

Curbside



DODGE DAKOTA REVIEW

By Anthony B. Barthel

Years ago Dodge needed to enter the then-hot small truck market as it seemed that that market might someday surpass the full-size truck category in sales. In the past they had collaborated with partner Mitsubishi to build small trucks, but Dodge took a leap and developed its own truck on the already proven Diplomat/New Yorker/everything else platform of the time and offered the first mid-size truck.

The company then made more news by offering the first eight-cylinder engine in a "smaller" truck in 1998. Ten years after its introduction in '88 the Dakota got a completely new body and chassis. The mid-size Dakota has always played on its strengths of a comfortable ride and good utility and, over the years, has expanded to include extended-cab and four-door cab models.

Today both Nissan and Toyota's smaller truck offerings live in the same mid-size neighborhood as the Dodge Dakota and Mit-

subishi's truck is actually based on the Dakota. Being a mid-size truck is no longer a way to stand out as the biggest players compete on the same field. So what is Dodge to do?

What's Hot

For 2009 the Dakota borrowed a page from the Hemi handbook with the Dakota's optional V8 utilizing two spark plugs per cylinder to achieve 310 horsepower. The V8 does this while also getting better fuel economy, a good thing. Those wanting the standard V6 will appreciate the fact that it now has been bumped to 210 horsepower.

Still, my first impression of the Dakota was still how very comfortable the ride is. Rather than the typical nervous feel that so many import-brand vehicles have, this felt Detroit smooth, baby. The tested Dakota was the Crew Cab (four door) TRX4 4X4 model, which meant it, was outfitted with plenty of features.

Another thing that has always been a Dakota hallmark is the flexibility of the interior cargo space and this version didn't disappoint. The rear seat cushions fold up,

making the interior space very usable. Not everything should be hauled outside, you know, and your pooches will appreciate the back-seat space even if they're not in the back seat. Roll down the back windows a bit and let them smell the passing traffic, or whatever dogs sniff.

I was actually pretty impressed that the well under the rear seat cushion was able to hold my cordless electric drill and a set of bits I was using, even with the cushion folded down in the sitting position. However, I almost left these tools in the Dakota when I returned it, oops. But it definitely kept them from prying eyes!

During its week with me the Dakota did a lot of pickup duties, hauling loads of pool chemicals, tools and all sorts of stuff. I was pretty busy doing the dirty work and the Dakota was happy to oblige.

This was the first Curbside test vehicle where I used a new iPhone app to measure fuel economy and project annual operating costs. Yes, I am a dork.

According to that app I got an average of 17.81 miles per gallon while the Dakota was with me and had a best mileage figure of 18.23. I tend to drive somewhat conservatively and this was a relatively large truck with a V8, so that's not bad.

In fact, another one of the Dakota's strengths is that it has more interior space and cargo space than that of any of the import brands. More power, more space.

What's Not

I think the biggest bummer about the Dakota was the interior materials. It still feels as if a lot of these materials come from the bargain basement. Chrysler, Dodge's parent company, is making a lot of strides in interior design of late and I hope this wave hits the Dakota soon. That being said, a lot of the import brand trucks also share in the cheap interior feel, so the Dakota isn't much behind them in this respect.

In Summary

There are a lot of people who appreciate the Dakota's size. It's much easier to drive a park than a larger truck while also offering some unique packaging options including Dodge's Crate N Go rear seat collapsible packaging system as well as the MyGig entertainment system featuring satellite radio and a hard drive for storing your tunes. Considering Chrysler's long warranty and the real world size of the Dakota, this might make a really good choice for a lot of motorists.

Fact Sheet

Base Price: \$31,045 Dakota Crew Cab TRX4 4X4

Price As Tested: \$36,680

Major Options: UConnect with GPS Navigation System, \$1,445; 4.7 Litre V8, \$985; Premium Sound Group, \$890

Model Year: 2009

Engine: 4.7 Liter V8

Transmission: Automatic •



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