

Roaming the City

In a Working Man's Truck

By Roger Witherspoon

It was one of those lucky city moments when there was a Starbucks in sight and a fairly large parking spot right in front. For a City boy, the day doesn't start much better than that.

So I began backing into the spot, and realized the Audi behind me was completely lost behind the protruding rear of the Sierra Crew Cab's large truck bed. Where is a big, tall, wide, gas guzzling SUV when you're looking for one?

So, mindful of the little sedan behind me, I did the only thing I could: put the hybrid into park, jumped out and checked. I had a good five feet to go, so I climbed back into the cab and began backing up slowly – repeating the in and out ritual of parallel parking until I was reasonably parked and the Audi was reasonably safe.

Pickup trucks were never really intended for the nation's older, Frost Belt cities. It wasn't until I moved to Texas, which hosts 20% of the nation's pickups that I realized that these work horses can double as fairly comfortable, well appointed, family cars. And in today's climate, they can be equipped with gadgets to make them as environmentally friendly as you can reasonably expect from a working truck.

That's a category that includes the newest working man's truck from General Motors: the GMC Sierra Hybrid which can haul your family belongings, three tons of concrete, or your newest baby with equal comfort and aplomb. If you'd like the exact same truck in a slightly different style, you'll find it in the Chevrolet Silverado – though the Chevy brand doesn't carry the same extra tough cachet as the GMC logo.

Though GM has spent much of the last two decades fighting against environmental improvements, the Detroit automotive giant has always had engineers and designers capable of developing and delivering powerful, yet fuel efficient vehicles – if given the chance. The Sierra Hybrid – and its sister Silverado – combine three systems in a technological blend which makes these competitive trucks for those who want them.

Under the Sierra's hood is a dual-mode power system consisting of a 6.0-liter V-8 engine producing 332 horsepower – which is adequate but not overpowering – and a 300-volt electrical engine whose torque goes directly to the axels. The combination is an instantly responsive power train which can haul three tons of material and carry another ton in its 53-cubic foot covered cargo bed.

An advantage of the hybrid system is the regenerative braking provided by the electric motor. The motor takes the heat from the brakes and converts it into electricity, which is stored in its battery pack. The result is that five or six years down the road, the owner of a hybrid does not need to spend hundreds of dollars on new brakes and rotors, an inevitable expense with regular, gas powered vehicles.

The V-8 engine on the Sierra Hybrid contains GM's Active Fuel Management, which drops the gasoline engine down to only four cylinders when cruising, thus cutting down on the rate of the regular gasoline it's burning. According to EPA estimates, the Sierra Hybrid burns 20 miles per gallon in city or highway motoring. That is an improvement over the standard, 14 MPG Sierra. The electric motor is capable of driving the truck at speeds under 30 miles per hour, or combining with the gasoline engine for

acceleration. The motor does not handle the power steering well when backing up at very low speeds, however, and maneuvering in and out of parking spots with just the electric motor means fighting the steering wheel.

As with most vehicles these days, many of the Sierra's features come a la carte. In this test model, the Sierra Hybrid did not have a navigation system with its color touch screen, or a backup camera. The latter is essential in city driving, where one prefers not to back into small, parked cars. And while many motorists feel a navigation system is an unnecessary luxury – particularly in this era of a portable Garmin – a key to the efficiency of any hybrid system is the interactive display which serves to train you into more energy efficient driving habits.

When you are looking at a screen showing gas usage ranging from 2 MPG to 100 MPG there is a natural inclination to try and keep the gauge in the upper range – especially when you are paying for the gas. You don't feel any better knowing that the Sierra takes regular gas if you are burning it at a single digit MPG rate. In the absence of such a visual feedback system, it is difficult to know when you should change the way you are driving. That is particularly true in a hybrid because when you are driving purely on electrical power, there is no sound. The silence can be disturbing, and there is a tendency to gun the accelerator just to make sure the engine is on.

But the luxury package for this working man's truck will add about \$6,000 to the price tag, which begins to shove it into another category.

The designers of the Sierra Hybrid wanted something comfortable for very tall men. Short men, handicapped men and women, and women in skirts may find it awkward to step up nearly three feet to get into the driver's seat since there is no access step. But once inside, it's a spacious, comfortable cabin with amenities for working or just cruising. The four wheel drive model comes with XM satellite radio, an in-dash CD and MP3 player, and an 18-inch wide center arm rest which can easily double as a computer table or work stand. There is also GM's OnStar communications systems, which can provide turn-by-turn navigating instructions or make phone calls through GM's satellite network. OnStar will often work in mountainous or rural regions where there is little or no cell phone access.

There is more than enough leg and headroom for five NBA forwards to sit comfortably on the wide, suede-like, manually-operated seats. And for another \$1,000 or so you can upgrade to heated leather. Underneath the rear seat is the 300-volt batter pack for the Sierra's electric motor. It is easily accessible by raising the seat, but otherwise the power pack is not noticeable.

The Sierra Hybrid is the kind of vehicle that GM built its reputation on. It is powerful, efficient, comfortable, and attractive. If GM survives its current economic troubles, this is one of the vehicles it will bank its future on.

GMC Sierra 4WD Hybrid Crew Cab

MSRP:		\$42,790
EPA Mileage:	20 MPG City	20 MPG Highway
Towing Capacity:		5,900 Pounds

Maximum Payload:

1,418 Pounds

Performance / Safety:

6.0-Liter cast aluminum V-8 engine producing 332 horsepower and 367 pound-feet of torque and active fuel management; 300-volt battery powered electric motor and 42-volt power rack & pinion steering system; two-mode continuous electric hybrid w/4 fixed gears; power-assisted 4-wheel disc brakes with regenerative braking; locking rear differential; stability and traction control; 5-spoke, 18-inch chrome-clad aluminum wheels; dual stage front air bags; head, curtain side airbags; daytime running lights.

Interior/ Comfort:

AM/FM/ XM satellite radio; single CD player; OnStar communications with turn-by-turn navigation; Bluetooth cell phone communication; tilt and telescope, leather wrapped steering wheel with fingertip audio, cell phone, and cruise controls; soft Tonneau cargo bay cover.