

A Family Car With Attitude:

Cruising in a Dodge Magnum

By Roger Witherspoon

Matt Davies leaned heavily against the roof of his silver Porsche and just stared at the car parked in front of him.

Davies, the Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial cartoonist at The Journal News, in New York, rarely looked at anything on wheels that Porsche didn't make. He liked speed, grace, and power, and the artist in him admired Porsche's spare lines advertising a big cat ready to pounce. But Davies couldn't take his eyes off the aggressive looking, station wagon with the lean lines and mean grill.

He slowly tilted his head from side to side, taking in the long, low roof lines of the car that seemed ready to pounce back on his sleek, silver streak. Finally, he nodded his head approvingly and said "Man, that is one funky station wagon. What is it?"

It was a 2005 Dodge Magnum SXT, a station wagon designed with far more character than is normally displayed on the family wheels. But then, that's the way it is supposed to look.

Ralph Gilles, the 34-year-old, Director of Design for DaimlerChrysler, said the company has been working hard to differentiate their brands by character as well as style.

"Dodge," said Gilles, "is a main-stream brand, but with an attitude. That car, next to any other station wagon or SUV-crossover, stands out."

That is primarily because it was never intended to be a station wagon. "We actually wanted to make it a hot rod," said Gilles, "We tried to find that sweet spot between function and style. We wanted to make it compelling, to ask people to look at it twice and look at the car differently.

"And most of the guys get it."

It is a guy's car. Davies later showed it to his wife, who didn't even want a test drive. But guys can't resist it.

It was intended as a muscle car, and it is. Its bold grill and long, tapered roof line differentiates the Magnum from all the other station wagons the way the Ford Taurus Wagon with its graceful lines redefined this segment of family wheels more than a decade ago. But the Magnum is grace under power.

The biggest version features a 5.7-liter Hemi V-8 engine with a five-speed automatic transmission delivering 340 horsepower and 390 pound-feet of torque. That station wagon can go from zero to 60 in 6.3 seconds. This version also features their Multiple Displacement System, which improves overall gas efficiency by about 20 percent.

When the car is moving at a steady state – on a highway, for example – the engine operates on just four cylinders. The remaining half of the engine kicks in when more power is needed. That is a feature designed into the company's V-8 Hemi engines, available on the Jeep Grand Cherokee and others. It was not designed into the smaller engines and will not be added as a bolt-on afterthought, though the next generation of V-6 engines may have some form of this fuel saving feature.

The test car was a more modest 3.5-Liter, V-6 Hemi with a four-speed automatic transmission delivering a respectable 250 horsepower and 250 pound-feet of torque on regular gas. Both engines have a towing capacity of 2,000 pounds. The V-6 was as powerful and responsive and it is as comfortable to drive the Magnum at 100 miles an hour as it is at 60 – weather and police permitting.

The Magnum has a four-wheel independent suspension, power rack and pinion steering, disc brakes, traction control and an electronic stability program for steady driving under all road conditions. The test car was a rear wheel drive, though there is an optional all-wheel drive which motorists living in snow country may find preferable.

On the road the Magnum felt more like a car than a station wagon, with speed to accelerate up steep hills. While driving through heavy rains brought by Hurricane Charles, the Magnum hugged the road as if it were a sunny summer day.

Like all Gilles' cars, Dodge paid as much attention to the interior as it did to the power train and design. Thunderstorms, nearby horns, and other external interruptions are distant hums easily lost under soft music from the entertainment system's four speakers.

It is roomy and the vinyl seats are comfortable – my NFL and NBA-sized colleagues settled easily into the passenger section with their heads intact and their knees did not touch the front seats.

The steering wheel tilts and telescopes and the center console is deep with added recessed areas for cell phones. About the only features missing from the Magnum were a sunroof and navigation system. But at about \$26,000 you could overlook those options.

This station wagon is not for everyone: hot rods are an acquired taste. But if you are looking for a family car that still provides the excitement you found in your sportier car days, the Magnum will be a welcome addition to the household.

2005 Magnum SXT

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| MSRP: | | \$25,995 |
| Mileage: | 19 MPG City | 27 MPG Highway |

Performance/ Safety:

3.5-Liter High-Output 24-valve V-6 engine; 4-speed automatic transmission; four-wheel disc brakes; power rack and pinion steering; 4-wheel independent touring suspension; electronic stability program; all-speed traction control; antilock 4-wheel brakes; 17-inch painted aluminum wheels; front air bags.

Interior:

Cloth, low-backed bucket seats; child seat tethers; tilt-telescoping steering wheel; AM/FM/CD entertainment system with four speakers; front and rear climate control outlets; liftgate flood lamps; cargo net; cargo compartment cover.