Leading Edge: Smartly designed crossover SUV looks to be the future of Ford

by Mark_Maynard

I'm no futurist when it comes to trends and design, but it's clear that Ford's new Edge crossover SUV is the future for Ford Motor Co.

This five-passenger people mover is contemporary, fashionable and nothing like the Explorer, which ignited this segment of sport-utility vehicles 17 years ago.

It is an accommodating vehicle for the American commute, smartly designed, and there's that bit of indescribable magic when a vehicle just feels right to drive; it inspires confidence on the road.

FORD EDGE - The 2007 Ford Edge SEL is all-wheel-drive and might be the perfect station wagon for the next generation. CNS Photo courtesy of Ford.

SUN ROOF - The Ford Edge SEL's panoramic sunroof has a large main panel that tilts or slides and a second row of glass that doesn't open. CNS Photo courtesy of Ford.

Not that there aren't issues, but none I couldn't forgive. My complaints were a tailgate release too high in the door to give good leverage for lifting, dashboard reflections in the windshield in bright sunlight and some plastic interior panels that weren't lined up perfectly.

But the topline SEL all-wheel-drive test truck was a "preproduction" model, which is one of the early vehicles off the line that is used for testing and media previews. A P.R. guy once explained the variations of preproduction vehicles: "If you like it, it's production. If you don't, it's preproduction and subject to improvement."

That said, your evaluation may vary, but Ford did delay final production of vehicles "to ensure consistency in the build quality of vehicles coming off the production line," a spokesman said. The delay was just three weeks and vehicles should be in good supply at dealers.

Today, the crossover SUV -- the nontruck SUV -- is a better definition of a "sport and utility" vehicle.

Edge is built from the Mazda6 sedan architecture, which also is used as the platform for the Ford Fusion,

Lincoln MKZ, Mazda CX-7 and Mazda CX-9.

Edge isn't intended for tough off-road use, although there is an all-wheel-drive option. It does the work of a wagon without a compromise to styling. And as a car, it is a true five-seater with a flat second-row floor and almost as much rear headroom as in the front.

Edge is sold in SE and SEL models in front- or all-wheel drive. Pricing ranges from $26,000 for a front-drive SE to $31,395 for the topline SEL Plus AWD, today's tester. Desirable options include:- Panoramic sunroof, $1,395, which is a large main sunroof that tilts or slides with a second row, moonroof panel that doesn't open. Both are covered by an electrically-controlled sunscreen.- Rear cargo management system, $65, which is basement storage of significant size under the cargo floor.- Reverse sensing system, $245, which alerts with tones to the nearness of objects. It's better to have this than nothing; however, it is not as good as a rearview camera, which isn't offered.- Tow package, $350, boosts capacity to 3,500 pounds.Photos don't do justice to the exterior design, which attracted double-takes from male and female drivers of all ages in my week of testing.

There's a place inside for everything from iPod plug-in, to supersize front cup holders, to 20-ounce bottle pockets in the doors as well as laptop space in the center console. The second row, 60/40-split, seat-backs fold with the flip of a lever or from the cargo area by an electro-mechanical switch.

The quality of materials is generally good and durable. The shift lever was stiff to move out of park and vague when engaging reverse and drive, but I learned to give an extra tug to secure the lever. And the steering felt heavier at low speeds than it needed to be.

Considerable engineering work went into making a sound-damped cabin and buffet-free sunroof experience. But while the ride is comfortable, there is some wind noise and road texture transmitted through the suspension at highway speeds. It was not objectionable "sound" but it was more noticeable than in my recent tests of the Escape and the grand Expedition EL SUVs.

There's a lot to this vehicle, and some of that validates the 2-ton curb weight. But the 265-horsepower, 3.5-liter V-6 moves the load briskly, helped by the six-speed automatic that doesn't hesitate to give a downshift to keep the power flowing.

Fuel mileage is rated 17 mpg around town and 24 on the highway, but I was observing just under 15 mpg for combined city/highway mileage from the onboard computer.

For those who need a large car, crossovers are a good solution. But some look too much like a wagon or van.

Edge looks like the future and it's a good place to be.Copley News Service

SPECS2007 Ford Edge SEL AWDBody style: Midsize, five-passenger crossover SUVEngine: Aluminum 3.5-liter, DOHC 24-valve, V-6Horsepower: 265 at 6,250 rpmTorque: 250 foot-pounds at 4,500 rpmTransmission: Six-speed automaticEPA fuel economy estimates: 17 mpg city, 24 highway (18/25 FWD); 87 octaneFuel tank: 20 gallonsDIMENSIONSCargo space: 32.1 cubic feet behind second rowFront head/leg/shoulder room: 40/40.7/58.9 inchesRear head/leg/shoulder room: 39.3/39.6/58.8 inchesLength/wheelbase: 185.7/111.2 inchesCurb weight: 4,073-4,282 FWD/AWD poundsFEATURESStandard equipment includes: Remote keyless entry, manual fold power mirrors, cloth bucket seats, 60/40, split-fold-flat rear bench seats with center head restraint, front and rear floor mats, front console, manual air conditioning, power windows with one-touch down driver, power locks and windows, cruise control, four-speaker audio system with CD and MP3SEL: Fog lamps, six-way power driver seat, overhead console, nine-speaker audio with six-disc CD, steering wheel audio controls, message

center/compass, chrome exhaust tips, dual illuminated visorsSafety equipment includes: Dual-stage front air bags, seat-mounted side air bags, Safety Canopy system with rollover detection and extended-duration side curtain air bags, electronic stability control with roll stability controlCHASSISBrakes: Four-wheel disc with four-wheel ABSSteering: Power rack and pinion; 36.8-foot turning circleSuspension: Four-wheel independent; stabilizer bars front and rearTires and wheels: P235/65, 17-inch, all-season painted aluminum wheels; optional, P245/60, 18-inch, all-season on painted aluminum or aluminum with chromePRICINGBase: $31,395, including $675 freight charge; $36,850 as testedOptions on test vehicle: Panoramic sunroof, $1,395; lower cargo management system, $65; 18-inch chrome-plated wheels, $750; reverse sensing system, $245; Sirius satellite radio, $195; class 2 trailer towing package, $350; DVD navigation system with Audiophile six-disc CD, $2,380; all-weather rubber floor mats, $75The competition: Nissan Murano, Toyota Highlander, Chevy Equinox, Subaru B9 TribecaWhere assembled: Ontario, CanadaPLUSES: Benchmark design and usability for the next-generation station wagon.MINUSES: Tailgate release doesn't give adequate leverage for lifting; dashboard reflections in the windshield; no rearview camera with the reverse-sensing system

Science of sound tapped to quiet EdgeMark Maynard There is a good story around the Ford Edge "wind noise" team and the in-depth engineering that happens behind the scenes. It was important for the vehicle to have a quiet cabin and to reduce wind buffeting caused by the optional Panoramic sunroof when it was in full-open position. Some of the more expensive competitors use a "comfort stop," or midposition opening, which helps quiet buffeting. Engineers tapped the science of sound to find satisfaction. They wanted the sound in the Edge, with the sunroof open, to be quiet enough for the driver and passengers to carry on a conversation or listen to music without shouting or blasting the stereo. "We had to get the frequencies generated by the wind deflector to levels that would minimize interruption of the speech-intelligibility ranges," said chief engineer Jim Baumbick. "That's very important when the customer is trying to talk on a cell phone or listen comfortably to the radio or iPod while the roof is open." Much effort concentrated on the wind deflector, the low, sunroof-wide panel that pops up when the roof is opened. The engineers considered the shape of the deflector ends, the optimal thickness of the deflector mesh and the aerodynamic shape of the deflector crossbar. Along with using noise-measurement mannequins that are wired to gauge sound, the team used microphones and air flow anemometers positioned around the roof opening and near the wind deflector to measure noise and air flow distribution. Tests were conducted in a wind tunnel simulating crosswinds of up to 25 mph, Baumbick said. The car was put on a turntable to get wind readings from all directions. Shaping the deflector ends was particularly important for balancing noise along the front of the roof opening, Baumbick said. "By optimizing the mesh density, deflector width, end wrap-around radius and deflector deployment height, noise generated by the deflector ends was minimized and balanced along the entire deflector width," he said. "The basic performance of the vehicle does not vary with crosswinds as some of the competitors do," Baumbick said. "At the same time, we are very balanced for loudness (full open) and much better levels than the significantly more expensive Mercedes-Benz."

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