

School's Out!

With 21st century pony car wars heating up—as Ford updates the hot-selling retro Mustang and GM reintroduces the Camaro—interest in the Dodge Challenger was so high the top-spec SRT8 went to presales early and sold out quickly. It was unusual to release the hottest model first, rather than building anticipation from the bottom up. The SRT8 is potent, indeed, with a 370-cubic-inch (6.1 liter) HEMI® V-8 pumping out 425hp and 420 lb-ft of torque, all in a 4170-pound package, with a choice of six-speed manual transmission (with twin-disc clutch) or five-speed automatic with overdrive. The base SE features a 250hp V-6, weighs 3720 pounds, and offers only a 4-speed overdrive automatic.

Enter the R/T. Its 5.7-liter HEMI V-8 puts out 376hp against a weight of 4041 pounds. This gives the SRT8 a power-to-weight ratio advantage of 9.5%, though torque is virtually identical at 410 (these R/T numbers are for the manual transmission; with an automatic, horsepower is 372 and torque is 401.)

The V-6 SE claims EPA fuel economy of 18/25 mpg (city/highway), with 89-octane mid-grade fuel recommended (but 87-octane regular "acceptable") against the R/T at 16/23 for the automatic (mid-grade fuel recommended but regular acceptable), or 15/23 manual (91 octane premium recommended but regular acceptable). The

SRT8 is lower still at 13/19 (automatic; manual info n/a) and requires premium fuel.

Nobody is buying a Dodge Challenger for fuel economy, but there are always degrees. If you know the max-power SRT8 is for you, then that is the version you will likely buy. If you want the Challenger look and feel at a bargain price (starting at \$21,995), the SE also brings fuel price AND mileage economies. But for the best of both worlds, the R/T is a great option.

SE Standard on the base Challenger SE are side-curtain air bags, AM/FM/CD radio with four speakers and MP3, a/c, eight-way power driver's seat, 60/40 split-folding rear bench with arm rests and two cup holders, adjustable lumbar support, 12-volt auxiliary power outlet in the center console, automatic speed control, rear-window defroster, fold-away power mirrors, power locks and windows, manual-tilt and telescoping steering column, remote keyless entry and tire pressure monitoring warning lamp.

SRT8 The Challenger SRT8 provides modern American muscle, with enhanced powertrain, ride and handling, benchmark braking, an aggressive-looking exterior and race-inspired interior. The SRT8

also features limited-slip differential, exclusive 20-inch fully forged aluminum wheels, carbon-fiber-like hood stripes, a race-inspired interior with bolstered seats, pistol-grip shifter (manual) and a reconfigurable display with performance readouts of 0–60 mph, 0–100 mph, 1/8- and 1/4-mile times, g-forces and 0–60 mph braking distance.

R/T For a balanced mix of hardware, technology and features, the Challenger R/T with its 5.1-liter HEMI hits the power/weight/fuel points mentioned above, plus the automatic transmission features fuel-saving multi-displacement (MDS) technology which claims to improve fuel economy by as much as 20 percent without sacrificing performance. The six-speed manual transmission, part of a "Track Pak" option, includes Hill Start Assist (HSA), limited-slip differential, bright pedal covers and performance steering.

Standard eighteen-inch machined aluminum wheels, dual exhaust with rectangular tips, rear body-color spoiler, standard anti-lock brakes, ESP, traction control, brake assist, vented brakes, fog lamps and leather-wrapped steering wheel and shifter knob are included. Available are Remote Start, Keyless Go push-button start and heated leather front seats.

A special-edition Challenger Classic R/T is slated for fall, in B5 Blue with wide black side stripes inspired by the original Challenger of the 1970s, script-style badging and modern 20-inch wheels styled with heritage five-spoke aluminum.

The all-new 2009 Dodge Challenger will be offered in nine vibrant colors including Brilliant Black, Bright Silver, TorRed, Inferno Red,

Deep Water Blue, Titanium, Stone White, HEMI Orange (R/T and SRT8 only) and B5 Blue (late availability R/T and SRT8 only). Carbon-fiber-like hood stripes are standard on the Dodge Challenger SRT8. The Dodge Challenger R/T features an optional hood-to-fender side stripe. Dark Slate Gray cloth seats are standard on Dodge Challenger SE and R/T. Dark Slate Gray leather seats with exclusive SRT trim are standard on Dodge Challenger SRT8.

KEEP RIGHT >>

Lead photo: Randall Bohi Photography www.randallbohi.com



Our Challenger R/T drive

Chrysler invited us to join them for lunch at Alice Cooperstown in downtown Phoenix, to see the 2009 lineup, including the Challengers, the all-new Dodge RAM pickup (see *Arizona Driver*, May/June 2008), and the HEMI Hybrid Chrysler Aspen and Dodge Durango (see *Arizona Driver*, September/October 2008 and see this issue's Auto News Update regarding their early cancellation).

As we'd heard Alice Cooper (with his inside track as owner of a Valley Chrysler-Jeep dealership) was taking delivery of his own Challenger about the same time (yes, Wayne, this car *WILL* be his), we entertained the notion he might join us for lunch and take delivery then and there. But he was playing a gig in London, Ontario, that evening. So no dice on that slice of glory.

We drove them all but concentrated on the Challenger R/T. From that starting point, our drive was limited to the relatively flat and square streets of downtown and south Phoenix. This car definitely turned heads, both on the city streets and in the neighborhoods and schoolyards to the south. We didn't test its heroics in the high school parking lot, but we did pull into the Phoenix Elementary School's bus lot, where the car was very well received by the District's staff and workers. This was a crowd with equal parts nostalgia for the original and finger-on-the-pulse of the next generation, so that was a strong endorsement.

Our drive was long enough to test acceleration, cornering, shifting and braking, and all performed very solidly and powerfully. With all that power on tap, it could be possible to do an embarrassing stall in that schoolyard lot, but it takes very little effort to avoid, and the dynamics become second nature almost immediately. The car feels larger, on the one hand, than its pony car competitors, but at the same time feels to be just the right size for what it is. We had only driven a couple of blocks when we felt that this was a package you could enjoy the heck out of, for a long, long time.

The only decision remaining is where your tastes and budget fall on issues of power, performance and petrol price. Clearly, the more power and performance you go for, the closer you may feel to the original Challenger's persona. But with modern technology and updated mechanicals on the entire lineup, the tie-breaking features and specifications of the Challenger R/T suggest this is a good model to try first. And it might well be the one you drive home.

The 2009 Dodge Challenger SE, R/T and SRT8 are available now. The Dodge Challenger Classic R/T will be available late in the 2009 model year. ■

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