

Alpha jewel

Alfa Romeo Giulietta-based Dodge has a strong user interface and handy layout ...and starts under \$20k

by Joe Sage

Catalina... Bonneville... Pontiac had some great names they abandoned along the way. We would have always loved to see some of them come back into play. Dart... Daytona... Charger... Challenger... Dodge has had some great names, too, and they have done a masterful job of bringing them back. As for the Dodge Dart name, as with any name that has a lineage spanning several decades, there are always going to be a couple of people who remember one they didn't like. We've encountered that with the Dart a couple of times. So when we tell them, hey, it's a great car...

it's actually the Alfa Romeo Giulietta... that gets their attention every time. Even the most skeptical will come around. It is built upon the foundation of the Giulietta, at any rate—yet another dividend of the Chrysler-Fiat partnership—though the Dart is a sedan, 12.5 inches longer than the Alfa hatchback sold in Europe.

We drove the 2013 Dodge Dart, in preproduction form, about exactly a year earlier, in the countryside around Austin, Texas (see our May/June 2012 issue). Our impressions at the time were favorable.



With interior stitching, upscale wheels, impressive interior room and other features, Dodge confidently compared it to the Mercedes-Benz C-Class—but at half the cost, or even lower. (At launch, they were still enjoying the memory of photos of Daimler-Benz CEO Dieter Zetsche marveling at the Dodge Dart at the Detroit auto show a couple of months earlier.)

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.

There are six total models: the base SE, SXT, Rallye, Aero, Limited and GT. SE prices start at \$15,995, SXT at \$17,995, Rallye at \$18,995, Aero at \$19,295, Limited at \$19,995 and GT at \$20,995. Our test car is almost at the top of the heap, other than the GT model, although we would have dropped ours down a peg by buying the manual transmission and knocking \$1100 off the sticker.

The Dart driver's environment

We received this car in late March, hopped in and spoke to the logbook: "we already know this is a dandy little machine; we drove it at launch and were duly impressed." Many current vehicles have a dramatically rising beltline. Looking over our shoulder, we noted that the Dart emphasizes this on the inside, as stitching heads downhill but it does not look that way. In the front door, this creates a level that launches into the rising beltline, and the whole appearance is very dynamic from the inside. A small third window behind the seat pillar—between a C-1 and C-2 pillar, you might say—opens things up.

(We noted later that the beltline must *really* rise: we had to readjust the left rearview mirror several times, pointing it down lower, counter to first impulses.)

We were impressed with setting up the Uconnect® touchscreen, quickly accomplishing a range of tasks, more than we had even set out to do, pretty intuitively. As with any, we had to journey a few layers in and a few layers back out, but solutions were there on first guess for just about everything we needed.

There are usefully redundant interfaces. For example, you can change your track on the iPod by touching the touchscreen or turning the tune knob or using controls on the steering wheel. It's all intuitive, none of the alternatives are in conflict, and you change your mind about your preferred method each time, if you feel like it.

We were impressed by the Dart's huge trunk, which also includes a pass-through, plus flip-down rear seats, opening the whole area up hatchback-style, making for a very utilitarian vehicle. Cargo volume in the trunk proper is 13.1 cubic feet, and it just grows from there.

We did wish we could open the trunk without pulling the key out of our pocket. The keyless only opens the front door, where there's a release inside, but if you have packages destined for the back seat and trunk, it takes several steps to dispose of it all.

Dashing around in our Dart

We started our drive in reverse. We found the backup camera a little murky, and we wish it projected your intended curvature, but it identified a clear path.

Our test Dart pumps 160 hp out of its four-cylinder



Our test Dodge Dart Limited included the optional 6-speed Powertech automatic. The 6-speed manual at right is standard on all trim levels—SE, SXT, Rallye, Limited and GT, as well as the Aero Model of the SE. The 6-speed Powertech is optionally available on all except the Aero, and a 6-speed dual dry clutch (DDCT) is available on all but the SE (including Aero Model) or GT. It's all part of the impressive number of ways you can configure your own new Dodge Dart.



powerplant. So does the available 1.4L turbo version, though the turbo has 184 lb-ft of torque, to this car's 147. Nonetheless, our car responded well to our commands. It wasn't effortless on its own behalf: you could feel it working for what it delivered. But it was delivering.

A Ferrari owner will notice the difference; a first car owner will be delighted with what the Dart offers. The engine has a growl that we noted as being somewhere between straining and performing, though we have a hunch this engine note is quite intentional and therefore intended to add a performance panache, which the car does benefit from. The 2-liter can be a little slow when the light turns green, but you quickly develop a touch of the pedal that can conquer this.

All in all, Dodge has brought us a top-notch sport European sedan, maneuverable and affordable enough for the Continent, while spacious, powerful and trimmed out enough for the States. The journey from Alfa Romeo's development labs to your local Dodge dealer is just the start. If you're shopping for a compact sedan in an affordable niche, the next few miles in the Dart's journey will be your test drive, and how many miles you pack on it after that is entirely up to you. There's not likely to be a bad mile in the bunch. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE/TRANS2.0L 4-cyl / 6-spd auto
 POWER/TORQUE160 hp / 147 lb-ft
 DRIVETRAINFWD
 WEIGHT3242 lb
 COLORSTrue Blue Pearl / Black
 MPG (EST)24/34/27 city/hwy/comb

- BASE\$19,995
- PREFERRED PACKAGE 24L LIMITED GROUP
- TECHNOLOGY GROUP: keyless entry/start, blind spot and rear cross path detection, auto high beam, rain-sense wipers\$995
- PREMIUM GROUP: leather seats and shift knob, heated front seats, heated steering wheel, remote start, dual-zone climate, garage door opener\$995
- Six-speed Powertech automatic\$1100
- 17x7.5 polished aluminum wheels\$395
- UCONNECT® infotainment\$495
- SiriusXM one year\$195
- Destination\$795

TOTAL\$24,965