

Wheels Test

A bit of stretching limbers up old TJ



Howard J. Elmer

Messing about with an icon must be a nerve-racking business. Imagine being responsible for shaping a new BMW or changing the skin on an F-150 truck. Tinkering with a loved brand identity is risky business for any automaker.

Despite the possible fallout, DaimlerChrysler has taken a chance and stretched the Jeep TJ frame to make the Unlimited.

Calling it a 2004½ model, it's all of 25.4 cm longer, a visually small change. But in practical terms, that adds 38 cm of floor space to the interior and exponentially improves the on-road ride.

Jeep purists know it's not the first time Jeep has offered an extended wheelbase; but it has been more than 20 years since the last stretch of the CJ-7. DaimlerChrysler is betting a whole new generation of customers will appreciate the Unlimited possibilities of the longer Jeep.

The Jeep engineering team says it was careful with the changes to the TJ. The frame was stretched to the point where it wouldn't seriously alter the off-road characteristics.

For the most part, that's true.

The Unlimited maintains a 21-degree breakover angle. Its approach angle is 43.1 degrees and the departure angle is a reduced 27.4 degrees.

The longer body has hurt the back-end clearance, but you have to weigh this against gaining a real cargo space.

Anyone who has had a TJ knows that its "trunk" fits exactly one case of beer. That's it. I prefer the cargo space (800 litres), which expands to almost 2,000 litres, with the back seat folded down.

If you do drag the back end on a rock, so what, when it's the all-steel frame you're scratching.

Weighing in at 1,689 kg, the Jeep's steel framing is an old-school design, with the frame supporting the steel body. Now, with a longer wheelbase, all that steel is put to good use.

The Unlimited has a tow rating of 1,587 kg, a significant increase from the TJ's limit of 680 kg, allowing the Unlimited to tow a decent-sized boat, RV, trailer with ATVs or snowmobiles.

As you'd expect, a stretched, upgraded Unlimited can hit \$30,000, compared to the base TJ (four cylinders, manual transmission) at just over \$22,000.

Power is one of the upgrades you're paying for. The 4-litre PowerTech inline-six engine coupled to a 42RLE four-speed auto transmission pumps out 190 hp at 4,600 rpm and makes 235 lb.-ft. of torque at 3,200 rpm.

Those numbers translate into slow bottom-end acceleration and a decent mid-range punch for regular driving. Off-road in four-wheel drive (particularly in the lower range), the higher rpm puts the torque to work climbing and crawling over obstacles. Here, the engine is more than adequate.

As a bonus, fuel consumption for the V6 is miserly, with an estimated highway fuel consumption of 13 litres per 100 km and 16.8 litres in the city.

Clambering over earth mounds and up and down stream banks in the Unlimited, I reacquainted myself with the fun of going where most sane people would fear to tread in a vehicle.

The reduced clearance with a longer frame was something I did notice, but I was careful. I didn't get stuck.

In regular road conditions, I found the most dramatic improvements in the ride. Despite the inherent sloppy feel of the coil spring suspension, the Unlimited rode flatter, smoother and suffered much less body roll than its cousin.

My two large teenage boys helped me test the Unlimited back seat, a space in the CJ that's barely useful as a place to throw your jacket, according to Matt and Stephen. My boys have been stuffed in both versions and, after rid-

ing to Haliburton and back without a mutiny, that was all I needed to know about the back seat.

I couldn't have done that in a TJ. One of the fun items on the Unlimited is the new Sunrider Soft Top that has more than one open position. If you don't want to fold down the entire cover, the top's steel tube framing lets you flip back just the front piece of the cover exposing what Jeep calls a sunroof.

Jeep got the roof design right. The top folds down quickly and stows in place behind the rear seat. It goes up just as quickly — you don't have to leave it at home if you choose to drive *al fresco*.

The top is a compilation of weather-resistant materials, zippers, Velcro and weather stripping. It's quiet (as quiet as it can be) when it's up and it keeps everything out — including mosquitoes.

Howard J. Elmer can be reached at powersports@sympatico.ca.



HOWARD J. ELMER PHOTO

Jeep has extended the TJ's wheelbase by 25.4 centimetres to create the Unlimited, resulting in a much more comfortable interior and better storage space. An upgraded engine adds more power, but helps push the price tag above \$30,000.

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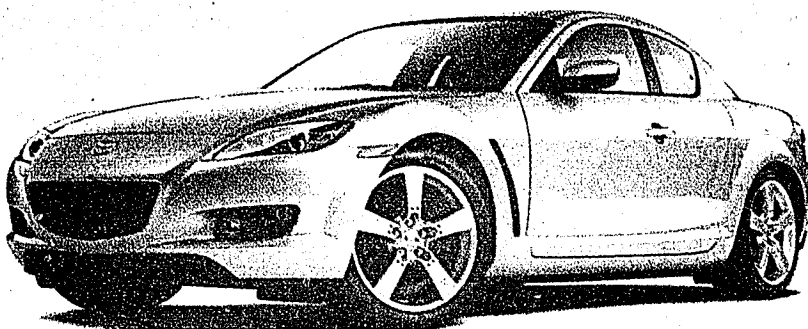
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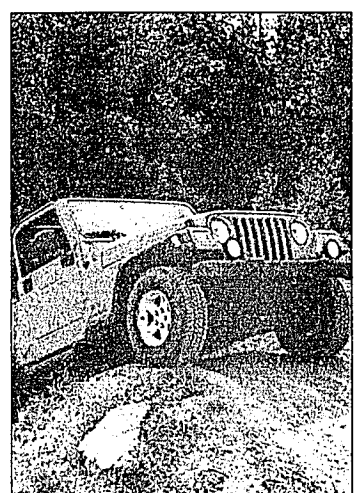
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Although the longer body has reduced the back-end clearance, the Unlimited can still handle a little off-roading.