

Avalon's new shape

Despite a surge in the utility-vehicle category, there remains plenty of interest (and demand) for traditional mid- and full-size family sedans. The most recent example is the **2019 Toyota Avalon**. Despite the car's massive grille, the auto-maker has created the sleekest Avalon yet. Overall length is up by close to an inch, while the distance between the front and rear wheels increases by two inches. Also striking is a luxurious interior with appointments and trim that rival most Lexus models (Lexus is Toyota's luxury brand). Most striking is the oversize touch-screen that appears Tesla-inspired, but with more style. The Avalon shares the same basic platform as the new-for-2018 Camry and will also offer that model's four-cylinder engine and optional V-6 powerplants, plus the same optional hybrid system.



2019 Toyota Avalon

The **Jeep Renegade** may be getting a facelift next year, part of FCA's overall sprucing up of its valuable Jeep brand.



No Jeep model left behind

With **Ram** truck and **Jeep** brands selling like offroad-ready hotcakes, Fiat Chrysler Automobiles seems ready to go all out to update and revamp both lineups (unlike the seemingly forgotten Dodge and Chrysler four-door family cars). In particular, the **Jeep Cherokee** and **Wrangler** are each refreshed for 2019: The 2018 **Grand Cherokee** can now be had with a 707-horsepower V-8 (borrowed from the Dodge Challenger and Charger Hellcat models) and a new second-generation **Compass** arrived last year. Now, sources are confirming that the stubby little **Renegade** will be given a mild front and rear facelift for 2019, along with a revised dashboard and control panel. A new four-cylinder turbo engine option — replacing the existing non-turbo four-cylinder — is also a distinct possibility.



A fleet of self-driving Chevy Cruzes is being tested out in San Francisco... and testing the patience of San Francisco's human residents.

Rise of the robots: Humans fight back

Steven King once wrote a short story where self-driving cars attacked people, but leave it to San Francisco to reverse that scenario.

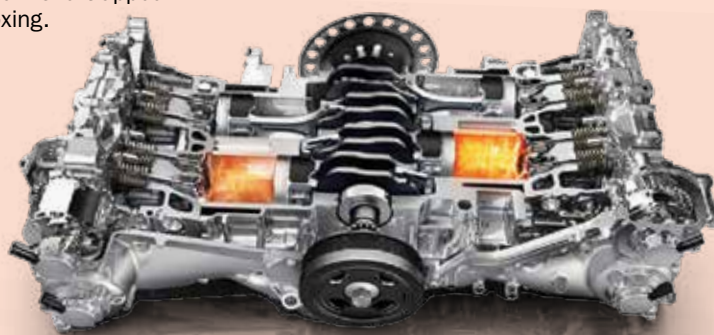
In the City by the Bay, residents have been observed assaulting the autonomous vehicles being tested out on the streets by Cruise, General Motors' autonomous division. In one incident on Jan. 10, a pedestrian in the Mission District actually crossed the street toward a Chevy Cruze Autonomous Vehicle and, according to a report, "struck the left side of the Cruise AV's rear bumper and hatch with his entire body," damaging the rear tail light. On Jan. 28, a taxi driver got out of his cab, approached another Cruze, and "slapped the front passenger window, causing a scratch." Police were not called in either incident.

Of six reported collisions involving self-driving vehicles in California so far this year, two have involved humans colliding on purpose with the robot cars.

The plucky nonconformists on the left coast have a history of defying technology they see as harmful to humans... and human jobs. Last December, the local animal shelter removed its 400-lb. Knightscope roaming security robot after backlash from residents. Another such robot was attacked by a drunken man in nearby Mountain View, Calif., the town that's home to Google.

In fact, some San Franciscan elected officials are now crusading for a law that would tax robots that take jobs from humans.

The Subaru four-cylinder engine is called a "boxer" because the two pistons on each side of the crankshaft appear to be boxing.



Subaru out of the "boxer" business?

That's a distinct possibility, according to sources. All Subaru's current offerings come with horizontally opposed — boxer — engines (one bank of two pistons fires 180 degrees to the second bank of two pistons, like boxing gloves sparring, with the crankshaft in the middle).

Word has it that the next-generation **Subaru WRX** and **WRX STI** (based on the Visiv Performance concept) that's due to launch for the 2020 model year might go a different route. The problem, say some Subie sources, is that the boxer engine doesn't lend itself to ever-tightening CO₂-emissions regulations that could directly impact the high-output WRX and STI.

It could be some time, however, before the less-potent four- and six-cylinder engine lineup is similarly changed to a new (and likely more conventional inline and V designs).

TEST DRIVE

2018 AMG GLC43 Coupe

Continued from page 1

the beefed up transmission clicks though the gears swiftly in automatic or manual mode. Top speed is estimated at an electronically limited 130 mph. (I enjoy having a license. I'll take their word for it.) Mercedes' 4Matic all-wheel-drive system is an on-demand system that integrates with the onboard traction control and stability programs, to maximize traction.

My recent test week in the GLC43 was punctuated by periods of intermittent light snow. My previous test in a GLC300 included a storm dump of almost two feet of the slushy stuff. AMG cars have a sport suspension and that is grippier than the standard "off road" suspension underpinning the GLC300.

The GLC43's Performance 4MATIC has a 31 percent front/69 percent rear bias. On all-season tread, both coupes handled confidently over wintry roads. And when the pavement was dry, handling was admirable (by crossover standards) in the GLC300, and more so in the GLC43. Absent a track and warmer weather, it's hard to offer any in depth appraisal beyond this.

Weather notwithstanding, these

models sit about a foot taller than their sportier mates in the showroom, and they feel it during hard cornering. Ride quality was firm but comfortably so in the GLC300. That was also true of the GLC43 — on smooth roads. However, potholes or rough pavement presented impact harshness, likely due to the sport suspension (stiffened for enhanced grip) and the even taller tire/wheel combo (21-inch in AMG, vs. 18s or 20s in 300).

The Dynamic Select mode offers the driver five settings (Eco, Comfort, Sport, Sport+ and Individual) — each with corresponding parameters for throttle response, shift mapping and steering effort. Sport+ includes an unmuzzling of the exhaust system which (particularly on sport exhaust equipped models) seasons the performance with a mildly growly soundtrack.

The profile view of GLC models shows a steeply sloping roofline, finishing in a bobtail back end (which wears a low-key spoiler on GLC43). The hatch roof style suggests a reduction in the size of the cargo hold. While that's true — there's less stowage space here than you'd find in crossovers with conventionally cut rooflines — cargo capacity ranges from 20.5-



The cabin of the 2018 AMG LC43 comes nicely appointed, but Mercedes-Benz's COMAND infotainment system, like many luxury vehicles, has a steep learning curve.

56.5 cubic-feet, depending on how the rear seats are configured. That's larger than the rival BMW model (17.7-49.4 cu. ft.), and enough for many people's needs. Rear seatbacks fold to a level load floor; liftover height in back is rather high. The curving roofline didn't present any head room issues in back for me. Rear legroom in back measures 37.3 inches, which should be adequate for most adults, and is fully 2½ inches more room than found in the BMW.

The front cabin is nicely appointed. Atop the center stack is a touchscreen (either 7-inch or 8.4-inch) which serves as your display for the COMAND infotainment system. It's accessed by a console mounted rheostat and surrounding buttons. The larger version of the high resolution screen is easy to see, but COMAND's operating design has a steep learning curve, and the touch pad controller doesn't accept input from a winter gloved hand. Like many luxury cars, system adjustments often take more time than they would with more conventionally designed switchgear.

The combination of the curvy coupe roofline and a near flat backlight create rear visibility issues for the driver. Some are unavoidable. The defroster isn't enough to keep snow and slush from congregating on the back window in a storm, and no rear wiper is offered.

However, the option sheet does offer many tech features, of which I recommend blind spot assist (part of the \$2,250 Driver Assistance Package) and the bird's-eye Surround View system (included in the \$1,290 Advanced Parking Assist Package) automated parking assist system.

The expanding family of crossover coupes is an interesting addition to the Mercedes-Benz lineup. In addition to matching up with prime competitor BMW (and then getting the ante), the AMG-tuned versions add a fun factor to a segment (crossovers) not known for that capacity.

A regular contributor to the Times Union for more than 25 years, Dan Lyons is the award-winning author of six books, and photographer of 180 calendars.

