

WHEELS

Briefly

U.S. cars fare poorly

Compiled from staff and wire reports

Americans who bought 1987 cars complained less about Japanese autos than U.S. models, according to preliminary results of a survey by J.D. Power & Associates.

Of 139 models surveyed by the Westlake Village, Calif., automotive research firm, the Toyota Cressida had the fewest problems, while Mercedes-Benz was named the carmaker with the least problems, followed by the Acura division of Honda, Nissan, Toyota and Honda, the study said.

The performance of other models were not immediately released because the complete survey results have not been published yet, said Bruce Johnson, director of the study.

Respondents said their most common car headaches involved noise or appearance, not mechanical defects. They complained about wind noise around the side door or window more often than any other problem, Johnson said.

The next most common complaints were chipped or scratched paint, rattles from the instrument panel or glove compartment, other interior troubles, and engine idling that is too rough or too fast.

Owners of 1987 Japanese cars reported an average of 129 problems per 100 cars, according to the survey, while the average for American cars was 176.

Of American manufacturers, Ford Motor Co. did best, with owners reporting 162 problems per 100 cars, compared with 179 problems for General Motors Corp. and 180 for Chrysler Corp. cars.

Car wash by mail

Two of the nation's top mail-order catalog companies have taken on a car-washing product produced by a Portland chemical company.

Al Crosby, director of marketing for Jadco Chemical Ltd., said his company's Mitt Soap — a blend of soap and caranuba wax — will be marketed through Solutions, a new catalog division of Norm Thompson Outfitters Inc., and East Coast catalog giant Brookstone.

Jadco began selling Mitt Soap retail three years ago. The product was developed 10 years ago, Crosby said, for use by automotive dealers and detail shops.

Ryan Johnson, a spokesman for Norm Thompson in Portland, said Solutions catalogs would be sent to 11 million American homes this year.

Students win award

Ten graduates of Portland-area high schools have been awarded \$1,000 college scholarships by the Metro Portland Auto Dealers Association's Auto Tech Society.

The scholarship winners excelled in high-school automotive technology classes.

Three of the scholarship winners — Vincent Curletto, Christopher Mansker and Johnathon Pooley — attended Columbia High School in Troutdale. Other winners are: Cory Bome, Tigard; Maurice Goff, Battle Ground, Wash.; Michael Hovde, Roosevelt; Rupert A. Liddie Jr., Jefferson; Kent Rose, Lakewood in Lake Oswego; Chad Schroll, Gladstone; and David Wyman, Mountain View in Vancouver.

Dealership honored

Gresham Nissan is the lone Portland-area Nissan dealership to receive the Japanese automaker's Award of Merit for 1986, dealership owners Tony Divito and Ron Anderson announced.

The Nissan Award of Merit is based on excellence in new and used-car sales, parts sales, service and customer satisfaction.

"Customer satisfaction is the critical element" in picking award winners, Divito said. "It seems to be the area which all dealers are emphasizing these days, but we've managed to be a little bit better than the others."

Chrysler adds flair to proven innards in LeBaron Coupe

It seems almost fitting that Chrysler Corp. — often maligned for its cookie-cutter product line — would come up with such a visual home run as the 1987 LeBaron Coupe.

Detractors will still argue that underneath the LeBaron Coupe's rounded, sculpted body, low nose and rakish windshield beats the four-cylinder heart of a K-car econobox — the car that saved the corporation from financial extinction.

And they'd be right. However, while the K-car is a mundane little beast, it's rock reliable, and reliability is one of the most desirable traits in today's electronics-cluttered automobiles.

On the surface, the LeBaron Coupe is a stylish personal luxury car in the mold of Ford's popular Thunderbird. In a break with past Chrysler practice, the LeBaron Coupe is being sold only under the upscale Chrysler nameplate. (It was quite a coup for Chrysler-Plymouth dealers, who had to give up the agonizingly slow-selling Laser to gain exclusive rights to the LeBaron Coupe.)

The LeBaron Coupe will carry four people comfortably and has a generous luggage compartment despite a rather short trunk. It is also fuel-efficient and quite snappy in its turbocharged form and has very good handling, even in its most basic form.

The standard engine-transmission combination offered with the LeBaron Coupe is Chrysler's tough, economical 2.5-liter four, which develops 100 horsepower and is coupled to a five-speed manual transaxle.

A three-speed automatic is optional, as is the 146-horsepower, turbocharged 2.2-liter four-cylinder engine.

With the standard engine, the Shadow generates rather standard acceleration: 0 to 60 mph takes a respectable 12.4 seconds. When equipped with the turbocharged engine, as the test car was, the arithmetic changes dramatically.

While there are no factory figures available on the turbocharged car, Car and Driver magazine says the



Brian Cour

LeBaron Coupe will hit 60 mph in 9.3 seconds and has a top speed of 109 mph.

The turbo engine package is a pretty good deal. For \$576, you get the turbocharged engine, a stainless-steel exhaust system and other performance bits and pieces.

In addition to getting off the line in a hurry with the turbocharger, the LeBaron Coupe corners quite nicely. The car gets its handling qualities from an independent suspension that uses gas-charged iso-struts up front, conventional shock absorbers in the rear and stabilizer bars at both ends.

Handling gets even better when you add the sport suspension package, which is an extra \$652. Among the additional goodies you get are P205/60HR15 Goodyear Eagle GT tires and 15-inch cast aluminum wheels.

Happily, the LeBaron Coupe provides top-notch handling without sacrificing too much in the way of ride — which is firm without being stiff.

Fuel economy on the LeBaron Coupe is a mixed bag. With the standard engine and the five-speed manual, it earns government mileage ratings of 25 miles per gallon in city driving and 32 on the highway. Hook that same engine to the automatic and it drops to 23 city and 28 highway.

With the turbocharged engine and manual gearbox, the mileage tails off to 20 and 29. Driving the turbocharged test car, which was outfitted with the automatic, I managed 20 mpg in mostly city driving.

Generally, the LeBaron Coupe seems like a pretty solid piece of equipment. It performs well, is reasonably roomy and comfortable, and affords good visibility. The analog



1987 Chrysler LeBaron Premium Coupe

Body type: 2-door, 5-passenger coupe

Drive: Front-wheel

Engine: 2.5-liter (153-cubic-inch), 100-horsepower inline 4-cylinder, with electronic, multipoint fuel injection

Transmissions: 5-speed manual, with 0.72-to-1 overdrive 5th gear

Final drive ratio: 2.51-to-1

Brakes: Power ventilated 10.1-inch discs front/7.9-inch drums rear

Standard equipment: Power-assisted rack-and-pinion steering; 6.0-by-14-inch stamped steel wheels, with full covers; P185/75R14 steel-belted radial tires; analog instruments, including 125-mph speedometer, 7,000-rpm tachometer, oil pressure, water temperature and ammeter gauges; gas-charged shock absorbers and front and rear anti-sway bars; cloth-covered sport seats front, bench seat rear, with split, fold-down seatbacks; center folding armrests; center console, with storage bin and hidden cassette compartment; remote trunk release; reading lights, front and rear; message center, with graphic displays for door ajar, low fuel, low washer fluid and trunk ajar; dual, manual remote-controlled rear-view mirrors; passenger visor vanity mirror; AM/FM electronic stereo radio, with 4 speakers and digital clock; leather-wrapped steering wheel; intermittent wipers

Major options: 2.2-liter (135-cubic-inch), 147-horsepower inline four-cylinder engine, with water-cooled turbocharger, \$568; 3-speed automatic transmission, \$529; leather upholstery, with 6-way power driver's seat, \$807; air conditioning, \$782; rear-window defogger, \$192; AM/FM electronic stereo radio, with cassette, 6 speakers, graphic equalizer and power antenna, \$569; power convenience package (includes dual, power-operated outside rear-view mirrors; power door locks, and power windows), \$363; flip-open, removable sunroof, \$569; handling package (includes 15-by-6-inch alloy wheels, P205/60HR15 Goodyear Eagle GT tires, larger front and rear anti-sway bars, and quick-ratio steering), \$652

Base price: \$12,702 (includes \$414 shipping charge)

Specifications:
Wheelbase 100.3 inches
Overall length 184.9 inches
Overall width 68.5 inches
Overall height 50.9 inches
Curb weight 2,920 pounds
Fuel capacity 14.0 gals.

Performance:
Top speed 109 mph
0-60 mph 9.3 seconds

Fuel economy:
(EPA estimates, city/highway): 19/24 mpg

Warranty:
1 year/12,000 miles overall; 7 years/70,000 miles on power train (\$100 deductible per incident of repair)

* With optional turbocharged engine and 3-speed automatic transmission

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instruments are quite readable, but the same cannot be said for the flashing light show offered by the optional digital instrumentation.

My only real complaint was the synthetic voice reminder system that kept telling me, among other things, that my keys were in the ignition and my seat belts were not fastened.

A nice touch, though, is the standard five-function trip computer that includes digital readouts for average miles per gallon, distance to empty, elapsed travel time and miles accumulated. Computer controls were mounted high on the dashboard, allowing simultaneous eye contact with the computer and the road.

Chrysler is going after the baby-boomers with the LeBaron Coupe, trying to cash in on that 40-year-old, largely college-educated crowd with average annual household incomes of \$36,400. Many of them are driving imports. However, there's enough in this package to get them to give it a look. And that, automotive marketing analysts agree, is half the battle.

Subaru includes once-popular hill-holder device

By BOB HAGIN

Pacheco Automotive News Service

Q: In 1941, my father purchased a new Studebaker Commander with a device called a hill-holder. It performed beautifully when stopping at intersections in the hilly parts of downtown Seattle in the days before automatic transmissions.

Why isn't this device offered as an option on today's manual-transmission cars?

A: How well I remember Stude-

baker's hill-holder. I have owned several stick-shift Studebakers over the years — mostly from the late 1940s and early '50s — and they made driving in hilly areas as easy as driving with an automatic.

The device was quite simple: The foot brake would automatically set itself until the car started forward, and then it released. Unfortunately, this item fell from favor when the automatic transmission became popular.

Subaru offers such a device as standard equipment on many of its new models, but I don't think any other automakers offer it as an option.

Q: I recently purchased a 1974 AMC Gremlin and can't figure out how to get the dash apart to replace light bulbs that are not working. I have removed the screws holding it in place, but it remains solid.

In addition, I'm not able to adjust a too-fast idle condition, even when I back out the carburetor's idle-adjustment screw. I have sent a check to American Motors Corp. for this vehicle's service manual, but have received no response from the company, and my check was not returned. Any ideas?

A: There's an old saying in the auto repair business that goes like

this: "When all else fails, read the instructions." However, in your case, it may be tough to come up with the "instructions" in the form of a shop manual on a car that old.

Right now, I suspect that most AMC employees have their minds on other things — such as being acquired by Chrysler Motors.

If your vehicle came with an owner's manual, perhaps it can give you a clue as to why the instrument cluster won't release. As I recall, the speedometer and instrument-panel connector plug has to be removed to get the panel out, but I'd look for another cause if all of the dash lights are out.

Most domestic cars of that era had a dash-light switch built into the headlight switch. The knob twisted to adjust the intensity of the instrument panel lights, and sometimes they get turned off and a person unfamiliar with the car may not know it.

In reference to your fast-idle problem, make sure you are tweaking the idle adjusting screw and not the air/fuel mixture control.

Bob Hagin welcomes questions about cars and their maintenance. Send your questions to "Wheels," The Oregonian, 1320 S.W. Broadway, Portland 97201.

Station wagon survives in variety of shapes

By RICHARD C. NOBLE

Newhouse News Service

Pessimists said that faithful workhorse of the American family — the station wagon — might go the way of the Edsel when fancy vans and pickups began catching the eye of consumers with kids and cargo to haul.

But like the V-8 engine and the convertible, the wagon lives on.

True, the wagons took a dip in sales numbers from their 1.4 million peak in 1973. But unlike the Edsel, they are still a force to be reckoned with in the automotive market; 857,000 were sold in 1986.

Automakers from American Motors to Volvo offer more than 30 models of wagons on today's market, ranging in price from less than \$7,000 to more than \$40,000.

Determining just what falls into the station wagon category can be about as tricky as changing a flat on a moving car.

As automakers keep coming out with new types of vehicles that do a good job of carrying people and things, it is increasingly difficult to decide whether to call a vehicle a wagon, compact van, sports-utility vehicle or a little bit of each.

In the early days of wagons, they were closer to trucks than cars. Then the concept shifted to being a sedan with a squared-off rear half and a back door.

Today's hatchbacks aren't considered station wagons in counting sales figures, but they serve much the same purpose.

A hatchback sedan with fold-down back seat can swallow almost as much cargo as a comparably sized wagon, but may be marketed as a five-door sedan. A sporty three-door hatchback compact might be able to

carry as much cargo as a subcompact wagon.

Pontiac's Trans Sport multipurpose vehicle looks like a cross between a station wagon and a compact van.

The Trans Sport design is reflected in GM's upcoming plastic-skinned APV. The V stands for vehicle; the AP has the dual meaning of all-purpose and all-plastic. It is expected at Chevrolet and Pontiac dealerships by 1990.

It could be tagged a van, but it is based on an A-body car platform. And unlike the other vans in the GM lineup produced by its Truck and Bus Group, the APV — known in-house as the GM-200 — is produced by a car group.

At the other end of the historical wagon chain, some credit a 1923 Star model with being the first production station wagon.

It was an open-sided version of what was then called a delivery wagon and had seats in the cargo area. It was a pleasant little open-air wagon for picking up travelers and their luggage at the train station and delivering them to the hotel.

Thieves prefer imports

WASHINGTON (AP) — Car thieves prefer imports over domestic automobiles and expensive sporty or specialty cars over the run-of-the-mill compact or station wagon, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

The insurance group said the 12 cars with the most claims for theft are all imports, although the findings caution that in many of the cases thieves likely stole components such as radios and not the automobile itself.

The wood-bodied station wagon was another product from the fertile entrepreneurship of Billy Durant, founder and loser of General Motors.

Henry Ford offered a wagon version of the Model A in 1929. It had a maple, birch and plywood body with canvas side curtains. Ford sold nearly 5,000 Model A wagons selling for \$650 each.

Chevy came out with what was claimed to be the first all-steel-bodied station wagon in 1935. It was built on a truck chassis.

Wagons weren't just for the Chevy, Plymouth and Ford set. Most major automakers have at some time offered a wagon. The ones with fancier price tags sometimes carried fancier names, such as estate wagon.

Some wagons called shooting brakes have been built on Rolls-Royce chassis. They were rugged, luxurious behemoths that royalty, or the merely rich, could use for weekend jaunts to the country castle.

But a Rolls-Royce shooting brake was hardly a mass-production item. It was more of a custom coachwork vehicle. An oil sheik or anyone else with a cargo area full of money can have a wagon built on just about any chassis.

Lynx Engineering in Great Britain has a wagon version of a Jaguar XJS HE — an ideal wagon for those who feel the urge to haul their mulch home from the garden store at 140 miles per hour.

Even in the less-rarefied atmosphere of regular production wagons, there are some pretty classy acts.

The Mercedes-Benz 300TD turbocharged diesel station wagon can haul you in style. It will cost about \$41,000, or \$44,000 with an automatic


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