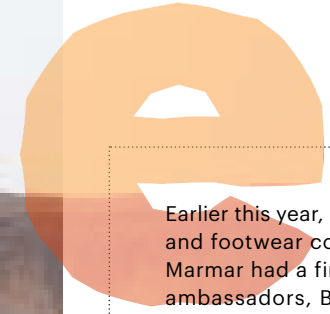




Nacho Libre!

BY TERENCE LOOSE

BRAD AND SHEENA VAN ORDEN ARE DRIVING THE VW VAN THEY NICKNAMED NACHO AROUND THE WORLD, HELPING AN OC BRAND BUILD AWARENESS OF THE GLOBAL NEED FOR CLEAN WATER.



Earlier this year, Huntington Beach-based sandal and footwear company Freewaters' founder Eli Marmar had a first meeting with his new brand ambassadors, Brad and Sheena Van Orden. It wasn't your normal meet and greet, however.

"We Skyped and Brad was in his van in a random parking lot somewhere in Malaysia," says Marmar. Since then, Marmar has gotten very used to the term "somewhere" when it comes to his new brand ambassadors. In fact, when asked where they are at the moment, he says, "I've lost track, actually. Sometimes I get a quick response to my emails, sometimes it's weeks later. It's all very organic."

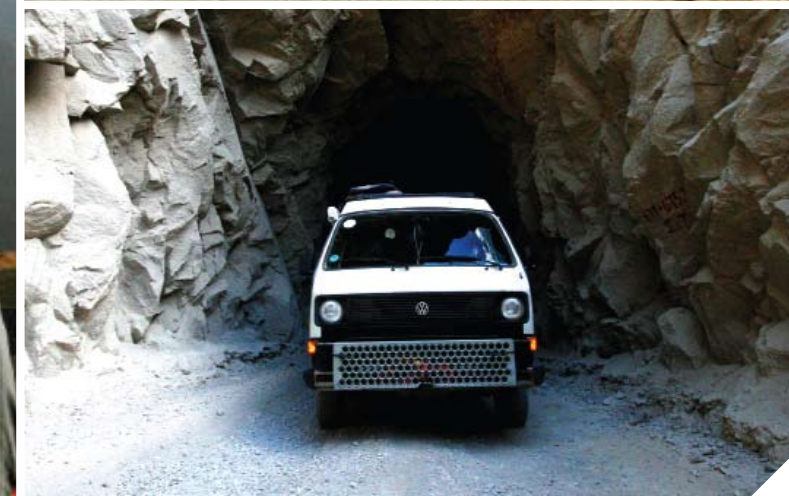
That's because since 2011, the Van Ordens have been wandering around the globe in their specially outfitted '84 VW van named Nacho—first driving south to the tip of South America, now cruising through Southeast Asia (we think).

But in fact, that idea of free-spirited roadtripping fit with Marmar and his business partner Martin Kim's goals when they founded Freewaters, a footwear company with a mission to help bring clean water to as many people lacking it as possible. That Brad and Sheena's travels have taken them to third-world countries where access to clean water can run as low as 10 percent of the population seemed a perfect fit.



Clockwise from left: A campsite with a view in Paracas, Peru, site of the oldest marine reserve in the country; kids in Guatemala with a gas jug-turned water container; Nacho enters Argentina.





Clockwise from above: Sheena and Brad visit Peru's famous salt pools, which have been in use since Inca times; Machu Picchu was a highlight of the couple's visit to Peru; One of the most common sights in third-world countries was women and children walking miles each day for fresh water. Nacho navigating Canyon del Pato, Peru; Freewaters sandals product placement in Ayutthaya, Thailand, which was founded in the 14th century and once was the capital of Siam.



"I'm really a hippie at heart," says Marmar, a graduate of Pasadena's Art Center College of Design whose background is in designing wetsuits and other action sports goods. "So I kept saying, 'Delivering cool products and traveling for our company is great, but that's not quite enough. We need to do something outside of our own egos and needs, something that connects us with the global community.'"

They thought about focusing on hunger or education, but, being a pair of surfers, they kept coming back to water. Unfortunately, the need was also there. Although it's hard to see it past the overflowing sports bottles of the OC, much of the world faces a daily challenge to get access to clean water. In fact, according to UNICEF, more than a third of the world population—2.5 billion people—lack improved sanitation services due to limited access to clean water and 783 million people still use unsafe drinking water sources. And there have been no shortage of predictions that the next war will not be fought over oil rights, but over access to clean water.

As a self-professed hippie, Marmar is really not that into war, so he and Kim have pledged one percent of their company's gross sales to well digging in third-world countries to give communities access to safe drinking water.

The company's current projects are in Tulwet, Kenya, a rural community of about 10,000. Freewaters has dug nine wells, each helping provide clean water for four hundred people per day. But perhaps what makes the effort more impressive

is the simplicity of it, a simplicity that Marmar planned carefully.

He says a danger in developing countries is that when the entity that came in to help leaves, there is no one to oversee the project, or the project breaks down and the knowledge, tools or materials are not available to get it up and running again. So the project benefits the organization's ego, but little else in the end. And that is exactly what Marmar started Freewaters to avoid.

"We bring in locals to help with the building. There's no heavy machinery and close to 100% of all the raw materials needed to build the well can be sourced locally," says Marmar. He says that empowers the locals and ensures fresh water for years to come. He hopes that this will also lead to Freewaters being more of a facilitator than a project manager.

Which brings us nicely back to that parking lot Skype session with Brad Van Orden somewhere in Malaysia. "During that call, Brad

told me that he was really excited about what we were doing, and that he was a mechanical engineer and had designed and built a water purification system in Nacho, his van. That was so perfect, so I told him I wanted to do more than just send him some sandals; I really want to empower them to do a water project during their travels," says Marmar.

Like Marmar's journey with Freewaters, Brad and Sheena's journey began out of a desire to do more than chase the usual trappings of success.

"We began to feel that the adventurous lives we'd known in the past were slowly winding down, and that we too would soon succumb to the monotony and security of the 'American Dream.' We decided that we should do something wild before it was too late," says Brad.

Then, by chance, a friend (who's a bit of a hippy himself, says Brad) sent him an article about a couple that drove their VW van through South America. Now, most people would read that article and say something like, "Wow, crazy," followed by, "So what's for lunch?"

Not Brad. He emailed it to Sheena with the question, "Want to do this?"

Most wives might look at that email and say, "Wow, crazy." Not Sheena. She immediately said yes.

So for the next two and half years, they scrimped and saved and outfitted their 1984 VW van named Nacho in preparation for a three-year journey around the world. They cut their rent in half by downsizing to a "shack," grew their own vegetables, rode bikes instead of driving their cars, and limited themselves to two meals out a month.

Reactions to their plan varied. Sheena's family were dead-set against it, while Brad's CEO asked him if he'd be willing to see a shrink. He didn't. And Sheena's family came around, eventually. So in the winter of 2011, they headed south and were soon camping on the beach in Mexico.

"The work-to-beach transition was very fast, and we took to it like Batman to rogue justice," says Brad.

From there, they spent their first year driving to the tip of Argentina, following the Andes all the way down South America into Patagonia and to Tierra del Fuego. Then, from Buenos Aires, they shipped Nacho to Malaysia and have since driven it all the way to the Chinese border.



Along the way, predictably, they had great days, and they had not-so-great ones, like the time they were burglarized in Argentina and lost thousands of dollars worth of camera, electronic, and other equipment, and Nacho suffered a smashed window.

"We spent that evening wrapped in blankets against the cold, staring at the wall and wishing we were back home," says Brad.

But despite the incident, they still travel on the premise that in general, people are good.

"Every place has its bad apples, but they're far outweighed by good people," says Brad. "Americans say Mexico is dangerous, Mexicans say Belize is dangerous, Belizeans say Guatemala is dangerous, and it goes on down the line. Everyone thinks that Boo Radley lives next door." But he says that's not what they found. "Mexicans are awesome. Colombians are awesome. Argentineans are awesome. Some Argentinean schmuck who broke our window isn't awesome, and it's as simple as that."

And for their part, they are determined to contribute to the pool of good people, which is a major reason they signed on with Freewaters. "Freewaters is a group of people

interested in adventure, in living under a different set of rules, and in using their energy and expertise to do good in the world, and we can do good on behalf of Freewaters," says Brad.

Their goal is to identify places in desperate need of clean water and, with Brad's engineering skills and Freewaters' resources, help them get it in the form of a long-term, sustainable project such as the ones in Kenya.

And unfortunately, there are many worthy candidates. "I'm conducting this interview from Laos, where 90% of the population doesn't have proper water sanitation," says Brad. In the dry season, the children in the mountain villages walk up to two



Above: By the end of their second day on the road, Brad and Sheena were relaxing in Mexico.

Left: After shipping Nacho to Malaysia from Buenos Aires, Argentina, Brad and Sheena drove through Thailand (pictured at left), Laos, and Vietnam, (right), up to the Chinese border, where paperwork and the high cost of guides forced a turn.



Right: Got water? You better in the Atacama Desert, Chile, a 600-mile plateau west of the Andes, which, according to NASA and National Geographic, is the driest desert in the world.

Below right: It's not an adventure until something bad happens, like Nacho's axle falling off in Costa Rica. Good thing Brad is a mechanical engineer.



hours a day to collect drinking water from nearby rivers. "And often, those rivers are tainted by poor waste management. We see it almost every day: young children walking the mountain roads alone or in groups, with water jugs lashed to their belts," Brad says.

In the end, Brad says they discovered that roadtripping was best when it involved and helped others. "If you had asked me two years ago what made me happy, I would have told you that going mountain biking, or going on trips, or building things made me happy. But I've realized that my old idea of happiness left out the most important thing: relationships."

That new perspective is driving his desire to help with one of the world's greatest humanitarian challenges: clean water. It's why he took that call in the random parking lot in Malaysia. And it's why Marmar brought him on board. He might be just one crazy mechanical engineer driving around the world in an old van, but get enough of those crazy engineers together, and who knows....

"We recognize that right now we can only do small things," says Marmar. "But it's the collection of small steps that make a great change." ♦

Who is Nacho?

Nacho is Brad and Sheena Van Orden's 1984 VW van. But Nacho is far from a stock model. In the two years prior to their departure, Brad completely redesigned and rebuilt the vehicle for what he knew would be a tough three-year journey. "Being that I'm a mechanical engineer, I went to town on it and made it into the ultimate road tripping machine," says Brad.

For instance, he modeled the body in CAD (computer-aided design) then redesigned the interior cabinetry and had a CNC machine cut it out for precision. Brad also designed a heat exchanger that uses the engine's excess heat to heat 15 gallons of water for use in the on-board, plumbed-in shower, or in the sink. Under the false floor he designed and built is a custom water purification system using UV lights and filtration.

"We also have a fully functioning kitchen, a couch, a refrigerator, an upstairs bed, hardwood maple floors, and a solar electric system to power everything," says Brad. Of course they do.