

MOTORING

Edited by William Wadsworth
william.wadsworth@scmp.com



The Buick LaCrosse Hybrid is a bold bid for top spot in the mainland’s emerging green car market, writes **Mark Andrews** in Shanghai

Batteries included

Hybrids are not popular in China. Toyota has produced the Prius at its joint venture with First Automobile Works since 2005, yet last year total sales were just 414 units. On the face of it, Buick’s decision to introduce a hybrid version of its LaCrosse seems unjustified by the market. So, why does the US marque’s owner, General Motors, think it will succeed where Toyota has failed?

On the mainland, Buick fits in as a premium brand between GM’s more mass-market Chevrolets and high-end Cadillacs. The LaCrosse, introduced in 2006, is a large, mid-range car. At just under five metres long, it’s much bigger than a BMW 5-Series or a Mercedes E-Class. And although it’s based on the same architecture as the American LaCrosse, the Chinese version was designed at Shanghai GM’s Pan Asia Technical Automotive Centre for

sale on the mainland and Taiwan. The exterior and interior are different, and it’s not even offered with the same engine choices. It’s a well-proportioned car. Front and rear overhangs are long and the body curves between the two in a pleasing manner. On the outside, the hybrid is nearly identical to the petrol-driven version, the only additions being a hybrid badge with a green “H” on the side and another on the rear to highlight the model’s GM Hybrid System, one that was first used on the Saturn Vue Green Line in 2006.

The car’s interior is decked out to please Chinese consumers and is more striking than its American namesake’s. There’s the ever-popular two-tone dash, with a dark grey top and the ubiquitous cream underneath, separated by a ribbon of fake wood. Dominating the centre is a grey LCD display with controls for the radio and CD/DVD player. At

the bottom are climate-control switches and a display showing information such as outside temperature. Attention to detail is pleasing, with touches such as a clock bearing the Buick logo and a central console accented in chrome.

The cream leather seats are supportive and comfortable, and the carpets are a similar shade. All the materials are good quality and the build is to a high standard, yet the overall feel is less luxurious. Rear passengers have plenty of legroom, although tall folks might suffer under the sloping roof, given the seats’ slight recline.

The car is equipped with electric windows, mirrors and sunroof, and a navigation system that also functions as a DVD/CD/MP3 player. It’s wired for MP3 players and Bluetooth mobile phones, with controls for much of the equipment on the leather-trimmed steering wheel, which is also home to a button for shifting between gears.

Overall, the hybrid isn’t radically different from the luxury version of the standard LaCrosse, but one special feature is eco-friendly air conditioning, which uses less energy than a standard air-con system.

For the most part the hybrid offers the same sort of drive as the standard 2.4-litre model. Mated to a six-speed automatic gearbox, the engine is responsive and has plenty of power, which proves useful when overtaking on Yuan Dong Da Dao out towards Pudong Airport. The steering is light but speed-adaptive

and feels tighter the faster I go. Roadholding is good even when cornering at speed on the tight curves of spaghetti junctions, and the softness of the ride helps cushion the bumps on poorly maintained roads such as the one to the Shanghai Links Golf Course.

The hybrid is a winning ride in traffic, too. Any car uses a lot of fuel when idling, so when the Buick is stationary and the needle on the rev counter falls to the point marked “auto stop”, its engine stops.

On the other side of the speedometer are two gauges: one for the fuel and one above it for the battery. When driving efficiently and when the brakes are applied, the nickel metal hydride battery is charged. On a hot summer’s day you can see the needle on the battery charge fall back as the air conditioning drains power. To further encourage fuel efficiency, there is a green “eco” light on the rev counter that illuminates under optimum driving conditions.

GM claims the hybrid uses 15 per cent less fuel than the regular 2.4-litre LaCrosse, with fuel consumption cut from 9.8 to 8.3 litres per 100km. But as I sit in city traffic with the air con blasting away, the fuel efficiency figure displayed under the speedometer is well over 10l/100km.

The LaCrosse is not a hybrid in the mould of the Toyota Prius. It has a bigger battery than the regular LaCrosse but, unlike the Prius, it doesn’t carry a huge battery pack under the floor. The electric motor helps drive the car from a standstill



while the engine bursts into life and at some points of acceleration, improving mid-range performance. The technology has more in common with BMW’s EfficientDynamics, which combines auto-start and stop with efficient battery charging and regenerative braking. Only for brief periods does the car operate on electric power.

GM hopes the LaCrosse will give it first-mover advantage in the mainland market. The Prius failed largely due to its price, analysts say, but the LaCrosse hybrid costs only 20,100 yuan (HK\$22,992) more than the standard LaCrosse, putting it in a similar price bracket to a Prius – yet it’s a much larger and more prestigious car. With rumours of a hefty increase in the cost of fuel as part of the “Olympic hangover” GM might be on to a winner.

AT A GLANCE: Buick LaCrosse Hybrid

What drives it? A 2,384cc Eco four-cylinder engine with a six-speed automatic gearbox and GM Hybrid System that delivers 168hp (125kW) at 6,400rpm to the front wheels.

How fast is it? It’s said to hit 100km/h in 10.9 seconds and peak at 180km/h.

How safe it is? It has only four airbags but is compliant with the mainland’s National Vehicle Safety Standard. The middle occupant in the rear gets a full seat belt.

How thirsty is it? Swigs 11.9 litres/100km in town and 8.3l/100km on the highway.

How clean is it? No CO2 emission figures are available, but the lower fuel consumption of the hybrid promises less flog than the standard LaCrosse.

Available: The LaCrosse sells on the mainland for 269,900 yuan (HK\$308,740).



The LaCrosse’s instruments keep the driver informed of battery charging from the car’s engine and brakes. Photos: Mark Andrews, GM Shanghai

Ford’s Edsel still top of the flops

Dave Kinney

America’s most famous automotive flop, the Edsel, has just turned 51. And while Blue Oval fans will cheer, Ford might not make a fuss. There was no homecoming at headquarters and no big cake shaped like the puckered-mouth grille at last year’s 50th anniversary celebrations. Perhaps the memory is still raw, or perhaps Ford is busy with its own problems. But the Edsel rolls on, causing a bigger stir now than when it was new. It remains a punch line, a symbol of 1950s excess and a cautionary tale of how the best-laid plans can collide with reality. Yet even in ignominy, the car has its fans and fanatics: Edsel is more desirable today than some contemporaries that were in greater demand when new.

Still, these are not valuable collectibles, but cultural curiosities, which is why the Edsel has an appeal that extends beyond the community of car collectors.

Running out of gas

The number of Edsel cars Ford produced in 1960 was

2,846

“Not unlike animal or sports art, people love it even though it’s mostly outside of the realms of critical acclaim or curatorial validation,” says Edith Yeomans, a fine arts appraiser in Toronto, Ontario.

The Edsel’s build-up was huge. Hints of the car’s wonders dribbled out for months before the introduction on September 4, 1957 – E-Day – as it was called. For many consumers, the car fell short of their expectations. In the end, even a giveaway of 1,000 ponies – intended to get children to bring parents to showrooms – was a failure.

Despite several features – a vertical grille, self-adjusting brakes, Teletouch transmission buttons on the steering wheel and a floating speedometer that glowed – the Edsel was rejected by the public. Among other things, it was derided for having a grille shaped like a toilet seat. *Time* magazine popularised the wisecrack that it looked like an Oldsmobile sucking a lemon.

Ford initially organised Edsel as a stand-alone division, and 1,300 independent dealers were established throughout the country. But in January 1958, sensing a

disaster in the making, Ford moved to integrate Edsel with Lincoln and Mercury, creating a division known as M-E-L.

The Edsel came in four series: the Pacer and Ranger were based on the standard Ford body, while the fancier Citation and Corsair were built on the bigger Mercury. For the introductory year of 1958 there were 18 models. For 1959, the Edsel got a single body shared with the 59 Ford, and by 1960 there was little attempt to hide the underlying Ford.

The spectacular sales debacle has been attributed to many reasons. Certainly the quality of early Edsels was poor. The cars were built alongside Fords and Mercurys by workers unaccustomed to the different parts and processes.

Compounding the problem, some parts ran out and incomplete cars went to dealerships with repair instructions, forcing dealers to cannibalise new cars.

The car came out as a recession was starting, and a month after E-Day the Soviets launched the first Sputnik. The Edsel, trumpeted as a new idea, suddenly seemed a vestige of the past. In *Sputnik: The Shock of the Century* (Walker Publishing, 2001), Paul Dickson wrote: “Sputnik affected national attitudes towards conspicuous consumption, symbolically killing off the market for the Edsel automobile and the decadent automotive tailfin. It was argued that the engineering talents of the nation were being wasted on frivolities.”

With polarising looks and haphazard quality, the Edsel languished in the marketplace. Output plunged from 63,110 in 1958 to just 2,846 for the brief 1960 model year, according to *The Standard Catalogue of American Cars*.

Edsels sell infrequently at auction, says Jim Cox, owner of Branson Collector Car Auction in Branson, Missouri. Cox has had five Edsels at his auctions in the past five years. “I get a lot of owners with unreasonable expectations about what their car is worth,” he says.

In the past two years he has sold a 59 Corsair convertible for US\$23,000 and a 60 Ranger sedan for US\$8,650. One of the rarest Edsels, a 60 Ranger convertible, got a high bid of US\$110,000 but did not sell at the recent Kruse Fall Auction in Auburn, Indiana.

Phil Skinner, collector-car-market editor for *Kelley Blue Book* and past president of the Edsel Owners Club, takes a different view. “The Edsel is one of the most economical collector cars you can get into,” he says. But he is a realist as well. Edsel is an acronym, he says, for “every day someone else laughs”.

The New York Times

Did your dad drive an Edsel? And what was the worst car you ever drove? Tell us on cars@scmp.com



The 1959 Edsel Ranger – a monument to Ford’s legendary blunder. Photo: AP

Footdown

Edited by William Wadsworth
cars@scmp.com

Easy rider into the hills

Rev up on one of the Classic Bike Club’s monthly rides and you might discover the beauty of Hong Kong. The club last Sunday cruised up to “the far northwest” of Hong Kong via the firing range at Lau Fau Shan and then home over Route Twisk.

Reader David Brian kindly sent us a picture of the terrific views riders can enjoy over Deep Bay (below). His 1999 BMW R1100S struggled on the “little trek”, he says. “It’s not the best bike for climbing hills, but it is a Beemer.”

Quite so, and such a pleasure to ride on a sunny day.

Rev-fest gaining momentum

The Third Hong Kong Motorcycle Show on November 2 could be “even bigger than last year”, says the

event’s organiser Ian Foster. Up to 30 respondents have expressed an interest in attending the rev-fest on the pedestrianised precinct of Chater Road.

“BMW, Harley-Davidson, Honda, KTM and Maguiars all confirm their participation, as well as a load of clubs,” organisers say.

We also hear that the police are considering *Footdown*’s recommendations for the placement of information panels answering frequently asked questions next to their bike displays.

We also recommend the Hong Kong Tourism Board add the show to its Discover Hong Kong calendar on the net, given that the show is free to enter and attended by virtually all members of the local biking community.



Wirewheels

Thomas Content

For women car buyers, kicking the tyres isn’t what it used to be. A new study conducted by US-based Johnson Controls has found that what women want in a vehicle is as varied as the demands they face balancing their careers and family roles.

The study says American women are looking for flexibility in the design of the cars, particularly when it comes to having enough storage – an issue of growing importance as buyers increasingly look to smaller vehicles thanks to high petrol prices.

The study was conducted last autumn, based on interviews and focus groups in Chicago and Boston, as well as in Germany and the Czech Republic.

“For women, the vehicle plays so many different roles,” says Renae Pippel, North America consumer research manager at Johnson Controls. “It might be the breakfast table when they’re dropping the kids off, and then it might be the commuter vehicle on the way to work, and then it’s a girls’ gossip area because you’re taking your friends out to lunch, and then it goes back to picking the kids up and turns into a homework



place or family room. The needs are constantly changing.”

Many women used to sacrifice having stylish wheels when they had children, Pippel says. But with increasing buying power, women today want their ride to be more than a “mum-taxi”, she says.

Some preferences in a vehicle remain universal. “Everybody wants a dependable, reliable vehicle to begin with, at the highest quality they can afford,” says Gene Cameron, vice-president of marketing at market research firm J.D. Power and Associates.

An analysis of sales that the company carried out last year found women tend to prefer more economical cars and smaller SUVs, such as the Volkswagen Beetle, Toyota Prius and Honda CRV, and that men tend to buy far more pickup trucks and big SUVs.

Women want the latest technology, they want a vehicle that’s not too environmentally irresponsible, and they miss the excitement of driving fun, “non-mum” vehicles, the survey says.

Pippel says women are also looking for storage space, and adds that with increasing concern that petrol prices will remain high, the industry needs to pay attention to making the interiors of smaller vehicles more versatile.

“It’s how do you do more with less space,” she says.

Meanwhile, British women’s car-buying website Evencars.com recently named the Audi A3 Cabriolet its convertible and car of the year. Women influence more than 80 per cent of car purchases in Britain and Evencars’ awards focus on what women really look for in a car.

“The Audi A3 won over all the judges with its impressive combination of talents,” says Evencars editor Alex Jenner-Fust. “It looks great – it’s neither too feminine nor flashy, but classy and well styled. It’s easy enough to get a child seat in the back and the soft-top roof

leaves more boot space than a folding hard top. Drivers will be rewarded with almost 40 miles per gallon [71 litres per 100km], too. It’s a great all-round, no-compromise package and truly deserves our top accolade.”

Go for the A3 soft top with the 1.8 TFSI Sport (bottom), Evencars’ judges say. Local dealer Premium Motors says it won’t import the car into Hong Kong in “the near future”, but a parallel



importer might. The website’s other category winners were:

Best supermini/city car: Fiat 500 (left). Best buy was L2 Pop rather than the 1.386cc version sold in Hong Kong – but then few cities have our hills.

Best MPV: Citroen C4 Grand Picasso, notably the 1.6 HDi SX.

Best 4x4: Land Rover Discovery, and the 2.7 TDV6 SE is best, the judges say.

Best sports car: Audi TT with the 2.0 TFSI 200 engine.

Best executive car: Jaguar XF. The judges liked the 2.7D V6 Luxury, which is unavailable in Hong Kong.

Best small family car: Hyundai i30 (far left), particularly the 1.4-litre version.

Best green car: BMW 3 Series. The judges liked the 318d, which is unavailable in Hong Kong. Perhaps the Transport Department and Motor Traders Association can explain why diesel cars are so hard to buy in Hong Kong, and when other world cities are embracing the marques’ latest engines?

• Calling all women drivers: What do you drive? And what’s the ideal car for Hong Kong? Tell us on cars@scmp.com

McClatchy-Tribune and Pixie Zheng