

The Underground Fleet

There is perhaps no more legendary vehicle on the American road-- and off of it -- than the Jeep.

The rugged four-by-four that built a reputation for performance and reliability during World War II found civilian duty after the war, navigating the hills, forests and highways of America. And a handful went undercover to become what may be the nation's largest fleet of underground Jeeps. These eight Jeeps pull trams that carry visitors through Fantastic Caverns. Located in the green Ozarks hills just north of Springfield, Missouri, it is America's only ride-through cave.

The Jeeps at Fantastic Caverns are descendants of those that earned their stripes on the battlefields of World War II. More than 600,000 Jeeps were built by Willys and Ford during the war. Developed for the military on the eve of the conflict, the Jeep got its name, so the story goes, from "general purpose" or GP. But the term "jeep" had already been in the vocabulary of Army slang for years, according to one account.

Citing a 1941 Army report, Jim Allen wrote in Fourwheeler magazine that the word "jeep" was used by Army mechanics as early as World War I to refer to any new motor vehicle that was brought in for testing. "Jeep" was also a derogatory term for a new recruit. The name was even given to a comic strip character -- Eugene the Magical Jeep, a small, endearing, doglike creature who had mysterious powers and first appeared in "Popeye" comics in 1936.

The Jeep has come a long way -- literally -- since those days, and the fleet at Fantastic Caverns is no exception. Collectively, the vehicles that ferry visitors through the cave have logged more than 200,000 miles. It's been slow going, too. The cave Jeeps' average speed is just under one mile an hour -- it takes about 50 minutes to complete the leisurely one-mile cave tour. The odometer on each vehicle clicks an average of just 750 times each year.

Unlike their military and civilian cousins, these Jeeps don't spend much time contending with mud, snow, ice or blazing summer heat. The temperature in the cave, which is open all year, hovers around a mild 60 degrees during all seasons.

Preserving their historic reputation as a workhouse, the Jeeps provide an innovative way to see one of the country's most accessible tourist attractions. There's no walking necessary, so the tour is ideal for families with small children, older folks and people who use wheelchairs.

Headlights on the Jeeps are fully functional, but they're seldom needed. The entire tour route through the cave is brightly lighted so visitors can see the stalactites, stalagmites, flowstones and other of the countless formations that were thousands, perhaps millions of years in the making.

The Jeep-trams are also a less invasive way for guests to see the cave. For example, the vehicles' eight wheels on the cave floor are far less disruptive than hundreds of walking feet would be. The Jeeps also run on propane, a cleaner-burning motor fuel.

Taking care of the environment is important to the owners of Fantastic Caverns. Water quality is closely monitored -- its purity is vital to

wildlife, including the tiny, rare, blind cavefish -- that inhabit the underground ecosystem. Great care is also taken to protect the cave's ancient, irreplaceable formations from damage.

Old soldiers and Jeeps eventually fade away, but these are going to be around for quite a long time to come. The original Jeeps at Fantastic Caverns were put into service in 1961 and retired just a few years ago, having lasted for more than 30 years. That means the current fleet of Jeeps have enough easy-going miles left in them to carry visitors through the cave far into the 21st century.