



Maserati's siren song

Levante might not be flashy but this SUV draws a crowd

If you buy a Maserati Levante thinking you can sneak around unnoticed because it's an SUV, you are shockingly wrong.

The Levante isn't flashy, but it has flair and that gorgeous trident badge. Consequently, it draws a Curious George out from every corner.

Those who don't see the famous badge will snap to attention because they hear it coming. That sound of power is another Maserati seduction. It's raspy, metallic, briny and swaggering.

The luxury brand cartel all make swanky SUVs, but the Maserati Levante is new to the game and stylish in that way Italians do stylish-sexy. Maserati has been around for 102 years, sometimes flailing in choppy waters. The Levante is the vehicle that



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could steady the brand, like the Cayenne SUV did for Porsche.

I test drove the Levante SQ4. It is the more powerful of the two models available, with a V6 twin turbo producing 424 horsepower and 428 lb.-ft. of torque. The tasty engine is made by Ferrari. Starting at just over \$103,000, it is possible to top it off with another \$7,000 or so in options if it feels deficient.

What a lovely vehicle inside and out. The exterior view is anchored by a big, luscious grille, sensuous like Sophia Lauren's mouth, but functional with shutters that open and close to direct air flow to the engine.

2017 MASERATI LEVANTE SQ4

- Base Price:** \$101,550
- Price as Tested:** \$118,405
- Engine Type:** 3.0-litre V6, twin turbo
- Power:** 424 hp
- Torque:** 428 lb.-ft.
- Fuel Consumption:** 16.8 L/100 km (city); 12.4 L/100 km (highway)
- What's Best:** Elegant, stylish looks, sport and normal driving modes make it livable for everyday driving
- What's Worst:** Shifter needs a makeover
- What's Interesting:** Priced above many competitors but with unique panache

Inside, seats are tightly tailored, the dash layout is crisp, and Maserati branding on the doorsills and pedals makes you feel special.

Sightlines can be a challenge, with big side mirrors intruding on the view, and backseat headrests pinching visibility out the back window. The Advanced Driver Assistance package helps, with its suite of aids, including lane-departure and blind-spot warnings and surround-view cameras. The backseat is spacious, and a vast sunroof

brings the heavens inside.

Driving the Maserati Levante is dreamy. Adjustable air springs, capable of five ride heights, smooth the wrinkles out of rough roads, and the hydraulic steering gets high praise, though I found it a bit uncommunicative.

The eight-speed automatic can be shifted via the oversized, nicely sculpted paddles mounted on the steering column. Though it is all-wheel drive, in normal driving conditions the Levante sends 100 per cent of the power to the rear wheels to give the enthusiastic driver the performance of rear-wheel drive. If something goes amok and things get slippery, then power is redistributed to restore balance.

With a choice of normal, sport and sport-plus driving modes, the Levante shows three distinct personalities. Acceleration is superior, with a sneaky fast response, so smooth that the landscape blurs by like an abstract painting. The zero-to-100 km/h performance is pegged at 4.9 seconds. Be warned that selecting a sport driving mode unleashes an alien howl as the exhaust baffles open up. I'm sure many drivers will love it, but the raspy snarl and the little shudder that waves through the body became annoying after a while.

So much of the Levante is deftly executed, it is curious how poorly the shifter performs. I had to do a lot of forward and reverse moves in a parking lot as I posed the car for photos, and it's almost impossible to land on the proper gear on the first try. Without distinct detents, the shifter slips by the gear you want.

For the first SUV from Maserati, so much is right – looks, performance and crowd appeal. It turns heads, from the car-wash owner I encountered who wanted to inspect it, to the guy selling whirligigs from his trunk at a country diner who noticed the portholes on the side of the Maserati – “Just like my Buick,” he said.

It's luxury done with Italian flair.

Kathy Renwald is an award-winning automotive writer, photographer and videographer.

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