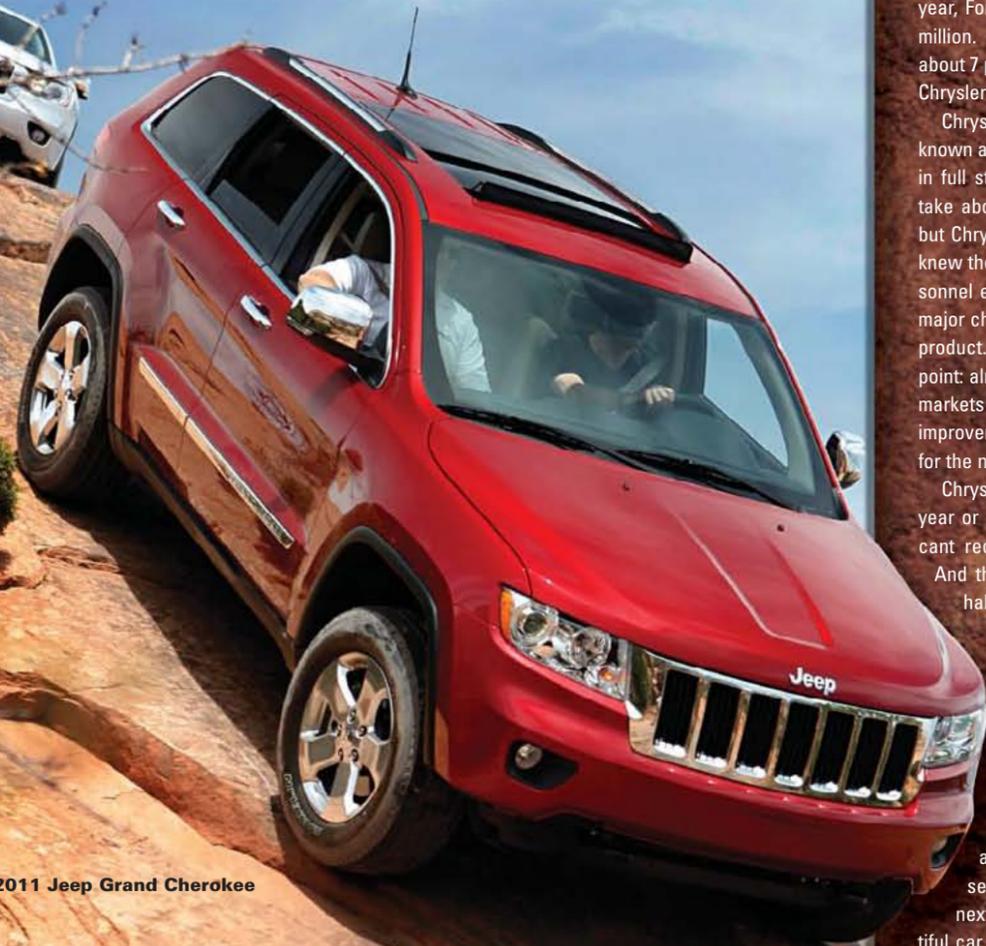


"Best ever" Grand Cherokee leads big upgrades from Jeep®

by Joe Sage



2011 Jeep Grand Cherokee

Arizona is major Jeep® country. Jeep folks tell us Airpark Chrysler-Jeep is one of the biggest Jeep dealers in the US. So when they have big news, they like to bring it here first. We met Jeep engineers and managers in Paradise Valley recently for a runthrough of what's new with not one, not two, but three iconic Jeep products.

Everyone knows GM and Chrysler utilized federal loans during the onset of the financial crisis, while Ford made it through having leveraged all its assets just beforehand. Chrysler is the smallest of the three: GM posts about 2 million unit sales a year, Ford about 1.7 million and Chrysler under a million. As markets recover, GM's sales are up about 7 percent for 2010, Ford over 21 percent, and Chrysler about 16.5 percent.

Chrysler's smaller size has long made them well known as very nimble, bringing concepts to market in full style and record time. Most new vehicles take about 4.5 years from concept to showroom, but Chrysler often beats that. In these times, they knew they had to move faster than ever. Jeep personnel explain to us that a new CEO has brought major changes in people, processes, culture... and product. The new Grand Cherokee is a case in point: already well along in development when the markets tanked, they invented new ways to make improvements "on the fly" that may have waited for the next model, in the past.

Chrysler had seemed pretty quiet for the last year or so, but with a purpose. There are significant recent releases from Chrysler and Dodge. And they have been especially busy with their halo Jeep brand. Now, the wraps come off three Jeeps with big, big changes.

2011 JEEP GRAND CHEROKEE

We've heard "all new" before, and here are those magic words again, but Jeep marketing chief Chris Ellis adds emphasis: "every bit." Recognizing the Grand Cherokee is their top-of-the-line model, and that people are ready to part with some serious cash for one (see pricing in sidebar, next page), Jeep set out to make this "a beautiful car, thoroughly modern, and competitive with any luxury make." That's a tall order, when coupled with the requirement that it still be "at a glance, a Jeep." And how have they done? Extremely well.

The company says this is their most capable Jeep ever (which implicitly means off-roading, another tall order given the presence of the Wrangler), while also being the most refined Jeep on-road, ever. Does the combination mean trade-offs on either? Ellis makes it clear there is zero compromise either on- or off-road.

Development of the new Grand Cherokee began before the Daimler divorce was final, so there are certain structural elements in common with the Mercedes-Benz ML-Class. But Ellis makes clear that all has been revised and/or enhanced to become a Jeep. Electronics have been changed,

as have the drive systems and the structure itself. The two were "separated at birth," he says, and no-one would ever mistake the two.

The Grand Cherokee's comes with a 5.7-liter V8 or the all-new 3.6-liter Pentastar V6 (the first application of this engine). The V6 boasts a range of about 500 miles per fill-up. Since you can take this vehicle anywhere whatsoever, this is a plus.

There are three different four-wheel-drive systems: Quadra-Trac I, a one-speed transfer case, Quadra-Trac II, a two-speed transfer case, and Quadra-Drive II, a fully-automatic full-time system with locks for both the front and rear axles. A Selec-Terrain system sets suspension and tractive capability for rock, sand/mud, snow, sport—or auto. And Quadra-Lift active air suspension provides additional ground clearance of 2.6 inches on demand—10.7 inches total—and automatically lowers at highway speeds. The Grand Cherokee's on- and off-road pedigrees are ready to tackle any surface, or even speed bumps and driveways. The raised suspension can also help with everyday ingress and egress. Access is further enhanced by keyless entry and start, wider front and rear doors, and a door opening angle of 73 degrees. The rear adds four inches of knee and legroom. And cargo volume has been increased by 19 percent—all while maintaining the all-important Rubicon Trail width overall. Rear cargo space is accessible through a full gate or a flip-glass rear window—the only such vehicle left in this class.

One more example of the Grand Cherokee's serious off-road character is its steel skid plates. When cross-shopping, Jeep says "ask about skid plates—or don't—you'll find out sooner or later." The engineers love driving their creation, and they like to challenge themselves: Ellis tells us they have not yet found a place the Grand Cherokee will *not* go—but they keep trying, "just because it's fun." For the most serious off-roading, the entire front fascia can be easily removed, using just six clips and no tools. The Grand Cherokee also sports two frame-attached front tow hooks—rare anymore on any SUV.

The Grand Cherokee boasts all-new front and rear suspension, body stiffness that is 146 percent higher than its predecessor, and radically reduced NVH (noise-vibration-harshness) specs. There is a full-size spare, stowed inside (along with a tool kit), where it's clean (tuxedo time) and accessible (when stuck in snow or mud or hooked up to tow).

Towing? With its V6 engine, the Grand Cherokee is rated for 5000 pounds; with the V8, 7400 pounds. One sweet detail is the inclusion of both 4- and 7-prong plugs, built-in and weatherproof.

Ellis saves his favorite for last. "Finally, we have an interior that's appropriate to the Grand Cherokee," he says, from the basic Laredo (start-

ing at \$30,215; see sidebar) to the Overland (\$41,910 base) with its stitched leather armrests and instrument panel. The steering wheel is new (on all Jeeps), with more controls to keep your hands on the wheel.

From mud ruts to ballroom valet, the new Grand Cherokee seems ready to tackle it all. Flexibility—the ability to "use it however you want," in Ellis's words—is deeply embedded in the Grand Cherokee's DNA.

2011 JEEP WRANGLER

Nothing in the Jeep lineup is more iconic than the Wrangler, and updating an icon is one of the more terrifying tasks a design and engineering team faces. The Wrangler "has always been and will always be the most capable off-road vehicle in the world," says Ellis (who lets us know he used to work for Land Rover). The biggest changes for the 2011 Wrangler are an all-new interior, an optional color-matched hard top, and power mirrors, handier than ever when navigating the rocky narrows.

The factory body-colored hardtop (available at first on the Sahara models only), "changes the character of the car as much as anything we've ever done," says Ellis. Reactions have been positive, so much so that dealers are getting requests already—"very wealthy requests"—to make this available on the top-of-the-line Rubicon. Expect this to happen. The color top is, of course, removable, the only caveat being that you'll have to be a little more careful with it, as it can scratch more easily.

Windows are enlarged on the sides and in the back. There is an entirely new instrument panel,



2011 Jeep Wrangler, Patriot and Grand Cherokee



2011 Jeep Wrangler Unlimited



2011 Jeep Wrangler



KEEP RIGHT >>

including a center stack with new knobs, not as recessed, and more precise controls overall. One-touch up/down windows may sound like a luxury, but can prove extremely useful in challenging off-road conditions. The external side mirrors are not only powered, but heated. Power means no more stopping, reaching and opening the windows to adjust. The locking console has soft-touch surfaces. A grab bar includes "since 1941" to recall the Jeep's early military heritage.

In the face of these new conveniences, the Wrangler's capabilities are in no way diminished. You can remove the top, remove the doors, fold the windshield flat—and it's still street legal (and off-road king). Drain plugs under the carpet let you use the Wrangler as intended and still hose it out up to instrument panel level.

The main difference between the 2-door and 4-door Wranglers is the breakover angle (approach angles are the same) and overall length. You'll also want to compare towing capacities. The 4-door Wrangler Unlimited has performed its own magic, bringing more high-income customers to the brand. Interestingly, the 4-door Wrangler Unlimited not only doubled Wrangler's sales volume, but the split has gone from 50/50 to 60/40 in favor of 4-door Wrangler Unlimited sales. Ellis tells us the 2-vs-4 option is "not a tough decision for most people."

If you're sold on the new Wrangler, be advised you're not alone. The plant is running at full capacity, and there are no incentives. Order now. Or maybe wait, as they tell us to stay tuned for another major change on the Wrangler in 2012.

2011 JEEP PATRIOT

"The Patriot should be better known," Ellis tells us right off the bat. Jeep claims this is "the most capable off-road vehicle" and delivers the best fuel economy (less subjective) in its class. They've been tackling its identity deficit; for example, the Patriot was on display and available for demos at the Easter Jeep Safari in Moab UT last year, where it was voted "Most Fun." And Moab voters are as tough as they come. They've already seen a significant sales increase on the prior model.

While the team was in Moab, they decided to put it to extreme tests themselves—to "try to break it," as Ellis puts it. They tried to find anything the Patriot could *not* do. Nada. Actively *trying* to break it (the engineers love this sort of thing), all they could do was bang it up a little.

Jeep spokesperson Kathy Graham tells us the Patriot is "truly a Jeep, part of the family," and that it fits well between the Grand Cherokee and the Wrangler. The Jeep lineup has expanded considerably over the past several years—Grand Cherokee, Patriot, Liberty, Compass, Wrangler—so we're not surprised if there may be a bit of confusion or overload in the marketplace. But it's easy to place the Patriot in the lineup if you think of it as a replacement for the classic un-grand Cherokee. At least that's how we tend to see it—affordable, well-appointed and totally capable—and evoca-

tive of the old Cherokee's styling.

Graham tells us the 2011 Patriot has minor front and rear fascia changes, but it looks very different overall because it has received a black lower body treatment all around, which at the rear emphasizes the vehicle's off-road exit angle. This is a great update—simple but very strong. Another detail in the rear: Ellis tells us his wife actually saw a prior Patriot in traffic in Michigan and inquired, "why is that gas tank hanging down?" Epiphany. That was the muffler assembly, and it is now black (with bright metal exhaust tips).

The Patriot has improvements in its structure, NVH, ride and handling, plus one inch more ground clearance for better off-road performance. The



2011 Jeep Patriot



2011 Jeep Patriot

interior has been revised with soft-touch materials, and new larger wheels are available.

EENY MEENY

Compare the fundamentals in the sidebar at right, and you may be able to pick the best Jeep for your needs. You may balance base-level specifications against options—e.g. a base Grand Cherokee for less than a tricked-out Liberty. But factor in seats, towing, horsepower, even style and feel ... and it all starts to come into focus. Then head to the dealer and slip behind the wheel. ■

PICKING YOUR JEEP®

There are models and options other than those below, but for comparison we're showing the base (4x2 on all except all-4x4 Wrangler), then top trim models (with 4x4, because, after all, these are Jeeps). There are other tradeoffs possible, but we sought to max out the cost here. For that reason, we even chose automatics on Wranglers, which we'd never really do. On some, we chose an up-priced color, even if not our favorite. We chose leather seats, though maybe less practical for good mudding. We maxed towing capacity on each. The overlap between function and options is as intriguing as always, but you'll Jeep has lots of possibilities well covered.

2011 JEEP GRAND CHEROKEE

Horsepower290 to 360 hp
 Seats5
 Towing capacity7400 lbs
 Est. fuel economyup to 23 mpg
 Starting price\$30,215
 Overland 4x4 starting price\$41,910
 Maxed out, approx\$48,520

2011 JEEP LIBERTY

Horsepower210 hp
 Seats5
 Towing capacity5000 lbs
 Est. fuel economyup to 22 mpg
 Starting price\$23,250
 Jet Unlimited 4x4 starting price\$29,245
 Maxed out, approx\$34,125

2011 JEEP PATRIOT

Horsepower158 hp
 Seats5
 Towing capacity2000 lbs
 Est. fuel economyup to 29 mpg
 Starting price\$15,995
 Latitude X 4x4 starting price\$24,595
 Maxed out, approx\$30,330

2011 JEEP WRANGLER

Horsepower202 hp
 Seats4
 Towing capacity2000 lbs
 Est. fuel economyup to 19 mpg
 Starting price\$22,045
 Rubicon 4x4 starting price\$29,995
 Maxed out, approx\$37,400

2011 JEEP WRANGLER UNLIMITED

Horsepower202 hp
 Seats5
 Towing capacity3500 lbs
 Est. fuel economyup to 19 mpg
 Starting price\$25,545
 Unlimited Rubicon 4x4 st. price\$32,745
 Maxed out, approx\$40,115

