

Mercury Rising - 2009 Mariner Premium

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SUVs have taken a beating in the last year. They're out of fashion, derided as gas hogs, and generally held responsible for the current dire straits of the automotive industry. Yet SUVs and pickup trucks made up over 60% of automotive sales in 2007. A lot of that can be chalked up to work trucks – it seems like every gardener, carpenter, and plumber in America runs from job to job in a white pickup – but SUVs fill an important segment of the auto market.

The reasons are obvious – if you need to haul a family and their gear, if you need to pull a moderate-sized trailer, or if you live in the 75% of the United States that sees snow, heavy rain, or unpaved roads, then an SUV probably looks attractive to you at least part of the time. Certainly in the heavy winter of 2008-2009, more than one person has been grateful for their 4WD SUV.

And the automakers know this, which is why SUVs are leading the charge towards alternative fuels, hybrid engines, and other efficiency developments. As an Audi executive explained it to me, if you take someone out of an SUV that gets 12 MPG and put them in one that gets 24 MPG, that's a bigger win than taking someone out of a small car that gets 30 MPG and putting them in a hybrid that gets 33 MPG. That's why Audi is looking to diesel and Ford, GM, Chrysler, Toyota, and Honda are looking to hybrids and flex-fuel.

This week's car, though, is not one of those. It's the Mercury Mariner Premium 4WD. I've sung the praises of the Mariner hybrid before - it's a fun vehicle that started with a capable 2.3-liter 4-cylinder engine. It's since been upgraded to 2.5 liters, but also includes the hybrid electric motor that helps it top 30 MPG in city driving. The Premium edition comes with a 3-liter V6 engine, offering 17/24 MPG. Which is not bad for a V6 of that size.

The Mariner delivers 240 horsepower and 233 pound-feet of torque from the V6, or you can buy yours with the basic 2.5-liter engine and get a very adequate 171 horsepower and the same number of pound-feet of torque. The 4-banger gets just 19/25 MPG, however, so if you need the power, you're not giving up much fuel economy with the V6. If economy's your thing, look to the hybrid.

With all that being said, the Mariner Premium drives very well. It's solid on the road, has power to spare, and it's as comfortable as any larger SUV. The Premium package offers you power everything, the V6 engine, 4WD, and voice-activated stereo with Ford's SYNC system. You also get leather, fog lights, and alloy wheels.

On the test vehicle, we also had the heated seats, 17-inch alloy wheels, power moonroof, the trailer towing package, backup radar, and the GPS navigation system. The total price tag on our Mariner was \$32,795, on a base price of \$26,790 for the Premium edition.

The trailering package allows you to tow up to 3,500 pounds. That's enough for a 20-foot boat, a small travel trailer, a couple of ATVs or Jet-Skis on a flatbed, or a single horse trailer. So the V6 Mariner makes sense for an active, outdoor family. You also get up to 66 cubic feet of cargo space, if you fold the rear seats down. You get 29 cubic feet behind the second row.

On the inside, the Mariner is nice. It's got the two-toned seat upholstery that is a Mercury hallmark, but I kind of like it. Certainly after the first day, there was nothing that annoyed me about it. The dash/console layout is workmanlike and easy to use.

The bottom line on the Mercury Mariner Premium is that it's a nice solid smaller-to-mid-size SUV. If you need a V6 to tow your stuff and AWD to get where you're going, the Mercury should be on your test-drive list. Yet I think for all that, fewer people will choose this car than the hybrid model as gas prices begin their inexorable march back up in the new year. Whatever your engine choice, 2009 is a good time to take a fresh look at the Mercury Mariner and its Ford Escape and Mazda Tribute stablemates.