

## **Dodge Grand Caravan:**

### **The Rationale for Road Trips**

**By Roger Witherspoon**

There is a certain appeal to the idea of a cross country road trip.

More people have flown over this country than have taken the time to drive a meandering route through the disparate regions of the country. The painted desert, Dakota Badlands, soaring Pikes Peak, swaying Miami palm trees and the clustered, sprawling light show that is New York City all look vastly different from 30,000 feet than they do from the ground.

Unfortunately, the romance of the road trip is also dimmed a bit by the reality of spending days in cramped positions in a confined space, with limited things to do besides listening to the kids get on each other's nerves. So what is a family with an itch to take to the road to do?

Well, they might start with a Dodge Grand Caravan minivan. It seems the folks holding the crayons at Dodge spent a lot of time musing about the way to take the drudgery out of road trips – for families or just a bunch of friends – and set out to eliminate as many of the drawbacks as they could reasonably think of. And they thought of a lot.

Outside, the Grand Caravan is a pleasant looking minivan, resembling a stretch SUV. But the low, long minivan is not just a stretched, ungainly box. Dodge's engineers put a four-liter V-6 engine under the sloping hood that cranks out 240 horsepower, which is more than enough to power the minivan like a family sedan instead of a lumbering truck. The traction and stability control systems, combined with the mini's wide stance and low center of gravity, gives the minivan the handling ability and feel of a car, even on winding, snow-covered mountain roads.

But it is inside the Grand Caravan – and its slightly upscale cousin, the Chrysler Town and Country – where the engineers and artists ran amok to produce a rolling experience one is unlikely to find in any other vehicle.

Some of the touches seem minor. The wide windows in the sliding center door are powered, just like the front windows, and can be fully lowered. Usually, in minivans, these windows are immobile, contributing the prison atmosphere of a minivan and stagnant air. In addition, there are manually operated sun screens for both the center windows and the windows by the third row of seats.

Do you want entertainment on the trip? That's fine, but how long does it take to get everyone to agree on what to listen to or see? Well, the Grand Caravan attempts to provide something for everyone. If you want the radio, there is AM/FM and Sirius satellite radio available, and nine speakers and a subwoofer to make the music as soothing or jarring as you like.

And if you prefer the 1,000 or so songs on your iPod, the Grand Caravan comes with a built in juke box with a 20-gigabyte hard drive. You may download your iPod music to the system and run it from there. But perhaps you would rather watch a movie, or play an electronic game. That's no problem, either. There are three video screens in the Grand Caravan, the navigation screen on the dash for the front passengers, and pull down

screens for the second and third row. The minivan has to be parked in order for the dashboard screen to show entertainment, however.

Each of these may be operated independently, showing three separate movies on DVD, or one row may watch a movie, while a second plays an electronic game and a third pulls in Sirius Satellite TV. This is the first year the Dodge and Chrysler have a television contract with Sirius, and they started with only the kids in mind. Only the Disney Channel, Cartoon Network, and Nickelodeon are available. But the folks at Dodge realize that kids are not the only ones in the minivan, and they are considering adding premium movie and all news and sports channels in the future. The screens use wireless headsets, so there is no problem with competing sounds in the small space.

There is also the issue of storage. A long road trip can seem interminable if there is limited room to move. Here, the engineers at Chrysler/Dodge have come up with a number of innovations. Their stow 'n go system features bins between the first and second row, and behind the third row, which are about the size of large suit cases and can hold luggage or other items with ease. At the touch of a button, the two third row seats can fold over and slide into the storage bin, thus turning the area into a cargo van. With stow 'n go, the second row of seats can usually slide into their storage bin as well, though they are manually operated.

But the new Dodge Caravan has come up with swivel 'n go, an innovation which lets the second row of seats turn 180 degrees so they are facing the passengers in the rear. There is more than a yard of space between the seats, so leg room is not a problem. The storage bin, however, holds a table which fits neatly in to a steel peg between the four seats. It is an innovation which is useful for playing games, having meals, or hosting a laptop computer. The ability to move around and stretch takes a major irritant out of long road trips. There is even a 112-volt outlet to plug in the computer's or game station power cord -- something you usually find only in a hybrid vehicle with its enormous battery pack.

For added storage, there is a large, double glove box capable of holding a case of sodas as well as a deep storage bin between the front seats. The large storage compartment between the front seats can actually come out, and the top portion is dishwasher safe. There are wide storage pouches on each of the doors, built-in bins by the third row seats, and small storage compartments overhead. All the seats in the Grand Caravan are soft, wide, supple leather, and the both the front and second row of seats can be heated.

At night, there is a soft blue light emanating from the ceiling which lets passengers see without interfering with the driver's visibility. Each seat also has its own, focused reading lamp. There is even a flashlight fitted in to the wall of the cargo area.

The engineers and interior designers at Dodge sought to craft a minivan which would be an integral part of a joyful road experience, rather than uncomfortable transportation between memorable sights. In that quest, they have largely succeeded.

After a long road trip in a Grand Caravan, the only real question a group might have is how soon can they do it again?

## **2008 Dodge Grand Caravan SXT**

**MSRP:** **\$38,480**  
**EPA Mileage:** **16 MPG City** **23 MPG Highway**

**Performance/ Safety:**

4.0-Liter aluminum SOHC V-6 engine producing 240 horsepower and 253 pound-feet of torque; 6-speed automatic transmission; anti-lock, 4-wheel disc brakes; brake assist; electronic stability control; power adjustable pedals; front & rear window washers; front advanced multistage air bags; supplemental side curtain air bags in all rows; 17-inch aluminum wheels.

**Interior/ Comfort:**

AM/FM/ Sirius satellite radio; 20-gigabyte juke box and MP3 player; 2 DVD players with wireless headsets; video remote control; Sirius Satellite TV; 9 Infinity amplified speakers and subwoofer; six-disc, in-dash CD player; swivel 'n go second row seating; stow 'n go third row seating; heated front and second rows; tilt, telescope, leather steering wheel with fingertip audio controls; cruise command; second and third row sun screens; 3 climate zones; 112-volt power outlet.