It watches you drive: Subaru Forester review



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- The 2019 Subaru Forester.
  Eric Bangeman
- Front, side, and rear underguards are standard across the Forester lineup.
  Eric Bangeman
- The wheelbase in the 2019 Forester is about an inch longer, which translates into about 1.4 inches of extra legroom in the back seat.
  Eric Bangeman
- There’s 76.1 cubic feet of cargo space with the back seat folded down.
  Eric Bangeman
- This is Subaru’s new design language… and it still looks

> like a Subaru, which is good.
> Eric Bangeman

When it comes to cars, there are two types of people: those who pledge their eternal love for Subaru, and everyone else. When I'm testing a Subaru, I get more questions and comments from friends and acquaintances than just about anything else I drive. And that was the case for Subaru's most popular model, the Forester.

Redesigned for 2019, the Forester comes standard with EyeSight, Subaru's suite of driver-assist technology. New to the Forester—and available only with the Touring model—is DriverFocus. Designed to fight distracted driving, DriverFocus uses the facial-recognition tech that has also found its way into smartphones. It can store profiles for up to five drivers and provides visual and auditory feedback if the system detects you're not paying attention to the road.

Look and feel

Sitting smack dab between the sub-compact Crosstrek and the sort-of-mid-size Outback, the Forester starts at $24,295 for the base model and comes in Premium, Sport, Limited, and Touring trim. The last is the most expensive, with an MSRP of $34,295. All five editions get the same 2.5-liter boxer four-cylinder engine, continuously variable transmission, all-wheel drive, EyeSight, and Subaru's above-average dual-screen StarLink infotainment system. A panoramic moonroof is standard on all models other than the base.

Compact crossovers like the Forester have to find the sometimes elusive balance between performance and fuel economy. The Forester is good at the latter—it's rated at 29mpg (26mpg in the city and 33mpg on the highway); we saw 30.2mpg in a week of mixed driving. The former can be a mixed bag. Subaru has tweaked the horizontally opposed boxer-four for 2019 by adding direct fuel injection, and the engine is

capable of 182hp (133.8kW) and 176lb-ft (238.6Nm) of torque, up from the 170hp (125kW) and 174lb-ft (235.9Nm) of last year's turbocharged model. And if the Forester has a weak spot, it's the engine and the continuously variable transmission.

The spirit is willing, but the engine is weak

You can see the improvement in power and torque from the 2018 to 2019 models, but those 12 extra horsepower aren't enough to overcome the impression that the engine is laboring when you call upon it for more power. Because the four cylinders under the hood are paired with a CVT transmission, those cylinders push to higher RPMs before the CVT "shifts" to a higher gear. I've noticed similar struggles with other small SUVs with CVTs (like the Nissan Rogue). It's not a deal-breaker by any stretch of the imagination, but it's the Forester's primary shortcoming.

If you want a more "authentic" feel to the transmission, the Sport and Touring Foresters come with paddle shifters that will simulate a seven-speed manual transmission. It does, and there's not much more to say about it. There are two drive modes: "Sport" offers better throttle responsiveness, while "Intelligent" is geared toward better fuel economy (ha, ha, geared!). I mostly kept to Intelligent mode, as Sport mode in a Forester doesn't really offer the benefits that it does in, say, a Jaguar E-Pace. In either mode, the Forester offers a stable ride with appropriate handling characteristics. There's nothing remarkable about it—it gets you from point A to point B, and it will do so competently and with a minimum of fuss.

- Subaru debuted a new infotainment layout in the 2020 Legacy, but the Forester gets the same as last year. Eric Bangeman

- Lots of controls on this steering wheel.
  Eric Bangeman
- The cockpit of the Forester.
  Eric Bangeman
- Plenty of room up here.
  Eric Bangeman
- There’s that 1.4 inches of extra legroom.
  Eric Bangeman
- And the rear seats recline, which my teenager appreciated.
  Eric Bangeman
- A close up of the driver-monitoring camera in the Forester. It supports up to five drivers.
  Eric Bangeman
- BOOP BEEP BOOP I AM SCANNING YOUR FACE (and apparently my finger).
  Eric Bangeman
- The driver-assist controls are located to the left of the steering wheel. I’m generally not a fan of button-palooza, but this is not a terrible solution.
  Eric Bangeman
- The view from the rear.
  Eric Bangeman

Beyond the strained acceleration, the Forester is a pleasant drive. Like the Crosstrek, sight lines from the driver’s seat are excellent. Subaru has added 1.2 inches (29mm) to the wheelbase, which translates into 1.4 inches (34mm) of additional legroom in the back seat. And, unlike some other compact SUVs/crossovers, sitting in the back seat doesn’t feel punitive if you’re an adult. There are optional heated seats, a pair of USB ports, and plenty of cup holders to go around (although not the 19 of the Ascent). The increased wheelbase also means more cargo space than previous models: 35.4cu. ft. (1,002L) behind the second row, increasing to 76.1cu. ft. (2,155L) with the seats folded down 60-40 style.

The Forester comes standard with Starlink. I've covered it in depth in previous reviews; it's one of the better infotainment systems available in a mainstream vehicle, especially with baked-in support for Android Auto and CarPlay. It's easy enough to interact with via the touchscreen, buttons, and steering wheel controls, and you can configure the small HD display in the instrument panel to display whatever info you find most relevant.

Stay on target

The selling point for Subaru is safety. EyeSight works well when it comes to maintaining a safe following distance, keeping you from drifting into another lane, and even applying automatic braking. Indeed, I had a car unexpectedly slam on the brakes in front of me while driving the Forester, and EyeSight engaged the brakes maybe a split-second before I did.

The real shiny newness in the Forester is DriverFocus. When you start the Forester up, the DriverFocus cameras will scan the driver's face. If it's your first time behind the wheel, it will do a face scan and offer to store the data in one of the five profile spots. If it detects your aren't looking straight ahead, it will beep and flash a warning on the display in the instrument panel. Ignore the warning and the Forester will gradually stop the vehicle.

In practice, DriverFocus works very well. I rubberneck when I drive, and I quickly got used to being chided by the car for not focusing on the road. With that degree of sensitivity, if you start to nod off behind the wheel or whip out your smartphone to read a text, the Subaru will chime at you until it has your attention. DriverFocus doesn't pay attention to eye position—it focuses on the position of your face, and I was able to trigger it by turning my head toward the passenger seat even though my eyes were still on the road.

Features like this make the Forester really stand out from the

competition. In fact, I'd put it well ahead of just about everything in its class, including the Jeep Cherokee, Nissan Rogue, and Toyota RAV4. Subaru has a coherent design philosophy across its range of vehicles, and that philosophy succeeds admirably when it comes to providing a safe, comfortable, and reasonably stylish ride—all at a price point that won't break the bank. If you're driving an aging Subaru and have been eying the new Forester, take the plunge. And if you're looking to get into a new compact SUV at a reasonable price, this car is worth a close look.

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