

## LONG-TERM TEST DODGE MAGNUM RT

Big enough for your family,  
quick enough for your friends,  
and sturdy enough to impress.

BY DAVE VANDERWERP

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFFREY G. RUSSELL

**"W**hy does a family hauler have to be slow, bland, and uninvolved?" DaimlerChrysler seemed to ask that rhetorically when the company launched the large, riskily styled Magnum wagon in 2004. So far, more than 100,000 people have answered with their dollars. Add in the Magnum's siblings, the Charger and the Chrysler 300, and it's more like 475,000.

This plus-size wagon is not just a family hauler. With its sharp responses, particularly in 340-hp Hemi RT trim, it's every bit a driver's car, too. We liked the idea and the execution, and we voted it a 10Best Car for 2005. The Magnum's appeal seems to span generations: Name another vehicle that's just as likely to have chromed-out, oversize wheels as it is to have kids' car seats in back.

But a car that's great for a few days is not necessarily one you'd want to own, so we ordered a Magnum RT to find out over 40,000 miles. The RT is the most popular and second most powerful model in the Magnum lineup, which ranges from a base \$23,255 SE with a 190-hp V-6 to the mighty 425-hp \$37,995 SRT8.

Almost no option box went unchecked as we added \$6170 to the Magnum's \$30,745 base price. Extras included a \$1895 navigation system, a \$950 sunroof, and convenience items such as heated power front

seats, automatic dual-zone climate control, satellite radio, and a multifunctional trip computer.

Of course, the first thing staffers here wanted to experience was the Magnum's impressive acceleration—0 to 60 mph in 5.8 seconds, with a quarter-mile rush of 14.3. After that initial excitement, we began to notice the details, such as the cavernous people space up front and in back. From the logbook: "Excellent adjustability of wheel, seat, and pedals." Indeed, the Magnum has more legroom front and rear than does a Chevy Tahoe. Packing five six-footers into the Magnum isn't a stretch. The wagon feels huge, too, as the driver peers out over the expansive dash and long hood, as if the seat were placed in the middle of the car. The blind spots through the tiny rear quarter-windows are a liability, and maneuvers that are based on the view rearward—particularly when just the dinky rear wiper area has been swept clear—take a measure of faith.

Power and space aside, we also reveled in the Magnum's solid structure, confident road manners, and relatively quiet interior. This big wagon is quite responsive for its 4295-pound weight: Stops from 70 mph in our initial testing required just 174 feet, and all-out grip on the skidpad was 0.81 g, limited by a stability-control system that can't be completely disabled. Some thought







the steering was a bit quick off-center, but it definitely provides reliable feedback through the grippy leather-covered wheel.

Early complaints involved the vast black-plastic interior that doesn't seem to fit with the stylish exterior. Some had difficulty wading through the various trip-computer and navigation menus; in particular, the nav-screen dimmer and the clock adjustment were elusive to a handful of staffers. But we universally liked the four legible and expensive-looking black-on-white gauge pods, even at night, when they glow elegantly.

Dodge recommends six service stops over the course of 40,000 miles, requiring an oil change and tire rotation every 6000 miles, which ran a reasonable \$46 each. However, every 12,000 miles the cabin air filter needs replacement, and that adds a pricey \$47, essentially doubling the service cost. The major maintenance at 30,000 miles calls for the spark plugs and engine air filter to be changed, along with the standard oil change and tire shuffle, and

that came to \$302.

So the tab for regular service was rather high at \$673, almost \$100 more than for a Hemi Dodge Durango (January 2006), and the Magnum's cabin-air-filter changes alone totaled \$141.

We had some problems. At about 12,000 miles, we noticed a slight brake-pedal pulsation while slowing from interstate speeds. And shortly thereafter, our Sirius satellite radio quit. The dealer turned the front brake rotors and replaced the satellite-radio receiver under warranty.

The air conditioning mysteriously petered out a couple times on long-distance trips, so at the 18,000-mile stop we had it checked. The problem was a sticking expansion valve, again replaced free under the three-year/36,000-mile warranty. Also replaced at no cost was a sun-visor retaining clip that we broke. Normally, we'd attribute that to the staff's propensity to manhandle cars, but we eventually broke both of the Magnum's clips, so they may be especially frail.

## RANTS AND RAVES

### PATRICK BEDARD

It has a purposeful, get-outta-the-way feeling on the highway that's genuinely inspiring.

### DAN WINTER

It's a good thing the Magnum has a sunroof because otherwise it feels like a casket on wheels.

### JARED GALL

Even at 80 mph with all the windows down, you can enjoy every watt of the Boston Acoustics sound system. I didn't expect that.

### TONY QUIROGA

Solid structure, quiet at speed. The 5.7-liter has excellent power delivery and torque. The five-speed works perfectly.

### DUKE KUNKLER

Seats are comfortable over the long haul. I didn't experience the structural fatigue I'd expect from a Dodge with 34,000 miles.

### ADAM KRIPKE

I think garbage cans are made out of the same plastic as the Magnum's interior.

### CORA WEBER

The display screen shows title and artist info of the track that is playing, which is especially useful when you have a random bunch of burned CDs.

Pesky brake pulsations resumed a couple thousand miles later, and we got stuck with a \$259 bill and an unscheduled stop to replace the front rotors (the 12-month/12,000-mile brake warranty had expired).

Toward the end of the Magnum's 40,000-mile stay, a staffer reported increased suspension noises coming from the front, and sure enough, the front anti-roll-bar links and bushings needed replacing. This happened just after the 36,000-mile



warranty expired, but our dealer covered the repair bill, citing our service history with them, which they say is common practice. We included the \$348 charge, however, since this sort of generosity can't always be counted on.

Estimating from the tread wear, we would have had to replace the tires at about 25,000 miles. But we racked up more than half the Magnum's 40,000 miles on snow tires, so we added a virtual \$412 to the normal-wear cost to cover a replacement set.

All those winter miles gave us a chance to demonstrate once again just how effective snow tires are, even with a rear-drive car. Our \$756 set of Dunlop Grandtrek WT M2s provided heaps of traction, and we had no reports of getting stuck. Road warrior K.C. Colwell cashed in on a \$50 bet by trekking up a particularly steep and snow-covered road in Snowmass Village, Colorado. "There weren't even any other rear-drive cars around," he gushed. "My friends thought there was no way." But if

you still think you need all-wheel drive, Dodge offers it for \$2000.

All told, the Magnum held up well to our rigorous mileage accumulation. In fact, many staffers commented on how surprisingly tight and solid it felt after 40,000 miles—the lone exception being a loose plastic trim piece that surrounds the shift lever. As a powerful, stylish, and satisfying enthusiast's alternative to the typical family-hauling choices, the Magnum makes a lot of sense.

### 2005 DODGE MAGNUM RT

Vehicle type: front-engine, rear-wheel-drive, 5-passenger, 5-door wagon

Price as tested: \$36,915 (base price: \$30,745)

Engine type: pushrod 16-valve V-8, iron block and aluminum heads, port fuel injection

|                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| Displacement        | 345 cu in, 5654cc                      |
| Power (SAE net)     | 340 bhp @ 5000 rpm                     |
| Torque (SAE net)    | 390 lb-ft @ 4000 rpm                   |
| Transmission        | 5-speed automatic with manual shifting |
| Wheelbase           | 120.0 in                               |
| Length/width/height | 197.7/74.1/58.3 in                     |
| Curb weight         | 4295 lb                                |

| Performance:                    | new      | 40,000   |
|---------------------------------|----------|----------|
| Zero to 60 mph                  | 5.8 sec  | 5.6 sec  |
| Zero to 100 mph                 | 14.7 sec | 14.4 sec |
| Zero to 120 mph                 | 22.6 sec | 22.2 sec |
| Street start, 5–60 mph          | 5.8 sec  | 5.9 sec  |
| Standing ¼-mile                 | 14.3 sec | 14.2 sec |
|                                 | @ 99 mph | @ 99 mph |
| Braking, 70–0 mph               | 174 ft   | 161 ft   |
| Roadholding, 300-ft-dia skidpad | 0.81 g   | 0.81 g   |
| Top speed (governor limited)    | 130 mph  | 130 mph  |
| EPA fuel economy, city driving  | 17 mpg   | 17 mpg   |
| C/D-observed fuel economy       | 20 mpg   | 20 mpg   |
| Unscheduled oil additions       | 0 qt     | 0 qt     |

### Service and repair stops:

|             |   |
|-------------|---|
| Scheduled   | 6 |
| Unscheduled | 2 |

### Operating costs (for 40,000 miles):

|                                |        |
|--------------------------------|--------|
| Service                        | \$673  |
| Normal wear                    | \$671  |
| Repair                         | \$348  |
| Gasoline (@ \$2.79 per gallon) | \$4900 |

### Life expectancies (estimated from 40,000-mile test):

|                  |                         |
|------------------|-------------------------|
| Tires            | 25,000 miles            |
| Front brake pads | more than 100,000 miles |
| Rear brake pads  | 100,000 miles           |

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