



The 2013 Ford Explorer Sport features a twin-turbocharged EcoBoost® engine, producing an estimated 350 horsepower.

By Steve Schaefer

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The Ford Explorer is widely credited with starting the sport utility vehicle frenzy of the 1990s. Today's rising star is the crossover vehicle, and the Explorer is now a member of that group.

Crossovers have unibody car platforms rather than mounting the body on a separate frame, like trucks do. Today's model is much more comfortable on the road, and that makes sense. Most buyers do not take their cars off the road anyway, even when they have four-wheel drive.

My tester was the new, high-performance 2013 Explorer Sport, which lives at the top of the model line. It boasts a twin-turbocharged Ecoboost V6 that puts out 365 horsepower and 350 lb.-ft. of torque from just 3.5 liters of displacement (the lesser models make do with 290 horsepower).

That's what Ford is doing with Ecoboost — giving the power of the next engine size up. So, a V6 provides V8 power, and a 1.6-liter four-cylinder moves a car such as the Fusion sedan with V6 enthusiasm. Fuel economy improves with this downsizing.

The latest Explorer is not much like the original two-box design. It wears the swoops and curves of the latest Taurus sedan, looking very modern and up-to-date.

My Sport distinguished itself with a glowing Ruby Red Metallic paint job (\$395 extra). It also wore stunning 20-inch alloy wheels and its face got a grille with a low-gloss sterling gray mesh and contrasting shiny ebony bars. No flashy chrome here!

I noted the name “Explorer” boldly drawn across the leading edge of the hood. With the new Flex wearing its model name proudly, too, there seems to be a de-emphasis on the Ford brand and a highlighting of the model name.

The Sport gets a stiffer chassis, sport-tuned electric power-assisted steering, larger brakes and a paddle-shift six-speed SelectShift automatic transmission. As you’d expect, no manual transmission is offered (or likely, requested).

As a four-wheel-drive vehicle, the Sport has a dial on the console where you can select your terrain and the car’s electronic system supplies the appropriate ride. This “terrain management system” includes Normal — where it stayed with me — as well as sand, snow, mud and hill descent.

Despite weighing nearly two and a half tons, the Explorer Sport moves quickly and quietly, and feels stable and secure. EPA numbers are 16 City, 22 Highway, 18 Average; I got 19 mpg. The EPA’s Air Pollution number is 5 and the Greenhouse Gas is 4, so it’s no environmental paragon,

but it'll carry seven people.



The black leather seats in my tester were supportive and felt like those from a sport sedan. With 10-way power adjustment, it was easy to set mine up just right. The perforated chairs offered three levels of heat and cool and wore attractive white stitching. The doors and dash flow smoothly, the trim is a matte gray, and the design is calm and relaxed.

The third-row seats disappear into a flat floor that worked out nicely for bass carrying. I was able to drop just the slim right second-row seat to do the job. Grocery carrying was easy with the third-row seatbacks folded forward and the cargo net holding everything in place.

Ford has introduced its Sync and MyFordTouch systems into its vehicles over the last few years. That means you can touch the screen at the center of the dash to make changes in your climate, audio and navigation systems — or talk to the system. I've found the Sync conversations to be sometimes frustrating, but touching the colorful screen becomes easy with practice.

With MyFordTouch, You can use steering-wheel-mounted buttons to customize the left and right sides of the electronic instrument panel to view what interests you at the moment. I like to keep track of fuel economy, and you can see it on the left — in bright blue — with current and accumulated figures available. The right side offers navigation, entertainment and vehicle data. I enjoyed watching the three-dimensional compass ball, which rolled around gently as I changed direction.

The Explorer, built in Chicago, comes in a range of models, including the base car, XLT, Limited and Sport. You can even order up one with the 2.0-liter four-cylinder Ecoboost engine — which puts out an unexpected 240 horsepower. Prices begin at \$29,955 and top out at \$41,545 for the Sport. Add a few packages and you get my tester, at \$46,640.

The Explorer, designed, built and enjoyed in America, is a great way to drive a big car and do big things. With smaller, but more powerful engines, it is becoming a touch more environmentally sensitive. If you need a smaller SUV, Ford has other options for you, but this is still the original.