



## Northern Ice

We travel to the end of the Dempster ice road and look back on the equipment that helped us get there.

By Scott Brady



Photo by Dave Harriton

The three AEV Ram trucks and solo Jeep Wrangler stop along the frozen MacKenzie River; the ice was over 4 feet thick and cracked from the constant pressure.

You never quite get comfortable with the ice. No matter how thick they say it is, you still see the cracks, along with air bubbles running just below the surface. Uncertainty is further exaggerated by popping noises and the fact that the clarity disguises the thickness. I was standing on the MacKenzie River, a massive waterway that flows north to the Arctic Ocean—the largest and longest river system in all of Canada. The Inuit call it Kuukpak, or Great River, a life-giving force that brings hydration, sustenance, and a means for transportation. I can best describe it as majestic, one of the most remote and compelling destinations for the North American overlander.

Most good adventures begin with ideas spun and mused about over a beer, preferably around a fire. Dave Harriton, CEO of American Expedition Vehicles (AEV), and I had been travelling together on and off for a decade, and we both love exploring in winter. He wanted to drive to Tuktoyaktuk on the ice road to test the performance of his new Ram Prospector and I would help with logistics—I had been there before. It was in fact my trip 10 years prior that made this journey all the more special: the 2007 Arctic Ocean Expedition was the first significant trip for *Overland Journal* and the first I had led internationally. So much had happened since then, and I was grateful for the opportunity to return.

The route started in Missoula, Montana, with three Rams and a HEMI-powered Jeep Wrangler Unlimited. The Alcan Highway is relatively uneventful until Whitehorse; our last remaining team members assembled here and we began the final push north. The interesting part of this route, at least from our perspective, is that the dirt and ice does not start until you have driven thousands and thousands of kilometers. Just shy of Dawson City (also worth a visit) a thread of a road cuts directly north, the beginning of the Dempster. It is one of the longest unsupported overland routes in North America, with 400 kilometers to the next fuel station.

The polar reaches of our planet are filled with rewards for the traveler, from the unique First Nation people of the Arctic to the unforgiving expanses of the Antarctic. It is the earth at its most dramatic, all of the changes in climate patterns expressed through crashing glaciers and stunning vistas. These regions also carry a great sense of accomplishment, as few endeavor to visit. The vast distances and harsh conditions serve as a filter, a gatekeeper of sorts against the unwilling or unprepared. It also gives me a great sense of pride and gratitude that such a wild landscape contributed a small part to the launch of *Overland Journal*—an adventure indeed.

The hazards of wintertime travel are real, and include long distances in bitter cold without any infrastructure. During my 2007 trip, it reached  $-50^{\circ}\text{C}$ , frostnipping the alveoli of my lungs. Accidents are frequent and breakdowns are common, reinforcing the importance of proper planning and a robust vehicle. This becomes even more critical if plans include driving out on the Arctic Ocean or down the many tributaries of the delta. The following pages share details on the equipment and vehicles used to drive to where the land ends, and the ice begins.





**CANON CAMERA AND LENSES**

Wildlife abounds in Northern Canada, which includes this grizzly scavenging for late fall calories. Capturing images like these is particularly hard on the equipment: between the endless corrugations, rain, and sub-zero temperatures, most consumer electronics die quickly. After four trips to the Arctic and a crossing of Antarctica, I have settled on Canon professional cameras and lenses as my tool of choice. Also, being a minimalist at heart (and often riding motorcycles with limited space), my kit has been distilled down to a 5D body in whatever the newest iteration is, with the indestructible and sharp 28-300mm f/3.5-5.6L lens. No doubt the aperture seems slow, but the combination of focal length and high ISO ensures low-light performance and a beautiful bokeh. As a backup, I carry a fully mechanical 50mm f/1.4 Pentax lens with a Canon adapter. In these conditions, bring plenty of batteries and consider adding a battery grip.

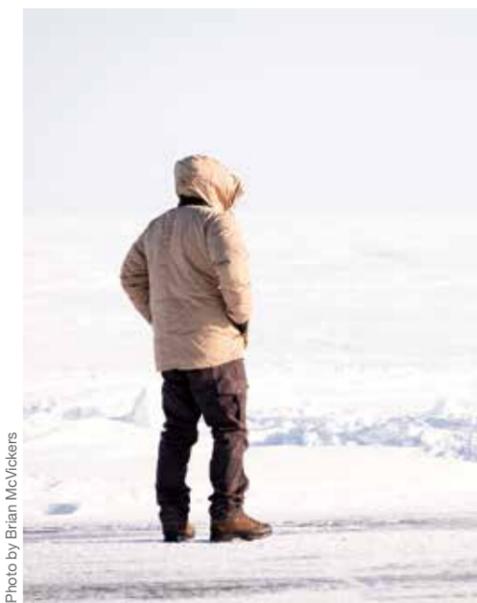


Photo by Brian McVickers

- HANWAG BOOT**
- FJALLRAVEN**
- NO. 16 COAT**
- PDX WATCH CAP**
- 66 NORTH**
- GLOVES**
- RAM**
- PROSPECTOR**



Equipment for the traveler is just as critical as modifications to the vehicle, especially in the Arctic. Prolonged exposure at -20°F with wind can result in frostnip to skin in minutes, and worsen as time passes. As a result, we take clothing and jackets seriously, focusing on quality brands and thoughtful layering. One of the most overlooked elements is the rate of conduction from bare ice (such as on the frozen river) to boots. This requires a thermal rating of 20-30 percent lower than typically found to ensure sustained movement on the ice. I used a HANWAG Alaska GTX that not only proved supremely warm but also allowed effective inputs on driver controls. Otherwise, wool base layers and products with down fill like this Fjallraven No. 16 coat were worn. A wool PDX Watch Cap and 66°North gloves that also allowed manipulation of camera controls and other devices provided the finishing touches to the ensemble.

The Ram Prospector trucks functioned surprisingly well in the Arctic; their large size ensured passenger comfort and also stability on low-traction surfaces. It takes days or weeks just to get to the start of the Dempster, so cruising comfort should not be discounted. Heated seats and steering wheel, a spacious cabin, good stereo, and commanding view of the road all lessened driver fatigue. This 2014 2500 turbo-diesel was the most modified of the group, with suspension and bumpers installed, and an innovative aluminum tray bed. The tray was massive, allowing an expansive platform for photography and equipment storage. It would easily carry two sleds, several motorcycles, or even support a Four Wheel Camper. The vehicle was also supremely capable with 41-inch Interco tires and dual ARB Air Locker differentials.



**JEEP  
WRANGLER  
UNLIMITED**  
RAM 2500

The smallest vehicle in the group was also one of the most capable, combining a HEMI V8 with 37-inch BFGoodrich All-Terrain KO2 tires. This 2015 Jeep Wrangler Unlimited Rubicon was modified with a 4.5-inch DualSport RS suspension, paint-matched Salta wheels, and lightweight aluminum roof rack. For protection and recovery, front and rear bumpers were installed, with a Warn 9,000-pound winch just out of sight. The swing-out also supported 10 gallons of fuel and 5 gallons of water. The Jeep was the most fun to drive, but the narrow width and shorter wheelbase also made it the most *entertaining* on the ice (400 horsepower didn't help). Personally, I loved the tan color treatment with matching rims. The entire package screamed adventure, prompting visions of traveling from the Arctic Ocean all the way to the Southern Ocean.

This sage green Ram 2500 was a long-term loan for *Overland Journal* and was used for several exploration trips in the desert southwest. One of the more notable takeaways was the AEV DualSport suspension, which achieves the seemingly impossible blend of durability, reliability, serviceability, ride quality, limit handling performance, and technical terrain articulation. The engineers have always made suspension a priority and the difference is noticeable from the first rock or roundabout. They focused particular emphasis on geometry correction, which improved roll center, castor, and steering precision. I am not saying it works perfectly everywhere, as the goal is clearly an intentional compromise to the function of a pickup, but the kit does inspire driver confidence, reduce highway fatigue, and still allow full payload. 🌐