

Still King of the Hills



RACHEL HOLLAND

Brace yourself Sergeant Stryker, the Jeep Wrangler is finally civilized. The all-new 1997 model has air conditioning that actually works, a top that doesn't take a construction battalion to raise and lower, and a suspension that allows you to keep all the fillings

in your teeth throughout the vehicle-warranty period. Slowly but surely, Jeep is reaching its goal of attracting buyers who are new to sport/utility vehicles—the majority of SUV buyers—those not planning to charge up the north face of Hill 437.

But rest easy, Sarge, the new model still

carries enough rugged "character" that it will never be mistaken for a cushy Ford Explorer or even a Toyota RAV4. Off-road, it still climbs rocks better than almost anything you can buy in a showroom. We've driven the new Wrangler over the Rubicon Trail twice, and found it better than any previous stock Wrangler, Scrambler, CJ-5 or flat-fendered Willys. The approach, departure and breakover angles are still among the best ever offered in a showroom, the grunt from the straight-six can still pop stumps out of the ground like big, wooden zits, and the gearing is still low enough that you can creep along at less than one mile an hour in four-wheel low and chug over boulders with steady ease.

And it's still relatively affordable. A bare-bones 1997 Wrangler starts at \$13,995, and the sticker can go up a little north of our Wrangler Sport's MSRP of \$21,738. The only vehicles that are as competent as the Wrangler is once you leave the highway cost far more. A Land Rover Defender 90 costs two to three times the Wrangler's sticker, a Hummer is from three to six times as much, and—

Facts

Manufacturer's Data

Chrysler Corporation
800 Chrysler Dr. East
Auburn Hills, MI 48326
Customer assistance telephone number:
(800) 992-1997

Country of origin: United States
Number of dealers: 2273

Pricing

Base: \$16,682 (six-cylinder)
As tested: \$21,738

Rebates: none

Destination charge: \$510

What owners paid:

\$13,568—\$20,100; \$16,783 avg.

Equipment

Standard: Tinted windshield, right

outside mirror, reclining high bucket front seats, fold and tumble rear bench seat, console with cupholder and tray, AM/FM stereo, clock, power steering, fuel/oil pressure/temperature gauges, tachometer, trip odometer, dual airbags

Options on test car: Tire and wheel package (\$637); four-wheel antilock brakes (\$599); floor mats (\$18); rear-trac lock differential (\$278); air conditioning (\$878); fog lamps (\$125); AM/FM cassette stereo (\$423); leather-wrapped steering wheel (\$48); hardtop (\$755); front tow hooks (\$40); cloth seats (\$107); convenience package, which includes lockable storage, courtesy light, engine compartment light, tilt steering, intermittent wipers, conventional spare tire (\$162)

Other major options: Glass sunscreen (rear quarter-windows and liftgate) (\$168), engine block heater (\$31), spare tire cover (\$46)

AutoFILE

and that's it. All the sport/utility vehicles listed as "the competition"—from the Geo Tracker/Suzuki Sidekick and Suzuki X-90, Kia Sportage and Toyota RAV4, to the larger 4Runner, Pathfinder and Rodeo—trail far behind when it comes to creeping over those passages that have almost generically come to be called "Jeep Trails."

But engineers kept in mind the new SUV buyer when they made changes. While the interior features a much more car-like dash, with that quick cool-down air conditioning and two airbags, the entire inside of the vehicle can still be cleaned out with a fire hose, without causing damage to any of the electronics.

Likewise, the new, four-wheel coil spring suspension helps as much off-road as on. While another seven inches of articulation is provided to the wheels for getting over high rocks and through big holes, the coil springs take the bumpiness out of small highway irregularities better than the old leaf springs, giving the new Jeep a more refined ride in the city. The wheelbase remains short, so the ride is still bouncy, but it is not as severe.

Transitional handling characteristics—the roll and yaw we felt going through our short, tight, 490-foot slalom—are much improved. The new Wrangler turned in a slalom speed of 39.8 mph, on par with most SUVs, and near that of the sedan-based RAV4. Going through the slalom, the

Wrangler felt almost spritely, with so much torque down low that we had to run through the cones in third because second gear made it too easy to spin. (Yes, safety lovers, we found that at the handling limit on flat, smooth pavement, the Wrangler slides out flat, whether under- or oversteering; it does not roll over.)

Low-end torque and stump-puller axle ratios don't help much in highway passing or in top-speed tests. Although its inline-six is strong, the Wrangler does not have a lot of power at high rpm. Owners reported a lack of oomph going up long, uphill slogs where horsepower is at a premium. That's just one of the tradeoffs of an off-road powertrain—you end up shifting down and going slower.

At the drag strip, we found that our quickest quarter-mile times came with a brutal 5000-rpm launch, near the Wrangler's 4600-rpm horsepower peak. Since first and second gears are so low, for off-roading, it took third gear to get the Wrangler to 60 mph. With a big jump in gear ratios from second to third, we didn't have to upshift to fourth to get through the quarter-mile.

The Wrangler still beats all the SUV competition we've tested recently in the quarter mile, and all but the Explorer V8 in 0 to 60 mph. There's a lot of thrust in a small package here.

Like the Defender 90, the Wrangler doesn't handle as well as a roadster on a paved mountain road, but it does feel light on its feet, and it is fun.

Owners' Voices

Overall

My Porsche 944 turbo is getting a lot more garage time since the arrival of my 1997 Wrangler. This is my first SUV (not counting those we used to roll in Vietnam), and the fun-to-drive ratio is high. The first thing I did was try to roll it, or get a sense of what it takes to roll it, before I put anybody in it. On a deserted stretch of toll road, at about 65 mph, I started doing abrupt lane changes (switch-back types). The Wrangler is stable—not scary.

Vito Castelli
Oak Park, Ill.

The 1997 Wrangler is my fourth. I've owned 1989, 1991 and 1993s, and my favorite, the 1997. I average 50,000 miles a year so the new ride is very much welcome.

Mike Weise
Ingomar, Pa.

Overall, we are quite pleased. We

decided that if only one of us had a Jeep, the other would fight to drive it—so, we each got one. It's the only convertible that didn't make our insurance rates skyrocket. We pay about \$1,050 each, per year. We expected it to ride like a truck, and we're impressed that it doesn't. We've ridden in friends' older Wranglers and are thrilled that the 1997's ride doesn't tire us.

J.J. Kingery-Veach
Columbia, Mo.

Likes

The new suspension is very good. Thanks again to Chrysler-Jeep engineers: They have done miracles compared to the 1995 Wrangler. I have no problems or dislikes to report.

Mel Gordon
Reno, Nev.

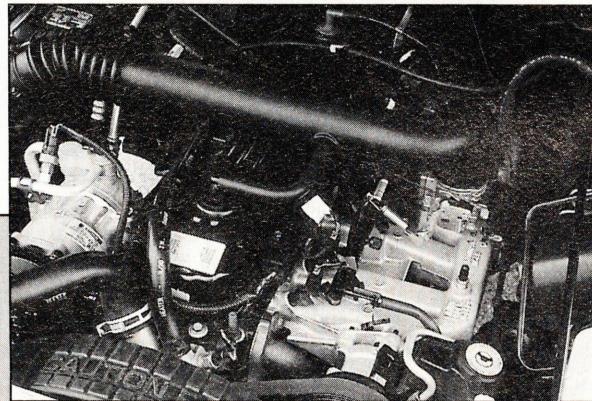
Likes

- Still just about the most capable vehicle when the pavement ends
- Relatively affordable
- New coil spring suspension improves ride and handling both on and off the highway

Dislikes

- While improved, the Wrangler still bounces a lot on the freeway
- Airbags may be welcome, but front seat knee bolsters rob legroom
- Loads of torque come at the expense of horsepower

That was what Wrangler owners told us again and again. The next vehicle of choice for many of them was not another SUV, but a convertible; some would pick a Wrangler over a Miata, even. A drive around town with the top off will show you why. There is a great sense of freedom with the top folded flat, or, with the optional Bimini soft top stretched between the windshield header and the roll bar. You don't get that in most other SUVs, not even in the two-door RAV4, with both of its removable sunroofs stowed. That sense of freedom, which Jeep has always created so well, is still the biggest draw of any Wrangler, new or old. ■



The new Wrangler's stump-pulling 4.0-liter six offers 222 lb ft of torque.

This has been the most fun vehicle I have ever owned. A simple drive to the grocery store is an adventure. I can't wait to get up and go to work, just so I can drive the Wrangler with the top down and the doors off, of course. The Jeep wave from other Jeep owners makes you feel like the president in a parade. The new Wrangler does everything its ancestors did, only in a more civilized way. To sum it up, nowhere on this green earth can you get a four-wheel-drive, four-passenger, six-cylinder-powered sport/utility convertible for \$18,000.

Raymond Tanguay
Prospect, Conn.

Jeep traditionalists
are happy that round
headlights have
returned.



Equity

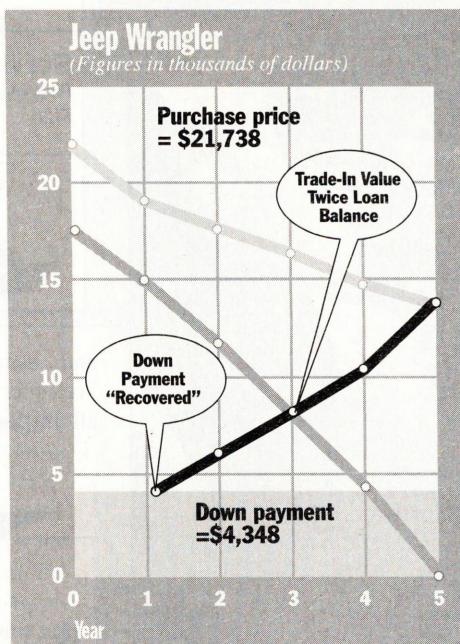
Jeep fans would know better, but it does seem that the Wrangler hasn't changed much over the years, from World War II right through the CJs and square-light Wranglers. What has been constant with the off-roader is its high resale value.

According to our model, based on a five-year loan, with a 20 percent down payment and the balance financed at 10 percent interest, a Jeep Wrangler owner recovers the down payment in the 13th month. This projection suggests that at the end of five years, the Jeep could be worth 63 percent of the original sticker price.

As is the case with Fender guitars and Porsche 911s, the Wrangler proves that sometimes the less things change on the surface, the better they retain their value. ■

■ Trade-in value
■ Loan balance
● Trade-in value minus loan balance

Projected trade-in values are not guaranteed. Projections are based on the assumption that what was true in the past will be true in the future.



It's a fun vehicle to drive. The air conditioning works better than expected—it cools the Jeep in a very short time and keeps it cool. It sits high, and when my wife drives, I don't worry about her getting caught in a rainstorm and having problems. It is very maneuverable and easy to parallel-park.

*Peter A. Marcus
Orlando, Fla.*

Dislikes

The seats are very supportive and comfortable, although moving the passenger seat for back seat entry is not a smooth operation. The seats need a better system, one with a memory. The improvements to the soft top are a trade off: It's a much quieter and better sealing top, but it has more hardware, and storing the rear side windows while on the road is impossible.

*Randy Sime
Bremen, Ind.*

The soft top takes too much time to put up and trunk space is limited. And there

has already been a recall for the airbag. I have also had a failure in the power steering, which was fixed under warranty.

*Ron Levy
Beaverton, Ore.*

I've had major problems with the air conditioning, and can't seem to get it or the entire ventilation system to work like it should. On spring and fall days, air and heat don't matter. But, when the heat index is 100 degrees plus, or when the windchill hits 40 below, you'd expect to be able to count on the heater and the air conditioner, and in my case, I can't. It's been back to the dealer five times, it still doesn't work, and the dealer doesn't seem to care.

*Courtney Nield
Oklahoma City*

Others Considered

I considered a Geo Tracker and a Toyota RAV4.

*Douglas Adams
Fishers, Ind.*

Numbers

Standing-Start Acceleration

0-35 mph	3.48 sec
0-55 mph	7.53 sec
0-60 mph	9.17 sec
0-100 km/h	9.85 sec
0-65 mph	10.76 sec
0-city block (500 ft)	59.1 mph, 8.87 sec
0-quarter mile	80 mph, 16.8 sec

Rolling Acceleration

25-45 mph (second gear)	3.7 sec
45-65 mph (third gear)	6.7 sec

Braking

65-0	158 ft
55-0	110 ft
45-0	.72 ft
35-0	.44 ft

Fuel Economy

EPA combined	18.8 mpg
AW overall	15.3 mpg

Handling

490-foot slalom	39.8 mph
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Best Numbers

0-60 mph	9.17 sec (AW)
SS-quarter mile	16.8 sec (AW)
60-0	134 ft (AW)
Skidpad	n/a

Engine

Front longitudinal	
4.0-liter/242-cid inline-six	
Horsepower	181@4600 rpm
Torque (lb ft)	222@2800 rpm
Compression ratio	8.8:1
Valve train	ohv 12-valve
Fuel delivery	Sequential, multi-port electronic injection

Drivetrain

Four-wheel drive	
Transmission	Five-speed manual
Final drive ratio	3.55:1

Brakes

F/R	Power vented discs/drums, ABS
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Wheels and Tires

Alloy, 225/75R-15	Goodyear Wrangler GS-A
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Suspension

Front	Live axle, leading arms, coil springs, gas-filled shocks, track bar, antiroll bar
Rear	Live axle, trailing arms, coil springs, gas-filled shocks, track bar, antiroll bar

Dimensions

Wheelbase (in)	93.4
Length/width (in)	147.7/66.7
Curb weight (lb)	3229

Capacities

Fuel (gal)	15.0
Cargo (cu ft)	35.7

Mark Vaughn, J.P. Vettriano, Kevin A. Wilson, Pete Albrecht and Nancy Gandelot compile AutoFile

My wife wanted a convertible, a red convertible. We looked at the Mazda Miata but there was no room for myself and the dog to ride with the wife. We also looked at the Sunfire convertible but decided on the Jeep.

*Patrick MacKlin
Ostrander, Ohio*

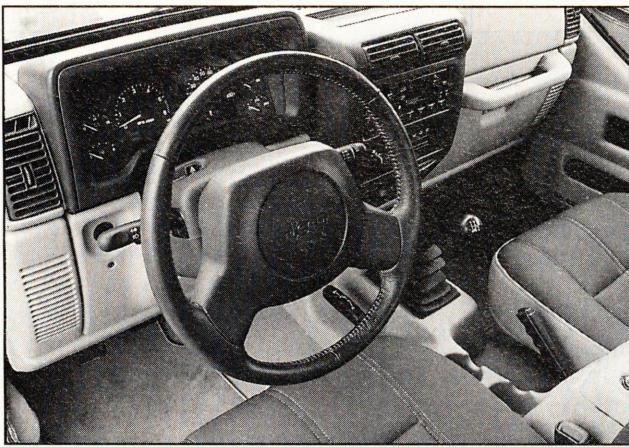
U.S. Media

The new front and rear coil suspension system is the highlight of the new model. It has not only removed much of the harshness of the highway ride of older leaf spring Jeeps, but has added almost seven inches to what engineers call "diagonal articulation" and off-roaders call "wheel-travel." This is the ability to keep all four wheels on the ground while climbing over uneven terrain.

Sports Afield

If a screwdriver is handy, the windshield can be flipped down. The side curtains, however, are an all-or-nothing proposition. Stopping to ask directions means unzipping the side curtain and folding the plastic window inside where it covers up the door handle and dumps rainwater on your lap. Inside, the 1997 Wrangler is a nice place to be. A new modular instrument panel replaces gauges that were scattered across the front dash. An elegant heating and ventilation system replaces an antiquated system. Wrangler owners must choose between hauling four people, or two people and their gear; they can't have it all with a short-wheelbase 4x4.

Field & Stream



Jeep critics also have reason to be pleased. While not quite civilized, the new Jeep handles with more surety, and is less jarring on long trips. For peace of mind, cornering is still best handled with finesse. But minor course corrections at unexpected speeds no longer upset the Wrangler's footing. The ride at the front is positively cushy, though the rear still bucks over bumps.

The Christian Science Monitor

Expenses



Consumer

This is the closest surviving descendant of the old World War II Jeep, the seed from which the entire sport/utility vehicle craze sprouted. It's the smallest, least expensive, and crudest Jeep. Nevertheless, its popularity with off-roaders endures. A basic four-wheel-drive vehicle with a hard, noisy ride and primitive handling, the Wrangler lives on because of its reputation for rugged durability in the wilds.

*Consumer Reports
Buying Guide*

The Manufacturer

This is a package that the entire Jeep team is very proud of. We improved Wrangler's capability and function, added safety features, improved the on-road ride

Security

three-year/
36,000-mile
basic warranty;
five/100,000
corrosion
coverage

Fuel

\$1470.58/year
AW overall mpg, 15,000
miles/year, gas at \$1.50/gal.

Parts

Alternator
\$280
Headlamp
\$72 (lens)
Windshield
\$515
Front fender
\$275
Hood
\$310
Wheel
\$300 (alloy)

Service

Scheduled maintenance at 15,000 miles/year
First year Second Third
\$124 \$124 \$240

Insurance

Insurance Services Office
Inc. rating: 0 is average, negative
numbers reflect lower rates, positive
numbers reflect higher rates

and handling. We developed a new Wrangler that is still a Wrangler. And all this for a relatively low \$260 million.

Craig Winn

Jeep Platform general manager

**AutoFile
Needs
You**

We're looking for owner comments on vehicles for upcoming AutoFiles. We'd like to hear from you if you own one of the following:

- Pontiac RamAir Firebird, Chevrolet Camaro SS, Ford Mustang SVT Cobra
- Acura 3.5RL
- Toyota 4Runner
- BMW 540i
- Nissan Pathfinder

There are a few requirements. You must have purchased the vehicle new and have owned it for at least three months. If you qualify, please tell us what you paid for the vehicle, when you bought it, and how many miles it has been driven. We'd also like to know your overall opinion, specific likes and dislikes, how good—or bad—your dealer is, what you pay for insurance and what other vehicles you considered buying. Please provide your vehicle identification number (VIN), which can be found on the title.

Send responses to AutoFile, *AutoWeek*, 1400 Woodbridge, Detroit MI 48207. Or call either Mark Vaughn in Los Angeles (213) 651-3710, or Nancy Gandelot in Detroit (313) 446-0343, during business hours. Our fax numbers are (313) 446-0347 and (313) 446-1027. Our e-mail address is letters@AutoWeek.com. There's also a fill-in form for AutoFile responses at *AutoWeek Online*, our World Wide Web homepage (<http://www.autoweek.com>). Regardless of how you respond, please give us your full street address with city and state, and a phone number where we can reach you for confirmation or clarification. ■