

New Jeep built for tough terrain, family tasking

by Mark_Maynard

High fuel prices have been tough on Chrysler's Jeep division. Its hardy off-road vehicles are built with heavy-duty components in critical areas to help owners get back home after a day on the trail. Carrying around heavy skid plates and cast-iron parts have a cost in fuel and the purchase price.

TAKE LIBERTY - Boasting a tight, 35.9-foot turning circle, Jeep Liberty pivots handily through the mall parking lot, and making a U-turn on a trail wouldn't involve dragging a load of brush with you. CNS Photo courtesy of Jeep. Your basic, mainstream SUV isn't quite so encumbered.

Trouble is, the new Liberty model has rugged good looks and engineering to make it capable off-road as well as a useful family wagon. And its unique option for the Sky Slider roof can turn bad days good. The canvas, roof-size sunroof, \$1,200, powers back to give convertible-like access to the great outdoors.

There's not much fuel savings to be had in the two-wheel-drive version. My Limited 2WD test truck weighed nearly 2 tons, which was about 135 pounds less than having the four-wheel-drive equipment. Fuel economy is 16 mpg city and 22 highway for six-speed manual or four-speed automatic transmission and 15/20 for the 4WD with automatic. I was averaging in the low 17s in combined driving.

Pricing ranges from \$20,990, including \$660 destination, for the base Liberty Sport 2WD to \$26,785 for the Limited 4WD. The Limited 2WD tester had a sticker price of \$31,235, which did not seem outrageous for the whole package.

The only engine offered is the 235-horsepower, 3.7-liter V-6. The test truck felt heavy on takeoff from a stop and the four-speed automatic could have used a gear or two more for quicker downshifts and, possibly, eke out another mpg or two of fuel economy. When the diesel option returns for this model, I expect it will be very popular. Liberty shares a platform with Dodge Nitro, which has an option for a 260-hp, 4.0-liter V-6 with five-speed automatic. Fuel ratings are 16/21 2WD, 15/20 4WD.

Liberty does well with many things on-road or off.

Its 35.9-foot turning circle is about as tight as most midsize sedans can accomplish. Liberty pivots handily through the mall parking lot, and making a U-turn on a trail wouldn't involve dragging a load of brush with you, as it might in the less-nimble Hummer.

Ride quality is trucky and bouncy, which may indicate that there's substantial wheel travel to keep tires in contact with the trail. But there's considerable "head toss" when making turns or entering driveways. Perhaps due to the fairly short wheelbase and width, high-speed driving did not feel planted and secure.

The stubby instrument panel allows good views over the hood and front fenders for guiding tire placement. Visibility is good over the shoulder, but the driver position would benefit from a telescoping steering wheel or adjustable pedals.

The tall architecture is good for cargo and passengers, though ergonomics could be better. Interior quality is durable and good enough for a Jeep, but not a "premium" Chrysler.

There are 40 inches of headroom front and rear and almost 39 inches of rear legroom, enough for a 6-foot-2 adult to be relatively comfortable. The front passenger seat folds flat and has a recessed, hard back that could be used as a desktop. It folds forward for more cargo capacity.

The rear doors open wide, but foot access is slim. Foot room in the center position is consumed by the tall transmission tunnel, but seats on either side benefit from a pair of low cup holders in the back side of the front console. Rear seat backs recline or fold flat for a cargo area with enough sleeping space for short campers. The cargo area has tie-downs and under-floor storage.

Jeep has done a good job of multitasking space in Liberty. There is value and function for the buyer who uses the vehicle as a dual-purpose trail and family vehicle. Taking an easy drive with the Sky Slider roof wide open makes it a little easier to see beyond the next gasoline station.

SPECS

2008 Jeep Liberty Limited 2WD

Body style: midsize, five-passenger sport-utility vehicle

Engine: 210-horsepower, SOHC, 3.7-liter V-6; 235 foot-pounds of torque at 4,000 rpm

Transmission: four-speed automatic

EPA fuel economy estimates: 16 mpg city, 22 highway; 87 octane recommended

DIMENSIONS

Cargo space: 31.5 cubic feet

Front head/leg/shoulder room: 40.4/40.8/56.8 inches

Rear head/leg/shoulder room: 40.3/38.8/56.6 inches

Length/wheelbase: 174.4/104.3 inches

Curb weight: 4,030 pounds (4,222 4WD)

FEATURES

Standard equipment includes: remote locking, air conditioning, six-way power driver seat, eight-speaker Infinity audio with in-dash CD and MP3, Sirius satellite radio with one year of service, illuminated vanity mirrors, leather-wrapped steering wheel with audio controls, power windows-locks-mirrors, cargo area cover and light, luxury front and rear floor mats

Safety features include: front multistage air bags, side-curtain air bags, electronic stability program, all-speed traction control, anti-lock four-wheel disc brakes, brake assist, hill-start assist

PRICING

Base: \$25,175 including \$660 freight charge; price as tested, \$31,235

Options on test vehicle: Inferno Red Crystal pearl coat paint, \$225; Preferred package 28F, \$2,295, includes manual driver seat lumbar, six-way power driver and two-way power passenger seats, leather-trimmed and heated seats, automatic air conditioning with pollen filter, seat-radio-mirror presets for driver, automatic headlights, 18-inch all-season performance tires and alloy wheels, rear park assist system, remote starting; trailer tow group, \$395; premium sound group, \$395, includes hands-free communications, auto-dimming rearview mirror with microphone, six-disc in-dash CD-DVD-MP3; MyGIG multimedia infotainment system, \$1,550, adds navigation, touch screen monitor, Sirius satellite radio

PLUSES: Appealing, capable and functional family Jeep.

MINUSES: Fuel economy; compromised center rear seat space. Scooter easy to operate, but storage space scarce

By Jerry Garrett, CNS

At the beginning of the 20th century, Henry Ford envisioned two cars in every garage in America. I wonder, as the 21st century starts, if we shouldn't also make room in our garages for a scooter.

First, a scooter is much easier to ride than a motorcycle. It is lighter, more maneuverable and sits on an easy-to-deploy center stand - not a kickstand. A scooter has no gears to shift or clutch to work, so starting off from an incline requires no coordination of gear, clutch and brake to get going. Twist the handgrip throttle and you're moving. It's an easier process to learn than riding a bicycle. There's nothing for your feet to do, except rest on the flat floorboards.

I've just finished many miles with an Aprilia SportCity 250, which has the power and size to carry a passenger.

I worried that I might get run over leaving traffic lights, but the SportCity launches from a standing start to 60 mph in about eight seconds. That's fast enough to zip out of harm's way.

The SportCity's secret, if you can call it that, is its state-of-the-art fuel-injected 250cc engine. It's an environmentally responsible four-stroke single-cylinder that meets tough Euro 3 emissions standards. The 22.5-horsepower engine has a top speed of 80 mph and cruises comfortably at freeway speeds, although I found it prudent to ride at about 60 mph in the slow lane.

At 61 mpg, fuel economy is better than any gasoline-engine car, but the fuel tank is only about 2 gallons.

Onboard storage is generally at a premium on the SportCity. The under-seat space is barely big enough for one small helmet.

With a load of two people and a bit of baggage, the SportCity will stop from 60 mph in a little more than three seconds. The scooter's stability under hard braking was also very reassuring.

The SportCity has 15-inch wheels, which classifies it among the largest scooters available. But it doesn't feel large; it feels as light and controllable as a 90cc moped in traffic. A smaller scooter, such as a Vespa with 10-inch wheels, might be more maneuverable and easier to park in urban situations.

Large wheels, however, make the SportCity a blast on the open road - sort of a contradiction in terms, considering this scooter's name.

The SportCity handled rough pavement surprisingly well. Its frame is made from high-strength, tubular steel for torsional rigidity. A hydraulic fork uses 35 mm stanchions that give the front wheel 4 inches of travel. The engine and transmission assembly also acts as the rear swing arm. Suspension is provided by two rear shock absorbers, which are adjustable. Rear wheel travel is 3 inches.

At \$4,599, the SportCity is an excellent value with admirable build quality, many advanced features and top resale value.

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