

By DURHL CAUSSEY

When you find yourself driving a car like the Ford Escape, you want some curvy roads to travel on and high mountains to climb. Maybe even a forest to explore, and nice folks to meet. My wife and I found just such an adventure on a spring vacation trip to Hot Springs, Arkansas.

The 103-inch wheelbase and 4WD Escape, with the Duratec 30-3.0L V6 engine complemented by a 6-speed automatic transmission, made our trip fun, comfortable, and inexpensive.

I must admit when I saw all the luggage the wife wanted to take, I was a little apprehensive. My one small suitcase and plastic grocery bag took up very little room. But her four pieces of luggage, ice chest, and several pieces of clothes on hangers, briefcases, and numerous other sacks and bags initially offered a challenge. For a moment I thought we were going away for several months as opposed to four or five days. But the Escape handled everything nicely.

The 60/40 split-folding rear seats opened up to 66.3 cubic feet of cargo space. Even with the seats up you still have up to 29.2 cubic feet of space in the back. The standard floor console gives you a 3-tier storage system, two removable bins, and a hidden storage area that's large enough to stow a laptop computer or purse. And we needed every bit of storage space. We stopped at fruit stands, garage sales, trader's day, and flea markets between Dallas and Hot Springs. After about the fourth stop I quit asking what we were going to do with all the "stuff" purchased and just gave her the money.

New for 2009 is an industry-first Easy Fuel capless fuel-filler system that is standard on every Escape and Escape Hybrid. It helps reduce harmful fuel tank evaporative emissions by eliminating the potential for you to drive with an incorrectly installed or missing gas cap. There is simply no gas cap with this system. It automatically seals when you remove the fuel

2009 Ford Escape

Fun in the Sun



nozzle. So you just gas up and go.

As my sweetheart trolled the highway for places to stop, I listened to the Ford SYNC, which is the new standard for in-vehicle communication and entertainment. SYNC is an available voice-activated, customizable, media system that fully integrates your Escape with most Bluetooth-enabled mobile phones and most popular digital media players.

On the trip, I got better than the 17-city mpg and the 24-highway mpg suggested by the EPA.

This trip was one of the most

relaxing and enjoyable trips we have ever taken. We slept in every morning, ate southern cooking in abundance, and she shopped until I dropped. The Ozark Mountains were beautiful as the forest prepared for the arrival of spring foliage. This entire panorama was viewed in great detail through the large windows of the Ford Escape.

The cabin did appear a little noisy at times. I'm not sure whether this was because of a lack of tightness on the engineer's part or rather because my sweet-

heart kept reminding me how much money she spent and how much money we saved. After all, how could one pass up the seat of a 1926 International Tractor for only \$40.

The Escape I drove was loaded and the suggested price was \$32,000. But without all the extra adornments, the Escape could be purchased for a mere \$26,000.

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The interior of the Escape. PHOTOS COURTESY OF FORD MOTOR

By JIM MEACHEN & TED BIEDERMAN

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We drove the future of affordable automotive entertainment a few weeks ago.

The future we see is a small four-door sedan with the ability to comfortably transport four adults and cargo with an out-the-door price of under 25 grand rated at 30 miles to the gallon (on the highway with accelerator in a normal position), capable of neck-snapping adrenaline-elevating 0-to-60 time under six seconds and the necessary suspension setup to carve up winding blacktops.

That's the future for people who love to drive, but don't have a BMW wallet.

That's the kind of frugality we want, the kind that will keep daily driving entertaining and not just another chore in the rather boring green zone.

We were admittedly a bit surprised to find this rewarding package in Chevrolet's compact economy nameplate, the Cobalt. But there it was, sitting in front of the office, always ready to deliver a new, exciting, and mostly economical driving adventure.

Chevrolet has delivered this neat four-door package—the Cobalt SS—using a turbocharged 2.0-liter direct-injection 4-cylinder engine making 260 horsepower and 260 pound-feet of torque. To create great quickness the sedan weighs in at an anorexic 2,995 pounds.

To get the most 'bang for the buck', the SS comes with only a short-throw five-speed manual transmission.

We know the proof is in the driving. But here are some numbers to crunch before giving the Cobalt SS sedan a few whirls around the block:

- Performance has been measured at 0-to-60 in 5.4 seconds when shifted expertly, 13.9 seconds at 104 miles per hour in the quarter mile, and with an excellent stopping distance from 60 mph, of 121 feet.
- Base price, which is also a

Chevrolet Cobalt SS: Frugal Four-Door Performance



Chevrolet Cobalt SS. COURTESY OF WWW.CAR-DATA.COM

well-equipped price, is an affordable \$23,435 including destination charge.

- Gas mileage is 30 mpg on the highway, 22 in town. Don't expect that kind of frugality in hard driving, but consider it very possible while taking the wife and kids to the mother-in-law's house on Sunday afternoon. Chevrolet says premium gas is recommended, but not required. That means the Cobalt will probably live on a steady diet of regular quite nicely.
- Trunk space, important for a small family, is a healthy - for a compact car - 13.9 cubic feet. Competitors such as the Ford Focus sedan have 13.8 cubic feet and the Honda Civic only 12. Like

most sedans in the segment, the rear seatbacks fold down 60/40 adding to hauling usability.

- Passenger space is adequate and rear headroom is good at nearly 38 inches. As with all compact sedans, some compromise may be needed between rear passengers and long-legged front passengers.

Passenger room and cargo space is the same for the garden-variety Cobalt, so let's concentrate on the things that make the SS special including its rewarding driving dynamics.

A footnote here: the Cobalt SS has come in coupe and sedan format for several years, and last year the two-door got the new

260-horsepower engine. If you like a sportier look and don't need the utility of four doors, the SS coupe also starts at \$23,435.

In 2008 the SS coupe featured a 205-horsepower turbocharged engine. There was an SS sedan package as well in 2007, but don't confuse it with the 2009 edition. It came with a naturally aspirated 2.4-liter engine making 171 horsepower.

The new Cobalt SS has been elevated into a class with the Mazdaspeed3, Mitsubishi Lancer Ralliart, and Subaru Impreza WRX. While performance is nearly equal, the Cobalt comes in at several thousand less.

Not only did we find the Cobalt

fast, it was especially rewarding when kicked back into third gear for lightning-like passing on a two-lane highway. We found it surprisingly composed with little body roll running through tight turns on our favorite stretch of law-enforcement-deprived backcountry asphalt. Make sure you check off the \$495 limited slip differential option to get the best possible cornering setup.

The SS was also impressive on a couple of pedal-to-the-metal starts with traction and stability control shut off. There was only a hint of torque steer from the front-wheel drive Cobalt and there was very little steering wheel tug to the left or right. Chevrolet has successfully

dialled out the problem that afflicts front drivers rippling with torque.

We applaud Chevrolet for putting in up-to-date safety equipment at no extra charge. Four-wheel antilock disc brakes (Brembo up front), head-curtain side airbags, stability and traction control, and tire pressure monitoring are part of the SS package.

So you've invested in this very entertaining car, but you want your neighbors to know that what's in the driveway is not the run-of-the-mill economy sedan. Although there's not a lot to differentiate the SS, your neighbors will notice the sporty 18-inch forged aluminum wheels wrapped with low-profile performance rubber. There's also a spoiler on the deck-lid and SS badges on each side.

Inside, we liked the performance cloth seats with color-keyed inserts and a big SS badge stitched into the seatbacks. The dashboard layout is standard Cobalt, meaning easy-to-read gauges, but large expanses of hard plastic that make it plain ugly. We could have used a center armrest for a tad more comfort.

Also missing are a decent selection of storage cubbies. The Cobalt, strangely for a 2009 car, has little useable storage space up front. There is a pull-open area to the left of the driver good for coins and big enough for a small cell phone.

There are few options available. The two biggest in terms of price are limited slip, as noted above, and a sunroof for \$750. Navigation is not offered, but General Motors' OnStar system with turn-by-turn navigation is available.

Standard equipment includes a complete power package, air conditioning, cruise control, and a high-performance audio system with seven Pioneer speakers, including a subwoofer mounted in the trunk.

We like the fact that you can get a domestic branded car that delivers rewarding pocket rocket performance for a very competitive price. Not only is the Cobalt SS a good car, we think it is every bit the equal of the best the competition has to offer.



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