

ICON BEGETS NEW ICON

AS DRIVER EXPECTATIONS EXTEND TO MORE THAN JUST POINT A TO POINT B, IT'S NO WONDER GOODYEAR INTRODUCED THE NEW COMFORTRED® TOURING TIRE ON HIGHWAY ONE FROM MONTEREY TO BIG SUR, ALSO MORE THAN JUST POINT A TO POINT B.

BY JOE SAGE

Tire selection can be a mind-numbing experience. You know your size, but practical considerations include purpose (performance? comfort? off-road? rain, snow, ice?), the tire's special characteristics and the life of the tire.

Some tires firmly establish their niche right up front. Such is the case with the original Goodyear ComforTred tire, and with the all-new ComforTred® Touring tire—a completely reengineered product that brings a well-known name forward, but widens its scope considerably.

Goodyear's Assurance® lineup includes three tires: ComforTred® Touring, TripleTred™ and Fuel Max®. The original ComforTred was introduced six years ago, and there are nine million of them on the road; "This is Goodyear's number one iconic product," says Michelle Dukeman, Goodyear passenger tire brand manager.

The original ComforTred was geared toward low noise and a comfortable ride, making it a favorite on classic boats like the Ford Crown Victoria or Buick Century. But tastes and sales have shifted, and as the company addressed an improved version, they examined their customers' expectations. The larger cars have mostly given way to a "mid-to-luxury" sedan segment. So meet an entirely new tire,

with many of the same goals, upgraded and enhanced, but for an evolving market.

Premium cars—Audi A6, BMW 3 Series, Cadillac, Lexus EX, Mercedes-Benz E-Class, and such—and even such mainstream cars as Honda Accord and Toyota Camry have gained far better handling and higher performance in the past few years. Buyers still rate smoothness, comfort and a quiet ride very high. But Gary Medalis, general manager, Goodyear consumer tires, says they also now want high performance, all-weather capability and great wear.

Market research was extensive. 25 percent of those surveyed described their driving as touring (a segment that grew from 8% to 25% from 2004 to 2009). A majority of drivers want simple everyday point-A-to-point-B comfort and safety, but they also want performance-enthusiast "me time." And on the same vehicle.

Considering that broad set of requirements, Goodyear's engineers began their modeling process and soon knew they would do best to take a clean-sheet approach. As lead engineer Keith Grabo notes, "we had to." Vehicles, segments and customers had all changed. Two dozen Goodyear engineers worked for two and a half years on a new tire.

Despite a highly evolved marketplace, Goodyear still found extremely high equity

in the ComforTred name. Thus, meet the new ComforTred® Touring tire. Engineering specifics include new treads, new compounds, a new "comfort edge" and a special comfort layer, a proprietary blend providing 20% more cushion.

The original ComforTred fit 71% of the market at the time, but the new one will fit 93% of the market today—a win for consumers, but also a potential win for Goodyear. Their hard work should pay off.

The Goodyear ComforTred Touring tire is constructed with two comfort zones in the tread and sidewall to optimize comfort and handling: an outer Comfort Layer, with an inner handling layer, and the Comfort Edge™ sidewall.

Noise, vibration and harshness (NVH) are transmitted through tires, wheels, chassis, steering column, pedals and more. Tires are the first line of defense. The above hardware can not only transmit but can amplify NVH, so the ComforTred Touring is engineered to reduce it, with its Comfort Layer working much like the gel sole in a shoe to insulate the cabin.

A new high-performance asymmetric tread pattern provides dry-pavement handling plus wet-weather traction, with a pattern of grooves and sipes that works like a geographical watershed system: creeks into streams, streams into rivers, moving the water out. The center is good for all weather, while shoulders and intermediate



ribs are good for wear, noise and handling. And the tread keeps the tire quiet.

Because the sound quality of tires is determined inside the vehicle, Goodyear uses an anechoic chamber, a room—usually quieter than any public library—that suppresses echoes or sound reflections and allows tonal characteristics of noise to be evaluated. The chamber is large enough to drive cars or large trucks into, and a test wheel embedded in the floor can spin the vehicle's tire without its engine running, deleting engine noise interference to pinpoint sounds from the tire under evaluation.

We first hop in a Lexus ES 350

KEEP RIGHT >>





sedan to see how well this all works, heading south from Monterey on California Highway One. By Carmel, we've noted the experience is like Bose Quiet Comfort headphones on a plane: we can hear other cars and outdoor noises, but the consistent noise that might be transmitted by the tires is largely absent. Yet we still feel the handling connectedness of the Lexus ES with the road. A pretty good achievement so far.

As we transition into farm and ranchland, we change the shifter on the Lexus from D to S and find it noticeably better with all its curves and hills on Highway One. We then realize that all we were thinking about was changing the shifter, when it's the tires we're here to evaluate, not the Lexus, because the tires themselves were performing quite well.

Our drive took us over Bixby Bridge, through tall woods and along unmatched cliffhanging switchbacks toward Big Sur. Some patches were foggy, but not particularly wet. The road is ideal for a performance test, and its sublime nature is well-suited to the serenity challenge. An excellent route for the mission at hand.

In about an hour, we've reached our turnaround point, high above the Pacific, where we change to a BMW 3 Series for the drive back north. We found the BMW to have more exciting shift points, even in standard Drive, though its steering felt less assured.

In an hour or so, we were back on four-lane Highway One through Seaside, just north of Monterey, where we encountered one very punishing stretch of concrete freeway with very rough seams. We had a window down, and the road was making quite a racket. But as soon as we rolled up the window, it became unbelievably quiet inside. Our voice memo states that we "couldn't have been more comfortable."

And now that we were so comfortable, it was track time. Goodyear had set up several courses in a large parking lot near Marina, California. Our experiments here were done in the Toyota Camry. They boiled down to rough road mitigation and wet surface handling.

First, we rode along in groups of four with a Goodyear test driver, on a vibration course, a straight stretch bearing the equivalent of demi-railroad ties, right side, left side, staggered. Attached to the steering wheel was an Apple iPhone with an accelerometer-driven app. (We've test-driven several accelerometer-based automotive apps and found the technology to be highly inaccurate in some of them, e.g. for measuring driving speed; we have no specific knowledge about this one, so we take it at face value.) We were all blindfolded, not something that generally induces comfort. "We're taking that sense away from you because I want you to *feel* what's going on," said our driver. "I'm going to hold a consistent 24-25 mph through all of this, so there's a nice comparison for you. Close your eyes... and just relax...."

After our bumpy ride, he solicited opinions, but none of us had any, having no idea what the mission was. He explained, "There are three different sensations that you should have had: one of them is shoulder movement, side-to-side. The next is what you feel in your butts, in the seats. And the final one is what we call head-toss." (The iPhone app is engineered to measure and display these three.)

"Did you experience those three?" Hard to say, meaningfully, after the fact. We figured we might have to go through again.

And that's just what he wanted us to do, to become aware of what we feel in our shoulders, our seat and our head. We ran the course again, eyes open, but wouldn't swear to any epiphanies. No-one ques-

KEEP RIGHT >>



tioned a generally nice ride. One stated the seat was “about the only thing I did feel,” while another said he “didn’t feel (his) head rocking that much.” Qualified crash test dummies we are not. We didn’t cross-compare other tires or different vehicles, and the vehicle itself is very important on such a test. But for such severe bumps, we did quite well, and to the degree the instrument is accurate (or even if not, by straight comparison), there appeared to be a demonstrable reduction in stress—as well as discomfort—to critical body parts.

Next up: wet course, and for this we did our own driving. This was a nicely laid out and challenging course, and its pièce de résistance was the Goodyear water truck and hose personnel, providing a significant wet weather experience—our own little typhoon—for about half the course. Our mission included turning at speed through the heaviest deluge, then executing a couple of additional even tighter turns, some requiring braking, beyond the flood. A front-driver like the Accord would not be our first choice for these conditions, but it’s a common real world setup. And the tires did very well,

even when pressed aggressively. We didn’t get to try ice and snow, of course, on a spring day in Monterey.

Combine all our objective tested and subjective perceived experiences, and Goodyear has surely done just what it set out to do: created a tire of broad core application, while eliminating most buying tradeoffs (notably the traditional buying decisions between comfort and performance, and/or dry roads versus wet weather). That leaves us with the issue of tread life. Goodyear is so confident in their materials that they are offering an 80,000-mile tread life warranty on T- and H-rated ComforTred Touring tires, and 70,000 on V-rated, described by them as a first-ever breakthrough.

Still not sure? Well, they’re backing it all up with their 30-Day Goodyear Pledge, also known as the Love ‘Em or Leave ‘Em program. Buy yourself a set of Goodyear ComforTred Touring tires, and you’ll have a month to decide whether they are keepers. If not, you can exchange them for a different set of Goodyear tires, at no cost to you. You can find complete details at www.goodyear.com. ■

MONTEREY TRAVEL NOTES

Each August, during the convergence of the Pebble Beach Concours, a full range of collector auctions, the long-running historic races at Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca and the Concorso Italiano, we depart Arizona for a refreshing several days on the Monterey Peninsula. Nice timing. As it turns out, it’s a great visit in late spring, too.

During the August events, rooms are expensive and hard to get; we often stay up the coast or inland, driving back and forth, early and quite late every day and night. And whereas we always toy with the idea of driving to Monterey up the full length of Highway One, we seem to end up flying to San Jose (SJC), about a 2-hour flight, and renting a car. On this trip, we were able to knock off about half of Highway One.



Instead of San Jose, we flew directly in to the Monterey Peninsula Airport (MRY). There are nonstop flights on US Air, just under 2 hours, but we were booked on United, via San Francisco upbound and LAX on the return. This is good for about four hours in each direction and includes commuter jet and prop flights, limiting luggage. But fares aren’t bad, the convenience of the Monterey airport is tops (especially if you can book nonstop), and if you’re staying in the area, you might be able to get by with hotel shuttles and forego the rental car.



We stayed two nights at the Hyatt Regency Monterey Hotel and Spa on Del Monte Golf Course (home to the Mecum Auction event in August). The resort is close to downtown Monterey, as well as to the Salinas Highway, a very central location for any trip, especially the big week in August. After our driving events were complete, we had a choice of golf, a tour of Cannery Row and the Monterey Bay Aquarium, or a session at the spa, all fine choices. For more information on the resort, visit monterey.hyatt.com.

