

Big Shot

MARK ANDREWS

Looking to buy a new car? Talk test drives the Buick GL8 to see how it measures up against the current competition.

Since 2007, sales for Buick in China have far exceeded those in the US market, with the Middle Kingdom today accounting for three out of every four Buicks sold worldwide. Were it not for its success here, Buick would likely have gone the same way as Saturn and Pontiac in the post-financial crisis General Motors' brand cull. Still, we aren't too surprised with Buick's success here, in the years before the Japanese occupation, they made up one in every five cars nationwide.

The original GL8 minivan, based on a Pontiac, carved a niche for itself as a company car for ferrying around executives and is still on sale today as a "business edition" vehicle. Buick has seriously beefed up the new GL8, with a huge exterior measuring over 5.25 meters in length and



eschews the utilitarian feel of the original for a curvier, fashionable look.

Thanks to the van's 1.8-meter height, the driver has a good, commanding view of the road. Dominating the dashboard are the drive selector and controls for the climate and entertainment system. Inset into the wood-finished dash, between chrome framed air vents, is a seven-inch LCD screen display that operates as DVD player, sat-nav, and reversing camera with aiming grid – the latter is essential in such a long vehicle. In addition, steering mounted controls are used for the Bluetooth connection, allowing for hands-free mobile phone use.

Considering its size, the steering is

remarkably light and this is matched with composed road holding at around town speeds. What soon becomes apparent is just how quiet the cabin is, which really is the point of this vehicle; after all, with a carrier vehicle of this size, it is often not so much about the driver's experience, but the passengers'.

Altogether, there are three rows of seats and the first two rear passengers are treated to electrically adjustable chairs, which, like the front seats, can be heated or cooled. However, the rear bench, while supposedly accommodating three adults, would be a tight squeeze for three and there is ultimately a trade off in space between the second and third row of seats.

Included in the GL8's features is a 10.2-

inch LCD screen, which drops down from the roof allowing rear passengers to be fully briefed on the way to meetings. There is also a 230V power supply to power-hungry laptops, meaning that passengers can work while they travel on long-distance journeys.

The GL8 additionally comes with GM's On Star service fully integrated and this is available in both English and Mandarin. Operated through buttons on the rear-view mirror, services available include a hands-free in-car telephone, navigation, automatic alerting of emergency services if a crash is detected, and stolen vehicle location.

While minivans in the US generally have a negative "hockey mom" image, in China, the GL8 is targeted as a business vehicle, however, that's not to say it wouldn't be equally at home as a family transporter.

Overall, as a luxury executive cruiser, the GL8 has little domestically made competition in China. Prices start at RMB 289,900 for the 2.4l and go all the way up to RMB 399,900 for the range topping 3.0l V6.

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