

When they say it's all new—they mean it



By Bill Schaffer. Photos: Joe Sage

Spending time with the engineers, planners and public relations staff of a new car is always an interesting experience. Having survived a grueling two or three years' gestation period, they are like new parents—proudly extolling the innovative features, unique design and offering all the best-in-class numbers like a mantra.

I'm not sure what we were expecting from the introduction of the all-new Chevrolet Equinox, because we had already driven the Saturn Vue, which rode on the same platform and had similar drivetrain elements. Honestly, we even thought it might be a rehash of the current Equinox, which was all new in 2006.

After an enthusiastic presentation of facts, figures and highlights on the 2010 Chevrolet Equinox, it was time to slip behind the wheel and spend some quality time getting to know GM's new baby.

There's no mistaking the Equinox is a Chevrolet, with its bold family two-tier grille and large gold bowtie insignia. The exterior looks longer and leaner than major competitors like the Honda CR-V and Toyota RAV4.

Inside, Equinox sports a bold two-tone treatment. We especially liked the Jet Black and Brownstone perforated leather combination from the three available choices on the top model.

The dash design is excellent and one of the more user-friendly configurations we've seen. The two-pod instrument panel resembles the new Camaro, with a large speedometer and tachometer flanking the fuel, temperature and a digital readout in the middle. Even without the optional navigation system, the center stack has logically organized buttons and simple dials for the functions we use most often—audio volume, tuning, fan and temperature. Redundant audio and Bluetooth controls are conveniently placed on the steering wheel. Parents will love the button that controls the rear door child locks, so it's

not necessary to flip the button on the door jams every time rear seat passengers switch from children to adults.

One of the best new features is limousine-like rear legroom. Even with the front seats adjusted all the way back, anyone but an NBA player has amazing legroom, thanks to the eight inches of rear seat adjustment.

Most Equinox buyers will chose the 182-hp, 2.4-liter four-cylinder engine with DOHC and direct injection driving the standard six-speed automatic. Driving the front wheels—or with optional all-wheel drive—this drivetrain accelerates from 0 to 60 mph in a respectable 8.7 seconds, while achieving a 22 mpg city and 32 mpg highway EPA rating. The AWD version is rated at 20/29 mpg. For optimum fuel economy, drivers press the "Economy" button on the center console to change the engine/transmission mapping for better fuel efficiency.

About 30 percent of Equinox customers will order the optional 264-hp, 3.0-liter direct injection V6. This ups the towing capacity from 1,500 to 3,500 pounds and makes a significant improvement in passing power and freeway on-ramp times. Zero-to-60 mph time for the V6 is 7.8 seconds. The EPA ranks the V6 at 18 mpg city and 25 mpg highway and just one mpg less for the AWD.

Prices start at \$23,185, including destination charge, for a front-wheel drive LS and go to \$30,540 for the LTZ. A fully loaded LTZ tops out at just over \$36,000.

The only nit we picked at the end of the day was the chrome latch on a dash-mounted compartment, which reflects in your eye when driving toward the sun. In addition, manually shifting the automatic transmission was difficult because the transmission shifter is mounted too far back on the center console.

But after spending a day in the Chevrolet Equinox, it was obvious why the Equinox team was so excited about this new compact crossover. Equinox is very well done, with excellent design execution, quality and value. ■

AZ DRIVER LOGBOOK NOTES

Bill attended the 2010 Equinox press intro in Michigan, and we drove the 2010 Equinox FWD LT1 in Arizona for a week. Our logbook reveals how we felt about discoveries large and small, along the way, such as:

- We entered the vehicle and promptly declared these to be the most comfortable seats ever—soft, cushioned, ventilated fabric... and comfy. But their positions are tough to adjust, with a combination of electrical and mechanical controls. And an unintended consequence of comfy little bumps on the fabric is that stopping can send just about anything you put on the seat flying onto the floor—every time.
- Very maneuverable, nice turning circle.
- Great stance, great visibility.
- A few nits about wiper controls and headlights with a mind of their own, etc., but these are things you always get used to.
- Ear-battering pressure effect with the driver's window open, in some conditions.
- Bill noted a latch that shines in your eye, and we noted a grained surface on the steering wheel, reflecting into the instruments.
- Shift settings are illuminated, so you can see when you're in D or R—a good thing, as you don't always feel them distinctly.
- We were able to move the Equinox a few yards with the hatch open—no warnings, scoldings or refusal to do it. Nice.
- Not a BMW X5, but half price or less, great fuel economy, a solid 85% comparison.

Pioneer and still a major benchmark for the segment



By Barbara and Bill Schaffer. Photos: Joe Sage

The all-new Toyota RAV4 was good when it was first introduced 14 years ago, but like a fine wine, the model has improved with age. With over 700,000 of the little SUVs sold by 2006, Toyota introduced the third generation without a great deal of fanfare, but we were amazed at how extreme that makeover was. The RAV4 surprised us with an optional 3.5-liter V6 pumping out 269 hp through a 5-speed automatic transmission. That's 50 to 75 more hp than we would have expected and 108 hp greater than their previous "big engine." We've also driven the standard 2.4-liter four-cylinder engine rated at 166 hp (five hp greater than the previous largest engine) and mated to a standard four-speed automatic. Merging onto the freeway or passing slow-moving vehicles was easy and comfortable.

The exterior of the RAV4 has a rugged, contemporary look and wide, sporty stance. The front slopes to a trapezoidal grille and four-bulb headlamps, adding to its aggressive stance. The rear is more traditional, with LED taillights and a spare in a color-keyed hard cover.

Inside there is considerable length and width for all passengers, with good head clearance and legroom for the second row, plus room for an optional third row (best utilized for younger children or animals). The second row seats split 40/60, and the third row 50/50, allowing a multitude of configurations for cargo and passengers.

The original RAV4 was the first SUV to utilize a unibody passenger-car-style platform, now used on about 80 percent of small SUVs. The current RAV4 was redesigned on an entirely new high-tensile steel platform with a rigid, lightweight body. It has four-wheel independent suspension, an economical but precise electronic steering system and good insulation, giving a quiet and sophisticated ride. The standard Star Safety System™ includes vehicle stability control, traction control, antilock brakes,

electronic brake-force distribution and brake assist.

The RAV4 is available in standard, Sport and Limited models, each with a choice of the four-cylinder or V-6 engine in two- or four-wheel-drive configurations.

The electronically controlled four-wheel-drive system distributes torque between front and rear and allows the system to switch freely between front- and four-wheel drive. The system can be manually locked to maximize torque to the rear; this lock is automatically disengaged over 25 mph or when the brakes are applied.

Our test RAV4 was the 5-Door Sport 4x4 with V6. This performance-oriented model adds 18-inch wheels, sport-tuned suspension, flared fenders and cosmetic upgrades. Included are dual zone a/c with filtration, cruise control, power windows/locks and keyless entry, gated shifter, and rear cargo storage with under-floor storage. A premium package (\$1930) added leather-trimmed seats, which completely transforms the RAV4 experience. Another package (\$1550) included touchscreen navigation with backup camera plus enhanced audio and satellite. The Sport has a base price of \$24,600. Fully equipped, ours stickered at \$30,938 (including \$745 destination charge). The Sport model with AWD plus extras add up to a most impressive small SUV. Our V6 all-wheel-drive test RAV4 is rated by the EPA at 21 mpg for city driving and 27 mpg on the highway. Fuel mileage numbers remain very close across the RAV4 range, whether with the 4-cylinder or V6, and for front-wheel and all-wheel drive.

Toyota has kept hitting the bullseye, and the current RAV4 is no exception. It's comfortable without giving up the agility that makes these fun-size SUVs a pleasure to drive. It's refined and sophisticated with a quiet elegance and a solid well-planted feeling we appreciate. It's not inexpensive, and for a few dollars more a buyer can step up to a Highlander or 4Runner, but those SUVs are not quite as much fun as the RAV4. ■

COMING IN THE 2010 RAV4

For 2010, the Toyota RAV4 compact SUV expands availability of features first offered on select grades for 2009. The base model now offers the backup monitor system with rear-view camera and monitor integrated into the electrochromic mirror. The Sport Appearance package, introduced for 2009 4x4 V6 models, will also be available on Sport grade 4x2 and 4x4 models equipped with the 2.5-liter four-cylinder engine in early 2010. The Sport grade models offer a new optional JBL audio system with steering wheel audio controls and hands-free Bluetooth™ connectivity. The Sport Appearance Package gives the RAV4 Sport grade a sleeker look, with a rear door design featuring chrome accents and no spare tire. (The package equips the RAV4 with run-flat tires.) Other cues include heated side mirrors with integrated turn signals, a stainless steel exhaust tip and unique badging. Inside, the package adds a chrome accented shift knob with leather insert, chrome interior door handles, parking brake and vent trim, and unique doorsills. For 2010, the Limited grade adds a chrome parking brake and vent trim.

The 2010 RAV4 is offered in three distinct grades: Base, Sport and top-of-the-line Limited, and with a choice between the 2.5-liter four-cylinder that was new for 2009 or the V6 engine. Both engines can be teamed with either front-wheel drive or electronic on-demand four-wheel-drive.