Higher-Caliber Style: Dodge delivers with nifty features

by Mark Maynard

With all the bottled water that is consumed around the world, a bottle cooler built into a glove box seems an obvious idea that should have been done years ago.

It wasn't, of course, though there are cooled consoles, glove boxes and optional electric coolers, mostly on luxury vehicles.

HIGH CALIBER - The new Dodge Caliber R/T offers an engaging design that puts all the best parts of a small car, SUV and wagon together. CNS Photo courtesy of Dodge. Dodge twisted the cap a little for the 2007 Caliber and put a cradle for four bottles or cans into the upper level of the glove box.

And while that might not seem like an earth-shattering innovation, it's nice to get back to a car that's been parked in 90-degree heat when some cool water awaits.

Now that's nifty - and there's more where that came from in this car.

Caliber is Dodge's replacement for the Neon. Pricing starts at $13,985 (including all-wheel drive and the $560 destination charge) for the base model, which is $410 below the outgoing Neon. All-wheel-drive cars are available now; front-wheel-drive cars go on sale in late summer.

Dodge calls the Caliber a "sports tourer," which by design wraps the best parts of a small car, SUV and wagon into a design that appeals to drivers of all ages, male or female, much as the PT Cruiser does.

The Caliber is sold in SE, SXT, R/T models, and soon, the 300-horsepower SRT4. The midlevel SXT has a starting price of $15,985. The R/T AWD, today's test car, is $19,985.

There are three four-cylinder engines: a 148-horsepower 1.8-liter, a 158-hp, 2.0-liter and a 172-hp, 2.4-liter. There's also a 2.0-liter turbo diesel engine for markets outside North America.

Caliber is Chrysler's first small car to have the option of all-wheel drive, which comes with the company's second-generation continuously variable automatic transmission.

The transmission also has steering-wheel shifters for a manual mode that simulates six gears for snappier acceleration and holding a gear when needed. The CVT, Dodge says, gives a 6 percent to 8 percent boost in fuel economy.

As might be expected, the base model is Spartan, with crank windows, manually adjusted outside mirrors, optional air conditioning, no manual height adjustment to the driver's seat, no chrome exhaust tip and plain 15-inch steel wheels and wheel covers.

But, nifty features include a sliding center armrest with cell phone or iPod holder, lighted blue-green rings in the cup holders and a CD audio system with audio input jacks for digital music.

Safety is also commendable. All Calibers come with side-curtain air bags and multistage front air bags with a driver knee bag. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration gave it the highest five-star rating for frontal crash protection for driver and passenger.

Moving up to the SXT or R/T also gives access to other safety features, including as electronic stability control, side air bags, Brake Assist and anti-lock brakes.

The R/T test car had all the good stuff, with a sticker price of $21,450, which included all-wheel drive, alloy wheels, remote locking, fog lights, many power conveniences and a front passenger seatback that folds flat for a table-like surface.

This is one of those so-called active-lifestyle vehicles, and it works for anything from biking to scrapbooking.

The interior is contemporary and sturdy, with much plastic on door panels and on areas where there will be wear and tear. The cargo area is hard vinyl so it can be swept out, or even removed, with some storage below.

Back seat room is large, and the rear seat back is a 60/40 split. On uplevel models, the rear seat reclines.

All models have a two-tone interior color theme of dark and light gray or beige, but an optional Sport Appearance Package ($645 on SXT, standard on R/T) adds red, yellow, orange or blue seat inserts and a trim surround at the center console that coordinates with the exterior color.

In addition to the usual paint choices of white, black, silver and tan, there are real colors: Inferno Red Crystal, Solar Yellow, Marine Blue and Sunburst Orange Pearl.

It is an enjoyable car to drive, but the CVT is a little slow to build speed when entering the freeway. The manual shift mode helps to manipulate the power when needed. Base models come with a five-speed manual.

Fuel mileage ratings for the R/T AWD are 23 mpg city, 26 highway, on 87 octane. The 1.8-liter engine is rated 28/32; the 2.0, 26/30.

All-wheel drive adds 152 pounds and more than 1 1/2 feet to the turning circle, which may be incentive for the standard front-wheel drive R/T model.

The high seating position gives a good view of the road, though there's a slight visibility issue at the base of the broad windshield pillars. Over-the-shoulder views are challenged at the small, rear side window when backing out of a parking slot. The suspension can be clunky at times and there is some wind noise at highway speeds.

But even with those gripes, the whole package works so well and looks so good that all can be forgiven. And the car gets attention.

I was tracked down in the Home Depot parking lot by a couple who asked, "What is that?" They were helping their 30-year-old daughter with choices for a new car.

Because they asked, I couldn't resist showing them the nifty features. And when told the price, they responded, "Is that all?"

The car almost sells itself.

Way to go Dodge. Here's another winner.

Copley News Service

Cool Caliber things-- Standard side-curtain air bags-- MusicGate power: Optional nine-speaker Boston Acoustics sound system with two swing-down speakers in the liftgate for tailgating ambience-- Optional rechargeable, removable flashlight mounted in the headliner above the cargo area, pops out for easy use and snaps in securely-- Chill zone: A cooled beverage storage bin can hold as many as four 20-ounce bottles or cans (available in air-conditioned models)-- A floor console sliding armrest moves forward 3 inches to accommodate shorter drivers. The armrest lid includes a flip pocket for holding a cell phone or MP3 player-- Optional 115-volt outlet in the center console to power small electronics-- Illuminated front cup holder rings glow blue-green to match other center stack lighting.-- Front passenger seat folds forward to create a tablelike surface (only on uplevel models)-- YES Essentials soil-repellent, anti-microbial fabric protects from stains, odors and discoloration

SPECS

2007 Dodge Caliber R/T AWDBody style: Compact 5-passenger, 4-door with liftgateEngine: 2.4 liter DOHC, 16-valve 4-cylinder with variable valve timingHorsepower: 172 at 6,000 rpmTorque: 165 foot-pounds at 4,400 rpmTransmission: Continuously variable automatic with 6-speed sport modeAcceleration: 0-60 mph, NAFuel economy: 23 mpg city, 26 highway; 87 octaneDIMENSIONSWheelbase/length: 103.7/173.8 inchesCurb weight: 3,308 poundsCargo area: 18.5 cubic feet, behind second row; 48, seats foldedTow rating: 1,000 poundsFront head/leg/shoulder room: 40/41.8/54.2 inchesSecond row head/leg/shoulder room: 38.9/35.6/53.4 inchesFEATURESStandard equipment: Vinyl load floor, auxiliary radio input jack, 12-volt power outlet, lighted front cup holders, sliding center console armrest with flip-up cell phone or iPod holder, body-color grille, 60/40 split-fold rear seats with reclineSafety: Dual-stage front air bags with driver knee bag, curtain air bags, front belt pretensioners; optional side bagsCHASSISSuspension: Front, independent MacPherson struts, coil springs over gas-charged shock absorbers, stabilizer bar; rear, multilink independent with coil springs, link-type stabilizer bar, gas-charged shocksSteering: Rack and pinion with hydraulic power assist; 37.2-foot turning circle (35.5, front-wheel drive)Brakes: 4-wheel discs with ABSTires and wheels: P215/55R18 AS Firestone Firehawk GTA 03 on machine-faced aluminum wheelsPRICINGBase price: $19,985, including $560 destination charge; price as tested, $21,450Options on test vehicle: Sunburst Orange Pearl paint ($150); driver convenience group ($400), includes tire pressure monitor display, temperature and compass readouts, automatic dimming rearview mirror, universal garage opener; 9-speaker Boston Acoustics audio, $400; 6-disc CD-MP3 ($320); Sirius satellite radio, $195, includes one-year subscription.Where assembled: Belvidere, Ill.PLUSES: Innovation, creativity and engaging design puts all the best parts of a small car, SUV and wagon in a package that appeals to young and old drivers, male or female.MINUSES: Power is slow to build; the suspension can be clunky; slight visibility issue at the base of the broad windshield pillars and over-the-shoulder views are challenged at the small, rear side window.

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