

Tribeca crossover is pricey and too cramped

by Mark_Maynard

Subarus are built so well and have such refined interiors that sometimes I expect more from them.

TRIBECA - The Tribeca is Subaru's largest vehicle and can come loaded with the third-row bench, rear DVD and a navigation system. CNS Photo courtesy of Subaru. That's true of the Tribeca crossover. It gives the perception of a luxury vehicle, but without all the perks. And Tribeca is not inexpensive at \$30,640 base and \$38,440 loaded with the third-row bench, rear DVD and navigation system.

This is Subaru's largest vehicle - a five- or seven-seater - and it has had its growing pains. After about a year and a half on sale, it was quickly put through a facial makeover to smooth out its stub nose, sculpt the rear pillars for better visibility and add a bigger engine.

But more horsepower may not be what Subaru needs. The new EPA fuel mileage ratings are 16 mpg city and 21 highway, but that's with a recommended 87 octane fuel.

The engineering of this vehicle is commendable, but there is just too much crammed into a small space.

Tribeca's exterior styling is as strong as the best crossovers, but the swoopy shape creates problems. There is an expansive, minivanlike dashboard and long windshield pillars that create awkward sightlines around the large, square outside mirrors (also new for '08). Look twice for pedestrians, then proceed.

The front-seat area is spacious and the cockpitlike instrument panel is efficient to use. Electroluminescent lighting is used in all gauges and fan-temp controls. I appreciate this lighting for its viewing in all light levels, but I wonder about the durability of these electronics in the often-used fan and temp controls. It's a techie treatment - even luxury class - but time will tell how well these hold up.

Headroom is generous and the seats supportive. The second row is flexible, too, with reclining and sliding seats. A low drive shaft tunnel eases center seat foot room, but the front-center console protrudes into the space, making it suitable only for kids. There are cup holders and grab handles aplenty, an AC fan control and overhead vents for the second and third rows. At night, there's ambient lighting in the foot wells and other areas, another luxury-class tease. But Subaru doesn't trust the public to provide automatic up and down power windows. Even Buick provides this convenience in its Enclave crossover.

The third row is fairly easily accessed by the sliding second row, but there are simpler and more efficient designs (such as in the Buick Enclave). The system in Tribeca moves the seat back and slides the seat forward, but returning the seat requires a separate step to reach in and slide the seat bottom into position.

The two seats in the third row are simple posterior pads for youngsters, and visibility from the right-side seat is dissected by the seat belt for the second-row center. That could have been avoided with a seat-mounted belt. The good part about the third row is it folds flat into the cargo floor.

If carrying five or six on a vacation, there won't be much room behind the third row. Space is generous with folded seats, but raising the tailgate requires strength. The release is in the middle of the door, which does not give good leverage for lifting.

At this price, a family could buy a minivan, get more room and more conveniences for not much more money.

Subaru should have a large crossover, but maybe this one needed more than just a styling makeover.

SPECS

2008 Subaru Tribeca Limited

Features: seven seats, rear-seat DVD and navigation system

Body style: all-wheel-drive, five- or seven-passenger crossover

Engine: 256-horsepower, DOHC, 3.6-liter six-cylinder boxer

Transmission: five-speed electronic automatic Sportshift with manual mode

EPA fuel economy estimates: 16 mpg city, 21 highway; 87 octane recommended

Length/wheelbase: 191.5/108.2 inches

Curb weight: 4,250 pounds

FEATURES

Standard equipment includes: eight-way power driver's seat with manual lumbar, four-way power front passenger seat, nine-speaker (160-watt) audio system with single-disc player and MP3 compatibility, leather-trimmed first- and second-row seats, touch screen GPS navigation system includes rearview camera and XM satellite radio, power tilt/slide glass moon roof, 18-inch alloy wheels

Safety features include: dual-stage front air bags, front seat side-impact air bags, curtain side-impact air bags for the front and second rows with rollover sensor, anti-lock brakes with electronic brake-force distribution and Emergency Brake Assist, active front-seat head restraints

PRICING

Base: \$30,640, including \$645 freight charge; price as tested, \$38,440

PLUSES: Impeccable assembly and materials quality

MINUSES: Expensive, average fuel economy, cramped third row

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