

Published Every Monday

Dodge Grand Caravan changes for the better

By Anne Fracassa
Avanti News Features

OK, OK.
I caught a lot of static from all of you out there when I said the Honda Odyssey was the very best minivan on the market.

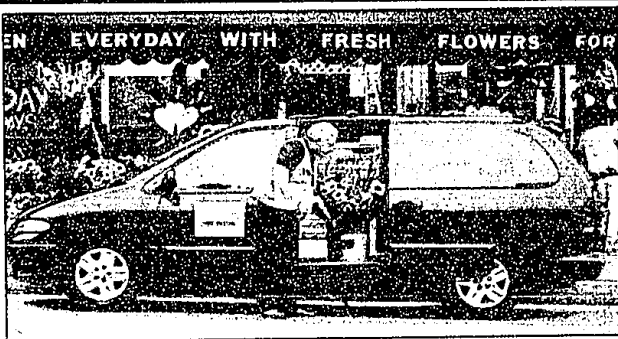
Well, at the time I drove it, it was.

It was the only minivan that drove like a car, was as easy — or easier — to get into than a car and had the magical fourth door on the driver's side.

I now stand corrected.
The Odyssey now ties for
first place with the 1996 Dodge
Grand Caravan.

It's been more than a decade since Chrysler changed the way America drove when it introduced the minivan. And for 12 years, it had the ugliest, hardest to get into, uncomfortablest (is that a word?) minivans on the market.

Oh, sure, it made minor revisions and changes here and there, but other minivans had nicer options, better suspensions, more car-like ride and feel and car-like amenities.



ROAD
TEST
By
Anne
Fracassa

there's a lot more glass (even though there's been a 30 percent increase), but there's better visibility all around than before. I don't see any blind

The front fascia looks friendly. The Grand Caravan is also higher and rounder than before, which translates into better front and rear headroom.

There are a lot of Caravans to choose from, including a short-wheelbase, long-wheelbase, entry level, mid-level and sporty versions. There are four

choices in engines as well: 2.4-liter 16-valve 4-cylinder, 3.0-liter V-6, 3.3-liter V-6 and 3.8-liter V-6.

The 2.4-liter engine is mated to either a 3- or 4-speed automatic transaxle; the 3.0-liter has a 3-speed automatic and the 3.6-liter and 3.8-liter engines have 4-speed automatic

The Grand Caravan evaluated was outfitted with the

3.3-liter sequential multi-port fuel injected V-6 that put out 158 horsepower. It was adequate for around-town driving. The 3.8-liter gives you 166 horsepower, which may be a little better for any towing you may have to do.

Fuel economy isn't too shabby: 18 in the city, 23 on the highway.

What I liked best was the interior.

Instrumentation is laid out well — logically, in fact. Everything is within easy reach, including the heating

There are pockets galore in this thing, from map pockets to coin holders to juice box hold-

Unfortunately, most "instrumentation" is done with warning lamps. Analog instrumentation is used only for the speedometer, odometer, trip

The tach is standard only on

the SE and LE trim levels. (I still would like to see more automakers use oil pressure gauges once in a while.)

Handling during city and highway driving was much better with the new Grand Caravan. It's quieter, too, and now has a car-like ride. It no longer feels like a truck.

The list of standard features on the Grand Caravan LE is long: Air, dual air bag (standard on all Caravans), front and rear door side beams, 4-wheel anti-lock brakes, eight cupholders, a rear defroster, power door locks, side window demister, tinted glass, intermittent wipers, windshield wiper de-icer and rear speed-sensitized wiper.

By the way, all you smokers out there have to specifically ask for a "smoker's convenience package" that includes the lighter and ash receiver inserts. More and more automakers are doing away with those things, and Chevrolet is one of them.

Oh, there's one thing Chrysler could do to top the Honda Odyssey. Put automatic sliding doors on the Grand Caravan.

The Grand Caravan is a pleasant surprise. How 'bout that — now there are two minivans worth their weight out there.

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If you'd like to see a particular car or have a car question, send an e-mail comment through the AVANTI11 website.

**1996 Dodge Grand
Caravan LE**
Vehicle class: Special-
purpose minivan.
Power: 3.3-liter V-6 engine.
Mileage: 18 city / 23 high way.
Base price: \$19,695.
Where built: Fenton, MO.

How Many Fluids?

(CCC)-How many fluids can be checked on a typical car? Four Six? Ten? If you guessed ten you're right. They're found in the


1. Engine
 2. Transmission
 3. Braking System
 4. Battery
 5. Windshield Washers
 6. Power Steering
 7. Cooling System (Antifreeze)
 8. CV Joints/Bear Axle
 9. Gas Tank
 10. Air Conditioner
- All of the above require periodic checking and "topping off," except the CV joints (which should be checked for leakage) and some batteries. Which one is "leaking"? The engine oil, antifreeze, transmission fluid and brake fluid.

How many require filter replacement? Generally, three: the engine oil, transmission fluid and fuel. Late-model cars are more susceptible to trouble due to contaminated fuel and brake fluid, says the Car Care Council. The tiny orifices in fuel injection and braking systems require that the fluids passing through them be absolutely clean. For the long life and dependability of your vehicle, check fluids regularly, says the Council.


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If you'd like to see a particular model tested or if you have a car question, send Anne Fracassa a message at AVANTI 1054, Avanti's America Online mailbox... Or comment through the Internet at AVANTI1054@aol.com


Anne Fracassa is senior editor of Avanti News Features.



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