

The Smooth Handling 2005 Jaguar XJL

story by Charles Renny

If you happen to be a bit of a gear-head, the opportunity to get one-on-one driving instruction from one of the world's best drivers is not something to pass up. I jumped at an invitation to attend the North American introduction of the All Aluminum Jaguar XJ Long Wheelbase luxury sedan in San Francisco, where Sir Jackie Stewart, three time Formula One Driving Champion, was in charge of the solo course.

Jaguar is introducing the long wheelbase version of its popular XJ 'Saloon' (British for sedan) less than a year after it introduced the all aluminum XJ. The long wheelbase model is aluminum as well, for a weight saving of nearly 265 kg over some of its luxury car rivals.

According to Mike Mohan, chief project engineer for the new XJL, the Jaguar factory has been almost totally rebuilt to work in aluminum, a change that is producing the hoped for results. Not only are sales up, but according to the latest J.D. Powers survey, Jaguar is the highest rated European manufacturer in Initial Quality Service and Customer Service Index, outdoing both Mercedes-Benz and BMW.

I drove both the Vanden Plas (starting at \$106,000) and Super V8 (starting at \$126,000) in order to compare them with the standard wheelbase XJ. Looking at regular and long wheelbase cars separately, you might think someone is pulling an expensive joke. It is only when the cars are side by side that you see the 12 cm difference in wheelbase.

Jaguar made 36 new body panels to keep the car in the proper XJ proportions. Such attention to detail provides more headroom in the rear along with considerably more leg, knee and foot room. Riding in the rear seat is a bit unusual for me, however, the comfort of fully adjustable, reclining seats made it bearable. It didn't hurt that part of the entertainment package consisted of LCD screens built into the back of the front seat head rests, or that the controls are in the rear centre console/arm rest.

Once I passed muster as a rear seat occupant, the Jaguar people let me into the front seat for a five hour drive over divided highways and





country roads. On multi-lane highways, you don't have to do much except change lanes, for that the Super V8 is the cat of choice. When I put my foot down things happen much quicker than in the normally aspirated Vanden Plas.

On the two lane, twisty back roads, the combination of long wheel base and weight reduction meant that I really didn't notice the extra length, except in the tightest corners. Even at that, the reworked steering box made sure I didn't miss a beat.

Back at our base, Jaguar laid out a solo course to highlight improvements in handling and braking. Our course consisted of an acceleration section followed by a quick stop. From there, it did a couple of quick lefts and rights, topped off by an increasing radius turn. A short transition area to shed off some speed was followed by a long serpentine course with a stop at the end.

Jaguar brought in Sir Jackie Stewart to give the 20 journalists a benchmark. Stewart chauffeured us around the course and gave us pointers on speed control, how to make best use of the stability control package and other driving tips.

When we were turned loose on the course, the ease with which Stewart had demonstrated how to gently move the steering wheel became a clownish pantomime of elbows and hands, not always moving in a co-ordinated manner. For me, the nose pushed out in a gentle understeer when trying to go faster around some corners. In the transition areas, the tail stayed put with little or no intervention from the stability control program.

Fortunately, these moves are not required on the street, even if the car is capable of doing them. The thinking behind the course was to show that the Jaguar XJL is more capable than most of the people who will drive it. 🐾



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