Ford's new Flex dares to be different with new and innovative features

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I've probably spent enough time on the Flex's exterior looks but, really, that planted, hip-to-be-square stance, the blacked out greenhouse with contrasting white or silver "floating" roof, the whole package enhanced by details like the four-side grooves, the lines flowing from headlamps to grille and the rear aluminum panels reflecting the grille up front, are too overwhelming not to mention.

Inside, passengers will sense a definite heightening in content and quality with plush surroundings to challenge any import. An optional multi-panel Vista Roof opens up the cabin space, already roomy in its own right. A good portion of the five-inch platform stretch went into the second row offering limo-like rear room.

"Nobody was yelling 'shotgun' during testing anymore," one engineer told me. "We found ourselves vying for second row seats instead."

The third row is a no-cost option in Canada and customers will love the fold-flat versatility of all the seats for maximum 2,356 litres (83.2 cu ft) cargo-carrying.

The Flex emphasizes new and innovative features.

"We've got everything including a fridge and sync," as one designer punned.

He meant options and standard features that include:

- A refrigerator between the second-row seats that can cool your sushi or up to seven 12-ounce pops to just above freezing in about two-and-a-half hours - 40 percent faster than a standard home refrigerator.
- Ford SYNC, a voice-activated, hands-free, communications and entertainment system that connects to iPods, cell phones etc.

Inside, the Ford Flex competes with any import in content, roomy comfort and quality of construction.

- Voice-activated navigation displayed on an eight-inch touch-screen display.
- Sony 700 watt, 5.1 surround sound audio and 10 speakers.
- EasyFuel capless fuel filler.
- Ambient Lighting with seven different interior colours.
- Reverse camera system.

Flex is powered by Ford's award-winning 3.5-litre V-6 engine delivering 262 hp at 6,250 rpm and 248 lb/ft of torque @ 4,500 rpm. This is the same engine used in the Edge and other Ford products but, while the increase in size and weight have an obvious effect, the Flex still pulls willingly enough, without noise or drama and delivers a very civilized ride.

The engine is mated to a six-speed automatic transmission that routes power through a choice of front-wheel-drive or an all-wheel-drive system that can allocate up to 100 percent of power to either axle.

We test drove the Flex through upstate New York and into Manhattan itself, the Flex showing its versatility with steering that tracked unerringly through country highway cornering to its demure take on the cut and thrust of downtown commuting. Its combination of content and comforts, the choice of two drive systems and two trim levels for Canada— SEL and Limited— along with its full complement of active and passive safety systems should make it a viable contender for family-hauling duties.

If Ford execs seem a little nervous about the Flex, well, it's only because we inevitably have to come back to looks and first impressions again, waiting to see the overall customer reactions to Flex's revolutionary design.

I was going to sum up that styling gamble with one of those lofty quotes, you know, something along the line of "nothing ventured, nothing gained" or maybe hearken back to Ford's "dare to be different" theme.

But after a long day of test drives, opinions bouncing back and forth and the interminable crunch of questions, one of the designers summed it up a little more pithily in an aside to me when he broke the usual corporate mould and muttered that, "hey, sometimes you just have to take a #&*ing risk."

The Flex's quiet, understated performance, its innovative content and combination of comfort and quality, make it appearance almost moot.

But we'll see soon enough see if it's a risk that pays off.

Ford Flex 2009 At A Glance

BODY STYLE: Full-size Crossover

DRIVE METHOD: front-engine, front-/all-wheel-drive.

ENGINE: 3.5-litre 24-valve DOHC Duratec V6 (262 hp, 248 lb/ft).

FUEL ECONOMY: FWD - 12.6L/8.4L/100km (city/hwy); AWD - 13.5L/9.2L/100km (city/hwy)

PRICE: SEL FWD - $34,999; SEL AWD - $36,999; Limited FWD - $40,999; Limited AWD - $42,999.

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Hwy: 7.8 L/100km 36 mpg*
◊ Approximate distance based on highway mileage

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