

Maserati Levante - The Luxury SUV That Rides Like the Wind

▀ The new model is a critical addition to a franchise without SUVs.



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Good news for the well-heeled set of Beverly Hills, Scarsdale, N.Y., and South Beach Miami. The Maserati Levante will turn heads with its looks and, more importantly, with its sound.

Italian automakers are known for creating memorably beautiful driving machines. (It must be said, however, that Italy has produced a few stinkers; the unlamented Fiat Multiplas springs instantly to mind). Italians have also built many great racing machines, Ferraris being just one storied name. In fact, the 3.0-liter twin-turbo V6 that powers the gasoline version of the Maserati Levante is a clone of a Ferrari engine, built on the same assembly line in Maranello.

Levante -- the model's name refers to a Mediterranean wind -- is the latest of a spate of luxury SUVs; Porsche Cayenne owning the distinction of the most renowned of the Europeans, Range Rover a close second. The Levante arrives not a moment too soon to help a franchise that has been relying on the Quattroporte and Ghibli sedans for most of its sales at a time when consumers of all income levels are demanding SUVs.

It's important to understand that Levante isn't an SUV in the same sense as a Range Rover or Cadillac Escalade; it's rather more like what once was called -- please forgive this reviled term -- a "hatchback," with a rear cargo area suitable for packages, groceries or a saddle and polo gear as opposed to the family's Great Dane.



For test drives of Levante, Maserati invited journalists to the Emilia-Romagna region of northern Italy, whose capital Bologna is where the Maserati brothers founded the automaker in 1914. Headquarters today are in Modena.

During high speed runs along the *autostrada* and across the hilly Po Valley, Levante delivered the solid footing, handling and sound (like a throaty growl from a caged animal) consistent with one's image of a high-powered Italian sports car.

The new Maserati features adjustable ride height, as well as multiple drive modes, which allow the driver to select for sporty performance, touring or maneuvering on unpaved roads or steep grades that are icy, bumpy or slippery. (An earlier plan to create a Maserati SUV from Jeep technology belonging to parent **Fiat Chrysler Automobiles (FCAU)** was dropped in 2013. Levante is based on the Ghibli sedan architecture).



Levante's cabin is decked out in handsomely grained leather criss-crossed with intricate stitching. Maserati has installed most, if not all, the high-tech safety and driver assistance tools that are becoming standard in all but the most basic vehicles: adaptive cruise control, lane departure warning and so forth. Features such as lane assist, which will return a straying vehicle to its lane, will be added to future models.

My test vehicle, with the more powerful of two gasoline-powered engines, was rated at 424 horsepower, a zero to 60 speed of 5 seconds and a top speed of 164 mph. It starts at \$83,000; a slightly less powerful version starts at \$70,000. With all options, the price would rise to around \$100,000. European customers can select one of two diesel engine choices. For U.S. customers, saving money on fuel probably won't be a high priority for most customers.

Doron Levin is the host of "In the Driver Seat," broadcast on SiriusXM Insight 121, Saturday at noon, encore Sunday at 9 a.m.

This article is commentary by an independent contributor. At the time of publication, the author held no positions in the stocks mentioned.