

Driving the new Equinox on the equinox under a Carolina moon

by Joe Sage

The equinox is the day the sun crosses the earth's equator. The vernal equinox, in March, marks the end of winter and the beginning of spring. This year, it also marked the end of the gen-two Chevrolet Equinox and the beginning of a highly developed new gen-three model, as it happens to be the day we drove the all-new 2018 Chevrolet Equinox compact crossover from Greenville, South Carolina to Asheville, North Carolina.

Chevy Equinox was born in 2005, when the crossover term, hard as it is to recall now, was barely being used or understood, and compact sales were sort of an offshoot niche of the whole thing. The original Equinox was in fact a sibling of the Pontiac Torrent, which itself was a replacement for the innovative but poorly received Pontiac Aztek.

The compact crossover Equinox was not a voice in the wilderness, however, as small Japanese utilities had been around for more than a decade, and notably the Ford Escape

had been around for five years.

Things started to warm up in the segment, to the point that the second generation of Equinox, from 2009 to 2017, became Chevrolet's third-best-selling vehicle in North America—ahead of familiar badges like Impala or Malibu and behind only the always-huge-numbers Chevy Silverado pickup and the economical compact Chevy Cruze.

This trend has only accelerated, to the point that the compact crossover is now the hottest selling segment in the industry, recently surpassing the midsize sedan. Knowing this, GM has put an enormous effort into the new third-generation Chevrolet Equinox.

We flew to Upstate South Carolina to meet the new vehicle and its development team. From there, we would drive north into North Carolina, through the Blue Ridge Mountains, a region with endless combinations of highway and byway, café and curio, historic site and new tech development hub, all combin-

ing to let us do what Chevrolet encourages everyone to do: Find New Roads.

We were driving the first of the first—pre-production builds of the Chevy Equinox with its Ecotec 170-hp 1.5-liter turbocharged four-cylinder dual-overhead-cam direct-injected gasoline engine. Coming soon will be a roughly 50 percent more powerful 2.0-liter model, as well as a 1.6-liter turbo-diesel with almost as much torque as the bigger gasoline engine and that torque applied across a wide power band. GM states this will be the only diesel offered in this segment in North America. All three engines have advanced cast aluminum blocks and cylinder heads.

You will have a lot of choices with the new Equinox—those three engines, each with a different transmission (a sophisticated small new nine-speed for the 2-liter, two different six-speeds for the others); front-wheel- or all-wheel-drive options; and four trim levels. For towing, you'll want the 2-liter. For maximum fuel economy, you'll either want the front-drive 1.5-liter (32 mph highway) or the turbo-diesel (expected to achieve about a 40-mpg highway rating once certified). Pricing starts at \$24,475 and hits the mid-\$30s for top trim and AWD with the 1.5-liter engine. Pricing for the bigger gasoline engine and the diesel

were not available yet at the time.

But whichever direction your heart and habits may lead you, you will benefit from the core efforts of the Equinox development team, from dual-rack-and-pinion electric power steering to specifically tuned suspension including a MacPherson strut front end with side-loaded modules, specifically tuned coil springs and a direct-acting stabilizer bar; and four-link independent rear suspension.

Wheels vary by engine, trim and options (17-, 18- and 19-inch), and brake sizes vary accordingly, but all are four-wheel disc with ABS and electronic stability control, Duralife rotors (which avoid rust and dust buildup, with the bonus of smoother steering and braking) and fuel-efficient low-drag calipers.

That all-new nine-speed transmission in the upcoming 2-liter model has a higher overall ratio, for fuel efficiency, and smaller steps between gears, for both fuel efficiency and a more refined ride. Its on-axis design puts all gears in line with the crankshaft. That plus GM's first application of a selectable one-way clutch reduce the unit to about the same size as a six-speed transmission.

All this is bundled together in a body that carries forward key cues from the popular prior model, as well as upscale front styling that reflects the Impala and is working its

way into much of the Chevrolet lineup. Developed with a particular emphasis on aerodynamics, the body achieves a 10 percent reduction in drag over its predecessor, with slippery features including dual electronically-controlled drag-reducing air dams in the front grilles, a larger rear spoiler (that also looks quite cool), and various air trips, deflectors and underbody panels throughout.

It's nice to know that all this technology lies beneath, but the human occupants within also have plenty to enjoy. Again depending upon trim level and options, the Equinox offers the spacious feel of a panoramic sunroof, with a power sunshade for the hottest and sunniest of Arizona's hot and sunny days. Front seats are available both heated and ventilated, and rear seats are available heated. The rear seats also fold just about completely flat with one simple latch, creating up to 63.5 cubic feet of cargo volume.

The vehicle's technology hub includes an available eight-inch touchscreen with a highly effective surround-view camera, Apple and Android connectivity, and GM's pioneering WiFi hot spot connectivity, now with a 4G LTE plan offering unlimited data for \$20 a month. On-screen functions are presented in a series



SPECIFICATIONS

SEATING CAPACITY	.....5-passenger
DRIVETRAIN	.....FWD or AWD
ENGINE: 1.5L TURBO DOHC DI	
HP/TORQUE	.....170 hp / 203 lb-ft
TRANSMISSION	.....6-spd auto
MPG	.....FWD .....26/32/28 (city/hwy/comb)
	.....AWD .....24/30/26 (city/hwy/comb)
ENGINE: 2.0L TURBO DOHC DI	
HP/TORQUE	.....252 hp / 260 lb-ft
TRANSMISSION	.....9-spd auto
MPG	.....FWD est 28 highway; others tbd
ENGINE: 1.6L TURBO-DIESEL	
HP/TORQUE	.....137 hp / 240 lb-ft
TRANSMISSION	.....6-spd auto
MPG	.....FWD est 40 highway; others tbd
SUSPENSION	.....F: MacPherson strut with side-loaded modules, specifically tuned coil springs, direct-acting stabilizer bar
	.....R: 4-link independent rear suspension
STEERING	.....dual rack & pinion elec power
WHEELS	.....17-, 18-, 19-inch aluminum
BRAKES	.....four-wheel disc, ABS, ESC,
	.....Duralife rotors and low-drag calipers
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	.....183.1 in / 107.3 in
TURNING CIRCLE	.....37.4 ft
CARGO VOLUME	.....29.9 / 63.5 cu.ft
WEIGHT	.....3327 lb (1.5L FWD)
TOWING CAPACITY	.....3500 lb (2.0L turbo)
BASE PRICES (with 1.5L turbo)	
L	.....FWD \$24,475
LS	.....FWD \$26,405
	.....AWD \$28,155
LT	.....FWD \$27,645
	.....AWD \$29,395
PREMIER	.....FWD \$31,685
	.....AWD \$35,330



of simple and effective app icons, and key functions such as volume and back/forward are knobs and switches, for quick eyes-off adjustments.

Chevrolet gave some structure to our Find New Roads mission by teaming up with Roadtrippers to give us a choice of routes for the drive from South Carolina to North—each with an emphasis variously on nature, culture, history, food and drink, or the one we chose, Swoon-worthy Scenic Sight-seeing. After all, we don't get to the South much. Parks, waterfalls and covered bridges punctuated our day, but more importantly gave us a chance to experience the new Chevy Equinox as owners do—paying attention to family, friends and the mission at hand, with a reliable and responsive vehicle providing the trip's foundation.

We had hoped to get to Asheville in time to visit its Pinball Museum, but even after slicing one or two swoon-worthy stops off our list, the little college and tech city's rush hour traffic dashed those plans. Too bad. For 15 bucks, you can help yourself to all the machines, and this place had been on our co-driver's bucket list for some time.

We did visit the headquarters of Moog Music, Inc. for a tour and nightclub-caliber demonstration of their innovative synthesizer and mixing technologies, still hand-built to spec by a dedicated team of skilled enthusiasts. It's a happenin' town.

In the morning, the Pinball Museum was again closed, as they are one day every week, since as a hands-on museum, regular repairs are a certainty.

Heading back to South Carolina, we added one irresistible check-it-off-our-own-list quick dash into the corner of Georgia, bringing your correspondent's states-visited list officially to a full 50.

Our drive affirmed that Chevrolet has done a very thorough job with the new Equinox—ready to take on Ford Escape, as well as its expanded field of Japanese, European and Korean compact crossover competitors. Yet, a key part of their marketing program is not about this or any model's individual relative positioning. It's about the collective presence of the Chevrolet brand.

You may have noticed a run of advertising for the past several months, in which a group of average people are exposed to a surprisingly long list of awards and best-ofs won by Chevy. What you may not have noticed—we're not sure we had, in fact—is that Chevrolet as an overall brand has not advertised collectively since the *Heartbeat of America* in the 1980s. You've seen Malibu, Volt, Silverado, Impala and whatnot, but not the full brand beating as one. It's a good move. Collectively, the awards are quite impressive, and it shines a light on the broad stable that comprise a familiar yet fresh full lineup of Chevrolet products. The latest is the 2018 Chevrolet Equinox, ready to go head-to-head with other giants in its niche. ■

