

Proof positive

America's new number-one-selling car shows there is no longer any need to choose among quality, style, economy or domestic build

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Number one in sales. Just as with computers, hamburgers and much else, that has not always meant the best you can possibly buy. Then again, as with cell-phones and MP3 players, sometimes it has. As we received the 2012 Chevrolet Cruze Eco for a test week, the Cruze was occupying the number one spot in US sales, and the Cruze is Chevrolet's biggest-selling model worldwide. In this case, these king-of-the-hill claims are backed up by quite a product, at quite a price.

GM's stylists have taken a shot of adrenaline over the past several years, in all segments. Gone are the days of "you don't really want this one" styling on small cars, inside and out. And features abound. For a good decade now, most any automotive writer would tell you that you just about can't buy a bad car anymore: build quality and ride have improved across the board. We would add that as this decade gets rolling, you just about can't-not-get a very complete set of features, options and electronics. Many cars in this price category now have features that, in a car at four or five times this cost, might come in an option package that costs as much as this car itself.

There is considerable value in the purchase of the Chevrolet Cruze. But there is also remarkable value in its ownership and operation.

WANT 30 MPG? HOW ABOUT 42? (OR 51?)

One strong trend in the industry right now is the development of powertrains with what are generally considered alternative power sources. (The more that come to market, the less these will be considered alternative.) But a corollary trend is toward maximizing the efficiency of the reliable, affordable and familiar internal combustion engine. And Chevrolet is wringing quite a bit out of the turbocharged 1.4-liter ECOTEC® in the Cruze. Add other Eco touches such as optimized aerodynamics, minimized weight and reduced rolling resistance, and with a six-speed manual (with Eco overdrive), the Cruze achieves 42 mpg (estimated highway). A Cruze Eco with an automatic transmission is rated at 39 mpg.

We're bullish on the availability of a manual transmission, and even moreso when it has the better fuel economy of the two (not always the case).

At that benchmark 42 mpg, the Chevrolet Cruze Eco sits among the most fuel-efficient non-hybrid vehicles sold in the US. (Chevrolet has confirmed that this number could grow to as high as 51 mpg with a diesel engine option starting in the 2013 model year. GM sells a diesel Cruze in Europe and Australia, but the engine is being reengineered to meet US emissions standards.)



Automakers are facing potential mandates to increase fuel economy to 35.5 mpg by 2016 and perhaps 56.2 mpg by 2025. The diesel GM already has waiting in the wings can be a major step toward this.)

MIDDLE DOG OF FIVE CRUZE MODELS

The non-Eco Cruze LS starts at just \$16,720 (with a non-turbo 1.8-liter ECOTEC engine achieving 36 mpg). Both the 1.8-liter non-turbo Cruze and the 1.4-liter ECOTEC turbocharged Cruze (1LT, 2LT and LTZ models, as well as Eco) are rated at 138 hp, but the turbo delivers more torque—148 lb-ft compared to 123 on the base LS.

Pricewise, the Cruze Eco sits in the middle, with a base price of \$19,245. Lose the aero features, but add more leather, chrome, upgraded instrumentation and such, and the 2LT or LTZ come in just over \$20,000 and at \$23,110, respectively. The LTZ comes with automatic only, and the weight of its options is one factor in its 36 mpg fuel mileage rating. The full lineup doesn't vary tremendously, so you'll have some fun working through the decision points for your own best goals.

The Eco nameplate is a harbinger of more to come. In model year 2013, watch for the Malibu Eco, which feature eAssist™ light electrification technology, expected to deliver an estimated 38 mpg highway, the highest for a midsize sedan in Chevrolet history. The eAssist system will use a state-of-the-art lithium-ion battery and electric motor-generator to enable regenerative braking electric assist and start-stop functionality, working with a 180-hp 2.4-liter ECOTEC direct-injection four-cylinder engine and six-speed automatic. But it will cost more—about \$5000 more, based on 2012 Malibu pricing.

The Cruze promises the amenities, quiet ride, roominess, infotainment and safety features of a larger car, in a compact car, at a compact price, and it's available now.

The 2012 Chevrolet Cruze is the only car in its class with 10 standard air bags, receiving an overall maximum possible five-star safety rating from the NHTSA.

ECO-CRUZIN': UNDER 20 GRAND, OVER 40 MPG

The 2012 Chevrolet Cruze Eco we spent a week with had the max-economy manual transmission, so it was max-rated at 28 mpg city and 42 mpg highway. The only add-



on to the \$19,245 base was an Eco Driver Convenience Package, at \$495, which added 6-way power adjustment to the driver's seat, plus rear parking assist. With destination charge of \$750, the test car stickered at \$20,490.

Traction control, StabiliTrak ESC with rollover protection and ABS are standard, as is rack-mounted electric power steering, which saves fuel by removing a steering pump from the engine's burden. Hydraulic ride bushings and an isolated engine cradle create a quiet cabin.

The Cruze Eco had a great engine-driveline note that gives a feeling of strength, noted at times as bordering on Shelbyesque. This backed up our initial impression: a solid car, stylish outside and in. The car has guts.

It felt less powerful on a freeway access ramp, but pretty potent at freeway speeds. On surface streets, the gearing of the manual transmission let us nail corners; though the suspension and tires a bit less so. The full Cruze lineup has a MacPherson strut front suspension, and most have an advanced Z-link rear suspension setup, but the latter is not included on the Cruze Eco with manual transmission. Too bad. We noted the difference in rear suspension performance several times.

The Cruze has a huge trunk, 15.4 cubic feet—bigger than an Audi A8 or BMW 7 Series. Interior size was generally fine, though we caught our toe on the hood release every time we got out. Our logbook states that if the ignition key didn't have a key fob on it, we might not notice that our knees were a bit crowded, but with a key fob, we noticed it constantly. An easy fix, of course.

The Cruze's instrument display gives you refreshingly straightforward information: to adjust fan speed, you get three little icons; to tune audio, you get a surprisingly usable selection for a small screen (though it takes longer to master). It's very clever: the smaller screen keeps this affordable compact car's positioning intact, while providing a wealth of top-notch interface. Audio quality, even after working deep into the controls, was nothing special.

The wheels punch beyond their weight. Interior styling is clean, controls are simple yet quite advanced. The new Cruze Eco is not likely to beat a Ferrari, but it will surprise a lot of people with its performance. The basic stats are inescapable: a price under 20 and fuel mileage over 40, all in an attractive package. ■

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