

Conveniences will make ES the big seller

by Mark_Maynard

The redesigned Mitsubishi Lancer is more than an evolutionary sedan, but it is an Evolution.

When Mitsubishi and DaimlerChrysler parted ways toward the end of 2005, this platform was under development by Mitsubishi for the new Lancer and a few Chrysler vehicles, such as the Jeep Compass and Dodge Caliber.

MITSUBISHI LANCER - There's a lot to the 2008 Mitsubishi Lancer that most drivers won't see, but they will feel. CNS Photo courtesy of Mitsubishi. In picking up the pieces after the breakup, Mitsubishi handed them first to its Evolution development team. The "Evo" is the all-wheel-drive, high-horsepower Lancer made notorious in video games and the "Fast and Furious" films.

Of course, the Evo engineers tuned the chassis to suit what would become their next little supercar (due out in early 2008). And that effect is what can be felt on the road in this all-new Lancer. The car is tight and isolated from road harshness.

Reinforcements added over the years to the previous generation Lancer were built into this one, with more use of high-strength and ultra-high-strength steel. The car is 2.6 inches wider and half an inch longer on a wheelbase that is 1.4 inches longer. It shares the architecture with the Outlander crossover SUV, but not its desirable six-speed automatic transmission or 3-liter V-6, yet.

For a simple, compact-class sedan, the handling is responsive and balanced. The cabin is open and feels larger than the competition and the long wheelbase gives a smoother ride than seems possible for an inexpensive car.

Sold in three trim levels, pricing ranges from a low of \$14,615 to \$19,115 for a top-line GTS with CVT. The midrange ES will run \$18,000 "popularly equipped."

All models come with a new 2-liter, four-cylinder engine. Rated 152 horsepower for much of North America, it is trimmed to 143 horses in California and those Northeastern states with stricter air-quality standards. The sacrifice of power earns the engine a PZEV - partial zero-emission vehicle - rating for clean living.

The DE model is base transportation with rear drum brakes, optional ABS and electronic brake distribution and no air conditioning. (Mitsubishi insists it has buyers in Alaska and Canada who don't want air

conditioning as a standard item.) The AC and Power Package, \$1,100, also adds anti-lock brakes, power door locks and driver's window auto-up function.

Standard safety features for all models include dual-stage front air bags, side curtain air bags, driver's knee bag and front-seat-mounted side-impact bags. Power windows, too, are standard and considered a safety at Mitsubishi. They are urged by consumers who want the security of being able to lower and raise the glass quickly when going through the drive-through ATM, toll booths, etc.

The ES model will be the big seller and with many more conveniences, including air conditioning with pollen filter, center floor console with armrest, floor mats, front map lights, height-adjustable driver's seat, cruise control with steering wheel control, 16-inch alloy wheels, more chrome and door handles and mirrors in the body color.

The GTS adds such enhancements as sport bucket seats, tighter suspension with a strut-tower brace, leather-wrapped steering wheel and shifter, fog lights, more chrome inside and 18-inch alloy wheels, which are a handsome customizing touch with the front and side air dams.

There are two main option groups.

The Sun & Sound Package (ES and GTS only, \$1,500) adds a 650-watt Rockford-Fosgate audio system with six-disc in-dash CD changer, MP3 input jack, power glass sunroof with sunshade and Sirius satellite radio.

The Navigation and Technology Package (GTS only, \$2,000) adds Fast Key entry system, a 30-gigabyte hard-drive satellite GPS system with 7.5-inch touch panel, digital music server and single-disc DVD player.

The plastics, fabrics and other interior materials are a huge improvement over recent Mitsubishi quality, but not a benchmark. The preproduction test cars I drove at the national media launch showed some gaps and misalignment of a panel or two, but final production was two months away at the Mizushima plant in Japan.

Visibility is good over the low hood, but sightlines can get complicated at the long windshield "A pillars." There is a good supply of storage areas, including bottle holders in the door panels. The back seat is raised for visibility and the seat bottom is well padded and long enough for adult thigh support. The ES and GTS have a 60/40 folding seat back, enhancing a trunk of usable proportions.

Highway driving with the five-speed manual has the engine spinning at 3,000 to 3,500 rpm and higher.

A sixth gear would quiet that down to below 3,000 rpms. But double and triple synchronizers in the gearbox and a shortened shift mechanism really do make for enjoyable shifting.

The continuously variable automatic is a one-mode system in the DE model, but it is upgraded with a manual-mode Sportronic in the ES and GTS models. The system simulates six steps to simulate gear changes, engaged by magnesium paddle shifters at the steering wheel.

The CVT is compact, lightweight and efficient for controlling emissions and fuel economy, but the one-mode CVT lacks zip and struggles with the Evinrude outboard-motor effect. Step on the gas, the engine revs and the car catches up with the sound, which is a moan. And the moan can escalate to frantic when pushed.

The CVT is at its most comfortable in low-stress driving conditions. In a mix of freeway and state route driving, the on-board computer indicated 30 mpg.

Next year, Lancer will graduate to a 2.4-liter four-cylinder, which may boost CVT performance, and there's the possibility of a 3-liter V-6 in the near future.

Copley News Service

SPECS

2007 Mitsubishi Lancer

Body style: compact, five-passenger front-wheel-drive sedan

Engine: aluminum, DOHC, 16-valve 2-liter in-line four-cylinder with electronic valve timing

Horsepower: 152/143 at 6,000 rpm

Torque: 146/143 foot-pounds at 4,250 rpm

- in California and other states with California air-quality standards

Transmission: five-speed manual or optional CVT

EPA fuel economy estimates: 21 mpg city, 29 highway; 22/29 CVT

DIMENSIONS

Trunk space: 11.6 cubic feet

Front head/leg/shoulder room: 39.6*/42.2/54.7 inches

(with sunroof, 38.5 inches head)

Rear head/leg/shoulder room: 36.9/36.1/54.3 inches

Length/wheelbase: 180/103.7 inches

Curb weight: 2,922 to 3,109 pounds

FEATURES

Standard equipment includes: four-speaker 140-watt CD audio system with MP3 playback, auto-off halogen headlights, power windows and (folding) mirrors, 16-inch steel wheels with full cover, trunk lid inner trim, power-assisted rack-and-pinion steering with 32.5-foot turning circle

Safety equipment includes: dual-stage front air bags, curtain side air bags, driver's knee bag, front-seat-mounted side-impact bags, front belts have pretensioners and force limiters; ABS and electronic brake force distribution on ES/GTS, optional on DE

PRICING

Base MSRPs: \$14,615 to \$19,115, including \$625 freight charge (\$750 in Alaska)

Warranty: 5 years/60,000 miles, basic; 10 years/100,000 miles, powertrain

The competition: Chevy Cobalt, Honda Civic, Mazda3, Toyota Corolla, etc.

PLUSES: Modern styling; tight body and suspension; smooth ride; tidy turning circle

MINUSES: Low content DE model; weak-performing base CVT transmission; high-revving engine

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