

Reporting for heavy duty

by Mark_Maynard

Which came first, the 40-foot, 17,000-pound travel trailer or the pickup to pull it?

If you don't tow a race car or a boat the size of a small cruise ship or the Taj Mahal of travel trailers, the concept of a supersized pickup is unnecessary.

F-250 - With the right engine and body style, Ford's new Super Duty F-250 pickup can haul up 15,600 pounds. The highest tow rating is with the F-350 Dual rear wheel at 18,700 pounds. CNS Photo courtesy of Ford.

TAILGATE STEP - The optional TailGate Step pulls down and out in one motion for an easy climb into the bed. CNS Photo.

I stopped counting the times I heard in a recent week of driving a diesel-powered 2008 Ford Super Duty, "Nobody needs a pickup that big."

There are times I agreed.

To use this truck as just a commuter vehicle would be a waste of fuel and highway space. But there is a certain pleasure in driving a massive truck with massive amounts of diesel power.

Super Duty is sold in three cab styles, five trim levels, three engines and two bed lengths in two- or four-wheel drive. Starting prices range from around \$23,000 to \$60,000. The F-250 SuperCab Lariat 4WD test truck had a starting price of \$35,680 and with options cost \$51,040. That price included \$6,895 for the diesel and \$1,490 for the five-speed automatic transmission.

The challenge for Ford engineers in the Super Duty redesign was to build a capable and durable work truck that can be dressed up with passenger-car comfort and electronics.

The frame is engineered to address all the add-ons from towing applications and customization, such as larger tires and raised suspensions.

The 2008 Super Duty has significant revisions, many of which were from customers. The size hasn't changed, but the face is bigger, for more of a "Li'l Peterbilt" experience, says Pete Reyes, Super Duty chief engineer.

There's a built-in step bumper at the front for a leg up to check engine fluids. Fog lights are protected within the bumper and grille opening, and headlights were lowered 4 inches to aim the beam lower to the ground and not in a passenger-car rearview mirror. The bumper is also lower for more crash compatibility with cars.

The interior is more refined with much more soundproofing and laminated QuietSteel at the firewall, between engine and cab. A turbulence strip between bed and cab also helped remove interior noise. The air conditioning gets colder faster, and the fan is quieter. There are new under-seat ducts to the rear.

The supplemental cab heater (\$250) is handy because the diesel takes longer to circulate heat. The added heater is warm almost immediately and in five minutes the cab is toasty, Reyes says.

Not available but appreciated would be front parking sensors and a rearview camera. The camera could help marital relations when it's the spouse helping to guide the driver to the trailer hitch.

Optional telescopic and folding trailering mirrors move out 2 3/4 inches, powered by three motors. The \$600 option is substantial but worth it for the fold feature, which I used frequently.

The trailer-brake controller was relocated to the instrument panel, up from the previous shin-banging under-dash placement. The electronics also have been upgraded to make it easier to adjust braking rates for trailers of various sizes.

An optional tailgate step is a Ford-exclusive option, which also was a customer request. Drop the (locking) tailgate, and the step slides out from within and a pole-type handrail can be raised from back of the tailgate. The \$375 option will be worth it for those beyond the age of scrambling up into the bed. Expect this extra to be offered soon on the F-150.

But the biggest news is the 6.4-liter diesel V-8.

This is the new-generation diesel, replacing the 6.0-liter, which had its share of problems in the early years.

The new engine design uses high-pressure, common rail injection, electric fuel injectors and an advanced diesel particulate (soot) filter in the exhaust system. Dual exhaust tips with cutaways are designed to cool exhaust during a burn-off period of built-up soot.

The diesel engine burns as cleanly as a passenger car, the exhaust doesn't stink, isn't black, and the engine is quieter because of the direct injection. And the new ultra-low-sulfur diesel fuel doesn't permeate your hands and nostrils if you spill a drop while filling up.

Also new on the diesel are two turbochargers. The smaller turbo spools up quickly for more pull off the line and the big turbo kicks in about 25 mph.

When those turbos are giving their full 42 pounds of boost, this truck moves out. You can feel the force when turbo No. 2 kicks in. The boost in acceleration from 30 to 60 mph is more like a sport sedan.

Then there's the fuel consumption. In my more than 300 miles of driving, the combined city/highway fuel mileage was in the low 14s. Currently, diesel costs less than 91 octane, but that can't last long.

Pop the hood and the front of the engine bay is dominated by an array of radiators, six of them, sandwiched in place and secured by just six bolts. The engine radiator is 950 square inches (versus 1,005 to 1,100 for a semi tractor), and there are coolers for oil, power steering, transmission and turbochargers. Even a diesel fuel cooler.

All this to give peace of mind to someone hauling a trailer uphill when it's 120 degrees, which is the Ford standard for success, Reyes says.

I didn't tow a thing in my test week, so I can't comment on that capability. But I did put more than 300 miles on the test truck and put in more than \$100 in diesel.

Driving around without cargo or a trailer is like saddling a draft horse for barrel racing. The F-250 SuperCab short-bed needs, oh, 600 pounds in the bed to settle the ride. After a 160-mile drive around the county, my head was pounding and my body was weary from the buckboard ride.

The SuperCab is spacious for front occupants, but better for cargo in back. The seat bottom is short, the seat back erect and there are no rear headrests. The backs of heads easily can be banged on the window, particularly when those teenagers won't stop making noise. However, the floor is flat and the seat bottom folds up for stowing gear or tools.

Interior quality is generally good, but the test truck's driver door had to be slammed to avoid the "Driver door ajar" warning. Also, the faux-wood trim plate at the passenger side window switches was loose and wouldn't snap into place. And the turn signal has an insistent electronic tick-tock that annoys quickly when waiting in traffic. Or maybe that was the day of my headache after 160 miles.

Steering, acceleration and shift points disguise the 6,385-pound curb weight. The four-wheel disc brakes are large, 13-inches plus, but there isn't an overwhelming sense of secure stopping power until you're hard on the pedal, and by then you're into the ABS.

Super Duty isn't just a truck for Ford; it has become a brand within the brand. Ask a Super Duty owner what he or she drives and the answer is likely to be "F-250," "F-350" or just "Super Duty."

There are limits on how posh this workhorse can be made, but more options for car-class innovation and comfort would make this truck more accommodating for the long haul.

DIESEL SUPER DUTY RECALL

Three incidents of flames coming out of tailpipes prompted Ford Motor Co. to make a voluntary recall of the diesel-powered Super Duty.

There were three reported incidents of flames coming out of tailpipes. Two were with Ford vehicles, one was a customer vehicle.

"There were no injuries, no vehicle fires, no structural damage," Super Duty chief engineer Pete Reyes said.

In each case, certain engine conditions caused excessive oil or fuel to collect in the diesel particulate filter and then burn off. The repair is a software update to the engine control module, which will put the engine in idle mode if a temperature threshold (well below ignition) is reached.

"It is very rare, and in some cases unrepeatable," Reyes said. The fix takes 30 minutes at a dealer.

Copley News Service

It's work - and play - for these trucks

Sales of Ford's Super Duty trucks run at about 380,000 units a year. The majority of sales are for work trucks, but the popularity of the pickups as dual-purpose - work-and-play - trucks has a strong and growing following.

Just observe the flow of traffic on an Interstate on a Friday afternoon. You'll be able to count the Super Dutys with beds loaded and hitched to a "toy box" travel-trailer with living quarters and garage space for other motorized toys.

And the pool of potential buyers hasn't peaked. Baby boomers are a significant sales group getting ready to hitch their retirement wagon to a star - and then a powerful truck to pull a travel-trailer outfitted with the accommodations to which they have become accustomed.

Traditionally, Super Duty sales are 70 percent diesel, 20 percent V-8 and 10 percent V-10. But initial orders are running at 80 percent diesel.

There's only one thing wrong with the Super Duty. It will pull a massive trailer up the steepest mountain highway in 120-degree temperatures, but it doesn't go far enough upscale in optional features. Buyers in this demographic have the disposable income.

And they like to make improvements to their trucks, often adding more horsepower. But that will be trickier with the new emissions standards and the more sensitive engine electronics.

For example, modified exhaust systems could trigger more frequent regeneration cycles of the particulate filter to burn off soot - more re-gens, more wear and tear, shorter life of an expensive component to replace out of warranty. And a different-from-stock exhaust system would also need to maintain the exhaust-tip diffuser, which dissipates heat and lowers exhaust temperature during a regeneration.

As for engine-performance computer chips, the emissions controls will have to be managed to maintain emissions standards. And, oops, running aftermarket chips voids the warranty, Reyes says.

The standard 30-gallon fuel tank on the short-bed F-250 and F-350 doesn't allow a cruising range of more than 350 miles, usually less. And there is no factory auxiliary tank offered. The long-box trucks, with an eight-foot bed, come with a 38-gallon tank. Only the F-450 and F-550 cab chassis have a dual-tank option for up to 59 gallons in the standard 40-gallon tank and the 19-gallon midship tank.

A SHOOTOUT COMING

Ford is brandishing its much improved F-Series Super Duty. General Motors rushed ahead production of its new heavy-duty Chevy Silverado and GMC Sierra with a new diesel engine. Dodge freshened its heavy-duty Ram and added a new 6.7-liter Cummins turbo diesel, due out after the first of the year.

All are squaring off to fire shots over the bow of the big, new Toyota Tundra.

The full-size Tundra isn't in a size league with the domestics' heavy duties, nor does it offer a diesel with pavement-clawing torque, but it's a Toyota. And Toyota is determined to carve up some sales through its reputation, vigorous ad campaigns and consumer driving programs.

The Detroit Three have competent heavy-duty trucks and brand-loyal customers. But fear, or respect, of Toyota makes better trucks for all.

SPECS

2008 F-250 SUPER DUTY LARIAT 4WD

Body style: Five- or six-passenger SuperCab (extended cab) heavy-duty pickup with 6.75-foot box

Engine: 6.4-liter V-8 diesel

Horsepower: 350 at 3,000 rpm

Torque: 650 at 2,000 rpm

Transmission: five-speed Torqshift automatic

EPA fuel economy estimates: 14.2 observed, city/highway

Fuel capacity: 30.5 gallons

DIMENSIONS

Payload capacity: 2,810 pounds

Tow capacity: 14,800 pounds

Front head/leg/shoulder room: 41.4/41/68 inches

Rear head/leg/shoulder room: 38.4/31.8/68.1 inches

Length/wheelbase: 231.8/141.8 inches

Curb weight: 6,385 pounds

FEATURES

Standard equipment includes: cab steps, front tow hooks, fog lights, locking and removable tailgate with lift assist, sliding rear window, spare tire and wheel lock, six-way power adjustable front seats, AM-FM-MP3-CD audio with auxiliary audio input jack, electrochromic mirror, leather-wrapped steering wheel with audio, cruise and climate controls, leather-trimmed seats, overhead console, rear fold-up bench, wood-grain trim accents, trailer hitch receiver (2-inch) and seven-wire harness with relays, box and cargo lights, map lights

Safety equipment includes: four-wheel ABS, front air bags

CHASSIS

Brakes: Hydro-boost four-wheel disc; 13.66-inch front, 13.39 rear

Steering: power recirculating ball, 47.5 feet

Suspension: twin coil monobeam, Rancho shock absorbers, stabilizer bar; rear, stabilizer bar with nonindependent live axle with leaf springs and staggered shock absorbers

Tires and wheels: 17- and 18-inch tires on steel wheels; optional, LT275/65R 20-inch on alloy wheels

PRICING

Base: \$35,680; price as tested, \$51,040

Options on test car: diesel engine, \$6,895; five-speed automatic, \$1,490; 3.73 ratio limited-slip axle, \$300; LT 275/65 20-inch all-terrain tires, \$1,245; power adjustable brake and accelerator pedals, \$120; navigation system with Audiophile 6-CD audio system, \$1,375; rubber floor mats, \$25; off-road package, \$225, adds transfer case skid plate, fuel tank skid plate and a decal; upfitter switches, \$85, adds toggles for fog lights, winch, driving lights, etc.; reverse parking sensor, \$245; rear power sliding window, \$185; tailgate step, \$375; stowable bed extender, \$250; traction control, \$130; electronic shift-on-the-fly 4WD, \$185; rapid-heat supplemental cab heater, \$250; engine block heater, \$35; trailer brake controller and telescoping (and folding) power mirrors, \$600; driver seat memory presets, \$225; 200-amp alternator, \$75; heated front seats, \$220; universal garage door opener, \$125

Where assembled: Kentucky

PLUSES: The reigning status symbol at the campground or the long haul. Much quieter cabin. Smooth flow of power between diesel and transmission. Quiet, clean and powerful diesel.

MINUSES: Buckboard ride; annoyingly loud tick-tock turn signal; driver door required slamming to avoid the "Driver door ajar" message; too few choices for upscale driver aids, such as a rearview camera; straight rear seat back and no back-seat headrests in SuperCab.

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