SPEED AGE
EXPERT TEST

DODGE *sure-footed showboat*

On this quick D-500, a liberal sprinkling of chrome looks good.

By AL BERGER

FOR anyone who enjoys fine automobiles, road-testing the 1959 Dodge D-500 couldn't be anything but unalloyed pleasure. Like any car, especially any American car, it has some qualities that an automotive purist would not approve, but the sheer comfort and convenience of the Dodge, combined with really robust performance and responsive handling, should overcome anyone's prejudices.

The styling department has done its best to disguise the fact that the '59 Dodge is the third-year model based on the "Suddenly It's 1960" body design that appeared in 1957. The frontal aspect has been drastically altered, with rather long arched "brows" over the dual headlamps, and a different type of grille mesh with twin floating bars in the grille opening. The familiar "tacked on" Dodge fin treatment is still with us, but the fins have been extended back and notched sharply underneath, and the vertically-paired tail lights protrude farther back than before, to give a rakish triple-tier effect with the fins.

The interior is remarkably well done. The engineering boys have reworked the seats and the floor pan to lower the drive tunnel under both front and rear seats. I drove two models, one with swivel seats and one without, and can report that the standard bench seat is one of the most comfortable I can remember, while I've already praised the virtues of Chrysler Corporation's swivel seats sufficiently in my Plymouth Fury road test in the January issue.

The instrument panel layout is just about the best I have ever seen. A full set of gauges is installed — Dodge doesn't seem to go along with the popular Detroit theory that the average American driver is incapable of understanding an ammeter or an oil pressure gauge. The speedometer is like last year's revolving-drum affair, with a row of vertical bars appearing in five-mph increments. There's one new feature—the speed indicator bars are green up to 35 mph, then the whole business turns orange until you reach 50 mph, when the bars turn red and stay that color through the rest of the range.

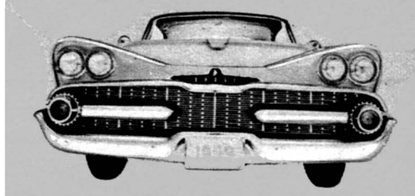
The whole group of instruments and controls are very neatly grouped in a trapezoidal housing, with the speedometer across the top and the other dials and controls underneath. All of them are perfectly visible to the driver through the top half of the new elliptical steering wheel. Each of the controls has its function neatly etched in the glass above it, clearly legible by day or night. The new push-button heater controls are in a horizontal line along the lower right-hand edge of the instrument panel.

Among the optional gadgets on the test cars were Chrysler Corporation's new Mirror-Matic electronic rear-view mirror and a wonderfully convenient outside mirror, which can be adjusted from inside the car by means of a small toggle-type control in the left-hand corner of the dashboard.

The Mirror-Matic works beautifully, especially in city traffic where it flips to "night" position the moment a pair of headlights appear from behind, and back to full-vision position as soon as the following car turns away or you turn into a side street. Sensitivity is controlled by a three-position switch on the front of the mirror bezel. "Hi-way" position is most sensitive, so that the mirror will respond to following headlights on a dark highway as soon as they're bright enough to bother the driver. "City" position is less sensitive, so that the mirror will not flip for ordinary city-street lights and signs. "Off" position locks the mirror prism in daytime full-vision position. There's one slight drawback in heavy city traffic, the constant clacking of the mirror as it flips back and forth can be annoying.

Among the engineering changes for 1959 are some improvements in Dodge's torsion-bar ball-joint front suspension. Cam-type anchor pins have now been installed from the upper suspension control arms so that the wheels can be aligned much more quickly and easily. The torsion-bar anchorage and adjustment, and the ball joints themselves, have been worked over and improved.

For the rear suspension, Dodge has added the best feature or air suspension, rear-end leveling. Called Level-Flite Torsion-Aire, the new option consists essentially of a pair of rubber-and-



SPECIFICATIONS: DODGE D-500

ENGINE AND CHASSIS

ENGINE	D-500
CYLINDER LAYOUT	90° V-8
BORE	4.25 INCHES
STROKE	3.38 INCHES
DISPLACEMENT	383 CU. IN.
COMPRESSION RATIO	10.0:1
VALVES	OH PUSHROD HYD. LIFTERS
CARBURETION	ONE 4-BBL.
TRANSMISSION	TORQUEFLITE
OVERALL RATIOS*	
1st	2.45
2nd	1.45
3rd	DIRECT
REAR AXLE RATIO	3.31 STD.
TORQUE CONVERTER (STALL RATIO)	2.2:1
STEERING	POWER, RACK AND SECTOR
TURNS (LOCK TO LOCK)	3.5
TURNING DIAMETER	43.7 FEET
BRAKE LINING AREA	230 SQ. IN.
SUSPENSION: FRONT	IND. TORSION BAR
REAR	LONG. LEAF
WEIGHT	
FUEL CAPACITY	20 GALS.

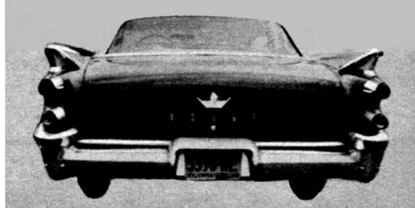
DIMENSIONS

OVERALL LENGTH	217.4 INCHES
OVERALL WIDTH	80.0 INCHES
OVERALL HEIGHT	54.3 INCHES
WHEELBASE	122 INCHES
TREAD: FRONT	60.9 INCHES
REAR	59.8 INCHES
GROUND CLEARANCE	5.54 INCHES

PERFORMANCE

ACCELERATION THROUGH GEARS	
0-30 MPH	3.8 SECONDS
0-40 MPH	4.7 SECONDS
0-50 MPH	6.7 SECONDS
0-60 MPH	8.8 SECONDS
STANDING ¼-MILE	16.3 SECONDS
SPEED AT END OF ¼	85 MPH
MAXIMUM SPEED	130 MPH (EST)
MAXIMUM BHP	320 @ 4600 RPM
MAXIMUM TORQUE (LBS./FT.)	420 @ 2800 RPM
HP PER CU. IN.	.84
LBS. PER HP	12.60
MILEAGE (ALL TESTS)	11.8 MPG

Notes: Weather cool, humid, light wind. Speedometer accurate at 60 mph
*Computed for torque converter at maximum stall ratio



Although Dodge's basic "Forward Look" remains, much trim has been changed.

Dodge trunk space remains close to the largest in the medium-price class. Lack of "dents" in lid keeps space at maximum.

Dodge's showy side-trim is in keeping with its spirited performance. Unique fins are bigger than ever.

Those oh-so-good Chrysler Corp. torsion bars make the Dodge's cornering ability a thing of beauty. Car holds the road as though it were on rails.

metal air chambers attached to the rear axle in addition to the standard leaf springs. There's a small compressor up front, belt-driven from the engine, along with a small steel air reservoir, and a leveling valve centered on the rear axle. The regular metal springs just support the car's "dry" weight. As load is added, the valve meters air from the reservoir tank into the air springs, keeping the rear end of the car at a constant height.

The effect on the car's ride is notable. The air springs react to weight transfer induced by turning or swerving the car, with the result that it's almost impossible to make the car sway, pitch or plow. As the photographs show, racking the Dodge around the sharpest turns at the Lime Rock sports car track produced scarcely enough lean to be visible. There's very little nose-diving when the brakes are slammed full on. Swinging the steering wheel sharply from side to side produces none of the frightening sway developed by some competitive cars. The nose of the Dodge moves slightly as the wheel is snapped, and if you do it hard enough the rear end will slip sideways just a bit, but that's all.

Steering, too, is excellent. The Chrysler Corporation "Constant-Control" power steering is really responsive and precise. The front wheels follow the steering wheel's motion right now, and they go right where you want to point them. The power chamber supplies 80% of the effort required to turn the wheel, and there are only three and a half turns from lock to lock, compared with five or more turns on most mechanical gears.

Torque-Flite transmission gives the driver so much control over the engine power that it's pointless to wish for a good old manual shift and a tachometer – no driver could out-shift this machine. You get instant acceleration when you floor the throttle. The TorqueFlite dropping into the required gear in a fraction of a second. For engine braking on downgrades or in traffic the "2" button slows you down nicely, and the "1" button gives a real low-gear effect.

The weakest spot on the car, probably, is the brakes. They're excellent at first–the action is smooth and even. But after braking down from a few acceleration-test runs, I found that the brakes on our test car had had it, for the time being. If you keep working them after they show some fade, look out. You lose braking power almost completely, and if they do hold, it will more than likely be with one wheel only, so that the car swerves.

However, this fault appears only with unusual use of the brakes – in normal operation they're faultless. And the fade problem is not a Dodge characteristic. Nearly all American cars suffer from inadequate brake cooling.

Under the hood, you can have quite a choice of engines this year. The reliable, but underpowered (135 hp) 230-cu. in. six is fine for taxis, but is not for the spirited driver. The 326-cu. in., 255-hp Red Ram V-8 is the standard Dodge eight, and for family-car use it's probably the best bet–not as economical as the six, but less frustrating in traffic. With a two-barrel carburetor. it develops 350 lbs./ft. of torque on regular-grade fuel.

Next step up the line is the Ram Fire V-8, with 361-cu. in. piston displacement and 10.1:1 compression ratio. This one, and the other top-line engines, are all versions of the Chrysler Corporation "B" engine, which was introduced last year. With a two-barrel carburetor, the Ram Fire develops 295 hp at 4,600 rpm. The Super Ram Fire V-8 is a hotter version of the same 361-cu. in. block, with a four-barrel carburetor, developing 305 hp.

Dodge has the honor of presenting Detroit's best dashboard for '59. Its instruments and gauges are all highly readable no matter what position steering wheel is in. Standard non-swivel seats are very comfortable.

The bored-out version, roughly the same as last year's large De Soto engine, displaces 383 cu. in., with bore and stroke of 4.25 x 3.38 inches, 10:1 compression ratio. In the D-500 version, with which both our test cars were equipped, it has a four-barrel carburetor and develops 320 hp. The super D-500, or police special, has two four-barrel carbs and is rated at 345 hp, but puts out the same torque, 320 lbs./ft., as the D-500, although it peaks at 3600 rpm instead of 2800.

The 1959 Dodge is a fast, comfortable, powerful car. I could find no situation that could overtax any part of the car except the brakes, and the use to which brakes are put in road tests is far from ordinary. The only other objection that can be made to the car can be made to all Big Three cars–sheer size. Tooling through narrow city streets and getting into normal-sized parking spaces with a car of this size is no fun. Of course, this is compensated for by passenger and luggage capacity.

All in all, that "Suddenly It's 1960" advertising was no idle boast. Here it is 1959, and the competition has yet to surpass this basic design which the Chrysler Corporation introduced in 1957. ●