

**Scenic Bypass to Thunderhill: Maxwell to Elk Creek via
2007 Infiniti G35S Six Speed Sedan:
Treat Yourself to this Driving Diversion!
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As a member of the San Francisco Region of the SCCA, we should all be proud that your organization had the foresight to build the trend setting Thunderhill Raceway Park. Hopefully you frequent this facility either to race, support races, assist as crew, drive at track days, or just attend to watch the variety of events there. Many of us go to Thunderhill from the south. I recently had an extra 90 minutes on a relaxed drive to Thunderhill, while thoroughly enjoying the Infiniti G35S, and decided to take a scenic detour. I'd done it once before, but it's been several years, and it was one of those experiences that was so good, I wanted to refresh and confirm my memory before I told my friends about it. Consider the memory refreshed, and it was even better than I remembered.

This route to Thunderhill makes no sense whatsoever, and is substantially out of the way. In fact, upon my return to the Bay Area, I felt the urge to buy some carbon credits or plant a tree, as it's probably 1/3 of a tank of gas spent on nothing but smiling. Consider it a good investment.



As you travel north (for those who live south of Willows) up Highway 5 through Williams, CA, the radar capital of the northern hemisphere, you will approach the hamlet of Maxwell. Years ago, we stumbled into Maxwell in the hunt for race track land, only to discover a charming and excellent restaurant called the Maxwell Inn. Resplendent with taxidermy to include a polar bear and buffalo, this historic spot will dish up a big city quality dinner for those so inclined. But this is just a sidebar, as on this day, we headed straight through Maxwell on the main road to the west and proceeded on our western loop to Thunderhill. (NOTE: This route is unmarked gray roads on a map, but if you follow easy signs to Lodoga, then Stonyford, then Elk Creek, then Willows, you will have no problem with the route.) You could imagine yourself in the high plains of Colorado as you leave Maxwell and approach a somewhat foreboding and remote looking coastal mountain range. The views of the range are striking in that the strata of millions of years of the earth's folding and slipping are prominent with sheets of rock outcroppings welcoming you into the first cut of the mountains. It's about this time that you realize that you're driving a driver's car in the G35, and your soul says, "Bring on these mountains, we can handle them."



Let there be no mystery about it, the G35S is an excellent companion that we've already learned to appreciate even in more pedestrian surroundings. Eerily quiet with only a trace of V6 moan when challenged, the G has eaten up every pothole, broken seam in the freeway, and city dweller's road challenges like licking a lollipop. This is one of the best suspensions we've experienced in terms of managing dips and bumps while remaining composed and controlled. We found this suspension so good that it may have out-BMW'd BMW. While very composed in aggressive canyon driving, there seems to be no compromise for this as is evidenced by this comfortable everyday ride. The interior, once again, while built to sport sedan scale, may be the best layout we've experienced, with outstanding headroom, superior, supportive seats, and an ample back seat for even six footers. To say that we're tucked into a cuddly surrounding for some spirited driving is an understatement. We feel like we're at home – as one might say, "This one is just right."

The route comes at you in segments that reflect the geology of this virtually forgotten western valley mountain range. First, there are fast sweepers with a few tight kinks, followed by a flow through the higher range area that precedes another, more sporty switchback section. The payoff for the switchback comes as you drop down into the scenic Indian Valley, which after driving predominantly to the west, finally turns you north and back in the general direction of the destination. This valley is where I'd caution you to use good judgment. There is great temptation here with a fabulous and scenic open road. There seems to be very little traffic in the area, except, for instance, Black Angus bulls that could be awaiting you around a bend. The road, while overall is not too bad for this far out, has its share of cracks and repairs that you'll want to avoid. In addition, we had to literally stop for turkeys, slow three separate times for deer and generally be on the lookout as we cruised through this voluptuous landscape. So, while this is a spectacular driver's route, keep your wits about you and don't do anything stupid.



You will already be chuckling to yourself that this is way too much fun as you approach, suddenly entering a 35mph zone that is the small village of Stonyford. It's at this point you begin driving along Stony Creek. In June, your first views of the creek are well, that it's a creek. But as you head north, the creek becomes a picturesque flow through an ancient rock wash, surrounded by poplars and subtly statuesque rock formations. This would be fun territory to hike, notwithstanding the rattle snakes that would be waiting in our path. As we drive north, the road opens up and is quite open and scenic. The G is now a confirmed team member, having displayed a stout, if not hemi-like 3.5 liter, 306hp V6 pull that had plenty of seat-of-the-pants torque (268lb ft, to be specific), even without downshifting to gain grunt. On the tightest of turns we challenged the G consistently, and consistently we exited briskly without any drama whatsoever. We were surprised, but not in a negative way, that the non-intrusive traction control indicator would pop on and off during brisk cornering, even up at a quicker pace in the 70 mph range as we navigated over dips and ruts with no challenge at all.



After a bit of a workout (remember, relax, hands at 9 and 3, pull the wheel, don't push the wheel, sit up on the wheel a bit, NASCAR drivers do this for 4 hours) we arrive in Elk Creek. If we hadn't already eaten, we would have stopped at the gem of a spot, Nancy's Elkhorn Lodge. But today, the mission was to drive, so drive we did, turning right onto Highway 162, the first sign of

real civilization for some time, and the final stretch to Thunderhill. It should be mentioned once again at this juncture, this is no place for stupid stuff on public highways. Highway 162 is an agricultural area with plenty of haybailers and pickups, so again – use good judgment in enjoying this beautiful road. Think of it as one of the very, very few things that you're proud of as tax money well spent.



Arriving at Thunderhill, the G35 has just been warming up for what's to come. Running on track during a Thunderhill Street School, the Infiniti once again exhibits great manners and a flexibility to play as hard as one cares too – up to a limit. Obviously, we find bump stops as we roll from Turn 3 to 4, but the predominant feeling while driving the G is “This is fun. This car could spend a whole day here, and the owner would be a happy camper.” With predictable turn in and only moderate understeer, the G rotates sweetly as power comes on as we pass apexes left and right. As a current racer of a T2 350Z with the previous generation of this V6, I can say that there is a substantial jump in torque, AND 500 more RPM's before redline with this second gen motor. The most obvious place this new power shows up is exiting Turn 11, where the butt-o-meter says there is more whomp going on under the hood than in my 2003 T2 car. Also, we challenged the brakes on one brief run and were surprised to feel a solid pedal throughout this brisk run.

One feature that Infiniti (Nissan) needs to work on is their clutch. This is a very nice 6-speed gearbox, but the awkward, sudden clutch grab makes being smooth a challenge. This is almost enough of an issue to send me to their excellent auto-stick automatic for a daily driver. Blasphemy!!

With this said, our tour in the Infiniti left us with both thumbs up – especially at the retail price of \$35,000 for this loaded model minus NAV (thank you). And the combination of this outstanding ride with the incredible roads made for an experience to remember. Going to Thunderhill sometime soon? Leave work early, take your time, and ride these roads to catch an up-close view of those neglected western valley mountains – you'll be glad you did!