

Shifting Gears

[Three Stretch Crossovers: Seating Seven Without a Minivan](#)

Posted: 08 Jul 2012 04:19 PM PDT

By Roger Witherspoon

There is nothing like a minivan.

If you've got a large family and have to haul kids, strollers, soccer and football gear, and assorted levels of first aid kits these miniature buses tend to fit the bill. And if you're an empty nester who likes to take road trips with friends, the minivan will get older bones around the country in plodding, genteel comfort.

They're great – unless you can't stand the sedate image, the slow speed, the boxy looks, and would prefer to walk in too-tight shoes than be caught dead in one of the stodgy, kid-carrying, miniature buses.

For folks like that – and there are many – the auto companies have stretched their crossovers, borrowed bottoms from trucks and come out with seven-passenger SUVs. These are marketed as minivans without the middle-age, sedate suburban look, and they sell as logical extensions to standard SUVs designed to meet the needs of expanding families.

But there are tradeoffs when you move from a small bus to a long car. The primary function of the minivan is to hold a lot and then look as good as possible, while the primary function of the stretch SUV is to look good while carrying what will still fit. In addition, those whose priority is a good-looking SUV generally want a vehicle that drives more like a sport machine and less like a bus. Balancing the needs of cargo and ego can be difficult.

Here are three distinct approaches to designing these long sets of wheels and, therefore, they will appeal to different households. Audi, with its Q-7, pushes technology and style; Infiniti promotes the safety systems in its JX 35; and Lincoln says nothing about what's in the MKT but suggests it's a step up in status to own one.



The Audi Q-7

No matter how often it airs, the Audi commercial grabs one's attention.

There is an old codger, reminiscent of Hemmingway's "Old Man and the Sea" reminiscing about the one that escaped his hook and got away. It doesn't take long to realize his hook is on a tow truck, his busy season is during the fierce New England winter, and the Audi is so sure-footed on snow and ice that the cars deliberately mock him.

You have to smile as he plaintively yells "Quattro!" as an Audi sports car with their four-wheel drive zips by in a cloud of swirling snowflakes. You smile, that is, if you're in the market for a sports car. What if you have a big family, need a vehicle that seats seven and don't particularly want a minivan? In that case, what can Quattro do for you?

Audi's answer to that is the Q-7, a stretched, crossover SUV intended to haul a young family of seven, or a smaller group with a lot of room for carry-on gear. While it is not designed to race along and mock the tow truck operators – or other motorists – it is likely to keep a family moving in style regardless of weather and road conditions. Audi does pay attention to exterior looks. But then, with a sticker price of \$65,000, it should.

Outside, the Q-7 has the soft curves and low roof line associated with sleek crossovers such as the Infiniti FX, indicating Audi puts as much stock in design and appearance as in function and performance. Under its long, sloping hood is a supercharged V-6 cranking out 333 horsepower and 325 pound-feet of torque. That power plant doesn't turn a big vehicle into a racing car, but it actually gives a sporty feel to the Q and, on the open road, makes it easy to forget that this is still a truck. And while it isn't prudent to take the speedometer of a small truck into triple digits – even one with a four-star rollover rating – the Q-7 is actually capable of easily getting your license revoked.

Inside, where the masses will reside, the Q-7 offers a lot.



The dashboard was thoughtfully designed with a small screen between the tachometer and speedometer which shows what functions are being utilized at any given time – heated seats, the radio, navigation system, climate, etc. Using fingertip controls the driver can change radio stations, alter the temperature in the rear seats, or zoom in or out of the navigation screen. The design allows the driver to keep his or her eyes on the road and not turn away looking for the appropriate buttons and dials.

For entertainment, the Q-7 has Sirius satellite radio and a CD player. There is an iPod connection inside the glove box, but no USB or MP3 port. The car does have Bluetooth, however, and can easily access the 1,000 or so songs stored in your Android Smartphone. The entertainment system can also be accessed from the rear, so the passengers don't have to necessarily bother the driver.

Its leather seats are wide and thickly padded, and the front pair are power adjustable and can be either heated or air cooled. The second row of seats actually has room for three passengers – two tall adults and a child in the middle whose legs will straddle the hump. The front and second row arm rests are wide and padded, and all doors have wide storage bins and bottle holders.

As with most stretched, seven-passenger vehicles, there is a trade-off to be made between the number of seats and the amount of available cargo room. That is the case here, where the third row, when not in use, provides more than half the cargo space. Using the third row for infants leaves little room for multiple baby carriages and other infant paraphernalia – as well as the stuff the rest of the family lugs around.

In the Q-7, the heavy, manually operated, third row of seats can be pulled up by either climbing into the trunk or folding down the second row seats and pushing them forward. There is not a lot of space between the rear of the second row seat, and the car's door frame, so access can be awkward. Once the third row is set up, however, they are large, deep, and comfortable. But there is absolutely no leg room. That means the third row works well for my daughter's year old twins in their rear-facing child seats, but not for the older kids or unpopular in-laws.

The key controls are set far back in the center console, making it necessary for the driver to look away from the road to find entertainment and climate settings. At some point, one can pretty much memorize the settings and operate by feel. But there is a learning curve for that trick and it is not the safest way to operate.



The Infiniti JX35

Then, along came the guys from Infiniti with the new JX35.

There is a lot riding on this new, stretch SUV considering the role Nissan/Infiniti has played in revolutionizing the SUV market. Their stylish Nissan Murano set a style trend in SUVs that's been obvious in every major brand for the last decade. The upscale model, the muscular-looking, five-passenger, Infiniti FX -50 can go head to head in terms of ride, looks, and interior appointments with any brand.

In addition, the FX models always had heavy duty power plants enabling them to run with or ahead of the competition just as Infiniti's sport coups, the G and IPL, readily ran with their contemporary BMWs and Audis. While one doesn't expect a truck to be quite as versatile and maneuverable as an SUV, the JX – the company's first venture into the seven-passenger market – was still expected to dazzle.

But it doesn't, though not for lack of trying.

The *New York Times*' Lawrence Ulrich absolutely hated this car (http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/10/automobiles/autoreviews/even-with-all-those-seats-the-driver-is-left-out.html?_r=1). But having high hopes dashed and the automotive equivalent of a broken heart needn't generate such hostility.

In its national advertising, Infiniti touts the JX' electronic safety systems in this \$52,000 SUV, including one which detects objects behind the car while it is moving in reverse, and automatically applies the brakes. In the ads, the smart-car stops the JX before it hits a child pushing his toy car. As with any new technology, it needs a little work. When I tried this in my driveway, the JX smart system stopped the car before it backed into my wife's Honda. But the system went dumb when it came to the two-foot high, child-sized birdbath – much to the annoyance of an assortment of sparrows, chickadees, and cardinals out for an afternoon splash.

There are a host of electronic gadgets, however. Their lane warning system, detects when you are veering outside the dotted lines, even if they are covered by several inches of fast-moving

rainwater. The sight lines aren't the best, but the car's blind-spot warning system alerts drivers to cars they can't see. There is also "intelligent" cruise control, which senses slower cars ahead and adjusts the speed to maintain a safe distance behind the vehicle until it speeds up or moves out of the way.



Infiniti has also borrowed a page from GM's OnStar system, and is offering its own, live, "Personal Assistant". In addition to automatically notifying nearby emergency personnel in the event of a crash, or immobilizing a stolen car, the Assistant can make hotel or restaurant reservations or provide step-by-step directions, among other services.

Under the Infiniti's hood is a 3.5-liter V-6 engine providing 265 horsepower and 248 pound feet of torque. That is significantly less power than the Audi Q-7, and not enough to stand out from the motorized crowd. It is, however, more than enough for an efficient, dependable SUV. That power was appreciated on a trip with the grand children to the New Jersey shore (Snookie was not invited).

The Atlantic Ocean beach at Seaside Heights was off limits to the little ones – and everyone else. There was a fierce storm far out to sea sending high waves crashing onshore – which meant the little ones could not play in the sand. In minutes, the streets of Seaside Heights were overwhelmed, with water covering the curbs and lawns and lapping against the summer rentals and year-round residences alike. None of it affected the JX, which rolled through fast moving, eight inches of water with aplomb – providing the kind of safe, secure ride one seeks in a large SUV.

Outside, the JX looks like what it is – a stretched SUV. In that stretching, however, it lost some of the distinctive flair which has characterized Infiniti vehicles. It's pleasant to look at, but nothing special to make heads swivel. The JX has the Infiniti trademark look, with a trim silhouette tapering towards the rear. There is a single, sunroof over the front seats, and long, wide windows for the first and second rows, which actually opens. There is a smaller, viewing window next to the third row, but it does not move.

There was a thought among Infiniti's designers that if you had a third row of seats, everyone should be able to actually use them. As a result, the JX provides about a yard of space between the first and second row of seats, but a bit less than a foot between the third and second row. The middle row, however, can slide 18 inches, which allows adjustments to fit most adults in all rows.

That tapered roof does cut down on the headroom, though, and would prove annoying to folks pushing six feet in height.

In terms of amenities, the JX has heated leather seats as well as heated steering wheel, which can be appreciated in cold weather or when there are sore joints. There is faux wood grain paneling on the doors, dash, and center console, which looks almost real.

The Bose sound system with 13 speakers is superb and, more importantly, easy to use.

The navigation system has an eight-inch screen with a split view backup camera: one is looking behind the car, and the other provides a 360 view all around the car. It allows you to change the view so when you are backing up, you can actually look along the passenger side of the car to see how close to the curb you are. If you use it, it is more reliable than the robot-powered safety brakes.

There are thoughtful storage spaces in the JX. The arm rest in the center console is nine inches wide, and deep enough too hold a small pocketbook. There is also a nine-inch-deep storage bin under the trunk, which is pretty small if the third row is in use.

One would be hard pressed to get a couple of baby strollers and luggage in there, though the storage bin is handy for smaller items.



Lincoln MKT

Lincoln's advertising is interesting.

They have replaced the campaign to convince upscale, male motorists that owning a Lincoln is the "smart" thing to do, and replaced it with a campaign aimed at upwardly mobile women and positioning the brand as the next, logical step up the social ladder. What the ads have in common is they deal with the image and less than five seconds on the car itself.

Which is interesting, since Lincoln's latest alphabet offering, the MKT, is a competitive entry in the stretch SUV class. And with a sticker price of \$57,000, it's priced right in the middle of this

trio of seven-seaters. Lincoln has long viewed itself as the understated alternative to the flashier Cadillac line. With the MKT, Lincoln's designers are attempting to break from that reserved, and sometimes boring, mold. Its standard, recessed, oval insignia has been pushed outward at the end of a long, sloping, pointed hood and splits two long, slim grills. The effect recalls the look of a predatory bird's beak. And while the MKT is a big car, the long, trimmer look – with bigger windows and less metal on the sides – is a break from the tank look of earlier models.

Under that long hood is the most powerful of the stretch SUV power plants. The MKT has a 3.5-liter engine producing 365 horsepower and 350 pound-feet of torque mated to a six-speed, automatic transmission with paddle shifts for a manual mode. Even though the stretch SUV is a heavy, truck based vehicle, the MKT engine provides the type of fast starts and instant surge associated with the best of Lincoln's, Infiniti's, and Audi's sedans.

None of these vehicles is especially frugal when it comes to gasoline usage, however. According to EPA estimates, the Lincoln and Audi Q-7 are each rated at 16 miles per gallon in city driving, and 23 and 22 MPG respectively on the highway; while the Infiniti was nominally better at 18 MPG in the city and 23 MPG on the open road. Given the margin of error with the EPA estimates, the gas rates are indistinguishable and any differences will be the direct result of individual driving styles.

Inside, Lincoln's designers had both comfort and accessibility in mind. There is a deep storage bin under the floor behind the third row of seats which increases the usually meager storage area. At the touch of a button, however, that rear row will fold into the bin, leaving a large, level cargo area. In an unusual design departure, the center console between the front two seats can, as an option, extend through the second row. This provides arm rests and convenient storage – as an option, it can contain a cooler. But choosing this extension means eliminating the center seat, though you can squeeze three kids into the rear.



There is no lack of convenient gadgets, either. For entertainment, there is a 700-watt THX II audio system with 14 speakers which comes closest to a home theatre system. It has Sirius satellite radio and navigation system, as well as iPod, MP3 and USB ports, and the Bluetooth system handles both phones and smartphone audio.

All of the leather seats are power activated. A row of buttons on the side wall in the trunk allows you to fold the third row flat or stow them under the floor. The button on the side panel also allows you to close the cargo door. This is an improvement over the Audi and Infiniti, where the

closing button is on the rear door itself – the Audi’s button is 7.5 feet above the ground – and the seats all have to be manually moved to get in or out.

While that is convenient, there is still a limit as to how much you can store in the longer Lincoln. A pair of strollers, for example, doesn’t leave much room for luggage.

In the end, there is no definitive rule governing what will meet a family’s esthetic and practical needs. The stretch SUV with its three rows of seats and more attractive profile will definitely fit the household needs in many garages.

But in time, some of these larger families may well wish they had opted for practicality instead of appearances and bought the mini bus.