

ARRIVE ALIVE...
Please Don't Drink and Drive
 This message brought to you as a community service of The Economist & Sun/Tribune

Take your teddy bear for an old fashioned train ride on Sunday, July 4.
 Every child up to 8 years of age, if accompanied by a teddy bear, ride for free.
 Bring mom and dad as well for a ride through the beautiful Oak Ridges Moraine. Join us for a fun day on Sunday.

Trains leave Uxbridge at 11:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m.
 Trains leave Stouffville at 1:00 p.m.

Affordable XL-7 still remains a mystery to many

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notes, the XL-7 remains a mystery to most consumers. The XL-7 is the top of Suzuki's three SUVs, which also includes the Vitara and the Grand Vitara. Power is a 2.7-litre, V6 producing 185 hp and 184 lb./ft. of torque. Suzuki is first and foremost an engineering company and its engines in particular are noted for being as lusty as they are reliable. Transmission choices include a five-speed manual or a five-speed automatic. The automatic is new for 2004 and only available on the XL-7. Suspension is pretty standard fare in the mid-size 4X4 segment being coil springs over MacPherson struts at the front and a five-link setup at the rear with coil springs on a solid rear axle. Ventilated disc brakes are found at the front, drums at the rear. Like their engines, Suzukis are also stoutly built. The XL-7 (along with BMW, Lexus and Mercedes-Benz), received the highest rating of an offset crash at 60 km/h from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. Being a Suzuki, the four-wheel-drive system has been worked on and refined over the past three decades to the point where it is bulletproof. On the XL-7, a dashboard mounted push-button selector for 2WD, 4WD and 4LO selects the transfer case mode. There are no more levers on the floor to tug at. With a length of 4,760 mm (187.4 in.) and a wheelbase of 2,800 mm (110.2 in), the XL-7 is at the longer end of the mid-size SUV segment. This allows the XL-7 to be ordered in both five- and seven-seat versions. The back row, split-fold seats are borderline functional as such, but they can serve their purpose literally in a pinch.

There are four XL-7 trim levels

There are actually four XL-7 trim levels starting with the JX, the JLX, the JLX Plus and the as tested here Limited. Even with the base JL, there's a lot of content such as AM/FM/CD with six speakers and a subwoofer, cruise, air, power locks/mirrors/windows, tilt steering and remote keyless entry. The JLX dials in things like automatic climate control and tilt/side glass sunroof while with the last two there's the third row seats and in the Limited the seats are leather and are heated. Lastly, the Limited has rear seat air conditioning. The interior is clean and contemporary but I found the wood trim (or simul-wood) oddly out of place against the creamy beige leather seating. Controls for the heating/cooling consist of three big knobs that don't need a rocket scientist or a 400-page manual to figure out how to make things work. Just twist the knob to the heat you want and the next knob to the automatic or manual for fan speed and wherever you want the airflow directed and then forget about it.

Taking one of Ontario's scenic highways up into cottage country, the XL-7 ambled along at 80 km/h with virtually no road noise seeping into the cabin, despite being shod with 16-inch all-season tires. Passing was a matter-of-fact thing, the V6 has plenty of reserve power to get out and around the endless line of boats on trailers.

The view from the driver's seat has the elevated position now so very much in vogue, but you have to set the mirrors carefully to get a handle on who or what is gaining. A case in point was a flock of pre-teen boys on ATVs and dirt bikes slicing along on the shoulder of the highway and making left turns, seemingly, on a whim. Where were their parents?

Had our kids been with us, there was ample seating for them and all the stuff they now bring, which has changed from strollers and folding cribs to golf bags and ubiquitous portable CDs.

I have to admit I enjoyed the fact the XL-7 ran on regular gas, as the brace of premium SUVs I've driven lately have had a major impact on my bank balance.

With a price of \$30,995 (\$31,995 as tested with third row seats) it was \$40,000 less than the premium SUV I'd driven the week previously, and no doubt a contributing reason why Consumers Digest Magazine named it as a Best Buy for 2003.

The XL-7 had a lot of pluses that, as the brochure said, "remain a mystery to many." Maybe it's time SUV buyers who want it all, except the price of a luxury SUV, should check out the XL-7.

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