People's choice: Mercury Montego builds on customer-satisfaction award

by Ron Moorhead

As the dark clouds and shorter daylight hours of winter settle in, the safety features and all-wheel drive of the Mercury Montego sedan are as comforting as a bowl of hot soup.

This Mercury twin to the Ford Five Hundred is endowed with refining features, and it is an award-winner among its owners.

MERCURY MONTEGO - The new Mercury Montego recently received AutoPacific's 2006 Ideal Vehicle Award, which recognizes the passenger vehicle that most closely meets customer expectations. CNS Photo courtesy of Mercury. It received AutoPacific's 2006 Ideal Vehicle Award, which recognizes the passenger vehicle that most closely meets customer expectations. Montego owners praised the car's cargo space and ease of access into and out of the vehicle. And they want very few or no changes at all made, according to the marketing research firm.

They got their wish for 2007. Model-year changes include the addition of traction control, front side air bags and Ford's Safety Canopy side curtains with rollover protection. Sirius satellite radio and 18-inch wheels are new options and there are two new paint colors: dune pearl clearcoat metallic and alloy clearcoat metallic.

Montego is sold in base and premier trim levels, front- or all-wheel drive with a 203-horsepower, 3.0-liter V-6. Front-drive cars come with a six-speed automatic transmission. All-wheel-drive models use a continuously variable transmission.

The CVT uses two variable-sized pulleys and a drive belt running between them to transfer power from engine to drive wheels. The system doesn't shift gears but changes the size of each pulley according to demand, making a near-seamless transition of power.

Driving a CVT-equipped vehicle for the first time can be a bit unsettling because there is no sensation of shifting gears. I prefer more interaction to my driving experience, and some manufacturers offer a sport mode that simulates shift points.

But the CVT is valued for fuel economy. The Montego AWD is rated 19 mpg city and 26 highway, on 87 octane. The front-drive Montego has mileage ratings of 21/29.

The car was designed to have a slightly higher seating position, which helps in visibility and in access. And

all-wheel drive adds just a bit more height.

The exterior design of the Montego is a touch of contemporary mixed with a bit of nostalgia. The car has an upright stance, with good visibility from all seats, without the feeling of being in an SUV.

This is one of a few sedans that has more legroom in the second row than the front.

The trunk is a spacious with 21.2 cubic feet and the front passenger seat folds flat for more utility.The interior is a change from the typical domestic automobile. Mercury has produced a pleasing mix of character with comfort and utility. Though there are a few hard plastic bits I would like to see replaced, there is durability and quality to the materials. Loaded with features, an all-wheel-drive Montego is sensible and stylish alternative to an SUV.Copley News Service

SPECS2007 Mercury Montego PremierEngine: Aluminum, 203 horsepower DOHC, V-6Transmission: Six-speed automatic (front-wheel drive) or continuously variable automatic (all-wheel drive)Fuel economy: 21 mpg city, 29 highway (all-wheel drive, 19/26); 87 octane recommendedWheelbase/length: 112.9/200.7Trunk space: 21.2 cubic feetCurb weight: 3,930 poundsFront head/leg/shoulder room: 39.4/41.2/57.8 inchesRear head/leg/shoulder room: 38.6/41.9/57.6 inches

FEATURESStandard equipment: remote locking with keypad, automatic HID headlamps and LED taillamps, fog lights, power (folding) mirrors; power windows-locks, dual-zone electronic climate control, floor mats, six-way power driver's seat, fold-flat passenger seat, seat-back pockets, split-fold rear seat, leather-wrapped tilt steering wheel with remote audio controls.

Premier equipment: 18-inch, 15-spoke alloy wheels; remote perimeter lighting; audiophile system with six-CD changer and subwoofer; leather seating surfaces; heated driver and front-passenger seats; two-way power passenger seat; leather-wrapped steering wheel and shift knob; overhead console with universal garage door opener; wood-grain interior trim; memory function for power seats, mirrors and adjustable pedals; trunk cargo net.

Safety: driver and front-passenger air bags; Safety Canopy air curtains with rollover protection and seat-mounted, side-impact air bags; passive anti-theft systemBrakes: Power assisted, four-wheel discs with ABSSteering: Power rack and pinion; 40-foot turning circleTires: 225/55R 18-inchBase price: $23,780; price as tested: $29,930, including $750 destination chargeWhere assembled: Chicago

PLUSES: High ride height, easy access, rear legroom, interior design.

MINUSES: Bland CVT shift experience; 40-foot turning circle.

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