

Luxury car is frugal on gas consumption

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model is powered by a 2.4-litre Ecotec engine/electric motor (164 hp, 159 lb/ft) and achieves 8.5L/100km in the city and 6.2L/100 on the highway.

Right now the four-cylinder engines have a four-speed automatic and the V6 has a six-speed automatic. In the new year, the topline LTZ will be available with a four-cylinder

engine in addition to the six-speed automatic making that a first in the mid-size segment and something long-distance commuters should love because it combines all the amenities

of a luxury car with frugal gas consumption.

The new Malibu uses the same world platform and suspension setup as the Saturn Aura; the same car was

named North American Car of the Year at the Detroit auto show. Derived from GM's Opel Division in Germany, this car has the same taut ride and positive handling that one expects from German sports sedans.

Visually, the new Malibu looks more substantial than the previous model with the Chevy bowtie logo integrated nicely into the new "family" one-bar grille. Interestingly, there are no less than 12 bowties on the exterior, some obvious, others small and discreet like on the headlight bulb reflectors.

In terms of everyday ride, it is a night and day improvement over the previous model. I mean here is a Malibu that likes to be put through its paces and I did on California's Pacific Coast Highway with its endless twists and turns and breathtaking scenery.

With the longer and wider wheelbase on California superhighways that are up to six lanes wide with surfaces varying from billiard table to pothole city, the Malibu soaked up everything it came across.

There are so many cars on the road there driven by people of a wide range of ability and attention spans that agility is a must. Being able to change a lane suddenly to avoid some jerk cutting across four lanes of traffic to get to an onramp is a necessity, and the Malibu was up to the challenge.

The interior of the Malibu, especially the LTZ with its wood trim accents, is a very pleasant place to be and a whole lot more inviting than the rental car look of the previous model. The instrument panel (IP) gives a hint of its European heritage due to its Opel DNA, but is not as "Euro" as the IP in the Saturn Astra I drove during the same event.

The front seat has a generous travel but when placed all the way back for long-legged drivers and the more portly (I'm the latter), it puts the seat directly behind the B-pillar. In terms of safety, it's about as good as it gets. But if you sit well back, it means dragging your butt across the B-pillar. Oddly it's awkward getting in, but not out, something I also noticed on the Saturn Aura, which has the identical cabin layout.

But on the whole, I definitely preferred the B-pillar between those California crazies and me.

I also briefly drove the hybrid that is a "mild" hybrid, in that it can't run on battery power alone. But GM figures that in urban use, the hybrid is good for an up to 20 per cent improvement in mileage because it turns itself off when stopped.

A "full" hybrid does get 50 per cent and better fuel economy but is about \$5,000-\$8,000 more expensive. One has to decide if he/she will save more than the purchase price over the life of his/her full hybrid.

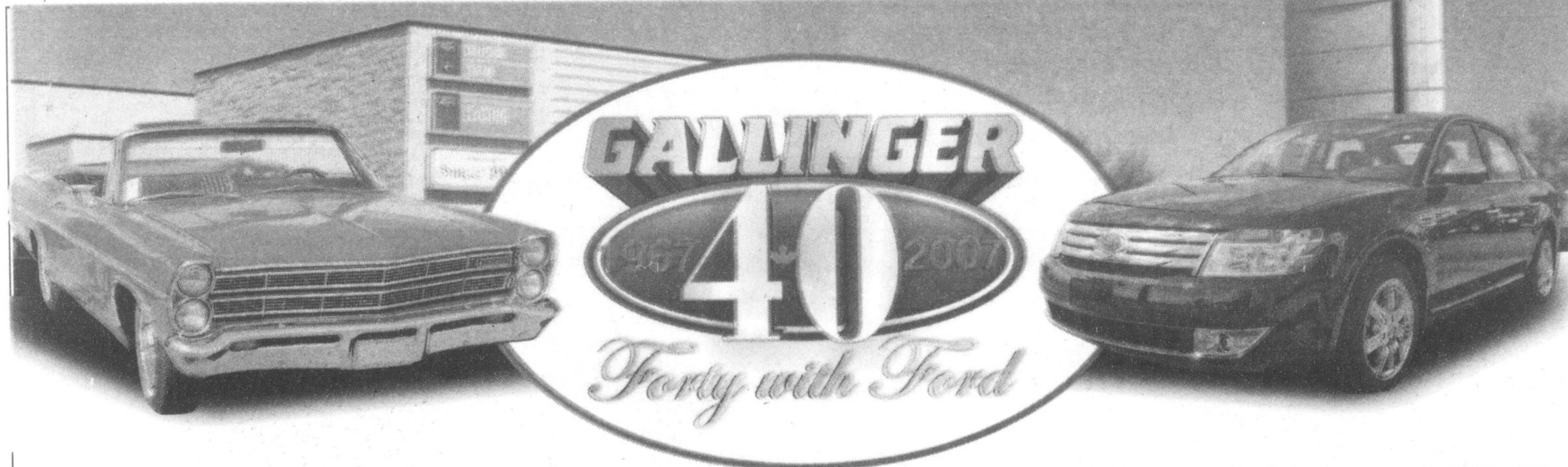
The only difference I could find in terms of ride and handling between the hybrid and the stock four-cylinder LS was getting used to the engine stopping at rest and coming back to life when the brake was released.

As always, a day with the car is not real road test, so I will book the car early next year and get some serious seat time.

But for now, the Malibu has gone from a follower to a leader in the mid-size sedan.



The 2008 Malibu is a giant step forward for Chevrolet, bringing it from just another player in the mid-size sedan segment to one of the leaders by offering more standard content at competitive prices.



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