

## Jeepers Creepers

# Hitting the Rugged Trail

By Chuck Cannon

THE SIERRA NEVADA—The question is, is getting there really half the fun? If you listen to the persons who drive Jeeps around the mountains, that is a low estimate. The Jeep is the "Tahoe Cadillac" in some circles, and six or eight hours behind the wheel of one enough to show why.

Actually, the strict meaning of Tahoe Cadillac is the sedan-type Jeeps, and one explanation for the term is that you can spend as much for a Jeep as you can for a Cadillac. More casually, it is applied to any Jeep vehicle; and when it is used by a Jeep owner, it is more a reference to quality than to price tag.

When *AutoWeek* decided to try to find out firsthand exactly why so much fanatic loyalty is spent on Jeeps, we figured there could be only one way to do it. Not by driving a Jeep around town for an hour or so, and not by going out unaided to try our hand at the hill country. We needed a trip offroad with some dedicated four-wheel-drive enthusiasts. It took only one visit to Cal-Vada Auto, a local Jeep dealer, to meet the Jeepers.

As it happened, a few members of the Reno Four-Wheelers, one of the many offroad clubs in the area, were heading for the tall timber that very weekend. The invitation was forthcoming, four-wheelers being a pretty hospitable breed. And a vehicle was forthcoming, too—a CJ-7, described rather more patronizingly than we thought appropriate as "a Jeep that practically drives itself." Admittedly, the reporter covering the story was new to offroading; but how much trouble could it be? If Cal-Vada was willing to lend out an \$8000 vehicle to a tyro, the whole trip would have to be a setup, following nice rustic trails and sipping champagne in pleasant mountain glades. Right?

Not exactly. In fact, not even approximately. The Reno Four-Wheelers meet on a number of scheduled trips throughout the

year, and in between times individual members will take it into their heads to meet for little impromptu jaunts. The purpose of these junkets is to go a little deeper into opportunities noticed during the last big get-together.

Which brings us back to the "Is getting there half the fun" question. Just what do these offroaders mean by opportunity? One would think they mean the opportunity to get to a particularly nice place not accessible by any non-4WD vehicle. This is not the case, however; it would seem that they mean the opportunity to try to cross the most difficult but still crossable terrain available, even if they have to go through miles of boring beautiful scenery to get there.

Or maybe that's too harsh. Nonetheless, the trip up into the Sierras in the caravan of experienced offroaders was a good deal rougher than we had bargained for.

It all started innocently enough, with breakfast at a giant truckstop/casino just east of the California border on I-80. (The Four-Wheelers met in the "Truckers Only" section. Off-roaders are like that—or maybe they just feel they have more in common with truck drivers than with bleary-eyed tourists trying to sober up for the long drive home after sacrificing the last of their traveler's checks at the blackjack tables.)

The Four-Wheelers are not like that. At least, not at 6 a.m. when they're getting ready to head for the Sierra Trek. Then they plow right through their steak and eggs, so they can get out and get down into 4WD as soon as possible.

That eventuality comes a few miles west, off I-80. The vehicles are lined up along the side of the road; the two beginners to offroading are tucked into line between old pros—old pros with winches—and, with no ceremony, the whole convoy plunges into the underbrush.

First come the rocks. They are some pretty



One can't help wondering how a genuine old-time explorer would have felt about the offroad urge: Find the absolutely

## Can an Autocrosser At Four Miles

nice rocks, fun to drive over, in fact, for a novice who's just learning that a Jeep can go a lot of places he wouldn't have thought it could go. It's a lot of fun, this business of climbing, slowly but surely, over stuff you would hesitate to walk over without an alpenstock. The pleasure is tempered during the first break, however, when the Trailmaster—he's the boss, but it's a rotating position of absolutely no prestige value—tells everyone, "Now it's time to go find the rocks." Everybody seems cheered by this, and the two beginners decide not to mention that they thought the rocks had come and gone.

When the rocks do come along, they're more rough than fun. The experts don't even pause, though; they just growl up the rocky trail and gather long enough to hear the Trailmaster say, "Let's go play in the mud," and the expedition is off again.

So far, the surrounding scenery has just been your average beautiful, and nobody has gotten extremely stuck. To the newcomer to both offroading and the Sierra Nevada, it all seems just a little disappointing. Then come the mud games.

The first Jeep immediately gets utterly bogged down in the mud, which is just a little patch in the middle of the trail. As soon as he is winched to safety, the rest of them try it,



If you know how to do it, you can ease right across the



When you're at the helm of a Tahoe Cadillac, you stand a chance of having lunch at a place like this.



# with the Tahoe Cadillacs



st awful terrain available, and then go across it. It must be a matter of point of view.

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world's worst quagmire, bog, tarpit or tarn...

but to the side, where the going is a little less difficult. Everybody makes it in fine style, and there's the strange thing: Why try the hard part until you see it's too hard, then go around to the easy part? It seems like saying you're going to do a hundred pushups, then deciding you can't do that many and saying you'll try 20 because you know you can do it.

But that's the whole point of driving a Jeep in the Sierras, it seems. You have to find the roughest trail you can possibly get across. If you were there for the scenery, you would just take the most convenient route, find the prettiest place and stay there until it was time to go home. The Four-Wheelers don't play it that way.

For instance: As the trail winds higher, the environment becomes incredibly perfect. When not filtered through thick evergreens, the sun blazes down into golden ferns alongside the road or glints off clear pools fed from springs trickling out through cracks in granite boulders, and in general things are just about as pretty as they can be in the mountains. And what do the Four-Wheelers do? Why, they stop alongside a mountain pool only as long as they have to to finish a can of beer or a sandwich, and then they jump back into their Jeeps to seek more rough spots.

limitless variety of Man. Chalk it up, and follow them to the further rough spots—and they are *really* rough this time. This time it's the sluiceboxes.

A sluicebox, for the uninitiate, is a long notch cut into the side of the mountain by violent rushing water. It is lined in its narrow bottom with chunks of loose granite ranging from the size of bowling balls to the size of Harley-Davidson 74s. Whenever melting snow is not running in the sluiceboxes, Jeep drivers are.

After a couple of sluiceboxes, having gotten stuck only once or twice (not counting the mud-play, during which we tried the old slide-across-the-surface-in-passing-gear technique, which didn't work) we decided we were ready for the worst.

The worst, in this case, amounted to the biggest, baddest sluicebox of them all. And the Trailmaster and the off-roaders were eager to show us the way there.

Before we could get there, however, the caravan found itself stumped by a couple of 4WD pickups stalled dead in the middle of the approach sluicebox. One was dead to the extent of having no steering box—just a couple of loose washers and a small adjustable wrench lying in a pool of oil under the

engine. It looked like time to turn back.

That's not counting on the determination a real off-roader can show, when it comes to finding the most difficult terrain. Over the objections of the wives present—wives often being concerned with such irrelevancies as grand theft auto, etc.—a few of the drivers simply hooked a winch to each end of the offending trucks, each in its turn, and hoisted them out of the right-of-way. It took a couple of hours, but it was worth it; the next two sluiceboxes were really terrible.

By and large, that was the general direction of AutoWeek's visit to the Sierra Trek. Beauties of surpassing magnitude were encountered and left behind, in search of the perfectly awful trail. We found it more often than not, to the tune of a crumpled fender and various other minor wounds on the loaner from Cal-Vada Auto. In all fairness, we have to admit that the CJ-7 did everything asked of it, and then some. As to whether it drove itself, there is an ego problem involved here. The automatic transmission was pretty welcome in those sluiceboxes, though. And in the mud. We can only hope practice makes perfect; we have a firm invitation to the next mud races in the area, and we sure would like to have another Jeep to crash around in. And no passing gear tricks this time.

## Offroading: A Closer Look

Jeeps, like other adult pleasures, seem to be an acquired taste.

At first glance, even first thump, there's precious little to recommend offroading to the sensible person: you thrash yourself, your vehicle, your passengers, and too often the environment, and the actual *being* where you're going becomes secondary to *getting* where you're going—which in rugged country is a mode of travel so painful that it makes third class train passage from Istanbul to Karachi look like the front seat of a Lincoln from Boca Raton to Fort Lauderdale.

But it grows on you. No sooner do the aches fade away than you start thinking about the view from that peak, and the way the sun came through the pine branches while you were picking your way down the sluice. Maybe you could get Friday off next week and do it again....

There's another facet of offroading that we haven't seen mentioned before: it requires as

much concentration as any other form of performance motoring, certainly as much, to do well, as driving a car fast on a mountain road. There's a certain fascination in placing the left wheel *there*, balancing the Jeep just so—sometimes so delicately that leaning forward or back can make the difference between go and no go—then easing forward in a controlled slide that, if not carefully shepherded, can see you wedged against a rock or tree.

Environmentalists—we number ourselves among them—can't help but be disturbed by the implications of dozens of Jeeps busting into the high country, tearing up the meadows and battering down trees. It doesn't have to be that way. Most responsible offroaders go there to find the wilderness, not to destroy it. Most offroad areas are traversed by a net of Jeep trails; most offroad enthusiasts stay on them. The few who do not run the risk of having the wilderness closed to us all.

—Lewis Clark



...and if you don't, you can get caught in an embarrassing little ditch your son could drive his tricycle through.