



2011 Chevrolet Cruze - First Drive Review

Handsome and competent, the Cruze is cruising toward its U.S. debut.

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We've had our share of Daewoo-engineered cars in North America. There was the late-1980s Pontiac LeMans, the forgettable Suzuki Reno and Foreza, and Chevrolet's uninspired Aveo econobox—all products of the Korean automaker. And don't forget the *actual* Daewoo-badged cars that were sold here. Why give the Korean company another chance?

Unfazed by criticism of previous Daewoo-designed cars, GM gave the Koreans design leadership for the 2011 Chevrolet Cruze compact car. A true world car to be sold around the globe, the Cruze will take the place of the Cobalt in Chevy's U.S. lineup. Moreover, the Cruze is the first iteration of GM's Delta II platform, which will host a number of new, global vehicles, including the [Chevrolet Orlando](#) MPV, the next-gen Opel/Vauxhall Astra, and an upcoming Buick version of the Astra.

Heading to the Continent First for Its Shakedown Cruise

Europe gets the Cruze first; we'll have to wait another year. We drove the Cruze at the European launch in Spain on the Gulf of Biscay. It must be said that the Cruze is a relatively minor deal in the Old World, since GM generates big sales in this segment with the Opel/Vauxhall Astra, which is sold as a [Saturn](#) in America. In Europe, the Cruze merely replaces the Daewoo Lacetti and Nubira—two inexpensive and nondescript entries sold here as the Suzuki Reno and Foreza, respectively.

In the U.S., though, the Cruze plays a different role, and GM needs to get it right. To be built at the Lordstown, Ohio, plant, the new sedan is expected to become one of GM's major sellers over the next few years. The extra year on the Continent should allow GM to work out the kinks before making the car available in its most vital market.

The Cruze is also significant because Chevrolet claims it ushers in a new styling strategy for the brand. We have to wait to see what that means for future Chevys, but we can say that the Cruze definitely looks good from nearly every angle. The front end is aggressive and powerful, and the rear impresses with its wide stance and taillights similar in shape to those of the BMW 7-series

and Lexus LS. Perhaps the least original aspect is the side view; we have seen this roofline and window opening on many cars, although rarely on such a compact model. On the road, the proportions seem just right. The Cruze manages to look masculine and cool, unlike most of its competitors, which, frankly, can be slightly embarrassing to be seen in.

No Diesels for the U.S., but Expect the Turbo Four to Be Very Efficient

In Europe, the Cruze launches with two gasoline four-cylinders—a 1.6-liter that makes 111 hp and a 1.8-liter producing 139 hp—and a 148-hp, 2.0-liter turbo-diesel that likely will spawn a 123-hp variant in the future. A five-speed manual is standard on all engines; the more powerful gasoline mill can be ordered with an optional six-speed automatic. We'll see the 1.8-liter gasoline engine here, as well as a 140-hp, 1.4-liter turbocharged gasoline four-cylinder—expected to return at least 40 mpg combined—that will debut as the car hits the North American market. And here's hoping we'll also be treated to a 260-hp SS version powered by the fire-breathing, turbocharged 2.0-liter Ecotec engine, although GM's High Performance Vehicle Operations have been [put on hold](#).

Solidly Built and Drives Well

The Cruze is low on breakthrough technologies, but it is a thoroughly well-engineered car, with an ultra-strong structure and low center of gravity. GM says 65 percent of its body and structure are made from high-strength steel. The fit and finish is improved over current GM small cars', as highlighted by the small gaps between the body panels, which require precise stamping and accurate assembly. On the road, the rigid body and the extensive sound dampening translate into less noise.

The Cruze handles well. When pushed, it stays on the safe side and moves into good-natured understeer until the electronic stability control gently kicks in. The hydraulic power steering offers good feedback for an economy car, but despite fat tires and 16- or 17-inch wheels, it does not display any sporting aspirations.

Neither, for that matter, do the current gasoline engines, but the 1.6-liter works adequately for most occasions. And although we disliked its nonlinear throttle response, this inexpensive engine is a better choice than the 1.8-liter unit, which is not much quicker but sounds thrashy when pushed. The larger engine is also hampered by its optional six-speed autobox. It works unobtrusively during normal driving and keeps the revs low on the freeway, but it's not up to spirited antics. It is painfully slow to respond, which manages to stifle any soul the 1.8-liter might have.

It's a different story with the turbo-diesel. Coupled to the crisp five-speed manual, it is far more fun to drive than the gasoline-powered models. Up to 236 lb-ft of torque is on tap, plenty to dart through gaps in traffic, and top speed with the oil burner is 131 mph. But the engine is expensive, and it's heavy enough that the car sacrifices some agility. What the Cruze needs is a turbocharged gasoline engine—luckily, one is on the way. Until the 1.4-liter turbocharged four arrives—and, we hope, the 2.0-liter—the current powertrains will lag behind the capabilities of the chassis.

Unique Cabin Materials Lend Upscale Air

On long trips, the interior of the Cruze shines. There's ample headroom despite a coupelike roofline. Drivers and passengers enjoy extraordinary legroom, and the front seats can be pushed way back. The rear seats can be folded down, and trunk space is impressive at 15.9 cubic feet. Less impressive is the fiddly, hard-to-reach lever that adjusts the front seatbacks.

The overall feel of the Cruze's cabin is far superior to those of the Reno/Lacetti and the Forenza/Nubira that it replaces. "We wanted to take that plastic feeling out," says GM Daewoo vice-president of design Tae-Wan Kim. The upper part of the dashboard is finished in cloth or a leather-type material, and a twin-cockpit theme tries to evoke classic Corvettes. Even the headliner is made of a rich-looking woven material not typically used in this segment.

Being a global car, the Cruze has to conform to both European and North American safety standards, which can be contradictory. Chevrolet promises high Insurance Institute of Highway Safety and Euro-NCAP crash ratings, and traction and stability control and ABS systems are standard, at least in Western Europe. The content for other markets has not been finalized, but we expect North America will get pretty much every available safety item.

Due Next Year

The Cruze will come to the U.S. next year first as a sedan, with production scheduled to begin at Lordstown in April 2010 as a 2011 model. The upcoming Chevrolet Orlando, built on the same platform, will serve the functional role of a Cruze station wagon when it launches in 2011. A five-door Cruze hatchback is also planned, but it's not yet decided if that body style will come here. There is no word on U.S. pricing yet, but the Cruze is highly affordable in Europe. Its German starting price is about €1500 less than a comparably equipped Lacetti, which was attractively priced to begin with.

Competition here in the U.S. includes the Ford Focus, the Dodge Caliber, the Toyota Corolla, the Honda Civic, the Nissan Sentra, and the Volkswagen Jetta. Compared with these, the Cruze holds its ground very well. The ancient Ford Focus and the crude Dodge Caliber do not stand a chance against this Chevy. (Ford still plans to introduce the [global third-generation](#) Focus to the U.S. for 2011, however, which should put up more of a fight.) A Volkswagen Rabbit/Golf or Jetta might be more fun to drive, particularly with the dual-clutch transmission, but they will be more costly as well. And the Toyota Corolla looks painfully generic next to the aggressively styled Cruze.

Ironically, now that the Daewoo brand name has disappeared everywhere except in its Korean home market, the company really begins to sparkle.