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Nov. 11, 2004

Chrysler 300C: A luxury muscle car that's a real steal

by DEVIN COMISKEY

"Hey! That thing got a Hemi in it?" You bet it does! And does it ever pack a punch. Chrysler, in the midst of a design revolution, scrapped its tired 300M 4-door sedan for a new luxobarge — the 300C — that inspires not only glee from hip-hoppers and Gen-Xers seeking a big car with lots of personality, but also relief for those seeking a luxury package and muscle car performance for a ridiculously low price.

The move has so far paid off handsomely for Chrysler, as demand for all "300" models is exceeding industry expectations.

The exterior of the 300C is commanding and bold. It's shaped like a brick, has a profile reminiscent of a chop-top '50s show car with its high doors and narrow windows and flashes plenty of bling-bling chrome from its side mirrors to its large wheels. It has a gangster aura about it as well.

"How many people can you fit in that trunk?," a co-worker asked. "That's something Tony Soprano would look good driving."

Indeed, the 300C's looks may not be

for everyone, but it's still classy.

Sliding into the interior of the 300C, occupants are enveloped by leather. There's ample room for at least 5 adults with plenty of leg and head room in front and back, although the front seats aren't as comfortable as they look.

The steering wheel, complete with a touch of cheesy tortoise shell plastic, houses computer controls for the radio and car computer, which is actually quite useful.

The Electronic Vehicle Information System (EVIC), a digital display in the middle of the gauge cluster, shows radio station information, volume, CD number, average gas mileage, fuel left in the gas tank, trip display and the ability to set several personal display preferences like display language and what doors to lock.

Reflecting the bargain nature of our particular 300C, an optional Bose 6-disc, 380-watt, CD/MP3 player and 13-speaker system (only \$535) was installed. It's money very well spent. Its concert hall sound quality is astounding and will suit any driver's needs, whether listening to Bach, P-Diddy or Judas Priest.

The electronically adjustable steering

TEST DRIVE



wheel column is also a nice feature. Chrysler's patented "AutoStick" Tiptronic-like transmission, however, is a silly option that few drivers of the 300C would ever use.

Driving the 4,000 pound 300C can be a chore, but Chrysler made sure a few items here and there would make it less so. The most useful of which are the side mirrors which automatically lower when the car is put into reverse, making backing into a parking spot or parallel parking a snap. With the 300C's high rear end, it's otherwise impossible to judge your distance from objects behind the car.

Another surprising plus in this car is its handling. It's surprisingly agile, with very little body roll, comfortable and is quite forgiving if you head into a curve too quickly.

Nonetheless, the 300C still requires a lot more effort to drive than most cars. It's a bit floaty on the highway and its weight requires more thoughtful braking and maneuvering. Its narrow windows and cavernous interior require more caution by the driver when switching lanes.

One would assume Detroit's auto manufacturers would have learned their lesson in the '70s when they were cranking out gas-guzzling V8s as gas prices rose. Certainly not Chrysler. The 300C's 340 horsepower, 5.7 liter Hemi — to put it plainly — is an oinker when it comes to gas mileage. It's advertised mileage numbers of 17/25 mpg don't hold up, even though the new Hemi includes a supposedly fuel-saving feature that cuts off four cylinders in normal highway driving. On a round trip to

Boston, we averaged a paltry 20.6 mpg with very little city driving. Very disappointing — and expensive.

That's not to say, however, that the Hemi isn't fun to drive when you feel the need for a little speed. The gas pedal is all you need to transform this cruise ship into a rocket ship.

For all of its minor faults and bold design, the 2005 Chrysler 300C is a winner. Although some buyers may want to hold out for the all-wheel drive or insanely over-powered and sportier SRT-8 versions scheduled to ship later this year, the \$33,530 price tag for our test model is a bargain — or really a steal.

There's little need to spend tens of thousands of dollars more for a Cadillac or Mercedes when you can aim a little lower and take this car home.

2005 CHRYSLER 300C

CAR PROVIDED BY DAIMLERCHRYSLER MOTORS COMPANY, LLC, WWW.CHRYSLER.COM

BASE PRICE: \$32,370

PRICE AS TESTED: \$33,530 (incl. \$625 destination)

ENGINE: 5.7 Liter Hemi V8, 340 hp @ 5,000 rpm/ 390 ft.-lbs torque @ 4,000 rpm

TRANSMISSION: 5-speed automatic with AutoStick shifting

DRIVE: Rear-Wheel Drive

FRONT SUSPENSION: Independent touring; 1 upper control arm, 1 lateral link, and 1 diagonal link per side; coil springs; anti-roll bar

Rear Suspension: Independent touring; 2 lateral links, 1 diagonal link, and 1 toe-control link per side; coil springs; anti-roll bar

SEATING CAPACITY: 5 adults

WHEELS: 7.5 x 18" chrome clad cast aluminum

TIRES: Continental ContiTouringContact, P225/60R-18; 99H M+S

MPG: 17 city/25 highway

BRAKES: Hydraulic with vacuum power assist,

anti-lock control, brake assist, and stability control.

SAFETY: Front advanced multi-stage air bags, child seat upper tether anchors, occupant classification system, emergency brake assist, all-speed traction control, performance ABS, rear door child protection locks, inside emergency trunk release, rain-sensitive wipers, security alarm and vehicle immobilizer.

SELECTED STANDARD FEATURES: Air conditioning with dual-zone climate control, cell phone storage, auto-dimming rear view mirror, Homelink universal garage door opener, steering wheel-mounted audio controls, heated front seats.

Optional features: Bose AM/FM stereo with 6-disc in-dash CD/MP3 changer, 13 Boston Acoustic speakers, subwoofer and 380-watt amplifier (\$535).

WARRANTY: 7-year or 70,000 mile powertrain limited warranty, towing assistance during warranty period, 3-year or 26,000 mile basic limited warranty.