

PREVIEW 2007 DODGE CALIBER



Tiptoeing past the hatchback hex.

BY PATRICK BEDARD

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BILL DELANEY

So the curtain comes down on cute. Adios, Neon (b. 1994, d. 2005). Say hello to daring. Dodge has touched the third rail of American car design, laid a hand flat on it. The Caliber comes in one body style only, a five-door hatchback!

So bold. So audacious. So suicidal!

American car buyers decided long ago that hatchbacks are for other people, and only a few of 'em—you know, Saab types. The mainstreamers stay away in droves. Remember the Pontiac Phoenix? How about the five-door hatchback that was to redeem the Corsica line for Chevy? No? Well, nobody else does, either.

But wait. Dodge denies that the chunky little Caliber is a hatchback. "Sports tourer," it says.

Hmm. Wasn't the Pacifica called a sports tourer when it was introduced? For sure, the semi-wagon-esque Dodge Magnum was billed as a sports tourer. Those

two have found respectable followings.

We think the Caliber will, too. For a small car priced at \$13,985 going in, this machine has a great deal of presence, of visual swagger. There's a brawny assertiveness about it, like you're meeting Durango's little brother. The fact that it's a hatchback, a.k.a. a five-door, doesn't come up in the first hour of looking it over.

In size, the Caliber is a fraction shorter than the four-door Neon on a wheelbase shorter by 1.3 inches, at 103.7 inches. Width is up a tad (1.4 inches). The significant departure is upward—at 60.4 inches, it's 4.4 taller than the Neon. The belly is higher, too, giving seven inches of ground clearance.

Yet there's more to the presence than height. Tire packages include 17s and 18s, pushed way out to the edges of the sheetmetal under bulked-up fender flares. Opt for the big chrome 7.0-by-18-inch five-

spoked, and *nobody* will notice the hatchback.

Inside, the driver's eye point is up about four inches over the Neon's, says Dodge. In back, the seat cushion is chair height. The high roofline raises the tops of the door openings, making

passenger entry much easier than in a conventional four-door. Of course, the rear seat folds forward to nearly flat—it's a hatchback, remember—opening up 48 cubic feet of cargo room.

In front, storage spaces abound: There's a lidded com-

partment atop the dash, a small bin in the center stack, and numerous smaller cubbies in the console. All but the base SE get the "Chill Zone," a four-bottle, air-conditioned drink cooler where the glove box would normally be.

The Caliber is a front-driver with all-wheel drive available (it adds 150 pounds) on the performance-flavored R/T, which is stacked above SE and SXT in the model lineup. A five-speed manual transmission is standard, and a CVT is optional, except in all-wheel-drive cars, which get the CVT as standard equipment. The platform, new for Caliber, will get more use later this year under the Jeep Compass, a taller and more SUV-like sister vehicle.

The Caliber is meant to be DaimlerChrysler's new world car, to be sold in 98 countries around the planet. It has a new four-cylinder world engine, too—no kidding—from the Chrysler Group World Engine family, a joint venture among DaimlerChrysler, Hyundai, and Mitsubishi. A 1.8-liter with 148 horsepower at 6500 rpm is standard on the SE and SXT, and a 2.0-liter with 158 horsepower at 6400 rpm is optional. All R/Ts get a 172-hp, 2.4-liter version of the same engine. These are state-of-the-art, four-valves-per-cylinder twin-cammers with variable valve timing on the intake and exhaust. They also have a tumble-inducing butterfly in the intake manifold to aid combustion dynamics. The 2.0



and 2.4 have balance shafts.

We've driven Calibers with all three engines, both transmissions, and front- and all-wheel drive. The engines are winners, remarkably silky over the rev range to the

6750-rpm redline (6500 for the 2.4), with smooth torque curves. The CVT is less pleasing. It responds to the throttle at low speeds with an overly amped jumpiness. R/Ts with the CVT get an AutoStick manumatic that simulates a six-speed gearbox.

The early Calibers we've driven were quiet cars, much more refined than the Neon, with carlike ride qualities. We'd call the steering ambiguous and inclined to carve a weavy track. Torque steer, unfortunately, was more noticeable in the 1.8 than the torque itself. The 2.4 CVT versions bordered on unruly at full throttle. We hope later cars will be better.

Don't expect to see many \$13,985 Calibers. Most of the samples we drove were close to, or above, \$20,000. That's far too pricey for a conventional small sedan, but the Caliber's high-

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Vehicle type: front-engine, front- or 4-wheel-drive, 5-passenger, 5-door wagon
Base price: \$13,985
Engines: DOHC 16-valve 1.8-liter inline-4, 148 hp, 125 lb-ft; DOHC 16-valve 2.0-liter inline-4, 158 hp, 141 lb-ft; DOHC 16-valve 2.4-liter inline-4, 172 hp, 165 lb-ft

Transmissions: continuously variable automatic with manumatic shifting, 5-speed manual

Wheelbase: 103.7 in
Length/width/height: 173.8/68.8/60.4 in
Curb weight: 3000–3350 lb

Performance ratings (C/D est):
Zero to 60 mph 8.5–9.0 sec
Standing ¼-mile 16.5–17.0 sec

Projected fuel economy (mfr's est):
EPA city driving 23–28 mpg
EPA highway driving 26–32 mpg

riding, brawny-lad muscularity is a whole new thing at the price. Sure, technically, it's hexed as a hatchback, but that doesn't keep buyers away from small SUVs. Looks like DaimlerChrysler has carved out another niche.

