

Ford Explorer longer and wider than the previous generation

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Instantly recognizable is the signature Ford grille, with bold, wide bars (perforated top and bottom) flanking a large blue oval. Wraparound projector-style front headlamps follow the contours over the bulging wheel arches, which are nicely filled by the large five-twin spoke alloys.

The new Explorer is also longer and wider than the previous generation, able to seat seven.

I'm generally skeptical of these claims, having sat in other mid-size, 'seven-passenger' SUVs and crossovers, like the Outlander and an earlier Santa Fe, and have found that you need to be under five feet tall, and a gymnast, to be seated comfortably.

At the Explorer event, a six-foot-two journalist sat in back, telling me it was slightly cramped, but not bad. My five-foot-nine frame fit with ease.

And although bigger and having more content, the 2011 model has shed nearly 100 pounds, thanks to light-

er materials such as an aluminum hood.

This bodes well for fuel economy, but the bigger green story is in the two new engines—a standard equipped 3.5-litre V6 that delivers approximately 20 per cent better fuel economy versus the previous V6 model, and a 2.0-litre turbo four that does at least 30 per cent better.

The standard powertrain, which is mated to a six-speed automatic transmission, provides an estimated 290 horsepower and 255 lb/ft of torque.

The optional 2.0-litre EcoBoost I-4, which delivers V6 power, is aimed at the buyer whose priority is fuel economy. It provides a projected 237 horsepower at 5,500 rpm and 250 lb/ft of torque, starting from a low 1,700 rpm through to 4,000 rpm.

Technology is the other big story, and the 2011 Explorer offers a long list of both standard and available safety and handling systems.

For example, V6 models are available with intelligent 4WD and a terrain management system. A console-mounted knob allows you to choose between snow, sand, mud and normal modes. There's also a hill descent mode.

Each setting tailors engine behavior, throttle tip-in, shift scheduling and traction and stability control calibrations for the specific surface condition.

Another innovation is Curve Control, launching in the 2011 Explorer, and to be rolled out to other Ford crossovers, sport utilities, trucks and vans by 2015.

The system can sense when a vehicle is entering a curve too quickly and responds accordingly. It can reduce engine output and apply braking to individual wheels to cut speed by up to 15 km/h in about a second, helping the driver stay on course.

Other safety features include inflatable rear seatbelts, which according to Ford are an industry first.

In the event of a crash, they spread impact forces across more than five times the area of a conventional seat belt, reducing pressure on the chest and helping to control head and neck motion. It's ideal for vulnerable passengers like kids and the elderly.

Other available technologies include adaptive cruise control and collision warning with brake support, a blind spot information system, and Park Assist—a feature that with help from the driver steers the vehicle into a parking spot.

Despite the Explorer moving to unibody construction, it still has a fairly hefty tow rating of 5,000 pounds, when powered by the V6. To help with hookup, there's an available reverse camera with zoom-in functionality.

The towing package includes sway control—shared with the F-150 pickup—along with trailer brake controller wiring and tow/haul mode. The latter feature, which I found effective in the Ford Super Duty pickup, increases engine braking to help slow the vehicle and trailer on a steep grade.

Production will begin later this year at Ford's Chicago plant, with the 2011 Explorer expected in dealerships some time this winter.

2011 Ford Explorer SUV at a glance:

- BODY STYLE:** mid-size SUV
- DRIVE METHOD:** front-engine, intelligent four-wheel-drive
- ENGINES:** 3.5-litre Ti-VCT V6 (290 hp and 255 lb/ft of torque); turbocharged 2.0-litre EcoBoost four cylinder (237 hp and 250 lb/ft of torque)
- TOWING CAPACITY:** up to 5,000 lbs when equipped with V6 engine
- FUEL ECONOMY:** n/a
- WEBSITE:** www.ford.ca
- PRICE:** n/a

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