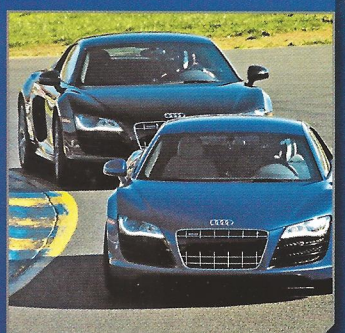
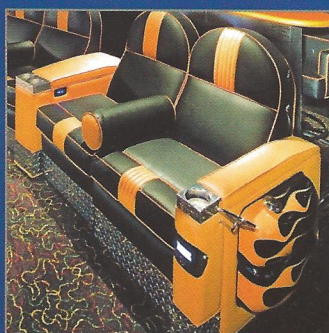
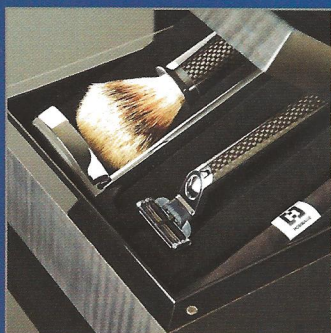
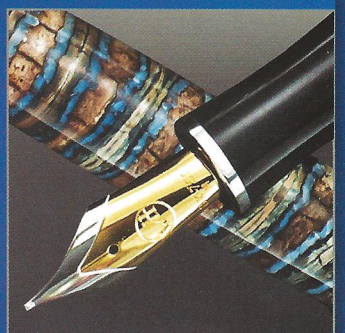
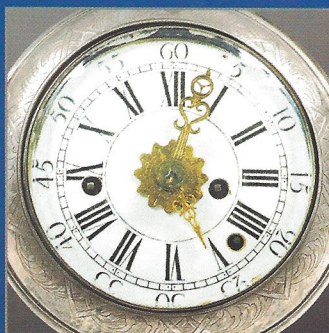
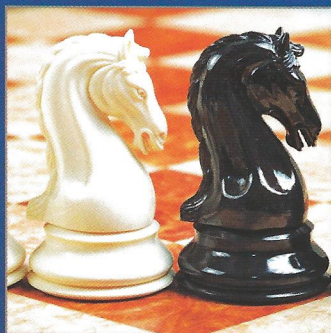
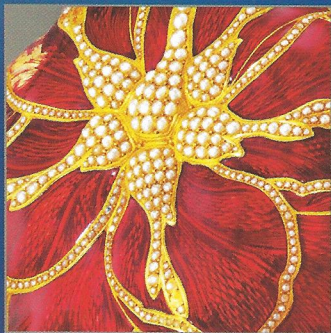
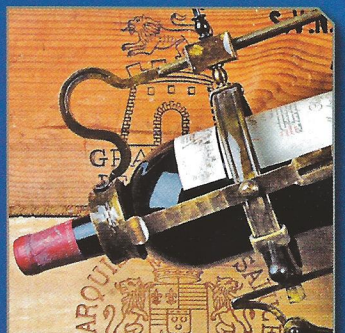
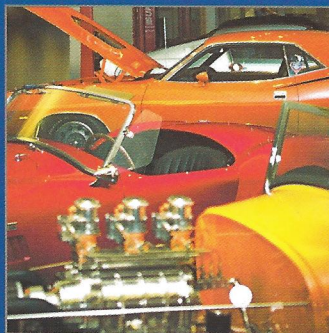
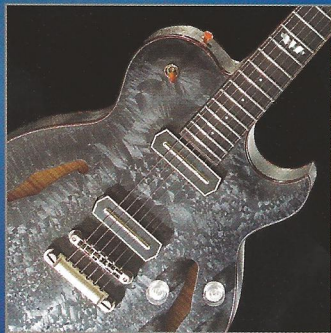
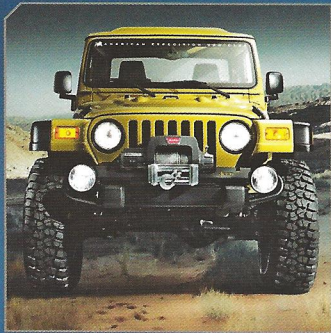


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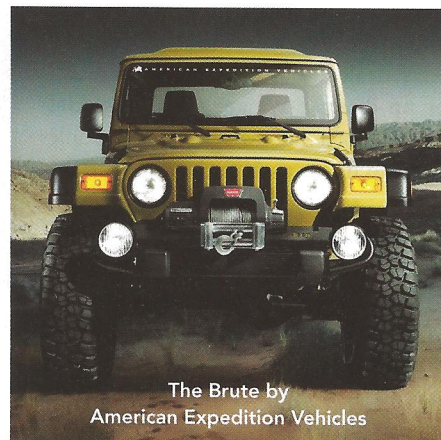


16 Unique Gifts

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CUSTOM TRUCKS AND SUVS



The Brute by
American Expedition Vehicles

STARING OUT at an open expanse of sandstone slabs on the back trails of Moab, Utah, I was reminded of the only steadfast rule when it comes to off-roading: if you're planning to conquer the great outdoors, you'd better come equipped with a great vehicle. The name of the trail was Steel Bender—an inauspicious designation, to say the least—and I was in a Jeep Wrangler. On paper, this might not look like the ideal situation, especially for anyone familiar with a modern-day Jeep. Thankfully, I was not driving your run-of-the-mill Wrangler; I was at the helm of an **American Expedition Vehicles** (www.aev-conversions.com) rock-crawling monster, and my copilot was the company's owner, Dave Harrington.

"Moab is an awesome training ground; it has everything from easy to really hard," explains Harrington. "Plus it's all right there close to town so you're never really very exposed. You can push harder than you typically would if you were 500 miles away from the nearest town."

Headquartered in Missoula, Mont., AEV builds and designs off-road machines to their full potential—a claim that the company backs up by testing them right in their backyard. Essentially, the company takes JK-style Jeep Wrangler models from the Toledo, Ohio, factory line and transforms them into off-road masterpieces.

**SPECIALTY VEHICLES THAT ATTRACT
ATTENTION WHETHER YOU'RE
HAULING KIDS, HAULING TRAILERS,
OR JUST HAULIN'. BY PAUL MEYERS**

"We produce just over 200 cars per year," claims Harrington. "There are about 10 Jeep dealers that are certified AEV dealers, but most people just call us up directly. We get a lot of special orders, so it makes sense that people come to us for their car."

One such customer, Gary Voigt, has owned four different AEV vehicles since acquiring his first in 2005. Voigt was introduced to the aftermarket brand at the Specialty Equipment Market Association (SEMA) show after a friend suggested that he consider AEV for his next vehicle purchase. After speaking with Harrington at the Las Vegas convention, he ordered a Brute—a Jeep Wrangler Rubicon converted to pickup-truck form. "The Brute is a fantastic vehicle," says Voigt. "You can't go anywhere without someone asking you about it. I've had people follow me into parking lots, and one time I had a guy follow me for 10 miles just to ask me where I got it."

According to Harrington, some of his retired customers travel the country in motor homes with their AEV in tow. For others, the AEV is their only car, one that they use as their daily driver during the week and take off-roading on the weekends. And then there are customers who require a



car like this for their everyday drives due to remote living situations. "I just did a motorcycle trip this last weekend into some of the isolated areas of Idaho, and I know that we've sold quite a few cars into these obscure towns," says Harrington. "Without the right vehicle, some of these people would be snowed in almost the entire year. I know a guy who has almost a five-hour drive to his house through

the woods. It's not a hard road, but you really have to be prepared for anything at that point—trees, mudslides, snow ... anything."

Voigt's Brute—the first of his AEV vehicles—sits at his cabin in Idaho, where most of his off-road excursions take place. Even though Voigt will dabble in some rock climbing from time to time, he doesn't consider himself a serious off-road driver. Instead, he sees himself more as a collector. "I actually bought a four-door JK in 2008 with a lift kit and 35-inch tires," he says. "It was a great road vehicle, but I ended up selling it to one of my business partners when I bought a 2009 JK with a 5.7-liter Hemi engine. Jeep's biggest problem was that their cars were just anemic. They make a lot of noise, but they wouldn't go up a hill. I have a



A 6.4-liter Hemi engine (top) powers AEV's Brute, a pickup conversion of a Jeep Wrangler (above).

lot of cars with a lot of horsepower, so the Hemi was really a great addition to the car. Now I have a 2012 JK that rides behind my motor home. It's just a thing of beauty."

Currently, AEV is working on producing a 6.4-liter Hemi conversion with 475 hp and 475 ft lbs of torque for customers who share Voigt's lust for power. Harrington claims the vehicle will be priced around \$80,000, but AEV offers a variety of options ranging from a \$40,000 lift kit to an unstoppable force of machinery outfitted with leather interior, a Hemi engine, and full off-road armoring that costs upwards of \$100,000.

"Most of our owners have some really nice cars, but they end up driving our car more often," says Harrington. "The Mercedes ends up just sitting in the garage, because these cars are just as nice to drive on-road as they are off-road. Plus, if someone ends up hitting our Jeep with their door in a parking lot, it's the other car that gets hurt, not ours."

A WINNING FORMULA

Hauk Designs (www.haukdesigns.com) of Chambersburg, Pa., also shares an affinity for Jeep products, but it does things a little differently than American Expedition Vehicles. While the AEV conversions look as if they rolled off the

Chrysler Group's assembly line, Hauk Designs goes to great lengths to set its vehicles apart from the Jeep nameplate. "We got tired of seeing so many Wranglers that looked like a parts catalog threw up on them," says Kenny Hauk, owner and founder of Hauk Designs. "Some of them look like a bad hack job, or sometimes they look good but just don't perform well because the suspension isn't a good match with the tires or the armor. We feel that we've put together a really good recipe."

That recipe is showcased in all three of Hauk's purpose-built creations: the Dune Raider, River Raider, and Rock Raider. Each Raider model is a turnkey product that is custom-manufactured to the owner's specifications. As the model names suggest, each individualized off-road warrior is tuned and modified to tackle a specific terrain: the Dune Raider for sand, the River Raider for wetlands, and the Rock Raider for rough-and-tumble trails. All three model variations are offered with a variety of power train options, since Hauk's goal is to offer personalized touches to each of the vehicles his company creates. The cars are offered with either manual or automatic transmissions and are mated to either a 5.7-liter Hemi with 400 hp or a Corvette-sourced 7.2-liter V-8 engine that produces more than 600 hp at the