

New wrinkle for Wrangler: Jeep adds doors without sacrificing attitude

by Mark_Maynard

The sensation of Jeep tires biting through a crust of earth on a wind-whipped dune telegraphs a message to an off-road driver. And then feeling those tires lose traction in the talcum below the crust sends another, more-urgent message.

Spinning tires, steep incline, sideways movement. Hmm, this could be an inopportune time to stop, I thought. That thought occurred just after I had thought, "I wonder how far we can go up this hill."

JEEP WRANGLER - The long-wheelbase Jeep Wrangler Unlimited is smoother riding on the highway but also smoother riding on the trail. CNS Photo courtesy of Jeep.

Then I wondered if I could shift into four-wheel-drive low before the Jeep went sideways.

The silty dune in the desert near Ocotillo Wells, Calif., was dense as Betty Crocker cake mix, but forgiving. The Jeep settled into the dust. I shifted into low, decided that the peak was too pointy to pursue and muddled backward down the hill in reverse.

It was a small, all-terrain-vehicle trail anyway, but I was curious if the long-wheelbase of the four-door Wrangler Sahara Unlimited might add stability in such a situation. And I had two able-bodied pushers along for the ride.

New for 2007, the Jeep Wrangler Unlimited is a more occupant-friendly Wrangler, for the most part. It still has the Trail Rated toughness of the two-door Wrangler, and it still has the same iconic face and big-tired bravado, but now it's a keeper for those who have outgrown their two-door.

Stretching the Wrangler's wheelbase by 20.6 inches and adding the back doors is an incentive for the family to get out for some fresh air and dirt. But Jeep had at least three other good reasons to build a four-door

Wrangler: the Toyota FJ Cruiser, the Hummer H3 and Nissan Xterra.

Jeep knows this territory, and the Unlimited has been a sellout since it went on sale last fall. Supply is still barely keeping up with demand.

The Wrangler is a complete redesign for 2007, with a new 202 horsepower V-6 (the only engine choice), six-speed manual transmission and dozens of top, door and windshield combinations. It is still built on a ladder frame and open steel body with solid axles. The anti-sway bars can still be unhooked for added up-and-down wheel travel in off-road situations. And for the ultimate Jeeper, there's now an option for an electronically detachable sway bar.

Sold in three trim levels, pricing starts at \$20,410 for the Wrangler Unlimited X two-wheel drive, and \$22,410 for four-wheel drive. The midlevel Sahara starts at \$22,410 2WD, \$26,735 4WD, and Rubicon at \$28,895.

A four-speed automatic transmission adds \$825. And for \$1,585 more, the Freedom Top adds a three-piece modular hardtop with a glass rear window, wiper-washer and defroster. The vehicle and gear are secure, but the top can be opened easier than the standard soft top.

The base vehicle, with crank windows and 16-inch steel wheels, is either the price leader or a basic body for the extreme Jeeper to build an ultimate off-roader. And what's the point of a two-wheel-drive Jeep? It's not a very good convertible.

Jeeps are built with heavy-duty components in key areas to resist damage off-road. The Unlimited has curb weights from 4,075 pounds for the base model to 4,340 pounds for the Rubicon with automatic. And fuel mileage shares the burden, 17/19 for four-wheel drive, manual or automatic, two doors or four.

Moving up a level to Sahara brings many conveniences, including remote locking, big audio system, dirt-resistant fabric seat covers, big 17-inch tires and alloy wheels. The Sahara test vehicle had an as-tested price of \$30,075.

A four-door is not usually the cool car in the lineup, but the Unlimited is a very distinct vehicle from the two-door version. It's "trucky" in all the good ways. And it's just fun to drive.

Grab the big, outside door handle and swing up into the driver's seat. It's all Jeep, from the square windshield to the exposed bolts and screws, the long shifter and four-wheel-drive lever.

There's nothing fancy here or unnecessary. Just tough plastic and parts meant to get dusty. There are steel doors -- that still lift off for off-road freedom -- and glass windows, not zip-out plastic. Half-doors are an option.

Twist the key in the ignition and, yep, that engine sound is all Jeep. But, finally, with enough V-6 power to get out of its way. The new 3.8-liter, overhead-valve V-6 has 202 horsepower and 237 foot-pounds of torque.

The six-speed manual is forgiving and slots each gear without a miss. In sixth on the highway, the engine is not roaring and the wind noise across the soft top and around the blunt face won't drive you mad.

The longer wheelbase smooths out the highway ride, but it also rolls over whoop-dee-doo smoother than the two-door Wrangler. The chassis is stiffer than before and the whole vehicle feels tight, whether crossing the street or twisting up and out of a trail.

The reciprocating ball steering has plenty of boost to easily turn the tall tires, but the steering isn't sensitive to oversteer when you're trying to place a tread on a rock in the trail.

The four-wheel disc brakes are capable and large -- almost 12 inches at the front and 12.4 rear -- and include four-wheel anti-lock with on- and off-road calibration and electronic stability control.

But as inviting as all this hardware is, there are some issues with the interior packaging.

The steering wheel tilts but has no telescopic adjustment and it was too close for my comfort in relation to the placement of the pedals. Tall drivers with large feet may find the pedal area narrow and confining. And after a few hours in the front seats, an option for lumbar adjustment would be worth the cost. Softer, more substantial door-panel armrests would be kinder to elbows and a flip-down driver's right-side armrest would also be a welcome comfort feature.

The back seat area is fine for children, but the door opening is a narrow path for adults. There is good seat-bottom padding, but a short bench for thigh support. And back-seat passengers during my off-road driving cautioned that the audio speakers built into the sport-bar roof support are forehead high and prone to contact. Nor are there grab bars for bracing when the going gets rough.

But at the end of the day, when everybody's smiling after a few hours of trail riding, that 19 mpg on the highway just doesn't matter when the new Wrangler Unlimited brings family and friends together.

Copley News Service SPECS2007 Jeep Wrangler Unlimited Sahara 4WD
Body style: Five-passenger, four-door utility vehicle
Engine: 3.8 liter, overhead valve V-6
Horsepower: 202 at 5,000 rpm
Torque: 237 at 4,000 rpm
Transmission: six-speed manual or optional four-speed automatic; Command-Trac shift-on-the-fly 4WD
EPA fuel economy estimates: 17 mpg city, 19 highway (17/21, 2WD); 87 octane recommended
Fuel tank: 23 gallons

DIMENSIONS Cargo space: 46.43 cubic feet; rear seats folded, 86.75 Front head/leg/shoulder room: 41.3/41/55.8 inches Rear head/leg/shoulder room: 40.4/37.2/56.8 inches Length/wheelbase: 173.4/116 inches Curb weight: 4,269 pounds

FEATURES Standard equipment includes: Remote locking, air conditioning, seven-speaker Infinity audio system, locking glove box, height-adjustable driver's seat, swing-away mirrors, power windows and locks, cruise control, padded sport bar with integrated speakers, tubular side rails, fog lights and halogen headlights, 60/40 split folding rear seat, full-length floor console, locking glove box, 12-volt power outlet, tilt steering wheel, colored fender flares, six speaker AM-FM-CD-MP3 radio, fuel tank and transfer case skid plates. Safety equipment includes: Dual-stage front air bags, electronic stability control, electronic roll mitigation; optional seat-mounted side bags

CHASSIS Brakes: power-assisted four-wheel discs with four-wheel anti-lock with on- and off-road calibration and electronic stability control Steering: Power, recirculating ball with damper; turning circle, 41.2 feet Suspension: live axles, leading arms, track bars, coil springs, stabilizer bars, monotube high-pressure gas-charged shock absorbers on 17- and 18-inch wheels; low-pressure on 16-inch wheel packages Tires and wheels: P235/75 17-inch on/off road tires and aluminum wheels with full-size spare and matching wheel

PRICING Base: \$26,735, including \$660 freight charge; price as tested, \$30,075 Options on test car: dual-top group, \$1,585, includes three-piece modular hard top with rear window wiper-washer and defroster; tow package, \$270, which adds a 4.10 axle ratio; side air bags, \$490; Trac-Lok limited slip differential, \$285; in-dash six-disc DVD/MP3 audio upgrade, \$350; Sirius satellite radio, \$195; 18-inch tires and wheels, \$165 The competition: Toyota FJ Cruiser, Hummer H3 and Nissan Xterra Where assembled: Toledo, Ohio

PLUSES: Trucky in all the right ways. Smooth on the road and smooth off road. Good power and a forgiving six-speed manual transmission.

MINUSES: Back seat better for children than adults; rear seat needs grab handles, plenty of them; speakers on the sport bar need to be moved to avoid contact with foreheads.

New wrinkle for Wrangler: Jeep adds doors without sacrificing attitude by Mark_Maynard