

Dodge Charger designed for police needs more power, better equipment

by Mark_Maynard

Strap me into a 600-horsepower Dodge Viper SRT10 and I'd be less tempted to break the law than I was while testing the black-and-white Dodge Charger Police Package.

I am far too immature to be trusted NOT to play with the lights, the sirens and air horn. And there's something empowering about driving a car with a heavy-duty push bar on the front bumper.

DODGE THIS - The Dodge Charger Police Package has the intimidating look for law enforcement, but not the size or horsepower. CNS Photo courtesy of Dodge. The test car was an example of what Dodge will sell to law enforcement agencies. It looked like a cop car but with Dodge City badges on the doors, Charger Precinct on the rear quarter panels and "Not in Service" disclaimers front and rear. After a second look, it was more like a parade car. But that didn't stop people from clicking off cell-phone photos and wanting their picture taken next to the car. One passerby called out, "It's about time Dodge got back in the business."

I thought a test of the Charger police pack would be a heckuvalotta fun for a week. And it was fun - for about a day of pulling pranks on friends and neighbors. But Dodge didn't tell me that it is illegal in California to drive a police-like car with an active light bar. A couple of police officers did take the time to explain, however.

The light bar has to be covered, and even better when the cover is stamped with "Out of Service." Police departments follow this law when cruisers are sent in for repairs and when the mechanic takes a test drive. It's for a good reason. It would be my bad timing if I were to pull up at the local convenience store and miscreants were pulling off a heist. They'd shoot first, ask questions later.

Or worse, I feared, if someone desperately needed police assistance - and all they got was me. I'm not good around spilled blood.

The slowest route between two points is in a cop car. Traffic keeps a close watch on the speedometer when the cruiser's nearby. It's the phenomenon of "black and white fright," an officer told me.

I had people stop twice at four-way intersections, then wave me through, even when it was their right of way. Oncoming drivers who would have made a left turn directly in front of me thought twice and hit the brakes. People frequently called out "Hi," which only made me wonder what they were up to.

After two days in the test cruiser, I quickly became a police sympathizer.

Mostly because I know how well-equipped this car could be.

The Charger is a good cop-car foundation, but Dodge, through its relationship with Mercedes-Benz, has access to the best safety and performance equipment ... for a price.

The limit for a new cruiser in San Diego is \$25,000, I was told off-the-record by a uniformed officer. That doesn't allow for a car that strikes awe in the hearts of would-be criminals.

The base price of the Dodge Charger is \$23,475 - and that's with a 250-horsepower V-6 engine. Add the 340-hp, 5.7-liter Hemi V-8 option and the car's over budget by \$750. That leaves out typical police options, such as floor mats (\$30), an eight-way power-adjustable driver's seat (\$380), the driver-side spotlight (\$200), full-size spare (\$160) and vinyl back seat (\$120). All of which were on the test car.

The Police Group option package, \$3,455, adds such extras as heavy-duty disc brakes, 160 mph speedometer, all-speed traction control, performance steering and performance suspension that includes load leveling and height control. There's a special floor console with panels for the light and siren controls, radios, screens and

other electronic communication devices.

The package also has 18-inch performance tires and steel wheels with hubcaps. Shiny, bolt-on wheel covers are extra.

And if budgets are tight, the performance tires are not for high mileage and are expensive to replace.

No Charger should leave the precinct without the Hemi V-8, which also adds a larger dual exhaust. But big deal. The car's heavy - more than 4,200 pounds with a driver and gear. And 340 hp does not make this an inspired pursuit vehicle.

Where's the big Hemi? The 425-hp, 6.1-liter V-8. That's the motor for this job. Or better yet, the Viper 8.4-liter V-10 - and all-wheel drive.

Cops spend a lot of time in their cars and both lead hard lives. They deserve the best.

The standard seats with manual adjustment are inadequate for police wear and tear, but the optional eight-way power adjusted driver seat is just marginally better. The seats should be Mercedes' 10-way adjustable seats for driver and passenger. Include heat and ventilation, maybe even the rolling massage action. And design Kevlar seat upholstery for long-lasting fabric.

Improve ergonomics. The gearshift lever has been moved from the console to the dashboard because police electronics occupy all space where the floor shifter was, except for cup holders. The shifter is awkward to use and it interferes with instrument panel controls in the drive position. And that's an area that will be further cluttered by more electronics and video screens.

The five-speed automatic has AutoStick function for manual shifting, but it's almost useless. The manual mode is engaged by a button at the end of the shift column, and gears are changed by a switch on the side of the handle. What about two hands on the wheel? The solution would be steering wheel shift buttons.

The front windows have one-touch lowering for the driver, but the function should be one touch down AND up for both front windows. Holding a finger on the window switch just takes more time from two hands on the wheel and a faster pursuit.

Visibility is particularly important in a cop car.

A rearview camera was once a luxury feature packaged with a navigation system on passenger cars, but those cameras are now options on even subcompact cars. A rearview from inside a police car could be a lifesaver.

Night vision is another luxury car option, but of real value for police, particularly those who patrol back roads without streetlights. Package it with the high-intensity bi-xenon headlights. Those are the bright, white-blue headlights that other drivers resent, but the lighting is much better.

And what's with the Mayberry-style spotlight on the driver's side? The handle protrudes at forehead height from the window pillar. It's a safety concern the National Highway Traffic and Safety Administration surely wouldn't sanction for a passenger car. There has to be a better, safer design. A power-operated, swiveling light controlled by a joystick a passenger could access would allow the driver to keep both hands on the wheel.

The Charger has a good list of safety features, including Brake Assist (that applies maximum brake force in emergency situations), vehicle stability control and multistage front air bags. But what about side air bags as

standard, not an option, and a head curtain?

But an obvious option not offered is Mercedes' body-armor fabric, which resists a .44-caliber Magnum.

Word on the street is that the Charger has the mean look for law enforcement, but it's too small on the inside for transporting scofflaws in the back seat.

After the cage is installed - with enough rearward seat travel for a 6-foot-tall driver - there's just a few inches of back-seat knee room. Not that providing comfort is a first thought for those passengers.

But vehicle size is a consideration. Chevrolet is also testing the Impala, which is liked even less than the Charger, according to one San Diego officer.

The Ford Crown Victoria is still the favored cruiser, but it is less than ideal and built on an aging platform that won't be around much longer.

Government service shouldn't mean risking one's life using equipment provided by the lowest bidder. And police cars should not be built to have resale value as taxis, which is how most old cop cars are retired.

There should be more incentives and subsidizing by the manufacturer. Providing the best police vehicle benefits everybody and saves lives - theirs and ours.

Copley News Service

SPECS2007 Dodge Charger Body style: Large, rear-wheel-drive five-passenger sedan Engine: 5.7 liter Hemi V-8 with multicylinder displacement and external coolers for engine oil, transmission fluid and power steering fluid Horsepower: 340 at 5,000 rpm Torque: 390 foot-pounds at 4,000 rpm Transmission: five-speed automatic EPA fuel economy estimates: 17 mpg city, 25 highway Safety features include: Multistage front air bags, electronic stability program with Brake Assist; four-wheel anti-lock brakes with all-speed traction control

PRICING Base: \$23,475, including \$675 freight charge Options on test cruise: Police group package 29A, \$3,455, includes 4-wheel heavy-duty disc brakes, 800-amp maintenance-free battery, 160-mph speedometer, all-speed traction control, performance steering and suspension, load leveling and height control, dashboard-mount automatic shift lever, heavy-duty cloth bucket seats, mini floor console, under-hood lamp, tilt-steering column, engine-hour meter, equipment mounting bracket, P225/60R 18-inch BSW performance tires on steel wheels with bright hub caps, security alarm, severe-duty engine cooling. Front and rear floor mats, \$30; 5.7 liter Hemi multidisplacement V-8, \$2,230, with performance, dual exhaust; 8-way power driver's seat, \$380; black driver-side spotlight, \$200; full-size spare tire with matching wheel, \$160, includes vinyl trunk liner and cover; 18-inch wheel covers, \$30; vinyl rear bench, \$120

The competition: Ford Crown Victoria, Chevrolet Impala Where assembled: Brampton, Ontario

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