

Flex has a growing cult following fanbase

Continued from page 1

and design seem clear enough.

The Flex lives up to its full-size, three-row, seven-passenger crossover ranking with ample room throughout the cabin, thanks to generous proportions and that long, squared-off roofline.

Second row seating is especially spacious and, yes, adults might actually fit into the third row. And the airy, big-windowed greenhouse, as tested, benefits from an optional multi-panel vista roof.

The seating position perches you slightly higher than sedan height but lower than an SUV seating position, making for a comfortable hip-point and big door, easily accessible entry into the vehicle.

Luggage is swallowed through a rear hatch that opens to take 566 litres, 1,223 litres with the third row folded or up to a maximum of 2,356 litres behind the first row. The Flex comes in three trim levels - SE, SEL and Limited.

The SE (\$31,799) starts with a 3.5-litre TI-VCT V6 (287 hp, 254 lb/ft) mated to a six-speed SelectShift automatic, channeling power through a standard front-wheel-drive system (FWD)

The SEL (\$38,799) carries over with the same powertrain, adds mid-level extras and offers an all-wheel-drive (AWD) model (\$40,799).

The Limited (\$45,099), tested here, tops out with a healthy list of included goodies, and makes AWD standard.

Our tester also adds \$11,200 worth of techy driver assists, options and packages, starting with Ford's 3.5-litre twin-turbo EcoBoost V6 (365 hp, 350 lb/ft) mated to the same six-speed automatic but adding steering wheel shifter paddles.

This upgraded engine adds best-in-class V6 power and a little adrenalized edginess to family hauling duties with snappy acceleration and a quicker throttle response.

Fuel economy with this EcoBoost engine

is rated at 15.7/11.2L/100km (city/hwy), which works out to about an extra litre of gas every 100 km, compared to the standard V6. My real world results with this more powerful, turbocharged motor averaged out to about 13.9L/100km (comb).

I'd like to see slightly better mileage than that but the Flex satisfies as a smooth sailer, sedate and comfortable in town or on the highway with a remarkably quiet absence of road and wind noise for a vehicle with the aerodynamics of an outhouse.

For 2016, upscale Ford Flex models add SYNC3, Ford's new communications and infotainment system featuring faster performance, conversational voice recognition and smartphone-like touch screen operation.

I'm on the fence about this new feature, recognizing its inevitability but still preferring regular buttons and knobs to the uncertain and driver-distracting screen jabs that often result in input miscues. Of course, that could just be fumble-fingered me.

Our tester also displays other new cues for 2016 - a unique Too Good To Be Blue colour and a first-ever Flex Appearance Package (\$900) that blacks-out the roof, door-handles, window sills, 20-inch wheels, grille and applique for a custom-like treatment that looks surprisingly cool.

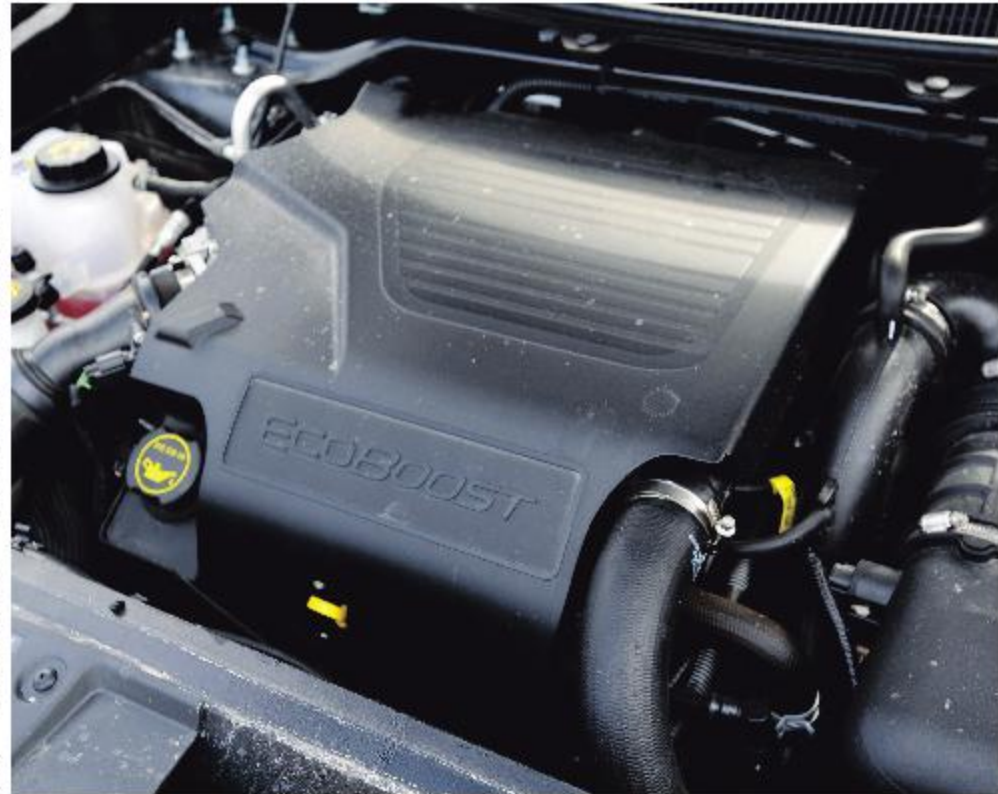
Now, summing up the Flex, some reviewers will trot out the old hip to be square platitude. But I'm not so sure.

I mentioned earlier that the Flex was difficult to define.

But it has also proved to be difficult to love with sales numbers below Ford expectations.

For the most part, consumers have been reluctant to embrace the sharper edges of rectangular design, as in the Honda Element (discontinued), Nissan Cube (dead) and Scion xB (gone). Only the snooty G-Wagon, Jeep Wrangler and Kia Soul remain to soldier on.

Rumour has it that the Flex might be phased out with the advent of the next generation Explorer in a year or two.



The Flex lineup starts with a standard 3.5-litre 287-hp TI-VCT V6 engine but, tested here, the Limited model ups the power ante with a 365-hp 3.5-litre twin turbo EcoBoost V6 mated to a SelectShift six-speed automatic and all-wheel-drive (AWD).

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