

Small Ford van connects in a big way

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We've been bullish on Ford's new little truck with the awkward name, the new 2010 Transit Connect (there is a bigger Transit van in the rest of the world), since we first heard it was coming to the US (see May/June 2009 issue). To revisit the fundamentals, this handy rig has 135 cubic feet of cargo volume, a 1600-pound payload capacity, 48.1" and 59.1" inside width and height, respectively, and just over six feet of closed-door cargo floor length, gets 22/25 mpg city/highway, and is yours for just \$21,475 (base including destination charges).

What does it compare to? This is Ford's first entry into the small-commercial category in the US. Purpose-built, they call it a no-compromise solution. As Ford points out, despite the popularity of this vehicle in international markets for years, most such needs have been met in the US market by "making do." Besides not efficiently meeting needs, this approach has generally added cost.

Folks needing a small panel van have made do with the Plymouth/Chrysler PT Cruiser, the Chevrolet HHR and such. Or they've used pickup trucks with shells, mini-vans or full-size vans. Ford points out that the interior volume of the Transit Connect is double that of the HHR. And its payload capacity is claimed to be more than that of

some full-size pickups (though their own example of an F-150 "half-ton" truck carries 3300 pounds). Be that as it may, if a 2-liter Duratec with 4-speed automatic (with overdrive) delivers the fuel economy, payload capacity and expected durability of the Transit Connect, it compares very favorably. This truck is engineered and tested to the same rugged standards as the full-size E-Series, and despite its lightweight efficiency, it bears a double-skinned body, great for insulation, structure and security.

AWARD-WINNING

The Transit Connect has received over 22 awards in Europe since its launch: Van of the Year 2002, International Van of the Year 2003, Most Reliable Van 2007, Best Light Van 2002-2007, Fleet Light Van of the Year 2003-2008, Best Security Light Van 2003-2008 and Best Small Van 2009. It's no wonder more than 600,000 have been sold so far (in 55 countries on three continents).

For anyone using a small vehicle in their business, to carry just about anything, this is worth a serious look. We doubt you'll have much trouble looking, either, as the Ford Transit Connect will probably be filling the streets and freeways like hotcakes, to mix unmixable metaphors.

TRACK TIME

Though we envision this hardworking little puppy tooling around the warehouse districts, ferrying loads of aircraft parts, or magazines, or flowers, or catering delights, Ford invited us to give it a try on a closed-course track at Firebird International Raceway. Okay.

First, we were presented with a full fleet of outfitted Fords, bearing bulkheads, racks, bins, drawers and shelves customized to a variety of businesses (and utilizing the large side panels well for identity graphics).

Next, we took to the track. As we sat down, we were still in conversation with someone outside, so we put our elbow on the windowsill and instinctively reached for the top of the window frame, as in most vehicles. Airball. The arms of someone over six feet tall do not reach the top of the frame. It was then that we realized something about this vehicle: although it looks quite tall, it actually has a low beltline, which exaggerates that appearance. The windows start low and are extra tall.

Although you are not likely to be using this vehicle for competition (although we haven't seen what will be done with them at SEMA yet), we can see why they took us to the track. The handling is superb. An intricate

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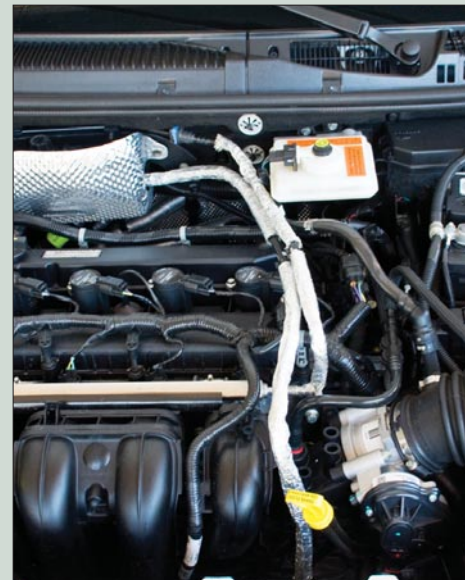


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course of coned loops and curves was easy to navigate, with a nice level feeling and solid handling throughout. We also took the opportunity to back into a corner by one of the track buildings, and the manageability of the whole package at this size is impressive.

TECH TIME

Yes, this is a work truck. While at Firebird, we also had a one-on-one review of the Transit Connect's communications and inventory technologies. The Ford Work Solutions electronic/data interface allows you to do conventional computing from your truck. Want one less thing to take up time each morning and evening? Ford Work Solutions helps you easily make sure you have the tools you need, loaded in the truck, with Tool Link™ (while also keeping track of each tool taken from and returned to the vehicle). You can track your entire fleet with Crew Chief™. And you can secure your valuables with a cable lock.

BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE

So what do you get for your twenty-one-some-odd grand? You get a frame with vibration-tested parts including high-strength steel front cross members, reinforced body shell and twin side cross members. You get a rolled steel rear bumper with energy absorber (not mandated

on trucks) and end caps, plus doors and hardware tested for 150,000-cycle functionality (that would equal ten times a day for over 40 years). You get a contemporary style, with character panels on the sides that add body rigidity. You get rack-and-pinion steering, front and rear anti-roll bars, available Roll Stability Control (RSC), lockable fuel door and hood, separate remote key unlocking features for passenger and cargo doors, first-row front and side air bags, and four-wheel anti-lock brakes. A simple rear left suspension carries the load.

The Duratec engine is a DOHC inline-4 with an aluminum block and head and sequential multiport electronic fuel injection, generating a decent around-town 136 hp and 128 lb-ft of torque. With its impressive fuel economy rating, a 15.4-gallon tank statistically should deliver over 350 miles of city driving without refueling. An engine oil cooler is standard.

EASY OPTIONS, ALTERNATIVES

Dual sliding side doors and split rear cargo doors which open to a full 180 degrees standard (or 225 degrees optional) provide plenty of access to the interior. The sliding doors on the Transit Connect Cargo Van are available with or without windows, while the rear doors have a window; a Panel Van version has no side or rear cargo area windows. Load height

is about two feet when the vehicle is empty.

If you've always needed a UPS van of your own, but one that's smaller and more maneuverable in tight spots (with a 39-foot curb-to-curb turning circle), this little truck is so compelling, you may already have one foot out the door, on your way to the Ford dealer. Or you may not need a service truck, but are thinking it might even be good just as a daily driver. Well, take heart: Ford is planning to bring a Wagon version to market before long, as well, with a folding second-row bench seat in either two- or three-passenger (four or five total) configurations.

In 2010, watch for a fully Battery Electric Vehicle (BEV) model, and probably a hybrid shortly thereafter. The BEV is preliminarily slated to run via a single-speed gearbox on a 21- or 28-kWh liquid-cooled lithium-ion battery, with a driving range of up to 100 miles (at up to 70mph with zero emissions) and a recharge time of 6-8 hours. Ford notes that output power may be less above 105° F.

Initially the Transit Connect is coming from a plant in Turkey, but by 2012, moves to Wayne, Michigan, and Louisville, Kentucky. The reinforced platform shares underpinning with the European Focus, but will move to the next generation Focus platform by 2013. The truck is available in XL and XLT trim levels. ■

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