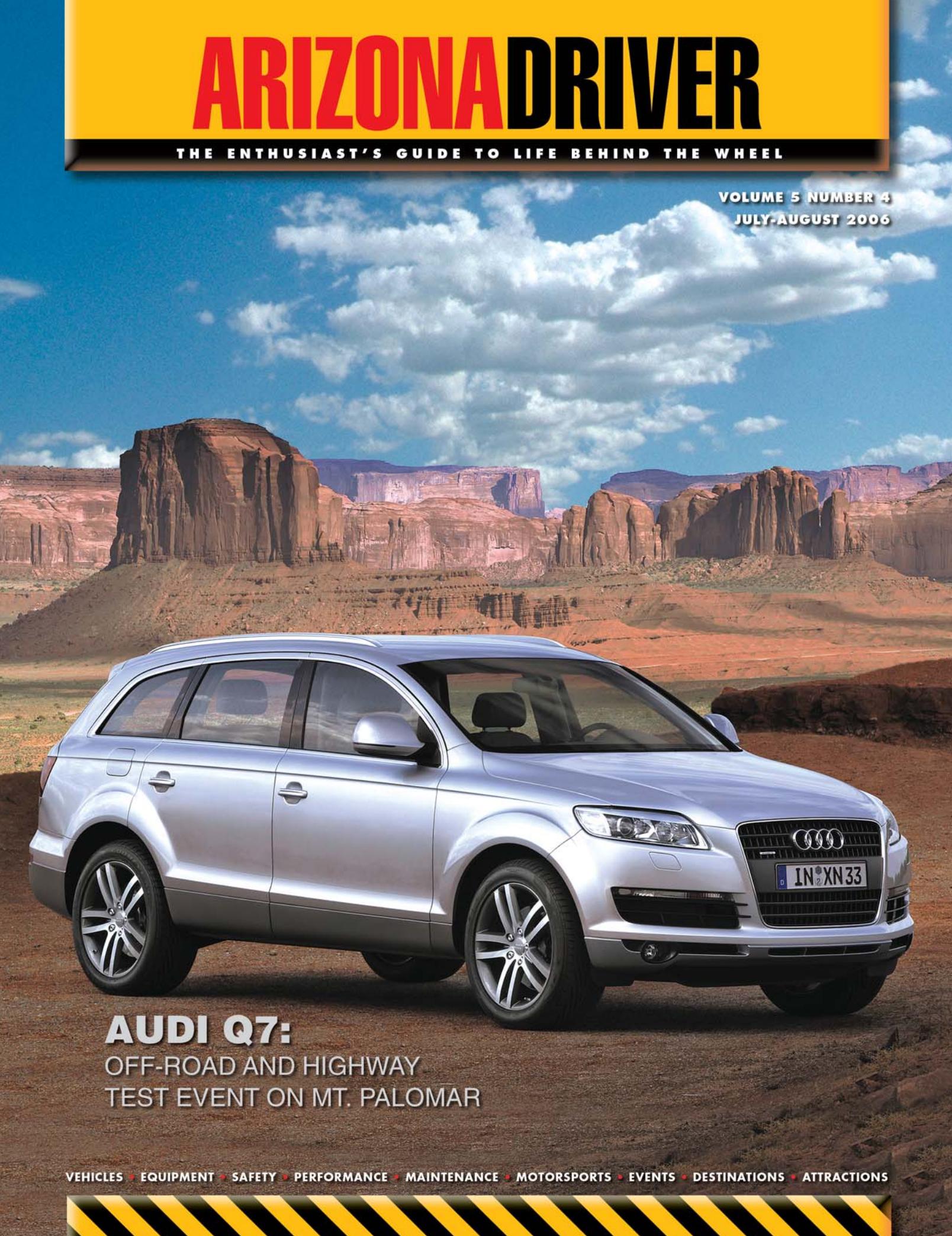


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AUDI Q7:
OFF-ROAD AND HIGHWAY
TEST EVENT ON MT. PALOMAR

VEHICLES • EQUIPMENT • SAFETY • PERFORMANCE • MAINTENANCE • MOTOSPORTS • EVENTS • DESTINATIONS • ATTRACTIONS

Audi Q7

**SIZE MATTERS...
STYLE MATTERS...
ENGINEERING MATTERS**



by Joe Sage



The Audi Q7 test drive event was a chance not only to see the full lineup of Audi Q7 SUVs shown above, but at the first evening's press introduction, we had a chance to see the upcoming S8, as well as the 2005 24 Hours of Le Mans winning #3 Audi R8, and also saw and heard (!) the new RS4.

We're just back from the press launch of the new Audi Q7 SUV, which was performed outside San Diego, starting at the Four Seasons Resort Aviara in Carlsbad, heading out local roads and freeways into San Diego County's wine country, then up the bad side of Mt. Palomar on forestry roads, and back down the good side on smooth and spectacular mountain highways. The event began with a thorough engineering and marketing presentation, explaining how Audi has come to the SUV market at this juncture, later than most and with its street-level quattro heritage as its foundation, but with market position carefully calculated, and every technical and human-factor detail of the vehicle even more carefully calculated. But the drive itself should tell us even more. And we were fortunate enough to not only have a well-planned route that would expose us to an extremely wide range of terrain, angle and speeds, but also to encounter heavy rains, thick fog, and brilliantly clear sunshine, all in the course of one day. If this Audi is everything they say it is, this drive will provide every chance to prove it.

Heading up the indoor presentation were Frank van Meel, Audi Q7 Program Manager with Audi AG in Germany, Johan de Nysschen, Executive VP of Audi of America, Wolfgang Hoffman, Director of Product Planning, Filip Brabec, Product Planning Manager for the Q7, and Steven Berkov, Director of Marketing.

Audi has declared 2006 to be The Year of Performance, introducing by year's end a new A4 and A6, this all-new Q7, and finally the performance suite of RS4, S8 and a new S6. (2007 is slated to be The Year of Emotion, starting with an all-new Audi TT.) The fundamental style changes are there for everyone to see, most identifiably notable in the new grille treatment, which combines the traditional above-bumper grille with the fascia intakes, creating a face you can't miss. (And although some people may take a few months adjusting to this look, it's already being picked up by many others, from





Chrysler to Mitsubishi and many more, as most leading-edge Audi design cues are.) Headlights have a more integrated sweep with front bodywork, and they take on a more aggressive angle and shape, varying with vehicle model. Taillights are also reshaped and are set more flush, almost seamlessly, into rear bodywork. Creases, curves, angles and beltlines are all modified, as always for Audi in ways that are subtle but distinctly new.

Audi has maintained a position for the past several years that with their impressive and capable fleet of quattro all-wheel-drive vehicles, they could withstand the SUV craze without participating. So why the change? Johan de Nysschen, Executive VP of Audi of America, points out that Audi's sales have been up every year since 1992 (and this accomplished without incentives), but that all in all, their lineup has remained quite Eurocentric. They seek to have a more global lineup, with reputation of power and stature in North America (and Asia) climbing to be on a par with that in Europe. Wolfgang Hoffman, Director of Product Planning, reminds us that the all-encompassing light truck (and SUV) market represents 50% of US sales. As such, Audi found they were unable to ignore the SUV trend in the United States. So they have taken the market head-on, with the thoroughly developed Q7.

Their benchmarks in developing the Q7 included referring to Audi's history and heritage, factoring in passion as represented through technology, and keeping a strong eye on both quality and style. The ultimate goal for the Q7 was to produce an SUV that is simultaneously sporty, progressive and sophisticated. The final product indicates that they did not forget any of these factors during Q7 development.

Audi readily recognizes their most obvious competition: Acura MDX, BMW X5, Infiniti FX45, Lexus RX330, Mercedes-Benz M-Class, Porsche Cayenne and Volvo XC90. However, they are equally aware that SUV growth is down, just as they bring the Q7 to market (but as gasoline prices climb wildly at the pump). Their stated goal was to not produce a "me too" SUV. They note that the SUV market has already evolved, starting with what they term the traditional (including the earliest phases of Bronco and Blazer, through the groundbreaking Jeep Cherokee, moving

on through the familiar Ford Explorer/Expedition/Excursion and Chevy Tahoe/GMC Yukon and all their competitors. Next we have the crossover generation, which many might think is still just taking hold at this time, as car-and truck-based vehicles distinguish themselves by style, function and wagon-like handling, including everything from most of the aforementioned competitive list, to small and tall wagons from many manufacturers. They slot the Q7 into a new third generation, centered on performance, which Audi says will combine the best of both the prior generations, and then some.

With the Porsche Cayenne and the Volkswagen Touareg already in production from Audi's sister companies, it's easy to guess that the Q7 might be a reskinned Touareg. Hoffman makes a point that this is not the case; he states that they two share just 15% of parts, with the Q7 notably incorporating Audi's refined quattro all-wheel-drive system, as well as a uniquely developed interior.

The engineering and design matrix for the Q7 has four quadrants: Performance, Safety, Design and Versatility. Performance is centered on the quattro system; safety is achieved through 60% steel construction; design in the sense of style is intended to speak for itself; and versatility is met by a vehicle with, among other things, 28 seating configurations. Our test drive will check out another aspect of versatility, notably neglected in many SUVs, its ability to perform admirably on pavement and off. Interestingly, the new quattro system installed in the Q7 is the same as that for the upcoming ultra-high-performance RS4 sedan, with 60% rear-wheel split and an entirely mechanical Torsen differential, achieving its class-topping torque sensing abilities with no electronics. Frank van Meel, Q7 Program Manager with Audi AG, states that this is a key element in the Q7's (and RS4's) new level of high performance. The Q7 is also outfitted with a robust multi-link suspension including Adaptive Air Suspension, based on that developed for the newest A8 and A6 sedans, which produces a combination of comfort and dynamics on- and off-road, as well as additional ground-clearing lift when seriously off-road or in deep snow (at lower speeds). The Adaptive Air Suspension has five settings: Automatic, Dynamic, Comfort, Offroad and Lift. (We tried them all in the course of our drive, and each has its place, though with plenty of overlap so it's more an option than necessity.)

Audi has paid attention to details, too. European engineers have long been baffled by the utter and absolute need for cupholders in vehicles sold in the United States. However, van Meel says cupholders are catching on in Europe, making it much easier to design global vehicles that carry this feature to Americans' satisfaction. (The only downside to the Germans' study of cupholders, apparently, was that their use required more restroom stops than normal.) Aware that large vehicles and vehicles with extended cabins have blind-spot issues, the Audi Q7 introduces outside mirrors with "side assist" technology that lets you know if another vehicle is in your blind spot, visually, before you might try an unwise lane change. (As with all such technologies, this should never become your first point of information, but it's useful for that one time in dozens when a big problem lurks in a small blind zone.) One note on the Audi audio system: if you've ever spent time online with Audi's build-your-car tool, you've faced the usual XM/Sirius conundrum. To simplify this choice, Audi is dropping XM and going to an all-Sirius option for 2007.

So let's drive! With predetermined route map in hand, two of us per vehicle, taking turns driving, we headed out from the Four Seasons inland toward I-15 north, destination: Mt. Palomar, elevation 6126 feet above sea level. Leaving the coast might normally mean getting into better weather, but as we hit I-15, the sky grew ominous. Not to worry; we were ready for anything, with quattro all-wheel-drive on a sturdy SUV chassis. But for now, we had California freeway traffic on our hands. This gave us ample opportunity to try out many of the Q7's proudest gadgets, from Adaptive Speed Control (which now works below 20mph, all the way to zero, and resumes if you are at zero less than 3 seconds),





to the side assist mirrors (a gadget anyone could learn to love, but again we'd remind readers that there is no substitute for turning your head, keeping always aware of your surroundings and any ways out of an unexpected crisis), to the Adaptive Air Suspension in its three highway settings: Automatic, Dynamic and Comfort (the best? there's no best; hence the choice!).

As the rain hit, the Audi was as unruffled as any quattro will be. Wet, dry, smooth, rough, pavement, gravel, whatever can be dished out can be soaked up by the quattro all-wheel-drive system; this we already know well. The Q7 was as solid as the sportiest sedan. As we exited the freeway and got onto 2-lane mountain highways, we knew we could open this machine up a bit, try the grip in the twisties. Alas, we spent the next several miles behind a large farm truck, with a double yellow line. When the yellow broke, though, we were gone... with power to spare, and quattro grip, the Zen approach to being there now will bring you to the front of the line with speed and confidence. The group gathered in the wine country, at the base of an old forestry road up the north-northeast side of Mt. Palomar.

From there it was only a short distance until the pavement started breaking up and quickly ended completely. The dirt road presented simple challenges at first: loose gravel, for which the grip of the Audi was outstanding; relatively steep side angles, ditto; ruts and erosion of a relatively minor nature at first, easy to navigate through, over or around. Very quickly, we entered thick fog, the clouds above from the storm we'd passed through below. Visibility was very limited, and the sides of the road dropped off precipitously. On we went, as comfortable as we'd been on the paved roads, but becoming even more alert.

As the grade eased, we entered forest and the remains of heavily-logged former forest. These were rough roads, indeed, and no time for photos! The ruts and washouts in this sizable length of road were not the kind anybody would drive through; it required the finesse of a Rubicon rally to work the big Audi around the most menacing trenches, holes, pits and grooves, not to mention randomly felled logs and stumps, and the occasional tight switchback and altitude change. Quite a road, and quite a vehicle. For toughness, it compared with a big Ford F-Series on a Rocky Mountain backwoods trail. For agility, it compared with a far smaller off-road vehicle. And all the while, comfort and control remained tops.

After quite a few miles of this, as our map promised us, we eased onto more civilized mountain park roads, then met in an overlook parking area within the state park. Lots of water, a few sports bars, and a bit of a debate with a park ranger about whether we were allowed to be doing any of this, and we were peacefully on our way down the highway side. Perhaps with the park ranger fresh in mind, or maybe just through a normal healthy state of paranoia, we knew it was quite possible the Sheriff by now knew there were a couple of dozen enthusiasts on the roads. Nonetheless, we were able to give the vehicle quite an exercise on these highways, with rapid descent, tight curves, narrow lanes and little margin for forgiveness. (And lo and behold, the Sheriff did pass us, headed uphill, but apparently were intent on something farther up behind us.) Knowing we had more than two and a half tons of vehicle in motion, we paused to compare the experience and agreed that, all in all, this big Audi Q7 handled as well as an S4 sports sedan on such a road. Quite a feat.

We were served lunch at the handcrafted castle shown at right, where we had another chance to discuss the vehicle with the engineers and product planners. One question seemed obvious: is a Q5 on the horizon? With the skill of a government press conference, they responded that no such thing had crossed their mind, and if it had, it would take years and years to pull it together. So we expect to hear more about it within a year and see it on the road soon after.

So can Audi crack the SUV market? Interestingly, statistics show that the SUV segment is the most brand-disloyal segment there is. Audi recognizes that every purchase will represent a conquest. After our drive (and our exposure to a thorough education on the technologies underlying the vehicle), we are convinced that just about anyone who took a similar drive, regardless what they were shopping for, would likely go home knowing they needed a new Audi Q7. ■





VEHICLE FEATURES : 2007 AUDI Q7



By Barbara & Bill Schaffer

Audi choose the beautiful and exclusive Carlsbad, California area to introduce its stylish new sport utility vehicle. As the first Audi SUV, the Q7 exemplifies the upscale character, quality and styling of all the other cars in their lineup, while adding a new rugged off-road character.

The Q7 is bold and sporty looking with free-flowing surfaces creating broad curves and seams that add up to an elegant design, while the high shoulder line gives it an athletic look. The roofline starts to taper down just in front of the B-pillar and ends in a coupe-like curve at the D-pillar. The rear features a wrap-around tailgate and a spoiler houses the third brake light.

Inside you'll find the Q7 to be sporty looking but at the same time very functional, with all the amenities of a luxury sport utility vehicle. The new Audi offers high quality materials, the latest technologies and a high level of functionality and craftsmanship throughout. One of the unique new features is the side assist that warns the driver of vehicles in the blind spot to the rear and behind. Buyers have a choice of three inlay wood accents or the optional aluminum trim.

A 4.2-liter V-8 pumping out 350 horsepower powers the Q7 and it is paired with a six-speed Tiptronic transmission with the Dynamic Shift Program (DSP) and quattro all-wheel drive system. A 3.6-liter V-6 is due out this fall.

This Audi SUV is no lightweight, tipping the scales at 5,269 pounds, but the powerful engine moves it along with great enthusiasm. Zero to 60 mph acceleration comes in just 7.1 seconds, and the top speed is electronically limited to 130 mph.

The four-wheel independent suspension is enhanced with optional adaptive air suspension that can be set to Dynamic, Automatic and Comfort modes. This system constantly adapts to road conditions and nearly eliminates all body roll and the dip and dive of accelerating and braking. It also raises the Q7 one inch when in the Off-Road mode.

Since the Audi is more than five and a half inches longer than the Porsche Cayenne and the Volkswagen Touareg, and 11.5-inches longer than the popular Acura MDX, the Q7 offers a spacious cabin with comfortable legroom. The Q7 is designed as a five-seater, a six-seater (with a pair of seats in three rows) or a seven-seater (with a two, two and three

seating configuration). The seats in the Q7 have been designed to provide optimum comfort on long trips. The driver's seat is height-adjustable and the steering column can be adjusted for height and angle.

The 4.2 Q7 comes in a standard model that includes all the normal power features, plus memory for driver's seat, outside mirrors and steering wheel positions, plus a Bose audio system with in-dash six-disc changer and adaptive speed control. It also has a garage door opener, air conditioning, alarm system, roof rails, leather seat surfaces, keyless remote system, stability control, leather-wrapped power tilt and telescoping steering wheel, rain sensing wipers, Bluetooth wireless connect, brake assist and much more for \$50,620 including destination.

The Premium model adds power panorama moonroof, four-zone air conditioning, third row seat, DVD-based navigation system, heated front seats with Cricket leather and seven-spoke cast alloy wheels for \$60,620 delivered. There are many additional luxury options available on both models. The V-6 is expected to start in the low \$40,000s. ■