

CAPABLE.

a classic case of sibling rivalry

By Joe Sage



When we wrote about the Mitsubishi Outlander Sport (May/June 2011)—a related, smaller vehicle—we titled the piece “swimming upstream,” noting that Mitsubishi “dances a bit to its own drummer,” adding that, “You would, too, if you had to battle for mindshare with Toyota, Nissan, Honda and the others. Compare market shares in the US (YTD March 2011): Toyota 14.2%, Honda 10.1%, Nissan 9.3%, Hyundai 4.7%, Kia 3.4%, Mazda 2.1% and Mitsubishi 0.7%.”

It turns out Mitsubishi is a strong swimmer. Not long after we received this larger Outlander in our fleet, we received word that the smaller Outlander Sport had achieved record sales in September 2012, the highest total for one month in its two years on the market—2,253 units, 49.0 percent higher than September 2011. The previous record was 1,618, this past March.

Outlander Sport is Mitsubishi’s top seller in the US, so much so that production was moved to their domestic plant in Normal, Illinois last July. As overall Mitsubishi sales for September were 4,806 units, Outlander Sport sales represent 46.9 percent of the entire lineup—hugely significant, and promising.

THIS BEGS A COMPARISON

The Outlander Sport a year and a half earlier had received somewhat faint praise in our pages. “They put their best foot forward, differentiating by style and a high level of features at an attractive price,” we noted, describing a vehicle with a base price of just \$18,495 at that time in two-wheel drive, putting out 148 hp from a 2.0L 4-cylinder, while achieving 24/29 MPG city/highway. The list of included features and amenities was long, as it is with this Outlander, and one \$1800 package then included everything from an LED-illuminated sunroof to a good 710-watt Rockford Fosgate audio system.

“So is the value there?” we asked at the time, of the 5-passenger Sport. We griped about the seats, climate control, suspension and steering, and most of all “what seemed like a great deal of straining on the part of the drivetrain.” But there were positives. “The styling’s well executed, given that its oversize grille is a Mitsubishi trademark. From a three-quarter rear view, the little SUV looks fairly attractive and bold. The 18-inch wheels help its overall stance considerably, and rear storage space is quite adequate.” We concluded that its “fit and finish, instrumentation, inclusions and accessories were fine for the price. The weak point was the driving. Competition is stiff, and you may compare other vehicles both new and used.” That perceived driving weakness was attributable to driveline acoustics as much as dynamics.

And yet, strong market reception for the Outlander Sport bodes well for the larger Outlander. Indeed, our praise for the big brother was healthier even before we learned about the sales success of the smaller one.

When we say big brother, little brother, the two are actually on the same chassis and 105.1-inch wheelbase, but the Outlander is almost 15 inches longer than the Sport (183.7 versus 169.1), and just over an inch wider. The Sport is a 5-seater, whereas the larger Outlander is available in 5- or 7-passenger configurations. Therein lies a key: while the Outlander Sport qualifies as a com-

pact, the larger Outlander does not, but it remains basically just as nimble, with more power and capacity.

Best of all—as a straining drivetrain bothered us most on the Sport last year—the larger Outlander has a 3.0-liter SOHC MIVEC V6, generating 230 hp and 215 lb-ft of torque, fed through a 6-speed automatic with paddle shifters. Might this be sportier than the Sport?

MITSUBISHI OUTLANDER ON THE ROAD

Though well equipped with standard features and three comprehensive option packages (Touring, Nav/Rear-view, Entertainment), the Outlander presents a mixed bag of conveniences. The door is keyless, but you still need a free hand to depress a button. It has keyless start, but not pushbutton: you turn a keylike stub. The handbrake is manual, the seats are power, and the steering wheel tilt and telescope are manual.

With the lesser power of the Sport in our memory, we headed out into the mean streets. Straight away, the Outlander kept up just fine in extremely aggressive traffic. The drivetrain has a light growl to it—something we were alert to listen for, after the Sport—but not much. Cruising for miles down a very busy main surface road during rush hour, bolting when needed from lane to lane, amid every kind of powerful SUV you can imagine—Explorer, Suburban, Escalade, Mercedes, Range Rover—we were never lacking for the power and handling we needed. The Outlander provided us with impressively capable driving in a challenging playground.

On freeways, we could do whatever we needed: change lanes, dive in a hole, dash forward through troublesome knots—all with no mushiness, but good solid handling. We had the feeling we were probably surprising a few people. Our expectations had been a little low from last year’s Sport, so we were surprising ourselves.

We had a few handling oddities: once when first putting it in drive, we patched out at no real speed; while turning right and accelerating, it jerked strongly farther to the right; and while turning left in a tight maneuver, it also pulled to the right. We contemplate whether it may have had a fluid leak affecting the brakes, an electronic handling oddity, or an emphasis on front-wheel drive at times. We had no opportunity to pursue this.

The audio system has decent sound, though some of the controls were counterintuitive and sent us to the manual. Worst is its satellite signal acquisition, which encourages you to watch the screen long enough—just to see what you might be tuning—to wrap yourself around a tree. Set it and forget it, before you head out.

We thought the taillights looked like something out of an aftermarket catalog and tended to cheapen it. Then again, they may look like the Lexus RX, classy and pricey. Eye of the beholder. Overall, it has relatively solid style, with a handsome profile and strong presence.

BACK TO THAT COMPARISON

If we had driven the bigger Outlander first, we may well have thought a smaller, 5-passenger version of it might be exactly what the market needs. (See the new two-size Hyundai Santa Fe elsewhere in this issue, for perspective.) But having driven the smaller one first, we preferred everything about the bigger one. It’s a weighted comparison, as this Outlander was top-tier, with the biggest engine, but it sounds, performs and runs better.



This is an extremely competitive segment, and you have a lot to choose from. But just between this pair from Mitsubishi, what do we see?

On fuel economy, the big Outlander qualifies as an LEV—a Low Emission Vehicle. In base 2WD form, it achieves 23/28 MPG city/highway, while our all-wheel-drive example (AWC, in Mitsubishi parlance, for All Wheel Control) with V6 gets 19/25. The smaller Outlander Sport rates 24/31 city/highway (auto) or 24/30 (manual) in 2WD, or 24/29 with AWC. Is it worth a drop of some four to 20 percent in fuel economy, for 55 percent more power? On the one hand, that’s the thinking that brought us years of bad fuel economy. On the other hand, in this case, it delivers what we found missing on the smaller Outlander Sport, at a mathematically reasonable tradeoff.

As far as bang for the buck, the smaller Outlander Sport for 2013 starts at \$19,170 for a base model in two-wheel drive, running to an un-optioned base of \$23,695 for top trim and AWC all-wheel drive. The larger Outlander starts at \$22,695 for a base 2WD, running to \$28,595 for the GT S-AWC V6—the vehicle we are driving here. Comparing base prices, are you getting at least 20 percent more vehicle, for 20 percent more money? Easily. (Our test vehicle, with non-performance-related options and destination cost, came to \$36,000.)

If fuel mileage is your primary deciding point, give the Outlander Sport a look, but drive it and see if the power is adequate to your needs—all Outlander Sports have the 148-hp 2.0L four. If you want a noticeably smoother and more powerful drive, with little loss in maneuverability, significant gains in capacity (even if not needed every day) and fuel mileage that was still brag-worthy a few short years ago, try the bigger Outlander. Depending upon model, it has either a 168-hp 2.4L four, or the 230-hp 3.0L V6 in this test vehicle. Hot sales numbers for the smaller Sport speak well for it, but they should speak well for the larger Outlander, as well. This is the one that seems like the better bet to us. ■

