2013 Escape: Ford's Compact SUV Goes Lux

Ann M. Job, For The Associated Press

With European-style handling, luxury looks, surprising refinement and new features for 2013, Ford's compact sport utility vehicle, the Escape, doesn't seem like an Escape anymore.

The familiar boxy shape is replaced by a sleek, rich-looking exterior, and the Escape's V-6, manual transmission and gasoline-electric hybrid model are gone.

Instead, every 2013 Escape comes with a six-speed automatic and a choice of three, gasoline-powered, four-cylinder engines.

Importantly, all three powerplants garner a minimum 30-miles-per-gallon-on-the-highway fuel economy rating from the federal government, and two of the three are turbocharged and deliver at least 184 foot-pounds of torque. In contrast, the only 2012 Escape with a fuel mileage rating of 30 mpg or more on the window sticker was the Escape Hybrid, which started at more than $30,000.

Starting manufacturer's suggested retail price, including destination charge, is $23,295 for a base, 2013 Escape S with 168-horsepower, naturally aspirated four cylinder, automatic transmission and front-wheel drive.

This base 2013 Escape is rated at 22/31 mpg in city/highway travel and includes air conditioning and cloth seats, with Ford's Sync voice-activated entertainment system available as a $295 option.

Unfortunately, pricing goes up considerably from the base model, and the test Escape with four-wheel drive and top equipment and trim level called Titanium, plus options, topping out at more than $36,000.

In between the base Escape and the top model are, thankfully, a number of choices — all with two rows of seats providing seating for five. The lowest starting retail price for a 2013 Escape with one of Ford's peppier, turbocharged engines is $25,895 for an SE with 178-horsepower four cylinder, automatic transmission, front-wheel drive and mileage rating of 23/33 mpg.

The lowest starting retail price for a four-wheel drive 2013 Escape is $27,645, and this is with the 178-horsepower, turbocharged four cylinder.

The Escape has many competitors, including the top-selling Honda CR-V with a starting MSRP, including destination charge, of $23,325 for a 2012 base model with 185-horsepower four cylinder, five-speed automatic and front-wheel drive. Among the CR-V's standard features is a rearview camera. The 2012 Hyundai Tucson SUV has a starting retail price of $19,970 with 165-horsepower four cylinder, five-speed manual and front-wheel drive. A 2012 Tucson with six-speed automatic starts at

$20,970.

Note that both the base CR-V and the base Tucson with automatic are rated at 23/31 mpg by the government, which is in line with the 2013 Escape models.

Ford's re-engineered Escape is a sibling of the company's Kuga, which is a compact crossover in Europe. This European heritage was one of the first impressions of the 2013 Escape test model. The vehicle felt solidly planted on the road, even on twisty mountain roads.

Weight shift from one side to the other during curves was well-managed and provided a more confident ride than that found in previous Escapes. In fact, there was little tippy feel, and road bumps came through mostly as mild vibrations.

To be sure, the Escape felt substantial and solid. It's not exactly a heavy sensation, but even a base 2013 Escape weighs more than 3,500 pounds, which is 200 pounds more than a base CR-V and base Tucson.

Overall, the ride was pleasant and more refined than in earlier Escapes, even though the test, top-of-the-line Titanium trim model, rode on big, stylish, 19-inch wheels.

The tester had the most powerful of the four-cylinder engines — a 240-horsepower, 2-liter, double overhead cam, turbocharged, four cylinder that, like other Ford four-cylinder turbos, carries the name EcoBoost. In fact, Ford's larger SUV, the Edge, uses this 2-liter turbo four cylinder, too.

Premium fuel is recommended to get the maximum power, which includes 270 foot-pounds of torque at 3,000 rpm in the Escape.

In real world driving, though, this turbo didn't send the Escape zooming forward in a rush. Rather, power was delivered smoothly but not instantaneously, even when the accelerator was suddenly pressed to the floor.

In more gentle acceleration, the test Escape, which weighed more than 3,700 pounds, moved comfortably through traffic, and the four-wheel disc brakes — an upgrade from rear drums in the 2012 Escape — worked capably.

Alas, fuel mileage in the tester averaged only 19.5 mpg in driving that was 70 percent in the city. So, it could travel not quite 300 miles on a single, 15.1-gallon tank, and the four-wheel drive tester didn't meet the government rating of 21/28 mpg.

The interior was impressive. Premium materials, including nicer plastic on the sizable dashboard, gave an upscale feel. The optional, full leather trim on the test Escape seats helped, too.

Brightly illuminated gauges in front of the driver are uncomplicated, but Ford's touch screen in the middle of the dashboard takes practice. A nice perk: The

rearview camera's picture is big on this sizable display screen, so drivers see clearly what's behind them.

The new Escape is one of the few compact SUVs to offer a power, rear liftgate. Usually, these are found on larger, luxury models.

Ford's power liftgate has a twist: A person can avoid pushing the key fob's "open liftgate" button and instead sort of kick his or her foot under the rear bumper, where a sensor detects that the liftgate needs to open. It's a fine idea, but with arms full of heavy pet supplies, I nearly fell on the pavement trying to kick my leg and keep my balance.

Another issue with the power liftgate: It goes fully upward each time, so in a parking garage, it struck the concrete beam overhead and then retracted a bit. The result: A small bump on the tailgate exterior.

The 2013 Escape is a bit longer and wider than its predecessor, and cargo space stretches to 68.1 cubic feet.

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