



Hummer Haven

A place where Hummer owners actually go off-road. Just not in their own Hummers.

The Hummer Driving Academy in Mishawaka, Indiana, caters to those lucky few (we see them more as unlucky) who own the off-road vehicle of off-road vehicles.

For about four grand, registered owners can participate in an all-inclusive, three-day program with a tour of the factory, three levels of off-road driving, and navigation and GPS instruction. If four large seems a bit stiff, AM General periodically offers the program as an incentive on the roughly \$100,000 vehicle. Indeed, the 10 owners in our group did not get stuck with the four-figure tuition fee.

The two-hour tour of the AM General plant, birthplace of the military Humvee and civilian H1, was reason enough to visit Mishawaka. It's not every day you get to watch a Desert Storm taxi roll down the line as workers install a machine-gun platform, rivet aluminum body panels, and apply "chemical agent resistant coating" camouflage paint.

On the tour, we met John and Sharon Koonce, a Chicago couple who arrived, naturally, in a Hummer. Part Metallic Pewter, part airbrush tribute to Dungeons & Dragons, the paint job on John's H1 featured a fire-breathing Puff whose purple, green, red, and yellow wrath encompassed the wagon. Had John ever taken his Hummer off-road? "Nah," he said with a grin. "I have too much invested in the paint job."

Bill Thompson, director of fleet sales and commercial services for AM General, admitted John Koonce's response reflects the experience of a majority of the Hummer owners who come to the school.

"Most of these people arrive having never put a tire on a dirt road," he said. "But they go through the school and leave pumped up, wanting to go off-road." More evidence was needed.

At the off-road facility, we were introduced to the field obstacle course, a man-made *Romper Room* for Hummers. We subjected the six H1s at our disposal to three-foot-high walls, 30-inch-deep water, 60-degree inclines and declines, and 40-degree side slopes. The latter can be equated to falling out of bed but never hitting the floor.

Obstacles conquered, we were off to the 14-mile trail system that meanders through AM General's 320-acre proving

ground, originally established by Studebaker! First up: "Jurassic Park." This trail cued images of a *T. rex* chomping at the butt of our H1. No such luck. JP was a walk in the park.

"That was easy," we said to our instructor, Trevor Stone, unintentionally challenging the toughness of the program. "Just wait till tomorrow," he snickered. Stone spoke truth. On the second day, we tackled mud, sand, swamps, and boulders. Oh, and we got stuck, too.

Traversing "Python Pass," we came to a formidable obstacle. From the passenger seat, Stone—now secretly determined to show us a hard time—pointed at a crest that loomed above a pair of offset bathtub divots. He instructed us to "maintain throttle at 1500 rpm and *don't let off* until you've cleared the top of the hill."

No problem. We hit the gas, watched the tach reach 1500, and then tried to keep it there. The Hummer—bucking like a spurred bronco—was all but impossible to control, much less maintain the prescribed engine speed. When the front tires cleared the crest, we crossed what we thought was the finish line. "No, no! Keep on it!" Stone yelled. It was too late; we were high-centered. But now we could winch!

Our final day began with a vicarious trip to Moab, Utah, where the infamous "Golden Crack" resides. Replicated on site, this V-ditch served as our final exam.

From outside our red H1, test-track administrator Brian Kroeger gave instructions: "Approach at about a 45-degree angle, ease the left front tire into the crack and slightly up the other side, then wait for me."

When we got to the "wait for me" part, the truck was more or less level, but we had three tires touching asphalt and one—the right front—with three feet of air beneath it. Peering out our window, we listened to Kroeger. "Now turn left, keep it at 1500 rpm, and stop when I tell ya!"

As the right front touched bottom, the left rear elevated five feet above. "Stop!" yelled Kroeger. Our truck now resembled a St. Bernard answering a call of nature. We felt at once safe and completely vulnerable.

When the dust had settled, we had newfound respect for the Hummer. Off-road, it is absolutely the most kick-ass "civilian" vehicle. On-road? Is pointless too strong a word?

What did the other grads/Hummer owners think? Off-roading was "fun," but "not in my Hummer."
—Ron Kiino

