Don’t call it a Hummer

**Chris Davies has had four Jeeps and a whole host of other trucks as well – and they’ve all been lifted. With his four-door Jeep Wrangler Unlimited, however, he’s taking things to a whole new level…**

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ake one look at Chris Davies’ 2007 Jeep Wrangler Sahara Unlimited, and you might make a certain assumption about him being a Jeep devotee. When we tell you that this is the fourth Wrangler he’s owned, you might assume that your assumption was correct.

But Chris is no one-marque man. ‘I’ve had Land Rovers, Suzukis, Mitsubishi L200s, Nissan Navaras and Toyota Hi-Luxes, he says. ‘All of then lifted. But I always get drawn back to Jeeps!’ So actually, your assumptions might be right. But probably only a bit.

It is indeed Jeeps that we’re here to talk
about, at any rate. And not just Jeeps but Wranglers. A whole lot of Wranglers. ‘My first was a white 4.2 YJ,’ Chris recalls. Then a red 4.0 TJ, and then another well modded 4.0 TJ in blue. And now this beast!’

This beast is from the first year of right-hand-drive JK production, when the revolutionary long-wheelbase model was still known as the Unlimited. It came to the UK in the spring of 2007, and the notion of a Wrangler which was not only diesel-engined but available with four doors was little short of amazing.

As was the vehicle itself. Civilised on the road, well equipped, properly built and better than ever in the rough, it was as if the Wrangler had finally come of age. It was brilliant value, too.

Jeep fans sat back and waited for huge sales figures to build, rubbing their hands in anticipation of a thriving second-market at giveaway prices. But then the world economy crashed, Jeep’s parent company Chrysler suffered horrific injuries in the process and UK supply slowed to a trickle. The JK is still a more common sight than previous Wranglers, but it’s still overwhelmed in number by the Land Rover Defender. Not to make a judgement between the two, but a lot of people don’t know what they’re missing.

Chris knows. He knows his Wranglers, he knew what moving up to a JK would give him and when he bought it in January 2012 he knew what he was going to do with it.

This largely involved putting in a call to Trevor at G-Force Autos in Halifax, who’s spent the last few years quietly building a reputation for turning out show-stopping Wranglers. You don’t need to spend much time looking at this one to work out why.

A lot of the mods on Chris’ Jeep are the kind you’d call ‘accessories’ rather than A-list stuff, but it works. And here’s why. If you dress up a vehicle with nothing but trinkets, it’ll look incomplete, like a Christmas dinner with no turkey. What you need is one big, central modification to hang it on, and suddenly everything else becomes relevant to that.

In this case, the big central mod is pretty obvious. On went a 4.5” Rugged Ridge suspension system, making room for a set of 35x13.50R18 Mickey Thompson MTZs on Dick Cepek DC2 rims. Boom.

These shelter beneath a set of wheelarch extensions the likes of which you might have thought existed only in the minds of drug-crazed cartoonists. Huge, lairy and wonderful: I’ve stayed in hotels where the beds were smaller. Between all this, a bank of five 6” spots on an overhead gantry and a Stubby front recovery bumper, also from Rugged Ridge, you’re looking at one seriously distinctive Jeep.

So much so, actually, that Chris thinks the arches are unique in the UK. He imported them himself (from the USA, natch) and while you wouldn’t fancy rubbing them up against any trees, they don’t half look cool.

Needless to say, the sort of off-roading that involves bouncing your ride off trees isn’t what this JK is about. Chris definitely isn’t scared of putting all that suspension to good use, to the extent that his truck’s in here because we bumped into him at a playday at Tong, but you don’t add an interior chrome pack to give yourself something extra to destroy, do you? It’s a funky daily drive and an above-average off-road toy, but it’s also proof that these things can exist together in one package without either having to play second fiddle.

In fact, Chris reckons the only real downside to the JK is its width. ‘This is not helped when someone fits big offset wheels and wider arches,’ he points out. ‘Yes, me! But it was never intended to be a city car.

‘This is a big leap forward from a TJ,’ he continues. ‘Not that there’s anything wrong with the TJ, I love em! But it’s so much torquier and smoother off-road, yet it cruises beautifully at motorway speeds too. Yes, even lifted.’

Actually, there is another drawback. ‘The 2.8 CRD engine a total peach – smooth, oozes toque and spends less time in the fuel station. But that’s a good thing, because I spend lots of time answering questions like “what does your Hummer do to the gallon?” Hummer? Seriously?!’

Aside from outrageous allegations like that, it’s all good. Chris even rates the JK’s standard sound system as better than some of the aftermarket ICE he’s had in the past, and being a range-topping Sahara model it has 4.1:1 diffs, making it a breeze to pull those 35” tyres.

For a man whose multi-marque tendencies mean he keeps coming back to Jeeps rather than sticking with them, there’s a sense that he’s reached a bit of a destinaton with this one. Those old YJs and TJs sure were fun, but when a Wrangler comes along with diesel power and four doors, suddenly your toy can be a sound family car, too. Sound, sensible – and a lot of fun.

It might spend more time looking in the mirror than your average off-road vehicle, but you’d understimate this Jeep at your peril. And whatever else you do, you wouldn’t call it a Hummer. Not more than once.

*We photographed Chris’ Wrangler at Tong, a
site near Bradford that’s known throughout the
UK off-road scene as one of the best in the
country. It’s owned and run by Parkwood Off-
Road Centre, and the monthly playdays it hosts
are legendary. To find out more, head towards
www.parkwood4x4.co.uk.*

CAPTIONS

**1] The JK rides on a 4.5” suspension lift, courtesy of springs and shocks from Rugged Ridge. The coils are hot-wound to resist sag and mimic the original factory rates, suiting them particularly well to vehicles like this that don’t carry huge amounts of heavy off-road gear**

**2] Tucked up in the springs’ top mounts, the lift is augmented by ¾” spacers which level the vehicle by bringing its nose up to match the height of its rear**

**3] Quick disconnects are very common on lifted Jeeps. A minute or two beneath the vehicle and the anti-roll bars can be released and swung away from the axle, liberating all the travel they would otherwise be trying to prevent**

**4] More good stuff from Rugged Ridge includes the company’s Stubby Recovery Bumper, which tidies up the front and provides enormous protection by being small enough to miss most things and strong enough not to care when it doesn’t. If you can’t see where it gets the ‘recovery’ part of its name, you’re not looking – though it doesn’t provide a winch mount, so those shackles will be getting tweaked by someone else’s rope**

**5] An odd place for spotlights but admit it, you want a set. As they’re designed to fit on a JK’s bonnet catches, there’s every chance that you can’t, but one of the definite benefits of running a Jeep is that there are people in America making cool stuff like this for them**

**6] You know those stupendously naff black nose covers you see on polish-tastic show cars when they’re being used on the road? Well, this chequer effect bonnet guard is only faintly reminiscent of those, and more to the point it actually looks in place on a Jeep, especially a Jeep like this**

**7, 8] Dick Cepek DC2 rims wrapped in 35x13.50R18 Mickey Thompson MTZ tyres totally dominate everything else about the Jeep’s image. Would a smaller rim and narrower tyre size be better in typical Brtitish off-road conditions? Easy: yes. Would it look as cool? Not quite as clear cut, that one…**

**9] Five spotlights? It’s a bit different, admit it. And since these things tend to come in boxes of two, it also means that should one of them get fetched off by a tree, Chris will presumably have a spare all ready to replace it**

**10, 11] There are no words to describe how outrageous the Wrangler looks with these colour-coded arch extensions, which were imported from America and, Chris believes, are the only set of their kind in the UK.
Well, there *are* words, but not the kind we can get away with using in a polite magazine like this. Let’s just say we went home and started looking at JKs in the small ads…**

**12] For many people, the 2.8 CRD engine made the difference between a Jeep Wrangler being a thing they would never buy in a million years and a vehicle they would buy and then keep for a million years. Prior to that, you could only get
them with a choice of lame but thirsty 2.5 and less lame but even more thirsty 4.0 straight-six petrol engines. The diesel unit, which arrived with the launch of the JK in 2007, is in Chris’ words ‘a total peach – smooth, oozes toque and spends less time in the fuel station!’**

**13] Rugged Ridge recommends using replacement propshafts on lifts of 4” and above due to the increased angle at which they’ll be operating. Chris was able to get away with it on his long-wheelbase Wrangler Unlimited, but on a two-door model you’d have no chance of that. Note also the replacement short rear control arms here (trailing links, in old money), which are all part of the klt**

**14, 15] The radius arms for the front axle are cranked, as you can see here. This is part of the Rugged Ridge kit, which includes both long front and short rear arms to replace the factory originals**