

DRIVES

'10 LAND ROVER RANGE ROVER | '10 LINCOLN MKZ | '10 BMW X6 M | '10 KIA FORTE KOUP | '10 CADILLAC SRX | LONG-TERMERS

BEST MINIVAN EVER?

Chrysler Town & Country challenges our minivan misconceptions

BY BOB GRITZINGER



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■ IF ONLY THE *AUTOWEEK* long-term Chrysler Town & Country wasn't a minivan, we'd call it perfect.

After 32,761 miles and 12 months of heavy-duty use that included long-distance runs to nearly every nook and cranny of the contiguous United States, we handed in the keys to our beloved Norge—so nicknamed for its pearl-white finish, boxy shape and pure practicality that made us think of it as a refrigerator on wheels.

Other than the usual wear and tear, a year in our hands did nothing to diminish the vehicle's solid functionality and operation. From trip one (a Colorado skiing trek) to trip done (a 1,500-miler from Michigan to Massachusetts and back), every knob, switch, hinge, lever, button and feature continued to function as intended when the vehicle rolled out of factory. The 4.0-liter V6 continued to pull strongly enough to squeal front rubber at launch and not entirely because of mileage-induced tire wear. The Norge loosened up some over the year but not to the point of creating noticeable squeaks, evil vibrations or unbearable rattles.

"This van is nothing short of

WRAP-UP

2008 Chrysler Town & Country

MILES DRIVEN (QUARTER/YEAR):
6,829/32,761

FUEL MILEAGE (QUARTER/YEAR):
18.8/19.7 mpg

FUEL COST (QUARTER/YEAR):
\$711.16/\$5,226.98

DAYS OUT OF SERVICE (QUARTER/YEAR): None/none

MAINTENANCE: First scheduled service, including oil change, tire rotation, software update (\$39.95); purchase and install OEM trailer hitch (\$598.73); install seven-way plug for tow hitch (\$43.75); second scheduled maintenance, including oil change, tire rotation, top fluids,

check air filter, brakes, hoses, clamps (\$48.75); third scheduled maintenance, including oil change, replace air filter (\$77.37); repair two windshield stone chips (\$29.95); fourth scheduled maintenance, including oil change, tire rotation, top fluids, check air filter, brakes, hoses, clamps, update nav system (\$48.75); fifth scheduled maintenance, including oil change, tire rotation, replace brake rotors and pads (\$340.98); replace left rear tire (\$146.27); sixth scheduled maintenance, including oil change, tire rotation, fluids, brake inspection (\$48.75)

ORIGINAL STICKER PRICE:
\$41,990

TRADE-IN VALUE:
\$21,575 (www.kbb.com)

miraculous in its ability to smoothly absorb miles and miles of highway without complaint," observed one editor who took the Norge on long road trips, first at break-in and then a year later as it ended its tour of duty. "Every single bit of this van still works like new, from the power doors and lift-gates to the electronics systems, and from the triple-zone air conditioning to the Swivel 'N Go seats," he noted.

Even more impressive, the Norge completed its work without losing a single day—that's

365 days of service without any repairs needed beyond scheduled maintenance. Very few vehicles in the *AW* fleet have performed at that high standard.

We came to love the Norge for its unparalleled functionality, including the power-folding third row, the under-the-floor storage caverns and the multitude of cupholders and cubbies. The little space in the lid of the center console proved the prime spot for wallets, cell phones and the like. Speaking of cell phones, some staffers learned to love the UConnect hands-free Bluetooth

mobile-phone connection, which served to turn the Norge into a rolling teleconference on more than one occasion. All of the interior appointments and lighting were judged superb.

Our model was built before all-wheel drive became available on Town & Country minivans, but a year of driving in all manner of bad weather proved that "utility" isn't the sole domain of SUVs. The front-drive Norge plugged through snow deep enough to stop buses and close schools, handling the sloppy stuff without fuss.

All the while, we recorded fuel mileage ranging from about 16 mpg to a high of 25 mpg; our average for the year settled at a respectable 19.7 mpg, slightly better than the EPA combined number on the sticker.

After our year in the Town & Country, we've learned that minivans have much merit, despite not fitting into the desirable demographic of crossovers and SUVs. As for our Norge, it made us believers in Chrysler quality and technology.

"For a while there, I might have recommended the Honda or Toyota over the Chrysler, but not now," remarked one staffer. ☺