

Suzuki Heads Up-Market - 2009 Suzuki XL7

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Suzuki is celebrating its centennial in 2009 - believe it or not, the company got its start making looms for weaving cloth in 1909. Along the way, they've had a successful history, introducing their motorcycles to the United States in 1963 and bringing the first four-wheeled ATV to the U.S. in 1983. They introduced their first passenger cars here in 1985 with the popular Sidekick mini-SUV.

Fast forward to today and Suzuki has an impressive lineup of small SUVs, priced to move and designed to appeal to a wide swath of the market. We'll talk about my favorite, the sporty SX4, in a couple weeks but right now we'll focus on Suzuki's flagship, the XL7.

Update: The good folks at Suzuki said that 2009 pricing will remain the same as 2008, and Suzuki dealers are offering smokin' deals on all '08 and incoming '09 XL7s. Check it out!

Suzuki calls the XL7 a mid-size crossover - that means it's built on a unibody chassis like a car, and offers seating for 7 in 3 rows. We took the XL7 on our patented "extended family test drive" - piling the whole family, including Grandma and Grandpa, into the car and going out to dinner. The verdict was generally positive, as an average-size adult was perfectly comfortable in the third row, though watching her get back there was something of a laugh riot.

The XL7 comes with a 3.6-liter DOHC V6 engine, delivering a respectable 252 horsepower and 243 pound feet of torque. The transmission at all levels is a smooth 6-speed automatic with "manu-matic" ratchet shift capability. The XL7's fuel economy comes in at a 17/24 in the 2WD configuration and 16/23 if you opt for AWD. That's not great, but it's also not bad for a 7-passenger SUV.

The XL7 is nice to drive - it's a solid-feeling, quiet ride, with adequate power. That may sound like faint praise, but really - cars always trade off power against fuel mileage, and "adequate" is what automakers should be trying to achieve!

The genius of Suzuki and the XL7 is in the configuration options. Suzuki is doing a great job of offering a lot of features for a low sticker price. So for 2009, you have your choice of three trim levels: Premium, Luxury and Limited.

The XL7 offers a long list of standard features, including remote keyless entry, power everything, cruise control, trip computer, auto on/off headlamps, air conditioning with automatic climate control and a CD stereo system with six speakers.

Standard family-friendly safety features on the XL7 include a car alarm with engine immobilizer, driver and passenger front airbags, side-curtain airbags for all rows of passengers, ABS with EBD, ESP with TCS, and TPMS. In addition, three-row, seven-passenger models feature rear cargo underfloor storage and auxiliary rear air conditioning with separate HVAC controls.

Pricing for 2009 hasn't been announced yet, but no one's asking much more for this year's SUV than for last year's, and the 2008 price for the Premium XL7 was only \$23,249.

The XL7 Luxury edition adds a leather appointed interior, power driver seat, heated front seats, and brushed aluminum-look lower front and rear bumper valances. It also offers a standard sunroof, six-disc in-dash CD player, and leather steering wheel with integrated audio controls. The starting MSRP for the XL7 Luxury was \$24,949 in 2008.

The XL7 Limited takes the car much farther up the luxury ladder, adding a backup camera, touch screen navigation

system, 17-inch chrome wheels, Pioneer premium XM Satellite Radio-ready audio system with seven speakers (including subwoofer), fog lamps, upgraded roof racks, rear spoiler and remote engine start. A DVD entertainment system with wireless headphones is a no-cost option in lieu of the sunroof and navigation system. With all of this equipment, the starting MSRP for the XL7 Limited was only \$27,299 last year, so it should be pretty close this year as well.