Less is More:

The Compact, Luxury SUV

By Roger Witherspoon

The moonless night sky was clear, the mountain road winding through the Hudson Highlands just south of West Point was dry and dark, it was the tail end of a very long day and for a change there were no deer to break the monotony of the unlit road.

Presuming I was alert and awake, the solitude of the road should not have mattered. But suddenly there was a flashing light on the dashboard, the increasingly loud ringing of a chime and an unseen hand began gently pushing the steering wheel towards the left. That combination of events – particularly the ghost hand opposing mine on the steering wheel – caught my attention, and I realized the car was drifting off the right side of the road. I quickly worked with the unseen hand to steer the car back to the center of the lane, and broke the silence by finding Usher on the hard drive in the car's Music Box, cranked up the sound from the 11-speaker Bose system and let his hard-driving song "Yeah!" reverberate through the Hudson River Valley.

Then, I gave a passing nod of thanks to the safety engineers at Infiniti – the upscale part of Nissan – who designed an alert for drowsy drivers into the new EX35. It is one of many features which mark the EX35, a car billed in the Infiniti television ads as the personal, luxury SUV. And personal is probably an appropriate term. The EX35 is shaped like the Infiniti FX45, the large, $50,000, "crossover" SUV which is nearly a foot longer. In length, the EX35 is also a good six inches shorter and its height four inches smaller than the Nissan Murano, the popular, $37,000 crossover whose nimbleness, comfort and styling largely defined this segment of the car industry.

It would be facile to say that the EX is the junior version of Infiniti's venerated FX series, the mid-sized SUV with the exaggerated wheel wells, bold and aggressive stance and V8 engine cranking out nearly 400 horsepower which can run at high speeds over highways and byways or zip across the mild off road courses. The typical FX buyer is a middle aged man, while the EX35 is intended to draw more women into the Infiniti lineup.

In that regard, the EX35 is more of a sedan with the higher styling of a crossover SUV. In that stance, it provides the higher ride than the average sedan, though the interior seems cozier than the wide open space one expects to find in an SUV. And with a price tag of about $45,500, it is aimed at both young professionals seeking luxury in small packages and empty nesters now able to spend money on their own creature comforts. For that kind of money, one might reasonably expect more than a few conveniences in the EX35, and in this case, the car delivers.

Under the hood, the EX has a 297-horsepower V-6 engine which is strong enough to push the car to a top speed of 142, steep hills included. There are few SUV's that one would attempt to push well into triple digits – aside from the Porsche Cayenne, Jeep Grand Cherokee SRT, and BMW, which were designed for road racing. All others threaten to roll over when the speedometer passes 80. But the smaller EX35, with traction controls rollover stabilizers, and 18-inch wheels, is still a car – rather than a small truck passing as a car – and cruises in the low hundreds as easily and securely as any sport sedan.

Inside, the EX35 features soft leather seats – which are heated in the front – and leather padding on the doors and dash. There is also real maple wood trim throughout, instead of the usual amenity of highly polished plastic painted to look like wood. There are touch screen controls for the all functions, which are definitely easier to use when driving than searching for buttons or maneuvering a joystick. This is especially easy in you want to change the navigation orientation, or change songs on the CD or stored hard drive and don't want to push the buttons on the steering wheel, which also control the audio or cruise controls.

The EX also features Bluetooth technology, and pairing phones is easy. Once the link is established the car automatically searches for, and finds the cell phone and reconnects as soon as the engine is turned on. This is done with a push button – the key itself stays in your pocket or purse, and you can lock or unlock the doors with the push of a button built into the handle.

Like most SUVs, there is a lot of room in the cargo area, and the rear seats can fold flat if additional space is needed. But passengers in the rear need to be short or children in car seats because the leg room is limited. And if the riders in the front are tall, there is virtually no rear leg room at all. That lack of space in the rear might be acceptable in a sporty car like Infiniti's G37 sedan, since sports car owners are not really interested in passengers. But one might expect more space in a vehicle billing itself as an SUV, and the EX35 – despite its strengths – could lose out to real sedans.

2008 Infiniti EX35 AWD

MSRP:		**$45,415**
EPA Mileage:	**16 MPG City**	**23 MPG Highway**
Top Speed:		**142 MPH**

Performance/ Safety:

3.5-Liter, aluminum alloy, DOHC V-6 engine producing 297 horsepower and 253 pound/feet of torque; all wheel drive; 5-speed automatic transmission with manual mode with paddle shifts; anti-lock brakes; snow mode; 4-wheel, power assisted front and rear disc brakes; double-wishbone front suspension; multi-link rear suspension; power steering; traction control; security system with vehicle immobilizer; 18-inch aluminum alloy wheels; xenon auto-leveling front headlights; active front lighting system; fog lamps; intelligent cruise control; lane departure prevention and warning system; driver & front passenger seat mounted, side impact air bags; roof-mounted curtain side impact air bags.

Interior/ Comfort:

AM/FM/XM satellite radio; Bose premium audio system with 11 speakers and 2 subwoofers; single, in-dash, CD player; compact flash slot; 9.3 GB Music Box hard drive; touch screen navigation system; voice activated navigation, audio, and phone;

Bluetooth; tilt & telescope steering wheel; leather seats; power folding rear seats; maple wood trim.