Acura's MDX crossover SUV is a computer on four wheels

by Mark_Maynard

I consider myself a reasonably tech-savvy middle-age guy. My cell phone takes pictures and plays music, and I can surf the Web and send e-mail. I text and send cutesy messages with photos. I have a Bluetooth earpiece. Everybody in my family of four has an overpowered computer with flat-screen monitors and wireless cable Internet. I travel with a pocket PC and keyboard.

I'm lazy and use these devices to make my life easier.

And I could be an ideal candidate for the new Acura MDX, a product of our commuting culture.

ACURA MDX - The Acura MDX with all the bells and whistles may be too much noise for some drivers. CNS Photo courtesy of Acura.

With a starting price of $40,665, it is a nice-enough, seven-seat, car-like sport utility vehicle. But Acura has a love of technology, and the top-line MDX Sport tester - $48,465 - included the electronic content of a desktop computer.

I suppose having that much electronic ability helps extend the daily cruising range of busy parents and business people. But for me it was just too much information in a machine that isn't as much about the driving experience as it is about being driven.

Settle back with the HandsFreeLink wireless telephone interface, a 10-speaker, 410-watt sound system with a multiformat six-disc changer, satellite radio, MP3 input jack and tri-zone automatic climate control - with humidity control.

There's a voice-recognizing navigation system with real-time traffic for handy rerouting in event of delays. And the Honda/Acura voice-recognition software is about the best in the business, but it's far from perfect.

The navigation system also packages a rearview camera, which will be of more use to some drivers than the navigation system. The back seat has a DVD entertainment center with wireless headphones and a 115V outlet for other amusements.

It's not that other car brands don't offer these features, it's that Acura identifies with them and puts them front and center.

Slide behind the driver's seat and you'll find 10 buttons on the steering wheel to access voice commands, cruise and audio controls, onboard computer and more. There's also a horn.

The center stack of audio and climate controls is a gleaming array of more buttons and switches. Most car controls are accessed through a central interface via a large dial. It works well enough after much practice, though not as simple as some offered in other luxury makes. Even resetting the odometer takes too many keystrokes.

Oddly, MDX does not offer keyless starting and locking, an electronic convenience I do find useful.

But nothing is held back in the styling. It is as modern as the term "crossover SUV." Rather than an emotional design, this one is futuristic. It appears small from the outside, but is voluminous inside.

The seats are full and comfortable. Sightlines are good out the front but become unclear and get complex over the shoulder when passengers are in the second row. The materials are first-rate and well assembled. There is durability for family abuse, and soft points where needed for comfort on a long drive.

The steering force feels heavier than it needs to be, particularly at low speeds. But the 37.6-foot turning circle is tight enough for maneuverability in close parking situations.

The third row is short-time space for children. The headrests are very close to the rear glass. But the seat backs fold flat with ease, giving way for plenty of grocery hauling.

Safety features are luxury class. They include side curtain air bags with rollover sensor, vehicle stability assist with traction control and even trailer stability assist.

On the road, the cabin is well sound and relatively isolated from road harshness; however, the body shape punches a blunt hole though the air, which can be heard rushing by at highway speeds.

There's also noticeable drumming noise on concrete road surfaces.

The Sport model adds an Active Damper sport suspension, offering Comfort and Sport settings. I found Comfort too soft and Sport too jiggly.

The MDX makes turns like a cat, and large, 13-inch disc brakes give strong, smooth stopping power. But the ride is choppy, even trucky. Pull into a driveway and there's considerable head toss as the suspension transfers weight.

The 300 horsepower, 3.7-liter V-6 would appear to have plenty of power, but you have to push it to get a sharp response. Leather, technology and safety features are not light, and the tester's curb weight was nearly 4,600 pounds.

Fuel economy is just adequate at 17 mpg city and 22 highway, but I was getting 15.6 to 17.9 in combined mileage, according to the computer.

The new five-speed automatic transmission with Sequential SportShift is a fine auto-shifter, but not inspired in manual mode.

I appreciate technology at home and work; however, do I really need an onboard calculator or will I key in important birthdays, meetings and other reminders in the Outlook-like calendar? Or are my other devices, such as cell phones, more efficient at this?

Like any top-line cell phone, the MDX has more electronic features than I use. But I can upgrade my cell phone in two years and get the next evolution. It will be easier to use, lighter and smaller.

Not so the MDX. It is state of the art for 2007, but owners will live with its information overload for several years without the hope of an update. It may have the latest automotive advancements, but the electronics it uses are at least a couple of years old. And getting older by the minute.

Copley News Service

SPECS

2007 Acura MDX Sport Entertainment

Body style: seven-passenger crossover SUV

Engine: 300 hp, 3.7 liter SOHC V-7 with VTEC

Transmission: five-speed automatic with sequential SportShift

EPA fuel economy estimates: 17 mpg city, 22 highway

FEATURES

Standard equipment includes: navigation system with voice recognition and rearview camera, DVD rear entertainment system with 9-inch display and wireless headsets, AcuraLink communication system with real-time traffic updates, perforated leather-trimmed seats, 10-speaker audio system with digital input, automatic climate control, eight-way power driver's seat with lumbar support, eight-way power front passenger seat, power moon roof, 18-inch all-season tires and alloy wheels, auto-leveling Xenon headlights, fog lights, power tailgate

Safety equipment includes: Dual stage front air bags, front side bags, side curtain air bags, stability assist, ABS, front belt pretensioners, tire pressure monitoring system

PRICING

Base: $48,465, including $670 freight charge; includes three months' free XM Satellite Radio

Warranty: four-year/50,000-mile basic vehicle coverage with 24-hour roadside assistance; six-year/70,000-mile powertrain

Where assembled: Ontario, Canada

The competition: Lexus RX, Volkswagen Touareg, Volvo XC90, Mazda CX-9

PLUSES: State of the future styling; quality components and assembly. No tune-ups for 100,000 miles.

MINUSES: Electronic-gadget baggage; poor fuel economy.

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