

Charger's looks can deceive

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Happily, that all changed in 1999 when Chrysler, showed the Charger concept with rear drive.

Finally in 2006, the new Charger was announced along with the Challenger both with available Hemi engines and loads of styling cues paying homage to those two great cars of the 1970s.

Tested here is the next generation, 2011 Charger and you don't have to look far to see the DNA. The aluminum hood features dual 'scallop' that bring a sculptured look to the front end, while large body-side scallops deliver a striking A-line across the doors.

The new version is classified as a full-size sedan but looks can deceive. The body sidelines combine with the pronounced front and rear wheel well flares to make it look like a coupe, although Dodge claims the largest back seat volume in the segment.

Yes, it has a Hemi but it also has a potent V6 too. The brand new Pentastar V6 with variable valve timing puts out 292 hp and 260 lb/ft of torque. That's 114 more hp than the V6 used in last year's Charger.

Fuel consumption is listed as

10.9/7.6L/100 km (26/37 mpg) city/highway. Drive is to the rear through a five-speed automatic transmission.

The V8 is still called a Hemi but it was totally re-engineered a few years ago and now features variable valve timing and the FuelSaver system that shuts down four of the eight cylinders when the Charger is cruising at a constant speed, which in turn, saves gas.

As it sits in the Charger, the new Hemi produces 372 hp and 401 lb/ft of torque. Opt for the V8 and you can also get all-wheel-drive (AWD) as well as the standard rear drive. Either way it comes with the five-speed automatic.

Fuel consumption on the RWD Hemi is 13.1/7.9L/100 km (22/36 mpg) city/highway. The AWD Hemi comes in at 13.1/8.7L/100 km (22/32 mpg).

The 2011 Charger comes with standard safety aids not even dreamed about when the original Charger was being built. There are actually 45 safety and security features including seven air bags (one for the driver's knees), electronic stability control with traction control and even hill start assist.

When it comes to pricing, the

six models are split into the SE (\$29,995), SXT (\$31,995) and SXT Plus (\$33,995) with the V6. The R/T (\$37,995), R/T Road and Track (\$38,995) and R/T AWD (\$39,995) feature the V8.

Tested here is the R/T that came with the optional Rallye Group that adds a big body-color rear spoiler and the chrome-clad 20-inch wheels from the R/T Road and Track model.

The road test portion of the press launch began in San Francisco and across the Golden Gate Bridge where the Hemi was really in its element, effortlessly cruising with the tach just a hair over 2000 rpm.

But then, Dodge had us drop down to the Pacific Coast Highway (PCH) on the way to Point Reyes.

More like a laneway than a highway, it snakes and winds up and down through the many hills and valleys that make this area so picturesque but a chore to drive.

Unlike the original Charger, the new one rides on a platform derived from the Mercedes-Benz E-Class. For 2011, the suspension was re-engineered and then re-tuned towards sharper handling.



Yep, it has a Hemi with 372 hp and 401 lb/ft of torque (shown) but the 2011 Dodge Charger also offers a variable valve timing 3.6-litre V6 producing 292 hp and 260 lb/ft of torque.

Because the great torque delivery is immediate and coupled with the suspension soaking up the road, you can really move on roads like this to the point that I was feeling queasy a few times—and I was driving.

I didn't get my hands on the AWD but would have liked to try it on the PCH. Dodge uses an active transfer case with a front axle system that disconnects when AWD it is not required. This increases overall mileage by about five per cent.

Later we glided along the top of the bay towards Napa and Sonoma. Passing was so easy. Push down on the gas and the Charger did just that, charge by.

Options of note start with the Uconnect Touch infotainment centre with big, and I mean big, 8.4-inch colour monitor with Garmin-source navi system, heated and cooled cup holders, Adaptive Cruise Control and Rear Cross Path Detection with rear view camera with grid lines.

There are orange and red Chargers but with a R/T AWD in grey, you'd have the sleeper of all sleepers—perfect for showing all those irritating lesser cars a little respect.

But no matter how you slice it, there is no substitute for a big V8 and rear drive and the 2011 Dodge Charger R/T more than proves the point.

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