

## **In The Family Way: Riding High in the Saddle in the Escalade ESV**

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The Cadillac Escalade isn't subtle. You want subtle? Try a grey Camry, a blue Magic Wagon, any 626.

The Escalade is not meant for subtle entrances. It's size and razor-sharp front-end styling draw gawks like white shirts draw BBQ sauce. Doormen snap to attention, pedestrians strain to look in: "Is that somebody?" Especially in truck-loving Calgary the Escalade is preceded by it's reputation. And the ESV is the biggest Escalade, by 22.5 inches. This is one momma of a truck.

We were fortunate enough to pilot the 'Slade around a loop of the Canadian Rockies. Starting in Calgary, we went west to Kananaskis, Banff, Lake Louise, Panorama, then south to Kimberly before heading east to Fernie and back up to Stampede Country. Instead of the Hollywood types, NBA players or rap stars that favour the 'Slade stateside, we were accompanied by Lori's mom as designated babysitter, and Emmett, king of the Caddy.

Not being blind or too terribly dumb, the first thing Peter noticed about the Escalade ESV was the size. Our version came with front buckets, dual captain's chairs in the second row, and a full-sized third row bench. Behind all of these seats was a large cargo area. Fold and flip the third row and the cargo hold becomes truly cavernous. It is so deep that Peter, at 6'0", had to crawl into the truck to fold the rear seat and pack our luggage.

As is the rule with any family vacation, cargo expanded to fit the available space. We had: two golf bags, two golf bag covers, four suitcases, diapers, baby food, 10 pairs of assorted shoes, an exersaucer, a full-size stroller, and a partridge in a pear tree. The ESV swallowed it all, with nothing blocking the view rearward, and pulled a Peggy Lee: "Is that all there is?"

If your family has too much stuff to fit in the Escalade ESV, sell some kids or rent out the dog. Even with all seven seats occupied, there is luggage space for everyone. If you're going to use the roof rack, be forewarned: the 'Slade is just on the border of "oversize" for parking structures such as the Calgary airport. We made it, but a roof rack load would have sent us to the overheight lot (the shame!).

The DVD entertainment system will keep the great unwashed of the nether regions happy, while the pilot and navigator assure a successful completion of the mission. Running boards assist the short of stature in the long hike to the seats. On our trip, Emmett's entourage was coddled in luxury. Substantial leather thrones, thick carpet, and sumptuous sounds kept all enthralled. No need for the DVD system in daylight through the Rockies. GM allows you to set a variety of functions to your preferences from the instrument panel. You can set, among other things, power lock options, side mirror dipping when reverse is engaged, and even the length of time the outside lights remain on after parking the truck. Tasteful wood inlays on the dash gave an air of luxury, but Peter could have done without the partial wood rim on the steering wheel. All leather, thank you. Our route was so straightforward as to render the navigation system redundant, but the Slade is equipped with a GPS based system, as well as Onstar, GM's excellent satellite assistance system.

With a vehicle this big, Lori and Peter were both ready for a wallowing, barge-like ride. Were we wrong! The Caddy handled city traffic with ease, and a lot of gas. You did need to pay attention to placement within your lane, as there is a whole bunch of vehicle around you. Accurate and well-weighted steering made this easy. Plenty of grunt away from stoplights, and the large side mirrors with integral turn indicators made lane changes less stressful. The tight turning radius really helped in parking lots, an area where we were both concerned about.

Perhaps it was beginners luck, but parking was a breeze: didn't hit one mountain!

Around town the ride was a little stiff-legged, but on the open highway the Caddy stretched out and devoured clicks like auto writers at a free buffet (not a pretty sight). Road imperfections were soaked up while ride motions were well damped- a tough combination. The ESV even handled a freak hailstorm that dumped eight inches of icy slush on Calgary-in July!

While not a vehicle for canyon carving or apex strafing the Escalade ESV fulfilled it's purpose on this trip: it transported an extended family and all their stuff through sun, hail, badlands and mountains in luxury and style. And, if need be, it could have towed a trailer, to boot! Here is the raison d'etre for monster SUV's: hauling lots o' people and stuff long distances in great comfort. Although the gas consumption was high (14.6 L/100 km average on mostly highway cruising), it was quite good for the load carried.

The Escalade ESV turned heads everywhere we went, and made some cowboys green with envy. They looked covetously at our prime Alberta beef as we cruised along in Cadillac comfort. Subtle? No. a great road trip vehicle? Most definitely.

Lori Knowles and Peter Gilbert are a husband and wife writing team in search of family automotive perfection.

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#### SIDEBAR 1

##### Cadillac Escalade ESV

Base price: \$78,150

Options on test car: DVD navigation system, \$3095. Rear seat entertainment system (DVD based), \$2095. Heavy Duty trailering Equipment, \$275.

Price as tested: \$82,715

Standard equipment includes: 2nd row reclining bucket seats, 3rd row bench seat, power adjustable pedals, heated second row seating, 345 hp Vortec 6000 V8 engine, 17" aluminum wheels, ultrasonic rear parking assist, OnStar, 2nd row audio controls, vehicle stability control, all-wheel drive, ABS.

#### SIDEBAR 2

Road Thrills: Knowing you have the ability to move a small town, riding in the cushiest saddles the West has ever seen.

Road Chills: Watching the gas gauge commit suicide very time you drive it solo, having to resign your Greenpeace membership 'cause you liked it so much.