



UPSCALE, DOWNSIZED

2013 BUICK ENCORE

MSRP: \$24,200 · AS TESTED: \$31,530

The average age of a Buick buyer has decreased by seven years in the past five. That stat is unique among its competitive set. The company looks to capitalize on this trend with its latest offering — Encore — a luxury crossover.

The vehicle type isn't new; Buick's Enclave crossover is the company's bestselling model. But, Enclave is a three row, seven-passenger midsize. Encore is a compact that seats five. Fielding a premium, small crossover is a first for Buick, and positions the company as one of the pioneers in this new market niche.

Arriving in showrooms on February 1st, Encore will be offered in four trim levels — Standard, Convenience, Leather and Premium.

Prices start at \$24,950 (including delivery), and a fully loaded Encore will sticker for \$33,700. One powertrain combination is offered: a turbocharged, 1.4-liter four-cylinder engine, linked to a six-speed automatic transmission. The Ecotec engine delivers 138 horsepower (@4,900 rpm) and 148 lb. ft. of torque (@ 1,850 rpm). Estimated fuel economy is 25 city/33 highway (FWD); 23/30 (AWD). It's a choice of one, but it's a good choice.

The turbo four is responsively quick, with power to pass, and produces very competitive mileage numbers. The drivetrain feels 'right-sized' in the 3,190 lb. (FWD) — 3,309 lb. (AWD) Encore.

Encore's footprint works well in urban or suburban environs. It's small enough to fit in parking spots, and large enough to avoid 18 wheeler anxiety on the highway. The suspension (MacPherson strut front/Multi-link rear) is tuned with comfort in mind, but Encore feels light on its feet. Front Wheel Drive is standard, but an on-demand, All Wheel Drive system can be added for an additional \$1,500. Buick expects the mix of FWD/AWD to be about 75 percent/25 percent, nationwide. However,



here in the northeast, AWD sales will likely run closer to 50 percent. Standard safety features include ten standard airbags, and GM's StabiliTrak electronic stability enhancement system.

Encore benefits from both active and passive noise reduction methods. The latter — which Buick labels Quiet Tuning — include a collection of acoustic

treatments, aimed at squelching unwanted sound and promoting a low noise environment in the cabin. Encore is also the first Buick to benefit from Bose Active Noise Cancellation technology. The system finds powertrain noise, and produces an acoustically opposite signal, to cancel out the unwanted sound. In practice, you'll hear the engine when you dig your spurs in, but it calms down nicely at speed. Overall, Encore is a quiet ride.

The interior is a handsome space; comfortable and — especially on higher trim levels — well appointed. Visibility is generally good, though the driver contends with a $\frac{3}{4}$ rear blind spot, courtesy of the thick, d-pillar. In addition to the attributes found in other trim levels, Premium models like

the ones I tested also add a six channel, seven speaker Bose premium sound system, front and rear park assist, rain sensing wipers and lane departure warning. Most controls are found in the center stack, which is densely (but logically) populated with buttons and knobs. The dash includes both hard and soft touch surfaces, along with blue, ambient lighting. Standard is Buick's Intellilink infotainment system. In addition to radio, CD and SiriusXM satellite radio, the system allows audio streaming from Sticher SmartRadio or Pandora Internet radio. The driver can access the system via voice commands, and connects his/her smartphone via Bluetooth or USB.

As even I might surmise from the name, the Leather trim level has leather trimmed seats, as do Premium models. Standard and Convenience feature cloth. Regardless of what they're wrapped in, the front seats have enough travel to suit the typical, NBA player (avg. height: 6'7"). I see those raised



eyebrows. Skeptics, please note that my co-pilot at the Encore launch was 6'6", and he actually had to move the seat up slightly from its furthest rearward reaches to drive comfortably. With that much push-back, of course, there's nothing left for rear seat leg room. However, I'm 6'1", and I was able to find a seat position where I could be comfortable in front and would be in back if, uh, I was sitting behind myself.

Storage space measures 18.8 cubic feet in the cargo bay. Visualize that as six, big grocery bags. Extra space can be had by folding, either/both of the 60/40 split rear seat backs. This raises the stowage ante to 48.4 cu. ft. While the seatbacks fold to a fairly flat load floor, you'll first

have to remove the rear head rests. The front passenger seat folds (mostly) flush as well, to accommodate really long items.

Front cabin storage spots are plentiful, if mainly small, and include trays in the center console, upper and lower glove boxes, door pockets, seatback pockets, eight beverage holders, and a hidden, phone-sized spot to the left of the steering wheel.

While most extras are bundled into trim packages, freestanding options can be added to any level. They include an upgraded sound system with GPS navigation, a 7-inch touch screen display and various audio inputs (\$795), a power tilt/slide moon roof (\$800), and chrome 18-inch rims (\$995).

A compact, premium crossover like Encore is a logical choice to introduce new people to the Buick brand. How large this new market sector is remains to be seen. Buick believes that the target market is a bi-modal blend of young professionals and downsizing empty-nesters. What they'll find here they should like. Encore molds functionality into a smaller footprint, and wraps the nicely appointed package in contemporary, crossover styling.