



Move Over, Range Rover

Words & Photography: Richard Truesdell

MOST people, at least in America, seem to believe that the concept of a luxury SUV is something of a recent innovation, that the genre started with the introduction of vehicles like the Lincoln Navigator and Cadillac Escalade in the late Nineties. But as most Brits know, Land Rover has offered the Range Rover, an English interpretation of a luxury SUV, since its introduction on Wednesday, June 17th, 1970, when it made its debut to the world's motoring press.

But as Land Rover was just introducing its first luxury SUV, over on the other side of the pond, Jeep had already discontinued its first effort, the 1966 to 1969 Super Wagoneer. If any one vehicle can claim the title of the world's first luxury SUV, it has to be Jeep's pioneering effort. How do I know this? I happen to own one of the slightly less than 4000 Super Wagoneers that rolled down Jeep's Toledo, Ohio assembly line.

Based on the Jeep Wagoneer, introduced in the fall of 1962 as a 1963 model, the Super Wagoneer built upon the Wagoneer's innovations such as the introduction of an automatic transmission option with four-wheel-drive, making a Wagoneer a viable alternative to that suburban mainstay, the traditional full-sized American station wagon. In addition, when the Wagoneer was introduced, it featured a standard overhead cam 230cu.in. straight six and

Thirty years ahead of its time, the Super Wagoneer lays claim to the title of being the world's first luxury SUV.



ABOVE: ACTOR DANNY THOMAS TAKING DELIVERY OF HIS SUPER WAGONEER IN TOLEDO, OHIO. JEEP APPRECIATED THAT THE PRICE OF THE SUPER WAGONEER WOULD MAKE THEM QUITE EXCLUSIVE, PRESTIGIOUS VEHICLES

RIGHT: A BLUE 1967 SUPER WAGONEER LINES UP NEXT TO RICHARD TRUESDELL'S 1969 MODEL. THE PRODUCTION OF THESE SUPER WAGONEERS WAS HALTED IN EARLY 1969, MEANING THAT RICHARD'S IS ONE OF THE LAST BATCH TO BE MADE

an innovative optional torsion bar independent front suspension, which unfortunately had a reputation of being difficult to maintain in proper alignment.

For the 1965 model year the big news was the availability of a V8 engine, in this case a two-barrel version of AMC's venerable 327cu.in. engine, making the Wagoneer the first 4x4 to offer both V8 power combined with an automatic transmission, further blurring the distinction between a car and a truck (Make no mistake about it, an early Wagoneer drove



The Hunt for the A-12 Blackbird

FUNNY thing about full-size Jeep owners, we congregate on the web and we like taking our FSJs into the outback, for just about any good reason. Together with Michael Baxter of Reno, Nevada, who helped me locate my Super Wagoneer, Rob Harrison of Danville, California, John Miller of Reno, Nevada and Michael Balea of San Francisco, California, we took off on a quest at my instigation, the hunt for the remains of a top-secret CIA-operated A-12 Black Bird that had crashed in the Nevada desert back in 1967, about 70 miles outside of the boundaries of Area 51. You know, the place where the US Air Force keeps the remains of aliens who crash here on Earth...

With the common denominator of Wagoneer ownership binding us, inspired by an obsessed lunatic's web site, we made a number of trips to the Nevada high desert in 2000 and 2001.

On what was our sixth trip overall, we located the site, ending our search. Now all of us have a collection of remnants of what I like to call 'our parents' tax dollars at work', Walt Ray's A-12, designated 06928.



What makes the quest all the more interesting was that we were able to drive our Wagoneers to within a mile of the very secluded crash site, which had been left virtually untouched since January 1967. Hell, if we weren't all good off-roaders and adherents to the tenants of Tread Lightly, we probably could have driven our FSJs right to the crash site as the remains of the road that the CIA used almost 40 years ago to haul out the larger portions of the then top-secret A-12 (the CIA's precursor to the better-known SR-71 Black Bird) still remained, although covered up by years of erosion as well as the desert fauna.



very much like a rugged truck, built as it was on a separate frame with solid axles front and rear in most versions).

As the 1966 models were being introduced, Jeep dealers were notified that a flagship model was on the way, the Super Wagoneer, which had been shown in concept form in 1965. The Super Wagoneer would be distinguished from other Wagoneers with a host of standard features; a four-barrel version of the 327cu.in. V8, three-speed Turbo HydraMatic automatic transmission with a console-mounted shifter, vinyl-trimmed bucket seats, deep-pile carpeting, air conditioning (mounted where the glove box was located on non-console-equipped Wagoneers), signal-seeking AM radio, power brakes, power steering with a six-position tilt steering wheel, power tailgate window, and several exterior features. These included Goodyear whitewall 8.45x15 Power Cushion tyres, Kelsey-Hayes mag-style wheel covers, a textured vinyl-covered roof and its most distinctive feature; instead of fake wood panelling, the Super Wagoneer was trimmed with basket-weave gold anodised trim, framed with stainless steel mouldings with a black-painted spear running the length of the exterior. All in all it was a classy package, which was reflected by its \$5943 window sticker price, which in 1966 would buy you a Cadillac or a Lincoln sedan. To spring for a Super Wagoneer meant that you really saw the merit of its part-time four-wheel-drive system, which could easily be engaged through the floor-mounted, two-speed transfer case.

You can see by the literature Jeep produced for prospective Super Wagoneer buyers that they were targeting a very select portion of the auto-buying marketplace. The cover of the four-colour brochure mimics the textured gold side trim panels on the full-sized Super Wagoneer, whilst the fold-out panels of the booklet were large enough so that a potential buyer could see all of the unique features. It even included a personally signed letter from Edgar Kaiser, then Chairman of the Board of Kaiser Jeep Corporation.

For 1967 things remained as they were for the Super Wagoneer as sales were never expected to be overwhelming and as most of the marketing attention was lavished on the

Super Wagoneer V 8s

ONE of the distinctions between the 1966 Super Wagoneers and its lower-priced versions was the 270-horsepower version of the AMC V8. The Super Wagoneer featured a four-barrel version of the 327cu.in. OHV V8; the two-barrel version produced 250 horsepower. The genesis of this engine dated back to 1956 when it was introduced in a 250cu.in. version in the compact Rambler.

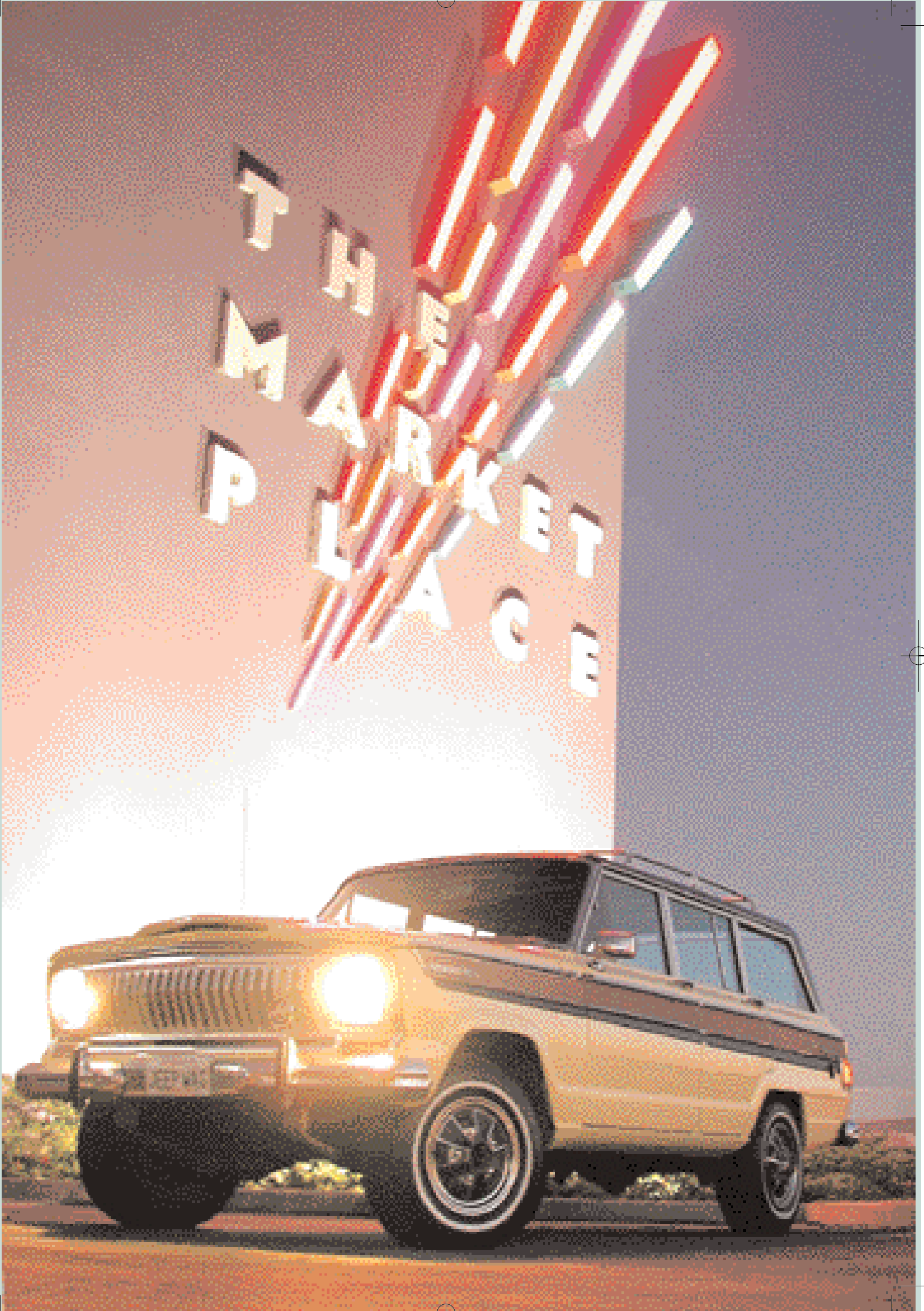
Unfortunately for Kaiser, AMC discontinued the manufacturing of the 327 V8 at the end of the 1966 model year for their own cars, replaced with the modern, thin-wall small-block 290 and 343cu.in. V8s, forcing Jeep to look elsewhere for a suitable engine. As they were already using a version of the Buick-based, 225cu.in. V6 for the CJ and Jeepster models, they logically turned to GM for the 350 Buick V8 for the Wagoneer. But for 1967, there were apparently enough 327s with the four-barrel carburetor left in inventory to fill the relatively small requirements needed for Super Wagoneer production.

In 1968 all versions of the Wagoneer line, including the Super Wagoneer, were fitted with the two-barrel version of the Buick 350, and in the Super Wagoneer it was only mated to the Turbo



HydroMatic 400 three-speed automatic transmission. If ever there was a bulletproof drive train, this was it.

More changes were coming with regard to V8 Jeeps but the Super Wagoneer wouldn't be around to benefit as production was discontinued early in 1969. Just one year later, Kaiser sold Jeep to American Motors and by 1971, AMC had engineered the entire Jeep lineup for its six- and eight-cylinder engines.





introduction, or reintroduction, of the sporty Jeep Commando (aka Jeepster), a more civilised version of the long running CJ series. In 1968, all two-wheel-drive versions of the Wagoneer were dropped, which had no effect on the Super Wagoneer since its part-time four-wheel-drive system (consisting of a Dana 27AF axle up front, a robust Dana 44 in the rear and a Spicer 20 two-speed transfer case) were an integral part of the package that gave the Super Wagoneer its combination of luxury with go-anywhere ability.

But by 1969, the end was in sight as the Super Wagoneer no longer was a separate model in the Wagoneer line-up; rather it became a trim level option, which apparently few buyers were opting for. The 1414D series designation, which had been attached to the Super Wagoneer from the start of production in 1966 now denoted the Custom Wagoneer V8, which sported all the unique Super Wagoneer standard features with the exception of the three-tone (gold/stainless steel/black) side trim, replaced with ... you guessed it, fake wood.

The bold experiment that started with such promise and excitement was allowed to die and although there is no breakout of Super Wagoneer production by year, Jeep historian Jim Allen states that 3989 Super Wagoneers were built from late 1965 to mid-1969, marking the end of Jeep's groundbreaking effort, just as Land Rover was about to introduce the Range Rover a short time later.

The spirit of the Super Wagoneer lived on in the months after AMC took over in February 1970. In 1971, a Custom Station Wagon model, reportedly all painted in a metallic green colour with some sporting sliding steel sunroofs, appeared and marked the last use of the Buick V8 in the Jeep Wagoneer line-up. Some speculate that it was AMC's attempt to use up the last remaining inventory of Buick 350s as by 1971, the crash programme to 'AMC-ise' all Jeep drivetrains had been completed.

It took another six years before another truly luxurious full-size Jeep would appear with the introduction of the Wagoneer Limited. Wood-trimmed on the outside, leather-lined on the inside, it ran basically unchanged, except for a

name change in 1984 to Grand Wagoneer with the introduction of the compact XJ Cherokee sport wagons, all the way to the end of production in 1991. While Grand Wagoneers are now revered as American icons (they boasted the highest per capita household income of any new vehicle sold when they went out of production) they lack the classic great looks of the 1966 to 1969 Super Wagoneers. ★

Jeep Wagoneer
first of the **NEW** Jeep BREED...

THE ONLY LUXURY 4x4 FOUR WHEEL DRIVE STATION WAGON

SPECIFICATIONS

WILLYS MOTORS (AUST.) PTY. LTD.

ABOVE: THE WAGONEER WAS INTRODUCED AS A 1963 MODEL, AND ALTHOUGH THERE HAD BEEN TRUCK-BASED PEOPLE CARRIERS ABOUT FOR SOME YEARS, THIS WAS THE FIRST PURPOSE-DESIGNED 4X4 VEHICLE FOR THE JOB. IT BEAT THE RANGE ROVER BY A CLEAR 7 YEARS. THIS WAS AN AD FOR WILLYS MOTORS AUSTRALIA, BASED IN BRISBANE. NOTE THE RIGHT-HAND DRIVE!

RIGHT: BUCKET SEATS AND CONSOLE ARE QUITE LUXURIOUS. NOTE THE 4X4 TRANSFER LEVER ON THE RIGHT OF THE TUNNEL. AUTOMATIC SHIFTER SHIFTS A GM TH400 TRANSMISSION



J-E-E-P – Just Everybody Else’s Parts

JEEP, even more so than its future parent, American Motors, were the masters of parts bin engineering. Because of their small size, by the time the Super Wagoneer was introduced, Kaiser produced very few of the engines used in Jeep vehicles, the exception being the four-cylinder models. AMC's 232 six, a very modern design introduced in the spring of 1964 (its 242cu.in. descendant is still in production, used on current Jeep Wranglers and the outgoing Grand Cherokee), was the standard engine on the base Wagoneer after the OHC six was sent to Argentina. The 327 V8 was standard on the Super Wagoneer and optional on less expensive Wagoneers. Later, Buick V8s, displacing 350 cubic inches, powered 1968 through 1970 full-sized Jeeps.

The interior pulled pieces from a variety of sources. As best as can be told, the bucket seats found on the Super Wagoneer look very much like the seats found in the Chevy II, mounted on a different seat track, whilst the console chrome trim appears to have been lifted right from the deluxe 1963 and 1964 AMC Rambler Ambassador. I haven't been able to source the seven-way adjustable steering column; all I know that when it came time to replace my original column, I believe that I got the very last one left in existence.

The clear tail light lenses come from the 1958 to 1961 Rambler American, while the 'Super' script on each rear fender, next to the Wagoneer nameplate, was also donated by the same Rambler Americans. The stylish mag-style wheels, manufactured by Kelsey Hayes, can be found on a number of mid-decade muscle cars from both GM and Chrysler, but as far as a 15in. application, those found on the Super Wagoneer appear to be unique.