

Latest and greatest

Wikileaks has nothin' on this place. What happens here stays here. Most of it, anyway. But once a year, we are allowed to see quite a bit—and to share it with you.

Each summer, Fiat Chrysler Automobiles (FCA) gathers media and machinery in the meadows of mid-Michigan for an event called "What's New." Present are the entire FCA lineup, along with concepts, announcements and a couple of surprises. It's like attending one of the big international auto shows—but with keys. We get behind the wheel of everything (except the concepts) and hit road courses, autocross, dragstrip and off-road trails, all at the super-secret Chelsea Proving Grounds.

FCA CHELSEA PROVING GROUNDS

Proving grounds by their very nature are remote. The FCA Proving Grounds near Chelsea, Michigan are hidden away among farms and rolling hills an hour or so west of Ann Arbor.

The 3,800-acre facility, opened in 1954 and constantly updated, is one of the largest in the world, with over 100 lane-miles of test surfaces and laboratory facilities for crash, emissions and

fuel economy testing.

Durability Roads of concrete, asphalt, gravel, stone and Belgian block test reliability and durability; Evaluation and Handling Roads have a variety of cornering at a wide range of speeds; an 18-acre Vehicle Dynamics Facility tests steering, suspension and braking up to 100 mph; Grade Roads of 7, 15 and 32 percent test hill climbing and service brakes, with 20 and 30 percenters for parking brake and transaxle parking sprag tests; and an Oval Test Track, six lanes and 4.7 miles long, runs up to 200 mph, with extreme banking for neutral steer at 130 mph in the sixth lane in the turns.

A 4.3-mile Ride Road tests steering, suspension, body shake and NVH; a Skid Traction Facility has four 1000-foot lanes of varying friction, with built-in sprinklers for wet surface testing; a 250-by-12-foot Splash Trough tests body sealing, fascia retention, water ingestion and engine electrical seals; and a 1.6-mile paved Straightaway Road tests brakes, while another 2.2-mile tests fuel economy, performance and coastdown.

Chelsea Proving Grounds is one of six FCA test facilities, along with Arizona Proving Grounds in



Ten zillion horses are let loose on a summer day in Michigan by Joe Sage



Yucca, ideal for hot weather testing and for dry conditions even in winter; Florida, Ontario and Mexico; and another Michigan facility in the vicinity of FCA headquarters in Auburn Hills.

Components of our FCA What's New event are held on the Durability Road, one of the shorter drive roads, a large paved pad and neighboring straightaway where we have timed autocross and dragstrip acceleration, and famous Lyman Trail, home of Jeep Trail Rated honors. All are inside the confines of the Oval, and each provides a carefully engineered combination of sublime torture and joy to us mere mortals.

New vehicles sprawled across the lawns and access roads included the entire 2017 lineups for Chrysler, Dodge, Fiat, Jeep, Ram and SRT—all ready for us to fire up and push hard.

On static display were final year special edition Vipers (see page 61) and the entire rockin' 2016 Moab Easter Jeep Safari Concept Collection. Jeep product planners like to bring their imaginations to market if they can, so much of what we saw here may well enter the pipeline, in whole or in part.

Other displays featured accessories and performance upgrades. Executives, marketing, engineering and design teams were on hand for any in-depth information or friendly conversation.

AUTOCROSS AND DRAGSTRIP

SRT and Abarth performance vehicles had a timed autocross course, and Hellcats a neighboring 1/8-mile dragstrip. Rain was threatening, so we headed here first, not because we mind a wet and wild time at speed, but just in case they had to shut it down. By the time we had shuttled to this subsite, a light drizzle was underway.

We tackled the autocross first, featuring the Dodge Challenger Hellcat and Charger Hellcat,

Viper, Jeep Grand Cherokee, Fiat 500 Abarth and Fiat 124 Spider Abarth. We had previously driven each one on track, autocross, dragstrip or all of the above and welcomed a back-to-back drive.

First we drove the Fiat 500 Abarth, then the Fiat 124 Spider Abarth, followed by Challenger Hellcat, Grand Cherokee SRT and Viper. (We didn't get to the Charger on this course). It was driest when we drove the 500 Abarth, and we noted its great performance on this course, not surprisingly after previous track time at Spring Mountain Motorsports Ranch in Nevada. For Abarth back-to-back, we grabbed the 124 Spider next. Next was the Challenger Hellcat, another superb autocross performer despite its size and weight, making it clear that size does not need to be a factor. Next was the Grand Cherokee SRT. Rain was picking up, but no way would we skip the Viper.

Varying rain may have given different cars different advantages, but when all was said and done, we casually and subjectively rated the 500 Abarth as #1, Viper #2, Challenger Hellcat #3, then the rest are tradeoffs involving function, performance and everything else anyone considers for vehicle ownership during non-track time.

We drove the Challenger and Charger Hellcats on the 1/8-mile timed dragstrip, as we have in the past. The pavement was damp—it was raining, but the cars at speed would tend to dry things out. With and without Launch Control or traction control, the Hellcats' systems were so responsive, we still made good times on the wet runs.

OFF-ROAD COURSE

On the Lyman Trail courses (including semi-extreme and highly extreme alternates), we drove the Jeep Renegade, because it's such a fun and

KEEP RIGHT >>



capable little beast (and because yet another friend was buying one and had a few new questions). We drove the Ram Rebel, because it's already very high on our list, a 1500 series pickup with modifications galore for heavy-duty, high clearance off-road use, yet with no compromise in its weight, fuel efficiency or towing capacity. And we drove a Jeep Wrangler, because—well, after all, this is Lyman Trail at Chelsea Proving Grounds.

Proving Grounds engineers are trying to break 'em on these courses, at least during development. We're trying not to, not that we could. Our vehicles had already proven themselves here before they ever hit production.

ROAD COURSES

We swap back and forth pretty freely between the two paved courses. One has a series of tight curves and broad sweepers, largely unbanked, surrounded by Michigan countryside (see photo below). The other is the Durability Road, with long straightaways for acceleration and braking in the right lane, and the left lane a series of special torture test surfaces (see small photo at right).

The Oval Test Track is not part of our program, but is in plain sight and always an inspiration. We spot a few test mules out there, the kind of camouflaged vehicles you see in spy photos (and this is on a day when the most serious stuff is actually stashed away from our prying eyes.)

We had already driven a number of the available vehicles at their initial launch events, and the day goes fast, but we had to take the Fiat 124 Spider out again, no question. As at the launch, it provided a wall-to-wall smile.

We drove off-road and heavy duty Ram 4x4 pickups here, as we often do, but also loved one in a different flavor—the sporty Brilliant Black Crystal Pearl Coat Ram 1500 R/T Regular Cab 4x2 shown at right, yours (or ours) for just \$35,985.

We drove the Jeep Wrangler Rubicon Wrangler 4x4, which proved as they always do that it is every bit as enjoyable on the highway as off-road.

We enjoyed the midsize Alfa Romeo-based Chrysler 200 in midgrade Limited Platinum trim (a stunner, and just \$24,490) and the Dodge Dart Turbo with 6-speed manual (solid, sporty and just \$17,995). And we were impressed by the latest of another favorite, the Dodge Durango, notable for upgrades in many of its included features, such as larger wheels and tires, without a price increase.

You could say there's a fourth venue—our tent, where we can grab WiFi and a bite to eat. Lunch is brought in by Zingerman's Deli, a well-loved good ol' American food purveyor out of Ann Arbor. Having hit classic Buddy's Pizza in Detroit and Zingerman's Roadhouse already that week, we were primed for another Pure Michigan lunch, replete with Faygo Rock N' Rye and Vernor's Ginger Ale. A torrential downpour in early afternoon paused the event, but only briefly—just time enough for another visit to the Zingerman's tent.

Just as Kid Rock had promised, it was summertime in Michigan. And—a good winter test drive notwithstanding—the perfect time and place to test the full Imported From Detroit FCA lineup.

The What's New event can be a bit like your high school reunion (if you went to an especially cool school). For weeks afterward, you remember everybody you talked to, about what, how much fun it was in aggregate, hope you didn't miss anybody, and realize there were so many fun things that happened you can't recount every one.

The event is exhilarating, informative and invariably enlightening. Any reasonable person will emerge from this event feeling the need for a seventeen-car garage. We certainly did. ■



Respect.

BY JOE SAGE

Sexy, tough and made in America. What better way to get around Michigan for a week than in the "Imported from Detroit" Chrysler 300 on its home turf? Our leather-lined Black Forest Green Pearl Coat sedan with 19-inch polished cast aluminum wheels turned heads and snagged compliments from pizza joints to weddings to roadhouses, everywhere from the 'hood to the 'burbs.

The Chrysler 300 lineup starts at \$32,160 for a rear-drive Limited. In the mid-to-upper \$30s are the 300S and 300C, one aimed at sport and one at comfort (the equally stylish 300S is \$2960 less). Our ride here is in the top model 300C Platinum AWD with a 292-hp Pentastar V6, at \$45,065 (or \$42,690 with rear-drive). Ours had a \$2995 pack-

age of electronic driving aids you could take or leave, though for \$3000 you could add a 363-hp 5.7L HEMI. (The V6 in the 300S is tweaked to 300 hp; the HEMI is offered on all but Limited; AWD is available on any Chrysler 300.) With all this power and roominess, highway fuel mileage still ranges from 25 mpg to as high as 31 mpg.

At half or even a third of some alternatives, you can forget about any Euro badge envy. In fact—as we found in Michigan—this industrial strength luxury cruiser can give other folks a good case of Detroit badge envy. ■

