

WHEELS

# The Mercury Cougar – an exciting vehicle no matter how you look at it

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This isn't the kind of Mercury Cougar I was expecting. Cougars have never been sporty, despite all the hype. With padded vinyl

roofs and big V8s, they were more like a stretched Mustang in spirit as well as performance and handling.

When it was announced the next Cougar would be a front-engine, front-driver with a choice of in-line four or V6, I instantly wondered why Ford had

just announced it was killing the Probe and kissing-cousin, the Mazda MX-6.

But while the drivetrain has a lot in common, the bulk of the car is based on the Ford Contour/Mercury Mystique sub-compact, that was an outgrowth of the Ford Mondeo sold in

Europe. Reaction to the Contour/Mystique has been hobbled by a few early problems, notably lack of backseat room (now corrected). There were no complaints about the handling, however. While not a lot of Mondeo parts made the translation when it came to using North American pieces in the car to save tooling, time, and money, the basics of the suspension geometry were left virtually alone.

So the Cougar builds on a fairly competent platform that happens to be 20 per cent stiffer. Suspension is MacStruts at front and the familiar Ford Quadralink technology. Because it has two transverse and one trailing arm per side, the rear wheels get a form of passive rear-wheel steering that comes into its own in the handling department.

The engines too are familiar, being the 2.0-litre, twin cam Zetec (125 hp, 130 ft/lb torque) or the V6 Duratec (170 hp, 165 ft/lb or torque) coupled to a five-speed manual transmission. The manual uses cables to make shifts. It takes a bit of practice to get over the notchy feeling, but that should go away as the miles smooth things out.

The other transmission is optional – the four-speed automatic transaxle, a solid performer in a wide range of Ford vehicles. Where this car differs from what has gone before is the aforementioned styling, part of Ford's new New Edge concept.

That means the design uses "sharp, crisp edges instead of the bubbly look," said Mike Wiggins from Craig Riley's Markville Lincoln Mercury.

There are more than a few leading edges on this car, along with at least four character lines on the flanks, arrow-shaped exterior door handles, triangles, ellipses, and even a few odd straight lines. This is a combination that should not work.

Happily for Mercury, this jumble comes together in such a way that it draws the eye forward to the nose instead of away from it, which is usually the case. Lathering in all of these design elements should have been a disaster. I will be watching closely to see how this translates when Ford's stylists get into something a little bigger like a Lincoln.

The interior also challenges the visual senses, but besides the seats and door pulls, it's more restrained. The first sensation is one of width and even more depth to the cabin. The back seat, normally vestigial in a coupe, is actually big enough for two adults, and a piece of cake for kids.

I, for one, applaud the decision by Mercury to stick with a hatchback when

See THE MERCURY, page 25.



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