

The Flex:

Standing out in a Crowd

By Roger Witherspoon

There were five of them standing around the oddly-shaped SUV in the parking lot: four men in animated conversation as they walked around the car and pointed; and a woman who silently, slowly, ran her hands along the evenly spaced grooves along the side.

They hadn't seen a Ford Flex, the deliberate break in SUV crossover styling which threw away the curved, smooth flowing lines typified by the Nissan Murano and instead emulates a child's rectangular block on wheels. It has a long, low, flat roof resembling that of a squashed toy school bus, and inside are square seats – wide, comfortable, heated, power adjustable, leather seats – but square nonetheless.

The men were fascinated by the space in this rolling box, and walked away in animated discussion while the woman smiled and said “It just seems so nice.”

Two days later, there was an armed break-in a few doors away in a neighborhood so quiet that police are rarely seen except when they unlock someone's car door. When they finished with their police work, three of them – two policemen and a sheriff -- knocked on the door and asked to look at the Flex, a car they had heard about, but hadn't seen. They sat in it, marveling at how much space there was around the head of an officer who stood six-foot four, and how much leg room was available in the third row of seats.

I showed them how to use SYNC – the voice activated system which controls the phone and entertainment networks – and they applauded the quality of the sound rolling out of the 10 speakers and the 390-watt Sony surround sound system as they switched from one Sirius satellite radio station to another.

I tossed them the keys and let them tool around the neighborhood, on the assumption that if you can't trust a cop not to steal your car, you can't trust anyone. Besides, I held their police car as hostage.

They soon returned the car and the keys and went back to work. But I couldn't help but notice that, as they walked by the car one last time, they wistfully ran their hands along the grooves on its side.

This is a car designed by an artist who wanted to hint at things that just aren't seen. It grew out of a brainstorming session among a group of Ford designers.

“The original working name for the car was the Hampton,” said design director Pat Schiavone. “It was derived from when Ford had a station wagon in the 1940s that was considered to be elegant for those vacationing and antiquing in the Hamptons. It was a classic, sophisticated vehicle with wood sides.

“We wanted to evoke that feeling, but we didn't think that wood was the way to go because we wanted to modernize this vehicle. But the grooves evoke the feeling of wood.”

There is no reason to expect speed in an SUV, and racing lines would be out of place. But the grooves on the side seem to hark at performance, at the wind rushing by while driving a 60's woody down the California coast. That's a lot to read into a rolling block.

The Flex has a design which Ford admits either pulls you in or repels you. There doesn't seem to be a neutral position on the geometrically precise, well crafted, spacious car which doesn't resemble an SUV, a crossover, or a truck – though it is, in fact, built on a truck body. When Ford began test marketing the car to focus groups, asking people whether they liked or hated the car – with 1 meaning they loved it and 10 meaning they hated it – they ended up with a bathtub graph with a lot of ones and twos, nines and tens, and nothing in between. That meant the Flex was a risky bet for Ford, which lost nearly \$9 billion last year and needs to produce cars which people really want to buy.

But they set out to build something that looked different from the SUV pack, and that is what they offer. In addition to its looks, the Flex doesn't handle like its class mates either, acting more like a well tooled Lincoln sedan than a van with three rows of passengers.

Part of that illusion stems from the design. In addition to the squat roof, the body is built lower to the ground – a trick of the eye courtesy of its 20-inch aluminum wheels. As a result, there is a low center of gravity of the Flex, making it easier to handle in any road condition.

There was a cloud burst over Bear Mountain, at the base of the Hudson Highlands just south of West Point. It would drop two inches of water in little more than an hour, accompanied by winds gusting to 40 miles an hour.

The two lane highway through the mountain was awash with a film of fast running water, occasionally punctuated by deeper pools where nearby streams had overrun their banks and flooded the road. For many vehicles, winding through the mountain on such a night would be hazardous duty. But the Flex, with traction, stability and rollover controls rolled as easily through the fast running water as it did on my quiet, suburban street. The high density fog lamps made it easy to see both the road and the meandering deer.

Under the hood, the flex is powered by a 3.5-liter V-6 engine whose 262 horsepower were more than enough to keep the Flex ahead of traffic. Inside, it is surprisingly spacious, with thin door posts adding to the illusion of openness. The base model test car which enthralled the police carried a price tag of about \$37,000. But for about \$6,000 more, the Flex comes with a long sun roof with three panels, one for each row, as well as a navigation system and backup camera. In addition, instead of a second row bench with a 60/40 split, the souped-up model offers two captain's chairs with a refrigerator in the middle.

One does not feel slighted by buying the base model. There is backup radar sending warning signals alerting the driver to solid obstacles or toddlers crawling by. The SYNC system shifts effortlessly between the AM, FM and Sirius radio, or the six-disc, in-dash CD player, or an iPod or MP3 player, or your cell phone. Just say the words.

Inside the wide, leather, center console is a button which lets you change the color of the ambient lighting in the cup holder and storage bin to any of seven different hues. And if you want to work on a computer – or video game – there is a 110-volt socket behind the center console. And it runs on regular gas.

That's packing a lot of goodies into a rolling block.

2009 Ford Flex Ltd All Wheel Drive

MSRP: **\$36,555**
EPA Estimate: **16 MPG City** **22 MPG Highway**

Performance/ Safety:

3.5-Liter, Duratec V-6 aluminum engine producing 262 horsepower and 248 pound-feet of torque; all wheel drive; 6-speed automatic transmission; traction and roll stability control; gas pressurized front suspension; independent rear suspension; power rack & pinion steering; 19-inch aluminum wheels; power lift gate; high density headlights and fog lamps; rear backup warning.

Interior / Comfort:

AM/ FM/ Sirius satellite radio; 6-disc, in-dash CD player; MP3, USB port, and iPod player; Bluetooth phone connection; Sony 390-watt audio system with 10 speakers; SYNC voice activated interface; leather seats; fold flat 2nd and 3rd row seats and front passenger seat; leather steering wheel with fingertip cruise command, cell phone and audio system; leather seats and wood trim; heated front and second row seats; 7 ambient lighting colors; rear audio and climate controls.