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2013 Dodge Dart **An old name for a nifty new package with a hint of Italian spice.**

Overview

If you're old enough to remember the Carter administration, the name may be familiar but that means you're beyond the target demographics for the Dart revival. A fixture at the entry end of the Dodge lineup from 1960 through 1976, the Dart was discontinued in 1977 and its badge went into mothballs, forgotten, but obviously not gone. Now it's been resuscitated, and affixed to this all-new line of compact sedans.

So the name is the same, and the new 2013 Dodge Dart occupies the same position in the Dodge passenger car hierarchy as the original. But the similarities end right there. The first car to incorporate engineering elements from corporate parent Fiat, the revival Dart is a contemporary front-drive compact facing a considerably stronger competitive environment than its 20th century namesake. Does it have the chops to be a compelling alternative to the Chevy Cruze, Ford Focus, Honda Civic, Hyundai Elantra, Kia Forte, Nissan Sentra, Mazda 3, Subaru Impreza, Toyota Corolla, and VW Jetta?

The answer is a definite maybe. Its styling is crisp, if not exactly head-turning, the structure is solid, the engineering credentials look good, and the number of equipment and trim choices exceptional.

Like other cars in the compact class, the Dart is aimed at young adults, primarily in their early to mid-20s, many of them married, many of them with young kids. The Dart makes a good case for itself with young parental types, thanks to an exceptionally roomy interior by compact sedan standards, and a respectable complement of standard safety features.

Basics. The Dodge Dart is as all-new as all-new gets in today's car business. Although fundamental elements of its unitbody foundations were adapted from the Alfa Romeo Giulietta, the snappy Italian hatchback, they've been stretched to accommodate the sedan body style: longer wheelbase, longer overall, wider track, wider body. The dimensional expansions are accompanied by structural enhancements; 68 percent of the bodyshell is composed of high-strength steel, according to the Dart development team, yielding a chassis that feels exceptionally solid.

Just as important, the Dart presents one of the broadest range of choices in its class: five trim levels, contemporary safety features, a dozen exterior colors, 14 interior trim variations, six different wheel designs ranging from 16 to 18 inches, four different grille treatments, three different four-cylinder engines (160-horsepower 2.0 liter, 160-horsepower 1.4-liter turbo, 184-horsepower 2.4-liter, limited to the R/T model), three different transmissions (6-speed manual, 6-speed automatic, 6-speed dual clutch automatic).

The Dart has a strong made-in-America story. Though some of the engines incorporate the innovative Multi-Air induction technology pioneered by Fiat, Chrysler's corporate parent, all three engines are assembled at Chrysler's Dundee, Michigan plant, and final vehicle assembly is at Chrysler's factory in Belvidere, Illinois.

Most important, the Dart stacks up well in today's two most critical considerations: MPG and MSRP. EPA fuel economy estimates range up to 41 mpg on the highway (for the yet-to-be-seen Aero model). Suggested retail pricing for the five trim levels opens at \$15,995 and climbs to \$19,995 for the Limited model. The sporty R/T version carries a \$22,495 base price.

Demerits: just one. For all the emphasis on the weight-saving benefits of high-strength steel, the Darts are a little pudgy by compact standards. Listed curb weights start at 3186 pounds for a Dart 2.0-liter with manual gearbox and go as high as 3348 pounds for a model equipped with the 2.4-liter engine and automatic transmission.

It might also be noted that the wide array of models and trim packages could pose an assembly quality challenge for the Belvidere factory. But the cars presented at the Dart's press preview measured up well in this regard.

Model Lineup

The Dodge Dart SE (\$15,995) comes standard with cloth upholstery, air conditioning, four-speaker AM/FM radio, power windows, and a 12-volt outlet.

The Dart SXT (\$17,995) upgrades with premium cloth seats and door panels, 17-inch aluminum alloy wheels, body-color power mirrors and locks, six-speaker audio system, front center console/sliding armrest, rear seat armrest, split folding rear seat.

Dart Rallye (\$18,995) gets upgraded cloth seats with accent stripes, trip computer, vehicle information center, fog lamps, cruise control, leather wrapped steering wheel with auxiliary audio controls, painted 17-inch aluminum alloy wheels. The 1.4-liter turbocharged engine and dual clutch automatic transmission are optional.

Dart Limited (\$19,995) includes upgraded interior cloth, door and seatback pockets, overhead console, front passenger under-seat storage, illuminated front cup holders, vanity mirrors, premium instrument panel with contrast stitching, thin film transistor instrument cluster, LED interior lighting, power adjustable driver's seat, heated power mirrors, active grille shutters, 8.4-inch Uconnect touch screen.

Dart R/T (\$22,495) includes most Limited standard features plus 18-inch aluminum alloy wheels, sport suspension tuning, heated leather sport seats, heated leather-wrapped steering wheel, 184-horsepower 2.4-liter engine.

Safety features on all Dodge Darts includes 10 airbags, ABS with brake lock differential, stability control, traction control.

Walkaround

The Dodge Dart looks athletic, with the skin tightly wrapped around the wheels, and a hint of Coke bottle contours: wider at the front and rear axles, slimmer between. A hint of forward-leaning rake, plus modest front and rear overhangs, suggests sportiness. The styling doesn't provoke many double-takes, however.

The design team took great pains with aerodynamics. The shape evolved through extensive wind tunnel time, and thoughtful details include active grille shutters that close to restrict radiator airflow when cooling air isn't needed, to reduce aerodynamic drag. The underbody is fully enclosed, and a rear diffuser manages underbody airflow to enhance stability.

The net of all the aero attention is a praiseworthy drag coefficient of 0.285, enhancing fuel economy and also helping to minimize wind noise.

Dodge signature elements for its latest offering are a new interpretation of the division's crosshair grille, and a taillamp treatment, adapted from the Dodge Challenger, that spreads across the entire rear end, incorporating 152 LEDs.

One other exterior note, that relates to the interior. At 183.9 inches long, 72.0 inches wide, and 57.7 inches tall the new Dart is one of the biggest of the current compact crop, and the designers have put those dimensions to work inside, creating one of the roomiest interiors (over 97 cubic feet) in this class. The 13.1-cubic foot trunk can be expanded by folding the rear seatbacks forward. In the base model the seatback is one piece. In other trim levels it's a split-folding setup.

Interior Features

Roominess is always a plus in a family sedan, but it's much more compelling when it's nicely appointed. Here, too, the Dart scores well. Nothing inside these new cars looks cheap, even in the most basic model, and soft-touch surfaces abound, dashboard, door panels, center console and elsewhere.

The basic cloth upholstery is attractive and looks durable, denim inserts are offered in the SXT trim level, and leather is an option in the top-of-the line Limited model. The seats are long-haul comfortable, with enough lateral support to feel sporty. Like all sedans, the cabin is rated for five, and like all of them the center rear position will accommodate an adult occupant about as far as the end of the driveway before complaints begin to fill the air. There's not enough shoulder room for three adults in the back seat, but it's okay for two adults for short distances.

Thoughtful storage touches: a glovebox big enough to swallow a laptop computer, and a bin under the right front passenger seat, accessed by folding the seat cushion forward.

As we expect of new cars today, there are plenty of optional electronic goodies. Foremost on this list is an 8.4-inch touch-screen display, dominating the center dash of the higher trim levels (not available on the base Dart). A nav system is offered for the Limited model, as well as a configurable electronic instrument package and an LED-powered light pipe surround for the entire instrument panel, which some may like, while others may find a bit garish.

Like other carmakers, Chrysler has taken notice of the success of Ford's Sync infotainment system and responded with one of its own, called U-connect. As expected, there's good audio, upgrade audio, satellite radio, and connections for MP3, your iPod, Pandora, or what have you.

Driving Impressions

Chrysler calls the Dart's two naturally aspirated engines Tigershark. This appellation is a little difficult to fathom with the basic 2.0-liter version, which doesn't feel very tigerish, particularly mated with the optional 6-speed automatic transmission. This was our primary test sample, and the combination that will probably make up the biggest percentage of Dart orders: 2.0-liter engine, 6-speed automatic, in the SXT trim level.

So equipped, the Dart is a rather ho-hum performer off the line, with so-so throttle response and some reluctance for the transmission to kick down a gear or two in passing situations. The Fiat-sourced 6-speed manual improves performance slightly, as well as the fun-to-drive index, and generates EPA fuel economy ratings of 27/39 mpg City/Highway.

The 1.4-liter turbo engine, shared with the Fiat 500 Abarth, delivers a little more verve. Its 160-horsepower rating is the same as that of the 2.0-liter, but it generates more torque, 184 pound-feet versus 148. The trick with this engine is keeping it in the sweet spot of its torque band, from 2500 to 4000 rpm. Otherwise, the engine bogs.

Although we have yet to drive it, the 2.4-liter R/T version, slated for showrooms in the third quarter of 2012, should be distinctly livelier, and will also feature sportier suspension tuning.

However, suspension tuning in the mainstream Darts is far from whipped cream. The chassis engineers admit they Americanized the suspension specs from those employed in the Alfa Giulietta, which translates as softened. But softened doesn't mean mushy. There's more body roll than you'd experience in the Alfa, but the Dart's responses are still eager, enhanced by one of the best electric power steering systems in this class: accurate, tactile, and nicely weighted.

We should also note that ride quality, the objective of the Americanization, is excellent. Firm enough to retain a strong suggestion of Euro feel, supple enough to take the hard edge of sharp bumps and warty pavement.

A little more power, or a little less curb weight, or both, would make the 2.0-liter Dart a little more entertaining, but even so the fun-to-drive index is well above average. The engineers also get high marks for quiet operation. A little road noise finds its way through the suspension, depending on pavement composition, but wind noise is nil, thanks to the aero refinements.

Summary

The Dodge Dart proves that Chrysler hasn't lost its design mojo, and that Fiat's stewardship is a positive arrangement. Attractive, roomy, comfortable, and handsomely turned out within, it also has an exceptionally solid feel, with above average road manners. Attractive pricing and an array of optional goodies make the Dart a compelling choice among sport compacts.

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