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AUGUST 2013  
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# Death Valley Excursion

An Overland Adventure with  
the Right Mix of Guide and  
People

Story Denis Snow  
Photos Robin L. Martin  
and Denis Snow

Picking the right 4WD guided tour operator is like picking your friends. You want them to be intelligent, loyal, trustworthy, knowledgeable and easy to be around; because for the duration of your adventure, they are the ones you'll be depending on to: lead the way, set the pace, be your spotter, help with trail repairs, be the source of information on every rock, plant, crawly thing, and safety as well as on the human and geological history of the area, AND tell great stories around the campfire.





Checking out the route before heading out of Ridgecrest.

Tom Severin, President of Badlands Off Road Adventures, Inc. is just such a tour operator. In business for 12 years, he is an International 4-Wheel Drive Trainers Association® certified professional 4WD Trainer and a Wilderness First Responder among many other certifications. He's obviously, very knowledgeable and leads several excursions throughout the year as well as conducting clinics on such subjects as: beginning off-roading, basic to advanced winching, tire repair on the trail, wilderness first aid, etc. He also frequently emails out various articles covering subjects like: Building Your Own First Aid Kit, Reading the Weather, Keep Recovery Gear Accessible, etc., and other valuable advice, tips for safe wheeling, new gear reviews, inside hints on upcoming events, etc. You can sign up for these at: [4x4training.com/contacts.html](http://4x4training.com/contacts.html).

These are precisely the reasons why the folks in our Death Valley Excursion group were on this trip. They've come to off-roading from different paths and different levels of experience. Some are relative newbies getting their first experiences; others initially joined 4x4 clubs and have been on the trails for years.

Other than experiencing two weeks in the Australian Outback with the folks from ARB a few years back, my overlanding experience was nil. That's why I jumped at the chance to join Tom's group on his 4 day (180 mi highway/245 mi off-road) excursion to places probably 98.6% of the people who visit Death Valley never experience or maybe even know about.

Friday morning with 11 people in eight vehicles, we headed out of Ridgecrest, southwest of DV, up State Highway 178 through the minerals

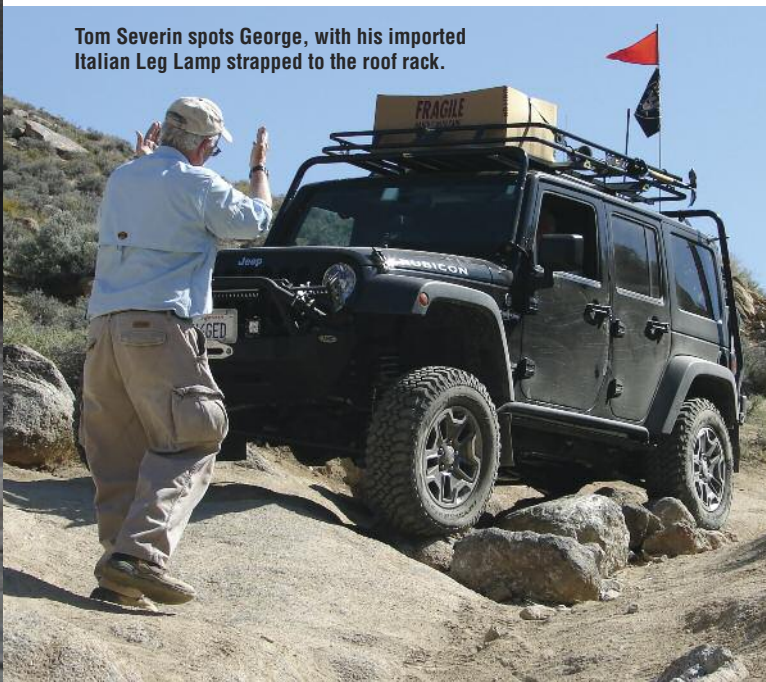


We hit our first major obstacle at Mangel Pass, (elev. 4326), a 120 ft. dry waterfall with the added challenge of an almost 3-foot in diameter boulder someone rolled smack-dab in the middle of the path—which wasn't easy to move out of the way.

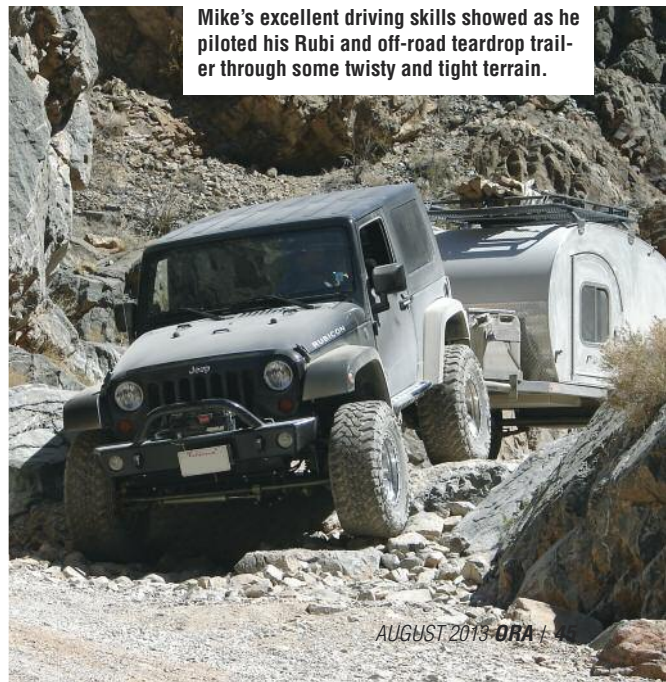
mining town of Trona, then jumped off the highway in Panamint Valley. Aired down and headed east, then south on graded Wingate Road, to Goler Wash Road and into the DV Park boundary.

The Death Valley area is an amazing place. Its human and geological history is astounding. No wonder there has been so many books and documentary films done on it. It's impossible to share all that we experienced on this excursion in the pages allocated for this story. So get some friends together, get a map, get a knowledgeable guide and GO...it's awesome!

Tom Severin spots George, with his imported Italian Leg Lamp strapped to the roof rack.



Mike's excellent driving skills showed as he piloted his Rubi and off-road teardrop trailer through some twisty and tight terrain.





## Why They Go With an Outfitter Like Tom Severin

"...Tom is organized and very thorough in planning his trips and in the classes. He is a wealth of knowledge and is very mechanically inclined. I've seen him change axles, drop driveshafts and patch tires in the field. This is very reassuring to someone like me and it is for these reasons that I only go with Tom."  
—Paul

"I got my first 4x at the age of twenty... Years later, I decided to take a couple of classes with Tom to refine my driving skills and meet other people with the same interests... We like to go on the trips that Tom does, because they are informal and we usually get to see some of the friends we've made on previous excursions."  
—Mike & Debi

"... Tom gives the history and interesting background to things and places we drive by or stop at. It is not just the driving to somewhere and camping, it is the story of places and good company in camp.

I never worry about anything when I go on Tom's adventures. I once ended up on the side of a hill where I was holding the door open to keep my 4Runner from rolling. Tom used two winches in front and one in back to get me back to level ground."  
—Skip

"We originally looked at 3 local clubs. One was a clique that was not open to new 4x4 owners who didn't own 2-door rock crawlers. The second were real jerks, took risks and drank on the trail. The third did mostly adopt a trail, and was not interested in camping.

At this point we realized that any time and money spent on certified training would keep us safe, cut years off the learning curve and allow us to see places that we would never go to by ourselves.  
—Ken & Cathy

"Badlands presented the opportunity to go out in a safe setting where a novice can enjoy a trail without getting lost or hurt. Tom's coaching helps me understand how my vehicle will behave under certain conditions and how I should react..."  
—Deshan



Ubehebe Crater was formed 2000-7000 years ago by a volcanic explosion creating a hole ½-mile wide by 600 ft. deep.



◀ We came across a number of grave markers. Mostly of ill-fated miners of the 1849s to the early 20th century claimed by Death Valley's harsh environment—which still claims ill-equipped tourists in this era. Tradition says to place a rock on the graves to symbolize never forgetting the deceased.



◀ Teakettle Junction. Years back someone left a teakettle there and the tradition stuck. Some members of our group added to the display.

▼ Racetrack—everybody's seen pictures and heard about it. Geologists have studied these tracks for years, yet the stones' apparent movement remain the subject of research without a conclusive answer.



▲ You find some strange things in the desert.



◀ Several times we came across locals like these who watched our passing parade of rigs. Burros aren't native to the area—they busted free/were set free back in the old mining days.





The Eureka Sand Dunes, largest dunes in California at almost 700' high.



Striped Butte consists of bands of different sediments that geological forces thrust up and twisted from the valley floor.

► A geologists' cabin at Anvil Springs offers great views of Striped Butte and the valley below. It's available for free overnight stays. You just need to leave it as clean/cleaner than you found it.



► Chloride Cliff (elev. 5279 ft.) looking into Death Valley proper towards the Furnace Creek and Badwater (elev. -279.8 ft.) area, with the Panamint Range on the right.



▼ Titus Canyon is a one-way trail from east to west. Its shear walls start to close in—to the point it becomes a slot canyon.



In the middle of desolate Saline Valley is a warm and cold springs oasis—felt great!



## 2013 Jeep JK Wrangler Unlimited Rubicon

So we could keep up with the other trail modified vehicles on this excursion, we borrowed a beautiful “Crush Clear Coat” colored 4-door that also gave us plenty of room for our provisions and camping gear.

I'd spent several hours at a time in JKs at media introductions, but never had the opportunity of spending 4 days with one. The Rubicon model has everything that one needs in an off-roading/overlanding vehicle right from the factory. The 3.6L V6 has more than enough power and torque; coupled with the 4:1 Rock-Trac® part-time system and Tru-Lock® front and rear axles—there wasn't anywhere we couldn't go—from rock gardens, to high angle up and side hills to sand washes. We also took advantage of the Uconnect® 430N CD/DVD/MP3/HDD/NAV and GPS Navigation while rocking out to SiriusXM tunes using the 6.5" touch-screen display no matter where we were. The only time we lost our GPS and XM tunes was when we were in the tightest of tight sections in the slots of Titus canyon.

## SOURCES

**Badlands Off Road Adventures, Inc.**  
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## 2013 Jeep JK Wrangler Unlimited Rubicon

Check out all of Jeep's Trail Rated vehicles at: [Jeep.com](http://Jeep.com)

## Tri-State Tours

[tristate.com.au](http://tristate.com.au)  
Michael and Joanne McCulkin.  
If you ever want to experience the Australian Outback—these are the people to contact.



A beautiful end to our day. ▲