

Plenty Big: Escalade for '07 is a hunk of hot-selling Cadillac luxury

by Mark Maynard

The third time's the charm for the Cadillac Escalade.

The third-generation Escalade, on sale now, is at long last the Eldorado of luxury sport utility vehicles.

Previous generations bankrolled enough development budget for the 2007 model that it could break out of the stamping mold from the Chevrolet Tahoe and GMC Yukon, with which Escalade shares a platform.

NEW CADILLAC - The 2007 Cadillac Escalade has a fierce exterior, a friendly interior and comes with an improved V-8 and 6-speed automatic. CNS Photo courtesy of Cadillac. The Cadillac gets its own exterior sheet metal and interior design, which is a bit of exclusive marketing cachet to encourage a Cadillac shopper to write a \$60,000 check for an enhanced Tahoe.

Escalade is THE choice when it comes to big and invasive automotive obnoxiousness. And the '07 model pushes that Cadillac image with an intimidating face, a 403-horsepower V-8, chrome fender gills and optional 22-inch wheels.

Love it or hate it, the image and marketing seems to be working. In the first 10 days of sales, one Cadillac dealer near me sold 15 Escalades. Two weeks later, he had a waiting list.

And sales have been just as wild across the country.

Escalade sales were up 45 percent compared to year-ago levels, and March sales were up 68 percent over February. (And it's a similar story for Yukon - up 109 percent in March - and for Tahoe, up 41 percent over February.)

And those Escalades were not discounted. Only all-wheel-drive models are available now, with a starting price of \$57,280 or about \$64,000 with options, which is how most dealers preordered them.

The two-wheel-drive model goes on sale in the fall.

The redesigned model, with all its improvements, costs the same as the 2006 model. That's a big ouch for all those who jumped in for the '06 value pricing campaigns, but with such popularity, can a midyear price

increase be far behind?

"Despite high fuel prices, these vehicles (Escalade/Tahoe/Yukon) are so right that they can sell anyway," says Gordon Wangers, CEO of Automotive Marketing Consultants in Vista, Calif. "They are Lexus-LS quiet. The ride quality is better than most luxury sedans, and for vehicles of their size and weight, they almost defy physics."

It was the 22-inch-wheel option that set the engineering baseline for Escalade, which also benefited Yukon and Tahoe.

The standard tires are 18-inch, but offering 22-inch tires and wheels - a factory first for an SUV - required the truck to be engineered from the wheels upward.

Bigger wheels added 13 pounds each, which led to a beefed-up chassis, wheel bearings and suspension. And bigger wheels required bigger four-wheel disc brakes. Hit the brake pedal and forward motion declines rapidly, without a big nose dive.

Some of that response in the test SUV may have been enhanced by the nearly foot-wide 22s. So, safety could be a good approach to convince a spouse that the \$2,995 option has added value.

Bigger wheels require more power to get them rolling, however.

This year's engine is a 403-horsepower, 6.2-liter V-8, which replaces a 345-hp, 6.0-liter V-8. The new engine matches the old one in fuel economy, 13 mpg city and 19 highway, using regular or premium, but peak power benefits from 91 octane.

That's dreadful mileage, but it is still an achievement for a 5,800-pound block that weighs almost 300 pounds more than the outgoing model. Key to the mileage improvement is a new six-speed automatic transmission, replacing a four-speed. There have been requests for the Duramax diesel V-8 engine option, which isn't likely to happen, but a fuel-saving gasoline-electric hybrid engine will be offered in 2008.

A big separator between Escalade and Yukon-Tahoe is the automatic air-controlled shock absorbers, which tame the mass to corner like a German sedan. It is remarkable technology that provides flat cornering, cancels bounce and jounce, and gives fingertip control at the steering wheel.

Escalade is a big SUV that's not all that efficient for passenger capacity but, once inside, few will complain.

The quality of parts and assembly appear much improved over last year's model. Low-gloss finishes and soft-touch surfaces prevail. Nuance leather-covered seats have aroma and support.

There's real wood on the steering wheel, and fake wood elsewhere that looks convincing.

At night, the gauges glow with blue backlighting and white needles.

Other necessities include a 10-speaker Bose 5.1 Dolby Digital surround sound audio, ultrasonic rear parking assist, searing blue-white bright high-intensity discharge headlights, fold and tumble second-row seats (with a power option) and a power lift gate.

The optional DVD navigation system adds a rearview camera and IntelliBeam headlamps that have automatic low-high control.

There are still a few rough edges to be found, and there isn't Lexus' obsessive attention to detail, but it's apparently good enough.

And for Escalade, it's the look that counts. And this truck has that and more of what it takes for people to get in line to write a \$60,000 check.

SPECS 2007 Cadillac Escalade Body style: Full-size, 4-door luxury sport utility with 3 rows of seats; rear- or all-wheel drive Engine: Aluminum 6.2 liter OHV V-8 with variable valve timing Horsepower: 403 at 5,700 rpm Torque: 417 at 4,400 rpm Transmission: 6-speed automatic Acceleration: 0 to 60 mph, 6.5 seconds EPA fuel economy estimates: 13 mpg city, 19 highway Fuel capacity: 26 gallons; premium recommended but not required **DIMENSIONS** Cargo space: 16.9 cubic feet behind third row Front head/leg/shoulder room: 40.3/41.3/65.3 inches Middle head/leg/shoulder room: 38.5/39/65.3 inches Rear head/leg/shoulder room: 38.2/25.4/61.7 inches Length/wheelbase: 202.5/116 inches Curb weight: 5,818 pounds Towing capacity: 7,400 pounds **FEATURES** Standard equipment: Remote locking with remote start, Nuance leather-covered seats, blue backlit gauges with white needles, wood-and-leather-trimmed steering wheel, digital Driver Information Center, trizone automatic climate control, ultrasonic rear parking assist, fold and tumble second-row seat, removable third-row bench power lift gate with electric-release glass, heated first- and second-row seats, 10-speaker Bose 5.1 Dolby digital surround sound audio, cruise control, floor mats, halogen fog lights, high-intensity discharge headlights, automatic air-controlled suspension level control, luggage rack with center rails, rain-sensing wipers and heated washer fluid

Safety equipment: Dual stage front air bags, roof-mounted head curtain side air bags with rollover sensor, 3-point belts, power-adjustable pedals, Stabilitrak vehicle control, tire-pressure monitoring

CHASSIS Brakes: Power-assisted 4-wheel discs with 4-channel ABS; vented front discs, solid rear discs; twin-piston front calipers, single-piston rear calipers Steering: Power-assisted rack and pinion; 39-foot turning circle Suspension: Independent, coil-over-shock with stabilizer bar and Road Sensing Suspension of electronically controlled shock absorbers; rear, 5-link with coil springs and stabilizer bar Tires and wheels: Bridgestone P265/65R 18-inch touring on machined aluminum wheels **PRICING** Base: \$57,280 including freight charge; price as tested, \$64,815 Options on test vehicle: 22-inch chromed wheels, \$2,995; sunroof, \$995; climate package, \$625, includes cooled and heated seats; Information package, \$2,495, includes DVD-integrated navigation, rearview camera system and IntelliBeam headlamps; second-row power folding seats, \$425

The competition: Lincoln Navigator, Lexus LX 470, Mercedes-Benz M-Class, Infiniti QX56, Range Rover

Where assembled: Arlington, Texas **PLUSES** Fierce exterior, friendly interior; improved V-8 and 6-speed automatic. Electronically controlled shock absorbers for ride control. **MINUSES:** Big SUV that's not so efficient for passenger capacity. Poor fuel economy.

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