

4^{OUR} CORNER ADVENT





STRUCTURE

[cover story]

HUMMER DRIVING ACADEMY REUNION

HUMMER Adventures writer Leslie Schneider and photographer John Martin joined HUMMER owners at the HUMMER Driving Academy Reunion 4Corners Adventure last September. Graduates attending the fifth reunion event were treated to an experience like nothing else at three of the world's most spectacular off-roading venues — Durango, Colo., Telluride, Colo., and Moab, Utah. Here is Schneider's report.



THE TRIP OF A LIFETIME

Days before Jim and Lynn Naftel of Escondido, Calif., are set to attend the 4Corners Adventure, recent Academy graduate Jim has second thoughts and asks Lynn, "What are we getting ourselves into?"

Like the HUMMER Driving Academy, HUMMER owners find themselves heading to the 4Corners Adventure with a variety of emotions. Those of us who haven't been to a reunion before are wondering what to expect. Past reunion participants are more confident of the action-packed adventure awaiting. Fortunately, we'll be guided by Academy staff and there's an extremely high repeat rate for the reunions.

All drivers and even some passengers are Academy graduates. At some point since the first H1 Academy debuted in 1998, we've all traveled to South Bend, Ind., to learn how to make full use of the most capable vehicles on the planet.

Students at the Academy learn how to scale impossibly high vertical walls, ford swamps, and finesse through outrageous side slopes and inclines. In short, we take our Academy-owned vehicles far beyond our boundaries, under the watchful care of friendly,

calm instructors. The instructors are as capable as the trucks that HUMMER builds. And when it's over, Academy graduates are, too.

The Academy also teaches safe recovery techniques, trip preparation and field repairs. In less than a week, graduates are transformed from timid to triumphant, with literally years of experience under their belts.

So how do you top that? We're about to find out ...

4SEASONS OF SPLENDOR

The 4Corners Adventure marks the first time the reunion has visited the only place in the U.S. where four states (Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona and Utah) intersect at one point. We'll soon discover that the Four Corners area is the country's biggest, best playground when you're driving a HUMMER.

We've come from all over the United States — California, Idaho, Tennessee, New Jersey and more. We own H1s or H2s or both. Some have even ordered newly launched H3s. Most of us have flown in, with AM General transporting our trucks. Others have driven or transported their own HUMMERs.



Left to right: Hitting the trails in New Mexico; Carol Wilson, Ann Dunlap and Dolores Zimmerman enjoy a break; an H2 owner listens to a spotter at Choquecherry Canyon; a line of HUMMERs heads through Colorado's San Juan Mountains; an H1 emerges from a rock tunnel. Lower photo: Tom Collins, Tim Bonadies and Ron Bomhoff

DRIVING ACADEMY LESSON 1

AN EXCEPTIONALLY CAPABLE TRUCK DESERVES AN EXCEPTIONALLY CAPABLE DRIVER.

We've arrived at the Durango Doubletree Hotel on Monday, and this evening's welcome banquet proves the perfect setting for alumni to get re-acquainted and meet new friends. The low-key, hospitable Academy staff makes it look easy, but behind the scenes, they've been working long hours to ensure our five days together are nothing short of amazing.

Academy Director Tim Bonadies is the first to voice what many of us will soon echo: "This is the highlight of my year." It's what HUMMER is all about — meeting up with old friends and making new ones, getting out into the wilderness where few dare to venture, reminding ourselves of exactly how capable our trucks (and we) really are.

After dinner, we get acquainted with everyone at the reunion, thanks to a novel slideshow that Bonadies narrates, featuring photos of owners from past reunions or the Academy as well as Academy instructors who will lead us this trip. We part the evening's activities with a duffel bag full of HUMMER goodies (jackets, umbrellas, portable lawn chairs, etc.) and no small amount of excited anticipation.

LAND OF ENCHANTMENT

Tuesday morning in Durango we pick up our box lunches from the concierge and line up all 28 HUMMERs in the hotel parking lot. A twenty-something cyclist rides by, holding up his cell phone to photograph our entourage in what will become a familiar scene.

Our ride through Southwest Colorado's San Juan Mountains to the pale yellow plains of Farmington, N.M., is beautiful and more meaningful, thanks to our Colorado guide, Tom Collins, who regales us with the area's colorful history over our CB radios. We cross the miles entertained by stories of Spanish explorers, miners and prospectors, native populations, railroad barons and brawling cowboys.

After an outdoor picnic lunch in the New Mexico high desert, we head over winding dirt hills and gradually work our way into our destination: Choquecherry Canyon, filled with twenty or so steep slickrock paths raking across the terrain

in haphazard angles. One gaze at the daunting trails and our anticipation mixes with anxiety.

Collins assures us that the slickrock was only slick to the pioneer's wooden wagon wheels that had metal strips. Today, it grips our rubber boot soles and tires as trucks inch their way down one steep path and up along another, with drivers concentrating and passengers snapping photos of our surreal, slow-motion ballet. "This is way too much fun," says Kathy Graber of Austin, Texas, while another quips, "What did you do today? We stood on our heads in our HUMMER."

DRIVING ACADEMY LESSON 2

SLOWER IS BETTER.

Like all great off-roading, it's as much fun to climb out and watch drivers maneuver slowly up and over the large, smooth rocks. At one point, Academy





“We’d be saying, we can’t do that in our H2. But then we’d see the H2 in front of us do it, so we’d do it, too!”

— Jim & Lynn Naftel’s Journal

Product Instructor Steve Spengler coaches a driver by saying, “You’re going to slide just a little on your underbody, but that’s okay ... Nice job!”

After several hours of warm-up “wheeling,” we turn back toward our Durango hotel, where small groups head off to tour the quaint, old mining town and use special reunion gift cards for dinner at one of the many restaurants in town.

EXCUSE ME WHILE I KISS THE SKY

Wednesday morning, we bid goodbye to Durango and head north toward Silverton, Colo., for a day of high mountain driving. Snaking through green valleys, we’re surprised to discover the aspen already turning gold. We climb narrow, rough roads, headed toward Molas and Hurricane Passes,

situated between 12,000 and 13,000 feet, well above the tree line. As noon approaches, we hit the mother lode: It begins to snow, a 180-degree turn from yesterday’s sunny, 85-degree desert. Our heavy, new HUMMER jackets come in handy and we wonder if Mother Nature produced the snow just for us.

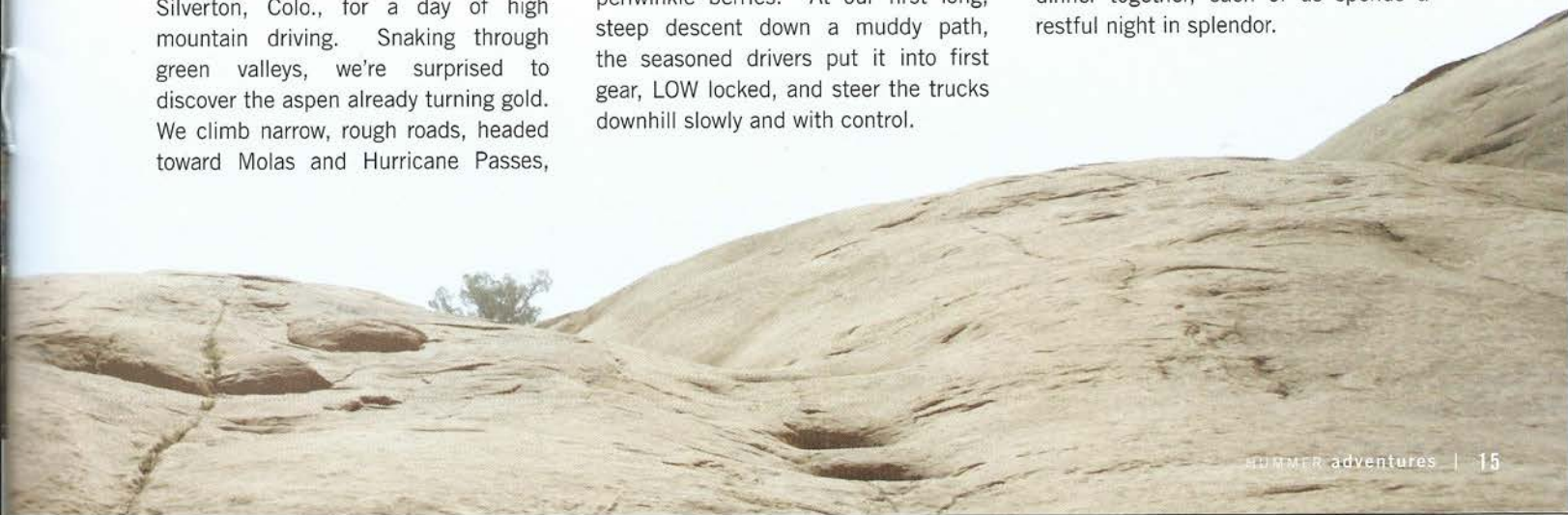
Mesmerized by the magical, formidable beauty, we pass a sign that states, “Rough and dangerous road ahead. Travel not recommended.” Everyone laughs over our CB radios. As Academy graduates, we’ve learned how to safely do what most people wouldn’t believe they could do, even in a HUMMER.

The terrain roughens as we leave smooth gravel roads behind at Poughkeepsie Gulch, which is a trail through a deep ravine. It’s time to air down the tires so they grip the snow-covered rocks better. The instructors are back out, spotting for us as the snow begins to stick to the piñon pines and juniper bushes with periwinkle berries. At our first long, steep descent down a muddy path, the seasoned drivers put it into first gear, LOW locked, and steer the trucks downhill slowly and with control.

As she handles the trail calmly in her H2, Deb Nachtrab of Petoskey, Mich., is grateful for all the Academy has taught her. “Nobody really knows what these trucks can do until they go to the Academy,” she says. Her husband Joe adds, “I have a new appreciation for all the H2s can do.”

In the afternoon, we snake our way through more narrow paths cut into barren mountains. Since the gravel trails look out over thousand-foot drops through mineral tailings or gravel, we’re grateful for the stability our trucks’ wide stances offer. At Imogene Pass, we take a driving break to gaze out over a stunning mountain view. At 13,114 feet, the freezing wind cuts to the bone, but the snow has stopped.

As twilight descends, we head for Telluride, which sits at 9,000 feet. Another thousand feet up we find our new hotel for the next two days: The Peaks and Golden Door Spa. After dinner together, each of us spends a restful night in splendor.





Vehicle photos: HUMMERs find sure footing along Colorado's mountain passes; Left to right on following page: Academy graduates and staff gather for a photo at the top of the Moab Rim; trucks climb the Moab Rim; trucks deftly negotiate Black Bear Pass.

A TRUCK WITH A VIEW

Thursday, we awake to a hard frost covering Telluride's grass, and most of us head back toward Silverton for more off-roading action among Colorado's San Juan Mountains. Others in our group have chosen to be pampered at the resort's luxurious Golden Door Spa, one of Conde Nast Traveler's Top 25 Finest Spas in the world.

Past Silverton, we climb to 11,000 feet, where we discover the ghost town of Animas Forks. We stop to poke around the wooden buildings built more than a century ago to house mining families and long-since abandoned. We set back out along rough gravel roads through the forbidding but beautiful landscape with shelves of craggy, moss-covered rock and scrubby, harvest-colored flowers. This awe-inspiring terrain reminds James Xu, a native of China who now lives in Richmond, Va., of Tibet.

While our friends back at the spa are having champagne with lunch, we return to Poughkeepsie Gulch from the other

direction, climbing instead of descending the steep trail. Today, there's no snow, and we spend a sunny, warm afternoon devouring lunch above a deep turquoise lake, nestled into an alpine bowl. Tom Collins tells us its name is Lake Como, but admits that homesick Italians named just about every lake around here by the same name.

"TO HELL YOU RIDE"

After lunch, it's time to get down to business. Our goal is to cross Black Bear Pass, the narrowest trail anyone in the group has ever negotiated. At an early point, the HUMMER in front of each vehicle looks as if it's heading into oblivion as we approach the narrow shelf slashed into the side of a mountain 2,500 feet above Telluride.

Partway down the legendary one-way trail, 5- and 6-point hairpin curves challenge drivers to inch their way forward over what appears to be the side of the mountain. They've been trained to trust their instructors, however; so they do it despite the high pucker

factor. Now even the instructors and guides have pulled out their cameras and are snapping away.

DRIVING ACADEMY LESSON 3
WHEN YOU CAN'T SEE YOUR PATH,
TRUST YOUR SPOTTER.

This afternoon, we learn how Telluride earned its name ... to hell you ride. Passengers agree that our job is the toughest, since drivers are channeling all their energy into hugging the mountain. Powerless, we're left to gaze out the window, which now resembles the view of an airborne plane's window more than a truck's. As we descend further, we're rewarded with a breathtaking view of Bridal Veil Falls, a magnificent waterfall that plunges down the mountain right next to us.

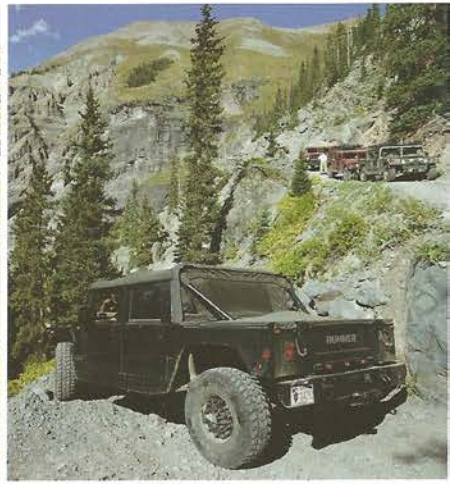
Successfully negotiating Black Bear gives the group a burst of exuberant confidence. "I can't believe we're doing this!" exclaims Chuck Zimmerman of Tucson, Ariz. "HUMMERs are engineering marvels!"

We finally return to The Peaks Resort above Telluride and many of us take a gondola ride down to the village for dinner. After wrestling "the bear" into

**"At Imogene Pass, it felt like we were at the top of the world.
This is what owning a HUMMER is all about."**

— Jim & Lynn Naftel's Journal





"Looking over the precipice, half of me wanted to turn back, yet the other half wanted to conquer the challenge."

— Jim & Lynn Naftel's Journal

submission, there's only one way to describe descending 1,000 feet in a gondola: quaint.

ACING GRADUATE SCHOOL

On Friday, we leave Colorado behind as we head west toward Utah and its off-roading paradise, Moab. Soon, the San Juan Mountains give way to plains of desert rock and prairie, interrupted by occasional buttes and small towns, where people stop and stare at the sight of our HUMMER entourage. Kids wave and cheer. "It's a bit of a scene," Taine Pechet of Radnor, Pa., deadpans. Again, the miles melt away, thanks to local history, now offered by desert guide Ron Bomhoff.

After an outdoor picnic at a refreshingly green park that arises from Southeast Utah's smooth, bare slabs of slickrock, we approach the infamous Moab Rim. The sun bakes the golden, porous rock and it's a challenge to stay hydrated in the searing heat.

The Moab Rim is one mile up the hard way. A technically intense trail, drivers climb over steep shelves of reddish-gold sandstone where lizards scurry into shaded shelter. Academy staff and

passengers coach and coax drivers up and over the impossibly steep inclines. "To the right," one spotter says. "Now straighten it out. Keep coming. You're halfway there..."



DRIVING ACADEMY LESSON 4
USE CORRECT TECHNIQUES TO
AVOID DAMAGE.

It's an extreme trail and yet we are prepared like never before. Skillfully, drivers finesse their way up and over rock formations, laying the rubber down gently. Just when it seems that someone will scrape an underbody shield, the trucks' incredibly high clearance kicks in. Drivers and trucks look cooler than they'll ever know.

At the top, we're rewarded by a breathtaking view of the Colorado River. Nothing prepares us for the unique magnificence, easily rivaling the Grand Canyon's splendor. "It's awesome, isn't it?" asks Academy Instructor Chris Deak. "That's why we saved it for last."

After posing for a quick group photo, we head back down that same mile. While technically not as difficult, heading down proves to be the ultimate head-game. Climbing, drivers tackled one shelf at a time, leaving each behind. Descending, all 87 or so shelves stand before us, the trail appears much steeper and it seems as if we could easily tumble forward, right into the river snaking below us.

Arriving at the bottom intact, we head through steep, red canyon walls the sunset paints even redder, and pull into our final resort, Moab's Sorrel River Ranch, an oasis surrounding us in western-style luxury. The staff of the four-diamond resort warmly greets us with an outdoor barbecue on the back porch overlooking the river.

It's pitch dark by 9 p.m. but the HUMMERs parked out in the horse corral have a ghostly glow cast from portable lights set up next to the service trailer. There, AM General's John Ward and Paul Hyde are busy working on several trucks. By now, most of the owners know that the technicians have been working into the night, every night, to ensure trucks are in top shape for the next day's drive.

KNOCKIN' ON HEAVEN'S DOOR

Saturday morning we awake in Moab with anticipation. Today, we'll master Hell's Revenge Trail, our "final examination" on this reunion trip, which has begun





Group photo of AM General and HUMMER Driving Academy staff from left to right: Chris Deak, Ron Bomhoff, Trevor Stone, John Ward, Tim Bonadies, Paul Hyde and Steve Spengler (kneeling); vehicle photo: HUMMERs conquer Hell's Revenge.

to resemble graduate school. We begin with a leisurely cruise over Castle Valley Road to get there.

Heading into Hell's Revenge, the porous rock grips our tires on our first nearly vertical incline. Like the old song says, "You got to go through hell before you get to heaven." Still, these "heavenly" trails are not for the faint of heart ... or the untrained. "This is incredible here but I wouldn't ever consider doing this without the Academy," says Terren Dunlap of Scottsdale, Ariz.

As Dunlap inches his truck past a sheer drop-off, he gasps, gripping the wheel. And keeps going. At a 20-foot hole they call the "belly button," Dunlap slowly eases his H2's tires down into it, then clambers up to the top on the other side. He laughs, "This is UNBELIEVABLE."

Today, our expansive boundaries are obliterated. We trust our instructors, our trucks and our skills. Bring it on.



DON'T GO, NEVER KNOW

Once again, we're overlooking the Colorado River as we lunch in the sun on top of a rock formation. Ann Dunlap says she's grateful she and Terren had the nerve to attend the Academy and then the reunion, adding that they know many people who are unwilling to take chances. "It's sad," Ann muses. "They miss a lot."

One of the best things about off-roading with an experienced group is that watching someone in front of you conquer an obstacle provides reassurance and challenge. There is no one this holds truer for this afternoon than California's Jim Naftel. Our "final exam" at Hell's Revenge takes place at Tip-Over Challenge, a steep rock wall with another rock wall above it on the left.

With only about half of our trucks successfully negotiating the obstacle, Naftel and his H2 fail to negotiate the wall on his first try. Humbled, he backs up, turns around and drives to where Tim Bonadies is standing. "Do you want to try it again?" Bonadies asks. "I don't know. Do you think I can make it?" Naftel replies. "Dolores did it," Bonadies answers.

H2 driver Dolores Zimmerman has successfully climbed the wall, and that knowledge is all the encouragement Naftel needs. Bonadies calls out advice as Naftel steadily throttles and claws his way to the top with a mixture of muscle, nerve and finesse. This time he makes it. Triumphant, he shakes his fist out the window at the top with a wide grin. The crowd goes wild.

Everyone agrees that this is the best day ever and we'll return to Moab some day. The late-afternoon drive back to the ranch is quiet. We're geeked and tired at the same time. We've traversed legendary trails with the best trucks, drivers and instructors. We've stayed in premier resorts and had exceptional food and company. We're humbly grateful for this opportunity of a lifetime.

The Academy opens a door into a whole new world. Not only do we know how far we and our trucks can go, but we've met extraordinary individuals who have become lifelong friends.

At the farewell banquet, hundreds of photos the photographer's shot all week flash on a screen. Instead of eating or chatting, owners watch photo after photo, cheering, teasing and laughing. It's been a great ride. ■■



"Each day was more challenging and exhilarating, making the day before feel like a piece of cake."

— Jim & Lynn Naftel's Journal