

Shifting Gears

[2012 Explorer: Another Big SUV from Ford](#)

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The storm had been building up all day, the dark, angry clouds piling up on each other, crowding out the sky as if waiting to see which member of the celestial gang would attack first. In the end, the signal was given by the rising north wind, which launched one fierce gust after another, making the traffic on the west-bound interstate a white-knuckle game of trying to drive in a straight line while being shoved from the side.

Into this game came the rain, slashing, pouring, and quickly filling the roadway and the small, meandering streams nearby. Depressions in the road were quickly filled, forcing the drivers of small cars and low sports cars to pause as water reached their doors and they wondered if they could roll through the fast-moving puddles.



But none of that really mattered since we were in a Ford Explorer which seems to have borrowed some tips from Land Rover and treats water, mud, gravel and dry pavement as pretty much the same surface. We rolled through nearly a foot of water in a low area and,

at one point, drove around a stuck car by rolling over the curb and through a mud puddle that had been a grassy glade. The large SUV was too heavy to really care about the sideways pushes from the wind, and since the Explorer no longer had its traditionally ugly box shape the car was aerodynamic enough to deflect much of the force of the wind over and around the vehicle.

So we passed the potato chips, had Outlaw Country on the Sirius radio booming from the dozen Sony speakers, and sang along with Robbie Fulks and his scatological Nashville tribute “*F... This Town!*” All things considered, it was a great road trip.

The guys at Ford Motor Company are allergic to minivans and their designers just won't draw them. So the company has three versions of stretch SUVs with three rows of seats and a smorgasbord of capabilities and amenities. For those seeking to maintain a bit of status while hauling a carload of kids, there is the MKT from Ford's Lincoln line (<http://bit.ly/MEbjWC>). If you don't care about status but like being a bit different, Ford offers the Flex, (<http://bit.ly/NrKYtr>) a sort of grown up version of the wooden trucks little boys play with. And now, for those who want a large SUV but would prefer if it had a bit of style and could do more than just be *really* big, Ford has redesigned its old workhorse, the Explorer.

Like all of the stretch SUVs, the Explorer can haul seven passengers because it puts a third row of seats in what is normally the trunk. In the Explorer, the rear seats have a certain amount of versatility. The third row has a 60/40 split, and can be operated independently. They can either fold flat or, at the push of a button, disappear into a bin in the floor. That arrangement leaves you with an SUV which comfortably seats five and has enough storage space for a week's worth of luggage for everyone.

But if you need all of the seats, it is easy to get into the Explorer's third row. At a flick of a lever, each of the second row seats will fold up and away, allowing access without having to go through a lot of awkward climbing. The problem, however, is that once you are in the last row you are pretty much stuck there. There is not enough leg room for an adult and kids can't get out unless they wait till the second row is empty and folded out of the way, or they climb over the rear. In an emergency, either would be difficult. And if the passengers in the second row decide to take a nap and recline their seats, the passengers in the back will really become claustrophobic. The folks in the second row, on the other hand, heave it easy. There is enough head, hip and leg room for a pair of 400-pound pro linebackers or three, relatively normal, 6-footers to relax on a cross country road trip.

But the lack of space in the third row, and its impact on the cargo area are common complaints with the stretch SUVs and the price paid for not being a minivan.

On the positive side, Ford packed a lot into the Explorer for \$46,000.

Beginning with its design, the new Explorer seems to have borrowed ideas from Ford's former relationship with Jaguar/Land Rover. The Explorer no longer looks like a big box. The hood is longer and flatter, a trick from Land Rover which doesn't make the SUV *svelte*, but tricks the eye into focusing on the long lean look, rather than its bulging middle. It looks thinner than it is.

As a practical matter, that long wheelbase increases the stability of the Explorer, which handles more like its smaller cousin, the Ford Escape, than like the truck that it really is. Powering the Explorer is a 290 horsepower V-6 engine mated to a six-speed automatic transmission and all-wheel drive. That makes it both fast and nimble on the road.



Off-road, Ford has borrowed additional ideas from Land Rover. In the center of the console is a circular control with pictures of different road conditions: normal, hill climb, downhill assist, sand, and snow. As the pictures imply, the Explorer's gear settings change to meet the road needs. The downhill assist is interesting in that it is meant to prevent the car from slipping backwards on a steep slope, or when towing a heavy load on a hill.

Unlike the Land Rover or Ford's heavy duty F-150 truck, however, the Explorer is not really designed for really rugged terrain. It does not have a skid pan protecting its undercarriage and, therefore, it cannot, for example, really handle a rock crawl though the transmission is able to split the torque from the front to the rear or from one side to another so the SUV can continue driving even if one wheel is off the ground. And while it can ford running streams, the design is about eight inches — though the doors are sealed tightly enough for deeper streams.

The Explorer also has a few of Ford's latest safety options which can come in handy on long trips or in really bad weather. Their lane changing system monitors the dotted road lines from a camera embedded in the windshield and alerts the driver if you are veering into another lane. This is useful in a heavy rain storm — particularly at night — when the lanes can be difficult to see. Further, if there is a continued pattern of wandering into adjacent lines, the leather steering wheel vibrates and a little coffee mug on the dash lights up with a

note saying it's time to get some rest.

There are also lights embedded into the rear view mirrors which alert the driver to cars in either side blind spot. While the sight lines on the Explorer are good, a vehicle of this size is going to have spots that are difficult to monitor and the blind spot notice should be considered a necessity rather than an optional add on.

Ford gave some thought to the Explorer's interior – a reasonable thing to do since that's where the people are. To begin with, it's quiet. The sound proofing is such that not only will it shut out the winds at high speed so you can enjoy a quiet, flute solo from Harold Johnson Sextet's *Moses*, it will also block the sound of a riding mower when you're parked near a garden and just enjoying the view. Ford hasn't always had that level of quality, but the same sound proofing can now be found in the compact Ford Fiesta at the other end of its product line.

The seats in the Explorer are soft, padded leather, and those in front are powered and can be heated. The door arm rests and dash are padded faux leather with wood accents which give the area a living room feel. There are bottle or large cup holders in the door which can actually hold an 18-ounce water bottle, and the second row has both a regular power outlet for phones and a 110-volt outlet with a standard plug. If your phone is a mobile hotspot, passengers can plug in a computer and turn the Explorer into a fast moving office.

On the dash, the eight-inch, touch activated, information screen is really easy to use and is divided essentially into four quadrants: Bluetooth, navigation, climate, and audio. Each sector can be activated with a light touch or voice command from Ford's SYNC system.

If you need to haul both a lot of people and a lot of their stuff, there's nothing like a minivan. But if a stretch SUV fits your needs, the Explorer may give its Detroit siblings, and the Audi Q-7 and Infiniti JX and run for the money.



2012 Ford Explorer

MSRP:		\$46,740
EPA Mileage:	17 MPG City	23 MPG Highway
Towing Capacity		5,000 Pounds

Performance / Safety:

3.5-Liter aluminum DOHC engine producing 290 horsepower and 255 pound-feet of torque; 6-speed automatic transmission; 4-wheel disc brakes; all wheel drive; MacPherson strut independent front suspension; SR1 independent multilink rear suspension; rack and pinion steering; traction and stability control; fog lights and high density headlamps; 20-inch, polished aluminum wheels; heated side mirrors; blind spot and lane change monitoring; reverse sensing and rear view camera; dual front stage and side impact airbags.

Interior / Comfort:

AM/FM/Sirius satellite radio; 390-watt Sony audio with 12 speakers; Bluetooth; CD and MP3 player; USB and iPod ports; tilt & telescoping, leather wrapped steering wheel with fingertip audio and cruise controls; leather seats; powered, heated front seats; fold flat rear seats with push-button stowing for 3rd row; 8-inch color information screen.