



# WHEELS



WHAT CAR?

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## 2003 Lincoln Navigator new face on old idea

BY ROB BEINTEMA

I expected performance. I expected luxury.

What I hadn't expected was the stares, the pointing and thumbs up reaction that I was getting while driving the 2003 Lincoln Aviator.

I mean, it's not like we haven't seen this face of luxury before.

"Awww, it's a baby Navigator!" my wife gushed with a tone usually reserved for googling infants and lap-jumping puppies.

She was right in fact, from a distance, it's difficult to tell a Navigator from an Aviator, until you put the two of them side by side. Then it looks like the Aviator somehow got shrunk in the wash.

But I guess it makes sense that Lincoln, the luxury sedan division that sought unlikely salvation in sport utility with a Ford Expedition makeover, would want to follow up on the Navigator's success with a baby brother based on the Ford Explorer.

Make no mistake, though. This is a Lincoln.

The chromed signature Lincoln waterfall grille with dark argent vanes is bracketed by high-intensity discharge (HID) headlamps and circular fog lamps built into the front bumper fascia. Standard running boards trim the side of the Aviator and large heated, power-adjustable side mirrors feature an excellent rear view along with a memory system, integrated turn signal repeaters and approach lamps.

In back, tail lamps are integrated into a split hatch with flip up rear glass that provides a shopping cart height liftover for grocery bags and other small stuff.

Aviator may be smaller than Navigator but it still offers respectable space advantages over



The 2003 Lincoln Aviator Aviator may be smaller than Navigator but it still offers respectable space advantages over

the competition.

Inside, front seat headroom and legroom are ranked as best-in-class, and no other midsize luxury SUV offers a choice of bucket or bench seats in the second row.

The second row is roomy and comfortable and the optional 40/20/40 split-bench seat, combined with the standard third-row seat offers seating for up to seven adult passengers. Third-row legroom is also 127 mm (5 inches) better than the next closest competitor. Headroom is almost 76.2 mm (3 inches) greater.

The luggage space behind the third row looks kind of dinky to me, thanks to the added third row, only 351 litres (12.4 cu.ft.) But the fold flat third bench, together with the second row flopped forward, maxes out overall space to 2,180 litres (77 cubic feet).

The Aviator takes interior luxury

to another level. The dashboard, gauge cluster and instrument panel are especially handsome, laid out with a combination of white light-emitting diode instrument illumination, satin nickel, grey and silver textures set against creamy leather and American burl walnut accents. It's beautiful, as good as any interior Lincoln, or Ford for that matter, has ever done.

In Canada, the Lincoln Aviator comes only in the top-notch Premium trim level, powered by an all-wheel drive platform. And, as you would expect, the Aviator comes loaded with all the goodies.

For example, Dual-zone electronic climate control and an auxiliary climate control system for second and third row passengers.

The Safety Canopy side curtain air-bag system, which provides enhanced occupant protection in

side impacts and rollovers.

\* Heated and cooled front seats with 5-setting temperature control.

\* Standard power-adjustable brake and accelerator pedals and the Rear Park Assist system that triggers in-cabin audio warnings if an obstacle is detected when reversing.

\* Six-way power-adjustable driver and front-passenger seats with power lumbar support and two memory settings for the driver's seat, side mirrors, brake and accelerator pedals.

\* AM/FM Audiophile sound system with six-disc in-dash compact disc player and secondary controls mounted on the steering wheel.

Options include a power moonroof, DVD rear seat entertainment system, a DVD based navigation system, chrome wheels, a tire pressure monitoring system and Class III towing package.

Lincoln has been boasting a new driving DNA, a series of dynamic and performance attributes common to the 2003 Navigator, Town Car and LS. Under the hood, an all-aluminum, 4.6-litre V-8 engine that uses dual overhead cams, four valves per cylinder and variable length intake runners, produces 302-horsepower and 300 foot-pounds of torque through a five-speed automatic transmission.

That prodigious power creates a maximum towing capacity of 3,311 kg (7,300 lbs) - 46 per cent better than the V-8 powered Mercedes-Benz ML500 and 22 per cent better than the BMW X5 4.4i. Aviator can even out-tow some full-size luxury SUVs, including the Lexus LX470, which is rated for a maximum of 2,948 kg (6,500 pounds). More about towing in the wrap up.

Okay, I've sung enough praises about this polished performer. But we should note that the Aviator's

strengths are also its weaknesses.

First, there's a penalty for all that power. The Aviator's gas mileage runs as bad as the big boys. I averaged a thirsty 18 L/100km, enough to encourage me to fill up with regular gas instead of the recommended premium octane fuel.

And despite definite ride improvements due to the four-wheel independent suspension with coil springs and monotube dampers, 17-inch wheels and tires and speed sensitive variable assist ZF Servotronic II rack-and-pinion steering, this is still a truck.

A very nice, a very fancy truck. But still a truck.

Yes, it cruises and carves corners with surprising aplomb for a fully loaded middleweight. But jar it across a harsh set of potholes or over a railway crossing and the back end still skitters and skates out sideways. Which, according to my daughter, makes watching movies on the jiggling DVD screen rather challenging.

Essentially, the Aviator is a new face on an old idea.

There are newer car-based luxury sport utes on the market for performance-oriented drivers looking for luxury and occasional all-weather ability.

But the 2003 Aviator follows the old formula for those who actually need a truck and are willing to pay for the luxuries that add a ultimate civility to the package. That formula is to take a solid, truck tough platform and load it to Lincoln limits with ultimate levels of performance, technology and luxurious features, boasting flexible seating and the roomiest cabin and best towing capability in its class.

It's not revolutionary. But it'll sell. Which is just about what I expected.

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