

## 2002 Chevrolet Camaro SS

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After years of hints and rumors, the show is finally over. 2002 will be the last model year for the Chevrolet Camaro, at least for the seeable future. The Camaro is a big-engine, heavy-metal throwback to another time. That, of course, is the source of its appeal. The Camaro is leaving in style, featuring a dazzling 35th Anniversary edition in its final year.

Rounding the corner of the new Millennium, the final Camaro still retains the long hood/short deck pony car proportions of the 1967 original. Only everything else has changed. With a sloping nose, deeply raked windshield, the Camaro sports a dart-like profile. Alloy wheels with painted surfaces freshen the 10-year-old body style. Up front, a wide, blacked-out grille gapes between narrow, oval headlamps. The hood is crowned by a functional fresh-air scoop, giving this aging muscle car an appropriately menacing look. A distinctive black roof treatment marks the Z28 coupe. The SS-specific, low-rise rear spoiler sets off its tail end nicely.

Raise the hood on a Camaro Z28 or SS, and you'll find Chevrolet's familiar 5.7-liter V8. It's tucked so far back, it looks as though you'd need to open the glove box to change a rear spark plug. But while it appears to be hiding, the 5.7 is hardly a shrinking violet.

Rated at 325 horsepower and 350 pounds-feet of torque in the SS (310 and 340 in standard Z28), this aluminum-block motor shines brightly. Its broad, smooth power band launches the Camaro effortlessly, whether from a standing start or for a fast highway pass. A slight nudge of the throttle yields added oomph in any gear. Dig your spurs in its side, and the SS responds with sufficient thrust to shove you back in your seat. Top speed is governed at 160 mph in SS models, 108 in Z28s, unless you opt for speed-rated tires. Both Z28 and SS models serenade the driver with a vintage V8 soundtrack, the classic, throaty rumble that is music to the ears of muscle-car buffs.

The SS motor is virtually unstressed at speed. At 80 mph, it's turning just 2400 rpm, a step above slumber. Thanks to this intelligent gearing, the SS is able to offer respectable highway fuel economy. EPA ratings for the automatic version are 18 city/26 highway: impressive, considering the engine's power output. The engine in base Camaros is GM's popular 3.8-liter V6, tuned in this application to produce 200 horsepower and 225 pounds-feet of torque. The 3800 V6 is found under the hood of countless GM products and seems to perform well no matter where it turns up.

A four-speed automatic transmission is standard on Z28 and SS, though buyers can opt for a six-speed manual at no additional cost. The automatic works well with the V8, with smooth shifts up and down. In previous-generation Camaros, handling was a one-way street, with super-heroic cornering power purchased at the expense of riding comfort. So these latest models are a pleasant surprise. Even the ultra-performance SS does not unduly punish you for the privilege. Standard Z28 models are tuned for a more compliant ride while still offering very capable cornering.

The convertibles were engineered from the ground up for roofless duty; they are not simply hardtops with the roof sawed off. Cowl shake on our convertible was unnoticeable on smooth pavement, and never more than moderate on any surface. That was a pleasant surprise. All-speed traction control is standard on Anniversary Camaros, and offered as an option on all other models (\$250 with a V6, \$450 with a V8). But even with it, we wouldn't relish driving a Camaro in snow or sleet, given its rear-wheel drive, light tail, wide tires and (in V8 cars) high power. For the parts of the country where winter weather brings bad driving conditions, the best solution for a Camaro is hibernation.