We compare eight $50,000 SUVs in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula.

“LOOKS LIKE WE HAVE A WINNER.”
Given a choice of driving destinations, you'd pick paradise, right? So that's what we did, except this was Paradise, Michigan, in the northeast corner of the Upper Peninsula, and it wasn't exactly paradise. "In winter," complained managing editor Steve Spence, "this place makes you long for biting flies." It was eight degrees on our first morning there, and the 600 residents were preparing to shovel 51 inches of snow—which is what falls in January alone.

There's one paved road through pretty Paradise, and it runs past the spectacular Upper and Lower Falls of the Tahquamenon River, whose original Algonquian translation is thought to have meant "the river where the women were lost." It is a wild place. The freighter Edmund Fitzgerald broke apart on Lake Superior near Whitefish Point, just north of Paradise, and the region—crisscrossed with unmapped two-tracks and 200 miles of snowmobile trails—is famous for northern hardwoods that are 300 to 400 years old. More important to us, it is also famous for the Tahquamenon Falls Brewery & Pub, for the Bear Butt Bar & Grill, and for the Yukon Inn, where, in years of extra heavy snowfall, snowmobilers park their machines on the roof. Seemed like a good place to test eight SUVs. If we could get there.

Each of our ice-caked utes, nicely equipped, hovered around the $50,000 mark. We wanted mid-size luxury SUVs only, so we tried to include those whose overall length was as close to 190 inches as possible. One of the oldest in our group, the Cadillac SRX, was also the longest, at 194.9 inches. But this admittedly arbitrary length stipulation precluded at least one notable that might otherwise have qualified on price: the Audi Q7. Two other contenders might also have tagged along—the Infiniti FX45 and the Porsche Cayenne S—but were left at home for having already been defeated in previous comparos. A loaded Jeep Commander might have acquitted itself well, but we felt that its cockpit lacked sufficient bling.

Our attention was keenly focused on a trio of old faithfuls—each in its second generation and all three of which have been recently freshened: the Acura MDX, the BMW X5 3.0si and the Mercedes-Benz ML350. We were also curious about the VW Touareg V-6 and Lexus GX470, both recently infused with more horses.

In total, we motored more than 1000 miles through the sort of blizzards that would depress an Iditarod musher, encrusting our SUVs with so much solid precipitation that the proximity sensors honked and bonged incessantly. On the other hand, we lost no women. Except those we tried to chat up at the Yukon Inn.

THE ACURA MDX SPORT RANKS FIRST

The Highs—Agile in the hills, superior tracking, gratifying to drive.
The Lows—Goofy grille, cluttered center stack, no low-range 4WD.
The Verdict—As much sport as utility, and, hey, it’s a Honda.

In comparison tests, it sometimes happens that the winner on paper—the vehicle with the superior test-track numbers—isn’t the winner on public roads. Readers never fail to remind us of this, usually in letters that begin, “Dear Morons.” You’ll be happy to know that this second-gen Acura MDX—which still sounds to us like a medical condition—was victorious almost everywhere it poked its gaudy grille. Check it out: Greatest skidpad grip. Highest lane-change speed. Second-quickest sprint to 60 mph. Best driving position. Best back-seat comfort. Lightest curb weight. Steering and brake feel that were tied with the BMW’s. A ride as cushy as the Benz’s. And a fun-to-drive rating equaled only by the Cadillac’s. All of that for the lowest as-tested price.
On the freeway, even pushed by icy 30-knot sidewinds, the MDX tracked like an S-class Benz, with the sort of on-center feel you'd expect from an Audi. In turns, it took a firm and true set, requiring no midcourse corrections, always whispering to its driver, “Go ahead and nail it, chief—I may look like an SUV, but I'm actually a 300-hp wagon.”

Don't get us wrong, the MDX proved plenty practical. Behind the second seat there's more cargo space than you'll find in the gigantic Land Rover, in part because this is the widest SUV in the group. And the split-folding third-row seat comes standard, although it can be accessed from the curb side only.

Complaints? The center stack's 50 buttons and switches looked like something NASA would reject. The MDX has no low-range four-wheel drive or ride-height control, although the traction- and stability-control systems mitigated that oversight. And the somber wraparound dash felt constricting to some, although it was in keeping with the MDX's anti-ute mission.

On comparison tests, early pronouncements are discouraged. But only 370 miles into this test, the Acura's grace and charisma sparked four editors to write in its logbook, “Looks like we have a winner.”

On the freeway, even pushed by icy 30-knot sidewinds, the MDX tracked like an S-class Benz, with the sort of on-center feel you'd expect from an Audi. In turns, it took a firm and true set, requiring no midcourse corrections, always whispering to its driver, “Go ahead and nail it, chief—I may look like an SUV, but I'm actually a 300-hp wagon.”

Don't get us wrong, the MDX proved plenty practical. Behind the second seat there's more cargo space than you'll find in the gigantic Land Rover, in part because this is the widest SUV in the group. And the split-folding third-row seat comes standard, although it can be accessed from the curb side only.

Complaints? The center stack's 50 buttons and switches looked like something NASA would reject. The MDX has no low-range four-wheel drive or ride-height control, although the traction- and stability-control systems mitigated that oversight. And the somber wrap-around dash felt constricting to some, although it was in keeping with the MDX's anti-ute mission.

On comparison tests, early pronouncements are discouraged. But only 370 miles into this test, the Acura's grace and charisma sparked four editors to write in its logbook, “Looks like we have a winner.”