

Big ESV falls short of Cadillac experience

by Mark Maynard

General Motors builds so many variants of its full-size SUVs that the differences end up being six of one, a half-dozen of the other between those at GMC, Chevrolet and Cadillac.

They're all pretty good truck-based SUVs, so it's more of a styling choice, whether Chevrolet Tahoe, Suburban or the GMC Yukons.

2007 CADILLAC ESCALADE ESV - The Cadillac Escalades stand out from the SUV pack due to their different exterior body panels, more soundproofing, leather and upscale electronics. CNS Photo courtesy of Cadillac. The Cadillac versions -- the Escalades, in short wheelbase, long wheelbase ESV and EXT pickup style -- have some uniqueness through various exterior body panels, more soundproofing, leather and electronic devices. And they cost more.

I logged more than 250 miles in a gold-mist metallic Escalade ESV with cashmere-hued leather, 22-inch chrome aluminum wheels, navigation with rearview camera, sunroof and a heated steering wheel. The window sticker was \$68,085, including \$8,400 in options that I expect many buyers would select.

At 5,866 pounds, this is a lot of vehicle. It's an effective extension of the contemporary Cadillac image and it is a competent stroking of a Chevrolet Suburban into a luxury SUV experience. But while you can gild a Suburban with champagne-beige paint, there are some dark roots showing in the Cadillac.

If size and mass equal personal security, this has the presence of 18 1/2-feet of safe-place on the highway.

It is made sure-footed with all-wheel drive with electronic stability control, automatic rear leveling and road-sensing suspension, four-wheel disc brakes with ABS and tire-pressure monitoring. Head curtain side air bags with rollover protection are part of the package.

Yet with all this and a mighty 417 foot-pounds of torque, the ESV is somewhat of a lumbering bear.

A few months ago I tested the short-wheelbase Escalade AWD and gave it a thumbs-up for guilty pleasure. It is extreme with the new 403-horsepower, 6.2-liter V-8 and six-speed automatic transmission. Even the 13-inch disc brakes with twin-piston front calipers were up to the task of halting its 5,665 pounds.

But the same road-sensing suspension, disc brakes and power applied to the 21-inch-longer ESV aren't as

impressive. This big wagon feels heavy as it moves from the stoplight and as it shifts weight to move quickly in lane changes. The brakes don't overwhelm with their stopping power, and they should.

Even the somewhat lighter Suburban drives with more responsiveness.

GM's new SUVs are built with tighter tolerances between body panels than ever before, and the quality shows in snug door closures and the fit and finish of construction. This improves aerodynamics and fuel economy in tiny increments.

But the height and mass of the ESV are felt at highway speeds in wind noise as its blunt face barrels through the air.

As GM ekes out greater fuel economy with aerodynamic treatments for slippery air flow, why not drop the ride height 4 inches? Lower the center of gravity for additional stability, make it easier for everybody to climb aboard and, maybe, cut down on wind noise. Not to mention the creation of a new, wide and low boulevard bruiser, which is a common aftermarket suspension treatment, anyway.

The ESV has a value-packed list of standard equipment, including 14-way power adjustable front seats, power adjustable pedals and heated windshield washer fluid. The Bose surround-sound audio system is a standout and the power liftgate is a useful convenience.

But it is inexcusable that the product planners did not insist on a head restraint at the center seat of the third row. It's an odd third row because the seat has a 50/50 split and the center three-point belt is positioned at the gap between the seats. With the bench's lower seatback, that's the whiplash seat.

What would your reaction be as a parent if you watched your child buckle into that seat?

I'd wish GM had charged a little more money and provided a Cadillac experience for all passengers.

Copley News Service

SPECS2007 Cadillac ESVBody style: Large, half-ton 7- or 8-passenger utility vehicleEngine: 403-hp, 6.2-liter OHV V-8 with 417 foot-pounds of torqueTransmission: six-speed automaticEPA fuel economy estimates: 13 mpg city, 20 highway; premium recommended, not required

FEATURESStandard equipment includes: remote locking, 18-inch aluminum wheels, tri-zone air

conditioning, Bose surround-sound audio system with 6-disc CD changer and MP3, power liftgate with liftglass, remote vehicle starter, high-intensity-discharge headlamps, rear audio controls, power (heated) folding mirrors, power adjustable wipers, rain-sensing wipers, heated washer fluid, steering wheel radio controls Safety equipment includes: Front air bags, head curtain side air bags for all rows with rollover protection, front belt pretensioners, Stabilitrak stability control, ultrasonic rear park assist, one-year OnStar service, tire-pressure monitoring system, four-wheel ABS

PRICING Base: \$59,680, including \$875 freight; as tested, \$68,085 Options on test car: 22-inch chrome aluminum wheels, \$2,995; Information package, \$2,495, includes navigation system, rearview camera and intellibeam; rear seat entertainment Warranty: 4-years/50,000-miles The competition: Lincoln Navigator, Mercedes-Benz GL, Infiniti QX56 Where assembled: Arlington, Texas

PLUSES: Powerful, contemporary Cadillac image.

MINUSES: Still reaching for luxury from a truck-based SUV; no center head restraint in third row.

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