



COMPETITIVE CHEVY

2013 CHEVY MALIBU 2.5 LTZ

MSRP: \$22,390 · AS TESTED: \$32,360

Complicated is simple; it's easy that's hard. I know what you're thinking: what's with the pearls of Zen wisdom from a guy who's as deep as a mud puddle? Actually, it's a tale of two dashboards.

About a month ago, I reviewed Cadillac's flagship. The XTS has, among other things, a luxurious interior, with a cutting edge center stack. Bleeding edge, more like it, as there's little here in the way of conventional switchgear. Knobs and buttons have largely been vanquished, unless they're virtual. Accessing the controls involves swipes and pokes — moves more common on a smart phone or tablet than they are on the typical dashboard. It works, and it's in tune with a younger audience that the automaker is courting. But, there's a learning curve to absorb the complexities, and a distraction factor until you do.

This week's drive is the new Chevy Malibu. There's more to the car than the dashboard, of course, and Malibu's not the only auto out there with a straight forward control panel. But, my first impression in hopping into the Malibu was that a clean control setup is always welcome, and Malibu's got one.

Now that we're inside, let's look around. Malibu is offered in LS, LT and LTZ trim levels as well as the Malibu Eco. A top level LTZ like my test car is, of course, very well appointed. In addition to the features on LS and LTs, the LTZ level adds heated, leather wrapped seats, and an 8-way power passenger seat (to complement the driver's seat). My loaded test car was spec'd with five additional options. The Electronics and Entertainment package (\$1,900) includes power moon roof, rear vision camera system and a 9-speaker, 250 watt Pioneer sound system. The Premium Package (\$1,000) adds HID headlights, keyless push-button start, and



memory settings for driver's seat and mirrors. The Advanced Safety Package (\$395) offers Forward Collision Alert and Lane Departure Warning. Crystal Red paint costs \$325 extra, and the two-tone black/brown

interior trim was \$150. The latter, by the way is really good-looking, without being gaudy. Ice blue ambient lighting and soft-touch dash covering on all trim levels give Malibu a noticeably upscale feel.

Front seats fit most any size passenger. With six-footers up front, like size passengers can fit snugly behind them. Just how snug the fit depends on how laid back the seat backs of the front passengers are. Inside storage spots are numerous and include one in a novel location, hidden behind the retractable navigation screen. Malibu's trunk mea-

sures 16.3 cubic feet — slightly bigger than Accord and Camry, by comparison. Split, folding rear seat-backs allow for longer items, though the trunk's smallish mouth won't swallow bulky things. Eco models have a smaller cargo capacity (13.2 cu. ft.), and only a very small pass-through to the back seat, because of the location of the eAssist battery. Newly available in '13 is Chevy's MyLink infotainment system. It integrates online services like Pandora and Stitcher, using voice commands and touch screen controls from Bluetooth enabled phones.

Malibu's roster of engine choices numbers three. The Eco model connects a 2.4-liter four-cylinder gas engine with a battery-powered electric motor. The combined output is 182 horsepower, and EPA's estimated fuel economy is 25 city/37 highway.



A turbocharged, 2.0 liter four is the performance option, making 259 h.p. and 260 lb.

ft. of torque. Mileage estimates are 21 city, 30 highway. Finally, the 2.5-liter four (as fitted in my test car) is rated at 197 horsepower and 191 lb. ft. of torque. EPA's MPG estimates of 22 city/34 highway seem right on; my week of mixed city/country driving split the difference at 28.

All engines are linked to a six-speed automatic transmission. I'm sure that the turbo's 259 h.p. is fun, but the 2.5 feels nearly ideal in the 3,500 lb. Malibu LTZ. It's smooth (particularly by four cylinder standards), quick enough to feel responsive, and while you'll hear it at wide open throttle, it cruises quietly at highway speeds.

Malibu's four-wheel independent suspension is biased towards the ride side of the ride/handling continuum, but not excessively so. The ride feels cushioned, not flabby, and the Chevy corners confidently, feels stable. Interior noise levels are notably low. Visibility is generally good except that the shallow backlight limits the rear view somewhat.

The midsize segment is the industry's largest, accounting for 2,000,000 vehicle sales every year.

The names of the models in this segment — Camry, Sonata, Accord, etc. read like a who's-who of popular, quality car choices. To contend successfully in this class, the new Malibu had to raise its game, which it has. The added refinement in the 2013 version — particularly on the inside — makes Chevy more competitive in segment now than at any time in recent memory.

A regular contributor to the Times Union for the past 20 years, Dan Lyons is the award-winning author of six books, and photographer of 135 calendars. Read Dan's recent reviews on line anytime at www.timesunion.com/cars.