

THE SOUL OF A TOP-PERFORMANCE DODGE CHALLENGER IN SOCCER MOMS' CLOTHING

STORY AND PHOTOS: JOE SAGE



It's not hard to grasp the conflict between the soul of a free spirit and the duties of a parent, or between an uncharted highway cruise and a hard day of work with four adults. Vehicles from the SRT performance operation at Chrysler ("Race inspired, street legal"), such as the Dodge Viper SRT10 or Dodge Challenger SRT8 tend toward the uncharted free spirit end of the scale. What's a hard-working family person to do? It turns out the answer may be as simple as this: check out the Jeep Grand Cherokee SRT8.

This vehicle is as practical as a standard Jeep Grand Cherokee in terms of day-to-

day use, with seating for five, easy four-door-plus-liftgate access, lots of cargo space, all-weather four-wheel-drive and 3500-pound towing capacity. Perfect for school and soccer runs or for a weekend towing the boat to the lake.

It is also as much fun to drive as its free-spirited cousins. The difference here is in style more than substance. There's no question a Dodge Challenger gives off a more immediate rebel aura than any SUV ever could. But that's half the magic of the Grand Cherokee SRT8: it's a stealthmobile

to the untrained eye, the perfect generator of a classic "who knew?!"

This vehicle is a confidence builder. It gives you confidence with its power and its driving position, but also gives you confidence that you won't be taken as out of place in a bad economy or fuel-challenged times, because the basic Grand Cherokee format has its same sense of purpose: it's not too big, not overdone, not overly expensive. Add this power package to it, and you can claim very good balance.

The Jeep Grand Cherokee SRT8 is the first

four-wheel-drive SRT, and it's the quickest, most powerful Jeep ever. This Jeep accelerates from 0-to-60 mph in "under 5 seconds" (Challenger states a specific 4.9)—quicker than the Porsche Cayenne Turbo or BMW X5. Beyond the engine, SRT has tuned the Grand Cherokee's ride, handling and brakes, and has added a race-inspired interior and functional, performance-oriented exterior details.

The racy front fascia also provides aerodynamic benefits, while providing sufficient air flow to cool the 6.1-liter HEMI V8 engine and ducted brake-system cooling. The rear fascia accommodates dual 4-inch exhaust tips. Sill extensions help the soccer team in and out, but also create additional downforce.

Is the SUV for you? We were compelled to compare the Jeep with the Dodge and found quite a few surprises:

.....JEEP GRAND CHEROKEE SRT8.....CHALLENGER SRT8.....
ENGINE.....370 cu.in HEMI® V8.....	370 cu.in HEMI® V8
HORSEPOWER/TORQUE.....420/420.....	425/420
ACCELERATION 0-TO-60.....under 5 sec.....	4.9 sec
EPA (AUTO., MAN.).....12/16, na.....	13/19, 14/22
TOWING (LB.).....3500.....	na
LENGTH (IN.).....195.1.....	197.7
WHEELBASE (IN.).....109.5.....	116
TRACK (FRONT/REAR).....63.3/62.1.....	63.0/63.1
DRAG COEFFICIENT.....0.375.....	0.353
SEATING.....2/3.....	2/3
HEADROOM (FRONT/REAR).....39.7/39.3.....	39.3/37.4
WEIGHT DISTRIB. (AUTO.).....56/44.....	54.5/45.5
GRND CLRNCE...chassis/rear ax 8.5/7.0.....	4.8
OVERALL HEIGHT.....66.7.....	57.1
VOLUME - INTERIOR.....108.86.....	91.5
VOLUME - CARGO.....34.5-67.4.....	16.2
DRIVETRAIN.....4WD.....	RWD

We're surprised to see the Jeep is as quick as the Challenger, but it does use more fuel. We're also surprised at the similar drag coefficients and headroom. Wheelbases differ more than length, confirming this Jeep is not designed for off-road clearance angles. But if you need towing or cargo volume, back seat doors or four-wheel drive... advantage: Jeep.

And to drive? No surprises: awesome.

These all-Americans are built as follows: the Jeep Grand Cherokee SRT8 in Detroit (and also in Austria) with its engine assembled in Mexico, and the Dodge Challenger in Ontario. The Grand Cherokee SRT8 starts at \$43,325 (and the Dodge Challenger SRT8 at \$43,680). The solution to your conundrum will surely reveal itself. ■

JEEP SRT8 LOGBOOK

FEATURES & STYLE

- Reactions from bystanders are positive and admiring. Might as well be in a Dodge Challenger. Smooth and sweet. With one window open, enjoying a nice V8 rumble.
- Some bigger SUVs suffer pains to present fuel mileage as being not-as-bad-as-it-looks. This looks (mostly) like a run-of-the-mill Grand Cherokee, so you can get away with quite a bit. A classic sleeper, it mostly hides its speed capability, as well.

- Tracking on a straightaway drifts or pulls a bit. Despite full-time all-wheel drive, this is probably a predictable effect from pushing 420 hp through beefy 255/45/20 front and 285/40/20 rear run-flat performance tires.

- At neighborhood speeds, it upshifts so frequently that you don't really get to play with the power or build up more torque.

- Seems to have a remarkably tight turning circle; actual spec: 37.1 feet.

- Suspension is *very* good around town, just realize while turning through a run-off trough. We didn't have a chance to try it off-road. That's not its prime mission, but... it's a Jeep, so it should qualify. It does rock left-to-right on uneven hard surfaces.

- Tried auto HVAC for awhile, tried compressor on and recirc on, no matter what, since it was getting pretty warm. Still not all that cool, so we studied the manual. Seemed that anything we touched, it would start getting warm, the recirc would go off, so we had to keep turning it back on. Living with this in the summer could take some vigilance. Doesn't seem effective on auto, nor at 69-68 degrees. Put it on LO, make sure to turn the compressor on, turn the recirc on, go back and forth on flow to just our face or face and footwell.

PERFORMANCE

- We had noted that the rear end seemed to do its own thing during cornering, possibly attributable to the wide tires. Later, we found a sizable subwoofer assembly had come disconnected and was thrashing around in the back, so we attributed it to that. but the effect continued, so we wondered whether it might be the other way around: that may be why the speaker is loose. We went over a speed bump and didn't even notice it in the front, but that back axle was just bone-jarring. The rear suspension is a simple live axle, so that could explain things.

- The moonroof's sunshield is a reach-up manual slide. Simple and effective.

- Last day, looking around at controls and realizing it's been a pretty user-friendly week. All straightforward and effective, an invisible interface... like a good waiter.

