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2009 Dodge Charger Modern Muscle Car.

Overview

The Dodge Charger is a full-size, four-door sedan that makes a bold design statement and backs it up with serious horsepower. A wide range of models is available, but all are comfortable cruisers, offering drivers a friendly haven from traffic and bumpy freeways.

The model line ranges from the basic but entertaining 2.7-liter Charger SE to the high-performance 425-hp SRT8. Between them are 3.5-liter V6 and 5.7-liter V8 models. The 3.5-liter V6 delivers entirely adequate performance for the mid-grade SXT model, while the V8s generate thrilling acceleration performance and make all the right noises. All-wheel drive is available for all-weather capability.

The Charger illustrates just how multi-talented and accomplished today's high-performance cars are compared to the unidimensional hot rods of yesteryear. The Charger has all the pavement-ripping, gut-thumping power of the old muscle cars, but it's packaged with modern creature comforts and tempered by handling competency. With either V8 engine, the Charger is fast in a straight line, and it corners better than those muscle cars of the past. However, it is large and heavy, measuring more than 16 feet in length and tipping the scales near two tons, so it's not as nimble as a sports car, or even a pony car.

On the inside, the Charger has plenty of room for a family of five, but the interior is largely plastic and the sightlines are partially obstructed in several directions. Buyers can opt for several entertainment features that will pacify both the kids and the adults. And if you need to carry cargo, the Charger has a large trunk with a handy split-folding rear seat.

The Charger used to be the only V8-powered large American car on the market, but it now faces competition from the Pontiac G8 and an improved Ford Taurus. The Charger offers a lot of room and great straight line power, but it appears to be falling behind the competition in driving dynamics and interior quality.

For 2009, the Charger gets a new taillight design, the 5.7-liter Hemi V8 gains power, and all-wheel-drive models get Active Transfer Case with Front-Axle Disconnect. SE models add alloy wheels, additional interior chrome trim and more equipment, while the SRT8 model adds more standard equipment, a retuned suspension, and new calibrations for the anti-lock brakes and electronic stability control systems. The SRT8 also adds a Super Bee package. LED lighting becomes standard for the front cup holders on all models, and the MyGIG hard-drive radio is now called UConnect Tunes and UConnect GPS when ordered with navigation system. Front side and curtain side air bags now optional instead of standard on most models.



Model Lineup

The base Dodge Charger SE has a 178-hp 2.7-liter V6 and a four-speed automatic transmission. The SXT uses a 250-hp 3.5-liter V6. The rear-drive SXT gets the four-speed automatic, while the all-wheel-drive (AWD) SXT is mated to a five-speed automatic transmission with Dodge's AutoStick manual shift gate. R/T models have a 368-hp 5.7-liter V8 and the five-speed AutoStick automatic. SRT8 models have a 425-hp 6.1-liter V8 and the AutoStick.

The SE (\$23,895) comes standard with cloth upholstery; air conditioning; interior air filter; cruise control; tilt/telescoping steering wheel; driver and passenger lumbar adjustment; AM/FM/CD stereo with auxiliary input jack; power windows, locks and mirrors; remote keyless entry; and P215/65R17 tires on aluminum wheels.

The SXT (\$25,510) adds an eight-way power adjustable driver's seat, a 60/40 split folding rear seat with fold-down center armrest, a 276-watt Boston Acoustics stereo, power-adjustable pedals, heated mirrors and fog lamps. The AWD SXT (\$28,850) also adds performance disc brakes and P225/60R18 tires.

The R/T (\$31,860) upgrades to leather upholstery, dual-zone automatic climate control, a leather-wrapped steering wheel and shift knob, heated front seats, eight-way power front passenger seat, folding heated mirrors, automatic headlights and 18-inch tires. The R/T AWD (\$33,960) adds all-wheel drive. The R/T Road/Track Performance package (\$3940) has sportier steering, front side airbags, curtain side airbags, sport seats with suede inserts, performance suspension, front and rear spoilers and P245/45R20 tires on aluminum wheels with black accents. The Daytona package (\$4475) has the same equipment, plus remote engine starting, a black grille, body color engine cover, special paint, a performance exhaust system and a special axle ratio.

The SRT8 (\$38,670) adds dual-zone automatic climate control, automatic headlights, remote engine starting, interior air filter, heated front seats, a Reconfigurable Display with performance pages, performance-tuned suspension, sport bucket seats, functional hood scoop, rear spoiler, a reprogrammed ESC system, Brembo brakes, Goodyear Supercar F1 tires on 20-inch forged aluminum wheels and a 180-mph speedometer. The Super Bee buzz model package (\$1900) comes with Hemi Orange paint, a serialized dash plaque, a special wheel design, silver Brembo brake calipers, UConnect Tunes hard-drive radio, orange seat accents, and hood and rear quarter panel decals.

Options include the Popular Equipment package for the SXT (\$2405) with leather upholstery, dual-zone automatic climate control, a leather-wrapped steering wheel and shift knob, heated front seats, a power passenger seat, a 276-watt Boston Acoustics sound system, automatic headlights and bodyside moldings, a slightly firmer touring suspension and P225/60R18 tires. A Popular Equipment package for R/T (\$1020) includes the Boston Acoustics sound system, 6CD changer, remote engine starting, and alarm. A Protection Group for SXT (\$1060) adds front side airbags, curtain side airbags, UConnect Phone wireless cell phone link, an auto-dimming rearview mirror, bodyside moldings and P215/60R17 self-sealing tires. Electronic stability control with traction control and anti-lock brakes are an option for the SE model (\$1025). The

UConnect Multimedia Suite for SXT and R/T models (\$1550) comes with an auto-dimming rearview mirror, UConnect wireless cell phone link and GPS system that includes a 30-gigabyte hard drive and a navigation system with real-time traffic. The UConnect Tunes hard-drive radio is available separately (\$650). Option Group II for the SRT8 (\$1195) adds a 6CD changer, an alarm and a Kicker sound system with a 200 watt subwoofer and a 322-watt amplifier. Option Group III for SRT8 (\$1635) adds UConnect GPS, UConnect Phone and an auto-dimming rearview mirror. Also available are a sunroof (\$950), a rear DVD entertainment system with Sirius Backseat TV for R/T and SRT8 (\$1460), Xenon headlights (\$695), and a rear spoiler for SXT (\$225). The Super Track Pack (\$400) for the R/T includes summer performance tires, stiffer springs, load-leveling shocks, a higher numerical axle ratio, sportier electronic stability control calibrations and higher performance steering and brakes.

Safety features that come standard on all Charger models include two-stage front airbags, tire-pressure monitor, and rear-seat LATCH child safety seat anchors. Antilock brakes with brake assist, traction control and electronic stability control, are standard on all but SE. Front side airbags and curtain side airbags for both seating rows are optional for all models. All-wheel drive is available for SXT and R/T models.

Walkaround

The Dodge Charger recalls the 1966 Dodge Coronet. Despite its fastback, two-door hardtop styling, the old Charger was somewhat blocky, with a squared-off front end, superficially sculpted slab sides and an equally vertical backside. There was the barest hint of a so-called Coke bottle look, with the body sides slightly pinched in about where there would have been a B-pillar. Not until the 1968 model year was any attention paid to moving the car rapidly through the air with minimal disturbance. The 2008 Charger starts at much the same place on the automotive styling evolutionary curve.

The same design team that parented the Chrysler 300 and Dodge Magnum designed the Charger. The Charger is built on the same platform as those two, but is three inches longer overall.

With this legacy, the upright silhouette comes as no surprise. The front end tilts forward as if it's leaning into the wind, specifically to recall the brutish, pre-aero-age styling of its muscle car era namesake.

Dominating the front of the car are the trademark Dodge crosshairs, chromed on the SXT and R/T, body-color in the SE and SRT8, and flat black on the Daytona. Compound halogen headlights peer out under hooded, almost scowling brows. A thin, trifurcated air intake slices across the lower portion of the front bumper. The Daytona and SRT8 wear a flat-black chin spoiler. Fog lamps on the SXT and higher models fill small, sculpted insets at the lower corners.

From the side, the demi-fastback roofline and glasshouse look more grafted onto the somewhat fulsome body than a natural extension of the overall styling theme, as if the designer were trying to make a sedan look like a coupe. The beltline arcs softly back from the headlights, where it

droops slightly, to about the midpoint of the rear side window, then kicks up over the rear quarter panel, visually bulking up the car's already hefty haunches.

The rear perspective shows a tall, almost vertical backside, with large taillights draped over the upper corners. A modest, Kamm-like lip stretches across the trailing edge of an expansive trunk lid, atop which sits a lift-suppressing spoiler on the Daytona and SRT8. A recess in the bumper holds the license plate. On the SE and SXT a single exhaust tip exits beneath the right-hand side, while the V8-powered models sport chrome-tipped, muscle car-idiom, dual exhausts.

Interior Features

The fabric-covered seats in the standard Dodge Charger are comfortable, with adequate thigh support and side bolstering. The suede-trimmed sport seats that come in the SRT8 have more pronounced bolsters, which is good for those rare times when a twisty two-lane beckons, but not as good for climbing in and out of the car every day.



Visibility from the driver's seat is compromised by safety measures and styling dictates. The thick A-pillars (between the windshield and front windows) are designed to meet federal rollover standards, but their width makes checking for pedestrians and crossing traffic difficult at times; this is common, however, and the Pontiac G8 is the same way. Meanwhile, a glance at the rearview mirror quickly puts to rest any lingering illusions about the Charger being a coupe: the rear window is a long way back. The C-pillars are also fat, and require careful checking of the blind spot during lane changes. In addition, the front of the roof juts out far in front of the seating position, so it can block your view of overhead traffic signals when you get close to the intersection.

The Charger's dashboard is largely plastic. It's mostly sturdy, but it seems cheap for a car that quickly tops \$30,000. The instrument cluster arrangement is pleasantly informative. The big, round speedometer and tachometer share the top half of the steering wheel opening, with fuel and coolant temperature gauges down in the left and right corners. The climate controls are conveniently positioned beneath the radio and are easy to operate.

Entertainment features are plentiful. In addition to an AM/FM/CD stereo, buyers can opt for Dodge's UConnect Tunes or UConnect GPS systems. Both have 30 gigabytes of hard drive space (up from 20 gigs last year) to hold music and picture files, but the GPS version also includes a navigation system with real-time traffic and voice activation.

The rear entertainment system installation takes a novel, but well-integrated approach. The screen hides beneath a cover on the front center console when not in use, then pivots up between the front seats for viewing. The interface, for DVD and input and output jacks, is incorporated into the rear of the console beneath the screen and above the rear seat ventilation registers. Without the entertainment system, the center console functions as a traditional storage bin. The system comes with Sirius Backseat TV, which includes three child-oriented channels, Cartoon

Network, Disney Channel and Nickelodeon. Two headsets are provided, so children in the back can watch the screen, while front occupants can listen to the radio.

SRT8 owners will be entertained by the Reconfigurable Display located in the vehicle information center. It displays what Chrysler calls Performance Pages. This feature can provide readouts of lateral and longitudinal G forces, 1/8- and 1/4-mile time and speed, 0-60 mph time, and braking distance.

Rear-seat room is plentiful, thanks to the long wheelbase, even with the front seats at their rearmost positions. No head restraint for the rear center seat is provided, however, making this car better for four adults than five.

Cubby storage includes a small, horizontal storage bin in the lower portion of the center stack, and there's a similar, longitudinal slot in the console to the right of the shift gate. A bin in the forward-most part of the front center console is large enough for coins and the like. Above it is a small, fold-down drawer where the Smokers Group ashtray would be, and next to that is a power point that would hold the lighter. Two cup holders sit in front of the console bin, and another pair can be found in the forward end of the rear seat center armrest. All four doors have good-sized map pockets, though the front seatbacks lack pouches for reading materials and headsets. The glove box is roomier than many.

The trunk is large. Loading items into the trunk is aided by a comfortably low lift-over height, at 30 inches. The trunk opening is shaped such that it swallows longer objects more readily than large parcels. All models except the base SE get 60/40 split folding rear seatbacks.

Driving Impressions

We've driven all the Charger models. The 2.7-liter V6 engine is barely adequate, but all agree it's the most frugal choice, with an EPA-estimated 18/26 mpg City/Highway.



The 3.5-liter V6 produces 250 horsepower and is EPA rated at 17/24 mpg City/Highway with rear-wheel drive and 16/23 mpg with all-wheel drive. When pushed, the big V6 breathes a bit harder than the V8 and requires more room when passing on crowded two-lanes.

The 5.7-liter V8, updated for 2009, makes the Charger R/T a muscle car. Horsepower is up from the previous 340 to 368 hp, while torque increases from 390 to 395 pound-feet. These figures add up to robust straight-line performance. The 0-60 mph acceleration test drops from about 6 seconds to the mid-5-second range, a significant increase. The 5.7-liter V8 features Dodge's Multi-Displacement System that conserves fuel by shutting down four cylinders when they're not needed to maintain the car's momentum. The system cannot be felt through the seat of the pants, at least not easily, but it can be monitored. For 2009, Dodge has added an ECO light in the electronic vehicle information center to indicate when four cylinders have been shut down.

The 6.1-liter V8 in the SRT8 cuts the 0-60 time to right around 5.0 seconds and provides thrilling passing punch and throttle response. Rated at 14/20 mpg, the Hemi is saddled with a \$1700 Gas Guzzler Tax.

2009 all-wheel-drive models come with Active Transfer Case and Front-axle Disconnect. When all-wheel drive isn't needed, the system automatically disconnects the front axle and opens the transfer case to reduce friction and rotational mass. The system reconnects the axle whenever AWD is needed, and drivers can opt to stay in AWD by shifting to AutoStick mode. Another light in the electronic vehicle information center indicates when the system switches modes. Dodge says Active Transfer Case and Front-axle Disconnect improves fuel economy by up to 1 mpg on the highway. AWD allows use of the Charger in winter weather and makes it more stable in heavy rain.

The five-speed AutoStick transmission works equally well in either Automatic or Manual mode. In Automatic mode, full-throttle upshifts wait until redline, and downshifts for passing are executed with minimal delay. In Manual mode, the transmission holds a gear to red line before shifting (unless you shift sooner manually, of course). By tromping the gas in manual mode you can force a downshift and it holds as long as the pedal is held to the floor; ease up ever so slightly, and the higher gear takes back over, and somewhat abruptly.

The Charger's brake hardware is shared with Mercedes-Benz, but the software code for the stability program, brake assist and traction control is written by and for Dodge. Mercedes engineers could learn something from Dodge. Pedal feel is firm, braking is reassuringly linear, and there's no perceived interference from the electronic watchdogs, yielding smooth, controlled stops. We haven't always been able to say the same about the braking characteristics on some of the Mercedes models (but they've improved also).

All of the Chargers are good cruisers, comfortably motoring along at 70-80 mph. The Charger is quiet at that speed, with little wind buffeting or road noise from the SE, SXT, and R/T, which come with 17- and 18-inch wheels. The 3.5-liter SXT model felt perfectly in its element on the bumpy highways between Detroit and Michigan International Raceway. Steering in the SE and SXT models we drove seemed a bit over-assisted at times, and could have used more on-center feel.

We drove a Charger along winding, two-lane back roads in southern Virginia then at Virginia International Raceway near Danville. The Charger is moderately nose-heavy and understeers when turning into corners before the electronic stability program steps in; the program's threshold seems set high enough to allow altering the line through a corner with deft throttle application. Given its size, it is slow to react to quick changes of direction, and the driver can really feel the car shift its weight from side to side.

The R/T Road/Track package comes with fatter, stickier tires (P235/55R18 Michelin MXM4s), recalibrated steering with better feel across the speed range, and suspension tweaks that combine to reduce body lean in corners and quicken turn-in response. A price is paid, however, as the sportier suspension and tire combination resonates more over broken pavement, not harshly, but

noticeably. Some drivers may also find the rumbling exhaust note of the Road/Track tiresome over long distances.

The Super Track Pack makes the Charger even sportier. Thanks to a higher numerical axle, Dodge says 0-60 time is as low as 5.3 seconds. Handling is a bit sharper, approaching SRT8 levels of performance, though the suspension is not quite as firm as the SRT8 suspension.

The SRT8 is the sportiest and fastest Charger. It handles better than a big car should, but it still feels big. While there is a ride penalty, we found the SRT8 easy to live with, even on pockmarked Midwestern streets. Be aware, however, that the lowered ride height calls for care when parking the SRT8 to avoid scraping the front fascia. That's not much price to pay for a true muscle car that you can drive every day.

Summary

The Dodge Charger delivers pony car excitement and style and recalls a bygone era, all while providing the roomy accommodations of a full-size car. The availability of all-wheel drive is a bonus for customers in the north, and the range of engines and suspension setups allows buyers to choose between fast and comfortable models. The design is a little long in the tooth, as challengers from Pontiac and Ford are pushing into the Charger's once-exclusive territory.



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