

PROGRESS *in* POSITIONING

LINCOLN MKX BECOMES MORE LINCOLN

JOE SAGE



Lincoln is making great strides—especially as Mercury fades into the sunset—to differentiate its products and image from Ford's eponymous standard lineup. And don't think this can't be done—witness the Cadillacs of today versus the rebadged and reskinned Oldsmobiles of just a decade ago.

LINCOLN MKX AND FORD EDGE

There had been little mistaking the Lincoln MKX as a rebadged, reskinned and luxury-detailed Ford Edge, since their basically simultaneous introduction in 2006 as 2007 models. But for 2011, that skin has been heavily redone—bringing a far more distinctive shape and overall look and feel to the MKX. Especially with its waterfall grille, it now at least looks all Lincoln, all the way.

Built on the CD3 platform derived originally and evolved from the Mazda6 G platform, the Edge created a new category, while Ford kept the Explorer. For Lincoln, however, the MKX replaced the Explorer-derived Aviator.

In late 2006 and through 2007, the Ford Edge did quite well, selling over 132,000 units, while the more-selective-market Lincoln MKX sold just under 40,000, about 30 percent of Ford's total. Slumps throughout the economy brought sales down in 2008 and 2009, but Lincoln's MKX dropped pro-rata against the Edge, to more like 23 percent. In 2010, the Edge rebounded, to almost 120,000 units as estimated at press time, while the MKX was set to total just over 20,000, about a 16 percent ratio. Time for something to be done. Whereas the vehicles are set to be completely redone as soon as 2012 (using Ford's new EUCD or EUCD2 global platform), the 2011 Lincoln has had a significant freshening.

MKX AND EDGE TODAY

The Ford and the Lincoln remain much the same vehicle for 2011. Both weigh in at just over two tons. Both are available as front-drivers or with all-wheel drive. The Ford introduced an inline-4-cylinder EcoBoost engine this year, but also has a 3.5-liter Duratec V6, while the sole engine for the Lincoln is a new 3.7-liter Duratec V6. Suspension and four-wheel anti-lock disc brakes are common to both. Whether MyFord Touch or MyLincoln Touch, electronics are essentially the same.

The Ford Edge starts at \$27,455 but can easily be outfitted to the mid-\$40s for a top-dog Sport with AWD and all the fixings. The Lincoln MKX starts at \$39,375 and can be optioned up to the mid-\$50s. In other words, a comparison that starts with the Lincoln about 44 percent higher drops to more like a 16 percent difference when tricked out. This seems to make the Lincoln a clearly better choice for the feature-hungry buyer, especially with several of its options not available on the Ford.

OUR WEEK WITH THE LINCOLN MKX

Our test Lincoln was a pre-production model, arriving with incomplete sticker pricing. Inclusions in the base model are extensive: power mirrors and rear liftgate, various lighting upgrades, dual exhaust, leather seats, heated-cooled 10-way front seats, MyLincoln Touch and SYNC, a capable AM/FM/Sirius/CD/MP3 audio system, dual-zone climate control, keyless entry and start plus remote start, backup sensing and much more. To this,



our front-wheel-drive vehicle added a Rapid Spec Premium Package with ambient lighting, rear camera, HID headlamps, voice-activated navigation, panoramic roof, blind spot monitoring and 20-inch chrome-clad aluminum wheels, all for \$7500. White Platinum Metallic Tri-coat paint adds \$595, and adaptive cruise control \$1295. A couple of other notes were indecipherable, but based on all that, this was about a \$50,000 MKX.

As we get in for first time, the instrument panel is the first thing that greets us, a minimalist presentation with just hatchmarks where the speedometer will be, and blue fades in the center screen and to the left and right of that. Electronic displays include MyLincoln Touch in the center, and next to the speedo a graphic readout that evolves from what we first saw in the Fusion Hybrid. Basically all context-sensitive variable-screen information—a concept that makes the iPhone so usable. (Why Ford hasn't partnered with Apple instead of Microsoft is beyond us.) Let's give it a try. The start button is right where we thought it would, in the dark. Intuitive. Great.

Size and shape are perfect; we're sold on the overall format of the vehicle within about a quarter block.

We step outside to check the mail and find the engine noise or probably fan noise is noticeably loud. Stepping back in, we like the sill panel with Lincoln all-caps lettering illuminated. Classy. As soon as we close the door, we are back to enjoying a very silent cabin.

Despite streamlining outside, the MKX has great visibility inside, with its big open greenhouse and an enormous rear window (though with headrests in the view).

Taking it out for the first time at night turns out to be a fun idea. We parked, got out, checked the passenger side door to see whether something had slid off the seat, which it hadn't. We closed the door and touched it with the back of our fingers and locked it, right where we expected to. If you have driven any current teach-heavy cars, you'll find the MKX extremely intuitive, and if you haven't, you'll simply find it a feature wonderland.

The more technology, the harder the user experience, often enough. We decide to tackle the audio and find its design to be slick as all getout. Volume (and also climate control, just below) are controlled with very subtly lit touch bars; adjustments are made by stroking your finger across the bar. Puts a smile on our face every time.

The vehicle looks somewhat tall and bulky, but it corners just flat and beautifully. Impressive. We cautiously tried a U-turn at a T-intersection. Wow. It's hard to believe the interior volume of this vehicle, yet how tight it turns (a 38.6-foot turning circle).



Lincoln-specific sheet metal in the front is vastly improved and surely hints at a more individualized future for the brand. We're not as nuts about the dead-on rear styling, though from a 3/4 rear view, it looks great.

The Duratec V6 produces 305 hp, plenty powerful. The MKX is also plenty maneuverable, easy to get in and out of, and has ample stopping power. It was a pleasure to drive any distance, as well as on point-to-point errands with lots of parking mixed in with driving.

What Ford has done with an interim update is impressive. The Lincoln looks all-Lincoln now, though it does remain a reskin of the Edge, with luxury upgrades and a few other features. As 2012 draws closer, we'll be watching for the timing of the next generation. But that's out of ongoing curiosity. There is no reason not to shop for this MKX, now. Unless you want a real stripper of a Ford Edge, the Lincoln MKX, already tricked out, is only about 10 grand more than a nicely outfitted Edge. ■

LINCOLN MKX LOGBOOK

- We love how intuitive most of the controls are, even clever and complex ones. The touch swipe for volume and fan speed seem Applesque. The screen itself, though, looks like a PowerPoint org chart, with little to intuitively show hierarchy or function.
- Side mirror controls are not lit, hard to find in the dark till you learn. A plus: lens-switch one-touch ceiling lights, our favorite.
- Buttons and touchscreen both beep a lot; we'd hope this can be turned off.
- Backup camera is not one of the best: grainy, off color, can spot a white Suburban at night, maybe. Path indicators are straight, unlike e.g. Audi's, which curve to actual path.
- Wish the shifter lit up, so you could tell whether you have shifted into D at night.
- Would like the fan for some quick inside air, wish it weren't touchscreen-dependent. We were, however, able to turn on recirc or max a/c easily, easy touch buttons and an immediate difference.
- Turn signal sounds like the crocodile that swallowed the clock in Peter Pan, maybe louder, noted by third parties as well.
- Not sure the touchscreen 'maps' correctly; we seem to get stations we didn't choose.
- Buttons for tuning, temp, seek and so on are touch buttons, but raised like pushbuttons, so they give tactile ability to find them.
- We had struggles with radio presets, lots of menu digging, inconsistencies between satellite and FM, odd alerts between items.
- If you get in and start before you get your seatbelt on, you get a four-tone repeating alert, on the one hand a bit subdued but on the other hand adequately annoying to make you do the job; a backwards win-win.
- The power point for charging things, in this case our phone, is in what would once have been an ashtray in the middle, and it's a whole SYNC area, with three RCA jacks, color-coded for its purposes, two USBs, and an SD ... oops there was a card in there ... (beep-beep) ... oh shoot, navigation SD card fault. Well, that's way too easy to take out. So there's a power point inside the console storage bin, which has two sides to it, split but operating as one, an oddity. Another power point is around the right side of the center stack, reachable with a stretch while parked, but you have to peek around because to hinge a cover off it and plug in.
- Our favorite little feature, the slide volume control, reveals an oddity: if we use our left hand, it just keeps going up. Odd.
- We tried to tilt the steering wheel, and the only control we could find was on the left side but it started moving the seat. Once we stopped, we tried it again, and sure enough it does tilt and telescope the steering wheel. A late preproduction bug?