

Chevy Cruze

Impressions after 5 years and 75,000 miles

About five and a half years ago, my wife said I needed to buy a new car. At first I objected, since after all the 2001 Alero had only about 130,000 miles on it. I figured I had all the bugs worked out. However, on second thought, it dawned on me that my wife had just said I could "go out and buy a new car." To be truthful, my only goal for a car is a daily driver, so I was not going to take out a mortgage to buy one. I needed something that was comfortable and reliable with decent gas mileage.

In 2011, Chevrolet introduced the Cruze to the American market, after having been sold in various countries around the world for a number of years. This was billed as a car to compete with the other compact cars like the Civic and Focus, and on my first impression, they did a good job. For the test drive I tried both the 1.8L naturally aspirated and 1.4L turbocharged versions. I very quickly decided the 1.4L engine was a smoother power plant, with about the same power and torque, but with slightly better gas mileage. For safety, the interior practically turns into one big airbag. The car was comfortable to drive, and for the size, as wide as the next car up (70.7" for the Cruze and 70.3" for the Malibu). In the end, I settled on a white 1LT; list price \$19,520.



From a design standpoint, the car is nice looking. If you know of someone you refer to as nice looking, tell them they are the mammalian equivalent of a Chevy Cruze, while keeping in mind their level of attractiveness. That's about where the Cruze sits. One thing I have noticed over the years is a move away from adding odd appendages to what are basically economy cars. The Alero had front and rear spoilers. Why? Because Oldsmobile's obviously need downforce. The Cruze has a thankfully clean style that does not add unneeded flairs or spoilers in an attempt at being superiorly ugly. As for my choice of the white body color, this is a personal favorite. I find white vehicles are easier to take care of, cooler in summer and do not show dirt as readily as a dark vehicle.



The interior of the car is for the most part spacious and comfortable. Two adults have no problem spending hours in this car over a long vacation drive. The back seat is another story. I'm 5'10" and would only be able to last about half an hour in the backseat before I knees were crying in agony. Like the rest of the car, the dash, gauges and controls are simple and easy to operate. The radio and cruise control buttons are on the steering wheel, as is common on most new cars. This model of Cruze has a strange shallow compartment on the middle of the dashboard

under the windshield. It's hard to reach while you're driving, and has a door that flips up and blocks your vision if you happen to open it while moving. Unique, but rather useless.

The car handles tight, with light steering wheel feedback. The steering system itself has electric-assist rack-and-pinion, instead of hydraulic power. The car dives into corners fairly well at moderate speeds with a minimum of body roll. The original tires were Goodyear's, which I had no problem with, except they eventually became very loud. I replaced them at about 65,000 miles with a set of Yokohama YK580 tires, which are much quieter and smoother.

The Austrian built 1.4L turbo is listed as having 136 HP and 148 ft-lbs of torque. Various specs have this running a 0-60 in a little over 10 seconds. I've never timed it, but these feels about right. When I bought the car, I was talking to a friend who likes to fix up old Camaros. Of course he asked about this 1.4L brute of an engine, and I assured him it was fine, but would not win any drag races. The engine is great for highway and city driving, with very respectable gas mileage numbers; I get about 40 mpg on the highway, and 30 to 33 mpg in combined driving. The one thing I have noticed is that the car has a sweet spot on the mileage. If you drove all day at a steady 45 mph, it would likely top 50 mpg, but then it drops off fairly quickly from there; almost like they designed it for that range. For instance, if you load two bikes on the back, run the air conditioner, and drive 75 mph on a hot day, the mileage drops to the high 20s. As far as available power goes, the 1.4L turbo quickly runs out of steam when pushed hard. Somewhere in central Illinois, I tried to pass a semi pulling a wind turbine blade. It was hot, the air conditioner was blasting and the bikes on the back were happily destroying the aerodynamics. With my foot flat on the floor, the engine made a lot of noise, but very little happened. As I inched up on the turbine blade, the oncoming car began looming in my vision. My instinct for self-preservation kicked in and I ducked back behind the truck.

This brings me to the only annoyance I have about this car. I would best describe the transmission as indecisive. It is a 6 speed overdrive automatic, with the manual/auto mode feature. The issue is how the transmission behaves when slowing and accelerating around a corner. You press the throttle down, the car waits a moment, jerks into the lower gear and then takes off. For a second, it feels like the engine has stopped, before it lurches back to life again. Then there are other times when I will slow way down for a corner, accelerate with the engine going to high revs, and then shifting to the higher gear. I will sometimes use the manual mode in city driving because it is much smoother and less offends my mechanical engineering senses. It almost feels like the programming of the shift points are not set properly to how the engine operates.

The transmission aside, I have been a very pleased with this car. The only maintenance items have been a coolant leak, a leaky valve cover gasket and mouse who built a nest on top of the cabin air filter. The question remains if this is equivalent or better than other cars in this class. There is some stiff competition in the small sedan market. There are a multitude of cars in this class that match the Cruze on fuel economy, reliability and performance. I can say that the car is a vast improvement over past small GM cars. My experience in this realm goes all the way back to a Vega station wagon my parents owned (a car that admirably combined too much weight and too little power to make it a great snow car, but not much else.) If public acceptance is a judge, I see a great number of Cruzes on the road. My guess is that the model continues to be a success and earn money for GM. For my own sake, I would recommend to anyone in the market for a small sedan to give the Cruze a look. I hope that GM continues to develop this model, possibly introducing hatchback and small wagon versions.