

Up-to-date kicks on route 66

WITH POTENT POWERTRAINS,
A SMOOTH POWER TOP,
DECENT MPG AND VALUE PRICES,
THE NEW CAMARO CONVERTIBLE
IS RIGHT AT HOME
ON THE MOTHER ROAD

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY LARRY EDSALL



Let's get the least impressive things about the 2011 Chevrolet Camaro convertible out of the way quickly: The top needs about 20 seconds to power itself up or down, which may seem an eternity in this day and age of convertible tops that disappear as quickly as a dragster reaches the timing lights. Nonetheless, don't overlook the fact that, at long last, you can buy a Camaro with a TOP THAT POWERS ITSELF UP AND DOWN.

Let's see, what else? Well, the trunk isn't huge, and when the top goes down it takes some of the available space. But once again, don't overlook the fact that THE TOP POWERS ITSELF DOWN so you can enjoy not only the open road but also the open air.

And speaking of the open air—and now we're already interrupting our list of least impressive things to insert one of the most impressive—the cockpit is amazingly quiet and unwindblown (is that a word?) when the top is down, even at speeds legal only on Interstate highways in the western United States.

One other thing for our least impressive list: For some enthusiasts' tastes, the car is a little softly sprung and not quite track-day-ready. On the other hand, the ride not only is quiet and unwindblown, but exceptionally smooth and comfortable at those highway speeds. And if you really want a track-day car, well, the ZL1 version of the new Camaro is coming down the road—and very quickly.

More than the sum of its parts

OK, so let's recap: The 2011 Chevrolet Camaro convertible has a top that powers itself up and down, that takes up some of the space where you might otherwise want to store a third suitcase, and the car allows you to ride in comfort and, based on the reactions we saw during our 700-mile test drive, in attention-grabbing style.

Whether we were getting thumbs up on the highway or questions at a gas station or whether it was the three young men at the motel who asked if they could take their pictures with the car—each of them taking his long turn sitting behind the steering wheel and smiling—

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ing widely while the others snapped his photo with their cellphones and immediately uploaded them to Facebook—the new Camaro convertible turned heads while at the same time turning mouths into smiles almost as big as those of those three young men.

The 2011 Chevrolet Camaro convertible we tested was the 2SS, the top-of-the-line trim level (also available are the 1LT, 2LT and 1SS).

The LTs are propelled by Chevy's 304-horsepower 3.6-liter V6, which we've experienced and enjoyed while driving Camaro coupes with fixed steel roofs. In fact, we liked the V6 so much that we speculated that it's probably the engine we'd order should we find ourselves in a position to buy a new Camaro convertible,

which we haven't, but which a close friend has done very recently; he's a long-time but aging motorcycle rider, and the Camaro convertible keeps him in the open air but with four wheels rather than just a pair on the pavement.

By the way, our reasoning regarding the V6 was that the convertible isn't going to be a track-day car but a boulevard cruiser, and for cruising boulevards or country roads, 304 horsepower would seem sufficient.

However, the SSs benefit from a 6.2-liter V8. Cars equipped with six-speed automatics carry a 400-horsepower L99 powerplant while those with six-speed manuals, like the one we were driving, get the 426-hp LS3.

The result: Driving the new Camaro SS convertible is

a lot like driving a Corvette, except you spend a lot less and gain a back seat.

The 2011 Chevrolet Camaro 2SS carries a base price of \$39,650 (or \$29,275 for the 1LT). For your nearly 40 grand you get the car, its powertrain and power top, plus StabiliTrak dynamic control, four-piston Brembo brakes, front and seat-mounted side airbags, six months of OnStar directions and connections, dual exhaust with polished tips, a rear spoiler, 20-inch wheels, heated external mirrors, fog lamps, rear parking assist, heads-up display, Boston Acoustics premium audio system with 10-inch subwoofer and USB port, XM satellite radio, trip computer, retro-style four-pack auxiliary gauges, auto-dimming interior mirror, tilt and telescoping steering column, leather seating with heated front seats, cruise and audio controls mounted on the retro-styled deep-dish steering wheel, dual power outlets, cup holders and more, including a very cool ambient lighting system built into the door panels.

Our vehicle also was equipped with the \$1,200 RS appearance package—flangeless aluminum wheels with a Midnight Silver painted finish, high-intensity discharge headlamps with "halo" rings, fog lamps and unique taillights.

As-tested price with destination charges is \$41,700.

Getting our kicks

The week we had the Camaro convertible coincided with a trip we needed to make to Gallup, New Mexico, as in "you'll see Amarillo, Gallup, New Mexico, Flagstaff, Arizona, don't forget Winona..." That's right, Gallup is one of the cities featured on the "Get Your Kicks" song about Route 66, and that's precisely what we decided to do—with some bonus sightseeing along the way.

We left Phoenix early in the morning and wound our way up through the Mazatzal Mountains to breakfast at the Knotty Pine Cafe in Payson. Then we climbed more, up the Mogollon Rim, then shot across the high desert to Holbrook, where we stopped to take pictures of the car at the historic Wigwam Village Motel with its teepee-shaped accommodations and a variety of classic cars that would make you think you're traveling the Mother Road in the 1950s.

We backtracked a little from Holbrook to drive through the Petrified Forest and Painted Desert national parks, then headed to Gallup, detouring off Interstate 40 as often as possible to explore as much of the old Route 66 as we could find. One of the things we found was a long-abandoned gas station where the pumps still were set at \$1.299 for regular and \$1.499 for premium. By the way, those were the prices for a whole gallon, not per quart.

Speaking of gasoline prices, while they're currently at new if not record heights, we didn't break the bank on our 700-mile trip. Another very nice thing about the new V8-powered Camaro is that you're turning only around 1700 rpm while traveling at 70 miles per hour. The EPA rates the car at 16 miles per gallon in city driving and at 24 on the highway. We averaged 23.2 without any sort of hypermiling. In fact, there were a few times when we well exceeded 1700 rpm.

We got our kicks in the Camaro convertible on old Route 66, but we're confident you'll get them no matter what road you choose to drive. ■

