

Portland Observer Auto Review

News and reviews on new motor vehicles

2007 Ford Explorer 4DR XLT 4X4 IRONMAN

BY KATHLEEN CARR

After Ford signed on to become the title sponsor of the Ironman Triathlon in 2005, the company decided to create an Explorer "buzz vehicle" to celebrate the relationship. The result is the 2007 Ironman Explorer, easily the best-looking Explorer variant based on the current body style.

Explorer underwent a makeover for 2006 that emphasized F-Series DNA and maturity, and the Ironman Package throws all that out the window for a bold, in-your-face look that's about as rough-and-ready as an Explorer has ever looked. The big front grille is blacked-out, and a gray plastic "Ironman" logo-imprinted lower front fascia has been added to the bumper below the opening. The paint -- wow, that's Orange! Orange Frost Clearcoat, to be exact. A trim kit has been added above the four wheel wells. It's a rugged-looking plastic fender flare that looks like it has been bolted to the Explorer with exposed Allen bolts -- shorthand for "masculine" in design language. Black body cladding runs along the rocker panels, creating a two-tone look for the Explorer. A black roof rack with black cross rails is mounted overhead, and 18" painted aluminum wheels wear the rubber. The back bumper wears a similar gray plastic Ironman logo piece as the front fascia.

Somehow this whole package works really well. Explorer's not a bad-looking SUV in the first place, if a little conservatively styled for my taste. Loading up with all that body-cladding and Halloween color scheme could easily have gone wrong, but it results in an Explorer that stands out from the crowd. I'm glad that Ford didn't go too heavily on the "Ironman" logos -- if anything, they're a little too subtle and hard to read -- because I would



Ironman ~ The Bold Explorer

Specifications: 4.6-Liter 3-Valve V8 Engine; 6-Speed Automatic O/D Transmission; 14-City 20-Highway MPG; \$38,630 MSRP

feel silly waddling out of a vehicle meant for a triathlete. As it is, Explorer has struck that careful balance between overwrought and cool.

Explorer's dash is a medley of plastics, with various textures and qualities competing for space and attention. The layout is logical and clean, with a minimum (for these days) of buttons, knobs and controls. The analog speedometer and tachometer are sunk into a simple chromed oval above the steering wheel, and the center stack houses audio, navigation and climate controls. Everything's right where it should be. My test vehicle was equipped with a \$2,505 (ouch!) navigation system, which I guess every Ironman should have. If I were a true triathlete I might opt for a handheld navigation system and save a grand or two.

Slow and steady wins the race, right? Well, Explorer isn't exactly slow. Under the hood is a 4.6 liter single-overhead cam V8 with three valves per cylinder and variable camshaft timing that cranks out a respectable 292 hp and 303 lb-ft of torque mated to a six-speed transmission, plenty of power to push around the 4777 lb vehicle. The transmission is good for sprints and long hauls, with excellent power distribution all along the way.

Ford spent a lot of time and money on Explorer's handling after the rollover debacles of the 1990s, and this Ironman

handles very athletically as a result. Four-wheel independent suspension, front and rear sway bars are standard to keep body roll to a minimum. Traction control with roll stability control, front side airbags, side impact door beams, and four-wheel anti-lock brakes with electronic brake force distribution are standard. A truly impressive 36.8' turning radius makes parking lot maneuvers and U-turns a breeze.

As big as it is, Explorer is really too small to have a useful third-row seat. It has one, but it is best used by the young and short of stature. Full-sized humans will not enjoy even a short ride back there, and the amenities are few -- they don't even get the leather seating surfaces that the first two rows are treated to. It's a one-tone vinyl world back there in the third row. Oh, the humiliation.

I have to admire anybody who has the

fortitude to compete in an Ironman competition. It's an amazing test of endurance and willpower, and deserves some recognition. Is this Explorer Ironman the right tribute? Well, it is chiseled and muscular. It does have some athletic moves and a lot of versatility, and it doesn't ever complain about the conditions. Perhaps it is worthy of an Ironman. You can save a few bucks on the Explorer by choosing fewer options -- a plain vanilla Explorer XLT with a V6 and two-wheel drive starts at \$25,300 -- but the Ironman package is a fun, unique choice for the triathlete.

If you want to be a triathlete, or just look like one, the Explorer Ironman is a very attractive choice. Maybe I should dust off my running shoes, grease up my bicycle and start training for an Ironman competition of my own. I feel inspired by the Ironman to be the bold explorer.

FOOD

The mission of the 'Food Section' is to provide our readers with great tasting healthy recipes and useful household information. The Portland Observer respectfully requests all comments and/or family recipes you would like to share with us. Address emails to foods@portlandobserver.com



Poppy Seed Salad

"What's more inviting than fresh fruit? This refreshing fresh fruit salad has only 90 calories."

Ingredients

- 1/4 cup honey
- 1/4 cup frozen limeade concentrate, thawed
- 2 tsp. poppy seeds
- 1 cup fresh strawberries cut in half
- 1 cup cubed pineapple
- 1 cup fresh blackberries
- 1 cup cubed watermelon
- 1/4 cup slivered almonds, toasted-if desired

Directions

1. In a medium bowl, mix honey, limeade concentrate and poppy seed.
2. Carefully toss fruit with honey mixture. Sprinkle with almonds.

Stuffed Vidalia Onions

"Vidalia onions are currently in season, healthy and they create a lively side dish that everyone will love!"



Ingredients

- 4 Vidalia or sweet onions
- 1/2 tsp. olive oil
- 2 medium zucchini, shredded
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 tsp. dried thyme, crushed
- 1 tsp. dried basil, crushed
- 3 Tbs. plain dry bread crumbs
- 1-1/2 Tbs. chopped toasted pine nuts
- 3 Tbs. freshly grated Parmesan cheese
- 1/4 tsp. salt
- 1/4 tsp. freshly ground black pepper

Directions

1. Preheat oven to 400F. Line a small baking pan with foil.
2. Cut 1/2" off the top of each onion; slightly trim the bottoms so that the onions stand upright. Place the onions, cut side up, in the prepared baking pan and coat with cooking spray. Bake for 1 hour, or until soft. Set aside for 15 minutes or until cool enough to handle.
3. Reduce the oven temperature to 350F.
4. Remove and discard the onion peels. Using a spoon, scoop out the onion centers (do not discard), leaving a 1/2" thick shell. Chop the centers and reserve 1 cup for the stuffing; save the remainder for another use.
5. Heat the oil in a large nonstick skillet over medium heat. Add the zucchini, garlic, thyme, basil and the 1 cup of chopped onions. Cook for 6 minutes, or until the zucchini is tender and most of the liquid has evaporated. Remove from the heat and stir in the bread crumbs, pine nuts, salt, pepper and 2-1/2 Tbs. of the cheese.
6. Divide the filling among the onion shells. Place the onion shells in the same baking pan and top with the remaining cheese.
7. Bake for 20 minutes or until golden.

SAFEWAY

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Lean Ground Beef
80% Lean 20% Fat.
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Selected varieties.
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CLUB PRICE

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AUGUST

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