

Wrangler scores with 4-door hardtop convertible

by Mark_Maynard

A four-door Jeep Wrangler is one of those ideas that sounds bad on paper and looks ungainly in photography. The concept should have had about as much chance of flying as a bumblebee but it took off.

The Jeep Wrangler Unlimited, available with a three-piece hardtop, adds 20.6 inches to the standard Wrangler's 95.4-inch wheelbase, length that went to back-seat space and more cargo room.

The bee and the four-door Wrangler defy logic. And the Wrangler Unlimited, a four-door, has been a stunning sales success.

It is not just the only four-door convertible for sale today, it hits the sweet spot for truckness and creates a desirable entry point as an accommodating family vehicle. And it's fun for all off-road, too, with standard Hill Start Assist, which prevents rollback on hills.

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Unlike the two-door Wrangler, the four-door is available in rear-wheel drive, not just 4WD.

Pricing starts at \$22,565 for the Unlimited X two-wheel drive, including a \$1,000 factory rebate. Four-wheel-drive models start at \$23,740, including the same rebate.

The Wrangler Unlimited has such charm that it willed me to overlook a few shortcomings because it works on so many levels - even if it isn't an engineering marvel.

The Sahara test truck was \$27,270 with rebate and \$28,445 with 4WD. Standard features include power windows and locks, remote keyless entry and security alarm, Stain Repel seat fabric, seven-speaker Infinity sound system with Sirius satellite radio, leather-wrapped steering wheel with cruise control, front and rear floor mats, deep-tint sunscreen glass, body-color fender flares, fog lamps, tow hooks, 18-inch machined aluminum wheels and tubular side steps.

The top-line Rubicon, \$31,590, is intended for the off-road enthusiast and is equipped with 17-inch BF Goodrich mud tires, Dana 44 heavy-duty front and rear axles (4.10 ratio), locking differentials, rock rails, electronic sway-bar disconnect and more.

I made some "observations" that aren't as much criticisms as curiosities, which could be filed under the heading "There Must Be a Better Way." Among them:

â€” The visors are inadequate, designed to fit to the contour of the windshield header, not to block sun and glare. There's a wide gap at the windshield-pillars sides of each front visor, which could or should be covered by a visor extender. And maybe also add some dot-matrix sunscreen behind the rearview mirror.

â€” The rearview mirror seems small, capturing a narrow view out the back. And the view out the back is constricted by the wiper motor on the left upper corner.

â€” The back seat is as upright as a church pew and the audio "sport bar" to house speakers is in head-whacking distance of tall occupants. And there are no grab bars for rear occupants to brace themselves when romping off road.

â€” The driver position is tight, which could be made more comfortable with a telescoping steering wheel or adjustable pedals, or both.

But the driving experience is tight and the cabin, with hardtop, was remarkably hushed of wind noise for a vehicle the shape of a block.

The 202-horsepower, 3.8-liter V-6 engine is best enjoyed off road, because its acceleration force is underwhelming. But the engine with manual transmission is now upgraded to cleaner ULEV II emissions from LEV II. A six-speed manual gearbox is standard, but not available on two-wheel-drive models. A four-speed automatic is optional, but Jeep can't bring on a six-speed soon enough. It will help launch force and cruising speed, plus more capable off-road climbing.

The tops are "convertible," but the process of removing or replacing panels is a little more complex than I care to mess with for a drive to work. But the hardtop will be the preferred choice for anyone living in severe climates, hot or cold.

The second-generation Command-Trac part-time, two-speed transfer case is standard on the base and Sahara models. An optional Trac-Lok limited-slip rear differential will be a must-have for off-roaders who seek out sand, gravel, snow or ice.

The engine and transmissions are made in the United States. Final assembly is in Toledo, Ohio. Engines are built in Trenton, Mich.

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