

## **Buick Adds New Smallest Car, Verano**

Ann M. Job, For The Associated Press

"Nice car." The words finally registered the third time the young man in the parking garage said them. With surprise, I acknowledged his comment. Then he asked, "It's a Lincoln, right?"

No, the 2012 Verano is a Buick, not a Lincoln. But yes, it is a decidedly nice car with pleasing styling, quiet interior, decent fuel mileage and noteworthy ride and handling.

Arriving this month in dealerships, the Verano is the smallest car at Buick, where it is positioned in size and price below the Buick Lacrosse and Regal sedans.

The Verano comes with a four-cylinder, naturally aspirated engine and carries a federal government fuel economy rating of 21 miles per gallon in city driving and 32 mpg on the highway. I averaged 25.5 mpg in travel that was two-thirds on the highway.

Starting manufacturer's suggested retail price, including destination charge, is \$23,470. This is for a base model with the 180-horsepower engine, six-speed automatic transmission and leatherette seating material.

Competitors include premium compact sedans, such as the 2012 Acura TSX compact sedan. With 201-horsepower four-cylinder, five-speed automatic and standard real leather seat trim plus other standard features such as moonroof and premium audio that are not offered in the base Verano, the base TSX has a starting retail price of \$29,810.

Some compact sedans can be found with lower starting prices. A 2012 Volkswagen Jetta with 170-horsepower, five-cylinder engine, automatic transmission and leatherette seat material has a starting MSRP, including destination charge, of \$18,365.

For the record, there is no compact Lincoln sedan.

The Verano gets a lot of looks, and not just from young people. The 15.3-foot-long, four-door car is nicely proportioned and upscale looking inside and out. Textured material on the interior ceiling looks as pricey as that in some European cars, and smart touches of faux wood-look plastic inside convey a luxury feel even at a \$20,000-plus price.

I just wish the middle passenger in the rear seat had a height-adjustable head restraint. It's stationary and sits too low for use by adults or even some teen-agers. I also noticed that while the stitching around the optional leather-trimmed seats in the test car had a light gray stitching accent color, the leather-wrapped steering

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wheel was finished with black stitching.

Intriguingly, the Verano doesn't float along on roads, the way old Buicks did. This new model rides solidly via a suspension — independent MacPherson struts up front and a torsion beam in the rear — that keeps the car body planted over bumps.

Drivers feel some of the road imperfections through the steering wheel, and the test Verano cornered well, maintained its composure in the curves and moved into compact-sized parking spaces easily.

The car also is quiet inside, noticeably more quiet than the Chevrolet Cruze, which uses the same front-wheel drive platform as the Verano. The platform was developed in Europe by Germany's Opel, which is part of Buick's parent company, General Motors Co.

Engine sound management is impressive.

Lifting the Verano hood, I found the 2.4-liter, double overhead cam four banger with an Ecotec label. Ecotec engines are more well-known in Chevy cars, and the Verano's Ecotec engine includes direct injection for best performance.

But with the hood up, the engine sounded noisy and a bit rattly, as four cylinders can.

Sitting inside the Verano, though, with the hood closed, I never heard rough, noisy engine sounds, and passengers couldn't tell what kind of engine was in the car.

The singular transmission — an automatic — shifted smoothly in the test car, and in normal, everyday driving in the city and highway, the test Verano moved along with decent pep.

Most buyers won't need much more than the 170 horsepower and peak torque of 171 foot-pounds at 4,900 rpm provided by this direct gasoline injection powerplant.

Note that regular gasoline and E85, which includes ethanol, are acceptable fuels for the Verano. But opening the car's gasoline filler door, I found printed warnings cautioning Verano drivers not to use fuel additives if they put E85 in the gasoline tank. Additives typically are advertised as fuel mileage boosters or engine cleaners.

Three adults sit a bit too closely across the Verano's back seat, and legroom back there is 33.9 inches, less than the 36.2 inches in the back seat of a 2012 Honda Civic. Headroom of 37.2 inches in the back seat is acceptable, but I'd prefer for the back doors to open wider for easier access and exit.

Much of the trunk space in the Verano is under the rear window. Total storage space is 15.2 cubic feet maximum, if there is no Bose audio subwoofer intruding and a tire inflator substitutes for the spare tire. VW's Jetta sedan has 15.5 cubic feet of trunk space in all models.

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I couldn't locate a keyhole on the trunk and opened it every time via the key fob or a latch inside the car.

The first time I was in the Verano, I also couldn't find how to turn the car on. The fob included a key, so I looked for an ignition key hole. But there was none.

It turned out a flat, black, rectangular button located with the buttons to disable the traction control and turn on the emergency flashers in the center stack of the dashboard was the button needed to start the car.

Standard safety equipment includes traction control, 10 air bags and antilock brakes. While the test car didn't include a backup camera, it had the loudest audible rear backup beeping system I've ever heard.

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