

Ford Escape and hybrid twin looking sharp after needed face-lift

by Mark Maynard

Ford Motor Co. is sending out early its remodeled 2008 Escape and Escape hybrid. This compact sport utility vehicle was treated to a "major-minor" freshening that smooths and refines, as any good face-lift should. The new Escape looks more like an Explorer and drives more like a car.

FORD ESCAPE - The remodeled 2008 Escape is a handy family vehicle with a back seat raised for visibility and rear seat backs that fold for cargo. CNS Photo courtesy of Ford. The new models, which have more standard safety equipment, went on sale in January. Escape is sold in four-cylinder and V-6, two- or four-wheel drive and as a four-cylinder gasoline-electric hybrid in two- or four-wheel drive.

Pricing ranges from \$19,245 to \$25,995 for the top-line Limited. With options, the Limited 4WD test truck was \$30,910. Compared with the '07 models, the '08s cost \$740 to \$1,050 less and have more standard equipment. Hybrid 2WD and 4WD models are \$580 to \$435 less.

The Escape is a handy family vehicle with a back seat raised for visibility and rear seat backs that fold for cargo. The redesign was necessary for it to stay competitive with the new Honda CR-V, Toyota RAV4 and Mitsubishi Outlander.

Notable improvements include a more quiet ride -- even quieter than the new Ford Edge crossover. But Escape's carryover four-speed automatic transmission may seem dated, though it works well enough.

The Limited 4WD test vehicle showed good use of the new materials, not the least of which are seat fabrics made from 100 percent recycled material. That should be an added incentive for those shopping the hybrid model.

The interior uses attractive design and subtle touches of metallic trim, but the cabin is still durable for the

scrapes and scuffs of family life.

Also new is a "top of dash" information display, ice-blue lighting and redesigned radio and climate controls.

Electric power steering eliminates belt-driven noises from the hydraulic system, corrects for steady tracking on crowned roads and ekes out more fuel economy from less drag on the engine. Side curtain air bags and electronic roll-stability control are also standard equipment.

Escape's broad stance isn't prone to body lean; I was able to power through cornering maneuvers without raucous tire squeal.

Fuel mileage ratings haven't been released, but it may be safe to expect similar mileage as the '07. There were no changes to the engines, but curb weights are about 100 pounds heavier, depending on model.

I haven't driven the four-cylinder model, but the 200-horsepower, 3.0-liter V-6 isn't a jack rabbit. But what it lacks in acceleration, it must be applying to fuel economy, which is 20 mpg city and 24 highway - that's up 1 mile per gallon in both categories over the '07 model. The 153-hp, 2.3-liter four-cylinder is rated 24/29 manual or 21/24 automatic 4WD. Both engines use 87 octane.

If it were my choice, I'd opt for the four-cylinder hybrid over the V-6. Unless you'll be towing, the performance is brisk and the fuel economy is commendable at 31/36 for the front-drive model. I like the efficiency of the hybrid system and how it shuts off the gasoline engine at stoplights. The engine is saving fuel and not pumping out emissions. Shouldn't all engines do this?

Small is in for these compact, five-passenger SUVs. They have evolved from an off-road formula to a nicely

refined alternative to a sedan. The Escape still has the rugged-looking exterior that helps it make a statement in this crowded segment. Value pricing seals the deal.

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SPECS2008 Ford Escape Limited 4WD **Body style:** Compact, five-passenger SUV with front- or four-wheel drive; four-wheel independent suspension **Engine:** Aluminum, 200-horsepower, DOHC 3.0-liter V-6 producing 193 foot-pounds of torque **Transmission:** four-speed automatic **EPA fuel economy estimates:** 19 mpg city, 23 highway; 87 octane recommended

DIMENSIONS **Cargo space:** 29.2 cubic feet behind second row **Front head/leg/shoulder room:** 40.4/41.6/56.6 inches **Length/wheelbase:** 174.7/103.1 inches **Curb weight:** 3,272 to 3,547 pounds (base 2WD to Limited 4WD)

FEATURES **Standard equipment includes:** Remote locking and keyless entry pad, air conditioning, cruise control, floor mats, leather-wrapped steering wheel with radio and cruise controls, leather-trimmed seats, 60/40 split folding rear seat back, 16-inch aluminum wheels, front fog lights, privacy glass, power windows-locks-mirrors, liftgate with flip-up glass, rear defrost and two-speed wiper, six-way power-adjustable driver's seat, auto-dim rearview mirror, illuminated vanity mirrors, automatic headlights, four-wheel disc brakes with ABS, power rack-and-pinion steering (36.7-foot turning circle) **Safety equipment includes:** dual-stage front air bags, side curtain air bags, electronic roll-stability control anti-lock brakes

PRICING **Base:** \$25,995, including \$665 freight charge; price as tested: \$30,910 **Options on test car:** P225/65 17-inch tires and chrome-clad wheels, \$695; Limited luxury package, \$795, includes automatic air conditioning, power heated mirrors and heated front seats; rear cargo convenience group, \$295, adds cargo cover, roof rail crossbars, lockable storage bin and under floor storage bin; Limited chrome appearance package, \$195; tow package, \$345; Energy Audiophile and navigation system, \$2,395; Sirius satellite radio, \$195 **The competition:** Chevrolet Equinox, Hyundai Tucson, Saturn Vue, Honda CR-V, Mitsubishi Outlander and others **Where assembled:** Kansas City, Mo.

PLUSES: Attractive ruggedness with street-savvy driving experience; well-soundproofed; large four-wheel disc brakes **MINUSES:** Gas tank is on the small side at 16.5 gallons, so it may just seem that you're filling up often. Four-speed automatic is quite capable but appears less evolved when the competition is using five-speeds.

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