

Emphasis

As a rear-driver, what this sporty Explorer does not have underscores what it does have BY JOE SAGE

Ford Explorer has been through a fair amount of transformation over 35 years and six generations, while its position and mission have remained quite consistent—even as an entire industry has evolved to mimic its no-longer-lonely niche. Born in 1991, and as evidence of how things go full circle over time, Explorer originally replaced the departing Bronco II, retaining its trucklike body-on-frame structure and rear-based 4x4 drivetrain under a new utility body—a sporty utility body, you might say. And a vehicle category was born.

Explorer went through four generations as a truck-based, body-on-frame, rear-drive-based vehicle, through 2010, before evolving to a front-drive-based unibody for gen five in 2011—something lost and something gained, more in line with more of the competition, and yet farther from its roots.

Explorer returned to rear-drive for gen six, in 2019, which we welcomed for reasons of soul as much as function. Although most usage would still be 4WD, increasingly automatic systems switch to two-wheel when appropriate, and in that operation we'd still rather have rear drive, especially as there is little slick-surface penalty, with 4WD and vehicle stability systems kicking in as needed.

This generation also brought the Explorer ST—a Sports Technologies version, with an emphasis on performance (along with key style points applied). Key to the ST is its 400-horsepower 3.0-liter

EcoBoost V6, rather than the 300-hp 2.3L EcoBoost inline-4 of other Explorer trims. (Blending the variables a bit, though, the bigger engine is now also an option in the luxe-oriented Platinum.)

This set the stage for a rear-drive ST, which arrived in the lineup two years later—an opportunity, correction or both, in pursuit of more power to the pavement. Whatever the case, like other trims, Explorer ST is now available either way, rear-drive or 4WD. (Evolution or emphasis aside, RWD is considered standard and 4WD an option on all trims.)

All that said, if you still think a Ford Explorer is a 4x4, period, that's understandable—as is ST suggesting pure performance, in turn suggesting the advantages of RWD. If interested, here's what you do or don't get with the rear-drive Explorer.

You save \$2000 (or \$2100 on base Active trim). Ford states only one weight per powertrain, re-

gardless of trim level (4,303 lb with the 2.3L, 4,631 lb with the 3.0L). While you have gained 328 lb with the V6, RWD shaves off some weight—not stated, but third-party guesstimated at about 100 lb. This should lead to slightly higher fuel mileage, also not broken out, and slightly more tow capacity (for the same GVWR). Acceleration could be quicker for RWD due to less weight or for 4WD due to more traction; on top of that, the drivelines are engineered differently for the two. Thus this result can vary, but is also not stated for this vehicle.

Mostly, you'll just want to hands-on feel it. The rear-drive ST is powerful and responsive, with a solid exhaust note. It bears its ST bones well.

Yet as both paved-performance and off-road adventure fans, we still knew that while we were enjoying its RWD basis, it has no 4WD to go to if-and-when needed. We would have been curious to take this up into snow (on some lesser-traveled roads), to see how it performed on slick or loose surfaces, dependent upon traction control in lieu

of 4WD, but that weather was not available.

The newest Explorer has a book's-worth of new tech features, including Google-Amazon-Apple-Android-compatible Ford Digital Experience infotainment—even available BlueCruise (if, after all this driver's car emphasis, you'd rather go hands-free). Massaging seats were a highlight in ours.

It nags at us to spend \$40-60,000 and not spring just a tiny percentage more to get what many would consider an SUV's most defining feature—four-wheel drive. Then again, some people might be certain they'll never need it, two grand is two grand, and other differentials mentioned above may add value in their own right.

We bought a classic muscle car from a guy in Utah some years back, lacking power steering and brakes common for its era. When we mentioned this, he grinned and said, "This is the horsepower model"—all the power, stripped of a bit of weight (and function). You might think of the rear-drive Explorer ST in much the same way. ■

Comparing with a typical 4WD SUV is one thing, but the current general absence of sedans provides another perspective. For some, a rear-drive SUV could fill that need, while providing easy ingress-egress and great cargo volume, as well. It's all relative.



SPECIFICATIONS

ASSEMBLY	Chicago Assembly Plant
ROWS / SEATS	three / six
ENGINE/TRANS BUILD	Lima OH / na
ENGINE	3.0L EcoBoost V6, DOHC, 24v, dir inj, roller finger follower, twin indep var cam timing, compacted graphite iron alum block, alum head, cast alum pistons, composite shell-welded intake manifold w runner pack, exhaust manifold integrated into alum head
HP/TORQUE	400* hp / 415* lb-ft <i>(w premium fuel, though reg is req'd, but figures are not provided for that)</i>
COMPRESSION RATIO	10.5:1
TRANSMISSION	10-spd auto, SelectShift, paddles
DRIVETRAIN	REAR-WHEEL-DRIVE
AXLE RATIO	(ST) 3.58
0-TO-60 / TOP SPEED	(no info)
SUSPENSION	4-wheel indep w stblzr bars
STEERING	(no info)
BRAKES	(ST) performance brakes (no further information)
WHEELS	21-in Magnetite-painted alum
TIRES	P275/45R21 all-season BSW
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	198.7 / 119.1
HEADROOM (F/2/3)	40.8 / 40.5 / 38.9 in
LEGROOM (F/2/3)	42.9 / 38.3 / 32.2 in
GROUND CLEARANCE	7.8 in
APPR / DEPART / BRKOVER	19.7 / 20.6 / 16.8°
TURNING CIRCLE	(no info)
CARGO CAPACITY	16.3 / 46.0 / 85.3 cu.ft
WEIGHT	4631 lb
TOW CAPACITY	5000 lb
FUEL / CAPACITY	reg unl / 20.2 gal
MPG	18/25/21 (city/hwy/comb)
BASE PRICE	\$55,505
PAINT: Star White Metallic Tri-Coat	795
DESTINATION CHARGE	1595
TOTAL	\$57,895

Note sticker price varies from current info below.

2025 FORD EXPLORER LINEUP

	RWD	4WD
Active		
300-hp 2.3L EcoBoost	\$39,755	\$41,855
ST-Line		
300-hp 2.3L EcoBoost	44,615	46,615
Platinum		
300-hp 2.3L EcoBoost	52,250	54,250
400-hp 3.0L EcoBoost available		
ST		
400-hp 3.0L EcoBoost	54,260	56,260

