

Grand Cherokee

By Barbara and Bill Schaffer



The Jeep Grand Cherokee first hit the roads back in 1992, and the new vehicle market hasn't been the same since. Jeep has traditionally been to off-roading what Kleenex has been to a runny nose, and the 2006 model carries on the heritage. However, the new Jeep Grand Cherokee is not just about off-roading—it's also about on-road performance, comfort and luxury.

The Jeep Grand Cherokee is somewhat like the sports car of sport utility vehicles. A little smaller than the rest of the mid-size SUVs, the Jeep has an agile feeling thanks to its tight turning radius, shorter length and wide, low stance. It also has the advantage of weighing several hundred pounds less than its competitors.

Even with the smaller size, the Grand Cherokee has interior specs very close to the competition in all areas except the rear. Back there, the Cherokee will hold about one suitcase or two small passengers fewer than its competitors. Towing capacity is 2,000 to 3,500 pounds less, too.

Since the Grand Cherokee was all new

from the ground up for 2005, there are few subtle design changes for the 2006 model. But under the hood there are a few powerful surprises, starting with the 5.7-liter Hemi V-8 engine and the 4.7 V-8. In addition, for those who don't care about so much power as they do economy, there is the 3.7-liter V-6 engine, even though the V-6 only gets about two more miles per gallon than the V-8.

The Grand Cherokee is one of the best off-roaders on the trail. With the traditional Jeep short/long independent front suspension and rear live axle, it climbs rocks, flies over washboards and digs through the mud with some of the best. It's what Jeep has always been known for and what it does best.

We were impressed with how well it did on the roads, too. The 330-hp Hemi with five-speed automatic transmission has excellent acceleration, and it handles quite well for something that sits up higher. It's not at the same level as some of the high-powered German SUVs, with their sophisticated four-wheel indepen-

dent suspension, but combined with its electronic stability control, electronic limited-slip differential and Quadra-Drive II—a sophisticated active full-time four-wheel drive system—the Jeep is impressive.

The Grand Cherokee is available in three models, including the entry-level Laredo, the Limited and the most luxurious of them all, the Overland.

Coming standard on the Limited that we tested are the Hemi engine, dual-zone air conditioning, power adjustable pedals, power windows/doors/locks/mirrors and speed control. It also has remote keyless entry, theft deterrent system, security alarm, stereo radio with in-dash six-disc CD changer, garage door opener, power front seats with memory for pedals/driver seat/mirrors/radio and that's just to name a few. The base price of the Limited with 4-wheel-drive system is \$34,470.

Our test Limited also came equipped with an abundance of desirable options like heated seats, navigation system, rear entertainment package, satellite radio

and much more. Just about anything a person could want is available for a price. The Jeep Grand Cherokee Laredo starts under \$27,000.

The Jeep rides on a unique new steel uniframe with a welded steel unit body with underlying front and rear modules. The frame system is much more rigid than the previous Grand Cherokee and translates into a more solid ride and body structure.

The Grand Cherokee is loaded with great technology like a stability system, advanced DVD navigation system, Sirius Satellite Radio, SmartBeam™ automatic dimming headlights, UConnect hands-free communications system and several other great gadgets.

Standard safety features on the Grand Cherokee Limited include multi-stage front seat airbags, LATCH child seat system, enhanced accident response system, traction control, tire pressure monitor. Front and rear side-curtain air bags are a \$1,495 option.

The Hemi engine produces a 0-to-60

mph time of 6.9 seconds. We hit a speed of 79 mph in our informal acceleration test, where we pull onto the highway and accelerate about one-eighth mile.

Considering the performance, our fuel economy was a respectable 17.5 mpg. The EPA rates it at 14 mpg for city driving and 19 mpg for the highway.

Jeep heritage goes back to WWII; perhaps that explains Americans' love for it. Whatever the reason, Jeep will probably be around for another 65 years or more. (It almost doesn't seem fair for a vehicle to outlive its buyers.)

It's been a couple of years since we've driven the Grand Cherokee, and this new one is a major improvement. It feels like it's a much higher quality in fit and finish, and the Hemi performance is fabulous.

For those wanting still more, the SRT-8 version is arriving at Jeep dealerships about now. With its 6.1-liter 415-hp Hemi it will meet or beat the acceleration of the awesome Porsche Cayenne Turbo (0 to 60 mph in less than 5 seconds) for less than half the price (\$39,995). WOW! ■

Jeep Grand Cherokee Limited

STANDARD EQUIPMENT

Leather seating; 4-wheel traction control; rain-sensitive wipers; dual zone climate control; adjustable pedals with memory; keyless entry; alarm; AM/FM stereo with in-dash 6-disc CD changer; universal garage door opener; power heated & folding outside mirrors; and much more.

Base Price: \$34,470

Options:

Pearl paint \$150
 Preferred package (stability control, heated front seats, SmartBeam™ headlights, UConnect hands-free communications system, sunroof) \$1,925
 Electronic infotainment system \$1,200
 Off road and towing package \$590
 Side airbags \$490
 Hemi engine with electric limited slip differential, limited slip front axle and Quadra-Drive 4WD \$1,495
 Navigation \$1,200
 Sirius Satellite Radio \$195
 Backup system \$255
 Tire pressure monitoring \$85
Total Options \$7,585
 Freight \$695
Price as Tested \$42,750

DIMENSIONS

EPA Size Spec. Purp
 Weight 3,994 lb.
 Wheelbase 109.5 in.
 Length 186.6 in.
 Width 73.3 in.
 Height 67.7 in.
 Fuel Capacity 20.8 gal.
 Cargo Capacity 34.5 to 67.4 cu. ft.

MECHANICAL

Engine 5.7L Hemi V-8
 Horsepower 330@5000
 Torque 375@4000
 Transmission 5-Spd. Auto
 Drive Four wheel
 Brakes Disc ABS
 Tires 245/65R17

PERFORMANCE

0 to 60 mph 6.9 sec.
 EPA economy rating 14/19 mpg
 Our actual fuel economy 17.5 mpg

COMPETITORS

Buick Rendezvous, Chevrolet TrailBlazer; Dodge Dakota, Ford Explorer, GMC Envoy, Hummer H3, Mercury Mountaineer, Nissan Pathfinder, Saab 9-7X, Subaru Tribeca, Toyota 4Runner, Volkswagen Touareg, Volvo XC90