



# Where the Sidewalk Ends

A guide to guerrilla off-roading *By Ezra Dyer*



**OFF-ROADING IS A THRILL.** One of my friends once drove his 1979 Jeep Cherokee Chief straight into a pond just to see what would happen. With water up to the doors and the center differential locked via a completely awesome switch in the glove box labeled **EMERGENCY 4WD**, the old Chief pulled itself out of the water like some sort of primordial creature. My own weapon of choice back in the day was a 1987 Cherokee with a three-inch suspension lift and thirty-one-inch mud tires. In college, I once got a ticket for parking that bad boy on top of a giant snowbank. Have I mentioned that I'm a hick?

Unfortunately, I live in the city these days, a nice air-conditioned nightmare called Boston. But while I may have stopped shooting road signs and drinking Genesee Cream Ale, I'm still a redneck at heart, which means that fulfilling my primitive urge to drive over large mounds of dirt isn't easy. In fact, some people might think it's downright impossible. But I've got plans. Big plans.

Like a skateboarder sizing up stairs or a railing, I've spent the past few months scouting the city for construction sites and abandoned parks. With the right preparation and proper equipment, I figure I can turn the city's empty lots and unfenced terrain into my own private guerrilla-off-roading course.

A NEW WRANGLER comes along only about once a decade, so I figured the release of the new four-door Wrangler Unlimited X was a good excuse to put my urban off-road theory to the test. What I'm looking for is an empty lot or construction site, and from my earlier scouting, the fast-gentrifying seaport district near the old docks seems like a fine place to start. I suppose that four-

wheeling through the footprint of a new high-rise condo is technically premeditated trespassing. But it seems to me that improv off-roading is a victimless crime. And as I'm parked above a gravelly hill and some abandoned train tracks, my rationalization never felt so rational. But before I can hop the curb, a state trooper rolls up and tells me to move it along. It's an inauspicious start to what could be a very long day.

Chastened but far from deterred, I set out once again, cruising aimlessly past some barbed-wire-ringed sites. Finally, just around the corner from the plush Seaport Hotel, I find a vacant construction site containing an idle bulldozer, some standing water, and two piles of dirt—one slightly taller than the Wrangler, the other a VW-Beetle-shaped mass of plowed-up roots, rebar, and discarded bottles of rot-gut vodka. There's an open gate. And more important, there are no cops.

After a quick look over my shoulder, I roll through the gate. Within seconds, I'm charging over the neater pile, raking one side of it flat with the Jeep's undercarriage as the world skews sideways through the windshield. Then I drop into low-range four-wheel drive and creep over the other mound. This is entertainment, but in a Wrangler equipped with a heavy-duty limited-slip rear differential, tall on/off-road tires, underbody skid plates, and a set of beefy tow hooks that jut from the front bumper like a bulldog's lower canines, it's about as much fun as schooling an eight-year-old at basketball. As I'm flinging some mud, six guys in suits approach the gate, which I take as my cue to leave. A fine warm-up, yes. But I need some tougher terrain.

A FEW YEARS BACK, as I was driving on I-93, I spotted a 4x4 roll out of the woods and onto the highway. It was amazing, the kind of thing you'd see in a truck commercial: frustrated driver stuck in traffic hops the highway barrier for a shortcut through the forest. I always wondered where that guy had come from. So I set off to find out.

Not so long ago, the rude-and-crude Wrangler could make a half dozen miles on the highway seem like a coast-to-coast trek, but the '07 is much happier on pavement than its predecessors. Gone is the prehistoric 4.0-liter

**JEEP WRANGLER UNLIMITED X 4X4**

**BASE PRICE:**  
\$22,410

**POWER:**  
3.8-liter, 205 hp V-6; six-speed manual transmission

**MILEAGE:**  
17 mpg city, 19 mpg highway



It's not a creek. But for an urban off-roading fix, industrial runoff does the trick.

inline six-cylinder that debuted in 1964, replaced by a somewhat less ancient 3.8-liter, 205-horsepower V-6. There's now traction and stability control, four-wheel antilock disc brakes, and electronic roll mitigation. And most important, you have that extra set of doors, giving Jeep the distinction of selling the only four-door convertible in the land.

A few miles out of town I reach my spot. There's a tangle of brambles surrounding a fence that looks as if it was knocked down sometime around the release of Pearl Jam's *Vitalogy*. I glance nervously at the north- and southbound lanes. Once I'm in the woods, I'll be okay. But if a cop spots me right now, with my front bumper poking into the pucker brush, I'll have some explaining to do. I feel sketchy, but, well... fuck it.

I crash through the brush and suddenly the trail opens up. A leaf-carpet-

ed path, punctuated here and there with felled logs, winds beneath a canopy of trees. To the left is a steep hill strewn with boulders, the topographic shield between me and the highway. The bumpy path winds down the hill, away from the road, and delivers me to a deep-blue pond a half mile later. Okay, perhaps it's a reservoir. But still, ringed with dense forest and a shoreline of steep rock, this scene belongs on a bottled-water label. It makes me want to build my own log cabin and raise a pet eagle. The only thing missing is a real off-road challenge. Sure, I grind the skid plates on some rocks near the edge of the water, but the only way I'd get stuck in this beast is if I actually drove into the water, and neither Chrysler nor the local water district would be too enthusiastic about that. So it's back out to the highway for the short slog back to the city.

ABOUT A MILE from Boston's historic Faneuil Hall, I spy an ambitious target next to the sprawling Boston Sand & Gravel pit. I circumnavigate the property past a sign that warns, SURVEILLANCE CAMERAS IN USE. POLICE TAKE NOTICE. I take notice as well. But I also notice something even more spectacular: an open gate through which lies a Wrangler's playground—a dozen two-story-high mounds of dirt and gravel studded with hundreds of huge rock chunks and crisscrossed by muddy rutted roads. About a hundred yards away, bucket loaders are actively loading up dump trucks. But the work-

ers don't appear too bothered by me. After all, a Wrangler has that rugged, industrial look that says it belongs on a job site. I power through the mud and creep up onto some of the rocks, flexing the suspension hard enough for one of the back wheels to come off the ground. The Jeep has more to give, but I'm worried that this haphazard stack of boulders will shift and swallow me up, so I back down and seek a new challenge: a hill climb. I aim the Jeep toward a promising slope, a tabletop about twenty feet high that consists of dirt, loose gravel, and basketball-sized stones. I floor the accelerator, rocks and dirt tumbling down the slope in my wake as the windshield fills with a view of the sky. Suddenly, I top off. Perched above the wasteland, I have my own private parking space with 360-degree city views.

WITH A FULL DAY of urban off-roading behind me, it's time to head out. It's nice to pretend you're a devil-may-care redneck, but I need to get home and pay my condo fee or the association is totally gonna get on my case. I shift into reverse, back over the crest of the hill, and... grind to a halt. I'm high-centered, the frame rails resting on the ground with the wheels dangling uselessly in the air.

I rock the Wrangler side to side. Still stuck. Shove boards and rocks under the tires. Nope. Try using a splintery piece of wood to scoop dirt from under the frame—my kingdom for a shovel! Shit. Darkness is falling. When I drove in here, I was worried about attracting notice from the construction guys. Now I wish they'd notice me. Finally, I spy a few bricks lying around and build a jacking platform. With the Jeep's jack, I lift the front end high enough to get some boulders under the front tires. (Don't try this at home.) And with a shot of gas and a determined shove, the Jeep finally breaks free.

My hands are full of splinters and my jacket is spattered with mud, but I feel giddy. Miring a 4x4 gives you a sick feeling in the pit of your stomach, but that anxiety is the reason you get such a rush when you finally escape. And it's even better when you do it in an illegal urban setting. Driving home, I hit the windshield wipers. They scrape away most of the accumulated mud, but one stubborn chunk won't budge. It takes a moment for me to realize that it's on the inside of the windshield. Mission accomplished. ■

## → THE ULTIMATE OFF-ROAD VEHICLE (OFF-ROADING NOT NECESSARY)

SEVEN YEARS AGO, our bowlegged, Stetson-wearing Jeep salesman met us in Montrose, Colorado, at what I like to call the "safe" airport (Sweetie, the wife, will fly into Telluride—I won't) and handed us the keys to our new Wrangler. He told me, "Son, this baby will turn on a dime and give you nine cents change." It's what we loved about our old Wrangler: Between the sound of the engine, the five-speed transmission, and the stiff shocks, you always knew you were driving, not just floating along. We thought we'd own it forever.

That was until we tested the new four-door Wrangler Unlimited X. It is everything our Wrangler was but with a real backseat, a more powerful engine, and a six-speed stick. It is civilized enough to drive from Telluride to Los Angeles for a meeting but rugged enough to conquer the snow-covered switchbacks to my house. Not that I intend to go off-roading in this thing. At Sweetie's behest, I tried that once in the old Wrangler, and for hours I lived out that *Annie Hall* moment in which Christopher Walken talks about fighting the urge to drive into oncoming traffic—only on the Ophir Pass. I was fighting the urge to jerk the wheel and plunge us thousands of feet to a rocky, explosive death. But I digress. The point is that this new Wrangler demands to be driven, even if you're just driving your kid the eight paved miles to school from East Hampton to Bridgehampton.

—BARRY SONNENFELD