

Chevy's reimagined Malibu proves to be a stylish sedan

by Mark_Maynard

Chevrolet knows it has something special in its new Malibu sedan, which is why it flew out a couple of experts from Detroit to give me a walk-around of the new model.

NEW MALIBU - There isn't one dominant feature that makes the new Chevy Malibu a keeper, but like a good recipe, all the ingredients work together for a memorable entree. CNS Photo courtesy of Chevrolet. Malibu is up against some tough competition, including Toyota Camry, Honda Accord, Nissan Altima and Ford Fusion. This mid-size sedan segment makes up about 21 percent of new-car sales and Chevrolet wasn't ready to give it up, said Malibu chief engineer Mike Mueller said. The previous Malibu sedan was sort of a straight-to-rental type of vehicle.

But not this one. Bob Lutz, General Motors' vice president of product development, said "It looks like \$40,000 and costs \$20,000."

Mueller, who led my vehicle viewing, said: "We can't meet the bottom of the bar anymore. The bar never lowers."

Lutz set the standard for Malibu. It was up to Mueller and his team, and like a shooter aiming at a clay pigeon, to hit a target that was to be ahead of the competition. His team was able to put detail through every slice of the car, Mueller said. Their handiwork can be seen from the cleanly applied trunk lid liner to the tiny, hardly noticeable Chevy bow tie emblems in the headlights.

Nitpickers will notice covered screw heads, padding in the storage bins, doors that close with vacuum tightness, and well-aligned interior panels and quality materials. Outside, the steel body stampings are crisp with tight gaps. Sloppy bodywork is a particular pet peeve for Lutz.

Mueller rode with Lutz at least five times in Milford, Mich., proving grounds to be sure the car was on course.

My top-line LTZ test car, \$28,340 with options, was a complete package of style, standard equipment and stamina. In fact, quality and style are present in all three trim levels as well as a hybrid. This quality is good not only for General Motors, but for all brands. Even Toyota, which still continues to get by with uninspired interior designs and materials.

Base pricing for Malibu ranges from \$19,995 to \$26,995, including a \$650 freight charge. The hybrid starts at \$22,790 and features include 16-inch aluminum wheels and a one-mode propulsion electric system with nickel-metal hydride batteries. This system does not have a battery-power-only mode, but it improves fuel economy by switching off the engine at stops and boosts acceleration with electric-motor assist. Fuel mileage is 24 miles per gallon city and 32 highway.

The base LS and mid-level LT models use a 169-horsepower, four-cylinder engine and four-speed automatic transmission. The top-line LTZ comes with a 252-horsepower, 3.6-liter V-6 and six-speed Tapshift automatic. The V-6 and six-speed are optional for the LT.

All models come with six air bags and traction control.

Worth paying extra for is the gorgeous Red Jewel paint (\$295), which complemented the two-tone, cocoa-cashmere leather with piping. GM leather used to emulate vinyl, but these hides are attractively textured and stitched. The leather is standard on LTZ, but even the LT gets UltraLux Sheer Suede seat covering.

The interior design accents openness and is well-dressed in pleasing, contrasting colors and textures. A thin bead of tiger-striped faux wood trim traces the arcs of the dual-cockpit, adding warmth and radiance. At night, blue-green ambient lighting beams from the map lights and the door handles.

The flow of design elements draws the focus on the gearshift console, which is almost art-like with neatly stitched leather and a chrome surround. The interior mix of materials, colors and textures is less dramatic in the middle models, but still appealing.

The three-spoke steering wheel is large and well-padded with bumps at the 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. positions. It just feels right to hold both hands on the wheel.

Driver controls are ergonomic and simple to use. Sightlines are good, even over the shoulder, due in part to the long wheelbase and body lines. All doors open wide - a feat of enhanced engineering and cost - that allows easier access.

The back seat area is a better place for two than three-across seating. A tall exhaust tunnel and high center seat with no head restraint exclude this position from all but the youngest, whose heads do not go above the seat back.

Both door-side seats have substantial head restraints, but the seat bottoms may be a tad short for driving full-bodied colleagues to lunch. There is plenty of foot room and knee space. The seats have a 60/40 fold, but there is no center armrest.

Attention to detail is evident in the woven fabric headliner, (much more tasteful than the mouse-fur liner in the Camry), robust coat hooks that will hold a sheaf of dry cleaning, slim door storage and seat-back nets.

Interior ambience is enhanced by an acoustic windshield, front side glass and thicker rear side glass. Spray-on deadener on the floor pans fills nooks, and crannies, and seals panels to resist noise penetration.

Mueller said the suspension is a balance of ride and handling. The car rode smoothly over grooved concrete on the interstate, which can put some sedans into a jiggly fit. Front and rear stabilizer bars allow some athletic driving. The long wheelbase helps ride quality, but it also affects the turning circle, which is large at 40.4 feet.

There's also balance between accelerator, steering and brake responses. The V-6 can be quick enough off the line for wheel spin, and shift points are timed for fuel economy. I used the steering wheel shift buttons (standard on LTZ) not for sporty driving, but to hold a gear in sluggish traffic. The power was then ready when I needed to move, without a big double downshift and tire squeal. Braking is flat - no nose dive.

After driving nearly 300 miles in the test car, I'm still looking for serious complaints. Mueller and all the vehicle teams appear to have had a budget to build and design the car that even they would like to own. He said a rear center headrest was not possible on this platform, which is shared by the Saturn Aura, Saab 9-3 and other GM models, but it definitely is planned for the next generation of the car.

A big question for new buyers attracted to this car. Will it be as dependable as a Camry or Accord?

Let's hope Lutz and Mueller have taken care of those details, too.

SPECS

2008 Chevrolet Malibu LTZ

Body style: mid-size, five-passenger front-wheel-drive sedan

Engine: aluminum, 252-horsepower, 3.6-liter, DOHC V-6 with variable valve timing; 251 foot-pounds of torque at 3,200 rpm

Transmission: six-speed Tapshift automatic

EPA fuel economy estimates: 17 mpg city, 26 highway; 87 octane recommended

Fuel capacity: 16.3 gallons

DIMENSIONS

Trunk space: 15.1 cubic feet

Front head/leg/shoulder room: 39.4/42.2/55.9 inches

Length/wheelbase: 191.8/112.3 inches

Curb weight: 3,649 pounds

Flat towable: yes

FEATURES

Standard equipment includes: remote locking with remote vehicle start, automatic climate control, power heated outside mirrors, power windows, power trunk release, eight-speaker audio system with six-disc CD changer, eight-way power driver seat (heated), six-way power front passenger seat (heated), leather-trimmed upholstery with piping, floor mats, split folding rear seat, tilt-telescopic steering wheel (leather wrapped), 18-inch touring tires and ultra-bright aluminum wheels

Safety features include: adjustable pedals, dual-stage front air bags, front side bags, head curtain side-impact bags, traction control, stability control, four-wheel disc brakes with ABS

PRICING

Base: \$26,995, including \$650 freight charge; price as tested \$28,340

Options on test car: rear power package, \$250, adds power center with 110 volt AC plug and manual rear window sunshade; sunroof, \$800; Red Jewel tintcoat, \$295

Warranty: Five years/100,000 miles powertrain

Final assembly: Kansas City, Kan.

Competition: Toyota Camry, Ford Fusion, Hyundai Sonata, Nissan Altima, Honda Accord

PLUSES: Styling, attention to detail, quality materials.

MINUSES: No rear center head restraint; tall exhaust tunnel cramps rear center seat foot room; 40.4-foot turning circle; more of a four-seater than five.

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