

# MOVING MOUNTAINS

Four Jeepers. Four countries. Four Jeep® models. Matt Colley, editor of 7 magazine, took a road trip from Turin into the Alps, stopping for some off-road action en route...

Photos: Alessandro Bianchi



**THOMAS ARNOLD**  
Country: Germany  
Model: Wrangler

Thomas works as a software developer, but his real passion is for mountaineering – he has conquered some of the world's highest and most treacherous peaks. Thomas usually drives a Wrangler JK Unlimited.



**JULIEN BOUTIN**  
Country: Switzerland  
Model: Renegade

Julien is a technician at a Jeep® garage in Nyon, Switzerland. He has competed in off-road racing and owns a Cherokee XJ.

**ENRICO ALOI**  
Country: Italy  
Model: Cherokee

Enrico works as a salesman in industrial supplies, and his daily drive is a 2001 Grand Cherokee WJ v8. He was an off-road instructor for the Italian off-road federation for 10 years.



**NEAL GASCOINE**  
Country: UK  
Model: Grand Cherokee

Neal works as an auditor in the energy industry. He also drives a Wrangler JKU and is an active member of the Jeep Owners Club UK. He recently led his first off-road experience on Salisbury Plain.



**It's a chilly** Wednesday night in late January. Inside the lobby of the hotel NH Torino Lingotto, four Jeep® enthusiasts, from four different countries and with four different first languages, have just arrived for an unforgettable two days of on- and off-road excitement. They'll each be test-driving a different model from the 2015 Jeep model range around northern Italy's beautiful and diverse landscape.

Mother Nature offers the intrepid adventurers a frosty reception, but inside the hotel the welcome is warm, as our protagonists battle the language barrier to break any lingering ice. Within half an hour, fragments of English, French, Italian and German come together to ensure that the common language of Jeep is being spoken fluently by all. "Jeep is a... how you say... *maladía. Maladie?*" offers Enrico. "*Maladie!*" Julien recognises the word and laughs, before Thomas remembers the English word and turns to Neal: "Jeep... it's an illness." Cue much laughter all round. No spoilers here, but this is the way the trip progresses; everybody mucks in together, whether on-road, off-road or out of the vehicles, to ensure that understanding and togetherness prevails throughout.

After an excellent meal in the hotel restaurant, the smartphones come out as our Jeepers are keen to show their vehicles to one another, and the table is abuzz with talk of models, modifications, trails and amusing anecdotes. Well fed and watered, the group retires to bed, ready to recharge the batteries for a long day ahead.

Thursday morning brings an early breakfast at 7am, followed by a quick treat before we head off to collect the vehicles. The hotel is



part of a giant former factory owned by the Fiat Automobile Group, and the roof of the complex holds a unique surprise. A banked oval racetrack, once used for testing and showpiece automobile races, stands proudly atop the building. The sense of history here is palpable; with a little imagination you can almost feel the ghosts of old bullet-shaped race cars jostling for position around you.

After this brief diversion, it's off to the Jeep press office. Our photographer Alessandro proves a useful translation tool, particularly with my pretty non-existent grasp of Italian, and Luna Bondesan from the Jeep Owners Group greets us with characteristic enthusiasm. After signing the requisite forms, Luna spurs us into action. "Okay guys, *andiamo!* Let's go!"

### Out of the city

The motorcade leaves the press office in bright sunlight, but these four super-strong vehicles are itching to leave behind their shiny, mirrored exteriors and find some tough terrain to tackle. We glide through the suburbs of Turin, with only the occasional red light stopping our serene progress.

Once we've made it into the countryside, we stop outside a butcher's shop in the middle of nowhere; Alessandro has spotted some prime photographic real estate where he can capture the vehicles in motion. As the drivers take it in turns to traverse this largely deserted stretch of road, an elderly couple potter around the remaining Jeep vehicles with something between trepidation and fascination, as though these state-of-the-art

off-roaders have arrived from another planet, rather than from the 'motor city' a few miles to the south.

We meander further into the countryside; the topography becomes more undulating and the roads more serpentine. This is promising. Just when it seems as if we're all set to take to the hills, the lead vehicle pulls over in a small hillside village; time for lunch. The general consensus is that the drivers hadn't realised they were hungry until sustenance was mentioned; however, once torn away from the steering wheel, stomachs are rumbling and appetites are rediscovered. After a plentiful meal at Trattoria la Piola, just outside the village of Rocca Canavese, we're ready to go and find some trails!

### Moving on up

The roads soon become even narrower and more winding. Eventually the tarmac gives way to dirt tracks, and the hairpins and overhangs take on a new dimension. It's nothing too taxing for our 'fab four', though – the drivers and vehicles navigate the mud and stony ground with ease. There's a little skidding from side to side in particularly sticky mud, but the four-wheel drive quickly allows us to gain traction and power through.

Stony ground soon gives way to terrain that can only be described as rocky – not quite Rubicon Trail rocky, but certainly obstacles too large to be called stones. Our drivers all display their excellent technique, making it up and over the impediments at the first time of asking. The key to off-road driving, Neal confirms, is "slow enough to maintain control, but fast enough to maintain momentum".

As if we were methodically working our way through the Selec Terrain system (now found on all models except the Wrangler), the inclusion of snow and ice adds another layer of intrigue to our foray into the hills. It's nothing compared to the conditions we will experience in Courmayeur, but more of that later...

Finally we reach the summit, and the pretty hilltop chapel of Madonna della Neve. The snow is as substantial here as the scenery is stunning, making an excellent location for some photos. Thomas and Julien take turns to reverse the Wrangler and the Renegade as close to the precipice as they dare, highlighting the go-anywhere versatility of Jeep vehicles to an excitable Alessandro, whose shutter works overtime as he captures the spectacle.

### Into the Alps

Coming back down the trail presents no problems, and before long we're headed for the autostrada. Through the tollgate... take a ticket... and let's open up the throttle!

Although the Wrangler seems a little miserable at the concept of eating up the kilometres on a long, straight highway, it's still a capable vehicle on-road. The Cherokee and Grand Cherokee are, of course, perfectly built for long-distance luxury, and the Renegade, although more akin to a 'baby Wrangler' in its design cues, borrows heavily from the Cherokee and Grand Cherokee in terms of comfort; it's surprisingly spacious for a compact SUV.

The train of vehicles continues to cruise effortlessly towards the looming mountains; as dusk descends, we reach the foothills of the Alps. As we leave the first road tunnel, a few snowflakes flutter down to greet us. As we exit the second, the flutter becomes a flurry. By the sixth, it's pitch black outside and we're in the midst of a blizzard; visibility is reduced to a few car lengths, but the Jeep vehicles plough on, gripping to the road with the capable winter tyres.

Finally we arrive in Courmayeur; as if by magic, the blizzard loses its bite, and gentle snowfall in the pretty town square gives the effect of a real-life snow globe. As we pull up at the impressive Hotel Royal e Golf in the heart of this exclusive ski resort, I notice the drivers' faces as they get out of their vehicles and hand their keys to the valet – wide-eyed with adrenaline and emotion, carrying smiles of varying intensity. We check in at the hotel, and after an hour to revitalise, it's off for a dinner with a difference!

### High-class hospitality

JSet Courmayeur was the first of Jeep's premium hospitality lounges worldwide. Launched in 2011, it is now a permanent fixture in the town, offering a wide range of outstanding cuisine and a most impressive wine list.

We are greeted cordially by Alberto and his team, who are only too happy to discuss the details of our journey with the drivers. We decide to let the chef surprise us, and we're not disappointed. A selection of tremendous plates are brought out for our delectation; we share them among ourselves, ensuring everyone gets a taste of each delicacy.

Our starters include a lip-smacking polenta with fried egg, porcini mushrooms and white truffle, as well as stuffed goose breast with foie gras. The main courses continue our culinary journey, with loin of venison →



The rooftop race track in Turin



gadgetry on.” Control will be vital later, but for now this expanse of ice is perfect for some wild wheel slip. Huge plumes of snow and ice catapult into the air as our four drivers take turns to impress with their driving dexterity. It’s a close-run thing, but Enrico’s work is particularly adventurous. At one point the Cherokee slides a little too close to the edge and nudges into a snowdrift, but it’s a gentle contact and no damage is done.

Playtime is over, kids! Now it’s time to ascend a meandering mountain route, which places exacting pressure on both the vehicles and their owners. I choose to join Thomas in the Wrangler, and we chat away to each other as the king of off-road vehicles cuts through the cold. Momentarily the wheels lose their bite on a particularly unwelcoming patch of ice; for a split second, Thomas’s face cuts to a picture of steely concentration. Almost immediately, the smile returns: “Hey! ESP”

We reach the end of this particularly long and winding cul-de-sac, and stop for one last round of photos before we head back to Turin. Alberto assures me that, in summer, the area around us magically transforms into a full 18-hole golf course; the terrain around here has year-round versatility that shares a synergy with these most able and agile vehicles.

**All good things...**

Before we know it, we’re off the *autostrada*, through the city traffic and back at the Jeep press office. However, there’s time enough for a coffee and a chat before we head off to catch our respective trains and planes back to the real world.

Julien is quick to share his experience of the Renegade: “I was a bit apprehensive because I’d never driven a Renegade over long distances. Actually it’s similar to the Cherokee in terms of comfort, so it was a really pleasant experience. Off-road it’s a 4x4 with really impressive control, and it’s nicely built whether you’re in the city or going to



have a bit of fun off-road. It’s also surprisingly spacious – the press shots make it look smaller, but when you get up close it definitely isn’t a small car.”

Neal also had his reservations at the start of the trip. “My daily drive is a JK, and that’s my comfort zone. We were going off to play off-road, and I got a Grand Cherokee – my expectation was that it’s a good motorway cruiser but it’s not going to be so confident off-road. However, with all the electronics in there it’s deceptively capable. I selected automatic four-wheel drive when I was following you guys up into the mountains yesterday, and it took everything in its stride. My expectations of what I thought the car would do and what it actually did were quite different. It was fantastic!”

Thomas is already an advocate (and owner) of the Wrangler, and this trip enabled him to continue his love affair with the model. “I live in a very rural area full of rugged terrain, so for me a Wrangler makes a real difference in terms of accessibility. The two-door version I’ve been driving on this trip is more nimble than my Unlimited;

it dealt with everything with a minimum of fuss. I was interested to know what driving the other models would have been like, but giving up the keys to a Wrangler just isn’t in my nature!” He accompanies this last comment with a big, wide grin.

Enrico is honest to a fault, and doesn’t want to equivocate with his views. “Personally I prefer the Grand Cherokee – I’m currently on my fourth, and I wouldn’t change it for anything. In a Grand Cherokee you can go anywhere – it’s big, but not too big. When I go off-road, I go anywhere people with a JK Unlimited can go, but I go with comfort. It’s so comfortable, it’s almost like being on the sofa at home!” So how did the Cherokee match up? “The Cherokee felt equally capable on the road and off it. The Cherokee is well-designed, it’s comfortable, it had no problems in the challenging conditions... if you live in a snowy or mountainous environment, or you have a family with children it would be ideal, I think. But I’m just too attached to my Grand Cherokee to consider changing it!”

Enrico concludes: “Whether you’re after a real hardcore off-roader, something more comfortable and family-oriented or anything in between, Jeep has the most complete range of cars on the market in my book.”

And with that, it’s time to move. Our drivers are still chatting away to each other as we wait for our taxis – email addresses and social media profiles are exchanged, along with promises to upload photos and stay in touch. As the sun sets over Turin, it also sets metaphorically over our trip; in a little under 48 hours, we’ve been almost to another world. It certainly feels that way as I touch down back in the UK to the dreary flatness of a British winter. The memories, however, will surely keep us warm until the next opportunity for a road trip arises! ▀



The four drivers relax in the JSet lounge after dinner

marinated in grilled juniper closely followed by tagliatelle in a game and red wine sauce. My pick of the desserts is the pear and cinnamon cake with vanilla sauce, but the ricotta cheesecake seems to be the one creating the most indulgent noises and nodding heads around the table.

As the wine corks continue to pop, we move downstairs from the restaurant to the lounge for a post-dinner *digestif*. Talk soon turns to the next morning: before we return to Turin, it’s imperative to put the Jeep vehicles through their paces in the wintry conditions. Alberto is quick to offer a suggestion: he knows of a nearby car park that is usually empty in the morning and turns into what can only be described as a skidpan. “Come back to the lounge at 8am tomorrow morning, and I’ll take you there myself,” offers Alberto, helpfully. “It sounds like something I don’t want to miss!”

**Playing in the snow**

Well rested, the entourage reconvenes at the JSet lounge the next morning, before being guided by Alberto to the aforementioned car park. The ice is packed tight on the surface, and the barriers surrounding the car park have been concealed beneath giant piles of snow shifted into position by a giant snowplough. Now let’s see how the Jeep model range copes with some serious ice...

The drivers discuss tactics among themselves – what’s the best configuration for getting some serious sliding? “Two-wheel drive with ESP off,” offers Neal. “Get the rear wheels spinning and let the back drift out.” But, as Enrico points out: “Of course if you want control, it’s four-wheel drive with all the



Alberto outside the JSet lounge in Courmayeur