

Times Colonist

(Victoria, British Columbia)

Friday, September 17, 2004

Mud, sweat and tears: Annual Jeep Jamboree is a family affair

BYLINE: Charles Gal, For CanWest News Service

SECTION: DRIVING; Pg. D3

LENGTH: 927 words

DATELINE: ROCKY MOUNTAIN HOUSE, Alta.

ROCKY MOUNTAIN HOUSE, Alta. -- Mud flew in all directions as Trevor Aslin worked his Jeep out of a deep mudhole on an old logging trail lined with tall, slender spruce trees. His wife -- sitting next to him -- and two children in the back seat all cheered him on. For Trevor Aslin, 42, wife Petra, 38, and their two children, Zachary, 9, and Hailey, 6, riding together in their modified 2003 blue Jeep Rubicon through mud holes and up steep, slippery and deeply rutted hillsides has become one of their normal family vacations. "The kids, they love it as much as the adults," said Aslin. "They said they liked playing in the mud with their parents." This is the third year the Aslins, residents of Red Deer, Alta., have taken part as a family in the DaimlerChrysler-sponsored Jeep Jamboree. The off-roading event in August takes Jeeps and their drivers over challenging terrain in re-forested areas on the hills southwest of Rocky Mountain House. Most of the trails used during the event were created by the logging and oilfield industries. Ron Baker, president of Jeep Jamboree Canada, explained that DaimlerChrysler identified a need to align the Jeep brand with a family event. "For years we've been perceived as the beer and hotdog crowd," said Baker. "We've worked very hard for seven years to make this a family event, to encourage the guys to bring their ladies and their families" as well as to "promote ecology, safe off-roading and Tread Lightly." To make the Jeep Jamboree event a safe one, but also one that is attractive to entire families, no alcohol is permitted on the trails. Anyone who has liquor on the trail is asked to leave immediately. To further attract families to the event, Jeep Jamboree has been offering a \$500 family package, which gives entrance to two adults and three children (a maximum number coinciding with the number of available seatbelts within a Jeep). At the base camp, where everyone gathers for breakfast in the mornings and for supper after driving the trails all day, there is a colourful playground for the children. Trail guides also distribute colouring books and small toys to children to help keep them entertained. Trevor Bushaw, 29, with wife Patty Kramm, 21, and children Natasha, 16 months, and Kyle, 6, were new to the Jeep

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Jamboree experience but had a great time, they said. Driving a blue 1996 Grand Cherokee Limited with a four-inch lift kit and homemade bumpers and skid plates, the family from Westlock, Alta., rode along as dad tackled the trails with 31-inch tires in a mostly stock-fitted vehicle. "My oldest son enjoyed it a lot, especially going through the mud and whatnot," said Kramm. "It was worth the money and worth going." The family was among those who pitched a tent in the nearby campground for two nights and didn't mind the rain. "We wanted it to rain some more to make the trails more interesting," Kramm said. Jeep Jamborees began in 1997, said John Cranfield, general manager of Jeep Jamboree Canada. What started out as two off-roading events in its first year has grown to seven Jamborees held each year in different regions of the country. The Alberta events in August wrapped up the Jeep Jamboree season which included earlier dates in Nova Scotia, Quebec, Ontario and British Columbia. Jeep Jamboree event is limited to Jeep owners because it's a type of "customer appreciation" event sponsored by DaimlerChrysler, the maker of Jeep vehicles. "A Jamboree is about people getting together, sharing a like interest and having a pile of fun. And that's what we do here," said Cranfield. After an early breakfast and morning drivers' meeting, participants take to one of seven trails of varying intensity and difficulty that are rated from 2 to 10. "A six will probably not damage your stock Jeep, but a 10 will mean you probably won't be taking your stock Jeep home," Cranfield added with a smile. Kevin Sakaluk, 32, a trail guide during the Jamboree, as well as director of the Northern Alberta Four Wheel Drive Association, said everyone involved with Jeep Jamboree is very concerned about protecting the environment. "Our philosophy is to leave the trails in as good or better condition than how we found them," he said. Jeep Jamboree follows the principles and guiding philosophy of Tread Lightly, Sakaluk explained, and that staying clear of meadows and wetlands by sticking only to the trails is part of the philosophy. According to its Web site, Tread Lightly brings together and unifies a broad spectrum of stakeholders including agencies, industry, media, conservation and enthusiast groups by educating all concerned about the ethical balance between humans and nature. The lunches that everyone takes onto the trail during the Jamboree are packaged into plastic and the carrying bags serve also as garbage bags, preventing any littering on the trails. Cigarettes must be extinguished inside vehicles and butts must not be left behind. Sakaluk said that the trails the Rocky Mountain House Jamboree uses are repaired and various areas are re-seeded by members of the Eco Four Wheeling Society and Northern Alberta Four Wheel Drive Association. Don Rilling, a trapper and resident of Nordegg, Alta., knows very well what kind of damage off-road vehicles and their drivers can inflict on land; he has seen it firsthand and often. An avid quad user himself, Rilling believes that responsible use of trails and respect of forested Crown lands is just basic ethics and good for everyone. "People have to respect this country and use it wisely, follow the rules of the bush, and everyone will be happy," he said.

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