

Q: Are customers still lining up for big SUVs? A: QX.

With the introduction of the all-new second generation QX, Infiniti demonstrates their belief that there is still a market for full-size luxury SUVs. The 2011 QX56 can still carry eight adults and their belongings in luxurious space and (when equipped) can tow up to 8,500 pounds.

But is there still a market for such a luxury behemoth? We headed to its launch in Louisville, Kentucky, to find out. The first information we received concerned sales. Everyone knows 2009 was a dismal benchmark for the entire industry, but Infiniti did post 2010 sales up 14.4% for the first quarter, up 46.2% in April year-over-year, and

in March had their best sales month since August 2009. Figures specific to the QX were far more dramatic: first-quarter sales were up a whopping 216% year-over-year, with March alone representing 40% more sold than in the entire three-month first quarter of 2009. This gave the Infiniti QX record market share of about 9.6%—at the end of an old model's cycle. The buying public is clearly finding much to like in the QX, and dealers are reportedly excited—and surprised—at the interest level in the QX (having anticipated more buzz for the new 2011 Infiniti M). In fact, during Infiniti's sponsorship of the NCAA Final Four, their presence on Facebook skyrocketed from 17,000 to 65,000—overnight.

The big question would be how to improve on such success. For an

answer, Infiniti asked owners for comments and ratings of the QX—unfiltered—and set up a team to respond to their interests and remedy any concerns.

The company had debated whether there should even be another QX in this day and age, given its large size and relative fuel consumption. What they learned is that the needs and desires of the marketplace remain much the same: the QX appeals to young buyers with the highest income and with children (future drivers). This core constituency uses the vehicle as intended—for kids, groups, distance and comfort. And most have another car: for 55% of current owners, another vehicle in the household is also a luxury vehicle. The segment is not large, but it is very appealing—and growing. So a new QX was enthusiastically put into development.

The 2011 QX56 is longer, wider and



longer, but also lighter. A new roof rack structure inspired a 3-inch drop in roof height, to accommodate parking structures and garage doors. The big SUV moves to 20-inch (or optional 22-inch) wheels and a wider track.

Inside, great attention has been given to finishes, materials, appointments and controls, which they say are modeled after those found in an executive jet, creating a high-level personal environment for any driver or passenger. The second row is particularly spacious and well appointed. (At one stop, they made sure we compared the back-seat experience of the QX to that in a Cadillac Escalade.) The third row benefits from a power reclining and folding feature (with a manual return), and, unique to the segment, it reclines up to 20 degrees (again reminiscent of executive aircraft). Three rows of passengers are kept comfortable with a tri-zone climate control system.

Other interior features include standard hard drive navigation, an Around View™ monitor, Bose 13-speaker premium audio, available perforated semi-aniline leather seating and an available Tri-Zone Entertainment System that allows

different sources to be played at the same time. The kids will have no complaints.

The second-generation Infiniti QX has been totally redesigned from the body-on-frame platform up. New technology includes a Hydraulic Body Motion Control system as part of the Deluxe Touring Package. Its new high-stiffness frame structure enhances ride comfort while reducing noise, vibration and harshness. A new 400-hp, 5.6-liter V8 engine with Variable Valve Event & Lift, Direct Injection gasoline feed and 7-speed automatic transmission gets about 10 percent better fuel economy than its predecessor (EPA estimates are 14/20/16 for city/highway/combined, in either two- or four-wheel drive).

Upon entering, the QX seemed spacious but not wide inside. It's clearly long, clearly roomy, but seems pleasingly compact. To us, this reinforced the executive jet claim. It's definitely wide on the outside, though, giving us a couple of tight fits along rural guardrails. Our Kentucky drive gave the new QX a thorough workout. We had horrendous weather and lots of rain. The automatic

KENTUCKY TRAVEL NOTES

The I-65 corridor, from Gary IN to Mobile AL, is a prime artery of the automotive industry in the eastern US. I-65 passes through Franklin TN, just south of Nashville and home to Nissan North America, Inc., parent company to Infiniti in the US, and through Louisville KY to the north. The folks from Nissan—still dealing with the aftermath of devastating May floods in the Nashville area—put together a great drive route for the new Infiniti QX56 from Louisville to Versailles KY (forget your European history and say “ver-sales”), just shy of Lexington.

Nonstop flights to Louisville (SDF) are hard to come by (apparently with just one a



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day on Southwest). We flew east on United via Chicago, with a two-and-a-half-hour delay in departure made up for by a 7-minute dash a considerable distance through O'Hare. We returned on US Air via Charlotte.

Louisville from the air looked as though little had changed in quite some time, which was actually kind of pleasant—the buildings appeared to be ones that may have defined the skyline four or five decades ago. Once on the ground, however, you find a lively city with a newly expanded exposition and convention center, lots of historic renovation, and the Louisville Slugger Museum & Factory (where you can buy a variety of souvenir



bats, large and small, but careful—you can't bring them on the plane). Louisville still has plenty of classic Southern border state charm. The Ohio River was running very high and muddy, a real taste of the Midwest in spring.

Lodging for one night in Louisville was at a most unusual spot: the 21c Hotel and Museum, a couple of blocks uphill from the river in the heart of the historic West Main District, merging multiple beautifully reno-

KEEP RIGHT >>

Logbook (cont'd) >>



braking is effective: we never put it to the ultimate test, but it applied itself in traffic and seemed it would stop us completely. (It's a little disquieting to think that's how kids may learn to drive, though). We tried hard cornering once the rain let up a little bit, and it holds the road effectively. We felt noticeable tugs in the steering at times, but basically it held its track and took the corners very strongly. We had two drivers per QX, and interestingly each of us felt more secure with the other one driving, opposite what we'd expect. While holding the wheel, we had some feeling of losing adhesion; granted the roads were very wet. We agreed the seats do impart the luxury jet feeling; aside from that it looks and feels like a nice luxury SUV interior, which is what it is. We wished for a larger rear wiper. We turned all the automated warnings and interventions on and off in stages, and all worked as planned.

The previous-generation QX was built in the US, but the 2011 model is built in Japan, at the Nissan Patrol factory. (However, there will no new Nissan Armada.)

Two models, the QX56 2WD and QX56 4WD, go on sale this summer. There also are expected to be two lineup extensions announced at Pebble Beach in August. MSRP is \$56,700 for 2WD and \$59,800 for 4WD, the same as the previous generation QX, despite significant added content and features. ■

vated historic buildings. The hotel has 90 rooms, 5000 square feet of meeting and event space, a restaurant and a civic center. But its unique nature springs from the museum, dedicated to the best work of living artists of the 21st century (hence 21c).

For hotel and museum information, visit 21cmuseumhotel.com or the museum's site at 21cmuseum.org, or call 877-217-6400.

Our test drive ran through the heart of Bluegrass Country. The first half of our driving day had weather for the record books. Torrential rains with twilight darkness at midmorning, repeated extreme flood warnings on the radio (our course ran along the Ohio River for awhile), and lightning that rivaled Arizona's August monsoon storms, though you couldn't always see these com-



Joe Sage (2)

ing—sometimes three or four lightning strikes seemed to surround us at any one time. Great test weather, when you come right down to it, for the vehicle at hand.

As the weather let up and the countryside revealed itself more clearly, we particularly liked the barns closer to Lexington and Versailles, generally nicely-proportioned single-gable style, finished in a near-black pitch with bright silver roofs on most of them. Fences were classic horse-country white in some cases, but matching dark pitch in others. Very striking.

Between Louisville and Knoxville, we stopped for pecan pie, homemade chocolates and pop at a well-stocked classic



Indian curio and souvenir roadside attraction (where you can also pick up your favorite Confederate paraphernalia).

We had a homemade Kentucky country lunch at the 125-acre Ardmore Farm near Versailles, a picture-perfect spot in the rolling Kentucky hills (perfect for towing horse trailers with the QX56).

For more information on this whole neck of the woods, visit kentuckytourism.com, gotolouisville.com or the Versailles area at woodfordcountyinfo.com. —Joe Sage

