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Travel

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JOSTLED PINK

THIS SEDONA JEEP TOUR IS SO WILD YOU WON'T KNOW WHICH WAY IS UP

Story by MARIJA POTKONJAK • Photos by DARRYL WEBB • TRIBUNE

Pink Jeep Tours

What: Two-hour Broken Arrow tour

When: Tours depart on the hour from 8 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. daily

Where: 204 N. Highway 89A, Sedona

Cost: \$72 per adult, \$54 per child

Information: (928) 282-5000 or (800) 873-3662 or

www.pinkjeep.com



SEDONA • They call it the Road of No Return. Taking an ordinary car on this rocky dirt road in Sedona's red rock country is basically a sacrifice to the gods of off-roading. But this pink Jeep is no ordinary vehicle, and the rocks piled high in the road don't faze our driver, Thomas Muetzel. I, on the other hand, am a wuss. When the Jeep lurches forward over the rocks I brace myself for impact. Note to self: "I should have worn my bicycle helmet." I look over to Italian tourist Monica Raveggi, hoping for some validation. Raveggi, who weighs barely 100 pounds, is strapped into the back seat and is swaying back and forth. "It's like a free massage on the butt," she says in heavily accented English. Clearly she's biased. Raveggi is all pink — from her magenta hair and Chanel sunglasses down to her pink Pumas. I guess I'm going to be the only wimp on board. Wimpdom is a lonely place. — STORY CONTINUES ON PAGE G4



ROCK CRAWLERS: Top, a pink Jeep makes its way around "Touron Hill." The name, which you won't find on a map, is a cross between tourist and moron. Some off-roaders try to drive directly up the hill rather than around it and have destroyed their vehicles in the process. Center, there are more than 60 Jeeps in the Pink Jeep Tours fleet. The company buys Jeep Wranglers and then outfits them for especially rugged terrain.

JOSTLED PINK

'THE MOUNTAINS ARE SMILING AT YOU'

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This all-terrain roller-coaster ride is the Broken Arrow Tour, one of the most popular offered by Pink Jeep Tours in Sedona. It's a bumpy, two-hour rumble through Mother Nature's amusement park. Instead of Disney's Mickey Mouse and Pirates of the Caribbean, you've got the majestic backdrop of Sedona, giant rocks that are millions of years old, and a view beyond the scope of human imagination.

The journey begins in Pink Jeep Plaza, where riders pass time between tours in the Pink Jeep Store, where you can buy sunglasses or a souvenir T-shirt, or in the waiting area. There's a fleet of pink Jeeps and a spectacular view. One of the drivers pops open the hood so a tourist can take a picture of the engine while a couple from Pennsylvania sit on a bench devouring ice cream cones.

It occurs to me that ice cream probably isn't a good idea before hitting the Road of No Return. I read the brochure and the words "4x4 adventure" are emblazoned on my brain. I'm not sure if I'm concerned for their gastrointestinal fortitude or irritated because I didn't think of it.

We meet Muetzel for the first time in the plaza. He calls out our names beginning with mine and says it right the first time — "Pot-Cognac" (this never happens). We're joined by Raveggi and two people from Connecticut — John and Heidi Long.

The Broken Arrow Trail lies within the Coconino National Forest, and Pink Jeep Tours has exclusive rights to it. The trail is named for the 1950 film starring James Stewart, which was shot in Sedona. The company is only allowed to take five Jeeps on the trail at a time, yet it still manages to bring more than 70,000 people each year to the trail.

The ride is rocky, rough and fast. Muetzel slows down at moments to give a quick tidbit about the plant life or the geology. This is the driver's show. Muetzel, a native of Bavaria, adds the right touch of German sarcasm and showmanship.

"Now this is cool," says Muetzel,



THRILL RIDE: Heidi Long, left, Monica Raveggi, middle, and John Long laugh after driving off a cliff while on the Broken Arrow Tour.

just before hitting a steep and rough patch in the trail. The Jeep is rocking back and forth and suddenly seems to become airborne.

"If it's so cool, why am I sweating?" Heidi Long yells in mid-swing. She's got both hands on the grips. It's good to know I'm not the only one sweating.

"Because you don't have that faith in man and machine," says Muetzel. He revs the Jeep over a boulder. In the rearview mirror a mischievous smile breaks his stoic expression. "The fun part is coming up. By then you will be relaxed."

The machine he's asking us to have so much faith in is a regular Jeep Wrangler that's been outfitted for rugged terrain and painted pink. The company spends about \$17,000 on upgrades for each vehicle. The Jeeps are clean and can carry up to nine people at a time.

The first stop is Submarine Rock, a sleek, circular formation that has a panoramic view of Sedona's red

rocks. Muetzel gives a quick lesson in geology and then gives everyone a few minutes to take pictures or simply soak up the beauty.

Most people don't complain about the rough ride, says Muetzel. A few husbands have been known to bring their wives thinking they'll like the "pink" part of the tour. They usually get in trouble, Muetzel says.

On the way to the second stop, Chicken Point (most of the names drivers use are not found on maps), Raveggi gets a little inspired. She decides to serenade Long. No matter how bumpy the ride, a good group makes each tour unique.

"Heidi, Heidi," she sings. "Ti sorridono i monti..." (Heidi, the mountains are smiling at you).

Before heading back to the Road of No Return, Muetzel drives up "Touron Hill" (apparently this is what you get when you cross a tourist with a moron). Many off-road vehicles have been damaged on this hill trying to climb straight up the

face. Muetzel drives in a loop up the hill at what seems like breakneck speed. Once at the top, he threatens to drive it backwards for the ladies.

I scream "No," and it dawns on me that I'm smiling. The ride is thrilling and my stomach doesn't seem to mind being shot back and forth and up and down.

In any roller-coaster ride there's a moment at the very top when motion is suspended. Before leaving Touron Hill, Muetzel re-creates that moment for effect. He takes a deep breath and then the Jeep bolts out and up over the boulder.

"Let's see if I can get some screams," he roars over the engine.

We don't disappoint. For an instant the Jeep seems to be in a free-fall.

Note to self: I can't wait to go again.

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ONE GOES UP, ONE GOES DOWN: At right, Pink Jeep Tour driver Thomas Muetzel gets a wave from other tourists while on the Broken Arrow Trail in Sedona.

