

The Outlander gets a nod from us as a “most improved” entry, and its fuel economy is tops here, but price could be a little better for the relatively low engine power it delivers. Compare these same qualities—cost, power, fuel economy—and it’s not hard to see how the Subaru Forester conquered this category with the judges overall. (In our own tally, however, the Hyundai came in first, and the Kia Sorento tied the Forester for second.) **Best Family: Subaru Forester 2.0XT Premium CVT.**

**LUXURY CLASS**

.....\$ as tested .....	MPG .....	HP .....	Torque
BMW X3 xDrive 28i			
.....\$52,345 .....	21/28 .....	240 .....	260
Buick Enclave AWD Premium			
.....\$52,090 .....	16/22 .....	288 .....	270
Jeep® Grand Cherokee Overland 4X4 (2014)			
.....\$51,875 .....	14/20 .....	360 .....	390
Mercedes-Benz GL450 4Matic			
.....\$98,165 .....	14/19 .....	362 .....	406
Volkswagen Touareg Hybrid (2012)			
.....\$63,790 .....	20/24 .....	333 .....	325

The X5 has long been our preferred BMW X, but this day we had the X1 and the X3. Our X3 felt a bit like a stripper, but in fact was optioned up to \$52k-plus from a base of \$38,500. The Buick—a real beauty on the first day—unfortunately fell out of service before the second day and was not scored. The Mercedes-Benz GL is a perennial favorite of ours, as is the Grand Cherokee, but the Jeep surprisingly fell well ahead of the Benz in point-by-point scoring, partly because the GL costs almost twice what the others in this category do. The VW Hybrid (a 2012 model) came in second in our tally, knocked down a bit for its price relative to all but the GL. Overall, the Grand Cherokee was our winner in this category and also won with the overall group. **Best Luxury: Jeep® Grand Cherokee Overland 4X4.**

**OVERALL WINNER**

The Grand Cherokee had our highest score (by one point) of any vehicle in all categories of this event. Apparently our own score sheet outcome was reflected throughout the full group of judges, as they crowned one champion: the **Northwest Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year: Jeep® Grand Cherokee Overland 4X4.** ■

**Well over halfway to max**

The Nissan Maxima impressed us so well a couple of years ago—delivering a fine large sedan ride for a front-wheel-driver—that we looked forward to the all-new 2013 Altima with great anticipation. While in Washington state for Mudfest, we drove one on our airport-to-Shoqualmie run, plus a bonus day or two in the islands.

Our Altima was a top-trim SV. There are three models, the price spread is fairly close, and they all have the same powertrain—the distinctions could just as easily be option packages. The base model starts at just \$21,760, and this SV at \$24,080. We’d go for the top model. (We had a stripper Altima rental in Colorado a few weeks later, which confirmed this.) Add one generally useful but not essential (unless you want a moonroof) package, and ours was out the door for \$27,005.

Our drive time was limited, but it did include steep climbs, as well as the rough

road surfaces that Pacific Northwest weather creates. We noted plenty of passing power on uphills at highway speeds, and solid, smooth suspension on the roughest of patches, with no front-drive torque, same as the Maxima. The nav and audio interface was simple and effective, typical Nissan.

We appreciate the fit, finish, fixtures and style of the Maxima, and had hoped for a downsized version in the new Altima. And...? It has come much closer than before. In the rich Java Metallic finish and top SV trim of our tester, the gap closes significantly. Focus on this one and not the old stripper rental, and things really start to gel. ■

