

SWIMMING UPSTREAM

MITSUBISHI CHARTS ITS OWN COURSE

BY JOE SAGE



Mitsubishi dances a bit to its own drummer. You would, too, if you had to battle for mindshare with Toyota, Nissan, Honda and the others. For perspective, compare market shares in the US (year-to-date March): Toyota 14.2%, Honda 10.1%, Nissan 9.3%, Hyundai 4.7%, Kia 3.4%, Mazda 2.1% and Mitsubishi 0.7%.

So they put their best foot forward, differentiating by style and a high level of features at an attractive price, as in the case of their small SUV, the Outlander, and its smaller sibling, the Outlander Sport, driven here. Its drivetrain is another example of their idiosyncrasies: rather than all-wheel-drive, per the norm, they promote AWC, for All Wheel Control. Not a bad term, really, considering all the controls they (and many contemporary models) have in place for safety and handling. But different.

The Outlander Sport starts at just \$18,495 in two-wheel drive, or \$22,995 in AWC all-wheel drive. The 2.0L DOHC inline-4 MIVEC engine puts out 148 hp and 145 lb-ft of torque; the SE with AWC weighs 3263 pounds. EPA estimated fuel mileage is 24 city, 29 highway, quite respectable for any capable SUV, partly due to its regenerative brakes, which capture braking energy as power.

Extensive amenities include a range of electronic interfaces, keyless entry and start, HID headlamps, 18-

inch wheels, paddle shift, hill start assist, locking 4WD, four-wheel disc brakes, ABS, 4-wheel independent suspension, heated seats, rain-sensing wipers and much more. Standard is a 6-speaker sound system, but part of our car's \$1800 Premium Package (along with an LED-illuminated panoramic glass sunroof) was a 710-watt Rockford Fosgate premium 9-speaker system with 10-inch subwoofer. With that plus destination charge, our test car stickered at \$25,575. Lots of inclusions for that price.

So is the value there? We had heard lukewarm opinions already, so we worked hard to give it the benefit of the doubt. Logbook notes indicated seats were uncomfortable, manual and hard to improve. Climate controls weren't getting us cool, and this on a 73-degree spring day, with another 40 degrees due in summer. We noted steering torque and so-so suspension, rough on drainage troughs and speed bumps. But mostly, we noted what seemed like a great deal of straining on the part of the drivetrain, mostly gauged by its sound effects. We confirmed it sounded gutless, thus feeling gutless. After one aggressive lane change, we noted: mission accomplished, but it sounded as though it would die trying.

Driving with the manumatic improved the experience, as we pushed all the shift points a little bit early. Though

shifting up should drop the power curve, all in all this gave us a higher sense of control and power, with what we had to work with. We put it in all-wheel drive on a mildly hilly and curvy—but very sandy—road and gave it some gas. We felt some slipping and grabbing, as its systems seemed more reactive than preemptive.

While most of our performance critiques were about drivetrain noise, our experience with the Rockford Fosgate audio system was very good. The interface is simple and includes options for punch, field, hall, live and stage, plus a range of normal, pop, rock and so on. We settled on hall and rock. The subwoofer is strong.

The styling's well executed, given that its oversize grille is a Mitsubishi trademark. From a three-quarter rear view, the little SUV looks fairly attractive and bold. The 18-inch wheels help its overall stance considerably and rear storage space is quite adequate.

The Mitsubishi Outlander Sport's fit and finish, instrumentation, inclusions and accessories were fine for the price. The weak point was the driving. Competition is stiff, and you may compare other vehicles both new and used. But if you turn up the Sport's above-average audio system up to the point that you don't hear the straining drivetrain, you can have an enjoyable little ride. ■

