

Fraternal Twins

Standard or SRT: so much shared DNA, with each responding powerfully to such different drummers

By Joe Sage



2014 Jeep Grand Cherokee



Since Jeep introduced its “best ever” Grand Cherokee in late 2010 for the 2011 model year (see our Jan/Feb 2011 issue), we’ve driven the vehicle repeatedly, both here in Arizona and on several trips in the tough mountain and coastal terrain of the Pacific Northwest. We’ve come away from each drive successively more satisfied. The Grand Cherokee is a vehicle we could live with for a long time.

But while we had found the previous generation appealing as it was, marketing director Jim Morrison says “I don’t think we’ve slept” back in the Jeep development offices. Just three model years later (and even more quickly in calendar years), a new Grand Cherokee was ready for us to sample in Austin, Texas this spring.

All surfaces, all speeds

Flying from Phoenix, our first thought was, Austin? We’ve been to several vehicle launches in that area over the past year or so, and it’s always a good drive, but shouldn’t the Grand Cherokee be running on the very Rubicon Trail it must always be benchmarked and engineered to conquer?

It turns out Texas was a great choice for the event. Talk about road and track. And trail. This venue had it all.

The smooth, hilly and winding highways of Austin’s Hill Country are a prime attraction for other launches we’ve attended there, and of course well suited for the Grand Cherokee’s highway miles. We knew we would also be heading to the brand new Circuit of the Americas Formula One racetrack outside Austin for a session of some sort with the potent SRT version of this new Jeep. But our visualization of the area had not included anything to rival the high ranges of the Sierra Nevada.

We should have known better. Jeep would not build a Grand Cherokee that couldn’t hack it in the extreme, and they would not hold this event anywhere that didn’t reflect that. What we had never been to before was Inks Ranch, near Llano, Texas, about 90 miles (depending upon route—and ours was circuitous) northwest of Austin.

Building a new Grand Cherokee

That 2011 refresh was a big one. Jeep’s prior record for Grand Cherokee sales had been in 1999—when the booming dot-com economy was in full swing—at 625,000 units. Last year, they set a new record: selling 700,000 units in *this* challenged economy. Despite its position as a record-smashing market leader and “the most awarded SUV,” Morrison says their job was to make it better.

He outlined five specific areas that were addressed. First was fuel mileage. Previous numbers weren’t bad for all that the vehicle delivers, but their new goal was a best-in-class 30 MPG, which they have achieved along with a 730-mile one-tank range, in a new EcoDiesel.

Next was luxury: this year’s Grand Cherokee lineup adds a new Summit top trim level.

Off-road capabilities would seem to be at their pinnacle already, but also new for 2014 is an improved crawl ratio—and more.

Tech features and some 60 new safety details round out the revival.

Jeep design manager Vince Galante points out that with the 2011 model they “had a hit on our hands,” with what seemed a timeless interpretation of the Grand Cherokee’s key style points. But they nonetheless wanted to modernize a bit more. This included joining the industry trend of updating lighting technology, front and rear.

Another goal was to better differentiate among the model’s various trim levels.

Changes overall include a grille that is shorter and wider, new front fascias and a more comprehensive personality for each trim level, inside and out. New DRLs and taillights provide a “signature” for the Grand Cherokee, day or night (at least in models above the Laredo, which carries forward last year’s headlights—see \$30 grand sidebar).

Chrome is deleted from the doors and nameplates, as well as the broad band between taillights—an immediate way to recognize the new model. There is a new rear spoiler the same as on the SRT model (which is for downforce on the SRT, but aimed toward fuel economy on the regular Grand Cherokee series). This caps a new touch-handle tailgate. The new top-tier Summit has body-color wheel flares and two-tone rocker panels, visually extending the vehicle for a more elegant presence. It also sports specialty tailpipes.

LaShirl Turner, manager of design for advanced color and trim, headed up the materials team for the new Grand Cherokee. New interiors are anchored in strong cues inspired by locales and cultures around the world. Moroccan Sun invokes Morocco at night, with browns and blacks, while Vesuvio emphasizes blues from the Italian

2014 Jeep Grand Cherokees (facing page) are ready for the highway and, in the case of 4x4 models, the most extreme off-road duty. Our drive included a couple of hundred miles of largely two-lane Texas Hill Country highways, capped by rock crawling and radical 55-degree descents in the outcroppings at Inks Ranch near Llano TX. On day two (this page) we took the SRT version, via highways that gave us a good preview of its powerful road-hugging abilities, to Circuit of the Americas—a 3.4-mile, 20-turn track with eleven left and nine right turns—for dead-serious track time. The versatility of every Jeep Grand Cherokee is echoed in the diversity of the overall lineup.



2014 Jeep Grand Cherokee SRT





The 2014 Jeep Grand Cherokees lined up below have just burned through about 90 miles of Hill Country highway en route to Inks Ranch in Texas, where they are ready to tackle tough-as-Rubicon trails, plus climbs and descents up to 55 degrees, among the surprisingly challenging rock outcroppings that appear in the middle of this otherwise relatively open land. On our second day, 2014 Jeep Grand Cherokee SRTs lined up at Circuit of the Americas (bottom photo) took us up to at least 124 mph on this invigorating new Formula One track.



Mediterranean. The Overland brings blue and brown together—which is much better than it may sound—and adds Nappa leather seats. For the top of the line Summit, Jeep evokes Arizona's own Grand Canyon, using a motif of deep brown and copper, unpolished wood and no chrome.

Grand Cherokee powertrains

Three engines are available in the mainstream Grand Cherokee: a 290-hp (260 lb-ft) 3.6-liter V6, a 360-hp (390 lb-ft) 5.7-liter V8 and a new 240-hp (420 lb-ft) 3.0-liter V6 Ecodiesel, sourced from Chrysler's international product chain and arriving during the second quarter of 2013.

All three are available with either 4x4 or 4x2 drivetrains, all of which utilize the same 8-speed automatic transmission.

The new Ecodiesel—quiet, clean and vibration-free—will top the lineup for fuel mileage and range, hitting 22/30 MPG (city/highway) in a two-wheel-drive model, or 21/28 as a 4x4. Highway driving range on one tank is 730 miles.

The popular 3.6L gasoline V6 is rated 17/25 as a 4x2 or 17/24 as a 4x4, with a 600-mile range. The 5.7L V8 is of course a little thirstier, at 14/22 MPG for a 4x2 or 14/20 for a 4x4. Range is not stated but should be about 535 miles, pro rata.

An Eco button on the console helps achieve those MPGs—remapping the shift points, invoking cylinder deactivation in the V8, and dropping the vehicle's air suspension a half inch for improved aerodynamics at highway speeds.

A Sport mode—which also drops the suspension, here for the aero boost without the eco power detuning—is on hand for 4x2 and base 4x4 models that don't have Selec-Terrain (with its own sand, mud, auto, snow and rock settings).

The Grand Cherokee SRT is of course a whole 'nother beast, with its own 470-hp (465 lb-ft) 6.4-liter HEMI® V8. Different numbers rise to the top for this one: a 0-to-60 time of 4.8 seconds and a quarter-mile in the mid-13s, with a top speed of 160 mph. Though weighing in at 5150 pounds, the SRT still achieves a 60-to-0 braking distance of just 116 feet. The SRT rates 13/19 MPG.

The regular Grand Cherokee is quicker this year, too—about one second faster 0-to-60 than the prior year for the 5.7L V8 and two seconds faster for the 3.6L V6.

There are three 4x4 systems: a base Quadra-Trac I (a single-speed 50/50 layout); a Quadra-Trac II (with active two-speed transfer case that can send 100 percent of drive to the front or rear); and a Quadra-Drive system (adding electric limited slip to the rear axle, capable of sending 100 percent of power to the left or right wheel).

Weights for the standard Grand Cherokee range from 4545 to almost 5400 pounds. GVWR is

6500 for all 4x2s and the gasoline V6 4x4; 6800 for diesel or V8 4x4s; and 6500 for the SRT, which comes with only a 4x4 drivetrain.

Towing capacity is 7400 lb for the V6 diesel or the standard V8 (7200 for the SRT), or 6200 lb for the gas V6, up from 5000 lb previously.

Despite its emphasis on track instead of trail, the SRT is the only Grand Cherokee that's available only as a 4x4. Nonetheless, the SRT can transfer as much as 70 percent of its power to the rear wheels during acceleration.

Hill and dale, track and trail

Dave Herzog, Grand Cherokee development manager, identified three touchstones for the vehicle: capability, performance and refinement.

Refinement is an ongoing process, covering all bases inside and out.

Capability is a Jeep fundamental, which we might usually identify first with off-roading, but equally applicable to daily driving and in fact, with the SRT, to high-speed track driving.

Conversely, while performance seems to speak to the SRT, it applies to clambering over the rocks in a standard Grand Cherokee, as well.

The ability of the Jeep Grand Cherokee to tackle all three of these worlds is what continues to amaze. Highway time confirmed the same roomy, comfortable and well-laid-out five-passenger SUV we've enjoyed for the past several years.

Significant time in the rocks once again revealed the miracle of the Jeep Grand Cherokee: that this same comfortable five-passenger SUV can follow an all-conditions Jeep Wrangler anywhere. This included spots as narrow and convoluted as the Rubicon, as well as maximum climbs and descents, where we put our trust in the Selec-Speed and Hill-Descent Controls, which assured confident and safe passage every time.

At Circuit of the Americas, after a safety briefing and a guided lap in the van, we were helmeted, strapped in and cut loose for a number of solo laps. The long straightaway between Turns 11 and 12 afforded the best chance to peek at the speedo, which showed us a 124-mph documented top speed—still in comfort and confidence.

The 2014 Jeep Grand Cherokee covers a more-than-twofold price range, from \$28,795 for a base Laredo 4x2, to \$62,995 for the SRT. The Limited falls in the mid-30s, with the Overland and Summit in the lower and upper 40s, respectively.

If you seek a daily driver, any Grand Cherokee model is a great place to start. From there, the first major fork in the road is whether you are planning on off-roading or track time, in which case, your direction will be clear. If you don't need to specifically do either of those, you are wide open: choose by budget and features. ■

IMPRESSION : 2014 JEEP GRAND CHEROKEE LAREDO 4X2

A Grand Cherokee for under \$30 grand

If you are sold on the Jeep Grand Cherokee, but on a budget, don't despair. Yes, the Compass starts under \$20,000, the Patriot under \$16,000—if rear-wheel-drive—and the eminently capable Wrangler—blessedly always 4-wheel-drive—as low as \$22,295 (mixing 2013 and 2014 prices a bit here, as we are in an ongoing changeover period).

But a flagship Grand Cherokee? Good news. The 2014 Laredo 4x2 we see here starts at \$28,795.



Is price the Laredo's main message? In a nutshell, yes. This is the most affordable trim level, bearing what amount to last year's headlights and slimmer standard features. At that price, you are indeed relegated to a two-wheel-drive Jeep Grand Cherokee. (We do understand the principle and the market, but still have a hard time contemplating two-wheel-drive Jeeps.) But for many people's driving needs, especially those who pretty much stick to the Valley of the Sun (monsoons notwithstanding) and can put the Rubicon Trail out of their minds, this is a solid choice among other wagon, van and crossover options, with all the comfort, engineering and basic brand panache of the Jeep Grand Cherokee. Ours was a pre-production unit with no final Monrooney sticker, but it did come with the 290-hp 3.6-liter V6, was upgraded with 18" aluminum wheels and an 8.4" Uconnect touchscreen, and would total \$31,285 with delivery. A 4x4 starts at just \$2000 more. ■