

Regal Rooding

In a Better Buick

By Roger Witherspoon

For many years, general descriptions accompanying many of General Motors' SUVs were not very flattering. They were big. They guzzled gas. Their technology wasn't particularly up to date, and their interiors were, well, reminiscent of Grandma's.

But then, things started to change after Ed Welburn, the sculptor trained at Howard University, took control of GM's crayons. Cadillac became an upscale sports sedan going rim to rim against Mercedes. The Hummer went from Arnold Schwarzenegger's military play toy to an upscale, off-road competitor to Land Rover. And the iconic Saturn line went from eccentric, undistinguished cars to styling leaders with their sporty Saturn Sky out in front. The whole GM line was remarkably, competitively retooled – except Buick, the venerated, upscale, sturdy line that seemed somehow neglected.

Until now. Welburn and company took a long look at what worked in the SUV, luxury sedan, and performance markets and rolled them into the Buick Enclave, a distinct, stylish, go-anywhere, technologically proficient which shows what GM can do when it really wants to be competitive.

Outside, the Enclave has the “crossover” styling reminiscent of the Infiniti FX or Lexus RX350, with bold, rounded lines and a silhouette starting with the sloping, Buick grille and flowing over 19-inch wheels to a rounded rear. Even though the Enclave is a full sized SUV with three rows of seats, it avoids the ungainly boxy styling which characterizes many of the larger SUVs. As added safety touches, the Enclave has fog lamps and adaptive, high density headlights which turn along with the wheels.

Under the hood, GM provided a 275-horsepower, V-6 engine, which is more than enough to propel the Enclave towards the triple digit range or, on a more sedate ride, tow up to 4,500 pounds and still stay ahead of traffic. With its rounded design and both stability and traction control, the Enclave easily slides through mean winter weather where sudden gusts of wind flow over and around the vehicle rather than buffeting and shoving an oversized rear end. As a result, the Enclave drives with the stability of a large sedan – though it is on a small truck body – and handles like, well, a family Buick.

Inside, GM loaded the amenities to provide the upscale experience one might expect in a \$46,000 car. The dash is a pair of curves providing separate, cabin-like spaces for the driver and front passenger. The dash, console and doors are heavily accented in real mahogany wood, rather than shiny, wood-like plastic, giving the interior the feel of a well appointed den rather than a rolling van.

The Enclave is a full sized SUV, with three rows of seats and the impression of spaciousness is enhanced by the separate sunroofs over the front and second row of wide, leather captain's chairs. Both sets provide enough room for the average NBA player to have a comfortable, long distance trip, and those in front also have the opportunity of heating their seats. The second row seats are on rails, making it easy to slide them out of the way to access the rear section. The third row is a bench ostensibly built for three, though that is only true for a trio of kids. There are, however, three separate climate zones so each set of passengers can be as hot or cold as they please.

The third row of seats fold flat to expand an already large cargo area which includes storage bins under the floor and tie down netting.

For entertainment, the Enclave has a DVD player with wireless headsets and rear controls so the passengers can watch movies while the driver and front passenger listen to CDs, XM satellite radio, or 1,000 or so of their favorite songs by plugging in their iPod. All the sounds are clearly audible over the digital Bose with 10 speakers.

On the functional side, the Enclave has rear radar and a back up camera to show where you've been, and a touch screen, easy to use navigation system to help you get to where you are going. It is a satellite based system which does not lose the Enclave even when motoring through rural mountain areas. If one is not comfortable with the do-it-yourself navigation system, there is OnStar, the GM communications system which provides both live concierges and turn-by-turn directions downloaded through its phone system.

The Buick Enclave is GM's effort to go head to head with Toyota's luxury Lexus line and offer car buyers a reason to help the company maintain its position as the world's largest car maker. Whether the effort will be successful or not remains to be seen. But the Buick Enclave certainly gives GM a reason for optimism, and American buyers an SUV to look forward to.

2008 Buick Enclave CXL

MSRP:		\$44,950
EPA Mileage:	16 MPG City	22 MPG Highway
Towing Capacity:		4,500 Pounds

Performance/ Safety:

3.6-Liter aluminum, DOHC V-6 engine producing 275 horsepower and 251 pound-feet of torque; all wheel drive; 6-speed automatic transmission with electronic manual mode; 19-inch aluminum wheels; dual exhaust, chrome tips; coil-over strut front suspension; independent rear suspension; hydraulic rack and pinion steering; stability and traction control; anti-lock brake system; dual frontal, head curtain, side airbags; high intensity projector headlamps; front fog lamps.

Interior/ Comfort:

AM/ FM XM satellite radio; keyless entry and remote ignition; OnStar communications; touch screen navigation system; mahogany wood and leather, tilt & telescope steering wheel; tri-zone climate control; DVD player; Bose sound system with 10 speakers; 1st and 2nd row sunroofs; 7-passenger seating – captains chairs 1st and 2nd row, split bench 3rd row; power liftgate; heated front seats; rear view backup camera.

Competition:

Acura MDX, Lexus RX350, Volvo XC90