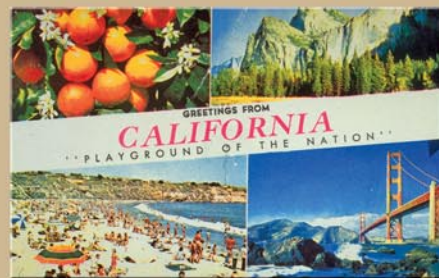


IF LOOKS COULD KILL

The new Jeep® Cherokee has cutting edge styling built atop an absolutely do-anything foundation

By Joe Sage



Many people were initially startled by the new Jeep Cherokee. When it was still in the rumor sketch and spy photo stage, we were. But it has grown on us remarkably fast. That's the first test of a restyling: does the prior model (or, for a new vehicle like this, the staid alternative) quickly become dated, and this one fresh? The new Jeep Cherokee passes this test, in our opinion. The second test is whether a forward-looking design will still look good after a few years of use and abuse. Time will tell. So far, we know it does look good dirty.

We now actually like the front quite a bit. In fact, it doesn't deviate as completely wildly as you may think: in the mid-1970s, the grille on a full-size Jeep Cherokee had a similar dynamic kink. The new one just has the added benefit of contributing to this compact Jeep's admirably high fuel mileage. We actually may be more critical of the rear sheetmetal—not that it is offensive, but it's just too similar to too many other vehicles. Look at a Jeep Wrangler from the back (or any other angle, inside or out) and its "Jeepness" will always come through. We'd like to see that here.

But enough about styling. This little Jeep is big news. What has Jeep given us to drive here?

When we drove the 2014 Jeep Grand Cherokee at launch last spring, in Texas, we were enormously impressed with its ability to do anything a Wrangler can do, despite its comfort, polish and size. The off-road course set up for us outside Westlake Village, California to torture and test the new smaller and more economical Jeep Cherokee was no more forgiving. And the new Cherokee was no less capable. In fact, we were blown away by what this little Jeep can do.

This vehicle replaces the Liberty in Jeep's lineup, going toe-to-toe in the marketplace with other compact SUVs such as the Ford Escape, Toyota RAV4 and many more. But—as always—Jeep has more than a full deck of cards up its sleeve.

The new Cherokee replaces the upright, boxy Liberty with a character and capability arguably more evocative of the flagship Grand Cherokee.



The mid-'70s Jeep Cherokee (above)—a sportier two-door derivative of the full-size Jeep Wagoneer—proves the angular grille of the new Cherokee bears Jeep heritage. The new Cherokee's grille may even beat that old model's Jeepworthiness by featuring the brand's current trademark seven bars. The 2014 Cherokee looks modern, clean and fresh.

Jeep holds the number one spot for SUVs in the US, and last year, Jeep sold over 700,000 units worldwide, a record. They aim to do it all again this year, despite having had the Liberty out of the mix for a few months while awaiting this replacement. The Cherokee clearly has its work cut out for it, but Jeep is bullish about its potential.

The goal was to produce an all-new vehicle that was "absolutely a true Jeep." The first look at its new styling reminded a few people of the Isuzu VehiCROSS from the '90s, kind of a trivia question and not exactly Rubicon Trail material. Forget that. Our time behind the wheel—which matched the top-ranked Grand Cherokee's Rubicon widths, 60-degree descents, mud, rocks and all the rest from earlier this year, but now in California instead of Texas—revealed supreme competence, for what looks superficially like any of a number of other small-to-midsize SUVs and CUVs. Highway time was no less impressive. We spent a whole day with the Cherokee, running the two-lane twisties of the Santa Monica Mountains, boulevards and freeways around Westlake Village, and an off-road course that only the bravest vehicles would attempt. It was tops, all around.

A Cherokee with 2.4-liter 16-valve Tigershark four-cylinder and nine-speed automatic is rated as high as 31 MPG highway, if you buy it in 4x2 form. (4x2? In the realm of pure Jeep-hood, a two-wheel-drive version bugs us a little, brand-wise. And this is actually front-wheel-drive as a 4x2. For our personal garage it would be a 4x4, problem solved. But we do understand the need for volume sales—and we also see its broad appeal.)

That nine-speed automatic is the first for this segment (and among the first at all). Our launch event received pretty wide mention for an uncharacteristic last-minute delay of a few weeks—as they decided the transmission needed more work. Word was that it would simply be a software fix, and new sales would remain on schedule, with an early September press launch (instead of August)



and Cherokees on the dealers' showroom floors by the end of that September, to fill the Liberty sales gap as soon as possible. Would it be done? We had no idea. Could it indeed just be a software patch? With Jeep's first-ever Fiat-generated chassis, a front-drive layout, that new nine-speed, a new rear-axle disconnect design and so many other innovations, we weren't sure. But fast forward just a few weeks, and there we were—driving hard, fast, steep, slow, smooth, rough and sure in the mountains of Southern California, with this thing shifting like a dream. They did it.

Engines include the aforementioned 2.4L MultiAir2 Tigershark inline-four (184 hp, 171 lb-ft) and a 3.2-liter Pentastar V6 (271 hp, 239 lb-ft). The four-cylinder can get up to 31 MPG, with a range of almost 500 miles on a tank of gas,

while the six-cylinder can tow 4500 pounds.

Meet three new 4x4 systems: Active Drive I, Active Drive II and Active Drive Lock. Active Drive I is an on-the-fly automatic system. Active Drive II has more aggressive gearing and locking systems for more serious off-roading. And Active Drive Lock is fully trail-rated, with a locking rear differential for the most serious rock crawling and off-roading. (And we can attest to its utter and complete capability at this.) Crawl ratios are as low as 56:1 with the 2.4L four and 47.8:1 with the 3.2L V6—up to 90 percent better than the Liberty this vehicle more than replaces.

One reason the new Cherokee's fuel economy ratings are as much as 45 percent higher than the outgoing Liberty's is another new innovation: a

KEEP RIGHT >>

Tough on the outside and tough to beat on the inside: we enjoyed both aspects of the Cherokee, on the boulevards and on heavily beaten trails.

rear-axle disconnect system on 4x4s that reduces drag while in two-wheel-drive situations (on the highway or around town in non-slip weather).

Tech features abound: adaptive cruise control, lane departure warning, forward collision warning, blind spot monitor, rear cross path detection, 8.5-inch Uconnect touchscreen system plus 7-inch TFT instrument cluster, dynamic backup camera, parallel and perpendicular park assist and even a wireless charging pad for your own devices.

The 2014 Jeep Cherokee is available in four models: Sport, Latitude, Limited and a Trail Rated Jeep Cherokee Trailhawk. Interiors reflect the high-end style, material and exotic color schemes introduced with the new Grand Cherokee. Inside and out, it's quite a package, in total.

We became so used to the Cherokee's styling, so fast—not just adjusting to it, but admiring it—that we're hard-pressed to remember why we were commenting on it at first. But we know it did take an adjustment.

During the press drive in California, we passed a Wrangler at one point, exiting a two-lane tunnel as we entered it. We contemplated what he might be thinking, seeing this for the first time. Did he more likely feel that this was a travesty, or that this was the future, and he was slipping behind? No worries—Jeep has made room for both approaches, and both carry the full DNA.

It definitely compares well with the Liberty. There's little question we're in a downsizing (and fuel-economy-boosting) era, and as the Jeep team has applied their skills to the new Cherokee, they have accomplished that benchmark of redesign: yesterday's model (the Liberty) looks immediately like yesterday's news.

We've heard other manufacturers state a goal of being recognizable from a considerable distance down the road—sort of a rearview mirror test. We'd say there's no question that this is recognizable as a Jeep, at a glance (from the front).

Overall, our experience with the new Jeep Cherokee is summed up by that relatively rare but oh so telling realization: we want one. This vehicle quickly went to our short list. We could even see owning two of them—one on the urban style side, and a Trailhawk on the hardcore side.

Part of the appeal of the Jeep Cherokee is its affordability—the lineup starts at \$22,995, just \$4500 more than the entry level Compass. It's very possible for you to build an economical take-home model, as all the fundamentals are sound throughout the line, complete with core Jeep capabilities. We would personally add four-wheel



drive (\$2000). A top model, however, starts just shy of \$30,000. You'll note that our two launch drive vehicles—a Limited and a Trailhawk (see sidebar)—were both optioned into the upper \$30s. And that's where we hang up a bit, in our hunt. We love everything about the Cherokee.

But we love everything about the Grand Cherokee, too, and it starts at \$28,995. That makes shopping a little more complicated. Even if you don't need its additional interior volume, the Grand Cherokee is a fine vehicle for most anyone. It is larger than the Cherokee, but it can handle the tight Rubicon Trail just as well, so maneuverability and fit shouldn't be huge determinants. The Cherokee does have higher fuel economy ratings (though a diesel Grand Cherokee is close). You owe it to yourself to head to the Jeep dealer and solve this conundrum for your own garage. ■

OUR TEST CHEROKEES

COMMON TO BOTH:

ENGINE3.2L Pentastar V6
TRANSMISSION9-speed automatic
POWER/TORQUE271 hp, 239 lb-ft torque
DRIVETRAIN4x4
FUEL MPG.....19/27 city/hwy, 22 comb
SUSPENSION:

(front) McPherson strut, long travel coil spring; (rear) four-link with trailing arm.

2014 JEEP CHEROKEE LIMITED 4X4:

WHEELS18 x 7.0 polished aluminum
BASE PRICE\$29,995
TESTED PRICE\$37,030

2014 JEEP CHEROKEE TRAILHAWK 4X4:

WHEELS17 x 7.5 polished aluminum
BASE PRICE\$29,495
TESTED PRICE\$36,120