

A Great American Hybrid

by David M. Brashear
September 3, 2008

After testing several hybrid offerings from American manufacturers, we bought a 2008 Ford Escape Hybrid in June, 2007. And 15,000 miles and more than a year of service later, we couldn't be happier with our selection. We strongly recommend the Ford Escape Hybrid.

Aside from two Chevrolet Suburbans for our family of six, we have never purchased any other new American cars. I suppose that, in a way, we've been customers of Ford through our Volvo and Range Rover purchases. But generally, we have liked BMWs and have owned several.

After a move from the city (Washington, D.C.) to Virginia Beach (a typical new American community where sprawl and distances are the norm), we decided to become more fuel efficient. We sold our aging Volvo 850 station wagon, which got very good gas mileage, and pushed our Ford Escape Hybrid into service.

Our four cylinder, front wheel drive Hybrid Escape has been a joy to own. Ford redesigned the Escape for 2008, and made the inside a bit more current in its styling. While the car is nice on the inside, it's clearly not a Range Rover or a BMW.


But we didn't buy our Ford Hybrid for luxury or premium styling – we bought it

to conserve energy and make our own small impact on the American economy. We were getting tired of sending more and more of our money for fuel to places generally unfriendly to the U.S., and we wanted to support American developments in the realm of next generation cars.

Our Ford Escape Hybrid has not been a disappointment. We have driven it all around the mid-Atlantic, and have been pleased with the way it drives and its remarkable fuel efficiency. More than anything, we have been captivated by the impressive amount of information and feedback the Escape gives to the driver, allowing the driver to operate the vehicle in a more fuel efficient manner.

Generally, we get about 34 or 35 miles to the gallon. But fuel efficiency can vary widely. When traveling from my brother's house in Tysons Corner to Arlington – a short trip of a few miles – our Hybrid sips gas, getting over 60 mpg. On long distance round trips from New York to Pittsburgh, I have averaged about 33 mpg. Driving locally in the flat coastal plains of Virginia Beach and Norfolk, I have often done better than 40 mpg.

It's all about your driving style. If you are prone to speeding out of the starting block when the light turns green, expect lower gas mileage. If you like to drive 80 mph, expect lower gas mileage. And if you must run the air conditioning at all times, expect lower gas mileage. But if you can learn to drive smartly, there is almost no limit to how efficiently you can drive the Escape Hybrid.



The car has many features. Ours has leather seats and most of the bells and whistles. The interior has a more “plastic” feel than we are accustomed to, but we have not been bothered by it. Our car has a wonderful sound system, with AM/FM radio, a CD player, satellite radio, and an MP3 player connection. We have heated front seats, a power sunroof, and a roof rack. And there is plenty of passenger and cargo room. We have been surprised at the amount of interior space – 5 people can travel very comfortably.

The Escape’s hybrid system operates in three ways – 1) at low speeds (generally up to about 20 or 25 mph), the vehicle runs using its electric motor, meaning no gas is consumed and the gas engine is off; 2) at high speeds (like highway driving), the gas engine is the primary force of propulsion, and excess energy is used to charge the high voltage battery; and 3) at medium speeds, both the electric motor and the gas engine work together to improve the fuel efficiency of the vehicle, with both providing propulsion. A fantastic, on-screen graphical system shows the driver exactly how energy is being used on a continuous basis, noting energy flow from the gas engine, electric motor, drive axle, and high voltage battery. Interestingly, a regenerative braking system captures excess energy while braking and uses that energy to charge the high voltage battery.

The central feature of the hybrid system is the high voltage battery. It cycles constantly, recharging when necessary, and then consuming its stored energy. The graphic feedback system allows the driver to check the charge level constantly.

We love our Ford Escape Hybrid, right down to its stylish “Hybrid” logo on both the sides and the rear of the car (kudos to the designer of the green leaf on the highway). But as with anything, there is room for improvement.

How would I change the car? First, I’d consider making a more upscale version, and perhaps parking it in the Lincoln showroom. The interior could be a selling point, with a little more effort. Second, I would increase the high voltage battery capacity. I always hate seeing the battery’s charge being consumed, especially at low speeds, knowing that the gas engine will soon kick on to provide propulsion while the battery recharges. Third, I would adjust the hybrid system computer so that the electric motor is given more of a chance to operate without gas assistance. Often while going up a residential hill slowly, the car will decide that I want more power and kick on the gas engine. The same can happen when I am comfortably cruising down a street at 25 mph with no gas assistance. Finally, I would change the front grill – it’s style and design look dated, even with the recent style change. Ford’s designers can certainly come up with something a bit more current in style.

Our final words of advice – get to a Ford dealer (or Mercury for the Mariner hybrid) – a pick up your new SUV. And if you hurry, you might be able to get a Federal Income tax credit to help pay for your new purchase (we did!).



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