The 2020 Jeep Gladiator Rubicon, tested



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- This is the 2020 Jeep Gladiator Rubicon.
- It’s still a Jeep, so that means it has to be able to get dirty. Our man Resnick got it dirty.
- If you like playing around in the mud but also want to be able to carry big loads, this might be the one for you. We banged the skid plates a few times but that’s why it has them.
- You can ford up to 30-inches of water in a Gladiator Rubicon.
- The Gladiator uses a 3.6L V6.
- There’s 11 inches of ground clearance and 35-inch tires will fit with no modifications.
- On-road manners are OK, but obviously somewhat

compromised by the off-road focus.
- The seats are all manual and the interior is designed to washed out if you get it muddy.
- Rear legroom is generous and the seats are configurable.
- Cubbies and storage spaces abound.

The new 2020 Jeep Gladiator is Jeep's first pickup truck in 27 years. Rather than compete head-on in concept with other mid-sized pickups in the market like Chevy's Colorado and Ford's new Ranger, Jeep has based it loosely on the legendary Wrangler in order to keep nearly all of that vehicle's off-roading capability in the transformation to pickup life. The Gladiator tackles off-road duties like, well, a Jeep, but it can also haul greater loads than other mid-sized trucks.

Jeep officials stress the notion that the Gladiator is 100-percent truck and also 100-percent Jeep, which means solid axles, boxiness, mud-wrestling through slimy trails and being ready for anything. It's rated to tow more than nearly everything in its class, but it doesn't really love that role. So, we've driven it, spat dirt and rocks off its tires, and scraped its dangly bits to take you deep into the Gladiator arena.

Rolling in the deep and muddy

This Gladiator's arena happens to be filthy; that's where Jeeps shine. On the road, though, the Gladiator acquits itself well. A 19.6-inch (500mm) longer wheelbase than Wrangler reduces rocking and porpoising over bumps and heaves in the road. Steering itself is rather vague and slow to react, but one must adjust expectations of a vehicle with this kind of off-roading focus. No vehicle with this kind of ability in the rocky stuff also ticks the sports-car-steering box.

The Gladiator body shares front fenders, hood and doors with the Wrangler, but little else. Ground clearance is generous; the top Rubicon model offers 11.1 inches (282mm) where the

base model offers 10 inches (254mm), both of which are greater than any Toyota Tacoma or Chevy Colorado. For serious off-roaders, 35-inch outer diameter tires will fit under the fenders without any modifications.

The Gladiator comes as a four-door with the five-foot-long bed out back, but there's variations within that spectrum. As on the Wrangler, you can opt for a soft top which peels back. You can remove the doors with the provided tools, as well. Finally, in the openness stakes, the windshield lays forward and flat.

When climbing up and down mud-soaked rocks, few tires can generate enough grip to prevent a little slippage, but because the Gladiator is narrower than the other mid-sized pickups, a small slip here and a skid there doesn't amount to much on narrow trails. The skid plates protecting the chassis underneath got a workout. Rain and mud erased many of the two-track ruts on the trails we used outside Sacramento, California, plus the vaunted Rubicon Trail near Lake Tahoe, helping ground the Gladiator on multiple occasions. Sometimes the grounding was accompanied by a 100-dB "bang!" But that's why it has skid plates in the first place. The Gladiator met every challenge we threw at it.

The truck's front anti-roll bar can be disconnected via a small dash button, giving greater suspension travel and articulation for the more extreme stuff. Our Rubicon version allowed manually locking up both front and rear differentials for the greatest possible traction on various surfaces and climbing and descending the steepest grades. The Gladiator can also traverse water up to 30 inches (76cm) deep; all its electronic modules and electric connections are mounted above that height and all connectors are sealed, plus the interior carpeting is removable and washable.

Ready for anything inside

Inside, the mission is clearly readiness. The front seats have no power adjustment option so that you can hose out mud-encrusted floors without fear of shorting out controls. As in the Wrangler, though, those with long legs could do with a bit more legroom up front. One fix is to adjust the front buckets for maximum height, which effectively gives you a bit more distance to the pedals. But this simultaneously boosts a tippy feeling as the truck is on a lateral incline and accentuates head toss over certain bumps.

Hardtops have removable panels, but there’s no convenient and secure place to store those panels on board. You could place them in the bed, but they’d slide around, damaging themselves. They’ll slide around in the back seats, too. Padded sleeves that strap in the bed would be the best solution.

The Uconnect infotainment system is quite well-done and very user-friendly. Apple CarPlay and Android Auto integration is standard across all models, though an up-level system adds many more features and a larger screen. This is the same system as in other FCA products and even though it’s been on the market for several years, it still works very well and shows almost no lag.

Rear seat occupants of the Gladiator will be surprised by the room, especially up high. There’s 4 inches (102mm) more headroom in back than the Honda Ridgeline pickup, itself no slouch on interior space. And even with the front seats pushed all the way back in their tracks, there’s still decent rear legroom.

Those rear seatbacks also fold to provide a flat parcel shelf, while the seat bottoms pivot upwards to enable loading of larger items. With that rear seat bottom up, you also have access to configurable, lockable storage bins. These bins also house neat holders to sort the various bolts that secure

removable bits like the doors, the hardtop, etc., so that when you've opened up the Gladiator to full exposure, they are well-marked in a tool kit for all fasteners with pictograms and icons.

The engine room with room for more variation

The Gladiator is powered by one engine at first launch, a 3.6L, 285hp (213kW) V6 which also generates 260lb-ft (353Nm) of torque and is shared among many Chrysler and FCA vehicles. It can be mated to either a six-speed manual or an eight-speed automatic transmission. Further, because the Gladiator must provide serious off-roading ability, all but the base manual-transmission models come with a two-speed transfer case providing low range for slow-going and steep climbing.

We drove both transmission configurations and despite the quaint purity of the manual transmission, we'd always opt for the automatic. Rowing your own gears in the Gladiator just isn't that compelling. It can become tedious in traffic and—for the novice—somewhat jerky when off-roading. Fuel economy ratings for the gas engine are 17/22/19mpg city/highway/combined with the automatic transmission, and 17/23/19 with the manual.

Jeep lists a maximum trailer towing capacity of 7,650 pounds (3,470kg), claiming the top figure of any of the mid-sized truck competition. A deep look into the new Ford Ranger's max tow rating shows a figure of 7,500 pounds (3,402kg) when properly equipped. However, Chevy lists the max towing for its Colorado at 7,700 pounds (3,493kg), though that requires the optional diesel engine and rear-drive only.

The various Gladiator trims begin with the Sport, at $35,040 (all prices include destination charges), spanning up to the top Rubicon, starting at $45,040. Our test model was optioned

with over $14,000 worth of options that drove the bottom line to a whopping $59,830. That’s a staggering sum for a Jeep, even if it is supremely capable and unique.

Jeep’s claim that the Gladiator is 100-percent Jeep is indeed right on the money. We could not discern any real-world downsides to having that extra length and lesser break-over angle with its susceptibility to high-centering over rocky terrain, plus the added wheelbase improves the Gladiator’s on-road ride quality.

On payload, the Gladiator meets the 100-percent truck claim, but it doesn’t tow heavy or large trailers as happily as it performs off-road, nor as well as any full-size pickup. With a Streamliner camper or a race car trailer we hitched up, the Gladiator did the job, but climbed more laboriously and the steering grew even more vague and apt to wander, even after adjusting trailer tongue weight. But realistically, few people will subject anything smaller than a full-size truck to regular bouts of towing.

So for its realistic duties, both on and off-road, the Gladiator meets and exceeds expectations. But for the top Rubicon with some full-capability and active safety options, you’ll have to fork over an old-time fortune for the privilege.

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