

Extended play

Ford's 7-passenger not-a-van has cool command of the road

by Joe Sage

The last time we drove the newest Ford Flex was at its launch (which also included the new Mustang and Taurus) about ten months earlier. That adventure took us through heavy wind, rain, sleet and snow from Portland, Oregon, over the mountains to the Pacific Coast and back. We drove the Flex on the and-back part, tackling snow, sleet and rain through the mountains. The nasty weather seemed to have tracked us down again when we had the Flex here in Arizona for a week this winter.

Ford's first bragging point for the updated 2013 Flex is its heavily reworked front sheet metal—which they consider perfect for “people who want to stand out from the crowd.” When we had first seen this treatment at the LA Auto Show a year or so earlier, it reminded us of Frozone from *The Incredibles*, or Cyclops from *X-Men*. But as we also noted at the time, those characters were both very cool. Starting with a basically boxy and utilitarian format, the Flex has always been an eye-catcher. Ford points out that the front's boxy edges have been rounded a bit in the new model, but boxiness is still its signature style point. Why fight it?

The interior has also been reworked, with new instrument clusters, steering wheel, seat trim and padding, and electronic panel finishes. Rain-sensing wipers, power-fold mirrors and passive entry/start—which allows remote unlocking and engine start—are also new. A new iteration of MyFord Touch®—intended to address customer feedback—provides two 4.2-inch screens in the instrument cluster and an 8-inch screen in the center stack.

At your fingertips are thumb shifters for a new SelectShift™ six-speed

With four large conventional doors, a three-seat second row with 60-40 split, and spacious fold-flat third-row seats, the Ford Flex offers all the flexibility you need to juggle family, friends and freight.

gearbox, offering fully automatic or manual control.

The Flex comes with either of the same two V6 engines as its platform-mate Taurus for 2013: the 285-hp standard 3.5-liter or the 355-hp EcoBoost. (An EcoBoost four is not available on the Flex, so far.) The conventional V6 with front-wheel drive achieves the best fuel mileage, at 18/25 MPG city/highway. This drops to 17/23 MPG with all-wheel drive, but we would find that tradeoff well worth it. The EcoBoost, despite its Eco tag, has lower fuel mileage, at 16/23 MPG city/highway—but don't forget its prodigious horsepower, about 25 percent stronger than the TI-VCT six, with a fuel economy drop of just eight to ten percent or so. And in real world conditions, the horsepower is sure to be noticeable. Fuel economy in real world conditions is famously variable. Now if only the EcoBoost came with all-wheel drive.

The Flex rides on any of multiple wheel options, including a new 20-inch machined aluminum model. The vehicle makes its closing statement with new standard dual chrome exhaust tips. These are the type of details that help the Flex do one of the other things it does best: be a great family vehicle while beating any stigma that might otherwise be found with its obvious alternative: a minivan.

Ford's big utility vehicles have been enjoying double-digit sales growth. While the Explorer's high degree of recognition brings customers in, many then discover the Edge and the Flex. The Flex is quickly the champ for those who need its three-row, seven-passenger layout and huge cargo space. The loyalty rate among Flex buyers is tops, with over 70 percent going on to buy another Ford product. It also attracts “conquest” buyers: fifty percent of customers who buy a Flex are buying their first Ford. But sales had been dropping off for a year or two; with this restyle and upgrade, Ford hopes to provide a course correction.

The cooler family car

It took us no time at all to appreciate the key character difference delivered by the Ford Flex. By the first time we were on the freeway—driving next to a minivan—we were thinking of several specific friends and colleagues who have taken a keen interest in the Flex. These are family folks, with both cargo and precious cargo to haul, but they all would prefer basically a more masculine truck or car, to a minivan. Unless you particularly want sliding side doors, this seems functionally equivalent and has none of that minivan stigma. The Flex is carlike, trucklike, mainstream.

When all seven seats are taken, cargo capacity behind the third row is 20 cu.ft., but with only five occupants, you can knock down the third row and more than double that, exceeding 40 cu.ft. Just honeymooning? With the middle row also down, cargo volume exceeds 80 cu.ft. There are a solid handful of seven-passenger vehicles in the marketplace, but matching the fuel economy, road-hugging stance and flexible overall volume of the long Flex is a tall order. (As noted last year, the Flex can look a mile long, but it's built on the same platform as the superb-handling and SVT-ready Ford Taurus.)

Ford's family-, friends- and freight-friendly Flex commands the road

We had picked the Flex up at the airport for a late drive home. With luggage in hand, we discovered the rear hatch is not powered, to our surprise, though that actually suits us fine (we hate to wait). The driver's seat has one of our least favorite features: it puts itself where it thinks is best, while you're away, then “presents” itself as you get in and try to sit down, moving below you and pushing you around. This we would disable if we owned the vehicle. Settling in and looking around, we confirm that the Flex is indeed big. We had been convincing ourselves that it looks big because it's long and relatively low and narrow—but it's sizable inside. The relative narrowness is appealing, reminding us of the Infiniti QX56, which is pitched as being akin to a personal jet aircraft inside. And though its overall stance and appearance are relatively low, headroom is abundant.



KEEP RIGHT >>

SPECIFICATIONS

2013 FORD FLEX LIMITED AWD

ENGINE3.5L RI-VCT V6
POWER/TORQUE285 hp / 253 lb-ft
TRANSMISSION6-spd SelectShift™
DRIVETRAINAWD
MPG (EST).....17/23 city/hwy

EXTERIOR: incl HID headlamps, fog lamps, LED taillights, keyless entry, power-folding-heated mirrors w/approach lamps and memory, power liftgate, privacy glass, capless fuel filler, chrome door handles, chrome exhaust tips, bright beltline molding.

INTERIOR: incl leather trim seats/wheel, 10-way power driver seat, 50/50 fold-flat third row, dual-zone climate, ambient lighting, adjustable pedals, overhead console.

FUNCTIONAL: incl Sony 390w 12-spr audio, Sirius sat, Sync w/MyFord Touch, nav, blind spot info, rear camera and sensing, keyless pushbutton start, powerpoints & 110v outlet.

SAFETY-SECURITY: incl AdvanceTrac/RSC, airbags incl front-side-canopy, SOS post crash alert system, TPM.

BASE.....\$41,180

- Equip. group: adaptive cruise; coll. warning; power fold 3rd row seat.\$2500
- Inflatable rear seatbelts.....195
- Two-tone: silver roof.....395
- Destination825

TOTAL.....\$45,095

Freeway passing power is nothing stunning but more than adequate, though the car can generate a noticeable growl when you punch the gears down. Overall, the transmission is effective, downshifting and accelerating as demanded, in some tight spots.

Proof that it's long? We benchmark a four-lane divided boulevard U-turn, and on our first, the Flex was utterly incapable of pulling it off, forcing a hasty multi-point maneuver as traffic started bearing down. No surprise, once we verify a 40.7-foot turning circle (compare with the Jeep Grand Cherokee's 37.1). On a later attempt, elsewhere, with more planning and by taking a wider loop farther into the intersection, we did eke it out.

The vehicle looks downright sexy, the more time we spend with it. Our first impressions of the revised sheet metal develop into appreciation, as we note others in traffic and remind ourselves that "distinctive" is pretty hard to come by. One of its most endearing style points is the availability of a contrasting roof, much as on a MINI—which also offers practicality, in a hot desert climate: you can choose your favorite color overall and still finish it off with a silver or "white suede" top.

We were glad to have all-wheel drive during our week of heavy rain, although the Flex's long wheelbase should provide a steady track even as a front-driver. (AWD models will still give the best service on slippery surfaces such as snow or sand.) In an impromptu parking lot slalom, we generated a little bit of wobble, a little bit of yaw, everything but pitch. But considering this vehicle is part private school bus, it was negligible. For a seven-passenger coach, it's impressive.

Long story short

Some people expect the Ford Flex to be bigger than it turns out to be, while others expected it to be smaller. Part of that is style positioning. We've mentioned the

MINI parallel, really just based on the contrasting roof. Others told us they thought it would be like a Scion xB, thus startling them with its seven-passenger bulk. Someone else compared it to the Chevrolet HHR, a very small vehicle that nonetheless functions widely as a commercial taxi. Basically, each carries its own persona, separate from the functional comparative. Bottom line: the Ford Flex is none of those—and not a minivan—but in many ways perhaps an extended reincarnation of the classic Ford Country Squire station wagon of the '50s through '80s (until the minivan came along to eclipse it).

We had our usual variety of logbook notes on details such as the seats with a frustrating mind of their own, some annoying audio controls, an inability to set climate with gloves on, and a propensity for beepers and buzzers to scold us about quite a few things. On the plus side, the Flex has ceiling-mounted ventilation for the rear seats, rare and a requirement for at least one dad we know.

We revisited that Infiniti QX56 comparison—talking here about a vehicle with a base price north of \$60,000 that can easily top \$80,000—thinking again how the Flex cabin reminds us of that, simultaneously feeling so spacious yet so intimate. The difference with the Flex—a vehicle with three trim levels starting in the \$30,000-40,000 range and easily maxed out at under \$50,000—may be that it doesn't have the over-the-top finishes and surfaces of an Infiniti, but does have a simple, rich soft-touch interior that we liked just fine. Consider it a family QX56.

Based on substantial feedback during our week, the dads—family guys with both kids and testosterone—stand out as a group, seeing something that has very cool style, is otherwise as useful as a minivan, and is also good for a hardware store getaway.

The whole family should find a whole lot to like in their own little private school bus. ■

