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# AutoSunday

## Updated Lexus RX 350 retains smooth ride

BY ANN M. JOB  
For The Associated Press

The best-selling vehicle at Lexus just got better for 2010, and it did so subtly.

The third-generation Lexus RX crossover sport utility vehicle — a crossover because it's based on a car platform — is a bit bigger and heavier than its predecessor, quieter, a tad more fuel efficient and has more features.

But the things people see first, such as exterior and interior styling, stay true to the popular, previous-generation model. The refined ride is still there, too, and the 2010 RX 350 continues to garner the top, 5-out-of-5 stars rating from the federal government in frontal and side crash tests.

It's also worth noting that Lexus, the luxury brand of Toyota, cut the starting manufacturer's suggested retail price, including destination charge, for the RX by \$900. A front-wheel drive RX 350 starts at \$37,675 for 2010, compared with \$38,575 for a 2009 model. The starting retail price for a 2010 RX 350 with all-

wheel drive is \$39,075 compared with \$39,975 for a 2009 model.

These prices put the RX in the middle of competing models in the luxury SUV segment. For example, the 2010 Infiniti FX35 has a starting MSRP, including destination charge, of \$43,015. But it's 3.5-inches longer and has a more powerful V-6 than the Lexus RX. Meantime, Infiniti's 2010 EX35 starts at \$34,665 and is a bit shorter in length but still has more horsepower than the RX.

Introduced in 1998, the RX quickly became the best seller at Lexus as American families looked to move out of minivans and into more trendy vehicles. RX sales last year in the United States totaled 84,181 as the economy declined, but they averaged more than 100,000 in previous years.

Based on the Camry platform, the RX offered what it does today — a seat height higher above the road and good views out, a smooth ride, quiet, comfortable interior and a luxury badge and amenities.

In recent years, Lexus also began selling a gasoline-electric hybrid version of RX with noteworthy fuel mileage. For 2010, the hybrid model is renamed the RX 450h, has fuel economy ratings of 32 miles per gallon in city driving and 28 mpg on the highway and carries a starting MSRP, including destination charge, of \$42,535. And yes, it's true the hybrid's city mileage is higher than highway mileage because stop-and-go city traffic provides more opportunities for electric power propulsion.

All 2010 RXes have an added inch in the wheelbase, which helps make the back seat even more comfortable for adults. There's 37.1 inches of legroom back there.

Seats front and back in the test RX 350 looked and were supportive, and four adults rode without fatigue on a two-hour road trip, making conversation all the way without straining to hear.

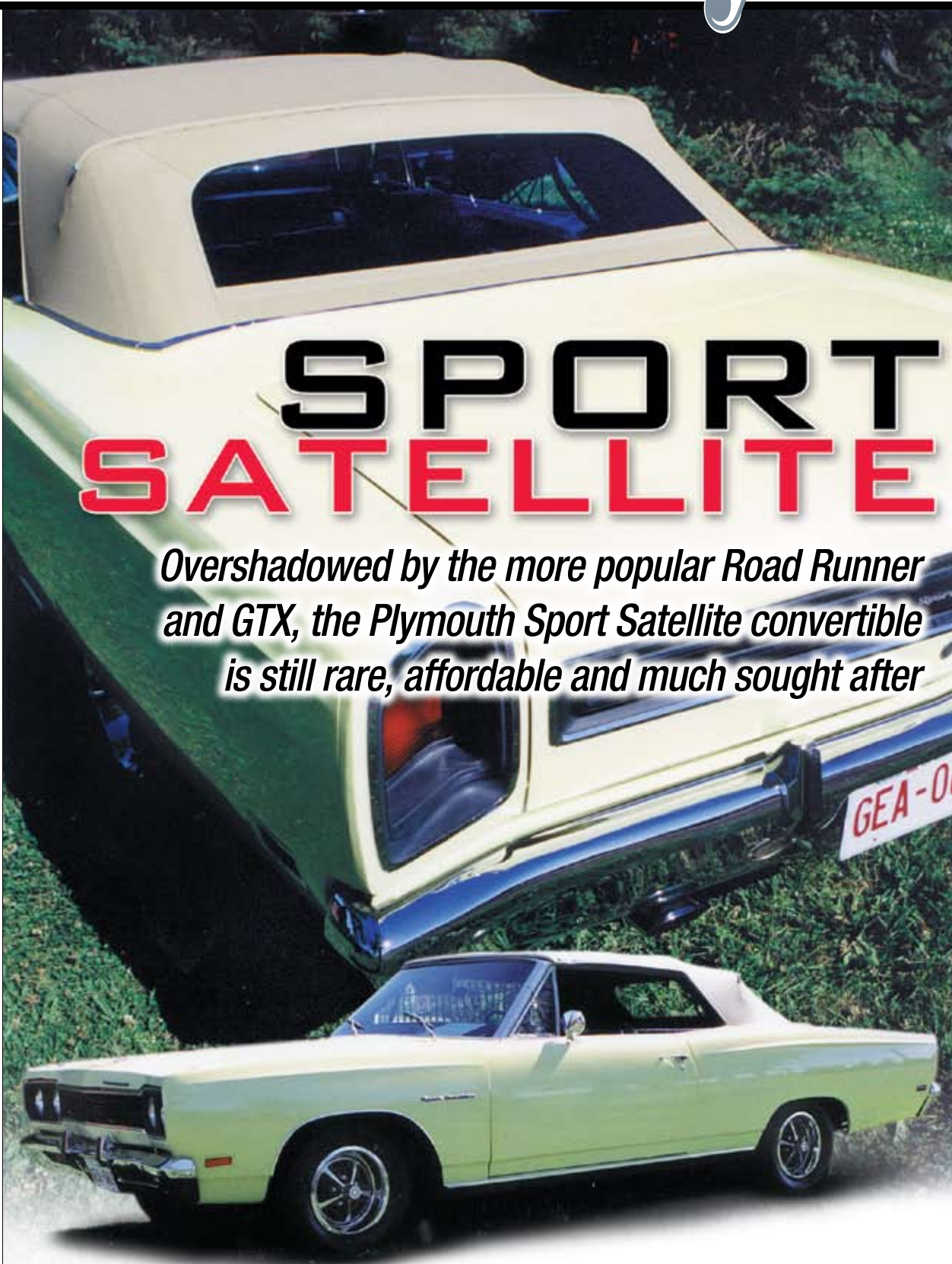
The RX 350's 3.5-liter, four-cam V-6 has 5 more horsepower this year, to 275, and while it's not the most horsepower in the segment, it feels more than adequate even as the RX 350 added some 300 pounds over last year's model. Torque now is up slightly to 257 foot-pounds at 4,700 rpm, which was enough to push my head back into the head restraint when I accelerated hard. Engine sounds, what I heard of them, were strong and confident.

Note that the engine performance numbers are for the RX engine using premium gasoline, which at today's prices can add up to a nearly \$60 bill to fill up the 19.2-gallon tank.

New features include a revised computer mouse-like control in the center console that manipulates a cursor on the large display in the dashboard. Other newfangled features include steering wheel and seat track that move in tandem to return to a driver's preset position at startup and a voice recognition system that can change temperatures, find restaurants and adjust songs just by verbal command.



ASSOCIATED PRESS/Courtesy of Lexus  
Lexus cut the starting retail price for the 2010 RX 350 by \$900, putting it in the middle of the luxury SUV segment.



BY JEFF MELNYCHUK

Wheelbase Communications

Trim is in.

Head down to the local dealer with a particular car in mind and the first question you'll likely be asked is: 'Were you after a DX, LX, ES, ES-R, EX-R ... or the ES-RXLi with the Sport, Leather, Chrome and Navigation packages?' Stumped,

you would ask for the differences to be explained and then, after a few sleepless nights comparing miles of spreadsheets, you would cross your fingers and make a selection.

It might be tough now, but the venerable "trim level" has roots nearly six decades deep. It was (and still is) a method to offer prestige — and make more money — on a particular model or body style of car.

Things were done a little differently back then, however. Whereas today you could select, say, a Toyota Camry, and order the trim package of your choice, back in the late 1960s those trim levels would probably have been given completely different model designations.

Take Chrysler's Plymouth division. For 1969, its popular 116-inch-wheelbase B-body design was entering the second year of production. There were five different engine sizes to be had — a 225-cubic-inch inline six cylinder and four V-8 engines displacing 318, 383, 426 and 440 cubic inches — and four-door sedan, four-door wagon, two-door hard top, coupe and convertible body styles.

And, although they were essentially the same car — from quarter panels and bumpers to suspension pieces and frameless unibody construction — most were given their own model designations/names based on trim and engine size, kind of like today ... only different.

Plymouth's base B-body model for 1969 was the Belvedere (the smaller, cheaper Valiant was an A-body) followed by the Satellite and Sport Satellite. The muscle cars that everyone is paying big bucks for these days were the Road Runner and GTX, the latter received a higher level of trim.

If you think it's tough selecting a new car today, imagine life back in 1969. Generally, three types of



With six body styles, five models and five engines to choose from (plus three versions of the 383), the '69 Plymouth intermediates took the idea of "trim levels" to the extreme.

buyers went after Plymouth's big B-body. On the one hand, the trunk and interior volume worked particularly well for families looking to cram a lot of space into their monthly payments. And, of course, go-fast die-hards couldn't get enough of the Road Runner and GTX performance cars which, starting around \$3,000, could tear the tires clean off the 14x6 road wheels.

The third category of buyer was perhaps the most interesting, simply because its members seemed to desire the look and feel of a performance car but with a lower sticker price, better fuel economy ... and fewer speeding tickets. The group was also interesting because there were so few people in it.

It might actually surprise you to know that the Sport Satellite, especially the convertible, has a much lower production volume than the then-and-now-famous Road Runner. People who haven't even heard of a Sport Satellite convertible won't be surprised.

In fact, the Sunfire Yellow model pictured above is just one of 85 produced with the 383 "Super Commando" four-barrel engine. One hundred others came with a two-barrel "Commando" 383 while the remainder of the 900 or so Sport Satellite convertibles produced that year came with the 318 V-8.

Aside from badging, stripes and a muscular looking blacked-out hood, there's really little to outwardly distinguish a Road Runner or GTX convertible from a Sport Satellite convertible. In fact, with

a 330-horsepower (five shy of the Road Runner 383) Super Commando 383, the Sport Satellite rag-top was about as quick as a base Road Runner and offered more chrome around the wheel wells and special red-highlight grille and recessed taillights. Trim-wise, the Sport Satellite fell somewhere between the Road Runner and GTX.

Because of this, it's a wonder more weren't sold. On the other hand, it was pretty tough slugging' against the over-hyped Road Runner, which in convertible form sold in numbers that more than doubled those of the Sport Satellite convertible.

Plymouth's little-known, often forgotten convertible is living proof, that, from a dollars and cents standpoint, rarity doesn't always mean desirability or value. That is to say they're still relatively cheap to buy, despite being rare. However, as the pool of high-dollar Road Runners and GTXs dries up, the value of second-tier American muscle cars, such as the Sport Satellite, should head skyward. For now, if you can find one, they remain relatively affordable and gain just as much attention and respect at car shows as their more famous siblings.

Indeed, trim is in, and if you were alive during the late 1960s, cars such as the Plymouth Sport Satellite convertible help you understand why.

• Jeff Melnychuk is Wheelbase Communications' managing editor. E-mail him at [www.wheelbase.us/mailbag.html](http://www.wheelbase.us/mailbag.html).

## Used-car warranties often hide loopholes

Q. I have an older car that I am going to need to drive for a few more years. Should I buy one of these warranties I see advertised?

A. I will make this simple. No. In most cases, the service contracts you see advertised on TV or that you buy over the phone or on the Internet, I don't consider to be good products. Not to mention they can be very expensive.

There are loop holes galore that will disappoint you when it comes time to get a repair done. Think about it; how can a company insure the repairs on a vehicle that has 100,000 miles on it, and they don't even inspect it? That fact right there raises all kinds of red flags for me. These companies are in this to make some money, not to fix your car.

I have had several clients come in with legitimate repairs that were needed, only to be declined because they did not have all their receipts from every oil change. There are some good ones that are underwritten by insurance companies that do what they say. These are generally sold through the repair shop or new car dealer network, but always do your homework.

Check with the Better Business Bureau or just go online and search for the company and see what you find. At least if you buy it from a person, you can look them in the eye if things don't go the way they were promised.

Lately I have had a difficult time getting agreement from these providers for the appropriate amount of dollars to do a particular job. In other words they are trying to dictate prices much like what happens in the auto insurance business. So guess who is left to pay the difference? More and more, good quality shops are refusing to accept these service contracts because they have become such a hassle to deal with in terms of time spent on the phone and in some cases not getting paid.

The long and short of this is, do your homework and do the math. Every once in a while I have a client who will really come out good by having one of these, but most folks never need the services that offset the initial investment. If these companies think they can win on this transaction, why not just keep the money in your pocket and self insure your repairs.

• Douglas Automotive is at 312 S. Hager Ave., Barrington, (847) 381-0454, and 7218B Virginia Road, Crystal Lake, (815) 356-0440. Visit [douglasautomotive.com](http://douglasautomotive.com). Send questions to [underthehood@dailyherald.com](mailto:underthehood@dailyherald.com).

## Sports car searches heat up this fall

Online searches for sports cars on [carmax.com](http://carmax.com) have increased since August, CarMax Inc. said.

The nation's largest retailer of used cars reports online searches for sports cars on its Web site are up about 6 percent. The most searched sports car on [carmax.com](http://carmax.com) is the Ford Mustang. Rounding out the top five searched sports cars are Chevrolet Corvette, Nissan 350Z, Chevrolet Camaro and BMW M3.



Doug McAllister  
Under the hood