

Chrysler unveils the 'Man Van'

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The 2012 Dodge Grand Caravan R/T, the top-of-the-line trim level of Dodge's ubiquitous people mover, making the most of recent power and performance modifications, loaded with equipment and amenities and, true to R/T tradition, styled with a sport-themed interior.

Actually, the latest evolution of Grand Caravan is a pretty good starting point with its sleek modern lines, accented with quad headlamps, 'Ring of Fire' LED taillights and, in the R/T trim level, with body-colouring on the bodyside moulding and trademark Dodge crosshair grille. The R/T stands on 17-inch satin carbon aluminum alloy wheels, for at least a little attitude.

In other vehicles across the Dodge lineup, an R/T model usually adds a power and performance upgrade.

But while the Grand Caravan R/T does add a little suspension stiffening, the one-choice powerplant, the 3.6-litre Pentastar V6 was deemed sufficient with 283 hp and 260 lb/ft of torque.

This award-winning V6 is harnessed to a six-speed auto tranny controlled via a cute little serpentine shifter poking out of the dash. Fuel economy is rated at 12.2/7.9L/100km (city/hwy).

As usual, my combined fuel average worked out to a more realistic 13.2L/100km.

With no major difference in R/T power

or exterior presentation, the main focus of the R/T design team was inside the vehicle, where the doors open to a premium black leather interior with red accent stitching and with metallic and chrome contrasts.

Now, we're talking masculine.

If this was built by another manufacturer, it would be the Harley-Davidson edition. The interior is darkly handsome, subtly lit by sapphire blue ambient illumination and although the overall ambiance of the cabin exudes an upscale, luxurious feel.

And, being the top-of-the-line trim, the R/T includes a lot of choices from the option list as standard equipment. Things like heated second row seats, a heated steering wheel, the Uconnect Voice Command communication system with Bluetooth and streaming audio, and an upgraded nine-speaker audio system with subwoofer.

The extra amenities build on an already inclusive package outfitting a well-designed ergonomic interior with a one-piece instrument panel and lots of innovative

storage spaces. Specialized equipment to help manage the non-voting passengers behind the first row includes cup and bottle holders, a panoramic mirror to keep an eye on the ankle-biters, pull-up window curtains for snoozing toddlers and the ultimate sedative—the optional DVD entertainment system (\$1,000).

You can further outfit the R/T with option packages like the Safety Sphere Group (\$975) with automatic headlamps, Blind Spot & Cross Path Detection, ParkSense Rear Park Assist, rain-sensitive wipers and the Security Group (\$795) with power liftgate, remote start and security alarm.

The Grand Caravan R/T comes with Chrysler's innovative Stow 'n Go seating system. When the seats are fully upright, their underfloor storage tubs can be used for hidden storage. And the seats fold down into whatever floor layout the passengers choose.

Luggage room is 930 litres (33 cu ft) behind the third row, 2,340 litres (83.8 cu ft) behind the second row, expanding to a huge flat cargo space of 4,100 litres (143.8 cu ft) with both the second and third row seats stowed under the floor.

During another test of a Grand Caravan, my wife and I used it to shuttle family members to a wedding, move our son into his apartment and ended the week with a tour through the Rockies.

Family grocery getter, team bus, moving van or mini RV. An all-in-one solution.

That kind of versatility and a \$19,995 starting price for the Canada Value Package entry-level model has kept the Grand Caravan in the top-selling tier of vehicles for much of its history, especially here in Canada.

And, for all its evolutions and changes, one constant and important feature of the Grand Caravan has been the 'Made in Canada' sticker on the door.

Although it's future is by no means set in stone, with rumours of a possible Euro-styled MPV replacement, for 2012 the Grand Caravan remains a well-rounded solution to family transportation needs with a new, uniquely masculine flavour added to the lineup with its R/T trim.

The R/T trim level lists for \$31,895, well up from the Grand Caravan's amazing \$19,995 starting price but just a few thousand more than the base models of its Honda and Toyota competitors, which certainly makes it worthy of consideration.

Dodge Grand Caravan R/T (at a glance)

BODY STYLE: Three-row, seven-passenger minivan.
DRIVE METHOD: front-engine, front-wheel drive.
ENGINE: 3.6-litre VVT V6 engine (283 hp, 260 lb/ft)
FUEL ECONOMY: 12.2/7.9L/100km (city/hwy)
TOW RATING: 1,632.9 kg (3,600 lb) with Trailer-tow Prep Package
CARGO VOLUME: 930 litres (33 cu ft) behind third row; 2,340 litres (83.8 cu ft) behind second row; 4,100 litres (143.8 cu ft) behind first row.
PRICE: Base, \$19,995; R/T, \$31,895
WEB SITE: www.dodge.ca

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