

## One giant leap for monster - Jeep

### COMPROMISE ISN'T ALWAYS A BAD THING...



**A COMPROMISE THAT WORKS:** The longer wheelbase and extra doors convert Jeep's Wrangler Unlimited Rubicon from a two-seater into a more practical five-seater without losing much of its legendary off-road capability. Du Plessis took off the front roof but threatening rain dissuaded him from removing the rest.

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By **Henri du Plessis**

Forget about Cherokees and Grand Cherokees, the real Jeep is supposed to be a small, square vehicle with only two seats, right?

Well, no... and enter the Jeep Wrangler Unlimited Rubicon.

We'll just call it the Rubicon - just because the car now has four doors and a much longer wheelbase, we don't need to stretch the name as well.

Yes, you heard right - four doors. Longer wheelbase. And if you are still unsure, let me add: five seats.

And it is blerrie big - in a smaller sort of way.

One has to ask why all this happened.

After all, the original Wrangler, still sticking to tradition like the Land Rover Defender, continues styling cues first penned way back in the 1950's when the original wartime Jeep proved too small to be of any real commercial use.

It has always been a great design for the purpose. The Wrangler in short-wheel base form (if you discard the road tyres and fit proper mud mashers) is unstoppable over just about any off-road terrain and the stuff of legend in obstacle-crossing circles, even today.

And one of the reasons for its success has been its short wheelbase and wide track, virtual lack of overhangs front and rear, and grunt from traditional straight-six petrol engines.

So why spoil that with a longer wheelbase and five seats? Compromise, that's why, as I discovered when this big yellow monster with its detachable black roof arrived in my driveway recently.

The reason? It has all the macho looks while still catering for the family. Or that's what I thought. For instance, commuting in a Wrangler is not necessarily a wise thing, even if it sports a surprisingly smooth automatic gearbox.

For one thing, it gets quite thirsty over short distances in city traffic, much like a sailor after a salty few months at sea.

It isn't difficult to record consumption figures hovering around 15 litres/100km, especially when you regularly have to flash up the six-cylinder engine with the accelerator pedal just to keep station with the rest of the traffic from traffic lights to stop streets.

Also its throttle response with the automatic box has a bit of a delay. You almost have to be a prophet when it comes to gaps in the traffic and your timing has to be perfect when you need to find a way

across a busy intersection.

Understandably, the suspension doesn't really allow for much in the way of snappy cornering. There's a significant amount of body roll and the big tyres don't help much either.

And don't take the Jeep on the road when you're in a rush. While it might happily trundle along at 140km/h on a straight, open road once you get there, this is not the kind of vehicle you need to rush from the centre of Cape Town to Table View to be in time to watch two big ships narrowly avoid running aground in a typical Cape winter storm. Trust me, I was there.

### **COMING INTO ITS OWN**

I had the opportunity to take the Rubicon out on the open road to one of my favourite Boland towns, Bonnievale, near where my brother-in-law manages an olive farm. The farm, nestled in the hills outside the town, is a superb venue to test an off-road vehicle's capabilities.

On the open road fuel consumption dropped considerably, to about 12.7 litres/100km. Comfort levels weren't brilliant but neither did the spine suffer all that much and, by all accounts, the family did not suffer any ill effects either. The Rubicon's no speed demon either but lopes along at legal speeds without allowing hills to bother it too much.

It was while we were playing around on the farm that the Rubicon really came into its own and I discovered that the longer wheelbase detracted very little from its legendary off-road ability.

The body roll so bothersome in the city turns out to be essential off the road where it allows for lots of suspension travel for climbing over obstacles. In fact, the vehicle's ability to clamber over rock and tree stump, wade through mud and soft sand and scale steep slopes was so good, the experience almost came as a bit of a let-down, as the fear factor remained negligible.

Yes, the longer wheelbase will let the Rubicon get hung up on a sharp obstacle sooner than the short-wheelbase original but it is still better than most other five-seat off-roaders.

### **SPECIALISED TOOL**

And we really tested the five-seater configuration by loading the in-laws as well. It was a tad squeezed in the rear but comfortable enough for a 30km run into town.

And we removed the front section of the roof, despite threatening rain. It's not as easy as pushing a button but the hand-operated fasteners did come undone with some persuasion.

We could have gone further, but had the rain made good on its threat we would have been undone, so we chose not to.

I can see that the Rubicon would be a great sport utility as a second vehicle for adventurous motorists, if you can spare the R334 900 for such as specialised tool.

The 3.8-litre six is smooth and willing, delivering 146kW and 315Nm and quite drivable. The equivalent Land Rover Defender is dearer and comes only with a diesel engine, which is more frugal, but also lower on power (but stronger on torque).

As far as comfort is concerned, there's little choice between the two, with the Jeep possibly edging its British opponent slightly.

The usual Chrysler warrantees and guarantees apply.