

Motoring

Edited by Nat Barnes
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Jeep loves rock and roll

By Nat Barnes

WE SEE the rock well before we hit it. Inching our Jeep Wrangler along the trail, with a guide ahead of us offering directions, there are huge boulders. Our guide motions us forward, giving us instructions to thread our way through this minefield. And then, just when we think we've escaped, one of the tyres side-slips on the dusty rock, we lurch sideways and there is an unmistakable, nauseating sound. We've been hearing it all day but that doesn't make it easier as the noise of a rock hitting the underside of the Jeep, then scraping along it, makes you wince involuntarily.

It feels and sounds like nothing short of someone taking a giant can opener to the bottom of the Jeep - the automotive equivalent of fingernails down a blackboard. "Don't worry, it's just the skid-plate, the car's fine," the instructor reassures us. Fine? As the scraping and the wrangler's tyres scabble and the car continues on its way we could



TRAILBLAZERS: New Jeep Wrangler makes light work of Rubicon terrain

think of other words to describe what just happened and not one would be "fine". In any other circumstance you'd be pulling over and on your hands and knees to check out the car's underside. This, however, is no ordinary circumstance. This is the Rubicon Trail in California, one of the toughest off-road courses in the world and the place where Jeep comes to test its new cars, including this new Wrangler.

This is no ordinary car either. It's no mistake that Jeep puts the Rubicon badge on its flagship Wrangler. Alongside the Trail Rated logo on the front wing, these are matters Jeep takes seriously. It's not hard to see why either. Aside perhaps from Land Rover, no other manufacturer has its off-roading ability underpinning its image and reputation to quite the extent that Jeep does. Just as a motorway service station is a natural habitat for a Ford Mondeo so this Wrangler belongs here on the Rubicon Trail.

All Wranglers are Trail Rated and Jeep uses it as a recognised standard for proven off-road ability. And, as its spokespeople proudly claim, just how many other

so-called new off-roaders could you drive straight out of a showroom and down this trail?

It only takes the first of those scrapes early on in our drive to prove the answer is none. Then again, aside from borrowing its name, Jeep is no stranger to the Rubicon Trail. Drivers have been taking their Jeeps on the trail since 1953 but the 22-mile route has been in use as an original stagecoach route from the 1890s, seeing its first motorised transport in 1908.

Around 12 miles of those are the 4x4 trail and today that's what separates the proverbial off-roading men from the boys in transport terms.

As well as Jeeps in all shapes and sizes the trail is regularly used by quad bikes and motorbikes and there's no doubt it's not for the faint-hearted. In an automotive world where crossovers and more lifestyle 4x4s are now prolific, the Rubicon Trail is a fully-charged defibrillator shock to your senses. Within a mile of starting the trail there is terrain that would have 99.9 per cent of even serious off-roaders crying and running for their mothers. And it only gets



Check out our video of the Jeep Wrangler on the road at express.co.uk/motoring

- LOGBOOK LOWDOWN**
- Model: Jeep Wrangler
 - On sale: November
 - Price range: from £43,995
 - Engine range: Turbo-petrol - 2.0-litre; Turbo-diesel - 2.2-litre
 - Power: 0 to 60mph in 8.0 seconds, 111mph top speed (2.0)
 - Average fuel economy: 38.1mpg (2.2TD)
 - CO₂ emissions range: est 195-230g/km
 - Rivals: Mercedes G-Class, a mountain goat, Suzuki Jimny
 - Rating: ★★★★★★



AFTER YOU: Our guide leads us through the trail's tricky terrain

worse from there. That we're tackling the trail in the new Jeep Wrangler probably isn't much of a surprise.

But that we're tackling it in one that's completely standard with a 2.0-litre petrol engine probably is. As diesel sales continue to fall, Jeep has introduced this new 2700hp 2.0-litre turbo-petrol engine alongside the existing 2.2-litre turbo-diesel.

Not so long ago that would have seemed folly but when this petrol-engined model arrives in showrooms at the start of next year (the diesel launches this autumn) it will account for two thirds of all new Wranglers leaving showrooms.

driver's mirror. The scenario gets repeated so many times during the course of our day that it almost becomes comical.

We drive along the trail, slowing up as we get to a tough section. However the trail has lived up to its reputation as one of the toughest off-road courses in the world. We're mentally and physically exhausted and in need of a cold beer, hot shower and comfortable bed as well as an opportunity to rid ourselves of the inch-thick dust that coats us and the car.

As we climb out of the Wrangler, we reflect on the most difficult and challenging - but probably most enjoyable - two days we've ever spent behind the wheel of a car. Driving the Rubicon Trail has been brutal and we've been left battered and broken. It might be the toughest off-road course in the world but this Jeep is tougher still. Our Wrangler looks ready to do it all again but, as for us, we'll need a little rest first.

BUT can such a small engine cope with the challenges and boulder-littered reality of the Rubicon, especially when matched to an eight-speed automatic gearbox? Throughout a day of crawling at slower-than-walking pace we get our answer time and time again.

In fact, as we follow our lead guide in another Wrangler along his carefully chosen line through the sharp-edged rocks, it soon becomes clear where the weakest link of the Wrangler's package lies: it's staring back at me every time I look in the

We follow the instructions given by the guide however, engaging low range on the gearbox to enable the Wrangler to creep ahead at a snail's pace. The BF Goodrich off-road tyres slip on the dusty rocks before finding some purchase and then steadily, inexorably push the Jeep over the obstacle ahead for it to continue on. There's barely time to register its achievements though, as yet another challenge lies past the next tree.

And this is how we progress down the trail, one obstacle after another, scraping the Wrangler's underside and with the Jeep shrugging off every upright rock and every tough section without even breaking into a sweat. By the end of the two days,

we've finally finished the Rubicon Trail. On paper, our journey looks underwhelming - just over 15 miles over the course of two days.

However the trail has lived up to its reputation as one of the toughest off-road courses in the world. We're mentally and physically exhausted and in need of a cold beer, hot shower and comfortable bed as well as an opportunity to rid ourselves of the inch-thick dust that coats us and the car.

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HOW TO TACKLE THE TRAIL YOURSELF

AS OUTLINED above, the Rubicon Trail is one of the toughest off-road routes in the world but the great news is that you can tackle it yourself.

No, not by taking your rented family saloon off-road while on holiday in California, but via the numerous professional tour companies that are available.

These companies will do everything from providing a Jeep for you to tackle the trail together with expert instruction, to including as many or as few creature comforts as you want.

The trail itself is open to all vehicles for most of the year and can even be tackled on motorbikes, quad bikes or on foot.

With driving tours, however, prices start from £300 if you want



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