

Family review: Daily driver

2012 Infiniti QX56 proves SUVs can be comfortable, luxurious

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There aren't many big SUVs I would want to drive daily, but a week with my family in the 2012 Infiniti QX56 might have changed my mind.

I can definitely say that I would like to ride around in it as a passenger every day; seating seven or eight people, it's cush and totally luxurious. As it should be: Padded with plenty of extras, my four-wheel-drive test vehicle came priced at an exorbitant \$75,340. I may very well have to choose between this opulent, luxurious SUV and sending my kids to college. College is overrated, don't you think? My zoology degree is doing nothing for me.

The QX56 manages to quell the myth that all SUVs are trucky and rugged. Instead, this beauty seeps comfort and luxury from every pore. Its private-jet-inspired interior is draped in gently gathered, buttery-soft leather, with all the extras that even the prissiest prima donnas among us would love. My favorites? Heated and cooled front seats, heated second-row seats, and a heated steering wheel that's just as comforting as warming my hands on a cup of cocoa.

Exterior

The QX is a huge SUV, but you don't really notice its full size until you try to park it in a garage space normally reserved for your small family sedan. Despite its grandiose size, the QX is remarkably easy to maneuver through your daily driving life thanks to its standard 360-degree Around View Monitor and a front and rear sonar



system. In a vehicle this size, you're normally left blindly creeping forward in a parking space or garage until you oh so gently bump into something, letting you know you've pulled all the way forward. (The kids won't notice that little dent in their plastic wagon, right?) In the QX56, you can switch on a front-view camera that shows you just how close you are to the object in front of you, a side-view camera showing you the side of the car and the curb as you're trying to parallel park, or a 360-degree view showing you a picture as if from above the car. Audio park assist adds to the ease when parking.

Family-friendly features

While the wide, flat seats in the QX56 are awesome for installing an array of odd-sized child-safety seats, they're not awesome for holding smaller drivers and passengers in place during the slight body roll that happens in such a large SUV. I didn't like sliding from one side of my seat

to the other and then back again around every curve. As it turns out, bolstered seats have a purpose besides looking sporty.

In a market full of hard-to-access third rows, the QX56 excels. The second row captain's chairs fold and tumble easily using either a hand lever on the seat itself or, better yet, a button on the dashboard. This is great news. Now, trying to load kids while being pressured to get through the carpool lane quickly, I can press this button to tumble the second row forward from the comfort of my heated driver's seat so all the kids can climb into the "way back." The kids who are climbing into the second row can then easily press the captain's chair back into place and climb in. And when I say "easily," I mean it. Even my 7-year-old stepdaughter can do it by herself.

To go from hauling kids to hauling stuff and back again, the power-operated split third row folds flat via a button in the cargo area. Ahh -- no seats to remove,

no seats to fight with, no numbered tabs to pull. (Step 1: pull this. Step 2: fold that. Step 3: give up.) Just easy, simple seats that fold. Ingenious.

Legroom in the second row is expansive while leaving enough legroom in the third row to accommodate kids of all sizes, or even average-sized adults. There are nine cupholders and four bottleholders scattered throughout all three rows, ensuring that every passenger can have his or her coffee and drink it, too.

Safety

The 2012 Infiniti QX56 hasn't been crash-tested. (Full-size SUVs seldom are.) It features driver and passenger front airbags and seat-mounted side-impact airbags, as well as standard side curtain airbags for all three rows of passengers. As required of all 2012 and later models, the QX includes antilock brakes, traction control and an electronic stability system. Hill start assist is also standard.

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Largely because of the recession, Connelly says, flaunting wealth has gone from good to gosh as the spending mentality of the average Joe and Jane went by the wayside.

Driving the trend, to some degree, are Baby Boomers, who are moving into smaller homes and, yes, smaller cars.

But there's a catch. While they may be willing to sacrifice space, they're not ready to jettison comfort.

"The trend is moving away from splurging for the sake of excess to splurging for the sake of improving your life," Connelly says. "Consumers want peace of mind and they want ease of engagement."

What exactly does that mean?

Well, to better understand it, Connelly says, all you have to do is look at the Ford Escape or the new Focus.

Let's face it - having a Focus in your driveway, or even an Escape, doesn't scream: "I'm trying to keep up with the Joneses."

And that might just be the point.

Instead of collections of expensive toys, the focus now is on experiences - such as a great vacation or an outstanding meal at a fine-dining restaurant. For a growing number of motorists, an affordable and comfortable car now trumps a trophy vehicle.

"Experiences provide great fulfillment," Connelly says. "They're the new status symbol."

So, it's not surprising that Ford is taking a gamble and offering consumers an affordably priced Focus, complete with all sorts of bells and whistles. For a few extra dollars you can get a Focus that will park itself, a feature that in the past has been reserved for larger, more expensive models.

Want to read more about what's going on in the automotive retail industry? Check out Rich Pollack's blog at www.southfloridaroad.blogspot.com. On the South Florida Road is written by Rich Pollack, an independent writer for Delray Beach-based Pollack Communications.



2013 Ford Escape

And not surprisingly, you can also get a Focus with a high-end sound system, Ford's Sync technology and, of course, dual-zone automatic climate control.

Illustrating what Connelly calls "sanity savings" - features that make life just a little easier - is the 2013 Escape's hands-free liftgate system.

A mom carrying a little one in one arm and lugging groceries in the other can now wave her foot under the rear bumper of the Escape and the hatch in the back will automatically open. Another wave of the foot and it closes.

Not surprisingly, by the way, the target audience for the Escape is women in their early 30s.

In many cases, advances in technology are making it possible for consumers to downsize.

But technology can be a double-edged sword, with too much of it getting in the way of a simple lifestyle. Ford's got that covered too with a "do not disturb" button available on the Sync system that will block incoming calls and even text messages.

2050 may be a long time off, but for Ford researchers and engineers figuring out how to make it easier for the expected burst of older drivers to get around, is a pressing problem today.

One has to wonder, might a Ford F-150 or Fusion with a built-in cane rack be in our future?