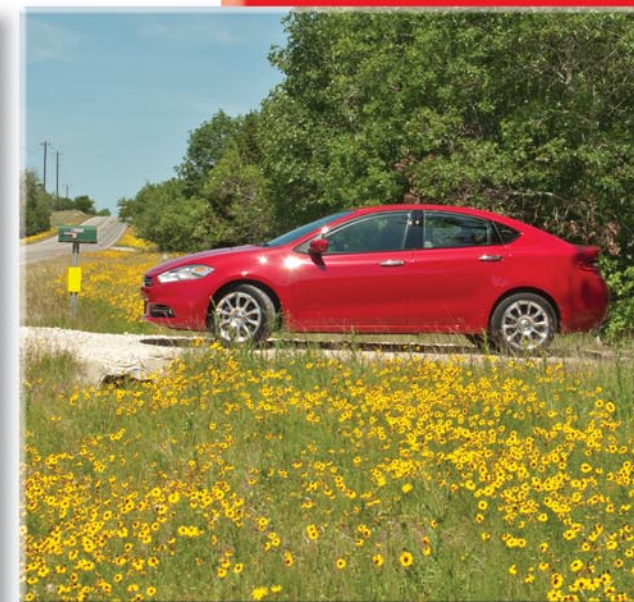
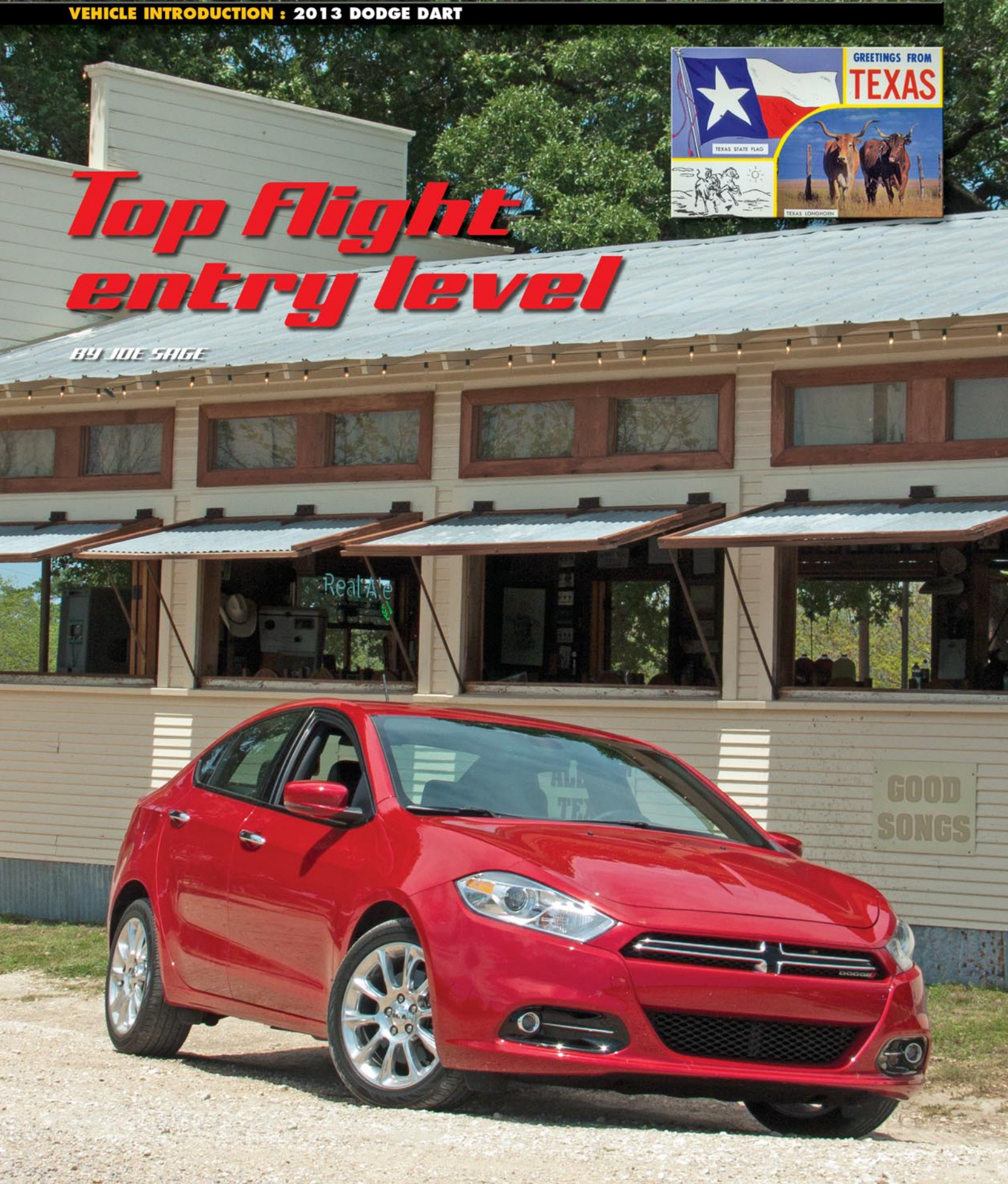


Top Flight entry level

BY JOE SAGE



If you've always wanted to own a brand new Alfa Romeo, this is finally your opportunity. The new Dodge Dart is the first vehicle to bear full fruit from Chrysler's new ownership by Fiat. By definition an entirely new Dodge, the Dart is at its core the highly successful Alfa Romeo Giulietta. It means the reignition of "Dodge fever," says Richard Cox, director of the Dodge brand at Chrysler Group LLC. Watch for six all-new or completely redesigned Dodges over the coming year, part of 16 vehicles Chrysler is introducing overall. This comes on the heels of a highly successful 2011, with Chrysler Group sales up 39 percent, with 290,000 incremental new customers, and all Dodge models showing double- or even triple-digit growth.

Despite these great numbers, Dodge knew they had a product gap in the compact segment—the fastest-growing segment there is. Compacts and midsize cars together equal one third of the market. The company studied the competition—mostly 4-door sedans—and found them to be "bland," to use Cox's word. Enter Alfa. The stylish Alfa Romeo Giulietta—and now the Dodge Dart—"shatters the perception of compact," says Cox. Dodge wants its small-car owners to be proud, not embarrassed, so they are delivering what Cox calls "a cool world-class car that just happens to be a compact."

Dart is not the only Giulietta spinoff. Overseas, the Fiat Bravo and Lancia Delta are also cousins. The Dart is a sedan, 12.5 inches longer than the Alfa hatchback.

Dodge Darts galore

Any European car hitting US shores will typically get new powertrains, suitable to our own regulations, as well as to our different driving habits, habitats and styles. The 2013 Dodge Dart will be available with no fewer than three engines and three transmissions. Not every transmission is available with every engine, but it's just the beginning of their explosion of choices in this new car: add four variable front grille/fascia treatments, 14 different interior combinations, half a dozen wheels in three sizes, and a dozen paint colors, multiply those out, and you actually have over 30,000 possible combinations before you even hit the option list. Count every-

thing, and there are over 100,000 ways to customize and personalize your new Dart. Dodge wants each owner to be able to "take pride in your ride." Pretty sweet from a car that's only going to set you back less than \$20,000. The options provide value and choice. For example, an 8.4-inch center stack screen comes for just \$595—the largest screen in the class, and it's not bundled with anything else you may not want or need.

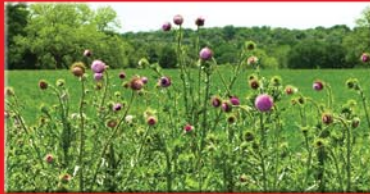
They've given the car such attention to detail, inside and out—stitching, upscale wheels, best-in-class interior room—that they confidently compare it with the Mercedes-Benz C-Class, but at half the cost or better. Do a quick search online, and you'll see Daimler-Benz CEO Dieter Zetsche marveling at the Dodge Dart in January, at the North American International Auto Show in Detroit. Dodge loves these photos.

The Dart claims more horsepower and more torque than competitors from Honda, Toyota and others. There are four models currently, with two more coming. Today, you can choose from the base SE, the SXT, Rallye and Limited. SE prices start at \$15,995, SXT at \$17,995, Rallye at \$18,995 and Limited at \$19,995. Next fall, watch for a fuel-sipping Aero model and a more potent R/T with 184 horsepower (up from 160) plus sport suspension, dual exhaust and 18-inch wheels.

The Dart is built on a strong and versatile platform. It's so strong and so versatile that the company has built a 600-horsepower all-wheel-drive rally car Dart that's faster than an F1 racer, hitting 0-to-60 in just 1.9 seconds. That's one wicked cool cousin to have in the family of your under-\$20k car.

The frugal cousin will be the Aero. This car's noble purpose stems from requirements imposed by the government when they lent money to Chrysler during the big Detroit shakeout: they must produce at least one 40-plus MPG car. This Dart will reportedly have the 1.4-liter MultiAir turbo that's available in other Darts (built by Chrysler in Michigan and also used in the Fiat 500), a 6-speed manual and weight-shaving tricks throughout. You can come very

KEEP RIGHT >>



close to Aero mileage now with the 1.4L turbo and manual, at 39 MPG highway.

You may have noticed mention of a manual transmission on the frugal versions, but it's available widely throughout the Dart lineup. Dodge says a 20 percent take rate on manual "proves there is demand," which is music to our ears.

Driving the hill country

Dodge Dart style begins right up front, with an in-your-face split-crosshair grille treatment. Projector-beam foglights and headlamps are included on all trim levels. Rear sheetmetal reflects a combination of Dodge muscle heritage and other models in the current lineup, evocative of the Challenger and Charger, though in narrower form. One of the many variables mentioned earlier is the grille treatment, which includes the upper and lower openings, the bar between, and a connecting area to the headlamps. Put it all together, and this variable can give you quite a range of style, with options for chrome, body color or black crosshairs, and body color or black in the solid areas.

Behind the grille is Dodge's first-ever active grille shutter system, which closes airflow in the lower intake at highway speeds for better aerodynamics.

As we contemplate a parking lot full of new Darts, about to choose one for our drive from downtown Austin into the hill country, we are struck by just how cool this small car appears, with its aggressive front, its large wheels, black leather and red highlights, and recall how many times we've wondered why these very cool smaller cars you can get in Europe are not available here. Well, now they are, and here it is.

It's a tough choice between the Tigershark and the 1.4-liter MultiAir Turbo. Both have 160 horsepower, but the 2.0L has less torque: 148 lb-ft versus 184 lb-ft for the turbo. (The R/T will get its additional horsepower from a 2.4L Tigershark.) We start with the 1.4L turbo—figuring it's the bigger news, and having enjoyed it in the Fiat 500 Abarth elsewhere in this issue. We swap

Attention to detail is everywhere in the Dodge Dart, inside and out. Options include engines and front appearance. Below and upper left are a sampling of grille combinations. The hill country was abuzz with bees and blossoms, and it just wouldn't be Austin if Willie Nelson himself hadn't shown up next to our hotel for the dedication of a statue in his honor.

for the 2.0L after lunch. There is not a huge difference in driving, which is about 90 percent Texas hill country and 10 percent within the Austin city limits, but the 1.4L turbo does have advantages by the numbers: higher torque and higher fuel economy (27/39/32 city/highway/combined, versus 25/36/29 for the 2-liter). Both have a base price of \$19,995.

Dodge says that although the Dart is classified as a compact car, it has a midsize interior. As we settle into our 2013 Dodge Dart Limited with the Tigershark 2.0-liter engine, we don't dispute this. It's a fine fit for two over-six-footers. Dodge has paid close attention to fit and finish inside, as well as material choices, surfacing, color and class-exclusive technological features. It's quite a cockpit for such an affordable car—sculpted, with a "floating island" bezel, 7-inch TFT display plus analog gauges, lots of ambient lighting—and available in 14 different combinations of cloth, leather and even denim. The gauges are easily customizable via four steering-wheel-mounted buttons. Bonus: the use of a vertical climate control system from Fiat has freed up space for a huge glovebox.

Our 2.0L is red over black leather, has the 6-speed manual, and adds the Uconnect Touch voice command system with 8.4-inch screen, plus a premium group and tech group (these aren't fully defined, as these are pre-production cars), backup camera, and blind spot plus rear crosspath detection systems, for a sticker of \$23,665 (plus destination). The 1.4L turbo is similar, but also adds Garmin navigation, Sirius/XM satellite radio and Travel Link, HID headlamps and nine Alpine speakers with subwoofer, coming in at \$25,160. The difference of just \$1495 for all those other features underscores the simplicity and affordability of Dart's option list.

Our drive included everything: freeways and interstates, hours' worth of beautiful two-lane country roads and highways with decent hills, curves, even a little bit of gravel at lunch. The Dart was great on all of it.

The Dodge Dart is scheduled to start showing up in dealerships by the end of June. It intends to compete with Hyundai Elantra, Chevy Cruze, Ford Focus, Honda Civic and Toyota Corolla. That list includes a few others that have been recently reenergized, too, but do not shop the category without including the Dodge Dart. It's an aggressive segment, and the new Chrysler Group brings an aggressive solution to the game. Dodge has thrown a Dart at this game board, and they have very definitely made a point. ■

