

Running Wild and Road Tripping

In the Dodge Caliber

By Roger Witherspoon

What do you suppose a liaison between the low riding, aggressive, panther-like Dodge Magnum and the powerful, aggressive, fast-moving, Dodge Charger might produce?

Well, if you held Dodge's automotive crayons and could imagine a rambunctious, gadget-toting teenager on wheels, you might come up with something like the Dodge Caliber. The Caliber is a spunky, compact SUV with all the comforts a spoiled kid could want, including the attitude.

It starts with the Caliber's look. Its grill has the distinct Dodge look found on the pouncing Magnum. But the grill is more open-faced than the bigger, more powerful car, and the curved lines underneath the grill containing the parking lights gives it a youthful smirk – which pretty much takes the aggression out of it.

"I just wanted to design a vehicle for an active lifestyle," said Mike Nicholas, the chief Dodge designer who pulled the Caliber out of his crayon box at the age of 35. "I wanted something that was flexible and functional. I wanted it to have presence to it where it would stand out on the road and catch your attention.

"We thought of it as a vehicle for both the city and suburbs, but it has a high sill and larger wheel and tire, so it looks like it can go anywhere on and off-road."

That look is enhanced by the fact that the Caliber is built on the Jeep Compass platform, and while it is not designed to ford streams and climb steep, rock-strewn hills, the Caliber does have all-wheel drive, handles like a Jeep and can comfortably go just about anywhere a whim and its 17-inch wheels will take you.

"I thought of it as the type of vehicle you could take on a road trip just about anywhere," Nicholas said. "And some of the accessories were things you might want to have along with you."

If that road trip is north of the Mason-Dixon Line, the heated leather seats might be appreciated. If the road gets rugged, one might appreciate the five-star crash rating and the side curtain air bags.

As for the accessories, take the arm rest – a fairly standard, functional part that is usually characterized by being wide or thin, hard plastic or padded. In the Caliber, however, the arm rest is padded, adjustable, and has an added function. The top flips open to reveal a holder designed for a cell phone or iPod, and there is a cord in the storage bin underneath which can connect the iPod to the MP3 outlet on the dash and allow you to hear your own tunes through the car's sound system.

"The cell phone holder was just a common sense thing," said Nicholas. "You're always looking for a place to put those things. And just about everyone has an iPod these days."

In addition, the standard 12-volt power outlets to recharge cell phones and other hand held electronic items are augmented with a 115-volt outlet in the center console so you can plug in the power cord for a laptop.

There was a lot of thought given to storing all sorts of items. In the dash, there are slots on either side of the steering wheel for small objects such as toll passes. Then, there

are three slots in the center console which can hold cell phones or other items, as well as a large storage bin under the adjustable arm rest for CDs. At night, the two cup holders are easy to find since there are soft blue lights ringing the bottom. And to keep your drinks cold, the deep glove compartment is in three sections: upper and lower sections for holding the average accumulation of stuff, and a center “chill box” which is kept cold by the Caliber’s air conditioning system and can hold four 20-ounce bottles or four standard sized cans.

Dodge folks are not saying if the chill box is the modern descendant of the moonshine legacy of the General Lee, the infamous Charger that roared through the television countryside a generation ago under the lead feet of the Dukes of Hazard.

There was some thought to the sound system, too. It features nine Boston Acoustic speakers and subwoofers – which can envelope the cabin or blanket the neighborhood – and a pair of articulating boom boxes built into the liftgate that can fold out with the touch of a button and face the world behind the car.

“It was just part of the road trip concept,” he said, “where you park your car somewhere to have a picnic or tailgate party and flip down the speakers, and get out the Frisbees. It’s for an active lifestyle.”

The Caliber may be a compact car, but it is not limited to short people. According to Nicholas, the car was designed to “look like you pumped the car with air, so it’s filling out” sort of like a kid outgrowing his clothes. That rounded look works inside, where there is plenty of head and leg room for a quarter of traveling NBA players and the center passenger seat is actually large enough to hold a child seat without encroaching on the adults on either side.

The rear seats fold down to enlarge the more than adequate trunk. And as another touch, if you push the rear light in and let it pop out, you are holding a flashlight whose batteries are continually recharged by the running motor.

“When you’re on the road,” explained Nicholas, “you always need a flashlight and you can either never find it or the batteries are always dead. Here, we have a convenient one and it’s always charging. It’s always there for you to pop out when you need it.”

Whether you need to or not, once you get behind the leather steering wheel of the Caliber and start 1,000 or more iPod tunes rolling through the boom box, you have a strong urge to get a nationwide map, and just go.

2007 Dodge Caliber SXT

MSRP:		\$18,740
EPA Mileage:	26 MPG City	30 MPG Highway

Performance/ Safety:

2.0-Liter, DOHC 4-cylinder engine producing 158 horsepower and 141 pound-feet of torque; continuously variable automatic transmission; all wheel drive; power front disc and rear drum brakes; Halogen headlights; 17-inch steel wheels; front multistage air bags; supplemental side curtain and rear air bags; power rack and pinion steering.

Interior/ Comfort:

AM/FM radio; CD, MP3 and iPod player; 9 Boston Acoustic speakers with subwoofers and 2 flexible liftgate speakers; 12 and 115-volt power outlets; leather seats and steering wheel; heated front seats with lumbar supports; tilt steering wheel with fingertip controls; folding rear seats in 60/40 split; rechargeable rear flashlight.