

AND NOW WE ARE A FAMILY

Ram ProMaster City adds dimension to van group

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JOE SAGE

You may have noticed a lot of vans in the news lately. And you are most likely starting to notice a whole new breed on the roads. Fading away are burly Econolines, being replaced by sleek European vans.

There have been Ford (their little Transit Connect, then their big Transit), Nissan (the other way around, big first, then small) and Daimler's

big Sprinter van, formerly a Dodge but now carrying Mercedes-Benz and Freightliner badges (and with a new small Mercedes van coming up).

Trends emerge: both large and small versions of each, for warehouse-to-hub-to-doorstep efficiencies, while reinforcing a push toward long service life combined with vastly improved fuel economy.

Another trend is the growth of the Ram Trucks brand overall. The Ram 1500 EcoDiesel pickup wins awards left and right, and the Ram 3500 claims highest towing capacity. Ram sales were up 28 percent for 2014. In December, Ram pickup sales were up 32 percent, while Ram Trucks overall were up 35 percent (higher than pickups alone, indicating ProMaster's rapid adoption).

Like the Dodge Dart and Chrysler 200, ProMaster vans are a Fiat dividend, based on trucks that are hugely successful worldwide, updated for the US market. Ram Commercial introduced the larger ProMaster vans last year (see our Jan-Feb 2014 issue). Now, we meet their smaller partner: the Ram ProMaster City van lineup.

Both draw directly from Fiat Professional, which has well over a century's experience in the field, providing an immediate jumpstart to Ram's big new push into the US van market.

The big ProMaster vans are derived from the front-wheel-drive Fiat Ducato, which has sold 4.5 million vans globally, with 2 million

still on the road. The bigger van brags best-in-class payload, cargo width and height and fuel efficiency (gas or diesel). It has 18,500-mile oil change intervals and easy step-in height.

Smaller new ProMaster City vans are derived from the front-wheel-drive Fiat Doblò, twice voted International Van of the Year by a jury from 19 countries. The US version picks up its own face (to our eye, echoing some elements of Dodge cars).

The demanding Class 1 small commercial van segment is shopped by buyers looking at purchase price, total cost of ownership over the vehicle's service life, competitive cargo space and payload, and features that provide functional versatility combined with quality and dependability.

Ram ProMaster City tackles these starting with price: the small cargo van starts at just \$23,130.

It claims best in class interior volume (131.7 cubic feet) and width between wheel wells (48.4 inches), able to carry 4-foot-wide cargo with a bit left over—great for building materials or pallet loads. Those loads can equal 1883 pounds, another best in class claim. The standard cargo interior includes 1000-pound tie-downs, and a wide range of interior upfits are available through Mopar.

The whole package is torture tested to harsh North American standards. Ride height has been increased for our rougher roads, yet the van maintains an extremely low step-in height (21.5 inches rear, 18.8 inches side). Its unibody chassis and anchor points have also been beefed up.

To walk the talk, Ram put us behind the wheel of the ProMaster City on the outskirts of Austin,

Our Ram ProMaster City van torture course at Troublemaker Studios outside Austin started with tight turns, sudden swerves, brutally harsh surface hazards and a tight loop to show off its remarkable 32-foot turning circle (a MINI's is 35.4 feet). Next was one of the most dramatic: crisis braking with an extremely slick surface under our left wheels, dry under our right—in which the van stopped quickly while remaining utterly straight, even with a load. A heavy rain chamber was followed by one more steering test on a sudden decreasing radius turn. The whole thing wrapped up with tight industrial space squeezes and loading dock maneuvers.

Texas, not only for some open road and suburban grid maneuvers, but also on a dedicated course they had built on the grounds of Troublemaker Studios. (This was a fascinating stop in its own right, as the source of such classics as co-owner Robert Rodriguez's *Machete*—that film's highly recognizable though unrecognizably modified rusty-armored El Camino sits out front—while props from *Spy Kids* and other well-known productions are inside.) This funky postmodern industrial location was perfect for getting rough with our little 21st century workhorse (see photo and caption, above, for a onceover on what we subjected the vans to). They thrived on the abuse.

A passenger version is also available, starting at \$24,130. Its second row has a fold-and-tumble feature for maximized volume; it will also have a mesh divider available, making it great for pets. Sliding side doors latch open, reliable even on hills (while competitors generally rely on friction).

Rear doors open to 90 degrees with a detent, then can open to 180 degrees. A clever touch is a 60/40 split on the doors, left/right. This gives full-width access to a load, while a wider door toward traffic protects a larger safe path to curbside.

In Europe, the Fiat has a choice of 1.4L gasoline or 2.0L diesel engines, with a manual trans-



mission available. In the US, the ProMaster City comes with Ram's proven 2.4L Tigershark four-cylinder gasoline engine, which at 178 hp and 174 lb-ft outpowers segment competitors. It is another recipient of FCA's amazing 9-speed automatic. Fuel mileage is 21/29/24 MPG (city/hwy/comb).

The engine is built in Michigan. The van is built in Turkey and upfitted in Baltimore. Powertrain warranty is five years or 100,000 miles. ■

