

## **Easy Green Rolling:**

### **Escape in a Hybrid**

**By Roger Witherspoon**

There is a cacophony of sounds associated with driving in New York City. Cab drivers tend to either live on their horns or lean out their window to shout at other motorists. There is the intermittent din from never ending construction projects. There is usually the wail of a siren or two and a persistent, background hum from several million moving people. And then, adding to the musical mosaic is the sound of car you happen to be driving.

Unless, of course, you are in a hybrid. Rides in fully functional vehicles with both gasoline and electric motors, like the Ford Escape Hybrid or its upscale cousin, the Mercury Mariner Hybrid, have their own distinct sound: silence. It is disconcerting, at first, to drive and hear nothing. And the operational sound of a hybrid, with its two types of motors, is akin to a mobile magician's trick – you hear and feel the steady rumble of the familiar sounding gasoline engine and then, suddenly, you don't.

Ford has taken a step to go after the mobile "green" market and chase Toyota with mid-sized SUVs which can run on either regular, unleaded gasoline or on the electric motor. In that regard, it is a true hybrid, similar to those in the Toyota fleet, rather than the modified hybrids offered by General Motors. In the GM system, the cars can not run on an electric motor. Instead, the fuel savings come by system in which the gas engine shuts off when the car is stopped or idling, and the electric motor continues to operate the car's electrical systems and restart the gas motor when you touch the accelerator.

Ford's decision to use the Escape, which they bill as the "best selling SUV on the planet", provides a high visibility platform from which to launch their hybrid system. To start with the hybrid version of the car is a complete Escape, with the handling, storage, and comfort which has made the small SUV so popular. It is small enough to handle like a sedan, which can be useful if you are roaming through New England and, periodically, have to dodge the wandering deer who like to stroll on paved roads. But the economics of hybrid technology are evident in tradeoffs which are made in engine performance and interior comfort. The use of expensive technology has consequences.

In terms of power, the traditional Ford Escape has a conventional, 200 horsepower, V-6 engine which is more than ample to propel the boxy little SUV to the front of the highway pack. It is stable enough that if one is cruising on the open highway and the speedometer is pushing 80 you do not fear rolling over or losing control on curves. The Escape's traction control and all wheel drive also make it a sure footed vehicle on severely winding, gravel, and country roads.

But where Toyota has opted for two electric motors – one for each axel to provide maximum power and torque – Ford has opted for the single electric motor. It is designed for city driving, and runs the car silently up to about 30 miles per hour. At that point, the gasoline engine takes over. When the car is accelerating, however, both the engine and motor are functioning, with the electric motor providing a boost to the more powerful gasoline engine.

As a result, the Escape Hybrid has a gasoline engine producing only 133 horsepower and an electric motor which, by itself, produces 94 horsepower but in its

boost mode raises the combined engines to only 155 horsepower. That makes the Escape Hybrid a sluggish vehicle when you are seeking a burst of power. It just doesn't have it. It will reach the same speeds as the regular Escape, and is strong enough to accelerate while climbing a steep hill. But it takes awhile for the Hybrid to get up to speed.

For most practical driving purposes, that is not really an issue. Speed is a relative concept in a place like New York City, where the average speed on highways is less than 30 miles per hour and street traffic speed sinks into the 20s.

The savings on gasoline from the use of the hybrid are greatest if the bulk of the driving is in urban settings. The regular Ford Escape has EPA mileage ratings of 17 miles per gallon in city driving and 22 miles per gallon on highways, while the Escape Hybrid poses 36 miles per gallon under the street lights and 31 miles per gallon on the open road.

The economics work this way. The EPA estimates that the average motorist drives 15,000 miles annually. In that case, since gasoline engines are inefficient in stop and go traffic, the owner of a regular Ford Escape would buy 882 gallons of gasoline annually to cruise around the city, or 681 gallons to roam the highways. A Ford Escape Hybrid owner with the same driving habits would need 416 gallons of gas cruising around the big city, an annual savings of 466 gallons; and 484 gallons on the highway, an annual reduction of 197 gallons.

While those numbers are significant, keep in mind that motorists do not buy gasoline by the hundreds of gallons. A reduction of 466 gallons annually in street driving averages out to about nine gallons of gasoline saved weekly. At today's prices, that is about \$30, which is not insignificant. But the new technology costs a premium of about \$3,100, which is paid up front when you buy the hybrid. At that rate, it would take at least two years of "savings" to equal the up front investment – and that is only if the driving is completely in the city and the actual mileage equals the EPA's overly optimistic test mileage. In reality, it is likely to take at least three years before the reduction in fuel consumption produces an ongoing cash savings.

Which brings us to the other tradeoff. The Ford Escape tested was a comfortable, all inclusive model with powered, heated, leather seats and a décor accented with wood and chrome. To cut down on the sticker price, the Escape Hybrid had manually operated cloth seats, for example, and a rather plain looking interior. It was comfortable, but not nearly the esthetically pleasing experience provided by the upscale, non-hybrid Escape.

Buying a Hybrid, therefore, means either paying for the privilege of operating a more energy efficient car, or settling for little less comfort. The differences are more esthetic than functional: you can easily drive a car without a navigation system, satellite radio, or a six-disc, in-dash CD player. But the time spent in a minimalist car is much less enjoyable and the traffic jams are much harder to tolerate.

The Escape is a small SUV, but it is designed to transport large folks in comfort. Bad Boy Alan Iverson could easily trade in his tricked-out Escalade for an Escape Hybrid and lazily take three of his NBA buddies on a cross country road trip. As its name implies, the Escape can provide a comfortable exit from the daily grind.

## **2008 Ford Escape Hybrid**

**MSRP:**

**\$33,195**

