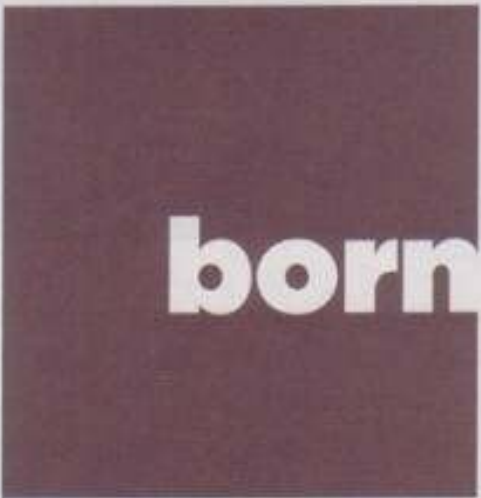
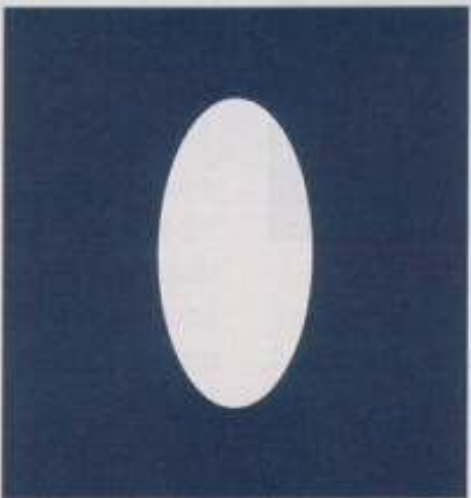


**(first drive) ford taurus**





REINVENTED  
AND COMING  
IN ON LITTLE  
CAT FEET

■ words  
**kim reynolds**  
■ photographs  
**julia lapalme**

## (first drive) ford taurus



**THE PLAN** seemed bulletproof. It was 2005, and Ford's flagship sedan was finally being clean-sheet overhauled. And to commemorate it, the troubled Taurus name would be cut free to basically haunt Hertz lots and replaced by one of those cool new "number" names—one that harkened back to a sentimental favorite no less—the "Five Hundred." Mechanically, everything was slotting right into place, too: The chassis would consist of rejiggered Volvo S80 bones, including an all-wheel-drive option. Nice. Power would come from a measly 201-horse version of the 3.0-liter V-6 Duratec. Not so good, but no matter. This was going to be a sure-fire deal: Watch out, Camry and Accord!

Watch out, indeed. While Ford's binoculars were trained across the Pacific, it seemed oddly oblivious to an ancient rival under its nose. In yonder Auburn Hills, Chrysler (to Ford's seemingly unending bad luck) was simultaneously readying its epic 300—fast (fitted with one of Chrysler V-8s), solid (composed of hand-me-down Mercedes instead of Volvo structure), and most of all, strikingly styled. That hissing sound behind the trumpets heralding the 300 onto America's roads was the air going out of Ford's spanking new flagship.

In truth, the Five Hundred wasn't a bad car. Yeah, its acceleration was stately (0-to-60 mph in 8.6 seconds), and the engine was a tortured soul even up against its six-

speed automatic (and, worse, yoked to the peculiarly behaving CVT). But it was worlds beyond the Taurus technically, stolid on the road, and styled inoffensively (its profile rather looked like a puffed Audi sedan, an artifact of its pleasantly elevated driving position).

And thus our sad story stood when Alan Mulally, fresh from successfully beating back the dreaded European Airbus from Boeing's good gates, got his new business cards with President and CEO of Ford Motor Company printed on them. According to *Forbes* last February, the idea for renaming a revamped Five Hundred "Taurus" actually originated with Ford's Barry Engle prior to the North American International (whatever, Detroit) Auto Show. Mr. Engle mentioned the idea to Cisco Codino, and Mr. Codino mentioned it to Mark Fields, and eventually all three approached Mulally with it. Mulally, it turns out, had taken note of the Taurus's original creation when Boeing started its paradigm-shifting 787 Dreamliner project and quickly approved of the idea. The name switcheroo simply confused the public, Mulally explained. And squandered a name recognition it would take billions to buy from scratch.

The Five Hundred's wobbliest wheel was its anemic performance, and the new 3.5-liter V-6 with 263 horsepower straightens that right out. Bang down the throttle pedal, and the car forcefully surges—it's not fast, maybe 7.6 seconds to 60, but it's in the game. The six-speed transmission (now the only choice, what with the CVT being nixed from the AWD configuration) is a nimble cog swapper, maybe not Lexus-magical in its ministrations, but certainly fast on its feet. What's interesting here is that the whole powertrain shebang is now mounted, not to the front subframe, but directly to the chassis via hydraulic mounts. The main point is to relieve the subframe of some 600 pounds, and this, along with a 10mm increase in front suspension travel and considerable retuning, has rendered the Taurus's ride startlingly improved, driven back to back against the Five Hundred.

## (first drive) ford taurus



In fact, driving the two back to back is exactly what Ford's press folks arranged. Key observations? While the handling remains nondescript, the road sizzle you used to feel throughout the car is nearly extinguished, and moderate bumps are swallowed whole. Likewise, interior noise is subdued due in part to foam pellets expanded into the A-pillars and new sound-absorptive material, called Sonosorb, swathed throughout the cabin. This suppression of NVH is actually a bigger story than the power jump, elevating the Taurus to a (sometimes wallowy) cush level that's noticeably above its admission price, which ranges from \$23,995 for the base front-drive SEL to \$29,445 for the AWD Limited.

For that you get a cavernous interior and a whopping 21.2 cubic feet (think six golf bags) in the trunk proper and a whole lot more if the split rear and front passenger seats are collapsed. Basically, if the Camry and Accord are a dimensional squeeze and the Avalon is a financial pinch, the Taurus could be just the right Fahrenheit porridge.

The 2008 Taurus further boasts roughly 500 improvements, of which 495 will put you straight to nappy. However, a few rousing highlights, aside from the chrome three-bar



grille and ventiports to sass up the styling, are things like side airbags that deploy upon a rise in door-cavity air pressure (it's the only "family" car to score the IIHS's and the NHTSA's top ratings) and the upcoming Microsoft Sync voice-activated interface between the driver and a cell-phone or digital music player (including iPod).

The born-again Taurus isn't for enthusiasts. It's handling can make the Camry seem BMW-esk, and impact noise gets reported with fidelity. But if you're a burned-out SUV family needing better mileage but giant space and impeccable safety scores too (and crossovers don't do it for you), the Taurus is back. ■



### 2008 FORD TAURUS

BASE PRICE RANGE	\$23,995-\$29,445
VEHICLE LAYOUT	Front engine, FWD or AWD, 5-pass, 4-door sedan
ENGINE	3.5L/263-hp/245-lb-ft DOHC 24-valve V-6
TRANSMISSION	6-speed automatic
CURB WEIGHT	3750-3950 lb (mfr)
WHEELBASE	112.9 in
LENGTH x WIDTH x HEIGHT	201.8 x 74.5 x 61.5 in
0-60 MPH	7.6 sec (mfr est)
EPA CITY/HWY FUEL ECON	17-18/24-28 mpg
CO <sub>2</sub> EMISSIONS	0.90-0.99 lb/mile
ON SALE IN U.S.	Currently