

The Little Big SUV

Going Everywhere in the Acadia

By Roger Witherspoon

When it comes to choosing an SUV, there are some choices that you wish you did not have to make.

If you are a soccer dad and, on occasion, are carrying a lot more than just your own kids a vehicle comfortably seating seven – with accompanying luggage – would be a good thing to have. But that means on most occasions you are driving a nearly empty, gas guzzling, boxy truck. Or you can opt for a mid-sized SUV or crossover, which means you have a vehicle which feels like a car but have to make two trips to the ballpark to carry all the kids and their stuff.

Which is why GM came up with the Acadia, a stretch SUV with the chassis and handling of a large sedan and a carrying capacity approaching that of the large rolling, truck-based boxes. Outside, the Acadia has the low, long, curving shape that is typical of crossover SUVs and ride like stretch sedans.

Susan Morales, the engineer in charge of GM's mid-sized crossover SUVs, said the all-wheel-drive Acadia shares a platform with the Saturn Outlook and Buick Enclave. "With the Acadia," said Morales, "we wanted an SUV that was smaller than the full sized trucks, and longer than the regular mid-sized vehicles with real third row seating for adults."

To ensure the Acadia handles like a sedan, Morales augmented the SUV's all wheel drive system with both stability and rollover controls, and a "panic brake assist" which automatically applies additional brake pressure in emergency stopping situations.

That design gives the Acadia and its three rows of seats – with a price tag of \$38,000 – an edge over its intended, well established, two-row competitors: the Honda Pilot, Ford Edge, Lexus RX, Acura MDX, and Toyota Highlander. Morales' Acadia is a bit more than 200 inches in length, about 15 inches longer than the others in that crossover class. The added length is used both to provide seating and ensuring that there is actually a cargo area, rather than a third row taking up the space that should have been used for cargo.

The Acadia, with a 275-horsepower V-6 engine, also has a bit more power than its competition. The Ford Edge, for example, has a 265-horsepower engine and the Honda Pilot's power plant produces 244 horses – though both vehicles have V-6 engines. The added power gives the larger Acadia the same performance capabilities on the road, allowing you to run on highways at higher speeds without straining the engine.

There was thought given to comfort, too, and the Acadia's seats are soft, padded leather, and the front set can be heated. In terms of seating in the rest of the vehicle, the Acadia's second row comes in two flavors – a pair of Captain's Chairs with space in between for easy access, or a traditional bench seating three which can fold flat in a 60/40 split. With either option, the third row is actually designed with enough leg and head room to hold adults up to six feet in height for the duration of a comfortable, cross country trip.

Morales had long trips in mind when it came to laying out the interior. The Acadia has about 25 storage places of varying sizes including cup and liter bottle holders.

The front armrest, for example, slides back and forth for use or access to a split-level lower console. The top layer is about two inches deep, but removing that tray provides a 60-cubic inch storage bin. Right behind it is a second row console with two storage compartments and cup holders. The entire assembly can fold flat into the floor, however, when the space is needed for storage. The entire second row can fold flat or slide forward to easier access to the third row or cargo area. There are also storage compartments under the floor in the cargo area.

For entertainment, the Acadia came fully loaded. There is a Bose surround system with 10 speakers and a subwoofer, the better to hear the sounds from the XM satellite radio or the six-disc, in-dash CD and MP3 player. For the folks in the rear, there is a pull down screen and a DVD player with wireless controls and headsets. It also has the OnStar communications system which, for \$299 annually, will provide live concierge services and turn-by-turn navigation assistance. That can serve as a backup to the built-in, DVD-based, easy to use, navigation system.

Whether or not the Acadia will manage to steal motorists from the more established competition remains to be seen. But it will certainly give them a well designed, comfortable run for their money.

2008 GMC Acadia AWD

MSRP:		\$38,015
EPA Mileage:	16 MPG City	22 MPG Highway
Towing Capacity:		4,500 Pounds

Performance/ Safety:

3.6-Liter V-6 engine producing 275 horsepower and 251 pound-feet of torque; 6-speed automatic transmission; panic brake assist; electronic stability and traction control; all wheel drive; back-up camera system; heated ice-defrosting rear view mirrors and heated windshield washer fluid; remote vehicle start; fog lamps; 18-inch aluminum wheels; dual frontal, head curtain side and side impact airbags; dual chrome tipped exhausts; independent front & rear suspension.

Interior / Comfort:

AM/FM/ XM satellite radio; 6-disc, in-dash CD and MP3 player; 10-speaker Bose 5.1 Surround Sound system; satellite based navigation system; DVD system with flip-down screen; OnStar communications system; leather, tilt & telescoping steering wheel with fingertip audio and cruise controls; Heads Up display; power sunroof; power and heated front seats; 7-passenger seating – captains chairs 2nd row and split bench 3rd row; 115-volt power outlet; 3-zone climate controls; power liftgate.

Competitors:

Ford Edge, Honda Pilot, Acura MDX, Lexus RS, Toyota Highlander.