

Cadillac Escalade Hybrid:

The Low Gas Video Game on Wheels

By Roger Witherspoon



I stared at the little white box in the middle of the dashboard in utter disbelief. Ninety-nine miles per gallon.

It was only there for a few seconds, and then dropped quickly to 75, then 60. It would have kept falling, but I wouldn't let it. I wanted the big number back. I eased into the right lane, letting the youngsters in the sports cars race by. I kept the big SUV at a steady pace, instead of zooming forward and hitting the brakes whenever I came close to another car. I coasted on the slightest downward incline – doing everything possible to reduce my gasoline consumption and let the little white gauge flash the magical number 99.

The overall gas mileage a vehicle gets is an average ranging from the voracious rate of gas consumption when you rapidly accelerate – as low as three MPG for full sized SUVs – up to the heady, 100 MPG rate you get when the car is basically coasting. The more time the car spends at the high end of the MPG scale, the better the overall rate and the more money the motorist saves. But there are limits as to what an individual car can do to save gas.

People who have spent time behind the wheel of small hybrids such as the sub-compact Toyota Prius, or the mid sized hybrids like the Chevrolet Malibu, are used to driving in such a way that they are frequently hitting the 99 mile per gallon figure. But those are light sedans and compact cars. Getting relatively high mileage in a truck is

another matter. On this occasion, however, I was behind the wheel of a Cadillac Escalade – the huge, heavy, boxy, eight-seater, luxury truck from General Motors – and it had not occurred to me that I might hit MPG numbers high enough to pull the Escalade’s overall average mileage rate up from the single digit motoring basement.

Yet, when it came time to refill the tank with regular unleaded gasoline, the Escalade Hybrid was hitting 20 MPG in mixed motoring, a far cry from the nine miles per gallon I averaged the last time I drove the big machine. While 20 MPG is not high enough to hurt ExxonMobil’s stock or lure people away from more efficient sedans, it does make the truck-based SUV a more realistic option for those in the market for a full sized set of luxury wheels.



This Escalade has a dual mode power system which allows it to run solely on the six-liter, 332-horsepower V-8 gasoline engine, the 300-volt, battery powered electric motor, or both. In addition, the V-8 has GM’s “Active Management System” which shuts down four of the cylinders when the car is cruising at a steady speed or going downhill. The combination of these systems is a major improvement over the non-hybrid model, which uses a slightly larger, 6.2-liter, 403 horsepower V-8 engine burning fuel at a rate of 9 miles per gallon in mixed city and highway driving. The difference in power systems between the standard and the more fuel efficient hybrid comes at a premium of \$3,500.

In practice, when you first start the 09 Escalade Hybrid, you hear and feel nothing, though you see the instrument panel and nine-inch LCD navigation and information screen light up, and the Bluetooth automatically connects to your cell phone. But electric motors sit silently, waiting until you hit the accelerator. There is no gas wasted idling the car.

The electric motor can power the Escalade up to about 30 miles per hour, which means that when you first take off, and in stop and go traffic there is no need to burn gasoline at all. The gas engine takes over at higher speeds, or if there is a hard acceleration, when both power systems are used. Since the electric motor applies its force directly to the axels, the combination of the two power systems greatly increases the responsiveness of the 7,500-pound vehicle. It is still a truck, but even at high speeds, the Escalade never feels like a runaway freight train.

The electric motor also converts the heat from brakes directly into electricity, which is stored in the battery pack under the second row of seats. As a result, there is no need to shell out several hundred dollars to replace the brake pads and rotors five or six years down the road.



In terms of luxury, the guy in the Escalade Hybrid commercials who smugly says “If it had a bathroom I’d live in it,” is exaggerating more than a little bit. But there are reasons why the Escalade, with a \$75,000 price tag, leads the full sized luxury pack.

On the outside, it is still a big, hulking mass, though the 2009 edition has far more character than the original black box. Ed Welburn, GM’s vice president for design and a Howard University-trained sculptor, has given the Escalade an aggressive face and broken the enormous sides with chrome air vents not unlike those spotted on large Land Rovers. The sheer mass on the car’s sides has been broken with slight, shape-shifting lines borrowed from those on stealth fighters, which gives even a parked Escalade the feeling of power in motion.

Buyers of the Escalade have traditionally been overwhelmingly male – a pattern common to the largest SUV class. But while the styling is still one of male oriented aggression, GM is hoping that the introduction of the hybrid will expand the SUV’s

appeal to more women and those seeking the latest in automotive technology and fuel efficiency. And for those worried about the longevity of the battery pack, it comes with an eight year, 100,000-mile warranty.

On the highway, the hybrid is a highly mobile, responsive truck capable of cruising in triple digits without feeling like a runaway train that is about to skip the rails and roll over. It is surprisingly versatile away from civilization as well. The Escalade has enough ground clearance to go on moderate off-road excursions, but the front seat is not inaccessible. When you open the door, a step slides out so one can maintain a sense of decorum – and women need not hike up their skirts – while easily climbing inside. Yet it is comfortable and cushioned enough to watch a movie without interruption on the pull down DVD screen while driving over a gravel country road.



Inside, the Escalade Hybrid provides the touches you would expect in a car in this price range. Seats are wide, leather, and heated in the front and back. Both the second and third row of seats can fold flat, turning the SUV into a cargo van. The third row is difficult to get into, however, since you have to climb over the folded second row to get there. So while one of the prominent Escalade commercials has a pair of long-legged, skimpily-clad women sitting back there, in reality they would stop at the second row and, perhaps, toss their Prada bags into the back seats. While the second row has enough leg room for Shaquille O’Neal, the third row is really for kids in children’s seats. The long-legged ladies, if they sat there, would have their knees somewhere around their ears.

The leather steering wheel tilts but does not telescope, which is a minor surprise. The navigation system is easy to use and intuitive, with a touch screen for those who are not comfortable with joy sticks. When the Bluetooth system is activated the nine-inch LCD screen, which is adjustable for easier viewing, shows a keypad for touch-dialing numbers.

For low speed safety, there is a backup camera displaying the rear scene on the LCD screen, an essential item when backing up in areas with freely roaming children, or

backing into tight parking spaces. On the highway, the Escalade also has a side radar which sounds a warning bell if you begin to move into another lane of traffic and overlooked a vehicle in the SUV's blind spot.

The Escalade also has OnStar, GM's satellite-based communications system which can frequently work in areas that cell phones cannot. The latest incarnation of OnStar can also host your cell phone, as well as provide turn-by-turn directions. And for fun, there is AM/FM and XM satellite radio, as well as a six-disc, in-dash CD player – though they neglected to add an iPod connection. For those who want to watch movies, the DVD player has wireless headsets so the rear passengers can view the overhead screen while the front passengers continue listening to the radio or CD player. When the car is stopped, however, the DVD will play through both the overhead screen and the front LCD screen, with the sound provided by the 10-speaker Bose system.

Most of the drive-in movie theaters of my youth have long gone. But parking the Escalade on a scenic overlook above the wide Hudson River Valley on a warm, moonlit night, reclining the back seats and watching a movie feels just as fine.



**2009 Cadillac Escalade Hybrid
4 Wheel Drive**

MSRP:		\$75,330
EPA Mileage:	20 MPG City	21 MPG Highway
As Tested Mileage:		20 MPG Combined
Towing Capacity:		5,600 Pounds

Performance / Safety:

6.0-Liter Vortec V-8 cast aluminum engine producing 332 horsepower and 367 pound/feet of torque; 300-volt hybrid electric motor; active fuel management; two mode continuous electric hybrid transmission; road sensing suspension; four wheel drive; rear locking differential; automatic rear leveling; antilock brakes; 4-wheel power assisted disc brakes with regenerative braking control; stability and traction controls; 22-inch chrome aluminum wheels; backup camera and side warning radar; dual frontal air bags; head curtain and side air bags for all rows.

Interior / Comfort:

AM/FM/XM satellite radio; 10-speaker Bose 5.1 surround sound system; 6-disc, in-dash CD and MP3 player; DVD player with pull-down screen; navigation system with touch screen or voice activated controls; 115-volt power outlet; heated and cooled front seats and back rests; heated rear seats; leather seats; leather covered, tilt steering wheel with fingertip audio and cruise controls; Bluetooth and OnStar connection; powered liftgate, pedals, and retractable access step; powered sunroof.