

# Climbing through the clouds

## Jeep tour business grows in region's wine hotspots

BY MARLIZE VAN ROMBURGH  
Staff Writer

Cloud Climber Jeeps was one of the first wine country tour companies in Santa Barbara and the Santa Ynez Valley. Now it's hoping to blaze the trail in Ojai and Paso Robles, too.

The company, founded in 1999 by Dave and Sybil DeMauro, offers back-country and wine tours, taking upwards of 5,000 people a year around in its signature yellow Jeeps. With the Santa Barbara County market now saturated by guided tour services, Cloud Climber recently expanded to Paso Robles and Ojai, both places where it hopes to stay ahead of the curve and establish itself before the tourism markets there peak.

"We like to be pioneers," Dave DeMauro said.

DeMauro has a background in tourism, working in the hospitality industry in San Diego for years before moving to Santa Barbara. Co-founder and wife Sybil DeMauro was formerly an educator at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. Both were ready to ditch their jobs and do their own thing when they decided to launch Cloud Climber Jeeps.

The company's very first Cloud Climber was Dave's own Jeep, then painted black. When it was sent off to be sprayed what would become the company's signature yellow, "it was like sending a kid off to school for the first time," Sybil said.

Over the next 11 years, the DeMauros expanded their fleet and their geography slowly and systematically, steering clear of debt as they grew.

"Little by little, business took off," Sybil said. The company now has 15 vehicles and five full-time and about 12 part-time drivers.

Establishing a reputation for quality and customer service was important, Sybil said, especially since much of the company's business relies on referrals and cross-promotions from area wineries and hotels.

Cloud Climber tours range in price from \$89 per person for a sunset tour to \$120 per person for a semi-private back-country wine tour.

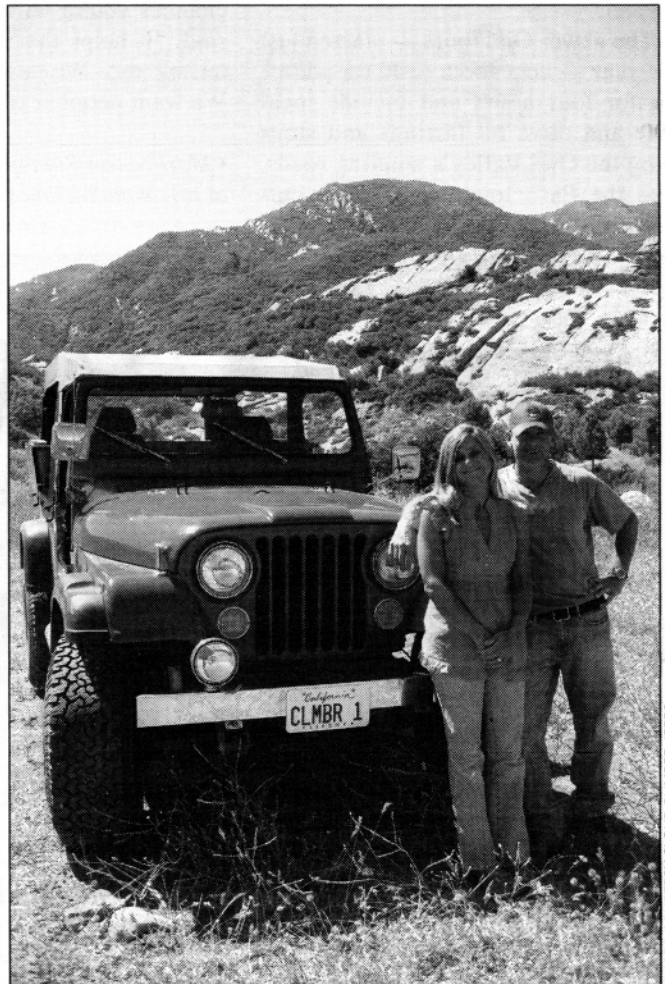


PHOTO COURTESY CLOUD CLIMBER JEEPS

Cloud Climber Jeeps owners Sybil and Dave DeMauro have expanded from Santa Barbara into Ventura and SLO counties.

The Santa Barbara wine tours take visitors past Lake Cachuma and into wine country. The excursions, averaging about five hours, include tastings at four wineries and a picnic lunch, and tourists can customize the drive based on the varietals or wineries they're most interested in.

Cloud Climber's Paso Robles tours started just last year. Northern San Luis Obispo County is "poising itself to be the Napa of the Central Coast," Dave said.

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## JEEPS

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"We plan to put ourselves in the places that haven't really become known," he said. "When we were starting in the Santa Ynez Valley, we knew it was going to be five years before they started growing good wines and 10 years before they started making great wines. We expect the same in Paso."

The newer Ojai tours — started just this year — cost about \$100 for adults, run for four hours and include local wine and olive oil tastings and stops along the Ojai Valley's winding roads. Like the Paso tours, the Ojai excursions

are meant to capitalize on a still largely unexplored market.

Cloud Climbers is betting the Ojai area will enjoy a tourism boom in years to come, in part aided by the recent launch of an Ojai Visitors Bureau.

In March, the city gave \$160,000 to the Ojai Valley Chamber of Commerce to spend on the bureau and promotion of the area as a tourist destination.

"When you're expanding in this economy, it says something about the chances you're willing to take," Dave said. "It helps that in Ojai, they were telling us, 'We want you guys here. We want people exploring this area.'"

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