



HAPPINESS IS A WARM GUN?

Shooting outside city limits

By Andy Valentine Photos by Trask Bedortha

Where I'm from there's a dearth of firearms. Hell, I grew up watching bobbies hit the beat with a billy club and a goofy hat — no pistols at their hips and certainly a lot fewer reasons to utilize bullets, considering the United Kingdom's nationwide ban on pistols and other concealable hand-cannons. But in the rural U.S., firearms and the great American outdoors go together like Rupert Murdoch and phone hacking.

Wanting to swim in the murky waters of this generally maligned American pastime, I began hunting for the man or woman who could help me learn more about just how enjoyable target shooting can be. I was surprised to find that, for a person who has about as much experience with shooting guns as Gandhi, tracking down a few lead catapults wasn't all that hard. The two fellas I contacted (who would like to remain nameless — let's call them Heckler and Koch) were all for lending me their guns and ammo so I too could experience the Second Amendment firsthand.

I had no idea the shooting laws in this country — especially here in Oregon — were so liberal. You can literally drive out beyond city limits with a borrowed gun and start firing at dusty old beer cans and miscellaneous targets. Just don't bust caps too close to the road or near a house or barn unless you want to pay damages on a pissed-off dude's truck, or if you particularly enjoy being labeled as a complete fucking imbecile — because that's what you'll be.

That said, there's a lot of things that fly out in the bush, and I don't just mean bullets. Tannerite targets, for instance, are completely legal and explode like the Challenger Space Shuttle if you add enough powder. First concocted locally by Daniel J. Tanner of Pleasant Hill, Tannerite is a mercurial mix of ammonium nitrate and aluminum powder that really takes to hot bullets. Like, if you shoot at this stuff from too close a range it could blow your dumb ass up. Heckler and Koch had no qualms with using Tannerite — although I'll admit I was a little disturbed at how bright their eyes were when they began mixing the chemicals out of my trunk.

Cackling as they loaded rifles, handguns and clay pigeon launchers, my guides embodied just how much the liberation of firearms beyond city limits means to some people. Given that they are both hard-working professionals with clean criminal records and with families, Heckler and Koch seemed to find nothing but pure catharsis in the bang of a barrel and the chance to escape. Understand: it's not just about the shooting — it's the getting out of town and

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blowing off steam in the wild. Without this hobby, I got the feeling these two would live their lives like caged panthers.

The sound of a pop echoing through the valley is something that every American should hear once in his life (after all, this country was founded on gunfire in the outdoors), and the smell of gun powder and empty casings is almost nostalgic of a time when we were young; mere boys pretending to play with guns and naively wishing that it could get just a little more realistic.

Of course, as a child in England I was destined to while away the hours pretending that sticks were guns or that I was legitimately pulling a trigger instead of hitting the R2 button on my Playstation controller — just like some kids here. And if you think a piece of plastic vibrating when you shoot in a videogame is even remotely realistic, think again. I've never experienced anything like the anticipation that comes attached to firing a weapon for the first time. What's the recoil like on this thing? How loud is it? Why should I

respect this morally questionable device that (like it or not) has punctuated human history for almost 650 years? That's something no videogame ever taught me.

In hindsight, sitting on my ass with a controller is fundamentally not as awesome, or healthy, as getting out into the wild and blowing through a box of bullets. And a great deal of people feel the same way, apparently.

There's a much bigger following of this ritualistic bullet-wasting than I had previously thought. You can pretty much count on seeing other shooters out there — or at least hearing them. If they come near you, try to look congenial. As Heckler found out on our little expedition, looking at a guy while holding a loaded shotgun makes you seem about as disquieting as forced sex with a wood-chipper.

"Get your finger off the trigger. Every gun is loaded. Even if you know it's not, treat it like it is," Koch kept telling me — a sure sign that, despite a demeanor of brazen nonchalance, this man also knew how to be safe around firearms. Educate

yourself on gun safety before you go shooting unless you want something awful to happen — but that should just be common sense, right?

So what does the Second Amendment in action look like to a foreigner? Part of me worries that a bullet is going to fly 50 miles and hit me in the head while I'm eating lunch at Jiffy Market, but there's another issue that's hard to ignore: I started out wanting to hold an SKS assault rifle and pop off round after round of power and fury, adrenaline coursing through my veins as my thirst for loud, smoky adventure was quenched. I ended up doing just that. And, with a childhood of thinking firearms were for irresponsible gun-freaks (and farmers) behind me, I had fun.

All this tells us is that target shooting is like a drunken meathead at a bar: He's loud, aggressive and intimidating on the outside, but in his heart there's an innocuous, childish soul crying out for attention. I say give it to him. You could find out he's not as fierce as he seems. **EW**