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Jim Mateja

Electricity building

Domestics make a run at high-mileage leaders by combining batteries with no-gas fuel sources

Published January 7, 2007

[<< previous](#)

"We took the unique things our rivals have and put them in our vans, while adding some features of our own," said Creed.

So the Stow N' Go seats that fold flat into the floor in the second and third rows stay, but new are optional second-row swivel seats that can face backwards. A table top is hidden in the floor.

Also new is power folding third-row seats (T&C Limited); second/third row video screens that will show different movies; integrated child as well as pop-up booster seats (with swivel seats); side-curtain air bags and front-seat knee blockers; stability control with traction control; power second-row windows with shades; and optional back-up camera with the navigation system.

And there's a choice of 3.3-liter V-6 that burns E85 or a 3.8-liter, 198-horsepower or 4-liter, 240-h.p. V-6 with 6-speed automatic.

Five Hundred to 1: The redesigned 2008 Ford Five Hundred sedan that comes out in the second quarter of this year will sport a three-bar chrome grille similar to that on the Ford Fusion and replace the 3-liter, 200-h.p. V-6 with a 3.5-liter, 260-h.p. V-6. That will make zero- to 60-m.p.h. acceleration 1.5 seconds quicker.

"Finally the Five Hundred gets some styling personality and more spirited performance. I only hope Ford now gets behind it with strong marketing because it deserves to sell better than it has," said George Peterson, president of AutoPacific.

Ford also added chrome accents on the door handles, mirror caps, license plate holder and exhaust tips and lowered the outside mirrors to reduce complaints of wind noise.

Sharper Focus: To take advantage of small-car growth, Ford will redesign its compact 2008 Focus sedan and add a two-door coupe this fall.

Focus is Ford's entry-level vehicle, at least until a new mini arrives soon. But Ford will drop the two- and four-door hatchbacks and wagon. The redesign, which makes Focus less frumpy, features a Fusion-esque chrome, two-bar grille.

In odd packages: Styling borders on wacky, but the Ford Airstream concept is meant to draw attention to its hydrogen fuel cell that operates in electric mode at all times.

You can travel 30 miles on batteries before having to stop and recharge or travel 30 miles and then rely on the fuel cell to produce electricity while the hydrogen lasts and then have to stop and recharge the batteries overnight.

Of course you could stop and refill with hydrogen at your local station, but it's more likely Ford would substitute gas or diesel until hydrogen is ready for prime time.

Airstream is a crossover slightly longer than a midsize Fusion in which driver/passenger seats swivel to face each other or those in back who sit along the walls.

A 360-degree game screen behind the front seats allows for viewing videos or playing games. It also acts like a lava lamp.

There are four-point safety belts, which secure across the waist like a belt and down both sides of the chest like suspenders to better secure occupants in a collision.

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- Local news
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- Opinion
- Columnists
- Politics
- Religion
- Special reports
- Photos
- Video
- Multimedia
- Obituaries
- Health
- Education
- Weather
- Traffic

Business

- Your money
- Stocks
- The Digital Page
- What's ahead
- Business tech
- Technology
- Wireless/ Networking
- Columnists

Sports

- Bears
- Bulls
- Blackhawks
- Cubs
- White Sox
- Colleges
- High school
- Golf
- Soccer
- Columnists

Travel

- Flight tracker
- Travel deals
- Fall colors
- Midwest getaways
- Follow the sun
- Skiing 2005-06
- Cruising 2005-06
- National Parks
- Resourceful traveler
- 10 for the road
- GeoQuiz

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- Arts
- Critics' reviews
- Dining
- Food
- Horoscope
- Leisure
- Lottery
- Movies
- Music
- Theater
- Shopping
- Television

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