



It's faster than at least one Porsche.

BY TONY QUIROGA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM CAIOZZO

It's telling that Ford gave this "crossover" car-based sport-ute a name that starts with the letter F. Ford's SUVs have names that start with the letter E (Escape, Explorer, Expedition, Excursion), so Ford must consider this seven-passenger vehicle to be genetically closer to its F-named carline (Focus, Five Hundred, 2006 Fusion).

The Freestyle seems to fall into the same vague category as the Chrysler Pacifica. It straddles the line between SUV and minivan, claiming to offer the advantages of both while leaving behind the disadvantages. To simplify matters, we classify the Pacifica and the Freestyle as SUVs. The Freestyle will appeal to shoppers who want minivan practicality hidden by sport-ute duds. Whether the formula will find new buyers or cannibalize Explorer sales remains to be seen.

Based on the modified Volvo platform that also lies beneath

the Ford Five Hundred sedan and Mercury Montego twin, the Freestyle lacks the body-on-frame construction of traditional SUVs like the Explorer. Instead, the Freestyle gets the lightweight and rigid unibody construction of modern cars. It's 10.2 inches longer and 2.3 inches wider than an Explorer but smaller than the super-size Expedition. Unlike the Pacifica or the new crossover vans from GM—the Buick Terraza, the Saturn Relay—or the old minivan-based SUVs from GM—the Pontiac Aztek, the Buick

Rendezvous—the Freestyle isn't based on a minivan platform, and since it isn't related to a minivan, the proportions and styling don't scream "Mommy!" to the world.

What former minivan owners who get into the Freestyle will immediately notice and appreciate is the low step-in. The Freestyle has a low floor, and there isn't a whole lot of ground clearance; actually, it

barely sits any higher than the Five Hundred sedan, so off-roading probably isn't in the cards. Once inside, you'll find seats that are perched high off the floor, providing the seating position so many drivers find as comforting as hot cocoa. Despite the Freestyle's car roots, you'll still be able to see over that pesky compact out front.

The Freestyle isn't as commodious as a minivan, but there are three rows that will seat seven. Even when it's filled to capacity, there is a useful amount of space for cargo behind the third row—something the Pacifica cannot claim. Folding or raising the third row is intuitive and requires little effort. It's as simple to use as any minivan's. Put down the third and second rows, and there's

enough room to store 57 cases of beer (that's 1368 bottles); perfect for moving your child into the dorm.

The Freestyle offers an exterior that looks butch enough not to embarrass you or the kiddies when you pick them up after school. There's a long SUV-like snout that protrudes far enough so no one will confuse this for a Freestar, and the tame front-end styling borders on anonymous. To soothe the nervous parent, there's all-wheel drive, adding \$1700 to the bottom line, side-impact and curtain airbags that protect all three rows for \$695, and a Volvo-inspired crash structure that costs nothing extra.

Power comes from Ford's familiar DOHC 3.0-liter V-6 that does duty in the Five Hundred. The engine's 203 horsepower and 207 pound-feet of torque work well enough in smaller vehicles, but in the Freestyle the relatively small mill has 4190 pounds and the friction of an all-wheel-drive system to put into motion. Supposedly, a 3.5-liter version of the engine is on the way. In the meantime, making the most of the available power is a ZF continuously variable transmission that has an infinite spread of ratios between a lowest "gear"—2.47:1—and a 0.41:1 top ratio.

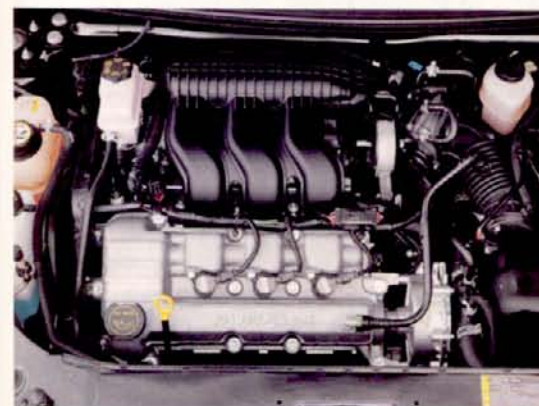
This is the first use of a CVT in something as large as the Freestyle, but its operation will be familiar if you've ever sampled one of these novel transmissions in a smaller car. Driven gently, the engine revs stay unobtrusively and quietly at low rpm, much as they do in a conventional automatic. But if you floor it, the engine will rev to 5800 rpm and stay there until you back off, whereas a conventional transmission would change to the next

gear. Keep the pedal mashed, and the Freestyle continues to accelerate uninterrupted with the engine crying out at 5800 rpm as the CVT goes through its spread of ratios seamlessly to keep the engine at its power peak. This takes a bit of getting used to, but if you never floor the Freestyle for the extended periods that we do, you'll never notice its unusual behavior.

Our Freestyle did the run to 60 mph in 8.2 seconds, which beats the V-6 Explorer's 9.0-second time. It even beat the 8.8-second ramble of a Porsche Cayenne V-6. However, those 8.2 seconds are a bit uncomfortable, because the engine note never changes from a constant 5800 rpm, and the sound from the 3.0-liter engine is about as enjoyable as an *American Idol* reject.

Once under way, the CVT is willing to quickly deliver the gear ratio necessary for a pass. The dash from 30 to 50 mph takes 4.3 seconds, with the 50-to-70-mph romp coming in 5.9 seconds. The CVT finds an appropriate ratio immediately and makes the most of the 203 horsepower. Back off the throttle, and engine revs drop quickly as the transmission selects its tallest gear. More horsepower and torque would certainly be nice, but the Freestyle has enough of both not to feel underpowered with a less than full load of folks, thanks to the resourceful transmission.

Ford claims to be spending quite a bit more development money on its interiors. The F-150 pickup was the first to enjoy the extra cash, and its interior is far better than anything else in the full-size-pickup segment. The Freestyle interior shows some F-150 influence, but what is great in a pickup truck is merely



THE VERDICT

Highs: Solid structure, quiet at speed, room for seven, low step-in height, CVT makes the most of available power.

Lows: Could use more power, engine groans when stressed, weak tow rating, questionable CVT reliability.

The Verdict: A refined sport-ute built on Volvo's platform proves more satisfying and useful than the Five Hundred sedan with the same roots.



good in a family vehicle. The plastics are nicely grained and the center stack has a tasteful metallic carbon-fiber-looking piece, but the entire dashboard feels hard and somewhat hollow to the touch. What did impress was the build quality of our test vehicle—everything fit and was aligned perfectly. The new corporate radio works easily, and the three-dial climate control is as straightforward as it gets.

A grippy and durable-looking fabric covered the seats of our mid-level SEL-grade Freestyle. Leather is standard on the top-of-the-line Limited, which starts

\$1055 north of our SEL's \$29,840 as-tested price. The SEL has a high level of standard equipment that includes an in-dash six-CD changer, a power driver seat, two-tone paint, 17-inch aluminum wheels, and automatic headlights. Our example wore two options, a sunroof (\$895) and a reverse sensing system (\$250) that beeps if you're about to back over junior's tricycle.

Point the Freestyle down an interstate, and enjoy the silence. Wind and road noise are subdued, and the serenity goes a long way toward making the Freestyle feel like

a more expensive vehicle. At 70 mph, the Freestyle registered a respectable 68 decibels, but to our ears the sound doesn't seem to increase much as you creep up into big-ticket territory. Combine the silence with steering that is solid on-center, and it's easy to find yourself speeding along at 10 to 15 mph over the limit. Even the engine fades quietly into the background at highway speeds as the transmission selects its tallest ratio, which works out to a somnolent 2100 rpm at 80 mph.

Pavement imperfections are swallowed almost inaudibly by the strut front and



FORD FREESTYLE SEL AWD

Vehicle type: front-engine, 4-wheel-drive, 7-passenger, 5-door wagon

Price as tested: \$29,840

Price and option breakdown: base Ford Freestyle SEL AWD (includes \$650 freight), \$28,695; power sunroof, \$895; reverse sensing system, \$250

Major standard accessories: power windows, driver seat, and locks; remote locking; A/C; cruise control; tilting steering wheel; rear defroster and wiper

Sound system: Ford AM-FM radio/CD changer, 4 speakers

ENGINE

Type	V-6, aluminum block and heads
Bore x stroke	3.50 x 3.13 in, 89.0 x 79.5mm
Displacement	181 cu in, 2967cc
Compression ratio	10.1:1
Fuel-delivery system	port injection
Valve gear	chain-driven double overhead cams, 4 valves per cylinder, hydraulic lifters
Power (SAE net)	203 bhp @ 5750 rpm
Torque (SAE net)	207 lb-ft @ 4500 rpm
Redline	5800 rpm

DRIVETRAIN

Transmission	continuously variable automatic with torque converter
Final-drive ratio	5.19:1
4-wheel-drive system	full time with automatic rear-axle engagement and open front and rear differentials

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase	112.9 in
Track, front/rear	64.6/65.0 in
Length/width/height	199.8/74.4/68.2 in
Ground clearance	6.3 in
Drag area, Cd (0.35) x frontal area (29.9 sq ft)	10.5 sq ft
Curb weight	4190 lb
Weight distribution, F/R	55.4/44.6%
Curb weight per horsepower	20.6 lb
Fuel capacity	19.0 gal

CHASSIS/BODY

Type	unit construction with 2 rubber-isolated subframes
Body material	welded steel and aluminum stampings

INTERIOR

SAE volume, front seat	55 cu ft
middle seat	53 cu ft
rear seat	38 cu ft
cargo, seats up/down	22/87 cu ft
Practical cargo room, length of pipe	141.5 in
largest sheet of plywood	82.0 x 43.5 in
no. of 10 x 10 x 16-in boxes, seats up/down	8/57
Front-seat adjustments	fore-and-aft, seatback angle; driver only: front height, rear height, lumbar support
Restraint systems, front	manual 3-point belts, driver and passenger front airbags
rear	manual 3-point belts

SUSPENSION

Front	ind, strut located by a control arm, coil springs, anti-roll bar
Rear	ind; 1 upper control arm, 1 trailing link, 1 lateral link, and 1 toe-control link per side; coil springs; automatically leveling shock absorbers; anti-roll bar

STEERING

Type	rack-and-pinion with hydraulic power assist
Steering ratio	16.0:1
Turns lock-to-lock	2.8
Turning circle curb-to-curb	40.0 ft

BRAKES

Type	hydraulic with vacuum power assist and anti-lock control
Front	12.5 x 1.1-in vented disc
Rear	13.0 x 0.4-in disc

WHEELS AND TIRES

Wheel size/type	17 x 17 in/cast aluminum
Tires	Continental ContiTouringContact, P215/65R-17 98T M+S
Test inflation pressures, F/R	32/34 psi
Spare	high-pressure compact

COUNTERPOINT

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When a vehicle arrives late to a crowded segment, it had better arrive with some advantages, and that's exactly what the Freestyle does. The new car-based SUV delivers an efficient package with a roomy second-row seat and a third row that's bearable for adult males. Ford's new CVT with the proven Duratec V-6 provides unexpectedly brisk performance with no weird slipping-clutch sensations. Although not touted as sporty, the Freestyle takes to rapid motoring very well while maintaining fine ride comfort. And this goodness comes at a price that undercuts most competitors'. Anyone seeking a versatile people mover should definitely check out the Freestyle.

ANDRÉ IDZIKOWSKI

There isn't much to complain about with the Freestyle. In fact, the only thing wrong with it is it needs a more powerful engine. Most SUVs aren't quick, but this one feels annoyingly slow getting up to speed on the freeway, and passing traffic on two-lane roads requires a lot of room and planning. The CVT automatic isn't to blame; it's one of the best I've run across. But it needs something larger than the 203-hp, 3.0-liter V-6 it's currently mated to. This is too bad, because the chassis feels solid and the Freestyle rides and handles better than most other SUVs on the market. Ford has done a bang-up job on this one. It just needs to get rid of the boat-anchor engine.

RON KIINO

The Freestyle is a stylish alternative to the dreaded minivan. Which begs the question: "Is it better than a minivan?" Well, it's better than some, namely, Ford's own team taxi, the Freestar. In our June 2004 comparison test of full-size minivans, the \$33,860 Freestar SEL reached 60 in 8.8 seconds, registered 0.73 g on the skidpad, and featured the tightest third row of the bunch. Unsurprisingly, it finished fifth—of five. For over \$4000 less, the Freestyle SEL hits 60 in 8.2, hugs the skidpad for 0.77 g, and sports a roomier third row that can be comfortably inhabited by adults. So congrats, Ford—the Freestyle appears to have a bright future. Too bad it just killed the Freestar.



multilink rear suspension. Turn the steering wheel, and the Freestyle responds quickly and predictably. Body roll is controlled, and although the tires protest loudly at the slightest provocation, there is a decent amount of grip (0.77 g). Despite its larger dimensions, the Freestyle is lighter than the Explorer and feels smaller than its stablemate. No matter how bad the pavement, this SUV never sets a foot wrong or shudders from blows. The feeling of refinement is probably the most satisfying aspect of the Freestyle driving experience and makes it a far better vehicle to live with than Ford's own Explorer.

Where the Freestyle comes up short is in towing capacity. You're limited to 2000 pounds, while an Explorer has the potential to drag 7140 pounds behind it. Clearly, the Freestyle is designed to move people instead of trailers. Certainly, its high level of refinement makes it a stellar people mover. So it's not a hard-core truck, and well, it's not a minivan, either. It's neither

fish nor fowl, but rather a different type of beast that belies its 203-hp engine and combines plenty of utility with a decent driving experience.

CURRENT BASE PRICE* dollars x 1000

Suzuki Grand Vitara XL-7 (2.7-liter, 170 hp, 4-sp auto)	28
Chrysler Pacifica AWD (3.5-liter, 250 hp, 4-sp auto)	28
Ford Freestyle SEL AWD (3.0-liter, 203 hp, CVT)	29
Buick Rendezvous CX AWD (3.4-liter, 185 hp, 4-sp auto)	29

*Base price includes freight, any performance options, and applicable gas-guzzler taxes.

ACCELERATION seconds ■ 0-60 mph ■ 1/4-mile

Ford Freestyle SEL AWD	11.5
Chrysler Pacifica AWD	11.5
Suzuki Grand Vitara XL-7	11.5
Buick Rendezvous CX AWD	11.5

BRAKING 70-0 mph, feet

Chrysler Pacifica AWD	119
Suzuki Grand Vitara XL-7	119
Buick Rendezvous CX AWD	119
Ford Freestyle SEL AWD	119

ROADHOLDING 300-foot skidpad, g

Chrysler Pacifica AWD	0.77
Ford Freestyle SEL AWD	0.77
Buick Rendezvous CX AWD	0.77
Suzuki Grand Vitara XL-7	0.77

EPA CITY FUEL ECONOMY mpg

Ford Freestyle SEL AWD	24
Buick Rendezvous CX AWD	24
Chrysler Pacifica AWD	24
Suzuki Grand Vitara XL-7	24

C/D TEST RESULTS

ACCELERATION	Seconds
Zero to 30 mph	3.1
40 mph	4.4
50 mph	6.1
60 mph	8.2
70 mph	10.7
80 mph	13.8
90 mph	18.0
100 mph	24.1
110 mph	34.6
Street start, 5-60 mph	8.7
Top-gear acceleration, 30-50 mph	4.3
50-70 mph	5.9
Standing 1/4-mile	16.4 sec @ 86 mph
Top speed (governor limited)	111 mph

BRAKING

70-0 mph @ impending lockup	192 ft
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HANDLING

Roadholding, 300-ft-dia skidpad	0.77 g
Understeer	minimal moderate excessive

PROJECTED FUEL ECONOMY (MFR'S EST)

EPA city driving	19 mpg
EPA highway driving	24 mpg
C/D-observed	17 mpg

INTERIOR SOUND LEVEL

Idle	50 dBA
Full-throttle acceleration	72 dBA
70-mph cruising	68 dBA