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Dunes 101: Driving a Line in the Sand

Elana Scherr heads to Moab, Utah, to take on the "most romantic off-road challenge" and try to impress a dog.

By [Elana Scherr](#) Published: Dec 19, 2020



ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRETT AFFRONTI | CAR AND DRIVER

Zip—full name: Zippity-Doo-Dog—is one of those outdoorsy dogs. The kind that is never on a leash because he has important dog stuff to do, like sniffing for rabbits, and leashes are for city dogs who wouldn't know a rabbit hole from a burrito wrapper. Outdoorsy dogs spend their days riding along in work trucks or, in the case of Zip, on the console of a [2020 Jeep Gladiator](#) towing a 2006 Wrangler. They are working dogs. When I met Zip, his job was to teach me to drive in sand dunes.

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Technically, it was John Marshall, owner of [Coyote Land Tours](#), whose job it was to teach me how to drive in the dunes, but the second I met Zip (who begrudgingly let me scratch his ears), I knew he was the one I needed to impress. Zip and Marshall met me at a diner in [Moab, Utah](#), because it's the kind of town where nothing gets done until everyone has had some coffee and eggs. Also, Marshall finds he can do a better job with his students if he gets a feel for their goals over pancakes rather than at the terrifying crevasses he's about to instruct them through. He's been leading off-road tours in Moab since 2002 and offering one-on-one (or group) instruction since 2003. He's helped experts become more expert, taught retirees how to use their newly purchased 4x4s, and coached countless tourists in rented Jeeps.

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My goal was to conquer sweeping mounds of sand, with their treacherous drops and deep, tricky bowls. Dunes are the most romantic off-road challenge, where a skilled pilot acts more as a dancer than a driver, riding the sand like a hawk on the wind. Dunes are also scary. Even the vocabulary is intimidating, all "witch's eyes" and "razorbacks." I was worried I couldn't do it.

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"It's like surfing," Marshall said. "Do you surf?" I shook my head. "Skateboard?" I looked blank. Zip, I swear to you, rolled his eyes. He was not any more impressed when I got the Wrangler stuck one-third of the way up the smallest dune. Marshall was more patient, talking me through the process of backing down and partially up the previous dune, using gravity to get the big tires moving and then laying into the throttle to keep them going. "Put some heat into it," he said as I let the revs drop. Slowly, I started to see the rhythm of it. A dune is not a racetrack with one or two fast lines and a bunch of space for mistakes; it's all potential lines and all potential mistakes.

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Marshall quickly realized that I did better with a destination than with turn-by-turn instructions and started giving me challenges. "Get us to that tree two miles over that way." "Find us a path to that far dune with the big shadow on it." "Take us to the riverbed." "Now go back to where I parked the truck when we started." Ah, yeah, where was that? Oh yes, by the big rock formation that looks like a Jell-O salad.

When we got to the truck, we ate Italian wraps on the tailgate of the Gladiator, and while I won Zip over with cheese and salami, Marshall told me stories of big-city tourists, or as he calls them, front-country people. Once, someone asked him if all the rocks were painted. Another if the sun always set over the same canyon. One lady stepped on a small rock and was concerned when it wobbled. She asked Marshall if there wasn't someone he should call to fix it. "I was like, 'What, like a maintenance guy who will hot-glue it down and make it safe?'"

The outdoors isn't about being safe, Marshall said. It's about being reminded to pay attention to your own fragility and discover your own strength to solve problems. "I can't teach you to make good decisions," he said, "but I can teach you how to recognize a bad one." Then he pointed to the park entrance, many miles away on a cliff top. "Meet you there," he said and called Zip, who ignored him to chase a possible rabbit. "Just start driving," he said. A few minutes down the trail, he radioed over: "Slow down and open your door." I looked back and saw Zip running along the trail past Marshall's vehicle to me. I opened the door and he leapt into my lap, then settled down on the console. I scratched his ears, and we headed out of the wilderness, each content that we had made a good decision.



Elana Scherr

Senior Editor, Features

Like a sleeper agent activated late in the game, Elana Scherr didn't know her calling at a young age. Like many girls, she planned to be a vet-astronaut-artist, and came closest to that last one by attending UCLA art school. She painted images of cars, but did not own one. Elana reluctantly got a driver's license at age 21 and discovered that she not only loved cars and wanted to drive them, but that other people loved cars and wanted to read about them, which meant somebody had to write about them. Since receiving activation codes, Elana has written for numerous car magazines and websites, covering classics, car culture, technology, motorsports, and new-car reviews. In 2020, she received a Best Feature award from the Motor Press Guild for [the C/D story "A Drive through Classic Americana in a Polestar 2."](#) In 2023, her [Car and Driver feature story "In Washington, D.C.'s Secret Carpool Cabal, It's a Daily Slug Fest"](#) was awarded 1st place in the 16th Annual National Arts & Entertainment Journalism Awards by the Los Angeles Press Club.

[Read full bio](#)

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