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**2013 Lincoln MKZ**

*Lincoln's future begins here*

by Gary Witzenburg

 Anyone paying attention knows that Ford Motor Company's luxury Lincoln brand has faded to a shadow of its formerly prestigious self -- but Lincoln says its "future begins" with this all-new 2013 MKZ. The big, old, full-frame, rear-drive luxobarge Lincoln Town Car, a favorite of limo builders, liveries and loyal owners for decades, is long gone, and other Lincolns of late have been (very nicely) rebadged and upgraded Fords.

 There's nothing wrong with fancying up popular-priced cars and trucks to transform them into luxury entries -- every maker from GM to Toyota has been doing that almost forever. But the art is in the execution. For many years, Ford's mid-range Mercury brand offered slightly upgraded Fords with different grilles, while top-range Lincolns were just another step up on the same basic vehicles. And both sat side-by-side in Lincoln-Mercury showrooms.

 But Ford managers recently said, "Enough!" Much to the chagrin of L-M dealers and (dwindling numbers of) Mercury owners, they euthanized Mercury and created a new Lincoln Motor Company, complete with its own design studio. And the first all-new car to emerge from this serious effort at reinventing Lincoln is this very slick MKZ mid-size luxury sedan.

 “The new Lincoln MKZ represents the future of Lincoln in both style and substance,” says Group Vice President, Global Marketing, Sales and Service Jim Farley. “It is proof of our commitment to deliver a new breed of Lincolns for a new generation of Lincoln clients – motor cars that are distinctive, elegant, full of technology and a delight to own.”

**Exterior and interior**

 While it's built on the same bones as Ford's very handsome mid-size Fusion, it looks nothing at all like a Fusion (check Box #1 on the upscale transformation checklist). The first Lincoln penned by the newly-created Lincoln Design Studio team, it was unveiled in "concept" form at last year's Detroit Auto Show and hasn't changed much from concept to production. We think it looks terrific from any angle.

 Most notable are its nearly coupe-like profile, with a steeply-raked windshield and stretched backlight (it’s 10 percent aerodynamically slicker than the 2012 MKZ it replaces) and a new, more refined, horizontal-bar interpretation of the marque’s recent split-wing grille. We liked this retro-modern grille shape (an homage to the 1938 Lincoln Zephyr) when it arrived with vertical bars a few years ago, and we like it even better with fine horizontal bars. The front LED headlights turn with the steering wheel for cornering visibility, and LED lamps at the rear enable a distinctively slim full-width taillamp.

 “The exterior’s front graphic is repeated in the dramatic sweep of the new instrument panel, helping tie the interior to the exterior in a harmonious manner," says Lincoln Design director Max Wolff. It's beautifully understated luxury cabin is full of rich natural materials and soft-touch surfaces. The supple premium leather trim is complimented by tasteful wood and metal-toned accents (check Box #2). One bold touch is the row of shift selection buttons (Park, Neutral, Reverse, Drive and Sport) running up the left side of the vertical console, instead of a console-mounted shift lever, which frees up space for more storage areas.

**Powertrains**

The 2013 Lincoln MKZoffers a choice of two engines or a fuel-efficient hybrid powertrain. The standard 2.0-liter turbocharged EcoBoost four delivers 240 horsepower and 22 mpg city/31 highway EPA fuel economy. The optional 3.7-liter V6 ups the ante to 300 horses at the cost of just three mpg (city and highway). Both drive the front or (with available awd) all four wheels through a six-speed automatic with steering-wheel shift paddles.

 But the best choice to optimize fuel efficiency is Ford's available 188-hp hybrid system, which teams a 2.0-liter four with an electric motor and an electronic continuously variable transmission (CVT). This MKZ Hybrid, Lincoln says, delivers the best fuel efficiency of any luxury vehicle in America.

**Features**

 An 11-speaker audiophile entertainment system, cabin air filtration, heated front seats (with 10-way driver's seat power controls), remote start and Active Noise Control -- which reduces their intensity of annoying frequencies -- are standard. An optional 700-watt, 14-channel, 14-speaker THX II Certified Audio system delivers home-theater surround sound, and a 15.2-square-foot Retractable Panoramic Roof is a new Lincoln signature feature.

 Also standard, the 10.1-inch reconfigurable Thin Film Transistor (TFT) color LCD instrument cluster operates with the latest version of Ford SYNC, while MyLincoln Touch controls entertainment, climate and available navigation functions, as well as phones, PDAs and MP3 players, through an eight-inch LCD touch screen. Turn-by-turn directions are available, and Ford's voice recognition software learns your voice and speaking patterns to improve the efficiency of voice commands.

 Among the 2013 MKZ’s available safety features is a Lane Keeping System that uses a camera in the rearview mirror to read lane markers and help avoid lane drifting due to distraction or fatigue, and radar-based Adaptive Cruise Control and Collision Warning with Brake Support, which automatically adjust your speed to traffic and give visual and audible alerts when a potential front-end collision is detected. Ford's excellent Active park Assist and Blind Spot Information System (BLIS) with cross-traffic alert make parallel parking a breeze and warn of oncoming vehicles when backing out of a parking space. And the MKZ is the only sedan in its class to offer inflatable second-row outboard seatbelts that spread impact forces to prevent or reduce injuries to rear passengers.

**Driving impressions**

We were pleasantly surprised by the MKZ’s (refined-strut front/integral-link rear) suspension, largely because standard Lincoln Drive Control delivers an excellent balance of smooth ride and tied-down handling. It transparently responds to driver inputs and road conditions to integrate operation of the engine, transmission, electric power-assisted steering (EPAS), Active Noise Control, traction and stability control systems and Computer-Controlled Damping (CCD). You select Sport, Normal or Comfort CCD modes through MyLincoln Touch, and they do make a difference. Our test car’s V6 was strong (and sounded muscular), its steering was precise and its braking stable and powerful (check Box #3). We also found its SYNC voice command and MyLincoln Touch systems much improved over earlier versions.

Front to rear, tire patch to top, this 2013 Lincoln MKZ looks great inside and out, drives beautifully and seems in every way a terrific mid-size luxury sedan well worth a serious look. The best new Lincoln in many years, it’s a great start to the revival of this once-great marque.

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