

# SAFARI AMERICAN STYLE

TACKLING THE TRAILS  
OF MOAB IN AEV JEEPS

BY ROGER HART







THE NAME OF THE TRAIL, Steel Bender, sent a shiver up the spine. It's sort of like the rodeo rider drawing Widowmaker in a bull-riding competition—there's a reason it got its name. A few minutes down the rocky and sandy trail, we figured out whence the name came. Put a wheel in the wrong place, and at the very least, you were bending some metal. At worst, you were breaking a suspension piece, rolling over, and, well, it could get ugly.

We went to Moab, Utah, for the 45th-annual Easter Jeep Safari to test the latest offerings from American Expedition Vehicles. AEV takes Jeep Wranglers—JK models, which are pretty good off-road straight from the Toledo, Ohio, factory—and turns them into *serious* off-road machines. AEV, based in Missoula, Mont., with production facilities in suburban Detroit, produces about 200 fully customized Jeeps annually. And the component business, with all of the pieces built at Quality Metalcraft in Livonia, Mich., continues to grow each year. Products are shipped worldwide.

We'd driven an AEV Hemi Wrangler on the streets of Detroit and were amazed at just how easy it was to drive, considering that it is lifted 3.5 inches and it rides on 17-inch alloy wheels shod with 35-inch mud/terrain tires. It laughs at potholes and looks as though it could crawl up and over



ROGER HART (3)

**2011 AEV Hemi Wrangler** **ON SALE:** Now **BASE PRICE:** \$76,149 (includes base Wrangler Rubicon) **DRIVETRAIN:** 5.7-liter, 375-hp, 410-lb-ft V8; 4WD, five-speed automatic **CURB WEIGHT:** 5,200 lb **0-60 MPH:** N/A **FUEL ECONOMY (EPA):** 15 mpg

a bulldozer. Despite the beefiness, it was very comfortable driving in the city.

But the trails around Moab are no picnic. There's a reason Moab veterans call the area "Disneyland for off-roading." You get to experience a Matterhorn ride.

Just as with moonshine and haggis, off-roading is an acquired taste. Steel Bender, rated at "six or seven" on an ascending scale of 10, was several hours of driving slowly, bouncing up and down rock faces and fording meandering streams. But a couple of hours into the trip, having traversed a stream or two and climbed up and down rock faces mere humans couldn't stand up on and scaring the daylights out of ourselves, we began to understand what it's all about. And then there are the views of the great American West.

"It's pretty neat out here," said Dave Harriton, AEV founder, who along with Michael Chetcuti and Mike Collins owns AEV. "These [AEV Jeeps] will take you

places you never could have imagined."

At the heart of an AEV full-on conversion is a 5.7-liter Hemi that replaces the stock 3.8-liter V6. While it would seem that at the speeds at which you crawl up, over and down rock, you wouldn't need much horsepower, we found that you do. When you need it, you need it *right now*, and that's where the extra two cylinders and additional 170 hp come in handy. AEV is working on a 6.4-liter Hemi conversion with 470 hp and 470 lb-ft of torque.

The conversion also includes AEV stamped front and rear bumpers, a rear tire carrier, a stamped-steel heat-reduction hood—all the better to help keep the air flowing to cool the big Hemi—and a snorkel to get the air intake up and out of dust and water. A Warn winch, off-road lights, an AEV instrument cluster, logo headrest and badges, plus a serialized engine-bay plaque, finish off the package. The full conversion increases the curb



weight of the vehicle by 200 pounds.

Heading out on the trail, we lowered the air pressure of the massive tires to 15 psi to better hug the rocks and float over the sand. At treacherous points along the trail, the 17-Jeep convoy made up mostly of AEV customers would stop and, one-by-one, tackle the obstacle, oftentimes with a trail veteran outside the vehicle acting as guide. You learn quickly to place the tires exactly where they tell you. In low gear with the dif-lock engaged, it took both feet on the brakes to stifle the massive torque from the Hemi. Even at idle, the vehicle wanted to creep forward.

The AEV conversion includes recalibrating the speedometer for the 35-inch tires as well as reprogramming the stability and traction control to keep them



ROGER HART

functional. The factory-installed electronic differential lock and sway-bar disconnect remain intact, and they came in handy during the trail drive.

After several hours of driving, we came away impressed with the quality of the workmanship, fit and finish and the capabilities of the vehicle. But this beast doesn't come cheap; it about doubles the \$36,000 price of a fully loaded Wrangler Rubicon. You can order an AEV Jeep at a handful of Jeep dealers around the country, or by contacting AEV at [www.aev-conversions.com](http://www.aev-conversions.com).

Fortunately, Steel Bender was more bark than bite. As one of the more than 30 or so certified trails used during the safari, it would claim no victims this day, as long as you don't count minor scrapes and bumps. And, as we found out, serious off-roaders don't. Those are just badges of honor. 🐾



## Couples Weekend

BY MARK VAUGHN

**□** SAY YOU LOVE camping, four-wheeling and the great outdoors but your spouse says those activities are "icky" and involve "snakes" and "all those gross bugs."

Well, the people at Xplore have a solution for you—one version of the Xplore FJ Cruiser comes with a roof-top tent. It's a penthouse above the *playa*, a cabin over the creek, a mansion in the mountains. You are safe from all manner of icky things. It's pretty much waterproof and is lined with a soft foam mattress. So all logical debate will end when you pull into the driveway with one of these and announce, "Look what I bought for us, baby!"

Xplore also has similar setups planned for Jeeps and a variety of trucks. Xplore packages cool off-road products, arranges with local dealerships to

offer them, and has the dealers install, sell and deliver them. Traditional off-roaders usually do all of this themselves. But Xplore isn't aimed at traditional 4x4 crawlers. It's aimed at those who might not want to go to all the trouble of sorting through parts catalogs, calculating winch loads and learning how to weld.

We borrowed a fully loaded Xplore FJ Cruiser for the weekend. It had a Katzkin leather interior, BFG off-road tires on Method aluminum wheels, Bilstein 5100 shocks and a Magnaflow cat-back exhaust. In case we went even farther, there was an ARB winch. There were other nice touches by off-road specialist TLC, including a custom wrap in place of a paint job. The power-train was stock.

Thus provisioned, we

loaded up the kids, dog and camping gear and headed out to the far eastern end of Joshua Tree National Park. Off of Highway 62 way east of Twentynine Palms, we turned south, past a parked van with camouflaged motorcycles and 25 jerry cans, past the strangely abandoned (or was it?) motor home, and headed up a rocky canyon, past the blown-out and bullet-riddled corpses of a late-1950s Buick sedan and a late-'50s Ford station wagon and, on a rare flat spot high enough above flash-flood danger, we camped.

Once parked for the night, we opened the pop-top tent with a bit of effort that would no doubt get easier every time you did it. A ladder provided access above the reptiles. It was quite cozy, especially since we had forgotten to bring the good sleeping bags and might otherwise have frozen that night.

Our fully loaded rig was \$60,000 or thereabouts, which includes the cost of the FJ. But fewer parts mean a lower price. It's a good way to get going off-road without all the work.

The FJ your author drove is going up for auction on eBay in July to benefit the National Parks Foundation. You can find out more at [www.xplorevehicles.com](http://www.xplorevehicles.com). 🐾







# CUSTOM CALLING

Entrepreneur offers modern takes on classic shapes

BY MARK VAUGHN

**□** SAY YOU INHERITED a small potentate, or won a couple of lotteries at once, and bought your own large island. In addition to assembling concubines, libations and ammo, you'd need transportation for when you went out to be admired by your people. May we suggest a sizeable squadron of Icon FJs and CJs.

Cost will be no object, since you'll be printing your own money, so the \$105,000 starting point of the FJs (CJs are only \$78,000) will not be a problem. The sun visors, for instance, are from the OE supplier for Learjet—the jet maker, not the seat maker—and cost \$400.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. First, who or what is Icon? It started out with entrepreneur, designer and

Energizer bunny Jonathan Ward, who found that he liked the character of old cars and trucks but didn't like their reliability and efficiency. He figured there were others like him willing to pay for old-school character matched with new-school reliability.

His first venture, still going strong, is TLC, as in Toyota Land Cruiser. TLC beautifully refurbishes old Land Cruisers and FJs for the discriminating four-wheeler. Its reputation is high among moneyed wheelers and its work is spotless.

But Ward wanted more. He wanted to make his own FJ. Our federal government has much to say on that topic, and meeting all federal standards for everything you'd have to do would make Ward's FJs cost more than a Learjet.

So he starts with a fully documented existing vehicle and builds and shapes his creations around that, with help from some of the best suppliers in the business. The ladder frame and control arms for the FJ suspension, for instance, are made by hot-rod frame maker Art Morrison. The aluminum body is made by a pontoon-boat manufacturer in Vancouver. Axles come from Dyna-

trac. The wiring harness is from Painless Performance. The steering column comes from Ididit, and the rest of the steering comes from Lee.

"Other than that, it's all us," said Ward.

The result looks like a vintage FJ or a CJ tribute, but with subtle modern design cues. It could fit in perfectly anywhere in the first through third worlds. But most go to estates in Sun Valley, Nantucket or the Hamptons.

We drove three of Ward's creations, two FJ variants and his latest product, a Jeep CJ takeoff called the CJ3B. In the FJs, power comes from a 350-hp, 5.3-liter LS-generation General Motors aluminum V8 mated to an Aisin Warner AX15 transmission. An Atlas II transfer case sends torque front and rear.

A 210-hp GM EcoTec four powers the smaller CJ3B, routing torque through a five-speed Aisin Warner manual transmission and an NP231 transfer case. There are other powertrain options, including diesels. You can see more choices at [www.icon4x4.com](http://www.icon4x4.com).

We had a great time wheeling in the Texas Canyon section of the Rowher Flats OHV

area near Santa Clarita, Calif., in the middle of the week when it was pretty empty. We did donuts and crawled up steeper stuff with ease. On the freeway to and from the dirt, the ride felt stiff, but with all of the customization available from Icon, you can tune it to your preference.

It's a level of design customization that the majority of four-wheelers won't be able to afford, for work they probably would prefer to do themselves. But buyers aren't the vast majority of four-wheelers.

"It's obvious this kind of product isn't for everyone," Ward said. "That's somewhat part of its charm. The buyer is someone who wants it to drive on that property he has, but he doesn't want to be messin' with it on the weekends."

Icon is crafting its take on the Ford Bronco, one of which will be shown at SEMA this fall. There even is an Aston Martin project in the works, a one-off customer car based on the original DB4 GT Zagato.

Icon 4x4 is a modern take on the coachbuilders of yore, with today's reliability wrapped in a classic design. If only we printed our own money. ☘