

Downsized but Upscale: Ford's Sport Trac can tow weekend toys, go to work or school

by Mark Maynard

We're all doing more with less, and so is Ford's 2007 Sport Trac, built from a stretched Explorer SUV.

This downsized but upscale "pickup" is a practical choice for users who haul or tow the weekend toys, but also need a carlike driver for work and the school car pool.

2007 FORD SPORT TRAC - The new Sport Trac is a practical choice for users who tow the weekend toys, but also need a car for work and school. CNS Photo courtesy of Ford. Sport Trac's Explorer wheelbase is stretched 16.8 inches to accommodate the 4 1/2-foot bed. It's also 5 inches longer and almost 2 inches wider than the '06 model. But compared with Ford's smallest F-150, Sport Trac is an inch shorter in length, 1.2 inches shorter overall and 5.2 inches narrower.

It's more refined than a full-size pickup with a reasonable, 37-foot turning circle - versus 41.8 in the F-150. Yet it still provides command-of-the-road height without being a road hog. Back-seat legroom beats an extended-cab pickup, but the foot room is snug for adults.

The truck is smooth to drive and remarkably quiet at highway speeds. The attractively designed interior appeared to be of good and substantial construction. Sport Trac isn't the same old thing with its "business casual" styling or features. And with gas prices what they are, Sport Trac is likely to remain a fresh look on the highway.

Prices start at just more than \$30,000. The top-line Limited four-wheel-drive test truck was \$35,175 with options - and it did have the presence and refinement, including Berber floor mats, to justify the price.

Rubber floors accented with Berber carpet have been a Sport Trac exclusive; it encourages the truck to be used and not fretted over when dirt gets dragged inside. The base model comes with a 210-horsepower,

4.0-liter V-6 and five-speed automatic transmission. But at 4,800 pounds, the optional 292-hp, 4.6-liter V-8 and six-speed automatic may have more appeal for users in this price bracket.

Only love can ease the hurt of a \$70 fill-up, and Sport Trac's fuel economy is modest. The V-6 is rated 15 mpg around town and 21 highway. The V-8 4WD is 14/20. And there is no flex-fuel option, cylinder deactivation or plans for a hybrid. The Control Trac four-wheel-drive system automatically transfers torque to the front wheels as needed. And despite the sophisticated electronics, there is a four-wheel-drive low for touchy off-road situations or pulling a boat trailer up a slick ramp.

The bed or cargo box is secure when it's fitted with the optional locking hard tonneau, \$595. Distance between the wheel wells is about 45 inches and the bed has built-in pockets to place two-by-fours to create a 4-foot load space above the wheel wells.

Inside the box are three bins recessed into the floor - two six-pack-sized bins in the right and left rear of the box and one large bin that runs the length of the box headboard. The bins have weather-resistant lids and removable drain plugs for storing wet gear or ice. Anyone for camping? Tailgating? Baja?

Among the helpful designs is one that's not so helpful - the inside door handle and grab bar. It's hard to believe the public-relations people let the designers get away with this one. The design is concept-car techno and attractively packaged on the door panel, but it's awkward to use.

The door release has ergonomic action, but the grab handle placed below is bad for leverage and it's not the first place a user reaches to pull the door shut - or to prevent the door from opening too quickly, such as when parked next to the grocery cart corral.

Oops, sorry Ford. There might be a nick in the door paint and fingernail marks in the driver-side armrest - which is where my hand went instinctively for the grab handle, but found only a padded armrest. After a week of driving, I still hadn't adapted to the design. There's a fix on the way, but when?

Other features I'd expect on a \$35,000 truck are a power rear sliding window and rearview backup camera. Except for rear head rests that get in the way of over-the-shoulder views, visibility isn't that bad on Sport Trac. But a rear camera is an investment worth the peace of mind that there's still room between the back of the truck and that Corolla you hope not to crease.

For safety, Ford built the Sport Trac to meet all known federal frontal- and side-impact crash requirements through 2010. Among the features are four air bags, optional side curtains, roll stability control and tire pressure monitoring system. Building an off-road urban vehicle has its challenges and compromises, but most here are workable.

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Copley News Service

SPECS2007 Ford Explorer Sport Trac Limited 4WD
Body style: five-passenger, rear- or four-wheel-drive utility vehicle
Engine: 4.6-liter, 24-valve V-8 with variable camshaft timing
Horsepower: 292 at 5,750 rpm
Torque: 300 at 3,950 rpm
Transmission: six-speed automatic with active torque-on-demand 4WD system
EPA fuel economy estimates: 14 mpg city, 20 highway (15/20 2WD); 87 octane recommended
Fuel capacity: 22.5 gallons

DIMENSIONSFront head/leg/shoulder room: 39.8/42.2/59 inches
Rear head/leg/shoulder room: 38.5/36.9/58.9 inches
Length/wheelbase: 210.2/130.5 inches
Tow capacity: 6,640 pounds
Curb weight: 4,793 pounds

FEATURESStandard equipment includes: remote locking, battery saver, security approach lamps, air conditioning, audio system with single CD, MP3 player, cruise control, power door locks-mirrors-windows, message center with 2-line display including outside temperature and compass, speed-sensitive front intermittent wipers, black body-side cladding and wheel lip moldings, 16-inch cast aluminum wheels, power plugs in the first and second rows and cargo area; vanity mirrors, privacy glass, black roof rails, Class II towing hitch, cargo bed storage compartments and tie-downs
Limited features include: fog lamps and automatic headlamps, monochromatic exterior, 18-inch machined aluminum wheels, silver step bars, silver roof side rails, leather-wrapped steering wheel and shift knob, 6-way power-adjustable driver's seat, floor console
Safety equipment includes: dual-stage front air bags, front side seat air bags, Roll Stability Control, tire pressure monitoring system, five-level front-passenger sensing system, adaptive load-limiting safety-belt retractors, four-wheel (four-channel) ABS with electronic brake force distribution; optional side air curtains

CHASSIS Brakes: four-wheel power disc brakes with standard 4-sensor, 4-channel ABS and AdvanceTrac with Roll Stability Control
Steering: low-friction rack-and-pinion with power assist; turning circle, 36.8 feet
Suspension: front, independent short- and long-arms, coil-over shocks and stabilizer bar; rear, trailing blade short- and long-arm design, coil-over shocks, stabilizer bar
Tires and wheels: P245/65R 17-inch all-season outline white-letter tires on cast-aluminum wheels; optional, P235/65R 18-inch on machined aluminum wheels

PRICINGBase: \$30,235, including \$695 freight charge; as tested, \$34,180
Options on test car: power moonroof, \$850; convenience package, \$195, includes automatic lamp, electrochromic mirror; electronics package, \$570, adds dual-zone air conditioning, message center and multifunction steering wheel controls; safety canopy side air curtain system, \$560; Class 3 towing, \$150; Audiophile AM-FM audio system with six-CD, MP3 player and powered subwoofer, \$510; power-adjustable pedals, \$125; cargo bed extender, \$195; Sirius satellite radio, \$195; hard tonneau cover, \$595; two-tone leather-trimmed seats, \$995
Warranty: three-year, 36,000-mile bumper-to-bumper
The competition: Honda Ridgeline, Chevrolet Avalanche
Where assembled: Louisville, Ky.

PLUSES: Love-at-first-sight styling with a business-casual work ethic.
MINUSES: Love hurts with \$70 fill-ups. No option for rearview camera. No power sliding rear window. Inside door handle design is concept-car clever but not practical.

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