

FIRST DRIVES: BMW 740i Sport & 540i Wagon, Pontiac Firebird WS6, Toyota Altezza

# ROAD & TRACK

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**Mustang Cobra vs. Chevrolet**  
**Camaro SS**

**SPORTING GT COUPES:**  
**Jaguar vs. Lexus vs. Mercedes-Benz**

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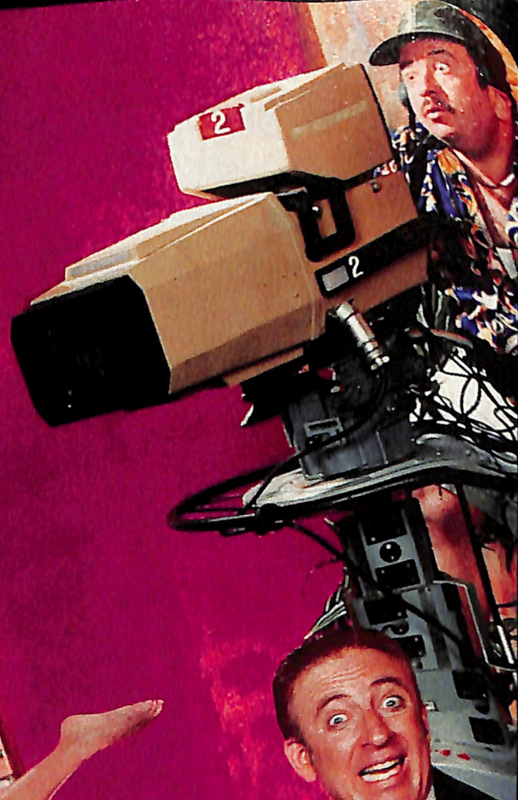
THIS AD CONTAINS:

**TTB** Two Timing Bigfoot

**BR** Big Ratings

**F** Furballs

**Mighty Tasty!**



# ROAD & TRACK



p. 54

## On The Cover:

It's a horse race as storied as The Preakness. Ford versus Chevy; Mustang versus Camaro. This year, Ford leaves the gate with a 15-hp bump in power and a slick new independent rear suspension for the SVT Mustang Cobra. Can the Camaro SS still jockey for position? Cover photo by Barry Hathaway

## Road Tests

- 54 Grudge Match: Chevrolet Camaro SS vs Ford SVT Mustang Cobra**  
With 320 horses, independent rear suspension and New Edge styling, the Mustang steps up to the plate against the Camaro. Is it a home run, or a mere pop fly?—*By Matt DeLorenzo*
- 66 Grand Touring, V-8 Style**  
We travel to wine country, searching for the ideal bouquet of luxury, handling and performance among the Jaguar XK8, Lexus SC 400 and Mercedes-Benz CLK430—*By Patrick Hong*
- 82 1983 Maxim Hook-and-Ladder Truck**  
What has a 100-ft. aerial that doesn't do a thing for radio reception? It's Costa Mesa's 19-ton, 53-ft.-long, rear-steer ladder on wheels, coming to a fire near you—*By Douglas Kott*



PHOTO BY RICHARD M. BARGON

p. 66

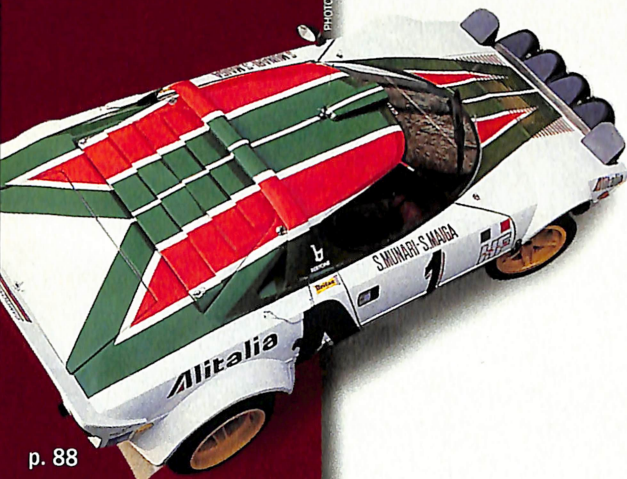


PHOTO BY GUY SPANGENBERG

p. 82

## First Drives

- 32 BMW 540i sport wagon**  
Who better than the engineers at BMW to put the "sport" in sport wagon? Somehow, this crisp-handling 5 Series sidesteps the station wagon stigma—*By Andrew Bornhop*
- 35 Saab 9-5 Wagon**  
From B-pillar rearward, it's a capacious new twist on an existing Saab, the first wagon from the Trollhättan-based manufacturer since the quirky 95—*By Andrew Bornhop*
- 37 Pontiac Firebird Formula WS6**  
Feeling nostalgic? Then a blast in Pontiac's pony car with its 320-hp Ram Air V-8 and taut WS6 suspension will take you back...and move you forward, quickly—*By Joe Rusz*
- 38 BMW 740i Sport**  
Once the domain of lesser BMWs, the Sport package—with its aggressive wheels and tires, sport seats and sequential shifter—is now playing on the flagship—*By Douglas Kott*
- 40 Toyota Altezza**  
Kid brother to the Lexus GS 400, the sporty, rear-drive Altezza will come to the U.S. as the Lexus IS 200, poised to take a chunk out of BMW 3 Series' sales—*By Jack Yamaguchi*



p. 88

## Features

- 88 Salon: Lancia Stratos**  
Hot from the crucible of top-rank international rally competition emerged an extraordinary mid-engine automobile that redefined the term "sports car"—*By Karl Ludvigsen*
- 130 Long-Term Test: Ford SVT Contour & Mercedes-Benz SLK230**  
Our Contour SVT drives east for the winter along its usual migratory route, and our SLK, nearing the end of its 50,000-mile test, sings off-key—*By Patrick Hong*

## Competition

- 98 Formula 1 Driver Ratings: Who's Fine in '99?**  
In 1998, we marveled at Mika; Schumacher shone; and Hill, Villeneuve, Coulthard, Irvine, et al., had memorable scraps farther back. What will the new year bring?—*By Rob Walker*

## Technical

- 121 Four Safety Technologies for the Millennium**  
Adaptive light control? How illuminating. Smart cruise control? Get out of town! Plus two other mind-boggling automotive technologies as we hurtle toward Y2K—*By Kim Reynolds*

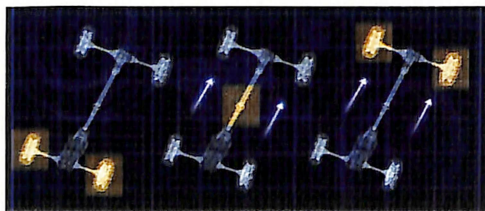
## Columns

- 9 On the Road**  
Confessions of a car junkie  
—*By Thos L. Bryant*
- 24 Side Glances**  
Random notes from the road  
—*By Peter Egan*
- 44 Ampersand**  
A look at the Detroit show through the lens of John Lamm  
—*Edited by Andrew Bornhop*
- 132 About the Sport**  
BAR looks to be a top-rung team, and an interview with Villeneuve  
—*Edited by Joe Rusz*

## Departments

People & Places	16
Your Turn	21
Years Ago	30
Reviews	112
Time & Place	144
Technical Correspondence	146
Tech Tidbits	148
Road Test Summary	152
Showcase	154
Market Place	160
PS	162

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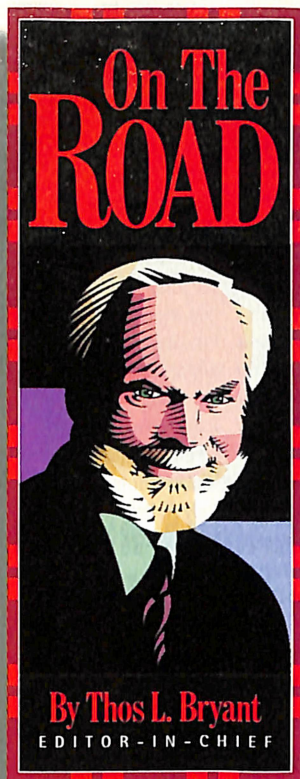


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## Confessions of a car junkie

I AM FULLY PREPARED TO CONFESS THAT I am a car junkie. I have been for more than 40 years, too, and I'm actually rather proud of it. I cannot resist sitting down and spending lots of time poring over classified ads and display ads in various publications in which classic and sports cars are offered for sale. *Hemmings Motor News* is a treasure-house of deals, ready to be closed...or rather, to be dreamt of. I used to actually buy the cars that caught my fancy: an Alfa Romeo Giulia SS, an Alfa GTV, an MGB, a Mercedes-Benz 300SL roadster, a couple of Pontiac Firebirds in the Sixties and Seventies, a 1941 Ford Pickup, a bevy of Volkswagen Beetles (including a Baja Bug modified Beetle) and on and on.

Like most people, however, I seemed to lose money on just about every car or truck I ever bought and sold—except the Mercedes, for which I paid \$3500. I sold it a year or so later for \$4500 and figured I had done all right. That is, until 300SL roadsters began selling for \$80,000 to \$100,000-plus in the Eighties, and then I wept. But for most enthusiasts, the buying and selling of automobiles is not a moneymaking proposition; we do it out of sheer love for the cars and/or an insatiable desire to try out as many interesting cars as we can.

Fortunately for me, coming to work at *Road & Track* presented the opportunity to drive all sorts of interesting and exciting cars, both new and old. But I still spend an inordinate amount of time going through ads for everything from a Jeep Grand Wagoneer (my wife, Patty, wants one) to an early-Fifties' Chevrolet or GMC pickup (Art Director Richard Baron and I want one to share) to Alfa Romeo Giuliettas and Giulias, hoping that someday I will have my favorite sports car from my youth.


The wonderful thing about ad perusing is that you can dream about owning an incredible assortment of cars without writing any checks. For instance, earlier today I was hot on the heels of a fine Alfa roadster, looked over a couple of Porsche 356s, revisited the long-wheelbase Ferrari 250 California Spyder that has been my dream car for 30 years or so, and even stuck my nose into a couple of Mercedes-Benz 300SL roadsters, thanks to Keith Martin's publication, *Sports Car Market*. Having driven an example of each of these cars at one time or another, I found myself once again enjoying the wonderful steering feel and the delightful gear change of the Alfa. And listening to the musical note of the Ferrari's V-12 engine exhaust, almost smelling the unmistakable aroma of Castrol motor oil from the past.

I am gladly willing to fork over cash to gain admittance to an automotive auction,

even though I know full well I'm not going to bid on a single car. But the dream factor is worth every penny of the admission price, as long as I'm free to wander among the cars, examine their interior appointments and flaws, check beneath the hoods to see the condition of the engine bay and the engine itself. All of this takes time and it is time well spent because I can dream for days about what owning and driving each car would be like if I should happen to purchase it.

Being blessed with a vivid imagination is a wonderful gift. I have spent untold hours driving great cars on roads all over the world. I recall the thrill of blasting down the Mulsanne Straight at the Le Mans circuit many years prior to my first visit there. And then, some years later, I actually got to do that very thing at the wheel of a Jaguar D-Type on the morning of the 24 Hours of Le Mans. My youthful dreams of participating in the great Italian classic road race, the Mille Miglia, nearly came true when I drove the course in the historic rally event that re-creates much of the excitement of the original race. For me, crossing the mountains of Umbria and heading into Rome, the halfway point, or chasing the car ahead through the streets of Florence and Bologna was just as exciting as the real thing.

Being a car junkie also puts you into an honorary fraternity with lots of other people who are as mad as you are. Once it becomes known that you enjoy such an affiliation, you find that cars are an immediate conversation starter almost anywhere you go. Today, for instance, I stopped by the local camera store to pick up the photos from our winter vacation. My friend, John, greeted me with news that the restoration project on his Camaro was completed and he could now turn his attention to the 1953 Buick Skylark convertible that was next on his list, and he naturally had a fine photo of the car to show me. Ken Gross, head of the Petersen Automotive Museum in Los Angeles, has as fine a collection of photos of his in-progress '32 Ford roadster hot rod as you'll ever see; and our Contributing Photographer Bill Warner in Florida is sending us a bevy of pictures of his latest, the original Edsel Ford hot rod.

Being a car junkie is one of life's great pleasures. Oh, I know there are those who will argue that cars are the ruination of civilization and that we should all be riding subways and buses, but that's all baloney. Cars are freedom vehicles and entertainment. They enhance our independence, our ability to roam far and wide, see new sights, meet new people and generally be more in touch with the world we live in. And they give us access to a dream world that is all too often well out of our reach. 

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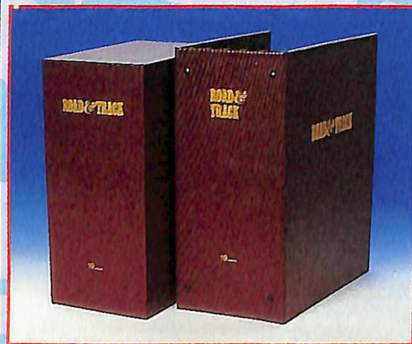
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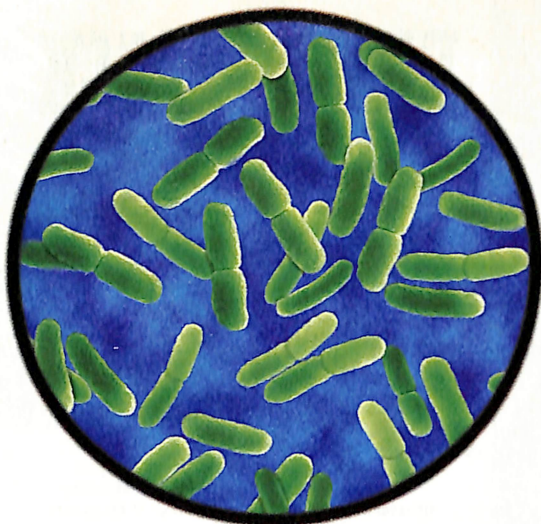
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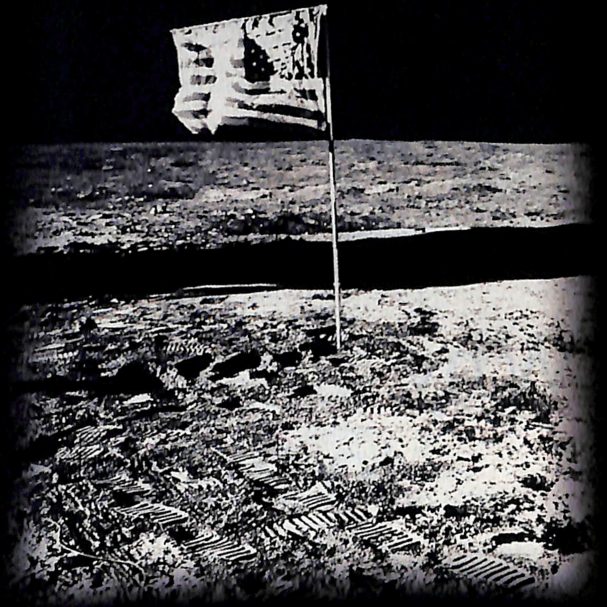


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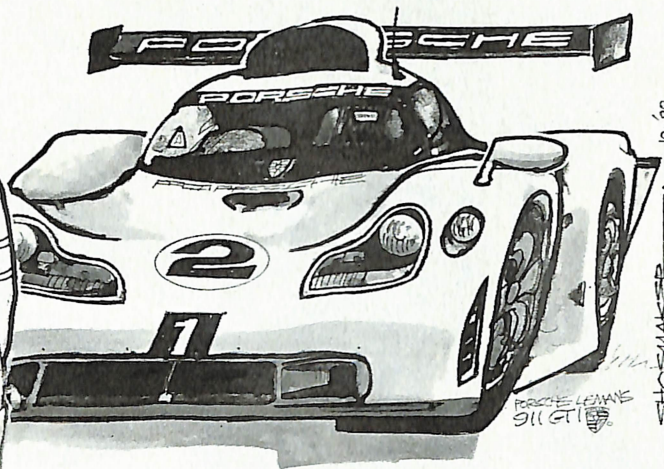
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# People & PLACES



10-98

**Smoking zombies:** In Belgrade, Yugoslavia, a hearse driver on his way to the cemetery from a mental clinic decided to light up a cigarette, then heard a hoarse voice behind him say, "Give me a cigarette too." The driver, thinking the body he was carrying had suddenly come to life, slid the car into a ditch, then fled the scene in panic. *Glas Javnosti*, a Belgrade newspaper, reported that police officers in a passing patrol car discovered the vehicle

complete with corpse—plus an inmate who had stowed away in the hearse to escape from the clinic.

**Technological splash:** A German couple out for a Christmas drive near Berlin ended up in a river because their luxury car's navigation system failed to mention that they had to wait for a ferry. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the 57-year-old driver and his passenger were out driving at night

when they came to a ferry crossing at the Havel River in Caputh, southwest of Berlin. Unfortunately, that information wasn't stored in their car's navigation system, so the driver kept going straight on, expecting to cross a bridge.

**Phileas Frog?** In Swansea, Massachusetts, a three-pound green cement frog used as a lawn ornament was stolen and returned recently under very mysterious circumstances.

Apparently the frog went on a nine-month around-the-world tour—the trip documented by postcards sent to his owners—and returned in a white stretch limousine. The person responsible for the theft is still unknown.

**He was always good at playing "Follow the Leader":** A motorist from London, Ontario, Canada, noticed that a car ahead of him was "weaving and bouncing off the curb," so he decided not to pass, suspecting the driver was drunk. A little while later, the weaving car pulled over. Its driver got out and asked for directions to a nearby town because, he said, he was lost. "No problem," the rear motorist told him. "Just follow me." The good Samaritan led him straight to the parking lot of the police station, where the drunk driver was arrested.

**Let's sue everyone:** A Los Angeles, California, man has filed a lawsuit against two former friends for dropping a hot french fry down his shirt, which he claims caused him to

PHOTO BY GUY SPANGENBERG

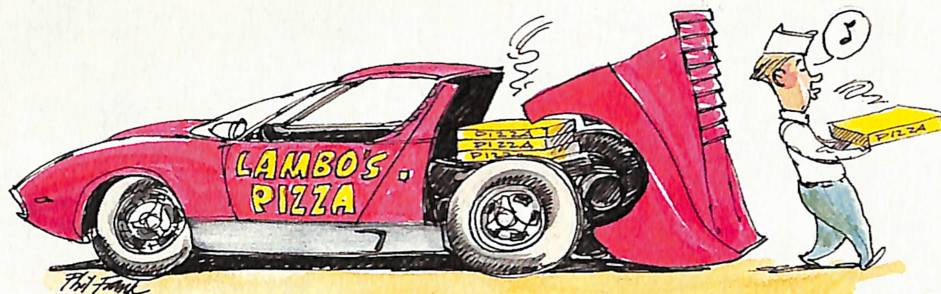


## A burning desire

Suppose we wanted to create, say, a 100-ft. roiling, searing fireball as a backdrop for our test of Costa Mesa Fire Department's hook-and-ladder truck (see page 82). Who ya gonna call? We dialed Rick Helgason, a Hollywood pyrotechnics expert whose work has appeared in such films as *Volcano*, *Apollo 13* and *Waterworld*, as well as stage productions of *Phantom of the Opera* and *The Wizard of Oz*. So how did this veteran of 23 years and more than 50 movies create this spectacular effect? Well (and kids, don't try this at home), he and his crew laid out a line of eight 5-gal. plastic bags filled with a mixture of gasoline and diesel fuel (the latter ingredient for color and

a bit of smoke) over coils of detonation cord, the whole string of them placed perpendicular to the truck, maybe 60 ft. behind. In addition, two mortars were positioned horizontally, immediately aft of the truck's rear wheels, to kick sparks out to the sides. With camera motor drives humming and a walkie-talkie countdown, Rick touched the bare leads of the detonator cord to a battery pack and...WHOOOF!...instant fireball. Blink and you'll miss it, as did Assistant Art Director Bert Swift who turned away momentarily, only to return his gaze to a pillar of smoke, slightly scorched asphalt and flaming bits of plastic bag. Even so, we all felt the sudden rush of heat and percussive blast from 150 yards away, a fiery finale to a most memorable photo shoot. —Douglas Kott

## Frank & Troise



lose control of his Dodge Caravan. Then, after he stopped and stumbled out the driver door, one of his friends accidentally shifted from Park into Reverse, causing the minivan to roll over his leg. So he's also suing Chrysler for not figuring out how to lock the gearshift when the driver steps away.

**They're biting today:** British thieves are stealing car keys from hallway tables (which are usually placed by the front door) by dragging them out through the doors' letter slots with fishing rods. "It's known as

hooking," said a representative of the Royal Automobile Club. "Motorists should be on the lookout for people carrying fishing rods in a built-up area where there's no sign of water."

**Tightening the belt:** The world's luxury carmakers seem to be angry at the Prince of Brunei. According to *The London Observer*, the prince owes them millions of dollars for the cars he has bought (he may own as many as 1500). After losing his job as the head of the Brunei Investment Agency, he may have to sell the cars, thus depressing the world's luxury-

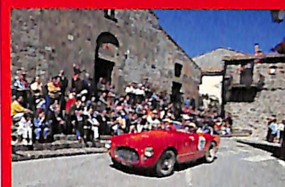
car market. "The Prince is said to have purchased several cars of the same model, identical in all but color, so that he could drive a different one each day to match his mood," the newspaper reported.

**Is the threat real?** The Y2K millennium bug struck in Singapore a full year before 2000. According to *The Sunday Times*, computerized taxi meters on 300 taxis went dead at noon on January 1 for about two hours. No reason was cited, except for information that the new meters were supposed to be "year 2000 compliant." ☐

## Dream Road Trip

Planning on a vacation in the coming month? How about southern Europe where the climate is hot and the racing even hotter? It'll make a road trip worth remembering.

• **SAN MARINO GRAND PRIX:** Your adventure begins in Imola on May 2. If you're not cheering for the Ferrari team here, then you'd best keep a low profile. For information, contact FIA at 011 33 1 43 12 44 55.



• **HISTORIC MILLE MIGLIA:** This renowned rally begins on May 6 from the mythical Rebuffone starting plank in Brescia to the center of Rome and back. For more information, contact the event organizers at 011 39 030 280036.

• **MONACO GRAND PRIX:** Then it's off to the Riviera to watch Formula 1 cars scream through the streets of beautiful Monte Carlo. Race day is May 16. For more information, call 011 33 1 43 12 44 55.

## It's a bird! It's a plane! It's...a Cadillac?

Elvis Presley, eat your heart out. What looks like a Hindu temple on wheels is actually a "customized" 1960 Cadillac, which owner Larry Fuente endearingly calls "Mad Cad." It was one of many "art cars" featured in a unique car show recently in San Francisco. Mad Cad features hundreds of thousands of

beads and rhinestones carefully glued to the car's body, as well as wildly ornate fins that protrude like horns from the rear fenders.

For more information about the Mad Cad and other wacky cars, check out [www.mercurypress.com](http://www.mercurypress.com) on the worldwide web.

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# YOUR Turn

## Honda's two-wheel technology comes to the fore

### Honda S2000

The Honda S2000 (*Driving Impressions & Technical Analysis*, January 1999) is indeed a welcome addition to the car enthusiast's wish list. Ever since I owned a Honda motor bike (tachometer redline at 10,000 rpm) in my late teens, I had wondered why Honda's car engines were not as exciting as the ones in their sports bikes in the mid and late Sixties. The shriek, the surge of power and the excitement that the little twin-carb 125-cc engine produced was phenomenal! Honda has at last produced not just an affordable and reliable but also a soul-stirring sports car. I cannot wait to test one at my local Honda dealer.

ARDESHIR B. DAMANIA  
Davis, California

Nice car....Waaay too expensive for real-life working stiffs, though. How about bringing back the CRX for less than 20 large? Silly me—the Civic Coupe Si is already over *that* and it is 300 lb. overweight to boot. Guess I'll have to keep my Neon ACR till the next one comes out. Heavy sigh....

MICHAEL HERBERT  
Flagstaff, Arizona

I love the S2000! But what makes Honda think enthusiasts will accept that hideous digital dash lifted straight from a 1984 Corvette? Come on, Honda! I don't care how much they weigh, I'll take an analog speedo and tach, thank you.

MICHAEL FRIED  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

After reading Paul Frère's article on the new Honda S2000, I am thoroughly disappointed in the worldwide engine manufacturers. Other companies should be embarrassed that their fuel-guzzling oversized engines are outperformed by a diminutive 4-banger. A 2.0-liter 4-cylinder producing 240 bhp is fantastic. Why do carmakers force us to suffer lower-horsepower, lower-miles-per-gallon-achieving engines that are much larger than this 2.0-liter? The technology is out there to produce them. Is it that much more expensive to make a technologically superior engine?

I would gladly trade my 4.3-liter Vortec V-6 (which achieves only 18 mpg) that makes 190 horsepower, for an efficient, high-performance four sans turbo. Wouldn't carmakers like to satisfy their customers' performance desires, meet high mileage EPA statutes, and lower vehicle weights by producing engines like the S2000's? I think it's about time. MICHAEL McLAUGHLIN

Atlanta, Georgia

*In amplification, our European Editor Paul Frère has pointed out that the power-assisted steering on the S2000 is electrically assisted, not hydraulically operated via a "power steering pump."*

*Also, European models will have a traction-control system that can be manually deactivated when so desired. Traction control will not be available on models for the U.S. market.—Ed.*

### Cadillac's gamble?

Having read Matt DeLorenzo's Letter from Detroit on the proposed Cadillac Evoq in the November issue of *Road & Track*, I can't believe that Mr. DeLorenzo thinks that the Evoq is a "gamble" on the future of Cadillac. With truly innovative

and appealing styling, the Evoq represents survival, nothing less for Cadillac. Sport-utility-based vehicles aside, Lincoln is no competition for Cadillac (the flagship Town Car looks like a beached whale). The last beautiful Cadillac I was really proud to own was the Allanté. It is vital for Cadillac that it produce the Evoq. I would order one immediately.

People are more sophisticated than car designers give them credit for. Most car buyers don't want models to look like "middle-of-the-road" clones of each other. A large consumer segment craving unique styling will not settle on some boring compromise design, and they are waiting patiently for the release of a really new and magnificent luxury coupe. Producing the Evoq is not "risk-taking." It is an absolute necessity.

STEVE FISHMAN  
Fort Lauderdale, Florida

### Cars and dreams of the staff

The "Cars and dreams of the staff" report by Editor-in-Chief Thos L. Bryant (*On the Road*, January 1999) always draws my attention. Thanks for sharing this information with the readers periodi-



WIM A. MOTTA

# Yokohama AVS Sport Because Stick Is Everything



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cally. The range is, indeed, broad, going all the way from Feature Editor Sam Mitani's carlessness and ambitious but impractical dream to Editor-At-Large Peter Egan's ever-changing collection of automotive delights and D-Jag wish.

An interesting and diverse staff with many interesting and diverse automotive interests. But not one New Beetle?

HARRY M. JOHNSON  
Eureka, California

### 2000 Mercedes-Benz S-Class

I very much liked Engineering Editor Dennis Simanaitis' piece in the January 1999 issue concerning the new S-Class. He mentioned that "the U.S. won't see any S-Class inline-6." I believe that Mercedes no longer makes any gasoline-powered inline 6-cylinder passenger-car engines; they're all V-6s now and these powerplants are used in several current Mercedes models that are sold in America. Mercedes did (or does) of course offer the current 140-series S-Class car with an inline-6 cylinder gasoline engine, and perhaps it will install the V-6 in the new platform for the markets outside of the U.S.

GEORGE E. MISSBACH JR.  
Atlanta, Georgia

*Reader Missbach has it right. Even the small-engine S320 (which we won't get in the U.S.) has swapped its inline-6 for the V-6 of M-B's latest engine family.*

### Remembering a gentleman racer

I thought to use my new e-mail capability to find fault with the January 1999 issue. Couldn't do it. *Road & Track* has followed me faithfully for many years; in the U.S., overseas and in combat (Korea, Vietnam, the Pentagon) and now retirement. I have enjoyed every issue. I was distressed to read of Olivier Gendebien's death. I met him once in France (1959, I think) when I

was unsuccessfully campaigning an Alfa. He was, as you say, a true gentleman of a school not to be found often today. Your Contributing Editors, Paul Frère and Phil Hill, are from the same mold. JIM CURRIE  
San Antonio, Texas

### Life behind the wheel

I enjoyed reading about Peter Egan's "ride along" (Side Glances, January 1999). It held special meaning for me, as my son is a police officer. I was invited to join him on a ride along earlier this year. I'm proud of myself. While traveling through the city streets to provide "backup," I didn't do any fatherly things, like tell him to slow down, watch out for other cars, etc. Too busy burying my fingers in the seat and armrest, I'm sure. I remember thinking later that it seems like just yesterday that I was teaching this youngster how to drive in an empty parking lot. The whole experience makes me proud of him and, as a parent, a little nervous for his safety. One thing's for sure, though: I can't wait for him to invite me along again!

STEPHEN BOTELHO  
Newark, California

Peter, I have read, enjoyed and admired your column for many years. I started reading *Road & Track* in the late Seventies when I was an owner of a '67 MGB-GT Special while in college in New York City. It was also about the time that I had my first cab-driving job in Manhattan. Now, 27 years later, I am a freelance photographer and I still drive a cab, albeit in Boise, Idaho. Let me tell you that if you want to live "behind the wheel," be a cab driver. Everything comes your way. I have learned the fine art of defensive driving, seen Hollywood stops daily, watched little old ladies doing 15 in a 35 zone, and all other manner of bad or discourteous driving.

DAVID R. GARZONE  
Boise, Idaho

### Inquiries

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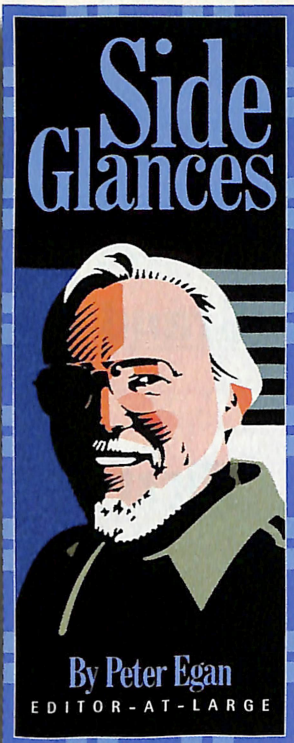
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## Random notes from the road

**F**INALLY GOT AROUND TO TOSSING MY 1998 wall calendar (Great Bluesmen & Women) into the dustbin of history, otherwise known as my filing cabinet, just the other day.

In flipping through the pages, I noticed a great many “trip arrows” drawn through entire weeks, and multiples of weeks. These are the markers I use to schedule trips, a solid line of Magic Marker with an arrowhead at one end and crude feathers at the tail, as only I can draw them. If an Indian tried to shoot one of these arrows, he would hit his own tepee.

Anyway, there are plenty of them, and no fewer than four of the arrows represent cross-country trips by car and motorcycle between here (Wisconsin) and California.

It looks almost like a work schedule for the Pony Express, but let me say right now I am not complaining. I love to drive—or ride—across the U.S. more than just about anything, and generally leap at the opportunity.

There have, however, been a few long, dull stretches of highway, with time to think and sometimes even write things down. While steering with one hand and not necessarily crossing the centerline, I have jotted down dozens of observations, five or six of which I can still read, despite my handwriting.

So here, after roughly 10,000 miles of American cross-country road travel last summer and autumn, are a few surviving impressions.

On men’s rooms and “rest” stops:

There are three ways to dry your hands after washing them: (1) with a cloth towel that cranks through in a long roll; (2) paper towels; or (3) a hot-air blower. My favorite type is the disposable paper towel, even if it may

not be the most environmentally sound.

The cloth towels have usually been cranked to the end of the roll, so you have to dry your hands on a wet section of blue cloth that has been used by the last 200 travelers, at whose character we can only guess, while paper towels give you a clean, portable sheet of absorbent paper that can also be used to rub the powdered sugar doughnut streaks off your shirt.

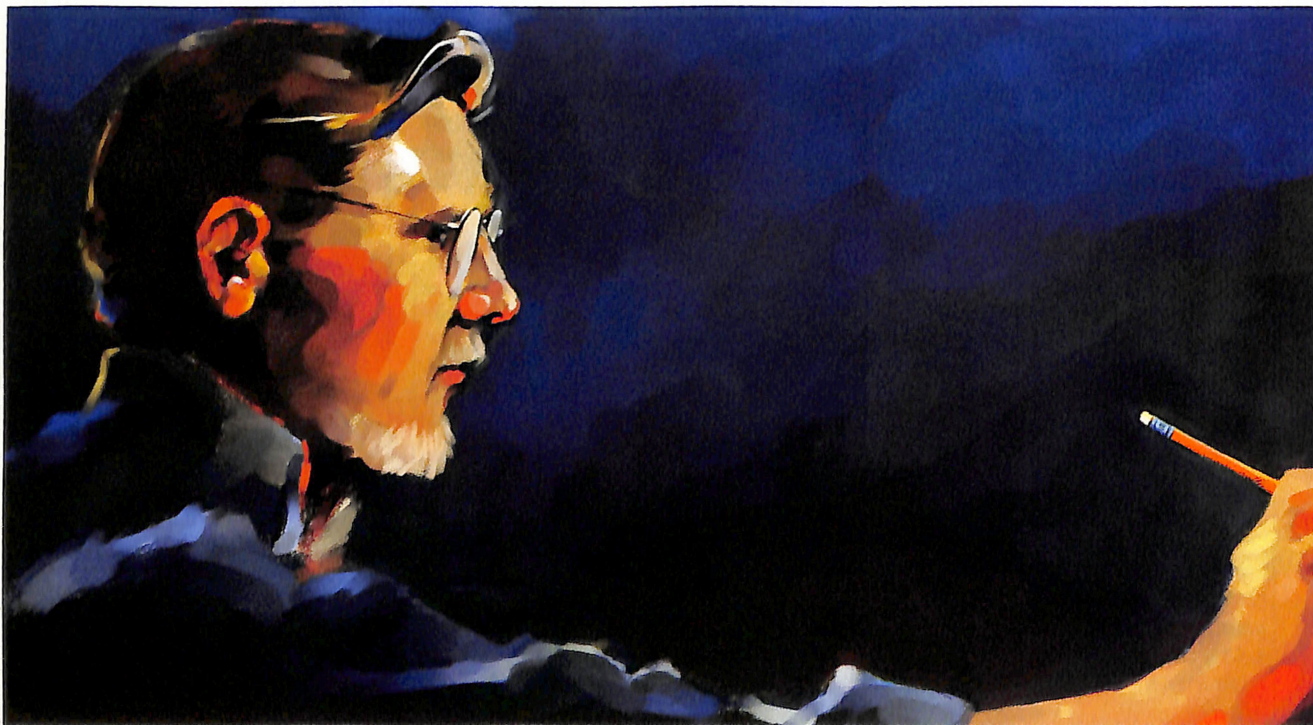
There’s something strangely unsatisfying about a hot-air blower. It leaves you feeling that some basic ritual of life has gone uncompleted, like a Latin mass without the final benediction. Also, there’s a small sign on every hot-air dryer that claims this is the most sanitary way to dry your hands, but I’m not so sure. If someone asked me to design a source of sanitary air, my first thought would not be to suck all the free molecules out of the average men’s room and blow them on my hands. I’ve never seen surgeons do this before an operation.

On truck drivers:

There is an easy tendency to be annoyed by trucks on the highway, because they sometimes pull out in the passing lane and then take five minutes to make a glacially slow pass of another semi before pulling back in. I think of this situation as a “truck race.”

The actual time lost to this tactic in a cross-country trip, however, is quite small, and I have learned to relax and live with it. In fact, I do almost anything I can to help truck drivers make lane changes or otherwise maneuver in traffic, simply because they have a hard job.

I once drove a 40-ft. flatbed truck across Milwaukee during rush hour and was amazed at how difficult it is to fit that



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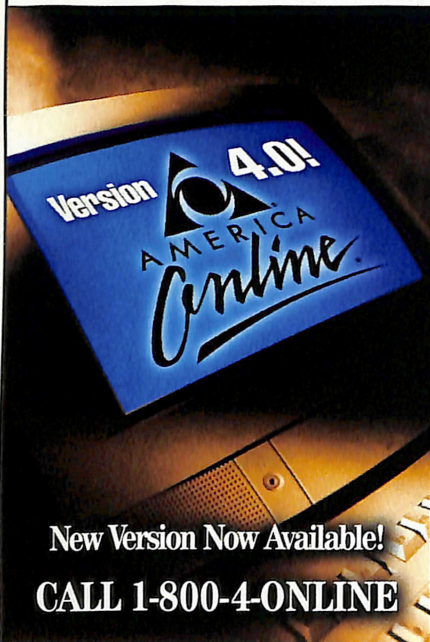
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thing into a traffic slot, and how inconsiderate car drivers could be, rushing in to cut you off at exit ramps, and so on. Ever since then I've wondered if every licensed driver shouldn't make at least one trip in a really long truck as a part of driver training, just to see what it's like.

But what is most striking to me about truck drivers is how good they are. There must be tremendous variations in training and experience, yet most can be counted on to do the right thing. They are generally the most predictable and polite drivers on the road, and a really stupid move by a truck driver is so rare as to be astonishing.

The skill level here is, I suppose, self-selecting. People without a certain level of mechanical aptitude tend to shy away from Peterbilt diesels and semitrailers. Some of us just aren't born to back a semi into a narrow alley on a busy street while others watch.

On television:

Almost the only time I ever spend an evening watching TV is when I'm on the road, checked into a motel, too wired on coffee to sleep, too fatigued to read and with no completely shot old British cars to restore in my motel room. Also, I usually don't bring a guitar because I have to fly home and don't trust the airlines with a musical instrument. Denied my usual leisure-time outlets, I click on the TV.

There are some excellent programs on Arts & Entertainment, PBS and The History Channel, Speedvision and a good selection of classic movies, so it's fun to kick back and watch. But most of what's on the major networks (and any number of minor ones) is so awful it simply takes your breath away and leaves you depressed.

If I had children in my household, I would unplug my television set, carry it quietly to the curb and set it firmly in a trash can, sideways. And then kick the can.

On the inexpressible joy of long-distance driving itself:

Somewhere on one of my trips—probably in west Texas—it occurred to me that one of the main reasons I

One of the main reasons I like cross-country driving is that there is almost nothing on earth that gives a human being more pleasure than appearing busy while doing essentially nothing.

like cross-country driving is that there is almost nothing on earth that gives a human being more pleasure than appearing busy while doing essentially nothing.

It's an instinct that takes many forms. One that I lean on heavily is cleaning tools and putting them away in my garage when I'm too tired to work on a car any more. Millions of people find this same solace on computer screens. They spend hundreds of hours sending office jokes or other pointless e-mail messages, their brains fairly humming with pleasure.

And why?

Because it's effortless, but makes you look busy. If you just sat there and stared at the wall—which would be equally productive—someone would have you committed.

Same with office meetings, the supreme example of sloth masquerading as action. We love them. Think of it: A whole morning shot, and with nothing more strenuous than voicing your opinion, which is the mental counterpart of falling off a log. (And I should know.)

Driving, of course, is one of those activities. I don't mean driving a race car, or muscling a big semi rig across the country. I'm talking about getting into a comfortable, modern passenger car and

pointing it at the other coast. It's almost as easy as surfing the Net, and you get to see a whole continent while being unavailable for work. Paradise.

On dining:

Human metabolism seems to follow no rules when you're on the road, so there's no way to predict which foods will seem most appealing during a long trip. But there's usually a theme.

When I was a kid, I once made it all the way to Florida and back with my folks while in the grip of fried shrimp mania. I ate nothing else for lunch or dinner, though I think my mother forced me to eat oatmeal for breakfast.

On one of my two recent motorcycle trips, the mood was entirely Mexican, but last month, during a solo drive in our long-term Ford SVT Contour from California to Wisconsin, the only thing that appealed to me was Kentucky Fried Chicken. Extra Crispy.

Now I'm afraid to turn in my expense report. Someone in our accounting office back in Greenwich, Connecticut, will probably walk around the office waving my report and saying, "Look at this! Here's a guy with a company expense account and he ate Kentucky Fried Chicken three nights in a row!"

But I make no apologies. Fast food has its place. I hate eating alone at a "real" restaurant with full service because there's nowhere to look and I usually end up being seated right across from some woman who's either so beautiful I pour coffee down my chin or so ugly she pours coffee down *her* chin.

Or else it's some huge guy with a tattoo and bad eyeball alignment and I can't tell if he's staring at me or looking out the window for cop cars.

Dining alone is strange.

On stopping for gas at the gates of Fort Sill, Oklahoma:

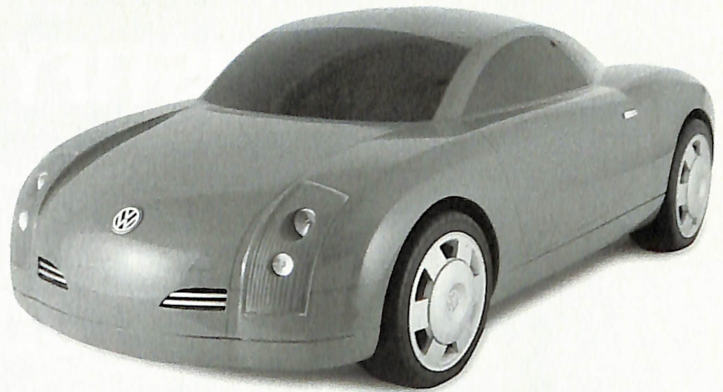
Fort Sill is a training camp for U.S. Army artillery units, and you can hear distant shells going off every 30 seconds or so, crumping into the ground with a deep, menacing rumble. Having "slept" beneath the barrels of two 105-mm howitzers in Vietnam for seven months, I have lost my taste for the sound of artillery.

As I filled my huge plastic coffee mug at the gas station, my neck got slightly shorter with each explosion that shook the building. If I lived here, I'd probably end up low-crawling home from work in a flak jacket.

On driving homeward through Missouri:

Green, hilly, peaceful. And free. ☺

# TRANSPORTATION DESIGN



With special thanks to Volkswagen. Modeled during internship at Volkswagen Design Center, Simi Valley.



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TROPHY

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## OLD SCHOOL LUXURIES



FIG. 1: CAVIAR

*Pro: Doesn't look like what it actually is (fish eggs).*

*Con: Not as pleasing to the nose as new-car smell.*



FIG. 2: Butler

*Pro: Will answer the door for the cable guy, no matter what the hour.*

*Con: Will drive your Altima while you're away and vehemently deny it upon your return.*

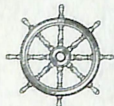


FIG. 3: Yacht

*Pro: Gives you a legitimate excuse to wear a captain's hat with a navy blazer.*

*Con: Mediocre turning radius.*



**"HOME, JAMES."** It's a phrase you don't typically associate with a midsize sedan. Then again, the Nissan Altima GLE isn't your typical midsize sedan.

For starters, it's a lot like a luxury car. It offers a cabin bathed in leather appointments and wood tones. The requisite fancy stereo. The power windows, door locks and mirrors. Even the power driver's seat that you can adjust 8 ways to Sunday.

More importantly, this luxury is more than skin deep. The fact of the matter is, the Altima rides on soft-mount suspension subframes that reduce vibrations and provide a smooth ride, just like an expensive European touring sedan.

The Altima has a quiet cabin silenced by sophisticated sound-dampening materials in the floor and roof pillars like you'd find in a traditional luxury sedan.

The Altima even provides you with a voluminous amount of space, giving you more rear seat leg room than any Mercedes C-class, thanks to its ingenious cabin architecture.

And perhaps best of all, everything is assembled to an exceptional level of fit and finish. After all, no other carmaker has Nissan's state-of-the-art Intelligent Body Assembly System (IBAS), that not only assembles the Altima with sophisticated robots, but double-checks their precision with intensely accurate 3-D lasers. All of which helps ensure a reassuring feel on the road for miles and years to come.

Yet, while the Altima may offer plenty of motivation to kick back in the back seat, there's even more motivation to get into the driver's seat.

In other words, "Hasta la vista, Jimbo!"

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IF IT WEREN'T FOR THE ALTIMA, YOU MIGHT NEVER HAVE SEEN THE WORDS "AFFORDABLE" AND "LUXURY" IN THE SAME SENTENCE, LET ALONE THE SAME AUTOMOBILE.

## THE NISSAN ALTIMA

### SPORTY ENOUGH TO JUSTIFY A DRIVEWAY SLALOM COURSE.

*Driving an Altima's a pretty good gig for a chauffeur. But why let him have all the fun? Instead, place your hands around its leather-wrapped wheel, find a twisty piece of asphalt and re-acquaint yourself with your old friend, the road.*

*See, the Altima is engineered with an impressive piece of technology called Super Toe Control™. And without getting super technical, this type of rear suspension gives the Altima serious traction in the kind of places you need it most—tight turns.*

*It's all part of the Altima's ingenious 4-wheel independent suspension that helps you steer clear of potholes and bumps. Or in situations where avoiding these things is impossible (i.e., every city street*

*in America), it at least helps to minimize and stabilize their impact.*

*Speaking of impact, you'll be quite impressed by the unexpected wallop of the Altima's dual-overhead-cam, 2.4-liter, 150-horsepower engine. It borrows some of its engineering from the racing circuit. Case in point: the Altima's microfinished crankshaft. Again, without taking out an engineering dictionary, microfinishing is a technique that boosts power and helps prolong engine life. So, too, does the Altima's steel timing chain, which, unlike in most cars, doesn't need changing at regular intervals.*



*Performance. Quality. Reliability. Are we speaking your language yet? OK, how about this: The Altima is priced from \$14,990 to \$21,338.*

### FEATURES.

Where would you be without Nissan engineering? After all, the Altima now offers "Second Generation" supplemental dual air bags, which have been designed to deploy with less force. Combined with 3-point seat belts, and a veritable battery of passive and active safety systems, the Altima affords you the ultimate luxury: peace of mind.

### MORE FEATURES.

What's a luxury car without a sophisticated stereo? In the Altima's case, quiet. So to fill that silence, we've endowed the Altima with a wondrous 120-watt, AM/FM/CD/cassette audio system. A standard luxury you'll find inside every Altima GLE.

### EVEN MORE FEATURES.

Who needs a chauffeur when you've got a keyless remote entry system? One push of a button locks the doors and arms the entire car. Another push of a button unlocks the doors, deactivates the Altima GLE security system and even turns the interior light on for you. Now, if only there were a button you could push to have your dry cleaning picked up.

### ONE LAST THING.

Any car can get you from point A to point B. For 40 years, we at Nissan have been making vehicles of exceptional quality, value and character, built on the idea that exhilaration is every bit as important as transportation.



Enjoy the ride.

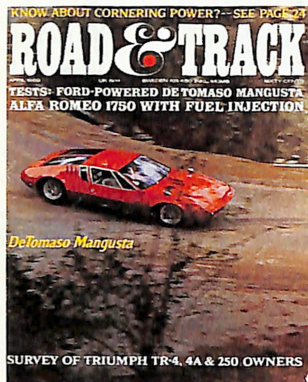
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shown, priced at \$21,338. Other equipment may vary. Retailer sets actual price. All MSRP's exclude taxes, title, license, \$520 destination charge, and locally required equipment.



By David W. Black

# Years Ago



## 1969

### 30 Years Ago

The issue flashed with enough facets to define a brilliant-cut gemstone. We devoted a cover, a road test and a personality profile to **ALESSANDRO DE TOMASO** and his beautiful new Mangusta. We also considered the handling characteristics of a Greyhound Bus; offered a character portrait of new **WORLD CHAMPION** Graham Hill; and even included a thorough technical analysis of cornering power.

■ The **MANGUSTA**—deep red and gorgeous on our cover—attracted more acquisitive attention during its tenure than any previous R&T test car. The dead-stock 302 Ford V-8 engine proved smooth and tractable, but we were disappointed in the Mangusta's imprecise ZF shift linkage, its tricky handling and inadequate brakes.



### GREYHOUND BUS

*For those who find commercial pleasure in our driving, here is one of the most reliable vehicles in transportation.*

■ The April road tests included a major driver and hauler; nothing less than an **MC-7 GREYHOUND BUS**. Tony Hogg was awed by its 9298-cc diesel's 770 lb.-ft. of torque at 1200 rpm, determining that "there isn't much that will stop those wheels from rotating." Tony also noted good road-holding, having actually

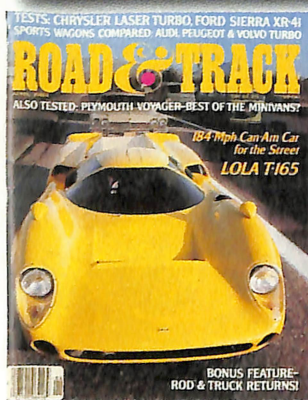
passed a Ferrari 250 GT Lusso on the outside of a curve once during a bus trip. He said he considered raising up a cheer of triumph, "but didn't want to awaken the other passengers."

■ In a major technical feature, Engineering Editor **RON WAKEFIELD** compared the cornering characteristics of nine cars, ranging from the modest Austin America to an all-out racer, a **GROUP 7 LOLA-FORD**, and then explained what it all meant and how it was done. His conclusion in that pre-downforce era: Tires are the single most important factor in achieving high cornering forces.

■ **GRAHAM HILL** had just become Driver's World Champion for the second time, and we gave Elizabeth Hayward a full six pages to explore this complex, gifted man's personality and dedication.

## April Milestones

- Land Rover introduces its first production vehicle at the Amsterdam Auto Show, 1948.
- Nigel Mansell wins by closest-ever margin of victory: 0.014 second, Spanish GP, 1986.



## 1984

### 15 Years Ago

We created an issue that was an envelope-stretcher in size (196 pages) and in its several weighty, unusual features. Major articles included a street-modified Lola **T-165 CAN-AM RACER**; along with a classic and museum-worthy Hispano-Suiza; an **APRIL-FOOLS'** comparison of colossal heavyweights; and Volume 3 of **ROD & TRUCK**, our self-twitling April oeuvre.

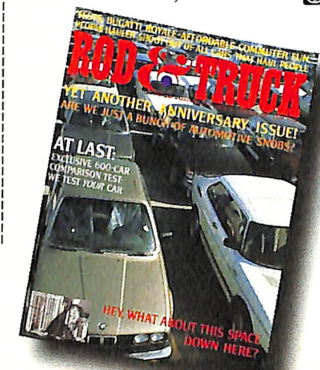
■ Our cover car, the **LOLA T-165**, had been constructed on a factory-built T-165 chassis and updated with T-222 suspension components, then converted to street compliance by Can-Am Constructors of Tempe, Arizona. The price was \$102,500,

as tested, and included a **560-BHP CHEVROLET V-8** capable of hurling it to an estimated 184 mph.

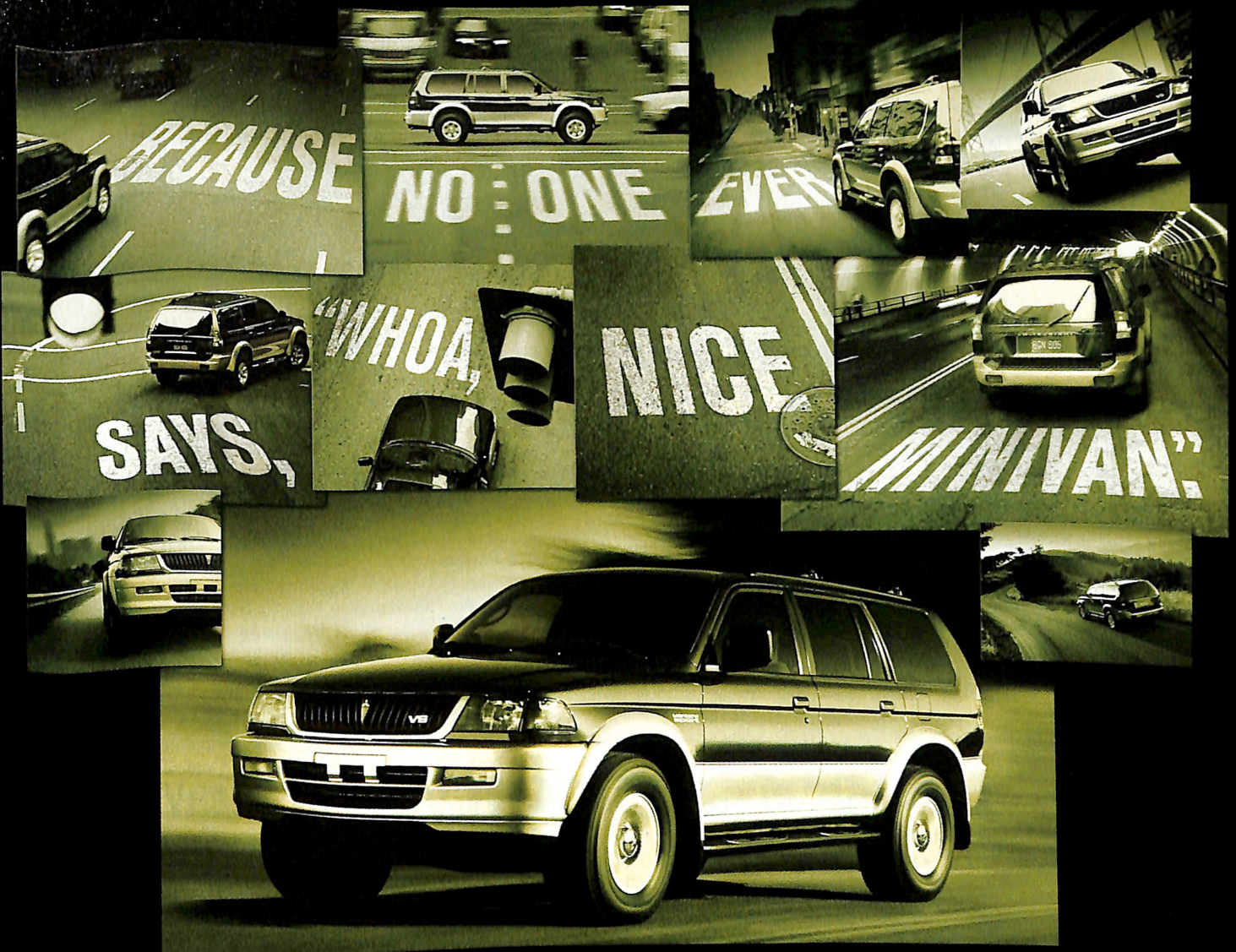
■ The Salon was honored to address one of history's great cars, a **1934 HISPANO-SUIZA J12** convertible roadster. We called it "a significant automotive treasure," and "a connoisseur's classic." The article was written and photographed by John Lamm, ending with a Carrosserie Comment by Strother MacMinn regarding **SAOUTCHIK MOTOR BODIES**, creator of the roadster's custom bodywork.

■ The third edition of our *Rod & Truck* send-up series featured a **600-CAR COMPARISON TEST** ("We test your car!"), speculation regarding the long-lost

"**HITLER FERRARI**," and—most important—a thundering-good road test, written by Innes Ireland, of a **KENWORTH W900 AERODYNE** freight hauler. Innes compared the great mover with our April 1966 subject, the Gresley A3 Pacific "**FLYING SCOTSMAN**" locomotive, in curb weights (17,270 lb. and 350,000 lb., respectively), and in acceleration times (0–60 mph in 88.8 seconds as against 6-plus minutes for the Scot).







the Mitsubishi Montero Sport, well equipped with 3.0L V6 at \$24,950. optional shift-on-the-fly 4WD a little extra.

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## FIRST DRIVE

# BMW 540i sport wagon

Teutonic hauler

BY ANDREW BORNHOP  
PHOTOS BY JEFF ALLEN

FEW WILL DISAGREE THAT BMW's 5 Series is an exceptional sports sedan, the standard by which others are judged. It's easy to see why. This well-appointed sedan, which fits neatly between the 3 and 7 Series BMWs in size, makes the driver a significant part of the equation, responding to inputs with uncommon grace and composure. In short, it's a luxurious rear-drive car whose agility belies its size.

And now BMW has added a wagon to the 5 Series lineup. Rather than calling it the "Touring" as it has done in the past, BMW has settled upon a more descriptive name: "sport wagon." Available as a 528i (fitted with a 193-bhp 2.8-liter inline-6) or as a 540i (fitted with a 282-bhp 4.4-liter V-8), these handsome new wagons are 1.2 in. longer than their sedan counterparts, but they ride on the same 111.4-in. wheelbase. Also unchanged is the suspension, still independent and still using quite a bit of aluminum for reduced weight. One difference, though, is the wagon's self-leveling rear suspension, which is an option on the 528i and standard on the 540i. Whenever a long-term increase in load is felt by the rear springs, pneumatic pressure is automatically applied to special shock absorbers that bring the vehicle back to its normal height.

By opening the hatch (or separately lifting the rear win-

dow), you gain access to the sport wagon's velour-lined cargo area, a reasonably spacious compartment that has a pull-back cover to conceal valuables...even when the rear seat has been folded flat. That seat—which splits 60/40 and has a ski sack—accommodates two adults and a small child in acceptable comfort. And on the well-equipped 540i we drove, the back of the rear seat is fitted with a pull-up retractable luggage net that attaches to the headliner. A good thing, as is the car's optional sliding rear load floor, which will save your lower back by making hard-to-reach cargo more accessible. When extended, this shelf, which can hold up to 165 lb., makes a fine picnic table.

If you think the 540i sport wagon shown here looks a little racier than a standard model, you're right; it's equipped with BMW's \$2800 Sport Package, whose slightly firmer springs help lower the ride by about an inch. That, combined with some aggressive 235/45ZR-17 Dunlops front


and rear, gives the car a very serious, low-slung demeanor, one that's enhanced by matte-black exterior trim (in place of the regular wagon's chrome).

For 1999, the 540i's 4-cam 4.4-liter V-8 now has VANOS continuously variable valve timing on its intake camshafts. Although peak horsepower of 282 bhp hasn't changed, it's now reached at 5400 rpm instead of 5700. And maximum torque has increased from last year's 310 lb.-ft. at 3900 to 324 at 3600, both values moving in the right direction.

According to BMW, this 4055-lb. wagon will hit 60 mph in 6.3 seconds, which by our clocks would make it the fastest-accelerating wagon in the U.S., a few clicks ahead of the turbocharged Volvo V70. Though a 5-speed manual transmission is available on the 528i sport wagon (whose inline-6 now has an aluminum block and variable valve timing on both the intake and exhaust camshafts), the 540i comes only with a 5-speed automatic. And it's an entertain-

ing gearbox, fitted with BMW's Steptronic manual shift function. In fully automatic mode, shifts are silky-smooth, quickly accomplished and aided by momentary reductions in engine torque.

With the lever in the manual gate the box responds obediently, upshifts occurring with forward nudges, downshifts with rearward. As you'd expect, traction control is standard on all 5 Series wagons, and the 540i even has Dynamic Stability Control standard.

So, what does a BMW 5 Series sport wagon cost? The 528i sport wagon starts at \$41,270, and the substantially better-equipped 540i lists for \$54,050. For the money, you get an exceptionally well engineered automobile that turns, brakes, accelerates and rides just like a standard 5 Series sedan. And a sport wagon, the standard by which all others shall be judged. 



■ When ordered with the Sport Package, the 540i sport wagon has this 3-spoke steering wheel, which flies the tricolor stitching and logo of BMW M.





BEAUTY IS MORE THAN SKIN DEEP. HENCE, THE 250HP ENGINE.



## YES, I WANT TO **START SOMETHING**

To receive the 1999 Oldsmobile Aurora information kit (pictured below), complete the questions below. Drop completed card into any mailbox and we'll send you this information at no cost. Or visit [www.auroracar.com](http://www.auroracar.com) to download a catalog.

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Address \_\_\_\_\_

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E-Mail Address \_\_\_\_\_ Daytime Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Evening Phone \_\_\_\_\_

1. What vehicles do you currently own? Please indicate whether you own or lease each vehicle.

Make \_\_\_\_\_ Model \_\_\_\_\_ Year \_\_\_\_\_  OWN  LEASE

Make \_\_\_\_\_ Model \_\_\_\_\_ Year \_\_\_\_\_  OWN  LEASE

2. When do you expect to purchase or lease a new vehicle? (Please check one.)

0-3 months  4-6 months  
 7-12 months  1 year or more

3. For your next new vehicle, which of the following are you considering? (Check all that apply.)

Compact  Luxury (e.g., Aurora)  
 Coupe (e.g., Alero 2dr)  Minivan (e.g., Silhouette)  
 Midsize (e.g., Alero 4dr, Intrigue)  Pickup  
 Large (e.g., Eighty Eight)  Sport Utility (e.g., Bravada)  
 Other (Please specify.) \_\_\_\_\_

4. Which makes and models are you considering?

Make \_\_\_\_\_ Model \_\_\_\_\_  PURCHASE  LEASE

Make \_\_\_\_\_ Model \_\_\_\_\_  PURCHASE  LEASE

5. Are you planning on taking a test drive in the next 30 days?

Yes  No  Have taken a test drive.

6. For which Oldsmobiles would you like to receive information? (Check all that apply.)

Alero™ (Coupe and Midsize)  Aurora (Luxury)  
 Bravada\* (Sport Utility)  Cutlass™ (Midsize)  
 Eighty Eight\* (Large)  Intrigue\* (Midsize)  
 LSS™ (Large)  Silhouette\* (Minivan)

7. Which attributes are important to you when considering a new vehicle? (Please rank 1-6 priority order.)

Reliability  Styling  Comfort/Convenience  
 Performance  Price  Safety  
 Other (Please specify.) \_\_\_\_\_



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## FIRST DRIVE

# Saab 9-5 Wagon

Practical.  
And a pleasure  
to drive

BY ANDREW BORNHOP

WAGONS, IN CASE YOU hadn't noticed, are back. And by this, I don't mean anything remotely similar to those ungainly behemoths of yesteryear, such as the Oldsmobile Vista Cruiser and Ford Country Squire. No, a new breed of wagon has taken center stage, one that sacrifices very little sport in the name of practicality. You know the cars I mean: the Audi A4 and A6 Avants, the Volvo V70, the BMW 5 Series Touring, the Volkswagen Passat Wagon and Subaru Legacy GT Wagon...in each it's downright easy to forget you're driving a wagon. And now you can add another Swede to that list: the Saab 9-5 Wagon, the first Saab station wagon since the quirky 95 was discontinued in 1978.

Called the 9-5 Kombi in Europe, the 9-5 Wagon comes to the U.S. in April, with prices ranging from \$31,850 to \$36,900. The base car is powered by Saab's turbocharged twin-cam 4-cylinder, the familiar 2.3-liter engine that pumps out a respectable 170 bhp at 5500 rpm and a stout 207 lb.-ft. of torque at an impressively low 1800 rpm. While I laud Saab for offering a 5-speed manual transmission as standard equipment, I personally prefer the optional 4-speed automatic transaxle; its shifts are particularly suited to the turbocharged engine's power delivery and broad torque band.

The top 9-5 Wagon, the V-6, is powered by Saab's unique asymmetrically turbocharged V-6, whose forward bank of cylinders drives a blower that benefits the whole engine to the tune of 200 bhp at 5000 rpm and 229 lb.-ft. of torque at only 2500. This engine, sourced from GM of Europe but heavily massaged by Saab in Trollhättan, mates exclusively to a 4-speed automatic transaxle that has a Sport mode for quicker shifts and a Winter mode for reduced off-the-line wheelspin. Traction control is standard on the V-6; for now, though, it's not available with the 4-cylinder.

From the B-pillar rearward, the 9-5 wagon's body is new,

creating a look that I prefer over the sedan. The strong wedge shape of the sedan is still visible, but the wagon's roofline and rear hatch provide a more pleasant, more purposeful look, to my eyes. And behind the rear seat you'll find generous cargo space, well finished and incorporating a pair of floor-mounted aluminum rails (similar to those used in the aircraft industry) with pop-in anchors that can keep a 130-lb. load secure in a 35-mph impact. These same safety considerations also led Saab to eschew a rear-facing third-row seat for kids, which was shelved late in the car's development. In the cargo area, a Kevlar net extends from the top of the rear seatback to anchor points in the headliner, helping keep unsecured items from coming forward in an accident. Cleverly, this net also works when the rear seat is folded flat because Saab has integrated additional anchor points in the headliner just aft of the front seats. Also worthy of note is the 9-5 Wagon's rear load floor, a dealer-installed accessory that can slide rearward to help gain access to your cargo. Fully extended, this floor can support 440 lb.

So, how does this Saab wagon drive? As you'd expect, much like the 9-5 sedan. Quiet. Comfortable. And reason-

ably quick with either engine, though Saab claims the V-6, at 8.7 seconds, is nearly 2 sec. quicker to 60 than the 2.3 automatic. The independent suspension is softer than you might expect, especially if you're familiar with the last Saab 9000. Nevertheless, the 9-5 exhibits enough grip to be entertaining on a twisty mountain road, its 215/55VR-16 tires hanging on pretty well until understeer rears its head in aggressive driving. And all along, the steering returns good feel with minimal kick-back considering the abundant torque of both engines.

As you'd expect of a car costing more than \$30,000, the 9-5 Wagon is well equipped. Four-wheel disc brakes with ABS are standard, along with a tilt/telescope steering wheel, a sunroof, an anti-theft alarm, a Harman Kardon stereo (with CD) and seat-mounted side-impact airbags. These front seats incorporate Saab's active headrests, designed to prevent whiplash in a rear-end collision. On 4-cylinder models the seats are covered in velour, and on the V-6, leather is standard. Leather is optional on 4-cylinder models.

In 1999, Saab expects to sell only 3500 9-5 Wagons in the U.S. Given the car's utility, panache, safety and style, don't be surprised if demand forces that number higher. ☐

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*The car, however, is well within reach.*

\*Based on latest available 1999 manufacturers' data comparing duration of powertrain, bumper-to-bumper and roadside assistance. See dealer for LIMITED WARRANTY details.  
\*\*1999 Sonata base MSRP (GLS MSRP \$16,999 shown) excludes freight, taxes, title, license and options. Dealer price may vary. Options may vary based on trim level.

## FIRST DRIVE

# Pontiac Firebird Formula WS6

You can go home again

BY JOE RUSZ  
PHOTOS BY BRIAN BLADES

FORGET RETRO CARS, THOSE new-age sedans, coupes and sports cars that attempt to cash in on the world's craving for nostalgia by mimicking styling that harkens back to a time when life was simple and cars were fun. Sure, it's great to see a New Beetle, a throwback T-Bird or a neo-Nomad, and hats off to Volkswagen, Ford and Chevrolet, respectively, for having the guts to build them. But who needs retro when you're building a car that has not changed much since its inception? We're speaking of the Pontiac Firebird, a stylish sports coupe that's the automotive equivalent of Dorian Gray (of portrait fame). Like Dorian, the Firebird is perpetually young—32, to be exact. Kissing cousin to Chevrolet's Camaro, GM's other F-body, the Firebird retains most of the same elements that made it an instant hit in 1967. It's relatively small, mechanically simple and, best of all, it's powered by what is arguably the best pushrod V-8 in the world: Chevrolet's 5.7-liter LS1, derived from the Corvette's powerplant.

Although the Firebird's styling has evolved over the years and the car has grown in size, the family resemblance is unmistakable. Those sleek coupe lines, a bit fuller perhaps than in the Seventies or even the Eighties, are every bit as athletic-looking. Let's call them muscular, not fat, thank you. And, thanks to contemporary plastic molding techniques, the car's body parts, in particular

the front and rear fascias, blend nicely with the rest of the car, in sharp contrast to Firebirds of yore whose front and rear spoilers looked tacked on. Although all five models (Firebird Coupe and Convertible, Formula Coupe, Trans Am Coupe and Convertible) share the same basic bodywork, the upmarket Formulas and Trans Ams have their own unique styling elements (different front spoilers, for example) and trim options that label them conservative (Formula) and wild (Trans Am).


For our brief refresher course we chose the Firebird Formula Coupe (with R7Q equipment delete package) rather than the Trans Am, not just because of the Formula Coupe's understated styling, but because of its slightly lower weight and absence of frills (power windows, super-duper stereo system, leather-wrapped steering wheel, etc). Of course there's no disguising the twin-bubble hood of Pontiac's Ram Air package that's common to both models. Ram Air, as the name suggests,

uses dual ducts to force air into the engine's induction system, thus boosting the output of GM's corporate V-8 to 320 bhp. Actually, Ram Air is just part of Pontiac's \$3150 WS6 performance and handling package that also includes 17 x 9-in. alloy wheels, P245/40ZR-17 tires, low-restriction dual exhaust system, power-steering cooler and sport suspension.

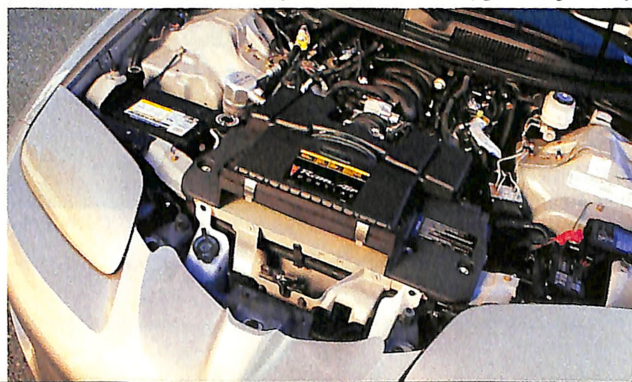
For road use the WS6 does very nicely. But enthusiasts never know when to say "when," hence the 1LE package, a \$1175 option that includes a thicker front anti-roll bar (1.3 in. versus 1.2), stiffer front and rear springs, harder control-arm bushings, and Koni adjustable shock absorbers. Engineered with the autocrosser in mind (yeah, right), this component grouping imbues the Formula (Trans Am too) with impressive handling—flat, with a modicum of understeer that can be controlled by judicious applications of power.

Speaking of power, your LS1-

equipped Firebird blasts off the mark like a jack rabbit on amphetamines (our testing of a convertible version resulted in a 0–60-mph time of 5.6 seconds and 14.0 sec. to reach the quarter mile). The 6-speed manual transmission's ratios are closely spaced from 1st through 4th, and though the spread widens in 5th and 6th, with 320 bhp and 335 lb.-ft. of torque, gearing doesn't matter all that much unless you really are racing your Firebird (canyon running in L.A.'s Santa Monica mountains doesn't count). Speaking of racing, Pontiac points out that the Firebird won last year's Motorola Cup, a professional showroom-stock racing series sanctioned by SportsCar (IMSA, to us old-timers), beating Porsches, Ford Mustangs, Toyota Supras and the like.

Fast? Yes. Fun? You bet! And well worth the money. Our Formula Coupe stickered out at \$26,800, not including rebates, allowances, incentives, etc., that are supposed to encourage all you thirtysomethings to buy those F-bodies. Please do: Although GM insists that it'll continue building Firebirds and Camaros through 2002, word on the street is that the General will pull the plug sooner if sales begin to lag. And wouldn't that be a loss to all those who prefer real to retro? 

■ All-too-rare functional hood scoops force-feed the LS1 V-8, generating 320 bhp.





## FIRST DRIVE

# BMW 740i Sport

Enhanced  
handling, striking  
looks, silken power

BY DOUGLAS KOTT

THIS LATEST BMW 7 SERIES is like a dashing foreign dignitary, perfectly coifed, impeccably dressed and well spoken, who suddenly drops to the floor at the Summit of World Peace to crank off a dozen one-armed push-ups. Yes, BMW's flagship is now available with a sport package, developed under the aegis of BMW's M division, that imparts extra visual wallop and additional suspension muscle to one of the world's classiest, most refined sedans. Available only on the short-wheelbase 740i (at 115.4 in., compared with the "iL" versions with 120.9-in. spans), the package adds \$2600 to the 740i's base price of \$62,970.

How about those eye-grabbing wheels and tires? These

massive parallel-spoke polished alloys (18 x 8 in. front, 18 x 9½ in. rear) wear equally serious performance rubber (235/50ZR-18s and 255/45ZR-18s, respectively) that fill out the wheel wells wickedly. Combined with a front suspension that's been lowered by 0.8 in. and blacked-out exterior trim, the big Bimmer now exudes a palpable air of menace, set off by the unflinching stare of beady headlights under panels of glass. It won't come or go unnoticed.

Suspension workings, too, have been massaged, the front MacPherson struts fitted with 10-percent-firmer springs, while the rear 4-link setup receives 25-percent-stiffer coils. Shocks are firmer all around, and the front anti-roll bar diameter grows from 20.5 mm to 22.0. There's a ride quality penalty, of course—Botts dots come through with a sharper *thwack*—but it's a perfectly acceptable compromise, as the changes enhance the locked-down, all-of-a-piece character of this chassis, and the sense of driving a smaller car than the 740i's 196.2-in. overall length would suggest. Effortless turn-in belies the mass of the 4.4-liter 4-cam V-8 up front, and grip is considerable. Of course, it won't involve you to the degree of driving a 328i, but it's remarkably responsive (dare I say nimble?) for a 4255-lb. automobile.


And speaking of response, the 740i's sublime 282-bhp 4.4-liter 4-cam V-8 now receives

BMW's VANOS steplessly variable valve timing on the intake camshafts to match the exhausts', resulting in 324 lb.-ft. of peak torque at 3700 rpm—a 14-lb.-ft. improvement, and 200 revs lower. Coupled with the sport package's shorter final drive (3.15:1 versus the standard 2.81:1) and higher-stall-speed torque converter, the BMW should blast to 60 mph in a factory-claimed 6.8 seconds, accompanied by a throaty murmur and just-so relaxations of engine torque for smooth, closely spaced shifts from the ZF 5-speed automatic.

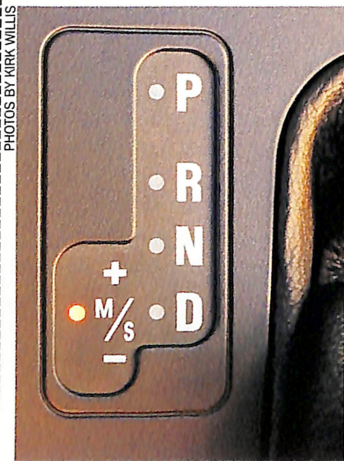
Want to feel a little more involved in the driving experience? Then tug the shift lever from D toward your right knee to engage the Steptronic sequential shift mode, where a nudge forward upshifts, a nudge back downshifts, with the selected gear indicated by a small, slightly fuzzy numeral on the instrument panel. Lag times

for shift actuation are quite short, and the lever works with a high-quality, solid action.

There are distinctive touches inside, most notably the 18-way (!) sports seats with 4-way lumbar and electric adjustment for even the forward-most thigh cushion. Most important, their sculpting manages to provide reasonable support for cornering without impeding access to the interior too much. Vavona redwood trim replaces burl walnut on the dash, center console and door panels, brightening up what was already a warm-feeling interior. The changes here whisper rather than shout, perfectly in keeping with the whole aggressive-yet-classy theme.

So now 7 Series owners can have their cake and eat it too: Head-of-State luxury coupled with crisp handling that's a cut above BMW's already high standard, topped off with an extra dose of attitude. 

■ The 740i's generous 12.8-in. front rotors almost look small inside the Sport's 18-in. alloys. Left, you can do the shifting.



PHOTOS BY KIRK WILLIS



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## FIRST DRIVE

# Toyota Altezza

This sports sedan is bound for the U.S. next year as a Lexus

BY JACK YAMAGUCHI  
PHOTOS BY JEFF ALLEN

I LAUD TOYOTA FOR STAGING a major counteroffensive against the myriad sport utes, minivans and crossover vehicles that now swarm all over Japan. Toyota, determined to revitalize the proper passenger-car segment, has launched a new weapon: It's named the Altezza, and called the Lexus IS 200 in Europe.

The Altezza is essentially a compact GS 300/400 sedan, with 5 in. lopped off the wheelbase, 16 off overall length, 3.2 off width and about an inch off its height. About the size of a BMW 3 Series sedan, the Altezza has styling that's not as flamboyant as the GS, but its overall shape is taut and crisp. Its appearance is also quite sporty, with some youthful hints appearing in the oversize headlights and bright, clear-lens-surrounded taillights, though the latter may not be everybody's cup of tea.

The Altezza sedan has re-

spectable aerodynamic characteristics, in spite of its wide, low-profile tires. With the aid of elaborate underbody shielding and fairings just ahead of the front and rear wheels, Toyota was able to attain a drag coefficient of only 0.30.

The hottest Altezza is the RS 200, powered by a fuel-injected dohc 16-valve inline-4 jointly developed by Toyota and Yamaha, the latter commissioned to build the engine. The 2.0-liter, when mated to a new 6-speed manual gearbox, is tuned to develop 210 bhp at 7600 rpm with hotter cams, oversize titanium valves and continuously variable valve timing working both the intake and exhaust camshafts. When mated to a 5-speed automatic, the engine puts out 10 bhp less, and employs steel, instead of titanium, valves.

Altezza's AS 200 (which, as I said, is the basis for the European-market Lexus IS 200) is powered by a 2.0-liter version of the dohc 24-valve inline-6, with variable valve timing on the intake camshaft only. This engine has 160 bhp at 6200 rpm, the philosophy being that a gentleman's sports sedan such as a Lexus should not have fewer than six cylinders.

The Europeans are, however,

compensated with one feature the Japanese are not given in that the 6-cylinder engine can be coupled to the Aisin 6-speed manual gearbox, as well as a 4-speed automatic. Another curious reversal in marketing practice is that the 6-cylinder model is the least expensive Altezza in Japan.

The engine sits well back in the engine bay; in the case of the 4-cylinder unit, its center is 3 in. aft of the wheel axis, attaining a near-ideal 51/49 weight distribution. The titanium-valve inline-4 is a natural-born revver, happily and quickly reaching its 6800-rpm redline with a delightfully crisp exhaust note. And while you won't find Miata-short throws in the Altezza, the Aisin 6-speed gearbox does have appealingly close upper ratios. On a twisty uphill section, I wished 2nd gear would pull higher, or that 3rd would come on strong at slightly lower velocities. But in my previous outing in the car, on the racetrack and European-type country road sections of Toyota's Shibetsu Proving Ground, the gearbox felt perfectly suited. A car is indeed a product of its birthplace.

The smart 5-speed automatic is shared with the GS, with its Normal, Power and Snow shift

modes. The transmission may be left in D, or it can be shifted via the chrome-ball lever in the staggered gate or by toggle switches on the steering wheel.

When you attach the GS 300's double-wishbone suspension to an extremely rigid and compact body, via hefty front and rear subframes, you get a formidable chassis. One that's even more so when you install oversize brakes from the same car and mount 215/45ZR-17 tires. And the people behind the Altezza's development are equally formidable.

Chief engineer Nobuaki Katayama has spearheaded Toyota's Le Mans efforts. Hiroshi Naruse, chief tuner, is Toyota's Mr. Top Gun. As such, the Altezza handles in neutral fashion, with no abrupt breakaway of the tail. Toyota's traction control is cautious, reducing torque output so drastically that it would take seemingly forever to recover from your display of bravado. Fortunately, Katayama-san was kind enough to install a cut-off switch.

There are some theatrics inside the Altezza that you may love or despise, such as the bright "chronograph" instrument cluster and aluminum-faced pedals. But all essential equipment is handsome and functional.

Will the Lexus IS 200 reach America? It will, in mid-2000. But not with the fire-breathing Yamaha engine. Or the 2.0-liter inline-6. Rather, it will almost certainly have a 2.5-liter inline-6 and a 5-speed manual gearbox to help it effectively compete with the BMW 328i.

■ One of the Altezza's interior highlights is the instrument cluster that's patterned to resemble a Swiss chronograph.



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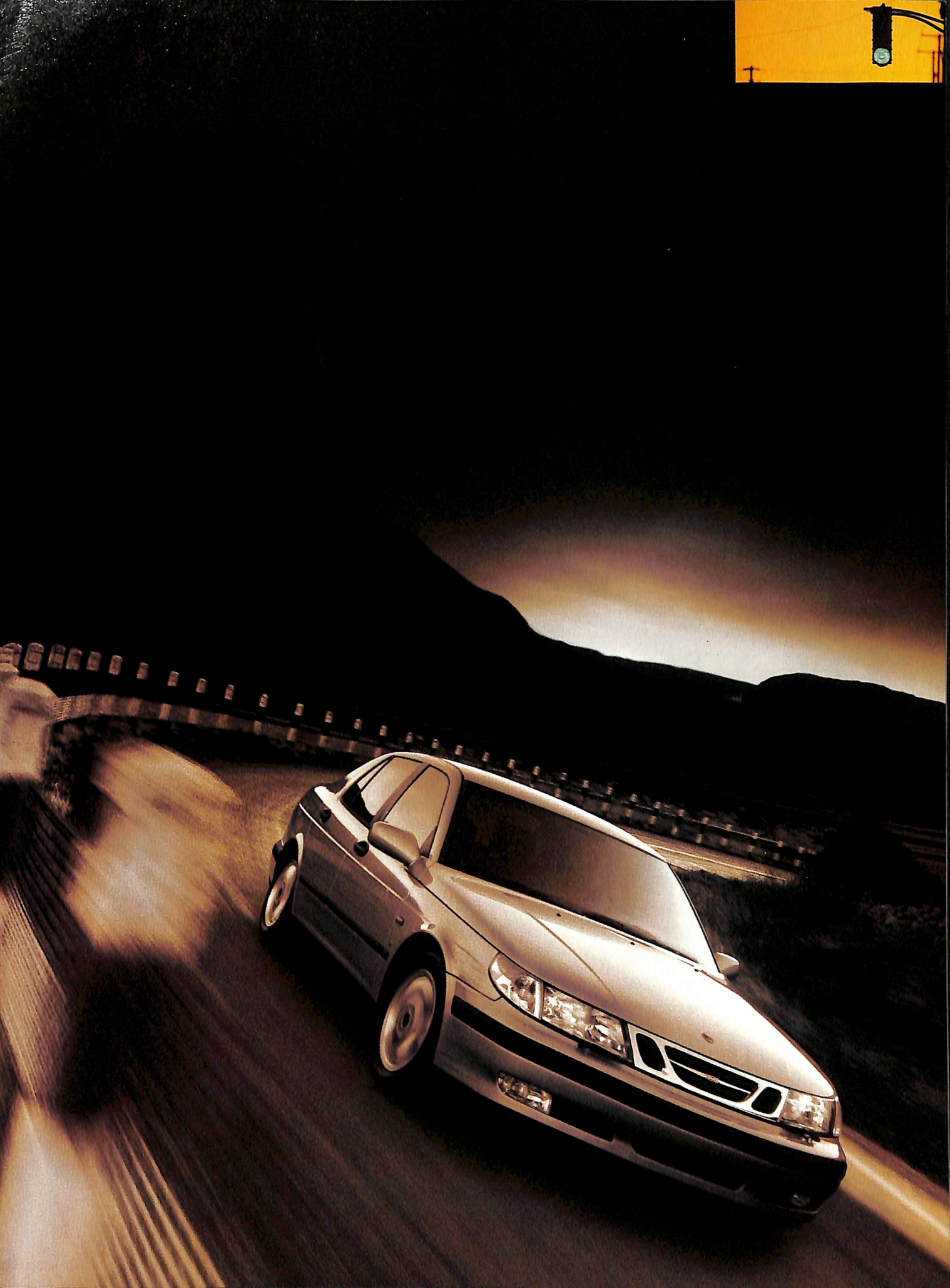
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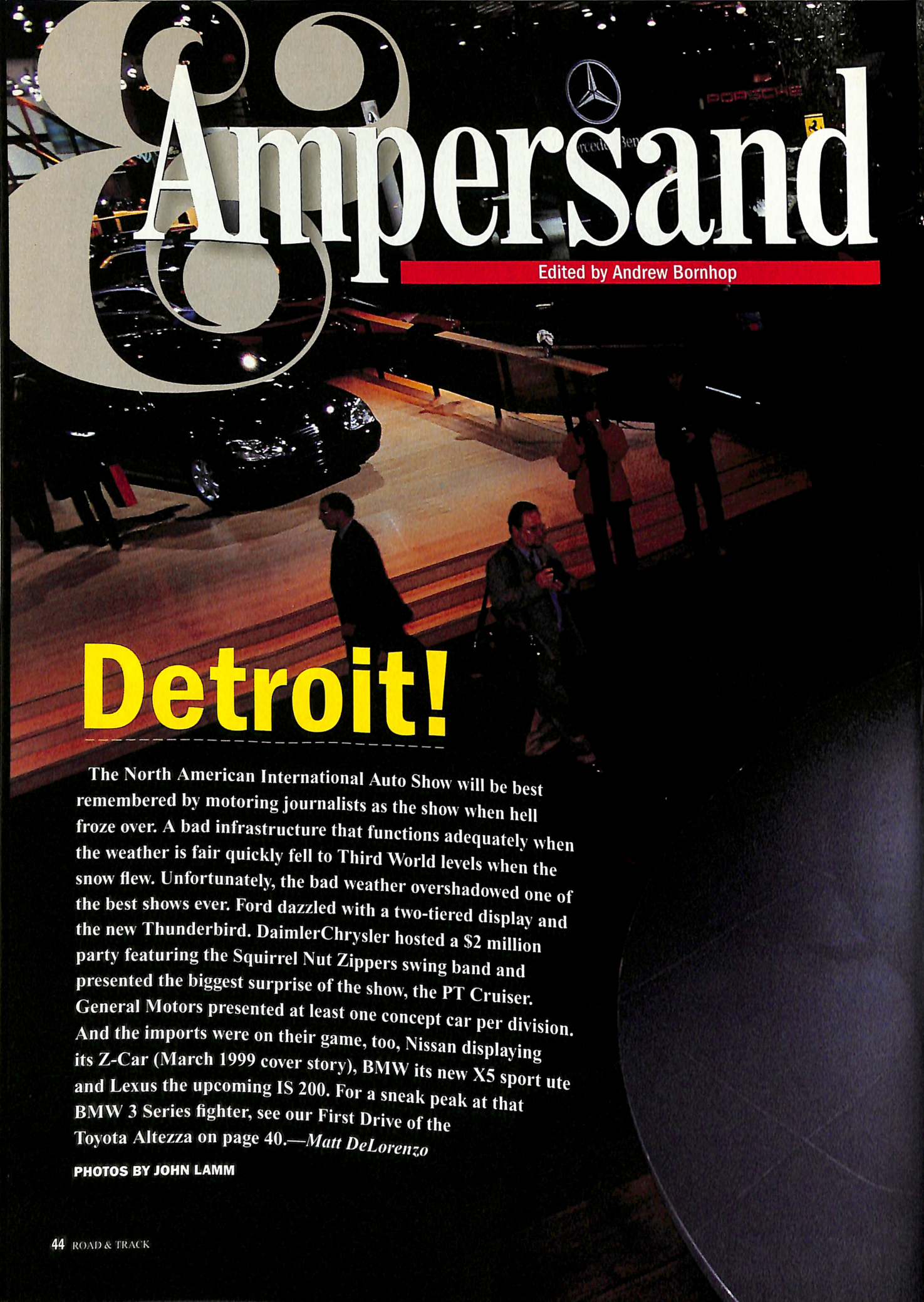
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at just 2,500 rpm. That's more low-end torque than the Audi A6 and the Lexus ES 300. Which means faster acceleration, when you need it the most. Even the standard Saab 2.3 liter 4-cylinder turbo outperforms bigger

engines. It delivers more low-end torque than the Mercedes C280, not to mention the BMW 528i. All it takes is a drive in a Saab 9-5 to see for yourself. In the rearview mirror.

**SAAB**





# Ampersand

Edited by Andrew Bornhop

## Detroit!

The North American International Auto Show will be best remembered by motoring journalists as the show when hell froze over. A bad infrastructure that functions adequately when the weather is fair quickly fell to Third World levels when the snow flew. Unfortunately, the bad weather overshadowed one of the best shows ever. Ford dazzled with a two-tiered display and the new Thunderbird. DaimlerChrysler hosted a \$2 million party featuring the Squirrel Nut Zippers swing band and presented the biggest surprise of the show, the PT Cruiser. General Motors presented at least one concept car per division. And the imports were on their game, too, Nissan displaying its Z-Car (March 1999 cover story), BMW its new X5 sport ute and Lexus the upcoming IS 200. For a sneak peak at that BMW 3 Series fighter, see our First Drive of the Toyota Altezza on page 40.—*Matt DeLorenzo*

PHOTOS BY JOHN LAMM

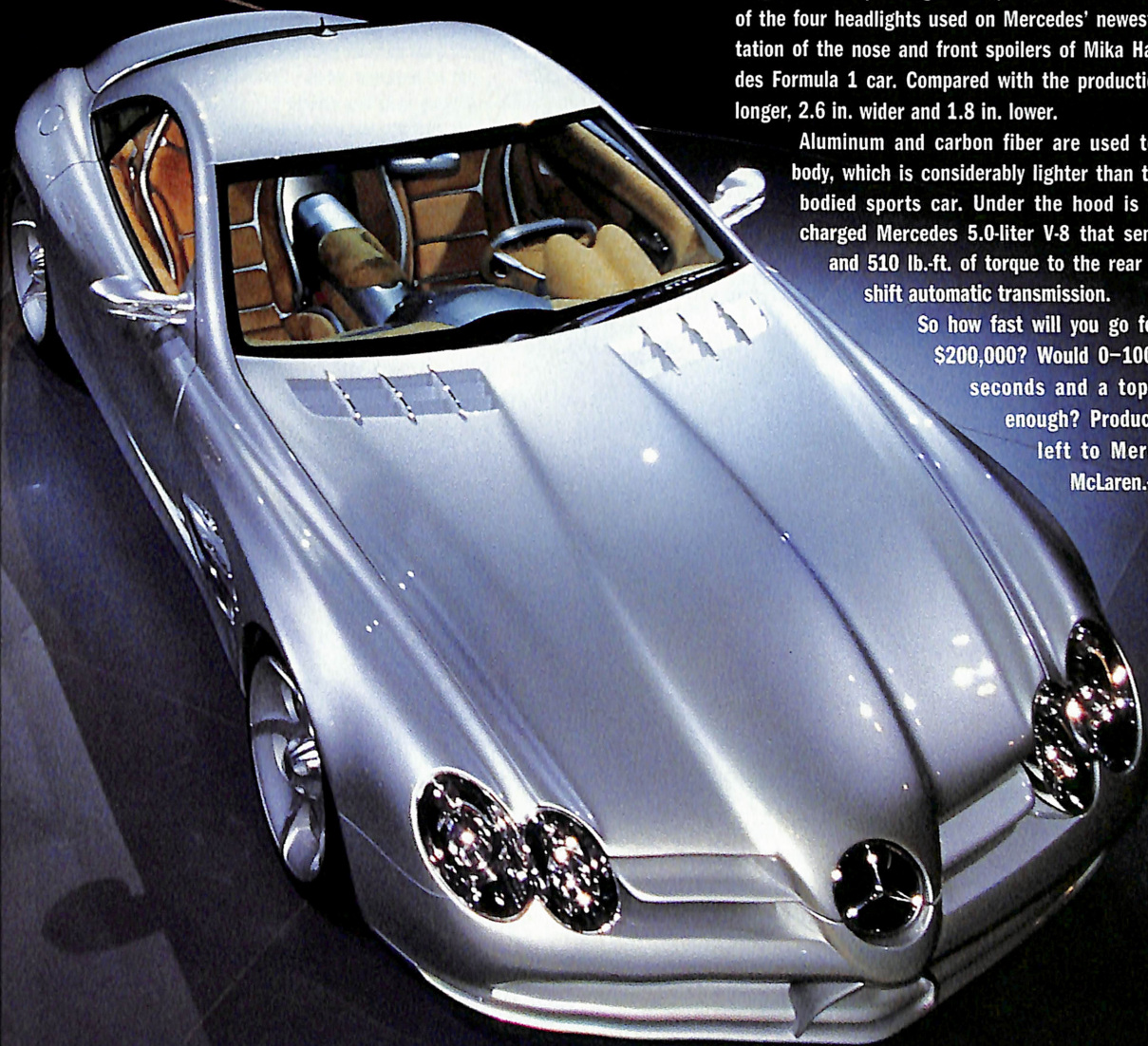


## Mercedes-Benz Vision SLR

■ The SLR is not a replacement for the SL; rather, this high-performance 2-seater slots in above that car. If it's produced, the body detailing, like the chrome on the vents behind the wheels, will probably be toned down, but the basic shape will be retained for production. Mercedes draws the SLR name from its past, particularly the two 1955 gullwing coupe versions of the fabled 300SLR sports car. Like those two, the new SLR has a long hood, a 2-passenger cockpit and a short tail. The front end is a mix of the four headlights used on Mercedes' newest models and an interpretation of the nose and front spoilers of Mika Hakkinen's McLaren-Mercedes Formula 1 car. Compared with the production SL, the SLR is 2.6 in. longer, 2.6 in. wider and 1.8 in. lower.

Aluminum and carbon fiber are used to make the chassis and body, which is considerably lighter than that of a traditional steel-bodied sports car. Under the hood is a new-generation supercharged Mercedes 5.0-liter V-8 that sends a whopping 557 bhp and 510 lb.-ft. of torque to the rear wheels via a 5-speed tip-shift automatic transmission.

So how fast will you go for the projected price of \$200,000? Would 0-100 km/h (62 mph) in 4.2 seconds and a top speed of 199 mph be enough? Production of the SLR may be left to Mercedes' racing partner, McLaren.—*John Lamm*



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