

TOTALLY NEW MALIBU

Chevy turns the tables on the competition, presenting an entirely new vehicle bearing a very familiar name.

Joe Sage - photos: RandallBohl.com

Just in time for our press date, GM invited us to WestWorld in Scottsdale, for an early look at the—we'll say it again—all-new Chevrolet Malibu for 2008. Not only was this a very early chance to see the vehicle (publication was embargoed until right about the day this issue rolled off the presses), but they brought the whole fleet—and the competition's fleet, too.

The whole fleet for the new Malibu comprises three essential forms: a 4-cylinder version, a V-6 model and a hybrid incorporating the latest of GM's intensive drive toward far greater fuel economy options (and a future with potentially no traditional fuels at all).

The competition's fleet included the Toyota Camry, Ford Fusion and Hyundai Sonata. The new Honda Accord and Nissan Altima were not available for this series of events.

Chevrolet had set up dual courses on the asphalt at WestWorld, a comprehensive one for the gasoline-powered 4- and 6-cylinder versions, and another for the hybrid.



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GM is proud of the Malibu's interior, a complete rework that's functional, attractive and evocative of import sedans in much higher price categories.

The conventionally-powered course included an acceleration straightaway, a series of compound curves with braking spots, slalom cones, a vibration patch, quick hard braking, and a slower speed-bump section. The hybrid course was shorter and simpler, allowing a reasonable range of acceleration, turns and braking, as well as a full-arrest spot to try out the Malibu Hybrid's AutoStop feature.

The Toyota, Ford and Hyundai were run on the longer course, along with both the 4-cylinder and V-6 versions of the Malibu. We saved the 6-cylinder Malibu for last. The drive bore out what GM hoped it would: the Malibu was a quiet, comfortable, great-handling car. The Ford surprised us by feeling a lot less balanced in tight turns at speed. We were interested to note that several media drivers were trying to see what tires all had, after driving the Toyota; unfortunately, it had gotten dark, and we didn't verify them all (and even if we had, of course that wouldn't tell us how each would do on the others' rubber; but it did imply there was something uneasy in the Toyota's cornering, compared to the others). We're used to Hyundai's rapid ascendancy in features, fit and finish, and style, but we still generally notice soft or floaty handling once in motion. The Sonata didn't seem to exhibit this on the test track, but we noticed most a

bit of lag upon acceleration, as the automatic transmission took on the task. This wasn't a likely deal-breaker in daily driving, but moving quickly from one test challenge to another, the penalty was palpable.

The base Malibu is powered by a 2.4L DOHC 4-cylinder gasoline engine with variable valve timing, generating 169hp and 160 lb-ft of torque. This engine is standard on the LS and LT models and available on the LTZ (coming in mid-2008). The transmission is a 4-speed automatic on the LS and LT, with a 6-speed automatic slated for the LTZ.

A 3.6L 24-valve DOHC V-6 with variable valve timing is standard on the LTZ and available on the 2LT, with 252hp and 251 lb-ft of torque, with a standard 6-speed automatic.

The Malibu Hybrid takes a comprehensive approach to its engineering and a simple, straightforward approach to its interface. Whereas some hybrids will numb or distract you with the dashboard equivalent of a PowerPoint presentation about your performance and economy, the Malibu Hybrid lets you drive normally, while displaying a couple of fundamentals about charge and drain of the system. The AutoStop was tested at a pause point on the track, a fairly conventional feature in terms of shutting off the gas engine when you've come to a stop, then seamlessly

getting you on your way when you release the brake pedal. Whether this is disquieting or not, which some people note, is basically moot—if you haven't driven a hybrid and experienced that yet, chances are good that you will very soon, and this will be old hat.

Chevy claims the lowest-priced hybrid in the midsize segment with the Malibu, and they say to expect a 10% fuel efficiency gain over gasoline power, to boot. The engineering is kept simple: its advanced Nickel Metal Hydride battery, charged through regenerative braking, is supplemented by the 2.4L DOHC 4-cylinder gas engine with variable valve timing, mated to a standard 4-speed automatic transmission, with the addition of an auxiliary oil pump.

All in all, the hybrid is a very conventional drive, so you will be able to make your comparative decision based on fuel economy goals, the crystal ball aspect of investing in new technology, features, price and your gut.

Given that the new Chevy Malibu is clearly a hot contender in its class, one question was painfully obvious: what do you say when someone states that they love the car, love the drive, love the price, love the features... but they're still thinking Honda or Toyota,



TRAVEL SITES TO BE SEEN

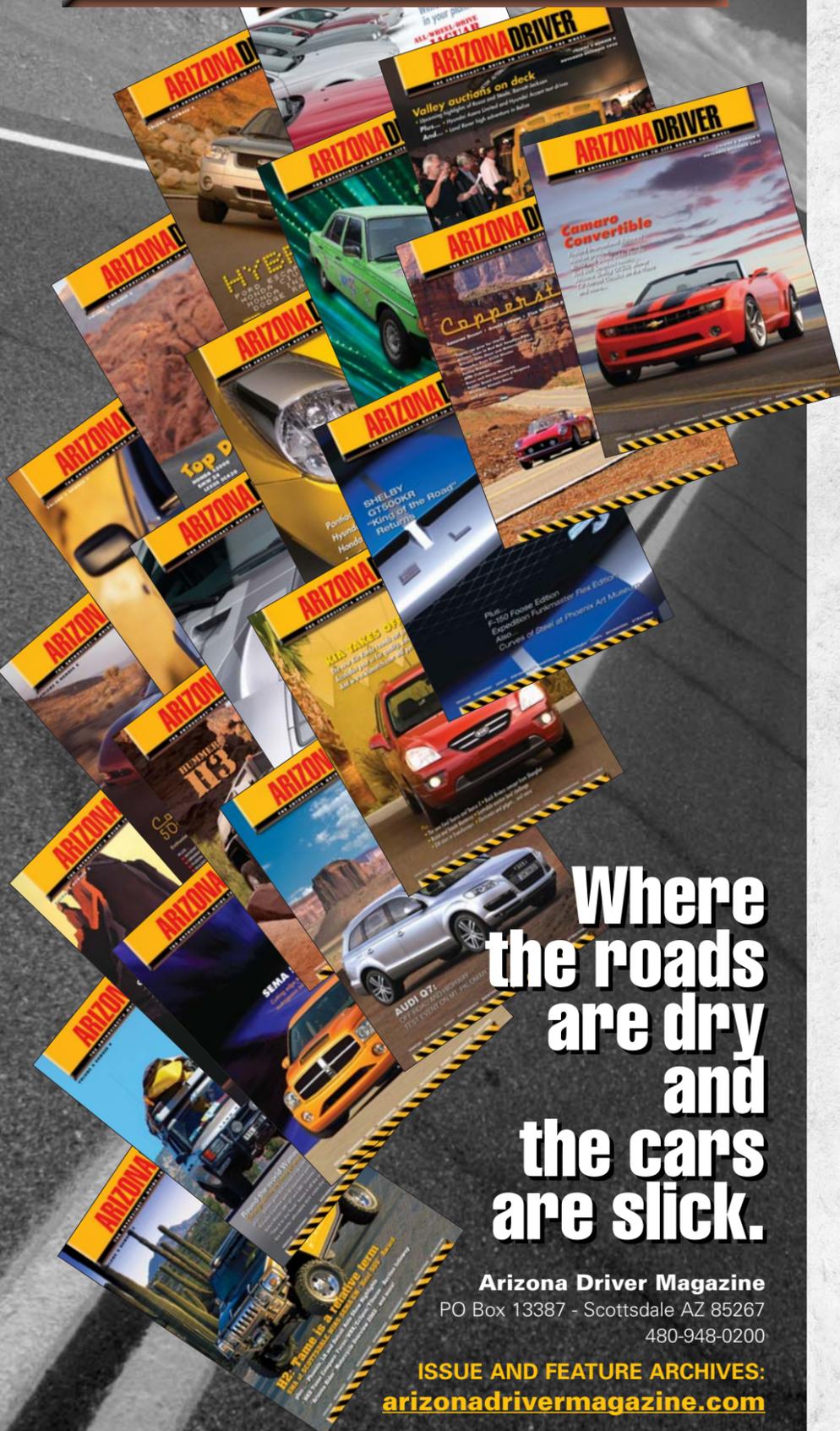
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GM's answer is immediate and actually quite clear: the Malibu is being built at GM's high-technology Fairfax plant, in Kansas City, where the Saturn Aura and Aura Hybrid are manufactured, and which is also home to GM's cutting-edge recycling plant. This is the top source for a 21st century Chevrolet. The Fairfax facility is the model and basis for everything GM will be doing, moving forward, so any ideas the consumer may have developed about comparative quality or durability to date need to be reassessed within this framework. State-of-the-art processes deliver a quiet, nicely balanced and more than reasonably powerful vehicle with the highest level of fit and finish we've probably ever seen from GM, bar the other machines already coming out of Fairfax, or GM's European offerings built by Opel.

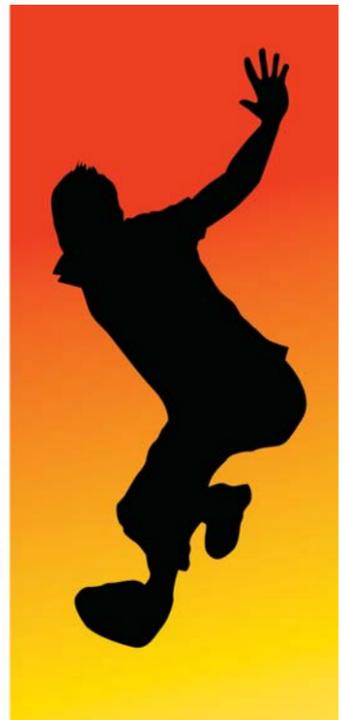
Chevy has worked hard to create a quiet interior on the new Malibu, which measures among the quietest in the midsize segment. Its stiff body structure and extensive use of high-strength steel isolate the cabin from powertrain, road and wind noise, while reducing body flex to minimize squeaks and rattles. The engines are mounted to a four-point isolated cradle that additionally minimizes powertrain noise and vibration. The interior also liberally utilizes acoustic foam, spray-on and welded sealers and other sound deadeners. These features may contribute to the Malibu being a couple of hundred pounds heavier than its competitors, but the media crew at our test agreed that this weight provided a solid stance and great handling, without noticeable power loss.

The stylists have done a great job with the Malibu, carrying forward the design equity of Chevrolet over the past few years, while outdoing the expectations benchmarked by the traditional offerings in this class. This is an affordable vehicle that will look quite handsome in anyone's driveway. Beyond overall style, they've had some fun: the exterior boasts a startling twelve-count-em-twelve Chevy bowtie emblems. They counted them for us: four wheel centers, the center of each headlight and taillight, the front grille center and rear deck, and two more that flashed by as we began to lose count. Say it loud: I'm Chevy and I'm proud.

The 2008 Chevrolet Malibu LS starts at \$19,995, with the high-end LTZ starting at \$26,995. The Malibu Hybrid has a base price of \$22,790. For additional information, visit www.chevrolet.com/2008malibu.

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