

basics By Joe Sage

The Mitsubishi Outlander Sport has a full complement of features and options. Pretty full, anyway; some of its features and options are 'lite' versions thereof—one power seat, partial one-touch windows, partially centralized locks. It's not quite as inexpensive as it may seem, unless you buy the base model (this is the top model, or was at the time; see below). But it is relatively affordable. It looks and feels pretty basic.

As we started our week with this vehicle, we were asked to rate it, from one to ten, in terms of recommending it to someone. We had questions. Recommending to whom? Everyone has different needs. And are we recommending five or ten vehicles? Or just one? They wanted just one answer.

Pointless as that seemed, we found ourselves revisiting the concept throughout the week. For an economy buyer, it rates pretty well. For anybody-and-everything, you can not possibly compare this with every SUV from Chevy to Subaru to Jeep to Mercedes-Benz in the same breath.

An economy buyer will find a comfortably sized compact SUV starting under \$20 grand. Knowing that, we were startled to realize this one stickered at about \$30 grand. Five of this was for its only option package, so if you skip that, \$25 grand is not too bad a price (though you'd miss that

Rockford Fosgate audio). That's still with AWD, a big plus in any sport utility worth its salt. To clock in under \$20 grand, you have to strip it down to front-drive and a 5-speed manual transmission.

Unfortunately, the manual is only available on that base front-driver. All the others have a CVT. On the plus side, this CVT is a clean implementation, not trying to cough its way through simulated shifts like so many (although some steps were mildly present under some conditions).

The vehicle's weight is less than 3300 pounds—it does not have a towing spec—which helps it achieve a 30 MPG highway rating. This involves an eco mode, which seems to make its own decisions about engagement—we discovered that when we inexplicably lost power in the fast lane.

Suspension is firm, which we generally like, but perhaps too firm at times even for us. On a stretch of freeway construction, where stripes had been removed, creating mild grooves, we had to fight for straight line control. Brakes—single-piston disc front and rear—seemed weak at times. The cable handbrake never felt 100 percent engaged.

Some ergonomics and controls had room for improvement in small details. The optional seven-inch touchscreen was a mixed blessing—concise but requiring some tight work at times. One-touch power windows or central power locks had selective partial implementations that frustrated us.

One of our more unusual but persistent logbook

SPECIFICATIONS: SE AWD 2.0L

ENGINE	2.0L MIVEC DOHC 16v 4-cylinder
TRANSMISSION	CVT (continuously variable)
DRIVETRAIN	all-wheel drive
POWER/TORQUE	148 hp / 145 lb-ft
WEIGHT	3274 lb (59/41 front/rear)
CARGO (BEHIND 2ND-1ST ROWS)	21.7 / 49.5 cu.ft.
TURNING CIRCLE	34.8 ft
MPG	24/30/27 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE.....\$24,195

TOURING PACKAGE: Leather seats, power driver's seat, nav w 7" touchscreen, Rockford Fosgate 710-watt 9-speaker audio, auto-dim mirror, panoramic glass roof, black roof rails.....4900

DESTINATION CHARGE:850

TOTAL.....\$29,945

notes had to do with a lack of respect we encountered. Few honk their horns here, and nobody honks at us, but we were honked at many times in this. We also were cut off a few times, in parking lots or on the road. Did this just look like it was going to be in the way? Our other feeling was of general invisibility, so maybe this was not all bad.

At 148 hp, we knew this could benefit from a stronger engine. Mitsubishi read our minds so quickly and effectively, they introduced a stronger engine for this Outlander Sport within just a couple of weeks of our drive. Outlander Sport is now available with an optional 2.4-liter engine producing 168 hp vs the 2.0's 148 hp. The bigger engine ups the price by several hundred dollars, about a 3 percent bump for a 20 percent power boost.

If you want something not everybody has, on a budget, the Mitsubishi Outlander Sport may be a good bet. Even at a relatively good price, though, competition remains stiff. We look forward to giving the bigger engine a try. ■



The new 2.4-liter models will be recognizable by a black center bar in the grille. The 2.4 GT will add feature upgrades comparable to those on the 2.0 SE trim level driven here, with similar options.

