By Steve Schaefer

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The Patriot sits somewhere between the glamorous and highly regarded new Grand Cherokee and the legendary Wrangler. The Wrangler is the direct descendant of the rugged four-wheeled World War II-winner. The Patriot could be a car that a lot of people will enjoy owning and driving.

The all-American product, assembled in Belvidere, Illinois, really looks like a proper Jeep, with its upright, slatted nose and round headlights to the squared-off, protruding wheelwells. It actually resembles the old Jeep Cherokee, a vehicle that helped to pave the way for compact SUVs in the 1980s.

The three models start with the Sport and move up through the Latitude and, at the top, the Limited. You can get a Patriot with front-wheel drive only; no-one will know that your car is no more of an offroader than a standard sedan, but it could save you money and improve your fuel economy a bit.

However, you can order two levels of four-wheel drive. Freedom Drive I offers a full-time active system that’s nice to have in inclement weather. You can lock the wheels into four-wheel drive for deep snow and sand conditions, but it’s really meant for on-road safety, not exploring on the trails. This system, along with seat-mounted airbags, helped earn the Patriot a “Top Safety Pick” rating from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) for the 2012 model.

The Freedom Drive II Off-Road Package adds what you need for some fun in the dirt and rocks. It has a transmission with a low 19:1 ratio crawl gear when it’s switched into offroad mode. It also comes with 17-inch alloy wheels and all-terrain tires. You get skid plates to protect the underside of the car, tow hooks and a full-size spare tire. Best of all, you receive the much honored “Trail Rated” badge.

There’s a special Freedom Edition Patriot this year. It comes in only red, white or blue and features a star on the hood and rear quarter panel, plus some extra comfort and convenience content. Best of all, Chrysler donates $250 to a military charity for each one sold.

Patriots come with one of two engines. The standard engine in the Sport and Latitude is a 2.0-liter four that puts out 158 horsepower and 141 lb.-ft. of torque. With a five-speed manual transmission, it gets a remarkable 30 miles per gallon on the highway. The five-speed manual comes only on the Sport, though. On higher levels, the continuously variable automatic is standard.

Standard on the Limited and optional on the other models is the 2.4-liter four-cylinder engine with 172 horsepower and 165 lb.-ft. of torque. You’ll lose two mpg on the highway compared to the 2.0-liter, but the extra power should be welcome in daily driving.

The EPA gives the Patriot with the 2.4-liter engine and automatic ratings of 21 combined (20 City, 23 Highway). I got 18.7 mpg in mixed driving. The EPA Green Vehicle Guide scores are 6 for Air Pollution and 4 for Greenhouse Gas (2012 model).

Thanks to dual variable-valve timing, the 2.4-liter engine makes the most of the torque curve for higher performance. My tester had this engine and it seemed eager to get up and go, although I didn’t take it on any rock-climbing expeditions.

The Sport has a lot going for it already for its low price, including the safety of electronic stability control and hill start assist, and conveniences like cruise control and an outside temperature display. The midrange Latitude adds power windows and locks, air conditioning, keyless entry, heated seats, a leather-wrapped steering wheel and a 115-volt power inverter. The Limited provides leather seats with power adjustment, an electronic vehicle information center, a nice audio system with SiriusXM, climate control, and all the trimmings.

After a welcome upgrade, the interior of the Patriot, while not luxurious, feels well crafted and substantial. Even the hard plastic pieces don’t feel cheap, and they fit together well. It’s a bit like a baby Grand Cherokee while still being the least expensive 4x4 sold in America. Prices for a manual-equipped two-wheel-drive Sport with no options start at just $16,920. My Latitude tester with four-wheel drive and some audio upgrades came in at $26,220.

Jeeps are not highly favored by the sharp-eyed folks at Consumer Reports, although the

Patriot’s reliability ratings are above average. It’s likely that the vehicle’s age is a factor here, but sales of Jeeps are up — so plenty of folks still want to own one.

Many changes are on the way for this storied brand, including a new small SUV based on a Fiat platform. But for the real all-American four-wheeling experience, this is a very reasonable way to take it to the street — and off the road.