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2009 Pontiac Solstice **A cool two-seater, now with a hard top.**

Overview

The Pontiac Solstice is a hot-looking, sports car that starts under \$25,000 and for 2009 is offered in two different body styles: A new coupe version joins the line for 2009.

Coupe or convertible, Pontiac's little two-seater is all about fun, and the reward of affordable sports car performance. The Solstice is responsive and easy to drive, with simple controls and a comfortable cockpit. GM's StabiliTrak stability control system, standard for 2009, adds a safety margin, helping the driver maintain control.

Coupe or roadster, the Solstice comes standard with a 2.4-liter four-cylinder engine that produces 173 horsepower and a five-speed manual transmission or optional five-speed automatic. The power output of the engine is adequate, but the car's relatively high curb weight (2950 pounds) limits performance. The base roadster trends toward no-frills, with hand-crank windows and air conditioning optional, but it does include a nice stereo with XM Satellite Radio and an iPod interface, as well as a lined convertible top for the roadster.

The Pontiac Solstice GXP features a turbocharged four-cylinder that produces 260 horsepower and 260 pound-feet of torque. The added power gives the GXP versions much stronger acceleration, capable of 0 to 60 mph in less than six seconds, and the base price includes more comfort and convenience features.

In addition to the new body style, all 2009 Solstice models come with anti-lock brakes, StabiliTrak and traction control, a limited slip differential.

To broaden the appeal of the coupe, Pontiac equipped it with a removable roof panel, rather than a solid top. The development team reasoned that the Solstice chassis was strong enough without the additional rigidity that goes with a solid top, and the removable panel, popularly known as a targa top, gives owners a wind-in-hair, sun-in-face option. Fashioned from plastic with a magnesium frame, the top is light (31 pounds) and easy to remove or install. However, there's no place to stow it on board. Pontiac addresses this issue with a soft-top option (\$1100). It's supported by bows, and the entire package rolls up for stowage behind the seats.

Unfortunately, this diminishes one of the coupe's big advantages versus the roadster. With its soft top stowed, the roadster has almost no luggage space. The coupe boasts 5.6 cubic feet, about the same as a Mazda MX-5 Miata, with a pair of covered bins behind the headrests for keeping small stuff corralled. Both versions of the Solstice lack door pockets or center console storage.



Although the coupe has a slightly higher practicality index, neither Solstice is really suitable for long trips, due to limited onboard storage, and the idiosyncrasies of the soft tops.

On the other hand, cars like this aren't really about transportation. They're about driving as entertainment, and in this sense the basic Solstice, a traditional rear-wheel-drive sports car, is in many ways a match for the Mazda MX-5 Miata. Measured by objective performance benchmarks, the Solstice GXP can be compared with much more expensive sports car stalwarts such as the Porsche Boxster and Cayman, and the Audi TT. In practice, the Solstice doesn't offer the handling precision of these other sports cars, nor does it match their refinement, interior quality and general tightness. But the roadster's styling stands out, and the new coupe is a real head-turner.

Model Lineup

The Pontiac Solstice roadster (\$24,275) is powered by a 173-hp, 2.4-liter four-cylinder engine. The standard transmission is a five-speed manual, and a five-speed automatic is optional (\$995). Solstice comes standard with hand-cranked windows, manually adjusted outside mirrors and manual door locks, though the driver's seat features a power height adjustment. The glass rear window of both body styles has a defogger, and the padded, urethane-clad steering wheel has a tilt adjustment, but does not adjust for reach. The shift knob is leather-wrapped, but seats and door panels are covered in cloth. Tires are generously sized 245/45VR18 Goodyear Eagle RSA all-season radials on 18-inch painted aluminum wheels. The six-speaker AM/FM/CD/MP3 stereo includes XM Satellite Radio and an iPod interface. OnStar is standard, along with GM's Driver Information Center. And the acoustic lining for the convertible top is standard. Air conditioning (\$960) is optional. The Convenience Package (\$395) adds cruise control, an enhanced Driver Information Center, and fog lamps. The Preferred Package (\$625) includes power windows, power door locks with remote keyless entry, and body-colored power outside mirrors.

Solstice GXP coupe (\$30,375) and roadster (\$29,485) are equipped with a turbocharged version of the 2.0-liter four-cylinder engine, generating 260 horsepower and 260 pound-feet of torque, matched to a five-speed manual transmission. The GXP comes with more standard features, including power windows and mirrors, cruise control, audio controls on a leather-wrapped steering wheel, remote keyless entry, fog lamps, and polished aluminum 18-inch wheels. Tires are the same size but are Goodyear Eagle F1 high-performance units. A five-speed automatic transmission is optional (\$995). Air conditioning (\$960) is optional.

Leather upholstery is available for the Solstice (\$690) and GXP (\$525) and comes as part of the Premium Package, which upgrades the base model with a leather-wrapped steering wheel that includes auxiliary audio controls. Audio upgrades include a high-watt Monsoon system with subwoofer (\$395), an in-dash six-CD changer (\$295), which retains MP3 capability and a separate input jack. Also available are aluminum-clad pedals (\$115), a rear spoiler (\$275), and carpeted floor mats (\$80). The base model can be ordered with polished aluminum (\$545) or chromed aluminum (\$795) wheels.

A Club Sport package (\$1095) for the Solstice roadster includes stiffened suspension components for track days and autocross events. There's also an SCCA SSB Championship Edition package (\$6235) that combines nearly all available options except automatic transmission and the Club Sport suspension. Appropriately, Championship Edition models are available only in Victory Red.

The Solstice is equipped with the minimum passive safety features required by federal regulations, which means seat belts and dual front dual-stage airbags. Anti-lock brakes and StabiliTrak are standard on all models for 2009, as is a tire pressure monitor system.

Walkaround

When the Solstice stole the 2002 Detroit auto show, it was displayed in two body styles: the now familiar roadster and a sleek coupe. Both shapes were created by Franz von Holhausen, a young GM designer who went on to star at Mazda and now works for Fisker. The official assignment to GM's design staff, handed down by Bob Lutz, was for a compact roadster. Von Holhausen's sketches dutifully answered the assignment, and obviously emerged, from dozens of design submissions, as the choice for the show car. But he also submitted variations for a slick two-seat coupe, which he actually preferred over the roadster.

Both body styles were shown in Detroit, but the coupe was a mere fiberglass mock-up, with no interior, while the roadster was a complete car, capable of moving under its own power. And it was the roadster that went into production, while the coupe concept simmered on a far back burner, never quite abandoned, but never green-lighted for production. Until now.

Like the roadster, the coupe has classic sports car proportions: long hood, wide track, limited front and rear overhangs, a look that's sleek, low, and ready for action. The coupe's rear hatch blends nicely into the shape, and the glass rear hatch lends a distinctive touch.

There's not a straight line, flat surface or right angle on the body of this car. The only body panel formed by the traditional stamping methods is the small section behind the front wheel well. The rest are created with a process called hydroforming, which uses extreme water pressure to press sheet metal into a mold. Hydroforming increases rigidity without adding weight, which in turn results in a stiffer platform, the key to responsive handling, reduced vibration and a smooth ride.

The GXP versions of both body styles can be distinguished by their black honeycomb grilles and small chin spoiler in front. They also feature expanded brake-cooling ducts around the fog lamps, polished dual exhaust tips and standard polished aluminum wheels.

The coupe has a targa top, with a removable roof panel, adding versatility to the package. There's also a convertible top option, a squarish piece with support bows that fills the gap left by the absent roof panel.

The roadster's convertible top is a triumph, stylistically. Granted, this car looks best with the top down, but even top-up the profile is stylish. The key to the slick look is a couple of Ferrari

Dinoesque sail panels, or buttresses, book-ending the vertical rear window and snugged down over the teardrop fairings behind the roadster's seats.

These sails have a downside, however. They add complexity to opening the trunk or raising and lowering the top, which tucks under the rear-hinged trunk lid covering the entire back part of the car. Click the remote or a button in the cockpit and three latches pop loose: one in the center for the trunk lid, the other two outboard beneath the roof sails.

When it works correctly, the sails pop up and the trunk opens of its own volition. However, an owner will sometimes find himself pushing the sails up and lifting the trunk lid. To close the trunk, reverse the process, remembering to re-latch both sails. The entire job takes less than a minute, but it can be cumbersome just to drop a bag into the trunk.

Also, since there's no warning light on the dash, to be absolutely sure the trunk lid closes you have to stand behind the car and put hands as close as possible to the far corners of the trunk lid, then slam. Then you have to walk from side to side and make sure both roof sails are attached. When they're not properly planted in their attachments, they can look wrinkled and awkward.

The same process applies to opening and closing the top. There's a single release lever inside the car in the center of the windshield frame. Unlatch it to pop the trunk lid and you can heft the top back and drop it into the trunk from the driver's seat, but you still have to get out to close the trunk. It's not conducive to opening the roof at a stoplight if the urge strikes, or raising it quickly when the rain starts. And with the top stowed, luggage space diminishes to almost nil.

Interior Features

Like all coupes and convertibles, the doors on the Pontiac Solstice are long, making climbing in and out relatively easy for a low-riding car, though not so handy in close-quarter parking lots. Driver and passenger sit hunkered down, with shoulders below the tops of the doors, Corvette-style. Some will love the feeling; others may feel uncomfortable with forward sightlines. The power height adjustment for the driver's seat will mitigate this problem for most.

We found the seats felt comfortable after two hours at the wheel. The seats are supportive in normal motoring, with a one-piece back and integrated headrests, but lateral support is just so-so for extreme driving such as a track day or autocross event.

For people space, particularly elbow room, the Solstice compares well with the Mazda MX-5 Miata, and its seats can accommodate fairly tall frames. The Premium Package leather in a Solstice GXP coupe we drove was well tailored, with GXP embroidered on the seatbacks.

Most materials are good quality, particularly the leather, soft plastic and trim plastic. However, the hard plastic on the doors and dash looks and feels too much like hard plastic.

The three-spoke steering wheel could be thicker, but the optional leather-wrapped rim feels great. Cruise-control and audio buttons are embedded in the spokes. The dash design is simple, handsome and effective. The panel sweeps up from the center console, over the gauges and into

the door panels. The gauges sit at the bottom of deep tubes, and while they're nicely shielded from reflection, they could be better aimed toward the driver's sight line. Four circular vents move plenty of air.

The three climate control knobs are big and easy to find. The square stereo face plate stands out oddly from the flowing curves everywhere else in the car. The volume and tuning knobs are large and covered with the same soft, grippy material as those for the climate controls, making them easy to adjust when the car is in motion. A row of buttons sits to the right of these gauges for hazard lights, traction electronics, fog lamps and dash lights, right where fingers stretch from the right hand when properly wrapped around the steering wheel.

The window switches are awkward to reach. With forearm flat on the driver's door arm rest, and the left hand resting at the door pull, the window switches sit somewhere under the wrist. It's difficult to slide the arm back to reach them (or the mirror adjustor), because the elbow is blocked by the seatback bolster. The driver must contort his or her left arm to try to get fingers on the switches.

Although the coupe is better than the convertible in this respect, small object storage space is seriously lacking in this car, probably the biggest single strike against the Solstice as a daily driver or a long vacation drive. There's a decent-sized glovebox, and small a bin between the front seats on the rear bulkhead that will accommodate some CDs, but you can't get into it while driving and the plastic latch is easily broken. The coupe adds a pair of small covered bins behind the headrests.

The cupholders, which pull out from under the bin on the bulkhead, are as good as useless for the driver. Door pockets are conspicuous by their absence. And aside from the coupe's covered bins, there's no room directly behind the seats.

The roadster's trunk is tiny and the space is oddly shaped. Doubling as storage for the convertible top, it provides 5.4 cubic feet of space with the top up, and just 2.1 cubic feet of space with the top down. Those numbers don't truly tell the tale, however. The elephant in the trunk is the gas tank, a big box that leaves barely enough room around the edges for small, soft-sided, duffel-bag-type luggage. While storage space in other small roadsters may not look significantly greater by the numbers, the practical, usable space in most is significantly better.

There's no room for a spare tire. As with the MX-5, the Solstice comes with an emergency inflator strapped to the back wall of the trunk; in other words, air up that flat tire and continue. Or call a tow truck.

Stowage is better in the coupe. Because they didn't have to accommodate the large folding convertible top, the designers were able to move the fuel tank evaporative canister down several inches, creating a bigger storage well capable of holding at least a weekend's worth of clothing in duffels. However, this space diminishes substantially if the owner adds the convertible top option.



OnStar Turn-by-Turn Navigation is available on the Solstice. Turn-by-Turn allows subscribers to talk to a live advisor, who in turn sends complete step-by-step directions to the vehicle through the OnStar system. These audio directions automatically play through the vehicle's stereo as needed, triggered by OnStar's global positioning system capabilities and ultimately leading the Solstice to its destination. OnStar calculates the route and relays it to the car, rather than leaving the calculations to an onboard computer and displaying them as directions or a map.

Driving Impressions

The Pontiac Solstice has predictable handling, good reflexes, and an impressive amount of usable horsepower and torque. One of the notable positives about Solstice is its exceptionally solid, flex-free chassis; there's little of the windshield-frame flexing that's common on other convertibles. That's why the coupe development team decided a targa top was feasible; the extra rigidity of a solid roof was unnecessary.



The GXP's turbocharged four-cylinder engine produces 260 horsepower and 260 pound-feet of torque as low as 2500 rpm, yielding 0-to-60 mph acceleration in the low five-second range. A six-speed manual transmission might match the engine's power characteristics better than the five-speed, but its engagements are crisp, making it a pleasure to use.

If 260 horsepower doesn't seem sufficient, Pontiac offers a Stage II turbo kit that boosts engine output to 300. It's available through Pontiac dealers for \$610.

With direct injection and other technologies, the more powerful GXP delivers better fuel economy than the base engine. Using the tougher 2008 tests, the GXP rates an EPA-estimated 19/28 mpg City/Highway compared with 19/25 mpg for the base Solstice. In both models, premium fuel is not required but recommended for maximum performance.

If you haven't tried a turbocharged engine in recent years, you'll be amazed at how evenly this one generates power. There is virtually no turbo lag (pause between flooring the gas pedal and surge from the engine). The GXP rolls its power on in such a smooth, linear fashion that some might be waiting for an obvious peak or kick.

There isn't one, but the driver quickly comes to appreciate the usable amount of acceleration performance available over a wide range of engine speeds. Driving at a good clip is easier in the GXP, and acceleration is less dependant on gear selection. This makes driving in urban conditions easy, and passing performance is excellent.

The shifter feel, and the plentiful torque combined with the hunkered-down driving position, contribute to a general feeling that the GXP is more muscular, more brutish, than the MX-5 and other small roadsters.

The GXP isn't tail happy, as you might expect in a light, high-powered, rear-wheel-drive car. Pushed hard, the Solstice GXP understeers. And with the traction electronics engaged, it resists any tendency for the rear wheels to slide.

The GXP responds promptly to inputs on the steering wheel, though with less enthusiasm than an MX-5. Near the center, the steering feels wooden. And the steering response isn't linear, meaning that it takes some practice to be sure how much the car will turn with a given input on the wheel.

The spring rates and damping are softer than some comparably priced sports cars, such as the Nissan 370Z, allowing more body roll in hard cornering, not a plus for high performance driving. And the Goodyear Eagle F1 tires don't generate as much grip as some of the competition. On the other hand, ride quality is exceptionally pleasant by sports car standards.

There are other identifiable traits in the GXP package that don't match up to class benchmarks. The brakes stop the car right now, with good pedal feel at first. But the harder and longer they're used, the more the pedal softens and its travel increases. In other words, hard driving can bring on brake fade. Also, the clutch engages abruptly, to the point that it's easy to stall the car during casual starts at low revs.

That said, the Solstice GXP makes a fine high-speed cruiser. It tracks straight and true at interstate speeds-plus, and it's quieter than many sports cars until the speedometer needle rotates north of 75 mph. At that point, there's wind noise around the coupe's targa top and windshield pillars.

Summary

Coupe or convertible, the Pontiac Solstice looks great, puts wind in your hair and is fun to drive. The base model starts under \$25,000, though air conditioning, power windows, and the coupe's convertible top insert are extra-cost options. However, Pontiac has added ABS, stability control, and a limited slip differential as standard equipment on all models for 2009. GXP models add a turbocharged engine. There's a shortage of storage and cargo space here, particularly in the convertible. But the Solstice is a hoot to drive, and it turns heads fast and often. Those may be the two most important reasons to buy a small roadster. It does this at a reasonable price, with objective performance that matches that of cars costing considerably more.

