



There are those in Detroit who say that you can't sell a vehicle where form follows function. But then the Jeep is not made in Detroit. The new Wagoneer is cast in the mold

of previous models, box-like, high-riding with more room and better visibility than conventional wagons. Down the dusty byways, it seals you away from the chocking clouds.

Road Testing The New Jeep Wagoneer

Text and Photos V. Lee Oertle

The Jeep Wagoneer swings into 1969 with a whole new outlook on life. With new, slick finish it is competitive with any \$5000 wagon — only with some very big advantages.

Want a rugged station wagon that lets you follow a Jeep just about anywhere it can go, but with a lot more comfort? Then you'll need a heavy-duty station wagon with all-wheel-drive, a medium-short wheelbase of about 110 inches and more interior space. That description pretty well covers the 1969 Jeep Wagoneer, something a lot of adventurous buyers will find practical this season. It's a vehicle that grows on you. With one, a buyer enjoys the best of two worlds: extra passenger comfort in a rugged trail-buster.

I said trail-buster *not* tail buster! For those drivers familiar with the unyielding seats and boomerang-like springs of sporty 4x4s, the Wagoneer will be a

genuine surprise. The new Wagoneers are equipped with variable-rate rear leaf springs, with double-acting shock absorbers at all four corners. The result, much modified and refined over the years, is a firm and well-controlled ride on paved streets and a rugged strength over rough terrain. There is a nice compromise here that a backroads artist should find impressive.

Great Improvements

Remember the first Jeep Wagoneers that appeared several years ago? The memory of my first road test in a Wagoneer left me with some pretty rough edges. I freely admit that I approached the 1969 model with a slight frown



The 230-horsepower Wagoneer can lure the driver into impossible situations (top) and then leave him to get out the best he can with big turning circle.

tucked between my brows. To say that the early Wagoneers "had a few bugs" could be comparable to saying that Interstate 40 "carries a few cars." But that was yesteryear. The new models are slickly finished and trimly balanced as any other \$5000 station wagon — but with *big* advantages. You can load a Wagoneer with front-drive, automatic transmission, single-lever transfer case and springs and axles which can take rough punishment daily.

One of the logical questions for this class of special-duty vehicles is, *who needs one?* Because of the tremendous versatility of a 4x4 station wagon, the answer is rather lengthy. Suburban home owners certainly can use a station wagon. The 4x4 advantage just makes it that much more attractive for getting through snow, across mud and ice and for other difficult traction situations. If you like to hunt, fish, go exploring — you'll need 4x4 to get back there beyond the end of the road.

Potential buyers include farmers, ranchers, contractors, resort operators, rock hounds — in fact, everyone with a bent toward adventure.

Interior Layout

The front-seat driver position is higher off the street than in conventional wagons. There's better vision all around. Instruments are clustered ahead of the steering wheel, but heater controls are mounted to extreme left side of the dash. Seats are foam-cushioned, nicely trimmed in vinyl and even the floors are covered with a vinyl carpet. Several trim packages are available: Standard, Custom and Super Wagoneer. Even the standard models are pleasingly designed. Buyers will find none of the *undressed-metal* look common to some station wagons.

Our test Wagoneer wasn't exactly fresh off the showroom floor. Over 10,800 miles were on the odometer when I was handed the keys. Telltale signs of age here and there were visible, but that's normal. (I wonder just how many potential buyers have wished that they could visualize a showroom model at age 10,000 miles — to judge how well the product holds up!) A casual inspection revealed at least one sagging door panel where the covering had bubbled slightly away from the door metal. Most of the hardware, while retaining a good mate with latches and so on, was a bit loose.

The only really objectionable problem in this 10,000-mile test vehicle was the rear seat latches. In a station wagon the second seat must fold flat to make a bed in the cargo area. Kaiser-Jeep engineers have devised very strong spring-loaded pins for this purpose. They're mounted atop the wheel wells, against which the second seat rests in cradle clamps. The holding pins are husky jumbo-sized steel pins that nevertheless allowed considerable play. That in turn showed up as *rattles* on every rough road. And I mean a *rattle* of the teeth-grating variety. It was one sour note in an otherwise quiet vehicle. Another problem with the seat hardware developed. It wasn't possible for one person to loosen the spring-loaded pins and fold the seat flat. It took two of us. The alternative was to spring the seat forward past one pin, then spring the other, which then wanted to jam and break fingernails. Maybe I'm making too much of a small thing here, but if you're a station wagon fan (and I am) you know that a fold-down second seat is a *major* reason for the purchase of a station wagon. It should operate smoothly.

Dusty Roads

But enough carping. On the positive side, one of the strongest virtues of the Jeep Wagoneer shows up best on dirty backtrails. Dust did not penetrate the interior when all windows and doors were closed. The Wagoneer thumped lightly over chuckholes, slid gracefully through a long stretch of blow-sand, and ground its way up a rock-shale hill in all-wheel-drive and when we stopped to lunch, not even the picnic basket wore a mantle of dust. Clean as the president's ink blotter. Anyone who fails to be impressed by this fact just doesn't understand off-trail vehicles.

Transfer Case

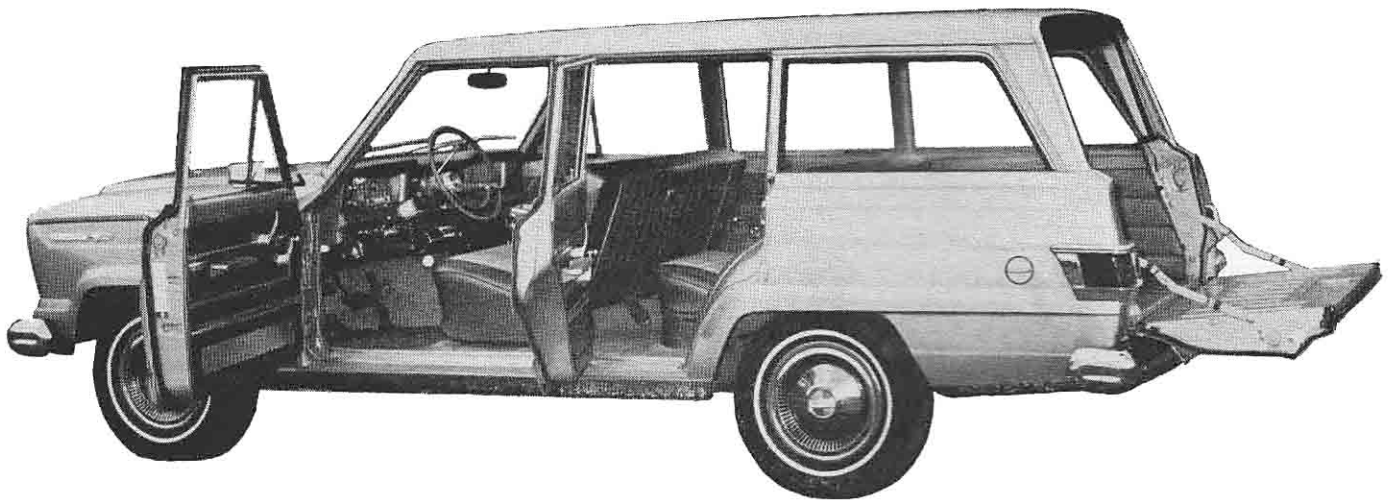
Since the primary value of a Wagoneer, when compared to conventional station wagons, is its all-wheel-drive ability, the operation of controls should interest every potential buyer. Our test unit was fitted with a fully automatic three-speed Turbo Hydra-Matic transmission with ratios of 2.48, 1.48, 1.00 and a reverse of 2.08. Tucked up under the air conditioner on the floor was a short curved lever (just one) that the driver operates without clutching or stopping. A new Wagoneer shifts effortlessly, but our teenaged test wagon required a little fiddling with the lever.

What a contrast with older 4x4s sprouting a forest of levers growing out of the floor! Any man capable of pulling a lever can handle the transfer case in the 1969 Jeep Wagoneer. The advantage of this ultra-simplified shifting method should be obvious. Your wife or girlfriend can take over while you catch a few winks of sleep on long vacation trips.

Performance

On the highway at turnpike speeds the Wagoneer feels as firm and comfortable as any other wagon, regardless of size. About the only difference here is that, perhaps due to the extra front-end weight, hard crosswinds don't have much effect on it. Wagons ahead of us weaved all over the street during one stormy night. The Wagoneer stayed in the track without any coaxing. Several engineering features make this good ride possible at no expense in off-road toughness. For example, there is a flexible coupling built into the steering column to absorb road shocks. Rubber bushings at spring and shock-connecting eyes minimize road noises.

Engine selection runs the gamut from a 232 cubic inch ohv six-cylinder engine of 145 horsepower, to a 250-horsepower V-8 of 327 cubic inches, and finally to the top banana fitted in our test Wagoneer: a 350 cubic inch V-8 rated at 270 horsepower. Load-starting power, passing, reserve and freeway speeds were simply effortless for the relatively light vehicle. With all the extra equipment



SPECIFICATIONS: 1969 Jeep Wagoneer
 Wheelbase: 110 inches • Overall length: 183.6 inches • Overall width: 75.6 inches • Height: 64.2 inches (unloaded) • Curb weight: 3801 pounds (std.) 4000-plus as tested • Tread: 57 inches • Engine: 350 cubic inches, V-8 (optional) • Horsepower: 230 @ 4400 rpm • Torque: 350 lbs.-ft. at 2400 rpm (optional) • Transmission: Turbo Hydra-Matic (optional) • Axle ratio: 3.31:1 (3.73:1 optional) • Tire size: 7.75 x 15 low-profile 4-ply rating • Wheels 5-stud disc type • Transfer case: 2-speed, single-lever control • Transfer case ratios: 1 to 1, and 2.03:1 • Suspension system: Front: leaf springs and shock absorbers. Rear: Variable-rate rear leaf springs • Steering: Recirculating ball type • Steering ratio: 24:1 • Brakes: 11 inches x 2 inches, total of 161.6 square inches • Price as tested: \$5167.45.



Jeep doors open wide to almost 90 degrees (top) making ingress and egress easy. Rear seat folds flat but mechanism is balky. Four-wheel-drive is engaged without hangup (above right). 350 engine (above right) has exceptional power.

Jeep Wagoneer

on our test Wagoneer, true weight probably exceeded 4000 pounds without passengers, and yet, never at any time did it feel anything but healthy.

The brakes, too, were efficient and smooth. We deliberately crossed several mountain streams but brakes did not wet-out. On long steep downgrades, the all-wheel-drive advantage paid double dividends. In low range 4x4 the Wagoneer held us back to a crawling pace, while heavier cars whizzed past us tapping the brakes in every steep hair-pin curve. Extra gears pay off in unexpected ways. However, the parking brake wouldn't hold the vehicle on a steep hill. It inched down the grade during every test. As previously pointed out, our test wagon had over 10,000 miles on it and quite possibly the parking brake was in bad need of simple adjustment. Incidentally, the parking brake is a foot-actuated unit connected to the rear service brakes, with a total of 80.8 square inches of effective lining area.

Penetration

Though the dual-range transfer case and husky V-8 engine were adequate

for every situation encountered on a rugged ten-day road test, there were a few problems requiring comment. For example, for all its versatility the turning circle diameter seemed annoyingly large. Considerable jockeying was required to get out of box canyons and rocky bottlenecks. The trouble with 4x4 vehicles is that they lure a driver into impossible-looking situations — then leave him to get out as best he can. It seems to me that if some method of reducing that circle could be found, this vehicle would be twice as maneuverable and many times more valuable to a true off-road driver.

But then, all things automotive are a compromise. Kaiser-Jeep undoubtedly believes (perhaps with justification) that their combination of modest wheelbase, 4x4 drive and large, comfortable passenger and cargo space is worth a sacrifice in ultimate maneuverability in tight spots. In fairness to that philosophy, it is probably true that most Jeep Wagoneer buyers will probably have a variety of purposes in mind. Not just the single-track idea of off-trail exploration. There are other vehicles (such as Jeep Universal) better able to handle

those sticky jobs. The Wagoneer is undeniably an impressive blending of station wagon and sporty 4x4 — all in one vehicle. Depending on where you live and how you spend your time on wheels, a Wagoneer could be the best investment you ever made. No one can dispute the fact that it offers something truly unusual in a field thick with conventional wagons.

Price

The as tested price of our test model was \$5167.45, plus the air conditioner. This price covered the Turbo Hydra-Matic, 350 V-8, all-wheel-drive, power steering and power brakes, radio and many other options. The price is probably about average for a loaded Jeep Wagoneer, but perhaps as much as \$1000 higher than standard models without frills. There is such a tremendous span of optional equipment available for the Wagoneer that the buyer can order it any way he wants. Don't let the price surprise you. Most any fully-equipped 4x4 vehicle runs \$4000 to \$4500 these days, and very few of them can match the roominess and comfort of the Jeep Wagoneer. /MT