

Chevy's Mr. Big: Much-Improved Suburban Improves (a bit) on Mileage

by Mark Maynard

Anyone who has ever slammed the hood of an old Chevy truck will realize how far GM truck construction has improved with the 2007 Chevrolet Suburban.

Body panel gaps are so tight now that owners need a lesson in how to close the hood: gently.

Slamming could have an impact on the grille, so GM engineers added a strut under the hood for a little downforce resistance. Now, just lower the hood and give a little push to latch.

CHEVY SUBURBAN - The 2007 Chevrolet Suburban is roomy, comfortable, smooth-riding and now has a well-finished interior. CNS Photo courtesy of Chevrolet. This gentle giant of SUVs is roomy, comfortable, smooth-riding and quiet. And, at long last, it has a well-finished interior.

It is still a familiar shape, but instead of a body that appears pumped up to dominate the road, this one is lean, tight and streamlined, mostly for fuel-saving aerodynamics.

It's more than 3 inches longer, a bit more than an inch taller and a tad wider than the '06. It weighs a couple of hundred pounds more, but gets better fuel economy.

The EPA rates the four-wheel-drive model at 11/15 mpg around town and 15/20 on the highway. The weeklong test drive was rated 1 mpg better in both categories.

The onboard computer, which calculates the average fuel economy, showed my around-town driving, with some freeway miles, was in the low to mid-13s. With the cruise control set at 65 mph, the highway mileage climbed toward 15 mpg, but that was affected by terrain and other vehicles that couldn't hold to a constant speed. As dreadful as those numbers appear, that's an engineering milestone considering the curb weight - 5,745 pounds for the 4WD - and that last year's four-wheel-drive Suburban with a 5.3 liter V-8 was rated at 13/15.

The Suburban can call on two nearly identical 5.3 liter V-8s.

Two-wheel-drive Suburbans use an iron-block, aluminum-head version that is rated 320 horsepower and 340 foot-pounds of torque. Four-wheel-drive models use an all-aluminum engine that is rated 310 hp.

The difference is in how the vehicles were handled by the test driver for the Society of Engineers. GM was targeting 310 hp and was surprised when it got 320.

Both engines have displacement-on-demand electronics that shut down a bank of cylinders when the engine is not under load.

Both engines run on 87 octane and any mix of E85 ethanol.

No diesel engine option is planned, nor will the two-mode hybrid system be offered, though it will be available on the smaller Tahoe and GMC Yukon in late '07.

Performance can be quite responsive, but mindful of fuel costs, I took it easy, which meant slower freeway merging. Passing power from 30 to 65 mph is strong.

The four-speed transmission is old-tech but dependable. A new six-speed is being introduced in some GM vehicles now, but not for the Suburban for a year or more, I'm told.

The six-speed will result in sharper off-the-line acceleration and the added gearing will boost fuel mileage.

Suburbans come in three trim levels - LS, LT and LTZ - in two- or four-wheel drive, and half-ton and heavy-duty 2500 series. A Z71 off-road package is not yet on sale.

Pricing for half-ton models starts at \$36,990 for the LS 2WD, which comes with remote locking, front bench seat with center armrest storage, power windows-locks-mirrors, black step rails, rear air conditioning and auxiliary heater, and Stabilitrak stability control system.

The LT ranges from \$37,740 to \$41,790, depending on the factory option packages. The LTZ, which adds 20-inch wheels and the AutoRide suspension - shock dampening and rear air-assisted load leveling - starts at \$45,655.

Today's test truck, a well-optioned LT3, had an as-tested price of \$51,265. That's luxury sedan territory, but it's well-supported by features and finesse.

The new truck is built on a boxed frame for long-term towing durability and resistance to flexing that otherwise encourages squeaks and rattles. The upgrade to big four-wheel discs - 13-inch rotors on the front, 13.5-inch rear - also required an upgrade to a 17-inch wheel to house the discs.

At last, Suburbans have the brakes they need, and then some.

Safety features include dual-stage front air bags and, on all but the base model, standard roof-mounted head curtain side air bags with rollover protection for all rows.

There's also rear park assist, which alerts by tone to the nearness of objects behind and eliminates backing by touch.

There's safety in stability, and the new design also widened the front track. The test truck cornered without much body roll and could make sharp, evasive maneuvers without wallow and a nose dive. That's impressive for such curb weight.

The AutoRide system - from the Cadillac Escalade - provides an even better response.

The 43-foot turning circle is a foot less than a Cadillac DTS sedan with 18-inch tires, but parking is still a handful in tight quarters.

A \$2,415 navigation system might be more than some owners need, but it's a worthy add-on when packaged with the rear back-up camera.

The designers were on the same page in creating a cohesive package that resists trendy experiments. Soft-touch materials, subtle use of wood and low-gloss plastics help reinforce the sticker price.

The dashboard was lowered and the windshield laid back, which has helped visibility over the front fenders. The interior feels more open, and the view from all seats is good.

This truck has plenty of well-arranged switches, gauges and cup holders. The center floor console is enormous - as it always has been on Suburbans - and is one of many useful storage areas.

The doors open wide but they are heavy when trying to close when parked on an incline. The door-side armrests could use a little more padding and a softer top to wear and tear on elbows.

Power folding second-row seats (\$425) are a luxury to keep kids from climbing over the leather upholstery, though manual operation of the one-lever, fold-and-tumble seats isn't difficult. The seat bottoms are completely enclosed to prevent snags or smudges on clothing.

Third-row seating is on a three-person bench or a pair of bucket seats. These seats also fold - easier than in past models - and are fitted with casters so they can be rolled in and out. Plastic tracks in the floor guide the process.

Each section, about 40 pounds, folds into a suitcase-like package with a handle for the trip to the garage for storage.

Critics of big SUVs might have thought the price of fuel would starve these beasts into extinction, but any obituary might be premature.

In the first few months of sales, 61 percent of buyers are trading in a Suburban for a new one, and nearly 7 percent are trading in a Tahoe.

In my week of driving, I got a couple of unexpected and enthusiastic reactions from two male drivers, one in a previous-generation Suburban and the other in a lightly customized Tahoe from two generations back.

Both drivers slowed down to pace me on the highway and moved from lane to lane to get a good look at the new Suburban.

Copley News Service SPECS2007 Chevrolet Suburban LT 1500 4WD
Body style: Full-size, 6- to 9-passenger SUV, half-ton in 2- or 4WD; body on frame construction
Engine: Aluminum 5.3 liter OHV V-8, with Displacement on Demand cylinder shut-off
Horsepower: 310 at 5,200 rpm
Torque: 335 at 4,400 rpm
Transmission: 4-speed automatic
EPA fuel economy estimates: 15 mpg city, 20 highway
Fuel capacity: 31.5 gallons; 87 octane recommended

DIMENSIONS
Cargo space: 45.8 cubic feet behind third row; 90, third row folded; 137.4, both rows

foldedFront head/leg/shoulder room: 41.1/41.3/65.3 inchesMiddle head/leg/shoulder room: 38.5/39.5/65.2 inchesRear head/leg/shoulder room: 38.1/34.9/64.7 inchesLength/wheelbase: 222.4/130 inchesHeight: 76.8 inchesCurb weight: 2WD, 5,613; 4WD, 5,745 poundsTow capacity: 2WD, 8,100 pounds; 4WD, 8,000

FEATURESStandard equipment includes: Remote locking, heated and leather-trimmed front captain's chairs with 12-way power adjusters, dual-zone automatic air conditioning, 9-speaker Bose audio system, power folding mirrors (with curb-tilt and integrated turn-signal indicators, driver-side auto-dimming feature and puddle lights)Safety equipment includes: Dual-stage front air bags, roof-mounted head curtain side air bags with rollover protection for all rows; front belt pretensioners; Stabilitrak stability control

CHASSISBrakes: 4-wheel disc, 4-wheel ABS; front rotors, 13 inches; rear, 13.5Steering: Power-assisted rack-and-pinion; turning circle, 43 feetSuspension: Front, independent, coil over shock; rear, 5-link with coil springsTires and wheels: P265/70R 17-inch blackwall Bridgestone AL2 all-season steel belt radials and cast-aluminum wheels; optional, 17-inch white letter Goodyears, blackwall on-off road Bridgestones and 20-inch blackwall Bridgestones

PRICINGBase: \$37,740, including \$875 freight charge; price as tested, \$51,265Options on test car: LT3 equipment group (\$4,050) includes leather-trimmed seats, 12-way power-adjustable and heated front seats, power-adjustable pedals, remote vehicle starter, head curtain side air bags, 6-disc CD and MP3 Bose audio system with 3 months of XM satellite radio, rear parking assist, power folding rearview mirrors with auto dimming and integrated turn signal arrows, tri-zone automatic air conditioning; 2nd-row power folding seats, (\$425); heated 2nd-row seats (\$200); 3rd-row bench (\$100); rain-sensing wipers (\$95) power sliding sunroof (\$995); power liftgate with liftglass (\$350); locking rear differential (\$295); premium paint (\$395); rear entertainment system (\$1,295); navigation-audio system (\$2,145); rear view camera system (\$195); luggage rack crossbars (\$45); heated washer fluid system, (\$85); P265/70R raised white outline letter tires (\$125); missing option credit (\$70)Where assembled: Arlington, Texas; Janesville, Wis.; and Silao, Mexico

PLUSES: Big but manageable and more efficient for driver and passengers than past models.

MINUSES: Heavy doors, door-side armrests need more padding and a softer top to save wear and tear on elbows and forearms. Six-speed transmission will help fuel economy.

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