

## **A Journey.**

E-mail can be interesting, especially when an invitation pops into your inbox and makes you feel quite important.

Dodge New Zealand popped an e-mail into my inbox in September offering me the opportunity to take a Journey, literally and attend the launch of the Dodge Journey.

Flattered, of course, and intrigued. Intrigued as motoring journalists often talk about launches they have attended – some in the most unflattering of terms – so the opportunity to attend one first hand was not going to be turned down. No way. Even if it did mean flying to Australia twice in three days...but that's another story.

Images of glamour and continual fun poured through my mind; exotic locations, extensive corporate hosting, stacks of giveaways to bring home; a veritable treasure trove of excitement beckoned me.

Someone has to do it...was my mantra, as I mentally geared up for this trip. Thoughts of Clarkson driving through the Dordogne also pressed forward – only he had a Lamborghini, I was to have a Dodge Journey – but no matter, this was going to be an exotic adventure all the way. My time had, finally, arrived.

Off to the airport on Thursday afternoon to board an Air New Zealand flight to Melbourne. Turn left to business class, ah no. Turn right to economy, sorry Pacific, class. Obviously business class was full of rugby players or something...

No matter, this aircraft is fitted with Air New Zealand's seatback entertainment experience, so I could have fun and pretend to be in business class. The system is all well and good, until you get within 10 minutes of the end of your movie and the system crashes. A minor detail thought I, a re-boot takes only about 2 minutes. Wrong. It takes 11 minutes during which time you find some people can't wait and cause the system to crash a second time – in turn causing the frustrated and not-very-impressed Air New Zealand flight crew to give up on it. And let's not worry about the frustrated and unimpressed passengers...

Touch down in Melbourne and, surely, the VIP treatment starts here. A limousine to whisk us very important journalists off to our Five Star luxury hotel. Dodge had thoughtfully booked us into the Hilton smack opposite the terminal at Tullamarine Airport. A five minute walk was our lot. Clarkson would not be impressed.

Dinner. Surely a glittering affair with shiny cars surrounding us in our exclusive, private dining room. Nope, we're tucked away in the back corner of the Hotel restaurant.

No matter, we're bound to be talking freely about how good our hosts' cars are, about the excitement facing us on the morrow. Ah, not this time. Dinner – the food – was excellent, but everyone spent the evening talking about... well anything apart from cars and especially Dodge product. Aircraft, travel, people – anything to avoid talking about cars.

The exceptional room at the Hilton with the magnificently sound proofed rooms allowed a good, nay a great, night's sleep. Things will improve in the morning. Surely. The morning had to see us board the waiting limo's laden with the fabled goody packs. It just had to.

The sun shone brightly as we walked across the road, back to the Terminal building and to the Qantas Meeting Rooms – complete with free orange juice, tea, coffee and water. Oh and a thoughtful Dodge person had brought some biccies too. How nice.

90 minutes of presentations, questions and answers followed, all standard format for launches. Now, please, it must time for the VIP treatment, where red carpets would abound and where impressed staff would pander to our every whim...

We piled into Grand Voyager's to go to the newest Dodge dealership in Victoria, at the privately owned (by Lindsay Fox) Essendon Airport where a fleet of shiny new Dodge Journeys awaited us. Grey concrete replaced red carpets; staff were – apart from the Dodge press team – noticeably absent.

Perhaps those myths of press launches are simply that, myths.



Clarkson would, by this time I felt, be jumping his 6' 5" frame up and down and demanding gifts galore...we, on the other hand, were grateful for the very nice Journey pen.

The reality of the day was around 300kms of driving, with the half-way point, and lunch, at a place in deepest Victoria, Daylesford. No five star luxuries there, one would guess.

Off we went. From this point the day becomes, well, a day long drive – or a long day drive, depending on your perspective. Naturally as seasoned travellers we all had half an eye on the clock to ensure that we could catch our return flight to Auckland.

When you read media reports on some cars, remember that most of the time it's based on first impressions, feedback from others at the launch and a day spent with the vehicle.

The day was bright (Stylish Dodge sunglasses provided? No, thought not) and hot, first thing to check was the climate control – checked, working and by the end of 8 hours in the saddle, quite grateful for it too.

Clearing the urban sprawl of Melbourne took us into the hinterland, where dust, some green fields and many brown ones, bounded by lumpy roads awaited us.

The Journey is a Crossover vehicle, so with higher than usual ground clearance and soft US-style suspension the driving was comfortable and not as tiring as I expected it.

Equally there was no chance of doing a circuit with "the Stig" driving to show us all how to do it. We had to make do with imagining what "the Stig" or Clarkson, or Hammond would do.

In nearly all cases the James May approach was adopted. Slow, relaxed and enjoyable.



Some of the Victorian open roads were ideal to try out the Journey's performance and handling capabilities – that and how the car will cruise all day at 95kph.

Dodge has launched three versions in New Zealand; entry level petrol and two luxury models, one diesel the other petrol. Our question was why no entry level diesel? The answer is that Australia doesn't think that there is a need in New Zealand...so there you have it. Did we protest this dictatorial decision? Not as loud as some would – no guesses for who...

Not having a diesel entry level is, as far as we are concerned, a not-very-bright move. The price of the diesel option is over \$ 52,000.00 and the difference between entry level (\$39,990.00) and top level is \$ 12,000.00. Too big a gap for most prospective buyers to contemplate, especially if environmental concern is part of the decision making...

Back to the day in Victoria.

Lunch was scheduled in Daylesford, which, amazingly, has its own Olympic Pool. It does, here's the proof.



The right hand image is the dinky café lunch was held at. Great coffee, excellent pizza oven roasted lamb and some enlightening conversation – with the locals not batting an eyelid as a convoy of Journey’s arrived at mid-day and then left in a cloud of dust. It may not have been glittering five star luxury but it was an excellent place to have lunch. If you’re passing through Daylesford – as you do – Franco’s is the place to eat at.

Lunch also gave everyone a chance to swap ‘war stories’ about the Journey – the most exciting was about meeting a ute virtually head on and then taking to the verge to avoid it. Mind you the on-coming ute did the same thing – it had to, that’s how some Victorian roads are built. None of this 150mph stuff teetering on cliff edges for us, oh no.

The break meant we could compare notes on... handling – neutral, performance – neutral, comfort – neutral, you get the picture. We’re not going to give away our innermost thoughts on the Journey – not yet anyway – you never know who is listening and we have to get back to the airport...

Refreshed and with that one eye on the clock off we went, this time my driving partner (Jack Biddle from AA technical services) and I got the diesel to play with. 150km of driving later and we end up where we started – the shiny new dealership at Essendon airport – still no red carpets, nor stretched limo, nor, strangely at a private airport, a corporate jet to whisk us home. Transfer back to the airport is in the same trusty Grand Voyagers; check in and the flight home.

With one day to familiarise oneself with the car, means the 30Gb hard drive ‘MyGig’ system went untried. As did the reversing camera, DVD player and just about all the bells and whistles the Journey comes with. Dodge helpfully providing press kits with images and text to let you know what you don’t have time to play with.

Isn’t there more to a car launch than that?

Apart from the conversations, the opportunity to sample the Melbourne Koru Club (Qantas Lounge you have nothing to fear) and see parts of the world not seen before and unlikely to be seen again, no there isn’t much more to vehicle launches than that.



I wish there was.

And what of the Dodge Journey? From a male perspective the vehicle, is adequate, quite comfortable and has the fun of a myriad of storage areas, seats that fold, move and store at the pull of a strap. In-car entertainment shares some of its features from the Chrysler Grand Voyager, although the 'MyGig' option is on the pricy side.

Isn't it a long way to go to, well, drive a car around Victoria?

Yes.

Was I disappointed? Oh I craved the VIP treatment, I desired the impressive, expensive, corporate gifts; the enticement, if you will, to promote the Journey. I did manage to score two more pens though...

Disappointed? I was aware that my first overseas launch was likely to be less than the glorious adventure I was lead to believe it would be. Or indeed what I secretly craved it to be.

I was impressed by the efforts that Dodge put in to the day, the planning and the cost. It isn't cheap flying and accommodating 6 journalists from New Zealand for an 8 hour road trip...

I saw first hand how the print media journalists cope with their particular pressures and how manufacturers need to promote their product ahead of release to the public.

Mind you, I could also see how some journalists clock up air miles like there is no tomorrow, how their duty free (paid by them I hasten to add) is always so well stocked and how much influence Australian head offices have on the New Zealand car market.

And that last bit is the most worrying of all.

Despite the glamorous image, attending umpteen vehicle launches a year requires stamina and perseverance. You also need to have a great sense of humour and be aware that comparing launches here to those in other, larger markets is a big mistake.

Maybe, one day, I will get to do the exotic and magical events that mythology tells me are out there...I will, though, not hesitate to accept more invitations to launches. They get into your blood somehow and you are always left wanting more...

Thanks to Dodge New Zealand for the invite, the opportunity, the pens and the hospitality, much appreciated.