

WHEELS

Dodge Nitro gets three new trim packages



Tom Strongman

The Nitro has street-tough styling and optional four-wheel drive.

By TOM STRONGMAN

The Nitro, with its squarish shape, blunt nose and fat fender flares, looks a bit like a street-fighter bulldog, and that's fitting because the Nitro is not really intended for off-road use.

Dodge's midsize SUV is derived from the Jeep Liberty, and it squares off against competitors such as the Toyota RAV4, Ford Escape and Honda CR-V. It feels more like a truck compared to the Toyota, Honda and Ford.

The Nitro is more than a reskinned Jeep Liberty. Its 108.8-inch wheelbase is considerably longer than that of the Liberty,

although the Nitro has almost the same passenger space. The Nitro's cargo space is slightly larger than that of the Liberty.

There are two engines: a 3.7-liter V-6 that pumps out 210 horsepower, and a 4.0-liter V-6 that is rated at 260 horsepower. Both engines are now equipped with a system that shuts off the flow of fuel when the engine is decelerating. This saves a bit of fuel and doesn't detract from performance. The 3.7 has a four-speed automatic transmission and the 4.0 has a five-speed automatic.

Dodge has dropped the SE and SXT model designations in exchange for lifestyle packages named Heat, Detonator and Shock. The Heat starts at \$21,590. The

Detonator receives the 4.0-liter engine, and prices begin at \$25,750. The Shock adds 20-inch wheels, and its base price is \$26,750. An all-wheel-drive Shock starts at \$28,410.

The test car was equipped with the 4.0-liter engine, and while it has good power, its fuel mileage is rated at 16 mpg in the city and 20 on the highway. That is considerably lower than most of its competitors.

The Shock's performance suspension is tuned for responsive handling, and it delivered a ride that was decidedly firm and sometimes jarring. The optional 20-inch wheels and low-profile tires that look so good also contribute to the ride's harshness.

The Nitro is available with rear-wheel or four-wheel drive. The four-wheel-drive model drives the rear wheels until you need extra traction. Four-wheel drive is selected with a switch on the console. The system then sends equal power to the front and rear wheels.

Traction control, anti-lock brakes, vehicle stability control and brake assist are standard. The stability control system also helps mitigate rollovers.



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trimmed with brushed silver accents. The center console can accommodate gadgets such as cell phones and PDAs.

The rear seat folds forward to create a

The Nitro's cabin is attractive and functional, although the interior textures tend to be hard and plain. The instrument panel has three round gauge pods

flat load floor, and the front passenger seat-back can also be folded forward to swallow long items such as a stepladder.

One handy option is a built-in 30-gigabyte hard drive that is part of the navigation and audio system. This unit can be controlled with voice commands. The hard drive can hold up to 4,250 songs. Users can also record voice memos, download photos or copy music from a CD, DVD or any device with a USB port.

The optional Sirius satellite radio has real-time traffic reports and can show alternate routes on the navigation screen.

All Nitro radios have input jacks for MP3 music players.

Price

The base price of the test car was \$28,410. Standard equipment includes heated leather seats, navigation system with a 30-gigabyte hard drive, 20-inch chrome wheels, power sunroof and an engine block heater. Options of the chrome accent group and trailer tow package brought the sticker price to \$30,940.

Warranty

Three years or 36,000 miles with a five-year, or 100,000-mile powertrain warranty.

The Specs

2010 Dodge Nitro Shock AWD

Engine: 4.0-liter, 260-hp V-6
Transmission: Automatic four-wheel drive
Wheelbase: 108.8 inches
Curb weight: 4,210 lbs.
Base price: \$28,410
As driven: \$30,940
MPG rating: 16 city, 20 hwy.

Man's relationship with his Porsche Speedster has been bumpy at times.

By TOM STRONGMAN

PONTOON BEACH, ILL. — Jim Giese has owned his 1958 Porsche Speedster longer than he has been married to his wife. Giese, a retired steel mill machinist, said he and his wife took the Speedster on their honeymoon in 1963.

Giese's love affair began when he bought his Porsche in October of 1960, and it continues to this day. Just like many relationships, his involvement with his Speedster has gone through stages of being hot, cold, ignored and hot again.

Giese wanted to race his car, so at night, after driving his wife to nursing school in Alton, Ill., he would practice his high-speed driving on the local river roads on the way back home. It was on these roads that he

learned about the Speedster's agility. Beginning in 1963, Giese started racing his car in regional and national Sports Car Club of America events in Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas and Wisconsin. By 1973, he'd won 120 trophies without a major mishap.

As racing became more demanding, Giese would have had to modify his car drastically to be competitive and he wanted to keep it as close to stock as possible.

Giese's relationship with the Speedster began to cool, and it spent more and more time in the garage. Eventually it sat for 30 years before he decided it was time to become involved once again, and so Giese began a painstaking restoration in his tiny, one-car garage.

Because he is a machinist by trade, Giese

loves to pay attention to the smallest details. When I visited his garage, he had a flood light in a pan sitting under the engine to warm the oil before the engine was started. A spare engine sat in the back of his garage on an engine stand, wrapped in plastic like a bouquet of flowers that just came from the florist. A spare transaxle was mounted to a wooden frame so it could be moved easily about the garage.

In 2004, he took his car to California to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Speedster.

His most prestigious award came in 2008 when his car was awarded Best of Show by the St. Louis Porsche Club in an event

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Jim Giese raced his Porsche Speedster years ago, but he babies it now that it has been restored.

at the Kemp Auto Museum.

Today, Giese's garage, lined with posters, photos and many of his trophies, is almost like a shrine for 50 years of memories of his little red car. Giese is trim and looks as fit as the restored Speedster. It's nice to see friends grow old together.

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