



Review: 2011 Chevy Cruze is very competent

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By MATT DEGEN

The new Chevrolet Cruze is a very competent compact that manages to stand out among the competition.

The Chevy Cruze comes at a good, and important, time for General Motors. Like the recent introduction of the new Ford Focus, the Cruze (sounds cooler than "Cruise," yes?) is a domestic car that touts high mileage and sets its sights on turf long associated with foreign competitors such as the Honda Civic, Toyota Corolla and Nissan Sentra.

The timing is important not just because of rising gas prices but because more and better compact cars are coming from a wider array of aggressive competitors, namely Hyundai and Kia. After years of making the dismal and outdated Cobalt, it was make or break time for GM in the compact category.

After a week of driving the Cruze, I can say Chevy has a winner.

First, the car comes with a very affordable price, one that beguiles this car's size and looks. Five models are offered in all, with a base LS version coming in at just over \$17,000, including destination. Even the upscale LTZ model with features like ultrasonic rear parking assist and 18-inch wheels notches in under \$23,000. It's a lot of car for the money.

My test model provided by GM was the Eco edition, whose tally came to \$20,770 with options like leather-wrapped steering wheel, Bluetooth and an automatic transmission. This model features the same 1.4-liter turbocharged four-cylinder found on every other Cruze except the LS edition (which gets a naturally aspirated 1.8-liter four-cylinder), but wrings out extra mileage low-resistance tires, a different front air dam, grille and rear spoiler.

GM likes to tout that this car can get up to 42 mpg on the highway, but the asterisk mark associated with that number is for a car linked to a six-speed manual transmission. With the six-speed automatic transmission like the kind mine was equipped with, that number falls to 37 for highway mpg and 26 mpg for city, numbers I found to be realistic.

With a total length of 181 inches, the Cruze is not big, yet it is plenty roomy, with accommodations for up to five passengers and a rear seat that isn't a squeeze. Even the trunk packs a lot of space, offering more than 15 cubic feet of cargo room and rear seats that fold if you need to haul longer items.

Most surprising about the Cruze is how refined it is on the road. This sedan offers a smooth, comfortable ride – one that feels too good for a \$20,000 car. The eight-way manual-adjusting driver's seat conforms well, the standard tilt/telescoping steering wheel is an easy reach, and there's even a firm dead pedal on the left to rest your foot. This is a car that can indeed comfortably cruise in.

Inside, the cabin is reasonably quiet, lest for wind noise that crops up above the driver's door at freeway speeds. Even Ken Elkinson's new ambient "Music for Commuting" collection couldn't tame the gush of noise that crept in around the A-pillar.

Likewise, the engine isn't exactly the smoothest-sounding thing out there when pressed for acceleration. A sprint from zero to freeway speeds elicited serious drone. Yet it always did the job, and while the car is no speed demon, the Cruze effortlessly ticked through the gears. If you feel like being sporty, you can also manually go up and down the gears with a push or pull of the transmission lever.

This car also gets kudos for its looks. While I didn't see anything particularly novel about it, the design is pleasing to the eyes, with soft curves and an athletic line that stretches horizontally across the middle of the car on both sides. Interior touches are equally nice, such as the soft red fabric on the dash in this version, and the simple yet functional center stack. If you want to spend the extra dough, you can also opt for upgrades such as a navigation system and lighted door-sill plates.

One interior faux pas I did find almost immediately was on the rearview mirror, of all places. This just happens to be the spot where GM decided to put the buttons for its OnStar rapid response and communications service. Guess who rang emergency personnel when simply trying to adjust the mirror for nighttime driving?

While Chevy may want to rethink the position of those buttons on the next version of the Cruze, there isn't a whole lot else that needs changing. The Cruze is a comfortable, efficient, good-looking car that offers a lot for your dollar. It's more proof that "econoboxes" are anything but these days, and even in the ever-growing field of competent compacts, the Cruze manages to stand out.

Your turn: Share your own thoughts on the Chevy Cruze in the comments area below.

This week's ride: 2011 Chevrolet Cruze Eco

Type: Five-passenger, front-wheel-drive sedan

Engine: 1.4-liter turbocharged four-cylinder

Total power: 138 horsepower, 148 lb.-ft. torque

Fuel economy rating: 26 city/37 highway

Base price, including destination: \$17,275

Price as equipped: \$20,770

The good: Comfort, ride quality, fuel-efficiency, value, roominess

The bad: Wind noise at speed, a motor that's a droner