

FIELD TESTED

2007 Jeep Wrangler & Wrangler Unlimited



There's a new code name in the Jeep lexicon. Here's the firsthand skinny on the new JK Wrangler

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You can pretty much set your watch by it. Give Jeep 10 years and they'll come out with a new version of its iconic short-wheelbase 4x4. In 1976 the CJ-7 hit the market. 1986 unveiled the CJ's replacement, the YJ Wrangler. In early 1996 we were on the advance test drive of the TJ Wrangler in central Arizona. Now it's 2006, and we're fresh off the JK Wrangler's trail test—done, appropriately enough, on California's famed Rubicon Trail.

With the two previous Jeep launches (forget about the Liberty, Grand, Commander, et al. for this discussion), the world-famous Jeep received significant bumper-to-bumper changes. The YJ proved to be a major step in a new direction when compared to its CJ predecessors. The TJ was a radical departure from the YJ not only in appearance but also in fundamental engineering. This year's introduction of the JK Wrangler (and, perhaps coinci-

dentally, the 65th anniversary of the regular production Jeep if you count the 1941 Willys MB as part of the program) doesn't quite measure up to the radical course corrections of decades past. Oh, it's different...don't get us wrong, but if hard-pressed to describe the next-generation Jeep in a word, it would be "refined."

More Of A Good Thing

The TJ Wrangler (1997–2006) set the

short-wheelbase Jeep on a fairly high plateau. The more refined ride achieved through the introduction of a coil spring suspension, softer profile, much improved canvas top design and the SUV-like interior made this model more palatable to consumers who couldn't quite abide by the coarser nature of the YJ Wrangler and the CJs before it. Fortunately, the folks at Jeep corporate didn't neuter the beast with these stem-to-stern improvements. On the contrary, the TJ proved to be a trail runner more than worthy of the brand, and more comfortable without losing touch with its

heritage. The new JK takes the Wrangler to the next level.

Outside, the JK holds tight to the TJ styling, but does so with a cleaner and more aerodynamic design. The 7-slot grille and incorporation of the turn signal light below the headlamps harken back to the CJ days. We also like the unified approach to the bumper design and integrated fog lamps. Drag coefficient is reduced thanks to the front air dam.

Another readily apparent change is the fenders. Gone are the sheetmetal/plastic combo units. This is replaced with single-piece durable plastic fenders that bolt on for quick and easy customization. The lower rocker panel section is also protected with single-piece blow-molded step assists with a diamond plate texture on top. Another prominent change is the windshield. A slight curvature was added and the rake increased to reduce wind noise and improve aerodynamics. This rounding business continues throughout the sheetmetal treatment, with a slight crowning evident on the body sides and rear corners. Again, nothing radical, but enough to update the look. Also, the door latch now consists of a horizontal grab handle and push-button latch mechanism.

With all of these changes, though, the Wrangler retains its essentials. The hood still folds down, and the full- and half-doors are still removable.

Sharp eyes will also note the increased

dimensional heft of the Wrangler. The more robust stance is credited to the 3.5-inch wider track width when compared to the TJ, and the overall width has increased by 5 inches. To our eyes, all of this contributes to a Wrangler that exhibits a more aggressive personality than its predecessor.

The Inside Digs

As you might expect, the increased width gave the engineers more room to play when designing the interior—and play they did.

The door panels receive a major architectural redesign with the integrated armrests and fresh door handle/lock treatment. Teeing off from the circular element theme first revealed with the launch of the Liberty, the JK's door panels, as with many other interior components, place heavy emphasis on round design cues. Another interesting element is the continuation of sheetmetal on the door panel as opposed to front-to-back plastic.

Also completely revised are the dash, center stack, console, steering wheel and instrument panel. While all design is



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subjective, we do feel that the instrument panel represents a huge improvement over the previous incarnation. It's much easier to view the instrumentation.

Due in large part to the wider chassis, the Wrangler now has a 54.6 cu. ft. front-seat area (up by 4.8 cu. ft.). This translates to a 5.1-inch increase in shoulder room and 4.6 inches of hip room—both welcome improvements. With this added space comes new sculpted seats that we found highly supportive thanks to the substantive seat cushion and side bolsters. The driver's seat is also height-adjustable (a Wrangler first), which is a really slick feature for short-statured drivers on the trail.

Naturally, the added room gives rear seat passengers a bit more comfort as well. Shoulder, hip and leg room are increased over the TJ. We spent some time riding in the back seat of a Wrangler Unlimited and discovered that adults will have no complaints unless the trip is too long. Kids should have no complaints at all. The Wrangler continues with the fold-and-tumble tradition, while the Wrangler Unlimited receives a new 60/40 fold-flat split bench.

Wrangler Unlimited

Speaking of the Wrangler Unlimited, have we overlooked the elephant in the room? Not a chance. We're so excited about this one we just can't stand it.

As you probably have surmised, the JK Wrangler Unlimited follows the TJ Wrangler Unlimited introduced a couple of years ago. The TJ version's longer wheelbase allowed for a significant bump in rear cargo space and was well received by the Jeep enthusiast community. Little wonder that the longer Wrangler has morphed into a four-door version.

The Unlimited sits on a 116-inch wheelbase platform, which is 20.6 inches longer than the Wrangler. With that extra space comes two rear doors, more rear

passenger seating room and a big jump in cargo space. With the rear seats up, the Unlimited has 46.4 cu. ft. of cargo space. Fold the seats flat and that number jumps to 86.75 cu. ft.

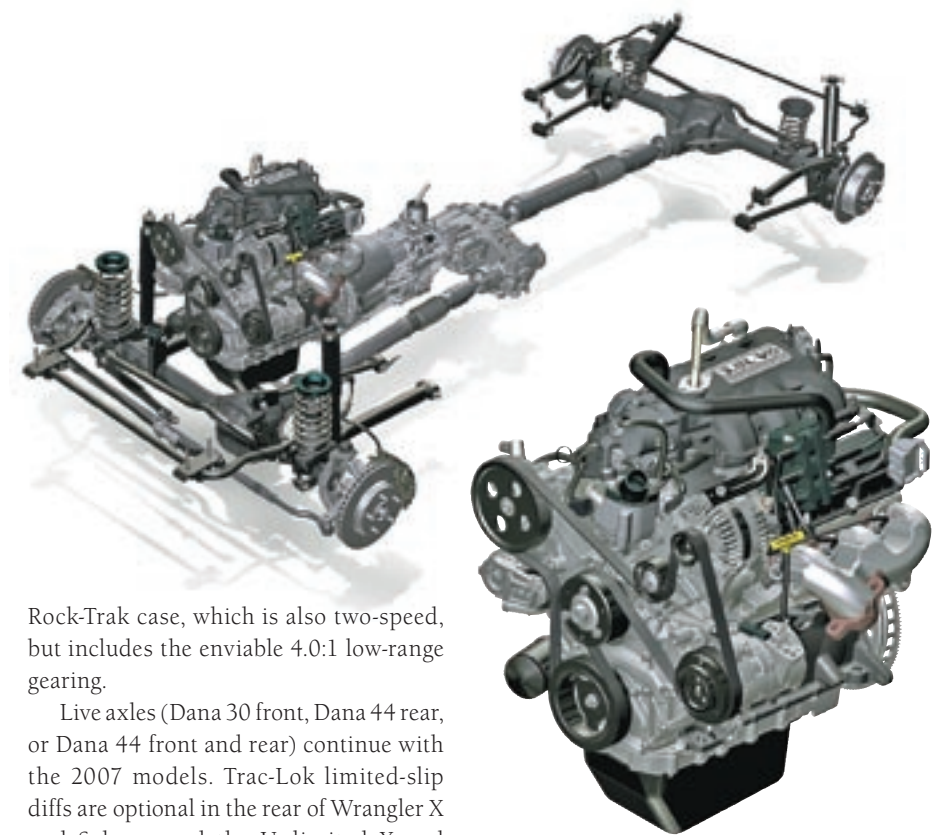
The Wrangler Unlimited is offered in two top configurations—soft and modular hard. The soft top makes this Jeep the only four-door open-air vehicle on the market. The modular hardtop—called the Freedom Top—is a three-piece unit. The panels over the front passenger and driver side can be removed independently of each other, or both panels and the rear portion of the top can be removed. This is a heavy piece, however, so complete removal of the hardtop is not a one-person job.

Driveline Lowdown

For 2007 the Wrangler powerteam has become a team of one. The I4 and the I6 are long gone, replaced with a 3.8L OHV V6. Boasting 202 horsepower and 237 lbs-ft of torque, this is a stout engine that's perfectly balanced for both the Wrangler and Wrangler Unlimited. Fuel economy is 17/19 city/highway for the 4WD models and 17/21 for 2WD versions. Oh, yeah... that's another interesting twist—the Unlimited will be offered in 2WD.

Behind the 3.8L is one of two transmissions. Standard across the board is another Jeep Wrangler first—a six-speed manual overdrive. Axle gearing is 3.21 (standard) or 4.10 (optional, standard on the Rubicon). Optional is the 42RE four-speed automatic. With this you get the 4.10 gears.

Two transfer cases are also part of the program. Wrangler X and Sahara, and Wrangler Unlimited X and Sahara, come with the second-generation NV241 two-speed part-time case with a 2.72:1 low-range. Both of the Rubicon versions are fitted with an upgraded NV241 Off-Road



Rock-Trak case, which is also two-speed, but includes the enviable 4.0:1 low-range gearing.

Live axles (Dana 30 front, Dana 44 rear, or Dana 44 front and rear) continue with the 2007 models. Trac-Lok limited-slip diffs are optional in the rear of Wrangler X and Sahara, and the Unlimited X and Sahara. Rubicon models, however, receive the Tru-Lock front and rear locking

differentials. The new deal here is that the locking diffs are actuated electronically

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(rather than pneumatically) via an easy-to-use rocker switch.

Another "new" for the Wrangler line (4WD models) is Brake Lock Differentials, which is part of the Electronic Stability Program (ESP). This system automatically activates when the transfer case is in 4-low, and works by sensing wheel spin differentiation and attempts to use brake power to apply equal torque to both wheels. ESP, in case you're not aware of it, is a comprehensive system that applies brake and engine control to maintain directional stability. This is now a common feature on many trucks and SUVs, and it comes as no surprise that DaimlerChrysler has added it to the Wrangler lineup.

Ride & Handling Essentials

The JK is built on an all-new fully boxed frame that is supposed to be 100 percent stiffer, with a 50-percent increase in

torsional rigidity. To this is tacked the expected five-link coil suspension system with revised geometry and new spring rates and shock valving. The front springs, for example, have a lower rate to provide smoother ride quality, which they certainly do. The steering system has also been stiffened and upgraded with a new recirculating-ball gearbox. The on-center feel and overall stability of this setup is a significant improvement on the highway when compared to the TJ. Less herky-jerky.

Among the more welcome options available on all models is the Active Sway Bar System (ASBS). Taking a cue from the Dodge Power Wagon, the ASBS allows drivers to disconnect the front sway bar with the flip of a switch. Unlike manual aftermarket quick disconnects, which separate the sway bar at the end links, the ASBS uses an electronic motor to engage/disengage the two halves of the sway bar, leaving the end links connected. This system works in 4WD high- or low-range

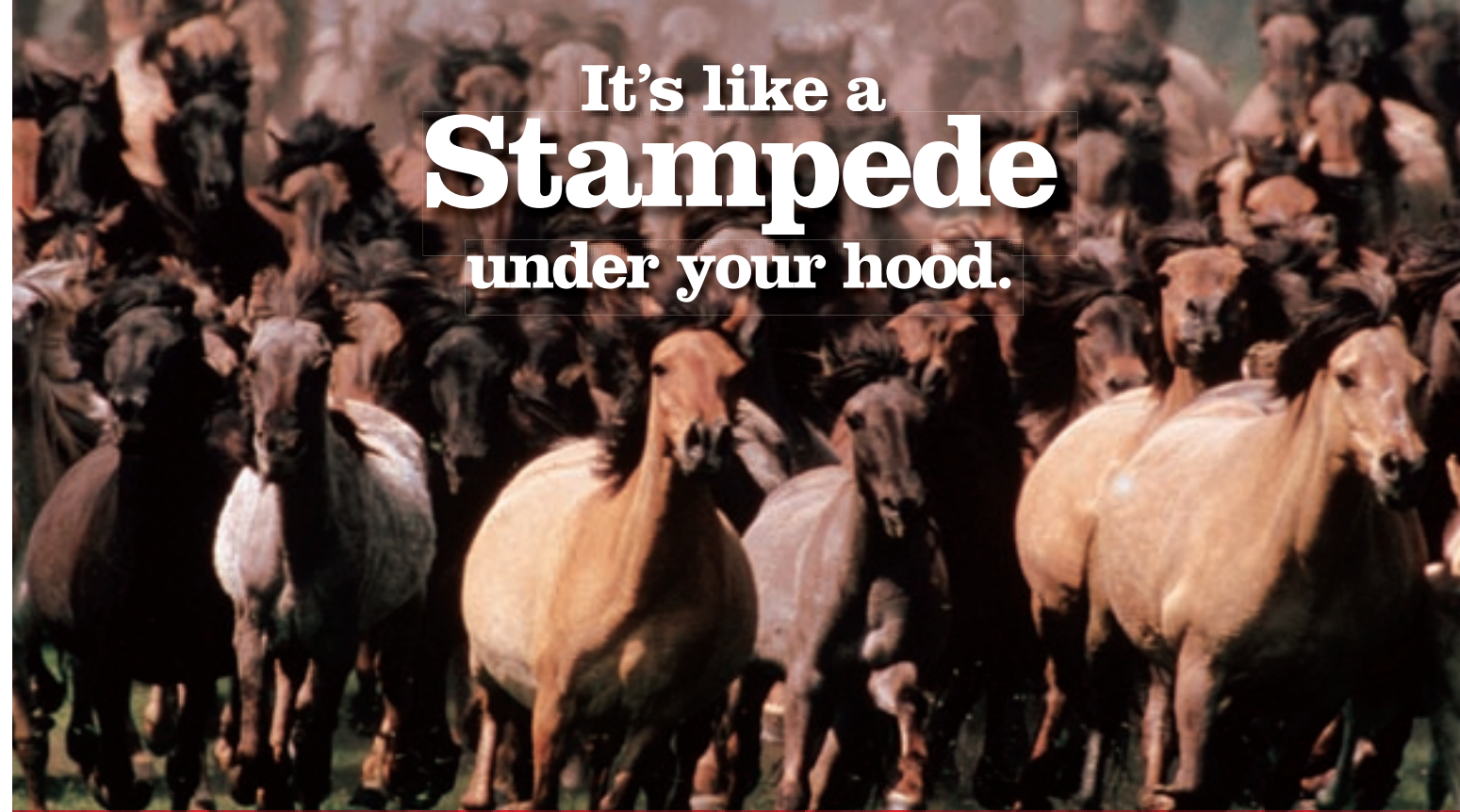
up to 18 mph. Go above that and the system automatically reengages the bar.

On The Trail And Highway

The Rubicon Trail provided an ideal test for the JK. I spent the majority of it in the Wrangler Unlimited because I was curious how the longer wheelbase would effect tight cornering, ground clearance and approach/departure angles. Except for the occasional bad lines taken (driver's mental hiccups), the Unlimited never failed to cut the perfect corner and never required a three-point turn. The approach (44.3) and

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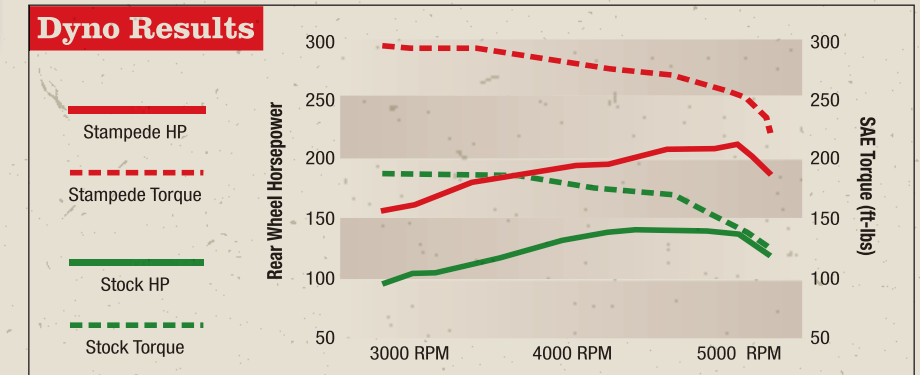


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Base Specifications

2007 Jeep Wrangler/Wrangler Unlimited


<p>Engine Type..... V6 OHV 12-valve Displacement..... 3.8L (230.5 cu. in.) Horsepower..... 202 @ 5,000 rpm Torque..... 237 lbs-ft @ 4,000 rpm Compression Ratio..... 9.6:1 Fuel Economy..... 17/19 (city/hwy)</p> <p>Transmission Manual..... 6-speed overdrive Automatic..... 4-speed overdrive</p> <p>Transfer Case NV241 Command-Trac: 2-speed, 2.72:1 low-range NV241OR Rock-Trac: 2-speed, 4.0:1 low-range</p> <p>Axles Front... Dana 30 (Dana 44 opt. Rubicon) Rear..... Dana 44 Ratio..... 3.21 std., 4.10 opt.</p> <p>Suspension Front..... Live-axle, coil spring, leading arms, track bar stabar Rear..... Live-axle, coil spring, trailing arms, track bar stabar</p> <p>Steering Type..... Power recirculating ball w/damper Ratio..... 16.7:1 (2-door) 14.7:1 (4-door) Turning Diameter..... 34.9 ft. (2-door) 41.2 ft. (4-door)</p>	<p>Brakes Front..... Disc, 11.9 x 1.1 in. vented rotor Rear..... Disc, 12.44 x 0.47 in. solid rotor</p> <p>Wheels Standard..... 16x7 in. steel Optional..... 16x7 in. aluminum Sahara..... 17x7.5 in. aluminum 18x7.5 in. aluminum (opt.) Rubicon..... 17x7.5 in. aluminum</p> <p>Tires P225/75R16, P245 P255/75R17 P255/70R18 LT255/75R17</p> <p>Dimensions & Capacities Overall Length..... 152.8 in. (2-door) 173.4 in. (4-door) Overall Width (w/o mirrors): 73.7 in. (2-door) 73.9 in. (4-door) Overall Height (hardtop)..... 70.9 in. Wheelbase..... 95.4 in. (2-door) 116.0 in. (4-door) Track..... 61.9 in. Overhang..... 26.7 in. (f), 30.6 in. (r) Max Payload..... 1,000 lbs. Curb Weight: 3,760-4,129 lbs. (2-door) 4,075-4,340 lbs. (4-door)</p>
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departure (40.4) angles with the LT255/75R17 tires proved to be Rubicon-friendly. When fore and aft hang-ups proved problematic, a quick flip of the locking diff fixed the situation. With this performance, combined with just over 10 inches of minimum ground clearance (rear axle, depending on tire size), I see no reason why anyone should look at the Unlimited as any less of a trail rig than its shorter-wheelbase sibling.

Another sweet feature that proved itself on the trail is the new Electronic Throttle Control system. This sucker provides velvet-smooth low-end throttle control, which is just what you need when traction control is a high priority. Because it is speed sensitive, the control curves are consistent throughout a wide set of operating conditions. There's even a calibration for 4-low to allow for improved engine power modulation.

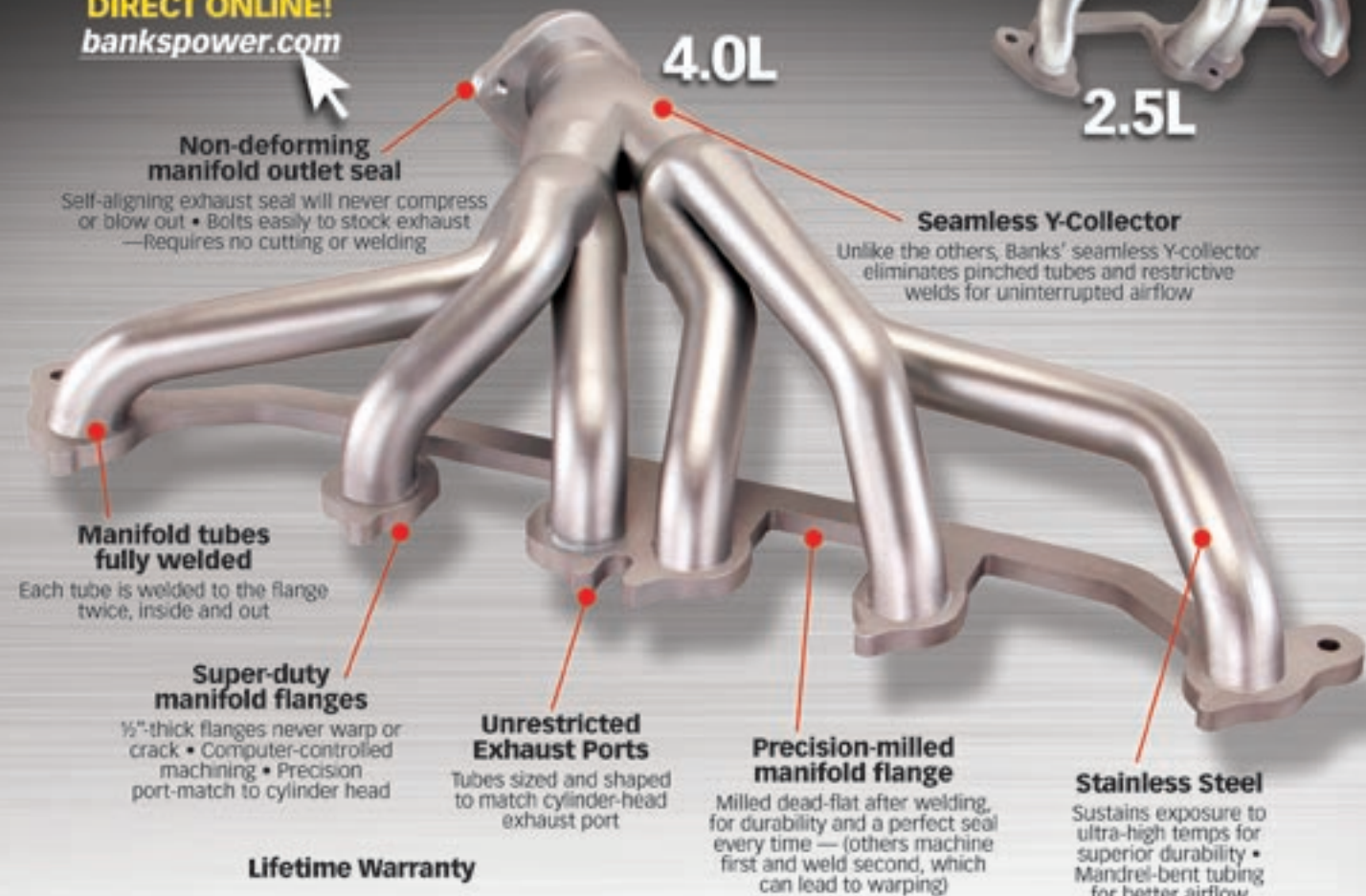
And, as mentioned earlier, the JK certainly feels like a more refined machine on the pavement. The revised coil spring rates and improved tuning (thanks in part to the stiffer frame and upgraded steering system) all contribute to more responsive, smoother and more predictable handling characteristics.

In sum, Jeep engineers hit the mark with this third-generation Wrangler. Everything we've come to expect in short-wheelbase Jeep performance is there, only there's more of it. Ditto on the styling—heritage isn't compromised by the refinements. We look forward to playing around with the JK for a long while. Well... at least for the next 10 years. 

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