



Photos and story by Gerri Young

You might think Euro Camp Jeep Croatia was all about Jeeps, but it was also about trees and driving Jeeps into forests, around and on top of trees—both living and cut.

“You want me to what?” was my answer when first invited to come along as a “navigator” on what was described as a Jeep road rally.

What kind of Jeeps? What kind of roads? I envisioned those Jeep Wranglers with canvas tops, big tires and very bouncy rides throwing me all over dirt roads full of holes and rocks and dead animals. My body started to ache just thinking about it. “All you need to know is how to drive and navigate,” said my soon-to-be road partner, Mary-Michaele Beltz, owner of International

Publications, Inc., and publisher of “AUTO-magazine.” Well, I have certainly done many miles of both of those so I somewhat reservedly agreed. After all, what a cool thing to say when someone asks, “What are you doing this weekend?” Driving a Jeep road rally in Croatia sure beats hanging out at the bowling alley.

Before long, a group of American, British, Swiss, Russian, and Irish folks ended up together in the Camp Jeep Village in Umag, Croatia, on the Istrian Peninsula. Drive from the Trieste, Italy, airport through Slovenia to Croatia and Umag is along the clear-as-vodka water at the north of the peninsula.

According to a release by Daimler Chrysler, the parent company of Jeep, more than 1,200 Jeep owners gathered at

this Sixth Annual Euro Camp Jeep, the largest single-brand 4x4 customer event in Europe. Twenty three countries were represented in this “ultimate celebration of Jeep” held at the Sol Polynesia Resort and featuring “a full range of activities...at an essential weekend for Jeep customers and enthusiasts,” according to Thomas Hausch, Executive Director of International Sales and Marketing, Chrysler Group.

Time to get back to me telling you exactly what all that means.

The Euro Camp Jeep covered a pretty good chunk of land in the resort. Huge white tents housed elegantly dressed tables and chairs for all the meals, a Jeep Shop, registration tables and a bar. A big open stage provided a music and announcement



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When Daimler-Chrysler invited EXCHANGE NEW CAR SALES to participate in the Euro Camp Jeep Croatia 2006, I decided it was a perfect way to say thanks to some of the many people who support this company. I invited our top

car sales associates, press representatives from “AUTO-magazine,” and some lucky military folks to come along for the experience and join in the fun. This story gives a personal viewpoint on going to camp “grown up” style.

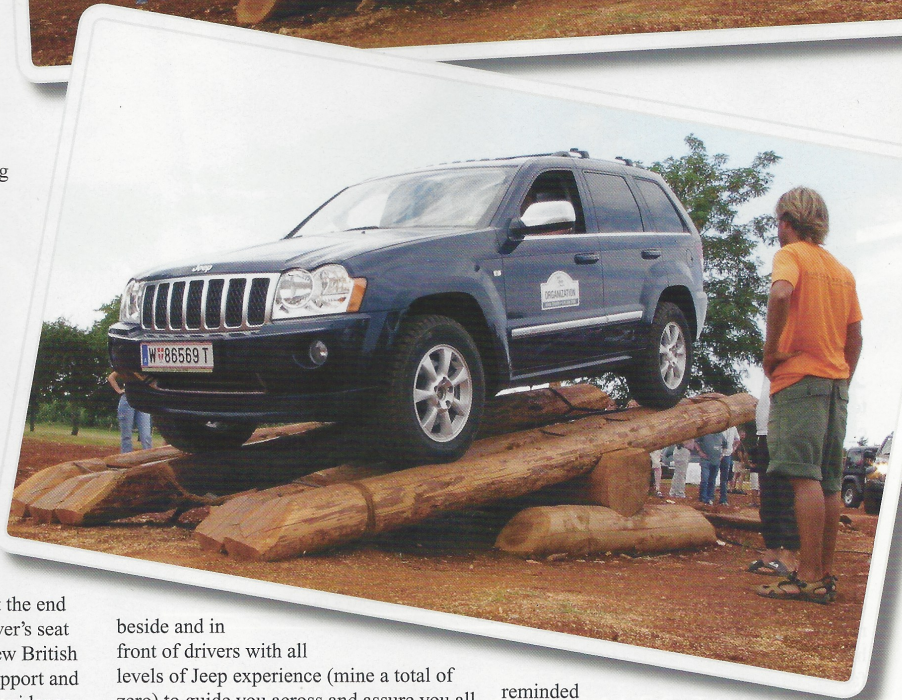
platform. Open-sided tents protected the European introduction of the all-new 2007 Jeep first-ever, four-door Wrangler Unlimited Rubicon edition. But all that was window dressing for the most important part of the scene—Jeep Academy.

“Holy Cherokee, they want us to do that?!” Laid out before us was a dirt track interrupted by about a half dozen obstacles built out of—what did I say this was really about?—trees. Huge logs, connected by metal, created challenges at least one step up from what you might experience driving the autobahns in Germany where I live. Our group of about 30 was gratefully supplied with an assortment of Jeeps from which we were expected to choose a model and then drive them over these medieval looking contraptions.

After being about trees, this challenge was about guts and whether or not you had enough of them. After watching closely and taking lots of photos from all sorts of angles, I knew I had what it took and declared to my friend, “there ain’t nothing here we can’t do!” We got in line.

I first rode as a passenger with three other folks including a confident Swiss woman driver. I was grateful for this preliminary exposure. At the end of the round, I jumped in the driver’s seat of the Jeep Liberty, taking my new British buddy Shawn along for moral support and his demonstrated brand of quiet guidance.

The first obstacle required driving up and over a giant see-saw made of logs (there’s that tree thing again). Two connected logs under the driver’s side and three under the passenger side comprised the entire supporting surface for the tires. An even bigger log running crosswise was the pivotal support for the see-saw. This was definitely not your school yard play thing. Handsome 20-something guys and gals bravely stood



beside and in front of drivers with all levels of Jeep experience (mine a total of zero) to guide you across and assure you all was well.

My young lady expert immediately told me to listen to her, not to Shawn, and up I went, stopping with my Jeep’s wheels just at the apex. She instructed me to very slowly drive forward and the minute I felt the logs tilt forward to press hard on the brakes to stop the Jeep’s downward roll. Up we crawled, tilt we did and, thunk, the Jeep jiggled to a stop, my foot firmly on the brake. It slightly

reminded me of my very first drive in a multi-storied parking garage as a teenager with my mom. My heart was pounding then and it was pounding now. Adrenaline surged through my body. “Good job,” said Shawn. That’s why I invited him along—the need for personal encouragement along the way. Slowly, we inched off the see-saw and headed to the next challenge which required driving up and over a log bridge.



At every obstacle, the guidance was direct and easy, the fear factor raising my attention level and creating excitement at each completed task. Some obstacles were high off the ground, some right in the dirt. One which I found the most threatening required putting the two driver's-side tires up a one-log-wide, four-log-high wall with angled ends, forcing the Jeep into a steep sideways angle. When I rode this one as a right-side passenger, I could have reached out for a handful of dirt if only I had not been listing to the left to keep from falling out the window.

At the end of this course, I was still riding high with the thrill of it all. It was hot and dusty and I hadn't even been to a hotel room yet, but I didn't much care. Already this trip was paying off in soaring confidence over having faced the fear and done it well. I looked forward to the next day's challenges.

After a late-night balcony party (ours) and music from the nearby bar at the Hotel Kanegra (think bungalow resort with lots of

hills, trees, water and ants in the shower), the next day we headed back to Camp Jeep Village to receive instructions and a road book for the eastward convoy into the Kornarija forest. We jumped into the Jeep of our choice—a Jeep Commander Limited and off we went for an hour's drive.

The Kornarija forest is largely unspoiled with towering trees and lush undergrowth. The hot, dry weather caused clouds of dust to rise from the roads as we ventured in. Quad driving, adventure track and Jeep trial were on the agenda for the day, along with a closely guarded secret event of some sort. Marking the entrance to the adventure area was a red Jeep Wrangler suspended above the ground on two wires. I hoped we weren't expected to place our Jeeps into a similar position.

Parking the vehicles, we went on foot into a forest clearing where several people stood in the official Jeep Camp shirts looking up into the tall trees. "What are you guys looking at? Are we supposed to climb trees now?" I joked as I turned to see what was so interesting up high.

"Damn, we are!"

A good way up a tree a man in a safety harness was walking a wire from platform to platform. All indications were that we were supposed to do this, too. Confidence running high, I suited up and then let several people go ahead of me so I could watch every move they made.

I considered the first step the toughest—dead lifting your body up a rope net like Johnny Depp in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, only harder because I didn't get to work out every day for six months to prepare for the task. Some of the men I watched climb struggled every step. Those more fit made



it easier. This part was the biggest physical challenge. Next came the mental thing—walking two wire sections and a log section



from platform to platform a very long way from the ground and then sliding down the last angled wire into a landing net.

The adventurous side of me really wanted to do this. After all, I was the only girl in a group of two dozen sailors to climb to the top of the higher mountain next to Macchu Picchu, Peru. Surely I could do this. But that was in another lifetime, in a place with ancient spirits guiding the way. I once walked inside a pitch-dark, giant fuel tank for a story. I stalked moose in the forest in Sweden at midnight. I rode a camel in Egypt and ate stuffed pigeon. I drove a Jeep up a single log wall. What was a little tree walking?

I talked several times to the expert assisting on the ground, peppering him with questions, and watched younger, stronger people tackle it with varying degrees of difficulty. The expert offered to pull me to the first platform so I didn't have to climb. I took photos and studied every landing, checking my harness and thinking of all the reasons why I should do this crazy thing...and all the reasons I shouldn't. In the end, good sense, fear of broken bones and lack of ad-



equate sleep won out. I didn't mention age and lack of strength as I apologized to the expert, slipped off the harness and stepped out of line. It would be the only disappointment of the trip for me. As I talked to each person completing the challenge, they all uttered the same word.

"Terrifying. Been there, done that, don't need to do it again."

Now it was time for the forest obstacles. Another Jeep Commander awaited us for this mostly natural course. Mary-Michaele

did the first round. The very first obstacle put my heart in my throat as the Jeep headed down a 20-foot, 45-degree incline—the steepest we'd seen and back up again. On the way down all we could see was dirt. At the top, only tree tops. We turned a hard right out of it on pure faith we weren't going to drive off into an abyss.

This sort of thing continued through the forest, giving us at least two thrills from not having all four tires on the ground. Isn't that



roots with nothing but a stone curb on each side of it. It allowed for maybe two spare feet on each side. As I stopped at the head of the bridge, I could see the ancient handicraft of its underpinnings as it curved to the left. The view over the valley was deep and wide. We were very high. There was no way to go back.

“Don’t look down, don’t open your door, don’t get out, don’t take pictures,” the guide had told us ahead of time. “Just watch the Jeep in front of you, wait until they are on the other side and then go slowly.”

I did just that. With everything in my body on alert, we made it across and cheered our performance on the other side. This one three-minute portion of the weekend would be talked about many times over.



the distinct advantage of being in the lead and not getting covered in dirt. Not a bad deal. No one was allowed to ride hell-bent-for-leather through the trails, but the guide certainly did kick it up several times and bounced us around enough to provide a fair number of thrills.

After a nice lunch at a traditional Istrian restaurant (pasta with my first-ever truffles) we began the last leg of our journey—returning to Jeep Camp via 68 kilometers mostly off road—some of which I’m sure Croatia forgot they have! Through clouds of thick dust we drove over holes and rocks, through skinny roads probably used mostly by tractors, in the forest, in the fields, up, around and under and over. The under was an ancient stone viaduct preceding the over by just a couple of minutes. We were forewarned about the over.

It was a fairly short, but 100-foot high, one-lane bridge covered in rocks and tree

Finally returning to Hotel

Kanegra that evening around

7 p.m., we had scant time to get ready to watch the final game of the soccer World Cup 2006. I’m not a soccer fan, but I have to admit I was happy to be part of this scene. There we were at the Coco Bar on our hotel grounds. Big screen under the sky, surrounded by a dozen different nationalities from our group and the just-right number of hotel guests. We sat in Croatia and looked across the water at Slovenia. Children played quietly in snow-like foam from a machine at the edge of the patio. They cavorted in bathing suits or birthday suits, building giant hairdos out of the bubbles and carrying them to smear on their nearby parents.

Our young Italian bus driver was beside himself with anxiety and joy as he watched his country defeat France. The Italian-favoring crowd went crazy. Adults jumped into the foam, beer was bought, music blared and the party kicked into high gear.

It was the perfect end to an extraordinary adventure. Thanks, Jeep. It was awesome.

unnatural? At each obstacle, the guides talked us through. Again, I benefited from riding shotgun the first time through and then taking the wheel myself.

We now switched from big Jeeps to 4-wheel quads. If you are reading this magazine you probably know that translates to noisy, little all terrain vehicles. After a near futile attempt to find a crash helmet that fit, I ended up riding shotgun on the French guide’s quad equipped with a very comfortable back seat. A bit of a wimpy way to go, but it had