

Commander smaller than other SUVs but it's no lightweight

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Special to The IFP



The 2006 Jeep Commander is the Jeep brand's first foray into the realm of the seven-passenger SUV.

"Sure, just what the world needs, another gas-guzzling, full-size SUV."

That was the wisecrack from a colleague when we first heard about the 2006 Jeep Commander—the Jeep brand's first foray into the realm of the seven-passenger SUVs.

I must admit, I had similar thoughts at the time, envisioning a honking big vehicle that would likely be hard to manoeuvre in and out of city traffic and definitely lacking in road-handling manners on the highway.

Then, I got a chance to drive one and my opinion did an abrupt about-face. I'm still not a likely candidate for one because I simply don't need a third row of seats.

But, I sure can see why some families might want one—particularly those who jockey sports teams around to arenas, ball parks or soccer pitches and need the versatility a seven-seat sport utility can offer.

Likewise, cottage-goers who occasionally want to do some serious off roading at the lake may fall in love with what the Commander brings to the table.

Photos of the Commander, because of its boxy, classic Jeep styling, make it look bigger than it really is. In fact, the Commander is based on the Grand Cherokee platform and shares a lot of the same

mechanicals. And, it's only five centimetres (two inches) longer than its Jeep sibling.

So, instead of having the bulk of other full-size seven-passenger SUVs like the Chevy Suburban, Toyota Sequoia and the like, the Jeep Commander is a notch below them on the size scale.

That's not to say that it's a lightweight by any means because it is the biggest Jeep ever and weighs in at 2309 kg. (5091 lb.).

As a result, expect to pay a price at the gas pumps, especially if you opt for the 5.7L V8 Hemi engine with its 330 horsepower and 375 lb-ft of torque.

Easing the pain a bit is the Multi Displacement System (MDS) on the Hemi, which basically shuts down four cylinders when you don't need them for acceleration. It's done so seamlessly, you have no way of knowing it's really happening.

There's no hesitation or lag

whatsoever. DaimlerChrysler says MDS increases fuel economy anywhere from 5 to 20 per cent depending on driving habits and vehicle usage.

Our tester was a top-of-the-line Jeep Commander Limited, loaded with options that bumped the MSRP to an eye-popping \$58,880.

Probably the reason the Commander looks so much bigger than the Grand Cherokee is because of its height. This is necessary for the theatre-style seating for the second and third row seats, providing great forward visibility.

Talking about the seating, the first two rows offer generous leg room. The third row is another story. Putting more than one adult in that area would be a stretch, but it is suitable for children.

The second row seats split 40-20-40 and the third row 50-50. Both rows fold forward to create a flat load floor. Behind the third

row is a handy storage bin in the load floor, perfect for stowing those odds and ends that would be sliding around otherwise in the upper cargo area. The bin comes with a reversible cover with carpet on one side and a washable plastic on the other.

Another interesting feature on the Limited edition is the CommandView skylights, located above the second row of seats. These dual skylights, combined with a power sunroof over the front row seats, create a sense of roominess in the interior. Roller shades on the skylights can be used to block out light if desired.

There are two trim levels offered—Commander and Commander Limited.

The Commander comes with a V6 and two V8 options. Standard engine is the 3.7-litre V6, producing 210 horsepower and 235 lb.-ft. of torque.

Also available is a 4.7-litre V8 with 235 horsepower (standard on the Commander Limited) and 305 lb.-ft. of torque and the 5.7-litre V8 Hemi mentioned earlier.

All come with a five-speed automatic transmission, and each has a different 4WD system.

Safety is a big feature of the Commander, which boasts Electronic Stability Control (ESP). This system includes anti-lock brakes, all-speed traction control, brake assist, electronic roll mitigation and four wheel brake traction control.

In a nutshell, ESP enhances dri-

ver control and helps maintain directional stability under all conditions.

Its greatest benefit is in critical driving situations such as turns and is especially valuable on mixed surfaces like patchy snow, ice or gravel.

If there is a discernible difference between where the driver is steering and where the vehicle is going, ESP applies selective braking and throttle control to put the car back onto the driver's intended path. In short, the system is meant to save us from our driving mistakes.

Airbags, side airbags and a rear back-up detection system add to the safety features of the vehicle.

Despite its size, the Commander Limited is really much more civilized than I expected. It manoeuvres well, even in the tight parking lots we find ourselves subjected to these days.

On the road, it cruises smoothly and presents little of the wind or road noise one often experiences in a 4X4.

The short and long-arm front suspension and five-link rear suspension with track bar provide stability both on and off road.

The cabin is roomy and quite attractive with a two-tone colour scheme.

With the three engine options and two trim levels and a starting price of just over \$40,000, the Commander has a lot to offer anyone in the market for an SUV at the upper end of the size scale.

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