

Twister touches down BY JOE SAGE

Since day one, Ford Mustang has offered affordability and choice, including the different personalities that come with different choices. At face value (and setting aside Shelby and other super-performance cars), the choices seem simple: four-cylinder EcoBoost turbo or V8; automatic or manual; and pick your favorite color. But it can get more complex than that.

Trim levels include base and Premium, GT and GT Premium, and Bullitt. Our sample here is built off the base 2.3-liter EcoBoost four-cylinder model (\$26,670), pretty much a stripper, but adds a significant High Performance Package (\$4995), as well as the only extra-cost paint out of ten possibilities, Twister Orange (\$495). The performance package also adds Equipment Group 100A, for keyless start and a couple of other items (see sidebar).

We don't mind and sometimes welcome a base model in principle—a bit less weight thus a bit more power to the wheels, simple knobs for climate and audio, a tangible cable handbrake. And we are more than happy to stick with the 6-speed manual transmission (10-speed auto adds \$1595). Other things, though, we miss. Windows are power, but we would find power seats a lot more accurate to adjust just right (something we battled all week in this one). And other options we wish it had come up repeatedly during our week with the car.

The High Performance Package includes a few simple performance upgrades (splitters, upsized

sway bars), but most notably boosts engine output from 310 to 330 hp (a 6.5 percent bump).

We started out tackling what felt to us like a mismatch of clutch and powertrain, but it turns out these may simply be related to overdone engine acoustics. The 4-cylinder EcoBoost turbo's torque is much more powerful than its size might suggest, and you actively feel it with the manual transmission, but it seems to make the clutch feel touchier to engage at the low end, like that of a much bigger engine. And the aggressive engine sound might also throw you at first—in what seemed to us the opposite of an EV, where quiet running belies neck-snapping acceleration, the four-cylinder Mustang puts out aggressive sound that exceeds low range power.

It took quite a dive to locate related settings, using a base-model physical steering wheel button set (just begging for an electronic "back" click) and its base-level screen. Normal, sport and track settings, to our ear, produce effects closer to rice rocket than muscle in nature. But when set to its "quiet" engine noise setting, clutch effort and power curve relative to sound effects both fell into line. Even "normal" could wake up the neighbors, and the system returns from quiet to normal upon restart, until you discover "quiet start," which conquers loud startup, then continues in quiet mode.

The base screen is a 4.2-inch LCD unit (a hair bigger than an iPhone 5 and reminiscent of desk-

top graphics from 30 years ago), with no touch interface. Audio is six-speaker AM-FM-MP3. Even with our own audio source, sound is weak.

You can replace that cumbersome settings arrangement with a handsome, useful set of toggle switches, and replace the base unit with an 8-inch screen, adding SYNC 3 and better nine-speaker audio with SiriusXM, by replacing the included Group 100A with Group 101A (\$2000), which also includes power seats and dual-zone automatic climate control. For another \$995, you can add voice-activated touchscreen navigation.

Another add-on ours was lacking was at least a temporary spare tire (another \$405). We found this out the hard way, picking up a huge screw on a Friday evening, fortunately getting to Discount Tire just as they were lowering the doors, but they were kind enough to squeeze in one more repair.

We had thought about driving this car up into red rock Utah and western Colorado, but the flat tire was our final fatal delay (and we're glad that didn't hit us in Monument Valley with no spare). Instead, we were able to tag along with Air Cooled Arizona on a run up Arizona highway 87, the Beeline Highway, from Fountain Hills to the cooler Ponderosa forests of Payson that weekend. Here, the Mustang's attributes had a chance to shine.

This drive, one of our favorites, is full of challenging grades and curves, snaking up through the mountains from 1500 feet to 5000 feet elevation. Also challenging were a few of our fellow travelers (not the old VWs). It may be the paint, but this car attracts a great many boy racers—and not

Challengers, Camaros and 911s, but rather affordable compacts, midsize pickups and such. After their repeated efforts to struggle past us just to box us in, we had little choice but to tap the High Performance engine's extra power and leave them all behind. For this, we made a point of changing to track mode, where maximum engine and exhaust sounds were exactly what was called for.

It was a spirited drive, and we realized that not once had we found ourselves wishing it were a V8.

Lucky thing, as choosing the 460-hp V8 means choosing the GT, which runs about \$9,000 higher in base form, or \$13,000 more as a GT Premium. The EcoBoost four with High Performance Package is intended to close this gap while maintaining that longstanding Mustang goal of relative affordability throughout the lineup. \$5,000 for 20 horsepower may be tough to compare with \$9,000 for 150 hp, but other apples and oranges also kick in.

Our wish for a few more features also led us to comparing the base EcoBoost four with its Premium trim level, itself also about a \$5,000 upgrade (and without the 20-hp High Performance bump). As you might expect, there are multiple paths to somewhat turning either into the other—adding creature features to the base Hi-Po or adding the Hi-Po engine to the already creature-featured EcoBoost Premium. Either way, you can quickly end up in the upper \$30s, bringing you back into V8-powered GT territory. The biggest remaining apple-and-orange is fuel mileage, which is notably higher across the board (with either transmission, Hi-Po or not, city-highway-combined) in the EcoBoost.

Put all that together, and you see the appeal of the car driven here and of keeping its feature set to a minimum. To a point. ■



SPECIFICATIONS

FACTORY	.....Flat Rock, Michigan
ENGINE	.....2.3L High Performance EcoBoost I-4 16v DOHC, high-pressure die-cast aluminum block w high-tensile liner & high-strength cast aluminum head, upgraded piston ring pack, 9.37:1 compression
HP / TORQUE	.....330 hp / 350 lb-ft
DRIVETRAIN	.....RWD
TRANSMISSION	.....Getrag 6-speed manual
TOP SPEED	.....(High Performance Package) 145 mph
SUSPENSION	.....F: double-ball-joint independent MacPherson strut, tubular stblzr bar; R: integral-link indep w coils, solid stblzr bar, mono-tube dampers. (Optional, not on ours: MagneRide damping.)
STEERING	.....three-mode elec power-assist rack & pinion w pull-drift compensation & active nibble control; standard, comfort & sport settings
BRAKES	.....(Perf.Pkg) F: 352x32mm vented discs, four-piston; R: 320x30mm solid, single-piston.
WHEELS / TIRES	.....(opt) 19x9 alum / P255/40R19 sumr
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	.....188.5 / 107.1 in
TURNING CIRCLE	.....(w 19" wheels) 37.8 ft
HEADROOM (F/R)	.....37.6 / 34.8 in
LEGROOM (F/R)	.....45.1 / 29 in
CARGO CAPACITY	.....13.5 cu.ft
WEIGHT	.....3542 lb
FUEL / CAPACITY	.....na
MPG	.....20/27/23 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE	.....\$26,670
TWISTER ORANGE PAINT	.....495
EQUIP GROUP 100A: FordPass Connect, TrackApps, Intelligent Access w push button start, dual bright exhaust w rolled tips	.....incl
2.3L HIGH PERFORMANCE PACKAGE: 2.3L High Performance EcoBoost engine, 3.55 limited-slip rear axle, 19x9 low gloss ebony painted pocket alum wheels, P255/40R19 summer tires, active valve performance exhaust, black painted strut-tower brace, engine-spun alum instrument panel, exterior mirrors in Magnetic, gauge pack (oil pressure and boost), GT Performance Package front splitter & belly pan, metallic grey hood accent stripe, heavy-duty front springs, larger brake rotors with four-piston fixed calipers, large radiator, performance rear wing, unique chassis tuning, unique EPAS, ABS and stability control tuning, upsized rear sway bar	.....4995
DESTINATION CHARGE	.....1195

TOTAL**\$33,355**
(No pricing on Monroney; recreated from available info.)

