

## 2010 Buick LaCrosse Challenges Acura, Lexus

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At the beginning of 2009, journalists, pundits and economists were taking bets on GM's future, and whether a division like Buick could survive the economic meltdown of the American automobile industry. But here we are at the end of the year and GM has not only survived, but Buick has its new LaCrosse sport sedan on showroom floors and the even sportier Buick Regal waiting to make its entrance.

Buick survived the cut that claimed Pontiac, Saturn, Hummer, and Saab for one very good but not obvious reason: driving a Buick is a huge status symbol in China. On the strength of both overseas and domestic sales, Buick has been profitable throughout the economic downturn.

But Buick, like the rest of GM, faces some steep challenges in the years to come. Just a few years ago, GM was promoting the Lucerne to drop the age of the average Buick buyer from the late 60s to the late 50s. People in their late 60s are typically buying the last car they will ever buy, so it's not a great demographic for future customer loyalty. Now with the LaCrosse and even more with the Regal, Buick is very clearly looking to break into the lucrative segment of professional buyers in their 40s and early 50s. The LaCrosse is aimed directly at Acura and Lexus buyers, and so is the upcoming Regal.

The new 2010 LaCrosse looks very much like the Acura TL and Lexus ES350, but there are some crucial differences. First, the LaCrosse has a base price of \$27,085, compared to the Acura's \$35,105 and the Lexus' \$34,470. That's a pretty powerful advantage in this recession year. Plus, the Acura's grill design is just plain butt ugly this year.

The second difference that may work to Buick's advantage is that it's not as sporty as the Acura or Lexus. The LaCrosse gives up about 20 horsepower to the Japanese cars, which is not a lot, but some people care about that. But the Buick also has a softer, smoother ride. With an apples-to-apples comparison between the All Wheel Drive LaCrosse CXL and the Acura TL SH-AWD, the Buick is a much more traditional luxury car driving experience while the Acura is an edgier European-style sports sedan.

But before you assume that this is a negative, consider that many buyers in their 40s and early 50s like to appear to be far more sporty than they really are. The LaCrosse looks enough like the Acura and Lexus to earn a full measure of executive parking lot pride, but offers the smooth, cushy ride that many buyers will privately love.

The LaCrosse CXL is a nice sedan. It comes with every feature a luxury car buyer could want, right down to nice leather and wood trim. And the passenger cabin is as quiet as a midnight snowfall – another Buick hallmark.

The driving experience in the LaCrosse is extremely comfortable. It's not a corner-carving sports car, but neither is it a big wallowing grandpa-mobile. The driver's station is well-designed, and the biggest gripe in a week of driving is that the LaCrosse required more accelerator movement to get going than any other car we've reviewed. That's not to say that the power wasn't there, just that you really have to step on the pedal to get to it. Oh, fuel economy is 16/25 from a 3.0-liter V6 with 255 horsepower. That's adequate.

As mentioned, the LaCrosse starts at \$27,085, but in the AWD trim, the CXL version starts at \$31,820. Having AWD is a big deal in the Pacific Northwest, and especially here in Portland where you might have to climb the Terwilliger Curves or the west hills in rain or snow 8 months out of the year.

In addition to the AWD CXL package, our test car came equipped with the Comfort & Convenience package. At \$550, this includes backup radar, memory seats and mirrors, and auto-dimming side-view mirrors. The CXL also included the \$1,350 Luxury package, which buys a very nice leather and wood-grain heated steering wheel, leather seats that are both heated and ventilated, a power rear sunshade, and a keyless entry and starting system. The car also came with a \$650 entertainment package that included a very nice Harman-Kardon stereo with a USB port and a 120-volt outlet for your laptop. Oh, and there's another \$650 on the sticker for 18-inch chrome-plated wheels.

All those options made the test LaCrosse book out at a cool \$35,770, and if you leave off the chrome wheels, the sticker price on a loaded AWD LaCrosse is the same as a base-model Acura TL and just a little more than the base-model Lexus. Not a bad deal, if you think about it.