

Features

Roughing It

Christopher Buckley, 09.02.04

Five SUVs, four shotguns, two spa resorts, one star NFL defensive tackle, two sporting clay courses, off-roading, wining, dining--our kind of safari.

It was taught that it's not polite to talk about money, but it was hard not to muse on the fact that our little procession of cars and shotguns was worth a half million dollars, if only for insurance purposes.

"Plus our bodies," Dave Butz observed. "They're worth at least eighty-five bucks apiece."

Dave Butz, as you probably already know, is the former All-Pro defensive tackle for the Washington Redskins and veteran of three Super Bowls. His body, at six-foot-six and 315 pounds, is doubtless worth more than mine, on any market. I came away from our three-day adventure impressed by every aspect of Dave: his amiable and gentle manner; his marksmanship; his love of shooting; his patient, even inspired, coaching of my own dismal shooting; and not least by his three Super Bowl rings, the ultimate in bling-bling. I was impressed, too, by the Porsche Cayenne, which managed to accommodate Dave without his having to put his head through the sunroof.

Each vehicle was fully loaded with all the trimmings, making our five-SUV motorcade Arianna Huffington's worst nightmare: 14 total tons of sport utility with an aggregate city mileage per gallon of 64. On the other hand, the cargo area of the Cadillac Escalade was roomy enough to fit even Michael Moore--possibly even two Michael Moores, though one per planet is surely enough.

Until now, I had never expected to find myself in the driver's seat of a Cadillac Escalade ESV Platinum (\$68,730). By trip's end, they had to pry the steering wheel from my fingers. I had no idea three tons of steel could accelerate to 90 mph going uphill on an interstate highway. Nor did I know that a Porsche Cayenne Turbo (\$93,045) could go 118 mph on winding country roads with one's foot barely pressing down on the accelerator pedal. I also got to drive a dreamy Lexus LX 470 (\$70,316), a hearty Land Rover Range Rover HSE (\$74,250) and a fierce-looking Mercedes-Benz G500 (\$78,340). What a voyage of discovery it was. And how modest my own little VW Golf Cabriolet now feels.

In due course we arrived at our first destination, The Homestead, in Hot Springs, Virginia. The Homestead is a grand old gal of a resort that has been around since 1760-something, long enough to have once burned down. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson soaked in its healing waters. Here, after the custom of Southern gentility, one dresses for dinner and everyone calls you "Sir"--and in the case of Dave Butz, they actually mean it. The breakfast buffet looks like a trade show for the National Association of People Who Require 6,000 Calories for Breakfast. I always know it is time to leave The Homestead when I start ladling "sausage gravy" onto my already heaping plate of grits, eggs, bacon, sausage, pancake, Belgian waffle and chocolate

donut. I was thrilled to read that my hero James Thurber once had a heart attack at The Homestead. So I'm not overindulging, but paying homage.

Our first night there, we repaired to the bar to, as Dave put it, "suck up some suds." This was the first time I had ever tried to match an NFL football player drink for drink. My notes from the evening are difficult to read, but if I have this right, they indicate that Dave's career in the league lasted 16 years; the average player's is 3.2 years. My notes also contain hieroglyphics pertaining to Redskins practices under the legendary George Allen. Water was not a part of Coach Allen's regimen. "He thought water was for sissies," Dave said. Two three-hour practices a day in summer heat, ending with 14 40-yard wind sprints. On some days, Dave might shed as much as 22 pounds. His muscles and joints cracked so loudly when he got up one morning that when he reached for something on the nightstand--water, presumably--the sound woke up his wife. He played 176 consecutive games in those years and never missed a practice. My notes from the evening include this quote: "There's nothing in the civilian world that will ever replace the feeling just prior to the snap of the ball."

Apparently we also talked that night about shooting. Dave is a champion shooter and a member of the board of the National Rifle Association. One day he shot a total of 3,200 rounds between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. That's almost 460 rounds per hour; probably about the same rate of fire as that of an average poor-bastard U.S. Marine in Fallujah. But Dave Butz, like a Marine, usually hits whatever he's aiming at, just as he did on the football field. Let me essay a joke: What do ducks and quarterbacks have in common? Neither get past jersey number 65.

The sporting clays course at The Homestead is congenial in every way. It may not be the best course in the country, but it has one thing no other course has: David Judah. Dave Judah is the shooting club manager and top instructor. He is a native-born Jamaican "from Constant Spring, St. Andrew, up from King-ston." He is a sunny, agreeable man of warm humor, and the best shotgun instructor I've ever experienced. Dave Butz is the second.

Dave Judah teaches in Zen phrases: "Now this next one I want you to miss by a foot, in front." And what do you know--I actually did hit it. When Jerome Cramer, Team FYI's top gun, seemed to be lunging at the targets with his shotgun, Dave chuckled and said, "I think you need a bayo-net on the end of that!" Jerome stopped lunging.

When, an hour into my humiliation, I became constipated trying simultaneously to remember a half dozen pieces of advice, Mr. Judah diagnosed the problem as "analysis paralysis." Shotgunning, like golf, sooner or later boils down to forgetting everything you know and Being One with the Gun. In golf, it's "Be the Ball." In shooting, it's "look for the 'Made in Taiwan.'" This particular Zen koan had to be explained to me: i.e., don't aim for the clay pigeon; aim for the fine print stamped on it. Sure thing. Easy enough, at 45 yards and traveling 50 miles an hour. Note that sporting clays differ from golf in one key respect: It is considered not done, to say nothing of not smart, to hurl your gun away in disgust after missing a shot.

Having Dave Judah and Dave Butz for instructors was like having Einstein and Stephen Hawking correcting your math homework. I spent the mornings blasting away at orange-blaze discs hurtling through the green glades in humbled awe.

It was also humbling to hold in my inept mitts the shotguns that Dave and Bill Baker, the impresario who had put together our adventure, had brought along. Here I go being vulgar again, but the four shotguns had an aggregate value of \$143,460. Our arsenal consisted of a

- Beretta SO5 Sporting, 12-gauge, over/under, 32-inch barrel (\$18,375);
- Holland & Holland Sporting Deluxe, 12-gauge, over/under, 28-inch barrel (\$62,500);
- Krieghoff K-80 Sporting, 12-gauge over/under, 32-inch barrel (\$12,585). This was Dave Butz's gun--with a custom-fitted stock made for him by Fred Wenig--which I nicknamed the Gun of Navarone and am still sore from lifting;
- Galazan A. Galazan Round-Frame Full-Sidelock, 20-gauge, over/under, 29-inch barrel (\$50,000, and as beautiful a piece of gunsmithing as ever to come out of my home state of Connecticut).

These are not guns you want to drop. Needless to say, we managed to do just that--and, naturally, to Dave Butz's Krieghoff, damaging it badly as it hurtled off the back of a golf cart after an abrupt start. Dave was a gentleman about it, but for a few very quiet, smoldering minutes you could hear the low rumble of lava welling inside him, and I had an inkling of what it must have been like to face this formidable man across the line of scrimmage. I was heartily glad never to have held that luckless office.

We said our grateful good-byes to Dave Judah and drove on to The Greenbrier, across the border in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia. The Greenbrier is a four-star resort hotel that, like The Homestead, has been around since 17-something, but never burned down, though Union soldiers threatened to torch it during the Civil War. It is first-rate in every way, which is doubtless why Congress built a secret bomb shelter--"Project Greek Island"--for itself here during the Cold War. This was the aboriginal "undisclosed location." The food at The Greenbrier is especially superb. Unfortunately, so are the rum punches at Sam Snead's, the informal restaurant named after the golf legend who was the resident pro here for many years.

As it happens, I was reading Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. The following fragment from that worthy novel sums up my feeling upon opening my eyes the next morning: "...there is no headache in the world like that caused by Vauxhall punch." At my age, one should really know better, but then as Tom Stoppard has said, "Age is a very high price to pay for maturity." Slowly, I reached for the Advil, contemplating joyfully the prospect of three hours with a piece of exploding metal next to my temple.

The sporting clays course at The Greenbrier is second to none. It is almost brand-new, designed by the British duo Justin Jones and John Higgins. The stations are inventive and challenging, the appointments superb, down to the outdoor-carpet lining in the shotgun shell trays on the stands. All very pukka.

Our instructor today was Curtis Kincaid, a jolly fellow who dispensed wisdom and tips in a plummy local accent. Station #7 was particularly challenging: the high "bird"--simulating driven pheasant--soaring overhead at 45 yards, so high that Curtis admonished us to "miss it" by ten feet in front. (This "miss it" business seems to be a theme among the Zen masters of sporting clays.)

To everyone's astonishment, I managed to hit it, several times. I'll say this for a Vauxhall punch hangover: When your only goal is trying to remain upright, you don't worry about missing, and relax. Even Dave was impressed. But Dave was himself, for the second day in a row, most impressive of all, with an identical score of 84 out of 100. While I myself would be thrilled to shoot 84, Dave normally shoots in the 90s and was handicapped by the fact that we were rotating different shotguns. My own scorecards have been somehow misplaced. What a loss to posterity.

It was now time for the off-road adventuring. The Greenbrier offers a course in this pastime called the land Rover Driving Experience. There are ten hours' worth of trails to satisfy every nonpavement driving fantasy.

Our instructor was the wonderfully named (and wonderfully companionable) Randi Arbuckle, a cheerful, khaki-clad dominatrix of four-wheeling. Here our \$380,000 worth--I really must stop mentioning this--of SUVs got the chance to show their stuff. We plowed through mud and over boulders and tilted 45 degrees sideways. We learned the rudiments of off-road driving, some of which are counterintuitive, such as braking with your left foot. This cuts down on reaction time, which is a good thing to cut down on when, say, you are hurtling down the side of a mountain.

I was invited to drive three tons of Cadillac down a hill, that, were it a ski slope, would be a double black diamond. Randi, sitting beside me, told me afterwards that there is really no point in blubbering and mumbling, "Into thy hands, lord, I commend my spirit" while doing this. Anyway, she explained, most of the cars we drove had something called "hill descent control." The onboard computer takes over the braking, basically.

My 12-year-old son's Game Boy has more computing power than the computers that supported the moon landing in 1969. (True fact, actually.) These cars combined have more computing power than HAL, the computer in 2001: A Space Odyssey. (Metaphor.) The door locks in the Mercedes, for instance, had a way of snapping shut 20 or so seconds into the drive, as though the decision were being made in Stuttgart.

I drove the Mercedes through the mud portion. Its black interior has a very military feel to it. There are three separate buttons controlling the front, center and rear locking

differentials. This is the car that could get you from one end of Africa to the other, or up the vertical side of a skyscraper, albeit slowly.

None of us ever quite mastered the navigational systems on the cars, but then this would have required doing something that Man has resisted since the Dawn of Time, namely reading the manual. That said, the instruction booklets for these vehicles combined are as thick as the New York City phone book. When I was growing up, the most exotic option on a new car was leather seats and a tape deck. Bose speakers, remote keyless entry, Internet access capability, emergency SOS, homelink wireless control system, park distance control, heated front wipers, rain-detecting wipers, overhead airbags, seatbelt pretensioners and tracker system were not something you gave much thought to on the dealer floors of my youth. Someday I would love to see the instruction manual on a nuclear submarine. Do they too, I wonder, have six-speed Tiptronic transmission with overdrive?

That night over drinks we compared notes on the cars. We apparently weren't drinking rum, since my notes are quite legible.

The general consensus was that we wanted to own all the cars and all of the guns.

With that scientific evaluation done and out of the way, we were able to concentrate on dinner.

Did I mention that they cost half a million dollars?