Infiniti retools G35, takes aim at BMW fans

by Mark Maynard

The 2007 G35 is essentially all new â€” but familiar.

An overnight success when it debuted in 2002, the sport sedan was attractive to younger buyers, was inspiring to drive and had style that appealed to men and women.

Five years later, it's still in the sweet spot.

Infiniti's plan for the G35 was more of a fine tailoring of what was already good.

INFINITI G35 - Infiniti's retooled G35 comes in five variations, with pricing ranges from $32,150 for the base model to $34,650 for all-wheel drive. CNS Photo courtesy of Infiniti. The overall footprint is a tad wider, longer and a half-inch lower than the original. It's 29 pounds heavier due to structural strengthening, but the car is faster and more fuel efficient. Another cubic foot of cabin space moved its EPA classification from compact to midsize. While there is more legroom in back, it's still a better four-passenger car, despite five seat belts.

Some of the tailoring includes a leather-wrapped steering wheel double-stitched by hand on a machine to move the seam for a smoother feel in the driver's hands. Inside, aluminum-alloy trim has a scritch-scratch-artsy technique called "Washi" that resembles a Japanese treatment for elegant, handmade paper. The metallic trim spans the face of the instrument panel, center console and on the door panels. It's so trendy it makes the $450 option for woodlike trim seem old-fashioned.

Sold in five variations, G35 pricing ranges from $32,150 for the base model to $34,650 for all-wheel drive. The Sport models are $34,150 for the five-speed automatic with magnesium steering-wheel paddle shifters or $32,950 for the six-speed manual.

The Sport 6MT tester was $37,950 with options, which did not include the $1,100 Technology Package. Among its features are Intelligent Cruise Control, which keeps a set distance from the vehicle ahead; Adaptive Front lighting, which turns a headlight about 22 degrees when making a turn; rearview camera; and Brake Assist with Preview Braking (required with the Navigation package, $2,100). Preview braking precharges the brake system when the adaptive cruise control laser identifies an impending crash.

But even with the three major option packages and the $550 trunk lid spoiler, the sticker price is still about $10,000 less than a comparably equipped BMW 335i.

Competitors include the Acura TL, Audi A4 and Lexus IS, but it is obvious that the BMW 3-series sedan was the benchmark. The upstart G35 also trumps the Bimmer by 55 horsepower and has more back-seat headroom, more front headroom and a half-foot tighter turning circle.

Bimmer loyalists won't overlook how the G styling mimics the iconic BMW C-kink in the side rear window.

The blatant copycats. Or is Infiniti just confident that its car is a competitor?

Structural improvements make the new G35 a much better car than the outgoing model, says Randy Fior, Infiniti's senior manager for product planning. The chassis is 40 percent stiffer, has 16 percent more spot welds and 300 percent more laser-seal welds.

"There was higher attention to detail to make the structure more capable because this car is dynamically more capable," he says. "And we wanted to provide more confidence to the driver."

Short drivers or tall, this car fits a range of sizes. There's a very tall 40.5 inches of front headroom, and even 39.1 with the sunroof. Sightlines are unhindered, particularly over the low hood, which helps the perception of being in control. Particularly worthwhile is the 35.4-foot turning circle, which is about as tight as it gets in a midsize sedan.

Fior's team also wanted a genuine stereo experience in its 10-speaker Bose Studio on Wheels, part of the $2,350 Premium package.

The car's front doors were engineered around a three-piece speaker setup, including a 10-inch woofer and 3-inch tweeter in each door. A 24-bit Burr Brown digital audio converter gets more data off the CD to more perfectly reproduce sound, Fior says.

Safety features are packaged in the Advanced Air Bag System, which includes dual-stage supplemental front air bags with seat belt sensors and occupant classification sensor, front-seat side-impact bags and roof-mounted side-impact curtain air bags that span front to rear.

Last year's G35 had two power ratingsâ€”280 horsepower for the standard models and 298 hp for the Sport. Now there's just one engine tune and it's enthusiast-rated at 306 hp and 268 foot-pounds of torque. This level of torque is useful when lolling along in second or third gear; a nudge on the throttle will pull the car up to speed. The 3.5-liter V-6 is 80 percent redesigned and sits a little lower, which adds to a lower center of gravity and more control in cornering. And there seems to be more of that distinctive Infiniti/Nissan high-revving engine note.

Fuel economy using 91 octane is 19 mpg city, 27 highway, which is 1 mpg better on the highway that last year's engine. The all-wheel drive and automatic-equipped cars get the same mpg improvements, now at 19/26 and 19/25.

One compromise to the car's high-tech positioning may be in the five-speed automatic. Much of the competition has moved on to six and seven speeds.Fior defends the new transmission.

"We think it is the optimum balance. It gives higher levels of performance in first, second and third, and better fuel economy in fourth and fifth," he says. "It also allows you stay in the gear longer for that 'swell' feeling of endless power. The more multispeed transmissions can't do that as easily."

The five-speed automatic blips the throttle on downshifts and has Adaptive Shift Control for quicker shifts in sporty driving situations.

The test car was lithe, lively and vicious-fast. Stall speed can be touchy with the six-speed manual, but once you are out of first gear, the pull of the engine just doesn't fade until the rev-limiter kicks in. Even in sixth at highway speeds, the engine jumps when the throttle goes down.

The steering is light but tactile and the pedals are placed for performance heel-toe shifting. The car is very controllable and stoppable with largeâ€”13-inchâ€”four-wheel discs with Brake Assist, electronic brake force distribution and ABS.

The Sport model has sport-tuned rear shock-absorber valving, larger (18-inch) wheels, high-performance tires instead of all-season and a wider rear tire than the front. Other features include a sport-styled steering wheel with special stitching color, aluminum pedals, sport-styled front seats with thigh extensions and driver's power torso and thigh bolsters, tinted chrome grille, sport front bumper and side sills.

There's a well-known bias among auto writers for the BMW 3-series sedans. The cars are passionate in performance with hand-in-glove bonding and they have been well-marketed as objects of desire.

BMW has been diligent in fending off advances from Lexus. But now with a more dominant offering from Infiniti, there's another courtesan flirting with that long-monogamous love affair of BMW and driver.

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SPECS2007 Infiniti G35 Sport 6MTBody style: midsize, five-passenger, rear-wheel-drive sport sedanEngine: aluminum 3.5-liter, DOHC, 24-valve V-6Horsepower: 306 at 6,800 rpmTorque: 268 foot-pounds at 4,800 rpmTransmission: Six-speed manual; optional five-speed automatic with manual mode and steering-wheel shift paddlesAcceleration: 0 to 60 mph, 5.2 to 5.3 seconds, estimatedEPA fuel economy estimates: 19 mpg city, 27 highwayFuel tank: 20 gallons; premium recommended

DIMENSIONSTrunk space: 13.5 cubic feetFront head/leg/shoulder room: 40.5/43.9/55.6 inchesRear head/leg/shoulder room: 37.7/34.7/55.2 inchesLength/wheelbase: 187/112.2 inchesCurb weight: 3,532 pounds

FEATURESStandard equipment includes: Infiniti Intelligent Key with push-button ignition, eight-way power adustable front seats, high-intensity-discharge bi-xenon headlights, fog lights, power windows-locks-mirrors, fold-down rear center armrest with locking trunk pass-through, rear-window defroster with timer, six-speaker audio system with Radio Data System and in-dash six-disc changer with MP3 playback capability and compact-flash port, cruise control with steering-wheel controls, dual-zone automatic air conditioning, electromagnetic trunk opener, dual overhead map lights with sunglasses holder.Sport upgrades: sport-styled steering wheel with special stitching color, aluminum pedals, sport-styled front seats with thigh extensions and driver's power torso and thigh bolsters, tinted chrome grille, sport front bumper and side sillsSafety equipment includes: dual-stage front air bags, seat-mounted side bags and roof-mounted curtain bags, active front head restraints and front belts with pretensioners and load limiters, tire-pressure monitoring, vehicle immobilizer system

CHASSISBrakes: power-assisted vented discs, with electronic Brake Force Distribution, Brake Assist and four-channel ABSSteering: power-assisted, vehicle-speed-sensitive rack-and-pinion; 35.4-foot turning circle (AWD 36.1)Suspension: front, independent double-wishbone with stabilizer bar; rear, multilink independent with stabilizer barTires and wheels: Bridgestone P225/50R 18-inch front, P245/45 rear; painted aluminum-alloy wheels

PRICINGBase: $32,950, including $700 freight charge; price as tested, $37,950Options on test car: Premium package, $2,350, includes power sliding sunroof, Bose Studio on Wheels audio upgrade, memory seat-mirrors-steering-wheel presets, power driver's seat lumbar adjuster, power tilt-telescopic steering wheel, one-touch up/down rear window function, auto-dimming rearview mirror with compass, Homelink gate-garage opener, heated front seats and side mirrors; rear spoiler, $550; navigation package, $2,100, includes touch screen, lane guidance, real-time traffic information, 9.5-gigabyte music hard drive,

compact-flash slot for playing MP3 files and XM satellite radioThe competition: Acura TL, Audi A4, BMW 3-series, Lexus ISWhere assembled: Japan

PLUSES: Precision in motion. Beautiful styling inside and out that doesn't compromise function and usability, except for that center back seat.

MINUSES: Two-person back seat despite the five seat belts; sport-style driver's seat-back bolsters can block seat belt access.

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