

City Dodge



The petrol attendant is visibly excited. “First time that I

see a Hummer, it looks so beautiful.” He’s right. The Nitro bears a certain resemblance to the H3, especially from the side, mainly because of those low-cut windows. Dodge’s latest offering is another American vehicle that makes a bold styling statement. The chromed 20-inch rims, cathedral-like front-end and body-coloured cladding look like after-market parts, but are, in fact, stock and they cut a pretty striking profile.

It’s the proportions of the hunky crossover that get the attention and makes the look work. The high waistline with the big wheels and a wide stance covered by macho flares are

impossible to ignore – even if you’re not particularly fond of SUVs. In fact, I can’t recall ever attracting more roadside attention in a car. So, full marks for the show-off factor.

Enough about the looks, let’s climb in. It’s not easy as there’s no handle to pull yourself up. Not only have the black plastic door handles been borrowed from its Jeep and Chrysler cousins – the Nitro shares its whole platform with the new Jeep Cherokee.

Despite the usual tough and robust plastics and fat steering wheel, trim levels are above standard on the top-of-the-range R/T version. The leather seats look comfortable, but unfortunately they aren’t. They they lack side



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Rapper Xzibit, host of the popular MTV show *Pimp my Ride*, wouldn't be happy with this one. Dodge's Nitro comes ready pimped from the factory. Despite the fancy 20-inch chromed wheels, Dieter Losskarn checked its 4x4 badge on the back and decided to dodge Baviaanskloof's ruts in the inferno-red city slicker. Photos by Elke Losskarn.

support, are too wide and hard, and the height can't be adjusted. There's also no rest for your left foot.

The large round inside door handles resemble those oversized toilet flush switches in restrooms for the handicapped, but at least you can grab them, even with big hands. Being American, cupholders and storage bins are plentiful in the cabin. For those who appreciate hi-tech gadgets, the Nitro features a My Gig multimedia

system that incorporates sat-nav, bluetooth and a powerful audio system with a six-DVD changer and really good speakers. It has a 20-giga-byte hard drive for storing data, which can be transferred via its USB port. An auxiliary jack connects to an MP3 player.

As is the case with most SUVs, you pay for the macho-ness with a high load floor, although the sliding panel in the luggage area's floor, dubbed Load 'n Go, is a great new gimmick. It slides out 46 centimetres and can support up to 181 kilograms, which came in handy in Willowmore, where finally, after years of searching for an office ornament, I found an old petrol pump in an antique shop.

With the mid-size crossover segment offering ever-more-refined suspension in vehicles, the live-rear-axle Nitro R/T, with its stiffened performance, is a bit of a throwback. It's not a smooth ride. Together with the rather uncomfortable seats, driving long distances is a back-aching experience. The big 20-inch wheels clomp over road imperfections, but on any uneven road surface (of which there are plenty along the Garden Route and around Addo Elephant National Park), the Nitro pitched and swayed all over the place.



Take the bull by the horns: the Dodge grille emblem is as flashy as the rest of it.

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Powered by the familiar 3,7-litre V6 engine housed in the current Jeep Cherokee, there's enough oomph to pull the rather heavy vehicle along. But as with the Hummer H3, you sometimes wish for a little more steam. The engine is combined with a four-speed automatic transmission that in the Nitro is a bit sluggish.

The steering feel is very vague. Riding in the Nitro is never dynamic, because of its high centre of gravity. Driver and passengers sit in a rather elevated position and, while this gives you a great view of the road ahead, the fact that you're not comfortably seated spoils the driving experience.

The four-wheel disc brakes with ABS are probably the Nitro's most impressive dynamic feature, offering excellent pedal feel and strong response. Standard on the Nitro is electronic stability programme (ESP), all-speed traction control, electronic roll mitigation (ERM) and tyre pressure monitoring.

I must admit I was quite worried about the vehicle's vertically extended front section when I entered Baviaanskloof from the Patensie side. Recent floods had a rather negative effect on the usually tough-enough

The low-down

Dodge Nitro R/T V6

Price: R349 900 (entry-level model SXT Auto: R319 900; 2,8 litre CRD from R339 900)

Engine: 3,7 litre V6; 151 kW/203 hp

Top speed: 195 km/h

Consumption/100 km: 13,5 litres

Fuel tank: 74 litres

Ground clearance: 210 mm

Approach angle: 25,6°

Departure angle: 26,7°

Weight: 1 872 kg

Towing capacity: 1 587 kg

For more information: www.dodge.co.za

For the same amount of money (R349 900), you could buy:

Jeep Wrangler Unlimited Rubicon 3,8 litre V6 R319 900

Land Rover Freelander 2 3,2 litre 6 cyl AT R349 000

Kia Sorento 3,8 litre V6 AT R349 900



LEFT: A great gimmick is the practical sliding panel in the rear, dubbed Load 'n Go.

OPPOSITE: Showing off in the Nitro on city roads is fun as it's one of the smartest SUVs currently available in South Africa.

track, which was very washed out and deeply rutted.

The first 90 kilometres took me five-and-a-half hours, but the front-end never scraped the ground. It must have something to do with its closeness to the tyres, resulting in practically no overhang.

I turned the switch from 2WD to 4WD, but what troubled me a bit was the lack of low range, especially while crawling down the steep Combrink's Pass, braking all the while. Going over the edge in this section with overheated brakes would definitely have been painful.

After dodging a couple of those frequent mobile speed bumps (mountain tortoises), I encountered the first river crossing. It felt a bit like ploughing through snow. Wading depth is definitely not the Nitro's strong point. After exiting, my cellphone chirped with its characteristic frog ringtone. Wait a minute – there's no cellphone reception in Baviaanskloof. Suddenly several agitated frogs jumped out of the mighty Nitro grill. Sorry guys.

I rattled on for some more kilometres, experiencing every bump and rut on the way home. But the stiff suspension had one big advantage. I hadn't seen my chiropractor for ages and he's a really nice guy, with a keen interest in cars and lots of *Getaway* mags in his waiting room.

Conclusion: after purchasing your Nitro, stick to the urban environment, upload your MP3 player with some catchy tunes, open the windows, cruise around trendy places and enjoy the attention. But leave the travelling part to Nitro's cousin, the Jeep.



Next month: We take a couple of new 2008 Harley-Davidsons for a ride around the countryside.

Boys' toys

Roll-out the cold ones

Another essential 4x4 safari product is a practical roll-out storage system. Fronrunner is offering a ready-to-fit combo storage system, which can be adapted to a number of 4x4s. What's great about this one is that it includes a built-in fridge slider, suitable for either 40l, 52l, 74l or even 80l fridges. There is no easier way to get a cold one in the bush than by sliding it out on multi-bearing, heavy-duty telescopic sliders. The combo will cost you R5995. Web www.fronrunner.co.za.



Fascinating desk junk

Turning shiny, 1:18 die-cast models into intriguing miniature junkyard masterpieces is Dirk Patschkowski's passion. He's an absolute artist when it comes to creating small-scale rust, spider webs, dents, scratches, dust, flat tyres and dirt. You can choose any existing 1:18 scale die-cast model and he'll transform it into a yesteryear masterpiece for your desk. He also works off photographs, copying and downsizing anything. You can have your personal licence plate on the car as well. The ultimate present for car-nuts doesn't come cheap – expect to pay around R7 000 for a sleeping beauty in an attractively decorated barnyard, including protective display cabinet. Web www.xsdreams.de.



Smart fuel bug

BP has come up with a bright idea: a tag which has a microchip that lets the fuel pump know it's you. It automatically records the fuel you use and deducts the cost from your garage card account. That means you don't have to scratch for cash, sign anything or wait around.

There are presently 500 filling stations in South Africa and Namibia that are hooked up to the system and the card gives you 15 per cent discount on AA membership and reductions at BP Express shops and cafes. The tag is free and can be instantly cancelled if you lose it. For more information, go to www.bp.co.za.

Stuck

In all the manuals and all the 4x4 courses, they always tell you to get out and scout the obstacle. This is how you get a 2x4 Nomad stuck if you don't! With some serious digging and hi-lift jacking, it was retrieved and fun was had by all on a 4x4 trail near Caledon. Geoff Swanepoel, Cape Town



If you have photographs of a 4x4 getting stuck, e-mail them to wheels@getaway.co.za or post them to Getaway Wheels, PO Box 180, Howard Place, 7450 Cape Town. You could win a Nissan Secure Tech Survival Kit worth R1 000, comprising an Off-Road Tactix manual and DVD, as well as a recovery bag with pull strap, shackles and a pair of gloves.

