

Midsized Marauding in

The Remade Malibu

By Roger Witherspoon

It was dark, raining, and the winter wind whipped in 50 mile per hour gusts through Hudson Highlands, roaring down valleys and slamming unexpectedly into the sides of cars passing through the mountain region just south of West Point. It was the kind of night when Bambi and the rest of the forest's night prowlers looked for shelter and ambulance crews stayed poised.

But inside the 2008 Malibu, it was a great night for a drive. There was no need to worry about meandering deer or ill-equipped motorists getting in the way. Considering the Malibu's new, sleek, aerodynamic design, its wider stance, the front wheel drive, the traction and stability control there was little to contemplate during a jaunt through the region except the soft sound of Coltrane wafting from the eight speakers in the 210-watt surround sound system.

In short, the Malibu is back and is likely to make a serious dent in the mid sized sedan market dominated by the Honda Accord, Nissan Altima and Toyota Camry. That would represent a serious change in fortune for the Malibu, which became a staple in the GM mid-sized fleet after its introduction in 1964. But, like many cars out of Detroit which were initially popular, the company did not maintain the styling or quality, and the line was discontinued in 1983. It was resurrected in 1996 because GM thought the name harked back to a better time, and would attract old and new buyers. Unfortunately, the quality of the second line of Malibu was not sufficient to lure the current generation of motorists from the stylish, fuel efficient, quiet, comfortable sedans regularly rolled out by Toyota and Honda.

So GM design chief Ed Welburn created a third edition of the brand – one whose exterior design and interior comforts could give the Japanese imports a serious run for the consumers' money. And in that regard, the competition is likely to boil down to brand loyalty, because none of the competing mid-sized sedans on the road is any better than the 2008 Malibu.

Starting outside, Welburn's team has crafted a stately sedan with a tapered front sloping back from the Chevy emblem which is embedded between two slim grills. Under the hood is a 250 horsepower, V-6 engine which is more than sufficient to roll the Malibu into triple digits – if road conditions and the police permit.

Adding to the sporting feel is the paddle shift which, in manual mode, is as responsive as that on the Audi A4. It is not the most fuel efficient sedan on the road, with an EPA rating of just 17 miles per gallon in city driving, and 26 miles per gallon in highway motoring. But in an effort to match the pairs of standard and hybrid Altimas and Camrys, GM is also introducing a hybrid Malibu, with an EPA rating of 24 miles per gallon in city driving and 32 miles per gallon on the highway. It is not quite as fuel efficient as its Japanese hybrid competitors – the Altima gets 35 miles per gallon in city traffic, and the Camry hybrid is rated at 40 miles per gallon – but the addition of an electric motor in the Malibu is a significant improvement over the standard, gasoline edition.

All hybrid systems cost more, and the premium for the Malibu hybrid is about \$1,800. There is, however, a \$1,300 tax credit available – though that only applies to the first 60,000 hybrids sold in the GM fleet. That means the tax credit is likely to disappear in the last half of the year. At Toyota, which pioneered the hybrid and sells the popular, compact Prius, the fleet tax deduction disappears around the end of the first quarter. In contrast, government priorities do not put a limit on the deductions for Hummers – which can range as high as \$90,000 for the \$120,000, seven miles per gallon H-1.

But the most notable change in the new Malibu is found when you open the doors. Inside, is where the GM’s designers really sought to compete with the Japanese brands and turn the Malibu in a comfortable, mobile den. The dash, for example, is two tiered and softly curves, dividing the two front sections into separate environments for the driver and passenger. The two toned, leather tiers are separated by wood trim, which provides soft accents throughout the cabin and, on the dash, hides soft night lighting. On the top of the dash is a handy storage compartment which can hold small items like handicapped placards and electronic toll passes.

The seats and interior have the same two-tone motif, with the padded captain’s chairs featuring double stitched leather and contrasting piping. The steering wheel tilts and telescopes, and has fingertip controls for both the audio system and cruise command. There is even a small, pull-out drawer to the left of the steering wheel to hold the driver’s cell phone.

The audio system has XM satellite radio as well as a six-disc, in-dash CD player. The Malibu does not have Bluetooth connection for cell phone users, and lacks a navigation system – though with a sticker price of about \$27,500, it can probably get away with it. The Malibu does come with GM’s OnStar communications system, which features live concierges who can download turn-by-turn directions to any destination.

In the rear, there is enough leg room for a pair of NFL line backers and the trunk could easily hold a coffin. The seats also fold down to make the cargo area even larger.

General Motors pioneered the development of the mid sized sedan and then lost the market to the innovative, consumer oriented Japanese auto makers. With the new Malibu, GM has a chance to again run at the head of the mid sized pack.

2008 Chevrolet Malibu LTZ

MSRP:		\$27,500
EPA Mileage:	17 MPG City	26 MPG Highway
Towing Capacity:		1,000 pounds

Performance/ Safety:

3.6-Liter, cast aluminum, DOHC, V-6 engine producing 252 horsepower and 251 pound-feet of torque; front wheel drive; six speed automatic transmission with manual mode with paddle shifts; 4-wheel independent suspension; 4-wheel disc brakes; anti-lock brake system; stability and traction control systems; 18-inch aluminum wheels; fog lamps; head, curtain, side air bags.

Interior/ comfort:

AM/FM/ XM satellite radio; OnStar communications; 6-disc, in-dash CD player; premium 210-watt sound system with 8 speakers; 110-volt power outlet; tilt and telescope, leather steering wheel with cruise control; leather, heated, power adjusted front seats; adjustable pedals; keyless entry and remote vehicle start.

Competitioin:

Honda Accord, Toyota Camry, Nissan Altima, Ford Fusion, Hyundai Sonata.