By ROB BEINTEMA

Carguide Magazine Metroland Media Group

'Yeah, I know the minivan would be perfect for the family, honey.

I just wish it was, umm . . , sportier, somehow.'

Chrysler Canada thinks they might have an answer for anyone who's ever stood in a dealer showroom, torn between the heart's desire and the head's logic.

It's the 2012 Dodge Caravan R/T.

Chrysler is, after all, responsible for the origin of the species, from the first 1984 Caravan initially bolted onto a K-car platform, to the evolution of the latest fifth generation version that debuted for 2008.

A mid-cycle upgrade for 2011 set the stage for a new R/T trim level with overall adjustments to the entire lineup— a retuned suspension and lowered ride height, a new powertrain, new steering and other tech upgrades along with an interior and exterior makeover.

Adding an R/T (Road and Track) trim level to a minivan lineup might seem a little ludicrous at first blush but the Grand Caravan has always come in a variety of models and optional choices, ranging from entry-level beaters to near luxury touring trim levels.

And the new R/T top-of-the-line trim level added a new twist on luxury— a masculine twist.

According to legend, during development, Ralph Gillies, Chrysler's design guru, and the R/T design team were referring to the R/T version as the 'Man Van'.

That might raise a chuckle because there's only so much you can do to change a minivan's image without going over the top. And there are no silly boy-racer addons here.

No big V8 Hemi crammed under the hood. No Hurst shifter. No tomato can exhausts or racing stripes. Only a demure roof spoiler to keep the dust off the subtle R/T badging on the liftgate.



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 sportthemed interior.

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)

TOW RATING: 1,632.9 kg (3,600 lb) with Trailer-

CARGO VOLUME: 930 litres (33 cu ft) behind third

row; 2,340 litres (83.8 cu ft) behind second row; 4,100

FUEL ECONOMY: 12.2/7.9L/100km (city/hwy)

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 bodycolouring on the bodyside moulding and trademark Dodge crosshair grille. The R/T

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 suspen-

sion stiffening, the one-choice powerplant, the 3.6-litre Pentastar V6 was deemed sufficient with 283 hp and 260 lb/ft of torque.

tow Prep Package

litres (143.8 cu ft) behind first row.

WEB SITE: www.dodge.ca

PRICE: Base, \$19,995; R/T, \$31,895

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 manufacstands on 17-inch satin carbon aluminum turer, it would be the Harley-Davidson

edition. The interior darkly handsome, subtly lit by sapphire blue ambient illumination andalthough 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 an 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.



CANADIAN TIRE GEORGETOWN MANAGER'S SPECIAL

• Formula 1 Oil Change

• Seasonal Tire Changeover (on rims)

• Check and top up select fluids

• Brake Inspection

Wheel Alignment

• Battery Test

ALL FOR

+ Tax most vehicles

ADD SEASONAL TIRE STORAGE FOR ONLY

Offer valid to May 1st 2012. Call (905) 877-5289 opt. 2.

