

Ad man turns tour director to show park's splendor to visitors

By Maris Brancheau

Seven years ago Joe Raffetto was sitting in a diner in Plymouth, Mass. watching a tour go by and he thought to himself, "Why couldn't that be done in Anza-Borrego?"

After years of hemming and hawing, Raffetto arrived in Borrego in January and began working in earnest to start California Overland. The tour company had its official grand opening on April 30.

"It wasn't my first choice to open up at the start of summer," Raffetto said while seated in his office and California Overland's headquarters at 1233 Palm Canyon Drive.

Temperatures are climbing, but Raffetto is eager to get going on tours of three types. He's even color-coded them. There's the Green Circle, the Blue Circle, and the Black Diamond. And tour participants can experience all three excursions while riding in the back of a M35A2. The former military troop-carriers can hold up to 18 people at a time. Raffetto has customized the back of the trucks with bus seats, seat belts, and carpet.

"It's not too noisy back there," Raffetto said after pulling out a stepladder and offering a hand up into the military truck. "But it's not air condi-

tioned. It's more for the adventure seeker."

Raffetto said he would have liked to have been running his troop carriers during the busy flower season that has just passed, but his final permitting from the state Public Utility Commission wasn't approved until mid-April.

"I hear the Europeans really like the heat," Raffetto said.

California Overland provides sunscreen and plenty of water during trips. He's working on getting canvas covers to provide shade over the back of the open-air vehicles. Over time Raffetto hopes to add a couple of military Humvees to his fleet. He has a 12-passenger van that will be used to pick up clients at hotels throughout San Diego and bring the visitors to Borrego for an overnight camping experience.

Raffetto says he's working closely with Anza-Borrego Desert State Park and is an official park concessionaire with the state. In exchange for operating his business within park boundaries, Raffetto will pay 10 percent of California Overland's gross income back to the park.

"From the beginning I didn't know if this would fly with the park," Raf-



SUN photo by MARIS BRANCHEAU

READY for business, Joe Raffetto shows a troop carrier that has been retrofitted to carry up to 18 passengers on desert tours. Raffetto held a grand opening celebration for California Overland on April 30.

fetto said. "But they've been very supportive and helpful."

Rates for California Overland's tours start at \$45 per person for the Green Circle and climb up to \$325. A typical Green Circle includes a tour of Font's Point and Clark's Dry Lake. Blue Circle trip are more challenging and can include hiking.

Overnight options include all camping gear, meals, and upon request, a guitarist.

Raffetto left his advertising business in New York, N.Y. and home in New Jersey to start California Overland.

As for his career change, Raffetto said, "Advertising doesn't make the world a better place. But to show people the vastness of the desert that they may have never seen before is a great thing."

To contact California Overland call (866) 6-EXPLORE.

Earth Day clean up was a success

Ocotillo Wells State Vehicular Recreation Area hosted a "Clean Up and Green Up" Earth Day event April 23. More than 100 people participated in the event based at Holmes Camp. Nearly two dumpsters were packed with collected trash and volunteers hauled away tires, pallets, and pieces of abandoned vehicles.

Participants took home an ocotillo cutting with care instructions. The plants



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