Chrysler 200 delivers solid value for the money

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And a lot of focus was centred on the interiors of the eight new vehicles Chrysler and Dodge debuted recently in San Francisco and Sonoma, Ca.

Perhaps the most revealing part of this press launch was hearing Chrysler head of interior design, Klaus Busse, say, that when the 'summer of 2009' crunch came, it would 'have been easy to take a nice chunk of money and walk away.

'But we knew then what we had on the drawing board and what was coming and that's why we stayed. And now, when I look at this, I can say it was worth it.'

Starting at $19,995, even the base LX model has soft-touch surfaces throughout where it used to be flimsy

plastic that looked so cheap you felt you could peel it off with your fingers.

You'll find ambient lighting (including cupholders) and the seats are made with a premium cloth not the bargain basement stuff while the rear seat has a 60/40 split/fold feature that makes for a huge cargo space. Air conditioning is standard.

In terms of safety, there are six airbags, four-wheel disc brakes with ABS plus a standard tire pressure monitor. Electronic Stability Control (ESP) with traction control is an option on the LX.

The LX, as mentioned, starts at $19,995. It has $900 worth of added content over the 2010 Sebring. But, and this is a crucial but, it is priced $4,000 below the current entry-level Sebring.

The LX is powered by Chrysler's 2.4-litre 'world engine' producing 173 hp and 166 lb/ft of torque through a four-speed automatic transmission. All 200s are front-engine, front-drive. On the LX, a six-speed automatic is an option.

The 200 Touring ($23,995) builds on the LX with standard ESP with added trim and a 3.6-litre Pentastar V6 as an option.

The 3.6-litre produces 328 hp and 260 lb/ft of torque and is standard on the Limited ($27,995) that adds gobs of trim like heated leather seats, universal garage door opener and Bluetooth connectivity.

Fuel numbers for the 2.4-litre, five-speed auto are 9.9/6.7L/100 km (29/42 mpg) city/highway; 2.4-litre six-speed auto, 10.5/6.4L/100 km (27/44 mpg) city/highway; 3.6-litre six-speed auto, 11.0/6.8L/100 km (26/42 mpg) city/highway.

Chrysler made noise, vibration and harshness (NHV) a priority with some 45 things done to quell noise intruding on the cabin like acoustic, laminated glass on the windshield and front door windows.

I cannot speak about the ride and handling of the 2.4-litre, as all my very brief driving was behind the wheel of a Limited.

Overall the car responded well to steering inputs although the steering wheel felt a little dead on centre. However, it tracked well and gave the sensation of being solid and dependable, which is always a good thing.

Can you push the 200? Well, with the 3.6-litre and the improved suspension on all models for 2011, yes you can but that is not what this car is designed to do.

It is the kind of car that delivers solid value for the money especially when you look at the starting prices which are, in some cases, $5,000 or more less then the immediate competition.

Canadians are price conscious, and at less than $20,000 to start, the 2011 Chrysler 200 should make a lot of consumers take a second look.

CHRYSLER 200 2011 SEDAN AT A GLANCE

BODY STYLE: Mid-size sedan.

DRIVE METHOD: front-engine, front-wheel-drive.

ENGINE: 2.4-litre, DOHC inline four-cylinder (173 hp, 166 lb/ft); 3.6-litre DOHC V6 (283 hp, 260 lb/ft).

FUEL ECONOMY: 2.4-litre, five-speed automatic, 9.9/6.7L/100 km (29/42 mpg) city/highway; 2.4-litre six-speed automatic, 10.5/6.4L/100 km (27/44 mpg) city/highway; 3.6-litre six-speed auto, 11.0/6.8L/100 km (26/42 mpg) city/highway.

TOWING CAPACITY: NA

PRICE: LX, $19,995; Touring, $23.995; Limited, $27,995.

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