

Charger, Dodge's Large Sedan Impresses

Ann M. Job, For The Associated Press

Forget about retro, nostalgia stuff. The 2012 Dodge Charger is an impressive, large, rear-wheel drive sedan for today's buyers who want to stand out from the crowd.

Revamped for 2012, the expressively styled, four-door Charger can look like a snarl coming down the road. It can act like a snarling machine, too, especially if it has the new-for-2012, 6.4-liter, Hemi V-8 with 470 horsepower.

Even the base, 3.6-liter V-6 is noteworthy. Mated to a new, eight-speed automatic transmission, it gives the 2012 Charger a federal government fuel economy rating of 19 miles per gallon in city driving and 31 mpg on the highway. That's higher than the 19/28-mpg rating for the 2012 Toyota Avalon.

Suspension upgrades give the new Charger smart, responsive handling, and at the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's crash tests, the 2012 Charger earned a top safety ranking — five out of five stars — for overall passenger protection.

Best of all, auto enthusiasts can find Charger models affordable. Starting manufacturer's suggested retail price, including destination charge, is \$26,420 for a 2012 Charger SE with the base, 3.6-liter V-6 with 292-horsepower mated to an automatic transmission.

This compares with the starting MSRP, including destination charge, of \$33,955 for a base, 2012 Avalon with 268-horsepower V-6 and automatic transmission, and \$26,350 for a base, 2012 Ford Taurus large sedan with 263-horsepower V-6 and automatic transmission. Both the Avalon and Taurus are front-wheel drive. The rear-wheel-drive, 2012 Hyundai Genesis sedan with 333-horsepower V-6 has a starting retail price of \$35,075.

The lowest starting retail price for a 2012 Charger with V-8 is \$30,920 for an R/T model with automatic-transmission and 370-horsepower, 5.7-liter, Hemi V-8. A 2012 Charger with the top-level, 470-horsepower Hemi V-8 has a starting retail price of \$47,720.

Neither the Avalon nor Taurus is offered with a V-8. But the starting retail price, including destination charge, for a 2012 Genesis sedan with 385-horsepower, 4.6-liter V-8 is \$45,375, while a 2012 Genesis 5.0 R-Spec sedan with 429-horsepower, 5-liter V-8 starts at \$47,375.

The Charger name dates to 1966, when Dodge joined domestic auto companies in selling "pony" and muscle cars. The name was used into the late 1970s and revived in 2006 on sedans that the media early on described as retro models.

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But the 2012 Charger's ride, amenities and technology aren't retro.

The test, 2012 Charger SRT8, for example, had the latest fuel saving technology — deactivation of up to four of the eight cylinders when power wasn't needed plus an active valve exhaust system that allowed fuel-sipping across a wide rpm range.

It helped the test car, with 70 percent city driving, to average 15.4 mpg. The official SRT8 mileage rating is 14/23 mpg. Note this is the lowest mileage rating of all Charger models. The SRT8 incurs a \$1,000 U.S. gas guzzler tax.

The big "oomph," or torque, in the car peaks at 470 foot-pounds at 4,300 rpm and is accompanied by awesome engine sounds.

The five-speed automatic seemed a bit old-school, but it worked fine and included paddle shifters so drivers can shift through gears on their own, if they like.

Optional, 245/45 performance tires on the test car seemed to bite into the pavement to get traction quickly as the power came on. And the 4,365-pound Charger easily beat other vehicles away from stoplights. Power came on steadily when the SRT8 merged onto highways and in passing maneuvers.

Reportedly, the top speed of 175 miles an hour is only because at that point, the aerodynamic drag on the car keeps it from going faster, not because Dodge installed a limiter.

Unlike most large sedans that have a sedate look, the SRT8 has audacious styling. The grille is blacked out and looks like a massive vacuum opening at the front of the car. There are SRT8 fenders on the sides and four, chrome, double-walled exhaust pipes at the back.

The sporty coupe-like look even fooled a passenger, who walked up and casually opened the rear door to get inside. He had to be reminded that there was a front door handle farther toward the front of the car.

Passengers get generous legroom, front and back, of at least 40.1 inches. The Genesis sedan provides some 44 inches of front-seat legroom.

Headroom of 38.6 inches in the well-bolstered Charger front seats provides most drivers and passengers with comfortable resting spots and decent views out over the slightly domed, aluminum hood. The Avalon has a bit more headroom— 38.9 inches in the front seat.

The 37.9 inches of rear headroom in the highly styled Charger compares with the Avalon's 37.5 inches and the Genesis sedan's 37.7 inches.

The test Charger SRT8 toiled around town and in the countryside with fine manners, responding without nervousness to steering inputs and keeping easily in its lane during turns and curves.

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The tidy, sport steering wheel with the flat-shaped bottom was a nice perk, and interior fit and finish was excellent.

As long as the suspension wasn't set in Sport mode, the ride was firm but not punishing, as dampers adjusted automatically to smooth the ride. The overall sensation was of a heavy car that was well-managed.

But there was constant road noise from the 20-inch tires.

Sport mode suspension changed the car's personality into a racetrack machine, and the large display screen in the middle of the dashboard could be switched to show racing stats such as 0-to-60-mph times and lateral g forces.

Unfortunately, the 2012 Charger has been the subject of six safety recalls, ranging from an engine problem to electrical headlamp wiring that could overheat.

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