

New Impala blows away competition

Cheaper than 2005, and better equipped



The 2006 Impala now features more conventional, triangular rear lights. Inside, the plastic panels fit more tightly than previous models.

All-new interior higher quality than before

[JIM KENZIE](#)

REGINA—One of the downsides to General Motors' wide array of models is that it reduces the company's opportunities to brag.

If you added up sales of Chevrolet Impala, Buick Allure and Pontiac Grand Prix, you wouldn't be able to see Honda Accord or Toyota Camry in the dust as the trio led the mid-size sedan sales derby.

In fact, collectively, these so-called W-body cars almost outsell Accord and Camry combined.

True, many — almost half — of Impala sales are to fleets. But a sale is a sale.

Sticking with the every-brand-gets-every-model strategy not only confuses the market and stresses GM's product development budget, but it eliminates the chance to shout "best-seller!" from the rooftops.

Imagine if GM sold all those cars under one label and was able to announce that, say, the Chevrolet Impala was the best-selling car in the world? Success breeds success.

GM says the model proliferation allows it to tailor the cars to different strata in the market. Maybe, but how come Honda and Toyota can sell the same car to everybody? That said, a lot of Canadians have bought Impalas. Last year, it outsold Camry all by itself, if not quite Accord. And it has consistently ranked in the top 10 overall.

A heavily-revised Impala arrives for the 2006 model year, following similar remakes from Pontiac (Grand Prix) and Buick (Regal and Century merged into Allure here, LaCrosse in the U.S.).

All three share the same architecture and all are built at GM's Oshawa AutoPlex, the largest (in terms of number of vehicles produced), highest-quality and highest-productivity plant in the western hemisphere.

Visually, Impala's all-new sheet metal may be better looking than before, but it is actually less striking because the controversial huge quadruple round taillights set in a cliff-like rear fascia have been replaced by more conventional triangular-shaped ones.

As with Allure, you may see more than a hint of the current Ford Taurus in the rear corners of the new Impala.

Overall length, wheelbase and other dimensions remain essentially as before, so Impala retains its impressive interior room, especially compared to its Japanese-branded competition.

Three engines will be offered in the front-wheel-drive Impala. The LT and LS get a new 3.5-litre V6 with 211 horsepower and 214 lb.-ft. of torque. The LTZ upgrades to a stroked version of this engine, displacing 3.9 litres, and producing 242 horsepower and 242 lb.-ft. of torque.

These engines appear to be distantly related to the 3.5-litre V6 in the Malibu, but GM says they're different enough — new block; new heads; the only actual shared components are the valve lifters — to warrant being called a separate family.

The major point of distinction is variable valve-timing, old hat for the Japanese and Germans, but something new for a Chevrolet sedan, and for any pushrod engine.

For the environmentally-conscious, Impala's 3.5 is also offered in a "flex-fuel" version capable of running on any combination of gasoline and ethanol up to E85 (85 per cent ethanol).

(Incidentally, Malibu and Pontiac G6 will get the 3.9 version as an option for 2006.)

The range-topping SS brings V8 power back to the Impala nameplate for the first time since — well, anybody care to guess?

This is a 5.3 litre with 303 horsepower and 323 lb.-ft. of torque. It also has variable displacement, making it capable of running on only four cylinders when you're just cruising gently, which can bring a benefit of up to 8 per cent lower fuel consumption. This is similar in concept to what Chrysler does in the 300 Hemi, and it works a treat there.

This engine is also currently available in the top-of-the-line Grand Prix and in some GM trucks.

All Impalas come with a four-speed automatic transmission.

Suspension remains MacStrut up front and three-link independent at the rear, but tuning has been firmed up considerably. I just got out of a Buick Allure; it rides and handles better than you'd expect from a Buick, which augurs well for the Impala.

Brakes, something of a weak point in the former Impala, are upgraded to four-wheel discs. ABS remains an option on LS and LT, but at least it is standard on LTZ and SS.

The interior is all-new, and features much higher quality trim materials and tighter panel fits than ever. The new standard radio looks so good it might have come out of an Audi. A particularly clever feature is the optional multi-functional rear seat. The seat cushion split-folds in one-third/two-thirds proportion; each portion can be flipped forward to create a bulkhead between itself and the front seat.

The wells beneath the cushions are lined with polycarbonate plastic, so you can stuff wet or dirty cargo in there.

Or shallow stuff like wallets, maybe a small digital camera, can be completely hidden from prying eyes when you flip the cushions back down again.

In addition, the seat back split-folds, forming a pass-through to the trunk. The rear head-restraints are permanently attached to the shelf so they don't have to be removed in order for the seat to fold completely flat.

I can say here that I was more impressed by Impala than I was by Allure, and more impressed by Allure than by Grand Prix.

Maybe that's a reflection of GM still being on the learning curve (the Grand Prix was launched first, Allure second, Impala now).

Or maybe it's an indication that Canadians not only build cars better, but they engineer cars better — about 20 to 30 per cent of the engineering on Grand Prix was done by GM's Canadian engineering centre (also in Oshawa), compared to 50 per cent for Allure and 60 to 65 per cent for Impala.

I know I told you last week that the new Hyundai Sonata set new standards for value and standard equipment in the mid-size sedan market.

Well, its reign at the top of the heap may have lasted only that one week, because the 2006 Impala LS starts at just \$24,685, and that includes a 211-horse V6, automatic transmission, 16-inch wheels, air conditioning, eight-way power driver's seat, GM's OnStar vehicle communication system, six-speaker CD stereo, remote keyless entry, front *and* rear side head air bags, and cruise control.

(But not ABS. As long as the market values cruise higher than ABS, we're all in trouble.) This is some \$215 less than a base four-cylinder Camry (which, GM loves to point out, has finished behind Impala in the J.D. Power Initial Quality survey for five years in a row).

It is also \$1,720 less than last year's Impala, yet the new car has some \$1,500 worth of additional equipment and features.

Of course, MSRP doesn't mean much in these days of "employee pricing" and other marketing incentives.

As a corporate strategy from 2006 onward, GM is attempting to bring its suggested retail prices down closer to the actual transaction prices being paid in the dealerships, to try and wean both themselves and their customers off this incentive merry-go-round.

The LTZ with the 242-horse V6, ABS and a handful of other goodies, starts at \$29,840.

The V8-powered SS begins at \$32,855.

These prices not only blow comparably-equipped Asian-branded competition out of the water, but also devastate the other domestics, being thousands less than a similarly-outfitted Chrysler 300 or Ford Five Hundred.

Suffice to say for now that if you're contemplating the purchase of any mid-size sedan, you owe it to yourself to hold fire for a couple of weeks.

Jim Kenzie, a freelance journalist (jim@jimkenzie.com), prepared this report based on travel provided by the automaker.