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Ford marks Explorer's 20th anniversary with a new light-duty SUV. It's the first production vehicle with an inflatable rear seatbelt, and it has a camera that focuses on the trailer hitch.

## Ford's faded Explorer gets new life with redesign

Offers 25% better fuel economy than old model;  
has excellent cornering and a smooth ride

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POSTMEDIA NEWS

With more than six million Ford Explorers built to date, it is one of the bestselling SUVs of all time.

You might remember in the 1990s the Explorer was the bestselling unit year after year. But as time went on and more competition emerged in the mid-sized SUV class, the Explorer lost relevance and market share.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of this iconic nameplate, and to celebrate Ford has introduced a whole new Explorer — one it hopes will help resurrect it to its former glory.

This new Explorer is no longer a truck-based SUV, but one based on the same car platform as the Ford Taurus and Ford Edge and Flex crossovers.

It is no longer available with a V-8 engine, but powered by a 230-horsepower 3.5-litre V-6, and in 2012 it will be offered with an EcoBoost turbo four-cylinder.

**The Skin:** Jim Holland, the chief engineer on the Explorer, told me the No. 1 objective was to improve fuel consumption. The 2011 Explorer is 25 per cent more efficient than the outgoing model, and aerodynamics play a large part in achieving this. The bold design isn't just attractive, but 12 per cent more efficient at slicing through the air; plus, the car-based platform is much lighter than the truck-based unit.

wider than the Ford Flex, helping to create more interior space for the standard three rows of seats.

**The Cockpit:** Ford says that the interior of this new Explorer was designed using European luxury crossovers as a benchmark, and in many ways Ford has succeeded in producing a good-looking unit.

The occupant touch points, such as the door and dash materials, are soft and well crafted. The instrument cluster and centre console feature classy-looking backlighting and modern buttons.

The optional MyFord Touch is the latest in vehicle entertainment and connectivity. The voice-activated navigation system can search for destinations while the driver stays focused on the road, and the high-end Sony stereo is a tour de force.

For buyers who require their Explorer to tow, the rear-view camera has a zoom feature that focuses on the trailer hitch. Great idea.

Since the Explorer is a mid-sized crossover, the second and third row of seats are not as roomy as the full-sized Ford Flex but will provide plenty of room for most families.

**The Ride:** Holland also revealed that other key objectives were to provide a quieter cabin than the competition, to offer a capable SUV that is easy to use and to improve handling and body roll.

The Explorer easily achieves these targets compared with the older model, but there had to be some sacrifices to meet these new

cornering ability, smooth highway characteristics and a firm ride.

In addition, 4WD units have a centre controller (Terrain Management) for choosing among sand, off-road and snow settings. The individual programs allow more or less wheel-slip, depending on the driver's requirements.

After driving over a bumpy off-road course, I was impressed with the abilities of this light-duty SUV. Not a Jeep or a Land Rover, but fine for most situations. Towing is limited to 2,268 kilograms.

**The Good:** The Explorer is the first production vehicle with an inflatable rear seatbelt, helping to distribute force over the chest area.

**The Bad:** The MyFord Touch system might be too advanced for some buyers.

**Zack's verdict:** With a starting price of \$29,999 for the base front-wheel-drive model and the top of the line 4WD coming in at just more than \$44,000, the Explorer will be a hit with buyers who want a comfortable three-row SUV for light-duty work. The electronics available with the MyFord Touch are so advanced that they are at the leading edge of the auto industry. In addition, Ford has proven to be a builder of high-quality products, cracking the top five in initial quality (No. 1 non-premium brand) from JD Power and Associates.

Ford has some strong competition in this segment, including the excellent new Grand Cherokee and Dodge Durango and even from their very own Ford Flex. Back in the 1990s, the mid-sized SUV market was a lot smaller, helping the Explorer to easily march to the top of the sales heap.

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