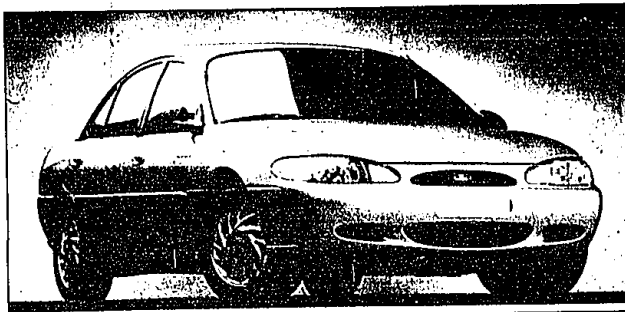


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By Anne Fracassa
Avanti NewsFeatures

What's important here is that these aren't just reskinned entry-level vehicles. This is a totally redesigned and re-engineered car. A car that in the past has cup-

tured almost 20 percent of the



**ROAD
TEST**
By
Anne
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water in its class

And most impressive is that it provides a superior ride. This is a suspension package that you would normally find on a mid-sized sedan. This has a ride better than Contour and Mystique; a ride just as nice as what's on the Taurus and Sable.

A little bit of history is in order: The original plan was to develop this new car in a partnership with Mazda, with Ford doing the styling, quality control and manu-

facturing and Mazda taking care of the implementation and testing. That idea was soon scrapped when Ford started to listen to its customers, who wanted a lower price on the car but an increase in equipment, power and comfort.

What's happened here is that Ford has set a new standard for small cars. Bob Kissel, Ford's chief project engineer for the 1997 Escort and Tracer, said the team even came in under budget. That's unheard of.

But the bottom line is that the customer benefits. And that's all that matters to people like you and me.

The details seem minor, but make all the difference in the world. Stuff like better corrosion protection, a substantial decrease in noise, vibration and harshness, torsional rigidity and a water-management system that makes the rain hitting the windshield travel up to the roof line, rather than to the sides and inside the car.

The powertrain program team had a tough job to do, but succeeded in giving the Escort and Tracer a performance feel, better shift quality and quieter idle quality. It also pumped up the horsepower and improved the smoothness of the automatic transmission. Everything the program team sought out to do was accomplished.

Traversing the winding hills of rural Georgia proved effortless for both the Escort and Tracer. The automatic transmission in the cars performed flawlessly, never hunting for a gear on even the steepest hills. Passing performance was quite impressive as well.

The Escort and Tracer are powered by a 2.0-liter 4-cylinder engine that's called Split Port Induction (SPI) 2000. This new engine delivers 110 horsepower, a 25 percent improvement over the 1.9-liter engine it replaces.

But that's not all. There's better fuel economy and a 15 percent

increase in torque. The engine has the revability of a 4-valve and the low-end feel of a 2-valve.

The styling of the new Escort and Tracer is a radical departure from the existing models. There used to be a famillal look to the Escort and Tracer all these years. Now that's gone.

Ford didn't just update the styling here. It's refined, has a more distinct appearance, softer lines and a steeply raked windshield. The headlights have clear outer lenses and the bumpers, side moldings and door handles are all color keyed, giving the cars a squarer, cleaner look.

Ford also increased the size of the Escort by making it 4 inches longer. What that translates into is more front headroom and legroom. With the 4-door model (which is the only model available until later in the model year), you'll find it easier to get in and out of and the rear seat room isn't shabby.

Instrumentation has been upgraded significantly. Unfortunately, the tachometer is gone unless you opt for the LE trim level. And the audio and climate control are together in the integrated control panel (ICP) — which is also on the Taurus and Sable. There's a larger display, bigger buttons and a dedicated check on the ICP.

The Escort and Tracer also have manual belts. Thank heavens. Those motorized numbers were a pain in the you know what. The belts are even height-adjustable in front.

Another feature usually only available on higher-priced models is a key fob that will open the driver's door and tailgate. And it even has a panic button. Anti-lock

brakes are available on all models. Also available is an integrated child car seat. There's a battery saver, dual airbags, child-proof door locks, rear-seat heat ducts and bolt-through wheel covers as well.

One thing is gone — the over-price structure. Remember? Escort and Tracer were one price for all models. Ford's eliminated the 3-door and 5-door models and has returned to a traditional form of pricing. There are two models now: The coupe and sedan.

Later this year, you'll see a wagon model. That was another disappointment. The rear of the wagon looks exactly like the model it "replaces." Everything else has changed — the interior, the front, the engine ... everything. It just has the same tired-looking rear end. Can't have everything, I guess.

That said, remember when you're looking at them that the 1997 Escort and Tracer are quality vehicles that have true value. Both are smart choices for informed buyers.

1997 Ford Escort and Mercury Tracer

Vehicle class:
Small passenger cars

Engine:
0-liter sequential electronic
port injection 4-cylinder.

Mileage:
26 city / 37 highway.

Where Built:
Wayne, Mich., and
Mermosilla, Mexico

Base price:
\$11,430.

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