Little to Regret in 50-Grand Yukon

by Mark Maynard

As a responsible member of the motoring media, I'm having some guilt for liking the new, large sport utility vehicles from General Motors.

I've just finished a week in a GMC Yukon and if you need one of these things, the 2007 model is a desirable improvement over the 2006.

GMC YUKON - The GMC Yukon is not just a dressed-up truck. The SUV is a fine cruising machine, even when costing more than $50,000. CNS Photo courtesy of GMC. A variant of the Chevy Tahoe, which is also the backbone for the Cadillac Escalade, this SUV is more evolved technologically. These trucks are so smooth now that they are the offspring of the great American sedan that was lost when cars were downsized to upsize fuel economy.

It used to be that trying to dress up a GM truck was an oxymoron. Not now. The quality of materials and how they are put together make a fine cruising machine, even when costing more than $50,000 "popularly equipped."

The Yukon tester cost $51,785, dressed in more than $12,000 in options, four-wheel drive and the 325-horsepower, 5.3-liter V-8. A $1,000 incentive through Jan. 3 can be combined with regional incentives and others, such as the Plumbing, Heating and Cooling Association or the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association, for which card-carrying members get a $500 discount (check www.edmunds.com for these and upcoming incentives).

Climb into the bucket seats and it's the La-Z-Boy command center. The leather is attractive, the seats full-bodied and all switches and controls are within comfortable reach and viewing.

You may not need a navigation system, but this one is packaged with a DVD and a back-up camera. Trust me, once you've experienced a back-up camera, you'll wonder how you got along without one before. Same with the power tailgate ($350). And, maybe, same with the 20-inch tires and polished aluminum wheels. The tires and wheels are a $1,795 extra and they won't be cheap to replace, but they do enhance the styling.

I also would have no regrets paying extra for the adjustable pedals, trizone automatic air conditioning, head curtain air bags, Bose audio, rear parking assist (tones signal that objects are close) and satellite radio -- all those and more are in the SLT2 package that costs $4,495.

The obvious downside to all this motoring pleasure is keeping fuel in it. The EPA credits this truck with 15 mpg city and 21 highway, but I didn't get such performance. But then I also recently tested a Toyota FJ Cruiser 4WD with 4.0-liter V-6 and five-speed automatic transmission that was rated 17/21. At $24,000, the FJ is being sold to a much younger crowd than Yukon, and it could sell in greater numbers.

A Flex-Fuel E85 version of the 5.3-liter -- capable of running on E85 ethanol fuel or a mixture of E85 and gasoline -- is standard on four-wheel-drive models and optional on 2WD models.

At 5,674 pounds at the curb, these trucks are substantially heavier than the 2006 models, but they also get substantially better fuel mileage and still run on 87 octane. The active fuel management system shuts down a bank of cylinders when they aren't needed and it's not likely the driver will notice.

And here's the caveat: In a year or so -- GM won't say when -- these trucks will get six-speed automatic transmissions that will give better fuel economy. The current four-speed automatics are fairly fuel efficient and bulletproof, but if it was my payment book, I would wait for the six-speed.

Of course, you'll pay more to get it.

Big trucks are self-limiting. When gas was cheap, they were trendy jewelry, but paying $80 and more to fill up is a great teaching tool. Most people learn quickly that if they don't need to blow that kind of money, they'll get something else as soon as possible. Those who do need a truck will appreciate the power, comfort and utility of the Yukon/Tahoe.

Copley News Service

SPECS2007 GMC Yukon SLT 4WDEngine: 325-horsepower, 5.3-liter V-8 with displacement on demandTransmission: 4-speed automatic with tow haul mode and automatic four-wheel driveEPA fuel economy estimates: 15 mpg city, 21 highway

FEATURESStandard equipment, includes: Remote locking, 6-way power-adjusted driver seat, trizone air conditioning with rear heat and air, cruise control, floor mats, lighted visor mirrors, 17-inch aluminum wheels, power windows-locks-mirrors (heated), fog lights, solar-ray deep-tinted glass, rear audio controls, driver information center, smooth-ride suspension package, running boards, heavy-duty trailering equipmentSafety: front air bags with passenger sensing system, 1-year OnStar service, 4-wheel anti-lock disc brakes, StabiliTrak stability control system, tire pressure monitor

PRICINGBase: $39,650, including $900 freight; price as tested, $51,785Options on test car: SLT2 decor ($4,495) includes leather-trimmed upholstery, 12-way power-adjusted and heated front seats with memory presets, heated second-row seats, two-passenger third-row seat, trizone automatic air conditioning, power adjustable pedals, head curtain side air bags, remote starting, 6-disc CD changer with MP3 and Bose speakers, XM satellite radio (three months free), integrated garage opener, power folding mirrors with turn-signal indicators, rear parking assist, luggage rack crossbars; navigation radio, $2,250; 20-inch polished aluminum wheels, $1,795; rear seat entertainment, $1,295; power sliding sunroof, $995; second-row seat power release, $425; power liftgate with lift glass, $350; rearview camera, $250; 4.10 rear axle ratio, $100; heavy-duty transmission cooler, $95; heated washer fluid, $85Where assembled: Arlington, Texas

PLUSES: Guilty pleasure in an SUV.

MINUSES: 4-speed automatic transmission

Little to Regret in 50-Grand Yukon by Mark Maynard