major fires.

In some places, the road runs right to the edge of the drop-off. No guard rails.

Just common sense and self-preservation remind you to drive carefully.

Not only do you want to take your time for safety's sake, but you'll want to stop frequently, to park in various designated areas along the road and walk to the most spectacular of overlooks.

Forest Road 300 and the various side roads that run off it are well-marked, though we found it very helpful to keep a copy of Swagman Publishing's *Arizona Backcountry Adventures* handy. Thick as a good-sized city's telephone book, *Backcountry Adventures* is a guide to driving off-pavement, from the basic how-tos to detailed road maps (with turn-by-turn navigation that includes driving distances and periodic GPS coordinates), as well as pages of text and photos about Arizona history, historic people, and the state's flora and fauna.

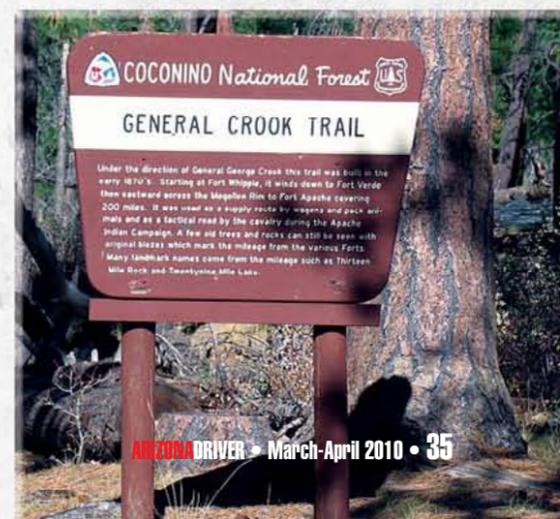
The book tells us the road was constructed in 1872, a year after Gen. Crook became military commander for the Arizona Territory, and that the General himself not only used General Springs as

a source of water, but reportedly had a "very narrow escape" from the Apaches at that spot.

We also learn that the Mogollon Rim was named for Juan Ignacio Flores Mogollon, governor of the Spanish province of Nuevo México from 1712-15, and that the trail is closed, snowed in during winter months.

We made our first stop seven miles along the Rim Road, at what *Adventures* describes as "Track on left is FR308 to Potato Lake. Track on right goes out to a viewpoint along the rim."

From that viewpoint, we could see the smoke rising from a prescribed burn. A little more than four miles further to the east we stopped at Hi-View Point, where we could smell that smoke, and where we discovered a US Geological Survey Bench Mark metal medallion dated 1933 and attached to a boulder right at the edge of the rim. The disc says the point is 7,494 feet above sea level.



KEEP RIGHT >>



At about 15 miles, you can turn north to see the recreation of General Springs Cabin, or park and follow the Tunnel Hiking Trail, which *Adventures* says takes you to the site of the tunnel for the proposed Mineral Belt Railroad, a spur running from the cross-country tracks at Flagstaff down to the copper mines at Globe. The plan, formulated in 1881, was to create a 3100-foot railway tunnel. However, only 70 feet of the tunnel was excavated before the project ran out of money.

Back on the Rim Road, we come to a low-lying, wetlands sort of area and a sign that identifies the Lost Lake-Karl Steffes Aspen Regeneration Project. The sign explains that in cooperation with the Karl Steffes Memorial Fund, the US Department of Agriculture has put up fences so the aspen sprouts can grow to above grazing height, at which point the fences will be removed. We don't know if the grazers are cattle or elk.

About halfway along the Rim Road, we drove north on Forest road 295E and followed it about four miles north to Knoll Lake, a secluded, picturesque, 75-acre, inverted V-shaped body of water tucked into the hills (just above the lake are 33 camp sites).

While exploring part of the shoreline—and wishing we had a canoe to get out on the lake's still surface—we noticed a sign that said anglers need a trout-fishing permit, and we chatted with a grandfather and his grandson who were storing their poles after a day of casting from shore. Grandpa said he and his son had been fishing the lake for 20 years and had yet to catch a single fish. But that really didn't matter, he said, because the lake had provided a succession of father/son outings—and now had blossomed into father/son/grandson events.

Our next stop was the forest ranger lookout tower near Promontory Butte, though all we could do was to look up, not out; the tower is locked except to forest personnel during fire season.

We did another short side trip to Woods Canyon Lake, at 52 acres smaller than Knoll, but very popular because it's located only five miles from the east end of the trail—and even has a paved road that leads to its shores. Just before the Rim Road T-bones into the state highway, we stop for one last overlook before heading back to the Valley. ■

