

Viper still has venom

by Mark_Maynard

I folded back the top of a Venom Red 2008 Dodge Viper SRT10 convertible, settled behind the wheel and headed for the highway. Six hundred horsepower is a terrible thing to waste.

DODGE VIPER - The 2008 Dodge Viper SRT10 is ready to roll with a 600-horsepower, 10-cylinder engine. The new model introduces six-speed manual transmission, a beefed-up differential, hood louvers, new springs and more. CNS Photo By Earnie Grafton. I scanned the instrument panel to switch off the traction - or electronic stability controls - until I worked up to a minimum threshold of confidence. But, hmmm, no such buttons were to be found.

No stability control, no traction control, no cruise control - no problem, apparently. It's all about driver control.

The Dodge Viper isn't a sports car on everyone's list, but that's how the loyalists want it, said Erich Heuschle, Viper supervisor of vehicle dynamics.

Among the two-seat-sports-car competition, Viper is the cannonball splash into the pool. It may not have all the creature comforts of other \$86,000 sports cars, but it does have 10 cylinders and a top speed of 202 mph. And there's much new for 2008.

This generation of the car is so smoothed out from the early years that "Viper" and "refined" can be used in the same sentence. But it's still a snake lying in wait.

Sold in coupe and convertible, the Viper is old-school, rear-wheel-drive muscle, crude but effective. It's fun in an invigorating, "I just cheated death" kind of way.

The new model introduces a new engine and six-speed manual transmission, a beefed-up differential, hood louvers, new springs and dampers, a retuned rear sway bar and a return to conventional tires - no more run-flats.

It's still a no-frills car, even if it does cost \$86,190 and \$86,940 for the coupe. There are the basic standard-equipment items - remote locking, air conditioning, front air bags, a seven-speaker audio system and power windows, but don't expect cup holders. There's not even an interior release for the hood - just reach through a slot in the grille for the tab.

There's also a now-dated red start button that requires putting the key into the ignition, then a push of the button. Technology has advanced to allow an "intelligent key" that allows one-step, push-button starting.

But firing the engine is still a thrill. The engine pops and crackles like a race car's, then warms into a lumpy mumble. It's obnoxious fun to run the engine to redline in first gear and lift off the throttle just to hear the angry, UPS-truck exhaust tone.

Enlarging the bore of the 10-hole V-block by one silly millimeter pushed displacement from 8.3 liters to 8.4. And with that, horsepower went up by 90. Some of the power boost comes from new cylinder heads with Computer Numerically Controlled combustion chambers, larger valves and variable valve timing, which combine to move air faster through the engine and out the downspout-size side pipes.

Moving power from engine to transmission is a new twin-disc clutch, replacing the larger-diameter, single-disc setup that was renowned for its left-leg exercise. The new clutch is about 18 percent lighter to actuate.

The Tremec T56 six-speed manual gearbox has flick-of-the-wrist shifter travel. And taller gears make better use of the torque - 560 foot-pounds at 5,000 rpm.

With this much power, the car will launch from zero to 60 mph in less than five seconds - all in first gear, if you can keep the tires from spinning. Then it's on to 90 mph in second, 120 in third and 202 in fifth gear, Heuschle said.

The gear ratios allow plenty of range in first, second and third for driving in traffic. At 70 mph in fifth, the engine is turning 2,000 rpm, which drops to 1,500 rpm in sixth at 80 mph. That should help fuel economy - 12 mpg city, 21 highway - if a Viper owner cares.

Working on the track at the Transportation Research Center near Columbus, Ohio, Heuschle elected himself for the testing.

"One day we did more than 150 miles at 200 mph," he said. "We did 197 with the top down and 202 with the top up. The coupe and convertible have very similar drag, and both are within 1 mph of each other."

He credits improved aerodynamics as key in breaking 200 mph. Also, the Michelin Pilot Sport PS2 tires - with a unique pattern, construction and compounding - are about two seconds faster per lap than the run-flats, Heuschle said.

Early Viper "roadsters" had a top that fit like a canvas pup tent and was prone to blowing off at high speed. Not so with this one. The trunk must first be opened, then the top can be manually folded back with little fuss, snapping into place to form a tight tonneau.

With the top down, it's the wind dump over the windshield that keeps drivers at sane-enough speeds. Not only hats, but sunglasses, too, are subject to wind loss.

With the top up, anti-Viper passengers will complain about the engine drone at high speeds, but it's more tolerable now than before. The speedometer is crammed with digits to 220 mph, and the lines between numbers jump in 5-mph increments. A digital speed readout would help those who worry about 10 or 20 mph over the limit.

Like rye whiskey, the Viper is an acquired taste. It isn't sanitized or boring.

"A few flaws help it stand out," Heuschle said. "Kind of like people."

SPECS

2008 Dodge Viper SRT10

Body style: two-seat, rear-wheel-drive convertible; tubular-space-frame backbone with plastic body panels and aluminum sills

Engine: aluminum, OHV 8.4-liter V-10 with variable valve timing and 20 valves

Horsepower: 600 at 6,100 rpm

Torque: 560 foot-pounds at 5,000 rpm

Transmission: six-speed manual with first-to-fourth skip shift

EPA fuel-economy estimates: 12 mpg city, 21 highway; 91 octane recommended

DIMENSIONS

Trunk space: about enough space for a small golf bag (6 1/4 cubic feet more in the coupe)

Front head/leg/shoulder room: 36.5/42.4/54.1 inches

Length/wheelbase: 175.6/98.8 inches

Curb weight: 3,440 pounds

FEATURES

Standard equipment includes: keyless entry, air conditioning, power windows, fog lights and high-intensity-discharge headlights, seven-speaker (310-watt) CD audio system, power-adjustable pedals, anti-lock disc brakes, dual-stage front air bags

CHASSIS

Brakes: 14-inch vented Brembo discs front and rear

Steering: Power-assisted rack and pinion; 40.5-foot turning circle

Suspension: four-wheel independent with high-performance aluminum control arms and knuckles, and lightweight coil-over-shock absorbers; stabilizer bars front and rear

Tires and wheels: Michelin Pilot Sport PS2, P275/35 ZR 18-inch front, P345/30 ZR 19-inch rear; aluminum wheels

PRICING

Base: \$86,190, including \$850 freight charge

Options: protection group, \$450, includes embroidered floor mats and car cover; dual painted stripes adds \$3,000

Final assembly: Conner Avenue Plant, Detroit

PLUSES: improved ride quality, easy shifting, attractive styling top up or down.

MINUSES: red start button is gimmicky and outdated; annoying first-to-fourth-gear skip shift (better to go from first to third). Hybrid car options

Q: Which small car is a good hybrid, that is a reasonable price.

- Anna

A: Any of the four-cylinder hybrids would be acceptable, Anna. The V-6 models - such as the Toyota Highlander - are more about performance or towing power than fuel economy.

The midsize Camry is a gentle driver, the Nissan Altima has a little sharper performance (and it still qualifies for the tax credit), the compact Civic is good, too. The Prius, which is the icon of hybrid cars, is small and still very much in demand.

If you need cargo space or just prefer to ride a little taller, the Ford Escape SUV hybrid (or sister vehicle

Mazda Tribute) make good four-cylinder choices, too.

Consider how much you drive, what you can afford and why you want a hybrid. If it is primarily to save gasoline money, you may be able to do just about as well with a thrifty traditional four-cylinder, such as the Chevy Aveo, Honda Civic, Kia Rio, etc. But if you are committed to the environment and are seeking improved fuel economy, the added cost of the hybrid may be worth it to you.

You can compare fuel mileage ratings and learn a vehicle's green rating at www.epa.gov/greenvehicles.

Also I recommend buying a new hybrid, or at least one that is just a year or two old.

Think of a hybrid as a home computer. Its electronics are state of the art for just a few years. And the technology evolves so quickly that a five-year-old computer has little resale value. The same will be true of old hybrids. It's not so much that the batteries may need to be replaced, but that the electronics can get skittish, just like your old home computer.

Consider leasing if your annual mileage doesn't exceed the lease limits. After three to five years you'll be able to turn in your vehicle for the next-generation, state-of-the-art computer, or hybrid vehicle.

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