

UNDER 30 GRAND ALMOST 30 MPG CHRYSLER 300

By Joe Sage



Original Chrysler 300 designer Ralph Gilles with his masterpiece in 2003. The 2012 Chrysler 300 SRT8 shown at Pebble Beach carries some of that DNA.

With its \$825 destination charge, the grand total for this highly equipped sedan was \$28,585.

EPA mileage for the 292-hp 3.6-liter 24-valve VVT V6 is 18 mpg city and 27 mpg highway, very healthy for a large car. With aluminum used for the engine and hood, total weight is 3961 pounds. Best-in-class power is healthy, too, up 16 percent from the previous V6 and a full 63 percent from a former 2.7-liter entry-level engine.

As an alternative, the Chrysler 300C has a 363-hp 5.7-liter HEMI® V8, 0-to-60 time under 6 seconds, fuel mileage of 16/25 (RWD), and a base price of \$38,170. The 300C also offers one thing the V6 doesn't: an all-wheel-drive option (at 15/23 mpg). We'd like to see an AWD V6, too. With a cast iron block, the HEMI brings this car to 4270 pounds (4513 with AWD).

Both the V6 and V8 HEMI run on 87-octane regular gas, though 89-octane is recommended for the HEMI.

WHAT LIES BENEATH

Development of the new Chrysler 300 has gone far beyond skin-deep. Unibody material and structural updates, two premium-composite underbody acoustic insulation panels, dual-pane acoustic windshield and front-door glass, body-cavity foam, doors with triple seals, and acoustic wheel-well liners all reduce noise.

Redesigned suspension has multiple arms and links, dual ball joints, coil-over-gas-shock and stabilizer bar geometry—plus lower control arms on AWD—and ride height has been lowered. Steering is rack and pinion with hydraulic power assist. All this is intended to compete with premium Europeans—but for under \$30k.

Driver controls present a refreshing combination of technology and simplicity. An 8.4-inch touchscreen interface is straightforward—it's easy to set climate, person-



Many details are outlined in metal: inside and out, shiny and brushed, round and square. The door handle is out of reach probably even for Randy Johnson.

alization options are done in a click or two, audio has an above average set of features, and you can whip through satellite stations quickly via a spinning knob, with no signal delays. We don't think we've seen a better radio display, with full information and even a logo for each station, which may sound minor but speeds up quick reference while eyes are needed on the road—one of the safest setups we've driven.

One reason people buy a large sedan is its trunk, and the 300's is sizable, with a big, flat, level surface, though it's infringed upon by the rear wheel wells. Rear seats split-fold to create additional stowage.

The 300 has a 38.9-foot turning circle, which with its rack and pinion setup gives a nimble feel in parking situations. Speed bumps gave us mixed results: some were perfectly smooth, while others were harsh, especially in the front. Cornering under acceleration was smooth and powerful. We noted that while it may not lay as flat as a costly European, you could actually "feel its heft," a well-controlled and enjoyable classic American sedan feel.

PRESTIGE WELL BEYOND PRICE

The prior Chrysler 300 delivered status and class at a low price point—quite an achievement. The new 300 may look more ordinary at a glance. But if we'd never seen the original, the analysis would be easy. We found ourselves comparing the car with imports that cost twice as much. We enjoyed the interior space, high stance and general feel of the new 300, well suited to American body sizes and tastes. Its straightforward big sedan dynamics are bound to please. Power and comfort are tops. It's easy for reviewers to forget budget and start comparing all sedans, but if you're shopping in the \$20s, this car may blow you away. ■

Some manufacturers' lineups seem to consist of small, medium and large versions of what essentially seems like almost the same car. A longstanding joke is that it is like choosing which of the Brady sisters to date.

Chrysler has replaced the venerable Sebring with a new Chrysler 200, a reasonable move. Town and Country minivans were also refreshed for 2011, sharing a clear family resemblance with the 200. Enter the new 300, still bearing the nameplate with impressive heritage dating back to 1955, and it takes on elements of the same. That may or may not be a good thing—see Brady sisters—but so far we have trouble ignoring the shadow cast by the Chrysler 300 this replaces. That machine, penned by Chrysler über-designer Ralph Gilles, had hit the marketplace square between the eyes. Combining refinement and bling, it delivered an incredible presence while selling—remarkably—in the mid-\$20s.

Gilles was so good he was promoted, now serving as Senior Vice President of Design at Chrysler Group LLC and President and CEO of the SRT Brand.

And the new 300 was penned by others. With a new

family grille, a rising beltline and swept-back windshield, the car has evolved. The question is whether it has lost some of its distinction, a somewhat diluted version of its former self. But it's starting to grow on us.

POWER, ECONOMY AND VALUE

Despite any change in personality, the Chrysler 300 remains a solid car and a great buy. Its base price is \$27,170—this for a full-size, fully appointed sedan. That includes 4-wheel ABS, electronic stability control, traction control, brake assist, hill start assist—features you might find on a \$60,000 car just a few years ago. It includes a full complement of safety features, extensive creature comforts and electronics, such gotta-have-em luxuries as Keyless Enter-N-Go, a decent 6-speaker audio system with device connectivity and one year of satellite radio thrown in, halogen headlamps and LED daytime running lights, 17-inch wheels and 4-wheel independent suspension. The only add-ons our test 300 had were its crystal pearl effect paint (just \$295) and a Bluetooth™ package for voice control and streaming audio (\$295).

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