

# Shifting Gears

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## [New Kid on the Block: Cruising in a Chevy Cruze](#)

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By Roger Witherspoon



To say it was pouring rain would be an understatement.

It was the kind of heavy, continuous, seamless torrent of water flowing ceaselessly from above that made the air just slightly less damp than the swollen creeks and, a few millenniums back, probably prompted fish to move topside and evolve into amphibians.

It was definitely not made for driving, since the winding highway through the lower Hudson River Valley Highlands had a steady cross flow of a half inch or more of water and the going was, at best treacherous. And to make matters worse, one of Bambi's cousins under a tree in the wide center median decided the shelter was better on the other side of the roadway, and began splashing across.

There wasn't a lot of time to avoid becoming one of the 1,200 motorists who hit a deer on New York State roadways each week. I tapped the brakes to avoid a skid and sharply

turned the wheel left to cross the shoulder behind the bolting Bambi. The left wheels crunched gravel then rose slightly on a grassy mound while the traction control strained to even out the spin rates between those off-road wheels and the two still on water-covered pavement. I expected the sharp maneuver to trigger a skid – this was, after all, a \$20,000 Chevy Cruze, not a high priced performance car.

But the engineers in Detroit apparently know what they are doing these days, and the Cruze handled the rain dance with aplomb. Even Keiko Matsui, whose delicate jazz piano was wafting softly from the Cruze's CD player, never skipped a beat as the car bounded on and off the roadway. No wonder GM is making money.



The mid-sized, four-door sedan is a crowded field where it is hard for a newcomer to carve a niche – especially in the under \$25,000 group. This is an area which, for too long, offered motorists little more than wind-blown boxes on wheels. But times have changed. Asian entries like the Kia Soul, the Suzuki Kizashi and the Toyota Scion tC; and Detroit models like the Ford Fiesta and Dodge Avenger offer an impressive array of gadgets and amenities and have become cars people seek, rather than relatively inexpensive wheels that people settle for.

So Chevrolet had work to do to make the Cruze noticed in the mid-sized pack. They started with the face. The sedan has the low, wide stance similar to that of the Camaro, but that is the only similarity. The trademark Chevy badge and wide grill on the Cruze forms more of a smile welcoming family motorists, than the dark, aggressive grimace gracing the sports car.

Under the hood, the Cruze sports a 1.4-liter, four-cylinder engine cranking out just 138 horsepower. But this is a light car and the engine is turbocharged, so it never feels underpowered. And since it is mated to a six-speed transmission, the Cruze is responsive in automatic or electronic manual mode. The engine is billed as getting 26 miles per gallon of regular gas in city driving and 37 MPG on the highway. That seems a bit wishful: the test car got 23.7 MPG in mixed driving.

GM was thoughtful in designing the interior, though frugal with some of the amenities.

The interior has attractive, two-toned seats, but they are unheated and cloth rather than leather. The seats are manually operated and, depending on your weight, may not be the easiest to maneuver, particularly when you are trying to adjust the seat's height. The seats are, however, wide and comfortable. The two-toned motif is used all around the interior, with the padding on the doors and dash matching the look of the center of the seats. The dash itself is a double curve, providing a separate space for the driver and passenger and demonstrating that a car does not have to be plain to be inexpensive.



There is enough leg and head room in the rear for two passengers who dwell well north of six feet to travel comfortably over long distances. In addition, the rear seats fold flat, providing additional storage space to an already ample trunk.

For entertainment, the Cruze came with AM/FM and XM satellite radio in addition to the CD and MP3 players, and the iPod and USB connections. The six-speaker sound system, with sub woofers in the front doors, was more than ample to envelope the cabin in sound. And the car's wind suppression is effective enough to allow you to easily hear every note in a soft solo even though the car is rolling down the road at triple digit speeds.

There is no navigation system in the Cruze, but the car has both Bluetooth connection for your smartphone and OnStar, GM's satellite communications network. So one can either use an app like Google's navigation system or push the OnStar button and get turn-by-turn directions as the system's satellites follow you down the highway.

The Cruze will have to work to make a dent in the tough, crowded, mid-sized marketplace. But it is likely to give the leaders in the segment a good run for the front of the road-running pack.



### **2011 Chevrolet Cruze**

**MSRP:** **\$21,455**

**EPA Mileage:** **26 MPG City** **37 MPG Highway**

**As Tested Mileage:** **23.7 MPG Mixed**

### **Performance / Safety:**

1.4-liter, DOHC, cast aluminum, turbo-charged engine producing 138 horsepower and 148 pound/feet of torque; 6-speed automatic transmission with manual mode; traction and stability controls; independent, MacPherson strut, front suspension; torsion beam rear suspension; 17-inch wheels; 4-wheel, anti-lock brakes; driver and front passenger front, knee, side impact, and head curtain airbags; rear side impact and head curtain airbags.

### **Interior / Comfort:**

AM/FM/XM Satellite radio; CD and MP3 player; USB and iPod ports; 6-speaker sound system; Bluetooth and OnStar communications; tilt & telescope steering wheel; leather wrapped steering wheel with fingertip audio, Bluetooth, and cruise controls.