

**Whoa,
Nellie!**

Marco Scuderi had to have a Jeep. He went to the States and got his hands on this CJ7, a fun, very capable off-road machine with loads of power and true character. Just don't damage it...

"Whoa, Nellybelle!" Baby boomers of a certain age might recognise the line as Pat Brady's panic-stricken plea to his cantankerous Jeep on 'The Roy Rogers Show', which ran until 1957. Nellybelle was a CJ2A Jeep with a mind of her own and often sped away driverless with Brady in frantic pursuit on foot.

Our Nelliebelle here is not quite so cantankerous, but she does have a mind of her own at times. Nellie is a 1978 Jeep

CJ7 Renegade originally fitted with a five-litre AMC 304 V8, auto transmission and the first generation Jeep Quadra-Trac constant 4WD transfer case (a Borg Warner BW1339), and was imported into New Zealand by owner Marco Scuderi.

How Marco ended up with the Jeep is a story in itself. Originally from Sicily, Marco came to NZ in 1997 after a stint in the navy and studies at university in Italy in geology and cartography. He did a master's degree and then worked for city councils in both North Shore and Palmerston North. After marrying a Kiwi, Alexandra, in 2002, he took up a fellowship to do a PhD at the University of Maryland in Washington DC, USA.

While there he fulfilled his dream of owning a Jeep – in fact his wife Alex maintains the real reason he accepted the fellowship in the States was to search for one.

The advertisement was for a "stock CJ7 Renegade, no rust, original AMC V8, TH400 tranny, constant 4WD" in Las Vegas, so a deposit was paid and he went over a couple of months later to complete the deal. The vendor was a young guy whose job was curator for a local Native American museum, who let slip over dinner that he would hunt in the desert for artefacts and particularly "liked going airborne and landing on the strong suspension the car was equipped with". Back in Washington DC, Marco was hit with reality: "The Jeep was now covered in snow, illegally parked on a

SPECIFICATIONS

1978 Jeep CJ7 Renegade

Engine 5.9L AMC 360 V8 with TBI injection

Gearbox TH400 3-speed auto

Transfer case Borg Warner BW1339 1st Generation Quadra-Trac

Diffs Front Dana 30 widened. Rear AM20 widened. Both with 4.11 ratio and Ox Cable Locker

Suspension Leaf springs front and rear with extended shackles

Tyres 35x11.5x15 Silverstone MT-117 Extreme on 10-inch rims



Great power from replacement 5.9-litre AMC 360 Tuff Dawg engine. TBI system chipped in Matamata. Dyno tested at 365hp and 623Nm before being detuned

residential street, no plates, no permit and the parking warden was waiting at the corner." The suspension was a strong set-up from Superlift, but the good points ended there. The chassis was, in fact, broken in four different places (from all those jumps, presumably), the carb could not cope with the extreme temperatures, and when Marco tried to clean the windscreen he realised there were no wipers. Who needs wipers in the Nevada desert? The hardtop was not closing well and the snow drifts were piling up inside, helped by the Swiss cheese-like pattern of holes on the body, where a number of external fuel jerry brackets used to be.

In need of help, the Jeep was sent to a couple of brothers who were experts at working on older Jeeps. Being some distance away, a tow truck was tasked with delivering the vehicle but the driver put the front tyres on a dolly, ignored the constant 4WD system and proceeded to blow the transfer case to pieces.

In the months and years that followed a new fully-boxed frame was put in, a new t-case was sourced, three different suspension set-ups were tried, a Howell throttle body fuel injection installed and the body was restored and repainted. Countless parts had to be sourced, mostly from the western states, and the bonnet had to be replaced – not that there was anything wrong with it, just that the panelbeater left it outside where a hurricane picked it up and took it away never to be seen again!

The axles are widened later model wide-track with a Dana 30 in the front. The rear is an AMC20 with custom hand-made tubes widened to 56 inches. Both front and rear have Ox cable lockers fitted and the ratios have been changed to 4.11. A double Cardan drive shaft is fitted to the rear.

In 2006 Marco and Alex returned to NZ bringing Nellie with them. Another tow truck was called to get the Jeep transported home and this time Marco "decided to make it clear that, after all, I was a Sicilian who did not want to have his car damaged again... understood?"

It arrived safely and since then Marco has collected six spare transfer cases and three reduction units just in case, because there are no more spare parts for these components. The transfer case is a BW1339 with low ratio and the ability to 'lock' the centre diff in an 'emergency' via a dial inside the glove box. Labels inside state that it should only be used when "immobile due to wheel spinning".

Marco has replaced the original hardtop for a fibreglass truck cab from 4WD Fibreglass in Hamilton. It had to be modified slightly to fit as it was meant for CJ8 Jeeps, but it does make the CJ7 look pretty smart and it is very simple to remove to go topless or fit the bikini soft top that Marco has for summer. He likes to cruise topless with no doors but "sometimes I end





Later model Dana 30 axles in front; rear is AMC20 with custom hand-made tubes widened to 56in. Both axles have Ox cable lockers

up tasting mud, sometimes I end up wet as a duck in a thunderstorm, but it is incredibly fun to drive”.

Nellie is certainly capable enough off-road, with extra-long leaves that provide plenty of articulation; with all three diffs fully locked it can certainly go places. Marco has moved the original Mile Marker winch to a demountable for the rear and fitted a Runva 11XP with synthetic rope on the front.

In the rear he has a full complement of recovery gear, including Hi-Lift jack, ropes, shackles, pulley blocks and so forth.

Tyres are 35x11.5x15 Silverstone MT-117 Extreme, which Marco finds “horrendously noisy” and “distract from the pleasure of driving on the road”. Although Nellie looks as if she ready to cross the Darien Gap at short notice, Marco “seeks no mud, no jungle, and most definitely no more pine forests”.

Nellie’s reliability record has been somewhat chequered. In 2011 the engine oil pump lost oil suction on a steep incline, ruining the bearings, and in 2012 a trip into Waitawheta caused the engine to overheat – but luckily Marco wasn’t turned into a camper for the night. A replacement 5.9-litre AMC 360 Tuff Dawg engine with high compression pistons and a few other mods was installed last year. The throttle body injector system was recalibrated (chipped) by Dave Green of Specialty Cars in Matamata. The engine was dyno tested at 365hp and 460 ft.lbs of torque (623Nm), then it was detuned to lower the peak torque. Marco doesn’t know the output now, but says “it is enough to take off with all four tyres spinning”. Until a dual brake booster and adjustments to the pedal were completed, braking always had a rather unpredictable outcome and hence the nickname Nelliebelle.

An additional oil cooler has been added for the engine and temporarily sits in the engine bay, but the intention is to get it mounted in the front grille.

Inside, a Uniden Pro530XL CB radio has been added but the rest is standard, including the original Jeep AM only, mono, single-speaker radio.

Overall, restoring the Jeep has had equal amounts of ups and downs for Marco. On average, every modification has been tried at least twice and caused a ripple effect of other modifications to follow. Marco can’t even say that the changes will stop anytime soon, as his plans for the future include installing a pair of Dana 44 axles that have been collecting dust in the garage for a few years now.

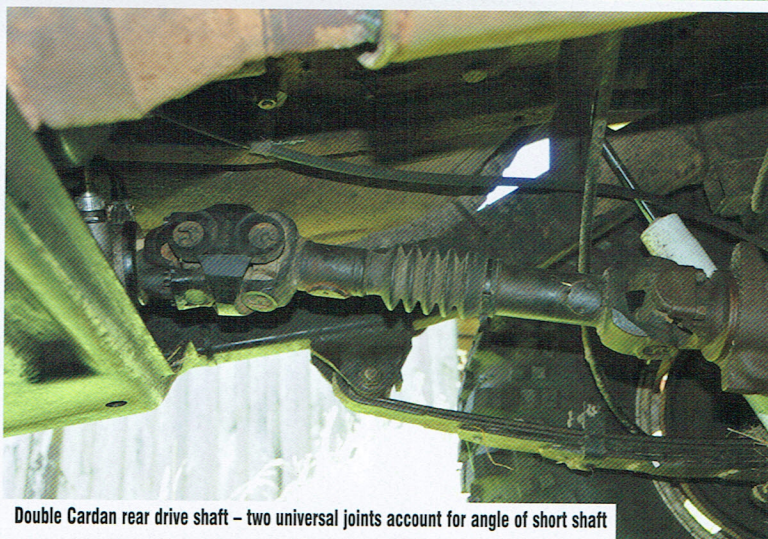
Meantime, with a growing circle of friends in the 4WD scene, Marco’s aim is to use Nelliebelle a bit more often with Jeep Club trips and tag-along safaris.



Original interior with standard Jeep AM mono radio. Note twin cable operated front and rear axle diff lock levers on transmission tunnel



Front leaf suspension with extended spring shackles; additional brace to support steering box, which is bolted to chassis



Double Cardan rear drive shaft – two universal joints account for angle of short shaft



Original Mile Marker winch is now demountable in rear; Runva 11XP with synthetic rope up front