

Down and dirty in Ford's all-new crown jewel

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It might seem that reinventing the Ford Explorer would be a matter of engineering and styling, but job one is to identify the market. The Explorer has one of the most-recognized names in the automotive industry, with 96 percent of the population knowing the name and product. That's a good thing, but at the same time means extra effort is needed to ensure that everyone knows this Explorer is new, new, new.

Consumer surveys revealed five goals, keywords or areas of focus among potential buyers: fun, family, Ford, adventure and SUV. To be king of a segment, you might think any one vehicle has to be able to accomplish anything and everything that all vehicles in the segment do. By that measure, the Explorer might have to match everything from a Jeep Wrangler, to a Suburban, to a Dodge diesel pickup. In fact, however, their customer research reveals "no rock climbers" and less towing need than anticipated, which has its own interesting statistics. Of their buyers, a full 85 percent never tow. Another 12 percent tow under 5000 pounds. 2.6 percent have another vehicle dedicated to towing anything over 5000 pounds. This leaves just 0.4 percent of potential Explorer customers who might want to own an Explorer and use it to tow, well, anything—including over 5000 pounds. Thus, the new Explorer is engineered to tow up to 5000 pounds, perhaps losing that 0.4 percent, but providing the other 99.6 percent with an SUV that costs less, weighs less, handles better and helps achieve one of Ford's prime objectives: better fuel economy.

With the 2011 Explorer, Ford proudly claims SUV class-leading fuel economy, as well as performance. High-tech powertrains include a standard powerful and fuel-efficient 3.5L V6 with twin independent variable camshaft timing (Ti-VCT). For top fuel economy, there is an optional 2.0L EcoBoost™ inline-4, which Ford says delivers V6-like power. Each engine has its own six-speed automatic transmission, to optimize performance and driving dynamics as well as maximize fuel economy. The V6 improves fuel economy over the prior Ford Explorer by about 20 percent, or roughly 4 MPG. With the EcoBoost 4, improvement is expected to top 30 percent, or about 6 MPG. The V6 still delivers 290 hp and 255 lb-ft of torque, while the EcoBoost 4—which Ford will introduce globally—offers 237 hp and almost the same torque—250—with peak torque generated from a low 1700-4000 RPM. This four can tow.

And what might you have to pay for all this enhanced technology and anticipated fuel saving? Amazingly enough, Ford has been able to deliver the all-new Explorer for \$1100 less than the old 2010 model—while adding 80 horsepower, 4-6 MPG and a third row.

The base Explorer with 6-speed automatic and AdvancTrac® with Roll Stability Control™ starts at \$28,190. The XLT upgrades to a 6-speed SelectShift Automatic™ and adds a Reverse Sensing System, along with broad feature and style upgrades, starting at \$31,190. And the Limited, adding MyFord Touch™ and Sony audio with HD Radio starts at \$37,190. Option pricing has also been address, with some major add-ons dropping by as much as 33 percent.

We've driven to, from, in and around San Diego

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FORD EXPLORER: A ONE-VEHICLE CONSUMER ELECTRONICS SHOW

Ford introduced SYNC at the North American International Auto Show in Detroit, in 2007, and implemented it on a dozen 2008 models. SYNC is a factory-installed, fully-integrated in-vehicle communications and entertainment system that allows users to make hands-free telephone calls, control music and perform other functions with their eyes on the road ahead—using voice commands. Computer programs and user interfaces were developed by Ford and third-party developers running on the Microsoft Windows Embedded Auto platform.

MyFord Touch™ (and MyLincoln Touch™) were introduced in 2010 in the 2011 Ford Edge. The MyFord Touch and SYNC names seem somewhat overlapping, although the general idea is that SYNC is the underlying OS for MyFord Touch, the user interface.

Besides voice control, the MyFord Touch system includes touchscreens—which intuition welcomes—and a five-way-button control on the steering wheel, matching controls of many devices. Various screens and gauges are reconfigurable or context-sensitive, providing vastly more information, personalization, and again working intuitively. The system's memory can lock in not only music and phone preferences, but the driver's preferred climate settings.

We spent the first hour or so of our San Diego presentation being introduced to the various technologies, each installed in its own dedicated vehicle and with personnel from each developer on hand to demonstrate that company's particular wares. Sony, HD Radio, Nuance, Gracenote, Telemann and others, as well as Ford themselves, gave us one-on-one demos, some smooth as silk, some with the occasional hiccup, a couple at times requiring more attention than a hand-off system ideally might, but all showing great promise and creating a solid basis for additional development.

Ford also includes internet connectivity for up to five passengers through a WiFi Mobile Hot Spot, either by password-protected LAN using a compatible USB broadband modem, or Personal Area Network using Bluetooth® tethering and a smartphone.

SD-card-based navigation includes easily updated maps, 3D landmarks, SIRIUS TravelLink, Wcities for enhanced POI information, and Eco-Route to apply a database of speed, distance and traffic to find an economical way to reach your destination.

Put it all together, and you find a system that can handle just about any task—routine or unexpected. Catalog and store contacts, destinations, music including such add-ons as album art, your favorite temperature and fan settings, and they are all available at the touch of a steering wheel button, a touchscreen interface, or—the tour de force of SYNC—a voice command. It's powerful, very complete, intuitive—so intuitive, we remain surprised they work with Microsoft and not Apple. Imagine the level of intuitive control if the systems were, well, in sync with the iPod, iPhone, iPad and Mac.

For more information on MyFord Touch and SYNC, visit ford.com/technology/sync/myfordtouch





County plenty, but we'd never been on the highway route we took for the Ford Explorer launch. And it had been many years since we'd driven through a lion and tiger sanctuary. The combination of the two gave us broad experience in Ford's all-new SUV. While we didn't have to actually fend off the big cats, the sanctuary had been adapted to provide courses including rough roads, off-road, hill descent, deep water, a sand pit and more. And the combination of four-lane freeway, "round-town" and most of all challenging two-lane mountain highways put paved roadworthiness to the test.

Highway time reveals a vehicle that, despite its SUV capabilities, is a fine "car." The interior is superb (modeled with benchmark Audi interiors in mind): fit and finish are tops, soft-touch surfaces and comfortable leather abound, electronics and controls (see sidebar, prior page) are convenient, and seating is very comfortable. Handling is great, belying its SUV stature. If you never take the Explorer off-road—and that's common enough among owners—you will still enjoy it daily.

Our visit to Lions Tigers and Bears Big Cat Rescue, near Alpine CA, up in the mountains north of I-8, gave us a chance to try the Explorer's prodigious handling technologies. Key among these is something the Explorer has picked up from the all-out Ford Raptor purpose-built off-road pickup—this despite the general lack of "rock climbers" in the Explorer demographic. This is Ford's Terrain Management System, which doesn't need a Moab rock rally to be of value.

Available on V6 Explorers as part of an intelligent 4WD system, the Terrain Management System is "situation-selectable," taking the guesswork out of four-wheel-drive range choices. "Simpler and more convenient for SUV veterans, the system will be a confidence-builder for drivers new to the segment," says Ford. Gone are the transfer case, with its HI and LO settings, which had been revealed to confuse more customers than help them. Instead, the driver need only turn a console-mounted knob to one of four settings: Snow, Sand, Mud or Normal. Also included (and also Raptor-derived) is a Hill Descent mode.

Our courses included challenges for all, and we ran some of them multiple times. We were told many of us had been taking one particularly rough two-track trail at slower speeds, as we took it at normal speed on our second pass—in total comfort. Hill Descent kept us from ending up in a creek with hot brakes, which is where most vehicles would have been. One long and deep water trough was no obstacle to the Explorer, which not only passed right through it, but never seemed to have any risk of stalling due to depth. A large sand pit was perhaps everybody's favorite: this mini-Sahara was very challenging in the Normal setting, though a normally skilled driver could conquer it and even have some fun; but in Sand mode, the driver gains total control of the vehicle—and yes, still has fun.

Many thanks to Lions Tigers and Bears for letting Ford and a pack of unrehabilitated automotive journalists take over their terrain for the day.

We could fill a whole brochure with more details of the 2011 Ford Explorer, but Ford has already done that. The new Ford Explorer is at dealers now. One thing for certain: the new Ford Explorer is one vehicle we would always take out, but never kick out of our garage. ■

