

2006 Pontiac Solstice
Grand Slam, or Just Another Long Out?
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For The Wheel

It was with great anticipation that we jumped into the Solstice. Obviously a visual stunner that is true to its concept car roots, we felt lucky to get an early chance to put the Solstice through its paces. Not only does this car look fantastic, but the fit and finish on this \$20K car is quite good. Simplistic to a fault – the interior is a bit too basic. With no gauges other than a hard to read fuel gauge, no console or door pockets – it’s a good idea to wear painter’s pants so you have a place to put your stuff. Other than a modest glove box, you’re on your own.



The Solstice certainly had to make a few compromises to be produced this quickly. The suspension however is from scratch and looks very good on paper. With independent, coilover Bilstein shocks and modified double wishbones to locate them, this bodes well for handling. A limited slip is also available, so there won't be a problem getting the power down. The Solstice weighs in at 2860 lbs...not bad. The Ecotec 2.4 liter DOHC engine, producing 177HP and 166 ft lb or torque, borrowed from existing production, and a five-speed transmission, sounds more than adequate to compete with the recent shot across the bow from Mazda with its totally new MX-5 Miata. While there appears to be a challenge right off the bat with a difficult to manage drop top, we remain excited and do not hesitate to put the Solstice to the task immediately.

This is where a sad story begins. Have you ever been at a ball game, and the home team had a chance to win in the late innings – two men on base – down two runs, and the slugger drills one to left center? The entire stadium leaps to their feet – the radio announcer chants “back, back, back” and then the death knell – you see the center fielder slow to a trot, inching toward the wall, reaching up he makes a sweet backhand catch. A long out – but the good news here – it’s only the 7th inning.

The 2006 Solstice is the equivalent of Nike Air running shoes populated by Kirstie Allie. An F115 fighter with the flat four from the Subaru. An ocean going cigarette boat powered by a Jacuzzi hot tub pump. I feel so guilty talking like this. GM has produced some very good, and

some awesome cars in the last few years. We LOVE the V cars. The GTO is awesome. Even the Saturn Ion Redline has endearing qualities. But they've left the enthusiasts at the curb with this initial iteration of the Solstice. This is not an enthusiast's car. It's a two-seater economy car that, with a proper drivetrain, would do one of the most dramatic transformations one could ever imagine. I hereby move that the sports car people of the world get a seat in the corporate meetings that do product planning. Doesn't it make more sense to release a proper car, with a proper engine that centers of influence will WOW about – then go down market once a performance image is established? Is this rocket science? Oh well – to the point, my first release of the clutch yielded a groan that took me back to the bad old days of the ever-popular Iron Duke four cylinder GM engine. This Ecotec engine groans, lacks pull, and is geared so wrong that it just isn't fun to drive. Third gear around town lugs, and there is transmission whine reminiscent of drivetrains 20 years in our past.

There is good news though. First – we ran the car up to Thunderhill for a three lap lunch run. The ride was great, room is excellent for a two-seater and from a comfort standpoint the Solstice has the new Miata whipped. On the track the epiphany took place. Looking over the flared fenders and tossing the Solstice into turn two (a wide left handed carousel), I had a glimpse of what a true sports car version of the Corvette could be. This is an AWESOME handling car. One of the best handling street cars we've ever tested. Easy to drive quickly, very predictable, and the brakes stayed with us nicely as well. But talk about testing your momentum driving skills....I never found a power band at any rev range. No matter how I spooled her up and carried speed on exit, any shift left a sense of 7 Miatas passing me immediately as the Solstice groaned for breath.

Now for the real good news. Pontiac must be aware that the initial effort is not an enthusiast hit, (a drive around the block is all one needs) as Pontiac website is already pitching the 2007 Solstice GXP. With a turbo 4 cylinder rated at 260 horses with 260 ft lbs of torque and, just as important a 3.73 rear axle ratio, the GXP is EXACTLY what the doctor ordered. This car will be a GRAND SLAM and win the enthusiast game for Pontiac. There are so many reasons to be excited about the Solstice. We must offer kudos to the GM brass for rolling it out. That they started with a price-point target rather than a performance target must be forgiven – as the GXP will be the first true sports car to come from Detroit in many, many years. We can't wait for what the future holds for the Solstice. P.S. One last comment for GM – we'd sure appreciate a rollover hoop or at least an option for one like the Boxster/S2000. Otherwise the many new owners will not be able to play with us at Thunderhill.