

2008 Ford Focus

BY TITUS HSU
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There is no doubt that the Focus holds a key position in the Ford Motor Company vehicle lineup. Its affordable price and exceptional performance in its class have won wide recognition. For 2008, Ford has redesigned the car throughout; unfortunately, the hatchback version is no longer available.

The new Focus has a bold look and shares design cues with its Fusion and Taurus siblings. The horizontal metal bar grille is Ford's current distinguishing design element.

At 391 L, the cargo carrying capacity is impressive for a sedan. The large side mirrors are great for keeping track of the surroundings.

The Focus is available in 3 trim levels: S, SE, and SES. The MSRP for the base model of the SES is \$16,375.

The Interior

The cabin is very spacious, and the front bucket seats provide good support for the driver and front passenger. The 60/40 split folding seat can accommodate up to three passengers in the back. The test vehicle was also equipped with the optional power moonroof.

The center console shows information such as the current radio station and the time. Two sets of similarly arranged buttons and knobs control the audio system and climate control system respectively. Air conditioning and Sirius satellite radio receiver are both standard features.

At the base of the console are two 12V DC outlets to accommodate a wide variety of in-car appliances.

Between the two outlets is an auxiliary audio input jack for connecting an MP3 player. An optional USB port is also available.

Think Sync

Ford Sync is a software system co-developed with Microsoft, exclusively for Ford and Lincoln vehicles. In a nutshell, Sync links the car audio system with cell phones through Bluetooth, and with digital music players through USB. Voice commands can be used to control the phone and the music players for complete hands-free communication. Press a button on the steering wheel to put the vehicle in listening mode, and just say the command. The voice recognition is sophisticated enough that you can tell it to play all songs by a certain artist or in a certain genre in the USB-connected player.

Following the instructions, pairing the Sync system to my Sony Ericsson W300i cell phone through Bluetooth was very simple. I tried receiving phone calls through the Sync system, and it worked very well. When you turn off the engine and open the door, the cell phone is automatically disconnected.

Sync is a powerful convenience feature, and Ford has made it a standard feature on the SES model. It is also available as a \$395 option on the SE.

On the Road

The 2008 Focus is equipped with a 2.0L I-4 engine that can produce 136 lb.-ft. of torque and 140 hp at peak. It's not going to win sprint races, but it is adequate to haul the vehicle from a complete stop to 40 mph in a quiet and relaxed manner.

The test vehicle was equipped with the optional four-speed automatic transmission. Step lightly on the gas pedal, and it shifts up to second then to third gear at 2,500 rpm. Reaching about 37 mph as it shifts into third, the engine drops down to 2,000 rpm. Ease off on the gas pedal; it would further shift into overdrive to reduce fuel consumption and the engine runs at an easy 1,500 rpm. Because of this tendency to cruise in overdrive, you may find it lacking when you try to accelerate gently. Step down on the gas, however, the transmission knows to downshift, and you get a lot more power to the wheels.

On the highway, the engine runs around 2,000 rpm while cruising at about 60 mph. The fuel consumption is rated at 24 mpg on city roads and 35 mpg on the highway. During the testing period, with mostly city driving and a bit of highway driving, the onboard computer calculated my fuel consumption to be about 26 mpg.

In the handling department, I think the suspension is the most exceptional aspect of this car—MacPherson struts in the front and independent multilink in the back. A front anti-roll bar is standard on all models, while the SES also comes with a rear anti-roll bar. The springs have been tuned to provide good support in tight turns but at the same time dampen the unpleasant bumps on the road to give a well-supported ride.

Safety Features

The 2008 Focus is equipped with two dual-stage front airbags, two front-seat side airbags, and two front-to-back side-curtain airbags to ensure passenger safety. Stopping power is provided by disc brakes in the front and drum brakes in the back. ABS is standard on SES models and optional on SE and S models. There is also an electronic tire pressure monitoring system to ensure that the tires are properly inflated.

Final Thoughts

The 2008 Focus is a very civilized car that has enough power to meet day-to-day city driving needs. The price tag puts it in direct competition with the likes of the Corolla and the Civic. Considering the number of features and its handling, it provides good value for your buck.

It would be nice to see a lightweight hatchback version of the new Focus. I imagine it would be a lot of fun driving a manual-transmission three-door Focus based on the current platform.



DISTINGUISHED DESIGN: The grille is a distinct design element on current Ford vehicles. TITUS HSU/THE EPOCH TIMES



CONTROLS: The center console with two sets of similarly arranged buttons. TITUS HSU/THE EPOCH TIMES



PLUG IN: 12V DC outlets and the aux input jack. Sync-equipped models would also have a USB connector. TITUS HSU/THE EPOCH TIMES



MOONROOF: A view to the outside with the moonroof open. TITUS HSU/THE EPOCH TIMES

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2008 Suzuki XL7 Limited

BY JO ANN HOLT
Special to The Epoch Times

The 2008 Suzuki XL7 Limited is a stylish and modern-looking crossover SUV built on a car platform, which anyone would be proud to drive. I really enjoyed driving the test model (a beautiful Cranberry Metallic with beige leather seats and faux wood trim inside) around town recently. Starting with the unique front fascia—a three-bar grille framed by jewel-type headlamps with the Suzuki "S" badge as the centerpiece, the Suzuki XL7 draws a lot of second glances.

The XL7 is also a very comfortable passenger car, seating up to seven passengers thanks to the available third-row seating, which offered plenty of leg room. It's also a great car for moving furniture or other items, as it handles heavy loads with ease thanks to the Nivomat self-leveling rear suspension that automatically adjusts for load weight. Towing capacity is rated at

3,500 pounds, allowing drivers to pull their motorcycle or boat trailers with ease.

Just a few of the luxury items that were included on the Limited edition were navigation system, DVD entertainment system, rear vision camera (displayed on the rearview mirror so the driver doesn't have to look down), heated leather front seats, remote start (from as far away as almost 200 feet), chrome wheels, and a sunroof.

The Suzuki engine is a 3.6L DOJC V6 with automatic transmission (and clutchless-manual capability) that delivers 252 hp and 243 lb.-ft. of torque for a smooth performance. The XL7 Limited also features 17-inch aluminum alloy wheels, chrome twin tailpipes, and a roof rack as standard equipment. Electronically controlled on-demand all-wheel drive is also available on all trim levels.

The XL7 received a five-star rating in the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) front-impact and side-impact

crash tests. Drivers and passengers also enjoy a traction control system and electronic stability program, plus a standard tire pressure monitoring system that reports the status of each tire.

Especially reassuring to drivers is the fixed-ratio rack-and-pinion steering that is tuned for responsiveness and that great "on-center" or all-is-well feeling. The XL7 is also backed by a 100,000-mile/7-year, fully transferable powertrain limited warranty.

The Suzuki XL7 Limited is priced at \$27,299, which means it is less expensive than competitors such as the Toyota Highlander or Honda Pilot. Gas mileage, which has become increasingly important with prices at the pump rising almost daily, is 15-16 miles per gallon in town and 22 mpg on the highway.

Jo Ann Holt is a columnist and car writer based in Dallas, Texas, and a member of the Texas Automobile Writers Association (TAWA).



2008 Suzuki's Flagship SUV provides style, comfort, performance and safety. SUZUKI MEDIA