



MOTORING

A rock and a hard place

Tim Barnes-Clay packs his boots, shorts and sunnies, and heads for the desert

Have you ever relished the thought of crossing a desert in a proper Jeep? It's always appealed to me, so when I was offered the chance I decided to do just that, in Morocco, behind the wheel of the 2015 Cherokee Trailhawk.

As it turned out, this was no run-of-the-mill automotive media event – it was a few days of tough driving away from the imperial city across the Agafay Desert and High Atlas Mountains. On reflection, it was one of the most colourful experiences of my career.

Just an hour from the lively souks and dizzying maze-like market streets of Marrakesh, the Agafay offers quite a contrast to the hustle and bustle of the city. The landscape slowly changes from urban to rural farmland, until you reach the desert, untouched by development. But this is not a Saharan-style sandy wilderness; it's more of a barren, abandoned plateau. Stretching for miles, this semi-lunar terrain is unforgiving in the summer months, but in the cooler seasons it provides a breathtaking environment, one that is often overlooked by those wanting to shuttle between the Atlas Mountains and Marrakesh.

This rocky setting is interrupted by astonishing fissures and curves, while concealed canyons jut out against the backcloth of the mountainous panorama. Nothing about the forbidding topography appears to make much sense – except to the new Jeep Cherokee.

Indeed, local villages have been driven out by the lack of water, so, apart from some local shepherds on their donkeys and the odd 4x4, the area is free for adventure. And, believe me, the Cherokee Trailhawk makes an ideal travelling companion in this kind of environment.

The full-bodied 4x4 model comes with a potent 3.2 litre V6 268 bhp petrol engine and a nine-speed automatic gearbox. It's virtually a bulldozer in terms of build and brawn. Just rotate the car's Selec-Terrain dial to 'Sand' mode and the Jeep Active Drive Lock does the rest. Any apparently impossible barriers to progress are soon dealt with by the sport utility vehicle's (SUV) exclusive 'Rock' mode. And when the route gets even tougher, '4WD-Low' can be selected. This engages the low-range gears and makes use of the rear differential lock.

Nothing seems to stand in the way of the Jeep's 'can do' talents. Even almost vertical uphill and downhill gradients can be set to



rights. By triggering Selec Speed Control, the pre-set pace can be held, leaving you to focus 100 per cent on nothing other than the steering; the Jeep Cherokee Trailhawk does the rest.

Out of the desert, the vehicle's on-tarmac wherewithal is just as inspiring, as we found out on the asphalt roads engraved into the Atlas Mountains. Praise has to go to the Trailhawk's independent suspensions; and once any crater-like potholes disappear from under the wheels, the Jeep's rear axle disengages and switches to front-wheel drive all by itself.

'It's virtually a bulldozer in terms of build and brawn'

Other admirable features to make the Jeep Cherokee Trailhawk a pleasure to drive include tinted sunscreen glass, coloured grille surrounds and roof rails, off-road wheel flares and 17-inch aluminium wheels. Inside the cabin, the equipment continues with Nappa leather trim, red interior stitching accents, all-season floor mats, a cargo net, a media centre with an 8.4-inch touch-screen display and USB remote port.

The 2015 Jeep Cherokee Trailhawk got us through our desert and mountain escapade

so capably we were almost disappointed by the dearth of drama. To be fair, though, the theatrical staging made up for any further rushes of adrenaline required.

Take it from me; if you're into hard-core 4x4s you could do a lot worse than this one. The Trailhawk illustrates all this on- and off-road capability with a distinctive, down-to-earth look, and the ingenuity of a family motor. It is backed up by Jeep Trail Rated equipment, which includes hard-nosed approach and departure angles, front suspension and transmission skid plates and signature red tow hooks.

There are, however, a few deficiencies worth noting. Despite the Trailhawk's upscale interior, it may not be the best option if you frequently need to transport a large quantity of kit. While the backseat is spacious for two or three adult passengers, the rear cargo area is somewhat small in comparison. Rivals, such as the new Land Rover Discovery Sport, are roomier, especially with the rear seats folded.

Of course, our time with the Jeep had to end, and it came to a close pleasantly under the setting sun back in Marrakesh. Elated, but exhausted, we all agreed that the Cherokee Trailhawk could well be all you ever need if off-roading is your thing. We also thought the Jeep reasonably priced, starting from just £34,865 on the road.

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