

## Ridge Running

### Subaru Style

By Roger Witherspoon

**Palm Springs** -- There is little room to maneuver on a one lane mountain highway with boulders and sage brush on one side, and 4,000 feet of air on the other.

Normally, that is not a problem, since the view along the rugged Palomar Mountains is spectacular, and there is little room to speed in a route characterized by switchbacks and hairpin curves. But the trip can seem unnecessarily long if you are stuck behind someone afraid to go faster than 20 miles an hour.

Which is why we drove patiently in "sport mode", maximizing the 247 pound-feet of torque in the Subaru's V-6 engine and waited for a little daylight. We rounded a hairpin curve behind the Sunday driver and hit the accelerator on a 50-yard straightaway. The five-speed transmission on the Subaru smoothly slid to fourth gear as car shot forward, quickly passing the meandering motorist and slowing down well before the next hairpin turn.

It was a maneuver which would be considered routine in most Subaru sedans. But this was different. While the vehicle was built on a Subaru Legacy sedan chassis, it was a new crossover, the Tribeca, which handles like a sedan while providing the benefits of an SUV. In developing the Tribeca, the folks holding Subaru's crayons placed the engine and fluid systems as low as possible in order to maintain a sedan-level center of gravity. The weight distribution combines with the electronic stability control program to produce an SUV which is not likely to roll over without the assistance of a crane.

In addition, the while most SUVs are primarily front wheel drive, the Subaru Tribeca some with full-time all wheel drive. On a smooth, dry highway, the Tribeca's five-speed transmission divides the torque in a 45-55 split, with the extra power going to the rear wheels. But the system is capable of shifting torque as needed, and can provide all or any portion of the torque to either set of wheels – which makes the Tribeca a vehicle which can go on just about any surface in just about any condition.

Subaru is entering a crowded crossover market – vehicles combining the space of an SUV with the frame and handling qualities of a sedan. And it will have to find a niche of its own somewhere between the high end Lexus RS 350 and Infiniti FX, and the mid-range Hyundai Veracruz and Honda Pilot, and the entry level Nissan Murano. It should not have trouble fitting in.

Externally, the Tribeca takes its styling cues from its predecessors and adds variations of its own. The frame flows from its wide, front grill, and the sides flare upwards toward the rear. This differentiates it from the Lexus RS, whose side and roof lines are parallel, and the Infiniti and Nissan, whose sides undulate over the wheel wells. In addition, the Tribeca's third side window is nearly full size, which adds to the impression of spaciousness inside and significantly improves the sight lines to the blind spot at the right rear of the car. Its profile is also distinguished by oversized rear view mirrors, which also help eliminate the SUV's blind spots.

Inside, the Tribeca takes its cues from naval craft, with curved lines setting off distinct operating centers. In this case, the dash is an undulating curve with a bulge in the

center holding the entertainment and information systems, and climate controls. Each front seat seems to float in its own, curved, leather padded pod.

This SUV comes in two flavors: regular and crowded. The regular SUV has two comfortable rows of leather seats, and the front set can be heated. The center seat in the back is actually large enough for an average adult, and there are separate climate controls for the rear passengers. Each door has a deep storage pocket and expanded section to hold a 20-ounce bottle. The four primary seats are large enough, with ample leg and head room, for NBA players on a road trip. The second row seats can be folded down to enlarge storage, or laid back to

The crowded version replaces most of the trunk with a third row bench capable of holding two very small people. While the second row seats roll out of the way at the touch of a button, they do not roll far and anyone venturing to the third row has to do some squeezing and climbing. On the plus side, the large third window eliminates the feeling of claustrophobia which frequently attends those stuck in the rear, and there are individual climate vents for the rear passengers.

The third row seats can fold flat to become part of the storage area.

Tribeca also offers a range of amenities. They all feature AM/FM and satellite radio, though the brand varies. Vehicles with a navigation system featuring a satellite GPS system come with XM satellite radio. Vehicles without the intuitive navigator have Sirius satellite radio. There is an easy to use, in-dash, six-disc CD and MP3 player, and the Tribeca comes with eight speakers and a pair of rear roof tweeters which can either envelop you in soft sound or merrily roil the countryside and bounce Usher of the San Bernardino Mountains. And for long road trips, there is also a DVD player for the rear passengers, using an eight-inch LCD, pull-down screen and wireless head phones.

Such variation comes with a price. In this case, the Tribeca is likely to range between \$30,000 and \$38,000 – though Subaru insists final prices have not been set. The pricing does raise questions about the purchase of a vehicle with a la carte amenities. These days, for vehicles costing more than \$30,000, navigation systems and satellite radio are considered obligatory by many motorists, rather than options.

Tribeca's competition stiffens, of course, as the price increases. But in any automotive crowd, the Tribeca should merrily hold its own. And if you've planned a cross country trip, it's a comfortable way to travel.

## **2008 Subaru Tribeca**

**MSRP: \$38,000**

### **Performance/ Safety:**

3.6-Liter DOHC V-6 engine producing 256 horsepower and 247 pound-feet of torque; symmetrical all wheel drive; 5-speed automatic transmission with electronic manual control; 4-wheel independent suspension; power assisted 4-wheel, anti-lock disc brakes; rack and pinion steering; 18-inch aluminum alloy wheels; roll-over sensor; seat-mounted, front side-impact air bags; front and rear, side curtain air bags.

### **Interior / Comfort:**

AM/ FM and XM or Sirius Satellite Radio; 6-disc, in-dash CD and MP3 player with 160-watt, 9-speaker premium audio system; leather wrapped, 3-spoke steering wheel with fingertip audio controls; DVD and game player with 9-inch pull down screen and wireless headsets; leather seats with front lumbar supports; power sunroof.