

Exploring new boundaries

Ford Explorer, the original definer of the SUV segment, brings a completely new game-changer onto the field

Ford is on a roll. They avoided the government-mandated restructuring that affected operations for others, they've continued to introduce new products, sales are strong and their stock value has soared. While others have sweated market segments—whether to stick with more profitable large vehicles and/or pursue alternative fuel and other small, efficient vehicles, Ford has continued to follow its own compass, bringing customers a full range of compelling options—including all of the above—ranging from the powerful Raptor purpose-built pickup to the diminutive Fiesta.

When things are going this well, but change is nonetheless in the wind, the challenge of moving the ball forward on its most iconic products is especially daunting. When the Ford Explorer was introduced in 1990 (as model year 1991), it was a game-changer. Joining a field of Jeep Cherokees and a few boxy imports, the Explorer sold like hotcakes and, although it didn't invent the Sport Utility Vehicle segment, it defined it for millions. The Ford Explorer in fact enjoys a whopping 96% name recognition in North America. That's equity.

We flew to Dearborn for the top-secret press reveal of the 2011 Ford Explorer on July 20, which came with an embargo date—no photos, no info—of six days later. Our phones were confiscated,

to ensure no early images escaped. We were able to mention the occasion on our Facebook page, but that's it. Embargoes are common, but more than usual, Ford had a plan: rather than either introduce the vehicle at a major auto show (while many others are doing the same) or wait for the next model-year full-line introduction, they created their own Explorer reveal day, July 26, when—starting at 12:01am—the cat was out of the bag and let off the leash. The vehicle had a fully-orchestrated public reveal on Facebook—a first—and special consumer launch events were held in eight cities (not Phoenix ... Detroit, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, Miami and others).

Was it worth the wait and is it worth all the buzz? Yes, it was, and yes it is.

What's new

There is so much new in the 2011 Ford Explorer, it might be hard to know where to start. At press launch, Ford opened with fuel mileage. Final EPA numbers were not yet available, but they expect a 30 percent increase over the prior model's fuel mileage—better, they say, than a

Toyota Highlander Hybrid. That would bring 2010's numbers (e.g. a two-wheel-drive 6-cylinder) from 14/20 to more like 18/26 mpg city/highway.

Fuel economy is the deal-breaking obstacle for any SUV to overcome. The typical customer wants its capabilities, utility, space—and sense of adventure. Improving fuel economy considerably has reduced that barrier from the formula. The second common barrier to SUV sales is driving dynamics. Ford declared a vision of no compromise, so the new Explorer team was assigned the challenging task of winning over all customers—on all counts.

While tackling those SUV-specific goals, they also had to keep in mind Ford's "four pillars" for their whole lineup: quality, green credentials, safety and smart technology.

Through it all, they had to never lose the iconic spirit of the Explorer. The team admits to having lived simultaneously with excitement and anxiety as the project unfolded.

Specific goals included seating for seven adults, class-leading first and second rows, best-in-class EPA numbers, competent towing capability and "spirited performance." Ford executives told us the process was like training an athlete. And not just any athlete: this was like training for the decathlon.

Power and economy

The heart of fuel economy efforts is a new 2.0-liter inline-4-cylinder EcoBoost promising the power of a V6, with 237 hp (a 13 percent increase) and 250 lb-ft of torque over a particularly wide band. Its fuel economy guesstimates put it in range of mainstream sedans like the Toyota Camry. Explorer also claims class-leading low CO₂ emissions. The I-4 has a 200,000 rpm turbocharger, designed for over 150,000 miles of service and tested for the equivalent of 10 years of operation.

The EcoBoost four is the show-off, but standard will be a 3.5-liter TiVCT V6 rated at 290 hp, with fuel mileage still more than 20 percent above its predecessors.

Fundamental change

Data showed the Explorer was used—no big surprise—on streets and highways most of the time. The biggest earth-moving changes were made in pursuit of driving quality. No longer built on a rear-wheel-drive truck-

based chassis, the new Explorer becomes a default-front-drive unibody. Front and rear suspension are new, and the vehicle claims greatly improved body roll and street noise.

Ford anticipates about 42 percent of sales will be upgraded to all-wheel drive.

Off-road and towing

But wait, you say. It's an SUV. It has to work off-road. Ford assures us there are no compromises here. To the rescue, their third pillar: smart technology. Anyone who buys the Explorer for die-hard truck reasons may miss the old 4WD transfer case, but most will be delighted by a new Terrain Management System in the AWD model. The twist of a console knob generates optimized setting for sand, snow, mud or everyday driving—a simple set of names that represent a full range of situations. The "Mud" setting remaps the accelerator pedal for faster spin, longer shifts and maximum torque, while backing off traction control to spin and shed mud. "Sand" applies more torque, especially to the rear. "Snow" is less aggressive, upshifts earlier and has less

spin in pursuit of more traction. Roll stability is always in place.

Add Hill Descent Control—which we tested in the Raptor in a memorable hands-on demo last spring—and novice or expert will have an off-road vehicle capable of most anything they can throw at it (up to 20 mph).

Towing capability is up to 5000 lbs with the V6, 2000 with the I-4, and the function is supported by tow haul settings, sway control and a rear camera to help you hook up.

Safety

Ford says the number one safety device is an alert and engaged driver. But they provide a lot of help. Explorer has a high-strength steel structure, a Safety Canopy® System of side curtain airbags for all three rows, and RSC® Roll Stability Control™. The new unibody subframe absorbs energy far better than the old truck frame, and a boron steel B-pillar provides exceptional structural strength.

Add the world's first inflatable safety belts, in the second row. These were demonstrated to media in Phoenix ahead of the Explorer reveal (sans Explorer). Clearly an idea you can't believe no one ever thought of before, these should be ubiquitous before long.

The electronics team adds a Blind Spot Information System with Cross Traffic Alert, and Adaptive Cruise Control with Brake Support, using algorithms to anticipate an emergency and prep or start braking quickly.

Another new technology that starts here and will quickly spread brand-wide is Curve Control. Upon arrival in Dearborn, our first stop was the test track, where fully-cloaked 2011 Explorers and driver-engineers awaited us. We were not to get a glimpse of much, the night before the official reveal. But the engineers took us around the track to demonstrate their new gem. Most drivers at some point enter a corner too fast, realize too late and may lose control. In fact, there are about 50,000 crashes each year attributed to this. Enter Curve Control. With us onboard, the engineers hit decreasing-radius track turns fast, with water applied. Curve Control rapidly reduces engine torque and can apply four-wheel braking, slowing the vehicle by up to 10 mph in about one second. It's surprisingly but calmly effective. Curve Control debuts as standard equipment on the 2011 Explorer and will be offered on 90 percent of Ford SUVs, crossovers, trucks and vans by 2015.



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Style and quality

In short, Ford changed everything—“everything you see, touch or hear.” Start with style. It often takes some time to get used to a new vehicle and to recognize it as an extension of its familiar past. Not so, here. The new model is immediately recognizable both as the Explorer and as part of the Ford family. The grille is reminiscent of Taurus (but to our eye also builds on Land Rover, formerly in the Ford fold), and the front adopts much the same stance as the Ford Edge.

Special attention was paid to delivering an increased quality level throughout, with soft touch points to user surfaces, a strong interior finish with brushed metal highlights and special lighting features, and tight surface gaps inside and out, aimed at meeting top-level German benchmarks. Chimes and alerts are “pleasant and precise,” while overall interior quietness is high, claiming NVH (noise-vibration-harshness) numbers better than BMW’s. This is a vehicle based on utility, but the word “luxury” enters the conversation.

Overhangs and corners have been cut, giving the Explorer a new streamlined and trim feel, also achieving a drag coefficient (cD) of 0.35 (closer to the 0.25 cD of a Prius than the 0.57 of a Hummer). Lamps, mirrors and badging are all new. The C-pillar, wider and slanted, is kept in body color, considered an Explorer signature detail.

Human-machine interface

The SYNC® system (Ford’s device connect technology) is already widely available across the Ford lineup. Ford aims to increasingly encourage drivers to keep their hands on the wheel and eyes on the road, with a collection of features under the new MyFord™ Touch label (for which they coin a modified term: *driver* connect technology). Their goal was a seamless interface with both touch and voice controls, options for customization, and utilization of cloud computing. The systems have been evolving for awhile, from the 2008 Focus (introduced in ‘07) with its center stack simplified, voice controls and eye level readouts; to the 2009 year’s Edge (new in ‘08), whose features were #1 in JD Power customer satisfaction; to the simplified, useful but not confounding economy readouts in the 2010 Fusion Hybrid (introduced in ‘09). The goal is to make the systems approachable and clear, and keep the driver attentive.

An LCD display is crisp and clear, touch is intended to be intuitive and quick, the center stack is simplified, and 5-way controllers on the wheel duplicate functions so the screen and stack aren’t even always needed. Hands-free voice control activates radio, nav, A/C and phone, with 10,000 possible commands already in place. From there, you can personalize extensively. Very welcome, they have expanded both grammar and aliases, so

that, for example, “play song” vs “play track” or “warmer” vs “temp up” will give the same results. Not only is this convenient, it reduces driver inattention from trying to guess the only magic words in most systems. Voice control also learns your voice and speech patterns, claiming to master them within the first three uses. A hands-on demo in a fully-equipped Edge didn’t always bear this out, but presumably results are better when it’s your own, for awhile. Unfortunately, we were told that a change between drivers means a fresh start on the system’s learning curve. This should surely have multi-user storage in the future.

A “do not disturb” button adds self-imposed self-control for times you shouldn’t be receiving phone calls or texts. The HD radio includes song-tagging, and SIRIUS Replay with 45-minute playback. Climate controls can store “My Temp” favorite settings. Navigation has turn-by-turn instructions, birds-eye 3D views and is SD-card-based, rather than DVD or hard drive, reducing the cost from about \$2000 to just \$795 (with updates more affordable). 911 calls are synced with GPS. The system can generate a vehicle health report and has mobile WiFi, Ford MyKey for parental control, and SYNC Post Crash Alert, triggering flashers and horn.

These features will be on the 2011 Explorer and Edge, the 2012 Focus, and should be on 80% of Ford’s vehicles within the next five years.

Customer first

Jim Farley, Ford group VP for global marketing, tells us the “utility” segment (SUVs and cross-overs) has grown from 25 to 30 percent of the market since 2003. Ford researched these buyers to the point of “moving in” (all but overnight) with families, to study their styles and needs.

Regardless of technical and/or semantic debates in the segment, Farley says customers basically don’t know and don’t care about frames, front-wheel drive or SUV-vs-CUV. They just make the most of the size and shape and volume. But while doing the mundane, they thought they were missing some potential. They might want to tow, they might want to drive off-pavement, they might want to do things they haven’t even thought of, but they’d like to know they can.

While creating a thoroughly modern, lighter-weight, fuel-economical, technically advanced and stylish new Ford Explorer, the full range of function has been maintained. Finally “sport” and “utility” belong in the same sentence.

We wanted to order one on the spot.

The base 2011 Explorer starts at \$28,190, with V6, 6-speed automatic and AdvanceTrac with RSC. The XLT starts at \$31,190 and the Limited at \$37,190. Moved up from a 2012 model, the 2011 Explorer will be in dealerships by year’s end. ■

