

Little Mercies

To see if its latest round of upgrades is noteworthy or not worthy, Jeff Glenn drove an '08 Z06 back-to-back with a virtually brand-new '07. He came back with these ideas and images.





We've already discussed the big news in the standard Corvette's '08 lineup, summed up in a three-digit acronym: LS3. That new base-Corvette powerplant makes 430 horsepower, has heads patterned on those from the LS7, and propels the standard C6 to a supercar-worthy 190 mph. Other "regular" '08 features include optional dual-mode exhaust, new wheels, tighter shift feel, and a revised steering rack.

Of course only a few of these updates—most intriguingly the latter—found their way

into the '08 Z06, a model that also received a \$1000 price bump this year. To see if that level of super-fine tuning is noticeable, let alone noteworthy, we decided to pull out a 2007 Z06 and compare it to the '08 edition back to back. Call us skeptical: After reading GM's data about the new rack's "stiffer intermediate shaft, re-machined internals, and revised controller setting," we wondered if these steering changes were upgrades behind the wheel, or just marketing fluff on the page.



Behind the Doors

Spending time with these consecutive-year Z06s also highlights a few of Chevy's cosmetic updates. Open the door and look down: The *Corvette* script that was cut out of black grip tape for '07 is now an embossed stamped-aluminum plate, making the entry sill look less like a skateboard and more like the rest of the high-end sports-car market. Similarly, the view from the driver's seat is essentially identical save for a few changes in materials. Chevy calls 2008's a more "crafted" interior, and by comparing the parts side-by-side you notice a couple of tiny differences. There are new stitch lines

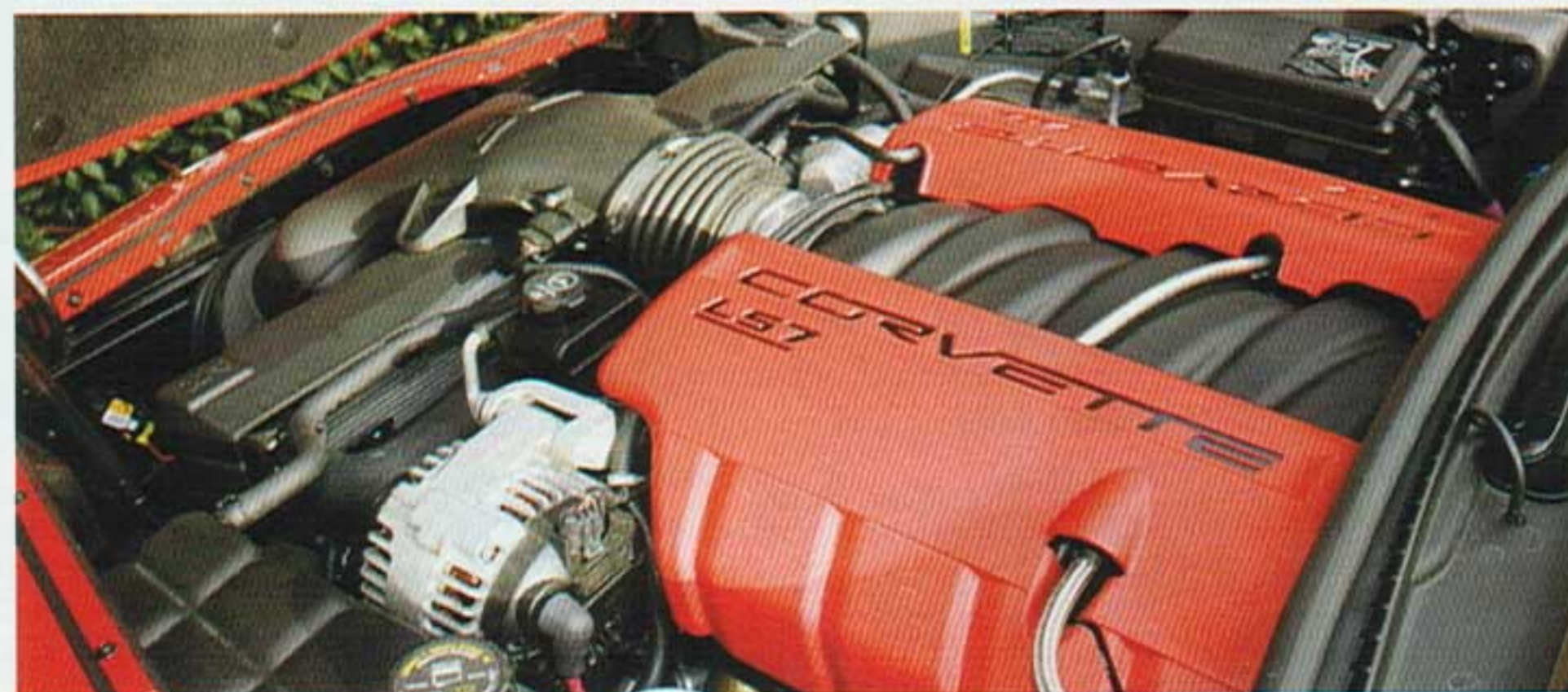
in the dash and console, though the thread is a bit out of place against the rubberized synthetic it passes through. Some faces are re-shod in smooth, shiny, carbon-look plastic rather than matte, graphite-colored, metallic-look plastic. (Basically, we'd call that a wash.)

On The Road

Eight tires and 1010 horsepower, all in a combined curb weight below that of a single Ford Excursion: Sounds like a '90s *C&D* feature on the latest Coloni creation, but in fact it's just two Z06s out for an afternoon's test drive.

As noted, the aforementioned steering rack

is the most significant mechanical change to the '08 Z06—and, to no little surprise, it turns out it makes quite a difference. Chevy claims that its remachined parts and reworked controller settings are designed to enhance steering feel, and hey, presto, they actually enhance the car's steering feel. The most obvious symptom is increased effort at lower speeds; under 40 mph, the revised 2008 steering proves less boosted in sharp turns and slow cornering. At highway speeds they seem nearly identical, but that's fine—the feel during lane changes and working the car through high-speed sweepers was already excellent. It was the city-speed



Without costing the carmaker very much, little details can make a big difference in overall perceived quality. Entry sill and vent-surround upgrades will barely bite into Chevy's \$1000 MY '08 price hike, but make the car appear more apropos to the money.

sensation that didn't thrill us, with the 2007 steering coming off much lighter and slower in comparison. Not only does the revised rack give the driver a better sense of connection to the road, the increased low-speed effort makes it easier to keep your inputs, and thus the car's motions, smooth.

At the Stick

The next-biggest mechanical change is less noticeable: At the shifter, one now finds a hair-shorter throw and marginally smoother action across the gates. The changes are most perceptible in the 2-3 and 4-5 shifts, but the stick feels happier in every motion. *A little* happier.

So, taken all in all, the '08 Z06 offers new buyers minor upgrades at best: There's nothing here that will motivate anyone to dump his existing example and step up to this one. But that's not what 2008 was supposed to be about, anyway. This season is about continuing development for its own sake. Yes, with a car as successful as the C6 Z06 it would've been easy to say "Why change it at all?" But ongoing development is a core feature of any serious sports car. Chevrolet is wise to be doing that with its Corvettes. ○