

Beating blizzards with Buick

by Joe Sage



There are four major components to this adventure: New England, winter, Buick and all-wheel drive.

Buick is on a roll, with an 11 percent sales gain for 2014, outselling such premium brands as Audi, Infiniti, Acura and Lincoln. Buick offers all-wheel drive on four out of its five models—the Regal midsize sedan, LaCrosse full-size sedan, Enclave big SUV and Encore subcompact crossover. (The Verano compact sedan is the only one without AWD available.)

To demonstrate just how effective all-wheel drive can be, and just how well Buick has implemented it, GM brought us to Lime Rock Park in Connecticut—one of the nation's premier racing facilities and home to the Skip Barber Racing School. And to be sure it made an impression, they did this in February. And to ensure that their efforts were well expended, Mother Nature kicked in with its first two of what would be three heavy blizzards in a row, along with near-zero temperatures.

With planes catching a quick opening between heavy onslaughts of snow if they

could, we headed east.

We're already fans of all-wheel drive. To those who say they don't need it, we say it's not a crutch—it's a feature. Race cars have it. If you're going to (ever) be driving in snow or ice, or heavy rain, or on loose sand or gravel—including the kind that graces Arizona roads after a rainstorm—it will have reserve grip at all four corners that can save your bacon. If you only drive on smooth, dry roads at all times, it will still give you enhanced performance. Grip distributed to all four wheels can make you perform like a cat on rails, to mix metaphors we have mixed before.

Additional drivetrain parts that bring power to both axles add some weight—271 pounds on a Buick Regal (or 288 on the sportiest GS) or just 119 pounds on the Buick Encore crossover.

You will pay a little more (the differences are \$2425 and \$1500 for the Regal and Encore, respectively). But what you gain is more than worth it.

Paris-Dakar desert off-road endurance rally champion Jean-Paul Luc's Ice Driving

School in Colorado—note the crossover value of winter and desert driving skills—had a cover headline on its original manual saying something like, "The weather is horrible, the roads are even worse ... perfect, let's go for a drive!"

We started our day with a drive of about an hour and a quarter to the track, on the icy and snowy two-lanes of hilly northwestern Connecticut.

Buick Encore AWD

We started with the little guy—the subcompact Buick Encore. Powered by a 1.4-liter Ecotec four, with a 30 MPG highway fuel mileage rating, Encore produces 138 hp and rides on 18-inch Continental tires.

We quickly gained experience with the Encore, sharing the roads with a general population who, despite some presumed familiarity with winter conditions, presented our team with every emergency

We were joined on this trip by driver Sue Mead (at far right), who was in the midst of final preparations for her stint on one of ten American teams in the women-only 25th Gazelle Off-Road Rally in the Moroccan desert, running from March 20 to April 4.

condition imaginable, well beyond what the roads themselves offered.

Stop sideways across the road, over the crest of an icy hill? All in a day's work for one local. Stop in time when we see this? All in a day's work for the Buick Encore AWD, with 11.8-inch vented front and 10.6-inch solid rear disc brakes, ABS and electronic brake force distribution.

The Encore's system in motion is just as sure—constructed with a separate power take-off in front and Borg Warner torque transfer device in the rear. This automatic on-demand system has electronic yaw damping and torque distribution among all four wheels, with up to 70 percent to the rear.

When we arrived at Lime Rock, we had two special winter courses prepared for us—one for the Encore and one for the Regal. We stayed with the Encore for our first circuit. Fresh snow made for optimum conditions—in this case meaning optimally challenging. Edges were hard to see and could be unforgiving had they been exceeded; and snow quickly developed into thick, wheel-grabbing chop.

The all-wheel-drive Encore performed like a champ—a plush, comfortable, confident, fully equipped champ with a premium cabin. (They have even added a WiFi hot spot this year.) Encore may look



small, but in a downsizing world, it feels very right-sized. Despite its tight dimensions, it proves itself to be very balanced and sure-footed. Everything can indeed come in a small package. Encore has 18.8 cu.ft. of cargo space behind the rear seats, or 48.4 cu.ft. with the rear seats down. Its cage body structure is 66 percent high-strength and ultra-high-strength steel.

The market has responded, with AWD representing 38 percent of Encore sales. In the Northeast, that figure is 69 percent, and here around Hartford, Connecticut, 80 percent. Availability of AWD has had Buick Encore completely dominating the premium subcompact crossover segment.

Encore with FWD starts at \$24,065. With AWD, three trim levels range from \$26,490 to \$30,375. Absolutely fully tricked out, you will still just top \$32k.



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Lisa Jesme, Buick Regal Driveline Engineer, takes the wheel of her creation to show us exactly how it's done. Exactly how it's done is a whole lot of fun.

Buick Regal AWD

As a key element of the brand's styling and engineering renaissance, the Buick Regal was greeted at its launch as a potential "3 slayer," meaning it just might finally be the one with the chops to take on the perennially successful BMW 3 Series. Our sidebar suggests that this is going well.

An entry level Regal has a 182-hp 2.4L four-cylinder and front-wheel drive. All others have a 259-hp 2.0L turbo and a choice of front- or all-wheel drive, right up to the sportiest Regal GS level. (The Regal GS includes a painful bargain for us: there is a six-speed manual transmission available, but only with front-wheel drive.)

The all-wheel-drivers have a six-speed electronic automatic with overdrive. Their on-demand system has two clutch packs: an electronically-controlled, hydraulically-actuated torque transfer device (TTD) for front/rear split and an electronic limited slip differential for left/right rear. In slick conditions, these improve traction and stability. In dry conditions, they can send up to 90 percent of torque to the rear; performance is optimized to reduce any torque steer or understeer.

The Regal's snow circuit at Lime Rock was racier, with longer straightaways and braking sections, slaloms and more complex cornering sections—all in line with the car's performance personality. As the day wore on and our team's spinning rubber started warming up the subsurfaces, significant ice fields were forming, hidden below the drier surface snow, equaling some of the most challenging condi-



CONSUMER REPORTS FIRSTS

FIRST DOMESTIC IN TOP 10. Buick is the first domestic brand to make the Top 10 of *Consumer Reports' Annual Car Brand Report Cards* since its inception, passing Honda and BMW for the first time.

REGAL DISPLACES BMW AS TOP SPORTS SEDAN. Buick Regal has earned *Consumer Reports' Top Pick for Sports Sedan*, replacing the BMW 328i.

• The complete report is at ConsumerReports.org.

tions you'll encounter in the real world. The Regal mastered it all; and however far a couple of dozen of us had pushed the envelope, Regal driveline engineer Lisa Jesme could push it farther (above).

AWD represents 17 percent of Regal sales nationwide, 33 percent in the Northeast and 50 percent in Hartford.

Regal starts just under \$30k. AWD models run from the lower-mid 30s up to the sporty Regal GS AWD at about \$40k.

We love the aggressive bite and confidence of a well-executed all-wheel-drive sedan, coupe or wagon on dry pavement, and we tend to think of AWD as all but expected on a crossover or SUV. Buick's AWD lineup pleases us greatly. ■

