

WESTERN ARIZONA WATERING HOLE

BY TYSON HUGIE

Food is such a great motivator. I've endured a yawn-inducing corporate seminar because there's a free meal involved. I ran a 13.1-mile race last month just because there were all-you-could-drink chocolate milk bottles at the end. And now, I've driven six hours and

And it seems we weren't alone. Hundreds of Jeep owners, ATVers, and campers had the same idea we did, and the saloon was a hoppin' place on a Saturday afternoon. Getting there was (more than?) half the fun. The closest town to the saloon—Parker, Arizona—was hosting an off-road race called the "Bluewater 425," which brought out all sorts of desert-goers. Think Baja race.

About 4 miles out of town on Arizona Highway 95, we headed east on Cienega Springs Road and were immediately warned by a roadside sign about primitive road conditions. Not to be turned away, I gripped the wheel and shifted the Acura ILX into low gear for a bumpy ride. Sam Haymart, of *TestDriven.TV* fame, followed closely behind in my cloud of dust with his 2017 Audi A4. We might have been the only ones crazy enough to subject our luxury sedans to such rocky terrain.

At certain times, the narrow road was only one lane wide, and we had to carefully maneuver around oncoming traffic. The five miles of dirt took us probably 20 minutes to navigate, but eventually we arrived at the oasis: a sprawling, multi-level restaurant and bar, crudely constructed inside a canyon, with surrounding parking.

From the parking lot, we could hear the bass beat of live music, and the closer we got, the louder the music—and the crowds—became. The lunch rush was in full swing at 12:45 pm—amazing because the place had barely opened for the day at "high noon." There were various places to order and the seating was "wherever you want." I grabbed my cheeseburger and sought after some shade on a set of bleachers.

The people-watching was some of the best I've ever had—it seems a few folks had a started happy hour early, as the Coors cans were clearly everyone's drink of choice to wash down their burgers. The band played on, and I couldn't help but sing along for a line or two when the song "Wagon Wheel" came up.

We took a short post-lunch hike to the summit of a rocky overlook. It gave us a great view of the entire bar area and the surrounding hills. Desert Bar was lined by a few rusting carcasses of old vehicles including a fire truck. I noticed upon surveying the parking lot from that vantage point, about 95 percent of the vehicles in the parking lot were higher clearance 4x4 trucks and SUVs. It was probably for good reason, too. While fair weather cruising wasn't a huge challenge, I imagine that any sort of inclement weather would pose a real muddy road hazard for someone like me taking a car out there (next time I'll take an SLX). And while owner Ken could probably attract a lot more visitors if road conditions were improved, the challenge of the trek is part of the allure.

Ken's vision of the Desert Bar started in the mid-1970s, when he had acquired the land of an old copper mining camp. By 1983, he had secured a liquor license and started hosting guests in a makeshift building. And in the 1990s, further improvements were made to the site, including construction of a small church and a covered bridge across the ravine between the parking lot and the main stage. By the looks of things during our visit, more enhancements are probably still under way, as we saw some concrete and rebar walls going up. And the entire place is now powered by solar panels—brilliant, actually.

We made our way back to civilization in one piece and perfectly satisfied with our six-hour trip for a nice, greasy burger. For anyone looking for an easy day trip from the Phoenix area, Nellie E. is a definite hit. But keep in mind its limited operating hours: it's only open from October through April, Saturdays and Sundays, from 12:00 noon to 6:00 pm. And the entire operation is cash only—don't even think of trying to pay with plastic out there. Have fun and check it out sometime. ■



over 300 miles (10 of them on some of the rockiest dirt road stretches I've ever put my car through) to pay \$12 for a cheeseburger. It was worth it.

The Nellie E. Saloon, better known as just the "Desert Bar," is just my kind of place. This one came at the recommendation of my friend Chris, who's always on the lookout for driving opportunities to obscure destinations. The drive took me and three friends to the Buckskin Mountains, in the remote and sparsely-populated western reaches of the Grand Canyon State. It's a beautiful area: the Colorado River slices through the middle of the desert and creates a border between Arizona and California. Spring breakers flock to the area for wild times at Lake Havasu. But our destination was far from any such refreshing water supply. It was tucked deep into a dusty canyon.

