

Long Range Cruising

In Suzuki's SUV

By Roger Witherspoon

The welcome sign was withdrawn from the highway slicing through Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains, replaced by a driving rain driven by winds whipping through the Shenandoah Valley at up to 50 miles per hour. Conditions did not change over the next 400 miles, with the rain and gusts slicing through Pennsylvania's Poconos. The wide, graded, interstate highways were slick from about an inch of water and emergency crews struggled to keep up with a steady stream of accidents.

These were the kinds of conditions which prompt some motorists to pull into the nearest motel and wait for a sunny day. But I was cross country cruising in a Suzuki XL-7, the largest of the Japanese carmaker's SUV fleet, which was designed to be as comfortable and effective in the worst of weather as it was on a sunny summer day.

The experience starts on the outside of XL-7, a relatively sleek, low, streamlined frame for a full sized SUV. By avoiding the boxy frame common to many full sized SUVs with three rows of seats, the XL-7's airframe slides through the strongest, sudden, side blasts of air so you are not constantly fighting the wheel to maintain control. It helps that the XL-7 has electronically controlled all wheel drive and independent front and rear suspensions which constantly adjust to shifting road conditions.

The rain in West Virginia dropped visibility to about three car lengths and I was cruising at about 50 miles per hour in the right lane when lights from a speeding, double-trailer truck suddenly filled the rear windshield. There was no time to do anything but swerve sharply into the left lane as the truck roared by in a cloud of spray. It could have been an unstable transition – an SUV is not intended to be driven like a sports car – but the Suzuki handled like one, its 17-inch wheels firmly biting through the water-logged roadway while the traction control prevented even the slightest skid. If safety is a feature you look for when hauling your family around, you might want to add the XL-7 to your list.

Inside, the guys with Suzuki's crayons added a number of features to justify the \$30,000 price tag. There is actual wood trim accenting the two tone leather seats, rather than the wood-like plastic usually found in vehicles in this price range. To make the long distance drive enjoyable, Suzuki added XM satellite radio to the AM/FM lineup, and an easy to use, touch screen navigation system. There is also an MP3 and iPod connection, which lets you bring your own favorite 1,000 or so musicians along for the ride. You can add a DVD player with wireless headphones, but only if you eliminate the sunroof and navigation system.

The XL-7 has three full rows of seats, though there is not much room between the second and third rows. The last row, therefore, is basically for passengers in child seats or youngsters who recently grew out of them. The first two rows, however, have enough room for the average NBA player to comfortably roll across the countryside. The driver's seat is powered, while the rest are manually operated. But they are wide, padded, and comfortable on long hauls. The heat is especially appreciated on long trips. The front passenger seat, as well as the seats in the second and third rows, fold flat to turn the SUV

into a cargo van. And if the load is heavy, there is an automatic, hydraulic leveling function which prevents the XL-7 from being off balance and sagging in the rear.

The XL-7 has a remote ignition built into the key, which starts the engine and the climate control, and is effective up to 200 feet away. That lets you sit comfortably inside your home on a winter day, point the key out of a convenient window and warm up the car. If the temperature is below 41 degrees, it automatically turns on the heat in the driver's seat.

With the XL-7, Suzuki has packed a lot into a relatively low cost package. Rain or shine, it will comfortably take you wherever you want to go.

2008 Suzuki XL7 Ltd.

MSRP:		\$29,548
EPA Mileage:	15 MPG City	22 MPG Highway
As Tested Mileage:	13.8 MPG City	19.2 MPG Highway
Towing Capacity:		3,500 Pounds

Performance/ Safety:

3.6-Liter DOHC aluminum engine producing 252 horsepower and 243 pound-feet of torque; electronic all wheel drive; 5-speed automatic transmission with manual shift mode; 17-inch chrome alloy wheels; fog lamps; anti-lock brakes; electronic brake force distribution; side curtain airbags.

Interior/ Comfort:

Remote keyless entry and ignition; AM/FM XM satellite radio; 6-disc CD and MP3 player; rear vision camera; touch-screen navigation system; tilt, leather wrapped steering wheel with fingertip audio controls; heated front seats; power tilt and slide sunroof; rear climate zone.