

AutoWeek

Loaded For Bear: Lenco's Bearcat Is Ready For Duty

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Note to self: don't tangle with the Lenco BearCat. No amount of road rage is going to overcome nine gun ports and 16,000 pounds of rolling armored vehicle—not to mention a SWAT team.

The BearCat (short for Ballistic Engineered Armored Response) is the most popular new urban rescue/assault vehicle among first responders and military units from the LAPD to the U.S. Air Force.



Built by Lenco Armored Vehicles of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, the \$194,000 BearCat is based on Ford's F-550 commercial truck. Lenco keeps Ford's 6.0-liter turbo-diesel, five-speed automatic transmission, coil-spring front / leaf-spring rear suspension and dash layout, but adds a body complete with turret and half-inch-thick steel armor.

You can enter the BearCat via forearm-busting driver/passenger doors, but special ops types will likely jump in through its two rear doors. Once in, 10 squad members in full gear can perch on padded benches running the length of either side. There are handrails above and a flat floor below, but not much else to see unless you crane to look out one of four armor-glass windows, pop open one of the cabin gun ports, or peer through the turret port. (Or, you might fire through them.)

Seven regional agencies in the mid-Atlantic recently received BearCats through a \$37 million Homeland Security Department grant, including the Quick Response Team of Maryland's Anne Arundel county police department. Anne Arundel is home to numerous "high value" targets including the National Security Agency. With ballistic protection and chemical/radiation sensors, the usefulness of the QRT's BearCat in terror situations is obvious, but the agency's Sgt. Daniel Rodriguez confirms its value in more conventional circumstances.

"We average maybe 18 calls a year with barricade/hostage situations. With the BearCat, we can safely transport a SWAT team in or out, or evacuate residents."

You might think the BearCat drives like... well, a tank. You'd be wrong. After a demo ride, Rodriguez gave us a chance behind the wheel. For all its armor and Terminator looks, the BearCat drives like any other F-550. Credit goes to Lenco for modifying its steering and distributing its weight in such a way as to make the BearCat almost nimble.

The dash, steering wheel and column shifter, right down to the AM/FM stereo, are pure Ford. In between the front buckets is a custom panel replete with radios, sensors, a hailer and an automatic snow-chain release toggle. Steering effort is light, the tranny (with four high/low transfer case) shifts well, and the turbodiesel offers plenty of torque. The BearCat cruises at highway speed with ease, and we're told it can reach triple digits.

Visibility over the long hood is fine, but for heaven's sake, check the mirrors for that Kia behind you or you'll crush it like a soda can. Most impressive is the BearCat's ability to turn 360 degrees almost within its own length. The ride is a little jouncy, and it's definitely no commuter, but when things get dicey it's a vehicle that can help save lives. Don't tangle with it.