

Grand Cherokee's evil twin pumps up the power

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It's a 5,000-pound, gas-guzzling torque monster, about as popular with green motorists as a Class A motorhome.

Sure, its siblings are powered by a reasonably fuel-efficient Pentastar V6, but not this bad boy. Under the hood you'll find the legendary Hemi V8 engine—in its thirstiest form.

Indeed the SRT8, which starts at \$55,395, may be a pricey, impractical and perhaps irresponsible take on Jeep's popular Grand Cherokee SUV, but despite these negatives, and the pain I felt at the gas pump, it was hard giving back the keys after a week of testing.

It can be fun embracing the dark side.

Star Wars analogies aside, even the look of the 2012 Jeep Grand Cherokee SRT8 is borderline sinister. The styling isn't radically different from less potent models, but certain cues suggest it's not your typical family hauler.

The SRT8 starts with a more muscular, planted look, having been lowered an inch and adorned with SRT-exclusive body-coloured wheel flares and side sills.

The monochromatic exterior continues with a one-piece fascia with new LED daytime running lamps and the body-coloured grille with black mesh accented by chrome bezel inserts. The lower grille is also painted gloss black.

The sculpted hood gets a couple of functional black heat extractors, and in rear there's a one-piece black fascia with separate air diffuser.

Big, four-inch exhaust tips flank the diffuser, rather than being centre-mounted as before.

As my tester was also dipped in black, the only flourishes of colour were the taillights and the red-painted Brembo brake callipers (six piston in front, four-piston in rear) peeking out from within the split five-spoke, 20-inch forged aluminum wheels, shod with big rubber.

Indeed, the Grand Cherokee SRT8 looks menacing, but not over the top. Which is a good thing, as you wouldn't want to draw too much attention to its all-new 6.4-litre Hemi V8 that pumps out a thumping 470

The black exterior of this 2012 Jeep Grand Cherokee SRT8, with its sculpted hood with black heat extractors, lurks a 6.4-litre Hemi V8 that delivers 470 hp and 465 lb/ft of torque. Its one-piece fascia, body-coloured grille with black mesh, and gloss black lower grill makes a sinister first impression. Beneath

hp and 465 lb/ft of torque. That's an improvement of 50 horses and 45 lb/ft over the 6.1-litre engine it replaces.

Avoiding the minutiae on intake and camshaft, I'll just note this new engine pulls across a wider RPM band than before. Ninety per cent of peak torque is now available between 2,800 and 6,000 rpm.

Sure, it has variable cylinder management (VCM), which during light cruising can shut down four cylinders, and a new active valve exhaust system that can improve highway fuel economy by 13 per cent. But I'll bet it doesn't get much use.

Fuel saver technology is nice, but in this vehicle, it's a bit like ordering a diet coke to wash down your triple bacon cheeseburger.

Helping route all that power to the pavement is a new SRT-tuned, adaptive damping suspension managed by the new Selec-Track 4x4 system.

This works with a load of tech that include stability control, adaptive damping, transmission mapping, transfer case

torque proportioning, electronic limited slip differential, throttle control and cylinder de-activation to automatically tune the driving dynamics.

A five-position dial allows drivers to choose the appropriate setting, with Auto, which provides the smoothest, most compliant ride (thanks to the adaptive suspension), probably the best choice for daily driving.

Auto even upshifts automatically with the paddles and autostick, so if you want more control, choose the Sport or Track settings. In manual mode, neither of these will upshift until you do, gear changes are delayed and noticeably quicker.

Sport also tightens the suspension for more body control, and Track takes that a step further, disabling traction control and locking down body motion for even better handling. Like Sport, this setting provides a rear bias in the 4x4 system, with torque split 35/65 between front and rear.

Tow mode reduces pitch and bounce for safer hauling, and modifies the shift

schedule for less 'busyness' in the transmission. And Snow mode provides gentler starts, as it begins in second gear, with the system programmed for reduced wheel-spin.

Unlike the six-speed 5.7-litre Cherokee, the SRT8's transmission gets one less cog. But no matter, with all that 6.4-litre Hemi torque, you'll not miss it.

Step on the throttle and the big P295/45ZR20 Pirelli Scorpion Verde all-season run-flat tires really dig in for a launch that's on par with many performance cars. There's no hesitation between shifts, particularly in Sport mode, as the transmission forcibly delivers each gear change.

The bellowing from its dual exhausts is just icing on the cake.

Despite its 2,336 kg (5,150 lb) curb weight, the Cherokee SRT8 will bolt from zero to 60 mph in 4.8 seconds, and do the quarter mile in the mid-13s.

See SRT8, pg. 3

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