

By a couple of years ago, Ford had found itself in the enviable but challenging position of having some vehicles that were big hits—in this case, the Explorer and Escape—whose designs, though solid and hugely popular, were getting a little long in the tooth. The new Escape was shown at auto shows over this past winter and is hitting the streets as you read this, while the Explorer was revealed more than a year ahead of that. We drove the Explorer in depth at its launch in the hills east of San Diego in late 2010 (see *Down and Dirty in Ford's Crown Jewel*, in our January/February 2011 issue). We drove it again for a week, here, late this winter.

The redesign process had involved very thorough investigation of the customer base, which revealed no intense off-roading and less towing—of lighter

loads—than anticipated. Thus the new Explorer tows 5000 pounds, enough for 99.6 percent of their customers, which helps deliver an SUV that costs less, weighs less, handles better and achieves higher fuel economy. The all-new 2011 Explorer also added 80 horsepower and a third row, all for \$1100 less than the old-model 2010. That couldn't leave you asking for much of anything else, it would seem.

Engines include a powerful standard 3.5L V6 and, for top fuel economy, a 2.0L EcoBoost™ inline-4. Each engine has its own six-speed automatic transmission—with a SelectShift™ for the V6. Though Ford had said the EcoBoost I-4 delivers V6-like power, joining the lineup soon will be a 3.5L EcoBoost V6 (the engine that is now outselling the V8 in Ford's top-selling F-150 pickup).

All your dreams don't necessarily come true in one machine. Fuel mileage for the Explorer can be as high as 20/28/23 MPG city/highway/combined, with front-wheel drive and the four-cylinder EcoBoost. If you want four-wheel drive, however, you must also get the V6, and estimated mileage drops to 17/23/19. (If you want a V6 without 4WD, it's a notch higher: 17/24/20.) We look forward to the V6 EcoBoost and its numbers. Meanwhile, we probably wouldn't get an Explorer without 4WD and the tow package, but if you're doing flat-land family business with it, the EcoBoost will give you very good fuel mileage for a three-row SUV. Max capability or max mileage, but not both—not an unusual tradeoff.

The base Explorer starts at \$28,870. The XLT upgrades the transmission and other features and

# The complete package.

## Explorer settles into its niche nicely.

By Joe Sage



starts at \$32,345. The Limited—our test model—adds a raft of amenities and starts at \$37,855 as a front-drive V6. The 4-cylinder EcoBoost starts at \$38,850—a price premium for fuel economy (and coming with a drop in horsepower, though a rise in torque), and you cannot get four-wheel drive with the 4-cylinder. An Explorer Limited 4WD (with the required V6) starts at \$39,885.

That base price for the Limited includes body-colored grille, fog lamps, power mirrors, keyless entry, extensive interior upgrades, Ford's SYNC system, 390-watt 12-speaker Sony audio and a lot more. Our test model added more and topped out at \$46,560 (see sidebar).

At the time of Explorer's launch, we received presentations from quite a few of Ford's third-party tech suppliers and called it "a one-vehicle consumer electronics show." This turns out not to be completely a plus. Our logbook for the week revealed quite a few instances of frustration with [a] several of the features and [b] the owner's manual, which, for instance, has 73 pages about how to set the seat. (This comes up in the logbook for issues we wrestled with concerning seating, audio, locks, lights, the message center and so on.) It's a recurrent theme not unique to this vehicle, but one can only hope that longer-term actual owner orientation is less frustrating than the one-week variety we typically do.

Our other notes were about size. Your correspondent is over six feet tall and has logged many a happy mile in full-size 4X4 pickups, yet we repeatedly noted that this vehicle is huge. Compared with its predecessor, it seems to have moved halfway to the Expedition. It's hard to put your elbow on the window or armrest, it's so wide—though you may keep the windows closed a lot, as wind buffeting was very strong from about 30 mph up.

For performance and handling, we take you back to our Southern California mountain obstacle course, from the launch. Our courses at that time included a particularly rough two-track trail, run at slower speeds, then faster—in total comfort. Hill Descent kept us from heating up our brakes and dumping ourselves in a creek, where most

vehicles would have been. The Explorer easily passed through a long, deep water trough, never seeming to have any risk of stalling due to depth or drag. Traction settings were tested in a large "mini-Sahara" sand pit, where the Sand mode gives even a less experienced driver total control. There are additional settings for Mud and Snow.

There are a lot of vehicles in the \$45-50k range, but they aren't likely to offer anything that the Ford Explorer Limited does not, really, since it comes complete with style, comfort, performance, operational economy, and very complete features and capability. Our only caveats are that the electronics are overdone, that it's a bit large (if the new Escape were a scaled-down Explorer, as we had hoped, that would be an answer), and that we would have to choose between fuel economy and four-wheel drive. Overall, we dare you to find anything missing. Maybe just that EcoBoost V6 engine, arriving soon. ■

### SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE.....	3.5L V6 Ti-VCT
Horsepower/Torque .....	290 hp / 255 lb-ft
TRANSMISSION .....	6-speed SelectShift™
DRIVETRAIN.....	4WD
BASE PRICE .....	\$39,855
OPTIONS: Equipment Group 302A: Voice-activated navigation, luxury seating, powerfold third row, power liftgate, BLIS inflatable rear seatbelts, blind spot monitor, active park assist, adaptive cruise and collision warning, rain-sensing wipers, HID headlamps..*	\$5310
	*(This package is now \$5600.)
Tow package .....	\$570
DESTINATION CHARGE .....	\$825
TOTAL PRICE.....	\$46,560