

By Rick Weinberg, Editor, California Business Journal

Unforgettable Experience

When the invitation landed in Scott Wakefield's email inbox, he turned to his wife Sabrina and said, "Honey, I know what we're doing this weekend."

The invitation was for Land Rover Anaheim Hill's Off-Road Experience at Borrego Springs Resort, a cozy oasis nestled between the rugged Anza-Borrego Desert and the dazzling foothills of the Santa Rosa Mountains in San Diego County, California.

The purpose of the two-day affair was to enable customers to experience the extraordinary off-road capabilities of their Land Rovers on some of the roughest and toughest terrain in the world.

"I figured, 'This is perfect for the weekend -- let's do something we've never done before,'" says Wakefield, an Anaheim Hills, California resident who had purchased a stunning Range Rover HSE just a few weeks earlier and had never experienced an off-road adventure of this kind.

Land Rover Anaheim Hills hosted a special off-road event in the rugged Anza-Borrego desert terrain where its customers experienced first-hand the amazing capabilities of their Land Rovers.

"I was excited," Sabrina says. "We've done some daring things like ballooning and ATVs. But going off-roading in a Land Rover is new for us."

The Wakefields were among a select group of participants for the adventure, which began with a Friday night cocktail and hor d'oeuvers



reception at Borrego Springs Resort. Guests stayed overnight at the luxurious resort, courtesy of Land Rover Anaheim Hills.

The following morning, after breakfast and a safety meeting, 10 Land Rovers lined up out-



Jay Allen spent two days planning the 35-mile trek over the rough and harsh desert terrain.

side the resort and sped off to the rough, dusty and rocky trails of the world-famous Anza-Borrego desert, a sprawling canvas for the group to feel the unique, jaw-dropping proficiency of the Land Rovers in an authentic, rustic Old West environment.

The six-hour journey was surreal: the desert terrain has eroded over thousands of years into fascinating and extraordinary rock and landscape shapes created by fierce wind and water. The topography consists of soft, waterborne sediments that have been deeply carved by water and wind. The area's clay soil is weak and plant life is sparse, so flash floods and other erosive forces have shaped the landscape into a bewildering maze of razorback ridges and mud hills.

With the bright Southern California sun shining down, the Land Rover entourage embarks on a 35-mile trek that includes stops at Devil's Slide, Mystic Rock Garden, 17 Palms Oasis (where settlers and travelers have left messages for more than 100 years in an Old West hand-crafted mailbox hidden inside a palm) and Font's Point, where you stand on the edge of a receding cliff and gaze across hundreds of square miles of fascinating landscape.

It took Jay Allen, Parts Manager of Land Rover Anaheim Hills, two days to plan the route. He wanted it to be extra special -- a perfect



The Mystical Rock Garden features a cosmic array of rock statues that resemble something out of a space.

and unforgettable experience for the participants.

When Land Rover Anaheim Hills General Manager Sven Larson initially approached Allen about handling the event, Allen knew immediately that he wanted it at Borrego Springs, where he has been driving his Land Rovers off-road for 25 years.

"Hands down, this is the ideal place to hold an event like this,'" he says. "This is my favorite place to ride. The scenery is unparalleled."

Allen designed the route to be exciting and to showcase the extraordinary off-road abilities of Land Rovers. He also wanted to provide the group with a fascinating glimpse of the history of the Anza-Borrego desert, considered by National Geographic as one of the best sites in the world.

Allen's off-road partner is his 2000 Land Rover Discovery. He's had seven Land Rovers all told. But this is the one he's held onto for his special off-roading excursions.

"Yep," he says with a grin, "this Land Rover is 13 years old, has 133,000 miles and we're about to head into the middle of nowhere, if that makes you feel confident."

There's no reason to fret, not with Allen leading the way. For good measure, the group is flanked by several other experienced Land Rover off-roaders as well as two technicians from the dealership – just in case one of the vehicles encounters a problem.

As the procession of Land Rovers head out on the road, passers-by gawk at the stylish and luxurious vehicles.

Minutes later, Allen turns into the desert terrain. He advises the group to select their four-wheel drive system's low range -- the reduction in transfer case gear ratios, aiding the vehicle's ability to traverse difficult terrain.

Up ahead, Allen spots two Jeep Wranglers. He snickers. "Land Rovers," he says to his passenger, "have superior suspension components and its drive line is much stronger than Jeep. Plus, this car is much more comfortable and luxurious. Jeeps bounce so much your fillings can fall out."

Allen is asked why he is such a devoted Land Rover guy.

"It has a very rich history," he says. "It has proven to the world that it is the best 4x4 by far. Not only do they make the best vehicles, but they do it with class. You can go off-road



The Land Rover Anaheim Hills off-road adventure participants relished their experience in the Anza-Borrego desert.

As the parade of Rovers negotiate the dusty, rocky terrain, they pass an ancient old riverbed, the San Felipe Wash. The stark beauty of the desert is marked by unique rock formations, like something you'd see on the moon and in science fiction films. There is sparse vegetation. Small trees with long, wispy finger-like branches pepper the landscape, defying the imagination with their ability to survive such a harsh environment.

The view is spectacular, like a painting. "A million dollar view," Allen says. "That's why I love it so much and come here so often. It's just so peaceful, relaxing and beautiful."

in the morning, cover your car with mud, then wash it off and pull up at the Ritz Carlton at night and everyone is dazzled by the look and style of the car."

The drive becomes more challenging as the Land Rovers cross an even more uneven and rock-strewn path. Yet the cars are amazingly composed, hurdling over the terrain.

"These vehicles are truly in their element," Allen says. "Off-road has always been part of Land Rover's DNA – and it's been a major part of my life for 25 years, nearly half my life."

He pauses. He and his son, Corbin, were just here a few weeks earlier. Some fathers and



Scott Wakefield was blown away by the picturesque desert views.

sons bond at ballgames. Allen and his son connect here.

"Off-roading is in my blood," he says. "It's my passion. There are a lot of first time off-roaders in this group. I wanted to give them a taste of what their vehicles are capable of – and show 'em the California back country.

"This is fun for me."

Allen squints at the sun. It's a perfect day – 73 degrees. Not a speck of rain in the forecast. Not that it would have mattered.

"There's no such thing as postponing off-roading," he says. "If it rains, it's 'Game on.' We are a rain or shine car and company."

Allen's Rover dips toward a tight, massive ditch. It appears as if he's heading into a cave – an unknown area. He takes it at an angle and lets the vehicle drop in easily. For the less-experienced, traversing this trench would be troublesome. Not for Allen.

He speeds up along the rough topography, the caravan following closely behind. Moments later, he pulls over, stops the car, jumps out and waves the cars to park. To the right is an immense hill and mountain.

"Welcome to Devil's Slide," Allen tells the group.

"We're going to climb that hill over there," he says, pointing to his left, "and then descend down the side of the hill at another steep angle."

The participants look at the hill then look at each other, bewildered. Even a bit nervous.





"You'll feel first-hand how incredibly capable your vehicle is," Allen says.

Ed Testa, an off-roader with as much experience and enthusiasm as Allen, gives the group some tips to handle the sharp, uphill climb, followed by an even sharper downhill drop. He tells them to keep their foot on the accelerator -- "people tend to pull their foot off and that loss of power can stop the car [in the middle of the climb]," he says. "Let the car think. Let it do its own thing."

Rover after Rover head up the side of Devil's Slide. Some of the untested drivers get stuck in the sand. Not a problem. All they do is back up slightly and then approach the deep sand with more gusto and head directly uphill, the nose of the Rover pointing toward the gorgeous blue sky.

Land Rover's Hill Descent Control (HDC) system works wonders to maintain a disciplined descent. For those who have never come across this feature before, HDC engages with the push of a button. Select the transmission's lowest gear and keep your feet flat on the floor. Then, without ever touching the brake pedal, the vehicle progresses down the hill at a few miles per hour. Like it has its own brain.

As J.D. Moore of San Clemente, California pushes up the slide with some encouragement from the experienced Land Rover staff, Allen pumps his arm and yells, "Yes! Yes! He's up!"

The top of Devil's Slide provides a scintillating and breathtaking panoramic view of the Anza-Borrego desert landscape.

Meanwhile, heading down Devil's Slide is quite different from going uphill: as the Rover inches to the edge of the cliff, you do not see anything in front of you … except sky and miles of terrain. It's as if the car is going to tip over and tumble head over heels downhill.

As Scott and Sabrina Wakefield sway down the slide, you can see the excitement, nervous-

ness and intrigue in their faces.

"Oh. My. God," Sabrina says moments later. "It was unbelievable. When Scott let go of the brake [and allowed the descent control system to work on its own], it was truly scary. But thrilling at the same."

As the couple tipped over the slide and headed down the rocky, dusty hill, Scott turned to his wife and jokingly said, "If we don't make it, I love you babe."



17 Palms Oasis is where settlers and travelers have left messages for more than 100 years in an Old West hand-crafted mailbox hidden inside a palm.

Compared to skiing, boating, riding ATVs and ballooning, "this venture is at the top of the list," Sabrina says. "At the very top."

Huan Pham of Tustin took Land Rover Anaheim Hills up on its invitation and brought along his 7-½ year old son, Ocean. Pham had just purchased his 2013 LR4 and it was his first off-road adventure – quite different from the minivan he was previously driving.

"My kids are a little older now so my wife said it was ok to get rid of the van and get this," he says smiling. "It was a happy day getting this vehicle."

As for rambling down Devil's Slide, his son Ocean says, "It was great. I thought we were going to fall right over the top and slide down the hill on the side or on the roof. But I wasn't scared a lick. Let's do it again."

J.D. Moore has been off-roading many times in his '04 Range Rover HSE, "but that was the steepest I've ever been," he says of the uphill and downhill journey. "It was fantastic. The capability of the vehicle really surprises me."

Following Devil's Slide, the group hops back into their vehicles and hurdles over to the next stop on the journey -- Mystic Rock Garden.

"I came up with that name," Allen says. "It



will make you believe there are aliens out there."

As the parade of Rovers gallop over the rocky terrain, Joe Yau of Hacienda Heights, California says he didn't think his '13 Range Rover Evoque was built to handle this kind of jagged terrain.

"But it can – and pretty easily," he says. "I'm surprised."

The eyes of the participants bulge as the procession of vehicles reach Mystical Rock Garden, which features a cosmic array of rock statues that resemble something out of space.

"I've never seen anything like this," Sabrina says. "It gives mystical a new meaning."

Back into the cars and back on the hard desert trail, the next stop on the tour is 17 Palms Oasis, a collection of trees shaken by wind, cold, heat, rain and sun over hundreds of years – or more.

The trail is steeper than the morning's earlier excursion -- and quite narrow in some places. All the better to showcase the capability of these Land Rovers. The cars amble up and over rocks effortlessly, clamoring up the terrain without any trouble whatsoever.

As Scott Wakefield looks out at the dreamlike scenery, he quips, "No Starbucks here." Sabrina laughs loudly.

"What till everyone asks, 'What did *you* do this weekend,'" she says.

For nearly 25 years, Wakefield had a company car. His most recent was a Ford Taurus. He jokes, "I can't image doing *this* in *that* car."

His new Range Rover is the first car he's purchased since '79, when he bought a Firebird. When he decided to get a new vehicle a few months ago, he didn't have a clue of what he wanted. He investigated his options. He took his time. It came down to a BMW 740, an Escalade and Range Rover.



"When I got in and drove the Range Rover, I loved the fact that it's all luxury on the inside and so tough and rugged on the outside," he says. "I knew immediately it was the car for me."

He pauses for a moment and says: "You know, Land Rover Anaheim Hills put a lot of thought, energy and effort into this event. Thumbs up to them. The more you do for customers, the better off you are. You never lose that way. In fact, they've made it hard to even think about going anywhere else for a car."

Following lunch, provided by Land Rover Anaheim Hills, the group arrives at 17 Palms Oasis.

"OK," Allen tells everyone. "Find the mailbox hidden in one of the palms where people have written messages for nearly 100 years."

The group searches for the mailbox. Sabrina finds it, slowly opens it and finds a few notebooks. She opens one. Several people in the group crane their necks, curious as to what they'll read.

"What an expedition visiting these historic grounds," one person from Utah wrote. "To touch something that dates as far back at the 1700s is quite moving."

"One of the best trips I've ever taken with my dad," writes another. "A great bonding experience. Thanks Dad! I love you!"

The participants flip through the notebooks, reading messages from people all over the world who have travelled to the area. They're in awe of the history.

It's mid afternoon and the Land Rover crowd departs for the final event of the day, an ideal curtain-closing moment: the scintillating Font's Point.

"The sights here will absolutely blow your mind," Allen says as he rolls over the sandy ground. "It is absolutely the perfect ending to a day like this."

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When he arrives at the final destination, the other Rovers line up behind him.

"I've been coming here for 25 years and it always gets to me," he tells the crowd gathered around him. "It always takes my breath away."

With that, the group turns and walks toward Font's Point, named after Father Pedro Font, who was part of a famous expedition to these grounds in 1774.

"Father Font calls this 'The sweeping of the earth,'" Allen says as the group ambles toward the edge of the receding cliff.

There, everyone stops cold in their tracks, mesmerized by the awe-inspiring view covering hundreds of square miles of sculptured landscape.

Tears well up in the eyes of the some of the participants as they gaze out over the horizon.

"You outdid yourself," Larson tells Allen. "What an experience."

"This," J.D. Moore says, "far exceeded my expectations."

It exceeded everyone's expectations.

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