

Chrysler Town & Country 2006: The Weekly Driver

Article by: James Raia

The mini-van market is among the most competitive segments of the automotive industry. The Dodge Caravan, Honda Odyssey and Toyota Sienna all have loyal owners. But with the upscale 2006 Chrysler Town and Country in the mix, buyers have an even more difficult choice.

The Town and Country offers high-end prestige in the mini-van category, plus an inviting, efficient and spacious configuration of second and third-row seats. Add a sleek, new design and a stylish front grill and the Town and Country also gets best-of-class marks for its handsome looks.

It's logical to assume mini-van buyers purchase their vehicles to transport numerous passengers or for larger cargo needs, and that's perhaps the Town & Country's best quality.

Seven passengers fit easily. With the third row of seats folded, the rear cargo area is cavernous. If the second and third-rows are folded down (flush with the floor), the available space could be rented out as a moveable storage shed. The back liftgate has an automatic opening and closing option, further adding to the vehicle's cargo-carrying qualities.

My test drive for the week was the Limited, the most advanced and most expensive of four Town & Country models.

It featured a 3.8-liter, V6 and a four-speed automatic transmission. As the manufacturer's top-of-the-line mini-van, the Limited's dark-gray leather seats and dark, wood-like console perfectly complemented the dark gray exterior color called "Brilliant Black Crystal."

The vehicle looks great on the open road and its ride quality, nicely appointed controls and overall comfort are all impressive. As one example, during non-daylight hours, the instrumentation panel is backlit a soft light green. It's a nice touch.

Driving the mini-van is comfortable and the front-window, near-panoramic view is a plus. Steering is satisfactory, and the vehicle has a commanding presence.

That leaves only two questionable areas — less-than-peppy acceleration and average fuel mileage that didn't quite meet the advertised city and highway numbers.

Standard features in the Limited edition are vast. All key functions — windows to doors, eight-way seats to the sliding rear doors — are automatic. The Limited edition includes a rear-obstacle detection system, interior air filter, heated front seats, six-disc CD/DVD player, a removable center console, automatic driver-side and rearview mirrors, automatic headlights, roof rack, fog lights and 16-inch chrome alloy wheels.

My weekly driver also featured an optional custom preferred package. It included power sunroof (\$1,005), Sirius satellite radio with one-year's service (\$195) and a rear-seat video system (\$990) featuring a second-row seven-inch overhead screen, wireless headphones and remote control.

With a destination charge of \$730, the Limited's total price reached \$37,900. That's a lot, but then again the Limited is a lot of mini-van.

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Safety features -- Dual front, driver's knee and side curtain airbags (all three rows).

Fuel Mileage (estimates) -- 18 mpg (city), 25 mpg (highway).

Warranty -- Bumper to bumper, 3 years/36,000 miles; Powertrain, 7 years/70,000 miles; Corrosion, 5 years/100,000 miles; Roadside assistance, 3 years/36,000 miles.

Base price -- \$33,325.