

## **2013 Buick Encore**

### **New crossover utility vehicle delivers luxury in a small package.**

#### **Overview**

The 2013 Buick Encore is a new entry-luxury crossover utility vehicle. At first exposure, the Encore is a bit confusing. Viewed from the outside, it is a very compact package that may cause buyers to be skeptical of the small luxury crossover title. Can anything this small really be luxury? More to the point, can this small luxury vehicle achieve the established Buick image, which company spokesmen describe as inviting, approachable, warm?

But climbing into the Encore and pulling the door shut, instantaneously, the Encore's luxury makes itself felt in its elegant design, fine instruments and high-quality switch-gear. If the Encore you climb into has leather upholstery, its beauty and richness will leave you in no doubt that this is a luxury crossover. The layout and proportioning of everything in the cockpit feels so spacious and commodious that it's hard to remember the smallness that struck you looking at the vehicle from outside.

This is very definitely a little/big vehicle, a world car-sized crossover that will fit into countless environments and driving conditions. Its outside package is so compact that whenever we came up upon another Encore during our test driving, we were stunned at how diminutive it looked moving through traffic. The Encore we were driving, identical to the one out the window, seemed sumptuous inside, a satisfying vehicle that suited all our needs. With smoke-and-mirrors designing like that, the Buick stylists have shown themselves wizards of clever packaging.

Buick's marketing plan for the Encore was to build a nimble, agile SUV that would be easy to park, maneuver, and have an excellent turning circle (a mere 36.7 feet). It should have available all-wheel drive, the plan said, extremely flexible stowage adaptability, carry five passengers, and provide advanced technology in combination with real luxury. The good news is, that's the vehicle we tested on the urban and rural roads of Georgia.

But the good news continues: This little/big package showed very efficient over-the-road performance. Being physically small and light, at 3190 pounds for the front-wheel-drive model, the Buick Encore requires only an absolutely tiny 1.4-liter four-cylinder turbocharged engine, coupled to a 6-speed Hydramatic automatic transmission, to deliver adequate local and Interstate performance. Even with the heavier 3309-lb all-wheel drive model, the Encore delivers an EPA-estimated 23/30 mpg City/Highway. The front-wheel drive Encore gets 25/33 mpg City/Highway mpg, the highest fuel economy of any front-wheel-drive crossover.

Encore's performance equation seems to be extremely well balanced. It delivers thrift and luxury in generous degrees, available for a very attractive price. Many starter families will be enticed by this vehicle. But we suspect just as many empty-nesters, no longer needing their huge, now-empty Enclaves, will flock to this mini-Enclave, happy to have a familiar taste of their Enclave's comfort and elegance.

## Model Lineup

The Buick Encore is offered in one model and four levels of trim. All feature a 138-hp Ecotec 1.4-liter turbo four-cylinder, 6-speed automatic transmission.

Encore (\$24,950) comes standard with fabric upholstery, single-zone manual air conditioning, seven-inch full-color CD/Sirius XM//USB voice recognition and Bluetooth audio, quiet tuning with Bose Noise Cancellation technology, rearview camera, 6-way power driver's seat with lumbar, leather steering wheel, heated mirrors, cruise control, ice-blue interior ambient lighting, heated outside mirrors, driver's express up/down window, passenger express down window, rear cargo cover, roof-mounted luggage rails, dual gloveboxes, theft-deterrent system, variable-effort power steering, 18-inch cast aluminum wheels, compact spare tire.

Convenience Package (\$25,760) adds electrochromic inside rearview mirror, remote start, dual automatic climate control, 120V outlet and fog lamps.

Leather Package (\$27,460) adds leather upholstery, heated steering wheel, power passenger seat, heated seats, driver memory settings for seats, outside mirrors, and climate control.

Premium Package (\$28,940) adds rain-sensing wipers, premium Bose audio, front and rear park assist, forward-collision alert, lane-departure warning, cargo net and cargo mat.

Options include satellite navigation (\$795), 18-inch chrome wheels (\$995), sunroof (\$995), DVD rear-seat entertainment system, Bose premium audio (\$595).

Safety features include the mandated dual front airbags plus side-curtain airbags for head protection, side-impact airbags for torso protection, rearview camera, OnStar. Active safety features include four-wheel disc brakes, ABS, EBD, electronic stability control. Optional safety features include all-wheel drive (\$1,500); forward-collision alert, lane-departure warning, and front and rear park assist (with Premium Package).

## Walkaround

Setting a precedent as the first-ever small luxury crossover, the Buick Encore obviously has some obstacles to overcome. Just how small is it really? Smaller than the Toyota Matrix. It's 165 inches long, with a wheelbase of 100.6 inches, and a track of 60.6 inches. And because the Encore is tall enough to make its occupants feel welcome, in pictures, its proportions make it look a little more like a Smart car than its designers might have wished.

But in person, the Encore's proportions are less startling. Its nose features the signature Buick waterfall grille, and its frontal view is muscular and attractive. The side view is unavoidably truncated and world car-like, but that will be a plus to many, while the wide, hungry tailgate in the rear is ready to take in a surprising amount of cargo, 48.4 cubic feet with the rear seat folded down.

As a bona fide crossover, the Encore's duties will be almost entirely on pavement, and its flowing curvaceousness will be well suited to those tasks. As a world car, it boasts an extremely clean 0.37 coefficient of drag, which is a snooty way of saying, it is aerodynamically very clean, helping it get optimum mileage at highway speeds. In fact, the closer you look at the Encore, the more keenly its qualities suit the tastes and tendencies of buyers who want to reduce their carbon footprint to a tippy-toe yet not pay the high price premium of a buying a hybrid vehicle to do so. Achieving full five-passenger service and getting 30 mpg or so on the highway in a vehicle that pampers its occupants every mile of the way: for many, that's worth considering.

## Interior Features

Climbing into the Buick Encore is where the real sleight of hand begins. The textures and materials and the elegant layout of the cabin immediately convince you that you're in a luxurious, expensive, inevitably much bigger crossover. One of the most pleasing aspects of the interior is the classically American dashboard. Buick has no interest in reinventing the wheel, as do so many offshore luxury-car builders. But at the same time, there is nothing dull or so-what about this Buick instrumentation. The displays are clean, bright, without affectation, and tell you what you want to know. If there was any complaint to be made, it's that the numbers on the speedometer and tachometer were small and hard to read.

The center stack's secondary controls, too, are exemplary. The standard rearview camera (a welcome provision in this family vehicle) reads well, and the screen provides easily manipulated controls for the Encore's very flexible audio system. The screen on our test vehicle also served as home port for Buick's full-color navigation system. This nav system continues to be winsomely simple to use, with excellent graphics.

But there were other lesser keynotes throughout the Encore that helped enhance its luxuriousness. All the switchgear had a sturdy firmness to it that confirmed its designers had taken their mission seriously. Even the soft-touch surfaces along the top of the dashboard and around the doors had an elegant compliance.

Our test car had leather seating, which was handsome and comfortable. The driver's seat's excellent lateral support had a fine snugness that we preferred over the larger, less-fitted seats in the larger Buick Enclave. The saddle leather was of fine quality, providing first-class seating for five adults. Elegant woodgrain elements highlighted the dash and doors, and as in the Enclave, at night, the Encore's ice-blue tinted interior ambient lighting made us feel like we'd arrived in a very special place indeed. A small moonroof was there to confirm the impression.

## Driving Impressions

The business end of this little/big Buick Encore is, of course, what it's like to drive. With its tiny turbo four-cylinder, can it really be luxurious, or is it just a buzzy little four-cylinder people-box with nice seats?

We pointed the Encore onto an Interstate and floored it. Acceleration is roughly in the 9-second zero-to-60 range, adequate most of the time. But the most interesting quality of this little 1.4-liter turbo engine is, while it surely thrashes furiously to accelerate, it doesn't make the upsetting, graceless groan most little four-cylinders make at full throttle. Engine noise is audible, but it's civilized and not unsettling, a revelation for such an engine.

Helping the engine enjoy life, the 6-speed automatic Hydramatic transmission is very smooth-shifting, giving the Encore's acceleration an altogether civilized, dare we say, luxurious tone. Further along the Interstate, when we wanted to accelerate and floored the throttle, the Hydramatic took a long time kicking-down two gears. However, when the gearshift button on the top of the shift lever was used, downshifting took place forthrightly. All doubts aside, the Encore drivetrain is far better than any description of it might suggest. It's small, efficient, straightforward, and given those constraints, entirely competent.

But we can't be sure how much of this Buick competence still isn't smoke and mirrors. That's because the Encore employs some extremely advanced measures to assure its creatures' comfort. This is the first Buick to employ Bose's active noise-cancellation technology. This system uses a microphone to take in the ambient sounds being generated in the Encore interior, analyzes those sounds to determine what opposite sounds will cancel them out, then broadcasts the latter. It sounds improbable, if not impossible, but driving the Encore at highway speeds, it is uncannily hushed and pleasant. Some of this is surely due to good aerodynamics and the lack of wind noise around the windshield and outside mirrors. But the serene level of mechanical sounds in the Encore at speed is almost certainly thanks to the Bose system. Who can guess what this will mean for peace and quiet in cars of the future? For the present, every Encore has noise cancellation, standard. It's a species of luxury few of us have expected.

Steering effort in the Buick Encore is firm, live, absolutely right. And as we moved into the rural parts of our route, the vehicle's cornering and lateral dynamics proved similarly firm and free of distracting roll. We found the brakes powerful and well controlled, allowing good modulation.

### **Summary**

All-new, the Buick Encore is fully prepared to be the first in a new segment of small luxury crossovers. It has a lavish inventory of virtues, from a well-specified mechanical foundation to sumptuous creature conveniences to distinguished over-the-road comfort and agile dynamics. Encore sets a high standard for competitors to match, with excellent efficiency, it's a one-of-a-kind in the small SUV market.

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