

## Jeep Flagship Refined, Capable

Ann M. Job, For The Associated Press

Those who thought sport utility vehicles were going the way of the dodo were wrong. SUVs haven't died off amid higher gasoline prices.

To the contrary, Jeep's flagship SUV, the Grand Cherokee, just posted its best June sales in the United States since 2005 and is up 38 percent so far this year from the year-ago period, when sales already rose impressively from 2010.

Buyers find the 2012 Grand Cherokee is an American-built, handsome and comfortable five-seater that offers a surprisingly refined and free-of-wind-noise ride on pavement while retaining its off-road chops.

It's also a recommended buy of Consumer Reports; the magazine predicted it would have average reliability.

Fuel economy isn't great, though. The best rating the 2012 Grand Cherokee receives from the federal government is 17 miles per gallon in city driving and 23 mpg on the highway. This is for a two-wheel drive model with V-6.

But because the Grand Cherokee's gas tank is so big — holding 24.6 gallons — this SUV can go upwards of 460 combined city/highway miles on a single tank.

Starting manufacturer's suggested retail price, including destination charge, for a base, 2012 Grand Cherokee Laredo with 290-horsepower V-6, two-wheel drive and automatic transmission is \$28,120.

The lowest starting retail price for a 2012 Grand Cherokee with four-wheel drive is \$30,120 for a base Laredo that comes with the 290-horse V-6 and automatic transmission.

Jeep offers two V-8s, too. One generates 360 horsepower, while the top-of-the-line Hemi V-8 produces 470 horsepower and is in a special Grand Cherokee SRT8 model. Retail prices for V-8-powered Grand Cherokees start at \$37,115.

Competitors include a variety of mid-size SUVs such as the 2012 Kia Sorento, which has a starting MSRP, including destination charge, of \$25,750 with two-wheel drive, 276-horsepower V-6 and automatic transmission.

Meantime, the 2012 Ford Explorer with front-wheel drive, 290-horsepower V-6 and automatic transmission has a retail starting price of \$29,695.

Note that neither the Sorento nor Explorer has a V-8, but the Sorento and Explorer are available with more fuel-thrifty four cylinders.

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Jeep is the quintessential American SUV brand, with roots dating to World War II when its U.S. Army runabout vehicle was nimble, barebones and rugged in all kinds of terrain.

Today's Grand Cherokee is, obviously, much larger and more luxurious, but it's still rugged and can handle off-road terrain with agility and skill.

It just doesn't look like a brutish off-roader.

The face of the 2012 Grand Cherokee is instantly recognizable with Jeep's vertical-slotted grille and characteristic SUV shape. Styling is pleasant and evolutionary from earlier Grand Cherokees.

The Selec-Terrain knob inside the vehicle and the 8.6 inches of ground clearance underneath hint that the Grand Cherokee can electronically adjust its traction for sand, mud and snow and can straddle rocks and maneuver over and around other obstacles off road.

But the Jeep and Grand Cherokee badges already are authentic verifiers of the long-running capabilities of this vehicle.

Inside the test Grand Cherokee Limited 4X4 model, leather-covered, heated seats, surprisingly quiet passenger compartment and generous passenger room make on- and off-road travel a pleasant, stress-free experience.

Steering in the tester had good on-center feel and was neither too light nor too heavy. Many bumps on pavement were expertly managed.

Passengers noticed weight shifting from one side to the other as the 4,800-pound Grand Cherokee went through "S" curves and if pushed too hard, the tester with 18-inch, all-season, on/off-road tires started to get sloppy in its handling. But even then, there was less of a tippy feel than expected and there was not a lot of "head toss" felt by passengers. This was accomplished by the base suspension, which includes a rear multi-link design.

Jeep offers an air suspension system that reportedly makes the ride a bit tauter, but it was not on the test Jeep.

Most buyers will find the base, 3.6-liter, double overhead cam, Pentastar V-6 adequate, unless they are going to do some major towing. Towing capacity with this engine is limited to 5,000 pounds. It's up to 7,400 pounds with the 5.7-liter V-8.

The V-6 power came on smoothly and steadily in the tester. Peak torque of 260 foot-pounds at 4,800 rpm didn't give appreciable low-end grunt but moved the vehicle forward confidently.

Gas mileage in combined city/highway travel in the 4X4 test model was 18.7 mpg, which is just under the government's estimate of 19 mpg. It didn't seem so bad, because the gas gauge needle moved slowly as the big tank was depleted. But at

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the filling station, a bill of more than \$80 at today's prices can hit the wallet hard.

Second-row seats have multiple recline positions; legroom of 38.6 inches is more than the 37.6 inches in the Sorento but a bit less than the 39.8 inches in the second row of the Explorer.

Note the Sorento and Explorer come with three rows of seats, but the Grand Cherokee, at just under 16 feet in overall length, has only two.

This leaves 35.1 inches of cargo space behind the rear seatback, and a full 68.7 cubic feet with second-row seats folded down.

The 2012 Grand Cherokee with 3.6-liter V-6 was part of a multi-vehicle safety recall at Chrysler last fall. Dealers replaced some engines because debris in the engines might cause a failure of a connecting rod bearing. This could lead to engine seizure and the potential for a crash.

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