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2010 Chevrolet Camaro More horsepower and speed than muscle cars with 24 mpg.

Overview

The rear-wheel-drive Chevrolet Camaro looks new and it is, but it was built from existing hardware, starting with the chassis architecture of the impressive Pontiac G8. Its chief engineer, a true-blue car guy, had three instructions, to make it: 1. drop dead gorgeous; 2. high performance; and 3. affordable. The Camaro succeeds on all three counts and is a breath of fresh air for GM.

We found the handling, ride and brakes exceptional. The styling is stupendous. Inside, the the instrumentation slips back into GM's too-hard-too-break habit of trying too hard to be clever with gauges.

The Camaro LS and LT models use a potent and sweet-sounding Cadillac V6 that makes 304 horsepower, with a six-speed manual transmission standard and six-speed automatic (with semi-manual shifting) optional.

The SS has the killer V8, a 6.2-liter Corvette engine making 400 horsepower with the optional six-speed manual automatic, or 425 horsepower with the standard six-speed manual. It uses the same suspension design with firmer shocks, springs and anti-roll bars, producing the same result under more demanding circumstances: great handling, great ride.

Model Lineup

The Camaro LS (\$22,245) comes with the 3.6-liter V6. A six-speed manual transmission is standard and a six-speed automatic with manual shifting is optional. Not a bare-bones model, the LS is fully power equipped, including cruise control, telescopic steering wheel, six-speaker AM/FM/XM/CD/MP3 sound system, OnStar Safe & Sound plan for one year, limited slip differential, 18-inch steel wheels. (Prices are Manufacturer's Suggested Retail Prices and do not include the \$750 destination charge.)

The Camaro LT (\$23,880) upgrades with leather upholstery with six-way power reclining driver's seat; fog lamps and integral front fascia; and 18-inch painted aluminum wheels; and OnStar Directions & Connections plan, offering turn-by-turn route instructions, both verbal and visual.

The Camaro SS (\$30,245) features the 6.2-liter V8 with a six-speed automatic or six-speed manual gearbox. The SS has special exterior trim, a beefier suspension, 20-inch painted aluminum wheels, and four-piston Brembo disc brakes.

Option packages LT2 (\$2,700) and SS2 (\$3,185) include heated mirrors and seats, nine-speaker, 245-watt audio system, Bluetooth and USB port, leather shift knob and steering wheel with audio controls, remote starting, and console mounted gauges including oil temp and pressure, volts and transmission fluid temp; the LT2 package also includes 19-inch painted aluminum wheels. A sunroof (\$900) is optional. Also available are 20-inch painted aluminum wheels and an RS appearance package.

Safety equipment on all Camaros includes electronic stability control with traction control, anti-lock brakes, frontal airbags, front side airbags, airbag curtains, and tire pressure monitor.

Walkaround

When you look down on the new Camaro from a balcony, you see the lines of the 1963 fastback split-window Corvette. This is as planned by its young designer, Sang Yup Lee, who came to the U.S. from Korea as a boy and grew up in the California car culture. There are subtle twin-cockpit humps on the hood that can be glimpsed at the top of the steeply raked 67-degree windshield, helping to produce a 0.37 Cd in the LS and LT, and 0.35 in the SS.

But the long hood with its v-shaped shark nose and black wide mesh grille (with simple headlights intended to be reminiscent of a '69 Camaro) is what catches your eye, makes you sigh, and triggers your longing. That too is by careful design. Starting with the architecture of the impressive Pontiac G8, the rear wheels were moved forward six inches, the fronts forward 3 inches, the windshield back 3 inches, and for a final touch lowering the front suspension. (Balance and handling? Check.)

All models use an aluminum hood with a 2.5-inch power dome intended to look like cowl induction but actually having no function other than appearance.

The SS has an additional wide and thin black simulated intake on the nose, the easiest way to tell whether it's a V8 or V6. Otherwise, the V6 can pretty much pass, a bonus for \$23k. Styling gills located just forward of the rear wheels add another nice touch. Even though the power dome, hood intake, cooling gills are not functional, they all work as styling enhancements, and don't come across as phony.

The new Camaro captures the look of the original '67, while not being seduced into retro clunkiness, virtually, and beautifully, there's no chrome. The 2010 Camaro is 5.7 inches longer and 3 inches wider than the '67 Camaro. The new one is 2.8 inches taller than the vintage model, that height coming largely from big tires. (All have the same outside diameter, whether with 18-, 19-, 20- or 21-inch wheels.)

The shapely strong hips stand out almost as much as the long hood, an edgy element the designer is most proud of, because they took so much work. He said it took 113 tries to get the one-piece sheet metal right, from the doors and pinched beltline rearward. It was worth it.

The rigid B-pillar is blacked-out, thus creating a clean outline for the side glass, blending into a handsome hardtop roofline. The short rear deck climbs upward and looks hot, showing off the car's great butt. The twin taillights look like blinking red sunglasses in each corner. The rear spoiler is a small lip that could be integrated more smoothly. Ten exterior colors are available, including a Corvette yellow that promises that the car will gather many thumbs-up, like our test model did.

Interior Features

The interior materials of the new Camaro are good, but the design doesn't rise to the level of the exterior. The instrumentation leaves something to be desired, with recessed speedo and tach stylized in square chrome housings, a nod to the classic Camaro interior. But that was 1967. However, back then they didn't have LED light pipe technology, an ambient light option that gives the cabin a warm glow.

The stitched leather wrap on the steering wheel is nice, although the three-spoke design doesn't make you say wow. The cloth bucket seats are comfortable, with decent bolstering, although we wonder if it's enough to keep an aggressive driver in his or her place during hard cornering. The front seat slides 8.5 inches and the steering wheel tilts and telescopes, so drivers of all sizes will fit; based on Camaro sales history, lots of women buyers are anticipated. The standard cloth upholstery is good, with excellent leather on available in black, gray, beige and two-tone Inferno Orange.

The climate control buttons on the center stack don't seem to be designed for ease of touch, but for looks. However we've touched worse. And those four gauges down on the center console forward of the shift

lever are an affectation; they're optional, but most Camaros will probably have them. The center console and armrest is nice, solid, and handsome in leather.

Visibility through the windshield is good despite the long hood and raked windshield, thanks to careful location of the driver's seat. Rear visibility over the driver's shoulder isn't very good, but then it's impossible to make it good with a roofline this sporty. Ferraris don't have good rearward vision, either.

The trunk is deep but the opening isn't large and it's almost flat, but it's worth it for the handsome rear deck. Good thing there's a pass-through to the trunk behind the rear seat, which isn't easy to crawl into, and feels a bit like a pit.

The rear seat legroom measures 29.9 inches, a distinction, as few cars today break below that 30-inch mark. In other words, you'll want to avoid sitting back there.

Driving Impressions

Like the Pontiac G8, the Camaro's chassis was developed in Australia, and the Ozzies again aced it. The structure is rigid, helping make the turn-in precise for a car this size; the grip is secure, and the damping is solid and supple, with both the V6 (FE2 suspension) and firmer V8 (FE3). The front suspension uses struts, and the rear is an independent multi-link that's rubber isolated. And we never encountered a harsh moment with the ride, in either car.

We spent half a day driving in the country east of San Diego, with the chief designer, Canadian Gene Stafanyshyn, riding shotgun and giving us the whole backstory. He's the guy you can thank for the true programming of the TAPshift manual automatic transmission. It does what you tell it to do, nothing more. We love that. Bully for GM, no corporate committee decisions, here. Stafanyshyn said he too hates manual automatic transmissions that shift on their own. One especially nice thing about this is that when you're in sixth gear on the freeway and accelerate, it won't kick down. It uses its sufficient 273 pound-feet of torque, as it should.

One small (but good) speeding problem with the LT is that the cabin is quiet, thanks partly to liquid sound deadener, so 80 mph feels like 70.

We chose the Camaro LT with its 3.6-liter V6 as our test model, because we think that's the shining surprise of the line. Sure, the throaty 6.2-liter, 426-horsepower SS will get front center stage, but the sweet-sounding, 7000-rpm V6 that gets 29 highway miles per gallon is the future. Its 304 horsepower is not only more than the 1967 Camaro SS (295 hp from a 350-cubic-inch V8), but more than last year's Mustang GT with a 4.6-liter dohc V8. The Camaro LT accelerates from 0-60 mph in 5.9 seconds, and will do the quarter mile in 14.4 seconds, which is hot in anyone's book. Stafanyshyn said the secret is the spark ignition in this one-year-old version of the Cadillac engine.

The LT will also stop from 60 mph in a superb 106 feet, as measured by Motor Trend magazine, or 128 feet according to GM. Surprisingly, the SS with its four-piston Brembo brakes doesn't do much better, being nearly 200 pounds heavier. Those big brakes will be more fade resistant, handy on a racetrack, but you'd be using the LT's brakes pretty hard to get them that hot.

Of course, you might be inclined to drive the LT that hard, especially with the six-speed manual transmission; this might be the most usable sporty combination. The gearbox is not exactly like butter, and Chevrolet says the throws are short but that's relative, and they are shorter than some. But overall it shifted nicely, including easily down into first gear for hairpin turns.

The SS is humongously fast, so if you're driving it hard, you're way into the danger zone with the law. It wins the 2010 muscle car battle with the Dodge Challenger SRT8 and Mustang GT, hands-down, say the

enthusiast mags. And let's not forget that price, an absolute steal at \$31k (almost matching the 1967 Camaro SS price of \$26,800 in today's dollars). But we were surprised and a bit disappointed by the civility of the exhaust note, as well as the 6000-rpm redline (with the automatic), so low it felt like the engine was being prevented from working. However, it wasn't; because the horsepower peaks at 5900 rpm, that redline was right. The good news is that the SS with the manual transmission redlines at 6600.

Summary

The new Camaro succeeds on all the main fronts: drop-dead gorgeous looks, potent and efficient engines borrowed from Cadillac and Corvette, great transmissions, superb handling and ride, and great prices. The only area where GM might have missed is the instrumentation, as it lacks the tidiness of the rest of the car.

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