



The **LONG** and the **SHORT** of it...

A comparison of Chrysler's Town & Country and Plymouth's Sport Satellite

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Are high-priced station wagons worth the price? Is it true that low- to medium-priced station wagons offer better fuel economy but lack comfort? Does a high-priced station wagon offer hidden advantages? Dollar for dollar, which station wagon is a better buy? Low- or high-priced?

The above list is only a sampling of the normal questions MOTOR TREND readers throw at us. And frankly, I wondered about it myself. The best way to decide the issue was a side-by-side comparison road test with two station wagons of similar manufacture — but in different price ranges. For this test we used the Chrysler Town and Country and the Plymouth Sport Satellite. Built by the same parent company, both wagons have similar suspension systems; and therefore, they can be rated according to specific questions concerning low-cost and high-cost wagons.

After 3600 road-test miles, we came home with some surprising conclusions. Some old half truths were exploded. A few old saws were resharpened. But there were surprising upsets, too, which made the comparisons worthwhile. Station wagons have evolved rapidly and many things owners said of them ten and even five years ago are no longer true. Just in general terms, for example, try these old myths.

1. "Station wagons have lousy brakes."
2. "Station wagons slide easily on ice and snow."
3. "Station wagons are heavy, sluggish and awkward."

Obviously, times have changed. Disc brakes, powerful engines and better weight distribution have improved the general handling and performance of station wagons to an astonishing degree. As for being awkward, forget it. The buyer who wants a quick-turning, fast-starting, agile station wagon can easily find one.

INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

Parked side-by-side, the Chrysler T&C wagon thrusts back nearly two feet behind the Plymouth Sport Satellite. The feeling of bigness in the Chrysler wagon carries over when you crawl inside on those luxurious astronaut seats. Black vinyl-covered, split front seats allow individual adjustments for driver and passenger. It's an excellent arrangement. When the motor starts the only audible signal is a muffled exhaust from behind. Instruments on the dashboard are clus-

tered to the left of the steering wheel. They're all rocker-types.

Underway, the Chrysler acts and feels like a quality carriage. Even wind noises seem baffled and subdued. Steering is unusually quick for a vehicle of this size. Crossing railroad tracks produces only a mild tire-thumping barely discernible inside the driving compartment. Very impressive, very luxurious.

The Plymouth Sport Satellite, by contrast, is another world. The particular model is full-dress in the Plymouth line. General quality of workmanship is at least as good, visually, as that in the larger Chrysler. The differences seem to be in *materials*. Though the interior decor is attractive, clean and above average in quality, there is *something* missing when compared to the T&C. What it is would be hard to say. For one thing, the Plymouth is somewhat smaller. The Satellite is about 2.6 inches narrower than the Chrysler and 16.8 inches shorter. It isn't a matter of feeling cramped in the Plymouth, you just *notice* the difference.

As for performance, the Sport Satellite is more responsive to the throttle. So much so that we could hardly believe the differences. Both wagons were equipped with four-barrel 383s and TorqueFlite transmissions, yet the Plymouth wagon could simply run away and hide from the T&C. All passengers commented on the different *sounds* of the two engines, also. In the Plymouth, healthy power sounds were faintly reminiscent of flatheads. The Chrysler engine is so heavily muffled by body insulation that it's hard to discern changes in the rpm level.

Comfort level in the Plymouth could be rated two ways. For the performance-minded I'd call it firm and happy. For the soft-ride purists I'd have to rate the Plymouth as a bit stiff when compared to the flabby-feeling Chrysler. There is an unmistakable air of *command* behind the steering wheel of the Sport Satellite. In the Chrysler, the driver feels a bit intimidated. Cut off from the world outside. So heavily insulated and wrapped with padding is it that virtually no feel of the highway reaches the driver. Judging turns, vehicle speed and inertia is decidedly more difficult.

The Plymouth, by contrast, hangs on longer and turns with less body roll. That's due in part to the difference in rear overhang. Plymouth's rear overhang is 57.8 inches.



Chrysler Town & Country obviously has Plymouth Sport Satellite beat in luxury category. Both wagons carry nine comfortably, but Chrysler is more plush. Chrysler has two-position gate door, while Plymouth has conventional tailgate. When it came to performance, Plymouth won hands down.

Chrysler's is 4.6 inches longer. While the Chrysler has a 122-inch wheelbase, Plymouth has 116 inches. These factors, of course, are bound to effect handling. In the mountains those fatter dimensions of the Chrysler were a definite drawback. On the return trip through 100 miles of freeway systems and city streets, the big wagon displayed the reasons for its popularity. Passenger comfort is superb. The quieter ride (less wind noise, less engine noise, less tire thump than the Plymouth) and more effective insulation explains why so many people enjoy a luxury station wagon.

Meanwhile, back in the mountains, the Sport Satellite ironed out the curves and slipped easily through long lines of slower traffic. The contrasts were amazing. Every 25 miles we switched drivers, several passengers changed wagons and impressions were noted.

GENERAL COMPARISONS

None of us checked the price sheets prior to the two-wagon road tests, so there were no built-in prejudices. Naturally, we were aware of a price differential, but that's all. Comparing the two station wagons strictly on performance and handling, this is the way it stacked up.

Passenger Capacity. Both wagons carry nine persons, on three seats, easily. The Chrysler has the two-position gate door, opening either sideways or down flat. The Plymouth drops flat like a conventional tailgate.

Load Starting Power. Because the Chrysler weighed about 800 pounds more than the Plymouth Satellite (including all accessories) it was, naturally, much slower than the Plymouth wearing the same 383 engine. The Satellite is far and away the best performer. The heavier the passenger and cargo loads, the more we noticed the difference.

Steering and Tracking. The longer-wheelbase Chrysler nevertheless had a quick-turning ratio that made it nearly as maneuverable as the Plymouth. The single drawback was in parking and jockeying the big station wagon in tight spots. On the open road, the Town and Country handles beautifully, tracks straight and doesn't wander. The Plymouth had a more solid feel to it in the corners but because of its lower body weight, suffered a bit more in gusts of wind.

Interior Comfort Level. The Chrysler wins this one hands down. I've never tested a luxury station wagon that I liked better. Where the Plymouth is adequate, satisfactory and merely efficient, the Chrysler is outstanding in its plushness. The assault on the ears is much subdued. Little vibrations and road shocks which affect all cars just don't bother passengers in the Chrysler. Any rudeness of pavement is absorbed and dampened.

Overall Handling. The Plymouth took this one with flying banners. It's lighter, quicker, faster and more nimble in all

situations. It has a sure-footed stance and an instant responsiveness which few wagons possess. Really outstanding in this category. The Chrysler, conversely, has sacrificed performance in favor of plushness.

SUMMING UP

The inevitable question, of course, is how much do they cost? Together, they rack up \$11,046.70, of which \$3245.40 is locked up in accessory equipment. Chrysler's base price is \$4669, while the Plymouth Sport Satellite tallies a \$3350 base price. Because of all the optional equipment, the final retail prices were much higher.

The biggest surprise of all, perhaps, came when we took a voice-vote of the six-person test crew. Five voted for the Plymouth Sport Satellite, one for the Town and Country Chrysler. (Naturally, the one dissenting vote was cast by a female member of the crew.) Admittedly, the average age of the testers was below 30, and far below the Chrysler's \$6300 price tag in *income level*. Despite that factor, if offered a choice between the two wagons at *no cost*, I personally would select the Plymouth Sport Satellite. If I lived anywhere but the madhouse traffic tangle called Southern California, I might feel a lot different about it. /MT

SPECIFICATIONS

	Plymouth Sport Satellite	Chrysler Town & Country
Price (complete as tested)	\$4886.70	\$6377.70
Weight (with accessories)	4436 pounds	5231 pounds
Passenger capacity	9	9
Wheelbase	116 inches	122 inches
Overall length	208 inches	224.8 inches
Width	76.5 inches	79.1 inches
Height	56.4 inches	57.9 inches
Track	59.5 inches	63.4 inches
Body overhang, rear	57.8 inches	62.4 inches
Engine	383 cubic inch	383 cubic inch
Horsepower	330 @ 5000	330 @ 5000
Torque	425 @ 3200	425 @ 3200
Transmission	3-speed TorqueFlite	
Axle Ratio	3.23:1	2.76:1
Brakes	Front discs, rear drums both vehicles	
Fuel tank capacity	23 gallons	19 gallons
Cargo capacity	84.9 cubic feet	93.1 cubic feet
Suspension	Torsion bar front, rear leaf springs both wagons	
Tire Size	8.55 x 14	8.55 x 15