



Spot the Sevens: Monument Valley, photograph by Mitch Leben

July 2006
Lowflying
for Lotus and Caterham Seven enthusiasts
Lotus Seven Club



Last summer, Club members joined the Seven Tours trip to America – to meet up with US-based Seven enthusiasts and drive from Houston to the Pacific coast, through seven States, spectacular scenery and sharing many an adventure. **Ian Brandon** looks back on an unforgettable three weeks.

HOW THE WEST WAS DRIVEN

The preparations

In August the cars were shipped from Beautiful Barking to a hot and humid Houston. Six cars were squeezed into each 40-foot container by hoisting three onto a top bunk of battens attached to the inside of the container. This delicate job was overseen with military gusto by Johny 'Rottweiler' Lyons and a willing band of lieutenants. Despite being told to arrive with 'no more than a quarter of a tankful', in the event the shipper did not seem to be too interested in the amount of fuel remaining in the cars and the only precautions taken were the disconnection of batteries and removal and bubble-wrapping of nose cones. En route, our ship had to avoid *Hurricane Ophelia*, which struck the eastern seaboard of America during the voyage, and eventually arrived only a couple of days before the advanced unloading party.

The main party gathered at Gatwick Airport in mid-September and we played 'spot the USA2005 tourers'. Giveaways were historic 'Sevens at La Sarthe' teeshirts or other regalia, minimal luggage and an 'I can't really believe this is really going to happen' expression. The party demographics were completely mixed. Ages ranged from mid-twenties to over seventy in the case of at least one American tourist. Some travelled alone or awaited a passenger flying out to do part of the route, there were a few fathers-and-sons, one set of twins, a few mates, but mostly mixed couples.

America being the litigation capital of the world meant that UK insurers politely declined the option to extend cover across the pond. A deal was therefore done with Sunrise Insurance Inc (we carried their decals) for a separate US policy.

Hotels were all pre-booked and were largely of the *Holiday Inn Express* variety, which proved to be ideal in most cases. Occasionally we went to bigger places like the *Austin Capital Marriott* (excellent) or the *Imperial Palace*, Las Vegas (vast and mediocre) or niche places like *The Lodge* at Vail (nice but snooty) or the other *Lodge* at Cambria Pines, California (village style motel with classy cabins).

The real America

After the first day – when everyone took an age to get going – cars started to leave much earlier in order to get a couple of hours under their belts before the heat really set in. We quite often skipped breakfast at the hotel and went for brunch at a diner in some unsuspecting

little place. It is here that you sample the real America and the cars and our accents tended to attract attention from fellow diners anxious to pass on information and learn 'what yawl doin?'. Although the roadbook made suggestions about suitable halts, it was up to individual crews to fit such things into their daily schedules.

Certain places suggested themselves naturally – like Lake City, Colorado – a small town with a narrow tree lined main street (very unusual in this land of pedestrian-unfriendly mega-wide roads, neon and billboards). At just under 9000 feet this place had an alpine feel to it and was the last watering hole (for cars and occupants) before we climbed up onto the top of the Rockies. We shared the one petrol station and diner there with a group of Harley riders, who were trying to decide if they had competition in the 'cool' stakes. After due consideration we were probably placed in the 'eccentric' box and I, for one, rather favour that image.

Evening arrival times were not fixed either so cars tended to move in small groups, which would occasionally grow into multi-coloured snakes when roadworks or traffic and narrower roads slowed progress.

Luggage solutions were many and various, but we borrowed a couple of vaguely triangular motorbike pannier cases, one of which fitted in the boot (along with a laptop backpack) and the other strapped to the right hand rollbar upright to allow unimpeded open left-rear visibility (some configurations had no rearward vision at all). Additionally we carried a holdall on a standard boot rack which quickly proved not to be up to the job.

The Places

Dead Horse Point, Mule Canyon, Leadville, Slumgullion Pass, Grand Junction, Big Sur, Artesia and Mexican Hat. Monument Valley, Death Valley, Cypress Point, Red Canyon, Four Corners, White Sands, Area 51 and Silverton. Such place names can recall the romance and pioneering spirit of a thousand Hollywood films in a way that, say, Chipping Sodbury, Eccles or Basildon never could. We USA2005 tourists were the extras in our very own road movie.

There were umpteen occasions when we had to pinch ourselves as reassurance that we were really there. One such moment was crossing the Golden Gate Bridge, one of the greatest of American icons, the >

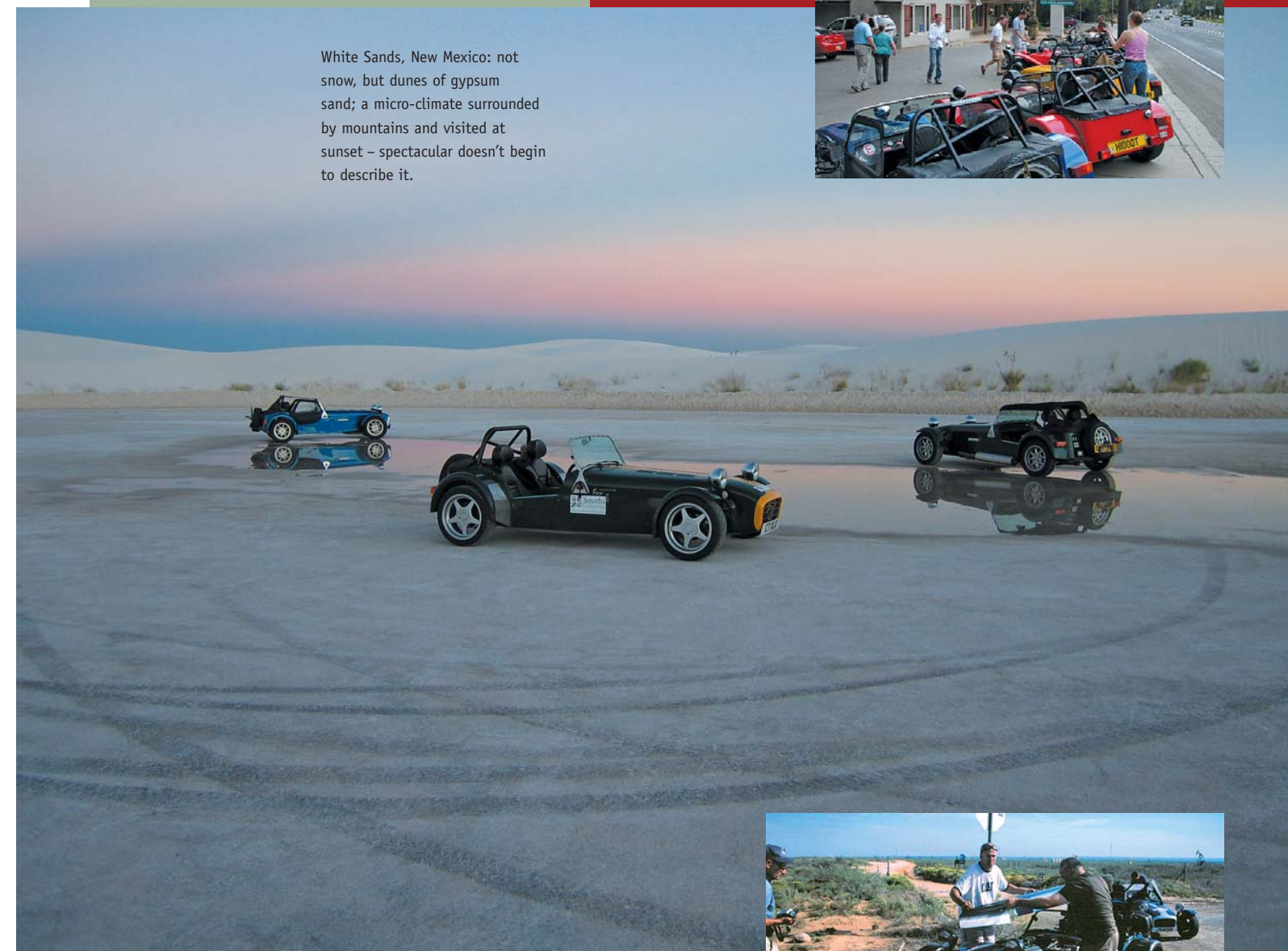


Left: ready to roll, from Seabrook, Texas, South of Houston on the Gulf of Mexico; just a few days later *Hurricane Rita* hit...

Below: a stand-off with the local Corvette fleet at San Angelo.



White Sands, New Mexico: not snow, but dunes of gypsum sand; a micro-climate surrounded by mountains and visited at sunset – spectacular doesn't begin to describe it.



Right: Frank and Gloria Martin's Superlight has its damaged sump replaced out in the desert; conveniently, those wheel ramps just happened to be there!



pictures on the faces of commuters were as always, priceless. Another was approaching the surreal Western film set that is Monument Valley. In my mind, Sevens have an affinity with leafy home counties B roads, so making our way south down Highway 163 made us feel slightly out of place. This is the archetypal vista of the John Ford Western, not a leaf in sight, no bends in prospect and that amazing jagged horizon. Only John Wayne was missing...

The Grand Canyon is one of those things that really merits the label 'awesome'. A mile deep and ten wide it was difficult to fully take in, even on a helicopter trip from Las Vegas.

We would have liked to have done as some others did and visit the canyon rim at sunrise but there was no way that we could do that and also visit Zion and Bryce National Parks, which were in the opposite direction. Bryce Canyon in particular is a spectacular place, albeit not on the scale of the Grand Canyon.

At the other end of the natural beauty scale was Las Vegas – brash, loud and wholly artificial. We arrived there after dark at the end of the 420-mile run through Arizona, Utah and Nevada that took in the aforementioned National Parks. A greater contrast you couldn't imagine.

We were travelling in convoy with Roger and Heather Tiffin in their R300 and we caused quite a stir as we blasted between traffic lights alongside the highly chromed cruisemobiles that adorn the strip. They moved everyone else on from the undercover frontage of the *Imperial Palace Hotel*, but we were allowed to stay there for 20 minutes while the wives negotiated one of the 15 check-in queues.

Among the positives, two of our number took advantage of the drive-in wedding facilities and Miss Mav became Mrs Mav, with their SV as the wedding car.

Travelling along the Pacific Coast Highway from Cambria to San Francisco was a suitable finale. This fantastic road hugs the cliffs and passes through the kind of places where you feel *The Mamas and the Papas* and *The Beach Boys* would still be the music of choice. The road

is quite sparsely populated given its proximity to Los Angeles and San Francisco and a very good average speed would be attainable were it not for the frequent photo opportunities which constantly interrupt. One effect of this was that the same unfortunate vehicles kept getting overtaken and re-overtaken as we made our stop-start progress North. I can't wait to see the trip DVD because I believe certain individuals were making very rapid time along this particular stretch!



The Weather

Chief organiser, Steve Blair had carefully chosen the end of September/early October as the best weather window to avoid the excesses of hot and cold prevalent across our geographically diverse route. Only two weeks after we had driven the sun kissed-road from Lake City over the Rockies and taken in Slumgullion Pass at 11,500 feet: Colorado-based tourer Ross Robbins reported that it was buried under the winter's first snowfall. Lucky or what?

On the other hand, it was just outside Austin, Texas, that we saw a roadside thermometer that read 97.6 degrees and that was at 4.30 in the afternoon. Both the temperature and the humidity were, we were told, unusually high for late September and it meant getting into a >

routine of carrying several bottles of water in the car, replaced at every fuel stop with some cold versions. Before we even started, Steve had given us a detailed warning on the signs of dehydration and at least one passenger succumbed to heat exhaustion and ended the day in one of the support trucks.

We were lucky indeed to be well into New Mexico when *Hurricane Rita* made landfall. In fact, our first-night hotel in Seabrook (on the coast south of Houston), was evacuated and we watched a news report from the hotel's car park with a reporter just about hanging on to a convenient palm tree. Nobody ever bought a Seven for its hurricane-proof weather protection and we were certainly glad to be well away from the fuel shortages and massive queues that later blocked the very roads we'd used about four days before.

Whilst the weather was largely wall-to-wall blue skies, we did cop some showers and on one occasion (when we were running on our own at the back of the field), we caught a Texas-sized shower: so heavy was it that we pulled off the road and, for fear of a flash flood, drove up in zero visibility onto a roadside embankment – a railway track as it turned out! Our Jill Judd 'bikini' top (don't worry, she has others), was never meant to keep out water and our map simply disintegrated as we sat in two pools of water.

Once we realised where we'd parked we got off pretty sharpish and as the shower passed everything was dry again within 15 minutes. Incidentally, a number of tourers made the excellent decision to make a purchase from 'Soft Bits for Sevens'. Some, like us, went for the minimalist look which although not waterproof, certainly kept the sun off and allowed some air to circulate inside the car. The more popular half-hood was better at keeping the water out, but possibly more claustrophobic – either way, a great investment for somewhere like Le Mans.

The Cars

Although the tour was primarily a Caterhamfest, we were accompanied by some other interesting cars. Among the Westfields was a 6.6 litre, 500 bhp Chevy-powered car, resplendent in chrome and cream leather – very much the American idea of what a hot rod should look like. There were quite a few American Birkins (mainly Zetec-powered), because Caterhams are relatively expensive in the States. There were also a couple of Civic type R-engined, Texas manufactured, Ultralites.

Rod Thonger and Geoff Cole brought their original twincam Lotus 7's and they were joined by a couple more American ones en route. Among the Dartford Diehards, there was surprisingly only one Vauxhall, Vinnie Barriskell's Finnish-registered example. There were a couple of Duratec's, but otherwise it was mainly crossflows and K-series variants (including a couple of 1.9 litre versions).

A fashionably late arrival was made by Mike Biddle's RSTV8-engined Superlight. This car, from Dubai via the Seven Workshop and Arch Motors, featured Racelogic launch control, a sequential 'box, 'adequate' bhp, an 11,000 rpm red line and the widest rear end I've ever seen. ■

Next month, Ian recalls something of the people on the trip, the reactions this unlikely cavalcade provoked and the mechanical hiccups they experienced along the way.

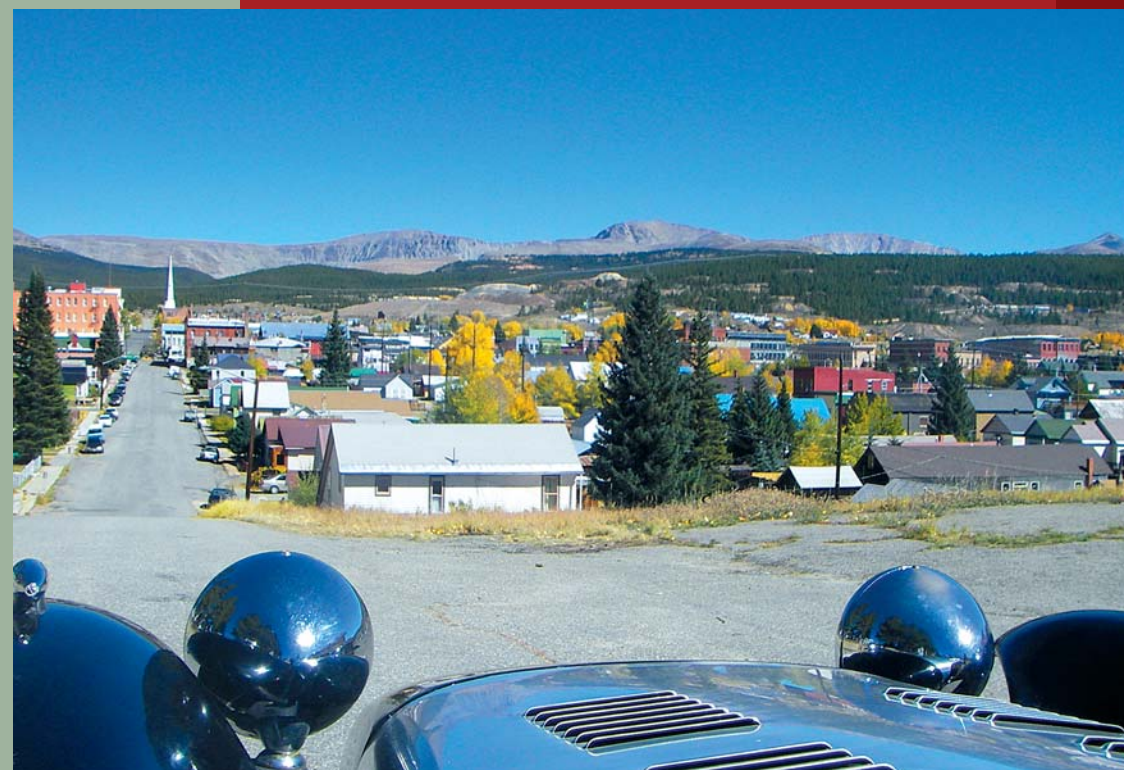
Below: Low flyers land in formation at Navajo Dam on the San Juan River.

The Slickrock Trail – awesome climbing potential experienced on 48-degree inclines in Hummers with very low gear ratios and 490 lbft of torque at little more than tickover.



Right: A mysterious stranger rode into town on a swift and exotic steed...

Below right: Still smiling, but Geoff Cole and Brian Green were just a little too late in finding a bridge to shelter under with their Lotus Seven S3.



Left: Madrid, New Mexico, began life as a mining town and made its name supplying coal to the Santa Fe Railroad. When demand for coal fell, Madrid became a ghost town but was revived in the 70s as a notable arts community.

Front cover

The breathtaking front cover picture (also below) of the Mitten Butte in Monument Valley is by Mich Leben; it was shot from the Navajo Tribal Park. Ian recalls that access was by the most tortuous and sump threatening road signed '4WDs only' and was the slowest journey he's ever made in a Seven!

Bottom left of the picture you can see the Sevens of Ian and the trip organizer Steve Blair, the two drivers and their wives.



The photographs

The pictures cover roughly the first part of the trip – through Texas, New Mexico, Colorado. Next month we'll see more spectacular scenery as the tour moves steadily West to the Pacific coast.

Photographs were supplied by **Chris Beardshaw, Mike Biddle, Steve Blair, Anita Brandon, Geoff Cole, David Daniels, Robin Ford, Tom Jones, Mitch Leben, Toby Riddell, Keith Tanner and Roger & Heather Tiffin;** thanks everyone – sorry we couldn't use them all!

Last summer, Club members joined a trip to America – to meet up with US-based Seven enthusiasts and drive from Houston to the Pacific coast, through seven States and spectacular scenery and sharing many an adventure. **Ian Brandon** concludes his look back on a great trip.

HOW THE WEST WAS DRIVEN PART 2

LAST MONTH WE heard about the preparations, the places, the weather (mostly fiercely hot, but also some torrential rain) and the cars as the USA Tour 05 made its way steadily westwards from Houston; this time we find out more about the cars, the people and the mechanical problems solved along the way. And see more astonishing scenery.

The People

The essence of Tour 7 is that everyone mucks in. Even before anyone left Blighty a huge amount of time had been expended by the core team. Steve and Mary Blair at the centre of route-planning and hotel-booking, Vinnie (the poisoned chalice of shipping) and Johnty Lyons (assembly of spares package, support liaison, loading and unloading). Also playing major roles were those who put the very comprehensive road book together: this was allocated to different people and apart from directions and maps also included details of attractions in the area and places to stop on the way to the next night's hotel.

One of the masterstrokes was to get input from US-based tourers who lived near the route because, of course, they knew the best Sevensing roads: for example, Highway 58 which winds its way across California around and over the mountains to the Pacific coast at Morro Bay. One Tom Jones, Duratec Caterham owner and resident of Southern California, directed us to this fantastic road, a banked switch-back which I am quite certain we would not have otherwise found. Other people volunteered to be 'hotel reps' – to provide a liaison point with the hotel and generally suss out the local amenities.

Then of course there were the support trucks from *Rocky Mountain Sportscars* (Caterham Dealers in Denver) and Ultralite and the unofficial support in the form of people like Johnty Lyons and Mick Smith (sporting the tee-shirt legend, "Of course I'll drop everything and sort your problem").

The tour was originally banking on support from the Caterham factory via the Denver dealership, but in the event, one of the consequences of the change of ownership mid-year, was that the new owners felt this wasn't viable for them (but Caterham Denver did support it at their own expense for a week in the middle). A few of us thought they were missing a pretty good marketing opportunity, but there you go!

I mustn't forget Tom and Mary Blair, Steve's parents (and Texas-res-

idents) who were ever-present conducting one of the support vehicles and organising such things as sponsorship, map-packs and tour tee-shirts. In general there was an overriding sense of camaraderie and for those of us that knew not a soul prior to the trip, that certainly helped make this the holiday of a lifetime.

The Reactions

"Gee what are those cute little cars?"; "I used to have an MG."; "Ok, you have to tell me the story."; "I've seen you guys going up and down here all day."; "Is it a race car?"; "What does it weigh?";

The most common vehicle in America is the Ford P150 pickup truck and when you sit next to one of these at the lights, you feel a touch insignificant; on one such occasion, somewhere in Nevada, a guy leaned out of his cab above us and hollered, "Hey, what y'all doin'?". We related the usual story about fifty of these cars, seven States, 3500 miles, yes we carry all our luggage with us, etc. And he just looked at us, shook his head and said, "Hey, I love you Brits. You and me, we're brothers, man."

At every fuel stop somebody would wander over – in part because, sometimes, we would fill up a whole gas station. Whereas in Britain if people are curious they prefer to avert their glance than ask what they really want to know, in America they just come right over and say what's on their mind. It's a very refreshing trait but did mean that every refuel took rather a long time.

The locals were also intrigued as we pushed the cars away from the pump after fill-up and shunted the next one into its place. As everyone knows it's often easier than getting in and out, but you don't see it catching on with your average Chevy driver!

On the road I think the performance surprised a few locals. To give just one example, we were heading towards Vail in a queue of 60 mph traffic with a huge chromed pickup, sprouting exhausts all over the place, right in our boot. The road then opened out into a steep uphill dual carriageway and the pickup floored it in a bellow of Detroit iron and was past us and the three cars in front. We got clear of the other cars and then the uphill acceleration in 5th from 60 to 90-plus was such that our redneck trucker was left slack-jawed as we howled up the canyon past him and I thought "Thank you, Dave Andrews, >

Right: Toby Riddell heading into heavy weather.



Below: a brief reprise of last month's feature, the Sevens of Steve Blair and Ian Brandon in Monument Valley.



Below: with the buttes of Monument Valley in the background a halt is made to check the route; were there that many roads to choose from? To the fore is the Series 3 Lotus driven by Geoff Cole and Brian Green



Above: Bryce Canyon National Park, Southern Utah, surely one of the most astonishing landscapes you could hope to reach in a Seven. Visit www.nps.gov/brca/ for images, information, and a virtual tour of the bizarre eroded limestone formations.



Powerspeed – and of course Colin Chapman – who gave us this fantastic car”. And ours was of course not in the same performance league as some of our fellow tourers (approx. 175 bhp vvc), but quite quick enough I think.

We gave up trying to explain that this was a Caterham and settled instead on a Lotus (sorry to the purists), but even that didn't have a great deal of resonance with most, although it was helpful that we could point to a genuine s3 Lotus which was travelling with our group most of the time.

As far as I recall only one person actually identified our car correctly and that was in the most unlikely place. We were the only ones to make our way five miles down an unmade road to the Mancos Valley Stagecoach Station in deepest Colorado. We attracted great interest from a party of pensioners from Grand Junction (who were there on a surprise trip to ride the same stagecoaches we went on), but it was the rather younger owner of the ranch (a full-on cowboy) who knew his car stuff. On the stage coach ride we were 'held up' by an Indian who said that he normally demanded credit cards or money from passengers, but today he wanted "the keys to the Lotus".

The Troubles

Of course, no trip like this would be complete without a few war stories. Within the first week we deposited our luggage on a Houston freeway courtesy of a sheared boot-rack lug; eventually traced a hot-starting problem to an uncrimped wire to the ECU (thanks Johny, Mick and Mav) and lost our coolant when a hose joiner failed.

We were also rear-ended in Austin, but fortunately with little structural damage. We had a rest day there and the local Lotus agent, *Autostrada*, were very helpful in taking me to their local exhaust specialist, the Muffin Shop (a muffler is a silencer, stateside), who welded up the boot rack and wheel carrier. As an aside, I have their tee-shirt with the unforgettable slogan, 'No muff too tough'. When I wore this it



Left: "The keys to the Lotus or your life!"

Above: on the rim road by the Grand Canyon.

attracted no reaction from Americans, but some very juvenile sniggering amongst the Brits. Overall we were very fortunate that the spare tyre had absorbed what was quite a big impact and instead of a split tank or bent axle, we just had a deranged wheel carrier and slightly kinked rear chassis tube.

We had just crossed the state line into a wide open and featureless New Mexico, from a similarly barren and stiflingly-hot West Texas (punctuated only by thousands of acres of 'nodding donkey' oil wells), when we came across Frank and Gloria Martin's Superlight stopped by the roadside with Frank underneath. Their sump had lost a battle with a huge tyre valve lever that had fallen off a truck into the middle of the road. Remarkably, the only building for miles (we were 30 miles from the next settlement) was right opposite, and housed a pair of wheel ramps. Even more remarkably Allan 'Wingco' Taylor and his 'Saga Seven' colleagues had turned back to see what had befallen >

their travelling companion and Wingco produced from his boot a spare K-series sump – as you do. A quick whip round for oil and Frank was on his way again. Unfortunately the sump plug was not fully tightened and sometime later that afternoon the oil was lost again, this time with terminal results. The next day, in Ruidoso, was a free day and as someone had thoughtfully bunged a spare 1.6 κ-series in a container (an engine never fitted in any car ever sold in the US), an engine crane was borrowed from a local garage and by lunchtime, hey presto, Frank had a new-ish engine which lasted him to the end of the trip!

The temperatures in Texas and the lower altitudes of New Mexico hovered just below the 100 degree mark and this took its toll on both cars and drivers. Some of the crossflows in particular were suffering overheating and some of the cars with no trim were frying their passengers. By Day 2, in Austin, people like Roger Tiffin could be found crouched in a sauna-like underground car park affixing foil to the footwells of his R300 in an attempt to keep cockpit conditions bearable. This turned out to be a very effective modification.

Among the older cars, Ross Robbins' Lotus 7 (which had joined us in Colorado), was consigned to the recovery trailer after holing a piston at the Willow Springs Raceway – which some tourers visited to see the classic race meeting and do a few enthusiastic laps.

That day finished in a small town called Tehachapi, probably most famous for being quite near the Edwards Air Force base and also adjacent to a very steep railway loop where you can see the same huge goods train going round a mountain and entering two different tunnels at different heights – weird.

Geoff Cole's 1968 140 bhp twincam 7 also arrived in Tehachapi on a trailer with what was diagnosed as a problem with a propshaft UJ. Such things do not tend to be stock items at the local Walmart, but fortunately Ross donated his propshaft and Geoff and, equally enthusiastic co-driver, Brian Green were genuinely excited at the thought of getting up at dawn the next day to do the transplant surgery. Mav recklessly lent his SV to his soon-to-be Mrs and Mrs Blair with sad results: they attacked a large rock with the sump and damaged the filter housing. The car spent the rest of the day on a trailer but was fixed soon after.

The Verdict

The sense of anticipation had been building gradually ever since I jokingly mentioned to my wife that I had seen a post on *BlatChat* about an American tour. I was amazed when she said we should go for it (she tolerates the car more than loves it), but barely a day passed either before or after, without our talking about it in some way. The return leg of the shipping was, however, a major problem and it is that factor alone which makes me think that maybe USA2005 will be a unique adventure, at least until somebody else picks up the heavy burden of organisation that surrounds such a trip.

We certainly had high expectations but they were exceeded many fold. The car went superbly, our travelling companions were great and the route and timing of the trip could not be bettered. 4000 miles travelling through a Hollywood film set under largely blue skies, in an archetypal British sports car which can wipe the floor with everything else on the road. What more can you ask? ■



Desert, mountain, canyon, woodland, out-of-town sprawl...

Above, left: all hands to for a cooling system repair at Sante Fe.

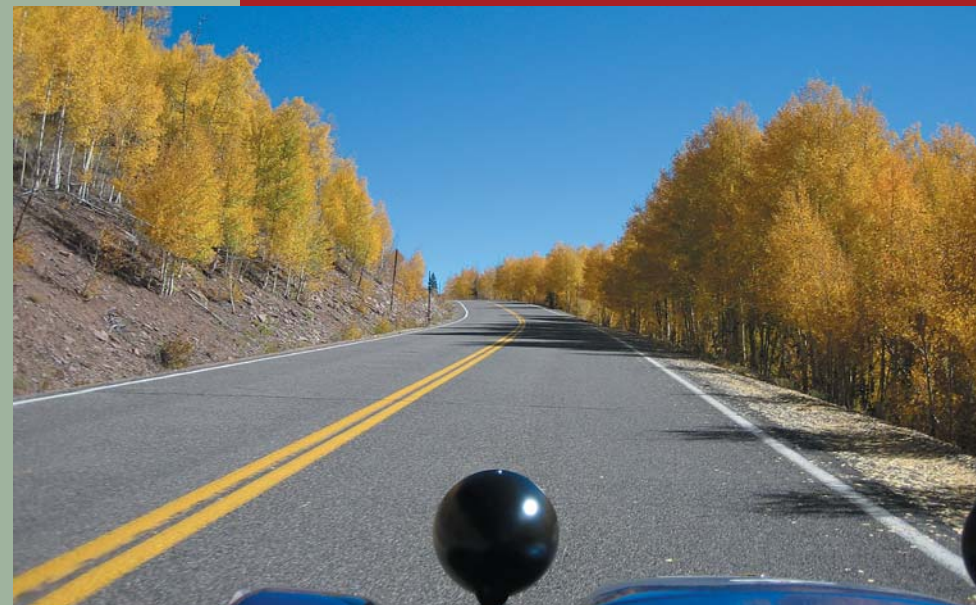


Above: a Californian sunrise greets the travellers ahead of another day of new sights and experiences.

Right, centre; heading up the Pacific coast road.

Right: mission accomplished – the West Coast reached after the trip of a lifetime; (insets: the Golden Gate Bridge and the Pacific Ocean)

The photographs: thanks go to **Chris Beardshaw, Mike Biddle, Steve Blair, Anita Brandon, Geoff Cole, David Daniels, Robin Ford, Tom Jones, Mitch Leben, Toby Riddell, Keith Tanner and Roger & Heather Tiffin** who supplied the pictures for this and last month's features – sorry we couldn't use them all!



Above: waiting at a typical railroad crossing, dwarfed amongst America's most plentiful vehicles.

Below: Mike Biddle arrives at Moab with his RST-V8 powered Seven – after enduring something of a battle with the conditions!



Above: the American magazine *Kitcar* was intrigued by the venture, devoting eight pages of the March issue to another account, also by Ian, (with a different selection of pictures). Well worth seeking out... www.kitcarmag.com