



UNUSUAL DRIVING

Heads up:
surveying the
scene at Tank
Town USA in
Blue Ridge, Ga.



Crushing It

IN SEARCH OF A ONE-OF-A-KIND DRIVING EXPERIENCE BEHIND
THE WHEEL—MAKE THAT LEVERS—OF A TANK



KRISTEN KOCH

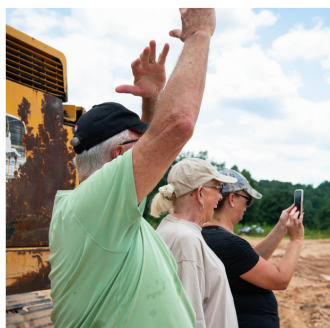


LEAH OVERSTREET

I'M

WIPING THE DUST OFF MY SUNGLASSES WHEN I FIRST HEAR WHAT SOUNDS LIKE A LAWNMOWER. IT GETS LOUDER, RESOLVING INTO A DIESEL ROAR, AND THEN I SEE IT, KICKING UP DIRT AND GRAVEL, PUFFING SMOKE AS IT CREEPS OVER THE MUD. I SNAP A PHOTO THAT I WILL LATER CAPTION WITH MULTIPLE EXCLAMATION MARKS. BECAUSE **THIS IS THE TANK THAT I'M ABOUT TO DRIVE. OVER A CAR. »**

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Clockwise from top left: the author gets some pro tips before the car crush; Liebross takes a break; taking a test drive to get used to steering with levers; a Tank Town participant spray-paints the next victim; the Brauns cheer on family members who take their turn

I've come to Tank Town USA in Blue Ridge, Ga., two and a half hours northeast of Atlanta, just for this. It's a large open field just off the highway that Todd Liebross acquired in 2012, then imported a few vehicles and opened Tank Town in 2013.

"I'd love to say that I thought of it myself, but the reality is, I saw it on the internet," he admits. He travelled to England to see how other tank-driving businesses operated, then returned to Blue Ridge and opened his own. "I figured, what's the worst that could happen, you end up with a couple of tanks? It's like *Field of Dreams*: if you build it, they will come."

Tank Town's drivers mostly come from the Atlanta area or neighbouring Florida. On the day of my visit, the other group is here as a Father's Day present—"for the father who has everything!" says Jennifer Braun, who arranged

the drive for her husband and her dad. Though it seems like a testosterone-heavy experience, Liebross says there's an equal number of women who come here to crush cars.

I've been told to bring my driver's licence, and to wear sturdy close-toed shoes, plenty of sunscreen and clothes that can get dirty. Having pulled the tank out to the starting position, Liebross calls me over to examine the day's victim: a four-door 2003 Saab 9-3 that, to me, looks like it's still in pretty good shape.

"Are you sure it's okay to crush this?" I ask. "Doesn't someone want to drive it?"

He assures me that it's fine. Like the other cars in the field, which range from flattened Audi sedans to pancaked Chrysler minivans, it's "a local's junk car," deemed too expensive to repair.

To whet my appetite for destruction, Liebross brings out a bin of work gloves, cans of spray paint and a metre-long

sledgehammer, encouraging me to write a message on the car and take out the side windows before I come at it with the tank. I clamber onto the roof of the car and take a few tentative practice swings before smashing the front passenger-side window. It's made of safety glass, so it pebbles and caves in, instead of shattering and flying everywhere. But it's worked; instead of worrying about the car, I whoop and smash the other passenger-side window. It's tank time.

Except it's not really a tank. Liebross is careful to specify that I'll be driving an FV432, an armoured personnel carrier (APC). Vehicles like it have served the British army since 1963 in theatres from Kuwait to Afghanistan. Upgraded models are still hauling soldiers and gear today.

But while the APC may not have been designed for front-line combat like a tank, it still runs on tracks and a hefty 240-horsepower Rolls-Royce >



From left: dropping the [sledge] hammer on a 2003 Saab 9-3; a vintage truck is one of a handful of other quirky vehicles at Tank Town USA

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MACHINE FUN

FOUR MORE PLACES WHERE YOU CAN TAKE A DRIVE ON THE WILD SIDE

Various locations
U.K.

Take the wheel of Optimus Prime in the cab of a Peterbilt 379 semi truck painted to look like the Transformer in a truck-driving experience with England’s **CAR CHASE HEROES**. True hauling enthusiasts can also try driving a Volvo FH460 truck. carchaseheroes.com

Oshawa
ONTARIO, CANADA

Climb aboard for a ride in a tank or armoured vehicle at the **ONTARIO REGIMENT RCAC REGIMENTAL MUSEUM**, billed as the only place in Canada where you can experience these vehicles up close. While you can choose the vehicle, the crew does the driving. ontarmuseum.ca

West Berlin
NEW JERSEY, U.S.A.

Kids over 107 centimetres tall can dig for treasure with a modified mini excavator at **DIGGERLAND USA**, a theme park dedicated to construction equipment. Adults over 18 can book time on full-size machines like a wheel loader and bulldozer at sister park Diggerland XL. diggerlandusa.com

Helmdon
NORTHANTS, U.K.

A full-day experience at **TANKS A LOT** involves everything from driving a 251 Gvozdika self-propelled tracked gun to learning to safely fire a 17th-century flintlock. If that’s not enough, they also offer courses to prepare you for a U.K. H-category licence, which allows holders to drive tracked vehicles on public roads. tanks-alot.co.uk

AD

UNUSUAL DRIVING



High above it all: the author, showing that Saab who's boss, takes the first pass over the hood

diesel engine. It has a circular hatch on top leading to a cabin with padded benches and air vents, and a square hatch—just in front of the circular one—that leads to the driver's seat, which, given its British origins, is on the right side of the vehicle.

Liebross brings out a ladder so I can climb in, then moves it away and hoists himself up using the tracks. He switches on the engine, passes me a pair of protective earmuffs and explains how to drive. There are two pedals: an accelerator that's large enough for a foot in a combat boot and a small red engine kill that I'm told not to touch. There are also two levers instead of a steering wheel. You pull the left one to go left, the right one to go right, and both at once to stop.

I shift into drive, gently press the throttle, and the tank lumbers into action. It takes a few presses—and a few cries of "More gas! More gas!" from Liebross—before we get up to speed. But once we do, it's surprisingly easy to steer around. I plant my tracks in the existing ruts and trundle around the field, looping up small inclines and down into mud puddles. It reminds me of being a kid, gleefully

riding my bike over curbs, over the lawn, over flower beds, not caring where I went so long as I was going.

Finally, it's time for the car crush. We'll do it in three passes, starting with a roll over the entire car from hood to trunk. Liebross helps me line up the FV432 with the car using my headlights; we do this so that I can drive straight over the car with maximum traction.

And we do. The APC takes it in stride, pushing forward without any problem. Even though I hear a little crumpling metal and smashing glass, it's barely audible over the chugging of the engine.

The next two passes are perpendicular, flattening the car's trunk and passenger compartment, and leaving a jumble of broken headrests, pebbled glass and bent metal. It's not exactly a surprise; as Liebross points out, "when you have 30,000 pounds of tank against 2,000 pounds of car, there's no real competition." It might not have been a fair fight, but I'm still calling it a smashing success. **CAA**