

# Life is an Expedition

**A**t midnight on New Year's Eve, I was making love in the back of a 1997 Ford Expedition.

In case you were wondering what I actually did when I was "on assignment," I make no apologies to the wretchedly repressed who might find this revelation shocking. After all, I am a grown man with a valid driver's license. This was loving, consensual and — given the Expedition's dual airbags, side impact beams and standard four-wheel anti-lock brakes — safe sex.

## RUMBLE SEAT



**DAVE NEIL**

Ford Expedition —

as the lum-  
One of us even had our seat belt on. So what makes this nocturne newsworthy? Just this: we tend to think of full-size sport-utilities — Chevy Tahoe and Suburban, GMC Yukon, and now the Ford Expedition — as the lum-

moxy, swollen siblings of the popular compact sport-utes like Explorer and Grand Cherokee. Full-sizers they seem too big, too hard to maneuver — road-hogging, trailer-hauling, unromantic creatures.

But after two weeks in an Expedition Eddie Bauer edition, I've learned there are times (early middle age, for instance) when only a full-size sport-ute is big enough to bottle life in all its vertiginous.

One day might call for you to take six neighborhood kids out for pizza — you can't leave any-  
one behind lest you hurt his

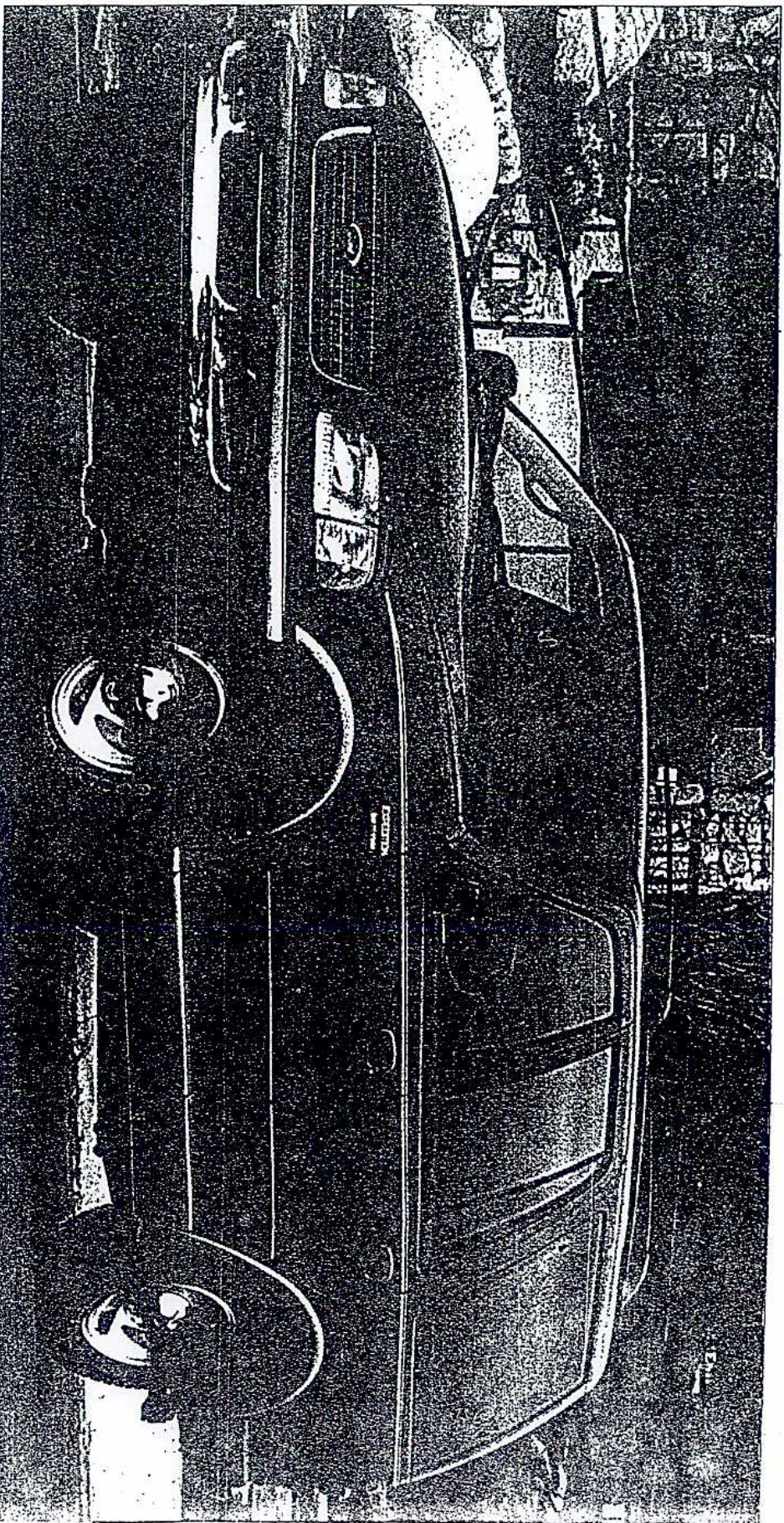
tender adolescent feelings. The next day you might have to ferry snowrock, boxes of tile, ShopVacs and table saws from the local Lowe's store to your perpetual bathroom remodeling project.

Another day might find you hell-bent for the border on a long-distance, high-speed holiday with roller blades, guitars and keyboards, clothes and books strewn around the cabin.

And on another day, you might — if your karma is really, really good — see that hungry look in a lover's eye, and find

See Expedition, page 20

Life, love and a dozen trips to Lowe's as we sample the variety of the full-size sport-utility experience



1... Raleigh, 851-5553, gets my nomination. Throughout the 1980s and early '90s, he kept my '69 Plymouth, '78 Volare and '78 Chrysler, all with over 125,000 miles, in super mechanical shape, including air conditioning compressors and coils on all three, replacing a computer with vacuum

ran to 96,000 miles before trading, and my '87 Escort, and '96 Town & Country go exclusively to him (except warranty repairs).

He is willing to explain what he found, what he recommends, and later, what he has done. He has never suggested unnecessary work. I'd drive 50 miles for his ser-

vice since I moved here, and have had no problems with their service, their prices, or their honesty.

As an example: A little over a year ago, the lights on my vehicle began to 'pulse' — dim, brighten, dim, brighten, in rhythm with my engine. I asked Flintom Service to check it out, thinking I had a seri-

THING, especially since they'd spent about 6 hours checking it out, but Muslim told me they weren't charging me because the didn't fix it. They told me if it got worse, maybe something would become more apparent, but until then, since I wasn't a hazard or in danger, to just keep an eye on it,

## EXPEDITION

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1D

yourself shoveling all that stuff into the space between the third seat and the rear hatch door. Now is the time when you honestly and truly love the second-seat fold-away feature — *Please don't jam, please* — that operates with a simple tug on a hidden strap. Then the panels on the back of the seat fold down to complete the floor, to make the Expedition a rangey and randy romper room, a bower of bliss with four-wheel drive.

And so it was: with my toe, I fiddled with the rear-facing set of audio controls mounted on the center console (why does WSHA go off the air at midnight?). I reached over the driver's seat and activated one of the flip-out rear quarter-panel windows and set the rear cabin climate control to Tropical. A single map light for mood.

And as the rockets went up and the dress came off, I thought, *I've got to get me one of these trucks.*

### BOYS NIGHT OUT

"There are footprints on the window back here, Dad," observed my 11-year-old son, curiously and innocently.

My girlfriend and I looked at each other and smiled. What had begun as a simple visit to the pizzeria had turned into a major adolescent assault on Lilly's pizza parlor, with five of the neighborhood kids as shock troops.

In its base form, with bench front seat (\$29,870), the Expedition carries nine people, a nifty feat of packaging for a full-size sport-ute that will fit in a standard size garage (the nine-passenger Chevy Suburban, at 230-odd inches, has trouble fitting in many garages).

With the Eddie Bauer bucket seats up front, Expedition carries eight in unusual comfort. Lots of attention has been paid to the

rear passengers, who can avail themselves of the two sets of overhead climate controls (one for each row of seats), an assortment of cupholders for all passengers, and auxiliary audio controls.

How shrewd are these features? The audio volume can be turned down from the rear seats but not turned up, so that in the battle for stereo control, parents always win over the kids.

Expedition has more head, leg and hip room than any other vehicle in its class. And that space is made available by two nicely oversized rear passenger doors.

After pizza, the kids piled into the Expedition and we went to the airport to look at airplanes. Along the way, however, the boys became fascinated by the deer grazing along the airport road. They watched in giddy amazement through the panoramic windows at the yearlings trampling through the dark. City kids.

I pulled the Expedition to the side of the road. A section of the second seat on the right folds all the way forward with a press of a button to ease egress from the back seats. The kids easily piled out of the car and began chasing the deer, as if somehow they might possibly catch one.

Then our little band chugged merrily back to the suburbs.

### WORKING FOR A LIVING

I'd put it off long enough. If I were ever to put my house in livable condition again I'd have to finish the bathroom remodeling. The upstairs looked like chimps with chainsaws had been living there.

My shopping list: table saw, bathroom door, three sheets of sheetrock, heavy five-gallon buckets of adhesive, boxes of tile, tools — the endless assortment of things you don't have that you desperately need when remodeling.

Somebody, stop me, before I remodel again.

The Expedition has 62.5 cubic feet of cargo space with the mid-

dle seat folded down, best-in-class in bower-of-bliss configuration. But more important, if you remove the 72-pound third seat, you'll discover a space 39.8 inches high, 48.5 inches wide and 82.2 inches long.

Mark well the 48.5-inch width. That means you can lay a sheet of 4x8-foot plywood, or sheetrock, flat on the floor, with only 14 inches sticking out the back. (When the long-wheelbase Expedition comes on the scene next year, they'll be able to swallow 4x8's whole.) This truck is the handiest tool in the toolbox.

Should you care to max out your Expedition you may opt for the unique four-corner load-leveling air suspension, which uses compressed air instead of conventional shocks and springs. This \$2,500 option, available only with the 4x4 Expeditions, levels the loaded vehicle for better hauling and towing stability.

It also features a "kneel-down" function that lowers the vehicle one inch so getting out is easier. In Four-Wheel-Low mode, the vehicle body raises up one inch for better ground clearance.

And at any time the air suspension lends the Expedition a pil-low, vibration-less ride, exceptional in a jumbo-sized vehicle with 17-inch all-terrain tires.

Expedition took the measure of the Suburbans and Tahoes of the world, benchmarked them and exceeded them. The Expedition has an 8,000-pound towing capacity, highest in its class, with the 5.4-liter V8 engine. That also gives it a 2,000-pound cargo capacity.

Two engines are available: the 4.6-liter V8 generates 215 hp at 4,400 rpm and 290 foot-pounds of torque at 3,250; the 5.4 liter (the same engine with a longer stroke and higher deck height) produces 230 hp at 4,250 and 325 pounds of torque at 3,000. Both engines are chain-driven SOHC's with 100,000-mile maintenance intervals and techy features like a low-mass and friction valvetrain and an

overheating-prevent mode that will allow the vehicle to limp home without ruining the engine.

Either engine provides adequate passing power, though the longer stroke of the 5.4 is more fun. Mileage ranges from 14/20, city/highway (in the 4.6 liter/4x2 vehicle) to 13/17 (5.4-liter/4x4) vehicle.

After a day's worth of devaluing my home, I felt the need to get away. I turned off Highway 98 to explore some cob-rough dirt roads. The Expedition comes with an advanced, shift-anytime 4x4 system that includes all-wheel-drive, wherein the front wheels engage any time the rear wheels begin to slip. This set-it-and-forget-it feature, designed for all-climate road use, works well off-road, too.

On this covart, I managed to find some deep, rutted roads cast in glue-like red clay. The AWD bogged down. Engaging 4x4 Low mode, I transformed the sweetly quiet and tractable road vehicle into a tractor and churned easily up and over the muck.

Not bad for a luxury bliss-mobile.

### ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

Few products can match the Eddie Bauer Expedition's sheer size, flawless road behavior, exceptional comfort, effortless utility and laundry list of features (lighted running boards, for example, or battery-saver option, LED turn signals in the outside mirrors, armrest-mounted 6-CD changer).

This is one beautiful sport-ute.

And it reminds me just how profound a difference a vehicle can have in the life of its owner. The Expedition isn't just transportation; it's access to a collection of pleasures — sensual, romantic, familial and industrious — and liberties. It's offers the freedom to work hard or chase a wild hare or take the kids on vacation.

Is that kind of freedom worth almost \$40,000? Do you have to ask?

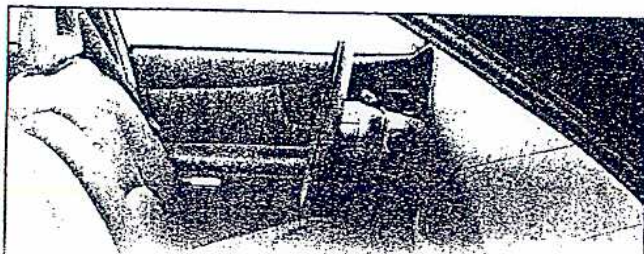
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## REGAL

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1D

the last hero-Buick before the front-wheel-drive GM10s took over.

While the new Regal doesn't go all the way back to the ground-pounding ways of the GNX, it is starting to head, if only a little bit,



less harsh.

Both Regal models retain their four-wheel discs with ABS, but the brakes are larger, up by 20 square inches in total swept area.

While the car still looks like a Buick inside and out ("You should be able to see the car a block-and-a-half away and know it's a Buick," says designer Wayne Kady), it also shares the comfort of