

## Shifting Gears

### [2013 Ford Flex: The Big Boys' Toy Bus](#)

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Let's say you need a vehicle with room for seven passengers and space for a lot of stuff – but you really don't want to spend several years with a minivan. In the style category, you're comfortable with an SUV, though you really don't want to drive what looks and feels like a small truck.

In that case, the guys with the crayons at Ford think they have the wheels for you. It's called the Flex, and it's hard to categorize.

It's 16 feet long and just five feet, eight-inches tall with a coffin-flat roof – giving it a longer, lower silhouette than the seven-passenger, stretch-SUVs it competes with: the Lincoln MKT, Infiniti JX or Audi Q-7.

Nor does it look like an SUV. The guys in Ford's design playpen never got past the wooden Tinker-toy stage and, as a result, put together a similar set of rectangles on 20-inch wheels with the rounded front and flat sides and roof. The look is distinct and, depending on

what toys you had as a kid, can either feel vaguely familiar and



comfortable, or just look like a rolling box.

Underneath that broad, flat, front hood Ford offers a choice in power plants. The standard engine and the one provided in the test car, is a 3.5-liter V-6 with twin independent, variable camshaft timing cranking out 287 horsepower and 254 pound-feet of torque. That is adequate once the Flex gets on the road. But it is sluggish and the car struggles to climb steep hills or pass another vehicle in a hurry. If you need power in a hurry, it helps to slip from automatic into manual mode and downshift for extra torque. But the car always feels underpowered, and is in trouble if the Flex is carrying a full passenger load and attempting to tow its designed limit of 4,500 pounds.

The alternative is Ford's V-6 EcoBoost engine, which provides 365 horsepower and 350 pound-feet of torque – which is enough juice to allow the Flex to meet its automotive potential. The smaller engine drinks 87 octane fuel and carries an EPA rating of 17 miles per gallon in city driving and 23 miles per gallon on the highway. The EcoBoost on the other hand, will only drink the costlier premium brew.

Perhaps because of its low stance and all wheel drive, the Flex drives like a long sedan instead of a small bus. At speeds pushing triple digits – which you shouldn't try except with a Jeep SRT8, Cadillac SRX, or Porsche Cayenne – one never feels as if you are trapped in a runaway train on really old tracks.

Riding in the flex is like traveling in a small living room, and the extended length of these stretch SUVs adds to the initial feeling of spaciousness. For those in the first two rows, travel is a continuous comfort, with enough leg and headroom for four pro football players and a normal-sized friend. The seats are wide enough for 300 pounders and thickly padded. The front seats can also be heated and are power operated. The second row seats are not adjustable, though the backs of these seats can recline enough for a comfortable nap. To reach the rear seats requires one to manually fold the second row out of the way – and once someone is in the third row they are stuck there. The seats are comfortable, but there is little leg room and best used for kids or small adults who are not claustrophobic.



Ford packed in more amenities than you might expect from a \$41,000 SUV. On the safety side, the Flex uses side-mounted radar to alert the driver to vehicles in either blind spot by blinking a light in the relevant side view mirror. In manual

mode, the gear shift in the center console does not move. Instead, one pushes an up or down button on the side of the gear shift. It works quickly and effortlessly, though it takes some time to get used to shifting gears in that manner.

It has the SYNC voice activated central command system to run its extensive entertainment network. SYNC takes some getting used to: the commands are not necessarily intuitive and it takes time to either memorize the appropriate commands and derivations or luck into them. For those who can't seem to work with the computerized SYNC robot, there is also an eight-inch color touch-screen and fingertip controls on the leather steering wheel which work quite nicely.

For sound, there is an in-dash CD player, as well as connections for MP3, iPods, and USB drives, and satellite radio.

The 2013 Flex will stand out from the stretch SUV pack because, well, it doesn't look like an SUV. Whether it's perceived as a hearse and ignored, or viewed as a neat, grown-up, toy for boys will be a matter of taste. It will, however, make its mark in the competition for seven-passenger, non-minivan vehicles.



### **2013 Ford Flex**

**MSRP:**

**\$41,280**

**EPA Mileage:**

**17 MPG City**

**23 MPG Highway**

**As Tested Mileage:**

**22 MPG Mixed**

**Towing Capacity:**

**4,471 Pounds**

**Performance / Safety:**

3.5-Liter, aluminum, V-6 engine producing 287 horsepower and 254 pound-feet of torque; front wheel drive; 6-speed automatic transmission; MacPherson strut front suspension; Multilink, independent rear suspension; power rack & pinion steering; traction and stability control; 20-inch machined aluminum wheels; adaptive cruise control; fog lights; Halogen headlamps; dual stage front airbags; seat-mounted, side impact bags.

**Interior / Comfort:**

AM/FM/Sirius satellite radio; Bluetooth; SYNC voice activation system; CD player; USB, iPod, and MP3 ports; tilt and telescoping leather steering wheel with fingertip audio and cruise controls; Sony sound system with 10 speakers; leather seats; powered, heated front seats; fold flat 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> row seats.