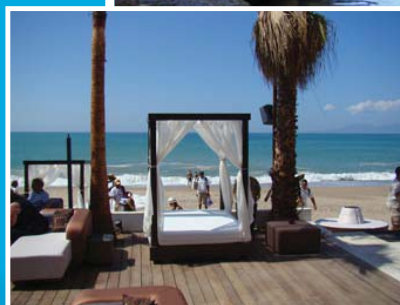
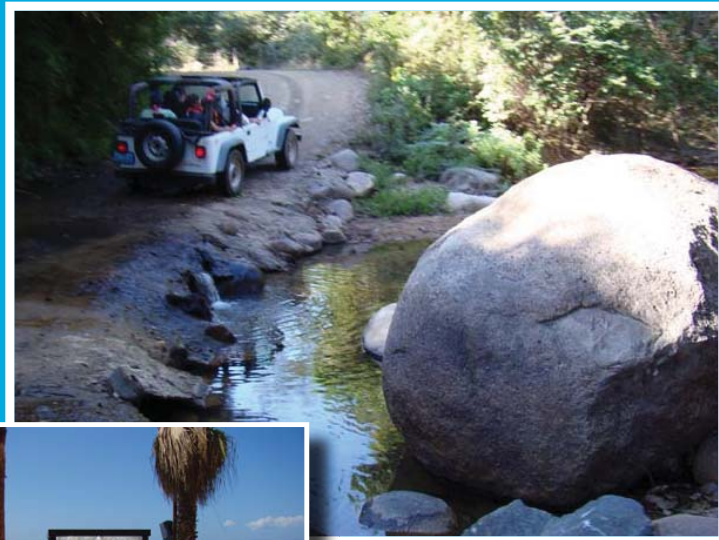


# Cruising and Jeeping on the Mexican Riviera - Part 1

By Mike Fissel & Carol Simpson

**What does cruising, as in taking a cruise on a cruise ship, and Jeeping have in common? Ordinarily nothing; however, members of Jeep Expeditions were looking to combine their love for Jeeps and adventure with a fun vacation aboard a cruise ship.**

How often does your wife, girlfriend, and/or family come with you while Jeeping? For some of us it doesn't happen very much. But what if you could combine a romantic cruise vacation with the Jeeping you love and the shopping she loves? Now you are thinking what we were thinking.





For our cruise we chose Carnival Cruise Lines seven-day Mexican Riviera trip aboard the Carnival Splendor. This cruise took us to the port cities of Mazatlan, Puerto Vallarta, and Cabo San Lucas. It also gave us the opportunity to Jeep the forested foot hills of the Sierra Madre Mountains and the Baja desert in two ports with touring/shopping in the third. And to keep your lady happy, there was still time for shopping on the two Jeeping days!

On the first day, our group of ten met at the Port of Los Angeles where we checked in and boarded our ship. Once aboard, we were treated to a tasty buffet with lots of choices, some we recognized and some a bit exotic. As the afternoon turned to evening, we participated in a number of fun events including a formal dinner and a late night showing of "Star Trek."

Days two and three were "fun days at sea." Carnival gives you their daily hand bill the night before which details all the activities for the following day. There were more things to do than you have time for and events that appeal to just about everyone. Bingo, dance lessons, mini golf, scrap booking class, deck games, scavenger hunts, music trivia, art show/auction, kids' games/activities and more. The casino is hopping with slot, poker, and blackjack tournaments. In addition, there was jazz, calypso, guitar, pop, and Latin music live in the numerous bars and public areas.

Around 3pm on day three, while sailing near the southern tip of the Baja peninsula, we were treated to several whale and dolphin sightings near the ship. This in itself was a pretty exhilarating experience to see such phenomenal creatures up close in their habitat.

Day four had us in Puerto Vallarta from 7am until 10pm. This was our 1<sup>st</sup> Jeeping day. We selected the Carnival Jeep Safari Shore



Excursion and at 8:15 that morning, we met Jose and Juan from Explore & Discover, our tour operator. After a few minutes to explain our trip and a few rules, we jumped into our Jeep TJ Wranglers and off to our 5 ½ hour trip. Our caravan proceeded through town, past the Corona factory and other names we were familiar with back home. We continued on through the town of Ixtapa and then past the huge regional prison. We then made the turn to take us to the foothills of the Sierra Madre. At the beginning of the dirt road, we stopped and were given bandanas so we didn't have to breathe dust. The road wound through the "tropical" forest, past ranches, small farms, and even a large greenhouse operation. I should note that out of the forty people on this trip, I think only ten people in our group had ever been in Jeeps because the first water crossing was quite a hit with the group.





About two hours into our trip we came to the village of Santa Cruz De Quelitan. A small church, a large public park, and a small convenience store of sorts were central parts of the town. This was the first stop of our trip. As the line of Jeeps came to a stop, children and towns folk greeted us. Standing in the public area, we could see Puerto Vallarta off in the distance below. Jose explained to us that like most small villages, the people were pretty much self-sufficient and pointed out the gardens that people had in their back yards. Banana trees, mangos, corn, beans, peppers, and other vegetables were just some of the things they typically grow there. Our group made the day of the convenience store owner as most everyone bought water, soda, snacks and for those not driving, a few cervezas.

With the rest break over, we had a few more water crossings which were a hit with our tour group and we found our way to a more "primitive" dirt road. At a spot where there was some pretty good erosion that most of the Jeeps drove around, one of our veteran Jeepers wanted to show the two passengers in his Jeep



what a stock TJ could do. What he didn't know is that the transfer case linkage had been disconnected on our tour Jeeps and became momentarily hung up. We later asked Jose why that was and he told us that 95% of the people on these tours have never been in a Jeep before and they didn't want someone tearing out a transfer case because they had no experience. A few miles later, we were back on pavement and heading to our next stop, The Dona Engracias Hacienda Tequila Factory.

Our stop at the tequila factory started out with a bottle of water for everyone and then a history lesson about tequila. We learned that true tequila is made only from the Blue Agave plant and it takes ten years for a plant to be ready for harvest. We were told that the "tequila" with the worm in the bottle is Mescal and is made from the Green Agave plant. Inside the factory, which has been around for generations, we saw all of the equipment that was used in the past 100 or so years to make tequila there and side by side, the modern equipment that has replaced it. With the explanation of how it is made, we moved to another room with chairs where we were invited to sit. The group got to sample six different types of tequila including three tequila liquors; almond, peach and coffee. Afterwards the group was given the opportunity to make purchases at factory prices, and many took advantage of the offer which was 50% or more less than U.S. retail we were told.





With our tasting done, we were treated to a “snack lunch:” two tacos of our choice (beef, pork, chicken and muchaca), beans, lettuce, and salsas. The tortillas were handmade and some of the best I have tasted. There was also an opportunity for a few minutes of shopping and then back onto the road to our final stop at the beach.



The beach stop was at a private beach with a nice little cantina there. There was a vendor there that had a “banana boat” and also offered parasailing. The waves were pretty impressive but many of the group decided to get their feet wet and six members of the group decided to do the banana boat. I watched as the banana boat was capsized when it first took off. Fortunately for them, the second attempt was a success.

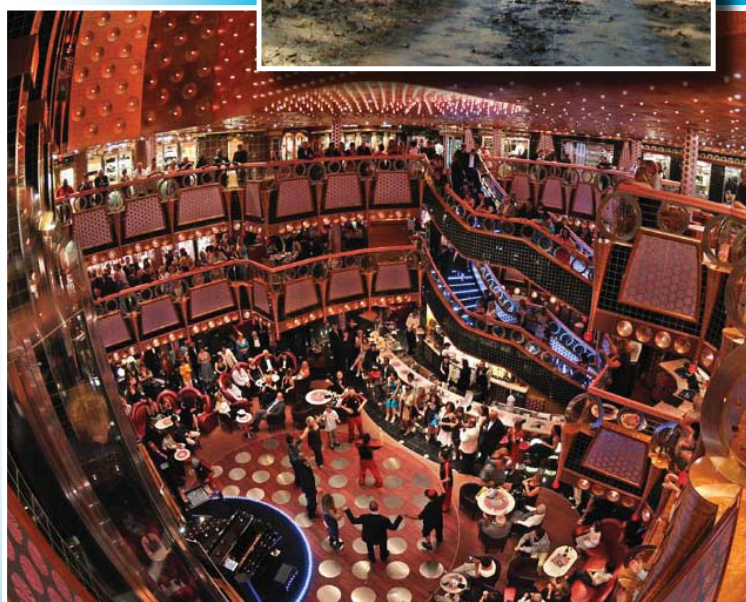


The people who went down to the beach seemed to be having a good time but several of them did literally get knocked down by the waves and current. An hour later we were all asked to return to our Jeeps for the trip back to the ship. With our tour over near the docks, some group members went back to the ship while others shopped at the Mercado next to the docks for jewelry, hats, t-shirts, and even cheap prescription drugs. Once back on the ship, a few members of the group had a late lunch while others went back to their cabins for a shower and nap before dinner.



At dinner our wait staff invited us to the midnight Mexican buffet and party topside but we decided to retire early so we could be ready for our next day in Mazatlan.

In the June/July issue of JPFreek Adventure Magazine, our story will continue with our stops in the port city of Mazatlan that will take you through our tour of the city and its endless shopping opportunities, as well as our final port of call and the much anticipated Baja Jeep Safari in Cabo San Lucas.





# Cruising and Jeeping on the Mexican Riviera - Part 2

By Mike Fissel & Carol Simpson

In our last issue we highlighted days one through four that included our first stop at Puerto Valarta and our Jeep Safari into the Sierra Madre foothills. Part II takes us to the last two of our three stops and our final Jeep adventure in the Baja desert.

Day five put us in the port city of Mazatlan. Our group was going to arrange a tour of the city so we left the ship and boarded the tram that took us through the seaport to the start of the tourist area. We passed many shops and found our way to the parking lot where scores of taxis and vans waited to negotiate a tour package for us. We worked our way over to these VW kit cars, not really a dune buggy and not really a VW but a unique open vehicle. For the ten of us, we settled on a cost for \$20 an hour for three of these vehicles.

We asked about tours at the Pacifico/Corona brewery. With luck on our side, the next tour was in half an hour. However, when we arrived we found out that shorts and open toed shoes were not allowed on the tour. Oh well, maybe next time. Our drivers started our tour by taking us to the famous lighthouse, slowing down and stopping for us to take pictures, showing us the sights, and the shoreline. We stopped at the cliff divers and watched these daredevils defy death, with our next stop at the town's centuries old cathedral and the downtown flea market where the prices are good. Our tour continued along the shoreline to the Golden Zone where there were lots of shopping opportunities and resorts.





Our lead driver suggested a place for lunch. It was not only excellent but also well priced with a great atmosphere on the beach. After lunch we headed back to the seaport for another hour of shopping and back on board the ship. The evening's dinner featured, amongst other items, my favorite: rack of lamb. The movie under the stars was Michael Jackson's "This is It."

On day six, our final port of call was in Cabo San Lucas where we had scheduled the Baja Jeep Safari through the ships shore excursion desk. We expected another day without 4WD but we were very wrong. We met our tour guide Henry from Tropical Tours and within a few miles we were already driving on unpaved roads. The roads in the beginning were hard sand, not much of a challenge for a Jeep, but things would change. At our first stop, Henry explained the area and history. The wash to our left was the same wash that participants in the Baja 1000 drive every three years coming into Cabo. At our next stop, Henry pointed out a 400+ year old cactus and told us about the different plant life in the Baja. As our Jeep Safari

continued, the trail became a little less civilized as we traveled up and down hills deeper into the Baja. We stopped at one of the highest points of our trip for a great view of the Pacific Ocean off in the distance far below. At one point we were accidentally separated from the lead Jeep but these Jeepers were prepared with GPS, Mexico GPS Atlas maps, and HAM radios. The best part of losing the leader was the fact that we got to do about 45 minutes of exploring on some of the many side trails. One of the forks we took landed us at a ranch with a nice house. The rancher, seeing two Jeeps outside his gate, came over and invited us in for some drinks. Meanwhile, Woody's Jeep was sitting next to a goat pen where he talked on the HAM radio with Dick who was in the lead Jeep. Every time he keyed his microphone, we could hear goats bleating in the background. It was hilarious! We decided to meet up with the lead Jeep and continue the tour.

Near the half way point, we entered a small village where we had a light lunch at the local boarding school followed by a short tour of the



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town to see how the people lived there and how the typical home is constructed. After leaving the town, the trail became narrow with some erosion. The sand became deep and soft so we decided it was time to shift the transfer case into 4-high.

Things became more fun and interesting as we followed the sandy riverbed to the sea. I closed my eyes and imagined for a few seconds the excitement of the Baja race going through here. All along the sandy riverbed, there were side trails, hills, and places to play. One of our Jeeps got high centered and we had to spend some time getting him unstuck from the deep sand. Eventually we arrived at the beach.

The ocean waves were quite intense and within a few minutes we had spotted a whale about 50 yards or so offshore. The group walked down to the surf and had no trouble getting wet with waves hitting the shoreline around three to five feet high. We got back in our Jeeps and drove down the beach until the trail disappeared into the ocean and our forward progress was stopped by massive rock formations. We turned around and drove several more miles back before turning to the east and highway 19 for the trip back to Cabo. The general consensus by everyone on this trip that it was awesome, and they wanted to do it again "next time" and it was worth every penny. Will I do it next time I am in Cabo? You better believe it! The Baja Jeep Safari in Cabo San Lucas is the best kept secret by the cruise lines so you need to check it out and if you need to make a choice of only doing one Jeep trip on your cruise, make sure it is this one.

Day seven was our last full day and was a day at sea. Like other days there are lots of activities, like the chocolate buffet and just as navigation and driving skills are important in Jeeping, they are also important when sailing a cruise ship

and touring the bridge.

We were greeted by 2<sup>nd</sup> officer Mario Imbimbo, an Italian as are most of the officers on Carnival Ships. As he was saying hello and welcoming us to the bridge, I used my best Italian and greeted him with "Hello and how are you doing?" He got a big smile and replied back to me in Italian. My 1<sup>st</sup> impression of the bridge was that it was kind of like the "Enterprise" in Star Trek with radar, sonar, GPS, satellite radios, and all sorts of electronic devices. It was spacious and very well organized. Mario told us that they were on auto-pilot at the time, navigating a GPS track from Cabo to L.A. While I don't have auto-pilot in my TJ, I know all about navigating the "outback" with saved tracks and could relate well to that. The electronic NAV charts on their 22+ inch screens looked very similar to the blue charts I was monitoring in my cabin on my Garmin and laptop. I don't know why, but I was surprised to see the ship using a saved GPS track to navigate. Mario continued to explain the ship's systems and management to us, and he stressed how things have gone high tech with joy sticks that have replaced the traditional large steering wheel on ships.

On day eight we arrived back in Los Angeles in the morning. We departed the ship after breakfast with our cruise over, and we all headed off for home. It was a trip of a lifetime and one that I know our entire group will never forget.

- For more information about Jeep Expeditions' next group Jeeping Cruise, or to join us on our 15 day Baja 2000 Expedition in October 2010, email us at [info@jeepexpeditions.org](mailto:info@jeepexpeditions.org). Be sure to place "Jeep Cruise or Baja 2000 Trip" in the subject line.



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