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SPECIAL ARTICLE
REPRINT FEATURING
FORD
ESCAPE XLT 4WD

smart**spending**

DRIVING FORCE

Rugged Good Looks . . .

. . . are just one reason the Ford Escape drives off with a SmartMoney Award. *By Sarah Breckenridge*



Ford's Escape strikes the right balance.

A few years ago the small SUV category barely existed. Today it's fiercely competitive, with a wide range of choices. But most people use small SUVs to hit the mall, not the mud, so we focused on five popular SUVs built on a car (not a truck) chassis, rating them on such factors as power, value, styling, ride, comfort and cargo space to select a SmartMoney Award winner.

TOYOTA RAV4

WITH THE SMALLEST engine of this bunch, the RAV4 also is the lightest of these SUVs. It's sprightly from a stop but strains when passing on the highway or climbing hills. It also corners nimbly.

The interior is uncluttered and attractive. Exterior styling has made great strides since the original jellybean-like RAV4, though it still looks rather "cute-

ute." While the low cargo floor makes loading easier, the tailgate that swings to the side, rather than up, is annoying in tight quarters. The rear seat's 50/50 split means that when you load long objects only one passenger can ride in the back. Tumbling the rear seats forward to create a flat-load floor is also a bit of a hassle, though unlike the seats in the other vehicles I drove, they can be completely removed to maximize cargo space.

The low base price is a bit misleading; unlike its competitors, the basic RAV4 comes stripped down. The CD player is standard, but you'll have to shell out extra for most of the other stuff you want. My test vehicle—with antilock brakes, alloy wheels and other goodies—came to \$22,642. (All prices include destination charge.)

SATURN VUE

THE VUE IS PART of Saturn's new focus on making its products as compelling as its buying experience, but it's just not compelling enough.

The VUE brings several firsts to this segment, though they are the kinds of features that appeal more to gearheads

than to typical Saturn fans. For example, the automatic transmission mated to the V-6 is a five-speed, allowing for quieter engine performance. The VUE is also the first small SUV to offer electric (versus hydraulic) power steering, which is meant to make maneuvering easier. The effect, though, is just the opposite. Steering feels rather numb at low speeds and, combined with a large turning radius for a car this size, makes squeezing into a tight parking spot unexpectedly difficult.

While the VUE doesn't offer the largest interior space, it's by far the most easily configured. By simply lifting one lever, the rear seats fold down to a flat-load floor, and the 70/30 split bench means two people can still sit comfortably with one side folded down. Even the front passenger seat folds flat.

HYUNDAI SANTA FE GLS

AESTHETICALLY, Hyundai's SUV does have several good sides: Its curvy styling is pleasing (albeit not particularly SUV-like) from all angles except the front. Unfortunately, the oddly bulging headlamps bring to mind the flared nostrils of a pig.

But the interior is attractive and the dash well laid out. And you get plenty of features for a low price. The midlevel GLS version I drove was equipped with 16-inch alloy wheels, keyless entry, a CD player and power driver's seat. If you're dying for heated leather seats, spring for the LX version, which is still less than \$25,000.

The downside: This SUV is a bit of a snooze to drive compared with the Ford Escape or RAV4. Even with the V-6, acceleration can be sluggish, since the Santa Fe weighs a portly 3,752 pounds—261 more than its nearest competitor. Nevertheless, those who care for interior comfort, space and value over driving dynamics will like the Santa Fe, which provides one of the more spacious interiors in its class.

HONDA CR-V EX

FOR ALL THAT the CR-V does right, the first impression when one slips into the driver's seat almost ruins it. The quirky layout of the controls, all in cheap-looking plastic, makes the car seem spartan.

But that initial impression dissipates once you begin to drive. Like the RAV4, the CR-V offers only a four-cylinder engine, but at 2.4 liters and 160 hp, it's up to the task. And it reaches maximum torque at a lower engine speed than the other four, making for brisk zero-to-60 runs.

Besides the dash layout, I had a few other minor styling quibbles, such as the swing-out rear gate similar to the RAV4's (though it does have a flip-up rear windshield for loading small items). But on the upside, the CR-V offers some unique features that families with young children will appreciate, including a cargo floor that morphs into a removable picnic table and rear seats that slide forward and back to adjust cargo and leg room.

FORD ESCAPE XLT






ULTIMATELY, ALL the cars in this segment are about compromises—after all, by their very definition, crossover SUVs have to balance the right elements of both cars and sport-utes. And in this case, Ford happens to strike just the right balance with its popular Escape. Like the other four reviewed here, it has full-time four-wheel drive (power is directed to the front wheels under most conditions, shifting to all four wheels only when the system detects slippage). But unlike the other four SUVs, it offers decent towing capacity (up to 3,500 pounds) and a four-wheel-drive lock mode, ideal for mud or ice.

Plus, it actually looks the part of a rugged SUV. Considering that utility vehicles owe their popularity more to their sporty looks than to their actual off-road capabilities, it's surprising how many automakers opt for a softer station-wagon-on-steroids look for their crossovers. Not Ford. The Escape resembles the popular Explorer, albeit shrunken a bit. Inside, the theme continues; my test vehicle had the best interior of this group, with tan leather on the steering wheel and seats.

The Escape also features the brawniest engine, a 3-liter V-6 that delivers a full 201 hp, by far the best in this group. And it's just as maneuverable and responsive as the rest of the crossovers, with tight steering and an independent suspension front and rear. **SM**

THE BEST SMALL SUV

The Ford Escape XLT wins the prize with the right blend of compact brawn, tight handling and macho style.

	CAR	ENGINE	FUEL ECONOMY (mpg) city/highway	COMFORT (front/rear leg room)	CARGO VOLUME (rear seats up/down)	BASE PRICE (auto. transmission)	OVERALL RATING* (as driven)
	Ford Escape XLT 4WD	3.0-liter, 201-hp V-6	18/23	41.6/36.4 inches	33.1/69.2 cu. ft.	\$25,570	★★★★★
	Honda CR-V EX 4WD	2.4-liter, 160-hp inline-4	22/26	41.3/39.4 inches	33.5/72 cu. ft.	\$22,860	★★★★
	Hyundai Santa Fe GLS AWD	2.7-liter, 173-hp V-6	18/24	41.6/36.8 inches	30.5/77.7 cu. ft.	\$22,124	★★★★
	Saturn VUE AWD	3.0-liter, 181-hp V-6	19/25	41.2/36.8 inches	30.8/63.8 cu. ft.	\$23,295	★★
	Toyota RAV4 4WD	2.0-liter, 148-hp inline-4	22/27	42.4/32.6 inches	29.2/68.3 cu. ft.	\$19,485	★★★

*Maximum five stars.

SOURCES: FORD; HONDA; HYUNDAI; GM; TOYOTA