Buick's Enclave crossover tunes out the noise and tunes in a comfortable ride

by Mark_Maynard

I've found the great American cruiser - and it's a Buick. And not even a sedan, but the Enclave crossover.

BUICK ENCLAVE - The Buick Enclave is an attractively styled family or business vehicle with high-quality fabrics, plastics and leather-trimmed seats, all assembled with care and attention to detail. Base pricing ranges from $32,790 to $36,900. CNS Photo courtesy of Buick. For those skeptics who still doubt the credibility and quality of an American-made vehicle, this is one to right so many wrongs. And it's among several new vehicles that show much improvement from all the home teams.

Enclave's quality and style have been a long time coming from General Motors. Buick loyalists, particularly, have endured so much. The division never needed a sport utility vehicle or a minivan. Both of those are gone now, leaving this step-up GM brand with the mid-size Lacrosse sedan, full-size Lucerne sedan and now this seven- or eight-passenger Enclave in front- or all-wheel drive.

Base prices range from $32,790 to $36,900. The top-of-the-line CXL test vehicle came well-optioned for $42,530, which included a $1,000 discount for the California-Florida-Texas chrome package that adds a power sunroof and second-row skylight, both with sunscreens.

Enclave is an attractively styled family or business vehicle with high-quality fabrics, plastics and leather-trimmed seats, all assembled with care and attention to detail. It's a shared "architecture" with the Saturn Outlook and GMC Acadia.

Perhaps most astounding of all in this vehicle is the quiet. Buick's QuietTuning soundproofing adds such features as laminated windshield glass, thicker side glass, triple-sealed doors and more sound isolation in key areas. It adds weight but creates what may be the quietest vehicle I've ever driven.

The silence is so enveloping that traffic jams become opportunities to turn up the tunes and tune out the chaos. Reducing the racket of the daily commute can be very de-stressing.

Having such a quiet interior is a risk point for Buick, because what noise that's heard becomes noticeable. But the test vehicle had not one itchy buzz, vibration, clunk or clink of a loose seat belt. Even wind noise is minimal for a vehicle of this size. However, large, outswept front windshield pillars can cause blind spots at the base of the outside mirrors.

The 275-horsepower, 3.6-liter V-6 runs on 87 octane and has good range from a 22-gallon tank. The fuel economy numbers may sound worse than they are. The 16 miles per gallon city and 22 highway (16/24 for front-wheel drive) reflect the new EPA standards and are about 20 percent lower than last year's calculations.

The six-speed automatic is new and the shift points are good for maneuvering this vehicle, which weighs nearly 5,000 pounds empty. The heft is felt in double downshifts that generate engine noise with just gradual acceleration.

The overall driving experience is of a smaller vehicle. The steering is lushly smooth, making the ride comfortably firm without the Buick bobble. The 40.4-foot turning circle is better than those of some smaller sedans.

The interior treatment is posh and trimmed, with plenty of realistic-looking wood trim and glittering chrome bits. Some of the everyday conveniences I appreciated were the automatic up and down to the side windows, lighted gauges, power tailgate and generous storage areas. The audio and AC-vent controls are easy to operate and also accessed from the steering wheel. I'd also recommend the optional tilt and telescoping adjustment, but there's no option for adjustable pedals.

Climbing into the third row of almost any van, SUV or crossover is best left to the young and agile. Enclave's sliding second row and generous headroom take out much of the gymnastics of entry and exit. But the third

row is still for youngsters.

Third-row seat backs fold easily from the cargo area and have straps to hoist them back into place. There's storage under the cargo floor and hooks to secure items.

The complex system of floor tracks for second-row seat travel could be undermined by the accumulation of gunk and dirt if not regularly cleaned and lubricated. I know one mother who took a look at those tracks and bought a Toyota Sienna minivan.

Cargo space is vague when considered in cubic feet, but the area behind the third row neatly fits a span of large paper grocery bags, or a stroller or other such awkward items. Enclave is long enough that the third-row head restraints are a safe distance from the glass and don't appear to be compromising in the event of a rear-end collision.

Standard safety features include six air bags with rollover-capable head curtain side bags. Enclave received the National Traffic Safety Administration's highest, five-star ratings for frontal crashes for driver and passenger and side-impact crashes for front- and rear-seat occupants. Rollover potential is four-star.

With seats for seven or eight, Enclave is an alternative to a minivan; however, it really has the style and drivability of a large sedan. The only element it lacks from its tail-finned predecessors is big-block horsepower. SPECS

2008 Buick Enclave CXL AWD

Body style: seven- or eight-passenger crossover with third-row split bench

Engine: aluminum, DOHC, 275-horsepower, 3.6-liter V-6 with variable valve timing

Transmission: six-speed automatic

0-to-60 acceleration: 8.2 seconds

EPA fuel economy estimates: 16 mpg city, 22 highway (16/24 2WD); 87 octane recommended

DIMENSIONS

Cargo space: 18.9 cubic feet behind third row

Length/wheelbase: 201.5/119 inches

Curb weight: 4,985 pounds (2WD 4,780 pounds)

Towing capacity: 4,500 pounds

FEATURES

Standard equipment includes: remote locking, tri-zone climate control, power lift gate, six-speaker CD audio system with MP3 and XM satellite radio, remote locking, xenon high-intensity discharge headlights and fog lights, leather-trimmed seats, mahogany wood-and-leather steering wheel, Smart Slide second-row seat, QuietTuning soundproofing, tilt-telescopic steering wheel, 19-inch tires and wheels

Safety features include: six air bags including rollover-capable head curtain side air bags, Stabilitrak electronic stability control with rollover mitigation, four-wheel disc brakes with ABS and traction control

PRICING

Base: $36,990, including $735 freight charge; price as tested, $43,530, including $1,000 chrome-package discount

Options on test vehicle: Entertainment package ($3,025) includes touch-screen navigation system, Bose sound system and rear-seat audio controls; Chrome package ($2,195) adds power sunroof with second-row skylight and 19-inch wheels; Luxury package ($925) adds heated and folding outside mirrors with turn-signal indicators, steerable headlights, power tilt-telescopic steering wheel and 110-volt power outlet; Red Jewel tint-coat, $395

Warranties: five years/100,000 miles powertrain; four years/50,000 miles basic bumper-to-bumper coverage

Competition: Acura MDX, Lexus RX 350, Volvo XC90, Hyundai Veracruz, Lincoln MKX

Where assembled: Lansing, Mich.

PLUSES: Good-looking, very quiet, luxuriously appointed non-minivan.

MINUSES: Floor tracks for seat travel will need care to avoid filling with gunk and debris Possible bumps when determining car's heritage

Q: My brother bought a 1968 Chevy SS convertible and would like to know if there is a Web site to determine whether it is a true Super Sport 427.

- Frank Green, via e-mail

A: Vince Muniga, a 19-year General Motors veteran, is my go-to source for heritage and high-performance questions. Determining genuine Super Sport status is clear as mud, but he offers some good resources.

Unlike Chrysler and Ford, GM did not always put a letter in the VIN to designate an engine, he said.

"I had a '69 Impala SS convertible with a 427-cubic-inch V-8 and tried to find exactly how many were made by Chevrolet," Muniga said. "They replied that SS designations were carried by 327, 396 and 427 passenger cars, which includes Malibus, Impalas, Caprices and Corvette."

To help determine the '68 in questions, Muniga offers some simple math.

"Take the number of Chevelles produced that year and figure that fewer than 10 percent were convertibles. Of that, probably 10 percent of those cars carried the SS option package.

"With all the different engine options - 327, 396 (various horsepower versions) and 427, you've got one rare car," he said.

"The good news is that beginning in 1966, cars did come with the 427 and this option continued through 1970 until the 454 came out.

You also may be able to tell by looking at the block.

Block numbers would be 3916321 (early) or 3935439 (late), he said. In addition to this block designation, there should be a portion of the VIN stamped into the block, possibly the last six numbers of the VIN.

For a good resource, get a copy of "Chevrolet by the Numbers: The Essential Chevrolet Parts Reference 1965-1969," by Alan Colvin ($23.07 at Amazon.com).

But there's another complication in validating heritage.

"Cars could also be ordered COPO - Central Office Production Option - if you knew someone," Muniga said. The 427 engine could be a dealer-installed option.

"Buyers should be aware that the muscle-car market is ripe with fraud," he said. "For $29.95 on eBay you can buy dies to stamp a block, fender top, etc. A good paper trail is always beneficial."

For example, try finding a first-generation Camaro convertible that isn't an RS/SS with a big block, he said.

"Believe me, there were a ton with 327, two barrels (carburetors) and an automatic," he said. "With no numbers or original build sheet, it's anyone's guess."

Here's the address of the experts; include an addressed envelope for a reply:

GM Heritage Center, 6400 Center St., Sterling Heights, MI 48312-2609.

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