

ROAD TEST (OF SORTS) – TOYOTA FJ40_(AS A PASSENGER)

When I joined a 4x4 club for the first time in 1974, the three prominent OHVs (Off Highway Vehicles) were the Jeep, early model Bronco and the Toyota FJ40. There was also the International Scout, Chevy Blazer and Land Rover but they were few and far between. I had a Bronco and my close friends, Fred had an FJ and Bill had a Jeep. The three of us spent considerable time trying to prove which vehicle was superior. We also spent a fair amount of time testing the Warn winch. The bottom line was that we never conclusively resolved the superiority issue.

Yesterday I got the opportunity to ride in FJ40 for the first time. That is one of those rare opportunities that you should not pass up. I understand the current generation from Toyota is an FJ200 so there have been many changes over the years. Except for Jeep, it seems that the auto manufacturers have continued to progressively move away from a true OHV (although Toyota did come back with the FJ Cruiser and that might challenge this statement). Prior to riding in this particular FJ40 (it belongs to John McVicker) I got a chance to spend several hours climbing under and through it. We removed the skid plate, traced and replaced several fuel lines, reinstalled the seats and gas tank cover etc., etc. While lying on the ground and looking up at this vehicle it becomes apparent why they last so long. I would not say it is built like a tank, but it is the early Japanese version of a Hummer. From below you also notice the great ground clearance (it has 16" wheels and equivalent to 32" tires). After getting all the pieces back together (we did not end up with any extra parts but we lost a couple bolts along the way) we decided we needed to do a good test drive. John lives in Big Pine so we decided to use the back door route to Coyote Flats. Very few people use this route; it is difficult and gets more difficult the higher you go. The route starts from the Glacier road (Crocker St.) by Baker Creek, across Warren Bench, up to and through Onion Valley, around Sugarloaf Mountain and onto Coyote Flats. We just wanted to get to the overlook of Onion Valley.

You have to "hop" up into the seat and right away you notice a lack of leg room (the passenger seat is not adjustable). When you close the door you get the feeling you are in a small private airplane. The seat is very comfortable (I don't think it is the original seat) and John has added a shoulder belt to the original lap seat belt. It road nice on the street and was ok on the dirt until things got rough. I was quickly looking for something to hold onto. This vehicle has a padded full roll cage and the bar above my head seemed to be the most suitable place to latch onto. I soon felt like a monkey hanging from a jungle gym. You have no idea what "rock and roll" means until you ride in one of these vehicles. Several times I thought we were going to roll over. We tilted over so far one time that I think I could have stuck my head out the window and kissed

the ground. Many times I looked at the driver to see if he was perspiring and white as a ghost- I know I was. He seemed to be absolutely oblivious to our extreme danger. It was like he was on a casual Sunday drive (or on drugs). He was spinning the steering wheel and rapidly shifting between first and second in low range, sometimes just chatting away. Knowing that we were approaching a steep sandy hill, I quizzed the driver about his tire pressure. He wasn't sure so we stopped to check. We reduced the tires from 50 psi to 18 psi (he has those nifty adjustable screw on adjusters). This road is so rough that I could not tell if it made any difference in the ride. The vehicle performed amazingly well. First gear in low range gave you the ability to crawl and the tires got a good bite in sand and rock. Although it does not have power steering, the large steering wheel seemed to help (a couple times the driver had to take his hands off the wheel and just let it spin). The transmission appeared to shift easily between the gears without grinding. It probably helped that the driver was very, very experienced with his vehicle.

We finally reach flat ground again and I could begin to relax. This ride reminded me of a plaque that my daughter has which goes something like this: The goal in life is not to end it with a well preserved body, but to slide in sideways and say "WHOA, what a ride!".