

ROAD TRIP



Mercedes GL



Toyota Highlander Hybrid



Land Rover LR 3

Summer Fun Travel for Katy Families



By Don Armstrong



Mazda CX-9

Demand for a new vehicle continues to grow for Katy families, and with summer here, it's time to look toward the highway and travel-by-car vacations. In this edition of Katy Magazine, we take a look at a variety of crossovers and SUVs that are sure to get you thinking about taking that family road trip.

The Ultimate Crossover

It wasn't that long ago that mid-size was the only choice available when looking for a more fuel efficient, car-based family hauler. All that changed a couple of years ago when Mazda introduced to us the full-figured crossover – the CX-9.

Billed as the company's flagship, the CX-9 is undoubtedly one of the best all-around crossovers on the market today. Combining styling, performance and versatility, Mazda has a real winner that continues to sell, despite our down economy.

Headlamps are mounted high up on the front clip. The laid-back windshield, pronounced front wheel arches, and tapered side glass give the slick, aerodynamic body a feeling of motion even at a stop. The two-toned dash evokes a car-like appearance with a rather tall console that intersects the center stack. Seating for seven includes a third row that is not only easily accessible but allows enough room for actual people to sit there, not just the family dog.

Powering the CX-9 is 3.7-liter V-6 that produces 273-HP, enough to tow the pop-up camper with ease. Coupled to a smooth six-speed automatic transmission, the front-wheel drive model gets 16 mpg-city and 21-highway. The all-wheel drive version gets one mpg less. Mazda offers three trim levels of the CX-9: Sport, Touring and Grand Touring. Pricing starts at \$29,820.

Land-O-Plenty

For those Katy families that have the means to afford the best of both worlds, luxury and off-road capability, then this is your SUV.

Land Rover carved a name for itself on the world stage by venturing over rocks, mud and, streams in areas that would be considered by most as forbidden zones. Although most of us will never use a vehicle like this to its full capabilities, the bragging rights mean a lot in Texas and Katy, and nothing screams "can-do" more than Land Rover's LR 3.

When we think of Rovers, we think of the same boxy body style that has become synonymous with the brand, and the LR 3 doesn't disappoint. The company has kept up with the times by offering lighting and trim updates that keep the package relevant to other high-rolling, do-all terrestrials.

To help you understand the LR 3's full range of off-road prowess, one only has to look at the Terrain Response System, Land Rover's four-wheel drive controller. General, Grass/Gravel/Snow, Mud/Ruts, Sand and Rock Crawl are the settings you'll have to choose from and are pretty much self-explanatory.

Power to turn the full-time, four-wheel drive system comes from a 4.4-liter, 300-HP V-8 that's connected to a six-speed automatic transmission and a two-speed transfer gearbox. The LR 3's air spring system with automatic load leveling and three selectable suspension settings - access, standard, and off-road - help



Cadillac Escalade Hybrid



Ford Flex

complete the off-road menu. The LR 3 starts at \$45,975, but at least you won't have to buy a winch.

Double the Mileage

Through most of its past 100 years, Cadillac's motto, "Standard of the World," was what most other carmakers considered top-of-line luxury. Despite being somewhat tarnished by a few questionable design miscues and an onslaught of competitors, Cadillac remains a shining light in a stormy sea of American automotive uncertainty.

To advance the brand and remain on the cutting edge, Cadillac must continually offer the latest and greatest the industry has to offer. Enter the 2009 Escalade Hybrid, a full-size traditional SUV, but with a two-mode hybrid power plant that gets a combined

20-mpg. That's an impressive number considering other three-ton, gasoline-only SUV's get about 12-mpg.

The Escalade Hybrid marries a 6.0-liter V-8 engine to two, 60-watt electric motors inside the automatic transmission that, together, deliver 332-HP and 367-pound-feet of torque. That's enough to tow an impressive 5,800-pounds.

If you enjoy sitting in your opulent home library, then this Cadillac will make the transition to the highway a breeze. Buttery soft leather is everywhere, including the door-panel trim and console door. The options list is short - retractable running boards and engine block heater. The rest comes standard, including tri-zone climate control, removable third row seating, navigation,

satellite radio and 14-way power front seats, just to name a few. Built at the GM plant in the Dallas suburb of Arlington, our Texas brothers and sisters know the importance of fit and finish, and there are no compromises on the 2009 Cadillac Escalade Hybrid. It starts at \$70,735.

Road Worthy Alternatives

Toyota Highlander Hybrid

If it's strictly mileage in an SUV you're after, then the Highlander should be on your test drive agenda. With seating for five and 26-mpg, it may not be the biggest kid on the block, but the price hits the sweet spot. Begins at \$34,700.

Mercedes Benz GL

The GL combines seven-passenger seating with off-road capability that is almost on par with the Land Rover. The new M-B Bluetec diesel option gets a combined 19-mpg. Here's grand style German luxury that starts at \$58,200.

Ford Flex

This new way of thinking has kept Ford from asking for government bailout money. The Flex combines the convenience of a minivan and the versatility of an SUV. The funky, boxy style houses tons of convenience that begins at \$28,550. **KM**

DON ARMSTRONG'S knowledge and life-long love affair with motorsports has earned him the reputation of being one of the area's most respected automotive journalists. He's a member of the Texas Auto Writers Association.

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