

ACURA INTEGRA

This is the entry-level model in Honda's luxury Acura line. A 1994 redesign made the Integra a little sleeker, but it's still a small car. Although it's a bit cramped and noisy, the Integra has much to recommend it. The GS-R version features a "VTEC" engine, Honda's clever design that electronically controls the intake-valve timing to increase both power and fuel economy. But the VTEC engine requires premium fuel. The standard, non-VTEC Four accelerates more than adequately, and it uses regular fuel. The manual five-speed gearbox shifts crisply and takes full advantage of an engine that likes to rev. The Integra handles quite nimbly. Unlike the GS-R versions, which ride quite stiffly, the lower trim lines are biased more toward ride comfort.

The front seats are firm - some people may find them too firm - and the cushions are very low. The rear seat can fold down to expand the trunk.

ACURA INTEGRA COUPE

Think of the Integra as a wealthy cousin of the Honda Civic. The small, sporty coupe version, redesigned in 1994, delivers just about everything one expects from a car of this type: zesty acceleration, nimble and sporty handling, and a stiff, rather noisy ride. The high-line GS-R version comes with a VTEC engine, Honda's clever design that electronically controls the intake-valve timing to improve both power and fuel economy. The engine easily revs to its 8000-rpm redline. The five-speed manual transmission shifts crisply, and its gearing emphasizes performance; the engine picks up speed readily in fifth gear at highway speeds. The steering provides decent feel of the road, although some may find it too light, and the car remains well

planted through bumpy turns. The instruments are clear, and most controls are easy to reach and use. Nicely shaped front seats deliver good, firm support - some people may find it too firm - and they hold their occupants in place during cornering. Save the rear seat for short trips - or for packages.

ACURA LEGEND

This is the flagship of Honda's luxury Acura line. A redesign, called the RL, is due in mid-1996, but at this writing little information is available. The carried-over 1995 version has a powerful 3.2-liter V6 that accelerates smoothly and impressively, especially for the Legend's size and weight. The car handles predictably, though not nimbly, in normal driving. The body leans considerably in sharp turns. Stops are straight, though relatively long. The ride is supple, well controlled, and quiet. Most people should feel comfortable in front, though side support could be better. The rear seat holds two comfortably; with three abreast, the center passenger is unhappy. The climate-control system works quickly and powerfully, but the manually controlled dash

vents are a nuisance. The gauges are large and clear, and the controls would be almost perfect if not for the tiny, hard-to-find horn buttons. Besides dual air bags, safety equipment includes front safety-belt pretensioners; they take up slack instantly in a frontal collision to improve protection.

ACURA SLX

Although the name is new, the vehicle isn't. The SLX is really an Isuzu Trooper with minor cosmetic touches such as leather upholstery and automatic climate control for an air of luxury. We haven't tested an SLX yet. The Trooper feels substantial and refined, but its weight robs the engine of much of its punch. The four-wheel drive is a crude, part-time system. You can expect a roomy interior and fairly comfortable seats, but only a so-so ride. The photo shows the Trooper; a photo of the SLX wasn't available at press time.

ACURA TL

The TL, which replaces the Vigor this year, is a slightly upscale mid-sized sedan, like Infiniti's I30 and Mazda's Millenia. It should be capable, but don't expect it to break new ground. It comes with all the usual amenities for cars of this class, like leather upholstery, automatic climate-control system, and fake-wood interior trim. The 2.5-liter version has a smooth, strong five-cylinder engine. Its brandmate, the 3.2 TL, is a more luxurious version that comes with a refined V6.

AUDI A4

The A4 is a sporty mid-sized sedan that replaces the Audi 90. (Only the convertible keeps its 90 designation.) It's a new design, with different sheet metal, interior, and suspension. For the first time, the all-wheel-drive Quattro option is available with an automatic transmission - with five speeds. Initially, it will come only with a V6. Later in the year, a turbocharged, 20-valve, 1.8-liter Four will join the lineup. A comprehensive warranty covers everything for the first three years.

AUDI A6

Formerly known as the Audi 100, the A6 received an exterior facelift in 1995. The last time we tested this model, we found many faults, from idiosyncratic placement of controls to a surprisingly mediocre ride and sluggish acceleration. Audi says it has remedied the most serious shortcomings. Audi has also juggled the list of options. You can now add all-wheel drive (the Quattro option) to the base car, for instance. Audi provides all scheduled maintenance free for three years or 50,000 miles.

BMW 3-SERIES

BMW practically invented the modern European sports sedan, and it continues to emphasize sporty handling. The 3-Series is BMW's small car. Precise, sports-car handling and tenacious tire grip let the driver feel very much in control. We liked the optional four-speed automatic transmission. Braking is excellent, and the optional traction control works wonders in slippery conditions. The ride is firm but compliant, and good sound insulation adds to the feeling of quality. The front seats offer ample support in all the right places. The rear seat, though, is cramped for two tall adults and downright hostile for three. A versatile climate-control system features separate settings for the driver and front passenger. Most controls are well designed, but several minor

switches and levers are hidden. The trunk may be too small for a family vacation, but it should be adequate for two people. The rear seat can fold to increase luggage space. For 1996, the 318ti hatchback joins the 3-Series lineup as a new, "entry level" BMW (see page 134). Also, the 318i gets a slightly larger, 1.9-liter Four, and the 325i becomes the 328i, as its Six grows to 2.8 liters. In the first quarter of 1996, BMW plans to introduce the U.S.-made Z3, an open-top roadster version of the 3-series, initially powered by a 1.8-liter Four.

BMW 318Ti

The 318ti is the newest addition to BMW's 3-Series cars. This hatchback coupe is similar in many respects to the regular 318i, but it's shorter and lighter. The rear suspension is like that of the previous-generation 3-Series. Expect precise handling and tenacious tire grip, plus a firm but comfortable ride.

BMW 5-SERIES

The BMW 5-Series leaves an impression of pure, functional precision. Nimble and precise handling makes the car a joy to drive. The five-speed automatic transmission adjusts shift points to suit road conditions. Handling is superb; the ride, firm but comfortable and quiet. The leather-upholstered front seats offer good support, but three adults barely fit in the rear. Clear displays complement easy-to-reach controls, and the trunk is roomy. Electronic traction control is available - and it's a must in winter driving. The station wagon version may not be as roomy as other wagons of that size. A redesign of the 5-Series, due in the spring of 1996, will include larger engines and side-impact air bags.

BMW 740I

This V8-powered model was redesigned for 1995. It competes with the world's finest and costliest luxury sports sedans. The 740iL version is slightly longer than the 740i. For 1996, the engine grows to 4.5 liters - which should make a fast car even fleetier. This model handles superbly and has all the fancy interior appointments one expects of cars in this price class. These models are substantially roomier than the 5-Series BMWs. Displays are quite clear, and nearly all controls are sensibly laid out and easy to reach.

BUICK CENTURY

This dated design is seriously outclassed by the competition. Its one notable virtue is a better-than-average reliability record. Every little twist in the road makes the car lean heavily and squeal its tires. The ride feels spongy, with hopping, wallowing, and bouncing on bumpy roads. The current Century is big on the outside but cramped inside. Even some small sedans such as the Mazda Protege and Chrysler's Dodge/Plymouth Neon have more room in the rear seat. The controls are overstyled and inconveniently placed. The optional 3.1-liter V6 and four-speed automatic make a much better choice than the standard 2.2-liter Four and three-speed automatic, but you're even better off choosing a different model. Our comments on the sedan apply to the station wagon as well.

BUICK LE SABRE

This is a large, quiet-riding, softly sprung sedan. It wallows a bit in turns, though it's not as porcine as the Roadmaster. Buick refined the Le Sabre's 3.8-liter V6 for 1996, adding an extra 35 hp. The car should accelerate smoothly and responsively. The four-speed automatic transmission shifts extremely smoothly. Seating is comfortable for five, less so for six. The controls are overstyled and hard to use, but the displays are clear.

BUICK PARK AVENUE

This high-line freeway cruiser is a longer and more luxurious relative of the Buick Le Sabre. It competes with big domestic luxury sedans such as the Oldsmobile Ninety Eight and Chrysler LHS, with emphasis on a soft ride and every imaginable power convenience. The standard, 3.8-liter V6 is quite capable of powering this large car; the Ultra version comes with a snappier, supercharged V6.

BUICK REGAL

This middle-of-the-road sedan has a few good points and a moderate price tag. The instrument panel was greatly improved for the 1995 model year. The 3.8-liter V6 performs strongly; the standard 3.1-liter V6 is just fine. The four-speed automatic transmission shifts very smoothly. Handling feels fairly sloppy. Expect a comfortable, quiet highway ride. Tall people will find room enough front and rear. Although the trunk is roomy, it would benefit from a fold-down rear seatback.

BUICK RIVIERA

The Riviera is billed as a "personal luxury coupe" - that is, a large, heavy two-door with lots of accessories. The current version was new in 1995. It's built on the same platform as the Oldsmobile Aurora, but it doesn't get the Aurora's outstanding Northstar V8. Instead, it's powered by a conventional 3.8-liter V6 developing 205 hp. Our test car, which had the optional supercharger, accelerated very well but drank lots of fuel. The Riviera is happiest cruising on freeways, where the ride is pleasant and the cabin is hushed. On country roads, it feels ponderous and leans a lot in corners. Finding a good driving position may be difficult. Tall drivers wanted more head room, and short drivers had to sit too close to the steering wheel. The

rear seat is fairly comfortable, but head room is scarce back there, too, and getting in and out is a challenge. The overstyled controls and displays are neither well thought out nor easy to use.

BUICK ROADMASTER

This is the last year for the massive Roadmaster, a close cousin of the Chevrolet Caprice. It's a big, heavy car with a full frame, rear-wheel drive, and a big V8 that gobbles fuel. The Roadmaster boasts an exceptionally smooth and quiet ride, but that's pretty much where its virtues end. Handling is ponderous and sluggish. Sightlines are poor. Controls and displays are neither logically laid out nor easy to see or use. It's roomy for five but not six.

BUICK SKYLARK

This model shares many components with the Oldsmobile Achieva and Pontiac Grand Am. The Skylark targets those who want a spot of luxury in a standard sedan. It received a facelift and interior modifications that included a new instrument panel for 1996. Traction control is now standard. Handling is just adequate; the car responds slowly to its steering, and the body leans sharply in turns. The 3.1-liter V6 is the engine of choice. The front seats are generally satisfactory. The rear seat is unfriendly even for two.

CADILLAC DE VILLE

This is Cadillac's best-selling model. The De Ville is built on a stretched version of the Cadillac Seville platform. It's a big, roomy, plush four-door land yacht. For 1996 even the base model gets Cadillac's sophisticated Northstar aluminum 4.6-liter V8 and electronically controlled transmission and suspension. (The Northstar was previously available only in the upscale Concours.) In our informal tests, the De Ville delivered a comfortable ride and handled well for such a large car.

CADILLAC ELDORADO

This plush luxury coupe comes with a full array of safety and luxury accessories. The heart of this design is the sophisticated "Northstar system," which combines a modern 4.6-liter aluminum V8, an electronically controlled four-speed automatic transmission, and an "active" suspension that reacts to road conditions. The Touring Coupe, which has the more powerful version of the Northstar V8, provides blazing acceleration and very smooth shifts, but the traction-control system is hard put at times to keep the front wheels from spinning. Compared with other cars in this luxury class, the Eldorado is rather cumbersome to maneuver in sharp turns and in traffic. The suspension provides a fine ride on good roads, but isolated

bumps tend to trip it up. Most people will find plenty of room in the front, but support could be better. Two adults can sit fairly comfortably in the rear seat, though getting in and out takes dexterity; for three adults, it's a tight squeeze. The automatic climate-control system works well, and the instruments are easy to read.

CADILLAC FLEETWOOD

Built on the same chassis as the Buick Roadmaster and Chevrolet Caprice, the rear-wheel-drive Fleetwood maintains the traditional characteristics of large domestic sedans: a soft ride, a quiet and plush interior, and enough muscle to haul a heavy trailer with ease. All three cars will be discontinued after the 1996 model year. You'll find plenty of interior room front and rear, plus a large trunk. You'll also find the cumbersome handling and mediocre fuel economy inherent in this breed.

CADILLAC SEVILLE

The Seville was designed to compete with the likes of Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Jaguar, Lexus, and Infiniti. It comes with Cadillac's "Northstar system," which includes a 4.6-liter aluminum V8, an electronic four-speed automatic transmission, traction control, and an "active" suspension that reacts to road conditions. The STS accelerates faster than many performance cars, and it corners fairly crisply. The ride deteriorates on poor roads. Some road and wind noise penetrates at highway speeds. The soft front seats offer good support. The rear seat is several notches worse, and it offers adequate room only for two.

CHEVROLET ASTRO

The Astro and its twin, the GMC Safari, now come only in extended-length versions. Cargo room is massive and towing capacity is good. Optional all-wheel drive is useful on slippery roads. But this rear-wheel-drive minivan is a dated design, with clumsy handling, an uncomfortable ride, and subpar reliability. Dutch (upper and lower) rear doors aid loading.

CHEVROLET BERETTA

This pseudo-sporty coupe version of the thrifty Corsica sedan offers no surprises, good or bad. The V6 is a better choice than the weak and noisy Four. The low front seats make it hard to see over the hood. Although the displays are clear, the controls are awkward and the climate-control system is weak.

CHEVROLET BLAZER

This model, like the similar GMC Jimmy, is now an up-to-date compact sport-utility vehicle. The 1995 redesign eliminated most of the older car's cruder elements. A fair amount of standard equipment, including air-conditioning, comes with all versions. A passenger's-side air bag is still unavailable - a strange omission in a new model. The standard engine, a 4.3-liter, 195-hp V6, accelerates powerfully, and the automatic transmission shifts very smoothly. The Blazer comes in various two- and four-wheel-drive versions, but most of the four-wheel-drive options use a crude part-time system. The highest trim line, the LT, offers a full-time four-wheel-drive system (without low range), like that of some sedans and minivans. The Blazer's vague steering and .

prodigious body lean during cornering don't inspire confidence, and the brakes are mediocre. Bumpy roads badly mar the ride. Occupants will find plenty of room front and rear, and the front seats, at least, are adequately comfortable. The rear bench is skimpy. Cargo space is quite generous. We have no reliability data on the redesigned Blazer. But many of the earlier mechanical components have been carried over, and the previous model has been unreliable.

CHEVROLET C/K

Chevy's full-sized pickup is designated "C" in two-wheel-drive versions, "K" in four-wheel-drive. It and its twin, the GMC Sierra, have a nicer interior now, and the engines are a bit stronger and more refined this year, but the C/K is still trucklike. It's designed for hauling large, heavy loads. Engines range from a 4.3-liter V6 up to a 7.4-liter V8 and a 6.5-liter turbodiesel. Expect a commanding view of the road and a quiet cabin. In 1996 extended-cab versions, an extra door on the passenger's side greatly eases loading of people or cargo.

CHEVROLET CAMARO

The Camaro and its cousin, the Pontiac Firebird, are among the dwindling ranks of rear-wheel-drive muscle cars. A high-performance 5.7-liter V8, essentially the same engine that powers the Chevrolet Corvette, comes standard in the Z28 version. So does a six-speed manual transmission. A four-speed automatic is optional, as is traction control. The standard V6 engine grew a little, to 3.8 liters, and picked up an extra 40 horsepower this year. The optional V8 delivers effortless thrust - what one buys a muscle car for. Both the V6 and V8 versions ride tolerably for a sporty car, but the V8 feels noticeably stiffer. Though the Camaro is too bulky to be called nimble, it corners with minimal body roll. The V8 version, which comes

with wider tires, grips the road better. Braking is very good. The front bucket seats cradle occupants nicely; the back seat is mostly for show. Wide roof pillars block much of the driver's view to the right rear, and both the front and rear ends are invisible to the driver. Camaros and Firebirds have been unreliable for years.

CHEVROLET CAPRICE

The Caprice fairly floats over most flaws in the pavement. If a pillow-soft highway ride is all you crave in a car, consider this big, old-fashioned, rear-wheel-drive cousin of the Buick Roadmaster. This is its last year of production. The optional 5.7-liter V8 cranks out gobs of power, but at the cost of poor fuel economy: about 17 mpg overall. The four-speed automatic transmission always shifts smoothly. An optional upgrade, the "sport" suspension, improves handling and curbs the car's tendency to wallow in curves. The split bench front seat feels like a living-room sofa; it doesn't provide much support. The rear seat is fairly comfortable for three tall adults. Instruments and controls are much more user-friendly than those in earlier Caprices, though

minor faults remain. The headlights lack a flash-to-pass feature, and the driver's armrest houses a jumble of window and seat-adjustment switches. Chevrolet introduced the Impala SS, a performance version of the Caprice, in 1995.

CHEVROLET CAVALIER

A 1995 redesign vastly improved the Cavalier. The new model easily outpoints most domestic and Japanese competitors. The standard 2.2-liter Four is the only part of the car that cries out for more improvement. It accelerates competently but is not as smooth as the best in this class. This year, most models offer an optional 2.4-liter dual-overhead-camshaft Four; Chevrolet says it's better than the standard engine, but we haven't had a chance to verify that yet. The three-speed automatic transmission shifts smoothly. (A four-speed automatic that includes traction-control is optional.) The steering is fairly quick, although the body leans quite a bit in hard turns. The ride is compliant, and good for a small car. All controls are clearly marked and easy to use

- routine for a Japanese car, but almost unheard of for GM. The front seats feel comfortable on short trips, but long journeys may fatigue some people's lower back and shoulders. In space and comfort, the rear seat is only adequate. Folding down the rear seatbacks expands an already good-sized trunk.

CHEVROLET CORSICA

This sedan remains little changed since its introduction in 1987, and it offers no surprises, good or bad. The Corsica represents the thrifty end of GM's compact models, which include the related Buick Skylark, Oldsmobile Achieva, and Pontiac Grand Am. The 2.2-liter Four performs weakly; the optional 3.1-liter V6 is a better choice. The steering feels vague, and the car leans a lot in turns. The ride feels busy at times but never harsh. The low front seat cushions make it hard to see over the hood, and a bolster on the seatback forces occupants to slouch forward. Three average-sized adults feel crowded in the rear seat. Although the displays are easy to read, the controls are awkward and the climate-control system is weak. Daytime running lights and a slightly revised rear suspension are new this year.

CHEVROLET CORVETTE

State-of-the-art technology blends with brute muscle-car power in this legendary two-seat sports car. The big, 5.7-liter V8 pushed our test car to 60 mph in 5.5 seconds - the fastest acceleration of any car we've tested - while an effective computer-controlled traction system minimizes wheel spin. A yet more powerful version of the same engine became available this year. The six-speed manual transmission shifts stiffly but precisely; to save fuel, a computer automatically guides the shifter from first gear directly into fourth when you shift at low rpm - odd for a sports car. The fiberglass body flexes and twists on rough roads, as in the Corvettes of yore. The steering is quick and precise, but the car is too bulky to feel nimble. It bounces so badly on rough

roads that tall drivers can bang their head on the roof. Short drivers may have to stretch to depress the clutch pedal. Even with the power seat fully raised, it's hard to see over the hood. Low seats and high, wide sills make getting in and out difficult. The climate-control system is effective. The controls work well, and the gauges are easy to read. The limited-edition ZR-1 was dropped for 1996.

CHEVROLET LUMINA

A 1995 redesign made this a much better car - but then, the Lumina had a long way to go to become good. The new car performs competently all around, though it's not outstanding in any important category. The Lumina is very quiet inside, and it has a good ride and a smooth powertrain. The seats are thinly padded. The controls and displays are generally well designed, but there's no "flash to pass" feature. The Monte Carlo nameplate was revived for the coupe version of the Lumina. Chevrolet says that both the coupe and the sedan can seat six, but three people up front are a crowd. The rear seat is too low and generally uncomfortable. The standard 3.1-liter V6 accelerates more than adequately; the optional 3.4-liter V6

produces 50 hp more, but it gulps a lot more fuel, and it's noisier. All versions come with lots of minor but helpful convenience features.

CHEVROLET LUMINA VAN

GM's plastic-bodied GM siblings - the Chevrolet Lumina, Oldsmobile Silhouette, and Pontiac Trans Sport - perform unimpressively, overall, though they do boast a few worthwhile convenience items. For 1996, the only engine is a newly revised 3.4-liter V6, which should accelerate adequately. The Lumina leaps and bounces on sharp bumps, leans heavily in turns, and handles ponderously. The Chevrolet and Pontiac versions have shorter snouts, but the driver still can't tell where the front bumper begins, and blind spots block the view to the sides and rear. The front seats offer good support. A seven-passenger seating option places three seats in the middle row plus two more in the rear. The middle seats are comfortable, the rear,

less so. One person can easily remove the lightweight individual seats. The optional electric sliding side door is well worth the price for the convenience it brings. Some controls are hard to reach, but the powerful climate-control system works well. A useful rear-seat air-conditioner is optional. These minivans are due for replacement for 1997.

CHEVROLET MONTE CARLO

This is the coupe version of the new-for-1995 Chevrolet Lumina sedan. Even among the impractical coupes, the Monte Carlo isn't the best choice. It combines the inconvenience of a two-door body style with rather sloppy handling and a bounding ride on rough roads. The Z34 model we tested has a "sporty" suspension that's too stiff on small bumps and too soft on big ones; the LS version rides better. There's plenty of room up front, but the cloth seats feel a little lumpy and lack support. The rear seat barely accommodates two tall people; forget about three. And climbing into the rear is torture. A first-rate climate-control system complements a well-designed and logical control cluster. The rear seatback folds down to increase the cargo capacity of the already roomy trunk.

CHEVROLET S-SERIES

The current version of Chevy's compact "S" pickup and its twin, the GMC Sonoma, are a modern, up-to-date design, but don't expect carlike handling: Like most other trucks, this one leans a lot in corners, the steering feels vague and heavy, and the rear axle hops to the side on washboard roads when the truck is unladen. The 4.3-liter V6 feels sprightly. The optional four-speed automatic transmission shifts smoothly. Even with antilock brakes, stopping distances are quite long for a modern vehicle. An exceptionally quiet cabin somewhat mitigates the stiff, rubbery ride. We prefer the extended-cab version for its convenience. For 1996, extended-cab versions have an optional "access panel" - really an extra side door - to aid loading the rear compartment.

The climate-control system works extremely well, but its controls are far from the driver. Cup-holders and storage nooks festoon the interior. We have two nagging concerns: reliability has been well below average, and this truck did not do well in Government crash tests.

CHEVROLET SUBURBAN

This overgrown station wagon (like its twin, the GMC Suburban) emphasizes utility. Built on a full-sized pickup chassis, it can seat up to nine people and tow a 10,000-pound trailer. It comes with two- or four-wheel drive; expect both versions to be more trucklike than carlike. Climate and radio controls have been improved. Both the 5.7-liter and mammoth 7.4-liter V8s gained more power for 1996. Expect both to burn a lot of fuel. The powerful 6.5-liter turbodiesel V8 may make sense for people who don't own a petroleum refinery.

CHEVROLET TAHOE

Formerly known as the K-Blazer, the Tahoe fills the gap between the enormous Suburban and the compact-sized Blazer. The Tahoe and its sibling, the GMC Yukon, are built on a full-sized pickup-truck chassis, which lends itself to hauling cargo or towing a heavy trailer. A 5.7-liter V8 is standard; a turbodiesel V8 is optional in two-door models. The ride is surprisingly comfortable, and handling is reasonably secure. A two-door version with two- or four-wheel drive was added for 1996.

CHRYSLER CIRRUS

The Cirrus and similar Dodge Stratus were new for 1995. (The similar Plymouth Breeze goes on sale in early 1996.) These compacts compete with the best mid-priced Japanese models, as well as with Ford's Contour and Mercury Mystique twins. The Cirrus we tested came with the optional 2.5-liter V6, which provided smooth and lively acceleration. A 2.4-liter Four is the standard engine. The four-speed automatic transmission shifts very smoothly. The ride feels taut and well controlled. The Cirrus and Stratus handle well and offer roomy seating - particularly in the rear, where three six-footers fit with ease. Controls and displays are first rate. The trunk is roomy, and folding the rear seatback makes room for even more cargo. Still, Chrysler needs

to address a few shortcomings, such as weak headlights, a noisy suspension, mediocre brakes, and poor fit and finish. Prospective buyers should wait at least a year to see how reliable this new model will be.

CHRYSLER CONCORDE

Chrysler's well-designed LH triplets - the Chrysler Concorde, Dodge Intrepid, and Eagle Vision, have many virtues but one glaring fault: worse-than-average reliability. They're roomy for five (with a bench front seat, the Intrepid can hold six). The 3.3-liter V6 accelerates well. The optional 3.5-liter V6 delivers a little more punch, at the cost of about 1 mpg overall and mid-grade rather than regular fuel. Handling is nimble, especially for such a large car. The LH cars ride smoothly and, for the most part, quietly, but the tires make more noise than we like, and the engine can sound harsh during acceleration. The headlights are weak, too. Most controls are well designed. Although the rear seat doesn't fold down to add cargo space, the trunk holds plenty of luggage.

CHRYSLER LHS

This is a slightly stretched, more luxuriously equipped, and more expensive version of Chrysler's LH sedans, the Dodge Intrepid, Chrysler Concorde, and Eagle Vision. (The virtually identical New Yorker has been discontinued.) The LHS adds five inches of length - most of it going into the especially roomy rear seat. The LHS can seat five in living-room comfort. The 3.5-liter V6 delivers spirited acceleration, and the four-speed automatic shifts fairly smoothly. The LHS handles fairly nimbly, like a much smaller car. It also offers a comfortable ride and a roomy cockpit. Some road rumble and harsh engine noise intrude into the cabin.

CHRYSLER SEBRING

If you're willing to accept the basic impracticality of a coupe, the Chrysler Sebring and its cousin, the Dodge Avenger, are fairly good choices. Introduced in 1995, these sporty coupes were designed by Chrysler and built in Illinois by Diamond Star Motors, a subsidiary of Mitsubishi. The base engine for both is a noisy Chrysler 2.0-liter Four; we'd choose the optional 2.5-liter V6 made by Mitsubishi, which accelerates more than adequately. Handling is competent and predictable. The chassis absorbs big bumps well, but little pavement flaws transmit firm kicks. The front seats provide good support except for the lower back. The passenger seat scoots forward to aid access to the rear, a welcome feature. The rear seat can hold two tall adults in only

moderate discomfort; three are a tight squeeze. Some of the minor controls are poorly placed, but otherwise, the instrument cluster is clear and functional. The large trunk gets bigger still when you fold down the rear seatbacks. Reliability is a question mark; many new Chrysler products have had problems in that area.

CHRYSLER SEBRING CONVERTIBLE

Although it's called a Sebring convertible, this car's underpinnings have more in common with the Cirrus, a good, up-to-date mid-sized sedan. Expect nicely laid-out controls and an interior that's roomy for a convertible.

CHRYSLER TOWN & COUNTRY

Traditionally, the Town & Country has been a loaded, long-wheelbase version of the Dodge Caravan and Plymouth Voyager. The 1996 model year marks these minivans' first redesign in a decade. (A regular-length Town & Country now joins the lineup.) The new minivans ride quietly, handle more nimbly than many sedans, and combine clever use of space with easy conversion from people-carrier to cargo-hauler. The long versions have more leg room for rear-seat passengers, as well as significantly more cargo space in back. These are the only minivans to offer a second (left side) sliding door - a very handy feature. Both of the available V6s accelerate well. The front seats provide good support, but they feel a little lumpy. The

two-person middle-row bench has a back that can be reclined, as does the three-person rearmost bench. The rear benches mount and dismount easily, and little wheels help you drag them about. But the benches are heavy, about 100 pounds each. The layout of the instruments is close to ideal, and sight lines are good, but the door pillar may block the view to the left for a very tall driver. Our only major reservation concerns reliability: Many new Chrysler products have had problems in that area.

DODGE AVENGER

If you're willing to accept the basic impracticality of a coupe, the Dodge Avenger and its cousin, the Chrysler Sebring, are fairly good choices. Introduced in 1995, these sporty coupes were designed by Chrysler and built by Diamond Star Motors, a U.S. subsidiary of Mitsubishi. The base engine for both is a Chrysler 2.0-liter Four. The optional 2.5-liter Mitsubishi V6 is a better choice; it accelerates more than adequately. Handling is competent and predictable. The chassis absorbs big bumps well, but little pavement flaws transmit firm kicks. The front seats provide good support except for the lower back. The passenger seat scoots forward to aid access to the rear, a welcome feature.

The rear seat holds two tall adults in moderate discomfort; three are a tight squeeze. Some of the minor controls are poorly placed, but otherwise, the instrument cluster is clear and functional. The large trunk gets bigger still when you fold down the rear seatbacks. Reliability is a question mark; many new Chrysler products have had problems in that area.

DODGE CARAVAN

The Dodge Caravan and its sibling, the Plymouth Voyager, were redesigned for 1996 - for the first time in 10 years. The new minivans ride quietly, handle more nimbly than many sedans, and combine clever use of space with easy conversion from people-carrier to cargo-hauler. The long-wheelbase Grand versions have more leg room for rear-seat passengers, as well as significantly more cargo space in back. The regular-length minivans are a shade more maneuverable. All offer a second (left side) sliding door - a very handy option. Of the three V6s available, the 3.3-liter is the best choice for performance and smoothness. The front seats provide good support but feel a little lumpy. The two-person middle-row bench has a back that

reclines for comfort, as does the three-person rearmost bench. The back benches mount and dismount easily, and little wheels help you drag them about. But the benches are heavy - about 100 pounds each. Instrument layout is close to ideal and sight lines are good, but a very tall driver may find that the door pillar blocks the view to the left. Our only major reservation concerns reliability: Many new Chrysler products have had problems in that area.

DODGE DAKOTA

The elderly Dakota has not aged well. Its one saving grace is a large bed, the roomiest available in a compact-sized pickup. That's particularly important if you choose an extended cab, which shortens the cargo box considerably. Compared with its Ford and Chevrolet competitors, though, the Dakota falls well back in most performance and convenience considerations. The 3.9-liter V6 we tested feels anemic. Expect more power but a big penalty in fuel economy with the V8. In the sample we tested, the four-speed automatic transmission often didn't downshift when it should or hunted back and forth between third and fourth gears annoyingly. The steering feels ponderous, and a wide turning circle makes parking clumsy. The ride is mediocre on good roads

and bad, and the seats, though soft, aren't very supportive. The interior is dated, with many minor controls poorly placed: it's all too easy to grab the mirror-adjustment lever when you want the headlight switch. Reliability has been worse than average for years. The Dakota is due for a redesign for 1997.

DODGE GRAND CARAVAN

The Dodge Grand Caravan and its siblings, the Chrysler Town & Country and Plymouth Grand Voyager, are extended versions of the Caravan and Voyager. The 1996 model year marks these minivans' first redesign in a decade. The new minivans ride quietly, handle more nimbly than many sedans, and combine clever use of space with easy conversion from people-carrier to cargo-hauler. The long versions have more leg room for rear-seat passengers, as well as significantly more cargo space in back. These are the only minivans to offer a second (left side) sliding door - a very handy feature. The 3.3- and 3.8-liter V6 engines accelerate well. The front seats provide good support but feel a little lumpy. The two-person middle-row bench has a

back that reclines for comfort, as does the three-person rearmost bench. The back benches mount and dismount easily, and little wheels help you drag them about. But they're heavy - about 100 pounds each. Instrument layout is close to ideal and sight lines are good, but a very tall driver may find that the door pillar blocks the view to the left. Our only major reservation concerns reliability: Many new Chrysler products have had problems in that area.

DODGE INTREPID

Chrysler's well-designed LH triplets - the Chrysler Concorde, Dodge Intrepid, and Eagle Vision, have many virtues but one glaring fault: worse-than-average reliability. They're roomy for five (with a bench front seat, the Intrepid can hold six). The performance of the 3.3-liter V6 should satisfy most people. The optional 3.5-liter V6 delivers slightly punchier acceleration, but it gives up about 1 mpg overall and requires mid-grade rather than regular fuel. Handling is nimble, especially for such a large car. The antilock brakes and traction control are worthwhile options. The LH cars ride smoothly and, for the most part, quietly, but the tires make more noise than we like, and the engine can sound harsh during acceleration. The headlights are weak, too. Most

controls are well designed. Although the rear seat doesn't fold down to add cargo space, the trunk holds plenty of luggage.

DODGE NEON

The Dodge/Plymouth Neon twins are among the very few small cars to be designed and made entirely in the U.S. in recent years. The Neon makes good use of its interior space. The standard 132-hp, 2.0-liter Four has plenty of power, but you have to rev it hard to get the performance - and it makes a racket at high rpm. The three-speed automatic transmission feels more responsive at low speeds than does the five-speed manual. You have to downshift the manual transmission often to maintain speed on even gentle highway inclines. The Neon handles predictably. The ride is jittery and busy, and broken pavement delivers choppy buckboard kicks. The front seats provide good, firm support for most people, but long-legged drivers need more

high support. The rear seat can hold three six-footers - if they're slim. Reliability of this new model remains to be seen.

DODGE RAM

The Ram was refined for 1994, but you won't forget you're driving a truck. Handling is ponderous but steady. The front seats are quite comfortable, and the control panel is nicely laid out. Even the regular-cab models have generous storage room behind the reclining seatbacks. Extended-cab (Club Cab) models have a rear bench seat for three. The optional 8.0-liter V10 is unnecessary. Consider the 5.9-liter V8 as the best all-around engine, or the 5.9-liter turbo diesel Six if you plan to put in long hours using the Ram as a work truck.

DODGE STEALTH

In their sportiest form, the Stealth and its twin, the Mitsubishi 3000GT, are loaded with techno-gadgets. Trim lines range from the 164-hp base model with front-wheel drive on up to the 320-hp R/T Turbo, with twin turbochargers, four-wheel steering, electronically adjustable suspension, and all-wheel drive. The R/T Turbo gives good cornering grip, exceptionally short stops, and powerful acceleration. The car is fast, but too heavy and wide to feel nimble. Nonturbo versions are fairly uninspiring to drive. The Stealth will be discontinued early in the 1996 model year.

DODGE STRATUS

The Stratus and similar Plymouth Breeze and Chrysler Cirrus compete with mid-sized Japanese models, as well as with the Ford Contour and Mercury Mystique. The Stratus offers roomy seating (especially in the rear) and a nicely designed interior. The optional 2.5-liter V6 provides lively acceleration, and the four-speed automatic transmission shifts very smoothly. The base Stratus's powertrain uses the Neon's 2.0-liter Four with a manual transmission. We tested the car with a 2.4-liter Four and an automatic. That engine accelerates nicely, but the throttle is a little touchy. The Stratus handles fairly well, and its ride is so-so. Controls and displays are first rate. You can augment the roomy trunk by folding the rear seatback. Still, Chrysler needs to

address a few shortcomings, such as weak headlights, a noisy suspension, mediocre brakes, and poor fit and finish. Prospective buyers should wait at least a year to see how reliable this new model will be.

EAGLE SUMMIT

Chrysler Corp. sells the Mitsubishi Mirage as the Eagle Summit. Most of the cars you'll see on a dealer's lot will be short on extra equipment such as antilock brakes. That's too bad, since the standard, non-antilock brakes are among the poorest we've tested in years. The Summit rides firmly and often uncomfortably. The front seats provide generally satisfactory support, and tall drivers will find adequate leg room. The rear seat can barely hold two six-footers, though three average-sized adults can fit without undue discomfort. Major controls are easy to see and grasp, but some minor switches are hidden or hard to operate. The versatile climate-control system quickly provides heated or cooled air. You can expand the Summit's moderate-sized

trunk by folding down the split rear seatback. The best thing about this car is its zesty and fuel-efficient powertrain. If you buy a Summit or a Mitsubishi Mirage, look for one with the 1.8-liter Four, five-speed manual transmission, and antilock brakes.

EAGLE SUMMIT WAGON

This cross between a small station wagon and a very small van is made in Japan by Mitsubishi. Tall and boxy, it has a single sliding side door like that of a van, and a high seating position that offers the driver a commanding view. The 2.4-liter Four (the engine of choice) delivers peppy acceleration. Handling, though, comes up a bit short: in tight turns, the tires squeal easily, the body leans, and the Summit wants to plow straight ahead. This wagon delivers a comfortable, quiet ride and provides a good deal more cargo space than do competing small wagons. Tall drivers may wish for more leg room. The rear seat offers ample room for two adults, but barely adequate room for three. The climate-control system quickly delivers ample warmed or cooled air and distributes it evenly. The instruments are legible; the controls could be easier to use. The optional all-wheel drive is useful where road conditions are poor.

EAGLE TALON

The Talon and similar Mitsubishi Eclipse were redesigned for 1995. They're made in Illinois by Diamond Star, a subsidiary of Mitsubishi. The standard engine is the Chrysler-built 2.0-liter Four that powers the Neon; it needs a lot of revving before it produces much power. More expensive trim lines get a more powerful Mitsubishi 2.0-liter turbocharged Four. It's fast enough, but it doesn't deliver the sporty handling of the Honda Prelude or Ford Probe. The Talon comes with either front- or all-wheel drive.

EAGLE VISION

Chrysler's well-designed LH triplets - the Chrysler Concorde, Dodge Intrepid, and Eagle Vision, have many virtues but one glaring fault: worse-than-average reliability. They're roomy for five (with a bench front seat, the Intrepid can hold six). The Vision, aimed at a slightly sportier crowd, offers buckets only. The 3.3-liter V6 accelerates well. The optional 3.5-liter V6 delivers a little more punch, at the cost of about 1 mpg overall and mid-grade rather than regular fuel. Handling is nimble, especially in the TSi version, but the TSi's ride is a bit harsh. Antilock brakes and traction control are worthwhile options. The tires make more noise than we like, and the engine can sound harsh during acceleration. Most controls are well designed. For

1996 the Vision offers "Autostick," which lets you shift the transmission like a manual, but without a clutch. Although the rear seat doesn't fold down, the trunk holds plenty of luggage.

FORD AEROSTAR

Though hardly state-of-the-art, the rear-wheel-drive Aerostar remains a sound choice for carrying six or seven people or towing a trailer, thanks to its roomy cargo area and strong 4.0-liter V6 option. It comes in either a regular-length or a 15-inch-longer extended-length version. The all-wheel-drive version handles more surefootedly than the ponderous rear-wheel-drive version. A reasonably good ride and effective climate-control system make this a comfortable minivan. Still, the Ford Windstar handily outpoints the Aerostar in nearly every measure of comfort and performance.

FORD ASPIRE

Like the Ford Festiva, which it replaced, the Aspire is made in Korea by Kia. The Aspire is fuel-efficient and has plenty of head room - and that's where the good news ends. The 1.3-liter Four provides painfully slow acceleration. The five-speed manual transmission shifts easily but requires frequent downshifting to maintain speed on inclines. The Aspire handles clumsily and leans sharply in turns. The nonpower steering is slow and unresponsive and can become very heavy in mid-turn. In short, the Aspire can be a chore to drive. The ride is busy and choppy, although the suspension damps most of the harshness. Leg room is snug for tall people, but short drivers can see well over the hood. The front seats provide generally good, firm support.

Two tall people can squeeze into the rear, but no seating position (or safety belt) is allotted for a third rear passenger.

FORD BRONCO

The big Bronco weighs in solidly on the utility end of the sport-utility continuum, where it competes with the Chevrolet Tahoe and GMC Yukon. This vehicle is a truck from the core outwards, but a truck that offers various levels of luxury appointments. The Bronco is designed for people who need to haul a lot of gear or tow a heavy trailer. Available only with a V8 engine, the Bronco delivers mediocre fuel economy.

FORD CONTOUR

The new-in-1995 Contour and its counterpart, the Mercury Mystique, were developed by Ford of Europe, where the car is called the Ford Mondeo. The car features modern styling and design, including a rigid body, a sophisticated rear suspension, and a smooth-shifting optional automatic transmission. The base 2.0-liter Four accelerates adequately but sounds boomy and idles a little roughly. The smooth and powerful 2.5-liter V6 is a much better choice. Even with the base suspension and tires, the car handles nimbly. The Contour and Mystique respond quickly to their steering. With the optional "sport" suspension and performance tires, the car negotiates winding roads like a good sports sedan. But the ride is a little better with the softer

base suspension. The front seats are comfortable, and most people should find plenty of room there. The rear seat is distinctly cramped, and the center position is too narrow to accommodate most child safety seats. Most controls are nicely designed, and the climate-control system includes a replaceable pollen/dust filter. Only the LX and SE versions offer a fold-down rear seatback.

FORD CROWN VICTORIA

This is one of the last big freeway cruisers made the old fashioned way, with a V8, full frame, and rear-wheel drive. Last year, the Crown Victoria and its sibling, the Mercury Marquis, received a minor facelift inside and out; the new interior includes a redesigned dash and new seats - good news, since the old seats were thinly padded and uncomfortable. The Crown Victoria delivers a serene ride, especially with a full load aboard. A huge trunk and substantial trailer-towing capability are further bonuses. The 4.6-liter V8 cruises effortlessly, and the automatic transmission shifts smoothly. Steering response is quite good, too. Choose the Preferred Equipment Package 114A and

Handling and Performance Package for better handling and tire grip. With the upgraded suspension and tires, the car plows ahead only moderately in hard turns. The front bench seat is designed to hold three abreast, but an adult won't be happy in the center position. Leg room is just adequate for tall drivers. The rear seat is roomy enough for three, though toe space under the front seats is tight.

FORD ESCORT

Some Escorts are made in the U.S. and some in Mexico. (The Escort's sibling, the Mercury Tracer, is made only in Mexico.) The sedan and station wagon come with a clunky 1.9-liter Four that struggles and moans. Far nicer is the optional 1.8-liter Four made by Mazda, which is smoother and more powerful. Alas, that engine is available only in the two-door GT hatchback in the Escort line. But it does come in the Mercury Tracer LTS sedan - the one to choose if you want the best here. Antilock brakes are badly needed in the Escort - and, again, they're available only in the GT (and the Tracer LTS). The basic Escort handles sluggishly; steering response is slow and a little sloppy. The GT version's taut suspension makes the car feel nimbler, though it

stiffens the ride. Too bad the Escort retains its irritating old motorized shoulder belts. Front seating is comfortable, and even short drivers can see well over the hood. The rear seat provides room enough for six-footers, but it's not very comfortable. The rear seatback sections can fold for more luggage room.

FORD ESCORT WAGON

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FORD EXPLORER

This best-selling sport-utility vehicle was redesigned inside and out for 1995, with improvements to the suspension, steering, and instrument panel. Ford finally offers an optional all-wheel drive system that can act as a full-time system if need be. The Explorer retains the previous model's 4.0-liter V6, which accelerates adequately. A 5.0-liter V8 is optional for 1996, but only in the two-wheel-drive XLT version. The four-speed automatic transmission shifts smoothly, if sometimes sluggishly. The steering feels light, but it gives some feel of the road. The ride is firm and well controlled, even with a full load aboard. The cabin remains as big and roomy as ever, and the four-door version easily seats five. Or you can fold the rear seats to create

a load area nearly as roomy as a minivan's. We recommend the optional trailer-towing package, with its added engine cooling. The high-line Limited version we tested offers very little more value than the XLT trimline and costs many thousands more.

FORD F-SERIES

Although it dates back to 1980, this has been the best-selling vehicle - car or truck - in the U.S. for years. The light-duty F-150 is the most popular in the series. Ford plans a major redesign during 1996, which will be designated a 1997 model. It will finally offer four-wheel antilock brakes. Extended-cab models will have a handy third door on the passenger's side to ease loading of the rear of the cab. Like other full-sized pickups, the F-Series is a work truck, good at hauling, and towing large loads. Engines range from a 4.9-liter 6 to a 7.5-liter V8 and a 7.3-liter turbodiesel V8.

FORD MUSTANG

A 1994 redesign gave this old-fashioned muscle car a new, more rigid body and a new interior. Unfortunately, the car retains most of the pedestrian underpinnings of its predecessor. The Mustang competes most closely with the only other surviving rear-wheel-drive muscle cars, the Chevrolet Camaro and Pontiac Firebird. Unlike those models, though, the Mustang doesn't feel sporty. The base version comes with a 3.8-liter V6, while the higher-line GT version offers the 4.6-liter V8 that powers the Ford Thunderbird and Crown Victoria. The V6 version feels sluggish, and it nose-dives severely during hard braking. The V8 has more punch; the 305-hp version is finally competitive with the Camaro and Firebird V8s. The Mustang handles stably and steadily on

smooth roads, but it bounces and sometimes steps to the side on bumpy roads. Expect a jerky ride in any version of the Mustang. The front seats provide generally adequate support but little comfort. Adults won't be comfortable for long in the rear seat. Most controls are well designed, except for Ford's usual hard-to-use radio.

FORD PROBE

The Probe and similar Mazda MX-6 are built in Michigan in a plant operated by Ford and Mazda. The two share many mechanical parts, but the Probe is a hatchback and the MX-6 is a coupe. A step up in performance from the base four-cylinder version, the V6 accelerates smoothly and with authority. We prefer the easy-shifting five-speed manual transmission to the optional four-speed automatic. Handling is very smooth and predictable. The Probe GT's taut suspension and wider tires provide crisper handling, but the MX-6 rides a bit more comfortably. (The base Probe, with a four-cylinder engine and softer suspension, wouldn't come close to matching the performance and handling of the GT - and it lacks seat-height

adjusters.) Save the rear seat for packages. We prefer the MX-6's interior layout to the Probe's. There's lots of luggage room under the Probe's hatchback, and folding the rear seatbacks extends the luggage area.

FORD RANGER

Ford's popular Ranger is our top-scoring compact pickup. Although the basic design has been around for years, technical tweaks have kept it up-to-date. The Ranger received a new, improved interior for 1995. The 1996 Ranger and similar Mazda B-Series are the only pickups with two air bags. The 4.0-liter V6 is fairly responsive, but it sounds harsh when it's revved. The Ranger handles well for a truck, but you won't mistake it for a passenger car. Steering is a bit vague, and the body leans quite a bit during cornering. Road bumps and uneven pavement mar the ride - also typical behavior for the breed. But the cab is reasonably quiet, and the front seats are soft and supportive.

The climate-control system works powerfully. An extended cab is so worthwhile an option that one wonders why it wasn't more popular years ago. Think of the space back there as a trunk (two children can occupy the small jump seats, but they won't be happy there).

FORD TAURUS

The Taurus and its sibling, the Mercury Sable, were thoroughly redesigned for 1996 - the first time in a decade. Informal test drives suggest that the new versions handle much better than their predecessors. They also have a much-improved interior design, spacious seating, and a pleasant ride. A unique dashboard pod puts the sound system and climate controls within easy reach of the driver. A new SHO version with a souped-up 3.4-liter aluminum V8 is due in mid-year.

FORD TAURUS WAGON

The Taurus (along with its sibling, the Mercury Sable) have long been among the top-selling sedans. They were thoroughly redesigned this year - for the first time in a decade - and took on swoopy lines based on a series of stylized ovals. The high-performance SHO version of the Taurus features a powerful and responsive V6 and a firmer suspension that provides slightly crisper handling.

FORD THUNDERBIRD

If you're willing to put up with the inconveniences of a coupe - long heavy doors and restricted access to the rear seat - the Thunderbird and its sibling, the Mercury Cougar, make a viable choice. For 1995, they received their first significant changes in six years: a new interior and freshened-up exterior. They keep the traditional rear-wheel drive. The optional V8 delivers plenty of acceleration and reasonable fuel economy. The four-speed transmission shifts slowly and clings to overdrive too long. Steering response is quick, but steering feel is so light that a driver gets little road feel. The body doesn't lean much in turns. The ride is firm but not punishing. The seats are soft enough, but they provide insufficient side and lower-back support. Restricted

head room makes the rear uncomfortable for tall people, and the tight toe space would bother anyone. Controls and displays are much improved over the previous ones, and the climate-control system is first rate. The trunk is roomy, though the optional premium sound system robs a lot of space back there. The rear seatbacks don't fold to increase the cargo area.

FORD WINDSTAR

This big front-wheel-drive model is one of the most refined minivans on the market, with a commendable ride. The floor is lower than that of other minivans; thus, it's easier to get into and load. It also feels quite carlike to drive, though its handling isn't as nimble as that of the new Chrysler minivans. And it never lets you forget how bulky it is. You can't see the ends of the body, so parking can take some guesswork. The Windstar is big inside, too, though not quite as big as the Dodge Grand Caravan/Chrysler Town & Country/Plymouth Grand Voyager triplets. The engine, the same workhorse 3.8-liter V6 Ford used for years in the Ford Taurus, picks up an additional 45 hp in

1996; that should make this minivan a little more sprightly. The controls are easy to reach, and the third seat can fold or slide forward a bit for more cargo room.

GEO METRO

Though the Metro grew a little larger with its 1995 redesign, it remains one of the smallest and lightest cars on the road. It's made in Canada by Suzuki, and it's similar to the Suzuki Swift. The car is much happier zipping around town than taking long trips. The base engine is a three-cylinder. What you give up in acceleration, which is a lot, you don't necessarily recover in fuel economy. Mileage is no better than in several more powerful small cars. The larger optional four-cylinder engine isn't much peppier. You'd expect a small car like this one to handle nimbly, but the Metro doesn't. The cockpit is cramped, particularly for long-legged people, and the stiff, choppy, and noisy ride becomes fatiguing over a long haul. The rear seat holds just two,

and not comfortably. Displays are easy to see, and most controls are sensibly laid out. The climate-control system works well for front-seat occupants; airflow to the rear is minimal.

GEO PRIZM

This high-rated model was once a virtual twin of the Toyota Corolla, but the two have developed distinct personalities. The Prizm and Corolla still share their powertrains, platform, and many body parts, but the Prizm has a slightly firmer ride. For best performance, choose the 1.8-liter Four over the base-level 1.6-liter Four, with either the five-speed manual transmission or the four-speed automatic. The Prizm's body leans a bit less than the Corolla's during cornering, but backing off the accelerator in a hard turn can make the tail slide out. The antilock brakes stop the car quite short, though not always entirely straight, on wet and dry roads. The ride is never punishing, but bumps make their presence known. The driving position feels a bit cramped,

but the front seats provide generally good support. The rear seat, like the Corolla's, is cramped. The climate-control system does its job quickly and powerfully. Most controls are easy to use, and the instruments are clear. You can expand the trunk by folding down the split rear seatback.

GEO TRACKER

The Tracker, Geo's version of the Suzuki Sidekick, is an agile little runabout that's not too punishing to live with. It finally has two air bags. Though better suited for local errands than long trips, the Tracker is a viable alternative to a small station wagon. It comes with two- or four-wheel drive and, as of 1996, a four-door as well as a convertible version. The engine provides adequate power. Optional fold-and-stow rear seats are available for the small cargo area behind the front seats.

GMC JIMMY

This model, like the similar Chevrolet Blazer, is now an up-to-date compact sport-utility vehicle. The 1995 redesign eliminated most of the older car's cruder elements. A fair amount of standard equipment, including air-conditioning, comes with all versions. The standard engine, a 4.3-liter, 190-hp V6, accelerates powerfully, and the automatic transmission shifts very smoothly. A passenger's-side air bag is still unavailable - a strange omission in a new model. The Jimmy comes in various two- and four-wheel-drive versions, but most of the four-wheel-drive options use a crude, part-time system. The highest trim line, the SLT, offers a full-time four-wheel-drive system (without low range), like that of some sedans and

minivans. Vague steering and prodigious body lean during cornering don't inspire confidence, and the brakes are mediocre. Bumpy roads badly mar the ride. Occupants will find plenty of room front and rear, and the front seats, at least, are adequately comfortable. The rear bench is skimpy. Cargo space is quite generous. We have no reliability data on the redesigned Jimmy. But many of the earlier mechanical components have been carried over, and the previous model has been unreliable.

GMC SAFARI

The Safari and its twin, the Chevrolet Astro, now come only in extended-length versions. Cargo room is massive and towing capacity is good. Optional all-wheel drive is useful on slippery roads. But this rear-wheel-drive minivan is a dated design, with clumsy handling, an uncomfortable ride, and subpar reliability. Dutch (upper and lower) rear doors aid loading.

GMC SIERRA C/K

The GMC Sierra and its twin, the Chevrolet C/K, are full-sized pickups, available with two- or four-wheel drive. The interior is nicer now, and the engines are more powerful and refined, but you'll still know you're driving a big truck. The Sierra is designed for hauling large, heavy loads. Engines range from a 4.3-liter V6 up to a 7.4-liter V8 and a 6.5-liter turbodiesel. Expect a commanding view of the road and a quiet cabin. In 1996 extended-cab versions, an extra door on the passenger's side (see photo) greatly eases loading of people or cargo.

GMC SONOMA

The compact GMC Sonoma, a twin of the Chevrolet S pickup, is a modern, up-to-date truck. For 1996, extended-cab versions have an optional "access panel" - an extra side door - to aid loading the rear compartment. The 4.3-liter V6 is sprightly. The optional four-speed automatic transmission shifts smoothly. Handling, though not bad, isn't as good as a car's: the Sonoma leans a lot in corners, the steering feels vague and heavy, and the rear axle hops to the side on washboard roads when the truck is unladen. Even with antilock brakes, stopping distances are quite long. An exceptionally quiet cabin somewhat mitigates the stiff, rubbery ride. We'd choose the extended-cab option for the convenience it brings. The climate-control system works extremely well, but its

controls are far from the driver. Cup-holders and storage nooks festoon the cabin. We have two nagging concerns: reliability has been well below average, and this truck did not do well in Government crash tests.

GMC SUBURBAN

This overgrown station wagon (like its twin, the Chevrolet Suburban) emphasizes utility over sport. Built on a full-sized pickup chassis, it can seat up to nine people and tow a 10,000-pound trailer. It comes in two- and four-wheel-drive versions; expect both to be more trucklike than carlike. Climate and radio controls have been improved. The thirsty 5.7-liter and mammoth 7.4-liter gasoline-burning V8s gained more power for 1996. The powerful 6.5-liter turbodiesel V8 may make sense for Suburban buyers who don't own a petroleum refinery.

GMC YUKON

The Yukon fills the gap between the compact GMC Jimmy and the enormous GMC Suburban. The Yukon and its Chevrolet sibling, the Tahoe, are built on a full-sized pickup-truck chassis, which lends itself to hauling cargo or towing a heavy trailer. A 5.7-liter V8 is standard; a turbodiesel V8 is optional in two-door models. The ride is surprisingly comfortable, and handling is reasonably secure. A two-door version with two- or four-wheel drive was added for 1996.

HONDA ACCORD

This model has been one of our top-rated sedans for many years. The high-line EX comes with a 2.2-liter "VTEC" Four, an engine whose valve timing is electronically controlled to boost both power and fuel economy. But even the base engine in the LX, a non-VTEC Four, delivers sprightly acceleration. (The optional V6, which became available in 1995, is a little faster, smoother and quieter, but a little less economical.) The sophisticated automatic transmission shifts smoothly and unobtrusively; its "grade logic" feature prevents hunting between gears on inclines. The LX leans quite a bit in turns, and its tires have mediocre grip. The EX handles more surely and a bit more nimbly, in part because of its larger tires. The taut suspension

damps out road irregularities well, the nicely shaped seats offer good support, and interior noise is minimal. A couple of quibbles: the trunk opening is small, and the key-operated release mechanism for folding down the rear seatbacks is awkward to reach. The wagon version rides and drives like the sedan. Cargo space is limited for a wagon in this class.

HONDA CIVIC

Honda's small-car entry, the Civic, was completely redesigned for 1996. We expect that Honda has made this good small car even better, with some incremental improvements in refinement and crashworthiness - and with no loss in the Civic's traditional reliability. The engines are marginally larger this year. The Civic comes in hatchback, coupe, and sedan versions. One, the HX hatchback, has an engine designed for optimum fuel economy. A unique continuously variable electronic transmission will be optional in the HX version.

HONDA CIVIC DEL SOL

This two-seater, based on the old Honda Civic, will carry on that model's underpinnings for a while. It comes up a little short for a contemporary sports car. Despite its detachable roof panel, the del Sol neither looks nor drives like a sports car. Think of it as an impractical economy car. All three models come with a 1.6-liter Four. The base S has 106 hp, and the Si has 125. A high-end "VTEC" version (with electronically controlled valve timing) cranks out 160 hp., and it comes with a sportier suspension as well. The Si's acceleration is quick enough, and steering response is adequate. The front end plows a bit, and the tail tends to slide out in tight, fast corners. The ride is busy, and the body flexes, rattles, and creaks on any but the smoothest roads.

Braking is mediocre without antilock brakes. A low seating position and wide rear roof pillars create serious blind spots for the driver. Tall drivers will find plenty of head and leg room. Even with the roof panel stowed in the trunk, lots of luggage room remains.

HONDA ODYSSEY

The Odyssey, Honda's first minivan, came to market in 1995. (The Isuzu Oasis, scheduled to be introduced early in 1996, is actually an Odyssey under its Isuzu nameplate.) Its compactness makes it feel more like a roomy wagon than a bulky minivan. It's based on the Honda Accord, and it drives very much like that sedan, with a supple, well-controlled ride, good handling, an efficient powertrain, and a logical, easy-to-use control layout. People who dislike sliding doors may appreciate the Odyssey's four conventional doors. The four-cylinder engine, the only choice available, is noisy. It accelerates adequately but labors a bit on long upgrades. Leg room in the cockpit may be a little tight for tall people, but the seats are comfortable. The high-line EX version

offers a height-adjustable driver's seat, handy for short people. But the LX model offers a better arrangement for the middle-row seats: a three-person bench that is far more practical than the two captain's chairs in the EX version. The rearmost bench seat cleverly folds and stows flush with the floor, leaving a good-sized cargo space behind the middle seats. Consider the Odyssey a six- or seven-passenger car with little luggage capacity or a four- or five-passenger car with ample luggage space. Although we don't have any reliability data on the Odyssey as yet, Honda models have generally been very reliable.

HONDA PASSPORT

Honda's first sport-utility vehicle is actually a rebadged Isuzu Rodeo. The Passport recently received two air bags and a significantly improved instrument panel. The optional V6 accelerates well. In the 1995 model, which continues into the first quarter of 1996, you must stop the car to engage the crude, part-time four-wheel drive (it can't be used on dry roads). Shift-on-the-fly finally comes with the true 1996 four-wheel-drive models. The current model's steering feels slow in routine driving, and the body leans heavily in turns. The Passport jiggles and bounds on rough roads. The two front seats provide good, extra-firm support. The flat rear bench gives plenty of space, but limited comfort, for three adults. The powerful heater serves

front-seat occupants well but leaves rear passengers out in the cold. The Passport offers little more cargo space than the average station wagon. The similar Rodeo has had a dismal reliability record. Note that the Rodeo comes with a much better warranty than the Passport.

HONDA PRELUDE

This sporty coupe is a happy blend of performance and handling. In fact, it's one of the best-handling sporty cars on the road. Honda's potent and economical 2.2-liter "VTEC" (valve timing electronically controlled) Four is an option, but even the less-powerful 2.3-liter Four in the Si version feels smooth and punchy. The five-speed manual transmission shifts precisely, but fully depressing the clutch pedal requires a stretch. The steering feels nicely weighted and responsive. Braking is respectable, though not outstanding. The ride is jiggly, but well controlled even on rough pavement. The cabin is fairly quiet for a sporty car. The front seats are firm and comfortable, and their large side bolsters cradle occupants in hard turns. The rear seat

is more decorative than functional; save it for packages or small children. The dashboard layout lags behind the fine ergonomics of most other Honda models. The Prelude devotes precious little space to storage or luggage.

HYUNDAI ACCENT

The Accent, Hyundai's smallest car, is the 1995 replacement for the dreadful Excel. Hyundai, a Korean manufacturer, has tried to forge a niche by selling low-priced cars with lots of standard equipment. Past efforts have been poorly executed and woefully unreliable. Now the company is trying to repair its image with a series of new designs. The Accent is a well-thought-out car with many features that are either unavailable or cost extra on competing small cars. The 92-hp, 1.5-liter Four provides adequate acceleration - better with the manual than with the automatic transmission. The optional power steering is a must. Unfortunately, antilock brakes are hard to find in Accents on dealers' lots, but the non-antilock brakes work fairly well. The

ride is choppy, but relatively quiet for a small car. The front seats provide reasonable support. The rear seat is roomier than those of competing cars, though a bit tight for tall people. Controls and displays are generally well placed. The Accent scores fairly well among the smallest cars on the road, but not so well if you include slightly larger and more expensive cars like the Geo Prizm, Mazda Protege, and Nissan Sentra. Reliability remains a key question.

HYUNDAI ELANTRA

The Elantra has been redesigned for 1996. In size and price, it fits between the new Accent, Hyundai's basic small car, and the Sonata, Hyundai's mid-sized sedan. Expect an up-to-date design, with a well-laid-out interior and lots of standard equipment. The Elantra must compete with well-established small cars like the Honda Civic, Toyota Corolla, and Dodge/Plymouth Neon. Reliability has been a problem for Hyundai, so caution is advised for the first year or so.

HYUNDAI SONATA

Though the Sonata was redesigned and much improved for 1995, it needs more polish to measure up to the competition. Previous Sonatas racked up a very poor record of reliability. The new car is about one inch longer than the Honda Accord, and its interior design is up-to-date. The standard engine is a 2.0-liter Four; the stronger, more refined, 3.0-liter V6 is a better choice. Handling is sound, but the steering feels overly light. The body leans and the tires squeal even during mild cornering. Every tiny bump in the road finds its way to the cabin; on bumpy roads, snaps, jolts, and stiff jiggles mar the ride. The front seats are fairly comfortable; the rear seat is adequate for two but snug for three adults. The trunk is roomy and the rear seatbacks fold for

more cargo space. Hyundais used to compete well in price, if nothing else. But with reasonable equipment, the Sonata's price advantage all but disappears.

INFINITI G20

This Japanese-made sports sedan feels like a good European car: it offers nimble handling without giving up much in comfort. The 2.0-liter Four delivers adequate acceleration and good fuel economy. The optional four-speed automatic transmission shifts smoothly in normal driving, more aggressively during hard acceleration. The crisp-shifting five-speed manual makes better use of the engine's modest power. The G20 handles nimbly, but abrupt avoidance maneuvers can make the rear end swing out a little. The front seats give good, firm support, and lots of adjustments on the driver's seat help accommodate practically anyone. The rear seat is roomy enough for two six-footers or three average-sized adults. The ride remains well controlled

even on rough pavement. The controls and displays are excellent; the climate-control system, quiet and effective. A fold-down rear seatback comes only in the high-line Touring model, but the trunk offers lots of luggage room even without that feature.

INFINITI I30

The I30 is new for 1996 - sort of. Actually, it's a rebadged Nissan Maxima with extra sound-deadening material, a plush leather interior, and fake-wood trim. It will compete in the class of \$30,000-plus sedans called, for want of a better term, "near luxury." We expect it to be a pleasant, competent car. The strong and smooth V6 is one of its best features. The interior is roomy, but the ride is nothing special, and the handling is no better than okay. We hope the I30's seats are more comfortable than the Maxima's, which didn't impress us.

INFINITI J30

This is a car for people who value near-absolute isolation from the road more than sporty handling. It's also a car for people who won't be using the rear seat often and who don't need much trunk room. Think of the J30 as a four-door luxury coupe. A 3.0-liter V6 drives the rear wheels, delivering smooth and responsive acceleration, and the four-speed automatic transmission (standard equipment) shifts smoothly. The car leans noticeably in tight turns, and the rear tires break loose fairly easily on slippery surfaces; alas, a traction-control system isn't available. Keeping the tail from wagging in abrupt maneuvers can be tricky. The antilock brakes always stop the car short and straight. The J30 rides smoothly and quietly over all kinds of

roads, and the engine is virtually inaudible at steady speeds. The front seats are especially comfortable; the eight-way power driver's seat can accommodate all but the tallest people. The rear seat is tight and uncomfortable even for two, and getting in and out is a challenge. The automatic climate-control system works very well. The major controls are laid out logically, and the important displays are clear. The trunk is small, and its high sill makes loading difficult.

INFINITI Q45

This is the flagship model in Nissan's luxury Infiniti line. The first-generation Q45 scored points for its muscle-car acceleration (thanks to a sophisticated 4.5-liter V8) and superb handling, almost like that of a big BMW. In later Q45 models, Nissan has blunted the performance in favor of a quieter, more refined ride. Too big to be agile, this rear-wheel-drive model plows ahead a little during hard cornering, but it remains firmly planted on the road. The suspension soaks up most road bumps well, giving a fine ride. Little noise penetrates the cabin. The front seats offer excellent though firm support. The steering-wheel and seat adjustments let you adapt the driving position to nearly any physique. The rear seat is comfortable for two adults but not for

three. Major controls and displays are generally well designed, though some minor switches are poorly placed. A large trunk makes this a fine vacation car.

ISUZU HOMBRE

The Hombre, new this year, is a basic Chevrolet S pickup with different sheet metal. But while the Chevrolet is built in Louisiana, the Hombre is built in Brazil. It's limited to a regular cab, standard bed, and two-wheel drive. The only powertrain is Chevrolet's base Four, which is barely adequate, and a five-speed manual transmission. Our concerns with this model include the sub-par first-year reliability of the Chevrolet S pickup. And although the Hombre has a different body, the S pickup's poor showing in Government crash tests doesn't inspire confidence.

ISUZU OASIS

The Oasis, scheduled to be introduced early in 1996, is actually a Honda Odyssey under its Isuzu nameplate. Its compactness makes it feel more like a roomy wagon than a bulky minivan. It's based on the Honda Accord, and it drives very much like that sedan, with a supple, well-controlled ride, good handling, an efficient powertrain, and a logical, easy-to-use control layout. People who dislike sliding doors may appreciate the Oasis's four conventional doors. The four-cylinder engine, the only choice available, is noisy. It accelerates adequately but labors a bit on long upgrades. Leg room in the cockpit may be a little tight for tall people, but the seats are comfortable. The three-person bench seat in the middle row is far more practical than the optional

captain's chairs, which can't be removed to enlarge the cargo area. The rearmost bench seat cleverly folds flush with the floor, leaving a good-sized cargo space behind the middle seats. Consider this a six- or seven-passenger car with little luggage space or a four- or five-passenger car with ample luggage space. Although we don't have any reliability data on the Oasis as yet, models made by Honda have generally been very reliable.

ISUZU RODEO

The compact Rodeo, made in Indiana, is a little smaller than Isuzu's flagship SUV, the Trooper. (The Honda Passport is actually a Rodeo with a different name badge.) The Rodeo recently received two air bags and a significantly improved instrument panel. The 3.2-liter V6 accelerates well. In the current 1995 model, which continues into the first quarter of 1996, you must stop the car to engage the crude, part-time four-wheel drive (it can't be used on dry roads). Shift-on-the-fly is finally available in the true 1996 four-wheel-drive models. The steering feels slow in routine driving, and the body leans heavily in turns. The Rodeo jiggles and bounds on rough roads. The two front seats provide good, extra-firm support. The flat rear bench seat gives

plenty of space but limited comfort for three adults. The powerful heater serves front-seat occupants well but leaves rear passengers out in the cold. Cargo space is only a little roomier than in the average station wagon. The Rodeo has had a dismal reliability record, but at least it comes with a much better warranty than does the Passport.

ISUZU TROOPER

This big, boxy vehicle feels substantial and refined, but its weight robs the 3.2-liter V6 of much of its performance. Dual air bags, new in 1995 models, should improve the Trooper's crash performance. The crude, part-time four-wheel drive isn't suitable for use on dry pavement. Handling is sloppy even in routine driving, and the car leans a lot in turns. Stops are straight but longer than usual, despite the four-wheel antilock brakes, and the nose dives severely. Comfortable seats compensate only partly for a ride that's bouncy and jiggly even on smooth roads. The driving position can accommodate various physiques: Head room is generous, leg room is adequate for six-footers, and short drivers can reach the pedals and see out well. The rear

seat is designed for three passengers, but it can comfortably hold only two. The climate-control system is powerful. Most of the controls are convenient, and the displays are clear.

JAGUAR XJ6

Jaguar freshened up this rear-wheel-drive model's styling for 1995, and the engine and suspension received some tweaks. The 4.0-liter inline Six delivers smooth and powerful acceleration. The XJ6 carves neatly through twisting country roads and remains predictable while negotiating tight turns. The ride is soft and well mannered. The once-chaotic control layout has been markedly improved. The front seats are nicely shaped, but the cockpit is cramped, and leg room is inadequate for tall drivers. The rear accommodates three adults in comfort. We lack sufficient data to predict the XJ6's reliability.

JEEP CHEROKEE

A standard driver's air bag and optional antilock brakes and full-time all-wheel drive were added in 1995, but the basic design has changed little since 1984. The Cherokee handles well in normal driving, and it has lots of cargo room. But it remains a harsh-riding and noisy vehicle with narrow seats. The 4.0-liter Six is much stronger than the 2.5-liter Four. Although the air-conditioner is powerful, the heater could be better. So could the controls and displays.

JEEP GRAND CHEROKEE

Don't confuse the Grand Cherokee with the plain old Cherokee. The Grand version is much more civilized and refined, and it scores very well in our tests. Unfortunately, the Grand Cherokee seems not to have improved on Jeep's woeful reliability record. Of the various rear-wheel and four-wheel-drive permutations, we'd opt for the highest-line Quadra-Trac, a sophisticated, full-time all-wheel-drive system. The 4.0-liter Six provides good acceleration. The 5.2-liter V8 uses only a little more fuel, and it earns its keep with its quick acceleration and towing ability. The four-speed automatic transmission shifts smoothly. Handling is stable and almost carlike, and stops are reasonably short. The Grand Cherokee rocks annoyingly from side to side on bumpy

roads, but the suspension soaks up ruts and ridges with aplomb. The cabin stays as quiet as in most sedans. The driving position accommodates both tall and short people. Seating is roomy and comfortable front and rear, with plenty of room for four adults. The instruments are easy to read, but the controls remain illogically scattered, despite their recent redesign. The powerful climate-control system can run either manually or semiautomatically.

JEEP WRANGLER

This is the closest surviving descendant of the old World War II Jeep, the seed from which the entire sport-utility craze sprouted. It's the smallest, least expensive, and crudest Jeep. Nevertheless, its popularity with off-roaders endures. A basic four-wheel-drive vehicle with a hard, noisy ride and primitive handling, the Wrangler lives on because of its reputation for rugged durability in the wilds. If you must buy one, opt for the Six and antilock brakes. The Wrangler has the worst reliability record of any sport-utility vehicle. A freshened-up 1997 Wrangler is due in mid-1996.

LAND ROVER DISCOVERY

The British-made Discovery, first imported in 1995, fills the niche between the old and primitive Defender and the chic, sophisticated, and costly Range Rover. A short wheelbase, high road clearance, and sophisticated full-time all-wheel-drive system well suit the Discovery for off-road excursions, but the vehicle comes up a bit short in everyday driving. The Discovery's 4.0-liter V8 delivers the worst of both worlds: slow acceleration and miserable fuel economy. The automatic transmission is slow to downshift, the steering feels a bit vague, and the body leans a lot in turns. Except for side-to-side rocking on uneven pavement, the ride is relatively good for a sport-utility vehicle. Expect very long stops on a wet road. The rear bench is reasonably

comfortable. The optional jump seats in the cargo bay are for children only. Major controls are easy to use, but minor controls are illogically arranged, hard to reach, and cryptically labeled. Payload capacity is generous, and the cargo bay is high, though a little short.

LEXUS ES300

This model gives a feeling of near-total isolation from the world outside. Some people like that, while others deplore the ES300's light steering and lack of road feel. The smooth V6, the same engine found in the Toyota Avalon and as an option in the Toyota Camry, accelerates smoothly and powerfully. The four-speed automatic shifts imperceptibly. Handling is sound but not sporty; stops are short and straight. Controls and displays are generally well designed, but the temperature and radio-volume knobs are easily confused, and strong sunlight washes out the brightly illuminated gauges. The front seats offer good support, but the leather upholstery is very slippery, and the interior is not especially roomy. The rear seat can accommodate three. The

trunk is large, but its loading sill is high. The ES300 shares many of its mechanical components with the Toyota Camry V6. The ES300 is a little quieter and a little more luxurious - and a lot more expensive.

LEXUS GS300

This rear-wheel-drive model emphasizes the luxury end of the sports-luxury field. As in most Lexus models, a cocoon of silence shields occupants from the rigors of the road. Although the GS300 competes with such European luxury sedans as the Mercedes E-Class and BMW 5-Series, its inline six-cylinder engine doesn't quite keep up with those competitors. Nor does the GS300 handle as well. Our test car's four-speed automatic transmission shifted smoothly under all conditions; a five-speed automatic is new for 1996. In hard turns, the body leans somewhat, the car tends to plow ahead, and the steering becomes very light. But handling remains safe. Controls and displays are a model that other automakers would do well to

imitate. Many adjustments help the power front seats to provide good support. One minor complaint: the low windshield header may obstruct a tall driver's view of overhead traffic lights. The rear seat is exceptionally comfortable for two, but a center passenger must perch too high. The trunk provides sufficient luggage space for a family of four.

LEXUS LS400

This flagship of Toyota's luxury-car division is one of the world's finest luxury sedans. Its 1995 redesign left the outside looking similar, but a longer wheelbase provides more interior room. The engine is also a little stronger, and the LS400 shed 200 pounds, so the performance feels a little livelier. This model combines a sophisticated rear-wheel-drive powertrain with a lush, quiet, leather-wrapped interior. The LS400 continues to emphasize quietness and road isolation. On previous models, the steering was very light, even numb; the latest model gives a bit more feel.

LEXUS SC400/SC300

This two-door luxury coupe places greater emphasis on performance than does the Lexus LS400 luxury sedan. The refined and powerful aluminum V8, with rear-wheel drive, delivers plenty of acceleration, and this coupe handles winding roads as well as a fine sports car would. A sophisticated and effective traction-control system minimizes wheel spin. The ride is firm, but the suspension soaks up most road bumps without fuss. The automatic climate-control system works superbly. The luminescent displays are exceptionally easy to read, but some secondary controls are awkwardly placed or hard to see. The optional Nakamichi stereo system sounds very good. Typical of a luxury coupe, the front seats offer fine accommodations for

most people, while the rear seat is better left uninhabited. Very large people may find even the front seats too narrow, and the trunk is quite small as well. The Lexus SC300 behaves virtually the same as the SC400. It's available with either a five-speed manual transmission or a four-speed automatic. The spirited Six isn't as smooth as the V8, but the car costs thousands of dollars less.

LINCOLN CONTINENTAL

The Continental was redesigned for 1995. The biggest performance upgrade came with the addition of the Lincoln Mark VIII's spirited aluminum V8, which should finally make this car more competitive with other luxury models. The suspension uses air cushions instead of springs. Several settings let the driver adjust the firmness of the ride and the effort required to turn the steering wheel. Like other Lincolns, this one comes fully loaded. The spacious interior should accommodate five with ease, and the cabin should be very quiet. The trunk is huge.

LINCOLN MARK VIII

A ride as smooth as any you'll find is this rear-wheel-drive luxury coupe's strong point. Sophisticated features include a powerful aluminum V8, electronically controlled powertrain, and fully independent suspension with air cushions instead of springs. The traction control works only at low speeds: a heavy foot on the throttle overwhelms it. The Mark VIII maneuvers with surprising agility for such a large car. The power-adjusted front seats offer good, firm support. Getting in and out of the front seats is easy, as long as you have room to open the long door fully. The rear seat is cramped. The automatic climate-control system is quiet and powerful, though a bit slow to start. Most controls are easy to see and reach.

LINCOLN TOWN CAR

Despite its sophisticated V8 and full complement of safety features, the Town Car maintains the time-worn tradition of domestic luxury turnpike cruisers: it comes with a full frame, rear-wheel drive, and a panoply of electronic gadgets and convenience features. Expect a soft, quiet ride and seating for six. To tame the car's tendency to wallow on bumps, choose the "ride control" package.

MAZDA 626

The 626 is a well-rounded and high-rated family sedan with an especially comfortable ride. It comes with either an adequate Four or a very smooth optional V6. Mazda's four-speed automatic transmission works well with either engine, but the five-speed manual can get the most performance out of the four-cylinder. The mid-line LX offers more value than the top-line ES, which comes loaded with expensive frills. The 626 handles reasonably well. The body leans a lot during cornering, but good tire grip gives the driver confidence. The front seats are nicely shaped. The rear seat can hold three. The controls are well laid out except for the small, hard-to-find horn buttons. The split rear seatback can be folded.

MAZDA B-SERIES

The Mazda pickup is really a Ford Ranger with a Mazda nameplate, and we expect it to behave similarly. Although the basic design has been around for years, technical tweaks have kept it up-to-date. The 1995 model year brought a new, greatly improved interior. In 1996, the B-Series and Ranger will be the only pickups to offer two air bags. The 4.0-liter V6 is fairly responsive, but it sounds harsh when revved. The B-series handles well for a truck, but you won't mistake it for a passenger car. The steering is vague, and the body leans quite a bit during cornering. Road bumps and uneven pavement mar the ride - also typical for the breed. But the cab remains reasonably quiet, and the front seats are soft and supportive. The climate-control

system works powerfully. The optional extended cab is so practical that one wonders why it wasn't more popular years ago. Think of the space back there as extra luggage room - two children can sit in the small jump seats back there, but they won't be happy.

MAZDA MILLENIA

The Millenia was supposed to be the first model in a new luxury line from Mazda, but the company's economic woes scuttled those plans. Instead, the Millenia emerged as a luxury Mazda, slotted between the compact 626 and the mid-sized 929. Sensible design details make the Millenia a comfortable, convenient car to drive. The high-trim S version we tested comes with a supercharged "Miller cycle" 2.3-liter V6 that puts out 210 hp - impressive for an engine that small. The car accelerates like a jet at takeoff, slowly at first, then robustly. The car holds the road and corners well, but it leans considerably in turns. The suspension soaks up ripples and ruts with quiet aplomb. The front seats are very comfortable and well shaped, but people

with long legs may find the cockpit a tight fit. The rear seat can hold three six-footers, but two would be much more comfortable. Most controls are clearly labeled and easy to use. The window and lock switches on the driver's door aren't illuminated at night, so they're hard to discern. The trunk is roomy.

MAZDA MPV

This minivan finally offers two air bags and four-wheel antilock brakes. (The old rear-only antilock brakes were subpar.) The MPV has four doors, like a station wagon. The V6 accelerates fairly well. The all-wheel-drive option improves handling somewhat. An optional load-leveling system smooths things out a bit. Cargo space is limited for a minivan.

MAZDA MX-5 MIATA

This Japanese-made two-seat convertible captures the ambiance of the popular British sports cars of the 1950s and 1960s - kidney-jarring ride, throaty exhaust, and all. Unlike those old sports cars, though, the Miata is weathertight and reliable. (A removable hardtop is optional.) The 1.8-liter Four provides zesty performance. A crisp-shifting five-speed manual transmission with a stubby shifter and short shift pattern enhances the car's sporty appeal. Nimble handling, precise and direct steering, and powerful brakes make this rear-wheel-drive sportster fun to drive. The Miata is built for small to medium-sized adults; tall occupants may feel especially claustrophobic with the top up. The engine emits sounds that are music to a car buff's ears, but

wind noise can be a problem at highway speeds. Most controls are easy to operate, and the displays are clear. The Miata has a capable climate-control system. If you take a vacation in the Miata, you'll have to travel light: trunk space is minimal.

MAZDA MX-6

The MX-6 and similar Ford Probe are both built in Michigan in a plant operated by Ford and Mazda. The MX-6 is a coupe with a conventional trunk, while the Probe is a hatchback, but they share many mechanical parts. A step up in performance from the base four-cylinder version, the LS version, with its V6, accelerates smoothly and strongly. We prefer the easy-shifting five-speed manual transmission to the four-speed automatic. Handling is very smooth and predictable. The MX-6's softer suspension provides a slightly more comfortable ride, while the Probe GT's taut suspension and wider tires provide crisper handling. Save the rear seat for packages. We prefer the MX-6's interior layout to the Probe's. Also, the MX-6 has been more reliable.

MAZDA PROTEGÉ

The Protege, redesigned for 1995, competes in the crowded small-car market against such models as the Honda Civic, Toyota Corolla, and Dodge/Plymouth Neon. The Protege is one of the best of the bunch. It's a roomy car in a small package, it handles well, and it provides a satisfactory ride. The larger of the two engines offered, a 1.8-liter Four, provides plenty of acceleration. The base 1.5-liter Four is a mite slower, but thriftier with fuel. Tires that grip well and fairly quick steering inspire confidence. The cabin stays quiet most of the time, but coarse pavement produces some tire noise. Most controls are well designed and easy to use. The front seats are hard but nicely shaped and supportive. The rear seat can hold three tall people

in a modicum of comfort. The trunk is relatively roomy, and the rear seatbacks can be folded down.

MAZDA RX-7

Comfort and practicality take a back seat to pure, uncompromising performance in the RX-7. The styling is reminiscent of classic sports-car marques of the past - Cobra, Jaguar, Ferrari. The RX-7 is a two-seater; the cockpit is cramped even for a pair of average-sized people, and pure misery for tall people. A rotary engine with twin turbochargers powers the rear wheels, delivering ferocious acceleration. The five-speed manual transmission is well matched to the engine; the travel of the shifter is short, and the action is precise. The brakes are exceptional. The RX-7 handles twisty roads with aplomb, as a sports car should. The stiff suspension produces an unusually hard ride; every pebble and pavement seam announces itself.

The car is relentlessly noisy, especially on coarse pavement. The bucket seats are comfortable for those who fit them, but access is awkward even for a sports car. The cockpit is stark, with practically no storage space for odds and ends. Luggage space is minimal, too.

MERCEDES-BENZ C-CLASS

The Mercedes C-Class may be the entry-level model for this high-priced nameplate, but it's luxuriously appointed throughout. As in all Mercedes-Benzes, the drive wheels are in the rear. The C220 comes with a 2.2-liter Four; the C280, with a 2.8-liter inline Six. The Six is a good deal more powerful. The four-speed automatic transmission engages slowly but then shifts smoothly. Traction control helps a lot on slick roads, but it's a pricey option. The car handles responsively and is easy to control in abrupt maneuvers. You can expect a supple, quiet ride. The front seats are very firm but comfortable. Leg room is tight for tall drivers, and the rear seat comfortably holds only two.

MERCEDES-BENZ E-CLASS

The civilized E-Class combines spirited acceleration with acceptable fuel economy, precise handling with a luxurious ride. The car now has a touch more interior space, and refinements to the suspension and steering should further improve the fine handling. Side-impact air bags are standard in the 1996 models. A new family of engines and a station wagon are due for 1997.

MERCURY COUGAR

If you're willing to put up with the inconveniences of a coupe - long heavy doors and restricted access to the rear seat - the Cougar and its sibling, the Ford Thunderbird, make a viable choice. For 1995, they received their first significant changes in six years: a new interior and freshened-up exterior. They keep the traditional rear-wheel drive. The optional V8 delivers plenty of acceleration and reasonable fuel economy. The four-speed transmission shifts slowly and clings to overdrive too long. Steering response is quick, but steering feel is so light that a driver gets little road feel. The body doesn't lean much in turns. The seats feel soft but provide insufficient side and lower back support. Restricted head room makes the rear uncomfortable for

tall people, and the tight toe space would bother anyone. Controls and displays are much improved over the previous ones, and the climate-control system is first rate. The trunk is roomy, though the optional premium sound system robs a lot of space back there. The rear seatbacks don't fold to increase the cargo area.

MERCURY GRAND MARQUIS

This is one of the last big freeway cruisers made the old fashioned way, with a V8, full frame, and rear-wheel drive. In 1995, the Grand Marquis and its sibling, the Ford Crown Victoria, received a minor facelift inside and out; the new interior includes a redesigned dash and new seats - good news, since the old seats were thinly padded and uncomfortable. The Grand Marquis delivers a serene ride, especially with a full load aboard. A huge trunk and substantial trailer-towing capability are further bonuses. The 4.6-liter V8 cruises effortlessly, and the automatic transmission shifts smoothly. Steering response is quite good, too. Choose the Handling and Performance Package for better handling and tire grip. With the upgraded suspension and tires,

the car plows ahead only moderately in hard turns. The front bench seat is designed to hold three abreast, but an adult won't be happy in the center position. Leg room is just adequate for tall drivers. The rear seat is roomy enough for three, though toe space is tight.

MERCURY MYSTIQUE

The new-in-1995 Mystique and its counterpart, the Ford Contour, were developed by Ford of Europe, where the car is called the Ford Mondeo. The car features modern styling and design, including a rigid body, a sophisticated rear suspension, and a smooth-shifting optional automatic transmission. The base 2.0-liter Four accelerates adequately, but it booms annoyingly and idles a little roughly. The smooth and powerful 2.5-liter V6 is a much better choice. The car feels nimble even with the base suspension and tires. The Contour and Mystique respond quickly to their steering. With the optional sport suspension and performance tires, the car negotiates winding roads like a good sports sedan. But the ride is a little better with the softer base

suspension. The front seats are comfortable, with plenty of room for most people. The rear seat is distinctly cramped, and the center position is too narrow to accommodate most child safety seats. Most controls are nicely designed, and the climate-control system includes a replaceable pollen/dust filter. The large trunk becomes roomier still when you fold down the rear seatback.

MERCURY SABLE

The Sable and its sibling, the Ford Taurus, were thoroughly redesigned for 1996 - the first time in a decade. Informal test drives suggest that the new versions handle much better than their predecessors. They also have a much-improved interior design, spacious seating, and a pleasant ride. A unique dashboard pod puts the sound system and climate controls within easy reach of the driver.

MERCURY TRACER

With the Tracer, as with its sibling, the Ford Escort, only one version is worth considering: the high-line LTS sedan. It's the only Tracer that offers the peppy, Mazda-built 1.8-liter Four. Although slightly smaller than the standard 1.9-liter Four, it's more powerful. (The station wagon isn't available with the desirable 1.8-liter Four.) The optional four-speed automatic transmission shifts fairly smoothly, and the five-speed manual transmission is a good choice as well. Antilock brakes are badly needed, since the standard brakes are mediocre at best - and only the LTS version offers them as an option. (The LTS we tested did have antilock brakes.) The base version handles sluggishly; steering response is a little sloppy. The taut LTS

suspension makes the car feel nimble and quick on country roads. The ride is fairly good, although a little stiff. Front seating is comfortable, and even short drivers can see well over the hood. Too bad this model retains its annoying old motorized shoulder belts. The rear seat is roomy enough for six-footers, though not very comfortable. The rear seatback sections can be folded for more luggage space.

MERCURY VILLAGER

The Villager and its twin, the Nissan Quest, are made in the U.S. jointly by Ford and Nissan. They are among our top-rated minivans, and they feel very carlike to drive. For 1996, conventional front safety belts finally replace the annoying old motorized shoulder belts. Finally, too, these minivans have dual air bags. The 3.0-liter V6 delivers plenty of power, and the four-speed automatic transmission generally shifts smoothly. Usable cargo space is adequate, although significantly smaller than in the Ford Windstar or Dodge Caravan and Plymouth Voyager twins. We strongly recommend the optional trailer-towing package - not only for its added towing capability, but also for its extra engine cooling and conventional spare tire.

The ride is quite smooth and quiet, and handling is nimble for a minivan; the body doesn't lean much during cornering. The optional heavy-duty suspension provides a slight edge in handling. The standard antilock brakes stop well. The driving position is comfortable; the height adjustment on the optional power seat accommodates both tall and short people. The optional center-row captain's chairs are easier to remove than the standard bench seat.

MITSUBISHI 3000 GT

In their sportiest form, the 3000GT and its twin, the Dodge Stealth, are loaded with techno-gadgets. Trim lines range from the 222-hp base model with front-wheel drive on up to the 320-hp VR-4, with twin turbochargers, four-wheel steering, electronically adjustable suspension, and all-wheel drive. The latter version gives good cornering grip, exceptionally short stops, and powerful acceleration. The car is fast, but it's too heavy and wide to feel nimble. Nonturbo versions are fairly uninspiring to drive. The rear seat is just for show.

MITSUBISHI DIAMANTE

Mitsubishi's most luxurious sedan competes in a market crowded with the likes of the BMW 3- and 5-Series, Mazda Millenia, Lexus ES 300, and Volvo 960. Though it's a capable performer, the Diamante doesn't stand out in that crowd. Computers control the variable-assist power steering, suspension, brakes, starting traction on slippery surfaces, interior temperature, door locks, and interior lighting in this gadget-laden sedan. But other models have scored as well or higher in our tests without all that gadgetry. The Diamante's weight takes its toll on performance; the 3.0-liter V6's strong acceleration is most apparent at speeds well above the legal limit. The four-speed automatic transmission shifts smoothly

except for an occasional low-speed bump; it offers Power and Economy modes. The antilock brakes stop the car straight but not all that short. The Diamante handles smoothly but not nimbly in routine driving. Emergency handling feels responsive; the tail may wag in abrupt avoidance maneuvers, however. The ride is taut, well controlled, and quiet. The front seats are comfortable for most people; the rear seat is tight even for two adults. The semiautomatic climate-control system works strongly and quickly, and the instruments are easy to read.

MITSUBISHI ECLIPSE

The Eclipse and similar Eagle Talon were redesigned for 1995. They're made in Illinois by Diamond Star, a subsidiary of Mitsubishi. The standard engine is the Chrysler-built 2.0-liter Four that powers the Neon; it needs a lot of revving before it produces much power. More expensive trim lines get a more powerful Mitsubishi 2.0-liter turbocharged Four. It's fast enough but doesn't deliver the sporty performance of the Honda Prelude or Ford Probe. The Eclipse comes with either front- or all-wheel drive.

MITSUBISHI GALANT

Although it's a competent family sedan, the Galant scored a notch below such excellent models as the Toyota Camry and Honda Accord. The 2.4-liter Four delivers lively acceleration. The optional electronic automatic transmission shifts smoothly most of the time, though it sometimes downshifts when you'd rather it wouldn't. Handling remains safe and controllable through tight, fast turns, and the steering provides good feel of the road. The ride is fine on smooth highways, but minor flaws in the road deliver firm kicks and jolts. Some may find the front seats too thinly padded. The contoured rear seat can hold three adults if need be, though the center passenger has only the hard folded armrest to lean back on. Instruments and controls are generally

clear and easy to use. The rear seatback can be folded down to expand the trunk.

MITSUBISHI MIGHTY MAX

This is a basic, rudimentary compact pickup. The 1996 model year will probably be the last for the Mighty Max, which is one of few imported pickups. It comes only with two-wheel drive, a regular cab, and a 116-hp four-cylinder engine. It's not a bad truck, but it's not a good truck either.

MITSUBISHI MIRAGE

This Mitsubishi model is also available from Chrysler Corp. as the Eagle Summit. Mitsubishi sells only coupe versions to the public; four-door sedans go to Mitsubishi's rental fleet. Most cars on the dealer's lot will be short on extra equipment such as antilock brakes. That's too bad, since the standard, non-antilock brakes are among the poorest we've tested in years. The car rides firmly and often uncomfortably. The front seats provide generally satisfactory support, and tall drivers will find adequate leg room. Three average-sized adults can fit in the back without undue discomfort. Major controls are easy to see and use, but some minor switches are hidden or hard to operate. The versatile climate-control system quickly provides heated or

cooled air. You can expand the moderate-sized trunk by folding down the split rear seatback in some versions. The best thing about this car is its zesty and fuel-efficient powertrain. If you buy a Mirage or Eagle Summit, look for one with the 1.8-liter Four, five-speed manual transmission, and antilock brakes.

MITSUBISHI MONTERO

The high, boxy Montero received minor interior improvements in 1996. The 3.0-liter V6 accelerates sluggishly; choose the 3.5-liter V6 instead. The Montero feels tippy in routine driving. The all-wheel-drive system, which can be left permanently engaged, reduces the tendency of the tail to swing out abruptly during hard cornering. The climate-control system is quick and powerful. Short drivers can see out well. The rear seat provides ample space for two but not three six-footers. Two small extra seats are available for the rear, so you can seat seven in a pinch.

NISSAN 200SX

The 200SX, which came out in 1995, is a sporty coupe version of the Nissan Sentra. It shares its base, 1.6-liter Four with the sedan; the SE-R version gets a stronger, 2.0-liter Four. The 200SX replaces several models: the old Sentra SE-R, which earned a reputation as an affordable, fun-to-drive little coupe, and the NX1600 and NX2000, two other examples of the inexpensive sporty-car genre. The 200SX is well laid out, and we expect it to be reliable.

NISSAN 240SX

Redesigned for 1995, the 240SX remains a front-engined, rear-wheel-drive coupe, competing with such front-drive models as the Acura Integra Coupe and Toyota Celica. Our early glimpse suggests that the 240SX provides decent handling and a reasonably comfortable ride. The 2.4-liter Four offers adequate if noisy acceleration. Full, clear instrumentation complements generally well-designed controls. The firm front seats provide adequate support. As in most small sports coupes, the rear seat is best left vacant.

NISSAN 300ZX

This two-seater is everything a sports car should be - and it's also remarkably smooth and easy to drive. The 3.0-liter V6, with twin turbochargers, runs flawlessly and delivers blazing acceleration without noticeable turbo lag (a delay in engine response common in turbocharged cars). In our tests, the 300ZX sped from rest to 60 mph in just 6.1 seconds. The five-speed manual transmission shifts crisply and precisely. Handling of this rear-wheel-drive model is virtually perfect during routine driving, and four-wheel steering makes cornering especially responsive. Excellent tire grip, minimal body lean, and smooth steering give crisp and quick response during emergency maneuvers, and the antilock brakes stop short and straight.

The electronic suspension gives you a choice of two settings; even the softer setting won't let you forget you're in a sports car. The front seats provide good support, but some drivers complained about the placement of the pedals or steering wheel. Climbing in or out requires nimbleness. The automatic climate-control system unobtrusively maintains the selected temperature. Operating controls are easy to reach but hard to see, and the two small horn buttons are hard to find quickly. The cargo bay is quite roomy for a sports car.

NISSAN ALTIMA

The Altima bills itself as an "affordable luxury car," a claim that stretches credulity on both ends. The ads proclaim such "luxury amenities" as dual air bags, a tilt steering wheel, and reclining seats - not exactly show-stoppers these days. But beyond the hyperbole, the Altima performs competently, overall. The 2.4-liter Four accelerates quickly enough, but it buzzes and hums while gathering speed. Both the manual and automatic transmissions work well. The Altima leans noticeably when cornering (the SE less so than other versions), but it remains predictable. The antilock brakes work well. The ride is jittery and busy on both good roads and bad. The front seats are low and flat, and their height can't be adjusted. Long-legged drivers need more thigh

support. Short drivers should have no problem. Rear seating is just roomy enough for two tall people; wedging in three adults asks a lot of them. The instruments are clear; the controls could be better. The GLE version's automatic climate-control system works well, as does the manual system in the SE and GXE. The trunk is roomy for a compact model, but the rear seatback doesn't fold down.

NISSAN MAXIMA

Nissan redesigned the Maxima for 1995 and made it a bit larger, distancing it from the compact Altima. A roomy interior, with lots of head room, and a strong, refined, aluminum V6 are the car's best features. While the Maxima remains competent, overall, Nissan seems to have cut a few corners. The seats aren't too comfortable, particularly on long trips, and the ride doesn't seem as supple as the previous model's. The worsened ride may be due to Nissan's having done away with the independent rear suspension of the previous model. (The new design saves weight and gives a smidgen more room in the rear seat.) The car feels ponderous during hard cornering, too. Nissan sells a plusher and more expensive version of the Maxima as the Infiniti I30.

NISSAN PATHFINDER

The Pathfinder has been completely redesigned for 1996, and little information is available at this writing. The new model has unit-body construction instead of a full frame. The old Pathfinder rode and handled very well for a sport-utility vehicle, and we don't expect that to change. What may change for the better is crashworthiness: the older model did very poorly in Government crash tests. We hope they'll upgrade the crude, part-time four-wheel-drive system, which is unsuitable for use on dry pavement.

NISSAN QUEST

The Quest and its twin, the Mercury Villager, are made in the U.S. jointly by Ford and Nissan. They are among our top-rated minivans, and they feel very carlike to drive. For 1996, conventional front safety belts finally replace the annoying old motorized front shoulder belts. Finally, too, these minivans have dual air bags. The 3.0-liter V6 delivers plenty of power, and the four-speed automatic transmission generally shifts smoothly. Usable cargo space is adequate, although significantly smaller than in the Ford Windstar or Dodge Caravan and Plymouth Voyager twins. We strongly recommend the optional trailer-towing package - not only for its added towing capability, but also for its extra engine cooling and conventional spare tire.

The ride is quite smooth and quiet, and handling is nimble for a minivan; the body doesn't lean much during cornering. The optional heavy-duty suspension provides a slight edge in handling. The standard antilock brakes stop well. The driving position is comfortable; the height adjustment on the optional power seat accommodates both tall and short people. The optional center-row captain's chairs are easier to remove than the standard bench seat.

NISSAN SENTRA

Although it was redesigned for 1995, the Sentra still falls a notch or two below the best small cars on the market. The 1.6-liter Four accelerates only adequately, and the optional four-speed automatic transmission hunts annoyingly between gears. The Sentra isn't as much fun to drive as some other small cars. Steering response borders on the sluggish. The car leans a lot in hard turns, and the tires don't grip the road all that well. The ride is satisfactory on most roads, and the front bucket seats provide good, firm support. Leg room is a bit tight for tall people front and rear. The rear seat provides all the usual small-car discomforts for three averaged-sized adults. Controls are easy to operate, and the displays are simple and legible. The trunk is relatively large, but the port through the rear seat is fairly small.

NISSAN TRUCK

This basic compact pickup is made in Tennessee, in the same factory that produces the Sentra. It's available in either two- or four-wheel drive. For 1996, it finally gets a driver's air bag. The V6 will disappear, leaving only the Four. Antilock brakes are available on the rear wheels only - an inadequate arrangement. The interior is nicely laid out, with an instrument panel similar to those in Nissan sedans.

OLDSMOBILE ACHIEVA

This aging and uninspired design shares many components with the Buick Skylark and Pontiac Grand Am. The Achieva seems designed to woo older, conservative buyers. The three-speed automatic transmission sometimes shifts abruptly. Traction control is now standard with the automatic transmission. Steering is slow and vague, and the car tends to plow ahead in corners. The optional 3.1-liter V6 accelerates quite smoothly. The front seats give firm, comfortable support, but the driving position is too low. The rear seat is a bit friendlier than the Skylark's and Grand Am's.

OLDSMOBILE AURORA

The Aurora is GM's attempt to compete with European and Japanese sports sedans. It borrows Cadillac's sophisticated aluminum Northstar V8, in a 250-hp version. That smooth, powerful engine is the car's best feature. The Aurora handles ponderously, like the big, heavy car that it is, and the steering offers little road feel. The car rides harshly and rocks annoyingly on bumpy roads. The standard tires provide a better ride than do the up-level performance tires. The cockpit is stylish but claustrophobic. The roof seems too low and the cowl too high, making a good driving position difficult to find. The safety belts can be uncomfortable for tall people, and the upper anchor isn't adjustable - surprising in a car aspiring for the upper ranks. The

controls work well, once you get used to their haphazard placement. The climate-control system is close to ideal. The front seats are firm but lumpy. The rear seat comfortably accommodates two tall people, but a middle passenger won't be happy there for long. The trunk is roomy but a little awkward to load and unload.

OLDSMOBILE BRAVADA

The Bravada is a loaded version of the Chevrolet Blazer and GMC Jimmy. The long list of standard equipment includes full-time all-wheel drive, with no low range. A driver's air bag is standard, but a passenger's air bag is still unavailable - unforgivable in a new model. Otherwise, the Bravada has the same strengths and weaknesses as the cheaper GM models. Expect powerful acceleration and a smooth-shifting transmission. Body lean during cornering and vague steering don't inspire driver confidence. The interior is passable, and cargo room is generous.

OLDSMOBILE CIERA

A better-than-average reliability record is the one major virtue of this dated design. As with its close cousin, the Buick Century, every little twist in the road makes the car lean heavily and squeal its tires. The ride feels spongy; the car hops, wallows, and bounces on bumpy roads. The Ciera is big outside but cramped inside. Even some small sedans such as the Mazda Protege and Dodge/Plymouth Neon have more room in the rear seat. The controls are overstyled and inconveniently placed. The optional 3.1-liter V6 and four-speed automatic make a much better choice than the standard 2.2-liter Four and three-speed automatic, but you're even better off with a different model. Our comments on the sedan apply to the station wagon as well.

OLDSMOBILE CUTLASS SUPREME

The 1996 model's new instrument panel and dual air bags aren't enough to improve this uninspired car. The Cutlass Supreme remains perhaps the least interesting of the GM family that includes the Buick Regal and Pontiac Grand Prix. Moderate price is the major appeal. The standard 3.1-liter V6 performs well. The optional 3.4-liter V6 delivers marginally more punch, but it's noisier and thirstier - and not worth the extra money. The four-speed automatic transmission shifts smoothly. The handling feels sloppy. The ride is poorly controlled on smooth roads and stiff and unyielding on poor ones - the worst of both worlds. The seats may look comfortable, but expect a backache after a moderate drive. Both the front and rear seats lack proper support. The rear seatback folds down to expand the large trunk.

OLDSMOBILE EIGHTY EIGHT

This is a quiet, softly sprung car. The 3.8-liter V6 accelerates responsively. The four-speed automatic transmission shifts extremely smoothly. The seating is comfortable for five, less so for six. The Eighty Eight received a new instrument panel for 1996. The Eighty Eight, Buick Le Sabre, and Pontiac Bonneville are similar in design, the Bonneville being the sportiest.

OLDSMOBILE NINETY EIGHT

This near-twin to the Buick Park Avenue is Oldsmobile's biggest freeway cruiser. It looks and feels like a traditional, old-style domestic luxury sedan, though it has a modern unitized body and front-wheel drive. Cars like this one emphasize a soft ride and a whole galaxy of power conveniences and luxury appointments. Handling tends to fall toward the sloppy end of the spectrum. We recommend the "touring suspension" package, which includes stiffer springs and larger tires, for better ride as well as handling.

OLDSMOBILE SILHOUETTE

GM's plastic-bodied minivan siblings - the Chevrolet Lumina, Oldsmobile Silhouette, and Pontiac Trans Sport - perform unimpressively, overall, though they do boast a few worthwhile convenience items. For 1996, the only engine is a newly revised 3.4-liter V6, which should accelerate adequately. The vehicle leaps and bounces on sharp bumps, leans heavily in turns, and handles ponderously. The long snout leaves the driver guessing where the front bumper is, and blind spots block the view to the sides and rear. The front seats offer good support. A seven-passenger seating option places three chairs in the middle row plus two more in the rear. The middle seats are comfortable, the rear seats less so. One person can easily

remove the lightweight individual seats. The optional electric sliding side door is well worth the price for the convenience it brings. Some controls are hard to reach, but the powerful climate-control system works well. A useful rear-seat air-conditioner is optional. These minivans are due for a redesign for 1997.

PLYMOUTH BREEZE

The Breeze will be introduced this year as the cheapest of Chrysler's "cloud car" design, which includes the upscale Chrysler Cirrus and mid-market Dodge Stratus. These mid-sized sedans compete with many Japanese models, as well as with Ford's Contour and Mercury Mystique twins. Initially, the Breeze will come only with the Neon's noisy 2.0-liter four-cylinder engine, plus modest levels of standard equipment. You'll find roomy seating, especially in the rear, and a nicely designed interior. Prospective buyers should wait to see how reliable this new model will be.

PLYMOUTH GRAND VOYAGER

The Plymouth Grand Voyager and its siblings, the Chrysler Town & Country and Dodge Grand Caravan, are extended versions of the Caravan and Voyager. The 1996 model year marks these minivans' first redesign in a decade. The new minivans ride quietly, handle more nimbly than many sedans, and combine clever use of space with easy conversion from people-carrier to cargo-hauler. The long versions have more leg room for rear-seat passengers, as well as significantly more cargo space in back. These are the only minivans to offer a second (left side) sliding door - a very handy feature. The optional 3.3- and 3.8-liter V6 engines accelerate well. The front seats provide good support but feel a little lumpy. The two-person middle-row bench

has a back that reclines for comfort, as does the three-person rearmost bench. The back benches mount and dismount easily, and little wheels help you drag them about. But the benches are heavy - about 100 pounds each. Instrument layout is close to ideal and sight lines are good, but a very tall driver may find that the door pillar blocks the view to the left. Our only major reservation concerns reliability: Many new Chrysler products have had problems in that area.

PLYMOUTH NEON

The Dodge/Plymouth Neon twins are among the very few small cars to be designed and made entirely in the U.S. in recent years. The small Neon makes good use of its interior space. The standard 132-hp, 2.0-liter Four has plenty of power, but you have to rev it hard to get the performance - and it makes a racket at high rpm. The three-speed automatic transmission feels more responsive at low speeds than does the five-speed manual transmission. You have to shift the manual transmission often to maintain speed on even gentle highway inclines. The Neon handles predictably. The ride is poorly isolated, jittery and busy, and broken pavement delivers choppy buckboard kicks. The front seats provide good, firm support for most people, but long-

legged drivers need more thigh support. The rear seat can hold three six-footers - if they're slim. Reliability of this new model remains to be seen.

PLYMOUTH VOYAGER

The Plymouth Voyager and its sibling, the Dodge Caravan, were redesigned for 1996 - for the first time in 10 years. The new minivans ride quietly, handle more nimbly than many sedans, and combine clever use of space with easy conversion from people-carrier to cargo-hauler. The long-wheelbase Grand versions have more leg room for rear-seat passengers, as well as significantly more cargo space in back. The regular-length minivans are a shade more maneuverable. All offer a second (left side) sliding door - a very handy option. Of the three V6s available, the 3.3-liter is probably the best choice for performance and smoothness. The front seats provide good support but feel a little lumpy. The two-person middle-row bench

has a back that reclines for comfort, as does the three-person rearmost bench. The back benches mount and dismount easily, and little wheels help you drag them about. But the benches are heavy - about 100 pounds each. Instrument layout is close to ideal and sight lines are good. A very tall driver may find that the door pillar blocks the view to the left. Our only major reservation concerns reliability: Many new Chrysler products have had problems in that area.

PONTIAC BONNEVILLE

Properly equipped, the Bonneville has been one of GM's all-around best large sedans for years. The optional firm suspension and touring tires markedly improve handling, and body roll remains in check during hard cornering. The Bonneville offers a tighter ride than do its GM cousins, the Buick Le Sabre and Oldsmobile Eighty Eight. It delivers quick steering response. A supercharged 3.8-liter V6 is optional, but it's not needed; the nonsupercharged V6 provides more-than-adequate acceleration. The four-speed automatic transmission shifts smoothly. A 12-way power seat offers a vast range of seating positions, but mastering the seats' nine separate rocker buttons requires

prolonged study. The front seats provide superb comfort. The rear seat is roomy enough to hold three adults, though the cushion is a bit short fore and aft.

PONTIAC FIREBIRD

The Firebird and its cousin, the Chevrolet Camaro, are among the dwindling ranks of rear-wheel-drive muscle cars. A high-performance 5.7-liter V8, essentially the same engine that powers the Chevrolet Corvette, comes standard in the Formula and Trans Am versions. So does a six-speed manual transmission. (A four-speed automatic is optional, as is traction control.) The V8's effortless thrust makes the standard 3.8-liter V6 seem sluggish by comparison. Both the V6 and V8 versions ride tolerably for a sporty car, but the V8 feels noticeably stiffer. Though the Firebird is too bulky to be called nimble, it corners with minimal body roll. The V8 version, which comes with wider tires, grips the road better. Braking is very good. The front

bucket seats cradle occupants nicely; the back seat is mostly for show. Wide roof pillars block much of the driver's view to the right rear, and both ends of the car are invisible to the driver. Firebirds and Camaros have been unreliable for years.

PONTIAC GRAND AM

This aging and uninspired design is based on the Chevrolet Corsica, which is little changed since 1987. The Grand Am shares many components with the Buick Skylark and Oldsmobile Achieva, but it aims at younger buyers who want a sportier image. The base engine for 1996 is an 2.4-liter Quad Four producing 150 hp. The best choice is the 3.1-liter V6. The tires grip well in turns, but the ride is unsettled, and handling feels a bit clumsy during hard cornering. The rear seat feels cramped.

PONTIAC GRAND PRIX

The Grand Prix is the best of the GM family that includes the Buick Regal and Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme - faint praise indeed. Moderate price is this car's major appeal. The Grand Prix handles best of this trio, thanks to quick, nicely weighted steering and minimal body lean. Pass up the optional 3.4-liter V6; it delivers little more punch than the standard 3.1, and it drinks more fuel. The automatic transmission shifts smoothly. The gauges are logically arranged and easy to read. The cabin is reasonably quiet. The car rides firmly even on good roads; poor roads deliver sharp jolts to the occupants. The front seats look more comfortable than they are. The rear seat is roomy, but the bench is too short and not very comfortable. A new, 1997 model is due in mid-1996.

PONTIAC SUNFIRE

The Sunfire and its sibling, the Chevrolet Cavalier, are all new for 1995. The Sunfire replaces the lackluster Sunbird and aims to be a sporty and inexpensive small car. A high-line GT version and a convertible are due midway through the model year. The standard version competes with models such as the Dodge/Plymouth Neon and Honda Civic. GM took a cue from the Japanese automakers by including a welter of useful amenities even in the base version. Our early and brief experience suggests that the car is pleasant to drive. The interior is modern and functional, and the controls are vastly improved.

PONTIAC TRANS SPORT

GM's plastic-bodied minivan siblings - the Chevrolet Lumina, Oldsmobile Silhouette, and Pontiac Trans Sport - perform unimpressively, overall, though they do boast a few worthwhile convenience items. The only engine is a 3.4-liter V6. The vehicle leaps and bounces on sharp bumps, leans heavily in turns, and handles ponderously. The Chevrolet and Pontiac versions have shorter snouts, but the driver still can't tell where the front bumper begins, and many blind spots block the view to the sides and rear. The front seats offer good support. A seven-passenger seating option places three chairs in the middle row plus two more in the rear. The middle seats are comfortable, the rear seats less so. One person can easily remove the individual

seats. The optional electric sliding side door is well worth the price for the convenience it brings. Some controls are hard to reach, but the powerful climate-control system works well. A useful rear-seat air-conditioner is optional. These minivans are due for replacement for the 1997 model year.

RANGE ROVER

Land Rover's Range Rover SE comes with all sorts of luxury-car amenities, power everything, and leather galore, as well as a number of advanced engineering features such as a sophisticated all-wheel-drive system and air suspension. When you park, the body can lower itself to ease access. Once under way, it rises again. It rises still more when you select Low Range, the better to clear off-road obstructions. It rides comfortably for an SUV and handles adequately, though it doesn't accelerate briskly.

SAAB 900

This good-performing though quirky sports sedan has a strong family resemblance to previous 900s. The base S version comes with a 2.3-liter Four or a very powerful 2.0-liter turbocharged Four. The higher-line SE models get a 2.5-liter V6 made by GM of Europe. The V6 accelerates strongly. The optional four-speed automatic transmission bumps into gear at times. The 900 corners smartly, with little body roll, and the steering provides good feedback, in the European style. The ride feels quite taut even on smooth roads. The front seats offer a wide range of power adjustments and give good, firm support except in hard turns. Consider this a four-passenger car; three in the rear are one too many. Airflow from the heater vents under

the dash isn't up to the task of keeping the driver's feet warm in winter. But the air-conditioner, with its large, easily adjusted dash vents, works well. The oddball controls take getting used to, although Saab loyalists say that such touches as an ignition key located between the front seats gives the car character.

SAAB 9000

This distinctive-looking sports sedan is Saab's largest and ablest model. For years it came only with a four-cylinder engine, albeit a very refined one. With the turbocharged Four, this model accelerates as well as the best of its V6 competitors. A new, optional 3.0-liter V6 from GM of Europe should add to the 9000's appeal. On takeoff, the front wheels tend to spin easily in the turbo version. The CS and V6 versions take off more sedately. The four-speed automatic transmission usually shifts smoothly. The Saab leans little while rounding turns. It keeps ride motions nicely under control, but every road bump makes its presence felt. (An optional softer suspension in this year's models is said to improve the ride.) The front seats give exceptional support

and comfort. A telescoping steering wheel, new this year, may help remedy the tendency of the wheel to rub against long-legged drivers' thighs. The eccentric control include window and sun-roof switches mounted low between the seats, where they're hard to see. The rear seat is roomy enough for three adults, but head room is skimpy in the center position. The hatchback configuration and fold-down rear seatback offer cavernous cargo room.

SATURN

Saturn has been remarkable for its low-pressure sales approach and no-haggle, one-price policy. But its products have been largely unremarkable. For 1996, the sedan got its first extensive refinements since it was introduced six years ago: a new body, new seats, and several minor changes aimed at reducing the old powertrain's relentless noisiness. Most controls and displays are sensibly designed. The roof has been raised to provide a little more head room. Reliability of previous models has been better than average.

SATURN SC

Saturn has established itself as one of the few domestic car lines that competes successfully with its Japanese counterparts in both performance and reliability. The SC2 is the sporty-coupe version, combining quick acceleration from its dual-overhead-camshaft, 1.9-liter Four with quick, nimble, and precise handling. Fuel economy is impressive: about 30 mpg in mixed driving. The engine buzzes when it's revved up. The taut suspension provides a stiff, sometimes jarring ride. The driving position and seat comfort are good, though tall drivers may want more head room. Access is a bit awkward, but at least the annoying old motorized safety belts are no more. The full instrumentation is easy to read. The climate-control system is

powerful but slow. The SC carries over virtually unchanged this year, while the sedan and station wagon versions get a facelift and some mechanical tweaks.

SATURN WAGON

Saturn has been remarkable for its low-pressure sales approach and no-haggle, one-price policy. But its products have been largely unremarkable. For 1996, the sedan got its first extensive refinements since it was introduced six years ago: a new body, new seats, and several minor changes aimed at reducing the old powertrain's relentless noisiness. Most controls and displays are sensibly designed. The roof has been raised to provide a little more head room. Reliability of previous models has been better than average.

SUBARU IMPREZA

Properly equipped, this model holds its own against a host of small cars on the market (although the base Impreza fails to impress). We recommend the L version, with automatic transmission and antilock brakes. The base 1.8-liter engine accelerates just adequately; the 2.2-liter Four is stronger. Without antilock brakes, stopping distances are very long on wet pavement. The manual-transmission version has a convenient "hill holder" clutch feature that keeps the car from rolling back while starting off uphill. The steering is nicely weighted and responsive. The Impreza delivers a smooth, gentle ride on the highway, but bad roads provoke some jittery motions. The rather low front seats provide good, firm support, though leg room is

just adequate for tall people. The rear is cramped for three adults, adequate for two. The instruments are clear, but the steering wheel obstructs several secondary controls. Trunk space is adequate; a fold-down rear seatback is a useful addition. The wagon version isn't the roomiest in its class, but it's a good choice.

SUBARU LEGACY

Overall, this is one of the best family sedans we've tested. The Legacy was updated and much improved for 1995. It's the only mid-priced compact to offer all-wheel drive, an option that significantly improves traction and stability in poor driving conditions. The 2.2-liter flat Four accelerates adequately, and the four-speed automatic transmission shifts quite smoothly. Antilock brakes stop the car straight and short. The Legacy carves tidily through twisty roads, and the steering feels precise and nicely weighted. The suspension smooths out rough patches and soaks up bumps. All but very tall drivers should be able to find a good driving position; leg room is just adequate for six-footers. The front seats are comfortable but low - and only the

LS and LSi versions offer a height adjustment. Two tall people will find the rear seat comfortable; three adults will find it less so. The versatile climate-control system furnishes plenty of warmed or cooled air quickly and evenly. The instruments and controls are easy to read and use. The trunk is large, and folding down the rear seatback provides even more cargo room. The station wagon version is a roomy, well-thought-out design.

SUBARU SVX

The sleek SVX lacks the razor edge of performance of a true sports car. But it offers the security and traction of all-wheel drive, and the comfort and quietness of a luxury sedan, along with a high level of technical sophistication. A 3.3-liter Six and smooth-shifting four-speed automatic transmission deliver ample acceleration. (A manual transmission is unavailable.) In normal driving, the handling feels very stable and predictable, but not truly sporty. Emergency handling lacks the precision we expect in a sports car. The front seats are comfortable; the rear seat is bearable for short periods. The futuristically styled divided side windows make it hard to reach through the window - to pay a toll, say. The instruments are easy to see and read. Aside

from the two tiny horn buttons on the spokes of the steering wheel, the controls are generally well designed.

SUZUKI ESTEEM

The new Esteem is Suzuki's first attempt at a passenger car larger than the subcompact Swift. Imported from Japan, the Esteem enters a market teeming with good small cars such as the Geo Prizm, Honda Civic, Nissan Sentra, Subaru Impreza, and Toyota Corolla. Even the base Esteem comes with lots of standard equipment. In most respects, it's typically Japanese, with neat packaging and thoughtful touches. Our early impressions are mostly favorable. But, overall, the Esteem is pricey for what you get.

SUZUKI SIDEKICK

This small runabout, a sibling of the Geo Tracker, got a more contemporary multivalve engine (unavailable in the Tracker) as an option for 1996. It also finally received two air bags. The Sidekick is a viable alternative to a small station wagon. It comes with two- or four-wheel drive and convertible or four-door body. Optional rear jump seats are available.

SUZUKI SWIFT

Though the Canadian-built Swift (along with the similar Geo Metro) grew a little larger with its 1995 redesign, it remains one of the smallest and lightest cars on the road. The Swift is much happier zipping around town than taking long trips. While the Metro version comes as a four-door sedan or two-door hatchback, the Swift comes only as a hatchback. The engine, a 1.3-liter Four, isn't particularly peppy, despite the car's light weight. You'd expect a small car like this one to handle nimbly, but the Swift doesn't. The cockpit is cramped, particularly for long-legged people, and the stiff, choppy ride becomes fatiguing over a long haul. The rear seat holds only two, and not all that

comfortably. Displays are easy to see, and most controls are sensibly laid out. The climate-control system works well in front, but airflow to the rear is minimal.

SUZUKI X90

The X90 is a new, small sport-utility vehicle based on the Suzuki Sidekick. This two-seater combines the features of a convertible, a coupe, a sport-utility vehicle, and a pickup truck - but it's not a practical alternative to any of the above. It's the sort of splashy little folly that projects an image of southern California drive-ins and beach parties.

TOYOTA 4RUNNER

The 4Runner is substantially redesigned for 1996. It's loosely based on the unexceptional Toyota Tacoma pickup truck. Engine choices include a 2.7-liter Four and a lively 3.4-liter V6; the latter is more desirable. The wheelbase is three inches longer than the previous model's, and the cargo floor is lower and wider. That translates into more cargo space and more rear-seat leg room. The previous 4Runner was extremely reliable, and it's holding its resale value well. The photo shows a 1995 model; a 1996 photo wasn't available at press time.

TOYOTA AVALON

The Avalon made its debut in 1995 as the new flagship of the Toyota line. Think of it as a well-equipped Camry with an extra-roomy rear seat. The 3.0-liter V6 is both powerful and economical, and the transmission always shifts smoothly. The Avalon corners quite nimbly for its size, but it tends to plow straight ahead when pushed to its limits. The car drives smoothly, but the light steering gives little road feel. The cabin is commendably quiet except for wind noise at highway speeds. The front bucket seats are large and luxurious, and the leather upholstery is comfortable, after an initial chill on cold days. (Seat heaters aren't available.) The optional bench front seat is comfortable for two, but the center position isn't hospitable for a

third passenger. The rear seat is very roomy and reasonably comfortable. As in other Toyotas, the controls and displays are a model of simplicity and good sense.

TOYOTA CAMRY

This refined, reliable family sedan is one of the best mid-sized cars you can buy for less than \$25,000. In our tests, the 3.0-liter V6 version scored nearly as well as the luxurious Lexus ES300, with which it shares many major components, although the Camry costs thousands less. The Camry drives effortlessly, like a luxury car. The V6 produces some 60 hp more than the standard 2.2-liter Four, but it requires premium fuel. With all the bundled accessories, the V6 adds about \$2000 to the price. Thus, the Four, which accelerates adequately, makes a more practical choice. We'd choose the smooth-shifting automatic transmission as well. Safe handling, good brakes, and a smooth, quiet ride remain Camry hallmarks. The roomy cabin

seats four comfortably, five in a pinch. The instruments and controls are thoughtfully designed, and folding the rear seatback expands the generous trunk. The roomy station wagon version offers a third seat. The wagon's handling can be a bit tricky during hard cornering, however.

TOYOTA CELICA

The Celica offers a well-rounded combination of handling, fuel economy, and reliability. The high-trim GT version, with its 2.2-liter Four, accelerates satisfactorily, though not as quickly as, say, the Acura Integra GS-R or the Ford Probe GT. The 1.8-liter Four in the ST version is sluggish. The five-speed manual transmission shifts precisely. The car responds quickly to its steering, and the tires grip well during hard cornering. The optional "sport" suspension improves handling - but it's usually packaged with expensive frills like leather upholstery and a sun roof. The Celica rides more comfortably than most small coupes. The instruments are easy to see, and the controls are sensibly laid out. The front seats offer good, firm support; save the rear seat for packages.

TOYOTA COROLLA

This has long been one of our recommended small cars - an able overall performer with a good reliability record. The Corolla used to be a virtual twin of the Geo Prizm, but the two have developed distinct personalities. The Corolla and Prizm still share their powertrains, platform, and many body parts. For best performance, choose the 1.8-liter Four over the base 1.6-liter Four, with either the five-speed manual transmission or the four-speed automatic. The Corolla handles safely and predictably, though it's not particularly nimble for a small car. The body leans hard and sometimes plows straight ahead in hard turns. The suspension damps out the biggest road irregularities, but the ride feels jittery on the highway. The front seats are

comfortable; the cramped rear seat holds only two adults in anything resembling comfort. Toyota has made the gauges easy to see and the controls easy to reach and operate. You can expand the already roomy trunk by folding down the rear seatback. The Corolla station wagon is a very good design, though a bit pricey. The Geo Prizm isn't available as a station wagon.

TOYOTA LAND CRUISER

The big, imposing Land Cruiser competes at the high end of the SUV market, against the likes of the Range Rover, a luxury British import. The 4.5-liter straight Six is powerful but not economical, and it provides leisurely acceleration in the heavy Land Cruiser. A sophisticated full-time all-wheel-drive system assures good traction in all conditions. You don't so much enter the Land Cruiser as scale its heights. Convenient grab handles aid the ascent, and the driver is then rewarded with a commanding view of the road. Expect a busy, rubbery ride regardless of the road surface. The Land Cruiser leans a lot in tight turns, but it holds the road well. Instruments and controls are close to ideal. The front seats are quite comfortable, and three adults can occupy

the second-row bench without pain. Passenger space is cramped in the third row. With the passenger seats folded and stowed, the Land Cruiser offers almost as much cargo space as a minivan.

TOYOTA PASEO

The newly redesigned Paseo may look sporty, but it's built on the underpinnings of the lowly, pedestrian Tercel. Consider the rear seat a shelf for packages, especially since the trunk is small. The controls and displays are simple, clear, and logical.

TOYOTA PREVIA

The Previa is a good though expensive choice. It has nice balance, responsive steering, and a quiet ride. A supercharged 2.4-liter Four, mounted midway between the front and rear wheels, is now the only engine available. The sophisticated, full-time all-wheel-drive option provides extra traction in poor driving conditions. The Previa feels secure in routine driving, and it held reasonably steady in hard turns at our test track. The front captain's chairs are comfortable, and both tall and short drivers can find a good driving position. But wide roof pillars and third-row head restraints create blind spots, and the downward-curving body panels hamper the driver's ability to gauge tight clearances. The rearmost seat is a flat, hard bench.

If you want to haul a lot of cargo, stay with the standard center bench seat; the optional captain's chairs can't be removed. The controls work well once you figure them out, and the displays are easy to read. The climate-control system works effectively.

TOYOTA RAV 4

The RAV 4 is one of the new breed of small, stylish sport-utility vehicles that carmakers hope will find a profitable niche in the booming sport-utility market. It's scheduled to become available in the winter of 1996. The underpinnings are similar to those of the Toyota Celica, and the RAV 4 will use unit-body construction. We expect it to be quite carlike to drive.

TOYOTA SUPRA

In its quickest, most expensive form, the Supra Turbo seems to be designed to go from here to there at triple the speed limit. It competes with such pricey sports cars as the Nissan 300ZX and Mazda RX-7 - two models which, we think, are more fun to drive. The Supra's 3.0-liter Six comes with or without dual turbochargers. The Turbo model delivers blazing acceleration. It comes only with a four-speed automatic transmission; the six-speed manual transmission has been dropped. Either a manual or an automatic is available on nonturbo models. A sophisticated traction-control system works at all speeds. The steering is a little short on feel, but the car corners exceptionally flat. The Supra rides harshly and nervously; you feel every seam

in the road and hear lots of road rumble. The front seats provide good, firm support, especially during cornering. The low seating position makes it hard to see out, though, and some drivers may have to stretch to depress the clutch pedal. The rear seat is a bad joke, and the shallow trunk holds little luggage.

TOYOTA T100

The T-100 is one of few imported pickup trucks - not all that surprising when you consider that imported trucks carry a steep, 25-percent tariff. The T-100 is a full-sized pickup, designed for hauling and towing. But if you expect to do much of either, choose the V6 rather than the standard Four. Controls and displays are easy to reach and see. The T-100 costs quite a bit for what you get, but it has proven quite reliable.

TOYOTA TACOMA

If you think that all Toyotas are good performers, think again. This truck, new in 1995, is unimpressive by any standard. It's true that previous Toyota pickups have been very reliable, and that the Tacoma has a responsive powertrain, especially with the optional V6. But the steering is slow and numb. Bumpy curves make the truck leap and bound. Without antilock brakes, stops are horrendously long - and the truck tends to spin out on wet pavement. And antilock brakes are very difficult to find in the Tacoma. The cargo bed is rimmed with flimsy sheet metal. The Tacoma rides uncomfortably, jittering on smooth roads and kicking and snapping on poor ones. The cabin remains quiet, but the seats are low and lack support. As in other Toyotas, most

of the controls and displays are well designed. The climate-control system works well, although placing cups in the cup-holders blocks the controls.

TOYOTA TERCEL

The Tercel was redesigned for 1995 but looks a lot like the previous model. The base version lacks many items you take for granted in other cars, like a clock, trip odometer, and right-side mirror. A reasonably equipped, higher-line Tercel is expensive for what you get. The Tercel's long suits are a zesty powertrain, excellent fuel economy, and a truly commendable record of reliability. Drawbacks include a poor ride, a noisy cabin, and a rear seat that requires a shoehorn. The car doesn't handle nimbly, and the body leans in turns. The manual steering is heavy and slow; the power steering is too light. The nonantilock brakes are mediocre, and antilock brakes are next to impossible to find. Front head room is fine, but leg room is skimpy for tall

people. As in other Toyotas, the controls are easy to see and well laid out.

VOLKSWAGEN GOLF

The Golf is a well-designed small car that handles nicely and uses its interior space well. The responsive 2.0-liter Four and easy-shifting five-speed manual transmission perform well together. The Golf feels sporty and agile on twisty country roads. It leans sharply in hard turns, but the steering transmits good feel of the road. The ride feels smooth and supple. The control layout is good, but some niggling problems, such as confusing wiper and washer controls, remain. Tall drivers may find insufficient leg and head room. For those who fit, the front seats offer good, firm support. The GTI VR6 version comes with a smooth, powerful V6. The Cabriolet convertible is the only Golf imported from Germany; all the others are made in Mexico. Reliability of this new model remains to be seen.

VOLKSWAGEN JETTA

Think of the Jetta as a Golf with a very large trunk tacked on. It's a practical car, with a responsive 2.0-liter Four and a comfortable interior. The sporty GLX version comes with a smooth and powerful V6 and a host of standard equipment. But even the plainer GL and GLS versions offer excellent handling, crisp steering, and good tire grip. At low speeds, the ride is supple in all three trim lines. But at higher speeds, the GLX's ride becomes unsettled and bouncy on undulating pavement - a problem that VW supposedly addressed in 1996 models. The front seats provide good, firm support, and adjustments on the seat and steering column help most drivers get comfortably situated. The rear seat can just about hold three slim six-footers. The gauges

are clear at night, but reflections can be a problem in daytime. Some controls - the horn buttons, switches for the rear power windows, the Off position for the wipers - are confusing or hard to use. The rear seat can be tumbled and folded for added luggage room. Reliability remains unknown.

VOLKSWAGEN PASSAT

VW's most expensive car was redesigned and much improved for 1995. The 2.8-liter V6 accelerates smoothly and strongly. A 2.0-liter gasoline Four and a 1.9-liter turbodiesel Four are available as well. The four-speed automatic transmission is much better than the previous one, but we still prefer the manual. Handling is crisp and agile, and the steering provides lots of road feel. The ride is firm, but the suspension soaks up most ripples and ruts nicely. The front seats are comfortable, and the wide adjustability of the driver's seat and steering wheel can accommodate people of almost any size. The rear seat is especially roomy. The gauges are clear, and the heating and ventilation work very well. The station wagon is particularly roomy. A turbodiesel joins the model lineup for 1996.

VOLVO 850

The 850 is the first and only Volvo sold in the U.S. with front-wheel drive. It was also the first model of any make to offer side-impact air bags, mounted on the edge of each front seatback. The 850 is more powerful and more nimble than Volvo's stodgy 900-Series. It competes with such sports sedans as the BMW 3-Series, Mazda Millenia, Mercedes-Benz C-Class, and Saab 900 - but it doesn't sacrifice any of Volvo's traditional practicality. The 850's five-cylinder engine is available with a turbocharger, which improves acceleration dramatically. The smooth-shifting four-speed automatic transmission offers a choice of Winter, Economy, and Sport modes, with varying shift points. The steering is nicely weighted, though not particularly

quick, and excellent tire grip bolsters driver confidence. Large, comfortable front seats only partly make up for a stiff, jiggly ride. The roomy rear seat accommodates three adults with ease, and the trunk can hold lots of luggage.

VOLVO 960

The rear-wheel-drive 960 is the lone remaining 900-Series Volvo. It comes with a 2.9-liter in-line Six that performs enthusiastically. Volvo has tweaked the suspension to improve both handling and ride. The front seats are pleasantly firm and nicely shaped. The rear seat is about as hospitable as they get, even for three adults. The climate-control system heats and cools superbly. The sedan has a cavernous trunk; the wagon, an exceptionally roomy cargo area. The safety belts have a pretensioner that instantly takes up slack in a frontal crash. Side-impact air bags are standard for 1996.

ACURA INTEGRA

This is the entry-level model in Honda's luxury Acura line. A 1994 redesign made the Integra a little sleeker, but it's still a small car. Although the Integra is a bit cramped and noisy, it has much to recommend it. The GS-R version features a VTEC engine, Honda's clever design that electronically controls the intake-valve timing to increase both power and fuel economy. The standard, non-VTEC Four accelerates more than adequately. The manual five-speed gearbox shifts crisply and takes full advantage of an engine that likes to rev up to its redline. The Integra handles quite nimbly. Unlike the GS-R versions, which ride quite stiffly, the lower trim lines are biased more toward ride comfort. The

front seats are firm - some people may find them too firm - and the cushions are very low. The rear seat can fold down to expand the trunk.

ACURA INTEGRA COUPE

This is the entry-level model in Honda's luxury Acura line. A 1994 redesign made the Integra a little sleeker, but it's still a small car. Although the Integra is a bit cramped and noisy, it has much to recommend it. The GS-R version features a VTEC engine, Honda's clever design that electronically controls the intake-valve timing to increase both power and fuel economy. The standard, non-VTEC Four accelerates more than adequately. The manual five-speed gearbox shifts crisply and takes full advantage of an engine that likes to rev up to its redline. The Integra handles quite nimbly. Unlike the GS-R versions, which ride quite stiffly, the lower trim lines are biased more toward ride comfort. The

front seats are firm - some people may find them too firm - and the cushions are very low. The rear seat can fold down to expand the trunk.

ACURA LEGEND

This is the flagship of Honda's luxury Acura line. The powerful 3.2-liter V6 engine accelerates smoothly and impressively, especially in view of the Legend's size and weight. But expect only about 20 mpg overall - on premium fuel. The four-speed automatic transmission sometimes shifts with a thump. The car handles predictably, though not nimbly, in normal driving. The Legend went through our avoidance maneuver relatively slowly; the tires didn't grip well, and the body leaned considerably in sharp turns. Stops are straight, though relatively long. The ride is fairly taut but well controlled and quiet. Most people should feel comfortable in front, though side support could be better. The rear seat holds two comfortably; with three abreast, the center

passenger is unhappy. The climate-control system works quickly and powerfully, but manually controlled dash vents are a nuisance. The gauges are large and clear, and the controls would be almost perfect if not for the tiny, hard-to-find horn buttons. Besides dual air bags, safety equipment includes front safety belt pretensioners; they take up slack instantly in a frontal collision to improve protection.

AUDI 90

One of very few sedans to offer all-wheel drive, the Quattro version of the Audi 90 provides superior traction on slippery roads. Handling is safe but not crisp. It brakes powerfully, but it lags in several important areas: its steering feels numb, and its ride is unremarkable. Considerable noise from the road and suspension reaches the interior. The 2.8-liter V6 runs extremely quietly and delivers ample acceleration, but achieving maximum performance requires a heavy foot on the accelerator and lots of shifting. The five-speed manual transmission shifts fairly smoothly. An automatic transmission is available in most versions of the 90, but not in the Quattro. Most drivers can get comfortable behind the controls and see out well, though portly

people may feel squeezed by the bolsters in the seat cushion. Seat heaters are a welcome option in cold weather. The rear seat is tight for three average-sized adults - or for two six-footers. The automatic climate-control system works powerfully and evenly. The idiosyncratic controls need improving, as do the hard-to-read minor gauges.

AUDI A6

Formerly known as the Audi 100, the A6 received an exterior facelift as well as a new nameplate for 1995. Last time we tested this model, we found many faults, from idiosyncratic placement of controls to a surprisingly mediocre ride quality and sluggish acceleration. Audi claims to have remedied some of the most serious shortcomings with numerous technical tweaks. Audi has also juggled the available options to allow car buyers to equip the A6 decently without spending into the stratosphere. You can now add all-wheel drive (the Quattro option) to the base car, for instance. Audi also offers an attractive warranty that, among other things, provides all scheduled maintenance at no charge for three years or 50,000 miles.

BMW 3-SERIES

BMW more or less invented the modern European sports sedan, and it continues to make cars that emphasize sporty handling over luxury. The 3-Series is BMW's smallest body size. Precise, sports-car handling and tenacious tire grip make the driver feel very much in control. We liked the optional four-speed automatic transmission. Outright acceleration, though quick enough, is not this car's forte - but it feels quicker than the acceleration times would indicate. Braking is excellent, and the optional traction control works wonders in slippery conditions. The ride is firm but compliant, and good sound insulation adds to the sense of quality. The front seats offer ample support in all the right places. The rear seat, though, is cramped for two tall adults and

downright hostile for three. A versatile climate-control system features separate settings for the driver and front passenger. Most controls are well designed, but several minor switches and levers are hidden from view. A small trunk makes this car less than ideal for a family vacation but probably a fine choice for childless couples, which are this model's natural customers. The rear seat can fold to increase luggage space.

BMW 318ti

The 318ti is the newest addition to BMW's 3-Series cars. This hatchback coupe is similar in many respects to the regular 318i, but it's shorter and lighter. The rear suspension is like that of the previous-generation 3-Series. Expect precise handling and tenacious tire grip, plus a firm but comfortable ride.

BMW 5-SERIES

The 5-Series BMW leaves an impression of pure, functional precision. The steering transmits plenty of road feel, and precise handling makes this car a joy to drive. The unusual five-speed automatic transmission senses road conditions and alters its shift points accordingly. The body stays fairly flat in hard corners, knifing through twisty roads with superb agility. The car rides firmly but comfortably, and the leather-upholstered front seats offer good support in all the right places. Three adults barely fit in the rear seat, though. Clear displays complement easy-to-reach controls, and the trunk is roomy. The cabin is quiet most of the time but admits a little wind noise at highway speeds. The 5-Series offers the choice of a six-cylinder engine, in the 525i, or

two sophisticated aluminum V8s: a 3.0-liter in the 530i and a much stronger 4.0-liter in the 540i. Electronic traction control, a must in winter driving, is standard in one version and worth getting in the others.

BMW 740I

This V8-powered model has been redesigned for 1995. It competes with the world's finest and costliest luxury sports sedans. The 740iL version is slightly longer than the 740i. This model has exceptional acceleration, superior handling, and all the fancy interior appointments one expects of cars in this price class, including multi-adjustable, heated leather seats that memorize preferred positions. These models are substantially roomier than the 5-Series BMWs. A five-speed automatic transmission is standard. Displays are quite clear, and nearly all controls are sensibly laid out and easy to reach.

BUICK CENTURY

This dated design is seriously outclassed by the competition. Its one salient virtue is a better-than-average repair record. The Century and its corporate cousin, the Oldsmobile Ciera, will soon be replaced with something more up-to-date. The current Century is big on the outside but feels cramped inside. Even some small sedans (such as the Geo Prizm and Chrysler's Neon) have more room in the rear. The controls are overstyled and inconveniently placed, and handling is substandard. The optional 3.1-liter V6 and four-speed automatic make a much better choice than the standard 2.2-liter Four and three-speed automatic, but you're better off still choosing a different car.

BUICK LE SABRE

In standard form, this is a quiet, softly sprung car with sloppy handling and lots of body lean in turns. The optional touring suspension improves handling markedly, though it stiffens the ride a little and makes it noisier. With the Touring suspension, the Le Sabre would score closer to the Pontiac Bonneville, a high-rated large model. The Le Sabre, with its 3.8-liter V6, accelerates smoothly and responsively. The four-speed automatic transmission shifts extremely smoothly. The brakes require long stopping distances on both wet and dry pavement. The seating is comfortable for five, less so for six. The controls are overstyled and hard to use, but the displays are clear and the automatic climate-control system is powerful. The three-point

front safety belts are particularly convenient. The Le Sabre, Oldsmobile Eighty Eight, and Pontiac Bonneville are similar in design, the Bonneville being the sportiest. The Buick Park Avenue and Oldsmobile Ninety Eight are also similar, with a longer body but no more interior room.

BUICK PARK AVENUE

This high-line freeway cruiser is a longer and more luxurious relative of the Buick Le Sabre. It competes with big domestic luxury sedans such as the Oldsmobile Ninety Eight and Lincoln Continental, with emphasis on a soft ride and every imaginable power convenience. The standard, 3.8-liter V6 is quite capable of powering this large car; the Ultra version comes with a snappier supercharged V6. Opt for the trailer-towing package; it includes a firmer suspension, which should improve handling and absorb the bumps.

BUICK REGAL

This year's dual air bags and claimed side-impact protection aren't enough to improve this uninspired member of the GM family that includes the Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme and Pontiac Grand Prix. Moderate price is this car's major appeal. The optional 3.8-liter V6 is a better performer than the standard 3.1-liter V6 and is worth the modest penalty in fuel economy. The four-speed automatic transmission shifts very smoothly. Handling feels fairly sloppy in tight, fast turns, though solid-feeling steering gives some reassurance. Expect a comfortable, quiet highway ride, slightly worse on broken pavement. Tall people will find room enough front and rear. The 1995 model's redesigned interior includes a cleaner

control panel and, according to Buick, more comfortable seats (we haven't tried them yet). Although the trunk is roomy, it would benefit from a fold-down rear seatback - or at least a pass-through port.

BUICK RIVIERA

GM has resurrected this nameplate after a year's hiatus, affixing it to a brand-new model. The new Riviera, like the old, is billed as a "personal luxury coupe" - that is, a large, heavy two-door model with lots of accessories. The new Riviera is built on the same platform as the Oldsmobile Aurora but is aimed at a more conservative buyer. The standard engine is a conventional 3.8-liter V6 developing 205 hp. A supercharged version will be available as well. (The Aurora's engine is a more up-to-date aluminum V8.) The Riviera's stylish interior features a clean, uncluttered control layout. A bench front seat is available, but we recommend the bucket seats unless you need seating for six.

BUICK ROADMASTER

A close cousin of the Chevrolet Caprice, this massive model has a full frame, rear-wheel drive, and a 5.7-liter V8 that gobbles fuel at the rate of about 17 mpg, on average. The Roadmaster boasts an exceptionally smooth and quiet ride, but that's pretty much where its virtues begin and end. Handling is ponderous and sluggish; the tires squeal even in moderate turns. The car recorded a very slow speed through our accident-avoidance maneuver. Three adults have plenty of room in the rear seat, but in the front seat, three are a crowd. The controls and displays are neither logically laid out nor easy to see or use. The driver can't easily tell where the car ends in the front, and wide rear roof pillars create a nasty blind spot. The climate-control system works well except for the windshield defroster.

BUICK SKYLARK

This aging and uninspired design is based on the Chevrolet Corsica, which is little changed since 1987. The Skylark shares its basic bodies, engines, transmissions, and many chassis components with the Oldsmobile Achieva and Pontiac Grand Am, but GM has imbued each model with a different personality. The Skylark targets those who want a spot of luxury in a sporty sedan. Even equipped with the Gran Sport package, though, handling is just adequate; the car responds slowly to its steering, and the body leans sharply in turns. The 3.1-liter V6 is a worthy option, quieter and more powerful than the 2.3-liter Four. The front seats are generally satisfactory. The rear seat is unfriendly even for two. The brakes stop the car straight and reasonably

short. Heating and cooling are a bit slow but effective once they're cranked up. The controls and displays need improvement. Previous versions of the Skylark fared poorly in the 35-mph Government crash tests. But now that an air bag is standard equipment, the driver at least should have better crash protection.

CADILLAC CONCOURS/DE VILLE

Cadillac's best-selling model line, the De Ville is built on a stretched version of the Cadillac Seville platform. It's a big, roomy, plush four-door land yacht. The base model comes with a 4.9-liter V8. The upscale Concours gets Cadillac's sophisticated Northstar aluminum 4.6-liter V8 and electronically controlled transmission and suspension. In informal tests, the DeVille delivered a comfortable ride and handled well for such a large car.

CADILLAC ELDORADO

This plush luxury coupe comes with a full array of safety and luxury accessories. The heart of this design is the sophisticated "Northstar system," which combines a modern 4.6-liter aluminum V8, an electronically controlled four-speed automatic transmission, and an "active" suspension that reacts to road conditions. The Touring Coupe, which has the more powerful version of the Northstar V8, provides blazing acceleration and very smooth shifts, but the traction-control system is hard put at times to keep the front wheels from spinning. Compared with other cars in this luxury class, the Eldorado is rather cumbersome to maneuver in sharp turns and in traffic. The suspension provides a fine ride on good roads, but isolated

bumps tend to trip it up. Most people will find plenty of room in the front, but support could be better. Two adults can sit fairly comfortably in the rear seat, though getting in and out takes dexterity; for three adults, it's a tight squeeze. The automatic climate-control system works quite well. The instruments are easy to read, but some secondary displays are poorly placed.

CADILLAC FLEETWOOD

Built on the same chassis as the Buick Roadmaster and Chevrolet Caprice, the rear-wheel-drive Fleetwood maintains the traditional characteristics of large domestic sedans: a soft ride, a quiet and plush interior, and enough muscle to haul a heavy trailer with ease. You'll find plenty of interior room front and rear, plus a large trunk. You'll also find the cumbersome handling and mediocre fuel economy inherent in this breed.

CADILLAC SEVILLE

This is Cadillac's answer to the ultrasophisticated luxury imports from Mercedes, BMW, Lexus, and Infiniti. The heart of this design is the "Northstar system," which made its debut in 1993. It combines a modern 4.6-liter aluminum V8, an electronically controlled four-speed automatic transmission, a traction-control system, and an electronically controlled "active" suspension that reacts to road conditions. The Northstar accelerates faster than many performance cars. The STS we tested cornered fairly crisply and threaded through our avoidance maneuver securely if not very quickly. The ride, though smooth on good roads, deteriorates considerably on poor ones. Some road and wind noise penetrates the cabin at highway speeds. The spacious

cockpit offers plenty of leg room, but the sun-roof option robs some head room. Softly padded front seats offer good support, but comfort in the rear is several notches worse. The rear seat offers adequate room for two, but not three.

CHEVROLET ASTRO

This year, all Astros have an extended body, with 10 more inches behind the rear wheels. But the design of the Astro and its sibling, the GMC Safari, is hardly up-to-date. Drawbacks include clumsy handling, an uncomfortable ride, and subpar reliability. The 4.3-liter high-output V6 runs smoothly, and the four-speed automatic transmission shifts smoothly. GM recommends premium fuel but says that regular may be used. This rear-wheel-drive van responds slowly to its steering, and it leans sharply in turns. It posted an unusually slow time through our emergency avoidance maneuver. Optional all-wheel drive is a useful feature for slippery road conditions. The brakes work well but noisily. The Astro rocks, bounds, and pitches even on

smooth roads. Lack of front foot room is a significant discomfort. With the optional eight-passenger seating package, the center and rear seats are comfortable for two but not for three. The digital displays are clear, but the controls are poorly arranged. The front and rear climate-control systems are powerful. The Astro boasts an enormous cargo area and impressive towing capability. Dutch (upper and lower) rear doors aid loading and unloading.

CHEVROLET BERETTA

The Beretta is a sporty coupe version of the Corsica sedan. It hasn't changed all that much since its introduction in 1987, and it offers no surprises, good or bad. It represents the thrifty end of GM's compact models, which include the related Buick Skylark, Oldsmobile Achieva, and Pontiac Grand Am. The 2.2-liter Four performs weakly and noisily; the optional 3.1-liter V6 is a better choice. The steering feels queasy and vague, and the car leans considerably in turns. The ride feels busy at times but never harsh. The rear suspension was altered this year to improve the ride a bit. The low front-seat cushions make it hard to see over the hood, and a bolster on the seatback forces occupants to slouch forward. Three average-sized adults feel crowded in the

rear seat. Although the displays are easy to read, the controls are awkward and the climate-control system is weak. The trunk is fairly roomy, and the optional Comfort Convenience Package includes a fold-down split rear seat that extends the cargo area.

CHEVROLET BLAZER

This model, like the similar GMC Jimmy, is now an up-to-date compact sport-utility vehicle. This year's redesign seems to have eliminated many of the older car's crude touches. A fair amount of standard equipment, including air-conditioning, comes in all versions. The standard engine is a 4.3-liter V6 developing 195 hp. The Blazer comes in two- and four-wheel-drive versions, but we see little point in tolerating the discomforts of a sport-utility vehicle without the utility of four-wheel drive. The highest trimline, the LT, is scheduled to acquire an all-wheel-drive option later in the model year.

CHEVROLET C/K

Chevy's full-sized pickup is designated "C" in two-wheel-drive versions, "K" in four-wheel-drive. It and its twin, the GMC Sierra, have a nicer interior now, and the engines are a bit stronger and more refined this year, but the C/K is still trucklike. It's designed for hauling large, heavy loads. Engines range from a 4.3-liter V6 up to a 7.4-liter V8 and a 6.5-liter turbodiesel. Expect a commanding view of the road and a quiet cabin.

CHEVROLET CAMARO

The Camaro and its cousin, the Pontiac Firebird, are among the dwindling ranks of rear-wheel-drive muscle cars. A high-performance 5.7-liter V8, essentially the same engine that powers the Chevrolet Corvette, comes standard in the Z28 version. So does a six-speed manual transmission. A four-speed automatic is optional, as is traction control. The V8's effortless thrust makes the basic 3.4-liter V6 seem sluggish by comparison. Both the V6 and V8 versions ride decently for a sporty car, but the V8 feels noticeably firmer. Though the Camaro is too bulky to be called nimble, it corners with minimal body roll. The V8, which comes with wider tires, grips the road better. Braking is very good. The front bucket seats cradle

occupants nicely; the back seat is mostly for show. Wide roof pillars block much of the driver's view, and both the front and rear ends are invisible to the driver. Older Camaro and Firebird models have been quite unreliable.

CHEVROLET CAPRICE

The Caprice fairly floats over most flaws in the pavement. If a pillow-soft highway ride is all you crave in a car, consider this big, old-fashioned, rear-wheel-drive cousin of the Buick Roadmaster. The optional 5.7-liter V8 cranks out gobs of power, but at the cost of poor fuel economy: about 17 mpg overall. The four-speed automatic transmission always shifts smoothly. An optional upgrade, the Sport Suspension, improves handling and curbs the car's tendency to wallow in curves. The split bench front seat feels like a living-room sofa; it doesn't provide much support. The rear seat is fairly comfortable for three tall adults. Instruments and controls are much more user-friendly than those in earlier Caprices, though some niggling faults remain. The

headlights lack a flash-to-pass feature, and the driver's armrest is home to a jumble of window and seat-adjustment switches. Chevrolet introduced a muscle version of the Caprice, the all-black Impala SS, this year.

CHEVROLET CAVALIER

This year's redesign includes a slightly shorter, wider, and rounder body on a longer wheelbase. Chevrolet has added many minor convenience features, such as heater ducts to the rear seat. The new Cavalier (and its Pontiac equivalent, the Sunfire) is a basic economy car. It provides decent seating for four people and a good complement of safety features. Controls are much easier to use than in the past. The rear seat cushion is very low, but at least it provides decent head room. Our early glimpse indicates that the new Cavalier is pleasant to drive. A more powerful engine is due mid-year.

CHEVROLET CORSICA

The Corsica sedan (like its sportier sibling, the Beretta coupe) remains little changed since its introduction in 1987, and it offers no surprises, good or bad. The Corsica represents the thrifty end of GM's compact models, which include the related Buick Skylark, Oldsmobile Achieva, and Pontiac Grand Am. The 2.2-liter Four performs weakly; the optional 3.1-liter V6 is a better choice. The steering feels queasy and vague, and the car leans a lot in turns. The ride feels busy at times but never harsh. The low front seat cushions make it hard to see over the hood, and a bolster on the seatback forces occupants to slouch forward. Three average-sized adults feel crowded in the rear seat. Although the displays are easy to read, the controls are awkward and the

climate-control system is weak. Daytime running lights and a slightly revised rear suspension are new this year.

CHEVROLET CORVETTE

Sophisticated electronics technology blends with brute muscle-car power in this legendary two-seat sports car. A huge, 5.7-liter V8 pushes the car to 60 mph in 5.5 seconds - the fastest acceleration of any car we've tested - while an effective computer-controlled traction system minimizes wheel spin. The six-speed manual transmission shifts stiffly but precisely; to save fuel, a computer automatically guides the shifter from first gear directly into fourth when you shift at low rpm, an odd feature for a sports car. The body flexes and twists on rough roads, as in the Corvettes of a quarter century ago. The steering is quick and precise, but the car is too bulky to feel nimble. It bounces so badly on rough roads that tall drivers can bang their head on the

roof. Short drivers may have to stretch to depress the clutch pedal. Even with the power seat fully raised, it's hard to see over the hood. Low seats and high, wide sills make getting in and out difficult. The climate-control system is effective. The controls work quite well, and the gauges are easy to read. This is the last year for the ZR-1 version.

CHEVROLET LUMINA

The Lumina was redesigned for 1995. It became a much better car - but then it had a long way to go to get good. Overall, the new car scores about the same as the Ford Taurus - competent all around but not outstanding in any important category. The Lumina is quiet inside, substantially quieter than the Taurus, and it has a better ride and smoother powertrain. The Taurus handles better, stops shorter, and has better seats. The Monte Carlo nameplate was revived for the coupe version of the Lumina. Chevrolet says that both can seat six, but three people up front are a crowd. The standard 3.1-liter V6 accelerates more than adequately; the optional 3.4-liter gives you 50 additional hp. All versions come with a welter of minor but helpful convenience features.

CHEVROLET LUMINA VAN

Expect uninspiring overall performance from the plastic-bodied Lumina and its siblings, the Oldsmobile Silhouette and Pontiac Trans Sport. The 3.8-liter V6 accelerates well but drinks quite a lot of fuel, while the smaller 3.1-liter engine is thriftier but less responsive. The van leaps and bounces on sharp bumps, leans heavily in turns, and handles ponderously. On undulating roads, the front end bobs and pitches. The Chevrolet and Pontiac versions had a couple of inches lopped off their long nose last year, but the driver still can't tell where the front of the car begins, and many blind spots block the view to the sides and rear. The front seats offer good support. An optional seven-passenger seating package places three chairs in the middle row

and two more in the rear. The middle seats are comfortable, the rear seats less so. One person can easily remove the individual seats to make room for cargo. The optional electric sliding side door is well worth the price for the convenience it brings. Some controls are hard to reach. But the powerful climate-control system works well. A useful rear-seat air-conditioner is optional.

CHEVROLET MONTE CARLO

The Monte Carlo nameplate resurfaced this year, attached to the coupe version of the redesigned '95 Chevrolet Lumina sedan. Where the Lumina aims squarely at the heart of the family-car market, the Monte Carlo courts those with a more youthful (and less practical) disposition. All versions come loaded with power accessories. An excellent dash layout features large, clear gauges and easy-to-use controls. Expect a smooth and responsive powertrain - something GM knows how to make - plus a tight, solid body. The high-line Z34 version has a 3.4-liter twin-camshaft V6 that provides more power than the standard 3.1-liter V6.

CHEVROLET S-SERIES

The current version of Chevy's compact "S" pickup and its twin, the GMC Sonoma, are a modern, up-to-date design, but don't expect carlike handling: Like most other trucks, this one leans a lot in corners, the steering feels vague and heavy, and the rear axle hops to the side on washboard roads when the truck is unladen. The 4.3-liter V6 feels sprightly. The optional four-speed automatic transmission shifts smoothly. Even with antilock brakes, stopping distances are quite long for a modern vehicle. An exceptionally quiet cabin somewhat mitigates the stiff, rubbery ride. We prefer the extended-cab version for its convenience. The climate-control system works extremely well, but its controls are far from the driver. Cup-holders and storage nooks

festoon the interior. We have two nagging concerns: reliability has been well below average, and this truck did not do well in Government crash tests.

CHEVROLET SUBURBAN

This overgrown station wagon (like its twin, the GMC Suburban) emphasizes utility over sport. Built on a full-sized pickup chassis, it can seat up to nine people and tow a 10,000-pound trailer. It comes in two- and four-wheel-drive versions; expect both to be more trucklike than carlike. Climate and radio controls are inconvenient. Both the 5.7-liter and mammoth 7.4-liter V8s burn a lot of gasoline. The powerful new 6.5-liter turbodiesel V8 may make sense for Suburban buyers who don't own a petroleum refinery.

CHEVROLET TAHOE

Formerly known as the K-Blazer, the Tahoe fills the gap between the elephantine Suburban and the compact-sized regular Blazer. The Tahoe and its sibling, the GMC Yukon, are built on a full-sized pickup-truck chassis, which lends itself to hauling cargo or towing a heavy trailer. A 5.7-liter V8 is standard; a turbodiesel V8 is optional. The ride is surprisingly comfortable, and handling is reasonably secure.

CHRYSLER CIRRUS

The Cirrus and similar Dodge Stratus are brand-new for 1995. These compacts compete with such Japanese models as the Honda Accord and Mazda 626 as well as Ford's new Contour and Mystique twins. Our early glimpse of the Cirrus showed us a crisp-handling car with good road grip, a smooth-running V6, and first-class controls and displays. We expect the slightly less lush Dodge to behave similarly, at least in the V6 version.

CHRYSLER CONCORDE

Chrysler's well-designed LH triplets - the Chrysler Concorde, Dodge Intrepid, and Eagle Vision, have many virtues but one glaring fault: worse-than-average reliability. They're roomy for five (with a bench front seat, the Intrepid can hold six). The 3.3-liter V6 accelerates well. The optional 3.5-liter V6 delivers a little more punch, at the cost of about 1 mpg overall and mid-grade rather than regular fuel. Handling is nimble, especially for such a large car. The LH cars ride smoothly and, for the most part, quietly, but the tires make more noise than we like, and the engine can sound harsh during acceleration. The headlights are weak, too. Most controls are well designed. Although the rear seat doesn't fold down to add cargo space, the trunk holds plenty of luggage.

CHRYSLER LE BARON CONVERTIBLE

This model hangs on as one of the last remaining Chrysler products built on the aged K-car chassis, soon to enter retirement. Among the latest tweaks is the addition of dual air bags. Sales have been reasonably strong, perhaps because the Le Baron is one of the only convertibles in its market niche. The last time we tested a Le Baron coupe (which is similar to the convertible), we were unimpressed with the handling and ride, particularly on poor road surfaces. The convertible's back seat is cramped and hard to reach.

CHRYSLER LHS/NEW YORKER

These are slightly stretched and more luxuriously equipped versions of Chrysler's LH sedans, the Dodge Intrepid, Chrysler Concorde, and Eagle Vision (which we consider the best large sedans on the market). The LHS and New Yorker add five inches of length - which ends up mostly toward the rear. If you want an especially roomy rear seat, the LHS or New Yorker is the model to choose. Otherwise, save several thousand dollars and opt for a standard-length LH car instead. The LHS is the sportier of the stretched pair; with individual front seats, it can seat five in living-room comfort. The New Yorker, with a front bench, can seat six. The 3.5-liter V6 delivers spirited acceleration, and the four-speed automatic shifts fairly smoothly.

The LHS/New Yorker twins handle fairly nimbly, like much smaller cars. They also offer a comfortable ride and a roomy cockpit. Some road rumble and harsh engine noise intrude into the cabin.

CHRYSLER SEBRING

If you're willing to accept the basic impracticality of a coupe, the Chrysler Sebring and its cousin, the Dodge Avenger, are fairly good choices. Introduced in 1995, these sporty coupes were designed by Chrysler and built in Illinois by Diamond Star Motors, a subsidiary of Mitsubishi. The base engine for both is a noisy Chrysler 2.0-liter Four; we'd choose the optional 2.5-liter V6 made by Mitsubishi, which accelerates more than adequately. Handling is competent and predictable. The chassis absorbs big bumps well, but little pavement flaws transmit firm kicks. The front seats provide good support except for the lower back. The passenger seat scoots forward to aid access to the rear, a welcome feature. The rear seat can hold two

tall adults in only moderate discomfort; three are a tight squeeze. Some of the minor controls are poorly placed, but otherwise, the instrument cluster is clear and functional. The large trunk gets bigger still when you fold down the rear seatbacks. Reliability is a question mark; many new Chrysler products have had problems in that area.

CHRYSLER TOWN & COUNTRY

Chrysler's top-of-the-line minivan, the Town & Country, is a loaded version of the Dodge Grand Caravan and Plymouth Grand Voyager twins. The automatic transmission shifts smoothly. Handling is acceptable - not fun, but safe. The van rides pleasantly on smooth roads, though it rocks and shudders occasionally on rough roads. The front seats are comfortable, and the driving position can accommodate a wide range of physiques. The seven-passenger seating package includes a built-in reclining child safety seat, which makes a lumpy seatback when retracted. The rearmost seat is crowded for three. The climate-control system is quite powerful. The displays are clear, and the controls have been improved. The shorter-

bodied Dodge Caravan and Plymouth Voyager have generally been more reliable.

DODGE AVENGER

If you're willing to accept the basic impracticality of a coupe, the Dodge Avenger and its cousin, the Chrysler Sebring, are fairly good choices. Introduced in 1995, these sporty coupes were designed by Chrysler and built by Diamond Star Motors, a U.S. subsidiary of Mitsubishi. The base engine for both is a Chrysler 2.0-liter Four. The optional 2.5-liter Mitsubishi V6 is a better choice; it accelerates more than adequately. Handling is competent and predictable. The chassis absorbs big bumps well, but little pavement flaws transmit firm kicks. The front seats provide good support except for the lower back. The passenger seat scoots forward to aid access to the rear, a welcome feature. The rear seat holds two tall

adults in moderate discomfort; three are a tight squeeze. Some of the minor controls are poorly placed, but otherwise, the instrument cluster is clear and functional. The large trunk gets bigger still when you fold down the rear seatbacks. Reliability is a question mark; many new Chrysler products have had problems in that area.

DODGE CARAVAN

The roomy Caravan and its twin, the Plymouth Voyager, have managed to stay on top of the minivan market for more than a decade, and deservedly so. Tweaks and refinements have improved the ride, handling, acceleration, and fuel economy of late, making a good van even better. The 3.3-liter V6 delivers plenty of power, but the automatic transmission sometimes shifts too often. Choose the optional beefed-up suspension; it helps the van corner better and stay level in hard turns without hurting the ride much. The high front seats give occupants a commanding view of the road, and they provide good, firm support. Reclining captain's chairs in the second row are a worthwhile option; they're comfortable and, if you need more

cargo space, easy for one person to remove. The rear bench is roomy but quite heavy; it may take two people to lift it out. The extended-wheelbase Dodge Grand Caravan, Plymouth Grand Voyager, and Chrysler Town & Country offer more space for people or luggage, but they haven't been as reliable. A redesigned 1996 model will be available early in 1995.

DODGE DAKOTA

The elderly Dakota has not aged well. Its one saving grace is a large bed, the roomiest available in a compact-sized pickup. That's particularly important if you choose an extended cab, which shortens the cargo box considerably. Compared with its Ford and Chevrolet competitors, though, the Dakota falls well back in most performance and convenience considerations. The 3.9-liter V6 we tested feels anemic. Expect more power but a big penalty in fuel economy with the V8. In the sample we tested, the four-speed automatic transmission often didn't downshift when it should or hunted back and forth between third and fourth gears annoyingly. The steering feels ponderous, and a wide turning circle makes parking clumsy. The ride is mediocre on good roads

and bad, and the seats, though soft, aren't very supportive. The interior is dated, with many minor controls poorly placed: it's all too easy to grab the mirror-adjustment lever when you want the headlight switch. Reliability has been worse than average for years. The Dakota is due for a redesign for 1997.

DODGE GRAND CARAVAN

The Dodge Grand Caravan and its siblings, the Chrysler Town & Country and Plymouth Grand Voyager, are extended versions of the top-rated Caravan and Voyager. The 3.3-liter V6 delivers adequate acceleration; a 3.8-liter V6 is available as well. The automatic transmission shifts smoothly; a manual transmission is unavailable. Handling is acceptable - not fun, but safe. The van rides pleasantly on smooth roads, though it rocks and shudders occasionally on rough roads. The front seats are comfortable, and the driving position can accommodate a wide range of physiques. The seven-passenger seating package includes a built-in reclining child safety seat, which makes a lumpy seatback when retracted. The rearmost seat is crowded for

three. The climate-control system is quite powerful. The displays are clear, and the controls have been improved. The shorter Dodge Caravan and Plymouth Voyager have generally been more reliable.

DODGE INTREPID

Chrysler's well-designed LH triplets - the Chrysler Concorde, Dodge Intrepid, and Eagle Vision, have many virtues but one glaring fault--worse-than-average reliability. They're roomy for five (with a bench front seat, the Intrepid can hold six). The performance of the 3.3-liter V6 should satisfy most people. The optional 3.5-liter V6 delivers slightly punchier acceleration, but it gives up about 1 mpg overall and requires mid-grade rather than regular fuel. Handling is nimble, especially for such a large car. We would choose the optional antilock brakes and traction control. The ride is smooth and quiet for the most part, but the tires make more noise than we like, and the engine can sound harsh during acceleration. The headlights are a little weak, too.

Most controls are well designed and laid out conveniently. Although the rear seat doesn't fold down to add cargo space, the trunk holds plenty of luggage.

DODGE NEON

The new Dodge/Plymouth Neon twins are among the very few small cars to be designed and made entirely in the U.S. in recent years. The Neon makes good use of its interior space. The standard 132-hp, 2.0-liter Four has plenty of power, but you have to rev it hard to get the performance - and it makes a racket at high rpm. The three-speed automatic transmission feels more responsive at low speeds than does the crisp-shifting five-speed manual transmission. You have to shift the manual transmission from fifth gear to fourth to maintain speed on even gentle highway inclines. The Neon handles predictably; the Sport version, with bigger and grippier tires, handles slightly better than the Highline. The ride is jittery and busy, and broken

pavement delivers choppy buckboard kicks. The front seats provide good, firm support for most people, but tall drivers wanted more thigh support. The rear seat can hold three six-footers - if they're slim. A coupe version is due early in 1995. Reliability of this new model remains to be seen.

DODGE RAM

The Ram was refined for 1994, but you won't forget you're driving a truck. Handling is ponderous but steady. The front seats are quite comfortable, and the control panel is nicely laid out. Even the regular-cab models have generous storage room behind the reclining seatbacks. Extended-cab (Club Cab) models have a rear bench seat for three. The optional 8.0-liter V10 is unnecessary. Consider the 5.9-liter V8 as the best all-around engine, or the 5.9-liter turbo diesel Six if you plan to put in long hours using the Ram as a work truck.

DODGE STEALTH

In its costliest and most performance-oriented form, this exotic sports car is a technological tour de force. It's made by Mitsubishi in Japan, as is its twin, the Mitsubishi 3000 GT. Price lines range from the base model, which comes with a non-turbocharged 3.0-liter V6 and front-wheel drive, on up to the R/T Turbo, with twin turbochargers, four-wheel steering, electronically adjustable suspension, and all-wheel drive. The latter version offers everything you'd expect in a sports car: excellent steering response and traction, lots of grip in turns, extraordinarily short stops, and (despite its considerable weight) blazing acceleration. The front seats are comfortable for most people. The rear seat is mostly for show. The automatic climate-

control system heats or cools quickly and quietly. The controls could be better; the displays are crisp and clear except for the climate-control screen.

DODGE STRATUS

The Stratus and similar Chrysler Cirrus are brand-new for 1995. These compacts compete with such Japanese models as the Honda Accord and Mazda 626 as well as Ford's new Contour and Mystique twins. Our early glimpse of the Cirrus showed us a crisp-handling car with good road grip, a tight body structure, and first-class controls and displays. We expect the slightly less lush Dodge to behave similarly, at least in the ES V6 version. The Dodge's base engine is a version of the Neon's 2.0-liter Four. A 2.4-liter twin-cam Four and a made-by-Mitsubishi V6 are available as upgrades.

EAGLE SUMMIT

Chrysler Corp. sells the Mitsubishi Mirage as the Eagle Summit. By any name, this Japanese design is a price leader, intended to entice buyers into showrooms filled with fancier and pricier models. Most of the cars you'll see on a dealer's lot will be short on extra equipment such as antilock brakes. That's too bad, since the standard, nonantilock brakes are the poorest we've tested in several years. The Summit rides firmly and often uncomfortably. The front seats provide generally satisfactory support, and tall drivers will find adequate leg room. The rear seat can barely hold two six-footers, though three average-sized adults can fit without undue discomfort. Major controls are easy to see and grasp, but some minor switches are hidden or hard

to operate. The versatile climate-control system quickly provides heated or cooled air. You can expand the Summit's moderate-sized trunk by folding down the split rear seatback. The best thing about this car is its zesty and fuel-efficient powertrain. If you must buy a Summit, choose the 1.8-liter Four, five-speed manual transmission, and antilock brakes.

EAGLE SUMMIT WAGON

This cross between a small station wagon and a very small van is made in Japan by Mitsubishi. Tall and boxy, it has a single sliding side door like that of a van, and a high seating position that offers the driver a commanding view. The 2.4-liter Four (the engine of choice) delivers peppy acceleration. Handling, though, comes up a bit short: in tight turns, the tires squeal easily, the body leans, and the car wants to plow straight ahead. This wagon delivers a comfortable, quiet ride and provides a good deal more cargo space than do competing small wagons. Tall drivers may wish for more leg room. The rear seat offers ample room for two adults, but barely adequate room for three. The climate-control system quickly delivers ample warmed or cooled

air and distributes it evenly. The instruments are legible; the controls could be easier to use.

EAGLE TALON

The Eagle Talon is similar to the Mitsubishi Eclipse; both are manufactured in Illinois by Diamond Star Motors, a Chrysler-Mitsubishi joint venture. The Talon was redesigned for 1995, although it keeps the distinctive off-center hump in the hood. The new car is said to have a stiffer body than its predecessor (that's a plus), and the wheelbase has grown slightly. The base model gets a new Chrysler-made 2.0-liter engine that develops 140 hp, while the higher-line versions get a turbocharged 2.0-liter Four that delivers 210 hp in the version with manual transmission, 205 with automatic. The all-wheel drive feature in the high-line TSi AWD version improves traction significantly.

EAGLE VISION

Chrysler's well-designed LH triplets - the Chrysler Concorde, Dodge Intrepid, and Eagle Vision, have many virtues but one glaring fault: worse-than-average reliability. They're roomy for five (with a bench front seat, the Intrepid can hold six). The Vision, aimed at a slightly sportier crowd, offers buckets only. The 3.3-liter V6 accelerates well. The optional 3.5-liter V6 delivers a little more punch, at the cost of about 1 mpg overall and mid-grade rather than regular fuel. Handling is nimble, especially in the TSi version, but the TSi's ride is a bit harsh. Antilock brakes and traction control are worthwhile options. The tires make more noise than we like, and the engine can sound harsh during acceleration. Most controls are well designed. For 1996 the

Vision offers "Autostick," which lets you shift the transmission like a manual, but without a clutch. Although the rear seat doesn't fold down, the trunk holds plenty of luggage.

FORD AEROSTAR

This hoary rear-wheel-drive model will be sold side-by-side with its replacement, the new front-wheel-drive Windstar, throughout 1995. Years of fine-tuning the chassis have made the Aerostar less and less trucklike - but it remains a sound choice for heavy-duty work, whether carrying six or seven people or towing a trailer. Credit its powerful, optional 4.0-liter V6 and its roomy cargo compartment, especially in the stretched version. (The 3.0-liter V6 provides adequate acceleration in the standard-length versions of the Aerostar.) The four-speed automatic transmission shifts abruptly during hard acceleration. The all-wheel-drive version handles more sure-footedly than the rear-wheel-drive version, especially on slippery roads. The ride

is good; the seating, very comfortable. Both the front and rear climate-control systems work well. The instruments are generally easy to read. The defroster fails to clear the lower edge of the windshield, so the wipers tend to ice up. Otherwise, both the front and rear climate-control systems work well.

FORD ASPIRE

Like the Ford Festiva, which it replaces, the Aspire is made in Korea by Kia. The Aspire is fuel efficient and has plenty of head room - and that's where the good news ends. The 1.3-liter Four provides painfully slow acceleration. The five-speed manual transmission shifts easily but requires frequent downshifting to maintain speed on inclines. The Aspire handles clumsily and leans sharply in turns. The nonpower steering is slow and unresponsive and can become very heavy in mid-turn. In short, it's a chore to drive. The ride is busy and taut, although the suspension damps most of the kicks and jiggles. Leg room is snug for tall people, but short drivers could see well over the hood. The front seats provide generally good, firm support. Two

tall people can squeeze into the rear, but no seating position is allotted for a third rear passenger.

FORD BRONCO

The big Bronco weighs in solidly on the utility end of the sport-utility continuum, where it competes with the Chevrolet Tahoe and GMC Yukon. This vehicle is a truck from the core outwards, but a truck that offers various levels of interior luxury appointments. The Bronco is designed for people who need to haul a lot of gear or tow a heavy trailer. Available only with a V8 engine, the Bronco delivers mediocre fuel economy.

FORD CONTOUR

The all-new Contour and its counterpart, the Mercury Mystique, were developed by Ford in Europe, where the car has been available for two years as the Ford Mondeo. The car features modern styling and design, including a rigid body, a sophisticated rear suspension, and a smooth-shifting optional automatic transmission. Our preliminary glimpse indicates that the standard four-cylinder engine performs adequately, while the optional V6 accelerates very smoothly and powerfully. The V6 is designed to go 100,000 miles between tuneups. The car handles nimbly, and the brakes feel particularly nice. The interior design is pleasant and functional.

FORD CROWN VICTORIA

This is one of the last big freeway cruisers made the old fashioned way, with a V8, full frame, and rear wheel drive. This year the Crown Victoria and its sibling, the Mercury Marquis, received a minor facelift inside and out; the new interior includes a redesigned dash and new seats - good news, since the old seats were thinly padded and uncomfortable. The Crown Victoria delivers a serene ride, especially with a full load aboard. A huge trunk and substantial trailer-towing capability are further bonuses. The 4.6-liter V8 cruises effortlessly, and the automatic transmission shifts smoothly. Steering response is quite good, too. Choose the Preferred Equipment Package 114A and Handling and Performance package for better handling and tire

grip. With the upgraded suspension and tires, the car plows ahead only moderately in hard turns. The front bench seat is designed to hold three abreast, but an adult won't be happy in the center position. Leg room for tall drivers is just adequate. The rear seat is roomy enough for three, though toe space under the front seats is tight.

FORD ESCORT

Some Escorts are made in the U.S. and some in Mexico. (The Escort's sibling, the Mercury Tracer, is made only in Mexico.) Although the Escort is one of the top-selling small cars in the U.S., we recommend that you consider only the highest-priced version, the GT two-door hatchback. It alone comes with a sophisticated 1.8-liter Four (made by Mazda). Although that engine is slightly smaller than the 1.9-liter Four in other versions, it's more powerful and provides strong acceleration, even with the optional four-speed automatic transmission. Antilock brakes are badly needed in the Escort - and, again, they're available only in the GT. The basic Escort handles sluggishly; steering response is slow and a little sloppy. The GT version's taut

suspension makes the car feel nimbler, though it stiffens the ride. Too bad the Escort retains its irritating old motorized shoulder belts. Front seating is comfortable, and even short drivers can see well over the hood. The rear seat provides room enough for six-footers, but it's not very comfortable. The rear seatback sections can fold for more luggage room.

FORD ESCORT WAGON

Some Escorts are made in the U.S. and some in Mexico. (The Escort's sibling, the Mercury Tracer, is made only in Mexico.) The sedan comes with a clunky 1.9-liter engine that struggles and moans. Far nicer is the optional 1.8-liter engine made by Mazda, which is smoother and more powerful. Alas, that engine is available only in the two-door GT hatchback in the Escort line. But it does come in the Mercury Tracer's LTS trim line - the one to choose if you want the best here. Antilock brakes are badly needed in the Escort - and, again, they're available only in the GT (and the Tracer LTS). The basic Escort handles sluggishly; steering response is slow and a little sloppy. The GT version's taut suspension makes the car feel nimbler,

though it stiffens the ride. Too bad the Escort retains its irritating old motorized shoulder belts. Front seating is comfortable, and even short drivers can see well over the hood. The rear seat provides room enough for six-footers, but it's not very comfortable. The rear seatback sections can fold for more luggage room.

FORD EXPLORER

This best-selling sport-utility vehicle was extensively redesigned for 1995, but it retains the previous model's 4.0-liter V6, and the cabin remains as big and roomy as ever. The four-door version easily seats five. Or you can fold the rear seats to create a long load floor nearly as roomy as a minivan's. The engine delivers adequate performance, and the four-speed automatic transmission shifts smoothly. A new suspension should improve the handling, and Ford upgraded the four-wheel drive to a full-time all-wheel-drive system this year, a major improvement.. This year the Explorer finally comes with dual airbags. We recommend the optional trailer-towing package, with its added engine cooling. (The Mazda Navajo is a two-door

version of the 1994 Ford Explorer. It did not receive the 1995 Explorer's full-time all-wheel drive, improved suspension, and dual air bags.)

FORD F-SERIES

Although it dates back to 1980, this has been the best-selling vehicle - car or truck - in the U.S. for years. The light-duty F-150 is the most popular in the series. Ford plans a major redesign during 1996, which will be designated a 1997 model. It will finally offer four-wheel antilock brakes. Extended-cab models will have a handy third door on the passenger's side to ease loading of the rear of the cab. Like other full-sized pickups, the F-Series is a work truck, good at hauling, and towing large loads. Engines range from a 4.9-liter 6 to a 7.5-liter V8 and a 7.3-liter turbodiesel V8.

FORD MUSTANG

A 1994 redesign gave this old-fashioned muscle car a new, more rigid body and a new interior. Unfortunately, the car retains most of the pedestrian underpinnings of its predecessor. The Mustang competes most closely with the only other surviving rear-wheel-drive muscle cars, the Chevy Camaro and Pontiac Firebird. Unlike those models, though, the Mustang doesn't feel sporty to drive. The base version comes with a 3.8-liter V6, while the higher-line GT version offers the 5.0-liter V8 that has powered the Mustang for many years. The V6 model feels a bit sluggish on takeoff and nose-dives severely during hard braking. The V8 has more punch but falls well short of the performance of the Camaro and Firebird V8s. It handles stably and steadily on

smooth roads, but it bounces and sometimes steps to the side on bumpy roads. Expect a jerky, active ride in any Mustang version. The front seats provide generally adequate support but little comfort. Adults won't be comfortable for long in the rear seat. Most controls are well designed, except for Ford's usual hard-to-use radio.

FORD PROBE

The Probe and the Mazda MX-6 are both built in Michigan in a plant operated by Ford and Mazda. The two models have different bodies but share many mechanical parts. The higher trim line of each make is a step up in performance from the base four-cylinder version. The V6 engine accelerates smoothly and with authority. We prefer the easy-shifting five-speed manual transmission to the optional four-speed automatic. Handling is very smooth and predictable. The Probe GT's taut suspension and wider tires provide crisper handling, but the MX-6 rides a bit more comfortably. (The base version, with a four-cylinder engine and softer suspension, wouldn't come close to matching the performance and handling of the GT. And the base Probe lacks a

rear wiper and seat-height adjusters.) The front seats are comfortable - the Probe's, not quite as comfortable as the MX-6's. Save the rear seat for packages. We prefer the MX-6's interior layout to the Probe's. There's lots of luggage room under the Probe's hatchback, and folding the rear seatbacks extends the luggage area. The MX-6 is a coupe with a conventional trunk.

FORD RANGER

Ford's popular Ranger is our top-scoring compact pickup. Although the basic design has been around for years, technical tweaks have kept it up-to-date. The Ranger received a new, improved interior for 1995. The 4.0-liter V6 is fairly responsive, but it sounds harsh when it's revved. The Ranger handles well for a truck, but you won't mistake it for a passenger car. Steering is a bit vague, and the body leans quite a bit during cornering. Road bumps and uneven pavement mar the ride - also typical behavior for the breed. But the cab is reasonably quiet, and the front seats are soft and supportive. The climate-control system works powerfully. An extended cab is so worthwhile an

option that one wonders why it wasn't more popular years ago. Think of the space back there as a trunk (two children can occupy the small jump seats, but they won't be happy there).

FORD TAURUS

The Taurus (along with its sibling, the Mercury Sable) was once a prima donna among domestic cars but has begun to show its age. It delivers good all-around performance, comfortable seating, and reasonable fuel economy. It seems like a very nice car - until you drive a Camry or an Accord or a Dodge Intrepid. The standard-equipment four-speed automatic transmission shifts fairly smoothly. The Taurus handles well in normal driving, though sluggishly in hard turns. The steering feels heavier than it used to, but still light at anything below highway speeds. The optional six-way power seat comfortably accommodates drivers of nearly any size. The rear seat is roomy enough for two six-footers, snug for three adults. The interior is quiet except for

wind noise. Most of the controls are well designed, and the optional automatic climate-control system furnishes plenty of warmed or cooled air. The high-performance SHO version of the Taurus features a powerful and responsive V6 and a firmer suspension that provides slightly crisper handling.

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FORD THUNDERBIRD

Last year the Thunderbird and similar Mercury Cougar received their first significant changes since 1989. The exterior was freshened up, and the interior is new. Expect a good ride, particularly in the front seats, and fairly quick, accurate steering. The base engine is a conventional 3.8-liter V6. The optional 4.6-liter V8, introduced last year, is more responsive, refined, and fuel efficient than the 5.0-liter V8 it replaced, though power output is about the same. Standard equipment includes a wealth of accessories such as air-conditioning, power windows, and power locks.

FORD WINDSTAR

New in '94, this big, front-wheel-drive model is one of the most refined minivans on the market. It has about the best ride of any minivan. The floor is lower than that of other vans and thus it's easier to get into and to load. It also feels quite carlike to drive, though it never lets you forget how bulky it is. And as you can't see the ends of the van, parking can take some guesswork. The inside is big too - almost as roomy as the extended-length Dodge Grand Caravan/Chrysler Town & Country/Plymouth Grand Voyager triplets. The engine, the same 3.8-liter V6 found in the Ford Taurus, accelerates adequately, but it's not exactly sprightly. The controls are easy to reach, and the third seat can fold or slide forward a bit for more cargo room.

GEO METRO

Though longer, higher, and wider this year, the Metro is still a very small car - one that's happier zipping around town than cruising on the highway. The little 1.0-liter, three-cylinder engine squeezes more miles out of a gallon of fuel than practically any other car. A more powerful Four is available this year. The Metro is similar to the Suzuki Swift, another inexpensive little runabout that is offered only as a hatchback. A four-door sedan version is new this year.

GEO PRIZM

This high-rated model was once a virtual twin of the Toyota Corolla, but the two have developed distinct personalities. The Prizm and Corolla still share their powertrains, platform, and many body parts, but the Prizm has a firmer ride, and it tends to come with less standard equipment. For best performance, choose the 1.8-liter Four over the base-level 1.6-liter Four, with either the five-speed manual transmission or the four-speed automatic. The Prizm's body rolls a bit less than the Corolla's during cornering, and the steering responds more crisply, but letting up on the accelerator during hard cornering can upset the car's balance and make the tail wag. The antilock brakes stop the car quite short, though not always entirely straight, on wet

and dry roads. The ride is never punishing, but large bumps make their presence known a bit more forcefully than in the Corolla. The driving position feels a bit cramped, but the front seats provide generally good support. The rear seat is just wide enough to hold three adults, though not very comfortably. The climate-control system does its job quickly and powerfully. Most controls are easy to use, and the instruments are clear. You can expand the trunk by folding down the split rear seatback.

GEO TRACKER

Here's an agile little Jeep-like runabout that's not too punishing to live with, although it's better suited to running errands around town than long trips. Geo's version of the Suzuki Sidekick, the Tracker, comes with two- or four-wheel drive. You can add optional fold-and-stow rear seats in the small cargo area behind the front seats. The hardtop version offers better weather protection than the convertible, at the expense of losing the open-air experience. The engine provides adequate power for freeway cruising, but stiff cross winds can buffet the car.

GMC JIMMY

This model, like the similar Chevrolet Blazer, is now an up-to-date compact sport-utility vehicle. This year's redesign seems to have eliminated many of the older car's crude touches. A fair amount of standard equipment, including air-conditioning, comes in all versions. The standard engine is a 4.3-liter V6 developing 195 hp. The Jimmy comes in two- and four-wheel-drive versions, but we see little point in tolerating the discomforts of a sport-utility vehicle without the utility of four-wheel drive. The Jimmy is scheduled to acquire an all-wheel-drive option later in the model year.

GMC SAFARI

The design of the Safari and its sibling, the Chevrolet Astro, is hardly up-to-date. Drawbacks include clumsy handling, an uncomfortable ride, and subpar reliability. The 4.3-liter high-output V6 runs smoothly, and the four-speed automatic transmission shifts smoothly. GM recommends premium fuel but says that regular may be used. This rear-wheel-drive van responds slowly to its steering, and it leans sharply in turns; the Astro we tested posted an unusually slow time through our emergency avoidance maneuver. Optional all-wheel drive is a useful feature for slippery road conditions. The brakes work well but noisily. The van rocks, bounds, and pitches even on smooth roads. Lack of front foot room is a significant discomfort. With the

optional eight-passenger seating package, the center and rear seats are comfortable for two but not for three. The digital displays are clear, but the controls are poorly arranged. The front and rear climate-control systems are powerful. The cargo area is enormous, and Dutch (upper and lower) rear doors aid loading and unloading. Towing capability is impressive.

GMC SIERRA C/K

The GMC Sierra and its twin, the Chevrolet C/K, are full-sized pickups, available with two- or four-wheel drive. The interior is nicer now, and the engines are more powerful and refined, but you'll still know you're driving a big truck. The Sierra is designed for hauling large, heavy loads. Engines range from a 4.3-liter V6 up to a 7.4-liter V8 and a 6.5-liter turbodiesel. Expect a commanding view of the road and a quiet cabin.

GMC SONOMA

The compact GMC Sonoma, a twin of the Chevrolet S pickup, is a modern, up-to-date truck. The 4.3-liter V6 is sprightly. The optional four-speed automatic transmission shifts smoothly. Handling, though not bad, isn't as good as a car's: the Sonoma leans a lot in corners, the steering feels vague and heavy, and the rear axle hops to the side on washboard roads when the truck is unladen. Even with antilock brakes, stopping distances are quite long. An exceptionally quiet cabin somewhat mitigates the stiff, rubbery ride. We'd choose the extended-cab option for the convenience it brings. The climate-control system works extremely well, but its controls are far from the driver. Cup-holders and storage nooks festoon the cabin. We have two nagging

concerns: reliability has been well below average, and this truck did not do well in Government crash tests.

GMC SUBURBAN

This overgrown station wagon (like its twin, the Chevrolet Suburban) emphasizes utility over sport. Built on a full-sized pickup chassis, it can seat up to nine people and tow a 10,000-pound trailer. It comes in two- and four-wheel-drive versions; expect both to be more trucklike than carlike. Climate and radio controls are inconvenient. Instead of the thirsty 5.7-liter and mammoth 7.4-liter gasoline-burning V8s, the powerful new 6.5-liter turbodiesel V8 may make sense for Suburban buyers who don't own a petroleum refinery.

GMC YUKON

The Yukon fills the gap between the elephantine Suburban and the compact-sized Jimmy. The Yukon and its sibling, the Chevrolet Tahoe, are built on a full-sized pickup-truck chassis, which lends itself to hauling cargo or towing a heavy trailer. All Yukons have four-wheel drive. The standard engine is a big 5.7-liter V8; an even larger, 6.5-liter turbodiesel V8 is optional. This model rides pleasantly for a truck and handles reasonably well. We would opt for an automatic transmission and the trailering option.

HONDA ACCORD

The popular Accord became a smidgen larger, mostly on the inside, in 1994. The redesign made this fine car even better. The high-trim-line EX model we tested comes with a 2.2-liter VTEC four-cylinder, an engine whose valve timing is electronically controlled to boost both power and fuel economy. The Four delivers sprightly acceleration. (A V6 has just been introduced.) The sophisticated automatic transmission shifts smoothly and unobtrusively; its "grade logic" feature prevents hunting between gears on inclines. Nimble handling, quick steering response, good tire grip, and limited body lean in turns combine to build driver confidence. A taut suspension damps out road irregularities well, nicely shaped seats offer good support, and

interior noise is minimal. A couple of quibbles: the trunk opening is small, and the key-operated release mechanism for folding down the rear seatbacks is awkward. The wagon version rides on the same chassis as the sedan; cargo space is limited for a wagon in this class.

HONDA CIVIC

We've come to expect good overall competence from each new Civic we test, and we haven't been disappointed. The basic 1.5-liter Four delivers peppy acceleration. The higher-line EX and sporty Si versions offer an even peppier 1.6-liter VTEC Four - an engine whose valve timing is electronically controlled to boost both power and fuel economy. The optional automatic transmission sometimes shifts annoyingly back and forth on uphill stretches. The ride is firm on smooth pavement, active on back roads. The noise level is typical for a small car; the tires hum and the engine buzzes when it's revved up. The tail feels a bit twitchy in abrupt avoidance maneuvers, but hard cornering under power is stable and smooth. The brakes stop

short and straight. The front seats are low but comfortable, and the driver can see out well. Two tall or three average-sized men can fit in the rear, though head room is snug. The displays are clear and easy to read, and the controls are nicely designed except for the tiny horn buttons in the spokes of the steering wheel. The climate-control system furnishes plenty of heated or cooled air.

HONDA CIVIC DEL SOL

This two-seat model, a replacement for the sporty Civic CRX, misses the mark. Despite its detachable roof panel, the del Sol neither looks nor drives like a sports car. Think of it as an impractical economy car. The base S version comes with a 1.5-liter Four. The Si version has a considerably more powerful 1.6-liter Four and larger wheels and tires. A VTEC version, whose valve timing is electronically controlled to boost both power and fuel economy, was added in 1994, along with a stiffer suspension. The Si's acceleration is quick enough, and steering response is adequate. The front end plowed a bit and the tail tended to slide out in tight maneuvers at our track. The ride is busy, and the body flexes, rattles, and creaks on any but the

smoothest roads. Braking is mediocre; too bad antilock brakes still aren't available. A low seating position and wide rear roof pillars create serious blind spots for the driver. Tall drivers will find plenty of head and leg room, though. Even with the roof panel stowed in the trunk, quite a lot of luggage room remains.

HONDA ODYSSEY

Honda's new minivan, its first ever, is built on the Honda Accord platform. It has four doors, like a station wagon, rather than a sliding door. Judging from the automaker's early press releases, the Odyssey is longer, lower, and narrower than most vans. We would expect it to be among the most carlike of vans and to be well built and reliable. It comes only with a 2.2-liter Four. A V6 probably would have made a better choice, if it were available.

HONDA PASSPORT

Honda jumped into the fast-growing sport-utility market in 1994. But rather than designing a vehicle from scratch, Honda arranged to put its Passport name on the Isuzu Rodeo, a compact model that's slightly smaller than Isuzu's flagship SUV, the Trooper. The Passport's V6 accelerates modestly, and you must first stop the car to engage the rudimentary four-wheel-drive system. (The four-wheel drive can't be used on dry roads.) The steering feels slow in routine driving, and the body leans heavily during cornering. The Passport jiggles and bounds on rough roads. The operating controls are distinctly awkward. The two front seats provide good, extra-firm support. The flat rear bench gives plenty of space but limited comfort for

three adults. The powerful heater serves front-seat occupants well but leaves rear passengers out in the cold. The Passport offers little more cargo space than the average station wagon. The identical Isuzu Rodeo has had a dismal reliability record. The Passport may or may not be as troublesome, but note that the Rodeo comes with a much better warranty than the Passport.

HONDA PRELUDE

This sporty coupe is a happy blend of performance and handling. Honda's potent and economical 2.2-liter VTEC (valve timing electronically controlled) Four is an option, but even the less powerful 2.3-liter Four in the Si version feels smooth and punchy. The five-speed manual transmission shifts slickly and precisely, but depressing the clutch pedal requires a stretch. The steering feels nicely weighted and responsive; the car handles well and is fun to drive. Braking is respectable, though not outstanding. The ride is jiggly, but well controlled even on rough pavement. The cabin is quiet for a sporty car. The front seats are firm and comfortable, and their large side bolsters cradle occupants in hard turns. The rear seat is more decorative than functional;

save it for packages or small children. The dashboard layout was improved a little in 1994 but still lags behind most other Honda models. Space for storage and luggage is limited.

HYUNDAI ACCENT

It would be hard for the Accent not to be an improvement over its predecessor, the Excel, which posted a poor reliability record. The Accent is the entry-level Hyundai, a small, basic runabout with a modern interior and rounded styling. It competes with the Toyota Tercel and Geo Metro in the uncrowded sub-\$10,000 price class. In this case, low price isn't necessarily synonymous with good value.

HYUNDAI ELANTRA

This Korean-made model fills the gap in Hyundai's lineup between the new, small Accent and the larger Sonata, also new for 1995. The inexpensive base version of the Elantra comes with a weak 1.6-liter Four that delivers mediocre fuel economy. The optional 1.8-liter Four is a much better choice. Trouble is, when the Elantra is properly equipped, with the larger engine and antilock brakes, it becomes about as costly as its Japanese competitors, which are better cars. The Elantra handles well enough on smooth roads. But the suspension crashes and bangs on bumps that other cars take in stride, robbing the ride of any semblance of comfort. The front seats offer good all-round support, and the driver can see out well. The rear seat can hold

two tall passengers easily and accepts three average-sized adults in a pinch. Some of the power-option switches are inconveniently placed or hard to operate.

HYUNDAI SCOUPE

A sporty car should be fun to drive - and the Scoupe isn't. There's little to praise in this model, the low-budget act in the sporty-car arena. It's a basic car, with trendy styling but a crude chassis. The high-trim-line Turbo version at least provides peppy acceleration. Otherwise, the Scoupe is a modest all-around performer. Note the lack of air bags and antilock brakes.

HYUNDAI SONATA

Hyundai models have competed well in price but not much else. Previous Sonatas racked up the worst reliability record of any model we've recently surveyed. The 1995 Sonata has become larger (it's now about one inch longer than the Honda Accord), and its interior appointments are much improved. The standard engine, a 2.0-liter Four, is a smidgen more powerful than last year's; the optional 3.0-liter V6 is even stronger and more refined. In our preliminary tests, the handling seemed sound, but the ride felt choppy and jittery over any but the best roads.

INFINITI G20

This Japanese model feels like a good European sports sedan, offering nimble handling without giving up much in comfort. The 2.0-liter Four delivers decent acceleration and good fuel economy. The optional four-speed automatic transmission shifts smoothly in normal driving, more aggressively during hard acceleration. We prefer the smooth-shifting five-speed manual transmission, which makes better use of the engine's modest horsepower. The G20 handles responsively, but abrupt avoidance maneuvers can make the rear end swing out a little. The front seats give good, firm support, and lots of adjustments on the driver's seat help accommodate practically anyone. The rear seat is roomy enough for two six-footers or three average-

sized adults. The ride remains well controlled even on rough pavement. The controls and displays are excellent; the climate-control system, powerful and effective. A fold-down rear seatback comes only in the high-line Touring model, but the trunk offers lots of luggage room even without that feature.

INFINITI J30

This is a car for people who value near-absolute isolation from the road more than sporty handling. It's also a car for people who won't be using the rear seat often and who don't need much trunk room. Functionally, the J30 is a luxury coupe, despite its four doors. A 3.0-liter V6 drives the rear wheels, delivering smooth and responsive acceleration, and the four-speed automatic transmission (standard equipment) shifts smoothly. The car leans noticeably in tight turns, and the rear tires break loose fairly easily on slippery surfaces; a traction-control system would be helpful. Keeping the tail from wagging in abrupt maneuvers can be tricky. The antilock brakes always stop the car short and straight. The J30 rides smoothly and quietly over

all kinds of roads, and the engine is virtually inaudible at steady speed. The front seats provide exceptional comfort; the eight-way power driver's seat can accommodate all but the tallest people. The rear seat is tight and uncomfortable even for two, and getting in or out is a challenge. The automatic climate-control system works very well. The major controls are laid out logically, and the important displays are clear. The trunk is small, and its high sill makes loading difficult.

INFINITI Q45

This is the flagship model in Nissan's luxury Infiniti line. The first-generation Q45 scored points for its muscle-car acceleration (thanks to a sophisticated 4.5-liter V8) and superb handling, almost like that of a big BMW. In newer Q45 models, some of the old performance has been blunted in favor of a quieter, more refined ride. Too big to be agile, this rear-wheel-drive model plows ahead a little during hard cornering but remains firmly planted on the ground. The Q45a version features a hydraulically operated "active" suspension that soaks up most road bumps and lessens pitching motions, but the ride is fine even without that feature. Little noise penetrates the cabin. The front seats offer excellent, though firm, support.

The steering-wheel and seat adjustments let you tailor the cockpit to nearly any physique. The rear seat is comfortable for two adults but not for three. Major controls and displays are generally well designed, though some minor switches are poorly placed. A large trunk makes this a fine vacation car.

ISUZU RODEO

The compact Rodeo, made in Indiana, is slightly smaller than Isuzu's flagship SUV, the Trooper. It squeezes modest acceleration from its 3.2-liter V6, and you must first stop the car to engage the rudimentary four-wheel-drive system. (The four-wheel drive can't be used on dry roads.) The steering feels slow in routine driving, and the body leans heavily during cornering. The Rodeo jiggles and bounds on rough roads. The operating controls are distinctly awkward. The two front seats provide good, extra-firm support, while the flat rear bench gives plenty of space but limited comfort for three. The powerful heater serves front-seat occupants well but leaves rear passengers out in the cold. The Rodeo offers little more cargo space than the

average station wagon. The Rodeo offers a much better warranty than the identical and similarly priced Honda Passport, a noteworthy consideration in view of this vehicle's shaky reliability history.

ISUZU TROOPER

This big, boxy vehicle feels substantial and refined, but its weight robs the 3.2-liter V6 of much of its performance. Dual air bags, new this year, should improve the Trooper's crash performance. The part-time four-wheel-drive system lacks a center differential, so it isn't suitable for use on dry pavement. Handling is sloppy even in routine driving, and the car leans a lot in turns. Stops are straight but longer than usual with four-wheel antilock brakes, and the nose dives severely. Comfortable seats compensate only partly for a ride that's bouncy and jiggly even on smooth roads. The driving position can accommodate various physiques: Head room is generous and leg room is adequate for six-footers, while short drivers can reach the pedals and see

out well. The rear seat is designed for three passengers, but it can comfortably hold only two. The climate-control system is powerful. Most of the controls are convenient, and the displays are clear.

JAGUAR XJ6

Jaguar freshened up this rear-wheel-drive model's styling for 1995, and the engine and suspension received some tweaks. The 4.0-liter inline Six delivers smooth and powerful acceleration. The XJ6 carves neatly through twisting country roads and remains predictable while negotiating tight turns, although its body leans somewhat. The ride is soft and well-mannered. Except for the sound of wind, noticeable even at moderate speeds, little noise intrudes into the cabin. The chaotically laid-out controls will satisfy only those with a tolerance for eccentricity. The front seats are nicely shaped but cramped, and leg room is inadequate for tall drivers. The rear accommodates two or even three adults in comfort, though.

Jaguar has a history of building elegant cars that don't hold up well. We lack sufficient data to predict the XJ6's reliability.

JEEP CHEROKEE

The Cherokee, a Chrysler Corp. product, benefits from some important new features this year, including a standard driver air bag and optional antilock brakes and full-time all-wheel drive. But the basic design has changed little since 1984, when it belonged to the late American Motors. It remains a harsh-riding vehicle with lots of cargo room and with narrow seats that can comfortably hold only slender people. Chrysler has reserved a V8 engine for the newer, more refined, and much costlier Jeep Grand Cherokee. The not-so-grand Cherokee's base engine is a 2.5-liter Four; you're better off with the much peppier 4.0-liter inline Six. The four-speed automatic transmission, with Power

and Comfort shift modes, shifts smoothly. The Cherokee handles well in normal driving, though it rides stiffly. Noise from the road and the tires can become annoying. The air-conditioner is powerful, but the heater could be better. So could the controls and displays. The basic version comes with rear-wheel drive, but there's little point in putting up with the discomforts of a sport-utility vehicle without opting for four-wheel drive.

JEEP GRAND CHEROKEE

Don't confuse the Grand Cherokee with the plain old Cherokee. The Grand version is much more civilized, scoring very well in our tests. Unfortunately, Jeep models have long been trouble-prone, and the Grand Cherokee hasn't changed that dismal pattern. The Grand Cherokee comes in various rear-wheel-drive and four-wheel-drive permutations; if you must buy this model, get the Quadra-Trac option, a sophisticated full-time all-wheel-drive system that can be used even on dry roads. The 4.0-liter Six provides good acceleration, and the 5.2-liter V8 is even more powerful. The four-speed automatic transmission shifts smoothly. Handling is stable and almost carlike, though a bit clumsy. Stops are reasonably short. The car

rocks annoyingly from side to side on bumpy roads, but the cabin is as quiet as in most sedans. The driving position accommodates both tall and short people. Seating is roomy and comfortable front and rear; three adults fit easily in the split rear seat. The instruments are easy to read, and the controls generally work logically. The climate-control system is powerful.

JEEP WRANGLER

This is the closest surviving descendant of the old World War II Jeep, the seed that sprouted the entire sport-utility craze. It's the smallest, least expensive, and crudest Jeep. Nevertheless, its popularity with off-roaders endures. A basic four-wheel-drive vehicle with a hard, noisy ride and primitive handling, the Wrangler lives on because of its reputation for rugged durability in the wilds. If you must buy one, opt for the Six and antilock brakes. The Wrangler has the worst reliability record of any sport-utility vehicle.

LAND ROVER DISCOVERY

The British-made Discovery, new for 1995, fits in the niche between the old and primitive Defender and the chic and luxurious Range Rover. Our early experience indicates that the Discovery's V8 runs smoothly, although the vehicle feels very heavy. Expressway driving is pleasant and uneventful, but back roads provoke considerable side-to-side jostling. Occupants get a high, panoramic view of the landscape, and there's plenty of room inside. The leather seats are firm, maybe too firm for some. And some secondary controls are poorly placed - but that's usual in a British car.

LEXUS ES300

This sophisticated upscale model does nearly everything well, but it's no bargain. The V6 version of the Toyota Camry, which sells for thousands less, shares the ES300's engine, driveline, and chassis; not surprisingly, those two models scored virtually the same, overall, in our tests. The ES300 accelerates powerfully, rides smoothly and very quietly, and offers excellent controls and displays. The 3.0-liter V6 performs flawlessly, and the four-speed automatic transmission shifts imperceptibly, whether in Power or Economy mode. The steering feels too light during normal driving, but the car's predictable handling during abrupt accident-avoidance maneuvers inspires confidence. The brakes stop the car short and straight on both wet and dry

pavement. The front seats offer good, firm support, and a multitude of adjustments allow people of all sizes to find a comfortable driving position. The rear seat is roomy enough for three. The trunk is large enough for a family vacation, but a high sill makes loading a chore.

LEXUS GS300

The rear-wheel-drive GS300 emphasizes the luxury end of the sports-luxury field. As in most Lexus models, the occupants are shielded from the rigors of the road in a cocoon of silence. Although the GS300 competes with such European luxury sedans as the Mercedes E-Class and BMW 5-Series, its inline six-cylinder engine doesn't quite keep up with the competition. The electronically controlled four-speed automatic transmission shifts smoothly under all conditions. In hard turns, the body rolls a bit and plows ahead, and the steering becomes very light, but handling remains sound overall. Controls and displays are a model that other automakers would do well to imitate. The many adjustments help the power front seats to provide good

support. One minor complaint: the low windshield header may obstruct a tall driver's view of overhead traffic lights. The rear seat is exceptionally comfortable for two, but a center passenger must perch too high. The trunk provides sufficient luggage space for a family of four.

LEXUS LS400

This flagship of Toyota's luxury-car division was redesigned for 1995. The new model resembles the older one, which was one of the world's finest luxury sedans. The wheelbase has been extended to provide more interior room. The LS400 combines a sophisticated, modern rear-wheel-drive powertrain with a lush, quiet, leather-wrapped interior. The steering was very light, even numb, in previous Lexuses, and the emphasis has been on isolation from the world outside. We would expect to find those characteristics in the new LS400 as well.

LEXUS SC400/SC300

This two-door luxury coupe places somewhat greater emphasis on performance than does the Lexus LS400 luxury sedan. The refined and powerful aluminum V8, with rear-wheel drive, delivers plenty of acceleration, and the suspension handles winding roads as nimbly as that of a fine sports car. A sophisticated and effective traction-control system minimizes wheel spin. The ride is firm, but the suspension soaks up most road bumps without fuss. The automatic climate-control system works superbly. The luminescent instrument displays are exceptionally easy to read, but some secondary controls are awkwardly placed or hard to see. The optional Nakamichi stereo system sounds very good. Typical of a luxury coupe, the front

seats offer fine accommodations for most people, while the rear seat is better left uninhabited. Very large people may find even the front seats too narrow, and the trunk is quite small as well. The Lexus SC300 behaves virtually the same as the SC400. Its spirited Six isn't as smooth as the V8, but the car costs thousands of dollars less.

LINCOLN CONTINENTAL

This model started out as a huge rear-wheel-drive freeway floater. In 1988, it became a front-wheel-drive, mid-sized model built on the Ford Taurus platform. And now, the Continental has been redesigned again. The 1995 model's biggest performance upgrade comes with the addition of the Lincoln Mark VIII's spirited aluminum V8, which should finally make this car more competitive with other luxury models. An air suspension is featured. Like other Lincolns, this one comes fully loaded. The spacious interior should accommodate six with ease, and the cabin should be very quiet.

LINCOLN MARK VIII

This sophisticated rear-wheel-drive luxury coupe has an aluminum V8, an electronically controlled powertrain, and a fully independent suspension. The Mark VIII's traction assist isn't as effective as some; it works only at low speeds, and a heavy foot on the throttle easily overwhelms it. The steering feels overly light at low speeds, but the Mark VIII maneuvers with surprising agility for such a large car. Getting into and out of the front seats is easy as long as you have room enough to open the long doors fully; access to the rear seat is a bit more difficult. The front seats, each with power adjustment, offer good, firm support. The rear seat is cramped, as is typical in a coupe. The powerful automatic climate-control system warms and cools quietly, but it's a bit

slow off the mark. Most controls are easy to see and reach in the modern interior, but the radio's small, flat controls are needlessly complicated.

LINCOLN TOWN CAR

Despite its sophisticated V8 and full complement of safety features, the Town Car maintains the hoary tradition of domestic luxury turnpike cruisers. It comes with a full frame, rear-wheel drive, and a panoply of electronic gadgets and convenience features. Expect a soft, quiet ride and seating for six. To tame the Town Car's tendency to wallow on bad roads, choose the ride-control package. A dual-exhaust system, made standard last year, added significant power.

MAZDA 626

The 626 is a well-rounded and high-rated family sedan with an especially comfortable ride. It comes with an adequate four-cylinder or a very smooth-running optional V6, a powerplant that delivers plenty of oomph but adds about \$2000 to the price sticker. The standard five-speed manual transmission is a good match for the four-cylinder engine, but the versatile four-speed automatic transmission is a good choice with either engine. The mid-line LX offers more value than the top-line ES, which comes laden with expensive goodies. The 626 holds the road well. Despite considerable body lean in hard turns, good tire grip and quick steering give a driver confidence. Firm, nicely shaped front seats complement the effective suspension. The rear bench can

hold three average-sized men in reasonable comfort. The controls are nicely laid out, except for the horn buttons, located on the spokes of the steering wheel, where they're hard to find in a hurry. The split rear seatback can fold down to expand the already large trunk. The four-cylinder version has been more reliable than the V6.

MAZDA 929

Don't let this luxurious model's traditional rear-wheel drive fool you. All else is state of the art. The 3.0-liter V6 launches the car aggressively from standstill, a trait that can produce disconcerting wheel spin on slippery roads. The four-speed automatic transmission shifts very smoothly. Handling is steady in normal driving, but loose and queasy during hard cornering. The brakes perform admirably on dry and wet roads. The car rides very quietly and very comfortably, even with a full load. The front seats could use more side support during hard cornering. A height adjustment on the driver's seat assures a good view even for short drivers, but tall drivers may find the accelerator too close. The rear seat feels like an easy chair with two

passengers, but it's much less comfortable with three abreast. Most controls are easy to operate, and the instruments are easy to read. The climate-control system works effectively. A small trunk is a drawback for families that take long vacations.

MAZDA B-SERIES

The Mazda pickup is really a Ford Ranger with a Mazda nameplate, and we expect it to behave similarly. Although the basic design has been around for years, technical tweaks have kept it up-to-date. The 1995 model year brought a new, greatly improved interior. The 4.0-liter V6 is fairly responsive, but it sounds harsh when revved. The B-series handles well for a truck, but you won't mistake it for a passenger car. The steering is vague, and the body leans quite a bit during cornering. Road bumps and uneven pavement mar the ride - also typical for the breed. But the cab remains reasonably quiet, and the front seats are soft and supportive. The climate-control system works powerfully. The optional extended cab is so practical that one

wonders why it wasn't more popular years ago. Think of the space back there as extra luggage room - two children can sit in the small jump seats back there, but they won't be happy.

MAZDA MILLENIA

The Millenia was supposed to be the first model in a new luxury line from Mazda, but the company's economic woes scuttled those plans. Instead, the Millenia emerged as a near-luxury Mazda, slotted between the compact 626 and the mid-sized 929. Our brief experience suggests that it's a quiet, well-put-together car. The standard engine, similar to the 626's smooth V6, accelerates smoothly. A so-called Miller Cycle engine, available in the S model, provides better acceleration and better fuel economy. Expect fine handling plus a comfortable, supple ride. The seats are nicely shaped and most controls are well laid out.

MAZDA MPV

This van has three strikes against it: its braking and ride are below par, and its cargo space is limited. The MPV feels nimble in ordinary driving, but its tail can swing out abruptly on wet roads and in sharp turns. Optional four-wheel drive improves handling stability somewhat; we left our van in four-wheel-drive all the time. The brakes stop the van straight but not quickly. The 3.0-liter V6 accelerates decently. The four-speed automatic transmission sometimes shifts with a bump; a Hold mode allows manual shifting. The MPV rides roughly, especially when it's lightly loaded; an optional automatic load-leveling system helps somewhat. The front seats are comfortable but need more side support. The middle seats are adequate for two; the rear bench

offers skimpy knee room and is very tight for three. The instruments are easy to read, but some controls are annoying. Though the standard climate-control system works well, the optional rear air-conditioner is useful in hot regions. The side door swings out instead of sliding, so it needs lots of clearance to open fully. Getting in and out is easy front and rear.

MAZDA MX-3

This is a small, agile coupe. Too bad Mazda dropped the smooth 1.8-liter V6 this year, leaving only a 1.6-liter Four. Steering is quick and accurate, though not strong on feel, and the tires grip well. But the MX-3's edge in handling comes at the expense of a very stiff and noisy ride. The optional antilock brakes are especially needed in this model; the standard brakes work well on dry roads, but they take their time stopping on wet pavement. The seats offer plenty of support. The instruments are clear and easy to read, the controls could use minor improvements.

MAZDA MX-5 MIATA

This Japanese-made two-seat convertible captures the ambiance of the popular British sports cars of the 1950s and 1960s - kidney-jarring ride, noisy exhaust, and all. Unlike those old sports cars, though, the Miata is weathertight and reliable. (A removable hardtop is optional.) The 1.8-liter Four provides peppy performance. A crisp-shifting five-speed manual transmission with a stubby shifter and short shift pattern enhances the car's sporty appeal. Nimble handling, precise and direct steering, and powerful brakes make this rear-wheel-drive sportster fun to drive. The Miata is built for small to medium-sized adults; tall occupants may feel cramped even with the top down and claustrophobic with the top up. The engine emits sounds that are

music to a car buff's ears, but wind noise can be a problem. Most controls are easy to operate, and the displays are clear. The Miata has a capable climate-control system. If you take a vacation in the Miata, you have to travel light: trunk space is minimal.

MAZDA MX-6

The MX-6 and the Ford Probe are both built in Michigan in a plant operated by Ford and Mazda. The two models have different bodies - the MX-6 is a coupe with a conventional trunk, while the Probe is a hatchback - but they share many mechanical parts. The higher trim line of each make is a step up in performance from the base four-cylinder version. The V6 engine accelerates smoothly and with authority. We prefer the easy-shifting five-speed manual transmission to the four-speed automatic. Handling is very smooth and predictable. The MX-6's softer suspension provides a slightly more comfortable ride, while the Probe GT's taut suspension and wider tires provide crisper handling. The front seats are comfortable - the MX-6's,

more so than the Probe GT's. Save the rear seat for packages. We prefer the MX-6's interior layout to the Probe's.

MAZDA PROTEGÉ

The Protege, redesigned for 1995, competes in the crowded small-car market against such models as the Honda Civic, Toyota Corolla, and Dodge/Plymouth Neon. We expect the new Protege to compare fairly well. The old model had a stiff ride but good handling, comfortable seats, a sensible control layout, and a responsive 1.8-liter engine. We anticipate that the new car will be even better.

MAZDA RX-7

Comfort and practicality take a back seat to pure, uncompromising performance in the RX-7. The styling is reminiscent of classic sports car marques of the past - Cobra, Jaguar, Ferrari. The RX-7 is a two-seater; the cockpit is cramped even for a pair of average-sized people, and pure misery for tall people. A 1.3-liter rotary engine with twin turbochargers powers the rear wheels, delivering ferocious acceleration. The five-speed manual transmission is well matched to the engine; the travel of the shifter is short, and the action precise. The brakes are exceptional. The RX-7 handles twisty roads with aplomb, as a sports car should. The stiff suspension produces an unusually hard ride; every pebble and pavement seam

announces itself. The car is relentlessly noisy, especially on coarse pavement. The bucket seats are comfortable for those who fit them, but access is awkward even for a sports car. The cockpit is stark, with practically no storage space for odds and ends. Luggage space is minimal, too. An R2 version is available for masochists who want maximum performance; it comes with an even stiffer suspension and minus leather upholstery and power accessories. The Touring version is the best choice for most drivers, in our judgment.

MERCEDES-BENZ C-CLASS

The C-class Mercedes replaced the smaller 190 model in 1994. The styling now more closely resembles Mercedes' larger sedans. The 2.8-liter straight Six in the C280 accelerates quite well, delivering a good deal more power than the C220's 2.2-liter Four. The four-speed automatic transmission engages slowly but then shifts smoothly. Optional traction control helps a lot but adds more than \$2500 to the sticker price. The car handles responsively and is easy to control in abrupt maneuvers. The ride feels supple, well damped, and commendably quiet. The power front seats have many adjustments, but they may feel too firm for some. Seat heaters are welcome in winter. Leather is a costly option. Leg room up front may be tight for tall drivers. The

automatic climate-control system doesn't work well; manual adjustments work better. Reflections sometimes spoil the otherwise clear displays. The rear seat holds two adults in relative comfort, but three are a crowd. An optional folding rear seatback increases the luggage room.

MERCEDES-BENZ E-CLASS

Last year, Mercedes renamed its fine mid-sized 300 series the E-Class. By any name, the E-Class is one of the world's finest production cars. It combines qualities that usually cannot comfortably coexist: spirited acceleration with acceptable fuel economy; precise handling with a luxurious ride. Mercedes offers a choice of engine sizes: a 3.2-liter inline Six (in the E320), a 4.2-liter V8 (in the E420), or a 3-liter diesel Six (in the E300). The latest model benefits from notable engine upgrades, a second air bag (which eliminates the glove compartment) and a number of cosmetic tweaks. The E-Class handles challenging roads with aplomb and remains predictable at all times. Electronic traction control is an essential option in winter driving conditions.

All controls are easy to reach and use. The rear seats don't fold down, but the trunk is quite roomy.

MERCURY COUGAR

This model aims at a slightly higher-scale market than its near twin, the Ford Thunderbird. Last year, the Cougar and T-Bird received an exterior facelift and a new interior. Expect a good ride, particularly in the front seats, and fairly quick, accurate steering. The base engine is a conventional 3.8-liter V6. An optional 4.6-liter V8, introduced last year, is a better choice; it's more responsive, refined, and fuel efficient than the 5.0-liter V8 it replaced, though power is about the same. Standard equipment includes a wealth of equipment such as air-conditioning, power windows, and power door locks.

MERCURY GRAND MARQUIS

This is one of the last big freeway cruisers made the old fashioned way, with a V8, full frame, and rear wheel drive. This year the Grand Marquis and its sibling, the Ford Crown Victoria, received a minor facelift inside and out; the new interior includes a redesigned dash and new seats - good news, since the old seats were thinly padded and uncomfortable. The Grand Marquis delivers a serene ride, especially with a full load aboard. A huge trunk and substantial trailer-towing capability are further bonuses. The 4.6-liter V8 cruises effortlessly, and the automatic transmission shifts smoothly. Steering response is quite good, too. Choose the Handling and Performance package for better handling and tire grip. With the upgraded suspension and tires,

the car plows ahead only moderately in hard turns. The front bench seat is designed to hold three abreast, but an adult won't be happy in the center position. Leg room for tall drivers is just adequate. The rear seat is roomy enough for three, though toe space is tight.

MERCURY MYSTIQUE

The all-new Mystique and its counterpart, the Ford Contour, were developed by Ford in Europe, where the car has been available for two years as the Ford Mondeo. The car features modern design, including a rigid body, a sophisticated rear suspension, and a smooth-shifting optional automatic transmission. Our preliminary glimpse indicates that the standard Four performs adequately, while the V6 accelerates very smoothly and powerfully. The V6 is designed to go 100,000 miles between tuneups. The car handles nimbly, and the brakes feel particularly nice. The interior design is functional.

MERCURY SABLE

The Sable (along with its sibling, the Ford Taurus) delivers fine all-around performance, comfortable seating accommodations, and reasonable fuel economy - about 20 to 23 mpg, overall, depending on which engine you get. The standard 3.0-liter V6 runs more quietly this year. The standard-equipment four-speed automatic transmission shifts smoothly. The Sable handles well in normal driving, though sluggishly in hard turns. The car tends to run too wide during hard cornering. The steering feels heavier than it used to, but still light at anything below highway speeds. The optional six-way power seat comfortably accommodates drivers of nearly any size. The rear seat is roomy enough for two six-footers, snug for three adults. The interior is quiet except for

wind noise. Most of the controls are well designed, and the optional automatic climate-control system furnishes plenty of warmed or cooled air.

MERCURY TRACER

With the Tracer, as with its sibling, the Ford Escort, only one version is worth considering. The high-line LTS is the only Tracer that offers the peppy, Mazda-built 1.8-liter Four. Although slightly smaller than the standard 1.9-liter Four, it's more powerful. The optional four-speed automatic transmission shifts fairly smoothly, and the five-speed manual transmission is a good choice as well. Antilock brakes are badly needed, since the standard brakes are mediocre at best - and only the LTS offers them as an option. (The LTS we tested had antilock brakes.) The base version handles sluggishly; steering response is a little sloppy. The taut LTS suspension makes the car feel nimble and quick on country roads. The ride is fairly good, although a little

stiff. Front seating is comfortable, and even short drivers can see well over the hood. Too bad Ford decided to retain the annoying old motorized shoulder belts. The rear seat is roomy enough for six-footers, though not very comfortable. The rear seatback sections can be folded for more luggage space.

MERCURY VILLAGER

The Villager and its twin, the Nissan Quest, are made in the U.S. jointly by Ford and Nissan. They are among our top-rated minivans, and they feel the most carlike of the vans we've tested. Our biggest complaint concerns the annoying motorized front shoulder belts. The 3.0-liter V6 delivers plenty of power, and the four-speed automatic transmission generally shifts smoothly. Usable cargo space is adequate although significantly smaller than in the Dodge Caravan and Plymouth Voyager twins. We strongly recommend the optional trailer-towing package - not only for its added towing capability, but also for its extra engine cooling and conventional spare. The ride is quite smooth and quiet, and handling is nimble for a van, with little body roll. The

Villager's ride is a bit softer than the Quest's, but its handling isn't quite as crisp; the optional heavy-duty suspension provides a slight edge in handling. The standard antilock brakes stop well. The driving position is comfortable; the height adjustment on the optional power seat accommodates both tall and short people. The optional center-row captain's chairs are easier to remove than the standard bench seat. A few controls are hidden, and the gauges could use more contrast. The versatile climate-control system provides ample heated or cooled air.

MITSUBISHI 3000 GT

In its costliest, most performance-oriented form, this exotic sports car is a technological tour de force. It's made by Mitsubishi in Japan, as is its twin, the Dodge Stealth. The 3000 GT is available in three price lines, ranging from the base model, with a nonturbocharged 3.0-liter V6 and front-wheel drive, on up to the VR-4, with twin turbochargers, four-wheel steering, electronically adjustable suspension, and all-wheel drive. A convertible model, the Spyder, is new for 1995; it features a unique retractable hardtop - and a stratospheric price tag. We tested the Stealth R/T Turbo, equivalent to the VR-4 version of the 3000 GT. It offers everything you'd expect in a sports car: excellent steering response and traction, lots of grip in turns,

extraordinarily short stops, and (despite its considerable weight) blazing acceleration. The front seats are comfortable for most people. The rear seat is mostly for show. The automatic climate-control system cools quickly and quietly. The controls could be better; the displays are crisp and clear except for the climate-control screen.

MITSUBISHI DIAMANTE

Mitsubishi's most luxurious sedan competes in a market crowded with the likes of the BMW 3- and 5-Series, Mazda 929, Oldsmobile Aurora, and Volvo 960. Though it's a capable performer, the Diamante doesn't stand out in that crowd. Computers control the variable-assist power steering, suspension, brakes, starting traction on slippery surfaces, interior temperature, door locks, and interior lighting in this gadget-laden sedan. But other models have scored as well or higher in our tests without all that gadgetry. The Diamante's weight takes its toll; the 3.0-liter V6's strong acceleration is most apparent at speeds well above the legal limit. The four-speed automatic transmission shifts smoothly except for an occasional

low-speed bump; it offers Power and Economy modes. The antilock brakes stop the car straight but not all that short. The Diamante handles smoothly but not nimbly in routine driving. Emergency handling feels responsive; the tail may wag in abrupt avoidance maneuvers. The ride is taut, well controlled, and quiet. The front seats are comfortable for most people; the rear seat is tight even for two adults. The semiautomatic climate-control system works strongly and quickly, and the instruments are easy to read.

MITSUBISHI ECLIPSE

The all-new Eclipse and similar Eagle Talon are made in Illinois by Diamond-Star Motors, a joint venture of Chrysler and Mitsubishi. The standard engine is a Chrysler-built 2.0-liter Four. Higher-trim versions get a more powerful 2.0-liter turbocharged Four made by Mitsubishi. The Eclipse has a longer wheelbase this year. The earliest models will have front-wheel drive, with all-wheel-drive GSX versions following later.

MITSUBISHI GALANT

Although it's a competent family sedan, the Galant scored a notch below such excellent models such as the Toyota Camry and Honda Accord. A 1994 redesign slightly enlarged the car and brought its safety features up to snuff. The 2.4-liter Four delivers lively acceleration, and a V6 is available for 1995. The optional electronic automatic transmission shifts smoothly most of the time, though it sometimes downshifts when you'd rather it wouldn't. Handling remains safe and controllable through tight, fast turns, and the steering provides good road feel. The ride is fine on smooth highways, but even minor pavement flaws deliver firm kicks and jolts. Some may find the front seats too thinly

padded. The contoured rear seat can hold three adults if need be, though the center passenger has only the hard folded armrest to lean back on. Instruments and controls are generally clear and easy to use. The rear seatback can fold down to expand the trunk.

MITSUBISHI MIGHTY MAX

This is a basic, rudimentary compact pickup. It comes only with two-wheel drive, a regular cab, and a 116-hp four-cylinder engine. It's not a bad truck, but it's not a good truck either.

MITSUBISHI MIRAGE

Made by Mitsubishi, this model is also available from Chrysler Corp. as the Eagle Summit. By any name, this Japanese design is a price leader, intended to entice buyers into showrooms filled with fancier and pricier models. This year, Mitsubishi will sell only coupe versions to the public; four-door sedans go to Mitsubishi's rental fleet. Most cars on the dealer's lot will be short on extra equipment such as antilock brakes. That's too bad, since the standard, nonantilock brakes are the poorest we've tested in several years. The car rides firmly and often uncomfortably. The front seats provide generally satisfactory support, and tall drivers will find adequate leg room. The rear seat can barely hold two six-footers, but three average-sized

adults can fit without undue discomfort. Major controls are easy to see and use, but some minor switches are hidden or hard to operate. The versatile climate-control system quickly provides heated or cooled air. You can expand the moderate-sized trunk by folding down the split rear seatback in some versions. The best thing about this car is its zesty and fuel-efficient powertrain. If you must buy a Mirage or Eagle Summit, choose the 1.8-liter Four, five-speed manual transmission, and antilock brakes.

MITSUBISHI MONTERO

The high and boxy Montero offers a sophisticated four-wheel-drive system (which is nice) and sluggish performance and unpredictable emergency handling (which is not so nice). The 3.0-liter V6 got a slight power boost last year, but the 3.5-liter V6 is a better bet to move this heavy model. The Montero's "Active Trac" four-wheel-drive system can remain engaged all the time - a good idea, since it reduces the Montero's tendency to abruptly swing out its tail during hard cornering. The Montero feels tippy and awkward in routine driving, and it leans a lot in tight turns. The antilock brakes perform adequately on wet and dry pavement. Short drivers can see well over the hood; tall drivers need more leg room. The rear

seat provides ample space for two (but not three) six-footers. An optional third seat for two more passengers became available in 1994. The climate-control system quickly supplies lots of heated or cooled air. The major controls work well, though some minor controls need improvement. The gauges aren't very legible.

NISSAN 200SX

The 200SX, new for '95, is a sporty coupe version of the new Nissan Sentra. It shares its base engine with the sedan, but it has different body panels and perhaps a stiffer suspension. The 200SX replaces both the Sentra SE-R, which earned a reputation as an affordable, fun-to-drive little coupe, and the NX1600/NX2000, two other exponents of the cheap sporty-car genre. We expect the 200SX to be well laid out and quite reliable.

NISSAN 240SX

Redesigned for 1995, the 240SX remains a front-engined, rear-wheel-drive coupe, competing with such front-drive models as the Acura Integra Coupe and Toyota Celica. Our early glimpse suggests that the 240SX provides fine handling and a reasonably comfortable ride. The 2.4-liter Four offers adequate if noisy acceleration. Full, clear instrumentation complements generally well-designed controls. The firm front seats provide adequate support. As in most small sports coupes, the rear seat is best left vacant.

NISSAN 300ZX

This two-seater is everything a sports car should be - and it's also remarkably smooth and easy to drive. The 3.0-liter V6, with twin turbochargers, runs flawlessly and delivers blazing acceleration without noticeable turbo lag. In our tests, the 300ZX sped from rest to 60 mph in just 6.1 seconds. The five-speed manual transmission shifts crisply and precisely. Handling of this rear-wheel-drive model is almost perfect during routine driving, and four-wheel steering makes cornering especially precise. Excellent tire grip, minimal body roll, and smooth steering give crisp and quick response during emergency maneuvers, and the antilock brakes stop short and straight. The electronic suspension gives you a choice of two settings; even the

softer setting won't let you forget you're in a sports car. The front seats provide good support, but some drivers complained about the placement of the pedals or steering wheel. Climbing in or out requires nimbleness. The automatic climate-control system unobtrusively maintains the chosen temperature. Operating controls are easy to reach but hard to see, and the two small horn buttons are hard to find in an emergency. The cargo bay is quite roomy for a sports car.

NISSAN ALTIMA

The Altima bills itself as an "affordable luxury car." That claim stretches credulity on both ends, though the car performs decently overall. The 2.4-liter Four accelerates quickly enough, but it buzzes and hums while gathering speed. Both the manual and automatic transmissions work well. The Altima leans noticeably when cornering (the SE less so than other versions), and it plows ahead through hard, tight turns, but it remains predictable. Antilock brakes stop the car short and straight on both wet and dry pavement. The ride is jittery and busy on both good roads and bad. Tall drivers will find the cockpit cramped, with too little leg room to the pedals. Short drivers should have no problem. The front seats are low and flat and can't be

adjusted for height. They offer good back support but too little thigh support. Rear seating is just roomy enough for two tall people; wedging in three adults forces the outboard passengers to twist uncomfortably. The instruments are clear enough; the controls could be better. The GLE version's automatic climate-control system works well, as does the manual system in the SE and GXE. The trunk is roomy for a compact model, but the rear seatback doesn't fold down.

NISSAN MAXIMA

Nissan redesigned the Maxima for 1995 and moved it upscale a bit to distance it from the compact Nissan Altima. It remains a competent sedan. Our early experience with this model revealed strong acceleration from the smooth, quiet aluminum V6. The ride is resilient and well controlled, and the cabin remains quiet at speed. Gauges and controls are easy to see and use. Head room is ample, and the rear seat is roomy.

NISSAN PATHFINDER

This model competes with the likes of the Chevrolet Blazer, Ford Explorer, and Jeep Grand Cherokee in the crowded sport-utility-vehicle market. The Pathfinder handles almost as well as a sedan. Its 3.0-liter V6 and optional automatic transmission form a smooth and peppy combination. You can select four-wheel-drive on the move, but it's a part-time system that's not suitable for use on dry pavement. The Pathfinder rides surprisingly well. Firm seating provides adequate support front and rear, but you'll find less cargo area here than in many other similar vehicles.

NISSAN QUEST

The Quest and its twin, the Mercury Villager, are made in the U.S. jointly by Ford and Nissan. They are among our top-rated minivans, and they feel the most carlike of the vans we've tested. Our biggest complaint concerns the annoying motorized front shoulder belts. The 3.0-liter V6 delivers plenty of power, and the four-speed automatic transmission generally shifts smoothly. Usable cargo space is adequate, although significantly smaller than in the Dodge Caravan and Plymouth Voyager twins. We strongly recommend the optional trailer-towing package - not only for its added towing capability, but for its extra engine cooling and conventional spare. The ride is quite smooth and quiet, and handling is nimble for a van, with little body roll. The Villager's

ride is a bit softer than the Quest's, but its handling isn't quite as crisp; the optional heavy-duty suspension provides a slight edge in handling. The antilock brakes stop well. The driving position is comfortable; the height adjustment on the optional power seat accommodates tall and short people. The optional center-row captain's chairs are easier to remove than the standard bench seat. A few controls are hidden, and the gauges could use more contrast. The versatile climate-control system provides ample heated or cooled air.

NISSAN SENTRA

The redesigned Sentra competes in a crowded market with such small cars as the Dodge/Plymouth Neon, Honda Civic, and Toyota Corolla - and we think the Sentra will more than hold its own. The previous model delivered a smooth and quiet ride, a sensible interior layout, and excellent reliability. We expect the same of the 1995 Sentra.

NISSAN TRUCK

This basic compact pickup is made in Tennessee, in the same factory that produces the Sentra. It's available in either two- or four-wheel drive. Antilock brakes are available on the rear wheels only - an inadequate arrangement. The interior is nicely laid out, with an instrument panel similar to those in Nissan sedans.

OLDSMOBILE ACHIEVA

This aging and uninspired design shares many components with the Buick Skylark and Pontiac Grand Am. The Achieva seems designed to woo older, conservative buyers. The three-speed automatic transmission sometimes shifts abruptly. Traction control is now standard with the automatic transmission. Steering is slow and vague, and the car tends to plow ahead in corners. The optional 3.1-liter V6 accelerates quite smoothly. The front seats give firm, comfortable support, but the driving position is too low. The rear seat is a bit friendlier than the Skylark's and Grand Am's.

OLDSMOBILE AURORA

The long-awaited Aurora is GM's attempt to compete with European and Japanese sports sedans. It borrows Cadillac's sophisticated aluminum "Northstar" V8, in a 250-horsepower version - probably the car's best feature. Even so, early testing reveals that this bulky car feels sluggish when accelerating from a standstill. The steering feels artificially weighted, as if to give the impression of road feel, and the ride manages to be both stiff and billowy. Six-footers will find adequate leg room and abundant head room. The controls are complex but contemporary. To keep up with the prestigious imports, the Aurora boasts bagsful of technological innovations.

OLDSMOBILE CIERA

Formerly called the Cutlass Ciera, this aging and uninspired model has one major advantage over other large and mid-sized cars: its better-than-average reliability record. The optional 3.1-liter V6 and four-speed automatic transmission make a peppier combination than the standard 2.2-liter Four and three-speed automatic. Don't expect sporty handling or high performance. GM will soon replace the Ciera and its corporate cousin, the Buick Century, with something more up-to-date.

OLDSMOBILE CUTLASS SUPREME

This year's new instrument panel and dual air bags aren't enough to improve this uninspired car. The Cutlass Supreme remains perhaps the least interesting of the GM family that includes the Buick Regal and Pontiac Grand Prix. Moderate price is this car's major appeal. The standard 3.1-liter V6 performs well. The optional 3.4-liter V6 delivers marginally more punch, but it's noisier, thirstier, and not worth the extra money. The four-speed automatic transmission shifts smoothly. The handling feels sloppy. The ride is poorly controlled on smooth roads and stiff and unyielding on poor ones - the worst of both worlds. The seats only look comfortable; expect a backache after a moderate drive. Both the front and rear seats lack proper

support. The rear seatback folds down to expand the already good-sized trunk - a minor plus.

OLDSMOBILE EIGHTY EIGHT

In standard form, this is a quiet, softly sprung car whose suspension all too frequently runs out of travel with a thump. The optional touring suspension improves the handling markedly, though it stiffens the ride a little and makes it noisier. With that suspension, the Eighty Eight would score almost as high, overall, as the somewhat similar Pontiac Bonneville, a high-rated large car. The 3.8-liter V6 accelerates responsively. The four-speed automatic transmission shifts extremely smoothly. Stopping distances are rather long, especially on wet pavement. The seating is comfortable for five, less so for six. The controls are mostly easy to find and use; the displays are clear, and the automatic climate-control system works powerfully. The three-

point front safety belts are particularly convenient. The Eighty Eight, Buick Le Sabre, and Pontiac Bonneville are similar in design, the Bonneville being the sportiest. The Buick Park Avenue and Oldsmobile Ninety Eight are also similar, with the same wheelbase but a longer body.

OLDSMOBILE NINETY EIGHT

This near-twin to the Buick Park Avenue is Oldsmobile's biggest freeway cruiser. It looks and feels like a traditional old-style luxury sedan, though it has a modern unitized body and front-wheel drive. Cars like this one emphasize a soft ride and a whole galaxy of power conveniences and luxury appointments. Handling tends to fall toward the sloppy end of the spectrum. We recommend the Touring Suspension package, which includes a stiffer suspension and larger tires.

OLDSMOBILE SILHOUETTE

Expect uninspiring overall performance from the plastic-bodied Silhouette and its siblings, the Chevrolet Lumina and Pontiac Trans Sport. The 3.8-liter V6 accelerates well but drinks quite a lot of fuel, while the 3.1-liter V6 is thriftier but less responsive. The van leaps and bounces on sharp bumps, leans heavily in turns, and handles ponderously. On undulating roads, the front end bobs and pitches. The driver can't tell where the front of the car begins, and many blind spots block the driver's view to the sides and rear. The front seats offer good support. An optional seven-passenger seating package includes three chairs in the middle row and two more in the rear. The middle seats are comfortable, the rear seats less so. One person can easily

remove the individual seats to make room for cargo. The optional electric sliding side door is well worth the price for the convenience it brings. The powerful climate-control system works well, and a rear-seat air-conditioner is optional. Some controls are hard to reach.

PLYMOUTH GRAND VOYAGER

The Grand Voyager and its siblings, the Chrysler Town & Country and Dodge Grand Caravan, are extended versions of the plain Caravan and Voyager. The 3.3-liter V6 delivers adequate acceleration; a 3.8-liter V6 is available as well. The automatic transmission shifts smoothly; a manual transmission is unavailable. Handling is acceptable - not fun, but safe. The van rides pleasantly on smooth roads, though it rocks and shudders occasionally on rough roads. The front seats are comfortable, and the driving position can accommodate a wide range of physiques. The seven-passenger seating package includes a built-in reclining child safety seat, which makes a lumpy seatback when retracted. The rearmost seat is crowded for

three. The climate-control system is quite powerful. The displays are clear, and the controls have been improved. The shorter-bodied Dodge Caravan and Plymouth Voyager have generally been more reliable.

PLYMOUTH NEON

The new Dodge/Plymouth Neon twins are among the very few small cars to be designed and made entirely in the U.S. in recent years. The Neon makes good use of its interior space. The standard 132-hp, 2.0-liter Four has plenty of power, but you have to rev it hard to get the performance - and it makes a racket at high rpm. The three-speed automatic transmission feels more responsive at low speeds than does the crisp-shifting five-speed manual transmission. You have to shift the manual transmission from fifth gear to fourth to maintain speed on even gentle highway inclines. The Neon handles predictably; the Sport version, with bigger and grippier tires, handles slightly better than the Highline. The ride is poorly isolated, jittery and busy,

and broken pavement delivers choppy buckboard kicks. The front seats provide good, firm support for most people, but tall drivers wanted more thigh support. The rear seat can hold three six-footers - if they're slim. A coupe version is due early in 1995. Reliability of this new model remains to be seen.

PLYMOUTH VOYAGER

The roomy Voyager and its twin, the Dodge Caravan, have managed to stay on top of the minivan market for more than a decade, and deservedly so. Tweaks and refinements have improved the ride, handling, acceleration, and fuel economy of late, making a good van even better. The 3.3-liter V6 delivers plenty of power, but the automatic transmission sometimes shifts too often. Choose the optional beefed-up suspension; it helps the van corner better and stay level in hard turns without hurting the ride much. The high front seats give occupants a commanding view of the road, and they provide good, firm support. Reclining captain's chairs in the second row are a worthwhile option; they're comfortable and, if you need more

cargo space, easy for one person to remove. The rear bench is roomy but quite heavy; it may take two people to lift it out. The extended-wheelbase Dodge Grand Caravan, Plymouth Grand Voyager, and Chrysler Town & Country offer more space for people or luggage, but they haven't been as reliable. A redesigned 1996 model will be available early in 1995.

PONTIAC BONNEVILLE

Properly equipped, the Bonneville has been one of GM's all-around best large sedans for years. The optional firm suspension and touring tires markedly improve handling. Body roll remains in check during hard cornering. The Bonneville offers a tighter ride than do its GM cousins, the Buick Le Sabre and Oldsmobile Eighty Eight. Quick steering response and a punchy 3.8-liter V6 - more powerful this year - provide a sporty feel. (Pass up the supercharged engine; the nonsupercharged one is just fine.) The four-speed automatic transmission shifts smoothly. A 12-way power seat offers a vast range of seating positions, but mastering the seats' nine separate rocker buttons requires prolonged study. The front seats provide superb

comfort. The rear accommodates three adults adequately, though the cushion is a bit short fore and aft.

PONTIAC FIREBIRD

The Firebird and its cousin, the Chevrolet Camaro, are among the dwindling ranks of rear-wheel-drive muscle cars. A high-performance 5.7-liter V8, essentially the same engine that powers the Chevrolet Corvette, comes standard in the Formula and Trans Am versions. So does a six-speed manual transmission (a four-speed automatic is optional, as is traction control). The V8's effortless thrust makes the basic 3.4-liter V6 seem sluggish by comparison. Both the V6 and V8 versions ride decently for a sporty car, but the V8 feels noticeably firmer. Though the Firebird is too bulky to be called nimble, it corners with minimal body roll. The V8, which comes with wider tires, grips the road better. Braking is very good indeed. The front

bucket seats cradle occupants nicely; the back seat is mostly for show. Wide roof pillars block much of the driver's view to the right rear, and both the front and rear ends are invisible to the driver. Older Firebird and Camaro models have been quite unreliable.

PONTIAC GRAND AM

This aging and uninspired design is based on the Chevrolet Corsica, which is little changed since 1987. The Grand Am shares many components with the Buick Skylark and Oldsmobile Achieva, but GM has imbued each model with a different personality. The flashy Grand Am aims at young buyers who want a sporty image. The base engine this year is an improved Quad Four, a 150-horsepower 2.3-liter, said to be quieter than last year's. Given a choice, we'd opt for the 3.1-liter V6. The tires grip well in turns, but the front end bounces disconcertingly on undulating pavement and occasionally the suspension runs out of travel. Handling feels a bit clumsy during hard cornering, though the tail remains firmly planted. The front

seats give good support despite their thin padding. Climbing in and out is awkward if the door-mounted front safety belts are left buckled. The rear seat feels cramped. The heater and air-conditioner work a bit slowly, but they're competent once they're cranked up. Displays are clear and easy on the eyes, but the levers are awkward and the switches for the power mirrors are poorly arranged.

PONTIAC GRAND PRIX

The Grand Prix is perhaps the best of the GM family that includes the Buick Regal and Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme - faint praise indeed. Moderate price is this car's major appeal. The Grand Prix handles best in this trio, thanks to quick, nicely weighted steering and minimal body roll. Pass up the optional 3.4-liter V6; it delivers little more punch than the standard 3.1, and it drinks more fuel. The automatic transmission shifts smoothly. The gauges are logically arranged and easy to read. The cabin is reasonably quiet. The car rides firmly even on good roads; poor roads deliver sharp jolts to the occupants. The front seats look more comfortable than they are, but the rear is roomy enough for three average-sized adults.

PONTIAC SUNFIRE

The Sunfire and its sibling, the Chevrolet Cavalier, are all new for 1995. The Sunfire replaces the lackluster Sunbird and aims to be a sporty and inexpensive small car. A high-line GT version and a convertible are due midway through the model year. The standard version competes with models such as the Dodge/Plymouth Neon and Honda Civic. GM took a cue from the Japanese automakers by including a welter of useful amenities even in the base version. Our early and brief experience suggests that the car is pleasant to drive. The interior is modern and functional, and the controls are vastly improved.

PONTIAC TRANS SPORT

Expect uninspiring overall performance from the plastic-bodied Trans Sport and its siblings, the Chevrolet Lumina and Oldsmobile Silhouette. The 3.8-liter V6 accelerates well but drinks quite a lot of fuel, while the smaller 3.1-liter engine is thriftier but less responsive. The van leaps and bounces on sharp bumps, leans heavily in turns, and handles ponderously. On undulating roads, the front end bobs and pitches. The Chevrolet and Pontiac versions had a couple of inches lopped off their long nose last year, but the driver still can't tell where the front of the car begins, and many blind spots block the driver's view to the sides and rear. The front seats offer good support. An optional seven-passenger seating package places three chairs in

the middle row and two more in the rear. The middle seats are comfortable, the rear seats less so. One person can easily remove the individual seats to make room for cargo. The optional electric sliding side door is well worth the price for the convenience it brings. The powerful climate-control system works well, and a rear-seat air-conditioner is optional. Some controls are hard to reach.

RANGE ROVER

Land Rover's Range Rover SE comes with all sorts of luxury-car amenities, power everything, and leather galore, as well as a number of advanced engineering features such as a sophisticated all-wheel-drive system and air suspension. When you park, the body can lower itself to ease access. Once under way, it rises again. It rises still more when you select Low Range, the better to clear off-road obstructions. It rides comfortably for an SUV and handles adequately, though it doesn't accelerate briskly.

SAAB 900

The Saab 900's 1994 redesign was its first in 15 years. Built by a Saab-General Motors partnership, it remains a good-performing though quirky sports sedan with a strong family resemblance to previous 900s. The base S version comes with a 2.3-liter Four or a very powerful 2.0-liter turbocharged Four. The higher line SE models get a 2.5-liter V6 made by GM in Europe. The V6 accelerates strongly. The optional four-speed automatic transmission bumps into gear at times. The 900 corners smartly, with little body roll, and the steering provides good feedback in the European style. The ride feels quite taut even on smooth roads. The front seats offer a wide range of power adjustments and give good, firm support except in hard turns.

Consider this a four-passenger car; three in the rear are one too many. Airflow from the heater vents under the dash isn't up to the task of keeping the driver's feet warm in winter. But the air-conditioner, with its large, easily adjusted dash vents, works well. The oddball controls take getting used to, although Saab loyalists say that such touches as an ignition key located between the front seats gives the car character.

SAAB 9000

This distinctive-looking sports sedan is Saab's largest and ablest model. For years it came only with a four-cylinder engine, albeit a very refined Four. With the optional turbocharger and intercooler, this model accelerates as well as the best of its competitors. A new, optional 3.0-liter V6 from GM of Europe should add to the 9000's appeal. The front wheels tend to lose traction rather easily in the turbo version. Nonturbo versions take off more tamely. The four-speed automatic transmission usually shifts smoothly. The Saab rolls little while rounding turns. It keeps ride motions nicely under control, but every road bump makes its presence felt. (An optional softer suspension in this year's models is said to improve the ride.) The front seats give

good support. A telescoping wheel, new this year, may help remedy the tendency of the wheel to rub against tall people's thighs. The eccentric control layout includes window and sun-roof switches down low between the seats, where they're hard to see. The rear bench is roomy enough for three adults, but head room is skimpy. The hatchback and fold-down rear seatback offer commendable cargo room.

SATURN

The Saturn models' big claim to fame is their exceptional reliability. The SL2 sedan is a much better overall performer than the cheaper SL and SL1. Its 1.9-liter Four delivers plenty of power (but it's also quite noisy). The optional automatic transmission shifts smoothly. Handling is nimble and precise, but the ride is stiff. The front seats are firm and comfortable. The rear seat can hold two tall or three average-sized men, though not very comfortably. A second air bag became standard for 1995, and thankfully the annoying motorized safety belts are gone. Most of the controls are sensibly designed, and the new displays are clear. The climate-control system furnishes ample heated and cooled air and distributes it well. A Saturn novelty:

plastic body panels that rebound rather than dent after a minor impact. Even if they do suffer damage, repairs should be relatively easy; unlike other models' body panels, which are generally welded on, the Saturn's panels (even the rear quarter panels and door skins) are attached with fasteners. The station wagon performs on a par with the sedan, but its cargo area is smaller than in other small wagons.

SATURN SC

Saturn has established itself as one of the few domestic car lines that competes successfully with its Japanese counterparts in both performance and reliability. The SC2 is the sporty coupe version, combining quick acceleration from its twin-camshaft 1.9-liter Four with quick, nimble, and precise handling. Fuel economy is impressive: about 30 mpg in mixed driving. At steady speeds, the Saturn is reasonably quiet inside, but the engine buzzes when it's revved up. The taut suspension provides a stiff, sometimes jarring ride. The driving position and seat comfort are good, though tall drivers may want more head room. Access is a bit awkward, but at least the annoying old motorized safety belts are no more. The full instrumentation is easy to read. The

climate-control system is powerful but slow. Like other Saturns, this model has plastic body panels that rebound rather than dent after a minor impact. Even if they do suffer damage, repairs should be relatively easy; unlike other models' body panels, which are generally welded on, the Saturn's panels (even the rear quarter panels and door skins) are attached with fasteners.

SATURN WAGON

The Saturn models' big claim to fame is their exceptional reliability. The SL2 sedan is a much better overall performer than the cheaper SL and SL1. Its 1.9-liter Four delivers plenty of power (but it's also quite noisy). The optional automatic transmission shifts smoothly. Handling is nimble and precise, but the ride is stiff. The front seats are firm and comfortable. The rear seat can hold two tall or three average-sized men, though not very comfortably. A second air bag became standard for 1995, and thankfully the annoying motorized safety belts are gone. Most of the controls are sensibly designed, and the new displays are clear. The climate-control system furnishes ample heated and cooled air and distributes it well. A Saturn novelty:

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SUBARU IMPREZA

Properly equipped, this model holds its own against the best small cars on the market (although the base Impreza fails to impress). We recommend the L version, with automatic transmission and antilock brakes. The base 1.8-liter engine accelerates just adequately; the 2.2-liter Four is stronger. Stopping distances are very long on wet pavement without antilock brakes. A convenient "hill holder" clutch feature keeps the car from rolling back while starting off uphill. The steering is nicely weighted and responsive. The Impreza delivers a smooth, gentle ride on the highway, but bad roads provoke jittery motions and abrupt kicks. The rather low front seats provide good, firm support, though leg room is just adequate for tall people. The

rear is very cramped for three adults, adequate for two. The instruments are clear enough, but the steering wheel obstructs several secondary controls. Trunk space is adequate; a fold-down rear seatback is a useful addition.

SUBARU LEGACY

This competent, well-rounded model is updated and much improved for 1995. The Legacy is the only mid-priced compact to offer all-wheel-drive, an option that significantly improves traction and stability in poor driving conditions. The 2.2-liter Four delivers more than adequate acceleration, and the four-speed automatic transmission shifts quite smoothly. Antilock brakes stop the car straight and fairly short. The Legacy handles well in routine driving, and its steering feels precise and nicely weighted. The suspension smooths out rough patches and soaks up bumps. All but very tall drivers should be able to find a good driving position; leg room is just adequate for six-footers. The front seats give good, firm support, but the cushions are low - and

only the LS and LSi versions offer a height adjustment. Two tall people will find the rear seat fairly accommodating. Three adults barely fit. The versatile climate-control system quickly and evenly furnishes plenty of warmed or cooled air. The instruments and controls are easy to use and read. The trunk is large, and folding down the rear seatback provides even more cargo room.

SUBARU SVX

The sleek SVX is more a touring coupe than a sports car, since it lacks the razor edge of performance of many of its competitors. But it offers the stability and traction of all-wheel drive and the comfort and quietness of a luxury sedan, along with a high level of technical sophistication. A 3.3-liter Six and smooth-shifting four-speed automatic transmission deliver ample acceleration. (A manual transmission is unavailable.) Normal handling feels very stable and predictable, but emergency handling lacks the precision we expect in a true sports car. The front seats are comfortable; the rear seat is bearable for short periods. The futuristically styled divided side windows make it hard to reach through the window - to pay a toll, say - and the Auto Up feature

on the driver's side could squeeze an unwary finger or a child's neck. The instruments are easy to see and read. Aside from the two tiny horn buttons on the spokes of the steering wheel, the controls are generally well designed.

SUZUKI ESTEEM

The new Esteem is Suzuki's first attempt at a passenger car larger than the subcompact Swift. Imported from Japan, the Esteem enters a market teeming with good small cars such as the Geo Prizm, Honda Civic, Nissan Sentra, Subaru Impreza, and Toyota Corolla. Even the base Esteem comes with lots of standard equipment. In most respects, it's typically Japanese, with neat packaging and thoughtful touches. Our early impressions are mostly favorable. But, overall, the Esteem is pricey for what you get.

SUZUKI SIDEKICK

This small, Jeep-like runabout (a sibling to the Geo Tracker) is powerful enough for freeway cruising, but it's better suited to running errands around town. It comes with two or four seats and two- or four-wheel-drive. It can be fully enclosed or a "convertible" with a soft top covering just the area behind the front seats. The four-door version is more than a foot longer than the two-door one and offers more standard equipment as well as more seating or cargo room in the rear.

SUZUKI SWIFT

Redesigned for 1995, the Swift remains a very small car, fine for zipping around town but cramped for long trips. Dual air bags became standard equipment this year. The 1.3-liter Four accelerates reasonably well and delivers good fuel economy.

TOYOTA 4RUNNER

Toyota's pickup truck provides the foundation for this sport-utility vehicle. That's why the 4Runner drives more like a truck than a car. Our brief experience with this vehicle tells us that the front seats are reasonably comfortable and the rear seat is tight for tall people. The interior is fairly quiet, but you can expect to be tossed around somewhat on poor roads. About the best one can say for the 4Runner is that it's been exceptionally reliable for a sport-utility vehicle, and it holds its resale value well.

TOYOTA AVALON

The Avalon makes its debut this year as the new flagship of the Toyota line. Larger than the Camry, it competes with such models as the Buick Le Sabre, Chrysler New Yorker, Nissan Maxima, and Pontiac Bonneville. The Avalon is built on a stretched version of the Camry platform and comes with a 3.0-liter V6 that's slightly more powerful than the Camry's. We expect it to be a quiet and refined car with excellent quality and superior reliability.

TOYOTA CAMRY

This excellent, reliable family sedan is one of the best mid-sized cars you can buy for less than \$25,000. In our tests, the 3.0-liter V6 version scored similarly to the luxury-class Lexus ES300, with which it shares many major components, although the Camry costs thousands less. The Camry drives effortlessly, like a luxury car. The V6 produces some 60 hp more than does the standard 2.2-liter Four, but Toyota recommends premium fuel for it. With all the bundled accessories, the V6 adds about \$2000 to the price. Thus, the Four, which accelerates adequately, makes a more practical choice. We'd choose the smooth-shifting automatic transmission as well. Safe handling, good brakes, and a smooth, quiet ride remain Camry hallmarks. The roomy

cabin seats four with comfort, five in a pinch. Thoughtfully designed instruments and controls work intuitively, and folding the rear seatback expands the already generous trunk. The roomy wagon version offers a third seat. The wagon's handling can be a bit tricky during hard cornering.

TOYOTA CELICA

The Celica took to the streets in 1994 with its fifth redesign, and it continues to offer up a well-rounded combination of good handling, good fuel economy, and excellent predicted reliability. The high-trim GT model, with its 2.2-liter Four, accelerates decently, though not as quickly as, say, the Acura Integra GS-R or the Ford Probe GT. The 1.8-liter Four in the ST version is even less responsive. The five-speed manual transmission shifts accurately. The car responds quickly to its steering, and the tires grip well during hard cornering. The optional "sport" suspension improves handling - but the way the options are packaged, it may be hard to find a Celica with sport suspension and without expensive frills like leather upholstery and a sun roof. The

Celica rides better than most small coupes. The instruments are easy to see and the controls are sensibly laid out. The front seats offer good, firm support; save the rear seat for packages, not passengers.

TOYOTA COROLLA

This has long been one of our recommended cars. The Corolla is an able overall performer with a good reliability record. The Corolla used to be a virtual twin of the Geo Prizm, but the two have developed distinct personalities. The Corolla and Prizm still share their powertrains, platform, and many body parts, but the Corolla has a softer ride and tends to come with more standard equipment. For best performance, choose the 1.8-liter Four over the base 1.6-liter Four, with either the five-speed manual transmission or the four-speed automatic. The Corolla handles safely and predictably, though it's not particularly nimble for a small car. The body rolls and sometimes plows straight ahead somewhat in hard turns. The suspension damps out the biggest

road irregularities, but the ride feels jiggly on the highway. The front seating is fine; the cramped rear seat holds only two adults in anything resembling comfort. Toyota has made the gauges easy to see and the controls easy to reach and operate. You can expand the already roomy trunk by folding down the rear seatback.

TOYOTA LAND CRUISER

The big, imposing Land Cruiser competes at the high end of the SUV market, where it squares off against the Range Rover, a luxury British import. The Land Cruiser was last redesigned in 1992, and it picked up a more powerful 4.5-liter straight Six in 1993. That fuel-thirsty engine provides leisurely acceleration but plenty of pulling power. A sophisticated full-time four-wheel-drive system assures good traction in all conditions. One does not so much enter the Land Cruiser as scale its heights. Convenient grab handles aid the ascent, and the driver is then rewarded with a commanding view of the road. Expect a busy, rubbery ride regardless of the road surface. The Land Cruiser leans a lot in tight turns, but it holds the road well. Instruments and controls

are close to ideal. The front seats are quite comfortable, and three adults can occupy the second-row bench without pain. Passenger space is cramped in the third row. With the passenger seats folded and stowed, the Land Cruiser offers almost as much cargo space as a minivan.

TOYOTA MR2

This rear-wheel-drive two-seater holds the fort as the only small, mid-engined sports car still on the market. The mid-mounted engine balances weight fore and aft for nimble, ultra-responsive handling. The MR2 serves up blazing acceleration, especially in its pricey Turbo version. Stowage space is severely limited, even for a sports car. The MR2's escalating price and high insurance cost have hurt its sales in the supersaturated sports car market, and 1995 may be the last year for the current design.

TOYOTA PASEO

The Paseo may look sporty, but it's built on the underpinnings of the lowly, pedestrian Tercel - the old Tercel, not this year's redesigned model. The 1.5-liter Four delivers impressive fuel economy but lacks punch. The five-speed manual transmission shifts accurately, but the shifter and clutch pedal feel too light. The Paseo zips through turns nimbly, but the soft suspension and numb steering rob it of driving enjoyment, and bumps make the car skate off course. Crosswind gusts push the Paseo around. The nonantilock brakes need lots of stopping room when the pavement is wet. The ride is soft but noisy. And the front seats are comfortable, though cramped for tall drivers. Head room is particularly skimpy, and access is fairly

difficult. Consider the rear seat a shelf for packages, especially since the trunk is small. The controls and displays are simple, clear, and logical.

TOYOTA PREVIA

The Previa is a good though expensive choice if you use a van mostly to carry people. It has nice balance, responsive steering, and a quiet ride. The 2.4-liter Four (mounted midway between the front and rear wheels) strains when the van is fully loaded. The optional supercharged engine may be worth considering. The four-speed automatic transmission shifts back and forth annoyingly between third and fourth gears on uphill slopes. The All-Trac four-wheel-drive option provides extra traction in poor driving conditions. The Previa feels secure in routine driving and reasonably steady in hard turns at the track. The front captain's chairs are comfortable, and both tall and short drivers can find a good driving position. But wide roof pillars and third-row head

restraints create blind spots, and the downward-curving body panels hamper the driver's ability to gauge tight clearances. The rearmost seat is a flat, hard bench. If you want to haul a lot of cargo, stay with the standard center bench seat; the optional captain's chairs can't be removed. The controls work well once you figure them out, and the displays are easy to read. The climate-control system works effectively.

TOYOTA SUPRA

In its quickest, most expensive form, the Supra Turbo seems to be designed to go from here to there at triple the speed limit. It competes with such pricey sports cars as the Nissan 300ZX and Mazda RX-7 - two models which, we think, are more fun to drive. The Supra's 3.0-liter Six comes with or without dual turbochargers. The Turbo model delivers blazing acceleration. A six-speed manual transmission uses gear ratios well chosen for quick take-offs and effortless cruising. A four-speed automatic is available as well. A sophisticated traction-control system works at all speeds. The steering is a little short on feel, but the car corners exceptionally flatly. The Supra rides harshly and nervously; you feel every seam in the road and hear lots of road

and wind noise. The front seats provide good, firm support, especially at the sides. The low seating position impedes the view, though, and some drivers may find the clutch pedal a long reach. The rear seat is a bad joke, and the shallow trunk holds little luggage.

TOYOTA T100

The T-100 is one of few imported pickup trucks - not all that surprising when you consider that imported trucks carry a steep, 25-percent tariff. The T-100 is a full-sized pickup, designed for hauling and towing. But if you expect to do much of either, choose the V6 rather than the standard Four. Controls and displays are easy to reach and see. The T-100 costs quite a bit for what you get, but it has proven quite reliable.

TOYOTA TACOMA

If you think that all Toyotas are good performers, think again. This truck, new in 1995, is unimpressive by any standard. It's true that previous Toyota pickups have been very reliable, and that the Tacoma has a responsive powertrain, especially with the optional V6. But the steering is slow and numb. Bumpy curves make the truck leap and bound. Without antilock brakes, stops are horrendously long - and the truck tends to spin out on wet pavement. And antilock brakes are very difficult to find in the Tacoma. The cargo bed is rimmed with flimsy sheet metal. The Tacoma rides uncomfortably, jittering on smooth roads and kicking and snapping on poor ones. The cabin remains quiet, but the seats are low and lack support. As in other Toyotas, most

of the controls and displays are well designed. The climate-control system works well, although placing cups in the cup-holders blocks the controls.

TOYOTA TERCEL

Toyota's entry-level model, though redesigned for 1995, has changed surprisingly little. The 1.5-liter Four gained 11 hp, which should add a little much-needed pep. The Tercel is, first and foremost, an economy car, inexpensive to buy and sparing with fuel. As is typical in Toyota models, the Tercel's instruments are easy to see and read, and the climate-control system produces ample heat and ventilation.

VOLKSWAGEN GOLF III

If you're looking for a sporty, fleet-footed small car, you could do far worse than the Golf. Redesigned in 1993, it retains the older Golf's basic appearance, but it has a slightly wider stance, larger wheels and tires, and a new interior. With its peppy and responsive 2.0-liter Four and easy-shifting five-speed manual transmission, the Golf performs well. It feels sporty and agile on twisty country roads. It leans sharply in hard turns, but the steering transmits good feel of the road. The ride feels smooth and supple, better than that of previous VWs. The control layout is much improved, but some niggling problems, such as confusing wiper and washer controls, remain. Tall drivers may find insufficient leg room and head room. For those who fit, the

front seats offer good, firm support. The GTI VR6 version comes with a smooth, powerful V6. The previous version of the Cabriolet convertible had the dubious distinction of being one of the most stolen cars in the U.S. Reliability of this new model remains to be seen.

VOLKSWAGEN JETTA III

Think of the Jetta as a Golf with a very large trunk. It's a practical, relatively inexpensive car, with a responsive, 2.0-liter Four and a comfortable interior. The sporty GLX version comes with a smooth and powerful V6 and a host of standard equipment. But even the plainer GL and GLS versions offer excellent handling, responsive steering, and good tire grip. At low speeds, the ride is supple enough in all three trim lines. But at higher speeds, the GLX's ride becomes unsettled and bouncy on undulating pavement. With a full load aboard, the springs all too easily compress fully on bumps. The front seats provide good, firm support, and adjustments on the seat and steering column help most drivers get comfortably situated. The rear seat can just

about hold three slim six-footers. The gauges are clear at night, but reflections can be a problem in daytime. Some controls are confusing or hard to use. The trunk is large, and the rear seat can tumble forward and fold for added luggage room. Reliability of this new model remains to be seen.

VOLKSWAGEN PASSAT

VW's most expensive sedan has been redesigned for 1995. The 2.8-liter V6 provides smoother and stronger acceleration than the previous 2.0-liter Four. The four-speed automatic transmission is much improved but could still be better. Handling is crisp and agile, and the ride is firm. The front seats are comfortable, and the wide adjustability of the driver's seat and steering wheel can accommodate people of almost any size. The rear seat is especially roomy. The gauges are clear, and the heating and ventilation work very well. The station wagon is especially roomy.

VOLVO 850

The 850 is the first and only Volvo sold in the U.S. with front-wheel drive. It's also the first model of any make to offer side-impact air bags, mounted on the edge of each front seatback. The 850 is fleetier and nimbler than the stodgy 900-series Volvos. It competes with such sports sedans as the BMW 3-Series, Mazda Millenia, Mercedes' C-Class, and Saab 900 - but it doesn't sacrifice any of Volvo's traditional practicality. The 850's five-cylinder engine is available with a turbocharger that improves acceleration dramatically. The smooth-shifting four-speed automatic transmission offers a choice of Winter, Economy, and Sport modes that vary the shift points. The steering is nicely weighted, though not particularly

quick. The body leans noticeably in sharp turns, but excellent tire grip bolsters driver confidence. Large, comfortable front seats only partly make up for the 850's stiff, jiggly ride. The roomy rear seat accommodates three adults with ease, and the trunk can hold lots of luggage.

VOLVO 940

The 940 is the more pedestrian of the two Volvo 900 Series. Its boxy body provides easy access, exceptional comfort for four or five, a wealth of safety features, and a cavernous trunk. The 940 comes with a 2.3-liter Four, with or without a turbocharger. The nonturbo Four is sluggish and not all that economical to run. The four-speed automatic transmission shifts too often and not very subtly. An automatic-locking differential limits wheel spin on slippery surfaces. The 940 handles safely and predictably but not nimbly. Stops are short and straight. The ride is taut and fairly comfortable. The front seats are pleasantly firm and nicely shaped. The rear seat is about as hospitable as they get, even for three adults. The climate-control system heats and cools

superbly. The gauges are large and clear, and most of the controls are sensible and easy to reach. A "pretensioner" system on the front safety belts instantly takes up slack in a frontal crash, improving protection. The wagon, which we tested, has an exceptionally roomy cargo area. All in all, it's an efficient design - but the Volvo 850 is even nicer, and some versions are priced comparably.

VOLVO 960

Some new sheet metal distinguishes the 1995 960 from its humbler stablemate, the 940. Both models provide easy access, exceptional comfort for four or five, a wealth of safety features, and a cavernous trunk. The 960 comes with a 2.9-liter in-line Six that performs enthusiastically. The four-speed automatic transmission offers Economy and Sport settings, as well as a Winter setting that lets you start in and hold any gear. An automatic-locking differential limits wheel spin on slippery surfaces. Traction control is unavailable, however. Previous Volvo sedans haven't handled nimbly, but Volvo has tweaked the 960's suspension to improve both handling and ride. Stops are short and straight. A short turning radius aids parking. The front

seats are pleasantly firm and nicely shaped. The rear seat is about as hospitable as they get, even for three adults. The climate-control system heats and cools superbly. The gauges are large and clear, and most of the controls are sensible and easy to reach. A "pretensioner" system on the front safety belts instantly takes up slack in a frontal crash, improving protection. The wagon has an exceptionally roomy cargo area.

ACURA INTEGRA

This small but expensive sedan is the entry-level model in Honda's luxury Acura line. Most drivers should be satisfied with the standard, 142-hp Four (it delivered more than enough pep) and the 5-speed manual transmission. A 170-hp VTEC Four is also available. Interior space was decent in front. The seats were quite firm, perhaps too firm for some people. The rear seat was cramped for tall people. Most controls were nicely laid out and easy to use, but the climate-control slides were hard to adjust.

ACURA INTEGRA COUPE

This small but expensive sedan is the entry-level model in Honda's luxury Acura line. Most drivers should be satisfied with the standard, 142-hp Four (it delivered more than enough pep) and the 5-speed manual transmission. A 170-hp VTEC Four is also available. Interior space was decent in front. The seats were quite firm, perhaps too firm for some people. The rear seat was cramped for tall people. Most controls were nicely laid out and easy to use, but the climate-control slides were hard to adjust.

ACURA LEGEND

The Legend accelerated impressively, but expect only about 20 mpg overall, on premium fuel. The 4-speed automatic transmission sometimes thumped. The car handled predictably but not nimbly. Mediocre tire grip limited cornering ability. Stops were straight, though rather long. The ride was quiet and fairly taut. Most people should feel comfortable in front. The rear seat holds three in a pinch. The climate-control system worked powerfully, but manually controlled dash vents were a nuisance. The gauges were clear, but the tiny horn buttons were hard to find. The front safety belts took up slack instantly in a frontal collision.

ACURA VIGOR

This model might compete more successfully among sporty coupes than family sedans. Its sporty image seems to require a stiff ride. Quick, nimble handling is the car's greatest asset. Acceleration was vigorous, and braking was short and straight. Front seating was low, but the driver can see out well, and room was plentiful. Three are a crowd in back. Access was awkward. The climate-control system heated and cooled quickly, most of the major controls were logical, and the gauges were easy to read. About the only major option you might consider is the automatic transmission, but we found that it shifted abruptly.

AUDI 100

The optional automatic transmission is especially irritating. It shifted slowly, and its shifter was awkward. Also, the V6 felt sluggish. The two-wheel-drive version handled fairly smoothly but lacked agility. The ride ranged from jiggly to almost snappy. The front seats were quite comfortable and roomy. Two tall riders found enough room in the rear, but the center position was no joy. Some of the controls were confusing, but most displays were legible. The manual climate-control system was fussy and weak. The automatic system was much better.

AUDI 90

The Quattro's all-wheel drive provided superior traction on slippery roads. The brakes worked powerfully, and handling felt safe but numb. Considerable noise reached the interior. Acceleration was ample, but maximum performance required a heavy throttle foot and lots of shifting. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted fairly smoothly. An automatic transmission is unavailable in the Quattro. The rear seat was tight for three. The automatic climate-control system worked powerfully. The odd controls and minor gauges needed improvement.

BMW 3-SERIES

The focus here is more on performance than luxury. The 325i's Six accelerated powerfully, and the optional 4-speed automatic shifted smoothly. (The 318i version has a Four.) The car braked superbly and carved through winding roads with the best of sports cars. Traction control in the 325 is a worthwhile option. The ride was firm and well controlled. Besides the sporty exhaust sound, we noted some road noise. The front seats provided good support. The rear seat was tight for tall people. The displays were clear, and the separate left and right climate-control systems were powerful.

BMW 5-SERIES

The BMW 530i and 540i came out in the middle of last year as 1994 models. These luxurious rear-wheel-drive sports sedans share their basic body with the 525i, but they come with sophisticated, all-aluminum V8s instead of a Six. In either version, expect fine handling but a fairly firm ride. We recommend traction control. A smooth 5-speed automatic transmission is standard in the 540i, optional in the 530i.

BMW 740I

These V8-powered models compete with the world's finest and costliest luxury sports sedans. The 740iL is four inches longer than the 740i. Both offered exceptional acceleration, superior handling and all the fancy interior appointments one expects of cars in this price class. These models are substantially roomier than the 5-series BMWs. A 5-speed automatic transmission is standard. Displays were quite clear, and nearly all controls were sensibly laid out and easy to reach.

BUICK CENTURY

This aging and uninteresting model has one major advantage: its repair record has been quite good. The Century and its corporate cousin, the Oldsmobile Cutlass Ciera, are no longer competitive with models such as the Ford Taurus. The optional 3.1-liter V6 and 4-speed automatic make a much better choice than the standard 2.2-liter Four with its three-speed automatic.

BUICK LE SABRE

In standard form, this is a quiet, softly sprung car with sloppy handling. The Touring suspension improved handling somewhat. The V6 provided responsive acceleration, and the 4-speed automatic shifted extremely smoothly. Seating was comfortable for five, less so for six. Controls were overstyled, but displays were clear, and the automatic climate-control system was powerful. The Le Sabre, Oldsmobile Eighty-Eight Royale and Pontiac Bonneville are similar. Among them, the Bonneville is sportiest. The Buick Park Avenue and Oldsmobile Ninety-Eight Regency are longer but no roomier.

BUICK PARK AVENUE

This high-line freeway cruiser is a longer and more luxurious relative of the Buick Le Sabre. It competes among big, quiet luxury sedans such as the Oldsmobile Ninety-Eight Regency and Lincoln Town Car, with emphasis on a soft ride and every imaginable power convenience. The standard, 3.8-liter V6 is quite capable of powering this large car. The Ultra version comes with a snappier supercharged V6. Opt for the trailer towing package. It includes a firmer suspension, which should improve handling.

BUICK REGAL

This aging model shares major components with the Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme and Pontiac Grand Prix, but it lacks the Pontiac's dual air bags and convenient front safety belts. The 3.8-liter V6 was peppier than the 3.1-liter V6 and only a bit thirstier. The 4-speed automatic shifted very smoothly. Handling felt fairly sloppy in tight turns. Expect a comfortable ride on smooth roads, a slightly worse ride on broken pavement. The front and rear seats were roomy enough for tall people but lack support. The gauges were easy to read, but many minor controls were scattered haphazardly.

BUICK ROADMASTER

This massive rear-wheel-drive model is the embodiment of automotive excess. A close cousin of the Chevrolet Caprice, it rode exceptionally smoothly and quietly, and that's pretty much where its virtues end. Handling was ponderous. Three people had lots of room in the rear, but three in front were tight. The driver couldn't see where the car ends in front, and wide rear roof pillars created a nasty blind spot. The climate-control system worked well.

BUICK SKYLARK

Though introduced in 1992, this design is based on the Chevrolet Corsica, little changed since 1987. The Skylark, Oldsmobile Achieva and Pontiac Grand Am share many components, but each has a different image. The Skylark targets those who want some luxury with their sportiness. Even with the Gran Sport package, handling was just adequate. The 3.1-liter V6 was quieter and peppier than the 2.3-liter Four. The front seats were satisfactory. The rear was unfriendly even for two. Heating and cooling were effective but slow. The controls and displays needed improvement.

CADILLAC CONCOURS/DE VILLE

Cadillac's best-selling model line for years, the De Ville saw its first major redesign in a decade this year. Now built on a stretched version of the Cadillac Seville platform, it's a big, plush, four-door land yacht. The De Ville comes with a 4.9-liter V8. The upscale Concours gets Cadillac's sophisticated Northstar all-aluminum 4.6-liter V8 and electronically controlled transmission and suspension. This car rode and handled well.

CADILLAC ELDORADO

This showy luxury coupe offers a full array of safety and luxury features and two versions of the sophisticated Northstar all-aluminum V8. The Touring Coupe provided blazing acceleration, the electronic 4-speed automatic transmission shifted very smoothly, and the traction control was exemplary on slippery roads. Handling was cumbersome. The car rode well on good roads, but bumps tended to trip it up. Though the front seat was roomy, support could be better. Two adults fit fairly nicely in the rear, but access was awkward. The automatic climate-control system worked quite well. The instruments were clear, but some displays were poorly placed.

CADILLAC FLEETWOOD

In last year's redesign, the rear-wheel-drive Fleetwood became a replacement for the Cadillac Brougham. Built on the same chassis as the Buick Roadmaster and Chevrolet Caprice, it maintains the traditional characteristics of large domestic sedans, with a soft ride, quiet and plush interior, and enough muscle to haul a heavy trailer with ease. You'll find plenty of interior room front and rear, plus a large trunk. You'll also find the cumbersome handling and mediocre fuel economy inherent in this breed.

CADILLAC SEVILLE

The Seville was designed to compete with sedans from Mercedes, BMW, Lexus and Infiniti. Its Northstar system combines a modern all-aluminum V8, an electronic 4-speed automatic transmission, traction control and an active suspension that reacted to the road. The Seville accelerated faster than many performance cars. The STS version cornered fairly crisply. The ride deteriorated considerably on poor roads. Some road and wind noise penetrated the cabin. Leg room was ample, but the sun-roof option robbed head room. The front seats offered good support. The rear was several notches worse.

CHEVROLET ASTRO

This old design hasn't aged well. The Astro and similar Safari suffered from clumsy handling, a trucklike ride and poor reliability. The V6 and 4-speed automatic transmission worked smoothly. Optional all-wheel drive was useful on slippery roads. Lack of front foot room was a major discomfort. With the eight-passenger package, the second and third seats were comfortable for two but not for three. The digital displays were clear. The controls were awkward. A huge cargo area, especially in the extended models, and impressive towing capability were pluses.

CHEVROLET BERETTA

This model offers no surprises, good or bad. It represents the thrifty end of GM's compact models. The V6 is a better choice than the weak and noisy Four. The steering felt vague, and the car leaned sharply in turns. The ride was busy but never harsh. The low front seats made it hard to see over the hood, and the seatbacks forced occupants to slouch. Three adults felt crowded in back. Although the displays were clear, the controls were awkward and the climate-control system was weak.

CHEVROLET CAMARO

The Camaro and its corporate cousin, the Pontiac Firebird, are rear-wheel-drive muscle cars. The Z28 version uses a slightly detuned version of the potent V8 that powers the Chevrolet Corvette. A six-speed manual transmission is standard. A 4-speed automatic is optional, as is traction control. The V8's effortless thrust made the V6 seem sluggish. The ride was decent. The handling was precise but not nimble. The V8's wider tires gripped better. Braking was competent. The front bucket seats cradled their occupants nicely and firmly. The rear seat was mostly for show.

CHEVROLET CAPRICE

A quiet, pillowy ride is the main claim to fame of this rear-wheel-drive model. The optional 5.7-liter V8 produced gobs of power, but delivered only about 17 mpg overall. The 4-speed automatic shifted very smoothly. The optional Sport Suspension improved handling. Seating was quite comfortable for two in front, not bad for three in the rear. Though slow to warm, the heater was strong and quiet. Instruments and controls were much friendlier than in earlier Caprices. Properly equipped, the Caprice can tow 5000 pounds.

CHEVROLET CAVALIER

Why this humdrum little sedan and its cousin, the Pontiac Sunbird, remain among GM's top sellers is a mystery. The Four accelerated slowly and noisily. The V6 is a better choice. The automatic transmission occasionally hesitated and then bumped into gear. Stops were reasonably short, but the brakes faded more than we like in repeated stops. Expect good handling, but not a comfortable ride. The front seats were hard and low, and the rear seat was tight. A complete redesign is due in the fall.

CHEVROLET CORSICA

This model offers no surprises, good or bad. It represents the thrifty end of GM's compact models. The V6 is a better choice than the weak and noisy Four. The steering felt vague, and the car leaned sharply in turns. The ride was busy but never harsh. The low front seats made it hard to see over the hood, and the seatbacks forced occupants to slouch. Three adults felt crowded in back. Although the displays were clear, the controls were awkward and the climate-control system was weak.

CHEVROLET CORVETTE

This legendary model is an odd mix of old and new. The body flexed and twisted. A huge V8 delivered blazing acceleration, while a sophisticated traction-control system minimized wheel spin. The six-speed manual transmission shifted stiffly but precisely. Short drivers may have to stretch to depress the clutch pedal. Steering was quick and precise, but the Corvette felt too bulky to be nimble. It bounced badly on rough roads. It was hard to see over the hood. The climate-control system was effective but noisy at times. The gauges were legible, and the controls worked quite well.

CHEVROLET K-BLAZER

Built on a full-sized pickup-truck chassis, this vehicle lends itself to hauling cargo or towing a heavy trailer. Don't confuse it with the compact-sized Chevrolet S-Blazer. The big version featured four-wheel drive, a big V8 and antilock brakes. It rode surprisingly well and handled reasonably well. The best way to outfit the Blazer is with an automatic transmission, trailer-towing option and Silverado Preferred Equipment Group 3, which includes many convenience items.

CHEVROLET LUMINA

A redesigned version, due in late Spring as a 1995 model, the Lumina offered a competitive ride, handling and comfort. The new model remains fairly large and roomy, with more convenient instruments and controls and updated safety equipment.

CHEVROLET LUMINA VAN

The plastic-clad Lumina is as competent as the similar Oldsmobile Silhouette and Pontiac Trans Sport. The optional seven-seat package is versatile. Its five modular seats were easy to fold, shift or remove. A power side door is nice. The 3.1-liter V6 and three-speed automatic accelerated adequately. The 3.8-liter V6 and 4-speed automatic did much better. Emergency handling was reasonably controllable. Seating was comfortable in the first two rows. Access to the third row was awkward. The ride was comfortable for a van, and the climate-control system was powerful.

CHEVROLET S-10 BLAZER

This model has changed little over the years. Don't confuse the S with the larger, plain Chevrolet Blazer. The S comes in two- and four-wheel-drive versions. We see little point in tolerating the discomforts of a sport-utility vehicle without the utility of four-wheel drive. The ride and handling were quite crude. To make this vehicle more competitive in its class, choose the 200-hp, 4.3-liter V6, along with the Tahoe LT package for its many convenience features. A new version will be introduced this summer as a 1995 model.

CHEVROLET SUBURBAN

Resembling an overgrown station wagon, the Suburban is built on a full-sized GM pickup chassis and comes in two- and four-wheel-drive versions. This sport-utility vehicle emphasizes utility over sport. It can haul lots of cargo or tow a heavy trailer. A redesign two years ago improved the handling and ride somewhat, but expect both to remain more trucklike than carlike. Instead of the thirsty 5.7-liter gasoline-powered V8, the powerful new 6.5-liter turbodiesel V8 may make sense for Suburban buyers who don't own a filling station.

CHRYSLER CONCORDE

The Concorde and its siblings, the Dodge Intrepid and Eagle Vision, are top-rated among large cars. The 3.3-liter V6 accelerated responsively. The optional 3.5-liter V6 packed even more punch, but was noisier. The automatic shifted quite smoothly. The Concorde handled surprisingly nimbly for so large a car. The ride was firm and well controlled. The horn buttons were hard to find quickly, but the displays were clear. Seating was roomy and comfortable for five.

CHRYSLER LE BARON

This is the last year for this sedan and the similar Dodge Spirit and Plymouth Acclaim. They remain competent if unexceptional cars. The V6, with 4-speed automatic, accelerated well. These models handled well in routine driving. The steering responded predictably in abrupt avoidance maneuvers. Front seating was fairly comfortable for most people. Short drivers needed the power seat. Two tall people could fit easily in the rear seat. With three sitting abreast, the middle position had inadequate leg room. The heater was slow to warm the cabin. The split rear seatback can be folded.

CHRYSLER LE BARON CONVERTIBLE

This is one of the last models to be built on Chrysler's hoary K-car chassis, soon to enter retirement. Among the latest tweaks is the addition of dual air bags. Sales have been reasonably strong for such a dated and uninspired design, perhaps because it's one of few convertibles in its market niche. The last time we tested a Le Baron coupe (similar to the convertible), we were unimpressed with the handling and ride, particularly on poor roads. As in many other two-door models, the back seat was cramped and hard to reach.

CHRYSLER LHS/NEW YORKER

These models are like the Chrysler Concorde/Dodge Intrepid/Eagle Vision triplets, which we consider the best large sedans on the market, but they're five inches longer. The LHS, with individual front seats, could seat five. The New Yorker, with a front bench seat, could seat six. The V6 gave spirited acceleration, and the 4-speed automatic shifted fairly smoothly. These models handled relatively nimbly and rode comfortably. But unless you crave an expansive rear seat and trunk, get one of the smaller triplets and save several thousand dollars.

CHRYSLER TOWN & COUNTRY

Chrysler Corp.'s minivans continue to hold their own against tough new competition. This model is a loaded version of the Dodge Grand Caravan and Plymouth Grand Voyager. Handling was sluggish, but stops were short. The van rode pleasantly on smooth roads but shuddered over bumps. The front seats were very comfortable. The rearmost seat was tight for three. The climate-control system was strong. Although the displays were clear, some controls could be better. The plain, shorter-bodied Dodge Caravan and Plymouth Voyager have been more reliable. A four-wheel-drive version is available.

DODGE CARAVAN

The Caravan/Plymouth Voyager twins were our benchmark minivans for years, and they're still competitive. The V6 was strong. The automatic transmission sometimes shifted too often. A 5-speed manual is available with the Four. The van handled sluggishly. An optional, stiffer suspension helped somewhat. The front seats were comfortable, and the climate-control system was powerful. The displays were clear, but minor controls could be better. The longer Chrysler Town & Country, Dodge Grand Caravan, and Plymouth Grand Voyager have been less reliable.

DODGE COLT

This model is also known as the Eagle Summit, Plymouth Colt and Mitsubishi Mirage. The Colt is a price leader, destined for oblivion next year. Most cars on dealers' lots will be short on equipment such as antilock brakes (too bad, since the conventional brakes were poor). The ride was uncomfortable. The front seats provided satisfactory support. The rear seat could barely hold two six-footers. Major controls were easy to see and grasp, and the climate-control system worked quickly. The split rear seatback could be folded.

DODGE GRAND CARAVAN

Chrysler Corp.'s minivans continue to hold their own against tough new competition. This model and similar Chrysler Town & Country and Plymouth Grand Voyager are extended versions of the plain Caravan and Voyager. Handling was sluggish, but stops were short. The van rode pleasantly on smooth roads but shuddered over bumps. Front seats were very comfortable. The rearmost seat was tight for three. The climate-control system was strong. Displays were clear. A four-wheel-drive version was available. The plain, shorter-bodied Dodge Caravan and Plymouth Voyager have been more reliable.

DODGE INTREPID

The Intrepid and its siblings, the Chrysler Concorde and Eagle Vision, are top-rated among large cars. The 3.3-liter V6 accelerated responsively. The 3.5-liter V6 packed even more punch. The automatic transmission shifted quite smoothly. The Intrepid handled surprisingly nimbly for so large a car. The ride was firm but pleasant. The horn buttons were hard to find quickly, but the displays were clear. Seating was roomy and comfortable for five.

DODGE SPIRIT

This is the last year for this unexceptional model and its siblings, the Chrysler Le Baron sedan and Plymouth Acclaim. The Four vibrated and growled. Get the V6. Handling was predictable but not crisp in abrupt maneuvers. Front seating was fairly comfortable, though short drivers needed the power-seat option. Toe space was tight for the front passenger. Two tall people fit easily in the rear, but a center passenger had too little leg room. A motorized right front safety belt is new this year. The heater worked slowly, and the controls and displays could be better. The split rear seatback could be folded.

DODGE STEALTH

In their sportiest form, the Stealth and its twin, the Mitsubishi 3000GT, are technological tours de force. Price lines range from the base model, with front-wheel drive, on up to the R/T Turbo, with twin turbos, four-wheel steering, electronically adjustable suspension and all-wheel drive. The R/T Turbo offered excellent steering response and traction, nimble cornering, exceptionally short stops, and blazing acceleration. The front seats were comfortable for most people. The tight rear seat was mostly for show. The automatic climate-control system worked well. The controls could be a bit easier to use.

EAGLE SUMMIT

This model is also known as the Dodge Colt, Plymouth Colt, and Mitsubishi Mirage. By any name, it's a price leader. Most cars on dealers' lots will be short on equipment such as antilock brakes (too bad, since the conventional brakes were poor). The car rode uncomfortably. The front seats provided satisfactory support. The rear seat could barely hold two six-footers. Major controls were easy to see and grasp, and the climate-control system worked quickly. The split rear seatback could be folded.

EAGLE SUMMIT WAGON

This cross between a small wagon and a very small van also sells as the Mitsubishi Expo LRV and Plymouth Colt Vista. Tall and boxy, it has a high seating position and a sliding side door. The engine of choice, a 2.4-liter Four, felt lively. The tires squealed, the body leaned and the car plowed ahead in tight turns. The ride was comfortable and quiet, and the Summit offered much more cargo space than did competing small wagons. Tall drivers needed more leg room. The rear seat was roomy for two, tight for three. The climate-control system worked well. The gauges were legible, but the controls could be handier.

EAGLE TALON

The Talon and similar Mitsubishi Eclipse are due for replacement later this year. The optional turbocharger added lots of power but hurt fuel economy somewhat. Handling felt responsive and stable. All-wheel drive in the top-line version improved handling. The ride wasn't bad for a sporty car, but the seating was too low. The rear seat was just about useless. Luggage space was skimpy. The Talon is a competent car overall, but more up-to-date models such as the Ford Probe, Honda Prelude and Mazda MX-6 have better comfort and convenience features.

EAGLE VISION

The Vision and its siblings, the Dodge Intrepid and Chrysler Concorde, are top-rated among large cars. The 3.3-liter V6 accelerated responsively. The optional 3.5-liter V6 packed even more punch, but it's noisier. The automatic transmission shifted quite smoothly. The Vision handled surprisingly nimbly for so large a car. The ride was firm and well controlled. The horn buttons were hard to find quickly, but the displays were clear. Seating was roomy and comfortable for five.

FORD AEROSTAR

This is a sound choice for carrying six or seven people or towing a trailer. Credit its strong optional 4.0-liter V6 and roomy cargo area. The 4-speed automatic transmission can shift abruptly. The all-wheel-drive version handled more sure-footedly than the ponderous rear-wheel-drive version. The ride was good. The seating was very comfortable. The dual climate-control systems worked well. The front-wheel-drive Ford Windstar will replace the Aerostar later this year.

FORD ASPIRE

This new model replaces the Ford Festiva, which anchored the small-car end of Ford's lineup. Like the Festiva, the Aspire is made in Korea by KIA. Think of it as a basic urban runabout, long on fuel economy but short on performance. It's quite roomy inside for a small car. The Aspire comes in an SE version, which aspires to be sportier than the normal two- or four-door hatchback.

FORD BRONCO

The elephantine Bronco weighs in solidly on the utility end of the sport-utility continuum, where it competes with the Chevrolet Blazer and GMC Yukon. This four-wheel-drive vehicle is a truck from the core outwards, but a truck that offers various levels of interior luxury appointments. It is designed for people who need to haul a lot of gear or tow a heavy trailer. Now available only with a V8 engine, the Bronco will sniff out every gas pump on its itinerary.

FORD CROWN VICTORIA

The big Ford and similar Mercury Grand Marquis are among the last big freeway cruisers with a V8, full frame and rear-wheel drive. A serene ride, huge trunk and substantial trailer-towing capability were major advantages. The car accelerated well, and the 4-speed automatic transmission shifted very smoothly. Steering response was fairly good. The Preferred Equipment Package 114A and the Handling and Performance Package materially improved braking and handling. The front seats lacked sufficient padding. The rear offered room for three. The controls were mostly logical.

FORD ESCORT

Only the GT version offers antilock brakes, and without antilock, the Escort (and similar Mercury Tracer) stopped poorly. The standard 1.9-liter Four gave lethargic and noisy acceleration. A sophisticated 1.8-liter Four in the GT, though slightly smaller, was more powerful. The basic Escort handled sluggishly, but the GT's taut suspension made the car feel nimble. Front seating was comfortable, and the driver could see out well. The rear seat provided room enough for six-footers, but it wasn't very comfortable.

FORD ESCORT WAGON

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FORD EXPLORER

Big and roomy, the four-door version easily seated five. (The Mazda Navajo is a two-door Explorer.) The V6 was adequate, and the 4-speed automatic shifted smoothly. The optional four-wheel drive, without a center differential, was unsuited for dry roads. Handling was ponderous. We recommend the optional limited-slip rear axle and trailer-towing package. Resilient front seats partly made up for a bouncy ride. The rear seat could hold three six-footers. The climate-control system was strong. Most controls were convenient, and the displays were clear.

FORD MUSTANG

The new-for-'94 Mustang continues as a rear-wheel-drive muscle car. This year's improvements are evolutionary rather than revolutionary. The Mustang offers a choice of 3.8-liter V6 or 5.0-liter V8. (A more modern, more powerful, and more refined 4.6-liter V8, similar to the one in the Lincoln Mark VIII, is due for next year.) The cabin was cramped. The rear seats were vestigial. Controls were easy to use, and displays were clear.

FORD PROBE

This model and the Mazda MX-6 share many mechanical parts. The higher price line of each make is a step up in performance from the base four-cylinder version. The V6 accelerated with authority. We prefer the easy-shifting 5-speed manual transmission. Handling was very smooth and predictable. The Probe GT's taut suspension and wide tires provided crisper handling, but the MX-6 rode a bit better. The front seats were comfortable, but reserve the rear seat for packages. There was lots of luggage room under the Probe's hatchback.

FORD TAURUS

The Taurus and similar Mercury Sable delivered fine all-round performance. The 4-speed automatic shifted smoothly. The Taurus handled well in normal driving but sluggishly in hard turns. The optional power seat comfortably accommodated drivers of nearly any size. The rear seat was roomy for two six-footers, adequate for three adults. The interior was quiet except for wind noise. Most of the controls were well designed. The optional automatic climate-control system worked well.

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FORD TEMPO

The Tempo and similar Mercury Topaz did everything adequately and nothing very well. This pair is due to be replaced later this year by the new Ford Contour and Mercury Mystique. Acceleration was leisurely. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. The steering was slow and the body leaned considerably in tight turns, although handling remained predictable. The driving position was fine for most physiques. The front seats offered good support, but the front passenger's toe space was skimpy. The rear-seat cushion was low and short.

FORD THUNDERBIRD

The Thunderbird and similar Mercury Cougar have received their first significant changes since 1989, exterior freshening and a new interior. Expect a decent ride, particularly for front seat occupants, but fairly clumsy handling. The optional new 4.6-liter V8 developed about the same power as the old 5.0-liter V8 but was more refined and fuel-efficient. Standard equipment includes a wealth of power accessories such as air-conditioning, power windows and power door locks. The old, awkward motorized safety belts are gone.

GEO METRO

This is not a car for freeway cruising. It felt zippy around town, but its small three-cylinder engine and cramped interior bode ill for long trips. The Metro is similar to, but cruder than, the Suzuki Swift, another inexpensive little runabout. Its pinch-penny practicality makes it popular with rental fleets. The four-door hatchback is the more practical version. The Metro will be redesigned for next year.

GEO PRIZM

This high-rated model and the Toyota Corolla share powertrains, platform and many body parts, but the Prizm had a firmer ride and sportier handling. Choose the 1.8-liter Four over the 1.6-liter Four, and the 5-speed manual transmission over the automatic. The steering responded crisply, but backing off the accelerator in a hard turn could make the tail wag. Stops were quite short. The driving position was a bit cramped, and the optional sun roof robbed lots of head room. The climate-control system worked well. Most controls were easy to use, and the gauges were clear. The split rear seatback could be folded.

GEO TRACKER

This small, two-door, Jeep-like runabout is Geo's version of the Suzuki Sidekick. (If you want four doors, you have to buy the Sidekick.) The Tracker comes with two- or four-wheel drive. You can add optional fold-and-stow rear seats in the small cargo area behind the front seats. The hardtop version offers better weather protection than the convertible, at the expense of losing the open-air experience. The Tracker may be okay for running errands, but not for long trips.

GMC JIMMY

Chevrolet-S Blazer is essentially similar. This model has changed little over the years. We see little point in tolerating the discomforts of a sport-utility vehicle without the utility of four-wheel drive. The ride and handling were quite crude. To make this vehicle more competitive in its class, choose the 200-hp, 4.3-liter V6, along with the Tahoe LT package for its many convenience features. A new version will be introduced this summer as a 1995 model.

GMC SAFARI

This old design hasn't aged well. The Astro and similar Safari suffered from clumsy handling, a trucklike ride and poor reliability. The V6 and 4-speed automatic transmission worked smoothly. Optional all-wheel drive was useful on slippery roads. Lack of front foot room was a major discomfort. With the eight-passenger package, the second and third seats were comfortable for two but not for three. The digital displays were clear. The controls were awkward. A huge cargo area, especially in the extended models, and impressive towing capability were pluses.

GMC SUBURBAN

Resembling an overgrown station wagon, the Suburban is built on a full-sized GM pickup chassis and comes in two- and four-wheel-drive versions. This sport-utility vehicle emphasizes utility over sport. It can haul lots of cargo or tow a heavy trailer. A redesign two years ago improved the handling and ride somewhat, but expect both to remain more trucklike than carlike. Instead of the thirsty 5.7-liter gasoline-powered V8, the powerful new 6.5-liter turbodiesel V8 may make sense for Suburban buyers who don't own a filling station.

GMC YUKON

Built on a full-sized pickup-truck chassis, this vehicle lends itself to hauling cargo or towing a heavy trailer. Don't confuse it with the compact-sized Chevrolet S-Blazer. The big version featured four-wheel drive, a big V8 and antilock brakes. It rode surprisingly well and handled reasonably well. The best way to outfit the Blazer is with an automatic transmission, trailer-towing option and Silverado Preferred Equipment Group 3, which includes many convenience items.

HONDA ACCORD

A complete redesign this year has made this fine model even better. The new Accord is a bit larger inside. We recommend the high-line EX version, which comes with a potent 2.2-liter VTEC Four that varies its valve timing to improve both power and fuel economy. The 4-speed automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Uphill, a "grade logic" feature prevented hunting between gears. Nimble handling and quick steering added to driver confidence. The suspension controlled the ride nicely, and the seats offered good support. Noise is minimal.

HONDA ACCORD WAGON

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HONDA CIVIC

Perennially one of our favorite small cars, the Civic felt peppy with the basic Four, even peppier with the VTEC Four. The optional 4-speed automatic transmission sometimes shifted annoyingly back and forth uphill. The ride was firm on smooth roads, active on rough roads, and fairly noisy. Handling was a bit twitchy in abrupt maneuvers. Stops were short and straight. Front seating was low but comfortable. Two tall or three average-sized adults could fit in the rear. The displays were clear. The controls were nice except for tiny horn buttons. The climate-control system worked well.

HONDA CIVIC DEL SOL

Despite its detachable roof panel, the del Sol is no sports car. Think of it as a two-seat economy car. The base S version was peppy. The Si was faster. The VTEC was faster still. The Si's front end plowed a bit and the tail tended to slide out somewhat at our track. The ride was busy, and the body flexed and creaked on most roads. Braking was mediocre, and it's too bad antilock brakes weren't available. Low seats and wide rear roof pillars created serious blind spots for the driver. Tall drivers will find plenty of room. The trunk was impressive, even with the roof panel stowed inside.

HONDA PASSPORT

Honda took a shortcut into the sport-utility market by simply rebadging an existing SUV, the Isuzu Rodeo. Both the Passport and Rodeo felt more like station wagons than high, boxy trucks. Expect generous room for passengers, modest room for cargo and a stiff ride. Skip the base Four in favor of the smooth 3.2-liter V6. You might as well choose the optional four-wheel drive as well. We see no point in enduring the discomforts of an SUV without that useful feature.

HONDA PRELUDE

The VTEC engine was potent, but even the Si version felt punchy. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted precisely, but depressing the clutch pedal required a stretch. The steering felt nicely weighted and responsive, and the car handled well. Braking was respectable but not outstanding. The ride was jiggly, though well controlled on rough pavement, and quiet for a sporty car. The front seats were firm and comfortable, and large side bolsters cradled occupants during hard cornering. The rear seat was more decorative than functional. The layout of the controls and displays was haphazard.

HYUNDAI ELANTRA

This Korean-made model represents a small step up from the uninspired Hyundai Excel. It needs several more steps. The 1.6-liter Four was noisy and feels flat. The optional 1.8-liter Four was more powerful. The car handled well enough on smooth roads, but the suspension crashed and banged on bumps that other cars take in stride. The front seats offered good all-around support, and the driver could see out well. The rear held two tall passengers easily and accepted three average-sized adults in a pinch. Some switches were hard to operate, and the heater worked well only on its highest and noisiest setting.

HYUNDAI EXCEL

This model has changed little in the past few years. It's still one of the cheapest cars available, in the worst sense of the word. Its good fuel economy and low price don't make up for its weak acceleration, crude handling and subpar ride. Hyundai's unusual warranty pays for virtually all maintenance for the first two years, but Hyundais have long had a poor reliability record.

HYUNDAI SCOUPE

The Scoupe represents the low-budget act in the sporty-car arena, a basic car with trendy styling but a crude chassis. The high-trim-line Turbo version should at least provide peppy acceleration. Otherwise, the Scoupe was a modest all-round performer. The LS version comes with a reasonable level of standard equipment, and all versions offer adequate roominess in the front seats. The problem is, a sporty car should be fun to drive, and the Scoupe isn't.

HYUNDAI SONATA

Hyundai models have competed well in price, but not much else. The previous Sonata has had a very poor reliability record. The latest one, introduced as a 1995 model, is larger in nearly every dimension. It's one inch longer than the Honda Accord, but still smaller than such competitors as the Toyota Camry. The standard engine, a 2.0-liter Four, was a smidgen more powerful than last year's. A 3.0-liter V6 is optional.

INFINITI G20

This “Japanese BMW” emphasizes performance without giving up much in luxury. The Four was powerful and economical. The optional 4-speed automatic shifted smoothly except during hard acceleration. The car felt nimble, but its tendency to swing out its rear end in abrupt maneuvers was tricky to control. The front seats gave good support, and lots of adjustments accommodated all but the tallest drivers. The rear seat could hold two six-footers or three average-sized adults. The ride was firm but never punishing. Controls and displays were excellent. The climate-control system was powerful. The trunk was roomy.

INFINITI J30

This model is for people who want near-absolute isolation from the road. It's also for people who won't use the tight rear seat often and who don't need much trunk space. Acceleration was responsive, and the 4-speed automatic shifted smoothly. The rear tires broke loose fairly easily on slippery roads. Controlling tail wag was tricky in abrupt maneuvers. Stops were short and straight. The front seats provided exceptional comfort, and power adjustments could accommodate all but the tallest driver. The automatic climate-control system worked very well. The major controls and displays were nicely designed.

INFINITI Q45

The original Q45 scored points for its potent acceleration and superb handling. The later Q45 felt more like the Lexus LS400. Performance was blunted in favor of a refined ride. Though too big to be agile, this rear-wheel-drive model gripped the road well. The active-suspension version soaked up bumps, but the ride was fine even with the conventional suspension. Little noise penetrated the cabin. The front seats offered excellent though firm support. Adjustments accommodated just about any driver. The rear was comfortable for two but not for three. Controls and displays were generally well designed, and the trunk was large.

ISUZU AMIGO

Think of it as a beach buggy with rear seats, a flashy runabout for the singles who inhabit beer commercials. Part pickup truck and part sport-utility vehicle, it lacked the utility of most pickups and the large enclosed cargo area of most SUVs. A removable canvas partial top let two rear passengers (or cargo) face the elements. At least, with its wide stance, the Amigo should handle more stably than many other small SUVs. It comes with two- or four-wheel drive.

ISUZU RODEO

The smaller of Isuzu's two conventional sport-utility vehicles, the Rodeo is more like a station wagon than is the high, boxy Isuzu Trooper. It offered generous passenger room and modest cargo room, unless you fold down the split rear seatback. The 3.2-liter V6 was a big improvement over the fuel-guzzling 3.1-liter V6. The optional part-time four-wheel-drive can't be used on dry pavement. The front seats were well padded and high, but leg room was skimpy. The rear seat could hold three with ease. The controls were confusing and awkward. Heating was strong but uneven.

ISUZU TROOPER

The Trooper is more civilized than its boxy Trooper II predecessor. The 3.2-liter V6 in the LS version couldn't push the heavy vehicle along very quickly. The part-time four-wheel drive (standard equipment) wasn't suitable for use on dry pavement. Handling was sloppy, and stops were long, with severe nose-dive. Comfortable seats partly compensated for a bouncy ride. Tall and short drivers could get comfortable behind the wheel. The rear seat was designed for three but comfortably held only two. The climate-control system was powerful. Most controls were convenient, and the displays were clear.

JAGUAR XJ6

Jaguar keeps perfecting antiquated designs. The rear-wheel-drive XJ6's Six was smooth and powerful. Handling was crisp. The ride was well mannered. Except for the wind, little noise intruded. The chaotic control layout required a strong tolerance for eccentricity. The front seats were nicely shaped but cramped, and the power adjustment was confusing and awkward. Tall drivers needed more leg room. The rear seat comfortably held three. Jaguars have a history of not holding up well. Perhaps that will change now that Ford owns the company.

JEEP CHEROKEE

The basic Cherokee has changed little in the last decade. It remains a harsh-riding vehicle with lots of cargo room and narrow seats that can comfortably accommodate only slender people. The four-cylinder engine was sluggish. You're better off with the strong Six. The 4-speed automatic shifted smoothly. Four-wheel drive is available. The Cherokee handled well in normal driving, though it rode stiffly and noisily. The air-conditioner was powerful, but the heater could be better. So could the controls and displays.

JEEP GRAND CHEROKEE

The upscale Grand Cherokee is vastly different from the plain Cherokee. Though it scored highest of any sport-utility vehicle we've tested, its reliability in its first year has been dismal. It comes with rear- and four-wheel drive. The Six accelerated well, and the V8, even better. The 4-speed automatic shifted smoothly. Handling was carlike, but the Jeep rocked annoyingly on bumps. The driving position suited both tall and short people. Seating was comfortable. Three fit easily in back. The gauges were clear, and most controls were logical. The climate-control system was powerful.

JEEP WRANGLER

This is the closest surviving descendant of the old World War II Jeep, the seed that sprouted the entire sport-utility craze. It's the smallest, least expensive and crudest Jeep. Nevertheless, its popularity with the off-road set endures. A basic four-wheel-drive vehicle with a hard, noisy ride and primitive handling, the Wrangler lives on because of its reputation for rugged durability in the wilds. If you must buy one, opt for the Six and antilock brakes.

LEXUS ES300

This sophisticated model feels much like the bigger Lexus LS400, though sportier. It shares its engine, driveline and chassis with the Toyota Camry V6, which costs thousands less, and which scored virtually the same in our tests. The ES300 accelerated powerfully, rode smoothly and very quietly, and offered excellent controls and displays. The 4-speed automatic shifted imperceptibly. Emergency handling inspired confidence, and stops were short and straight. The front seats offered good support, and a multitude of adjustments allowed everyone to find a comfortable driving position. The rear seat was roomy for three, and the trunk was large.

LEXUS GS300

This newest member of Toyota's luxury Lexus line nestles in size and price between the entry-level Lexus ES300 and the top-of-the-line Lexus LS400 sedan. The GS300 targets the sporty-sedan market, where it competes with the likes of the BMW 5-Series, Mercedes-Benz E-Class and Saab 9000. Accommodations were top-notch, but the trunk was relatively small. This rear-wheel-drive model is powered by a detuned version of the six-cylinder engine used in the Lexus SC300 coupe.

LEXUS LS400

The LS400 aims to be one of the world's best luxury sedans, and it succeeds. It combines a sophisticated, powerful V8 with a lush interior. Not a driver's car, this rear-wheel-drive cruiser stresses isolation from the world outside. Virtually everything is electronically controlled. The 4-speed automatic shifted exceptionally smoothly. The steering felt light, almost numb. Emergency handling was sure-footed but not quick. Expect a quiet, unruffled ride. The cabin offered excellent front seating, with multiple adjustments that fit nearly any driver. Three could fit comfortably in the rear. Controls and displays were exceptionally well designed.

LEXUS SC400/SC300

This luxury-coupe version of the LS400 sedan delivered plenty of power to its rear wheels, and it handled winding roads as nimbly as a fine sports car. Traction control minimized wheel spin. The firm suspension soaked up bumps without fuss. The front seats offered fine accommodation, but leave the rear uninhabited. The luminescent displays were excellent, but some secondary controls were awkwardly placed. The automatic climate-control system was superb. The trunk was small. The SC300's spirited Six wasn't as smooth as the V8, but the car costs thousands less.

LINCOLN CONTINENTAL

The Continental is built on the Ford Taurus/Mercury Sable platform. Next year will see a complete redesign on a new platform. No one could mistake the V6 for a V8. Acceleration was leisurely. Last time we tested a Continental, a few years ago, we found the handling and steering a little sluggish and sloppy. But this year's suspension modifications may improve matters some. The spacious interior held six with ease, and the cabin was very quiet. The trunk was huge.

LINCOLN MARK VIII

This rear-wheel drive luxury coupe's strong point is a ride as smooth as any you'll find. Sophisticated features included a powerful aluminum V8, electronically controlled powertrain and fully independent suspension with air cushions instead of springs. The traction control worked only at low speeds. The Mark VIII maneuvered with surprising agility for such a large car. The front seats, each with power adjustment, offered good, firm support. Rear seating was cramped. The powerful automatic climate-control system was quiet, though a bit slow to start. Most controls were easy to see and reach, but the radio was needlessly complicated.

LINCOLN TOWN CAR

Despite its sophisticated V8 and full complement of safety features, the Town Car maintains the hoary tradition of domestic luxury turnpike cruisers. It comes with a full frame, rear-wheel drive, and a panoply of electronic gadgets and convenience features. Expect a soft, quiet ride and seating for six. To tame the Town Car's tendency to wallow on bad roads, choose the Ride Control package. A dual-exhaust system, made standard for 1994, has added significant power.

MAZDA 323

This basic little two-door hatchback is nearing the end of its life as Mazda's entry-level model in the shrinking small-car market, overtaken by the slightly larger and more powerful four-door Mazda Protegé sedan. The 323 offers a roomy interior for a small car, plus a fold-down rear seat that further expands the trunk space. This model lacks antilock brakes and air bags.

MAZDA 626

The 626 has much to recommend it. It comes with either an adequate Four or a powerful V6. The optional 4-speed automatic, recently improved, worked well with either engine. The mid-line LX offers more value than the top-line ES. The 626 handled well. Despite lots of body lean, its nimble handling and quick steering gave the driver confidence. Expect a comfortable ride on most roads, thanks in part to the nicely shaped front seats. The rear seat could hold three. The controls were nicely laid out except for small, hard-to-find horn buttons. The split rear seatback could be folded.

MAZDA 929

The luxurious 929 retains its traditional rear-wheel drive, but all else is state of the art. The V6 took off aggressively from a standstill. The 4-speed automatic shifted very smoothly. Handling was smooth and steady in normal driving, queasy during hard cornering. The brakes performed admirably. The car rode very quietly and comfortably, even with a full load. The front seats could use more side support. A height adjustment assured a good view even for short drivers. Tall drivers may find the accelerator too close. The rear is comfortable for two, much less so for three. Most controls and displays worked well, as did the climate-control system.

MAZDA MPV

Braking and ride were below par, handling was tail-happy during abrupt maneuvers, and cargo space was limited. Optional four-wheel drive improved handling somewhat. The V6 accelerated decently. The 4-speed automatic sometimes bumped into gear. An optional load-leveling system smoothed the rough ride somewhat. The front seats were comfortable but needed more side support. The middle seats were adequate for two. The rear bench was very tight for three. The instruments were clear, but some controls were annoying. The climate-control system worked well, especially with the optional rear air-conditioner.

MAZDA MX-3

This is a small, agile coupe. The V6 version was quicker than the Four, but no match for, say, the Saturn SC. Steering was quick and accurate, though not strong on feel, and the tires gripped well. But that edge in handling came at the expense of a stiff and noisy ride. The optional antilock brakes were especially needed in this model. The seats offered plenty of support. A low roof, low seat cushions, and high sills hampered access. The instruments were easy to read, but the controls could be better. The climate-control system was quick and powerful, but distribution was spotty.

MAZDA MX-5 MIATA

This rear-wheel drive two-seater harkens back to the British sports cars of the 1950s and 1960s, with their hard and noisy ride, but the Miata is weathertight and reliable. A peppy Four and a crisp 5-speed manual transmission with a short shift pattern enhanced the sporty appeal. Nimble handling, precise steering and powerful brakes added to the fun. Tall people may feel cramped. The exhaust note was music to a car buff's ears, but wind noise was a problem. The trunk was tiny. Most controls were easy to work, the displays were clear and the climate-control system was capable.

MAZDA MX-6

This model and the Ford Probe share many mechanical parts. The higher price line of each make is a step up in performance from the base four-cylinder version. The V6 accelerated with authority. Both models handled very smoothly and predictably. The MX-6 rode a bit more comfortably, and the Probe handled a bit more crisply. The front seats were comfortable, but reserve the rear seat for packages. Unlike the Probe, which is a hatchback, the MX-6 has a conventional trunk.

MAZDA NAVAJO

The Navajo and Ford Explorer are similar, but the Navajo comes only with two doors. The V6 was adequate, and the 4-speed automatic shifted smoothly. The four-wheel drive, without a center differential, was unsuited for dry roads. Handling of our Explorer was ponderous. We recommend the optional limited-slip rear axle and trailer-towing package. Resilient front seats partly made up for a bouncy ride. The rear seat could hold three six-footers. The climate-control system was strong. Most controls were convenient, and the displays were clear.

MAZDA PROTEGÉ

This aging model will be replaced next year. The 1.8-liter Four delivered responsive performance. The Protegé generally handled well. Comfortable seats somewhat made up for a stiff ride. The rear seat was roomy enough for three adults if they sat up straight. The split rear seatback folded to enlarge the trunk. The controls were uncomplicated. The instruments were simple and clear. This model lacks antilock brakes and air bags.

MAZDA RX-7

Cast as a return to the pure, uncompromising sports car, the RX-7 looks and feels the part. Practicality isn't part of the script. The RX-7 is cramped for a pair of average-sized people, pure misery for tall people. A rotary engine with twin turbochargers, driving the rear wheels, delivered ferocious acceleration. The 5-speed manual transmission felt precise. The brakes were exceptional. The RX-7 was nimble and responsive, but its ride was unusually hard and relentlessly noisy. The cockpit was stark, with practically no storage for odds and ends. The trunk was tiny.

MERCEDES-BENZ C-CLASS

The new Mercedes C-Class replaces the aging 190 series and represents the entry level for this luxury nameplate. As in all Mercedes-Benzes, the drive wheels are in the rear. The two engine choices determine the models' names: the C220 comes with a 2.2-liter Four. The C280 comes with a 2.8-liter inline Six. You can expect the usual luxuriously appointed interior and full complement of safety features, along with a bit more room than in the old 190.

MERCEDES-BENZ E-CLASS

E-Class is the new name for the fine Mercedes-Benz 300 series. In price and size, these luxurious four-door sedans represent the middle range of the Mercedes stable. The E320 has a 3.2-liter inline Six. The E420 has a 4.2-liter V8. The front styling resembles that of Mercedes' top-of-the-line S-Class cars. E-Class models delivered precise handling, effortless performance and an excellent ride, and they're loaded with the latest in safety and convenience features.

MERCURY CAPRI

It's no Mazda Miata, just a Miata wannabe. With a convertible top and vestigial rear seats, the Australian-made Capri seems to be designed to lure young people into a Mercury showroom. It's a tinny little sports car with unimpressive riding and driving qualifications. Handling was mediocre for a sports car. The ride was tiring on expressways and brutal on back roads. The driving position was uncomfortable, especially for tall people, and the rear seats were a bad joke. This is the last year for the Capri.

MERCURY COUGAR

This model aims at a slightly higher-scale market than its near twin, the Ford Thunderbird. Its basic design dates back five years, but the latest model brings some modern tweaks, including a revised interior. More important, Mercury has added one of Ford's sophisticated "modular" 4.6-liter V8s. It delivered about as much power as the 5.0-liter V8 it replaced, though it's lighter and more economical. Dual air bags supersede the annoying motorized front safety belts, and lots of power conveniences are standard equipment.

MERCURY GRAND MARQUIS

The big Mercury and similar Ford Crown Victoria are among the last big freeway cruisers with a V8, full frame and rear-wheel drive. A serene ride, huge trunk and substantial trailer-towing capability are major advantages. The car accelerated well, and the 4-speed automatic shifted very smoothly. Steering response was fairly good. The Preferred Equipment Package 172A and the Handling Package materially improved braking and handling. The front seats lacked sufficient padding. The rear offered room for three. The controls were mostly logical.

MERCURY SABLE

The Sable and similar Ford Taurus delivered fine all-round performance. The 4-speed automatic shifted smoothly. These models handled well in normal driving but ran wide in hard turns. The optional heavy-duty suspension improved neither the handling nor the ride. The optional power seat comfortably accommodated drivers of nearly any size. The rear seat was roomy for two six-footers, adequate for three adults. The interior was quiet except for wind noise. Most controls were well designed. The optional automatic climate-control system worked well.

MERCURY SABLE WAGON

The Sable and similar Ford Taurus delivered fine all-round performance. The 4-speed automatic shifted smoothly. These models handled well in normal driving but ran wide in hard turns. The optional heavy-duty suspension improved neither the handling nor the ride. The optional power seat comfortably accommodated drivers of nearly any size. The rear seat was roomy for two six-footers, adequate for three adults. The interior was quiet except for wind noise. Most controls were well designed. The optional automatic climate-control system worked well.

MERCURY TOPAZ

The Topaz and similar Ford Tempo did everything adequately and nothing very well. This pair is due to be replaced later this year by the new Mercury Mystique and Ford Contour. Acceleration was leisurely. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. The steering was slow and the body leaned considerably in tight turns, although handling remained predictable. The driving position was fine for most physiques. The front seats offered good support, but the front passenger's toe space was skimpy. The rear cushion was low and short.

MERCURY TRACER

Only the LTS version offered antilock brakes, and without antilock, the Tracer (and similar Ford Escort) stopped poorly. The standard 1.9-liter Four provided noisy and lethargic acceleration. A sophisticated 1.8-liter Four in the LTS, though slightly smaller, is more powerful. The basic model handled sluggishly, but the LTS's taut suspension made the car feel nimble. Front seating was comfortable, and the driver could see out well. The rear seat provided room enough for six-footers, but was not very comfortable.

MERCURY VILLAGER

The Villager and similar Nissan Quest are our top-rated minivans, though they don't offer the most cargo room. The V6 performed well, and the 4-speed automatic generally shifted smoothly. Get the optional trailer-towing package. The ride was quite smooth and quiet, and handling was carlike. An optional heavy-duty suspension helped handling slightly. The brakes worked well. The optional power seat accommodated tall and short drivers. The center-row captain's chairs were easier to remove than the standard bench. A few controls were hidden, and the gauges needed more contrast. The climate-control system worked well.

MITSUBISHI 3000 GT

In their sportiest form, the 3000 GT and its twin, the Dodge Stealth, are technological tours de force. Price lines range from the base model with front-wheel drive on up to the VR-4, with twin turbos, four-wheel steering, electronically adjustable suspension and all-wheel drive. Our Stealth R/T Turbo, equivalent to the 3000 GT VR-4, gave good cornering grip, exceptionally short stops and blazing acceleration. (The 1994 VR-4 was even faster.) The front seats were comfortable. The rear seat was mostly for show. The automatic climate-control system worked well. The controls could be a bit easier to use.

MITSUBISHI DIAMANTE

Computers control the Diamante's power steering, suspension, brakes, starting traction, cabin temperature, locks and interior lighting. But other models do very nicely without all that gadgetry. Acceleration was strong only at illegal speeds. The 4-speed automatic usually shifted smoothly. Stops were rather long. The Diamante handled smoothly but not nimbly. The tail wagged as the tires lost their grip. The ride was well controlled and quiet. The front seats were comfortable. The rear was tight even for two. The semi-automatic climate-control system worked well, and the gauges were easy to read.

MITSUBISHI ECLIPSE

The Eclipse and similar Eagle Talon are due for replacement later this year. The optional turbocharger added lots of power but hurt fuel economy somewhat. Handling felt responsive and stable. All-wheel drive in the top-line version improved handling. The ride wasn't bad for a sporty car, but seating was too low. The rear seat was just about useless. Luggage space was skimpy. The Eclipse was competent overall, but more up-to-date models such as the Ford Probe, Honda Prelude and Mazda MX-6 have better comfort and convenience features.

MITSUBISHI EXPO

This tall wagon with a rear liftgate is in a niche all its own, a hybrid of a van and a sport-utility vehicle. The Expo, entirely different from the smaller Expo LRV, has a fairly long wheelbase and three rows of seats. Overall, it's about as long as a mid-sized sedan. Four-wheel drive is an option. To us, the Expo LRV makes more sense. It's a peppy little cargo hauler that's comfortable and economical.

MITSUBISHI EXPO LRV

This cross between a small wagon and a very small van also sells as the Eagle Summit Wagon and Plymouth Colt Vista. Tall and boxy, it has a high seating position and a single sliding side door. The engine of choice, a 2.4-liter Four, felt lively. The tires squealed, the body leaned and the car plowed ahead in tight turns. The LRV rode comfortably and quietly, and it offered much more cargo space than do competing small wagons. Tall drivers needed more leg room. The rear seat was tight for three. The climate-control system worked well. The gauges were legible, but the controls could be handier.

MITSUBISHI GALANT

This model tested out well, but not as well as the excellent Toyota Camry and Honda Accord. This year's redesign slightly enlarged the body and added safety features. Acceleration was lively. The optional 4-speed automatic sometimes downshifted when it shouldn't. The Galant handled controllably in tight turns, and the steering provided good road feel. The ride was smooth on good roads, but minor pavement flaws delivered jolts. Some may find the front-seat padding too thin. The rear seat holds three if need be. The gauges and controls were nicely designed. The rear seatback could be folded.

MITSUBISHI MIRAGE

This model is also known as the Dodge Colt, Eagle Summit and Plymouth Colt. By any name, it's a price leader. Most cars on dealers' lots will be short on equipment such as antilock brakes (too bad, since the nonantilock brakes were poor). The ride was uncomfortable. The front seats provided satisfactory support. The rear seat could barely hold two six-footers. Major controls were easy to see and grasp, and the climate-control system worked quickly. The split rear seatback could be folded.

MITSUBISHI MONTERO

This high and boxy vehicle accelerated sluggishly with the 3.0-liter V6. The 3.5-liter V6 is a better bet. The Montero felt tippy in routine driving. Leave the "Active Trac" system in four-wheel drive to reduce the Montero's tendency to abruptly swing out its tail during hard cornering. The brakes performed adequately. Short drivers could see well over the hood. Tall drivers needed more leg room. The rear seat provided ample space for two but not three six-footers. The climate-control system was quick and powerful. The major controls worked well, but the gauges weren't very legible.

NISSAN 240SX

The 240SX is due for a redesign in midyear. Last year's convertible version of this model has continued into the 1994 model year. Despite a firm and abrupt ride typical of a small car, the 240SX's capable rear-wheel-drive chassis provided fine handling. The 2.4-liter Four offered peppy if noisy acceleration. Full, clear instrumentation complemented generally well-designed controls. The firm bucket front seats provided adequate support. As with most small sportsters, the rear seat was best left uninhabited.

NISSAN 300ZX

This rear-wheel-drive two-seater is everything a sports car should be, and it's smooth and easy to drive. The twin-turbo V6 delivered blazing acceleration. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted crisply. Handling was near perfect. Four-wheel steering made cornering especially precise. Stops were short and straight. The electronic suspension offered two settings, and both feel stiff. The seats provided good support. The automatic climate-control system worked well. Controls were hard to see, and the small horn buttons were hard to find in an emergency. The cargo bay was roomy for a sports car.

NISSAN ALTIMA

The Altima is not a sporty car. It leaned noticeably when cornering, and it plowed ahead through hard turns. It accelerated quite quickly, but the engine buzzed and hummed. Stops were short. The ride was jittery and busy. Tall drivers will find the cockpit cramped. Short drivers should have no problem. The front seats were low and lack thigh support. Rear seating was roomy enough for two tall people. Three were a squeeze. The gauges were clear enough. The controls could be better. The GLE's automatic climate-control system worked well, and the trunk was quite roomy.

NISSAN MAXIMA

The Maxima is a competent and well-rounded sedan. It provided precise handling, sporty acceleration and a large measure of comfort. Nissan has moved the Maxima upscale to separate it further from the compact Nissan Altima. A 1995 Maxima, due this spring, retains last year's fine powertrain, but its new body resembles Nissan's premium Infiniti Q45.

NISSAN PATHFINDER

This model competes with the Chevrolet S-Blazer, Ford Explorer and Jeep Grand Cherokee in the crowded SUV market. The Pathfinder rode almost as well as a sedan, and its V6 and optional automatic transmission formed a peppy combination. The optional part-time four-wheel-drive system wasn't suitable for dry pavement. The Pathfinder handled surprisingly well in normal driving, but it became rather sloppy in tight turns. Firm seating provided adequate support front and rear, but you'll find less cargo area here than in many other similar vehicles.

NISSAN QUEST

The Quest and similar Mercury Villager are our top-rated minivans, though they don't offer the most cargo room. The V6 performed well, and the 4-speed automatic transmission generally shifted smoothly. The ride was quite smooth and quiet, and handling was carlike. An optional heavy-duty suspension helped handling slightly. The brakes worked well. The optional power seat accommodated tall and short drivers. The center-row captain's chairs were easier to remove than the standard bench. A few controls were hidden, and the gauges needed more contrast. The climate-control system worked well.

NISSAN SENTRA

The Sentra offered a smooth and quiet ride and a sensible interior layout. But the handling was just adequate. During hard cornering, the body leaned and the tail wanted to slide out. Antilock brakes are available only in the upscale GXE sedan and sporty SE-R coupe. The front seats offered good, firm support, but the rear seat was cramped. The controls and displays were logically placed and easy to use. The trunk was generous for a small model, and the GXE version's split rear seatback could be folded for added luggage space.

OLDSMOBILE ACHIEVA

Though introduced in 1992, this design is based on the Chevrolet Corsica, little changed since 1987. The Achieva, Buick Skylark and Pontiac Grand Am share many components, but each has a different image. The Achieva seems to woo conservative buyers. The troublesome and noisy "Quad" Four performed weakly. We preferred the V6. Cornering was slow and vague. The front seats gave good support, but the driving position was low. The rear seat was a bit more comfortable than the Skylark's and Grand Am's. Displays were clear except for occasional reflections.

OLDSMOBILE BRAVADA

This upscale, four-door version of the Chevrolet S-Blazer is due for redesign for 1996. It's a trucklike vehicle with a choppy ride. The V6 accelerated well and the 4-speed automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Full-time all-wheel drive is standard. Handling was sloppy but controllable. The driving position was low and too close to the wheel. The front seats offered satisfactory support. The rear had ample room even for tall passengers. The rear seat easily folded flat, forming a long cargo floor. Unless you choose the optional external spare-tire carrier, cargo space is limited.

OLDSMOBILE CUTLASS CIERA

This aging and uninteresting model has one major advantage over other large and mid-sized cars: its reliability record. The optional 3.1-liter V6 and 4-speed automatic transmission make a peppier combination than the standard 2.2-liter Four and three-speed automatic. Don't expect sporty handling or high performance.

OLDSMOBILE CUTLASS SUPREME

This unexceptional model is similar in spirit to the Buick Regal and Pontiac Grand Prix. The 3.1-liter V6 was satisfactory. The 3.4-liter V6 was stronger but thirstier. The 4-speed automatic transmission shifted very smoothly. Handling felt sluggish and sloppy but predictable. The ride was smooth on good roads, but the suspension ran out of travel on bumps. Get the six-way power seat. The heater was a bit slow to warm up. The controls needed improvement, and the displays were small. The trunk was roomy.

OLDSMOBILE EIGHTY EIGHT ROYALE

This was a quiet, softly sprung car with sloppy handling. The touring suspension improved handling a bit. The V6 accelerated responsively, and the 4-speed automatic transmission shifted extremely smoothly. Seating was comfortable for five, less so for six. The controls were much improved over those of previous models, and the displays were clear. The automatic climate-control system was powerful. The Eighty-Eight, Buick Le Sabre and Pontiac Bonneville are similar, the Bonneville being the sportiest. The Buick Park Avenue and Oldsmobile Ninety-Eight are longer but no roomier.

OLDSMOBILE NINETY EIGHT REGENCY

This near-twin to the Buick Park Avenue is Oldsmobile's biggest turnpike cruiser. It looks and feels like a traditional old-style luxury sedan, though it has a modern unitized body and front-wheel drive. Cars like this one emphasize a soft ride and a galaxy of power conveniences and luxury appointments. Handling tended to fall toward the sloppy end of the spectrum.

OLDSMOBILE SILHOUETTE

The plastic-clad Silhouette is competent, overall, as are the similar Chevrolet Lumina and Pontiac Trans Sport. The seven-seat package is versatile. Its five modular seats were easy to fold, shift or remove. A power side door is nice. The 3.1-liter V6 and three-speed automatic transmission accelerated adequately. The 3.8-liter V6 and 4-speed automatic did much better. Emergency handling was reasonably controllable. Seating was comfortable in the first two rows. Access to the third row was awkward. The ride was comfortable for a van, and the climate-control system was powerful.

PLYMOUTH ACCLAIM

This is the last year for this unexceptional model and its siblings, the Chrysler Le Baron sedan and Dodge Spirit. The Four vibrated and growled. Get the V6. Handling was predictable but not crisp in abrupt maneuvers. Front seating was fairly comfortable, though short drivers need the power-seat option. Toe space was tight for the front passenger. Two tall people fit easily in the rear, but a center passenger had too little leg room. A motorized right front safety belt is new this year. The heater worked slowly, and the controls and displays could be better.

PLYMOUTH COLT

This model is also known as the Dodge Colt, Eagle Summit and Mitsubishi Mirage. By any name, it's a price leader, destined for oblivion next year. Most cars on dealers' lots will be short on equipment such as antilock brakes (too bad, since the nonantilock brakes were poor). The car rode uncomfortably. The front seats provided satisfactory support. The rear seat could barely hold two six-footers. Major controls were easy to see and grasp, and the climate-control system worked quickly. The split rear seatback could be folded.

PLYMOUTH COLT VISTA WAGON

This cross between a small wagon and a very small van also sells as the Eagle Summit Wagon and Mitsubishi Expo LRV. Tall and boxy, it has high seating and a sliding side door. The engine of choice, a 2.4-liter Four, felt lively. The tires squealed, the body leaned and the car plowed ahead in tight turns. The ride was comfortable and quiet, and there was much more cargo space than in competing small wagons. Tall drivers needed more leg room. The rear seat was roomy for two, tight for three. The climate-control system worked well. The gauges were legible, but the controls could be handier.

PLYMOUTH GRAND VOYAGER

Chrysler Corp.'s minivans continue to hold their own against tough new competition. This model and similar Chrysler Town & Country and Dodge Grand Caravan are extended versions of the plain Caravan and Voyager. Handling was sluggish, but stops were short. Four-wheel drive is available. The van rode pleasantly on smooth roads but shuddered over bumps. Front seats were very comfortable. The rearmost seat was tight for three. The climate-control system was strong. Displays were clear, and controls were improved over those in previous models. The plain, shorter-bodied Dodge Caravan and Plymouth Voyager have been more reliable.

PLYMOUTH VOYAGER

The Voyager/Dodge Caravan twins were our benchmark minivans for years, and they're still competitive. The V6 was strong. The automatic transmission sometimes shifted too often. A 5-speed manual is available with the Four. The van handled sluggishly. An optional, stiffer suspension helped somewhat. The front seats were comfortable, and the climate-control system was powerful. The displays were clear, but minor controls could be better. The longer Chrysler Town & Country, Dodge Grand Caravan and Plymouth Grand Voyager have been less reliable.

PONTIAC BONNEVILLE

The Bonneville offered a tight, almost European feel, much better than that of the somewhat similar Buick Le Sabre and Oldsmobile Eighty-Eight Royale. The firm suspension and touring tires markedly improved handling and ride. Leave the supercharged engine to the hot-rodders. The 4-speed automatic transmission shifted responsively and very smoothly. Front seating was exceptionally comfortable. The rear was fine for two, not bad for three. The automatic climate-control system worked effectively, and the gauges were clear.

PONTIAC FIREBIRD

The Firebird and its cousin, the Chevrolet Camaro, are rear-wheel-drive muscle cars. The Formula and Trans Am versions use a slightly detuned version of the potent V8 that powers the Chevrolet Corvette. A six-speed manual transmission is standard. A 4-speed automatic is optional, as is traction control. The V8's effortless thrust made the V6 seem sluggish. The ride was decent. Handling was precise but not nimble. The V8's wider tires gripped better. Braking was competent. The front bucket seats cradled their occupants firmly. The rear seat was mostly for show.

PONTIAC GRAND AM

Though introduced in 1992, this design is based on the Chevrolet Corsica, little changed since 1987. The Grand Am, Buick Skylark, and Olds Achieva share many components, but each has a different image. The flashy Grand Am aims at young buyers. Handling felt a bit clumsy, and the front end bounced disconcertingly on rough roads. The front seats gave good support despite thin padding. The rear felt cramped. Heating and cooling were a bit slow but competent. Displays were easy on the eyes, but minor controls were clunky or poorly arranged.

PONTIAC GRAND PRIX

This aging model shares major components with the Buick Regal and Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme. Of the three, only the Pontiac has dual air bags. The sedan has conventional front safety belts rather than awkward door-mounted ones. The 3.4-liter V6 was peppier than the 3.1-liter V6, but thirstier. The 4-speed automatic transmission shifted smoothly. The steering was quick. The ride was firm on smooth roads, jolting on poor roads. The front seats looked more comfortable than they were. The rear was roomy enough to hold three fairly painlessly. The gauges were logically arranged and easy to read.

PONTIAC SUNBIRD

Why this humdrum little sedan and its cousin, the Chevrolet Cavalier, remain among GM's top sellers is a mystery. The Four accelerated slowly and noisily. The V6 is a better choice. The automatic transmission occasionally hesitated and then bumped into gear. Stops were reasonably short, but the brakes faded more than we like in repeated stops. Expert good handling, though not a comfortable ride. The front seats were hard and low, and the rear seat was tight. A complete redesign is due in the fall.

PONTIAC TRANS SPORT

The plastic-clad Trans Sport is competent, overall, as are the similar Chevrolet Lumina and Oldsmobile Silhouette. The seven-seat package is versatile. Its five modular seats were easy to fold, shift or remove. A power side door is nice. The 3.1-liter V6 and three-speed automatic transmission accelerated adequately. The 3.8-liter V6 and 4-speed automatic did much better. Emergency handling was reasonably controllable. Seating was comfortable in the first two rows. Access to the third row was awkward. The ride was comfortable for a van, and the climate-control system was powerful.

SAAB 900

This model, redesigned for this year, is more refined and looks much like the old Saab 900. Saabs have always had a unique personality, not to mention quirky touches like an ignition lock located on the floor rather than on the steering column. You can expect good handling, good performance, a large and versatile cargo area, and a full complement of safety features from this sturdy, solid car. Besides the standard-equipment 2.3-liter Four and optional 2.0-liter turbocharged Four, Saab offers a 2.5-liter V6.

SAAB 9000

Saab's biggest sedan is known for its solid performance, good handling, comfortable accommodations, and large and versatile cargo area. Besides the standard 2.3-liter Four, a turbocharged version is available in every body style and trim line. (That option adds several thousand dollars to the price.) All 9000s come with a wealth of safety and convenience equipment as standard.

SATURN

Saturn's reliability is exceptional for a domestic make. Stick with the SL2 version. It was powerful, though quite noisy. The optional automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Handling was nimble. The ride was stiff. The front seats were firm and comfortable. The rear was very uncomfortable. Most controls and displays were sensibly designed. Heating and cooling were ample. The plastic body panels rebound rather than dent after a minor impact, and they're held by fasteners, so replacement should be relatively easy.

SATURN SC

Saturn is one of the few domestic makes that compete successfully with the Japanese in both performance and reliability. This sporty coupe combines quick acceleration, impressive fuel economy and nimble handling. The Saturn was fairly quiet except when the engine is revved. The ride was stiff, even jarring. Tall drivers may want more head room. The gauges were easy to read. The climate-control system was strong but slow. The plastic body panels flex after a minor impact, and they're attached with fasteners, so replacement should be easy.

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SUBARU IMPREZA

The base Impreza isn't all that "imprezive," but the LS version with automatic transmission and antilock brakes holds its own. The steering was nicely weighted and responsive. All-wheel drive is available. The LS model, with bigger tires than those on the base L, handled more nimbly and crisply. The ride was smooth and gentle on the highway, jittery on bad roads. The front seats provided good support, though leg room was just adequate for tall people. The rear was awfully cramped for three. The instruments were clear.

SUBARU LEGACY

This competent model will be replaced this summer. It's the only mid-priced compact to offer all-wheel drive in some versions. Acceleration was adequate. A turbocharger is available. The 4-speed automatic shifted quite smoothly. The Legacy rode well on the highway, but its tail wagged easily in abrupt maneuvers. The front seats gave good support. The climate-control system worked quickly and powerfully. The gauges were clear, but the controls could be better. The split rear seatback could be folded.

SUBARU SVX

The SVX lacks the razor-sharp performance of a true sports car, but it offers the comfort and quietness of a luxury sedan and, optionally, the traction of all-wheel drive. Acceleration was ample, and the 4-speed automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Normal handling felt very stable, but emergency handling lacked precision. The front seats were comfortable. Two adults could tolerate the rear seat for short periods. The divided side windows made it hard to reach through, to pay a toll, say. The gauges were easy to read. Aside from tiny horn buttons, the controls were well designed.

SUZUKI SAMURAI

Rated Not Acceptable because of its tendency to roll over during a hard turn. We found this tiny 4-wheel-drive vehicle wretched in most other respects as well.

SUZUKI SIDEKICK

This tiny, Jeep-like runabout (a sibling to the Geo Tracker) comes in a wide range of styles: two or four doors, two or four seats, two- or four-wheel drive, fully enclosed or as a “convertible” with a soft top covering just the area behind the front seats. The four-door is more than a foot longer than the two-door and offers more standard equipment as well as more seating or cargo room in the rear. The Sidekick is better suited to running errands around town than cruising the turnpikes.

SUZUKI SWIFT

The Swift is much like the Geo Metro, but less basic and slightly peppier. It's a small, cheap runabout, better suited to zipping around town than cruising the turnpikes. The Swift, with its 1.3-liter Four, accelerated better than the Metro, with its 1.0-liter three-cylinder, while still delivering good fuel economy. The GT's perky 100-hp Four, combined with a generous amount of standard equipment, adds up to a spicy little runabout for about \$10,000.

TOYOTA 4RUNNER

Toyota's pickup truck provides the foundation for this sport-utility vehicle. That's why the 4Runner drives more like a truck than a car. Its V6 provided weak acceleration, and the cargo area was small. The front seats were reasonably comfortable, but the floor was high off the ground and the rear seat was tight for tall people. The interior was fairly quiet, but you can expect to be tossed around somewhat on poor roads. About the best one can say for the 4Runner is that it's been exceptionally reliable for a sport-utility vehicle, and it holds its resale value well. Four-wheel drive is available.

TOYOTA CAMRY

One of the best family sedans under \$25,000, the Camry drives like a luxury car. The V6 version scored about as well as the similar Lexus ES300, which sells for thousands more. The V6 was quiet and strong, but the Four was no slouch. Stops were short. Safe handling and a smooth and quiet ride were bonuses. Room in front was ample. Short drivers may wish they could sit higher. The optional sun roof reduced rear head room. The gauges were clear, and the controls were straightforward. The climate-control system worked effectively.

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TOYOTA CELICA

The Celica's new body gives it a passing resemblance to a Lexus coupe, but the car retains last year's underpinnings. The Celica is a well-built little sports coupe, with comfortable front seats and a nice control layout. The only engine is a four, but it's well up to the task of moving this fairly light car around.

TOYOTA COROLLA

This high-rated model and the Geo Prizm share many mechanical and body parts, but the Corolla rides a bit better. It also tends to come with more standard equipment and cost more. Choose the 1.8-liter Four over the 1.6-liter Four. The Corolla handled predictably, but not very nimbly for a small car. The front seats were fine. The cramped rear seat held only two in anything resembling comfort. The gauges were clear, and most controls were easy to use. The climate-control system worked well. The split rear seatback could be folded down.

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TOYOTA LAND CRUISER

This very expensive sport-utility vehicle comes with all the fancy extras of a high-end sedan. As in most SUVs, high seats gave a commanding view of the landscape. This vehicle offered a bouncy and jittery but quiet ride. Its Six delivered strong performance. Rugged construction, high ground clearance and sophisticated full-time all-wheel drive make the Land Cruiser well suited for on- and off-road use.

TOYOTA MR2

This rear-wheel-drive two-seater holds the fort as the only available small, mid-engined sports car. The engine balanced weight fore and aft for nimble, ultra-responsive handling. The MR2 served up lively acceleration, especially in its Turbo version. Stowage space was severely limited, even for a sports car. The MR2's escalating price and high insurance cost have hurt its sales in the supersaturated sports-car market.

TOYOTA PASEO

Unexciting acceleration, a soft suspension and numb steering betray this model's plebeian Toyota Tercel lineage. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted accurately, but the shifter and clutch pedal feel too light. Bumps and wind gusts pushed the car off course. The nonantilock brakes needed lots of room on wet pavement. The driving position was cramped for tall people. Consider the rear seat a shelf for packages. The controls and displays were fine, but the climate-control system was woefully inadequate.

TOYOTA PREVIA

This van is good for hauling people, not cargo. The load area was small, and the standard Four strained with a full load. The new supercharged Four should help. Uphill, the 4-speed automatic shifted annoyingly back and forth. Cornering was reasonably steady. Optional four-wheel drive helped on slippery roads. Drivers of all sizes could get comfortable. The rearmost seat was flat and hard. For the middle row, get optional swiveling captain's chairs. The controls worked well once we figured them out, and the displays were legible. The climate-control system worked effectively.

TOYOTA SUPRA

Although previous Supra models emphasized the luxury end of the sporty-car spectrum, this year's lighter and leaner model lunges into the high-performance arena of the true sports car, with a jarring and noisy ride. It competes with Japanese-bred road-eaters like the Dodge Stealth/Mitsubishi 3000GT, Mazda RX-7 and Nissan 300ZX. The Supra Turbo sports a smooth-shifting six-speed manual transmission and a very hot twin-turbocharged engine, and it comes fully loaded with accessories.

TOYOTA TERCEL

First and foremost, this is an economy car. Tall drivers should try before they buy. The engine accelerated adequately but lacked pep. The Tercel handled nimbly, but the tail tended to swing out during hard cornering. Although the seats were firm and nicely shaped, space was in short supply. The ride was coarse even on good roads, and the car transmitted a lot of tire and road noise to the cabin. As is typical in Toyota models, the Tercel's instruments were easy to see and read.

VOLKSWAGEN CORRADO SLC

The Corrado's V6 delivered smooth and strong performance. Expect near-perfect routine handling and smooth, responsive handling through hard turns. Many controls were poorly labeled. Their functions may remain a mystery unless you consult the owner's manual. Front-seat comfort was very good. Though the Corrado has a rear seat, consider the car a two-seater for all practical purposes. If you're tall, pass up the sunroof. It robbed head room.

VOLKSWAGEN GOLF III

A responsive Four provides the power for the new Golf. Though the current model resembles the previous one on the outside, it has a slightly wider stance, larger (14-inch) tires, and a redesigned interior. The control layout is much improved over that of previous VWs. With a slick-shifting 5-speed manual transmission, the new Golf should be fun to drive. Consider only the versions that have dual air bags.

VOLKSWAGEN JETTA III

The current Jetta offers a trifle more interior space than last year's model, while retaining a roomy trunk. A 2.0-liter Four is the standard engine in all but the sporty GLX version, which gets a powerful V6. Consider only the versions that have dual air bags.

VOLKSWAGEN PASSAT

Despite some high spots, this model is riddled with annoyances. The V6 was smooth and strong, but the 4-speed automatic transmission often shifted when it shouldn't. Handling was crisp, but the ride was stiff. The front and rear seats were comfortable, and the driving position accommodated people of almost any size. The gauges were clear, and the heating and ventilation worked very well. Some controls were poorly labeled or hard to see. The station wagon's cargo area was especially roomy. The Passat will be redesigned later this year.

VOLVO 850

Volvo is trying to shed its stodgy image with this sporty yet practical model. The 4-speed automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly. A Winter mode allows starts in second or third. The ride was choppy. The steering wasn't particularly quick, but handling was predictable. On dry pavement, the 850 stopped as short as any car we've tested. Wet-pavement stops were also short. The driving position accommodated people of nearly any size, and five can fit in exceptional comfort. The automatic climate-control system was powerful, and most displays and controls were easy to see and use.

VOLVO 940

The 940 has a Four. It provides many safety features, exceptional comfort for five and a huge trunk. The wagon was especially roomy. The 4-speed automatic transmission lets you start in any gear, and a locking differential limits wheel spin. Handling was predictable, though not nimble, and stops were short and straight. The ride was smooth. The climate-control system worked superbly. Gauges were clear, and most controls were sensible. "Pretensioners" on the front safety belts instantly take up slack in a crash.

VOLVO 940 WAGON

The 940 has a Four. It provides many safety features, exceptional comfort for five and a huge trunk. The wagon was especially roomy. The 4-speed automatic transmission lets you start in any gear, and a locking differential limits wheel spin. Handling was predictable, though not nimble, and stops were short and straight. The ride was smooth. The climate-control system worked superbly. Gauges were clear, and most controls were sensible. "Pretensioners" on the front safety belts instantly take up slack in a crash.

VOLVO 960

The 960 has a peppy Six. It provides many safety features, exceptional comfort for five and a huge trunk. The wagon was especially roomy. The 4-speed automatic transmission lets you start in any gear, and a locking differential limits wheel spin. Handling was predictable, though not nimble, and stops were short and straight. The ride was smooth. The climate-control system worked superbly. Gauges were clear, and most controls were sensible. "Pretensioners" on the front safety belts instantly take up slack in a crash.

ACURA INTEGRA

This model, designed by Honda, is the sportiest of these small sedans. The 1.8-liter Four provided peppy acceleration, and the four-speed automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly. Handling and braking were superb, as were the front seats. The cushions were low, but drivers had no trouble seeing out. The climate-control system was also excellent except for somewhat spotty heat. Controls and displays were, for the most part, logical and easy to use, and the trunk was surprisingly large for a small car. The model's only major weakness was its mediocre rear seat. The Integra is due to be redesigned for 1994.

ACURA INTEGRA COUPE

This model, designed by Honda, is the sportiest of these small sedans. The 1.8-liter Four provided peppy acceleration, and the four-speed automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly. Handling and braking were superb, as were the front seats. The cushions were low, but drivers had no trouble seeing out. The climate-control system was also excellent except for somewhat spotty heat. Controls and displays were, for the most part, logical and easy to use, and the trunk was surprisingly large for a small car. The model's only major weakness was its mediocre rear seat. The Integra is due to be redesigned for 1994.

ACURA LEGEND

This model should satisfy those who want plenty of power, thanks to its 3.2-liter V6. The Legend accelerated impressively, especially for its weight. Its ride felt smooth and refined. Its driving position was exceptionally good. The Legend handled predictably, but the car's bulk detracted from its nimbleness. Stopping distances were relatively long. Most riders found the front seats comfortable. The rear seat was comfortable for two, less so for three. The gauges were large and clear. If not for the tiny, hard-to-find horn buttons, the controls would be practically perfect. The climate system was powerful.

BMW 3-SERIES

The focus is more on sporty performance than luxury in this rear-wheel-drive sedan. The 325i, the top overall scorer among compact models, does everything a sports sedan should do: the 2.5-liter Six was powerful, and the four-speed automatic shifted smoothly. The 325i braked superbly, and carved through winding country roads with the best of sports cars. The front seats provided good support. The rear seat was tight for tall passengers. The ride was firm but well controlled. Many of the controls were small and hard to grasp, but the displays were clear and legible and the climate system was powerful. The 325i's fragile bumpers suffered heavy damage in our low-speed bumper-basher tests.

BMW 5-SERIES

Some of its Japanese challengers surpass this German rear-wheel-drive model in a number of ways, but not in sheer driving pleasure. The 525i has a 2.5-liter Six. The 535i has a Six displacing 3.5 liters. The 535i's combination of handling, braking and acceleration makes it one of the sportiest cars in its class. It can travel bumpy, curvy roads at imprudently high speeds, but at the cost of a stiff ride. During hard acceleration, the engine's throaty assertiveness may be music to some ears, noise to others. The bumpers suffered extensive damage in our low-speed basher tests. V8-powered models are scheduled to replace the 535i shortly.

BUICK LE SABRE

Oldsmobile 88 Royale is essentially similar. In standard form, these are softly sprung cars with sloppy and unresponsive handling and lots of body lean in turns. The optional touring suspension improved handling markedly, though it made the ride a little stiffer and noisier. The seating was comfortable for five. The shape of the standard split-bench front seat and lack of shoulder room discouraged three adults from sitting abreast. The controls were overstyled and hard to use, but the three-point front safety belts were particularly convenient. The brakes worked well on dry pavement, not so well on wet pavement. The Buick Park Avenue and Oldsmobile 98 are similar to the Le Sabre and 88. They have the same wheelbase, but a longer body.

CHEVROLET LUMINA APV

Oldsmobile Silhouette and Pontiac Trans Sport are essentially similar. These plastic-clad siblings perform competently overall. The optional seating layout for seven passengers is especially versatile. You can fold or shift the modular seats. And since they weigh only 35 pounds each, they're easy to remove entirely. The optional 3.8-liter V6 and four-speed automatic transmission provided especially good performance. Nimble handling, a ride that's surprisingly comfortable for a van, a powerful climate system and excellent bumper protection were further advantages. Seating was comfortable. The seemingly random design of the controls was frustrating. Gauges were easy to read at night but reflections caused problems in daylight.

CHRYSLER CONCORDE

Dodge Intrepid and Eagle Vision are essentially similar. Chrysler Corp. finally has some truly competitive models to sell. These triplets, code-named "LH," are highly rated in this group. The 3.3-liter V6 accelerated responsively. The optional 3.5-liter V6 packed even more punch, but it's noisier. These big cars handle surprisingly nimbly. The stiffest suspension provided the sportiest handling and firmest ride. The mid-level "touring" suspension is best for most drivers. The erratic automatic climate control needs improvement. Seating was comfortable for five.

DODGE CARAVAN

Plymouth Voyager is essentially similar. For years these were our benchmark minivans. An automatic transmission that was introduced in 1989 proved unreliable, but the problems have eased, according to our recent survey data. The ride was generally good, the front seats were comfortable and the interior was roomy. Steering was sluggish. Like most vans, these models leaned heavily in turns. Optional stiffer suspensions improved handling somewhat. An optional built-in child safety seat is handy for parents but makes a lumpy backrest when folded. Traction improved markedly with optional all-wheel drive. The extended-body Grand Caravan, Grand Voyager and Chrysler Town & Country have been less reliable.

DODGE INTREPID

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DODGE STEALTH

A sibling of the Mitsubishi 3000GT. The Stealth comes in four levels of price and performance, from a base version with a nonturbocharged 3.0-liter V6 and front-wheel drive on up to the R/T Turbo, with twin turbochargers, four-wheel steering and all-wheel drive. The R/T Turbo offered excellent steering response and traction, nimble cornering, extraordinarily short stops, and blazing acceleration. The front seats were comfortable for everyone except very tall or portly people. The rear seat was mostly for show.

EAGLE VISION

Chrysler Concorde and Dodge Intrepid are essentially similar. Chrysler Corp. finally has some truly competitive models to sell. These triplets, code-named "LH," are highly rated in this group. The 3.3-liter V6 accelerated responsively. The optional 3.5-liter V6 packed even more punch, but it's noisier. These big cars handle surprisingly nimbly. The stiffest suspension provided the sportiest handling and firmest ride. The mid-level "touring" suspension is best for most drivers. The erratic automatic climate control needs improvement. Seating was comfortable for five.

FORD AEROSTAR

This van is a good choice for heavy-duty work, whether that means carrying six or seven passengers or towing a trailer. Credit its powerful 4.0-liter V6 (optional in some versions) and roomy cargo compartment, especially in the stretched version. Sometimes the four-speed automatic transmission shifted abruptly. The all-wheel-drive version handled more sure-footedly than the ponderous rear-wheel-drive version. The brakes took a long time to stop, especially on wet pavement. The ride was good. The seating was very comfortable. Both the front and rear climate systems worked well. The controls were generally well laid out, and the displays were very clear.

FORD ESCORT

Mercury Tracer is essentially similar. A good all-round performer. The standard 1.9-liter Four gave decent acceleration. The sophisticated 1.8-liter Four in the pricier versions was peppier. The optional four-speed automatic transmission shifted fairly smoothly. The basic versions handled competently, though steering response was a little sloppy. The Escort LX-E's taut suspension made the car feel nimble, but the tail wagged unsettlingly in abrupt avoidance maneuvers. Front seating was comfortable and gave the driver a good view over the hood. Rear seating was roomy enough for six-footers, though not very comfortable.

FORD ESCORT WAGON

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FORD EXPLORER

Mazda Navajo is essentially similar. The Explorer is the best-selling sport-utility vehicle in the U.S. Big and roomy, the four-door Explorer easily seats five. (The Mazda Navajo comes only in two-door form.) Resilient front seats partly compensated for a stiff, bouncy ride. Short drivers could see well over the hood, yet tall drivers had plenty of leg room. The rear seats can fold down to form a flat cargo floor nearly seven feet long. Handling was ponderous but predictable. The car leaned and plowed ahead in tight turns. The primitive four-wheel-drive system, engaged with a button on the dash, is unsuited for use on dry pavement because it lacks a center differential.

FORD PROBE

Mazda MX-6 is essentially similar. Redesigned for 1993. Though their bodies are quite different, the Probe and Mazda MX-6 share many mechanical parts. The higher price line of each make is a step up in performance from the base four-cylinder version. The V6 engine accelerated with authority. Choose the five-speed manual transmission. Both models handled very smoothly. The Probe felt a bit crisper. The MX-6 rode a bit more comfortably. The front seats are comfortable, the MX-6's even more than the Probe's. Reserve the rear seat for packages. There's lots of luggage room under the Probe's hatch.

FORD TAURUS

Mercury Sable is essentially similar. These siblings remain in the top ranks of domestic sedans. They deliver fine all-round performance and comfortable and quiet accommodations. The four-speed automatic transmission shifted smoothly. These models handled sluggishly in hard turns at the track. The optional heavy-duty suspension didn't seem to help. The optional six-way power seat comfortably accommodated drivers of nearly any size. The rear seat was roomy enough for two six-footers, snug for three adults. The controls were well designed except for those on the radio.

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GEO PRIZM

Redesigned for 1993. The Prizm is sold by Chevrolet dealers. A good sedan for a small family. The base 1.6-liter Four delivered adequate power when it's coupled to the five-speed manual transmission. If you prefer an automatic transmission, choose the four-speed, not the three, and get the 1.8-liter Four.

HONDA ACCORD

This is one of the best all-round compact sedans on the market. A 2.2-liter Four provided acceleration as strong as that of some V6 models. The four-speed automatic shifted a bit abruptly and whined. Handling was smooth and nimble. The ride was a bit nervous. The brakes stopped the Accord short and straight, but the antilock feature pulses obtrusively. Though the front seats were low, they're comfortable, and three adults can fit in the rear without being pinched. The climate system and displays were excellent. The Accord is scheduled to be redesigned for 1994.

HONDA ACCORD WAGON

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HONDA CIVIC

This high-scoring model is one of our perennial favorites among small cars. You can expect peppy acceleration, though handling was a little less nimble than in earlier models. Front seating was low but comfortable, and the driver can see out well. Two tall or three average-sized men can fit in the rear, but head room was snug. The basic engine is a 1.5-liter Four. The higher-line EX and sporty Si versions come with a more powerful, 1.6-liter VTEC Four. An automatic transmission is optional in most versions. The climate system was powerful and the controls and displays were nicely designed.

HONDA PRELUDE

Honda redesigned the Prelude for 1992 and added a high-performance VTEC engine as an option for 1993. Even the less powerful engine in the Si version, a 2.3-liter Four, felt punchy. The five-speed manual transmission shifted slickly and precisely, but depressing the clutch pedal required a stretch. The steering felt nicely weighted and responsive. The car handled well, except on wet pavement, where the standard tires don't get a good grip. The interior was quiet for a sporty car, and the front seats were comfortable. The controls were haphazardly arranged, and displays were poorly designed. The rear seat was more decorative than functional, and storage and luggage space was limited.

INFINITI G20

Despite an emphasis on performance and handling, this very reliable model lacks little in luxury amenities. The powerful 2.0-liter Four accelerated responsively. The four-speed automatic transmission shifted smoothly in normal driving, more aggressively during hard acceleration. The G20's relatively light weight made the car feel especially nimble, but handling can be tricky at the limit. The front seats gave good, firm support, and the driver's seat accommodated all but very tall people. The rear seat was roomy enough for two tall or three average-sized adults. The ride was stiff but never really uncomfortable. The controls and displays were excellent. The climate system was powerful.

INFINITI Q45

This luxurious four-door sedan could embarrass many sports cars on a drag strip or a winding road. Nevertheless, you couldn't ask for much more in luxury. The 4.5-liter V8 delivered awesome acceleration. The four-speed automatic transmission shifted exceptionally smoothly. The car stopped short and straight. Handling was superb except on slippery roads, where rear-wheel drive, performance tires and an abundance of power made the car skittish. The car rode firmly but very comfortably. At a steady 60 mph, the only sound was the wind. The front seats were nicely shaped. The rear seat was comfortable for two, less so for three. The displays were easy to read.

ISUZU TROOPER

Introduced in 1992 as a replacement for the Trooper II, the new Trooper is more civilized than its boxy predecessor. A high-output 3.2-liter V6 is standard in the LS version. It ran well, but it can't push the heavy Trooper along very quickly. The soft seats and quiet cabin make the Trooper reminiscent of a passenger car. Handling was sloppy, and the car leaned a lot in turns. Even short drivers could see out well. Comfortable seats partly compensated for a ride that's bouncy even on smooth roads. The rear seat accommodated only two people. The primitive part-time four-wheel drive, engaged with a secondary shifter, isn't suitable for use on dry pavement.

JEEP GRAND CHEROKEE

This relatively new Jeep model scored highest overall among sport-utility vehicles. It comes in a variety of two- and four-wheel-drive permutations. We recommend the automatic transmission and the Quadra-Trac option, a sophisticated full-time all-wheel-drive system. The 4.0-liter Six gives good acceleration. A 5.2-liter V8 is also available. Handling was precise and stable, but the light power steering gave drivers little feel of the road. On bumpy roads, the Jeep rocked from side to side, but the interior was as quiet as in most sedans. Seating was comfortable front and rear, and three adults fit easily in the split-bench rear seat. Jeeps have been quite unreliable in the past.

LEXUS ES300

We can sum up this model in four words: sophisticated, lavish, very reliable. Overall, the ES300 is much like the bigger and costlier Lexus LS400, but nimbler and sportier. It did just about everything very well. It accelerated powerfully, rode smoothly and exceptionally quietly, and offered excellent controls and displays. The 3.0-liter V6 performed flawlessly. The four-speed automatic transmission shifted imperceptibly, and the brakes stopped the car short and straight. The front seats accommodated people of all sizes. The rear seat was roomy enough for three. The front bumper suffered two dents from our basher.

LEXUS LS400

Toyota developed this rear-wheel-drive model to compete with the world's top luxury sedans. For us, the LS400 is a quality benchmark, combining advanced engineering and excellent reliability with almost every comfort, convenience and safety feature conceived of for automobiles. A 4.0-liter V8 provided superb acceleration, and the four-speed automatic transmission shifted extremely smoothly. Other high spots included safe handling and braking, a nearly perfect ride, exceptionally comfortable seats, and the best controls and displays we've seen in a car. (The optional traction-control system is a must in snow.)

LINCOLN CONTINENTAL

Ford's flagship model has all the comforts and conveniences the domestic auto industry can muster. But the Continental is very different from the performance-oriented sedans in this class. The 3.8-liter V6 moved the car adequately, but no one would mistake it for a V8. Handling was safe but sloppy, and the brakes were unexceptional. The soft suspension provided a smooth, floating ride on good roads. Bumps made the car heave. The interior holds six with room to spare. The rear seat was especially roomy. The controls look complex, but most operate logically. Drivers can't see all the gauges at once. Pushing a button called up electronic readings of engine temperature, oil pressure and the like, one at a time.

MAZDA 323

The 323 is a basic two-door, and comes with a 1.6-liter Four.) The car generally handles very well, though it plows ahead a bit too much in tight turns. Comfortable seats somewhat mitigate a stiff ride. The rear seat is roomy enough for three, and the rear seatback can fold to increase trunk space. The controls are uncomplicated, the instruments simple and clear.

MAZDA 626

This has been one of our recommended models for years, and it has consistently scored well in all our important tests. Redesigned for 1993. The DX and LX versions come with a 2.0-liter Four. The ES comes with a 2.5-liter V6. Available transmissions include a five-speed manual and a four-speed automatic.

MAZDA 929

The 929, restyled last year, retains its traditional rear-wheel drive, but all else is state of the art. The 3.0-liter V6 took off aggressively. The four-speed automatic transmission shifted very smoothly. Handling was smooth and steady in normal driving, but loose and queasy during hard cornering. The brakes performed admirably. The ride was very comfortable, even with a full load, and very quiet. The front seats could use more side support during cornering. The rear seat felt like an easy chair with two passengers, but was uncomfortable for three. Most controls worked easily. The instruments were easy enough to read, but too glitzy. The trunk was small.

MAZDA MX-3

This small, agile coupe was introduced in 1992. Even with the optional V6 that comes in the GS version, it lacked the acceleration of such competitors as the Nissan NX 2000 and Saturn SC. The gearing made the engine rev faster than necessary, particularly in fifth gear. Steering was accurate and precise and the tires gripped well, but the ride was very stiff. The seats offered plenty of support. A low roof, low seat cushions, high sills and motorized shoulder belts hampered access. Pass up the optional center-console extension. It gets in the way when you shift. The optional antilock brakes were especially needed: the standard brakes take their time stopping on wet pavement.

MAZDA MX-5 MIATA

This two-seat convertible captures the ambiance of the British sports cars of yesteryear (the Austin-Healeys, Triumphs and MGs), including the harsh, noisy ride. But at least the Miata is weathertight and reliable. The 1.6-liter Four provided punchy performance and impressive fuel economy: about 30 mpg, overall. A crisp-shifting five-speed manual transmission, nimble handling, precise steering and powerful brakes make this rear-wheel-drive sportster fun to drive. But tall occupants felt cramped, and trunk space was minimal. Most controls were easy to operate, and the displays were clear.

MAZDA MX-6

Ford Probe GT is essentially similar. Redesigned for 1993. Though their bodies are quite different, they share many mechanical parts. The higher price line of each make is a step up in performance from the base four-cylinder version. The V6 engine accelerated with authority. Choose the five-speed manual transmission. Both models handled very smoothly. The Probe felt a bit crisper. The MX-6 rode a bit more comfortably. The front seats were comfortable, the MX-6's even more than the Probe's. Reserve the rear seat for packages. The MX-6 is a coupe with a conventional trunk.

MAZDA NAVAJO

Ford Explorer is essentially similar. The Explorer is the best-selling sport-utility vehicle in the U.S. Big and roomy, the four-door Explorer easily seats five. (The Mazda Navajo comes only in two-door form.) Resilient front seats partly compensate for a stiff, bouncy ride. Short drivers can see well over the hood, yet tall drivers have plenty of leg room. The rear seats can fold down to form a flat cargo floor nearly seven feet long. Handling is ponderous but predictable. The car leans and plows ahead in tight turns. The primitive four-wheel-drive system, engaged with a button on the dash, is unsuited for use on dry pavement because it lacks a center differential.

MAZDA PROTEGÉ

The Protégé is an upscale four-door sedan. It shares its chassis and drivetrain with the Ford Escort and Mercury Tracer. The 1.8-liter Four, standard in the Protégé, delivers good acceleration, and the optional overdrive automatic transmission shifts smoothly except during hard acceleration. The car generally handles very well, though it plows ahead a bit too much in tight turns. Comfortable seats somewhat mitigate a stiff ride. The rear seat is roomy enough for three, and the rear seatback can fold to increase trunk space. The controls are uncomplicated, the instruments simple and clear.

MAZDA RX-7

This is one of the highest-scoring sports cars. The styling of the 1993 redesign is reminiscent of such classic sports cars as Cobra, Jaguar and Ferrari. A 1.3-liter rotary engine with twin turbochargers powered the rear wheels, delivering ferocious acceleration. Handling was nimble and precise. The cockpit was too small for a large person and rather cramped even for an average-sized person. The stiff suspension produced an exceptionally hard, uncomfortable ride, although the bucket seats were comfortable for those who fit them. Access was awkward even for a sports car. The cabin was stark, with practically no storage space for odds and ends. Luggage space was minimal, too.

MERCEDES-BENZ 190

All the Mercedes models we've ever tested have provided a fine combination of powerful acceleration, sporty handling, supple ride and a wide array of luxury features. The rear-wheel-drive 190E, the baby of the Mercedes line, is no exception. A 2.3-liter Four and a 2.6-liter Six are available, along with a five-speed manual transmission or a four-speed automatic. For both driver and front passenger, tensioning retractors, actuated in a front-end crash, instantly take up slack in the safety belts to improve their protection. The 190E is due to be replaced by a new "C-class" sedan for 1994.

MERCEDES-BENZ 300

This expensive model combines sophisticated engineering with solid comfort, even though it hasn't enjoyed a major redesign since 1986. Engines include gasoline-burning Sixes ranging from 2.8 to 3.2 liters, as well as a five-cylinder, 2.5-liter turbodiesel. The 400E comes with a very powerful 4.2-liter V8, the better to compete with the likes of the big Lexus and Infiniti sedans. Mercedes models are noted for excellent ride control and handling. Most have rear-wheel drive, but the 300 sedan and wagon are available with a sophisticated all-wheel-drive system. A "pretensioner" system on the front safety belts instantly takes up slack in a crash.

MERCURY SABLE

Ford Taurus is essentially similar. These siblings remain in the top ranks of domestic sedans. They deliver fine all-round performance and comfortable and quiet accommodations. The four-speed automatic transmission shifted smoothly. These models handled sluggishly in hard turns at the track. The optional heavy-duty suspension didn't seem to help. The optional six-way power seat comfortably accommodated drivers of nearly any size. The rear seat was roomy enough for two six-footers, snug for three adults. The controls were well designed except for those on the radio.

MERCURY SABLE WAGON

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MERCURY TRACER

A good all-round performer. The standard 1.9-liter Four gave decent acceleration. The sophisticated 1.8-liter Four in the pricier versions was peppier. The optional four-speed automatic transmission shifted fairly smoothly. The basic versions handled competently, though steering response was a little sloppy. Front seating was comfortable and gave the driver a good view over the hood. Rear seating was roomy enough for six-footers, though not very comfortable.

MERCURY VILLAGER

Nissan Quest is essentially similar. These siblings, new for 1993, are the most carlike of minivans and scored highest in their group. The Quest is apt to come with more extras than the Villager. In either one, the 3.0-liter V6 delivered plenty of power, the four-speed automatic generally shifted smoothly and the interior was admirably quiet for a van. The ride was quite smooth, and handling was nimble and precise. The Villager/Quest twins have significantly less cargo room than, say, the Dodge Caravan/Plymouth Voyager siblings. The optional center-row captain's chairs were easier to remove than the standard bench seat.

MITSUBISHI 3000 GT

A sibling of the Dodge Stealth, the Stealth comes in four levels of price and performance, from a base version with a nonturbocharged 3.0-liter V6 and front-wheel drive on up to the R/T Turbo, with twin turbochargers, four-wheel steering, and all-wheel drive. The R/T Turbo offered excellent steering response and traction, nimble cornering, extraordinarily short stops, and blazing acceleration. The front seats were comfortable for everyone except very tall or portly people. The rear seat was mostly for show.

MITSUBISHI GALANT

This model combines crisp handling with comfortable seating front and rear. A 2.0-liter Four provided responsive acceleration, and the four-speed automatic transmission shifted smoothly except under light acceleration from low speeds. The ride was never serene, but never truly uncomfortable. The driving position will fit most people, though six-footers will find the leg room tight. The major operating controls were logical and well laid out, and the instruments were large and legible. The climate system can deal with any weather. The Galant is scheduled for a complete redesign in the summer of 1993.

NISSAN 240SX

This rear-wheel-drive model provided quick acceleration, thanks to its 2.4-liter Four, but fuel economy was mediocre. The five-speed manual transmission shifted very precisely. The ride felt firm and busy. The 240SX responded quickly to its steering, but the handling can become somewhat tricky at the limit. The 240SX is scheduled to be redesigned for 1994.

NISSAN 300ZX

This rear-wheel-drive two-seater is everything a sports car should be, which is why it's one of the highest-scoring models in this group. It's remarkably easy to drive, providing a fine balance of performance and comfort. The standard 3.0-liter V6 was powerful enough. The twin-turbocharged version was fierce. A crisp-shifting five-speed manual transmission, smooth and steady handling, and powerful brakes make this a driver's car. But the ride won't let you forget you're in a sports car, even on the softer of the adjustable suspension's two settings. The interior was quiet for a sports car, and the seats provided good, firm support. Access was awkward, however, and the driver can't see well to the sides and rear. The controls were hard to see, but the displays were clear.

NISSAN MAXIMA

The flagship of the Nissan line offers performance, comfort, practicality and excellent reliability, all in one package. The GXE is more luxurious, while the SE is sportier. The Maxima's 3.0-liter V6 was smooth and powerful. The car responded accurately and fairly quickly to its steering. Short, straight stops added up to excellent braking. The seating was comfortable. The driver's seat, with its many adjustments, accommodated all but the tallest drivers, and three adults had plenty of room in the rear seat. The ride was firm but supple, taking even the worst bumps in stride. The operating controls were logically designed, and the climate system could cope with any temperature.

NISSAN NX

The Nissan Sentra sedan provides many of the parts for this model. The NX 2000 is one of the best of the moderately priced sporty cars. Its 2.0-liter Four accelerated with authority, and the five-speed manual transmission shifts smoothly. The NX 1600 is similar, but its 1.6-liter Four lacked the larger engine's punch. The NX 2000 handled precisely and nimbly, and took tight corners smoothly and predictably. With either model, expect a stiff ride. Front seating was comfortable, but long-legged drivers may wish for more leg room. The rear seat should be reserved for children or cargo, not adults.

NISSAN PATHFINDER

If you want a sport-utility vehicle that drives and feels like a sedan, the Pathfinder comes closest. The price you pay for that relatively smooth ride and handling is a cargo compartment that's relatively small and awkward to expand. The 3.0-liter V6 provided quick acceleration, but the four-speed automatic occasionally lurched into gear. Braking was sure and straight. The front seats provided good, firm support. Tall drivers will wish for more leg room. The rear seat was inhospitable, and getting in and out was difficult. The heater warmed slowly, but the excellent ventilation system and powerful air-conditioner made amends in warm weather. Many of the controls were annoyingly small, and the rear-mounted spare and rear-seat head restraints blocked the driver's view aft.

NISSAN QUEST

Mercury Villager is essentially similar. These siblings, new for 1993, are the most carlike of minivans and scored highest in their group. The Quest is apt to come with more extras than the Villager. In either one, the 3.0-liter V6 delivered plenty of power, the four-speed automatic generally shifted smoothly and the interior was admirably quiet for a van. The ride was quite smooth, and handling was nimble and precise. The Villager/Quest twins have significantly less cargo room than, say, the Dodge Caravan/Plymouth Voyager siblings. The optional center-row captain's chairs were easier to remove than the standard bench seat.

NISSAN SENTRA

Its smooth, quiet ride would have made the Sentra a very desirable small car if not for the tight, uncomfortable rear seat. Acceleration was adequate with the standard 1.6-liter Four (and brisk with the SE-R version's 2.0-liter Four). The four-speed automatic shifted quite smoothly. Handling was sloppy during hard cornering, and stopping distances were rather long for a car equipped with antilock brakes. The front seats provided good all-round support, but tall drivers will want more leg room. The interior was as quiet as that of many large cars. The controls and displays were easy to use.

OLDSMOBILE EIGHTY EIGHT ROYALE

Buick Le Sabre is essentially similar. In standard form, these are softly sprung cars with sloppy and unresponsive handling and lots of body lean in turns. The optional touring suspension improved handling markedly, though it made the ride a little stiffer and noisier. The seating was comfortable for five. The shape of the standard split-bench front seat and lack of shoulder room discouraged three adults from sitting abreast. The controls were overstyled and hard to use, but the three-point front safety belts were particularly convenient. The brakes worked well on dry pavement, not so well on wet pavement. The Buick Park Avenue and Oldsmobile 98 are similar to the Le Sabre and 88. They have the same wheelbase, but a longer body.

OLDSMOBILE SILHOUETTE

Pontiac Trans Sport and Chevrolet Lumina APV are essentially similar. These plastic-clad siblings perform competently overall. The optional seating layout for seven passengers is especially versatile. You can fold or shift the modular seats. And since they weigh only 35 pounds each, they're easy to remove entirely. The optional 3.8-liter V6 and four-speed automatic transmission provided especially good performance. Nimble handling, a ride that's surprisingly comfortable for a van, a powerful climate system and excellent bumper protection were further advantages. Seating was comfortable. The seemingly random design of the controls was frustrating. Gauges were easy to read at night but reflections caused problems in daylight.

PLYMOUTH VOYAGER

Dodge Caravan is essentially similar. For years these were our benchmark minivans. An automatic transmission that was introduced in 1989 proved unreliable, but the problems have eased, according to our recent survey data. The ride was generally good, the front seats were comfortable and the interior was roomy. Steering was sluggish. Like most vans, these models leaned heavily in turns. Optional stiffer suspensions improved handling somewhat. An optional built-in child safety seat is handy for parents but makes a lumpy backrest when folded. Traction improved markedly with optional all-wheel drive. The extended-body Grand Caravan, Grand Voyager and Chrysler Town & Country have been less reliable.

PONTIAC BONNEVILLE

Pontiac is traditionally the sportiest GM line, and the Bonneville follows suit. With the optional firm suspension and touring tires, it's top-rated among big cars. The Bonneville responded nicely to its steering, and a torquey 3.8-liter V6 delivered enthusiastic acceleration. The optional antilock brakes worked well on dry pavement, but worse than average on wet pavement. Seating was comfortable for two front and rear, but a third rear passenger must perch uncomfortably on a raised portion of the rear cushion. Controls were uncomplicated and easy to use, better than those in the big Buicks and Oldsmobiles.

PONTIAC TRANS SPORT

Oldsmobile Silhouette and Chevrolet Lumina APV are essentially similar. These plastic-clad siblings perform competently overall. The optional seating layout for seven passengers is especially versatile. You can fold or shift the modular seats. And since they weigh only 35 pounds each, they're easy to remove entirely. The optional 3.8-liter V6 and four-speed automatic transmission provided especially good performance. Nimble handling, a ride that's surprisingly comfortable for a van, a powerful climate system and excellent bumper protection were further advantages. Seating was comfortable. The seemingly random design of the controls was frustrating. Gauges were easy to read at night but reflections caused problems in daylight.

SATURN

This is the highest-scoring small model we've tested recently. Its big claim to fame is its reliability for a fairly new domestic design. A Saturn novelty: plastic body panels that rebound rather than dent after a minor impact. Choose the SL2 over the cheaper SL and SL1. Its 1.9-liter Four delivered plenty of power, and noise. The optional automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Handling was nimble and precise, but the ride was stiff. The front seats were firm and comfortable. The rear seat holds two tall or three average-sized adults, though not very comfortably. In addition to a driver's-side air bag, the Saturn has motorized shoulder belts, which entangle anyone getting in with packages.

SATURN SC

Saturn has established itself as one of the few domestic car lines that competes successfully with its Japanese counterparts in both performance and reliability. The SC2 is a sporty coupe, combining quick acceleration from its 1.9-liter Four with quick, nimble, precise handling. At steady speeds, the Saturn was notably quiet inside. The taut suspension made for a stiff, sometimes jarring ride. Driving position and front-seat comfort were good, though tall drivers may want more head room. Access was a bit awkward, and the motorized safety belts don't help.

SATURN WAGON

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SUBARU LEGACY

This model offers a smooth ride, pleasant front seating, and controls that are both state of the art and comfortably familiar. The Legacy's 2.2-liter Four lacked the agricultural throb and growl of many other Subaru engines, and the four-speed automatic transmission worked smoothly. Handling was steady during normal driving. An all-wheel-drive version is a good choice in the snow belt. The climate system worked well.

SUBARU SVX

Subaru's first attempt at a luxury sports model is a nice sporty car, though it lacks the razor edge of performance of some of its competitors. A 3.3-liter Six and smooth-shifting four-speed automatic transmission delivered ample acceleration, and all-wheel drive provided excellent traction. Normal handling felt very stable and predictable, but emergency handling wasn't precise. The front seats were comfortable. The rear seat was bearable for two adults. The divided side windows made it hard to reach through the window, and the Auto Up feature on the driver's side could squeeze a child's neck.

SUZUKI SAMURAI

Rated Not Acceptable because of its tendency to roll over during a hard turn. We found this tiny 4-wheel-drive vehicle wretched in most other respects as well.

TOYOTA CAMRY

Those looking for an excellent and very reliable family sedan need look no further. A 1992 redesign made this fine model bigger and better. The V6 version is the top-rated model in this group. The V6 Camry performed much like Toyota's luxury Lexus ES300 model, with which it shares many major components. It may lack the Lexus panache, but it provides far better value. The 3.0-liter V6 was smooth, quiet and strong. (The 2.2-liter Four was no slouch.) Nimble handling, a quiet ride and comfortable seats were additional advantages. Front leg and head room was ample, but rear head room was cramped with the optional moonroof. Gauges were clear and simple, and controls were straightforward.

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TOYOTA CELICA

All the usual Toyota values, and sporty-car drawbacks, are combined in this model. Its 2.2-liter Four provided snappy acceleration, and the five-speed manual transmission shifted crisply. Handling was excellent, with quick and precise steering response and lots of road feel, and the brakes stopped short and straight. The ride was firm but comfortable for a sporty car. The driving position was very comfortable, but with serious blind spots at the rear corners. The deeply contoured front seats offered good, firm support, but the cabin felt cramped. Think of the rear seat as a package shelf. The climate system, controls, and displays all earned our top marks. The Celica is due to be redesigned for 1994.

TOYOTA COROLLA

Redesigned for 1993. A good sedan for a small family. The base 1.6-liter Four delivered adequate power when it's coupled to the five-speed manual transmission. If you prefer an automatic transmission, choose the four-speed, not the three, and get the 1.8-liter Four.

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TOYOTA PREVIA

If you use a van mostly to carry people, this very reliable model is a good choice. It has nice balance, responsive steering and a quiet ride, but the 2.4-liter Four strained when the van was loaded. The All-Trac four-wheel-drive option is worthwhile for its extra traction in poor driving conditions. The front seats were comfortable, and both tall and short drivers could find a good driving position. But wide roof pillars, third-row head restraints and a curving body style hampered the driver's view. The rearmost seat was a flat, hard bench. In the middle, we recommend the optional swiveling captain's chairs, as good as the ones up front. The controls worked well, once you figure them out, and the displays were easy to read.

VOLVO 240

This is a time machine. Climb in, and suddenly it's 1968, the year this tall, boxy rear-wheel-drive model made its debut. Minor changes over the years have kept the model competitive, if not very exciting. The station wagon has a special advantage over most other compact models: cavernous cargo room. The 240 series will be discontinued after this year.

VOLVO 240 WAGON

This is a time machine. Climb in, and suddenly it's 1968, the year this tall, boxy rear-wheel-drive model made its debut. Minor changes over the years have kept the model competitive, if not very exciting. The station wagon has a special advantage over most other compact models: cavernous cargo room. The 240 series will be discontinued after this year.

VOLVO 940

The boxy body provides exceptional comfort for five, and the cavernous trunk is ideal for vacations. The 960 series has a 2.9-liter Six, which provides enthusiastic performance. The 940 series comes with a 2.3-liter Four, with or without a turbocharger. Stops are short and straight. Volvo sedans have never handled nimbly, and this model is no exception. The ride was taut and smooth. The front seats were firm and nicely shaped. Tall drivers may find the accelerator too close. The rear seat was about as hospitable as they get. The climate-control system was superb, as were the gauges and controls. A "pretensioner" system on the front safety belts instantly takes up slack in a crash.

VOLVO 940 WAGON

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ACURA INTEGRA

The sportiest sedan designed by Honda. Superb handling and braking. The 1.8-liter Four provided brisk acceleration. Overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly. Heating was somewhat spotty, but the climate-control system was otherwise excellent. Logical controls and displays for the most part, and a surprisingly large trunk for such a small car. The front seats and driving position were virtually ideal for most people, but the rear seat was uncomfortable. Due for redesign in 1993.

ACURA INTEGRA COUPE

The sportiest sedan designed by Honda. Superb handling and braking. The 1.8-liter Four provided brisk acceleration. Overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly. Heating was somewhat spotty, but the climate-control system was otherwise excellent. Logical controls and displays for the most part, and a surprisingly large trunk for such a small car. The front seats and driving position were virtually ideal for most people, but the rear seat was uncomfortable. Due for redesign in 1993.

ACURA LEGEND

Redesigned last year, the Legend continues to set standards in its class. The car now has a more powerful 3.2-liter V6 and antilock brakes. The L and LS versions have air bags for driver and passenger. Well-designed controls, comfortable front seats and a fairly spacious rear seat make this a worthwhile luxury sedan.

BMW 3-SERIES

Everything a sports sedan ought to be, except for weak bumpers. Its 2.5-liter inline Six accelerated powerfully, and the overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly. A manual setting lets you hold any gear, useful when starting out on slippery roads. Rear-wheel drive. Delightfully crisp handling. This sedan carved through winding country roads with the best of sports cars, and braked superbly. Stiff but well-controlled ride. Comfortable front seats, but the steering wheel wasn't centered directly in front of the driver, an annoyance, and it doesn't tilt. Rear seat wasn't comfortable for three. Excellent climate-control system. Controls need some minor improvements. Excellent displays.

BMW 5-SERIES

A sport package. Responsive acceleration from the 3.5-liter Inline Six and superb handling made this rear-wheel-drive sedan a pleasure to drive. Exceptionally smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Antilock brakes provided one of the shortest stopping distances we've recorded. Road-hugging ability on winding back roads came at the expense of a rather stiff ride. Skittery on slick roads. Tall drivers may need more head room. Scant rear-seat knee room. Especially well-designed safety belts. Versatile climate system and complex controls. Frail bumpers are costly to repair.

BUICK LE SABRE

Overall personality depends on equipment. With the standard suspension, it's a typical big car, in the worst sense of the term. Quiet, floating ride on most roads. Bumpy on rough roads. The optional touring suspension made for more responsive handling, much like that of the Pontiac Bonneville, cousin to the 88 Royale and Le Sabre. Very comfortable seating for five adults.

DODGE CARAVAN

Fine family transport, our favorite small van until serious reliability problems in the overdrive automatic transmission knocked it off our Recommended list for a year. Though still troublesome, the transmission seems to be improving. Smooth, peppy 3.0-liter V6 in our van. Remarkable front-occupant protection for a small van in government crash tests, thanks in part to driver's-side air bag. Built-in child-restraint system is an option. The extended-body Chrysler Town & Country, Dodge Grand Caravan and Plymouth Grand Voyager have more reliability problems than do the conventional-body versions. All-wheel drive is available.

DODGE COLT

Though not tested recently, this car, built by Mitsubishi, has performed well in the past and has proved reliable.

DODGE STEALTH

Mitsubishi's answer to the Chevrolet Corvette. Exotic-car performance (especially with the 3.0-liter twin-turbo V6 and all-wheel drive in highest-trim-line version). Precise five-speed manual transmission, but clutch pedal is too far forward. Front seats were comfortable for all but very tall or very portly people. Consider the car a two-seater. The rear seat can handle only small children or luggage. Superlative sports-car handling, and the shortest stopping distances we've recorded. The electronically adjustable suspension was an affectation, as was the adjustment for exhaust sound. Awkward controls, clear displays. The shallow trunk can be expanded by folding the rear seatback.

EAGLE SUMMIT

Though not tested recently, this car, built by Mitsubishi, has performed well in the past and has proved reliable. New for 1992 is the wagon version of the Summit. The sedan and hatchback versions are due to be redesigned for 1993.

EAGLE TALON

A refined design, comfortable and remarkably quiet. Handled nicely, and even its base 1.8-liter Four gave good acceleration. But it lacked the special nimbleness and pickup that thrill-seekers might want. Larger engines, available in more expensive versions, would provide more snap at the cost of fuel economy. Stops were sure and steady, if a bit long. Firm, supportive front seats. Reserve the rear seat for short, nimble and uncomplaining folks. Very good heater, excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Excellent controls and displays.

FORD CROWN VICTORIA

A 1992 redesign (introduced in the spring of 1991) that retains a traditional full frame and rear-wheel drive. New, 4.6-liter V8 is smaller than its predecessor but more powerful and more fuel-efficient. Quick steering response in normal driving. Safe but sloppy handling in abrupt maneuvers. Rode well when fully loaded. Roomy accommodations and very good climate system. Huge trunk. Suitably equipped, this sedan can tow a 5000-pound trailer. A Touring Sedan version with a more powerful V8 and special handling suspension is available. Big Fords tend to be troubleprone in their first year of ownership. After that, reliability generally improves to average or better.

FORD ESCORT

A pleasant design, based in part on powertrain and chassis parts from the Mazda Protegé. Performed competently in most of our tests, though emergency handling was sloppy and a bit tricky and the brakes were a bit disappointing. The 1.9-liter Four ran smoothly, but acceleration wasn't especially peppy. (The 1.8-liter, 16-valve Four was more powerful.) Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Comfortable front seats, relatively comfortable rear seat. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays. Roomy trunk for such a small sedan. Note that the Mercury Tracer, assembled in Mexico, performed slightly better in our tests than the essentially similar Ford Escort.

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FORD EXPLORER

A better-handling and generally more competent replacement for the Ford Bronco II. Unusually large cargo area, especially in four-door Explorer model, and very comfortable seating. (The Navajo, built by Ford, comes only in two-door form.) With suitable equipment, this vehicle can tow a 5700-pound trailer. The 4.0-liter V6 provided better acceleration and fuel economy with manual transmission than with automatic, but both transmissions shifted smoothly. Easily shifted to 4-wheel drive with convenient push button. Clumsy but safe handling. The rear-wheel antilock brakes had no effect in our dry-pavement tests, but braking is no problem. Bumpy ride on all but the smoothest roads. A full load made matters even worse.

Quiet inside. Uneven heating, generous ventilation and cooling. Well-designed controls.

FORD FESTIVA

This tiny model, designed by Mazda of Japan and manufactured by KIA in Korea, has a somewhat better seating package than do most other small commuter cars. Its tiny, 1.3-liter Four delivered very impressive fuel economy, 37 mpg overall in our last tests, and surprisingly peppy performance. Excellent handling and braking.

FORD TAURUS

The Taurus and Mercury Sable are our favorite domestic sedans. The 3.8-liter V6 in our latest test car performed superlatively, as did the standard 3.0-liter V6. Electronic overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted very smoothly. Safe but not sporty handling. Powerful but touchy brakes. Comfortable, quiet ride. Excellent driving position and front seat comfort. Available with bench front seat that holds three. Remarkably comfortable rear seat, even for six-footers. Excellent climate-control system and displays. We disliked the horn buttons on the steering-wheel spokes. Roomy trunk. We recommend the middle-of-the-line GL version for best value.

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GEO PRIZM

An impressive all-around performer, with a smooth, peppy 1.6-liter Four. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Handling was steady and safe, but not quick or crisp. Relatively good ride, even on most secondary roads. Excellent brakes. Very good driving position and front seating, but uncomfortable rear seat. Very good heating, excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Faultless displays, but controls presented a host of minor irritations. The GSi version offers a more powerful engine and other sporty equipment. The Prizm's twin, the Toyota Corolla, provided mediocre driver protection in government crash tests. Due for redesign in 1993.

HONDA ACCORD

This is one of the best-selling models in the U.S. Acceleration with the 2.2-liter Four was as strong as that of many compacts' V6s. Electronically controlled automatic transmission shifted a bit abruptly and whined. Smooth, nimble handling. Short, straight stops, but the antilock brakes pulsed obtrusively. The stiff, nervous ride was somewhat better with a full load. Rather noisy inside. Low but comfortable front seats, with excellent driver visibility. Three adults can fit in the rear without feeling pinched. Excellent climate-control system and displays.

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HONDA CIVIC

Completely redesigned for 1992, the Civic now has a driver's-side air bag as standard equipment, a big plus. It has always been a peppy, tight-handling car, and it most likely remains so. Antilock brakes are available only in the top-of-the-line model, which carries a high sticker price.

HONDA PRELUDE

Completely redesigned for 1992. Very well equipped even in base version, but considerably more expensive than last year's model. Now has a driver's-side air bag, an important safety plus. A passenger air bag is available as an option in certain models. Only higher trim lines have antilock brakes and four-wheel steering.

INFINITI G20

A sporty sedan, with focus on handling. Powerful 2.0-liter Four was both responsive and economical. Overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly in normal driving, more aggressively during hard acceleration. Relatively light weight made for nimble steering response, but the handling could be a bit tricky at the limit, when the rear end tried to swing out. Excellent brakes. Stiff but not punishing ride. Supportive front seats. The driver's seat allowed lots of adjustment. Comfortable rear seat. Excellent climate system, controls and displays. Large trunk. Hard-to-service engine compartment.

INFINITI Q45

Awesome acceleration from the 4.5-liter V8 and exceptional handling in both normal and emergency driving make the Infiniti the sportiest of the luxury sedans. But the rear-wheel drive, performance tires and impressive power made the car skittish on slippery roads, despite the limited-slip differential. Exceptionally smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Despite the car's sporty feel, one couldn't ask for more amenities. Tall drivers should check head and leg room. The rear seat could be better for three. Very good climate system. Controls emphasized form over function.

LEXUS ES300

A fine balance of luxury and sportiness in a smaller package than the Lexus LS400. The ES300 did just about everything well, scoring higher than the Lexus ES250, which it replaced. Sophisticated and lavish, much like the bigger Lexus LS400, but nimbler and sportier. The 3.0-liter V6 provided powerful acceleration. Exceptionally smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Firm and composed ride, even with a full load. Supportive, fully adjustable front seats. Roomy rear seat, even for three. Excellent controls and displays.

LEXUS LS400

Combines advanced engineering with almost every conceivable comfort, safety and convenience feature, making this the highest-scoring car we've tested to date. The 4.0-liter V8 provided effortless acceleration. Exceptionally smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Rear-wheel drive. First-rate handling (except on snow, where the car felt twitchy). The brakes inspired confidence, and the Lexus's ride was the best we've experienced. Comfortable accommodations front and rear. Excellent climate system and first-rate controls.

LINCOLN CONTINENTAL

All the comforts and conveniences the domestic auto industry could muster, plus two air bags. Standard air suspension gives a superb, quiet ride (at least on good roads), but sluggish and sloppy handling. The 3.8-liter V6 ran without a hitch and provided adequate acceleration. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. The spacious cabin accommodated six with room to spare. Limousine-like leg room in the rear. Huge trunk. Complex but logical controls.

MAZDA 323

Good value in its class. Two-door version of the Protégé. The 1.8-liter Four ran flawlessly and gave peppy acceleration. Overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly except during brisk acceleration. Crisp, responsive handling in normal driving, but controlling tail wag sometimes took skillful steering when the car was cornering near its limits. Braking was excellent, as were controls and displays. A mediocre heater let down the otherwise competent climate-control system. For added performance, consider the LX version, with a more powerful engine and other sports-oriented equipment.

MAZDA 626

One of our recommended models for years. Scored well in all our important tests. The 2.2-liter Four ran well but rasped during hard acceleration. Electronically controlled overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly except during acceleration from low speeds. Competent though not sporty handling. Excellent brakes. Firm but satisfactory ride on all but the worst roads. Comfortable front seats. Roomy but unsupportive rear seat. Marginal heater, excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. We disliked the horn buttons on the steering-wheel spokes. Excellent displays. Large, expandable trunk. 1993 redesign due this spring.

MAZDA 929

The competent but bland 929 has been replaced by a totally new design for 1992. Air bags for the driver and passenger are standard, as are antilock brakes. The sleek Jaguar-like exterior covers a higher performance 3.0-liter V6. Rear-wheel drive. The interior is a mixture of modern control layouts and older-style details. A solar-cell sunroof can charge the battery in winter or ventilate the interior in summer.

MAZDA MPV

A good people carrier, but rear-wheel drive and nonremovable rear seat limit cargo room. Second seat can be removed, but not easily. Commanding driving position and comfortable front and second seats. Reasonably responsive acceleration from the 3.0-liter V6. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Pleasant normal handling, sloppy in emergency maneuvers. Adequate heating and ventilation. Marginal air-conditioning. Logical controls. Provided mediocre driver protection in government crash tests. All-wheel drive is available.

MAZDA MX-5 MIATA

A two-seat convertible that feels much like the Lotus, Austin-Healeys and MGs of yesteryear, including the noisy, harsh ride. But the cockpit is weathertight. In other words, little pieces aren't likely to fall off as you drive. The 1.6-liter Four gave a sprightly performance. Crisp-shifting five-speed manual transmission. Nimble handling, precise steering and excellent brakes. Rear-wheel drive. Tall riders felt cramped even with the top down, claustrophobic with the top up. Excellent climate-control system. Very good controls, excellent displays.

MAZDA MX-6

A happy combination of driving fun and practical family transport. The GT version's 2.2-liter turbocharged Four started and ran flawlessly and provided exceptional acceleration. (The nonturbo engine in the cheaper trim line should satisfy all but hot-rodders.) The five-speed manual transmission usually shifted crisply. Excellent handling and braking. Very comfortable driving position and front seating. Skimpy knee room and toe space in rear seat. Fairly quiet. Unpleasant ride on back roads. Competent climate-control system. Awkward controls, excellent displays. 1993 redesign due this spring.

MAZDA NAVAJO

A better-handling and generally more competent replacement for the Ford Bronco II. Unusually large cargo area, especially in four-door Explorer model, and very comfortable seating. (The Navajo, built by Ford, comes only in two-door form.) With suitable equipment, this vehicle can tow a 5700-pound trailer. The 4.0-liter V6 provided better acceleration and fuel economy with manual transmission than with automatic, but both transmissions shifted smoothly. Easily shifted to 4-wheel drive with convenient push button. Clumsy but safe handling. The rear-wheel antilock brakes had no effect in our dry-pavement tests, but braking is no problem. Bumpy ride on all but the

smoothest roads. A full load made matters even worse. Quiet inside. Uneven heating, generous ventilation and cooling. Well-designed controls.

MAZDA PROTEGÉ

Good value in its class. Four-door version of the 323. The 1.8-liter Four ran flawlessly and gave peppy acceleration. Overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly except during brisk acceleration. Crisp, responsive handling in normal driving, but controlling tail wag sometimes took skillful steering when the car was cornering near its limits. Braking was excellent, as were controls and displays. A mediocre heater let down the otherwise competent climate-control system. For added performance, consider the LX version, with a more powerful engine and other sports-oriented equipment.

MERCEDES-BENZ 300

The solid, expensive 300 series hasn't been redesigned in any major way since it was introduced in 1986. A driver's-side air bag is standard. The optional passenger air bag takes the place of the glove compartment. Antilock brakes are standard. A 2.6-liter Six, a 3.0-liter Six and a 2.5-liter turbo. Five diesel are available in the 300 series. The 400E comes with a 4.2-liter V8, the better to compete against the likes of the Lexus and Infiniti. Most models have rear-wheel drive, but both the sedan and wagon are available with a sophisticated all-wheel-drive system.

MERCURY GRAND MARQUIS

A 1992 redesign (introduced in the spring of 1991) that retains a traditional full frame and rear-wheel drive. New, 4.6-liter V8 is smaller than its predecessor but more powerful and more fuel-efficient. Quick steering response in normal driving. Safe but sloppy handling in abrupt maneuvers. Rode well when fully loaded. Roomy accommodations and very good climate system. Huge trunk. Suitably equipped, this sedan can tow a 5000-pound trailer. A Touring Sedan version with a more powerful V8 and special handling suspension is available. Big Fords tend to be troubleprone in their first year of ownership. After that, reliability generally improves to average or better.

MERCURY SABLE

The Sable and Ford Taurus are our favorite domestic sedans. The 3.8-liter V6 in our latest test car performed superlatively, as did the standard 3.0-liter V6. Electronic overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted very smoothly. Safe but not sporty handling. Powerful but touchy brakes. Comfortable, quiet ride. Excellent driving position and front seat comfort. Available with bench front seat that holds three. Remarkably comfortable rear seat, even for six-footers. Excellent climate-control system and displays. We disliked the horn buttons on the steering-wheel spokes. Roomy trunk. We recommend the middle-of-the-line GL version for best value.

MERCURY SABLE WAGON

The Sable and Ford Taurus are our favorite domestic sedans. The 3.8-liter V6 in our latest test car performed superlatively, as did the standard 3.0-liter V6. Electronic overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted very smoothly. Safe but not sporty handling. Powerful but touchy brakes. Comfortable, quiet ride. Excellent driving position and front seat comfort. Available with bench front seat that holds three. Remarkably comfortable rear seat, even for six-footers. Excellent climate-control system and displays. We disliked the horn buttons on the steering-wheel spokes. Roomy trunk. We recommend the middle-of-the-line GL version for best value.

MERCURY TRACER

A pleasant design, based in part on powertrain and chassis parts from the Mazda Protegé. Performed competently in most of our tests, though emergency handling was sloppy and a bit tricky and the brakes were a bit disappointing. The 1.9-liter Four ran smoothly, but acceleration wasn't especially peppy. (The 1.8-liter, 16-valve Four is more powerful.) Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Comfortable front seats, relatively comfortable rear seat. Excellent climate-control system, controls, and displays. Roomy trunk for such a small sedan. Note that the Tracer performed slightly better in our tests than the essentially similar Ford Escort.

MITSUBISHI 3000 GT

Mitsubishi's answer to the Chevrolet Corvette. Exotic-car performance (especially with the 3.0-liter twin-turbo V6 and all-wheel drive in highest-trim-line version). Precise five-speed manual transmission, but clutch pedal is too far forward. Front seats were comfortable for all but very tall or very portly people. Consider the car a two-seater. The rear seat can handle only small children or luggage. Superlative sports-car handling, and the shortest stopping distances we've recorded. The electronically adjustable suspension was an affectation, as was the adjustment for exhaust sound. Awkward controls, clear displays. The shallow trunk can be expanded by folding the rear seatback.

MITSUBISHI DIAMANTE

A gadget-lover's delight (and most of the gadgets work quite well). Computers control the variable-assist power steering, suspension, starting traction on slippery surfaces, interior temperature, door locks and interior lighting. The 3.0-liter V6's performance didn't measure up to that of the sportiest models in this class. Its strong acceleration was most apparent at speeds well above the legal limit. The overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly. The car is relatively heavy, and the poundage takes its toll on nimbleness and acceleration.

MITSUBISHI ECLIPSE

A refined design, comfortable and remarkably quiet. Handled nicely, and even its base 1.8-liter Four gave good acceleration. But it lacked the special nimbleness and pickup that thrill-seekers might want. Larger engines, available in more expensive versions, would provide more snap at the cost of fuel economy. Stops were sure and steady, if a bit long. Firm, supportive front seats. Reserve the rear seat for short, nimble, and uncomplaining folks. Very good heater, excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Excellent controls and displays.

MITSUBISHI GALANT

A desirable model that combines crisp, sporty handling with comfortable seating front and rear. The 2.0-liter Four accelerated responsively. Electronically controlled automatic transmission shifted smoothly except during light acceleration at low speeds. Electronic steering in the GS version lets you adjust steering effort. Excellent brakes. Firm, nervous ride. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays. The Galant provided mediocre driver protection in government crash tests. Due for replacement for 1993.

MITSUBISHI MIRAGE

Though not tested recently, this car has performed well in the past and has proved reliable.

NISSAN 240SX

A rear-wheel-drive model. Relatively large, 2.4-liter Four provides quick acceleration but mediocre fuel economy. Very precise shifter. Firm and busy ride. Quick and responsive handling, but somewhat tricky at the limit.

NISSAN MAXIMA

The Maxima offers performance, practicality and reliability, all in one package. We tested the sports-oriented SE. The 3.0-liter V6 ran flawlessly and delivered spirited acceleration. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Very good emergency handling. Short, straight stops with no brake fade. Taut, well-controlled ride. Very quiet inside. Excellent driving position and front-seat comfort. Rear seat was wide enough for three adults. Excellent climate-control system and controls, very good displays. Scored higher than average in owner satisfaction.

NISSAN PATHFINDER

Feels the most like a passenger car. Offered a competent ride and handling. But the cargo compartment was small and awkward to expand. Quick acceleration from the 3.0-liter V6. The overdrive automatic transmission occasionally lurched into gear. Sure and straight braking. Inhospitable rear seat, with awkward access. Slow-warming heater, but excellent ventilation and powerful air-conditioning. Tiny, annoying controls. Rear head restraints and optional door-mounted spare tire interfere with view to the rear.

NISSAN SENTRA

The sports-sedan appearance and high level of performance could make you forget that this is an economy car. The 1.6-liter Four started and ran well and accelerated strongly. Very good normal handling. Not as good in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Comfortable front seats, despite the low driving position. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Spotty heating, excellent ventilation. Convenient controls and clear displays. We tested the base E version with a 4-speed manual transmission.

NISSAN STANZA

Quite a nice car, but emphasizes performance over comfort. The 2.4-liter Four provided impressive acceleration at the cost of fuel economy. Smooth-shifting electronic overdrive automatic transmission. Crisp, responsive handling and sure, steady braking. Comfortable seating both front and rear. Harsh, relatively noisy ride. Excellent controls and displays. Deep, roomy trunk. Due for redesign in 1993.

OLDSMOBILE EIGHTY EIGHT ROYALE

Overall personality depends on equipment. With the standard suspension, it's a typical big car, in the worst sense of the term. Quiet, floating ride on most roads. Bumpy on rough roads. The optional touring suspension made for more responsive handling, much like that of the Pontiac Bonneville, cousin to the 88 Royale and Le Sabre. Very comfortable seating for five adults. Overdone, inefficient controls in the Oldsmobile.

PLYMOUTH COLT

Though not tested recently, this car, built by Mitsubishi, has performed well in the past and has proved reliable. New for 1992 is the wagon version of the Plymouth Colt Vista. The sedan and hatchback versions are due to be redesigned for 1993.

PLYMOUTH LASER

A refined design, comfortable and remarkably quiet. Handled nicely, and even its base 1.8-liter Four gave good acceleration. But it lacked the special nimbleness and pickup that thrill-seekers might want. Larger engines, available in more expensive versions, would provide more snap at the cost of fuel economy. Stops were sure and steady, if a bit long. Firm, supportive front seats. Reserve the rear seat for short, nimble, and uncomplaining folks. Very good heater, excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Excellent controls and displays.

PLYMOUTH VOYAGER

Fine family transport, our favorite small van until serious reliability problems in the overdrive automatic transmission knocked it off our Recommended list for a year. Though still troublesome, the transmission seems to be improving. Smooth, peppy 3.0-liter V6 in our van. Remarkable front-occupant protection for a small van in government crash tests, thanks in part to driver's-side air bag. Built-in child-restraint system is an option. The extended-body Chrysler Town & Country, Dodge Grand Caravan and Plymouth Grand Voyager have more reliability problems than do the conventional-body versions. All-wheel drive is available.

PONTIAC BONNEVILLE

Fun to drive if equipped with sport suspension. The 3.8-liter V6 provided excellent acceleration. Responsive, smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Exceptionally short stops on dry pavement. Front-wheel drive added to the roominess. The optional sport suspension delivered ride and handling reminiscent of a European sports sedan, that is, firm ride and precise, fast handling. Seating was better suited to four passengers than five or six. Noisier than most big cars, but not objectionably so. Slow defrosting. Uncomplicated controls.

PONTIAC TRANSPORT

An innovative, versatile package with modular seating and plastic body panels. You may not like the view from behind the wheel, as the driving position needed improvement. Seats were comfortable, however. The 3.1-liter V6 gave adequate acceleration. Smooth-shifting three-speed automatic transmission. (A 3.8-liter V6 and overdrive automatic transmission are now optional.) Nimbler than most vans in normal driving. Brakes felt numb but stopped well. Steady ride on highways, and a full load smoothed out the ride on back roads. Competent climate-control system. Cluttered controls.

SATURN

Exceptional first-year reliability, a breakthrough for a car designed and built in the U.S. The 1.9-liter Four in the base version provided impressive fuel economy, but it was rough and noisy and its acceleration was pokey. Much nicer were the higher-line versions, with their peppier engine, more closely spaced gears and sportier suspension. The automatic transmission shifted too often, especially in the base version, and the rear seat was especially uncomfortable. Unique bolt-on plastic front fenders, door skins and quarter panels were dent-resistant and easy to replace when damaged. Good controls, another breakthrough for GM, which had been paying too little attention to ergonomics. Note: Late-production Saturns offer an air bag. Station wagon version due in 1993.

SUBARU LEGACY

Despite its name, the Legacy has inherited little from its Subaru ancestors, a good thing. The 2.2-liter Four didn't growl and throb like other Subaru engines. The electronically controlled automatic transmission shifted smoothly except for an occasional driveline shudder when accelerating moderately in overdrive. Steady normal handling. Tail-happy tendency at the track required quick and skillful steering correction. Excellent brakes. Smooth, quiet ride. Excellent front seats, and a somewhat cramped rear seat. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

SUZUKI SAMURAI

Rated Not Acceptable because of its tendency to roll over during a hard turn. We found this tiny 4-wheel-drive vehicle wretched in most other respects as well.

TOYOTA CAMRY

Those looking for an excellent sedan need look no further. The Camry may lack the panache of the similar Lexus ES300, but it provides far more overall value. We tested the Deluxe version, with a four-cylinder engine, and the XLE, with a V6. The higher-line 3.0-liter V6 was more spirited than the basic 2.2-liter Four, but the Four was thriftier and handled more nimbly. Electronically controlled overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Excellent brakes. The XLE V6 had the edge in ride and interior quietness. Very good front seating. Excellent with power adjustment. Adequate rear seating. Versatile climate-control system, excellent controls and displays. Roomy trunk.

TOYOTA CAMRY WAGON

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TOYOTA CELICA

All the usual Toyota virtues, and sporty-car drawbacks. The 2.2-liter Four provided smooth, snappy performance. Crisp-shifting five-speed manual transmission with well-chosen gear ratios. Excellent handling, with quick and precise response and lots of road feel. Brakes provided short, straight stops. Comfortable though firm ride. Very comfortable driving position, though with serious blind spots at the rear corners. Comfortable, deeply contoured front seats. Very uncomfortable, claustrophobic rear seating, barely more than a package shelf with safety belts. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

TOYOTA COROLLA

An impressive all-around performer, with a smooth, peppy 1.6-liter Four. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Handling is steady and safe, but not quick or crisp. Relatively good ride, even on most secondary roads. Excellent brakes. Very good driving position and front seating, but uncomfortable rear seat. Very good heating, excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Faultless displays, but controls present a host of minor irritations. The GSi version offers a more powerful engine and other sporty equipment. The Corolla provided mediocre driver protection in government crash tests. Due for redesign in 1993.

TOYOTA COROLLA WAGON

An impressive all-around performer, with a smooth, peppy 1.6-liter Four. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Handling is steady and safe, but not quick or crisp. Relatively good ride, even on most secondary roads. Excellent brakes. Very good driving position and front seating, but uncomfortable rear seat. Very good heating, excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Faultless displays, but controls present a host of minor irritations. The GSi version offers a more powerful engine and other sporty equipment. The Corolla provided mediocre driver protection in government crash tests. Due for redesign in 1993.

TOYOTA CRESSIDA

A well-equipped car that represents a nice combination of sportiness and luxury. But the Cressida is beginning to show its age. It has irritating motorized front shoulder belts instead of air bags. A 3.0-liter Six and overdrive automatic transmission power this rear-wheel-drive model. Antilock brakes are optional. Seating was a bit tight front and rear. Excellent controls and displays.

TOYOTA MR2

Fun on the road, but only for two. No rear seat. Mid-engine design and rear-wheel drive combine to provide superlative normal and emergency handling. The 2.2-liter Four ran smoothly and accelerated strongly. Precise five-speed manual transmission. Excellent braking. Among the shortest stopping distances we've recorded. Very comfortable driving position and seats. Moderate noise level on most roads, worse at speed. Two trunks, front and rear, but both are skimpy. Nervous ride. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays. Difficult to service some engine components.

TOYOTA PREVIA

Contemporary styling and innovative design. Unique mid-engine layout and rear-wheel drive. With light load, drove like a good sedan. With full load, the 2.4-liter Four struggled, and handling and ride suffered. The overdrive automatic transmission didn't shift smoothly. Adequate seating accommodations, spotty heating, gimmicky controls. Converting from people carrier to cargo hauler was time consuming, but placement of the 2.4-liter 4 under the driver's seat increased usable cargo space. All-wheel drive is available.

VOLVO 240

This model is long in the tooth. Climb in, and it's 1968, the year this tall, boxy rear-wheel-drive design made its debut. But its performance remains competent if not exciting. We've tested this model several times over the years, monitoring the design changes that Volvo has made. The most important recent improvement is the addition of antilock brakes. The station wagon version boasts cavernous cargo room.

VOLVO 740

This roomy rear-wheel-drive model shares sedan and station wagon bodies with the 940 and 960. Powered by a 2.3-liter Four. Some models come with a turbocharger. A driver's-side air bag and antilock brakes are standard. Provided excellent driver and front-passenger protection in government crash tests.

VOLVO 940

This roomy rear-wheel-drive model shares sedan and station wagon bodies with the 940 and 960. Powered by a 2.3-liter Four. Some models come with a turbocharger. A driver's-side air bag and antilock brakes are standard. Provided excellent driver and front-passenger protection in government crash tests.

VOLVO 940 WAGON

This roomy rear-wheel-drive model shares sedan and station wagon bodies with the 940 and 960. Powered by a 2.3-liter Four. Some models come with a turbocharger. A driver's-side air bag and antilock brakes are standard. Provided excellent driver and front-passenger protection in government crash tests.

VOLVO 960

This roomy rear-wheel-drive model shares sedan and station wagon bodies with the 740 and 940. Powered by a 2.3-liter Four. Some models come with a turbocharger. The 960, new this year, has a 3.0-liter Six. A driver's-side air bag and antilock brakes are standard. Provided excellent driver and front-passenger protection in Government crash tests.

ACURA INTEGRA

This model has a sportier image than others made by Honda. The 1.8-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. The Integra had a smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission, as well as excellent handling and braking. Driving position was very good. The front seats were low but exceptionally comfortable, and the rear seat was uncomfortable. Cabin was moderately comfortable. The interior was moderately quiet, and the ride was a firm one. Very good heating, and excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Both controls and displays were excellent.

ACURA INTEGRA COUPE

This model has a sportier image than others made by Honda. The 1.8-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. The Integra had a smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission, as well as excellent handling and braking. Driving position was very good. The front seats were low but exceptionally comfortable, and the rear seat was uncomfortable. Cabin was moderately comfortable. The interior was moderately quiet, and the ride was a firm one. Very good heating, and excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Both controls and displays were excellent.

ACURA LEGEND

A completely new design, with a 3.2-liter V6 now placed fore and aft rather than sideways. A driver's side air bag and antilock brakes are standard. The LS model has a passenger's-side air bag as well.

AUDI 100/200

Audi's largest model. The Quattro versions have full-time 4-wheel drive. The 100 has a 2.3 liter 5. The 200 has a 2.2-liter turbo 5. Has driver's-side air bag.

AUDI 80/90

Fairly competent. All 80/90 models now have a 2.3-liter 5 and a driver's-side air bag. Antilock brakes are optional on the 80, standard on others.

BMW 3-SERIES

Exemplary in almost every respect. A rear-wheel-drive design with excellent handling and braking. The old familiar BMW tail twitch looms up only under slippery road conditions. All models have antilock brakes and a driver's-side air bag.

BMW 5-SERIES

The 535i is an excellent performer. Rear-wheel drive. Driver's-side air bag and antilock brakes are standard. The 3.5-liter 6 was strong and responsive. It provided very quick acceleration. Flawless overdrive automatic transmission. Responsive handling, but some twitchiness on slippery roads. Excellent brakes. Excellent driving position and front seats. Rear seat comfortable for two, uncomfortable for three. Very quiet. Powerful, unusually versatile climate-control system. Somewhat complicated controls. Displays were clear.

BUICK CENTURY

Oldsmobile Cutlass Ciera and Pontiac 6000 are essentially similar. An aging design, no longer competitive.

BUICK LE SABRE

Oldsmobile 88 Royale and Pontiac Bonneville are essentially similar. A six-year-old design that's still competitive. The 3.8-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Very smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Handling was competent in normal driving, sloppy in emergency maneuvers. Very good brakes. Exceptional driving position with optional power seat. Very comfortable split-bench front seat. Annoying automatic safety belts hindered access. Comfortable rear seat. Very quiet. Soft and smooth ride on good roads, kicking and bounding on big bumps or when fully loaded. Heater somewhat slow to warm. Excellent air-conditioning and ventilation. Scattered controls, glitzy displays.

BUICK PARK AVENUE

Oldsmobile Ninety-Eight is essentially similar. The Electra, redesigned and renamed. Has driver's-side air bag and antilock brakes.

BUICK REGAL

Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme and Pontiac Grand Prix are essentially similar. A new and unexceptional model with an old nameplate. The ride especially didn't measure up. The 3.1-liter V6 started and ran well. The automatic overdrive transmission shifted too often into and out of fourth gear. Sluggish, sloppy handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. The power driver's seat improved view over the hood. Fairly comfortable rear seat. Quiet. Overly soft ride, bottomed easily on all but the smoothest roads. Excellent climate-control system. Better controls than in other GM models. The optional digital displays were clear.

BUICK RIVIERA

Oldsmobile Tornado is essentially similar. Performed competently when last tested, but is extravagantly inefficient. Has driver's-side air bag.

BUICK SKYLARK

Pontiac Grand Am and Oldsmobile Cutlass Calais are essentially similar. The best of the GM compacts, but not up to the standards of the best imports. The 2.3-liter 4 started reliably but occasionally hesitated on initial acceleration during warm-up. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Excellent handling with optional handling suspension. Very good with standard suspension. Excellent brakes. Fairly low driving position with awkward access. Low but fairly comfortable front seats. Rear seat uncomfortable for two or three. Busy, rather harsh ride. Ride was better with the standard suspension. Moderate noise level. Excellent climate-control system. Logical controls, and better displays than in the Pontiac and Oldsmobile counterparts.

CADILLAC BROUGHAM

The last of GM's decade-old rear-wheel-drive chassis designs. The standard 5-liter V8 finally has fuel-injection. A 5.7-liter V8 is optional. Antilock brakes are standard. Incredibly, an air bag still isn't available.

CADILLAC DE VILLE/FLEETWOOD

The same basic platform as that of the large Buicks and Oldsmobiles, but with a 4.9-liter V8, new electronically controlled automatic transmission, driver's-side air bag and antilock brakes.

CADILLAC ELDORADO

Similar to the Buick Riviera and Oldsmobile Toronado, but with a 4.9-liter V8. Driver's-side air bag and antilock brakes are standard.

CADILLAC SEVILLE

Basically a 4-door version of the Cadillac Eldorado. Driver's-side air bag and antilock brakes are standard.

CHEVROLET ASTRO

GMC Safari is essentially similar. A truck chassis with front-mounted 4.3-liter V6 and rear-wheel or all-wheel-drive. Four-wheel antilock brakes are standard.

CHEVROLET BERETTA

Whether you want a sporty coupe or a practical sedan, you can do better than the Beretta. All models have a driver's-side air bag. The 2.2-liter 4 started and ran well. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission with lock-up feature. Excellent handling with performance suspension, sloppy and vague handling with standard suspension. Excellent brakes. Awkward driving position. Comfortable front seating. Uncomfortable rear seating. Tight head and knee room. Moderate noise level. Firm, well-controlled ride with Sport suspension. Ride was softer and less controlled with standard suspension. Adequate heating. Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning.

CHEVROLET BLAZER

GMC Jimmy is essentially similar. A large 4-wheel-drive wagon based on Chevrolet's full-sized pickup truck. A 5.7-liter gasoline V8 and a 6.2-liter diesel V8 are the standard engines. A manual transmission is unavailable with the diesel.

CHEVROLET CAMARO

Pontiac Firebird is essentially similar. Top-notch handling and superb braking. Rear-wheel drive. Poor driver visibility and clumsy access. Has driver's-side air bag. The 5-liter V8 started and ran flawlessly. Strong acceleration. The overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly, but delayed shifts sometimes allowed engine to lug. Precise, fairly quick handling. Poor traction on slippery roads. The brakes were excellent. Fairly comfortable front seats. Low driving position. Fairly difficult access. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Firm, jittery ride. Moderate noise level. Slow-warming heater, excellent air-conditioning. Convenient controls and displays.

CHEVROLET CAPRICE

New aero-style body but pretty much the same old rear-wheel-drive chassis. Comfortable. Sloppy handling. Hard to maneuver in traffic. Has driver's-side air bag. The 5-liter V8 started and ran flawlessly. The overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly except into and out of overdrive. Numb, mushy handling. Standard antilock brakes gave rather long stops. Very good driving position with power seat, but the extremities of the car were hard to gauge. Front seat was too soft for best support. Roomy rear seat, but lacked support. Very quiet. Floating ride, snapped and bottomed on secondary roads. Slow heater. Powerful ventilation and air-conditioning. Poor controls, confusing displays.

CHEVROLET CAVALIER

Pontiac Sunbird is essentially similar. No match for its Japanese competitors.

CHEVROLET CORSICA

Whether you want a sporty coupe or a practical sedan, you can do better than the Corsica. All models have a driver's-side air bag. The 2.2-liter 4 started and ran well. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission with lock-up feature. Excellent handling with performance suspension, sloppy and vague handling with standard suspension. Excellent brakes. Awkward driving position. Comfortable front seating. Uncomfortable rear seating. Tight head and knee room. Moderate noise level. Firm, well-controlled ride with Sport suspension. Ride was softer and less controlled with standard suspension. Adequate heating. Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning.

CHEVROLET LUMINA

Ride and seating are disappointing. The 3.1-liter V6 started well but occasionally hesitated when cold. The overdrive automatic transmission shifted into and out of overdrive too often. Very good handling with the Euro version's sporty suspension. Excellent brakes. Front seat very comfortable for two, very uncomfortable for three. Rear seat fairly comfortable even for three. Stiff ride. Moderately quiet. Loud exhaust in Euro version. Excellent climate-control system. Inconvenient controls. Small, hard-to-read instruments.

CHEVROLET LUMINA APV

Pontiac Trans Sport and Oldsmobile Silhouette are essentially similar. But you may not like the view from the driver's seat. The 3.1-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. More nimble than most minivans in routine driving. Controllable in emergency maneuvers. Numb, unresponsive brakes, but they stop well. Awkward driving position. The optional power seat can help. Very comfortable front seats, comfortable modular middle and rear seats, a bit cramped in the rear. Quiet. Powerful climate controls. Irritating control layout, especially for the wipers and climate controls. Very good displays.

CHEVROLET S-10 BLAZER

GMC S-15 Jimmy is essentially similar. Rather crude. Rear-wheel drive or 4-wheel drive. Smaller than the regular Blazer. The 4.3-liter V6 started and ran well. The overdrive automatic transmission worked smoothly but shifted into overdrive too soon. The 4-wheel drive can be hard to engage. Vehicle often stepped to the side on minor road irregularities. Numb, sloppy steering in emergency maneuvers. Standard 4-wheel antilock brakes responded slowly but stopped quickly. Comfortable driving position. Thinly padded front seats. Roomy rear seat, but not very comfortable. Moderately quiet overall, despite noisy engine. Harsh ride on all but the smoothest pavement. Ample heat except in the rear. Excellent ventilation

and air-conditioning. Controls were inconvenient, poorly labeled and confusingly crowded. Displays needed more contrast.

CHEVROLET SUBURBAN

GMC Suburban is essentially similar. The biggest station wagon of all, based on Chevrolet's full-sized pickup truck. Popular for towing large trailers. A 5.7-liter gasoline V8 and a 6.2-liter diesel V8 are the standard engines. Rear-wheel drive or 4-wheel drive.

CHRYSLER LE BARON

Dodge Spirit and Plymouth Acclaim are essentially similar. The Spirit and Acclaim are among the best of the Chrysler products, but in four-cylinder form only. The Spirit and Acclaim V6 and the Chrysler Le Baron come only with the troublesome Ultradrive automatic transmission. Avoid it. Has driver's-side air bag. The 2.5-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Smooth, responsive normal handling. Safe and predictable but sloppy in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Comfortable front seat. Driving position was cramped for tall driver. Fairly comfortable rear seat for two or three. Moderate noise level. Steady ride on expressways. Jittery on rural roads. Very good heater, excellent ventilation.

CHRYSLER LE BARON COUPE/CONVERTIBLE

A big, clumsy body with an uninhabitable rear seat. Earns points for a driver's-side air bag. A V6 engine is now available in addition to the turbo 4. The 2.5-liter turbo 4 started and ran flawlessly and gives snappy acceleration. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Very good routine handling. Emergency handling could be more precise and crisp. Touchy brakes. Driving position lacked sufficient leg room for tall drivers. Comfortable front seats, very uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Stiff, jiggly ride even on good roads. Tossing and snapping on secondary roads. Powerful automatic climate-control system, but air distribution was imperfect.

CHRYSLER NEW YORKER FIFTH AVENUE/IMPERIAL

A stretched version of the Chrysler New Yorker/Dodge Dynasty, but not as wide inside as the full-sized models from Ford and GM. Satisfactory all-around performance. A driver's-side air bag is standard, as in all U.S.-built Chrysler models. The overdrive automatic transmission has been especially troublesome.

CHRYSLER NEW YORKER SALON

Dodge Dynasty is essentially similar. Competitive with other medium-sized domestic sedans, but the troublesome Ultradrive automatic transmission makes it a poor choice. Has driver's-side air bag. The 3.3-liter V6 started well but occasionally stumbled during warm-up. Fairly smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Clumsy handling. Excellent antilock brakes. Very good driving position. Very comfortable front seats. Comfortable, adequately roomy rear seat. Quiet. Comfortable ride except on large bumps. Climate controls need improvement. Unhandy controls, excellent displays.

CHRYSLER TOWN & COUNTRY

Dodge Grand Caravan and Plymouth Grand Voyager are essentially similar. A stretched, long-wheelbase version of the Dodge Caravan and Plymouth Voyager, redesigned this year. The standard Ultradrive automatic transmission has been especially troublesome during the past two years.

DODGE CARAVAN

Plymouth Voyager is essentially similar. Generally improved, thanks to extensive redesign. Avoid the troublesome Ultradrive overdrive automatic transmission. The model of choice is the SE with 3-liter V6 and 3-speed automatic transmission. The 3-liter V6 started and ran well. Smooth-shifting 3-speed automatic transmission. Improved routine handling, but emergency handling is still clumsy and unsteady. Very good brakes. Driver's leg room was a bit tight. Very comfortable front seats and optional individual second-row seats. Comfortable third-row seat. Satisfactory ride on smooth roads, but lacks control on rough pavement. Quiet on smooth roads. Lots of shaking and rattling on rough roads. Slow heater. Strong ventilation and

air-conditioning. New controls felt better, but wiper and headlight switches were awkward. Clear displays, but tall drivers may not be able to see all of them.

DODGE COLT

Eagle Summit, Mitsubishi Mirage and Plymouth Colt are essentially similar. The Colt was one of the best small cars, with an unusually comfortable rear seat. The 1.5-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting 5-speed manual transmission, and excellent handling and braking. Both driving position and seats were comfortable. Cabin was moderately quiet. Ride was fairly comfortable, as the suspension soaks up the worst bumps. Climate-control system, controls and displays were excellent.

DODGE DAYTONA

Updated, but still seems less than the sum of its parts. Has driver's-side air bag. The 2.5-liter 4 started well but surged during warm-up. Difficult to drive smoothly. Balky 5-speed manual transmission. The Daytona handled reasonably well in normal driving, but somewhat unpredictably in emergency maneuvers. Poorly balanced brakes. Rear wheels locked prematurely. Fairly comfortable front seats. Low driving position, awkward foot-operated parking brake. Very uncomfortable rear seat. The ride was annoyingly busy, and the suspension bottomed too easily. Fairly quiet. Ample heat, but misdirected. Air-conditioning not as powerful as some. Good operating controls, clear displays.

DODGE DYNASTY

Chrysler New Yorker is essentially similar. Competitive with other medium-sized domestic sedans, but the troublesome Ultradrive automatic transmission makes it a poor choice. Has driver's-side air bag. The 3.3-liter V6 started well but occasionally stumbled during warm-up. Fairly smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Clumsy handling. Excellent antilock brakes. Very good driving position. Very comfortable front seats. Comfortable, adequately roomy rear seat. Quiet. Comfortable ride except on large bumps. Climate controls need improvement. Unhandy controls, excellent displays.

DODGE GRAND CARAVAN

Chrysler Town and Country and Plymouth Grand Voyager are essentially similar. A stretched, long-wheelbase version of the Dodge Caravan and Plymouth Voyager, redesigned this year. The standard Ultradrive automatic transmission has been especially troublesome during the past two years.

DODGE MONACO

Eagle Premier is essentially similar. An exceptionally comfortable car. Designed by Renault and American Motors Corp., and acquired by Chrysler Corp. in 1987 with purchase of AMC. The 3-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Lively acceleration. Annoying overdrive automatic transmission downshifted abruptly during deceleration. Steering wasn't crisp. Good overall handling. Excellent brakes. Ideal driving position for most drivers. Exceptionally comfortable and roomy front and rear seats. Smooth, pleasantly quiet ride. Excellent climate-control system. Complicated controls. Generally clear displays.

DODGE SHADOW

Plymouth Sundance is essentially similar. The Shadow was well equipped, but an undistinguished performer. The 2.2-liter 4 started quickly but surged during acceleration. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted satisfactorily. Very good routine handling, but the Shadow was not nimble in emergency maneuvers. Brakes were excellent. The driving position was low, and the foot-operated parking brake was awkward with manual transmission. Front seats were comfortable, while the rear seat was very uncomfortable. The interior was moderately quiet. The somewhat harsh ride was better with a full load. Good heater and strong ventilation, along with simple controls and clear displays.

DODGE SPIRIT

Chrysler Le Baron and Plymouth Acclaim are essentially similar. The Spirit and Acclaim are among the best of the Chrysler products, but in four-cylinder form only. The Spirit and Acclaim V6 and the Chrysler Le Baron come only with the troublesome Ultradrive automatic transmission. Avoid it. Has driver's-side air bag. The 2.5-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Smooth, responsive normal handling. Safe and predictable but sloppy in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Comfortable front seat. Driving position was cramped for tall driver. Fairly comfortable rear seat for two or three. Moderate noise level. Steady ride on expressways. Jittery on rural roads. Very good heater, excellent ventilation.

DODGE STEALTH

Mitsubishi 3000GT is essentially similar. A new model, built by Mitsubishi and sold by Chrysler. Has driver's-side air bag.

EAGLE PREMIER

Dodge Monaco is essentially similar. An exceptionally comfortable car. Designed by Renault and American Motors Corp., and acquired by Chrysler Corp. in 1987 with purchase of AMC. The 3-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Lively acceleration. Annoying overdrive automatic transmission downshifted abruptly during deceleration. Steering wasn't crisp. Good overall handling. Excellent brakes. Ideal driving position for most drivers. Exceptionally comfortable and roomy front and rear seats. Smooth, pleasantly quiet ride. Excellent climate-control system. Complicated controls. Generally clear displays.

EAGLE SUMMIT

Dodge Colt, Mitsubishi Mirage and Plymouth Colt are essentially similar. The Summit was one of the best small cars, with an unusually comfortable rear seat. The 1.5-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting 5-speed manual transmission, and excellent handling and braking. Both driving position and seats were comfortable. Cabin was moderately quiet. Ride was fairly comfortable, as the suspension soaked up the worst bumps. Climate-control system, controls and displays were excellent.

EAGLE TALON

Plymouth Laser and Mitsubishi Eclipse are essentially similar. Three siblings, all excellent cars. The 2-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth, precise-shifting 5-speed manual transmission. Very crisp and responsive handling. Excellent braking. Very comfortable front seats. Awkward driving position for short drivers. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Moderately noisy. Jittery ride on almost all roads. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

FORD AEROSTAR

Noticeably improved over the years. Feels less truck-like of late. Rear antilock brakes are standard. Has rear-wheel drive or full-time all-wheel drive. Can tow up to 5000 pounds. The 3-liter V6 started and ran without a hitch. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Slow and clumsy routine handling. Even more sluggish in accident-avoidance maneuvers. Touchy brakes, but very short stopping distances. Very good driving position. Very comfortable front and middle-row captain's chairs. Comfortable bench rear seat. Quiet, tight body. Harsh, bounding ride. Very good climate-control system. Haphazard controls. Generally clear displays.

FORD BRONCO

A large 4-wheel-drive utility vehicle based on Ford's full-sized pickup truck. A 4.9-liter 6 is standard. 5- and 5.8-liter V8s are optional.

FORD ESCORT

Mercury Tracer is essentially similar. The Escort is a new model based on the Mazda Protege. It promises to be a very good car, if it's reliable. The 1.9-liter 4 started and ran well. The easy-shifting 5-speed manual transmission was geared more for economy than performance. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Both steering and handling were responsive, although the car was a bit twitchy in emergency maneuvers. Brakes were very good. Driving position was very good. The front seats were comfortable, while the rear seat was uncomfortable. The cabin was moderately noisy. The Escort offered a typical small-car ride. Heater was versatile, the controls were logical and the displays were clear.

FORD ESCORT WAGON

Mercury Tracer is essentially similar. The Escort is a new model based on the Mazda Protege. It promises to be a very good car, if it's reliable. The 1.9-liter 4 started and ran well. The easy-shifting 5-speed manual transmission was geared more for economy than performance. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Both steering and handling were responsive, although the car was a bit twitchy in emergency maneuvers. Brakes were very good. Driving position was very good. The front seats were comfortable, while the rear seat was uncomfortable. The cabin was moderately noisy. The Escort offered a typical small-car ride. Heater was versatile, the controls were logical and the displays were clear.

FORD EXPLORER

Mazda Navajo is essentially similar. Came out last year as a 1991 model. Has a roomy, well-designed body. The 4-door version is especially useful. Rear-wheel drive or 4-wheel drive. The 4-liter V6 started easily and ran well. Both the overdrive automatic and 5-speed manual transmissions shifted smoothly. Sluggish handling. Even moderate turns made the body lean and the front tires squeal. The rear-wheel antilock brakes worked very well. Very good driving position. Very comfortable front captain's chairs, comfortable rear seat. Quiet. Ride was too soft, poorly controlled. Very good heating, excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Logical controls except for wiper/washer switch. Excellent displays.

FORD FESTIVA

A very small commuter car, the Festiva is quite comfortable for two. All versions are now fuel-injected.

FORD LTD CROWN VICTORIA

Mercury Grand Marquis is essentially similar. These comments apply to the 1991 model. The 1992 model, now being introduced, is significantly redesigned but retains rear-wheel drive. The 1991 model is comfortable, but not a driver's car. The 5-liter V8 started and ran flawlessly. The overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly except into and out of overdrive. Numb and clumsy handling with lots of body lean. Excellent brakes, though initially touchy. Excellent driving position. Very comfortable, roomy front seat. High, comfortable rear seat. Very quiet. Smooth and steady ride. Carries full load well. Slow heater. Strong ventilation and air-conditioning. Very good controls and displays.

FORD MUSTANG

An old-school design, with rear-wheel drive. The V8 version provided gut-wrenching acceleration, and a gut-wrenching ride. Has driver's-side air bag. The 5-liter V8 started and ran flawlessly. Very powerful acceleration. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Handling inspired confidence. The brakes were very good. Fairly comfortable front seats. Awkward, low driving position. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Harsh ride. The heating was very good, and the air-conditioning was effective. Logical controls, clear displays.

FORD PROBE

Mazda MX-6 is essentially similar. Sporty performance not only with turbo 4 and V6, but with base 4 as well. The 2.2-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth, peppy acceleration. Easy-shifting 5-speed manual transmission and excellent clutch. Excellent routine handling, and controllable but not crisp emergency handling. The brakes were excellent. Very comfortable front seats. Exceptionally comfortable driving position. Very uncomfortable rear seat. The noise level was moderate. Taut, busy ride. Very good heating and air-conditioning. Excellent controls and displays.

FORD TAURUS

Mercury Sable is essentially similar. Still the best of the medium-sized domestic models. An electronically controlled overdrive automatic transmission and a driver's-side air bag are now standard. The 3-liter V6 started and ran well. Strong acceleration. Smooth shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Very good handling. Excellent brakes. Excellent driving position with power seat. Very comfortable front seats, and a fairly comfortable rear seat. Quiet. Stable ride on most roads. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

FORD TAURUS SHO

Mercury Sable is essentially similar. Still the best of the medium-sized domestic models. An electronically controlled overdrive automatic transmission and a driver's-side air bag are now standard. The 3-liter V6 started and ran well. Strong acceleration. Smooth shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Very good handling. Excellent brakes. Excellent driving position with power seat. Very comfortable front seats, and a fairly comfortable rear seat. Quiet. Stable ride on most roads. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

FORD TAURUS WAGON

Mercury Sable is essentially similar. Still the best of the medium-sized domestic models. An electronically controlled overdrive automatic transmission and a driver's-side air bag are now standard. The 3-liter V6 started and ran well. Strong acceleration. Smooth shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Very good handling. Excellent brakes. Excellent driving position with power seat. Very comfortable front seats, and a fairly comfortable rear seat. Quiet. Stable ride on most roads. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

FORD TEMPO

Mercury Topaz is essentially similar. Competent, dull, unreliable. The 2.3-liter 4 started and ran well. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Sloppy but safe handling. Very good brakes. Very good driving position. Very comfortable front seats, uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Rather harsh ride with GLS suspension, but no worse when fully loaded. Excellent climate-control system. Mostly logical controls and clear displays.

FORD THUNDERBIRD

Mercury Cougar is essentially similar. A roomier body and better ergonomics as of last year. Rear-wheel drive. The 3.8-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Competent routine handling, but sloppy in emergency maneuvers. Excessive nose-dive and erratic locking of front brakes during hard stops. Very good driving position. Very comfortable front seats with power controls. Comfortable rear seats, but tight for tall passengers. Very quiet. Well-controlled ride. Excellent air-conditioning and ventilation. Skimpily distribution of heat, and noisy fan. Excellent controls and displays.

GEO METRO

A minicar made by Suzuki and sold by Chevrolet dealers, the Metro has a 1-liter 3. The convertible has a driver's-side air bag.

GEO PRIZM

The top Geo model, the Prizm's 1.6-liter, 16-valve 4 started and ran without a hitch. The car had a smooth-shifting automatic transmission, and offered steady and smooth handling. The brakes were excellent. The driving position was very good. The front seats were very comfortable, and the rear seat was uncomfortable. The interior was moderately quiet. The comfortable ride got choppier with a full load. The Prizm had excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. The heater warmed quickly but cooled slowly. The controls were very good, and the displays were clear.

GEO STORM

Isuzu Impulse is essentially similar. Built by Isuzu and sold by Chevrolet dealers. Two versions of a 1.6-liter 4 are available. Driver's-side air bag is standard.

GEO TRACKER

Suzuki Sidekick is essentially similar. More sport than utility. A small, nimble vehicle made by Suzuki and sold by Chevrolet dealers. Don't confuse it with the tippy Suzuki Samurai, which we rated Not Acceptable. The 1.6-liter 4 started easily and ran well. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted crisply except in cold weather before the oil warmed. Very good handling. Excellent braking. Low, awkward driving position. Overly firm front seats with poor support. Roomy but uncomfortable rear seat. Noisy, fatiguing ride. Excellent heating and ventilation. Virtually perfect controls and displays.

GMC JIMMY

Chevrolet Blazer is essentially similar. A large 4-wheel-drive wagon based on Chevrolet's full-sized pickup truck. A 5.7-liter gasoline V8 and a 6.2-liter diesel V8 are the standard engines. A manual transmission is unavailable with the diesel.

GMC S-15 JIMMY

Chevrolet S-10 Blazer is essentially similar. Rather crude. Rear-wheel drive or 4-wheel drive. Smaller than the regular Blazer. The 4.3-liter V6 started and ran well. The overdrive automatic transmission worked smoothly but shifted into overdrive too soon. The 4-wheel drive can be hard to engage. Vehicle often stepped to the side on minor road irregularities. Numb, sloppy steering in emergency maneuvers. Standard 4-wheel antilock brakes responded slowly but stopped quickly. Comfortable driving position. Thinly padded front seats. Roomy rear seat, but not very comfortable. Moderately quiet overall, despite noisy engine. Harsh ride on all but the smoothest pavement. Ample heat except in the rear.

Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Controls were inconvenient, poorly labeled and confusingly crowded. Displays need more contrast.

GMC SAFARI

Chevrolet Astro is essentially similar. A truck chassis with front-mounted 4.3-liter V6 and rear-wheel or all-wheel-drive. Four-wheel antilock brakes are standard.

GMC SUBURBAN

Chevrolet Suburban is essentially similar. The biggest station wagon of all, based on Chevrolet's full-sized pickup truck. Popular for towing large trailers. A 5.7-liter gasoline V8 and a 6.2-liter diesel V8 are the standard engines. Rear-wheel drive or 4-wheel drive.

HONDA ACCORD

A class act among moderately priced compacts. The wagon, new this year, has a driver's-side air bag. The 2.2-liter 4 started and ran well and accelerated briskly. The overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly. Smooth, easy handling. Excellent brakes. Low, sporty-car driving position. Very comfortable front seats. Rear seat comfortable for two or three. Moderately quiet. Firm, well-controlled ride on most roads. Excellent climate-control system, controls, and displays.

HONDA ACCORD WAGON

A class act among moderately priced compacts. The wagon, new this year, has a driver's-side air bag. The 2.2-liter 4 started and ran well and accelerated briskly. The overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly. Smooth, easy handling. Excellent brakes. Low, sporty-car driving position. Very comfortable front seats. Rear seat comfortable for two or three. Moderately quiet. Firm, well-controlled ride on most roads. Excellent climate-control system, controls, and displays.

HONDA CIVIC

The Civic is consistently one of CU's top-rated small models, with a high resale value. The 1.5-liter 4 started and ran well. The 1.6-liter 4 in the 4-wheel drive wagon started and ran flawlessly. The acceleration was responsive. The overdrive automatic transmission shifted abruptly during hard acceleration, while the manual transmission shifted crisply. The sedan handled precisely in normal driving, but emergency handling was a bit vague. The wagon handled even better. The brakes were excellent. The front seats were very comfortable. The rear seat was uncomfortable for two and very uncomfortable for three. The cabin was moderately quiet and the ride was fairly comfortable. The climate-control system was very good. All controls and displays were excellent.

HONDA CIVIC CRX

A small 2-seater. The base and HF versions are economical commuter cars. The Si is a peppy, tight-handling sporty car. The Si's 1.6-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted fairly crisply. Excellent handling and brakes. Fairly comfortable seats. There was limited head room for tall drivers. Fairly awkward pedal placement. Moderate noise level. Jittery ride on most roads. Very good climate-control system. Excellent operating controls and displays.

HONDA CIVIC WAGON

The Civic is consistently one of CU's top-rated small models, with a high resale value. The 1.5-liter 4 started and ran well. The 1.6-liter 4 in the 4-wheel drive wagon started and ran flawlessly. The acceleration was responsive. The overdrive automatic transmission shifted abruptly during hard acceleration, while the manual transmission shifted crisply. The sedan handled precisely in normal driving, but emergency handling was a bit vague. The wagon handled even better. The brakes were excellent. The front seats were very comfortable. The rear seat was uncomfortable for two and very uncomfortable for three. The cabin was moderately quiet and the ride was fairly comfortable.

The climate-control system was very good. All controls and displays were excellent.

HONDA PRELUDE

One of our favorite sporty cars, with nimble, precise handling.

HYUNDAI EXCEL

Mitsubishi Precis is essentially similar. Hyundai's technology is still lagging, and reliability remains a problem. The 1.5-liter 4 often stalled and stumbled after a cold start, and acceleration was sluggish. The overdrive automatic transmission shifted abruptly at times. The steering felt vague and rubbery in normal driving and sluggish at the track. Excellent brakes. Very good driving position. Very comfortable front seats, uncomfortable rear seat. Moderately quiet. The uncomfortable ride was worse with a full load. Marginal climate-control system. Irritating controls, but clear displays.

HYUNDAI SCOUPE

A sporty version of the mundane Hyundai Excel. It comes with the Excel's 1.5-liter 4 and either a 5-speed manual or an overdrive automatic transmission.

HYUNDAI SONATA

Lots of car for the money, but needs stronger bumpers. The 2.4-liter 4 stalled when the transmission was first put into gear. It also shook at idle, especially when the air-conditioner was on. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Smooth, responsive handling. Excellent brakes. Excellent driving position. Very comfortable front and rear seats. Quiet. Satisfactory ride. Excellent climate-control system. Convenient controls, clear displays.

INFINITI G20

A new model with lots of standard equipment. A 2-liter 4 and antilock brakes are standard.

INFINITI M30

A luxury sports coupe, introduced last year by a new division of Nissan. Has 3-liter V6, automatic transmission, rear-wheel drive, antilock brakes and a driver's-side air bag.

INFINITI Q45

A fully equipped luxury sedan made by a new division of Nissan. Driver's-side air bag is standard. Rear-wheel drive. The 4.5-liter, 32-valve V8 started and ran flawlessly and provided awesome acceleration. Very smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Excellent handling. Excellent antilock brakes. Exceptionally good driving position and front seats. Rear seat comfortable for two, uncomfortable for three. Very quiet. Very comfortable ride on good roads, but busy on back roads, with occasional bounding over large bumps. Very good heater. Excellent air-conditioning and ventilation. Satisfactory controls and excellent displays.

ISUZU AMIGO

Based on Isuzu's short-wheelbase pickup truck. Available engines include 2.3- and 2.6-liter 4s. Rear-wheel or 4-wheel drive.

ISUZU IMPULSE

Geo Storm is essentially similar. New car, old name. A 1.6-liter 4 and a driver's-side air bag are standard.

ISUZU RODEO

A new model. S versions have a 2.6-liter 4 and a 5-speed manual transmission. Other versions come with a 3.1-liter V6. An automatic transmission is optional with the V6. Rear-wheel or 4-wheel drive.

ISUZU STYLUS

A new design marking Isuzu's return to the passenger-car market. The 1.6-liter 4 comes in two versions. A driver's-side air bag is standard. Antilock brakes are optional in the XS.

ISUZU TROOPER II

A large, high, 4-wheel-drive go-anywhere vehicle, more truck than wagon. As roomy as a medium-sized sedan, but unimpressive in most of our tests. Most versions come with a 2.8-liter V6.

JEEP CHEROKEE

A large go-anywhere vehicle, more a family-sized wagon than a truck. Very powerful 6.

JEEP WRANGLER

A crude 4-wheel-drive runabout that performed poorly in most of our tests. In emergency situations, the handling could be a handful for the average driver.

LEXUS ES250

New last year and unchanged this year. Basically a Toyota Camry V6 loaded with all available equipment, including a driver's-side air bag and antilock brakes.

LEXUS LS400

Overall, the best car we've ever tested. A luxury sedan made by a new division of Toyota. Fully equipped with a multivalve V8, antilock brakes, driver's-side air bag and much more. The 4-liter, 32-valve V8 accelerated to exceptionally high speeds very quickly and effortlessly. Very smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Nearly ideal handling in normal driving. Smooth, crisp and steady in emergency maneuvers. Excellent antilock brakes. Exceptional driving position and front and rear seats. Very quiet. Versatile, easy-to-use automatic climate-control system. Especially convenient controls. The fluorescent display was impressive day and night.

LINCOLN CONTINENTAL

One of the best-performing domestic luxury models. Has air bags for both front occupants. The 3.8-liter V6 started and ran without a hitch and provided adequate acceleration. The overdrive automatic transmission performed well without the electronic controls found in some luxury imports. Electronic air suspension gave safe handling in routine driving, sluggish and sloppy handling in emergency maneuvers. Excellent antilock brakes. Excellent driving position enhanced by power adjustments. Exceptionally comfortable front seat for three. Very comfortable rear seat, with limousine-like leg room. Very quiet. Excellent ride control. The self-leveling suspension kept the car level regardless of the load. Excellent heating and

air-conditioning, very good ventilation. Logical controls. Some displays partly hidden.

LINCOLN MARK VII

A rear-wheel-drive model. A driver's-side air bag, air suspension, and antilock brakes are standard.

LINCOLN TOWN CAR

A rear-wheel-drive model with Ford's new modular 4.6-liter V8. Antilock brakes and air bags for both front occupants are standard.

MAZDA 323

One of our top choices among small cars, the Mazda 323 offers good value. The 1.8-liter, 16-valve 4 started and ran flawlessly and gave peppy acceleration. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Steady normal handling, but somewhat unpredictable at the track. Excellent brakes. Very good driving position. Very comfortable front seats, comfortable rear seat. Moderately quiet. Typical small-car ride. The climate-control system was adequate. Controls and displays were excellent.

MAZDA 626

Most are now built in Michigan.

MAZDA 929

Lots of seating and luggage room, with exceptional ride comfort. Rear-wheel drive. The S is sportier than the base version and has a more powerful V6. The 3-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Very good routine handling. Controllable emergency handling. Excellent antilock brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats and driving position. Comfortable rear seat. Very quiet. Good ride control. Excellent climate-control system. Very good controls and displays.

MAZDA MPV

A good people-carrier with good trailer-towing ability. A raised rear deck and nonremovable rear seat restrict cargo room. Rear-wheel drive or 4-wheel drive. Antilock rear brakes are standard. The 3-liter V6 started and ran well. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Pleasant routine handling. Sloppy in emergency maneuvers. Very good brakes. Commanding driving position and exceptionally comfortable front seats. Comfortable center and rear bench seats. Satisfactory ride. Quiet. Very good heater and defroster. Weak air-conditioner. Excellent controls and displays.

MAZDA MX-5 MIATA

A refined version of the British sports cars of 30 years ago. Mazda has engineered out some of those cars' worst failings and kept the responsive acceleration and precise steering and handling. Rear-wheel drive. Has driver's-side air bag. The 1.6-liter 4 started and ran very well. The stubby shifter of the 5-speed transmission gave crisp shifts and enhanced the sporty feel. Quick, responsive and predictable handling. Excellent brakes. Sportingly low, firm and enveloping bucket seats. Tall occupants felt cramped even with the top down, claustrophobic with the top up. The steering wheel was too close. Harsh ride, much noisier than average. Excellent climate-control system. Very good controls, excellent displays.

MAZDA MX-6

Ford Probe is essentially similar. The practicality of a usable rear seat without a sacrifice in performance. The 2.2-liter turbo 4 started and ran flawlessly. The 5-speed manual transmission usually shifted crisply. Excellent handling and braking. Very comfortable driving position and front seating. Skimpy knee room and toe space in rear seat. Fairly quiet. Fairly comfortable ride on expressways, unpleasant on back roads. Competent, unobtrusive climate-control system. Controls were awkward. Displays were excellent.

MAZDA NAVAJO

Ford Explorer is essentially similar. Came out last year as a 1991 model. Has a roomy, well-designed body. The 4-door version is especially useful. Rear-wheel drive or 4-wheel drive. The 4-liter V6 started easily and ran well. Both the overdrive automatic and 5-speed manual transmissions shifted smoothly. Sluggish handling. Even moderate turns made the body lean and the front tires squeal. The rear-wheel antilock brakes worked very well. Very good driving position. Very comfortable front captain's chairs, comfortable rear seat. Quiet. Ride was too soft, poorly controlled. Very good heating, excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Logical controls except for wiper/washer switch. Excellent displays.

MAZDA PROTEGÉ

One of our top choices among small cars, the Mazda 323/Protegé offers good value. The 1.8-liter, 16-valve 4 started and ran flawlessly and gave peppy acceleration. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Steady normal handling, but somewhat unpredictable at the track. Excellent brakes. Very good driving position. Very comfortable front seats, comfortable rear seat. Moderately quiet. Typical small-car ride. The climate-control system was adequate. Controls and displays were excellent.

MAZDA RX-7

A two-seater with rotary engine and rear-wheel drive. Convertible has driver's-side air bag.

MERCEDES-BENZ 190

Rear-wheel drive and a choice of 2.3-liter 4 or 2.6-liter 6. Driver's-side air bag and antilock brakes are standard.

MERCEDES-BENZ 300

One of the best models CU had ever tested as of 1986 - and it should be, for the price. Antilock brakes and a driver's-side air bag are standard. A passenger-side air bag is an option.

MERCURY COUGAR

Ford Thunderbird is essentially similar. A roomier body and better ergonomics as of last year. The 3.8-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Competent routine handling, but sloppy in emergency maneuvers. Excessive nose-dive and erratic locking of front brakes during hard stops. Very good driving position. Very comfortable front seats with power controls. Comfortable rear seats, but tight for tall passengers. Very quiet. Well-controlled ride. Excellent air-conditioning and ventilation. Skimpy distribution of heat, and noisy fan. Excellent controls and displays.

MERCURY GRAND MARQUIS

Ford LTD Crown Victoria is essentially similar. These comments apply to the 1991 model. The 1992 model, now being introduced, is significantly redesigned but retains rear-wheel drive. The 1991 model is comfortable, but not a driver's car. The 5-liter V8 started and ran flawlessly. The overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly except into and out of overdrive. Numb and clumsy handling with lots of body lean. Excellent brakes, though initially touchy. Excellent driving position. Very comfortable, roomy front seat. High, comfortable rear seat. Very quiet. Smooth and steady ride. Carries full load well. Slow heater. Strong ventilation and air-conditioning. Very good controls and displays.

MERCURY SABLE

Ford Taurus is essentially similar. Still the best of the medium-sized domestic models. An electronically controlled overdrive automatic transmission and a driver's-side air bag are now standard. The 3-liter V6 started and ran well. Strong acceleration. Smooth shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Very good handling. Excellent brakes. Excellent driving position with power seat. Very comfortable front seats, and a fairly comfortable rear seat. Quiet. Stable ride on most roads. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

MERCURY SABLE WAGON

Ford Taurus is essentially similar. Still the best of the medium-sized domestic models. An electronically controlled overdrive automatic transmission and a driver's-side air bag are now standard. The 3-liter V6 started and ran well. Strong acceleration. Smooth shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Very good handling. Excellent brakes. Excellent driving position with power seat. Very comfortable front seats, and a fairly comfortable rear seat. Quiet. Stable ride on most roads. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

MERCURY TOPAZ

Ford Tempo is essentially similar. Competent, dull, unreliable. The 2.3-liter 4 started and ran well. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Sloppy but safe handling. Very good brakes. Very good driving position. Very comfortable front seats, uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Rather harsh ride with GLS suspension, but no worse when fully loaded. Excellent climate-control system. Mostly logical controls and clear displays.

MERCURY TRACER

Ford Escort is essentially similar. The Tracer is a new model based on the Mazda Protege. It promises to be a very good car, if it's reliable. The 1.9-liter 4 started and ran well. The easy-shifting 5-speed manual transmission was geared more for economy than performance. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Both steering and handling were responsive, although the car was a bit twitchy in emergency maneuvers. Brakes were very good. Driving position was very good. The front seats were comfortable, while the rear seat was uncomfortable. The cabin was moderately noisy. The Escort offered a typical small-car ride. Heater was versatile, the controls were logical and the displays were clear.

MITSUBISHI 3000 GT

Dodge Stealth is essentially similar. Very powerful, loaded with features.

MITSUBISHI ECLIPSE

Eagle Talon and Plymouth Laser are essentially similar. Three siblings, all excellent cars. The 2-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth, precise-shifting 5-speed manual transmission. Very crisp and responsive handling. Excellent braking. Very comfortable front seats. Awkward driving position for short drivers. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Moderately noisy. Jittery ride on almost all roads. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

MITSUBISHI GALANT

A very desirable car. Two new sporty versions, due this year, will provide extra flash. The 2-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission, with Economy and Power modes. Handled well in normal driving, but a bit sloppy and ponderous in emergency maneuvers. Very good brakes. Very good driving position. Very comfortable front seats, very comfortable rear seat. Quiet. Taut but comfortable ride. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

MITSUBISHI MIRAGE

Dodge Colt, Eagle Summit and Plymouth Colt are essentially similar. The Mirage is one of the best small cars, with an unusually comfortable rear seat. The 1.5-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting 5-speed manual transmission, and excellent handling and braking. Both driving position and seats were comfortable. Cabin was moderately quiet. Ride was fairly comfortable, as the suspension soaked up the worst bumps. Climate-control system, controls and displays were excellent.

MITSUBISHI MONTERO

A large 4-wheel-drive utility vehicle with lots of cargo capacity. A 3-liter V6 is standard.

MITSUBISHI PRECIS

Hyundai Excel is essentially similar. The 1.5-liter 4 often stalled and stumbled after a cold start, and acceleration was sluggish. The overdrive automatic transmission shifted abruptly at times. The steering felt vague and rubbery in normal driving and sluggish at the track. Excellent brakes. Very good driving position. Very comfortable front seats, uncomfortable rear seat. Moderately quiet. The uncomfortable ride was worse with a full load. Marginal climate-control system. Controls were irritating, but displays were clear.

NISSAN 240SX

The 240SX runs with the best of the sporty cars except for tricky emergency handling. Rear-wheel drive. The 2.4-liter, 12-valve 4 started quickly, ran flawlessly, and gave strong acceleration. Smooth-shifting 5-speed manual transmission. Excellent routine handling. Somewhat tail-happy but controllable in emergency handling. Very good braking. Very comfortable front seats. Good driving position for most. There was not enough leg room for tall drivers. The rear seat was unusable. Moderate noise level. Fairly uncomfortable ride. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

NISSAN 300ZX

Rear-wheel drive.

NISSAN MAXIMA

One of the best medium-sized models. We tested the GXE, with automatically adjusting suspension and Wurlitzer dashboard, but we prefer the SE, with its conventional suspension and analog gauges. The 3-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly and gave strong acceleration. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Fairly responsive routine handling. Steady in hard turns, but tended to plow during abrupt maneuvers. Competent braking. Excellent driving position and front seats. Driver's seat manually adjustable for height and tilt. Comfortable rear seat. Quiet. Soft, smooth ride on most roads. Good control even on big bumps. Inconsistent automatic climate controls. Well-designed but complicated controls. Dazzling and confusing displays in the GXE.

NISSAN PATHFINDER

The best-riding sports/utility vehicle we've tested. Relatively small cargo compartment and inhospitable rear seat. The 3-liter V6 started and ran well, but the overdrive automatic transmission occasionally lurched into gear or stayed in third too long. Competent normal handling. Sloppy but controllable emergency handling. Excellent brakes. Good driving position. Comfortable front seat, uncomfortable rear seat, with awkward access. Comfortable, quiet ride. Not enough warm air from the heater reached the rear seat. Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Small, fussy controls. Displays were excellent.

NISSAN SENTRA

The result of a complete redesign, and a complete transformation, the Sentra is sportier than the previous model. The 1.6-liter, 16-valve 4 started and ran well and accelerated strongly. Precise, easy-shifting 4-speed manual transmission in E version. Very good normal handling, but not as crisp in emergency maneuvers. Brakes were excellent. The front seats were comfortable. Low driving position. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Moderately quiet. Reasonably comfortable ride. Spotty heating, excellent ventilation. Convenient controls, clear displays.

NISSAN STANZA

Much improved last year, with a roomier body, stronger engine, and sportier handling. But noise level is up and fuel economy is down slightly. The 2.4-liter 4 started quickly and ran well. The overdrive automatic transmission sometimes downshifted abruptly. Competent handling during routine driving. Worse in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Very good driving position. Very comfortable front seats, uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Fairly comfortable ride. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

OLDSMOBILE BRAVADA

A less truck-like version of the Chevrolet S-10 Blazer. Has full-time 4-wheel drive and more standard equipment than the Blazer.

OLDSMOBILE CUTLASS CALAIS

Buick Skylark and Pontiac Grand Am are essentially similar. The best of the GM compacts, but not up to the standards of the best imports. The 2.3-liter 4 started reliably but occasionally hesitated on initial acceleration during warm-up. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Excellent handling with optional handling suspension. Very good with standard suspension. Excellent brakes. Fairly low driving position with awkward access. Low but fairly comfortable front seats. Rear seat uncomfortable for two or three. Busy, rather harsh ride. Ride was better with the standard suspension. Moderate noise level. Excellent climate-control system. Logical controls, and better displays than in the Buick and Pontiac counterparts.

OLDSMOBILE CUTLASS CIERA

Buick Century and Pontiac 6000 are essentially similar. An aging design, no longer competitive.

OLDSMOBILE CUTLASS SUPREME

Buick Regal and Pontiac Grand Prix are essentially similar. A new and unexceptional model with an old nameplate. The ride especially doesn't measure up. The 3.1-liter V6 started and ran well. The automatic overdrive transmission shifted too often into and out of fourth gear. Sluggish, sloppy handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. The power driver's seat improved view over the hood. Fairly comfortable rear seat. Quiet. Overly soft ride, bottomed easily on all but the smoothest roads. Excellent climate-control system. Better controls than in other GM models. The optional digital displays were clear.

OLDSMOBILE EIGHTY EIGHT ROYALE

Buick Le Sabre and Pontiac Bonneville are essentially similar. A six-year-old design that's still competitive. The 3.8-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Very smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Handling was competent in normal driving, sloppy in emergency maneuvers. Very good brakes. Exceptional driving position with optional power seat. Very comfortable split-bench front seat. Annoying automatic safety belts hinder access. Comfortable rear seat. Very quiet. Soft and smooth ride on good roads, kicking and bounding on big bumps or when fully loaded. Heater somewhat slow to warm. Excellent air-conditioning and ventilation. Scattered controls, glitzy displays.

OLDSMOBILE NINETY EIGHT REGENCY

Buick Park Avenue is essentially similar. The Electra, redesigned and renamed. Has driver's-side air bag and antilock brakes.

OLDSMOBILE SILHOUETTE

Chevrolet Lumina APV and Pontiac Trans Sport are essentially similar. But you may not like the view from the driver's seat. The 3.1-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. More nimble than most minivans in routine driving. Controllable in emergency maneuvers. Numb, unresponsive brakes, but they stop well. Awkward driving position. The optional power seat can help. Very comfortable front seats, comfortable modular middle and rear seats, a bit cramped in the rear. Quiet. Powerful climate controls. Irritating control layout, especially for the wipers and climate controls. Very good displays.

OLDSMOBILE TORONADO

Buick Riviera is essentially similar. Performed competently when last tested, but is extravagantly inefficient. Has driver's-side air bag.

PEUGEOT 505

A pleasant car to drive, but with unpredictable handling and fragile bumpers. Antilock brakes standard on 4-door S and Mi16, and wagon S. The 1.9-liter 4 started and ran well. The overdrive automatic transmission gave slow initial acceleration and often hunted between third and fourth gears. Crisp handling in normal driving, tricky in emergency maneuvers. Touchy brakes. Excellent driving position. Very comfortable front seats. Rear seat comfortable for two, uncomfortable for three. Moderate noise level. Smooth, supple ride. Excellent climate controls. Fairly well-designed controls and clear displays.

PLYMOUTH ACCLAIM

Chrysler Le Baron and Dodge Spirit are essentially similar. The Spirit and Acclaim are among the best of the Chrysler products, but in four-cylinder form only. The Spirit and Acclaim V6 and the Chrysler Le Baron come only with the troublesome Ultradrive automatic transmission. Avoid it. Has driver's-side air bag. The 2.5-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Smooth, responsive normal handling. Safe and predictable but sloppy in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Comfortable front seat. Driving position was cramped for tall driver. Fairly comfortable rear seat for two or three. Moderate noise level. Steady ride on expressways. Jittery on rural roads. Very good heater, excellent ventilation.

PLYMOUTH COLT

Dodge Colt, Eagle Summit and Mitsubishi Mirage are essentially similar. The Colt is one of the best small cars, with an unusually comfortable rear seat. The 1.5-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting 5-speed manual transmission, and excellent handling and braking. Both driving position and seats were comfortable. Cabin was moderately quiet. Ride was fairly comfortable, as the suspension soaked up the worst bumps. Climate-control system, controls and displays were excellent.

PLYMOUTH GRAND VOYAGER

Chrysler Town and Country and Dodge Grand Caravan are essentially similar. A stretched, long-wheelbase version of the Dodge Caravan and Plymouth Voyager, redesigned this year. The standard Ultradrive automatic transmission has been especially troublesome during the past two years.

PLYMOUTH LASER

Eagle Talon and Mitsubishi Eclipse are essentially similar. Three siblings, all excellent cars. The 2-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth, precise-shifting 5-speed manual transmission. Very crisp and responsive handling. Excellent braking. Very comfortable front seats. Awkward driving position for short drivers. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Moderately noisy. Jittery ride on almost all roads. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

PLYMOUTH SUNDANCE

Dodge Shadow is essentially similar. The Sundance is well equipped, but an undistinguished performer. The 2.2-liter 4 started quickly but surged during acceleration. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted satisfactorily. The Sundance offered very good routine handling, but was not nimble in emergency maneuvers. The brakes were excellent. The driving position was low, and the foot-operated parking brake was awkward with manual transmission. The front seats were comfortable, while the rear seat was very uncomfortable. The interior was moderately quiet. The somewhat harsh ride was better with a full load. There was a good heater and strong ventilation, along with simple controls and clear displays.

PLYMOUTH VOYAGER

Dodge Caravan is essentially similar. Generally improved, thanks to extensive redesign. Avoid the troublesome Ultradrive overdrive automatic transmission. The model of choice is the SE with 3-liter V6 and 3-speed automatic transmission. The 3-liter V6 started and ran well. Smooth-shifting 3-speed automatic transmission. Improved routine handling, but emergency handling was still clumsy and unsteady. Very good brakes. Driver's leg room was a bit tight. Very comfortable front seats and optional individual second-row seats. Comfortable third-row seat. Satisfactory ride on smooth roads, but lacked control on rough pavement. Quiet on smooth roads. Lots of shaking and rattling on rough roads. Slow heater. Strong ventilation and air-

conditioning. New controls felt better, but wiper and headlight switches were awkward. Clear displays, but tall drivers may not be able to see all of them.

PONTIAC 6000

Buick Century and Oldsmobile Cutlass Ciera are essentially similar. An aging design, no longer competitive.

PONTIAC 6000 WAGON

Buick Century and Oldsmobile Cutlass Ciera are essentially similar. An aging design, no longer competitive.

PONTIAC BONNEVILLE

Buick Le Sabre and Oldsmobile 88 Royale are essentially similar. A six-year-old design that's still competitive. The 3.8-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Very smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Handling was competent in normal driving, sloppy in emergency maneuvers. Very good brakes. Exceptional driving position with optional power seat. Very comfortable split-bench front seat. Annoying automatic safety belts hindered access. Comfortable rear seat. Very quiet. Soft and smooth ride on good roads, kicking and bounding on big bumps or when fully loaded. Heater somewhat slow to warm. Excellent air-conditioning and ventilation. Scattered controls, glitzy displays.

PONTIAC FIREBIRD

Chevrolet Camaro is essentially similar. Top-notch handling and superb braking. Rear-wheel drive. Poor driver visibility and clumsy access. Has driver's-side air bag. The 5-liter V8 started and ran flawlessly. Strong acceleration. The overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly, but delayed shifts sometimes allowed engine to lug. Precise, fairly quick handling. Poor traction on slippery roads. The brakes were excellent. Fairly comfortable front seats. Low driving position. Fairly difficult access. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Firm, jittery ride. Moderate noise level. Slow-warming heater, excellent air-conditioning. Convenient controls and displays.

PONTIAC GRAND AM

Buick Skylark and Oldsmobile Cutlass Calais are essentially similar. The best of the GM compacts, but not up to the standards of the best imports. The 2.3-liter 4 started reliably but occasionally hesitated on initial acceleration during warm-up. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Excellent handling with optional handling suspension. Very good with standard suspension. Excellent brakes. Fairly low driving position with awkward access. Low but fairly comfortable front seats. Rear seat uncomfortable for two or three. Busy, rather harsh ride. Ride was better with the standard suspension. Moderate noise level. Excellent climate-control system. Logical controls, and better displays than in the Buick and Oldsmobile counterparts.

PONTIAC GRAND PRIX

Buick Regal and Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme are essentially similar. A new and unexceptional model with an old nameplate. The ride especially doesn't measure up. The 3.1-liter V6 started and ran well. The automatic overdrive transmission shifted too often into and out of fourth gear. Sluggish, sloppy handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. The power driver's seat improved view over the hood. Fairly comfortable rear seat. Quiet. Overly soft ride, bottomed easily on all but the smoothest roads. Excellent climate-control system. Better controls than in other GM models. The optional digital displays were clear.

PONTIAC LE MANS

Unpleasant and uncomfortable.

PONTIAC SUNBIRD

Chevrolet Cavalier is essentially similar. No match for its Japanese competitors.

PONTIAC TRANSPORT

Chevrolet Lumina APV and Oldsmobile Silhouette are essentially similar. But you may not like the view from the driver's seat. The 3.1-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. More nimble than most minivans in routine driving. Controllable in emergency maneuvers. Numb, unresponsive brakes, but they stopped well. Awkward driving position. The optional power seat can help. Very comfortable front seats, comfortable modular middle and rear seats, a bit cramped in the rear. Quiet. Powerful climate controls. Irritating control layout, especially for the wipers and climate controls. Very good displays.

SAAB 900

Still crazy after all these years. An old and idiosyncratic design, but competent. A slightly more powerful engine this year. A driver's-side air bag and antilock brakes are standard.

SAAB 9000

This year's changes include a new 2.3-liter 4, available with or without turbocharger. A driver's-side air bag and antilock brakes are standard.

SATURN

A new model from a new division of General Motors Corp., the Saturn offers a choice of two 4's and two transmissions: a 5-speed manual and an overdrive automatic.

STERLING 827

Based on an older version of the Acura Legend. This model has been plagued with reliability problems

SUBARU JUSTY

A small commuter car. The optional ECVT transmission is efficient. The 1.2-liter 3 started reliably from cold but hesitated and occasionally stalled on take-off. The Electronic Continuously Variable Transmission (ECVT) was noisy and rough but allowed good fuel economy. Both handling and braking were very good. Driving position was fairly good. Front seats were fairly comfortable, while rear seat was very uncomfortable. The interior was moderately quiet, but noise increased on coarse pavement. The Justy offered a typical small-car ride. Both heating and ventilation were very good. Controls were very good, and displays were excellent.

SUBARU LEGACY

A fine overall performer. The Legacy is unlike other Subarus, and that's a compliment. The 2.2-liter 4 started and ran well. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Excellent handling in normal driving, but a bit twitchy at the track. Excellent brakes. Excellent driving position, with exceptionally comfortable front seats. The rear seat was fairly comfortable for two, uncomfortable for three. Quiet. Generally soft ride. Excellent climate-control system. Logical controls, clear displays.

SUBARU LOYALE

The 1.8-liter 4 started easily but surged briefly during acceleration and deceleration. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission, and a balky 5-speed manual transmission. Handling was very good, and brakes were excellent. The driving position was very good. The front seats were comfortable, and the rear seat was uncomfortable. The interior was moderately quiet, and the ride was fairly pleasant except with a full load. Heating was adequate but uneven. Air-conditioning was excellent, as were all controls and displays.

SUBARU LOYALE WAGON

The 1.8-liter 4 started easily but surged briefly during acceleration and deceleration. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission, and a balky 5-speed manual transmission. Handling was very good, and brakes were excellent. The driving position was very good. The front seats were comfortable, and the rear seat was uncomfortable. The interior was moderately quiet, and the ride was fairly pleasant except with a full load. Heating was adequate but uneven. Air-conditioning was excellent, as were all controls and displays.

SUBARU XT

The styling of the XT is more aggressive than its performance. The XT6 version should be more competitive. The 1.8-liter 4 started quickly but surged noticeably during acceleration. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted smoothly most of the time. It balked at shifts into second and reverse. Excellent routine handling. Emergency handling was controllable despite slight skating in bumpy turns. Very good brakes. Very good driving position. Very comfortable front seats, unusable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Moderately good ride on most roads. Very good heating system, excellent air-conditioning, poor ventilation. Scattered, inconvenient controls. Very clear displays.

SUZUKI SAMURAI

Rated Not Acceptable because of its tendency to roll over during a hard turn. We found this tiny 4-wheel-drive vehicle wretched in most other respects as well.

SUZUKI SIDEKICK

Geo Tracker is essentially similar. More sport than utility. A small, nimble vehicle made by Suzuki and sold by Chevrolet dealers. Don't confuse it with the tippy Suzuki Samurai, which we rated Not Acceptable. The 1.6-liter 4 started easily and ran well. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted crisply except in cold weather before the oil warmed. Very good handling. Excellent braking. Low, awkward driving position. Overly firm front seats with poor support. Roomy but uncomfortable rear seat. Noisy, fatiguing ride. Excellent heating and ventilation. Virtually perfect controls and displays.

SUZUKI SWIFT

Geo Metro is essentially similar. A minicar, the Swift has a 1.3-liter 4. The convertible has a driver's-side air bag. One of our favorite small models. Top-notch resale value. The 1.6-liter 4 started and ran well. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Competent routine handling. Sluggish but controllable emergency handling. Excellent brakes. Very good driving position. Very comfortable front seats, uncomfortable rear seat. Moderately quiet. Rode well for a small car except when fully loaded. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

TOYOTA 4RUNNER

Unimpressive overall. Toyota's traditional reliability is the main selling point. The 3-liter V6 started and ran well except for occasional spark knock. The overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly except for the lockup feature, which made the engine feel as if it was losing power. Reasonably good normal handling. Predictable but not crisp emergency handling. Rear-wheel antilock brakes performed well. Good driving position. Comfortable front seats, uncomfortable rear seat. Annoying but quiet ride. Very good climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

TOYOTA CAMRY

Still among the best compact models, although several competitors have closed the gap. Both the 2-liter 4 and the 2.5-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission, with Power and Normal ranges. Very good routine handling. A bit unsteady but safe in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes in sedan, relatively long stops in wagon. Excellent driving position. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. The rear seat was fairly comfortable for two, less so for three. Moderate noise level. Smooth, soft ride with good control. Excellent climate-control system. Very good controls, excellent displays.

TOYOTA CAMRY WAGON

Still among the best compact models, although several competitors have closed the gap. Both the 2-liter 4 and the 2.5-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission, with Power and Normal ranges. Very good routine handling. A bit unsteady but safe in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes in sedan, relatively long stops in wagon. Excellent driving position. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. The rear seat was fairly comfortable for two, less so for three. Moderate noise level. Smooth, soft ride with good control. Excellent climate-control system. Very good controls, excellent displays.

TOYOTA CELICA

Exceptional performance along with all the usual Toyota virtues, including reliability. Has driver's-side air bag. The 2.2-liter, 16-valve 4 started and ran flawlessly. Crisp-shifting 5-speed manual transmission, with well-chosen gear ratios. Excellent handling and braking. Very comfortable driving position. Very comfortable front seats, and a very uncomfortable, claustrophobic rear seat. Moderate noise level. Fairly comfortable ride. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

TOYOTA CRESSIDA

A fine overall performer, with consistently high test scores except for rear-seat comfort. Rear-wheel drive. The 3-liter 6 started easily, ran perfectly and accelerated briskly. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Impressive handling. Excellent braking. Very good driving position. Very comfortable front seats, fairly uncomfortable rear seat. Quiet. Ride was smooth except with a full load. Excellent automatic climate-control system. Complicated controls, clear displays.

TOYOTA LAND CRUISER

Toyota's largest 4-wheel-drive utility vehicle. A 4-liter 6 and an overdrive automatic transmission are standard.

TOYOTA MR2

Outstanding performance, but it's a two-seater with minimal room for luggage. Mid engine and rear-wheel drive. Has driver's air bag. The 2.2-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Precise 5-speed manual transmission. Excellent handling and braking. Very comfortable driving position and seats. Moderate noise level on most roads, worse at highway speeds. Nervous ride. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

TOYOTA PREVIA

A new model with an unusual mid-engine layout and rear-wheel drive or all-wheel drive. Pleasant handling but fragile bumpers. The 2.4-liter 4 started and ran well. Engine wasn't as responsive as in other minivans with V6. Fairly smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Better handling than in most large sedans. Excellent brakes. Pleasantly high driving position. Comfortable front seats and optional middle-row captain's chairs. Comfortable, foldable rear bench seat. Comfortable, quiet ride. Powerful heater and dual air-conditioning. Overstyled but logical controls. Clear displays.

TOYOTA SUPRA

The top of Toyota's sporty line, with a powerful 3-liter, 24-valve 6 and rear-wheel drive. Driver's-side air bag.

TOYOTA TERCEL

Stylishly redesigned, but pretty much the same old Tercel performance. The 1.5-liter 4 started easily and ran well. Crisp-shifting 4-speed manual transmission in the base model. Very good routine handling, but not very crisp in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Somewhat cramped driving position. Comfortable front seats and very uncomfortable rear seat. Fairly noisy. Ride was uncomfortable. The heater was fairly weak, and ventilation was satisfactory. Excellent controls and displays.

VOLKSWAGEN CORRADO

Superb handling and braking, soured by stiff ride, vague shifting and muddled controls. The 1.8-liter supercharged 4 started and ran smoothly but doesn't feel all that powerful. Vague, balky 5-speed manual transmission. Excellent handling and braking. Very comfortable front seats. Awkward driving position. Essentially uninhabitable rear seat. Moderate noise level. The ride was stiff and annoying even on smooth roads, and uncomfortable on back roads. Very good heating, and excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Poorly designed and poorly labeled controls. Displays were excellent.

VOLKSWAGEN FOX

Facelifted this year.

VOLKSWAGEN GOLF

Similar to the Jetta.

VOLKSWAGEN JETTA

Has a precision European feel that most Japanese models can't quite match. A 1.6-liter diesel 4 is available in the GL 4-door for the same price as the 1.8-liter gasoline 4.

VOLKSWAGEN PASSAT

Mostly unchanged since it was introduced last year. It comes with a 2-liter 4 and either a 5-speed manual or an automatic transmission. Antilock brakes are optional.

VOLKSWAGEN VANAGON

Lots of room for people, but stepped-up floor over rear-mounted engine and rear-wheel-drive components limits cargo room. Not up to the level of the best minivans in performance or comfort.

VOLVO 240

An old rear-wheel-drive design. The boxy wagon provides cavernous cargo room. A driver's-side air bag is standard. Antilock brakes are optional.

VOLVO 240 WAGON

An old rear-wheel-drive design. The boxy wagon provides cavernous cargo room. A driver's-side air bag is standard. Antilock brakes are optional.

VOLVO 740

A rear-wheel-drive model that performs with the best of the medium-sized models. Restyled, but still roomy and comfortable. A driver's-side air bag is standard. Antilock brakes are standard in all 940 models, optional in 740.

ACURA INTEGRA

Has a new body and redesigned chassis for this year. A 1.8-liter 4 is now standard. The Integra carries a sportier image than that of other models made by Honda.

ACURA INTEGRA COUPE

Has a new body and redesigned chassis for this year. A 1.8-liter 4 is now standard. The Integra carries a sportier image than that of other models made by Honda.

ACURA LEGEND

One of the sportiest medium-sized models, but with no sacrifice in comfort. A driver-side air bag is standard in all versions. Antilock brakes are standard in L and LS versions, unavailable in the base version. The 2.7-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly, accelerated strongly. The overdrive automatic transmission shifted abruptly at times. Excellent handling, very precise and crisp in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Rear seat fairly comfortable for two, tight for three. Taut but comfortable ride. The suspension absorbed jolts from tar strips and sharp bumps. Very quiet. Powerful climate-control system, but the air-conditioning and ventilation generated annoying drafts. Excellent controls and displays.

AUDI 100/200

Virtually the same as the Audi 5000, which it replaced last year. The 5000 scored high in our tests. Investigations by the governments of Canada, Japan and the U.S. have exonerated the 5000 of the charge that faulty powertrain design caused "sudden acceleration."

AUDI 80/90

Fairly competent overall. But the 80 is no match for its Japanese competitors in terms of features, and the 90 is relatively pricey for its class. The 2.0-liter 4 in the 80 stumbled when cold. The idle remained shaky even after warm-up. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Very competent routine handling. Tail-wagging required some skill to control in emergency maneuvers. Relatively long stopping distances from 60 mph. Very good driving position. Excellent front seat, uncomfortable rear seat. Moderately quiet. Stiff ride, better with full load. Heating ample but poorly distributed. Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Unusual controls, with confusion between headlight and hazard-warning levers. Very clear displays.

BMW 3-SERIES

An exemplary car in almost all respects except rear seating. Excellent handling and braking except on slippery roads, when the familiar "BMW twitch" becomes apparent. Has rear-wheel drive.

BMW 5-SERIES

The body is the same for the 525i and 535i, but the 6 in the 535i is bigger. An automatic transmission is standard in the 535i. Like all BMWs, the 525i and 535i have rear-wheel drive. Both models have a driver-side air bag and antilock brakes, plus many other comfort and convenience features.

BUICK CENTURY

Chevrolet Celebrity, Oldsmobile Cutlass Ciera and Pontiac 6000 are essentially similar. An aging design, not competitive with the best medium-sized models. Watch where you park, as the bumpers are flimsy. The 2.8-liter V6 in our 1988 model started and ran flawlessly and accelerated responsively. (The 3.1- and 3.3-liter V6s in the 1990 models perform similarly). Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Numb, sluggish handling. The body leaned noticeably in emergency maneuvers. Stops were a bit long. Comfortable front seat and driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Generally pleasant ride on expressways, but the soft suspension had trouble with bumpy secondary roads. Quiet. Excellent climate-control system.

BUICK ELECTRA

Oldsmobile 98 Regency is essentially similar. More expensive than Buick Le Sabre, Oldsmobile 88 Royale and Pontiac Bonneville, and better equipped. Otherwise, this family of cars is more alike than different.

BUICK LE SABRE

Oldsmobile 88 Royale and Pontiac Bonneville are essentially similar. The V6 offers better fuel economy and handling than the V8 in the Ford LTD Crown Victoria and Mercury Grand Marquis, but the suspension was too soft for rough roads or heavy loads. The 3.8-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly and accelerated responsively. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Crisp routine handling for such a large car. Responsive and stable emergency handling, but leaned a lot. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable split bench front seat. Awkward automatic front safety belts. Excellent driving position with power seat. Fairly comfortable rear seat. Quiet. Soft, smooth ride on good roads. Suspension topped and bottomed mildly on back roads. Excellent climate-control system except for heater, which was slow to warm up. Dated controls. Minimal displays, with reflections.

BUICK REGAL

A relatively large, inefficient model for transporting two in comfort. Cramped rear seat. A driver-side air bag is standard. Antilock brakes are standard only in the Toronado Trofeo model.

BUICK RIVIERA

Oldsmobile Toronado is essentially similar. A relatively large, inefficient model for transporting two in comfort. Cramped rear seat. A driver-side air bag is standard. Antilock brakes are standard only in the Toronado Trofeo model.

BUICK SKYLARK

Oldsmobile Cutlass Calais and Pontiac Grand Am are essentially similar. Competent overall, but not up to the standards of the best imported compacts. The optional 2.3-liter Quad 4 started and ran well. Strong acceleration at high revs. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Responsive handling. Excellent brakes. Low but fairly comfortable front seats and driving position. Awkward automatic safety belts. Rear seat is very uncomfortable for two or three. Rather harsh ride. Quiet. Excellent climate-control system. Fussy controls. Reflections on displays.

CADILLAC BROUGHAM

The longest of the large models. Has full-frame construction and rear-wheel drive, along with a 5.0-liter V8. Antilock brakes are standard equipment, but air bags remain unavailable in Cadillac's flagship model.

CADILLAC DE VILLE/FLEETWOOD

Much like Buick Electra and Oldsmobile 98 Regency but longer. Also, has a 4.5-liter V8 rather than a 3.8-liter V6. Driver-side air bag is standard. Antilock brakes are standard in Fleetwood and Sixty Special, optional in De Ville.

CADILLAC ELDORADO

A 2-door version of the Cadillac Seville, similar to the Buick Riviera and Oldsmobile Toronado. A 4.5-liter V8 is standard, as is a driver-side air bag.

CADILLAC SEVILLE

Basically a 4-door version of the Cadillac Eldorado. A driver-side air bag is standard. Antilock brakes are an option in the base version, standard in the Touring Sedan.

CHEVROLET ASTRO

GMC Safari is essentially similar. More truck than big wagon. A 4.3-liter V6 drives the rear wheels. Antilock brakes are standard. Stretch and full-time 4-wheel-drive versions available.

CHEVROLET BERETTA

Whether you want a sporty coupe or a practical sedan, there are better choices than the Beretta. The 2.0-liter 4 started well but often hesitated when partly warm. The 2.8-liter V6 started and ran well. It's been replaced by a 3.1-liter V6 for 1990. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted crisply but occasionally balked when going into first or reverse. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission with lock-up feature. Excellent handling with Beretta's optional performance suspension. Responsive, but occasionally displayed a rubbery twitch at the end of the fastest runs. Excellent brakes. Comfortable front seats. Awkward driving position. Too low for good visibility. Uncomfortable rear seat. Skimpy head and knee room. Moderately quiet. Firm but

well-controlled ride with Beretta's Sport suspension. Adequate heating. Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Very good controls and displays, with some daytime reflections.

CHEVROLET BLAZER

GMC Jimmy is essentially similar. A large 4-wheel-drive model based on Chevrolet's full-sized pickup truck. A 5.7-liter gasoline-powered V8 and a 6.2-liter diesel V8 are the standard engines. A manual transmission is unavailable with the diesel.

CHEVROLET CAMARO

Pontiac Firebird is essentially similar. Top-notch handling and braking, but at the cost of poor driver visibility, clumsy access and a luggage area that's a bad joke. Has rear-wheel drive. The 5.0-liter V8 started and ran flawlessly and accelerated strongly. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission, but delayed shifts sometimes made the engine labor. Fairly quick, precise handling. Poor traction on slippery roads. Excellent brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats. Low driving position. Fairly difficult access. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Firm and jittery ride. Moderately noisy. Heater slow to warm. Excellent air-conditioning. Generally convenient controls, clear displays.

CHEVROLET CAPRICE

An old-school design, with rear-wheel drive, full-frame construction, and big V8. Mediocre overall performance, below-average reliability. Restyled 1991 model due this spring. The 5.0-liter V8 started and ran flawlessly. The overdrive automatic transmission shifted into and out of overdrive too often. Slow steering response, but steady handling in normal driving. Sluggish and vague in emergency maneuvers. Slight weaving during short stops. Very comfortable front seat. Very good driving position with recommended power seat. Fairly comfortable rear seat. Quiet. Smooth ride on the highway, but distinctly uncomfortable on bumpy roads. Heater very slow to warm up. Excellent air-conditioning. Dated but functional controls and displays.

CHEVROLET CAVALIER

Pontiac Sunbird is essentially similar. The Cavalier and Pontiac Sunbird are the last survivors from among GM's J-car series. They don't compete well with the better compacts.

CHEVROLET CELEBRITY WAGON

Buick Century, Oldsmobile Cutlass Ciera and Pontiac 6000 are essentially similar. An aging design, not competitive with the best medium-sized models. Watch where you park, as the bumpers are flimsy. The 2.8-liter V6 in our 1988 model started and ran flawlessly and accelerated responsively. (The 3.1- and 3.3-liter V6s in the 1990 models perform similarly). Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Numb, sluggish handling. The body leaned noticeably in emergency maneuvers. Stops were a bit long. Comfortable front seat and driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Generally pleasant ride on expressways, but the soft suspension had trouble with bumpy secondary roads. Quiet. Excellent climate-control system.

CHEVROLET CORSICA

Whether you want a sporty coupe or a practical sedan, there are better choices than the Corsica. The 2.0-liter 4 started well but often hesitated when partly warm. The 2.8-liter V6 started and ran well. It's been replaced by a 3.1-liter V6 for 1990. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted crisply but occasionally balked when going into first or reverse. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission with lock-up feature. Very good handling with Corsica's standard suspension. Responsive, but occasionally displayed a rubbery twitch at the end of the fastest runs. Excellent brakes. Comfortable front seats. Awkward driving position; too low for good visibility. Uncomfortable rear seat. Skimpy head and knee room. Moderately quiet. Softer and less controlled ride with

Corsica's standard suspension. Adequate heating. Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Very good controls and displays, with some daytime reflections.

CHEVROLET CORVETTE

This heavy two-seater with fiberglass body, rear-wheel drive and V8 engine doesn't change much from year to year, except that it gets more and more powerful and expensive.

CHEVROLET LUMINA

Buick Regal, Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme and Pontiac Grand Prix are essentially similar. Chevrolet's new nameplate doesn't measure up. Ride and seating were disappointing. The 3.1-liter V6 started well but occasionally hesitated while cold. The overdrive automatic transmission shifted into and out of overdrive too often. Very good handling in the Euro version. Excellent brakes. Front seat very comfortable for two, very uncomfortable for three. Rear seat fairly comfortable even for three. Stiff ride. No better with full load. Moderately quiet. Loud exhaust in Euro version. Excellent climate-control system. Inconvenient controls and small, hard-to-read instruments.

CHEVROLET LUMINA APV

Oldsmobile Silhouette and Pontiac Trans Sport are essentially similar. A new, conspicuously innovative model with modular seating and a sleek plastic skin over a steel body hull. About as competent overall as the top-rated Chrysler Corp. minivans. The 3.1-liter V6 started and ran well. Very smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Best-handling minivan we've tested, almost as good as a typical sedan. Very good brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Driving position awkward for tall drivers. Very comfortable seating for up to five rear passengers. Smooth ride on most roads. It's not much worse with full load. Quiet. Ample heat but spotty distribution. Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Small, fussy controls. Instruments lacked contrast.

CHEVROLET S-10 BLAZER

GMC S-15 Jimmy is essentially similar. Marketed as a family vehicle but feels more like a truck. Fairly competent overall. Large size is a drawback in off-road driving. Rear antilock brakes are standard. A 4-door version is available. The 2.8-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly, but we prefer the more powerful 4.3-liter V6. Primitive, clumsy 5-speed manual transmission. Stable handling on smooth roads, but bumps often required steering corrections. Clumsy, vague emergency handling. Excellent braking. Front seats too low and too firm. Poor pedal arrangement. Optional rear bench seat roomy for two, but gave poor support. Noisy. Nervous ride even on good roads. Wild tossing on rough roads. Slow and spotty heating, but excellent air-conditioning and ventilation. Annoying controls. Insufficient contrast in displays.

CHEVROLET SUBURBAN

GMC Suburban is essentially similar. The largest station-wagon body available, based on Chevrolet's full-sized pickup truck. It's often used to pull large trailers. A 5.7-liter gasoline-powered V8 and a 6.2-liter diesel V8 are the standard engines.

CHRYSLER LE BARON

Dodge Spirit and Plymouth Acclaim are essentially similar. A replacement for the tired old Dodge Aries/Plymouth Reliant K-cars. The 2.5-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Smooth, responsive normal handling. Predictable but sloppy in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Comfortable front seat, cramped for tall drivers. Fairly comfortable rear seat even for three. Moderately quiet. Steady ride on expressways, nervous on rural roads. Very good heater, excellent ventilation.

CHRYSLER LE BARON COUPE/CONVERTIBLE

An uninhabitable rear seat is this model's biggest failing. The turbocharged engine gave snappy acceleration. A driver-side air bag is standard. The 2.5-liter turbo 4 started and ran flawlessly. Generally smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Very good routine handling, sloppy emergency handling. Touchy brakes. Comfortable front seats. Insufficient leg room for tall drivers. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Moderately quiet. Stiff ride. Powerful automatic climate-control system, but air distribution could be better. Cluttered controls, clear displays.

CHRYSLER NEW YORKER

Dodge Dynasty is essentially similar. The largest model available from Chrysler Corp., but not as roomy inside as the largest cars from Ford and GM. Satisfactory all-around performance. A driver-side air bag is standard, as in all U.S.-built Chrysler models. The 3.0-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly and gave lively acceleration. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Sluggish, sloppy handling. Excellent brakes with or without optional antilock system. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position with optional power seat (recommended). Fairly comfortable rear seat. Quiet. Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Mediocre heating. Straightforward controls, clear but dated displays.

CHRYSLER NEW YORKER FIFTH AVENUE/IMPERIAL

A stretched version of the Chrysler New Yorker/Dodge Dynasty, an example of Chrysler Corp.'s penchant for confusing car buyers with numerous nameplates for a single basic car. The engine is a new 3.3-liter V6. As with all domestic Chrysler products, a driver-side air bag is standard. Antilock brakes are standard in the Imperial.

CHRYSLER TOWN & COUNTRY

Dodge Grand Caravan, Chrysler Town and Country, and Plymouth Grand Voyager are essentially similar. A stretched version of the plain Caravan. Plain or Grand, still our top choice in minivans. Hauls like a truck, and seats up to seven. The 3.3-liter V6 started and ran very well and provided ample acceleration. Generally smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission, with an occasional abrupt shift. Satisfactory handling, though clumsy and slow. Large turning circle in the stretched Grand version. Very good brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Driving position easily tailored with power seat. Very comfortable center and rear bench seats. Rode as comfortably and quietly as a family sedan. We recommend

the heavy-duty suspension. Excellent climate-control system, but with complicated controls. Generally legible instruments.

DODGE CARAVAN

Plymouth Voyager is essentially similar. Behaves like its long-wheelbase Dodge Grand Caravan/Plymouth Grand Voyager cousins in most respects.

DODGE COLT

Eagle Summit, Plymouth Colt, Mitsubishi Mirage are essentially similar. One of the best small cars we've tested recently, with an unusually comfortable rear seat. Data doesn't apply to Dodge/Plymouth Colt wagon, an older design. The 1.5-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting 5-speed manual transmission. Excellent handling and brakes. Comfortable seats and driving position. Moderately quiet. Fairly comfortable ride, soaked up the worst bumps. Excellent climate-control system.

DODGE COLT WAGON

Eagle Summit, Plymouth Colt, Mitsubishi Mirage are essentially similar. One of the best small cars we've tested recently, with an unusually comfortable rear seat. Data don't apply to Dodge/Plymouth Colt wagon, an older design. The 1.5-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting 5-speed manual transmission. Excellent handling and brakes. Comfortable seats and driving position. Moderately quiet. Fairly comfortable ride, soaked up the worst bumps. Excellent climate-control system.

DODGE DAYTONA

All the right pieces, but the whole seems less than the sum of its parts. The 2.5-liter 4 started well but surged during warm-up. Difficult to drive smoothly. Balky 5-speed manual transmission. Reasonably good normal handling, but not predictable enough in emergency maneuvers. Poorly balanced brakes. Rear wheels locked prematurely. Fairly comfortable front seats. Low driving position. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Annoying busy ride. Suspension bottomed easily. Fairly quiet. Ample heat, but misdirected. Adequate ventilation and air-conditioning. Generally good controls, clear displays.

DODGE DYNASTY

Chrysler New Yorker is essentially similar. The largest model available from Chrysler Corp., but not as roomy inside as the largest cars from Ford and GM. Satisfactory all-around performance. A driver-side air bag is standard, as in all U.S.-built Chrysler models. The 3.0-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly and gave lively acceleration. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Sluggish, sloppy handling. Excellent brakes with or without optional antilock system. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position with optional power seat (recommended). Fairly comfortable rear seat. Quiet. Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Mediocre heating. Straightforward controls, clear but dated displays.

DODGE GRAND CARAVAN

Chrysler Town and Country and Plymouth Grand Voyager are essentially similar. A stretched version of the plain Caravan. Plain or Grand, still our top choice in minivans. Hauls like a truck, and seats up to seven. The 3.3-liter V6 started and ran very well and provided ample acceleration. Generally smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission, with an occasional abrupt shift. Satisfactory handling, though clumsy and slow. Large turning circle in the stretched Grand version. Very good brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Driving position easily tailored with power seat. Very comfortable center and rear bench seats. Rode as comfortably and quietly as a family sedan. We

recommend the heavy-duty suspension. Excellent climate-control system, but with complicated controls. Generally legible instruments.

DODGE MONACO

Eagle Premier is essentially similar. An exceptionally comfortable car, with superior ride and seating. Originally designed by Renault and American Motors Corp. Chrysler Corp. acquired the car in 1987, when it bought AMC. The 3.0-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Annoying overdrive automatic transmission. Shifted smoothly when accelerating, but downshifted abruptly when decelerating. Fairly slow steering response. Sloppy but controllable in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Exceptionally comfortable and roomy front seats. Ideal driving position for most drivers. Very comfortable and roomy rear seat. Smooth, well-controlled ride, among the

best of the domestic models. Quiet. Excellent climate-control system. Complicated, awkward controls (especially the turn-signal lever). Generally clear displays.

DODGE OMNI

Plymouth Horizon is essentially similar. Never highly rated by CR, the Omni/Horizon twins ceased production in February.

DODGE SHADOW

Plymouth Sundance is essentially similar. Somewhat small as compact cars go. Performed reasonably well. The hatchback body compromises rear-seat comfort. A driver-side air bag is standard.

DODGE SPIRIT

Chrysler Le Baron and Plymouth Acclaim are essentially similar. A replacement for the tired old Dodge Aries/Plymouth Reliant K-cars. The 2.5-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Smooth, responsive normal handling. Predictable but sloppy in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Comfortable front seat, cramped for tall drivers. Fairly comfortable rear seat even for three. Moderately quiet. Steady ride on expressways, nervous on rural roads. Very good heater, excellent ventilation.

EAGLE PREMIER

Dodge Monaco is essentially similar. An exceptionally comfortable car, with superior ride and seating. Originally designed by Renault and American Motors Corp. Chrysler Corp. acquired the car in 1987, when it bought AMC. The 3.0-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Annoying overdrive automatic transmission. Shifted smoothly when accelerating, but downshifted abruptly when decelerating. Fairly slow steering response. Sloppy but controllable in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Exceptionally comfortable and roomy front seats. Ideal driving position for most drivers. Very comfortable and roomy rear seat. Smooth, well-controlled ride, among the

best of the domestic models. Quiet. Excellent climate-control system. Complicated, awkward controls (especially the turn-signal lever). Generally clear displays.

EAGLE SUMMIT

Dodge Colt, Plymouth Colt, Mitsubishi Mirage are essentially similar. One of the best small cars we've tested recently, with an unusually comfortable rear seat. Data doesn't apply to Dodge/Plymouth Colt wagon, an older design. The 1.5-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting 5-speed manual transmission. Excellent handling and brakes. Comfortable seats and driving position. Moderately quiet. Fairly comfortable ride, soaked up the worst bumps. Excellent climate-control system.

EAGLE TALON

Mitsubishi Eclipse and Plymouth Laser are essentially similar. All three siblings, made in the same Illinois plant, are excellent cars. The 2.0-liter 4 (the engine option we like best) started and ran flawlessly. Precise, smooth-shifting 5-speed manual transmission. Excellent handling, with very quick and crisp response. (Four-wheel-drive versions are available in Eagle and Mitsubishi models.) Excellent braking. Very comfortable front seats. Driving position awkward for short drivers. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Fairly quiet. Jittery ride. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

FORD AEROSTAR

Feels more like a truck than a big wagon. Rear-wheel drive is a boon for trailer towing. The 3.0-liter V6 started and ran well. Very smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Clumsy and vague routine handling. Sloppy but controllable emergency handling. Improved brakes, but stops were still a bit long. Very comfortable front captain's chairs. Fairly comfortable driving position. Fairly comfortable center bench seat, uncomfortable rear bench seat. (The optional center captain's chairs hinder access.) Quiet. Ride was fairly well controlled on good roads, less so on poor roads. Excellent climate-control system. Inconvenient controls, legible displays.

FORD BRONCO

A large 4-wheel-drive utility vehicle based on Ford's full-sized pickup truck. A 4.9-liter 6 is standard, while 5.0- and 5.8-liter V8s are optional.

FORD BRONCO II

A model to be avoided because of its poor emergency handling. The 1991 Ford Explorer replaces the Bronco II. The 2.9-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly and accelerated responsively. Competent 5-speed manual transmission. Numb, vague normal handling. Often lifted one or two wheels in emergency maneuvers. Excellent braking, with short stops. Insufficient support from individual XLT front seats. Awkward driving position, especially for very short and tall drivers. Rear seat roomy enough for two, but poor support. Fairly quiet. Rode more like a passenger car than a utility vehicle. Very good heating, excellent air-conditioning and ventilation. Very good controls, excellent displays.

FORD ESCORT

A model with few strengths and many weaknesses, the Escort lacks the roominess and sophistication of the higher-rated small cars. The 1.9-liter 4 started easily but hesitated during warm-up. The 5-speed manual transmission felt a bit vague. The clutch engaged abruptly at the top of its long pedal travel. Clumsy routine handling and unpleasant emergency handling. Very good brakes. Uncomfortable front and rear seats. Awkward driving position. Fairly noisy. Harsh ride. Adequate heating and ventilation. Awkward controls, clear displays.

FORD ESCORT WAGON

A model with few strengths and many weaknesses, the Escort lacks the roominess and sophistication of the higher-rated small cars. The 1.9-liter 4 started easily but hesitated during warm-up. The 5-speed manual transmission felt a bit vague. The clutch engaged abruptly at the top of its long pedal travel. Clumsy routine handling and unpleasant emergency handling. Very good brakes. Uncomfortable front and rear seats. Awkward driving position. Fairly noisy. Harsh ride. Adequate heating and ventilation. Awkward controls, clear displays.

FORD FESTIVA

About what you'd expect from a tiny commuter car, except for surprisingly comfortable seating for two. Now available with automatic transmission in all but the base model. The 1.3-liter 4 started easily but hesitated slightly during acceleration (newly added fuel injection may help with that problem). Easy-shifting 4-speed manual transmission (a 5-speed manual is standard this year). Nimble handling. Especially responsive in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats and pleasantly high driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Fairly noisy, choppy ride. Very good heater and ventilation. Logical controls, clear displays.

FORD LTD CROWN VICTORIA

Mercury Grand Marquis is essentially similar. A winner by default, recommended because most other large models are unimpressive and because this model's reliability has been reasonably good. The 5.0-liter V8 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Handling was numb and vague in normal driving, stable but cumbersome in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable split bench front seat. Very good driving position with power seat. Quiet. Well insulated, smooth ride on good roads, worse on secondary roads. Generally excellent climate-control system, but Inconvenient windshield-wiper control. Glittery but simple displays.

FORD MUSTANG

The 5.0-liter V8 started and ran flawlessly and accelerated very powerfully. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Competent handling. Very good brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats. Awkward, low driving position. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Moderately noisy. Harsh ride. Very good heater, effective air-conditioning. Logical controls, clear displays.

FORD PROBE

Sporty styling and performance even in the tamest 4-cylinder version. Turbo 4 and V6 versions available. The Probe and the Mazda MX-6, made in the same Michigan plant, share many powertrain parts. The 2.2-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth, peppy acceleration. Easy-shifting 5-speed manual transmission. Excellent routine handling. Emergency handling was controllable but not as crisp. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Unusually comfortable driving position. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Moderately noisy. Taut ride. Very good heater and air-conditioning. Excellent controls and displays.

FORD TAURUS

Mercury Sable is essentially similar. Still the class act of the domestic medium-sized cars. Improvements this year include a driver-side air bag and more convenient controls. The 3.0-liter V6 started and ran well. Usually smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Very good handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable seats. Excellent driving position with recommended power seat. Quiet. Stable, tightly controlled ride on all but the worst roads. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

FORD TAURUS SHO

Mercury Sable is essentially similar. Still the class act of the domestic medium-sized cars. Improvements this year include a driver-side air bag and more convenient controls. The 3.0-liter V6 started and ran well. Usually smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Very good handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable seats. Excellent driving position with recommended power seat. Quiet. Stable, tightly controlled ride on all but the worst roads. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

FORD TAURUS WAGON

Mercury Sable is essentially similar. Still the class act of the domestic medium-sized cars. Improvements this year include a driver-side air bag and more convenient controls. The 3.0-liter V6 started and ran well. Usually smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Very good handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable seats. Excellent driving position with recommended power seat. Quiet. Stable, tightly controlled ride on all but the worst roads. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

FORD TEMPO

Mercury Topaz is essentially similar. Decent overall, let down by inferior rear seat and repair record. The 2.3-liter 4 started and ran well. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Competent handling. Very good brakes. Very comfortable front seats and driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderately quiet. Relatively harsh ride in GLS. Excellent climate-control system. Mostly logical controls, clear displays.

FORD THUNDERBIRD

Mercury Cougar is essentially similar. Last year's changes made the Thunderbird a much nicer car, thanks to a roomier body and better ergonomics. Retains rear-wheel drive. A typical coupe drawback: long, heavy doors that are awkward to open. The 3.8-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Competent routine handling. Sloppy in emergency maneuvers. Hard braking caused excessive nose-dive and erratic locking of front brakes. Comfortable front seats with power controls. Comfortable rear seats, but tight for tall passengers. Very quiet, well-controlled ride. Skimpy and noisy heating. Excellent ventilation and climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

GEO METRO

Suzuki Swift is essentially similar. This minicar, made by Suzuki and sold by Chevrolet dealers, was formerly the Chevrolet Sprint. The Metro has a 1.0-liter 3. The similar Suzuki Swift has a 1.3-liter 4.

GEO PRIZM

This top model in the Geo line, sold by Chevrolet dealers, was formerly the Chevrolet Nova. Essentially a Toyota Corolla built in California.

GEO STORM

A new Suzuki-built model with a 1.6-liter 4. A driver-side air bag is standard.

GEO TRACKER

Suzuki Sidekick is essentially similar. More sport than utility, a small and nimble 4-wheel-drive vehicle made by Suzuki and sold by Chevrolet dealers. Not to be confused with the tippy Suzuki Samurai, which we rated Not Acceptable. The 1.6-liter 4 started easily and ran well except for barely perceptible hesitation and occasional rough idle. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted crisply except in cold weather before the oil warmed. Very good handling. Excellent braking. Overly firm front seats with poor support. Low, awkward driving position. Roomy but uncomfortable rear seat. Noisy, fatiguing ride. Excellent heating and ventilation. Virtually perfect controls and displays.

GMC JIMMY

Chevrolet Blazer is essentially similar. A large 4-wheel-drive model based on Chevrolet's full-sized pickup truck. A 5.7-liter gasoline-powered V8 and a 6.2-liter diesel V8 are the standard engines. A manual transmission is unavailable with the diesel.

GMC S-15 JIMMY

Chevrolet S-10 Blazer is essentially similar. Marketed as a family vehicle but feels more like a truck. Fairly competent overall. Large size is a drawback in off-road driving. Rear antilock brakes are standard. A 4-door version is available. The 2.8-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly, but we prefer the more powerful 4.3-liter V6. Primitive, clumsy 5-speed manual transmission. Stable handling on smooth roads, but bumps often required steering corrections. Clumsy, vague emergency handling. Excellent braking. Front seats too low and too firm. Poor pedal arrangement. Optional rear bench seat roomy for two, but gave poor support. Noisy. Nervous ride even on good roads. Wild tossing on rough roads. Slow and spotty heating, but excellent air-conditioning and ventilation. Annoying controls. Insufficient contrast in displays.

GMC SAFARI

Chevrolet Astro is essentially similar. More truck than big wagon. A 4.3-liter V6 drives the rear wheels. Antilock brakes are standard. Stretch and full-time 4-wheel-drive versions available.

GMC SUBURBAN

Chevrolet Suburban is essentially similar. The largest station-wagon body available, based on Chevrolet's full-sized pickup truck. It's often used to pull large trailers. A 5.7-liter gasoline-powered V8 and a 6.2-liter diesel V8 are the standard engines.

HONDA ACCORD

Bigger, better and more powerful. Among the very best of compacts. The 2.2-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. The overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly. Top-notch handling. Excellent brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats, but low. Rear seat comfortable even for three. Moderately quiet. Mostly well-controlled ride. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

HONDA CIVIC

Consistently among CR's top-rated small models. Has had high resale value. The 1.5-liter 4 ran and accelerated well. The overdrive automatic transmission shifted abruptly during hard acceleration. Precise routine handling. Slightly vague in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Rear seat is uncomfortable for two, very uncomfortable for three. Moderately quiet. Fairly comfortable ride. Very good climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

HONDA CIVIC CRX

A small two-seater. The base and HF versions are economical commuter cars. The Si is a peppy, taut-handling sporty car. The 1.6-liter 4 (Si model) started and ran flawlessly. The 5-speed manual transmission wasn't crisp. The clutch pedal had a long travel. Excellent handling and braking. Fairly comfortable front seats. Skimpy head room for tall drivers. Moderately noisy. Jittery ride, though large bumps weren't a problem. Very good climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

HONDA PRELUDE

One of our top choices in sporty cars, with nimble, precise handling. The 2.0-liter 4 started easily and was very responsive when warm. Very easy-shifting 5-speed manual transmission. Superlative handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Driving position is too low and reclined. Drivers more than six feet tall may not have enough head room. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Moderately noisy. Jittery ride, but large bumps weren't a problem. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

HYUNDAI EXCEL

Mitsubishi Precis is essentially similar. This year's complete redesign includes a new body and fuel-injected engine.

HYUNDAI SONATA

Lots of car for the money. Needs stronger bumpers. The 2.4-liter 4 stalled when first put into gear, It also shook at idle. Smooth, responsive handling. Excellent brakes. Very good seats and driving position. Moderately quiet. Comfortable ride. Excellent climate-control system.

INFINITI Q45

A fully equipped luxury sedan made by a new division of Nissan. It has an extremely powerful V8, antilock brakes, and driver-side air bag.

ISUZU AMIGO

Basically a recreational vehicle based on Isuzu's short-wheelbase pickup truck. A 2.3- and a 2.6-liter 4 are available. An automatic transmission isn't offered.

ISUZU TROOPER II

A large, tall 4-wheel-drive go-anywhere vehicle. As roomy inside as a medium-sized passenger car, but rather trucklike in feel. Unimpressive in most of our tests. The 2.6-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Generally smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Indecisive when trying to maintain speed uphill. Mediocre normal handling, unnerving but controllable emergency handling. Excellent though touchy brakes, with very short stops. Comfortable front seats. Very good driving position for most people. Flat and firm rear seat, roomy for two but cramped for three. Noisy, harsh ride. Disappointing heating, but excellent air-conditioning and ventilation. Generally good controls and displays.

JEEP CHEROKEE

A large utility vehicle that serves as a go-anywhere vehicle and family-sized wagon. Feels more like a wagon than a truck. The 4.0-liter 6 started and ran flawlessly and accelerated strongly. The overdrive automatic transmission occasionally downshifted abruptly. Vague normal handling. Sluggish and sloppy at the test track. Somewhat long stopping distances. Mediocre optional bucket front seats. Disappointing driving position. Hard and flat rear seat, roomy enough for two but cramped for three. Noisy, uncomfortable ride. Heater was slow to warm. Otherwise, the climate-control system was excellent. Excellent controls and displays.

JEEP WRANGLER

A crude 4-wheel-drive runabout that performed poorly in many of our tests. In an emergency, the handling could be a handful for the average driver. The 2.5-liter 4 cranked slowly but always started and ran well. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted stiffly when cold. Abrupt, numb normal handling. Tricky emergency handling. Unimpressive brakes. The front seats gave little support, and the seatbacks aren't adjustable. Awkward driving position. Very uncomfortable rear seat, barely accommodates two. Very noisy, punishing ride. Heater warmed slowly and gave poor distribution. ventilation virtually nonexistent. Unorganized controls and displays.

LEXUS LS400

A fully equipped luxury sedan made by a new division of Toyota. It has a multivalve V8, antilock brakes, and driver-side air bag.

LINCOLN CONTINENTAL

Loosely based on the Ford Taurus/Mercury Sable chassis, this model has a 3.8-liter V6, electronic air suspension, antilock brakes and air bags for both front occupants.

LINCOLN MARK VII

A large, heavy car with rear-wheel drive. It performed fairly competently when we last tested it, in 1986. Air suspension and antilock brakes are standard.

LINCOLN TOWN CAR

Some chassis changes and a new body style for 1990. Driver and passenger air bags are standard, as are antilock brakes. The powertrain is essentially that of the Ford LTD Crown Victoria and Mercury Grand Marquis.

MAZDA 323

Mercury Tracer is essentially similar. Good value. One of CR's top choices among small cars. The 4-door version is now the Protegé. The 1.6-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly and gave very peppy acceleration. Crisp, precise 4-speed manual transmission. Excellent routine handling, responsive emergency handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderately quiet. Typical small-car ride. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

MAZDA 626

One of the best compacts, and, with the turbocharger, one of the quickest. The 2.2-liter turbocharged 4 started and ran flawlessly. Very responsive, abrupt acceleration. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Quick, precise handling. The optional antilock braking system gave excellent control and short stops. Very comfortable front seat. Nearly ideal driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderately quiet. Firm, nicely controlled ride. Very good heating. Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Most controls easy to use. Excellent displays.

MAZDA 929

One of the best seating packages in an import. The suspension of this rear-wheel-drive model is skewed more toward ride comfort than handling precision. The new S model is sportier, with a more powerful V6. The 3.0-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Very good routine handling. Emergency handling was a bit unsettling. Excellent braking (with antilock system). Exceptionally comfortable front seats and driving position. Comfortable rear seat. Very quiet. Very good ride control. Excellent climate-control system. Very good controls and displays.

MAZDA MPV

A good people-carrier with exceptional trailer-towing ability. But a raised rear deck and permanently attached third seat restrict cargo-carrying ability. Rear-wheel drive. Antilock rear brakes are standard. The 3.0-liter V6 started and ran well. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Pleasant routine handling. Sloppy in emergency maneuvers. Rather long stops because of premature locking of the front brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats and commanding driving position. Fairly comfortable center and rear bench seats. Satisfactory ride, but annoying side-to-side motions. Quiet. Good heater and defroster. Weak air-conditioner. Excellent controls and displays.

MAZDA MX-5 MIATA

1.6-liter 4, rear-wheel drive and two seats.

MAZDA MX-6

Designed in Japan and built in the U.S. A near-twin to the Ford Probe, the MX-6 shares its basic chassis with the Mazda 626.

MAZDA PROTEGÉ

Mercury Tracer is essentially similar. Good value. One of CR's top choices among small cars. The 4-door version is now the Protegé. The 1.6-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly and gave very peppy acceleration. Crisp, precise 4-speed manual transmission. Excellent routine handling, responsive emergency handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderately quiet. Typical small-car ride. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

MAZDA RX-7

A rotary engine makes this rear-wheel drive two-seater unique.

MERCEDES-BENZ 190

This model has been upgraded with a larger interior and a 6-cylinder engine. It retains rear-wheel drive. A driver-side air bag and antilock brakes are standard.

MERCEDES-BENZ 300

The rear-wheel-drive 300E was among the best all-around cars CR had ever tested when we reported on it in 1986. Antilock brakes and a driver-side air bag are standard. The new 4matic features a full-time 4-wheel-drive system.

MERCURY COUGAR

Ford Thunderbird is essentially similar. Last year's changes made the Thunderbird a much nicer car, thanks to a roomier body and better ergonomics. Retains rear-wheel drive. A typical coupe drawback: long, heavy doors that are awkward to open. The 3.8-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Competent routine handling. Sloppy in emergency maneuvers. Hard braking caused excessive nose-dive and erratic locking of front brakes. Comfortable front seats with power controls. Comfortable rear seats, but tight for tall passengers. Very quiet, well-controlled ride. Skimpy and noisy heating. Excellent ventilation and climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

MERCURY GRAND MARQUIS

Ford LTD Crown Victoria is essentially similar. A winner by default, recommended because most other large models are unimpressive and because this model's reliability has been reasonably good. The 5.0-liter V8 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Handling was numb and vague in normal driving, stable but cumbersome in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable split bench front seat. Very good driving position with power seat. Quiet. Well insulated, smooth ride on good roads, worse on secondary roads. Generally excellent climate-control system, but the heater was a bit slow to warm up. Inconvenient windshield-wiper control. Glittery but simple displays.

MERCURY SABLE

Ford Taurus is essentially similar. Still the class act of the domestic medium-sized cars. Improvements this year include a driver-side air bag and more convenient controls. The 3.0-liter V6 started and ran well. Usually smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Very good handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable seats. Excellent driving position with recommended power seat. Quiet. Stable, tightly controlled ride on all but the worst roads. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

MERCURY SABLE WAGON

Ford Taurus is essentially similar. Still the class act of the domestic medium-sized cars. Improvements this year include a driver-side air bag and more convenient controls. The 3.0-liter V6 started and ran well. Usually smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Very good handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable seats. Excellent driving position with recommended power seat. Quiet. Stable, tightly controlled ride on all but the worst roads. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

MERCURY TOPAZ

Ford Tempo is essentially similar. Decent overall, let down by inferior rear seat and repair record. The 2.3-liter 4 started and ran well. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Competent handling. Very good brakes. Very comfortable front seats and driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderately quiet. Relatively harsh ride in GLS. Excellent climate-control system. Mostly logical controls, clear displays.

MITSUBISHI ECLIPSE

Eagle Talon and Plymouth Laser are essentially similar. All three siblings, made in the same Illinois plant, are excellent cars. The 2.0-liter 4 (the engine option we like best) started and ran flawlessly. Precise, smooth-shifting 5-speed manual transmission. Excellent handling, with very quick and crisp response. (Four-wheel-drive versions are available in Eagle and Mitsubishi models.) Excellent braking. Very comfortable front seats. Driving position awkward for short drivers. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Fairly quiet. Jittery ride. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

MITSUBISHI GALANT

A superior model with a feel of solidity and quality. Matches the best of the compacts in ride and seating accommodations. The 2.0-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Crisp handling in normal driving, a bit sloppy and ponderous in emergency maneuvers. Very good brakes. Very comfortable front seats and driving position. Very comfortable rear seat. Quiet. Taut but comfortable ride. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

MITSUBISHI MIRAGE

Dodge Colt, Eagle Summit and Plymouth Colt are essentially similar. One of the best small cars we've tested recently, with an unusually comfortable rear seat. Data doesn't apply to Dodge/Plymouth Colt wagon, an older design. The 1.5-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting 5-speed manual transmission. Excellent handling and brakes. Comfortable seats and driving position. Moderately quiet. Fairly comfortable ride, soaked up the worst bumps. Excellent climate-control system.

MITSUBISHI MONTERO

A large, rather crude 4-wheel-drive utility vehicle, essentially similar to the discontinued Dodge Raider. Competent in off-road driving, but ungainly in emergency maneuvers. A 3.0-liter V6 is now standard.

MITSUBISHI PRECIS

This year's complete redesign includes a new body and fuel-injected engine.

MITSUBISHI SIGMA

A technological tour de force, with electronic power steering, optional electronic suspension and power equipment galore. Though compact inside, it competes with the medium-sized Nissan Maxima and Toyota Cressida in price and image. The 3.0-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Very competent handling. Very good braking. Comfortable front seats. Driving position cramped for tall drivers. Uncomfortable rear seat. Very quiet. Very good ride with electronically adjustable suspension. Excellent climate-control system. Unusual but nicely designed controls, clear displays.

MITSUBISHI WAGON VAN

Disappointing front seats, ride, brakes, and bumpers, all in one misbegotten package. Engine mounted forward of rear axle. Rear-wheel drive. The 2.4-liter 4 started and ran well. The overdrive automatic transmission shifted abruptly and too often. Steering response was almost too quick. Poor crosswind stability. Fairly good emergency handling. Weaved during braking. Uncomfortable front seats. Awkward driving position. Fairly comfortable swiveling captain's chairs in center and rear bench seat. Moderately quiet. Punishing ride. Excellent dual climate-control system. Scattered controls, clear displays.

NISSAN 240SX

An improvement over its predecessor, the Nissan 200SX. This rear-wheel-drive model performed with the best of the sporty cars except for its tricky emergency handling. The 2.4-liter 4 started quickly, ran flawlessly and accelerated strongly. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted crisply. Excellent routine handling. Twitchy but controllable emergency handling. Very good braking. Very comfortable front seats. Good driving position for most. Not enough leg room for tall drivers. Tiny, unusable rear seat. Moderately noisy. Fairly uncomfortable ride. Very good heating and ventilation systems. Excellent controls and displays.

NISSAN 300ZX

Completely redesigned, this rear-wheel-drive car is now much more contemporary.

NISSAN AXCESS

Actually a small, high-roofed wagon rather than a van. Successor to the Nissan Stanza wagon. Its unpredictable handling is reason enough to shop for another model. The 2.4-liter 4 started and ran without a hitch. Abrupt-shifting overdrive automatic transmission tended to hold third gear too long. Sharp steering maneuvers made the van turn in more sharply than expected. In emergency maneuvers, maintaining control became difficult. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Awkward driving position, tight for tall drivers. Jittery ride. Moderately quiet. Engine noise was obtrusive at times. Slow heater, drafty and weak ventilation and air-conditioning. Logical controls, clear displays.

NISSAN MAXIMA

An excellent performer. One of our top-rated medium-sized models. Though we tested the flamboyant GXE version, with automatically adjusting suspension and Wurlitzer dashboard, we prefer the SE, with conventional suspension and analog gauges. The 3.0-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly and accelerated strongly. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Fairly responsive routine handling. Steady in hard turns, but fishtailed during abrupt maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Driver's seat has manual adjustment for height and tilt. Comfortable rear seat. Quiet. Soft, smooth ride on most roads. Good control even on large bumps. Inconsistent automatic climate-control system. Nicely designed but

complicated controls. Dazzling, confusing digital displays in GXE version.

NISSAN PATHFINDER

A four-wheel-drive utility vehicle based on Nissan's pickup truck. It has a 3.0-liter V6 and comes well equipped.

NISSAN PULSAR NX

When we last tested Nissan's smallest sporty car, it performed fairly well. A driver-side air bag is standard.

NISSAN SENTRA

One of CR's recommended models, though not one of the top performers. The 1.6-liter 4 started and ran well. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted crisply. Very good routine handling. Sluggish in emergency maneuvers. Very good brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderately quiet. Reasonably comfortable ride. Excellent climate-control system. Convenient controls, clear displays.

NISSAN STANZA

Improvements this year include a roomier body, more powerful engine and sportier handling. But noise level is up, and fuel economy is down slightly. The 2.4-liter 4 started quickly and ran well. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Excellent handling. Excellent brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Comfortable rear seat. Moderately quiet. Objectionable tire roar. Stiff, busy ride. Climate-control system very good except for drafts. Excellent controls and displays.

NISSAN VAN

This vehicle has been completely recalled and has been bought back by the manufacturer.

OLDSMOBILE CUTLASS CALAIS

Buick Skylark and Pontiac Grand Am are essentially similar. Competent overall, but not up to the standards of the best imported compacts. The optional 2.3-liter Quad 4 started and ran well. Strong acceleration at high revs. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Responsive handling. Excellent brakes. Low but fairly comfortable front seats and driving position. Awkward automatic safety belts. Rear seat is very uncomfortable for two or three. Rather harsh ride. Quiet. Excellent climate-control system. Fussy controls. Reflections on displays.

OLDSMOBILE CUTLASS CIERA

Buick Century, Chevrolet Celebrity and Pontiac 6000 are essentially similar. An aging design, not competitive with the best medium-sized models. Watch where you park, as the bumpers are flimsy. The 2.8-liter V6 in our 1988 model started and ran flawlessly and accelerated responsively. (The 3.1- and 3.3-liter V6s in the 1990 models perform similarly). Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Numb, sluggish handling. The body leaned noticeably in emergency maneuvers. Stops were a bit long. Comfortable front seat and driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Generally pleasant ride on expressways, but the soft suspension had trouble with bumpy secondary roads. Quiet. Excellent climate-control system.

OLDSMOBILE CUTLASS SUPREME

Chevrolet Lumina, Buick Regal and Pontiac Grand Prix are essentially similar. A new, unexceptional model with an old nameplate. Ride and seating don't measure up. New GM models tend to be troublesome. The 3.1-liter V6 started and ran well. The overdrive automatic transmission shifted too often into and out of fourth gear. Sluggish, sloppy handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Power driver's seat improves the view over the hood. Fairly comfortable rear seat. Quiet. Overly soft ride, bottomed too easily on all but the smoothest roads. Excellent climate-control system. Operating controls better than in other GM models. Optional digital displays were clear.

OLDSMOBILE EIGHTY EIGHT ROYALE

Buick Le Sabre and Pontiac Bonneville are essentially similar. The V6 offers better fuel economy and handling than the V8 in the Ford LTD Crown Victoria and Mercury Grand Marquis, but the suspension was too soft for rough roads or heavy loads. The 3.8-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly and accelerated responsively. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Crisp routine handling for such a large car. Responsive and stable emergency handling, but leaned a lot. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable split bench front seat. Awkward automatic front safety belts. Excellent driving position with power seat. Fairly comfortable rear seat. Quiet. Soft, smooth ride on good roads. Suspension topped and bottomed mildly on back roads.

Excellent climate-control system except for heater, which was slow to warm up. Dated controls. Minimal displays, with reflections.

OLDSMOBILE NINETY EIGHT REGENCY

Buick Electra is essentially similar. More expensive than Buick Le Sabre, Oldsmobile 88 Royale and Pontiac Bonneville, and better equipped. Otherwise, this family of cars is more alike than different.

OLDSMOBILE SILHOUETTE

Chevrolet Lumina APV and Pontiac Trans Sport are essentially similar. A new, conspicuously innovative model with modular seating and a sleek plastic skin over a steel body hull. About as competent overall as the top-rated Chrysler Corp. minivans. The 3.1-liter V6 started and ran well. Very smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Best-handling minivan we've tested, almost as good as a typical sedan. Very good brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Driving position awkward for tall drivers. Very comfortable seating for up to five rear passengers. Smooth ride on most roads. It's not much worse with full load. Quiet. Ample heat but spotty distribution. Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Small, fussy controls. Instruments lacked contrast.

OLDSMOBILE TORONADO

Buick Riviera is essentially similar. A relatively large, inefficient model for transporting two in comfort. Cramped rear seat. A driver-side air bag is standard. Antilock brakes are standard only in the Toronado Trofeo model.

PEUGEOT 405

Pleasant to drive. Unpredictable handling and fragile bumpers are drawbacks. The 1.9-liter 4 started and ran well. The overdrive automatic transmission hunted between third and fourth. Crisp normal handling, tricky in emergency maneuvers. Very good but touchy brakes. Very comfortable front seats, excellent driving position. Rear seat comfortable for two, uncomfortable for three. Moderately quiet. Smooth, supple ride. Excellent climate-control system. Fairly well-designed controls, clear displays.

PEUGEOT 505

A comfortable, fully equipped car with rear-wheel drive and a choice of engines: a 4, a Turbo 4 or a V6. The station wagon is especially roomy, with optional seating for eight.

PLYMOUTH ACCLAIM

Chrysler Le Baron and Dodge Spirit are essentially similar. A replacement for the tired old Dodge Aries/Plymouth Reliant K-cars. The 2.5-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Smooth, responsive normal handling. Predictable but sloppy in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Comfortable front seat, cramped for tall drivers. Fairly comfortable rear seat even for three. Moderately quiet. Steady ride on expressways, nervous on rural roads. Very good heater, excellent ventilation.

PLYMOUTH COLT

Dodge Colt, Eagle Summit, Mitsubishi Mirage are essentially similar. One of the best small cars we've tested recently, with an unusually comfortable rear seat. Data doesn't apply to Dodge/Plymouth Colt wagon, an older design. The 1.5-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting 5-speed manual transmission. Excellent handling and brakes. Comfortable seats and driving position. Moderately quiet. Fairly comfortable ride, soaked up the worst bumps. Excellent climate-control system.

PLYMOUTH COLT WAGON

Dodge Colt, Eagle Summit, Mitsubishi Mirage are essentially similar. One of the best small cars we've tested recently, with an unusually comfortable rear seat. Data don't apply to Dodge/Plymouth Colt wagon, an older design. The 1.5-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting 5-speed manual transmission. Excellent handling and brakes. Comfortable seats and driving position. Moderately quiet. Fairly comfortable ride, soaked up the worst bumps. Excellent climate-control system.

PLYMOUTH GRAND VOYAGER

Chrysler Town and Country and Dodge Grand Caravan are essentially similar. A stretched version of the plain Caravan. Plain or Grand, still our top choice in minivans. Hauls like a truck, and seats up to seven. The 3.3-liter V6 started and ran very well and provided ample acceleration. Generally smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission, with an occasional abrupt shift. Satisfactory handling, though clumsy and slow. Large turning circle in the stretched Grand version. Very good brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Driving position easily tailored with power seat. Very comfortable center and rear bench seats. Rode as comfortably and quietly as a family sedan. We recommend the heavy-duty suspension. Excellent climate-

control system, but with complicated controls. Generally legible instruments.

PLYMOUTH HORIZON

Dodge Omni is essentially similar. Never highly rated by CR, the Omni/Horizon twins ceased production in February.

PLYMOUTH LASER

Eagle Talon and Mitsubishi Eclipse are essentially similar. All three siblings, made in the same Illinois plant, are excellent cars. The 2.0-liter 4 (the engine option we like best) started and ran flawlessly. Precise, smooth-shifting 5-speed manual transmission. Excellent handling, with very quick and crisp response. (Four-wheel-drive versions are available in Eagle and Mitsubishi models.) Excellent braking. Very comfortable front seats. Driving position awkward for short drivers. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Fairly quiet. Jittery ride. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

PLYMOUTH SUNDANCE

Dodge Shadow is essentially similar. Somewhat small as compact cars go. Performed reasonably well. The hatchback body compromises rear-seat comfort. A driver-side air bag is standard.

PLYMOUTH VOYAGER

Dodge Caravan is essentially similar. Behaves like its long-wheelbase Dodge Grand Caravan/Plymouth Grand Voyager cousins in most respects.

PONTIAC 6000

Buick Century, Chevrolet Celebrity and Oldsmobile Cutlass Ciera are essentially similar. An aging design, not competitive with the best medium-sized models. Watch where you park, as the bumpers are flimsy. The 2.8-liter V6 in our 1988 model started and ran flawlessly and accelerated responsively. (The 3.1- and 3.3-liter V6s in the 1990 models perform similarly). Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Numb, sluggish handling. The body leaned noticeably in emergency maneuvers. Stops were a bit long. Comfortable front seat and driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Generally pleasant ride on expressways, but the soft suspension had trouble with bumpy secondary roads. Quiet. Excellent climate-control system.

PONTIAC 6000 WAGON

Buick Century, Chevrolet Celebrity and Oldsmobile Cutlass Ciera are essentially similar. An aging design, not competitive with the best medium-sized models. Watch where you park, as the bumpers are flimsy. The 2.8-liter V6 in our 1988 model started and ran flawlessly and accelerated responsively. (The 3.1- and 3.3-liter V6s in the 1990 models perform similarly). Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Numb, sluggish handling. The body leaned noticeably in emergency maneuvers. Stops were a bit long. Comfortable front seat and driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Generally pleasant ride on expressways, but the soft suspension had trouble with bumpy secondary roads. Quiet. Excellent climate-control system.

PONTIAC BONNEVILLE

Oldsmobile 88 Royale and Pontiac Bonneville are essentially similar. The V6 offers better fuel economy and handling than the V8 in the Ford LTD Crown Victoria and Mercury Grand Marquis, but the suspension was too soft for rough roads or heavy loads. The 3.8-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly and accelerated responsively. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Crisp routine handling for such a large car. Responsive and stable emergency handling, but leaned a lot. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable split bench front seat. Awkward automatic front safety belts. Excellent driving position with power seat. Fairly comfortable rear seat. Quiet. Soft, smooth ride on good roads. Suspension topped and bottomed mildly on back roads. Excellent climate-control system except for heater, which was slow to warm up. Dated controls. Minimal displays, with reflections.

PONTIAC FIREBIRD

Chevrolet Camaro is essentially similar. Top-notch handling and braking, but at the cost of poor driver visibility, clumsy access and a luggage area that's a bad joke. Has rear-wheel drive. The 5.0-liter V8 started and ran flawlessly and accelerated strongly. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission, but delayed shifts sometimes made the engine labor. Fairly quick, precise handling. Poor traction on slippery roads. Excellent brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats. Low driving position. Fairly difficult access. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Firm and jittery ride. Moderately noisy. Heater slow to warm. Excellent air-conditioning. Generally convenient controls, clear displays.

PONTIAC GRAND AM

Buick Skylark and Oldsmobile Cutlass Calais are essentially similar. Competent overall, but not up to the standards of the best imported compacts. The optional 2.3-liter Quad 4 started and ran well. Strong acceleration at high revs. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Responsive handling. Excellent brakes. Low but fairly comfortable front seats and driving position. Awkward automatic safety belts. Rear seat is very uncomfortable for two or three. Rather harsh ride. Quiet. Excellent climate-control system. Fussy controls. Reflections on displays.

PONTIAC GRAND PRIX

Chevrolet Lumina, Buick Regal and Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme are essentially similar. A new, unexceptional model with an old nameplate. Ride and seating don't measure up. New GM models tend to be troublesome. The 3.1-liter V6 started and ran well. The overdrive automatic transmission shifted too often into and out of fourth gear. Sluggish, sloppy handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Power driver's seat improves the view over the hood. Fairly comfortable rear seat. Quiet. Overly soft ride, bottomed too easily on all but the smoothest roads. Excellent climate-control system. Operating controls better than in other GM models. Optional digital displays were clear.

PONTIAC LE MANS

Generally an unpleasant and uncomfortable car, with poor reliability to boot. The 1.6-liter 4 was rough during acceleration. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Responsive handling in normal driving, unpredictable in emergency maneuvers. Brakes faded during repeated-stop tests. Comfortable front seats. Insufficient leg room for tall drivers. Uncomfortable rear seat. Fairly noisy. Excellent climate-control system. Awkward controls, excellent displays.

PONTIAC SUNBIRD

Chevrolet Cavalier is essentially similar. The Cavalier and Pontiac Sunbird are the last survivors from among GM's J-car series. They don't compete well with the better compacts.

PONTIAC TRANS SPORT

Chevrolet Lumina APV and Oldsmobile Silhouette are essentially similar. A new, conspicuously innovative model with modular seating and a sleek plastic skin over a steel body hull. About as competent overall as the top-rated Chrysler Corp. minivans. The 3.1-liter V6 started and ran well. Very smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Best-handling minivan we've tested, almost as good as a typical sedan. Very good brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Driving position awkward for tall drivers. Very comfortable seating for up to five rear passengers. Smooth ride on most roads. It's not much worse with full load. Quiet. Ample heat but spotty distribution. Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Small, fussy controls. Instruments lacked contrast.

PORSCHE 944

This rear-wheel-drive model performed very well and handled precisely when last tested. Air bags are standard for both driver and passenger.

SAAB 900

Detail improvements for 1990. A driver-side air bag is standard, as are antilock brakes and air-conditioning.

SAAB 9000

A very roomy and comfortable car. Very powerful response from the turbocharged 4, but the turbo kicks in abruptly. A driver-side air bag and antilock brakes are standard.

STERLING 827

Based on an older version of the Acura Legend. This model has been plagued with reliability problems.

SUBARU JUSTY

Just another of many tiny, unremarkable economy models, but with a remarkable optional automatic transmission. The 1.2-liter 3 started reliably but then hesitated and occasionally stalled. The unique automatic Electronic Continuously Variable Transmission (ECVT) shifts gently or abruptly, depending on how hard you step on the accelerator. During stops, the clutch doesn't disengage until nearly at a standstill, causing vibration. Very good handling and braking. Fairly comfortable front seats and driving position. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Moderately quiet. Much worse on coarse pavement. Typical small-car ride. Very good heating and ventilation. Very good controls, excellent displays.

SUBARU LEGACY

A fine overall performer. Quite unlike other Subarus, and that's a compliment. The 2.2-liter 4 started and ran well. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Excellent routine handling. A bit twitchy at the track. Excellent brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats and excellent driving position. Rear seat fairly comfortable for two, uncomfortable for three. Quiet. Generally soft ride. Excellent climate-control system. Logical controls, clear displays.

SUBARU LOYALE

Subaru's old DL and GL renamed, and better than most small cars. The 1.8-liter 4 started easily but surged briefly during acceleration and deceleration. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Very good handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats and driving position. Rear seat fairly comfortable for two, cramped for three. Moderately quiet. Fairly pleasant ride except with full load. Adequate but uneven heating. Excellent air-conditioning, but no vent position. Excellent controls and displays.

SUBARU LOYALE WAGON

Subaru's old DL and GL renamed, and better than most small cars. The 1.8-liter 4 started easily but surged briefly during acceleration and deceleration. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Very good handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats and driving position. Rear seat fairly comfortable for two, cramped for three. Moderately quiet. Fairly pleasant ride except with full load. Adequate but uneven heating. Excellent air-conditioning, but no vent position. Excellent controls and displays.

SUBARU XT

A sheep in wolf's clothing. The XT's performance didn't match its aggressive styling. The XT6 version would be more competitive. The 1.8-liter 4 started quickly but surged during acceleration. The 5-speed manual transmission sometimes balked. Excellent routine handling. Emergency handling was controllable. In bumpy turns, we noted slight skating. Very good brakes. Very comfortable front seat. Very good driving position. Cramped, unusable rear seat. Moderately noisy. Moderately good ride. Very good heating system. Weak ventilation. Scattered, very inconvenient operating controls. Very clear displays.

SUZUKI SAMURAI

Rated Not Acceptable because of its tendency to roll over during a hard turn. We found this tiny 4-wheel-drive vehicle wretched in most other respects as well.

SUZUKI SIDEKICK

Geo Tracker is essentially similar. More sport than utility, a small and nimble 4-wheel-drive vehicle made by Suzuki and sold by Chevrolet dealers. Not to be confused with the tippy Suzuki Samurai, which we rated Not Acceptable. The 1.6-liter 4 started easily and ran well except for barely perceptible hesitation and occasional rough idle. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted crisply except in cold weather before the oil warmed. Very good handling. Excellent braking. Overly firm front seats with poor support. Low, awkward driving position. Roomy but uncomfortable rear seat. Noisy, fatiguing ride. Excellent heating and ventilation. Virtually perfect controls and displays.

SUZUKI SWIFT

Geo Metro is essentially similar. This minicar, made by Suzuki and sold by Chevrolet dealers, was formerly the Chevrolet Sprint. The Geo Metro has a 1.0-liter 3. The similar Swift has a 1.3-liter 4.

TOYOTA 4RUNNER

A small vehicle based on Toyota's pickup truck. Base engine is a 2.4-liter 4. A 3.0-liter V6 is optional in some models, standard in others.

TOYOTA CAMRY

Our top choice in the compact group for years. The Camry is still good, but its competitors have closed the gap. Both the 2.0-liter 4 and the 2.5-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Very good routine handling, somewhat sloppy emergency handling. Excellent brakes in sedan. Relatively long stops with wagon. Exceptionally comfortable front seats, excellent driving position. Rear seat is fairly comfortable for two, less so for three. Quiet. Soft, nicely controlled ride. Excellent climate-control system. Very good controls, excellent displays.

TOYOTA CAMRY WAGON

Our top choice in the compact group for years. The Camry is still good, but its competitors have closed the gap. Both the 2.0-liter 4 and the 2.5-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Very good routine handling, somewhat sloppy emergency handling. Excellent brakes in sedan. Relatively long stops with wagon. Exceptionally comfortable front seats, excellent driving position. Rear seat is fairly comfortable for two, less so for three. Quiet. Soft, nicely controlled ride. Excellent climate-control system. Very good controls, excellent displays.

TOYOTA CELICA

One of our top-rated sporty models for years, and completely redesigned for 1990.

TOYOTA COROLLA

Geo Prizm is essentially similar. One of the best small models, with an exceptionally comfortable ride for its size. Engine now has fuel injection instead of carburetor. Top-notch resale value. The 1.6-liter 4 started and ran well. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Very good routine handling. Emergency handling not crisp. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats and driving position. Rear seat uncomfortable even for two. Moderately quiet. Rode well for a small car except when carrying a full load. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

TOYOTA COROLLA WAGON

Geo Prizm is essentially similar. One of the best small models, with an exceptionally comfortable ride for its size. Engine now has fuel injection instead of carburetor. Top-notch resale value. The 1.6-liter 4 started and ran well. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Very good routine handling. Emergency handling not crisp. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats and driving position. Rear seat uncomfortable even for two. Moderately quiet. Rode well for a small car except when carrying a full load. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

TOYOTA CRESSIDA

An excellent overall performer, the top model sold under the Toyota name. Rear-wheel drive. It has consistently scored high in CR's tests except for rear-seat comfort. The 3.0-liter 6 started easily, ran perfectly and accelerated briskly. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Impressive handling. Steady in hard turns at the track. Excellent braking. Very comfortable front seats and driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat, with poor lower-back and thigh support. Quiet. Smooth ride with light load. It gets markedly worse with full load. Excellent automatic climate-control system. Complicated controls, clear displays.

TOYOTA LAND CRUISER

Toyota's largest 4-wheel-drive utility vehicle. A 4.0-liter 6 and overdrive automatic transmission are standard.

TOYOTA SUPRA

Has a powerful 3.0-liter, 24-valve 6 and rear-wheel drive.

TOYOTA TERCEL

Certainly not one of the most sophisticated small models, but it performs well and costs little to run. The 1.5-liter 4 started easily but sagged during warm-up. Crisp-shifting 5-speed manual transmission. Fairly clumsy handling for a small car. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Fairly noisy. Typical small-car ride. Excellent climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

VOLKSWAGEN CORRADO

A completely new model with a supercharged 1.8-liter 4.

VOLKSWAGEN FOX

Our 1987 model performed fairly well. Ride, handling and accommodations were up to average small-car standards.

VOLKSWAGEN GOLF

This has been one of our recommended small models for several years. Overall performance should be similar to that of the VW Jetta.

VOLKSWAGEN GTI

The base GTI is now a VW Golf with special suspension. A version with a 16-valve, 2.0-liter 4 is new.

VOLKSWAGEN JETTA

Exudes a feeling of precision and smoothness that most Japanese small models can't quite match. The diesel engine makes a comeback. The 1.8-liter gasoline 4 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Superb handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Fairly comfortable driving position. Rear seat is uncomfortable even for two. Stiff and fairly noisy ride. Excellent climate-control system. Very good controls and displays. Unusually large trunk.

VOLKSWAGEN VANAGON

Lots of room for people, but stepped-up floor over rear-mounted engine and rear-wheel-drive components limits cargo room. In our previous tests, the van lacked power, handled poorly and wandered badly in crosswinds.

VOLVO 240

An old rear-wheel-drive design that still performs well in its class. The boxy wagon provides cavernous cargo room. A driver-side air bag is standard. The 2.3-liter 4 started easily and ran well. Some engine vibration during idle. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Stable handling. Sloppy but safe in hard turns at the test track. Stops were a bit long. Very comfortable front seats. Fairly comfortable rear seat. Crowded for three adults. Firm, rather harsh ride. Moderately quiet. Very good climate-control system, though somewhat difficult to regulate. Nicely designed controls, clear displays.

VOLVO 240 WAGON

An old rear-wheel-drive design that still performs well in its class. The boxy wagon provides cavernous cargo room. A driver-side air bag is standard. The 2.3-liter 4 started easily and ran well. Some engine vibration during idle. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Stable handling. Sloppy but safe in hard turns at the test track. Stops were a bit long. Very comfortable front seats. Fairly comfortable rear seat. Crowded for three adults. Firm, rather harsh ride. Moderately quiet. Very good climate-control system, though somewhat difficult to regulate. Nicely designed controls, clear displays.

VOLVO 740/760

Roomy and comfortable, whether sedan or station wagon. These rear-wheel-drive models performed on a par with the best of the medium-sized models. A driver-side air bag is standard. Antilock brakes are standard equipment in all but the 740 base and GL versions.

ACURA INTEGRA

The 1.6-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted precisely. Excellent handling and braking. Low but very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Firm ride. The suspension soaked up sharp road irregularities satisfactorily. Very good heating. Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning, controls and displays.

ACURA INTEGRA COUPE

The 1.6-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted precisely. Excellent handling and braking. Low but very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Firm ride. The suspension soaked up sharp road irregularities satisfactorily. Very good heating. Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning, controls and displays.

ACURA LEGEND

CR ranked the 1986 Legend, made by Honda, right up with the best cars we have tested. Since then, the engine and transmission have been changed and a driver's-side air bag has been added. Antilock brakes are standard in the L and LS versions.

ALFA ROMEO MILANO

The 2.5-liter V6 started and ran well. Some off-the-line hesitation, but strong acceleration. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. This rear-wheel-drive model gave competent routine handling. Somewhat sluggish and sloppy emergency handling. The anti-lock brakes gave short and straight stops, but the pedal pulsated strongly. Front seat poorly shaped and too low. Woefully inadequate leg room. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Nicely controlled ride over large bumps, but harsh over small road imperfections. Heater slow to warm, and temperature almost impossible to adjust finely. Marginal and noisy ventilation and air-conditioning. Unusual and confusing controls and displays.

AUDI 100/200

This is Audi's replacement for the 5000 series. The Quattro versions have full-time 4-wheel drive. Other than model designations, very little has changed. The 100 has the familiar 2.3-liter 5-cylinder engine. The 200 has a 2.2-liter turbo 5.

AUDI 80/90

The 2-liter 4 in the 80 stumbled during warm-up, then performed well except for a shaky idle. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Until it warmed up, it stayed in first gear too long. Very competent routine handling in front-wheel-drive 80 (the Quattros have full-time 4-wheel drive). A bit sloppy in abrupt avoidance maneuvers. Relatively long stopping distances. Excellent front seat. Very good driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderately noisy. Stiff ride is better with full load. Ample heat, but poorly distributed. Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Unusual controls. Confusion between headlight and hazard-warning levers. Very clear displays.

BMW 3-SERIES

The 2.5-liter 6 started and ran flawlessly. Strong acceleration. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly and quickly. This rear-wheel-drive model had crisp, steady and responsive handling, but it was touchy on snow and ice (we would expect the 4-wheel-drive version to do better). The antilock brakes stopped flawlessly. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Very comfortable driving position. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Fairly quiet. Firm, taut ride. Harsh on small, sharp bumps. Excellent climate-control system and controls. Very clear displays.

BUICK CENTURY

Chevrolet Celebrity, Oldsmobile Cutlass Ciera and Pontiac 6000 are essentially similar. The 2.8-liter V6 (no longer an option in the Buick but still available in the Chevrolet, Oldsmobile and Pontiac) started and ran flawlessly. Responsive acceleration. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. The third-gear lock-up contributed to quiet highway cruising. The steering felt dull and sluggish, and the body leaned considerably during emergency-type maneuvers. Stopping distance from 60 mph was a bit long. Comfortable front seat and driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Generally pleasant ride on expressways, but the soft suspension had trouble dealing with secondary roads. Pleasantly quiet. Excellent heating and air-conditioning.

BUICK ELECTRA

Oldsmobile 98 Regency is essentially similar. The Electra and Oldsmobile 98 are more expensive and have more standard equipment than the Buick Le Sabre, the Oldsmobile 88 Royale and the Pontiac Bonneville. Otherwise, this family of cars is more alike than different. All five models have a 3.8-liter V6.

BUICK LE SABRE

Oldsmobile 88 Royale and Pontiac Bonneville are essentially similar. The 3.8-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Responsive acceleration. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Crisp handling for such a large car. Responsive and stable emergency handling, but with considerable body lean. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable split bench front seat. Automatic front safety belts significantly hinder access. With power seat (recommended), excellent driving position. Fairly comfortable rear seat. Quiet. Rode softly and smoothly but topped or bottomed its suspension mildly on back roads. Climate controls were excellent except for the heater, which was a bit slow to warm up. Dated and somewhat inconvenient controls. Minimal displays, with reflections.

BUICK REGAL

Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme and Pontiac Grand Prix are essentially similar. The 2.8-liter V6 we tested started and ran well. (A 3.1-liter engine replaced that engine as standard in mid-year.) The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly, but shifts into and out of overdrive were too frequent. Smooth and responsive in routine driving, sluggish and unsteady in emergency maneuvers. Very good brakes. Very comfortable split bench front seat. Very good driving position with optional 6-way power seat. Automatic safety belts made entry and exit very difficult. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Fairly quiet. Firm, active ride. Heater was slow to warm up. Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Fussy, awkward controls. Poor displays, either too bright or too dim.

BUICK RIVIERA

Oldsmobile Toronado is essentially similar. Changes in the 1989 Riviera are largely cosmetic. The body is 11 inches longer. The Riviera and the Toronado both performed competently in our tests.

BUICK SKYHAWK

Oldsmobile Cutlass Calais and Pontiac Sunbird are essentially similar. The 2-liter 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Competent handling. Very good brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Rear seat uncomfortable for two, very uncomfortable for three. Moderately noisy. Reasonably good ride on most roads, poorly controlled on rough roads. Excellent climate-control system. Hard-to-read gauges. Daytime reflections made matters worse. Mostly convenient controls.

BUICK SKYLARK

Oldsmobile Cutlass Calais and Pontiac Grand Am are essentially similar. The 2.5-liter 4 started reliably. During warm-up, it occasionally hesitated on initial acceleration. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Excellent handling with optional handling suspension, very good without it. Excellent brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats. Fairly low driving position. Awkward access. Uncomfortable rear seat. Busy, rather harsh ride. Better with standard suspension. Moderately noisy. Excellent climate-control system. Logical controls. Better displays than in Buick Skylark or Oldsmobile Calais.

CADILLAC BROUGHAM

The Brougham is the last of the Cadillacs with full-frame construction and rear-wheel drive. It is the longest of the large cars and has a 5-liter V8. Strangely, this flagship model offers neither air-bag protection nor antilock brakes.

CADILLAC DE VILLE/FLEETWOOD

Buick Electra and Oldsmobile 98 Regency are essentially similar, but the Cadillacs are longer and have a 4.5-liter V8. Antilock brakes are standard in the Fleetwood and Sixty Special models, a \$925 option in the others.

CADILLAC ELDORADO

The 2-door version of the Cadillac Seville. Very similar in design to the Buick Riviera and Oldsmobile Toronado. The Eldorado has a 4.5-liter V8 rather than a 3.8-liter V6.

CADILLAC SEVILLE

Basically a 4-door version of the Cadillac Eldorado. Antilock brakes are optional.

CHEVROLET ASTRO

GMC Safari is essentially similar. The Astro has a truck chassis with a front engine and rear-wheel drive. Only a 4.3-liter V6 is available. Rear antilock brakes are standard. The 1986 model, the last we tested, had comfortable seats but an uncomfortable ride.

CHEVROLET BERETTA

The 2-liter 4 started well, but it often died out or hesitated when partly warm. The 2.8-liter V6 started quickly and ran well. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted crisply but occasionally balked going into first or reverse. The automatic transmission, with lock-up, shifted smoothly. Excellent handling with Sport suspension. Sloppy and vague with standard suspension. Excellent brakes. Comfortable front seats. Awkward driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Tight head and knee room. Moderately noisy. Firm, well-controlled ride with Sport suspension. Softer, less controlled with standard suspension. Adequate heating. Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Very good controls and displays.

CHEVROLET CAMARO

Pontiac Firebird is essentially similar. The 5-liter V8 started and ran flawlessly. Strong acceleration. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly but sometimes delayed shifts, allowing the engine to lug. This rear-wheel-drive car had precise, fairly quick handling. Marginal traction on slippery roads. Excellent brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats. Low driving position. Fairly difficult access. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Firm, jittery ride. Moderate noise level. Heater slow to warm. Excellent air-conditioning. Generally convenient controls and displays.

CHEVROLET CAPRICE

The 5-liter V8 started and ran flawlessly. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted into and out of overdrive too often. Steady but slow normally for this rear-wheel-drive model, sluggish and vague in emergency maneuvers. Competent brakes. Very comfortable front seat. With power seat (recommended), very good driving position. Fairly comfortable rear seat. Quiet. Smooth ride on good roads, distinctly uncomfortable on bumpy roads. Heater very slow to warm up. Excellent air-conditioning. Controls and displays are dated but generally functional.

CHEVROLET CAVALIER

Buick Skyhawk and Pontiac Sunbird are essentially similar. The 2-liter 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Competent handling. Very good brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Rear seat uncomfortable for two, very uncomfortable for three. Moderately noisy. Reasonably good ride on most roads, poorly controlled on rough roads. Excellent climate-control system. Hard-to-read gauges. Daytime reflections made matters worse. Mostly convenient controls.

CHEVROLET CELEBRITY

Chevrolet Celebrity, Oldsmobile Cutlass Ciera and Pontiac 6000 are essentially similar. The 2.8-liter V6 (no longer an option in the Buick but still available in the Chevrolet, Oldsmobile and Pontiac) started and ran flawlessly. Responsive acceleration. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. The third-gear lock-up contributed to quiet highway cruising. The steering felt dull and sluggish, and the body leaned considerably during emergency-type maneuvers. Stopping distance from 60 mph was a bit long. Comfortable front seat and driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Generally pleasant ride on expressways, but the soft suspension had trouble dealing with secondary roads. Pleasantly quiet. Excellent heating and air-conditioning.

CHEVROLET CELEBRITY WAGON

Chevrolet Celebrity, Oldsmobile Cutlass Ciera and Pontiac 6000 are essentially similar. The 2.8-liter V6 (no longer an option in the Buick but still available in the Chevrolet, Oldsmobile and Pontiac) started and ran flawlessly. Responsive acceleration. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. The third-gear lock-up contributed to quiet highway cruising. The steering felt dull and sluggish, and the body leaned considerably during emergency-type maneuvers. Stopping distance from 60 mph was a bit long. Comfortable front seat and driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Generally pleasant ride on expressways, but the soft suspension had trouble dealing with secondary roads. Pleasantly quiet. Excellent heating and air-conditioning.

CHEVROLET CORSICA

The 2-liter 4 started well, but it often died out or hesitated when partly warm. The 2.8-liter V6 started quickly and ran well. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted crisply but occasionally balked going into first or reverse. The automatic transmission, with lock-up, shifted smoothly. Excellent handling with Sport suspension. Sloppy and vague with standard suspension. Excellent brakes. Comfortable front seats. Awkward driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Tight head and knee room. Moderately noisy. Firm, well-controlled ride with Sport suspension. Softer, less controlled with standard suspension. Adequate heating. Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Very good controls and displays.

CHEVROLET CORVETTE

The Corvette's many hi-tech systems now include a 6-speed manual transmission. The car remains a very heavy, powerful two-seater with a fiberglass body, rear-wheel drive, and a large and thirsty V8.

CHRYSLER CONQUEST

This turbocharged rear-wheel-drive model is very powerful. Its long list of equipment includes rear antilock brakes. When last tested, it was competent. The Mitsubishi Starion is essentially similar.

CHRYSLER FIFTH AVENUE

The Fifth Avenue, Dodge Diplomat and Plymouth Gran Fury are variations on the rear-wheel-drive design that started life as the late Dodge Aspen/Plymouth Volare. Chrysler Corp. ceased production of this V8-powered model as of the first of this year.

CHRYSLER LE BARON COUPE/CONVERTIBLE

The 2.5-liter 4 started easily and ran well. The automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly. Competent handling, but not as precise or crisp as we would like. Steady, easy-to-modulate brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Generally satisfactory driving position with optional power seat. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Moderately noisy. Harsh, jiggly ride on most roads. The automatic climate-control system was powerful, but temperature control was imperfect. Excellent controls and displays.

CHRYSLER NEW YORKER

Dodge Dynasty is essentially similar. The 3-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Responsive acceleration. Smooth-shifting 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission. Generally competent handling, but not as crisp and responsive as in most contemporary medium-sized models. The tires squealed much too easily during cornering. Excellent brakes with or without optional antilock system. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position with optional power seat (recommended). Fairly comfortable rear seat. Pleasantly quiet. Very good climate-control system. Straightforward controls, clear but dated displays.

DODGE ARIES AMERICA

Plymouth Reliant America is essentially similar. The Aries and Reliant have been replaced by the Dodge Spirit and Plymouth Acclaim. The Aries did not test out well, but it offered an attractive package for the low price.

DODGE CARAVAN

Plymouth Voyager is essentially similar. The short-wheelbase Voyager and Caravan behave like their long-wheelbase Grand cousins in all respects. An optional turbo 4 is new this year.

DODGE COLT

The Dodge/Plymouth Colt twins have a new body for 1989. The essentially similar Mitsubishi Mirage and Eagle Summit are available in sedan form.

DODGE DAYTONA

The 2.5-liter 4 started well but surged during warm-up. Difficult to drive smoothly. The 5-speed manual transmission was often balky. Reasonably good handling in normal driving, but car wasn't predictable enough in emergency maneuvers. Poorly balanced brakes. Rear wheels locked prematurely. Fairly comfortable front seats. Low driving position. Awkward foot-operated parking brake. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Annoyingly busy ride. Fairly quiet. Ample heat, but misdirected. Relatively weak air-conditioning. Generally good operating controls, clear displays.

DODGE DIPLOMAT

The Diplomat, Chrysler Fifth Avenue and Plymouth Gran Fury are variations on the rear-wheel-drive design that started life as the late Dodge Aspen/Plymouth Volare. Chrysler Corp. ceased production of this V8-powered model as of the first of this year.

DODGE DYNASTY

The Chrysler New Yorker is essentially similar. The 3-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Responsive acceleration. Smooth-shifting 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission. Generally competent handling, but not as crisp and responsive as in most contemporary medium-sized models. The tires squealed much too easily during cornering. Excellent brakes with or without optional antilock system. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position with optional power seat (recommended). Fairly comfortable rear seat. Pleasantly quiet. Very good climate-control system. Straightforward controls, clear but dated displays.

DODGE GRAND CARAVAN

Plymouth Grand Voyager is essentially similar. The 3-liter V6 started and ran well. The automatic transmission, with lock-up, shifted smoothly. Sluggish handling in this front-engine van with front-wheel drive. Large turning circle. Very good brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Nonadjustable passenger seat. Comfortable, car-like driving position. Fairly comfortable center and rear bench seats. Fairly quiet. Fairly comfortable ride on most roads. Heavy-duty suspension seems to improve the ride. Excellent climate-control system. Straightforward controls, clear displays.

DODGE LANCER

Chrysler Le Baron is essentially similar. The Le Baron and Lancer are built on the stretched K-car chassis. With the proper options, they performed reasonably well. However, both models are slated to be replaced later this year by the Dodge Spirit/Plymouth Acclaim, with a new chassis and body.

DODGE OMNI AMERICA

Plymouth Horizon America is essentially similar. The 2.2-liter 4 usually ran well. The 5-speed manual transmission was vague and balky at times. Clumsy handling. The nonpower steering felt slow and vague. Excellent brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats. Awkward driving position and poorly placed clutch pedal. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Soft ride, but poorly controlled on rural roads. Crude and archaic heater. Ventilation especially poor in cars without air-conditioning. Very poor operating controls. Reflections in gauges.

DODGE SHADOW

The 2.2-liter 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly. Handling was generally predictable, but a bit skittish in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Tall drivers couldn't see some instruments. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Comfortable ride on expressways, busy on back roads. Moderately noisy. Unimpressive heater. Excellent air-conditioning. Logical controls. Displays generally easy to read.

DODGE SPIRIT

Plymouth Acclaim is essentially similar. This model, introduced in mid-1989, competes with the Chevrolet Corsica and Ford Tempo, as well as imports such as the Honda Accord and Toyota Camry. It is slightly larger than the Dodge Aries/Plymouth Reliant, which it replaces, and it comes with a 2.5-liter 4, a turbocharged 4 or a 3-liter V6.

EAGLE MEDALLION

The 2.2-liter 4 started easily and ran well. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Responsive, accurate handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Comfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Exceptionally smooth ride for a compact car. Very good heating. Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Inconvenient controls. Clear displays.

EAGLE MEDALLION WAGON

The 2.2-liter 4 started easily and ran well. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Responsive, accurate handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Comfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Exceptionally smooth ride for a compact car. Very good heating. Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Inconvenient controls. Clear displays.

EAGLE PREMIER

The 3-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Lively acceleration. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly during acceleration, downshifted abruptly during deceleration. Precise, responsive handling. The power steering provided better-than-usual road feel. Crisp and predictable in hard turns around the track. Very good brakes. Very comfortable and roomy, front and rear. Driving position ideal for most drivers. Pleasantly quiet. Excellent climate-control system. The important controls are on the steering column, within fingertip reach. Inconveniently positioned turn-signal lever. Generally clear displays, but insufficient contrast in bright daylight.

EAGLE SUMMIT

The new Summit, sold by Chrysler's Jeep/Eagle division, is essentially similar to the Dodge/Plymouth Colt and the Mitsubishi Mirage.

FORD AEROSTAR

The 3-liter V6, mounted in front, started and ran well. The 4-speed automatic transmission shifted very smoothly. Handling of this rear-wheel-drive van was rather clumsy and vague during routine driving, sloppy but controllable during emergency maneuvers. Decent brakes, but stopping distances were a bit long. Very comfortable front captain's chairs (included in 7-passenger XL package). Fairly comfortable driving position. Fairly comfortable center seats. Uncomfortable rear bench seats. Optional center captain's chairs make entry awkward. Quiet. Fairly well controlled ride on good roads, less so on poor roads. Excellent climate-control system. Awkward, inconvenient controls. Easy-to-read displays.

FORD ESCORT

The Escort was restyled last year. Interior comfort and performance remain about the same. Interior room, especially width, is tight.

FORD ESCORT WAGON

The Escort was restyled last year. Interior comfort and performance remain about the same. Interior room, especially width, is tight.

FORD FESTIVA

The 1.3-liter 4 started easily but hesitated slightly during acceleration. The 4-speed manual transmission shifted easily. Nimble handling. Emergency handling was especially responsive. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Comfortably high driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Fairly noisy. Choppy ride, typical of a small car. Very good heater and ventilation. Logical controls, clear displays.

FORD LTD CROWN VICTORIA

Mercury Grand Marquis is essentially similar. The 5-liter V8 started and ran flawlessly. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Handling of this rear-wheel-drive model was numb and vague in normal driving, stable but cumbersome in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable split bench front seat. With power seat, very good driving position. Quiet. Well-insulated, smooth ride on good roads. Not too bad on secondary roads. Excellent climate control except for heater, which is a bit slow to warm up. Glittery but simple displays.

FORD MUSTANG

The 5-liter V8 started and ran flawlessly. Very powerful acceleration. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly. This rear-wheel drive model inspired confidence in normal driving and emergency maneuvers. Very good brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats. Awkward, low driving position. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Harsh ride. Very good heater. Effective air-conditioning. Logical controls, clear displays.

FORD PROBE

Mazda MX-6 is essentially similar. The 2.2-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth, peppy acceleration. The 5-speed manual transmission was easy to shift. Excellent clutch. Excellent routine handling, emergency handling controllable but not crisp. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Unusually comfortable driving position. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Taut ride, busy but not painful. Very good heater and air-conditioning. Excellent controls and displays.

FORD TAURUS

Mercury Sable is essentially similar. Both the 2.5-liter 4 and the 3-liter V6 started and ran well. With the V6, the 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted very smoothly. With the 4, the 3-speed automatic transmission shifted smoothly, but acceleration was no more than adequate. Agile, smooth routine handling. Excellent in emergency maneuvers. The wagon's handling was especially competent. Straight stops, but fairly long stopping distances. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Excellent driving position with optional power seat (recommended). Rear seat fairly comfortable for two or three. Quiet. Stable ride, tightly controlled on all but the worst roads. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

FORD TAURUS SHO

Mercury Sable is essentially similar. Both the 2.5-liter 4 and the 3-liter V6 started and ran well. With the V6, the 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted very smoothly. With the 4, the 3-speed automatic transmission shifted smoothly, but acceleration was no more than adequate. Agile, smooth routine handling. Excellent in emergency maneuvers. The wagon's handling was especially competent. Straight stops, but fairly long stopping distances. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Excellent driving position with optional power seat (recommended). Rear seat fairly comfortable for two or three. Quiet. Stable ride, tightly controlled on all but the worst roads. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

FORD TAURUS WAGON

Mercury Sable is essentially similar. Both the 2.5-liter 4 and the 3-liter V6 started and ran well. With the V6, the 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted very smoothly. With the 4, the 3-speed automatic transmission shifted smoothly, but acceleration was no more than adequate. Agile, smooth routine handling. Excellent in emergency maneuvers. The wagon's handling was especially competent. Straight stops, but fairly long stopping distances. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Excellent driving position with optional power seat (recommended). Rear seat fairly comfortable for two or three. Quiet. Stable ride, tightly controlled on all but the worst roads. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

FORD TEMPO

Mercury Topaz is essentially similar. The 2.3-liter 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Reasonably good handling. Very good brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderately noisy. Relatively harsh ride with GLS suspension. No worse with full load. Excellent climate-control system. Mostly logical controls, clear-displays.

FORD THUNDERBIRD

Mercury Cougar is essentially similar. The Thunderbird and Cougar have a new body and chassis this year but retain their rear-wheel-drive design. A supercharged V6 is new in the Super Coupe version.

GEO METRO

This model was formerly the Chevrolet Sprint. Also available as the Suzuki Swift, with 1.3-liter 4. The 1-liter 3 started easily but sagged and hesitated during acceleration. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted crisply. Very good handling. Sure and steady brakes. Small but fairly comfortable front seats. Low driving position. Fairly noisy. Harsh, active ride. Heater responded slowly to changes in temperature setting. Unimpressive ventilation. Logical controls, clear displays.

GEO PRIZM

The Prizm is the top model in the newly named Geo line sold by Chevrolet dealers. Essentially a Toyota Corolla, it should behave as impressively. The Nova and the Corolla have been very reliable.

GEO SPECTRUM

The Isuzu I-Mark is essentially similar. The front-wheel-drive Chevrolet Spectrum has taken the Geo name for 1989 but is otherwise unchanged. It has not been as competent as most Japanese imports.

GMC SAFARI

Chevrolet Astro is essentially similar. The Astro has a truck chassis with a front engine and rear-wheel drive. Only a 4.3-liter V6 is available. Rear antilock brakes are standard. The 1986 model, the last we tested, had comfortable seats but an uncomfortable ride.

HONDA ACCORD

The carbureted 2-liter 4 sometimes stalled once after a cold start and occasionally hesitated while warming up. Brisk acceleration. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly. Very competent handling. Very good brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Low, sporty-car driving position. Rear seat uncomfortable for two or three. Moderate noise level. Firm, well-controlled ride on most roads. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

HONDA CIVIC

The 1.5-liter 4 often stalled after a cold start. Once warm, it ran well. Responsive acceleration. The 4-speed automatic transmission shifted abruptly during hard acceleration. Crisp, precise handling in normal driving. A bit vague in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Rear seat uncomfortable for two, very uncomfortable for three. Moderate noise level. Fairly comfortable ride. Very good climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

HONDA CIVIC CRX

This 2-seater is one of CR's top-rated sporty cars. Though redesigned for 1988, it most likely retains the responsive acceleration and nimble handling of the previous model.

HONDA PRELUDE

The 2-liter 4 started easily and was very responsive when warm. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted very easily. With or without 4-wheel steering, handling was as sharp, accurate and steady as anyone could want. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Driving position too low and reclined. Tall drivers may have insufficient head room. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Jittery ride on most roads. Excellent climate-control system, operating controls and displays.

HYUNDAI EXCEL

Mitsubishi Precis is essentially similar. The 1.5-liter 4 started easily, but hesitated during acceleration even when warm. Both the 4-speed and 5-speed manual transmissions shifted easily. Sluggish handling for a small car. Emergency maneuvers were tricky. Excellent brakes. Firm front seats with good support. Accelerator pedal too close to the driver. Moderately noisy, annoyingly so on coarse pavement. Busy small-car ride. Adequate heating and ventilation. Very good controls, excellent displays.

HYUNDAI SONATA

We have classified this new sedan as a medium-sized car because of its roomy interior dimensions. A 2.4-liter 4 and 5-speed manual transmission are standard. A 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission is optional. The GLS is very well equipped.

ISUZU I-MARK

Geo Spectrum is essentially similar to the Isuzu I-Mark, a poor seller. The front-wheel-drive Chevrolet Spectrum has taken the Geo name for 1989 but is otherwise unchanged. It has not been as competent as most Japanese imports.

ISUZU IMPULSE

When last tested, the rear-wheel-drive Impulse did not perform as well as the better models in this class.

LINCOLN CONTINENTAL

This model, new for 1988, is based on the Ford Taurus/Mercury Sable chassis. It has a 3.8-liter V6, electronically controlled suspension and steering, antilock brakes, and two front air bags.

LINCOLN TOWN CAR

This model is a stretched version of the large Ford and Mercury. Its powertrain is the same, but its interior appointments are more luxurious.

MAZDA 323

Mercury Tracer is essentially similar. The 1.6-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Spirited acceleration. The 4-speed manual transmission shifted crisply and precisely. Excellent routine handling and responsive emergency handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Typical small-car ride. Excellent climate-control system, controls, and displays.

MAZDA 626

The 2.2-liter turbocharged 4 started and ran flawlessly. Very responsive acceleration, but the turbo's power comes on very abruptly. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Quick, precise handling. The optional antilock brakes gave excellent control and short stopping distances. Very comfortable front seat. Nearly ideal driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderately noisy. Firm, well-controlled ride. Very good heating. Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Most controls were easy to use. Excellent displays.

MAZDA 929

New for 1988, this is Mazda's entry into the luxury sports-sedan market. It has a 3-liter V6, 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission, and rear-wheel drive. The interior is quite roomy.

MAZDA MPV

This new model has a front engine and rear-wheel drive. A 2.6-liter 4 and a 3-liter V6 are available. Seating is for 5 or 7. The cargo floor steps up at the rear. The MPV appears to be oriented more toward passenger-car than truck use.

MAZDA MX-6

The MX-6 was designed in Japan and is built in the U.S. in a joint venture with Ford. The MX-6's basic chassis is similar to that of the Mazda 626.

MAZDA RX-7

The 1989 model has not been released as of this writing. When last tested, this rotary-engine, rear-wheel-drive car was excellent.

MERCEDES-BENZ 190

The rear-wheel-drive 190 has been redesigned to offer more interior room (a previous shortcoming), and the gasoline 4 has been replaced by a 6. The diesel 5 is not available in California.

MERCEDES-BENZ 300

The rear-wheel-drive 300E was among the best cars CR had ever tested when we last reported on it, and well it should be for the price. Antilock brakes and a driver's-side air bag are standard.

MERCURY COUGAR

Ford Thunderbird is essentially similar. The Thunderbird and Cougar have a new body and chassis this year but retain their rear-wheel-drive design. A supercharged V6 is new in the Super Coupe version.

MERCURY GRAND MARQUIS

Ford LTD Crown Victoria is essentially similar. The 5-liter V8 started and ran flawlessly. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Handling of this rear-wheel-drive model was numb and vague in normal driving, stable but cumbersome in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable split bench front seat. With power seat, very good driving position. Quiet. Well-insulated, smooth ride on good roads. Not too bad on secondary roads. Excellent climate control except for heater, which is a bit slow to warm up. Glittery but simple displays.

MERCURY SABLE

Ford Taurus is essentially similar. Both the 2.5-liter 4 and the 3-liter V6 started and ran well. With the V6, the 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted very smoothly. With the 4, the 3-speed automatic transmission shifted smoothly, but acceleration was no more than adequate. Agile, smooth routine handling. Excellent in emergency maneuvers. The wagon's handling was especially competent. Straight stops, but fairly long stopping distances. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Excellent driving position with optional power seat (recommended). Rear seat fairly comfortable for two or three. Quiet. Stable ride, tightly controlled on all but the worst roads. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

MERCURY SABLE WAGON

Ford Taurus is essentially similar. Both the 2.5-liter 4 and the 3-liter V6 started and ran well. With the V6, the 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted very smoothly. With the 4, the 3-speed automatic transmission shifted smoothly, but acceleration was no more than adequate. Agile, smooth routine handling. Excellent in emergency maneuvers. The wagon's handling was especially competent. Straight stops, but fairly long stopping distances. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Excellent driving position with optional power seat (recommended). Rear seat fairly comfortable for two or three. Quiet. Stable ride, tightly controlled on all but the worst roads. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

MERCURY TOPAZ

Ford Tempo is essentially similar. The 2.3-liter 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Reasonably good handling. Very good brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderately noisy. Relatively harsh ride with GLS suspension. No worse with full load. Excellent climate-control system. Mostly logical controls, clear-displays.

MERCURY TRACER

The 1.6-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Peppy acceleration. The automatic transmission, with lock-up feature, shifted smoothly. Steady and predictable handling, but steering response felt dull. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Fairly noisy. Typical small-car ride. Excellent climate-control system. Good controls, excellent displays.

MERKUR SCORPIO

This rear-wheel-drive model comes with a 3-liter V6 and either a 5-speed manual or 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission. It is very well equipped and, except for head room, is spacious inside.

MERKUR XR4TI

This turbocharged rear-wheel-drive model has changed little since we tested it in 1985. Although it performs well, its reliability has been worse than average. The XR4Ti will be discontinued after this model year.

MITSUBISHI GALANT

The 2-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly. It offers a choice of Economy or Power mode. Competent routine handling, but a bit sloppy and ponderous in emergency maneuvers. Very good brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Very comfortable rear seat. Quiet. Taut but comfortable ride. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

MITSUBISHI MIRAGE

The Mirage sedan is similar to the Eagle Summit. The hatchback is similar to the Dodge/Plymouth Colt.

MITSUBISHI PRECIS

Hyundai Excel is essentially similar. The 1.5-liter 4 started easily but hesitated during acceleration. The 4-speed manual transmission shifted easily. Felt sluggish for a small car. Emergency handling was tricky. Excellent brakes. Comfortable front seats. Driver's leg room is tight. Moderate noise level. Engine noisy at highway speeds. Jiggly small-car ride. Very good heating, excellent ventilation. Very good controls and displays.

MITSUBISHI SIGMA

The 3-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Smooth-shifting 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission. Nearly flawless handling. Very good brakes. Comfortable front seats. Cramped driving position for tall people. Uncomfortable rear seat. Very quiet. Optional electronically adjustable suspension gave very good ride. Excellent climate-control system. Unusual but well-designed controls. Clear displays.

MITSUBISHI STARION

This turbocharged rear-wheel-drive model is very powerful. Its long list of equipment includes rear antilock brakes. When last tested, it was competent. The Chrysler Conquest, available from Chrysler Corp. dealers, is essentially similar.

MITSUBISHI WAGON VAN

The 2.4-liter 4, mounted amidships, started and ran well. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted abruptly and too often. A manual transmission is not available. Steering response of this rear-wheel-drive van was almost too quick, and crosswind stability was poor. Fairly good emergency handling. Fair brakes. Uncomfortable front seats. Awkward driving position. Fairly comfortable center and rear captain's chairs. Moderately noisy. The axle gears howled. Rough, bouncy ride. Excellent climate-control system with optional dual air-conditioning. Scattered controls, clear displays.

NISSAN 240SX

This new model has a 2.4-liter, 12-valve 4, a 5-speed manual or a 4-speed automatic transmission, and rear-wheel drive.

NISSAN 300ZX

A new version of this rear-wheel-drive car, probably to be designated a 1990 model, is due this spring. The old 300ZX was large and heavy for a sports car, but comfortable and very well-equipped.

NISSAN MAXIMA

Only the 3-liter V6, 5-speed manual transmission and 4-speed overdrive automatic are carried over from the older model. All else is redesigned for 1989. The interior is considerably roomier, so much so that we now classify the Maxima as a medium-sized model.

NISSAN PULSAR NX

The 1.6-liter 4 (16-valve SE version) started quickly, ran flawlessly and accelerated strongly. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted smoothly except when cold. Excellent handling, especially in hard test-track maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Good driving position for most. Not enough leg room for tall drivers. Virtually unusable rear seat. Fairly noisy. Fairly uncomfortable ride. Good heating and ventilation. Excellent air-conditioning.

NISSAN SENTRA

The 1.6-liter 4 usually started and ran well. The automatic transmission, with lock-up, shifted smoothly. Very good handling in normal driving. Sluggish in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Reasonably comfortable ride. Excellent climate-control system. Convenient controls, clear displays.

NISSAN STANZA

The 2-liter 4 started quickly and ran well. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission sometimes downshifted abruptly. Competent handling. Not as good in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Fairly comfortable ride. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

NISSAN VAN

This vehicle has been completely recalled and has been bought back by the manufacturer.

OLDSMOBILE CUTLASS CALAIS

Buick Skylark and Pontiac Grand Am are essentially similar. The 2.5-liter 4 started reliably. During warm-up, it occasionally hesitated on initial acceleration. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Excellent handling with optional handling suspension, very good without it. Excellent brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats. Fairly low driving position. Awkward access. Uncomfortable rear seat. Busy, rather harsh ride. Better with standard suspension. Moderately noisy. Excellent climate-control system. Logical controls. Better displays than in Buick Skylark or Oldsmobile Calais.

OLDSMOBILE CUTLASS CIERA

Buick Century, Chevrolet Celebrity and Pontiac 6000 are essentially similar. The 2.8-liter V6 (no longer an option in the Buick but still available in the Chevrolet, Oldsmobile and Pontiac) started and ran flawlessly. Responsive acceleration. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. The third-gear lock-up contributed to quiet highway cruising. The steering felt dull and sluggish, and the body leaned considerably during emergency-type maneuvers. Stopping distance from 60 mph was a bit long. Comfortable front seat and driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Generally pleasant ride on expressways, but the soft suspension had trouble dealing with secondary roads. Pleasantly quiet. Excellent heating and air-conditioning.

OLDSMOBILE CUTLASS SUPREME

Buick Regal and Pontiac Grand Prix are essentially similar. The 2.8-liter V6 we tested started and ran well. (A 3.1-liter engine replaced that engine as standard in mid-year.) The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly, but shifts into and out of overdrive were too frequent. Smooth and responsive in routine driving, sluggish and unsteady in emergency maneuvers. Very good brakes. Very comfortable split bench front seat. Very good driving position with optional 6-way power seat. Automatic safety belts made entry and exit very difficult. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Fairly quiet. Firm, active ride. Heater was slow to warm up. Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Fussy, awkward controls. Poor displays, either too bright or too dim.

OLDSMOBILE EIGHTY EIGHT ROYALE

Buick Le Sabre and Pontiac Bonneville are essentially similar. The 3.8-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Responsive acceleration. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Crisp handling for such a large car. Responsive and stable emergency handling, but with considerable body lean. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable split bench front seat. Automatic front safety belts significantly hinder access. With power seat (recommended), excellent driving position. Fairly comfortable rear seat. Quiet. Rode softly and smoothly but topped or bottomed its suspension mildly on back roads. Climate controls were excellent except for the heater, which was a bit slow to warm up. Dated and somewhat inconvenient controls. Minimal displays, with reflections.

OLDSMOBILE NINETY EIGHT REGENCY

Buick Electra is essentially similar. The Electra and Oldsmobile 98 are more expensive and have more standard equipment than the Buick Le Sabre, the Oldsmobile 88 Royale and the Pontiac Bonneville. Otherwise, this family of cars is more alike than different. All five models have a 3.8-liter V6.

OLDSMOBILE TORONADO

Buick Riviera is essentially similar. Changes in the 1989 Riviera are largely cosmetic. The body is 11 inches longer. The Riviera and the Toronado both performed competently in our tests.

PEUGEOT 405

The 1.9-liter 4 started and ran well. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission often hunted between third and fourth gears. Slow initial acceleration with automatic. Crisp handling in normal driving. Tricky in emergency maneuvers. Very good but touchy brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Excellent driving position. Rear seat comfortable for two, uncomfortable for three. Moderately noisy. Smooth, supple ride. Excellent climate-control system. Fairly well-designed controls, clear displays.

PEUGEOT 505

This comfortable car offers a 4, turbo 4, and V6, along with rear-wheel drive. The station wagon is especially roomy. The level of standard equipment is high. Few options are offered.

PLYMOUTH ACCLAIM

Dodge Spirit is essentially similar. This model, introduced in mid-1989, competes with the Chevrolet Corsica and Ford Tempo, as well as imports such as the Honda Accord and Toyota Camry. It is slightly larger than the Dodge Aries/Plymouth Reliant, which it replaces, and it comes with a 2.5-liter 4, a turbocharged 4 or a 3-liter V6.

PLYMOUTH COLT

The Dodge/Plymouth Colt twins have a new body for 1989. The essentially similar Mitsubishi Mirage and Eagle Summit are available in sedan form.

PLYMOUTH GRAN FURY

The Gran Fury, Dodge Diplomat and Chrysler Fifth Avenue are variations on the rear-wheel-drive design that started life as the late Dodge Aspen/Plymouth Volare. Chrysler Corp. ceased production of this V8-powered model as of the first of this year.

PLYMOUTH GRAND VOYAGER

Dodge Grand Caravan is essentially similar. The 3-liter V6 started and ran well. The automatic transmission, with lock-up, shifted smoothly. Sluggish handling in this front-engine van with front-wheel drive. Large turning circle. Very good brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Nonadjustable passenger seat. Comfortable, car-like driving position. Fairly comfortable center and rear bench seats. Fairly quiet. Fairly comfortable ride on most roads. Heavy-duty suspension seems to improve the ride. Excellent climate-control system. Straightforward controls, clear displays.

PLYMOUTH HORIZON AMERICA

Dodge Omni America is essentially similar. The 2.2-liter 4 usually ran well. The 5-speed manual transmission was vague and balky at times. Clumsy handling. The nonpower steering felt slow and vague. Excellent brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats. Awkward driving position and poorly placed clutch pedal. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Soft ride, but poorly controlled on rural roads. Crude and archaic heater. Ventilation especially poor in cars without air-conditioning. Very poor operating controls. Reflections in gauges.

PLYMOUTH RELIANT AMERICA

Dodge Aries America is essentially similar. The Aries and Reliant have been replaced by the Dodge Spirit and Plymouth Acclaim. The Aries did not test out well, but it offered an attractive package for the low price.

PLYMOUTH SUNDANCE

The 2.2-liter 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly. Handling was generally predictable, but a bit skittish in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Tall drivers couldn't see some instruments. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Comfortable ride on expressways, busy on back roads. Moderately noisy. Unimpressive heater. Excellent air-conditioning. Logical controls. Displays generally easy to read.

PLYMOUTH VOYAGER

Dodge Caravan is essentially similar. The short-wheelbase Voyager and Caravan behave like their long-wheelbase Grand cousins in all respects. An optional turbo 4 is new this year.

PONTIAC 6000

Chevrolet Celebrity, Oldsmobile Cutlass Ciera and Buick Century are essentially similar. The 2.8-liter V6 (no longer an option in the Buick but still available in the Chevrolet, Oldsmobile and Pontiac) started and ran flawlessly. Responsive acceleration. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. The third-gear lock-up contributed to quiet highway cruising. The steering felt dull and sluggish, and the body leaned considerably during emergency-type maneuvers. Stopping distance from 60 mph was a bit long. Comfortable front seat and driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Generally pleasant ride on expressways, but the soft suspension had trouble dealing with secondary roads. Pleasantly quiet. Excellent heating and air-conditioning.

PONTIAC 6000 WAGON

Chevrolet Celebrity, Oldsmobile Cutlass Ciera and Buick Century are essentially similar. The 2.8-liter V6 (no longer an option in the Buick but still available in the Chevrolet, Oldsmobile and Pontiac) started and ran flawlessly. Responsive acceleration. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. The third-gear lock-up contributed to quiet highway cruising. The steering felt dull and sluggish, and the body leaned considerably during emergency-type maneuvers. Stopping distance from 60 mph was a bit long. Comfortable front seat and driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Generally pleasant ride on expressways, but the soft suspension had trouble dealing with secondary roads. Pleasantly quiet. Excellent heating and air-conditioning.

PONTIAC BONNEVILLE

Buick Le Sabre and Oldsmobile 88 Royale are essentially similar. This report is on the SE version. The 3.8-liter V6 started and ran eagerly. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission worked smoothly, but shifted into and out of lock-up too frequently. Excellent handling. Predictable and crisp. Excellent brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seat and driving position. Fairly comfortable rear seat. Quiet except for noisy exhaust. Excellent climate-control system. Very good operating controls, easy-to-read displays.

PONTIAC FIREBIRD

Chevrolet Camaro is essentially similar. The 5-liter V8 started and ran flawlessly. Strong acceleration. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly but sometimes delayed shifts, allowing the engine to lug. This rear-wheel-drive car had precise, fairly quick handling. Marginal traction on slippery roads. Excellent brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats. Low driving position. Fairly difficult access. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Firm, jittery ride. Moderate noise level. Heater slow to warm. Excellent air-conditioning. Generally convenient controls and displays.

PONTIAC GRAND AM

Buick Skylark and Oldsmobile Cutlass Calais are essentially similar. The 2.5-liter 4 started reliably. During warm-up, it occasionally hesitated on initial acceleration. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Excellent handling with optional handling suspension, very good without it. Excellent brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats. Fairly low driving position. Awkward access. Uncomfortable rear seat. Busy, rather harsh ride. Better with standard suspension. Moderately noisy. Excellent climate-control system. Logical controls. Better displays than in Buick Skylark or Oldsmobile Calais.

PONTIAC GRAND PRIX

Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme and Buick Regal are essentially similar. The 2.8-liter V6 we tested started and ran well. (A 3.1-liter engine replaced that engine as standard in mid-year.) The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly, but shifts into and out of overdrive were too frequent. Smooth and responsive in routine driving, sluggish and unsteady in emergency maneuvers. Very good brakes. Very comfortable split bench front seat. Very good driving position with optional 6-way power seat. Automatic safety belts made entry and exit very difficult. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Fairly quiet. Firm, active ride. Heater was slow to warm up. Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Fussy, awkward controls. Poor displays, either too bright or too dim.

PONTIAC LE MANS

The 1.6-liter 4 started flawlessly but vibrated during acceleration. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Responsive handling in normal driving, unpredictable in emergency maneuvers. The brakes faded noticeably after a series of hard stops. Comfortable front seats, but not enough leg room for tall drivers. Uncomfortable rear seat. Fairly noisy. Excellent climate-control system. Awkward controls, excellent displays.

PONTIAC SUNBIRD

Buick Skyhawk and Chevrolet Cavalier are essentially similar. The 2-liter 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Competent handling. Very good brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Rear seat uncomfortable for two, very uncomfortable for three. Moderately noisy. Reasonably good ride on most roads, poorly controlled on rough roads. Excellent climate-control system. Hard-to-read gauges. Daytime reflections made matters worse. Mostly convenient controls.

PORSCHE 944

This rear-wheel-drive model has become considerably more expensive since we tested it in 1986. It performed very well and handled precisely and crisply. Air bags are standard for both driver and passenger.

SAAB 900

Although basically unchanged for quite a few years, this model remains competitive in its class. With the turbo engine, the response comes on very abruptly.

SAAB 9000

The 2-liter turbo 4 started quickly and ran well. Very strong acceleration, but turbo lag sometimes made the car feel sluggish, especially from rest. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Excellent routine handling. In abrupt avoidance maneuvers, drivers had some trouble controlling the Saab's tendency to wag its tail. Excellent brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seat. Exceptionally good driving position. Fairly comfortable rear seat. Moderately noisy. Road noise was especially obtrusive on coarse pavement. Harsh, jittery ride, but well controlled over large bumps. Excellent automatic climate-control system, controls and displays.

STERLING 827

Based on an older version of the Acura Legend. This model has been plagued with reliability problems.

SUBARU JUSTY

The body has been lengthened slightly and the chassis revised for 1989. Also new this year is an electronic continuously variable automatic transmission (ECVT), the first of its kind in a model sold in volume in the U.S. We were unimpressed with the 1987 model we tested.

SUBARU XT

The 1.8-liter 4 started easily but surged briefly during acceleration and deceleration. The 3-speed automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Easy to control. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Rear seat fairly comfortable for two, cramped for three. Moderate noise level. Fairly pleasant ride except with full load. Adequate but uneven heating. Excellent air-conditioning, controls and displays.

SUZUKI SAMURAI

Rated Not Acceptable because of its tendency to roll over during a hard turn. We found this tiny 4-wheel-drive vehicle wretched in most other respects as well.

TOYOTA CAMRY

Both the 2-liter 4 and the 2.5-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly. It offers a choice of Power or Normal range. Very good routine handling. A bit unsteady but safe during hard cornering. Excellent brakes in sedan. Relatively long stopping distances for wagon. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Excellent driving position. Rear seat fairly comfortable for two, uncomfortable for three. Moderately noisy. Smooth, soft ride with good control. Excellent climate-control system. Very good controls, excellent displays.

TOYOTA CAMRY WAGON

Both the 2-liter 4 and the 2.5-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly. It offers a choice of Power or Normal range. Very good routine handling. A bit unsteady but safe during hard cornering. Excellent brakes in sedan. Relatively long stopping distances for wagon. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Excellent driving position. Rear seat fairly comfortable for two, uncomfortable for three. Moderately noisy. Smooth, soft ride with good control. Excellent climate-control system. Very good controls, excellent displays.

TOYOTA CELICA

The Celica has been one of our top-rated sporty models for years. It comes in many versions, including turbo and 4-wheel drive.

TOYOTA COROLLA

The 1.6-liter 4 started and ran well. Smooth-shifting 3-speed automatic transmission. Good handling in normal driving, sluggish but controllable in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Rear seat very uncomfortable for two or three. Moderate noise level. Relatively good ride except when carrying a full load. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

TOYOTA COROLLA WAGON

The 1.6-liter 4 started and ran well. Smooth-shifting 3-speed automatic transmission. Good handling in normal driving, sluggish but controllable in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Rear seat very uncomfortable for two or three. Moderate noise level. Relatively good ride except when carrying a full load. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

TOYOTA CRESSIDA

This rear-wheel-drive model now has a larger body and a 3-liter 6. A 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission is standard, as is most luxury equipment.

TOYOTA MR2

This mid-engined, rear-wheel-drive two-seater is exactly what a tiny sports car should be: peppy, agile and responsive. Comfort and room are not strong points. The supercharged version provides even more power.

TOYOTA SUPRA

This top-of-the-line sporty Toyota has had a light face-lift this year. It retains its powerful 3-liter, 24-valve 6 and rear-wheel drive.

TOYOTA TERCEL

The 1.5-liter 4 started easily but sagged during warm-up. The 4-speed manual transmission shifted crisply. Fairly clumsy handling for a small car. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Fairly noisy. Typical small-car ride. Excellent climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

TOYOTA VAN

The Toyota's amidships engine placement and rear-wheel drive, typical of Japanese passenger vans, make for difficult access from the front seating compartment to the rear. The van does not ride well, and it wanders in crosswinds.

VOLKSWAGEN FOX

The peppy 1.8-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. The 4-speed manual transmission has well-chosen gear ratios. Shifting into first and reverse was difficult. Steady and accurate handling in normal driving, safely controllable in emergency handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Fairly steady ride on expressways and average back roads. Sharp jostling on poor roads. Adequate heating. Very good ventilation. Awkward controls with hard-to-read labels. Excellent displays. Relatively large trunk.

VOLKSWAGEN GOLF

The Golf has been one of our recommended small models for several years. Overall performance should be similar to that of the VW Jetta.

VOLKSWAGEN GTI

A 16-valve 4 and close-ratio manual transmission give very strong acceleration, but at the expense of high engine speeds. Expect the GTI to handle very well.

VOLKSWAGEN JETTA

The 1.8-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Smooth, precise handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Fairly comfortable driving position. Rear seat uncomfortable for two or three. Stiff, busy, and fairly noisy ride. Excellent climate-control system. Very good controls and displays. Unusually large trunk.

VOLKSWAGEN VANAGON

This rear-wheel-drive van has plenty of room for passengers, but it does not convert to a flat-floor cargo carrier. The floor steps up over the rear-mounted engine. In our previous tests, the van lacked power, handled poorly, and wandered badly in crosswinds. Traction on slippery pavement was poor. Heating and air-conditioning were weak.

VOLVO 240

The 2.3-liter 4 started easily and ran well. Some vibration during idle. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly. In normal driving, this rear-wheel-drive model handled stably. Sloppy but safe handling in hard turns at the test track. The brakes performed well, but stopping distances were a bit long. Very comfortable front seats. Fairly comfortable rear seat, but crowded for three. Firm, rather harsh ride. Moderate noise level. Very good climate-control system, but somewhat difficult to regulate. Well-designed controls, clear displays.

VOLVO 240 WAGON

The 2.3-liter 4 started easily and ran well. Some vibration during idle. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly. In normal driving, this rear-wheel-drive model handled stably. Sloppy but safe handling in hard turns at the test track. The brakes performed well, but stopping distances were a bit long. Very comfortable front seats. Fairly comfortable rear seat, but crowded for three. Firm, rather harsh ride. Moderate noise level. Very good climate-control system, but somewhat difficult to regulate. Well-designed controls, clear displays.

VOLVO 740/760

The 2.3-liter turbo 4 started quickly and ran well. Very strong acceleration, with minimal turbo lag. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly and downshifted quickly on demand. Very good handling. Excellent brakes. The antilock feature allowed short, straight stops. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Rear seat fairly comfortable for two or three. Quiet inside. Generally steady ride, but with pitching and rocking on secondary roads. Excellent automatic climate-control system. Generally simple, easy-to-use operating controls. The switches for the power driver's seat were awkward. Excellent displays.

YUGO

The 1.1-liter 4 almost always stalled when started, and it hesitated, sputtered and backfired during warm-up. Sluggish acceleration. The 4-speed manual transmission was very imprecise and often balky, especially when we shifted into reverse. Normal handling not as nimble as on most small cars. Steering felt heavy and vague at low speeds, especially when we accelerated. Very good emergency handling. Brakes somewhat difficult to modulate. Uncomfortable front seats. Extremely awkward driving position. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Noisy, harsh ride. Marginal heater and defroster. Modest ventilation. Poorly designed controls. Generally legible displays.

ACURA INTEGRA

The 1.6-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted precisely. Routine and emergency handling in this front-wheel-drive model were excellent. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seating and driving position, though low. Uncomfortable rear seating. Moderate noise level. Ride was firm, but the suspension satisfactorily damped sharp, busy motions. Very good heating. Excellent fresh-air ventilation and air-conditioning. Excellent controls and displays.

ACURA INTEGRA COUPE

The 1.6-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted precisely. Routine and emergency handling in this front-wheel-drive model were excellent. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seating and driving position, though low. Uncomfortable rear seating. Moderate noise level. Ride was firm, but the suspension satisfactorily damped sharp, busy motions. Very good heating. Excellent fresh-air ventilation and air-conditioning. Excellent controls and displays.

ACURA LEGEND

The 2.5-liter V6 (the 1988 model has a 2.7-liter V6) started and ran flawlessly. Acceleration was very strong. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted harshly at times. This front-wheel-drive model had excellent routine handling. Emergency handling was very precise and crisp. Excellent brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Head room tight for tall drivers. Rear seat fairly comfortable for two, tight for three. Taut but comfortable ride. Suspension absorbed jolts from tar strips and sharp bumps well. Ample heating and air-conditioning. Ventilation was free of drafts. Excellent controls, easy to see and use. Excellent displays.

AUDI 5000

The 2.2-liter 5 started and ran well, though vibration was noticeable at higher speeds and at idle. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive car handled with smooth precision. Excellent brakes even without optional antilock feature. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Generous leg room. Fairly comfortable rear seat for two or three. Fairly quiet. Very competent ride. Excellent automatic climate-control system. Mostly logical controls, clear displays.

AUDI 80/90

The Audi 80/90 is new for 1988 and replaces the 4000 line. The 80 has a 4-cylinder engine. Both Quattros and the 90 have a 5-cylinder, except for the 90 with automatic transmission, which uses the 4. The price difference is mainly because of trim. Compared with most compacts, this model is fairly small inside.

BMW 3-SERIES

The 2.5-liter 6 (the i version) started and ran flawlessly. Strong acceleration. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted up and down smoothly and quickly. Crisp, steady, and responsive handling. Flawless braking with anti-lock brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seating. Very comfortable driving position. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Fairly quiet. Firm and taut ride, felt harsh on small, sharp bumps. Excellent climate-control system. Excellent controls, logical and easy to use. Very clear displays.

BUICK CENTURY

Chevrolet Celebrity, Oldsmobile Cutlass Ciera and Pontiac 6000 are essentially similar. The 2.5-liter 4 started easily and ran well. The automatic transmission with lock-up shifted smoothly, but early lock-up made the engine lug. This front-wheel-drive model handled sluggishly but safely. Stops from 60 mph were disappointingly long. Very comfortable front seat. Very good driving position, but may be low for some drivers. Quiet. Fairly comfortable ride, but too soft on rough roads. Handling package would be desirable for most driving conditions. Excellent climate-control system. Generally good controls and displays.

BUICK ELECTRA

Oldsmobile 98 Regency is essentially similar. The Electra and Olds 98 are essentially the same front-wheel-drive cars as the lower-priced Le Sabre and Delta 88 models. They have a higher level of standard equipment, but that's about all. Antilock brakes are standard on the T-Type model.

BUICK LE SABRE

Oldsmobile Delta 88 Royale and Pontiac Bonneville are essentially similar. The 3.8-liter V6 started easily and ran well. The overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly in this front-wheel-drive model. Vague but safe handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable split bench front seat, roomy enough for three adults. Very comfortable, though rather low, driving position. Rear seat fairly comfortable even for three. Exceptionally quiet inside. Smooth ride on expressways, rough on secondary roads. Excellent climate control. Old-fashioned, familiar controls in Buick and Olds models. Minimal displays.

BUICK REGAL

Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme and Pontiac Grand Prix are essentially similar. The 2.8-liter V6 started and ran well. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly, but too often into and out of overdrive. This front-wheel-drive model handled smoothly and responsively in routine driving, but was sluggish and unsteady in emergency maneuvers. Very good brakes. Very comfortable split bench front seat. Very comfortable driving position with 6-way power seat. Entry and exit very difficult because of automatic safety belts. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Fairly quiet. Firm and active ride. Slow heater, but excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Fussy, awkward controls. Poor displays, either too bright or too dim.

BUICK RIVIERA

Oldsmobile Toronado is essentially similar. The 3.8-liter V6 started and ran without a problem. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Very competent routine handling with T-Type suspension. Very controllable emergency handling in this front-wheel-drive model. Excellent brakes. Excellent front seats, with many power adjustments. Excellent driving position. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Access to rear seat especially awkward. Very stiff ride on back roads with T-Type suspension. Very quiet. Excellent heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning. Controls are needlessly complex and distracting. The Graphic Control Center is a small video display

on the dash. Operation requires pushing various buttons to call up other screens and select desired activity. Digital displays are clear.

BUICK SKYHAWK

Chevrolet Cavalier, Oldsmobile Firenza and Pontiac Sunbird are essentially similar. The 2-liter 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model handled well in normal driving and emergency maneuvers. Very good brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats, very good driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat for two, very uncomfortable for three. Moderate noise level. Reasonably good ride, but not well controlled on rough roads. Excellent climate-control system. Gauges were hard to read. Most controls were convenient.

BUICK SKYLARK

Pontiac Grand Am and Oldsmobile Calais are essentially similar. The 2.5-liter 4 started reliably but occasionally hesitated on initial acceleration during warm-up. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model's handling with optional suspension was excellent. Without it, very good. Excellent brakes. Low and fairly comfortable front seats. Fairly low driving position with awkward access. Uncomfortable rear seat for two or three. Busy, rather harsh ride. Would be better with the standard suspension. Moderate noise level. Excellent climate-control system. Logical controls. Better displays than in Buick or Oldsmobile counterparts.

CADILLAC BROUGHAM

The Brougham model is the last of the "real" Cadillacs with rear-wheel drive. It now has a 5-liter V8 and holds claim to being the longest of the large cars.

CADILLAC CIMARRON

The 2.8-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Very responsive acceleration. The automatic transmission with lock-up occasionally shifted abruptly during acceleration. Responsive, precise and controllable handling in this front-wheel-drive model. Very good brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats and excellent driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Cramped for three adults. Moderate noise level. Stiff, jiggly ride. Excellent climate-control system. Generally familiar, easy-to-use controls. Excellent displays.

CADILLAC DE VILLE/FLEETWOOD

The front-wheel-drive De Ville is basically the same as the Buick Electra and Oldsmobile 98 Regency, except that the Cadillac models have a 4.5-liter V8 engine. The Sixty Special has antilock brakes.

CADILLAC ELDORADO

The Eldorado is the 2-door version of the front-wheel-drive Cadillac Seville. It is now powered by a 4.5-liter version of Cadillac's aluminum V8 engine.

CADILLAC SEVILLE

The Seville is a 4-door version of the Cadillac Eldorado.

CHEVROLET ASTRO

GMC Safari is a twin. The 4.3-liter V6 ran flawlessly except for an occasional stall after a cold start. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted abruptly from first to second, and it hunted into and out of lock-up on mild upgrades. Handling was sluggish and vague, but safe. Traction was below par on slippery roads. Very good brakes, a bit hard to modulate. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. High driving position, would have been excellent except for awkward pedal placement and lack of foot space. Fairly comfortable center and rear seats in 8-person seating package. Moderate noise level, uncomfortable ride. Adequate heating, modest ventilation and weak air-conditioning. Awkward controls. Clear displays.

CHEVROLET BERETTA

Both the 2-liter 4 and the 2.8-liter V6 started quickly and ran flawlessly. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted crisply but occasionally balked shifts into first or reverse. The automatic transmission with lock-up feature shifted smoothly most of the time. These front-wheel-drive models had excellent routine and emergency handling with performance suspension, sloppy and vague with standard suspension. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seating. Awkward driving position with manual transmission. Uncomfortable rear seating. Moderate noise level. Firm but well-controlled ride with Sport suspension. Softer and less controlled with standard suspension. Adequate heating. Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Very good controls. Excellent displays.

CHEVROLET CAMARO

Pontiac Firebird is essentially similar. The Camaro and Firebird are vintage sporty cars. Large and heavy. Consider them 2-seaters. They rely primarily on stiff suspensions to achieve the handling desired (usually at the expense of ride comfort) in cars of this type. Although a base V6 is available, most of these models are purchased with the more powerful V8.

CHEVROLET CAPRICE

The Caprice remains close to its original 1977 rear-wheel drive version. The Buick Estate Wagon, Oldsmobile Custom Cruiser and Pontiac Safari all share the Caprice wagon chassis and body.

CHEVROLET CAVALIER

Buick Skyhawk, Chevrolet Cavalier, Oldsmobile Firenza and Pontiac Sunbird are essentially similar. The 2-liter 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model handled well in normal driving and emergency maneuvers. Very good brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats, very good driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat for two, very uncomfortable for three. Moderate noise level. Reasonably good ride, but not well controlled on rough roads. Excellent climate-control system. Gauges were hard to read. Most controls were convenient.

CHEVROLET CORSICA

Both the 2-liter 4 and the 2.8-liter V6 started quickly and ran flawlessly. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted crisply but occasionally balked shifts into first or reverse. The automatic transmission with lock-up feature shifted smoothly most of the time. These front-wheel-drive models had excellent routine and emergency handling with performance suspension, sloppy and vague with standard suspension. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seating. Awkward driving position with manual transmission. Uncomfortable rear seating. Moderate noise level. Firm but well-controlled ride with Sport suspension. Softer and less controlled with standard suspension. Adequate heating. Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Very good controls. Excellent displays.

CHEVROLET CORVETTE

The Corvette has, among its many features, an antilock brake system and anti-theft system. The car remains a very heavy, powerful two-seater with a fiberglass body and a large and thirsty V8.

CHEVROLET MONTE CARLO

The Monte Carlo continues as GM's aging rear-wheel-drive specialty car. The other divisions of GM now have new front-wheel-drive models. In recent years, with its optional V8 engine and SS model, the Monte Carlo developed a performance image.

CHEVROLET NOVA

The 1.6-liter 4 started easily, but hesitated occasionally even after it warmed up. Smooth-shifting 5-speed manual transmission. Light clutch action. Handling of this front-wheel-drive model felt somewhat vague and sloppy, with considerable body lean. Excellent brakes. Excellent front seats and nearly ideal driving position. Uncomfortable, cramped rear seat, especially for three adults. Moderate noise level. Rode as comfortably as many larger models. Excellent climate-control system. Controls were generally easy to use, and displays were clear.

CHEVROLET SPECTRUM

Spectrum is essentially similar to the Isuzu I-Mark. The Spectrum has not turned out to be either as competent or as reliable as most of the Japanese imports. This year, a price-leader model and a turbocharged model have been added.

CHEVROLET SPRINT

The 1-liter 3 started well when cold but then sagged and hesitated during acceleration. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted crisply. This front-wheel-drive model handled well. Sure and steady brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats, but small and low. Low driving position. Fairly noisy. Harsh and active ride. Heater responded slowly to changes in temperature setting. Unimpressive ventilation. Logical controls and clear displays.

CHRYSLER CONQUEST

Mitsubishi Starion is essentially similar. The turbocharged Conquest is a very powerful performer. It comes fully equipped, including antilock brakes on the rear wheels. When last tested, we found it to be a competent machine, but a fairly rare one.

CHRYSLER FIFTH AVENUE

The Fifth Avenue, Dodge Diplomat and Plymouth Gran Fury are all variants of the same rear-wheel-drive design that started life as the Dodge Aspen/Plymouth Volare. This V8-powered model is the only such design left in Chrysler Corp.'s line.

CHRYSLER LE BARON

The front-wheel-drive Chrysler Le Baron sedan and wagon are built on the basic K-car (Dodge Aries/Plymouth Reliant) platform. Because of their much higher level of trim and standard equipment, they are priced to sell in the medium-sized field. Buyers should be very careful to avoid being confused by the name-game Chrysler deliberately plays with its many models. According to industry sources, this model will be discontinued after this model year.

CHRYSLER LE BARON COUPE/CONVERTIBLE

Both the 2.5-liter 4 and the turbocharged 2.2-liter 4 started easily and ran well. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly most of the time. Very good handling, but not as precise or crisp as desired. Braking was steady and easy to modulate. Very comfortable front seats. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Generally satisfactory driving position with power seat. Moderate noise level. Ride was harsh, stiff and jiggly on most roads. The automatic climate-control system was powerful, but temperature control was imperfect. Excellent controls and displays.

CHRYSLER LE BARON GTS

Dodge Lancer is essentially similar. The 2.5-liter 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly in normal driving, more abruptly in hard acceleration. Vague but controllable handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position except for very tall or very short people. Uncomfortable rear seat. Cramped for three adults. Quiet. Rather harsh and jittery ride. Excellent climate-control system. Generally logical controls. Clear and complete displays.

CHRYSLER NEW YORKER

The New Yorker, new for 1988, shares its body with the new Dodge Dynasty. It has a longer wheelbase and is slightly wider than the previous New Yorker model (now called New Yorker Turbo) and has a 3-liter V6 engine (the Dodge has a 2.5-liter 4 as standard).

CHRYSLER NEW YORKER TURBO

The 2.2-liter turbo 4 started easily and ran well. Strong acceleration. The hot idle was shaky. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model handled rather sloppily. Emergency handling was sluggish, with some tail-wag and considerable body roll. Excellent brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seat. Uncomfortable rear seat. Basically soft ride, but lost control on large, sharp bumps. Quiet. Excellent climate-control system. Logical controls. Clear displays.

DODGE 600

Plymouth Caravelle is essentially similar. The 2.2-liter 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission generally shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model handled vaguely and sluggishly. Very good brakes. Very comfortable front seat. Good driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Very good climate-control system. Generally logical controls. Clear displays.

DODGE ARIES AMERICA

The Aries and Plymouth Reliant are twins. These K-cars have not tested out well.

DODGE CARAVAN

Plymouth Voyager is a twin. The 2.5-liter 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive van handled much like a passenger car in normal driving, but was sluggish and vague in emergency maneuvers. The front brakes locked a bit too soon, extending stopping distances, but fade was slight. Exceptionally comfortable front seats and driving position. Passenger's seat is not adjustable. Fairly comfortable second seat for two. Fairly comfortable third seat for two or three. Moderate noise level. The Caravan rode more like a car than a truck. The ride was pleasant on good roads, but rough on back roads. Excellent climate-control system. Very good controls and displays.

DODGE COLT

Plymouth Colt and Mitsubishi Mirage are essentially similar. The 1.5-liter 4 in our base model ran well except for occasional stumbling during warm-up. Crisp, easy-shifting manual 4-speed transmission. This front-wheel-drive model handled sloppily for a small car. Excellent brakes. Comfortable front seats, but too little leg room for tall drivers. Rear seat uncomfortable for two, very tight for three. Fairly noisy. Very good ventilation, adequate windshield defrosting and heating. Very good controls, excellent displays.

DODGE DAYTONA

The Daytona is now much more sports-oriented. Engines and transmissions follow the usual Chrysler K-car lineup, with both fuel-injected and turbocharged versions.

DODGE DIPLOMAT

The Diplomat, Chrysler Fifth Avenue and Plymouth Gran Fury are all variants of the same rear-wheel-drive design that started life as the Dodge Aspen/Plymouth Volare. This V8-powered model is the only such design left in Chrysler Corp.'s line.

DODGE DYNASTY

The Chrysler New Yorker, new for 1988, shares its body with the new Dodge Dynasty. It has a longer wheelbase and is slightly wider than the previous New Yorker model (now called New Yorker Turbo) and has a 3-liter V6 engine (the Dodge has a 2.5-liter 4 as standard).

DODGE GRAND CARAVAN

Plymouth Grand Voyager is a twin. The 3-liter V6 started and ran well. The automatic transmission with lock-up feature shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model handled sluggishly. Fairly large turning circle. Very good brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Passenger seat does not adjust. Driving position car-like and comfortable. Fairly comfortable center and rear bench seats. Fairly quiet. Fairly comfortable ride on most roads. Heavy-duty suspension appeared to help the ride. Excellent climate-control system. Straight-forward controls. Clear displays.

DODGE LANCER

Chrysler Le Baron GTS is essentially similar. The 2.5-liter 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly in normal driving, more abruptly in hard acceleration. Vague but controllable handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position except for very tall or very short people. Uncomfortable rear seat. Cramped for three adults. Quiet. Rather harsh and jittery ride. Excellent climate-control system. Generally logical controls. Clear and complete displays.

DODGE OMNI AMERICA

The Omni and Plymouth Horizon are twins. The 2.2-liter 4 usually ran well. The 5-speed manual transmission was vague and balky at times. This front-wheel-drive model handled clumsily, and its steering felt heavy and vague. Excellent brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats. Awkward driving position and bad clutch placement. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Soft ride, but lacked control over rural roads. Crude and archaic heater, and especially poor ventilation in models without air-conditioning. Very poor operating controls. Some reflections on gauges.

DODGE SHADOW

The Shadow and Plymouth Sundance are twins. The 2.2-liter 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model handled predictably but was a bit skittish in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Some instruments cut off from tall driver's view. Very uncomfortable rear seat for two or three. Comfortable ride on expressways. Bumpy on rural roads. Moderate noise level. Unimpressive heater. Excellent air-conditioning. Controls and displays logical and very easy to read.

EAGLE MEDALLION

The 2.2-liter 4 started easily and ran well. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model handled responsively and accurately. Excellent brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Comfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Exceptionally smooth ride for a compact car. Very good heating. Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Inconvenient controls. Clear displays.

EAGLE MEDALLION WAGON

The 2.2-liter 4 started easily and ran well. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model handled responsively and accurately. Excellent brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Comfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Exceptionally smooth ride for a compact car. Very good heating. Excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Inconvenient controls. Clear displays.

EAGLE PREMIER

The Premier is part of Chrysler's acquisition of American Motors. This model is made in Canada and fits neatly into the domestic medium-sized model mix. A 2.5-liter 4 is standard, but most Premiers will be equipped with a 3-liter V6 (not the same V6 used in Chrysler products). The LX model is more domestic-oriented. The ES more toward the European taste.

FORD AEROSTAR

The 3-liter V6 started and ran well. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted very smoothly. Rather clumsy and vague routine handling. Sluggish but controllable emergency handling. Stopping distances a bit long. Very comfortable front captain's chairs (included in 7-seat XL package). Fairly comfortable driving position. Fairly comfortable center and uncomfortable rear bench seats. Avoid the center captain's chairs. They inhibit entry. Quiet. Fairly well-controlled ride on good roads, but less so on poor roads. Excellent climate controls. Awkward, inconvenient controls. Easy-to-read displays.

FORD ESCORT

The Ford Escort (the Mercury Lynx has been dropped for 1988) may be one of the largest-selling cars in the world, but it has never been very impressive in our tests. Passenger room, especially width, is tight and the ride comfort is not competitive. However, for those looking for a traditional, U.S.-built small car, the Escort is the best choice. A 1988 1/2 version with a restyled body is due out late this spring.

FORD ESCORT EXP

The EXP, a sporty version of the Ford Escort, was reskinned in mid-1986. It has not been very successful in the marketplace and has been a potential drop-out candidate every year.

FORD ESCORT WAGON

The Ford Escort (the Mercury Lynx has been dropped for 1988) may be one of the largest-selling cars in the world, but it has never been very impressive in our tests. Passenger room, especially width, is tight and the ride comfort is not competitive. However, for those looking for a traditional, U.S.-built small car, the Escort is the best choice. A 1988 1/2 version with a restyled body is due out late this spring.

FORD FESTIVA

The 1.3-liter 4 started easily, but hesitated slightly when accelerating. The 4-speed manual transmission shifted easily. This front-wheel-drive model handled nimbly. Emergency handling was especially responsive. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats with comfortably high driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Fairly noisy. Typical small-car ride. Somewhat choppy. Very good heater and ventilation. Logical controls. Clear displays.

FORD LTD CROWN VICTORIA

Mercury Grand Marquis is essentially similar. The big Ford and the Grand Marquis remain CR's choice in the traditional large-car field. They achieve that rating not because of their outstanding performance but because of their reliability record. It remains one of the best among domestic models.

FORD MUSTANG

The Mustang has been made to look more contemporary with the addition of more aerodynamic styling and an interior redesign. It remains an older-design rear-wheel-drive chassis with either a 4 or a high-output V8 engine.

FORD TAURUS

Mercury Sable is essentially similar. Both the 3-liter V6 and the 2.5-liter 4 started and ran well. With the V6, the 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted very smoothly. With the 4, the automatic transmission shifted smoothly, but acceleration was no more than adequate (the V6 is recommended). This front-wheel-drive model handled very well. The wagon was especially competent. Stops were straight, but distances were fairly long. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Excellent driving position with recommended power seat. Rear seat fairly comfortable for two or three. Quiet. Stable, tightly controlled ride on all but the bumpiest roads. Excellent climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

FORD TAURUS WAGON

Mercury Sable is essentially similar. Both the 3-liter V6 and the 2.5-liter 4 started and ran well. With the V6, the 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted very smoothly. With the 4, the automatic transmission shifted smoothly, but acceleration was no more than adequate (the V6 is recommended). This front-wheel-drive model handled very well. The wagon was especially competent. Stops were straight, but distances were fairly long. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Excellent driving position with recommended power seat. Rear seat fairly comfortable for two or three. Quiet. Stable, tightly controlled ride on all but the bumpiest roads. Excellent climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

FORD TEMPO

The Tempo and Mercury Topaz are twins. They have a new body for 1988, but underneath are much the same. In our tests, the front-wheel-drive Tempo/Topaz have performed about on a par with the other domestic compacts. The 4-wheel-drive model is unusual, as is the driver-side air-bag restraint system.

FORD THUNDERBIRD

Mercury Cougar is essentially similar. The 2.3-liter turbocharged 4 (Turbo Coupe version) started quickly and ran well. Very strong acceleration when engine was revved. The 5-speed manual transmission felt notchy and stiff. Long clutch-pedal travel, but smooth engagement. Handling was very crisp and predictable. Excellent antilock brakes. Nose dive was excessive during hard stops. Exceptionally comfortable front seats with power controls. Awkward driving position with shifter and clutch. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Most occupants preferred the Turbo Coupe's ride setting on Firm for best control. Excellent climate-control system. Inconvenient wiper control. Excellent displays.

GMC SAFARI

Chevrolet Astro is a twin. The 4.3-liter V6 ran flawlessly except for an occasional stall after a cold start. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted abruptly from first to second, and it hunted into and out of lock-up on mild upgrades. Handling was sluggish and vague, but safe. Traction was below par on slippery roads. Very good brakes, a bit hard to modulate. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. High driving position, would have been excellent except for awkward pedal placement and lack of foot space. Fairly comfortable center and rear seats in 8-person seating package. Moderate noise level, uncomfortable ride. Adequate heating, modest ventilation and weak air-conditioning. Awkward controls. Clear displays.

HONDA ACCORD

The 2-liter 4 sometimes stalled once after a cold start and occasionally hesitated while warming up. Brisk acceleration. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive car handled very well. Very good brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Low, sporty-car driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Firm ride with good control on most roads. Excellent climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

HONDA CIVIC

The Honda Civic has been extensively redesigned for 1988. All models now have a 1.5-liter, 16-valve 4 with fuel injection. The base hatchback still has a 4-speed manual transmission. The other models have a 5-speed. We expect the Civic will continue to be an excellent small car.

HONDA CIVIC CRX

The Honda Civic CRX is one of CR's top-rated sporty cars. This 2-seater, front-wheel-drive model has been redesigned for 1988 and will probably retain the responsive acceleration and nimble handling of the previous model.

HYUNDAI EXCEL

The Excel and the Mitsubishi Precis are twins. The 1.5-liter 4 started quickly but sagged and hesitated during moderate acceleration when warming up or fully warm. Both the 4- and 5-speed manual transmissions shifted easily but often blocked reverse. Engine revs are high on the highway with the 4-speed transmission. This front-wheel-drive car had sluggish handling. Emergency handling was also sloppy and vague. Brakes had noticeable fade from repeated stops in earlier models. Excellent in 1988 version. Firm and supportive front seats. Cloth upholstery is preferred over the slippery vinyl on the base model. Accelerator pedal too close to driver. Moderately noisy, annoyingly so on coarse road surfaces. Busy small-car ride. Adequate heater and ventilation. Very good controls, excellent displays.

ISUZU I-MARK

The front-wheel-drive Isuzu I-Mark is essentially the same car as the Chevrolet Spectrum. Sales have been relatively modest.

ISUZU IMPULSE

The Impulse retains a rear-wheel-drive chassis, but its styling is very contemporary.

LINCOLN CONTINENTAL

The Continental is all-new for 1988 and is based on the front-wheel-drive Ford Taurus/Mercury Sable platform. It has a 3.8-liter V6 and electronically controlled suspension and steering system. Antilock braking is also standard.

LINCOLN MARK VII

The 5-liter V8 started and ran well. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted very smoothly. Handling was responsive and smooth. Very good antilock brakes, but stopping distances were somewhat long. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat for two or three. Very quiet. Unusually well-controlled, smooth ride with automatic-leveling air suspension. Excellent automatic climate-control system. Complicated controls, clear digital displays.

LINCOLN TOWN CAR

The Town Car is a stretched version of the big Ford and Mercury. Its powertrain is the same as in those models, but it has more luxurious interior appointments.

MAZDA 323

Mercury Tracer is essentially similar. The 1.6-liter 4 (now with fuel injection) started and ran flawlessly. Spirited acceleration. Both the 4- and 5-speed manual transmission shifted crisply and precisely. This front-wheel-drive model gave excellent routine handling and responsive emergency handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats, very good driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Typical small-car ride. Excellent climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

MAZDA 626

The Mazda 626 has a new body for 1988. The 2-door models have been dropped. The top-line sedan has electronic four-wheel steering and a turbocharged engine. We expect the new 626 to be a top-rated compact.

MAZDA 929

The 929 is new for 1988 and is Mazda's entry into the luxury sports sedan market. The chassis has a 3-liter V6 engine and rear-wheel drive. Standard equipment level is very high. The interior space is quite roomy.

MAZDA MX-6

The MX-6 is a new model, designed by Mazda in Japan and built in a new plant in Michigan in a joint venture with Ford. Its basic chassis is similar to that of the Mazda 626. Later this year, Ford will sell its own version of this car, called the Probe.

MAZDA RX-7

The 1.3-liter twin-chamber rotary started quickly and ran flawlessly when warm. In cold weather, idle during warm-up was rough. Acceleration was strong and smooth. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted smoothly. Routine handling was excellent. Emergency handling, very controllable in hard turns. Excellent brakes. This 2-seater has very comfortable front seats. Driving position too low for optimal comfort. Moderately high road noise. Very active and hard ride on all but the smoothest roads. Excellent heating and fresh-air ventilation. Satisfactory air-conditioning. Controls are a bit unusual but easy to use. Excellent displays.

MERCEDES-BENZ 190

When CR last tested a 190, we found it to be a very good performer. But its rear seating was below average for a compact.

MERCEDES-BENZ 300

The 3-liter 6 started and ran flawlessly and accelerated the car very quickly. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted very smoothly. Impressively precise handling. The antilock braking system stopped the car short and straight even on slippery roads. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Excellent driving position. Fairly comfortable rear seat, with ample room for three average adults. Quiet inside. Firm, well-controlled ride. Excellent automatic climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

MERCURY COUGAR

Ford Thunderbird is essentially similar. The 3.8-liter V6 started and ran well and delivered ample acceleration. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Smooth but sluggish and numb handling. Stops were straight and fairly short, although the car's nose dive was disconcerting. Very comfortable front seats. Low driving position, helped by optional power driver's seat. Very uncomfortable, cramped rear seat for two or three. Quiet. Smooth ride on most roads, even when carrying a full load. Excellent climate-control system. Inconvenient windshield wiper/washer controls. Clear displays.

MERCURY GRAND MARQUIS

Ford Crown Victoria LTD is essentially similar. The big Ford and the Grand Marquis remain CR's choice in the traditional large-car field. They achieve that rating not because of their outstanding performance but because of their reliability record. It remains one of the best among domestic models.

MERCURY SABLE

Ford Taurus is essentially similar. Both the 3-liter V6 and the 2.5-liter 4 started and ran well. With the V6, the 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted very smoothly. With the 4, the automatic transmission shifted smoothly, but acceleration was no more than adequate (the V6 is recommended). This front-wheel-drive model handled very well. The wagon was especially competent. Stops were straight, but distances were fairly long. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Excellent driving position with recommended power seat. Rear seat fairly comfortable for two or three. Quiet. Stable, tightly controlled ride on all but the bumpiest roads. Excellent climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

MERCURY SABLE WAGON

Ford Taurus is essentially similar. Both the 3-liter V6 and the 2.5-liter 4 started and ran well. With the V6, the 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted very smoothly. With the 4, the automatic transmission shifted smoothly, but acceleration was no more than adequate (the V6 is recommended). This front-wheel-drive model handled very well. The wagon was especially competent. Stops were straight, but distances were fairly long. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Excellent driving position with recommended power seat. Rear seat fairly comfortable for two or three. Quiet. Stable, tightly controlled ride on all but the bumpiest roads. Excellent climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

MERCURY TOPAZ

The Topaz and Ford Tempo are twins. They have a new body for 1988, but underneath are much the same. In our tests, the front-wheel-drive Tempo/Topaz have performed about on a par with the other domestic compacts. The 4-wheel-drive model is unusual, as is the driver-side air-bag restraint system.

MERCURY TRACER

The Tracer is basically a Mazda 323, designed in Japan and built in a new plant in Mexico. It is available in one well-equipped price line. We expect the Tracer to perform similarly to the Mazda 323.

MERKUR SCORPIO

The German-built Scorpio is a 4-door, the second in the line of Merkur models to be sold by Lincoln dealers. It is a completely different car from the XR4Ti coupe model. It has a 3-liter V6 engine, either manual or automatic transmission, and rear-wheel drive. The Scorpio is very well equipped and has generous interior room, except for head room.

MERKUR XR4TI

The Merkur line has been expanded to add the Scorpio, a completely different sedan model. The XR4Ti has changed little since we tested it in 1985. It remains a rather odd turbocharged coupe with definite European characteristics. Although it performs well, its reliability has not been all that good.

MITSUBISHI CORDIA

The front-wheel-drive Cordia is the sporty-car version of the Tredia sedan and shares the Tredia's relative obscurity.

MITSUBISHI GALANT SIGMA

The Galant with 4-cylinder engine has been one of CR's top-rated compacts. For 1988, the 4 is not available. Instead, a new 3-liter V6 is standard. The Sigma is very well equipped.

MITSUBISHI MIRAGE

The Mirage is a fairly obscure model, known better as the Dodge and Plymouth Colt. The 1.5-liter 4 in our base model ran well except for occasional stumbling during warm-up. Crisp, easy-shifting manual 4-speed transmission. This front-wheel-drive model handled sloppily for a small car. Excellent brakes. Comfortable front seats, but too little leg room for tall drivers. Rear seat uncomfortable for two, very tight for three. Fairly noisy. Very good ventilation, adequate windshield defrosting and heating. Very good controls, excellent displays.

MITSUBISHI PRECIS

The Precis and the Hyundai Excel are twins. The 1.5-liter 4 started easily but hesitated during acceleration. The 4-speed manual transmission shifted easily. This front-wheel-drive model handled sluggishly for a small car and was tricky in emergency handling. Excellent brakes. Comfortable front seats, but vinyl in base model was unpleasant. Tight driver leg room. Moderate noise level. Engine was noisy at highway speeds. Jiggly small-car ride. Very good heating, excellent ventilation. Very good controls and displays.

MITSUBISHI STARION

The turbocharged Starion is a very powerful performer. It comes fully equipped, including antilock brakes on the rear wheels. When last tested, we found it to be a competent machine, but a fairly rare one. It is also sold as the Chrysler Conquest by Chrysler Corp. dealers.

MITSUBISHI TREDIA

The Tredia is a satisfactory but not outstanding car. Model to be dropped.

MITSUBISHI WAGON VAN

The 2.4-liter 4 started and ran well. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted too often and abruptly. Steering was almost too responsive. Poor crosswind stability. Emergency handling was fairly good. Fair brakes. Uncomfortable front seats. Awkward driving position. Fairly comfortable center and rear seats. Versatile captain's chairs in center. Moderate noise level. The rear-axle gears howled. Abusive, busy ride. Excellent climate-control system with dual air-conditioning and heater. Scattered controls. Clear displays.

NISSAN 200SX

The 200SX has a 2-liter 4 in the XE models. The SE model has the powerful 3-liter V6 used in the 300ZX. When last tested, in 1985, the 200SX was a good, representative sporty car.

NISSAN 300ZX

The 300ZX is large and heavy for a sports car, but very well equipped and comfortable. Its rear-wheel-drive chassis and powerful 3-liter V6 engine are largely unchanged. A turbocharged version of the V6 is also available.

NISSAN MAXIMA

The 3-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly and gave strong acceleration. Smooth-shifting 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission. Fairly responsive routine handling in this front-wheel-drive model. Steady in hard turns, but tendency to fishtail during abrupt maneuvers. Some weaving during shortest stops. Very comfortable front seats. Fairly comfortable driving position. Tight leg room for tall drivers. Uncomfortable rear seat, cramped for three adults. Fairly quiet, but sharply busy ride. Powerful climate-control. Noisy heater. Well-designed but numerous controls. Excellent displays.

NISSAN MAXIMA WAGON

The 3-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly and gave strong acceleration. Smooth-shifting 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission. Fairly responsive routine handling in this front-wheel-drive model. Steady in hard turns, but tendency to fishtail during abrupt maneuvers. Some weaving during shortest stops. Very comfortable front seats. Fairly comfortable driving position. Tight leg room for tall drivers. Uncomfortable rear seat, cramped for three adults. Fairly quiet, but sharply busy ride. Powerful climate-control. Noisy heater. Well-designed but numerous controls. Excellent displays.

NISSAN PULSAR NX

The 1.6-liter 4 (SE 16-valve version) started quickly, ran flawlessly, and gave strong acceleration. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted smoothly except when cold. This front-wheel-drive model handled very well, especially in hard test-track maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Good driving position for most. Not enough leg room to the accelerator for tall drivers. Unusable rear seat. Fairly noisy. Fairly uncomfortable ride. Good heating and fresh-air systems. Excellent air-conditioning.

NISSAN SENTRA

The 1.6-liter 4 usually started and ran well. The automatic transmission with lock-up shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model handled well in normal driving, sluggishly in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Reasonably comfortable ride. Excellent climate-control system. Convenient controls, clear displays.

NISSAN STANZA

The 2-liter 4 started quickly and ran well. The 4-speed automatic transmission sometimes downshifted abruptly. Routine handling of this front-wheel-drive model was competent. Emergency maneuvers, less so. Both the wagon's and the sedan's brakes were exceptional. The front seats were very comfortable in the sedan, exceptionally comfortable in the wagon. Very good driving position. Rather tight rear seat in the sedan. Fairly comfortable in the wagon. Moderate noise level. Fairly comfortable ride. Excellent climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

NISSAN VAN

This vehicle has been completely recalled and has been bought back by the manufacturer.

OLDSMOBILE CALAIS

Buick Skylark and Pontiac Grand Am are essentially similar. The 2.5-liter 4 started reliably but occasionally hesitated on initial acceleration during warm-up. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model's handling with optional suspension was excellent. Without it, very good. Excellent brakes. Low and fairly comfortable front seats. Fairly low driving position with awkward access. Uncomfortable rear seat for two or three. Busy, rather harsh ride. Would be better with the standard suspension. Moderate noise level. Excellent climate-control system. Logical controls. Better displays than in Buick or Oldsmobile counterparts.

OLDSMOBILE CUTLASS CIERA

Buick Century, Chevrolet Celebrity and Pontiac 6000 are essentially similar. The 2.5-liter 4 started easily and ran well. The automatic transmission with lock-up shifted smoothly, but early lock-up made the engine lug. This front-wheel-drive model handled sluggishly but safely. Stops from 60 mph were disappointingly long. Very comfortable front seat. Very good driving position, but may be low for some drivers. Quiet. Fairly comfortable ride, but too soft on rough roads. Handling package would be desirable for most driving conditions. Excellent climate-control system. Generally good controls and displays.

OLDSMOBILE CUTLASS SUPREME

Buick Regal and Pontiac Grand Prix are essentially similar. The 2.8-liter V6 started and ran well. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly, but too often into and out of overdrive. This front-wheel-drive model handled smoothly and responsively in routine driving, but was sluggish and unsteady in emergency maneuvers. Very good brakes. Very comfortable split bench front seat. Very comfortable driving position with 6-way power seat. Entry and exit very difficult because of automatic safety belts. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Fairly quiet. Firm and active ride. Slow heater, but excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Fussy, awkward controls. Poor displays, either too bright or too dim.

OLDSMOBILE DELTA EIGHTY EIGHT ROYAL

Buick Le Sabre and Pontiac Bonneville are essentially similar. The 3.8-liter V6 started easily and ran well. The overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly in this front-wheel-drive model. Vague but safe handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable split bench front seat, roomy enough for three adults. Very comfortable, though rather low, driving position. Rear seat fairly comfortable even for three. Exceptionally quiet inside. Smooth ride on expressways, rough on secondary roads. Excellent climate control. Old-fashioned, familiar controls in Buick and Olds models. Minimal displays.

OLDSMOBILE FIRENZA

Buick Skyhawk, Chevrolet Cavalier and Pontiac Sunbird are essentially similar. The 2-liter 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model handled well in normal driving and emergency maneuvers. Very good brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats, very good driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat for two, very uncomfortable for three. Moderate noise level. Reasonably good ride, but not well controlled on rough roads. Excellent climate-control system. Gauges were hard to read. Most controls were convenient.

OLDSMOBILE NINETY EIGHT REGENCY

Buick Electra is essentially similar. The Electra and Olds 98 are essentially the same front-wheel-drive cars as the lower-priced Le Sabre and Delta 88 models. They have a higher level of standard equipment, but that's about all. Antilock brakes are standard on the T-Type model.

OLDSMOBILE TORONADO

The 3.8-liter V6 started and ran without a problem. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Sluggish routine handling. Car tended to shift direction slightly in bumpy turns. Emergency handling sloppy and vague. Tail wagged and steering response lagged during abrupt maneuvers. Mediocre brakes. Excessive nose dive contributed to long stopping distances. Very comfortable front seats. Driving position nearly ideal for all but very short drivers. Uncomfortable rear seat. Barely enough head room for six-footers. Standard suspension gave smooth ride on good roads, but topped and bottomed badly on back roads. Access to rear seat awkward. Extremely quiet. Excellent heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning. Controls are

conventional type, but with a confusing array of tiny buttons. Digital displays are clear.

PEUGEOT 505

Peugeot has evidently tried to compensate for its lack of market penetration by providing a bewildering line of models. The 505 is a comfortable car of conventional rear-wheel-drive design and offers a 4, turbo 4, and V6. Standard equipment level is high. Only a few options are offered.

PEUGEOT 505 WAGON

Peugeot has evidently tried to compensate for its lack of market penetration by providing a bewildering line of models. The 505 is a comfortable car of conventional rear-wheel-drive design and offers a 4, turbo 4, and V6. Standard equipment level is high. Only a few options are offered.

PLYMOUTH CARAVELLE

Dodge 600 is essentially similar. The 2.2-liter 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission generally shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model handled vaguely and sluggishly. Very good brakes. Very comfortable front seat. Good driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Very good climate-control system. Generally logical controls. Clear displays.

PLYMOUTH COLT

Dodge Colt and Mitsubishi Mirage are essentially similar. The 1.5-liter 4 in our base model ran well except for occasional stumbling during warm-up. Crisp, easy-shifting manual 4-speed transmission. This front-wheel-drive model handled sloppily for a small car. Excellent brakes. Comfortable front seats, but too little leg room for tall drivers. Rear seat uncomfortable for two, very tight for three. Fairly noisy. Very good ventilation, adequate windshield defrosting and heating. Very good controls, excellent displays.

PLYMOUTH GRAN FURY

The Gran Fury, Dodge Diplomat and Chrysler Fifth Avenue are all variants of the same rear-wheel-drive design that started life as the Dodge Aspen/Plymouth Volare. This V8-powered model is the only such design left in Chrysler Corp.'s line.

PLYMOUTH GRAND VOYAGER

Dodge Grand Caravan is a twin. The 3-liter V6 started and ran well. The automatic transmission with lock-up feature shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model handled sluggishly. Fairly large turning circle. Very good brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Passenger seat does not adjust. Driving position car-like and comfortable. Fairly comfortable center and rear bench seats. Fairly quiet. Fairly comfortable ride on most roads. Heavy-duty suspension appeared to help the ride. Excellent climate-control system. Straight-forward controls. Clear displays.

PLYMOUTH HORIZON AMERICA

The Omni and Plymouth Horizon are twins. The 2.2-liter 4 usually ran well. The 5-speed manual transmission was vague and balky at times. This front-wheel-drive model handled clumsily, and its steering felt heavy and vague. Excellent brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats. Awkward driving position and bad clutch placement. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Soft ride, but lacked control over rural roads. Crude and archaic heater, and especially poor ventilation in models without air-conditioning. Very poor operating controls. Some reflections on gauges.

PLYMOUTH RELIANT AMERICA

The Aries and Plymouth Reliant are twins. These K-cars have not tested out well.

PLYMOUTH SUNDANCE

The Sundance and Dodge Shadow are twins. The 2.2-liter 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model handled predictably but was a bit skittish in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Some instruments cut off from tall driver's view. Very uncomfortable rear seat for two or three. Comfortable ride on expressways. Busy on rural roads. Moderate noise level. Unimpressive heater. Excellent air-conditioning. Controls and displays logical and very easy to read.

PLYMOUTH VOYAGER

Dodge Caravan is a twin. The 2.5-liter 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive van handled much like a passenger car in normal driving, but was sluggish and vague in emergency maneuvers. The front brakes locked a bit too soon, extending stopping distances, but fade was slight. Exceptionally comfortable front seats and driving position. Passenger's seat is not adjustable. Fairly comfortable second seat for two. Fairly comfortable third seat for two or three. Moderate noise level. The Voyager rode more like a car than a truck. The ride was pleasant on good roads, but rough on back roads. Excellent climate-control system. Very good controls and displays.

PONTIAC 6000

Buick Century, Chevrolet Celebrity and Oldsmobile Cutlass Ciera are essentially similar. The 2.5-liter 4 started easily and ran well. The automatic transmission with lock-up shifted smoothly, but early lock-up made the engine lug. This front-wheel-drive model handled sluggishly but safely. Stops from 60 mph were disappointingly long. Very comfortable front seat. Very good driving position, but may be low for some drivers. Quiet. Fairly comfortable ride, but too soft on rough roads. Handling package would be desirable for most driving conditions. Excellent climate-control system. Generally good controls and displays.

PONTIAC 6000 WAGON

Buick Century, Chevrolet Celebrity and Oldsmobile Cutlass Ciera are essentially similar. The 2.5-liter 4 started easily and ran well. The automatic transmission with lock-up shifted smoothly, but early lock-up made the engine lug. This front-wheel-drive model handled sluggishly but safely. Stops from 60 mph were disappointingly long. Very comfortable front seat. Very good driving position, but may be low for some drivers. Quiet. Fairly comfortable ride, but too soft on rough roads. Handling package would be desirable for most driving conditions. Excellent climate-control system. Generally good controls and displays.

PONTIAC BONNEVILLE

Buick Le Sabre and Oldsmobile Delta 88 are essentially similar. The 3.8-liter V6 in the tested SE started and ran eagerly. The overdrive transmission shifted smoothly but shifted into and out of lock-up frequently. Very responsive acceleration. During takeoff, the front wheels often spun on slippery pavement. Excellent handling. Faultless brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seat and driving position. Fairly comfortable rear seat. Quiet. Noisy exhaust on SE. Excellent climate-control system. Very good controls. Clear displays.

PONTIAC FIERO

The Fiero, Pontiac's plastic-bodied 2-seater, has become much more sports-oriented than when it was introduced in 1984. We were not impressed when we tested the original 4-cylinder version. We found the GT V6 to be more of what the car should be. There have been a lot of problems with the Fiero.

PONTIAC FIREBIRD

Chevrolet Camaro is essentially similar. The Camaro and Firebird are vintage sporty cars. Large and heavy. Consider them 2-seaters. They rely primarily on stiff suspensions to achieve the handling desired (usually at the expense of ride comfort) in cars of this type. Although a base V6 is available, most of these models are purchased with the more powerful V8.

PONTIAC GRAND AM

Buick Skylark and Oldsmobile Calais are essentially similar. The 2.5-liter 4 started reliably but occasionally hesitated on initial acceleration during warm-up. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model's handling with optional suspension was excellent. Without it, very good. Excellent brakes. Low and fairly comfortable front seats. Fairly low driving position with awkward access. Uncomfortable rear seat for two or three. Busy, rather harsh ride. Would be better with the standard suspension. Moderate noise level. Excellent climate-control system. Logical controls. Better displays than in Buick or Oldsmobile counterparts.

PONTIAC GRAND PRIX

Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme and Buick Regal are essentially similar. The 2.8-liter V6 started and ran well. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly, but too often into and out of overdrive. This front-wheel-drive model handled smoothly and responsively in routine driving, but was sluggish and unsteady in emergency maneuvers. Very good brakes. Very comfortable split bench front seat. Very comfortable driving position with 6-way power seat. Entry and exit very difficult because of automatic safety belts. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Fairly quiet. Firm and active ride. Slow heater, but excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Fussy, awkward controls. Poor displays, either too bright or too dim.

PONTIAC LE MANS

The Le Mans was designed in Germany as the Opel Kadett, re-engineered in Michigan for Pontiac, and then manufactured in Korea by Daewoo.

PONTIAC SUNBIRD

Buick Skyhawk, Chevrolet Cavalier and Oldsmobile Firenza are essentially similar. The 2-liter 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model handled well in normal driving and emergency maneuvers. Very good brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats, very good driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat for two, very uncomfortable for three. Moderate noise level. Reasonably good ride, but not well controlled on rough roads. Excellent climate-control system. Gauges were hard to read. Most controls were convenient.

PORSCHE 944

The 2.5-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Strong acceleration. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted firmly and precisely. Excellent routine handling. Response was smooth and very predictable. Emergency handling was excellent. Extremely short, straight, and controllable stops. Awkward access to the low front seat. Very comfortable front seats. Awkward driving position for short drivers. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Fairly noisy. Stiff, harsh ride, especially over patched or broken pavement. Well-controlled on big bumps. Excellent climate-control system. Controls logical and easy to use.

SAAB 900

The front-wheel-drive Saab 900 has been around for quite a few years in its present form, but continues to be a competent compact. Three versions of the 2-liter 4 are available.

SAAB 9000

The 2-liter turbo 4 started quickly and ran well. Very strong acceleration, but turbo lag sometimes made the car feel sluggish, especially from rest. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Excellent routine handling. In abrupt avoidance maneuvers, drivers had some trouble controlling the car's tendency to wag its tail. Excellent brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seat and driving position. Fairly comfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Road noise from coarse pavement was especially obtrusive. Ride was harsh and jittery, but well controlled over large bumps. Excellent automatic climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

STERLING 825

The 2.5-liter V6 started quickly and ran well. Very strong acceleration. The V6 was smooth, but lacked low-speed torque. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted fairly smoothly. Excellent handling and braking. Very comfortable front seats and fairly comfortable rear seats. Very comfortable driving position, but tall drivers may find the head room a bit skimpy. Quiet. Steady and well-controlled ride most of the time. On back roads, some rubbery chatter over broken pavement and mild suspension topping over large bumps. Excellent climate-control system. Awkward and complicated controls. Very clear displays.

SUBARU JUSTY

The 1.2-liter 3 started well but sagged and hesitated while warming up. The 5-speed manual transmission has well-chosen gear ratios but occasionally blocked engagement of first and third gears. This front-wheel-drive car had sloppy handling. Excellent brakes. Fairly comfortable front seating and driving position. Leg room to pedals was tight for tall drivers. Noisy even at highway speeds in overdrive gear. One of the worst-riding small cars CR has tested in recent years. Adequate heating, excellent fresh-air system. Very good controls and excellent displays.

SUBARU XT

The Subaru has turned out to be an above-average performer, and has the advantage of being available in a variety of 4-wheel-drive models. This year, the model lineup has been simplified.

SUZUKI SAMURAI

Rated Not Acceptable because of its tendency to roll over during a hard turn. We found this tiny 4-wheel-drive vehicle wretched in most other respects as well.

TOYOTA CAMRY

The 2-liter 4 started and ran very well. Very smooth idle. Unusually good fuel economy. The 4-speed automatic overdrive transmission shifted smoothly, has both Power and Normal ranges. This front-wheel-drive model handled steadily and accurately. Excellent brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Excellent driving position with plenty of adjustment. Very comfortable rear seat for two, fairly comfortable for three. Moderate noise level. Ride was smooth, with good control. Excellent climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

TOYOTA CAMRY WAGON

The 2-liter 4 started and ran very well. Very smooth idle. Unusually good fuel economy. The 4-speed automatic overdrive transmission shifted smoothly, has both Power and Normal ranges. This front-wheel-drive model handled steadily and accurately. Excellent brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Excellent driving position with plenty of adjustment. Very comfortable rear seat for two, fairly comfortable for three. Moderate noise level. Ride was smooth, with good control. Excellent climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

TOYOTA CELICA

The 2-liter 4 (16-valve) started and ran flawlessly. Very quick acceleration. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted quickly and precisely in this front-wheel-drive model. Excellent routine handling, with quick and precise steering response. Excellent emergency handling. Close to perfect around the test track. Extremely short, straight and controllable stops. Excellent driving position due to wide adjustability of seat. Extremely comfortable front seats. Awkward access. Rear seat unsuitable even for children. Moderate noise level, worse on coarse pavement. Generally stiff and nervous ride, but good for a sporty car. Excellent climate-control system. Powerful and unobtrusive. Controls were good and worked well. Displays were extremely clear.

TOYOTA COROLLA

Toyota's successful Corolla front-wheel-drive family sedan has been redesigned for 1988. It has a new body and a 16-valve engine, which it no longer shares with the Chevrolet Nova.

TOYOTA COROLLA FX

The 1.6-liter 4 (GT-S 16-valve version) started and ran flawlessly. Lively acceleration. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted crisply. This front-wheel-drive model handled very well. Excellent brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Excellent driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Fairly noisy. Jittery ride. Excellent heating and ventilation, controls and displays.

TOYOTA COROLLA WAGON

Toyota's successful Corolla front-wheel-drive family sedan has been redesigned for 1988. It has a new body and a 16-valve engine, which it no longer shares with the Chevrolet Nova.

TOYOTA CRESSIDA

The 2.8-liter 6 started easily, ran perfectly, and accelerated briskly. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Impressive routine handling. Steady, though slightly vague, emergency handling. Excellent braking. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Excellent driving position. Fairly comfortable rear seat for two. Less so for three. Quiet. Ride was smooth with light load. Markedly worse with full load. Excellent automatic climate-control system. Complicated controls. Clear displays.

TOYOTA MR2

When we last tested the Toyota MR2, in 1985, we found it to be exactly what a tiny sports car should be: peppy, agile and responsive. Comfort and room are not strong points, however. With the addition of a supercharged engine, more power is on tap.

TOYOTA SUPRA

The Supra, the top-line sporty Toyota, was new for mid-year 1986. It remains rear-wheel drive, but is much more performance-oriented, with a powerful 3-liter, 24-valve 6.

TOYOTA TERCEL

The 1.5-liter 4 started easily, but sagged during warm-up. The 4-speed manual transmission shifted crisply. This front-wheel-drive model handled fairly clumsily for a small car. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Fairly noisy. Typical small-car ride. Excellent climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

TOYOTA VAN

The Toyota Van, because of its engine placement, does not have the easy access from the front to the rear seats that the domestic vans have. It does not ride well, and is very sensitive to crosswinds.

VOLKSWAGEN FOX

The peppy 1.8-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. The 4-speed manual transmission has well-chosen gear ratios, but the linkage occasionally blocked going into first or reverse. This front-wheel-drive model had steady, accurate routine handling, and safely controllable emergency handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seating and driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Ride fairly steady on expressways and average back roads, but jostled sharply on bad roads. Adequate heating. Warm-air distribution could have been better. Very good ventilation. Awkward controls with hard-to-read labels. Excellent displays. Large trunk capacity.

VOLKSWAGEN GOLF

The Golf has been one of the better-performing small cars for several years. Performance should be similar to that of the VW Jetta.

VOLKSWAGEN GTI

The GTI has a 16-valve engine and close-ratio manual transmission that gives very strong acceleration at the expense of high rpm. That and trim features differentiate it from the Golf GT model. Expect the GTI to have handling of a very high order.

VOLKSWAGEN JETTA

This model is mechanically similar to the VW Golf. The 1.8-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted stiffly and, occasionally, reluctantly. This front-wheel-drive model handled very well. The brakes were somewhat difficult to modulate. Very comfortable front seats. Fairly comfortable driving position. The rear seat was uncomfortable for two or three people. Stiff, busy, and fairly noisy, but very good ride control on bad roads. Excellent climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

VOLKSWAGEN QUANTUM

The 2.2-liter 5 started and ran solidly, but its valve lifters clattered briefly after a cold start. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Very good routine handling in this front-wheel-drive model (Syncro version not tested). Excellent emergency handling. Excellent brakes. Very short stops from 60 mph. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position, but tight for tall drivers. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Harsh ride, but well-controlled on poor roads. Mediocre heater. Ample but drafty ventilation. Excellent air-conditioning. Disappointing controls. Excellent displays.

VOLKSWAGEN SCIROCCO

The Scirocco remains one of VW's oldest designs. This front-wheel-drive car handles very well, but the GTI has considerably better passenger accommodations. The new 16-valve engine is the same as that in the GTI.

VOLKSWAGEN VANAGON

The rear-engined Vanagon is very roomy inside for passengers, but does not convert to a flat-floor cargo carrier. Previous tests have shown that the van lacked power, handled poorly, and was very vulnerable to crosswinds. Rear-wheel traction was poor on slippery surfaces. Heating and air-conditioning were weak.

VOLVO 240

The 240 series Volvo has been around for many years, yet remains competitive in performance with many newer models. It retains rear-wheel drive.

VOLVO 240 WAGON

The 240 series Volvo has been around for many years, yet remains competitive in performance with many newer models. It retains rear-wheel drive.

VOLVO 740/760

The 2.3-liter turbo 4 started quickly and ran well. Very strong acceleration. The 4-speed overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly and down-shifted quickly on demand. Handling was very good. Excellent brakes. The antilock brakes allowed short, straight stops. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Fairly comfortable rear seat for two or three. Quiet inside. Generally steady ride, but pitching and rocking on secondary roads was quite noticeable. Excellent automatic climate-control system. Operating controls were generally simple and easy to use, but the switches for the power driver's seat, low alongside the seat cushion, weren't easy to use by feel. Excellent displays.

YUGO

The 1.1-liter 4 stalled almost every time we started it. It hesitated, sputtered, and backfired during warm-up. Sluggish acceleration. The 4-speed manual transmission was very imprecise and often balky, especially into reverse. In routine driving, the handling of this front-wheel-drive model wasn't as nimble as that of most small cars. The steering felt heavy and vague during low-speed cornering, especially when we accelerated. Very good emergency handling. Brakes were somewhat difficult to modulate. Uncomfortable front seats. Extremely awkward driving position. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Noisy, harsh ride. Marginal heater and defroster. Modest ventilation. Poorly-designed controls. Generally easy-to-read displays.

ACURA INTEGRA

The front-wheel-drive Integra is made by Honda but sold in this country by Acura dealers. This model is performance-oriented, with a 16-valve, 1.6-liter Four and wide tires. Lots of equipment is standard.

ACURA INTEGRA COUPE

The front-wheel-drive Integra is made by Honda but sold in this country by Acura dealers. This is performance-oriented, with a 16-valve, 1.6-liter Four and wide tires. Lots of equipment is standard.

ACURA LEGEND

The 2.5-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Acceleration was very strong. The overdrive automatic transmission shifted harshly at times. This front-wheel-drive model had excellent routine handling. Emergency handling was very precise and crisp. Excellent brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Driver's seat has manual adjustments for lumbar and thigh support. Head room tight for tall drivers. Rear seat fairly comfortable for two, tight for three. Taut but comfortable ride. Suspension absorbed jolts from tar strips and sharp bumps well. Ample heating. Ventilation was free of drafts. Excellent controls, easy to see and use. Excellent gauges.

AMC EAGLE

The Eagle has full-time four-wheel drive. Its old body design lacks interior room, especially in the cargo area of the wagon.

AUDI 4000

The 2.2-liter 5 in the Quattro sometimes required long cranking to start, but it ran well. Very responsive acceleration. Smooth shifting 5-speed manual transmission. The Quattro's full-time four-wheel drive gave precise, responsive handling and excellent traction on dry and slippery roads. Short, straight stops. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Rear seat fairly comfortable for two, tight for three. Moderate noise level. Road noise worse on coarse pavement. Steady ride. Harsh with full load. Powerful and versatile air-conditioning. Powerful heater, but slow to respond to changes in temperature setting. Strong but noisy ventilation. Good controls, clear displays.

AUDI 5000

The 2.2-liter 5 started and ran well at all times, though engine vibration was noticeable at higher speeds and at idle. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive car handled with smooth precision. Excellent brakes, even without optional antilock feature. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Generous leg room. Rear seat fairly comfortable for two or three. Fairly quiet. Very competent ride. Excellent automatic climate controls. Mostly logical controls. Clear displays.

BMW 3-SERIES

The 6-cylinder 325 replaces the 4-cylinder 318 series. Antilock braking is standard equipment, as is an antitheft system. The 318i tested previously had the same body. We found its driving position and front-seat comfort satisfactory. The rear seat was very uncomfortable. Very good handling except on ice or snow.

BUICK CENTURY

Chevrolet Celebrity, Oldsmobile Cutlass Ciera and Pontiac 6000 are essentially similar. The 2.5-liter 4 started easily and ran well. The automatic transmission with lock-up shifted smoothly, but early lock-up made the engine lug. This front-wheel-drive model handled sluggishly but safely. Stops from 60 mph were disappointingly long. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position, but may be low for some drivers. Quiet. Fairly comfortable ride, but too soft on rough surfaces. Handling package would be desirable for most driving conditions. Excellent climate-control system. Generally good controls and displays.

BUICK ELECTRA

Oldsmobile 98 Regency is essentially similar. The 3.8-liter V6 always started and ran well. The smooth-shifting 4-speed automatic transmission shifted into and out of overdrive lock-up too often. In this front-wheel-drive car, directional stability felt uncertain at times, and the rear wheels tended to step out in bumpy turns. Responsive steering. Very good braking, though abrupt in short stops. Front seating exceptionally comfortable for two or three. Rear seating very comfortable for two, uncomfortable for three on long trips. Ride very good on smooth roads, much worse on bumpy roads. Quiet inside. Coarse pavement increased interior noise. Excellent climate-control system. Most controls were convenient. Mostly clear displays.

BUICK LE SABRE

Oldsmobile Delta 88 Royale and Pontiac Bonneville are essentially similar. The 3.8-liter V6 started easily and ran well. The overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly. Vague but safe handling. Excellent braking. Very comfortable split-bench front seat, roomy enough for three. Very comfortable, though low, driving position. Rear seat fairly comfortable even for three. Exceptionally quiet inside. Smooth ride on expressways, rough on secondary roads. (Handling suspension is recommended.) Excellent climate control. Old-fashioned, familiar controls in Buick and Olds models. Minimal displays.

BUICK REGAL

Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme is essentially similar. The Regal and the Cutlass Supreme are the last remnants of GM's coupe line. These models have been supplanted by more modern, front-wheel-drive designs.

BUICK RIVIERA

Cadillac Eldorado and Oldsmobile Toronado are essentially similar. The 3.8-liter V6 started and ran without a problem. The overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly. With T-package suspension, very competent routine handling and very controllable emergency handling. Excellent brakes. Excellent front seats, with 18 power adjustments. Excellent driving position. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Access to rear seat especially awkward. With handling suspension, very stiff ride on back roads. Very quiet. Excellent heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning. Needless complex controls: the Graphic Control Center, a small video display monitor, is extremely distracting. Digital displays are clear.

BUICK SKYHAWK

Chevrolet Cavalier, Oldsmobile Firenza and Pontiac Sunbird J-cars are essentially similar. The 2-liter 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model handled well. Very good brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats; very good driving position. Rear seat uncomfortable for two, worse for three. Moderate noise level. Generally soft ride, but abrupt on rough roads. Excellent climate-control system. Gauges were hard to read in daytime because of reflections. Most controls were convenient.

BUICK SOMERSET/SKYLARK

Pontiac Grand Am and Oldsmobile Calais are essentially similar. The 2.5-liter 4 started reliably but occasionally hesitated on initial acceleration. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model with optional suspension handled very well. Excellent brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats. Fairly low driving position. Rear seat uncomfortable for two or three. Stiff ride. Would be better with the standard suspension. Moderate noise level. Excellent climate-control system. Logical controls. Better displays than in Buick or Oldsmobile counterparts.

CADILLAC CIMARRON

The 2.8-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Very responsive acceleration. The 3-speed automatic with lock-up feature occasionally shifted abruptly. Precise, controllable handling in this front-wheel-drive model. Very good brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats and excellent driving position. Rear seat cramped for three adults. Moderate noise level. Stiff, jiggly ride. Excellent climate-control system. Easy-to-use controls. Excellent displays.

CADILLAC DE VILLE

The front-wheel-drive De Ville is basically the same as the Buick Electra and the Oldsmobile 98 Regency, except that the Cadillac has a V8 engine.

CADILLAC ELDORADO

Unlike the Riviera and Toronado, the Eldorado is available only with Cadillac's small V8 engine.

CADILLAC SEVILLE

The 4-door version of the Cadillac Eldorado.

CHEVROLET ASTRO

GMC Safari is a twin. The 4.3-liter V6 ran flawlessly except for an occasional stall after a cold start. The 4-speed automatic transmission usually shifted abruptly from first to second, and it hunted in and out of lock-up on mild upgrades. Sluggish but safe handling. Poor traction on slippery roads. Very good brakes, a bit hard to modulate. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. High driving position would have been excellent except for awkward pedal placement and lack of foot space. Fairly comfortable center and rear seats in 8-person seating package. Moderate noise level, uncomfortable ride. Adequate heating, modest ventilation, and weak air-conditioning. Awkward controls. Clear displays.

CHEVROLET BERETTA

The front-wheel-drive Chevrolet Beretta is sold as a 1988 model. It shares its power train with the Cavalier.

CHEVROLET CAMARO

Pontiac Firebird is essentially similar. The Camaro and Firebird are vintage sporty cars, large and heavy, with very stiff suspension. Although a V6 is standard, most of these cars are sold with V8.

CHEVROLET CAPRICE

The Caprice remains close to its original 1977 rear-wheel drive version. The Buick Estate Wagon, Oldsmobile Custom Cruiser, and Pontiac Safari all share the Caprice wagon chassis and body.

CHEVROLET CAVALIER

Buick Skyhawk, Oldsmobile Firenza and Pontiac Sunbird J-cars are essentially similar. The 2-liter 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model handled well. Very good brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats; very good driving position. Rear seat uncomfortable for two, worse for three. Moderate noise level. Generally soft ride, but abrupt on rough roads. Excellent climate-control system. Gauges were hard to read in daytime because of reflections. Most controls were convenient.

CHEVROLET CELEBRITY

Buick Century, Oldsmobile Cutlass Ciera and Pontiac 6000 are essentially similar. The 2.5-liter 4 started easily and ran well. The automatic transmission with lock-up shifted smoothly, but early lock-up made the engine lug. This front-wheel-drive model handled sluggishly but safely. Stops from 60 mph were disappointingly long. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position, but may be low for some drivers. Quiet. Fairly comfortable ride, but too soft on rough surfaces. Handling package would be desirable for most driving conditions. Excellent climate-control system. Generally good controls and displays.

CHEVROLET CELEBRITY WAGON

Buick Century, Oldsmobile Cutlass Ciera and Pontiac 6000 are essentially similar. The 2.5-liter 4 started easily and ran well. The automatic transmission with lock-up shifted smoothly, but early lock-up made the engine lug. This front-wheel-drive model handled sluggishly but safely. Stops from 60 mph were disappointingly long. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position, but may be low for some drivers. Quiet. Fairly comfortable ride, but too soft on rough surfaces. Handling package would be desirable for most driving conditions. Excellent climate-control system. Generally good controls and displays.

CHEVROLET CORSICA

The front-wheel-drive Chevrolet Corsica is sold as a 1988 model. It shares its power train with the Cavalier.

CHEVROLET CORVETTE

Chevrolet's technology flagship has antilock brakes and an antitheft system. it's a heavy, powerful two-seater with a fiber-glass body and large, thirsty V8.

CHEVROLET MONTE CARLO

The Monte Carlo and Pontiac Grand Prix are still hanging on as GM's aging rear-wheel-drive specialty cars. In recent years, the Monte Carlo, in the SS version with the optional V8, has developed a performance image.

CHEVROLET NOVA

This model, made jointly by Chevrolet and Toyota, is essentially similar to the Toyota Corolla 4-door. The 1.6-liter 4 started easily but hesitated occasionally even after it warmed up. Smooth-shifting 5-speed manual transmission. Light clutch action. Handling of this front-wheel-drive model felt somewhat vague and sloppy, and the body leaned considerably during cornering. Excellent braking. Excellent front seats and nearly ideal driving position.

Uncomfortable, cramped rear seat, especially for three adults. Moderate noise level. Rode as comfortably as many larger models. Excellent climate-control system. Controls were generally easy to use, and displays were clear.

CHEVROLET SPECTRUM

The Spectrum is essentially similar to the Isuzu I-Mark. The 1.5-liter 4 bucked annoyingly under acceleration. When partly warm, it sometimes sagged severely. Smooth-shifting 5-speed manual transmission. This front-wheel-drive car had very competent handling, excellent in emergency maneuvers. Touchy brakes. Some swerving during very hard stops. Fairly comfortable front seats, but cushions are skimpy for portly or tall people. Some drivers wanted to sit higher. Tall drivers wanted more leg room. Uncomfortable rear seat, holds only two. Fairly noisy, annoyingly so on coarse pavement. Ride basically well controlled with light load, but harsh and jerky on rough roads. Strong ventilation, anemic heating and windshield defrosting.

Nicely designed controls except for horn buttons on the steering wheel. Clear displays. Annoyingly bright upshift light.

CHEVROLET SPRINT

The 1-liter 3 started well when cold but then sagged and hesitated during acceleration. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted crisply. This front-wheel-drive model handled well. Sure and steady brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats, but small and low. Low driving position, and clutch too far from driver when throttle is within easy reach. Fairly noisy. Harsh and active ride. Heater responded slowly to changes in temperature setting. Unimpressive ventilation. Logical controls and clear displays.

CHRYSLER CONQUEST

The turbocharged Conquest comes fully equipped. When last tested, it was competent. It is also sold as the Mitsubishi Starion.

CHRYSLER FIFTH AVENUE

Dodge Diplomat and Plymouth Gran Fury are essentially similar. The 5.2-liter V8 started and ran well. Very smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Constant steering corrections needed to keep car from wandering on highways. In very short stops, a front or rear brake often locked, making the car weave from side to side. Exceptionally comfortable split-bench seat for two, but cramped for a third occupant in the center. Uncomfortable rear seat, although just roomy enough for six-footers and just wide enough for three adults. Good ride on smooth roads, snappy on rough ones. Moderate noise level. Excellent climate-control system. Crowded but easy-to-reach controls. Daytime reflections spoiled the clearly marked displays.

CHRYSLER LE BARON

The Le Baron is basically the same as the Dodge Aries and Plymouth Reliant K-cars, but it's costlier and hence competes in the medium class. Between this Le Baron, the new Le Baron Coupe, and the Le Baron GTS, confusion is not only possible, it appears to be the manufacturer's goal.

CHRYSLER LE BARON COUPE/CONVERTIBLE

The Le Baron Coupe is a new 1987 model with a new body shell, but it shares all its basic chassis components with the Dodge Aries and Plymouth Reliant K-cars.

CHRYSLER LE BARON GTS

Dodge Lancer is a twin. When cold, the optional 2.5-liter 4 required longer cranking than usual, but it ran well. The 2.2-liter turbo 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly during normal driving, more abruptly during hard acceleration. Vague but controllable handling, much improved by optional sport handling suspension. Excellent braking. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position except for very tall or very short people. Uncomfortable rear seat. Cramped for three adults. Quiet but jittery ride. Excellent climate-control system. Generally logical controls. Clear and complete displays.

CHRYSLER NEW YORKER

Plymouth Caravelle and Dodge 600 are essentially similar. The 2.2-liter 4 started and ran well. The 2.5-liter 4 and the turbocharged 2.2-liter 4 also ran without problems. The automatic transmission generally shifted smoothly. Handling of this front-wheel-drive model was somewhat vague and sluggish. Very good brakes. Very comfortable front seat. Good driving position, but a tilt steering column would have been welcome. Uncomfortable rear seat. Very good climate-control system. Generally logical controls. Clear displays.

DODGE 600

Plymouth Caravelle and Chrysler New Yorker are essentially similar. The 2.2-liter 4 started and ran well. The 2.5-liter 4 and the turbocharged 2.2-liter 4 also ran without problems. The automatic transmission generally shifted smoothly. Handling of this front-wheel-drive model was somewhat vague and sluggish. Very good brakes. Very comfortable front seat. Good driving position, but a tilt steering column would have been welcome. Uncomfortable rear seat. Very good climate-control system. Generally logical controls. Clear displays.

DODGE ARIES

Plymouth Reliant is a twin. The 2.2-liter 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission occasionally shifted abruptly. This front-wheel-drive model handled somewhat vaguely in emergency maneuvers. Very good brakes. Bench front seat fairly comfortable for two or three. Rear seat uncomfortable for two or three. Moderate noise level. Ride was busy, too soft with full load. Very good climate system.

DODGE CARAVAN

Plymouth Voyager is a twin. The optional 2.6-liter 4 started and ran well. (A 2.2-liter 4 is standard, a 3-liter V6 will be optional later in the year.) The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive van handled much like a typical passenger car in normal driving but was sluggish and vague in emergency maneuvers. The front brakes locked a bit too soon, extending stopping distances, but fade was slight. Exceptionally comfortable front seats and driving position. Passenger's seat is not adjustable. Second seat fairly comfortable for two. Third seat fairly comfortable for two or three. Moderate noise level. The Voyager rode more like a car than a truck. The ride was pleasant on good roads but rough on back roads. Excellent climate-control system. Very good controls and displays.

DODGE COLT VISTA WAGON

Plymouth Colt and Mitsubishi Mirage are essentially similar. The 1.5-liter 4 ran well except for occasional stumbling during warm-up. Weak acceleration, especially in fourth and fifth gears. Crisp, easy-shifting manual 5-speed transmission. This front-wheel-drive model handled very precisely and responsively. Slight fade was the only problem with the brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats, but too little leg room for tall drivers. Rear seat uncomfortable for two, very tight for three. Moderate noise level. Very good air-conditioning and ventilation, adequate windshield defrosting, weak heating. Very good controls, excellent displays.

DODGE DAYTONA

The Daytona has been face-lifted for 1987, and the Plymouth version has been dropped from the line. When we last tested the front-wheel-drive Daytona we judged it a good overall performer, but not up to the level of the better cars in this group.

DODGE DIPLOMAT

Chrysler Fifth Avenue and Plymouth Gran Fury are essentially similar. The 5.2-liter V8 started and ran well. Very smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Constant steering corrections needed to keep car from wandering on highways. In very short stops, a front or rear brake often locked, making the car weave from side to side. Exceptionally comfortable split-bench seat for two, but cramped for a third occupant in the center. Uncomfortable rear seat, although just roomy enough for six-footers and just wide enough for three adults. Good ride on smooth roads, snappy on rough ones. Moderate noise level. Excellent climate-control system. Crowded but easy-to-reach controls. Daytime reflections spoiled the clearly marked displays.

DODGE LANCER

Chrysler Le Baron GTS is a twin. When cold, the optional 2.5-liter 4 required longer cranking than usual, but it ran well. The 2.2-liter turbo 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly during normal driving, more abruptly during hard acceleration. Vague but controllable handling, much improved by optional sport handling suspension. Excellent braking. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position except for very tall or very short people. Uncomfortable rear seat. Cramped for three adults. Quiet but jittery ride. Excellent climate-control system. Generally logical controls. Clear and complete displays.

DODGE OMNI AMERICA/CHARGER

Plymouth Horizon/Turismo is a twin. The 2.2-liter 4 sometimes died after a cold start, then sagged occasionally during acceleration. The 5-speed manual transmission was vague and balky at times. This front-wheel-drive model handled clumsily for a small car, and its steering felt heavy and vague. Excellent brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats. Awkward driving position, tight leg room and bad clutch placement. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Soft ride, but lacked control over rural roads. Crude and archaic heater, and especially poor ventilation in cars without air-conditioning. Very poor controls. Turn signal out of easy reach of the driver. Some reflections on gauges.

DODGE SHADOW

Plymouth Sundance is a twin. The 2.2-liter 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model was a bit skittish in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Some instruments cut off from tall driver's view. Rear seat very uncomfortable for two or three. Ride was comfortable on expressways, busy on rural roads. Moderate noise level. Unimpressive heater. Excellent air-conditioner. Logical controls and displays.

FORD AEROSTAR

The 3-liter V6 (new for 1987) wasn't tested. The 4-speed automatic transmission usually shifted very smoothly. Sluggish and sloppy but controllable handling. Poor braking performance: Stopping distances without wheel locking were very long. When a wheel locked, the van often swerved to the side, sometimes severely. Fairly comfortable front captain's chairs (included in 7-seat XL package). Awkward and uncomfortable driving position. Fairly comfortable center and rear seats. Moderate noise level. Fairly well-controlled ride on good roads, punishing on poor roads. Excellent climate-control system. Awkward, inconvenient controls. Easy-to-read displays.

FORD ESCORT

Mercury Lynx is a twin. The 1.9-liter 4 started and ran well but buzzed and vibrated during acceleration. The 5-speed manual transmission wasn't crisp, and the clutch pedal required a long push. The automatic transmission shifted back and forth annoyingly often. Steering in this front-wheel-drive car required frequent small corrections to maintain a straight course. Sloppy but safe emergency handling. Brakes were somewhat hard to modulate, and the car nosedived during short stops. Very comfortable front seats. Awkward driving position, especially for the tall people. Rear seat very uncomfortable for two. Moderate noise level, but especially noisy on coarse pavement. Uncomfortable ride; frequent bobbing and tossing. Excellent

climate-control system. Awkward controls. Display could be a bit more legible.

FORD ESCORT EXP

The EXP, a sporty version of the front-wheel-drive Ford Escort/Mercury Lynx, was restyled in mid-1986. It now has a more sporty emphasis.

FORD ESCORT WAGON

Mercury Lynx is a twin. The 1.9-liter 4 started and ran well but buzzed and vibrated during acceleration. The 5-speed manual transmission wasn't crisp, and the clutch pedal required a long push. The automatic transmission shifted back and forth annoyingly often. Steering in this front-wheel-drive car required frequent small corrections to maintain a straight course. Sloppy but safe emergency handling. Brakes were somewhat hard to modulate, and the car nosedived during short stops. Very comfortable front seats. Awkward driving position, especially for the tall people. Rear seat very uncomfortable for two. Moderate noise level, but especially noisy on coarse pavement. Uncomfortable ride; frequent bobbing and tossing. Excellent

climate-control system. Awkward controls. Display could be a bit more legible.

FORD LTD CROWN VICTORIA

Mercury Grand Marquis is a twin. The 5-liter V8 always started and ran well. The 4-speed automatic transmission worked smoothly, but it shifted into and out of overdrive too frequently. Handling was somewhat sluggish and clumsy but safe. Very good brakes. Split-bench front seat exceptionally comfortable for two, very comfortable for three. Rear seat very comfortable for two or three. Very quiet. Excellent ride. Rode well even with full load. Excellent climate-control system. The Mercury's glittery gauges were hard to read. The Ford's are better. Awkward windshield wiper/washer control.

FORD MUSTANG

The Mustang was last redesigned in 1979 and is larger and heavier than the modern, front-wheel-drive sporty cars. Its twin, the Mercury Capri, has been dropped for 1987. Handling of basic models has been below par among sporty cars.

FORD TAURUS

Mercury Sable is a twin. Both the 3-liter V6 and the 2.5-liter 4 started and ran well. With the V6, the overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted very smoothly. With the 4, the automatic transmission shifted smoothly, but acceleration was no more than adequate. This front-wheel-drive model handled very well. The wagon version was especially competent. Fairly long stopping distances and considerable brake fade, but stops were straight. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Excellent driving position with power seat. Without the power adjustment, the seat was too low and the steering wheel too high. Rear seat fairly comfortable for two or three. Quiet inside. Stable, tightly controlled ride on all but the bumpiest roads. Excellent climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

FORD TAURUS WAGON

Mercury Sable is a twin. Both the 3-liter V6 and the 2.5-liter 4 started and ran well. With the V6, the overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted very smoothly. With the 4, the automatic transmission shifted smoothly, but acceleration was no more than adequate. This front-wheel-drive model handled very well. The wagon version was especially competent. Fairly long stopping distances and considerable brake fade, but stops were straight. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Excellent driving position with power seat. Without the power adjustment, the seat was too low and the steering wheel too high. Rear seat fairly comfortable for two or three. Quiet inside. Stable, tightly controlled ride on all but the bumpiest roads. Excellent climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

FORD TEMPO

Mercury Topaz is a twin. The 2.3-liter HSC 4 started easily and ran well. Rather slow acceleration. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Handling of this front-wheel-drive model was somewhat sluggish in normal driving, but predictable during emergency maneuvers. Very good brakes. Stops were a bit long, but fade was minimal. Very comfortable front seats. Improved driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Busy ride. Excellent climate system, even without air-conditioning. Annoying push-button release for ignition key.

FORD THUNDERBIRD

Mercury Cougar is essentially similar. The 3.8-liter V6 started and ran well and delivered ample acceleration. The automatic transmission shifted fairly smoothly. Sluggish handling; rear end sometimes swung out during hard turns. Stops were straight and fairly short. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Low driving position, helped by optional power driver's seat. Rear seat very uncomfortable for two or three. Quiet, smooth, and well-controlled ride, even with a full load. Excellent climate-control system.

GMC SAFARI

Chevrolet Astro is a twin. The 4.3-liter V6 ran flawlessly except for an occasional stall after a cold start. The 4-speed automatic transmission usually shifted abruptly from first to second, and it hunted in and out of lock-up on mild upgrades. Sluggish but safe handling. Poor traction on slippery roads. Very good brakes, a bit hard to modulate. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. High driving position would have been excellent except for awkward pedal placement and lack of foot space. Fairly comfortable center and rear seats in 8-person seating package. Moderate noise level, uncomfortable ride. Adequate heating, modest ventilation, and weak air-conditioning. Awkward controls. Clear displays.

HONDA ACCORD

The 2-liter 4 sometimes stalled once after a cold start and occasionally hesitated while warming up. The 4-speed automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive car handled very well. Very good brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Low, sporty-car driving position. Rear seat uncomfortable for two or three. Moderate noise level. Firm ride with good control. Excellent climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

HONDA CIVIC

The 1.5-liter 4 started easily and ran well. The automatic transmission did not shift very smoothly, but the lock-up mechanism worked well. This front-wheel-drive car handled nimbly and precisely. Outstanding in our track test. Excellent brakes. Driving position awkward for some drivers because accelerator pedal is too close. Fairly comfortable front seats. Rear seat uncomfortable for two, very uncomfortable for three. Moderate noise level. Fairly abrupt, stiff ride. Very good climate-control system. Excellent operating controls and displays.

HONDA CIVIC CRX

The 1.5-liter fuel-injected 4 (standard in the Si model) ran flawlessly and accelerated briskly. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model handled nimbly and precisely. Excellent braking. The CRX is a low 2-seater. Access is difficult. Fairly comfortable seats, awkward pedals. Moderate noise level. Comfortable ride. Excellent climate controls. Somewhat awkward controls, but displays were easy to read.

HONDA PRELUDE

The 2-liter 4 started easily and was responsive once warm. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted very easily. This front-wheel-drive car handled easily and responsively. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Driving position low and reclined. Drivers over six feet tall may have insufficient head room. Very uncomfortable rear seat for two or three. Moderate noise level. Firm but not punishing ride. Fairly weak heating and defrosting. Satisfactory air-conditioning. Excellent operating controls and displays.

HYUNDAI EXCEL

The 1.5-liter 4 started quickly but sagged and hesitated during warm-up and surged during moderate acceleration. Both the 4-speed and 5-speed manual transmission shifted easily but often blocked reverse. At highway speeds, engine revs are high with the 4-speed transmission. This front-wheel-drive car had sluggish handling. Sloppy but controllable emergency handling. Disappointing brakes, with fairly long stopping distance and noticeable fade from repeated stops. Firm and supportive front seats; we prefer cloth upholstery over the slippery vinyl in the base model. Accelerator pedal too close to driver. Moderately noisy, annoyingly so on coarse pavement. Adequate heating and ventilation.

ISUZU I-MARK

The front-wheel-drive I-Mark is essentially the same car as the Chevrolet Spectrum. The 1.5-liter 4 bucked annoyingly under acceleration. When partly warm, it sometimes sagged severely. Smooth-shifting 5-speed manual transmission. This front-wheel-drive car had very competent handling, excellent in emergency maneuvers. Touchy brakes. Some swerving during very hard stops. Fairly comfortable front seats, but cushions are skimpy for portly or tall people. Some drivers wanted to sit higher. Tall drivers wanted more leg room. Uncomfortable rear seat, holds only two. Fairly noisy, annoyingly so on coarse pavement. Ride basically well controlled with light load, but harsh and jerky on rough roads. Strong ventilation, anemic heating and windshield

defrosting. Nicely designed controls except for horn buttons on the steering wheel. Clear displays. Annoyingly bright upshift light.

ISUZU IMPULSE

The Impulse has a rather old-fashioned chassis layout. When last tested, it did not perform as well as the better models in its class.

LINCOLN CONTINENTAL

The Continental is the 4-door version of the Lincoln Mark VII. Air suspension, antilock brakes and a 5-liter V8 are standard.

LINCOLN TOWN CAR

The Town car is a stretched version of the big Ford and Mercury. Its powertrain is the same as in those models, but interior appointments are more luxurious.

MAZDA 323

The 1.6-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Spirited acceleration. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted crisply and precisely. This front-wheel-drive model gave excellent routine handling, sloppy but safe emergency handling. The brakes were a little difficult to modulate. Very comfortable front seats, very good driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Typical small-car ride. Excellent climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

MAZDA 626

The 2-liter 4 started and ran well except for an occasionally shaky idle. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted smoothly but balked going into reverse. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model handled very well. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Driving position cramped for tall people. Uncomfortable rear seat for two or three. Moderate noise level. Firm ride with good control. Very good heating; excellent ventilation and air-conditioning. Very good controls. Excellent displays.

MAZDA RX-7

The 1.3-liter twin-chamber rotary engine started quickly and ran flawlessly when warm. In cold weather, idle was rough during warm-up. Acceleration was strong and smooth. The transmission shifted smoothly. Excellent handling, extremely controllable. Excellent brakes. This 2-seater has very comfortable front seats, though the driving position was too low. Fairly high road noise. Very active and hard ride on all but the smoothest roads. Excellent heating and fresh-air ventilation, satisfactory air-conditioning. Controls are a bit unusual in design but easy to use. Excellent displays.

MERCEDES-BENZ 190

The 2.3-liter gasoline 4 started and ran well at all times. Responsive acceleration. The 4-speed automatic transmission shifted abruptly at times. Handling was smooth, responsive and controllable. Excellent brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Gasoline version fairly quiet. Taut, very well-controlled ride. Very good climate system with automatic temperature control.

MERCEDES-BENZ 300

The 3-liter gasoline 6 started and ran flawlessly and accelerated very quickly. The 4-speed automatic transmission usually shifted very smoothly. Impressively precise handling. Superior braking. The antilock brakes stopped the car very short and straight even on slippery roads. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Excellent driving position. Fairly comfortable rear seat, with ample room for three average adults. Firm, well-controlled, and quiet ride. Excellent automatic climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

MERCURY COUGAR

Ford Thunderbird is essentially similar. The 3.8-liter V6 started and ran well and delivered ample acceleration. The automatic transmission shifted fairly smoothly. Sluggish handling; rear end sometimes swung out during hard turns. Stops were straight and fairly short. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Low driving position, helped by optional power driver's seat. Rear seat very uncomfortable for two or three. Quiet, smooth, and well-controlled ride, even with a full load. Excellent climate-control system.

MERCURY GRAND MARQUIS

Ford LTD Crown Victoria is a twin. The 5-liter V8 always started and ran well. The 4-speed automatic transmission worked smoothly, but it shifted into and out of overdrive too frequently. Handling was somewhat sluggish and clumsy but safe. Very good brakes. Split-bench front seat exceptionally comfortable for two, very comfortable for three. Rear seat very comfortable for two or three. Very quiet. Excellent ride. Rode well even with full load. Excellent climate-control system. The Mercury's glittery gauges were hard to read. The Ford's are better. Awkward windshield wiper/washer control.

MERCURY LYNX

Ford Escort is a twin. The 1.9-liter 4 started and ran well but buzzed and vibrated during acceleration. The 5-speed manual transmission wasn't crisp, and the clutch pedal required a long push. The automatic transmission shifted back and forth annoyingly often. Steering in this front-wheel-drive car required frequent small corrections to maintain a straight course. Sloppy but safe emergency handling. Brakes were somewhat hard to modulate, and the car nosedived during short stops. Very comfortable front seats. Awkward driving position, especially for the tall people. Rear seat very uncomfortable for two. Moderate noise level, but especially noisy on coarse pavement. Uncomfortable ride; frequent bobbing and tossing. Excellent

climate-control system. Awkward controls. Display could be a bit more legible.

MERCURY SABLE

Ford Taurus is a twin. Both the 3-liter V6 and the 2.5-liter 4 started and ran well. With the V6, the overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted very smoothly. With the 4, the automatic transmission shifted smoothly, but acceleration was no more than adequate. This front-wheel-drive model handled very well. The wagon version was especially competent. Fairly long stopping distances and considerable brake fade, but stops were straight. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Excellent driving position with power seat. Without the power adjustment, the seat was too low and the steering wheel too high. Rear seat fairly comfortable for two or three. Quiet inside. Stable, tightly controlled ride on all but the bumpiest roads. Excellent climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

MERCURY SABLE WAGON

Ford Taurus is a twin. Both the 3-liter V6 and the 2.5-liter 4 started and ran well. With the V6, the overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted very smoothly. With the 4, the automatic transmission shifted smoothly, but acceleration was no more than adequate. This front-wheel-drive model handled very well. The wagon version was especially competent. Fairly long stopping distances and considerable brake fade, but stops were straight. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Excellent driving position with power seat. Without the power adjustment, the seat was too low and the steering wheel too high. Rear seat fairly comfortable for two or three. Quiet inside. Stable, tightly controlled ride on all but the bumpiest roads. Excellent climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

MERCURY TOPAZ

Ford Tempo is a twin. The 2.3-liter HSC 4 started easily and ran well. Rather slow acceleration. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Handling of this front-wheel-drive model was somewhat sluggish in normal driving, but predictable during emergency maneuvers. Very good brakes. Stops were a bit long, but fade was minimal. Very comfortable front seats. Improved driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Busy ride. Excellent climate system, even without air-conditioning. Annoying push-button release for ignition key.

MERKUR XR4TI

The 2.3-liter turbocharged 4 started easily and ran well. We noted some turbo lag (delayed engine response) but acceleration was very strong. Rather stiff-shifting 5-speed manual transmission, with high gearing that wasn't ideal for driving around town. Smooth and precise routine handling. Hard cornering tended to make the car swing out its tail, a bit disconcerting, but not hard to control. Exceptional brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Driver's seat can be raised or lowered. Excellent driving position. Uncomfortable rear seat for two or three. Inadequate head room for six-footers. Moderate noise level. Well-controlled ride. Excellent air-conditioning and ventilation. The heater was a bit weak, but defrosting was satisfactory. Odd, confusing controls. Clear displays.

MITSUBISHI CORDIA

The front-wheel-drive Mitsubishi Cordia is a sporty version of the Tredia sedan. Except for the Cordia's very uncomfortable rear seat, our test results for the Mitsubishi Tredia should apply to this model.

MITSUBISHI GALANT

The 2.4-liter 4 started easily and ran well. The electronically controlled 4-speed automatic transmission with lockup feature shifted smoothly and did a good job of selecting the proper gear. This front-wheel-drive model's handling was almost flawless, Excellent braking. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Driver's seat is adjustable for height and lower-back support. Very comfortable adjustable rear seat; remarkably roomy even for three. Quiet inside. Busy but competent ride. Excellent climate-control system. Unusual but well-designed controls. Radio was hard to reach. Easy-to-read gauges.

MITSUBISHI MIRAGE

Dodge Colt and Plymouth Colt are essentially similar. The 1.5-liter 4 ran well except for occasional stumbling during warm-up. Weak acceleration, especially in fourth and fifth gears. Crisp, easy-shifting manual 5-speed transmission. This front-wheel-drive model handled very precisely and responsively. Slight fade was the only problem with the brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats, but too little leg room for tall drivers. Rear seat uncomfortable for two, very tight for three. Moderate noise level. Very good air-conditioning and ventilation, adequate windshield defrosting, weak heating. Very good controls, excellent displays.

MITSUBISHI STARION

The turbocharged Starion comes fully equipped. When last tested, it was competent. It is also sold as the Plymouth Conquest.

MITSUBISHI TREDIA

The 2-liter 4 started easily but sagged and hesitated. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted well except into fifth gear. This front-wheel-drive model handled very well in routine driving. Emergency handling was somewhat sloppy but steady. The brakes felt a bit touchy. Fairly comfortable in front except for drivers over 5 feet 10 inches. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Reasonably comfortable ride. Excellent heating, very good ventilation, rather weak air-conditioning. Excellent controls and displays.

NISSAN 200SX

The 200SX turbo 4 has been dropped, and the SE model now has the 300ZX's powerful 3-liter V6. When last tested, the 200SX was a good, representative sporty car.

NISSAN 300ZX

The 300ZX is large and heavy for a sports car, but very well equipped and comfortable. Its rear-wheel-drive chassis and powerful 3-liter V6 are largely unchanged. The body has been face-lifted.

NISSAN MAXIMA

The 3-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Strong acceleration. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Fairly responsive routine handling in this front-wheel-drive model. Tendency to fish-tail during abrupt maneuvers. Some weaving during hard stops. Very comfortable front seats. Fairly comfortable front seats. Fairly comfortable driving position. Tight leg room for tall drivers. Uncomfortable rear seat, cramped for three adults. Fairly quiet but sharply busy ride. Powerful climate-control system. Noisy heater. Well-designed but complicated controls. Excellent displays.

NISSAN MAXIMA WAGON

The 3-liter V6 started and ran flawlessly. Strong acceleration. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Fairly responsive routine handling in this front-wheel-drive model. Tendency to fish-tail during abrupt maneuvers. Some weaving during hard stops. Very comfortable front seats. Fairly comfortable front seats. Fairly comfortable driving position. Tight leg room for tall drivers. Uncomfortable rear seat, cramped for three adults. Fairly quiet but sharply busy ride. Powerful climate-control system. Noisy heater. Well-designed but complicated controls. Excellent displays.

NISSAN PULSAR NX

The Pulsar NX is new for 1987. This front-wheel-drive car comes with a removable T-roof. Even the rear hatch can be removed with tools. The car is, practically speaking, a 2-seater. The rear seat is most useful when folded down. The SE has a 16-valve high-performance 4.

NISSAN SENTRA

The 1.6-liter 4 usually started and ran well. The automatic transmission with lock-up shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model handled well in normal driving, a bit sluggishly in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Reasonably comfortable ride except on really bumpy roads. Excellent climate-control system. Convenient controls, clear displays.

NISSAN STANZA

The 2-liter 4 started quickly and ran well. The 4-speed automatic transmission sometimes downshifted abruptly and unnecessarily during acceleration. Routine handling of this front-wheel-drive model was competent. Emergency maneuvers were less so. Exceptional brakes. The front seats were very comfortable in the sedan, exceptionally comfortable in the wagon. Very good driving position. Rather tight rear seat in the sedan. Fairly comfortable in the wagon. Moderate noise level. Fairly comfortable ride. Excellent climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

NISSAN VAN

This vehicle has been completely recalled and has been bought back by the manufacturer.

OLDSMOBILE CALAIS

Buick Skylark/Somerset and Pontiac Grand Am are essentially similar. The 2.5-liter 4 started reliably but occasionally hesitated on initial acceleration. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model with optional suspension handled very well. Excellent brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats. Fairly low driving position. Rear seat uncomfortable for two or three. Stiff ride. Would be better with the standard suspension. Moderate noise level. Excellent climate-control system. Logical controls. Better displays than in Buick or Pontiac counterparts.

OLDSMOBILE CUTLASS CIERA

Buick Century, Chevrolet Celebrity and Pontiac 6000 are essentially similar. The 2.5-liter 4 started easily and ran well. The automatic transmission with lock-up shifted smoothly, but early lock-up made the engine lug. This front-wheel-drive model handled sluggishly but safely. Stops from 60 mph were disappointingly long. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position, but may be low for some drivers. Quiet. Fairly comfortable ride, but too soft on rough surfaces. Handling package would be desirable for most driving conditions. Excellent climate-control system. Generally good controls and displays.

OLDSMOBILE CUTLASS SUPREME

Buick Regal is essentially similar. The Regal and the Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme are the last remnants of GM's coupe line. These models have been supplanted by more modern, front-wheel-drive designs.

OLDSMOBILE DELTA EIGHTY EIGHT ROYAL

Buick Le Sabre and Pontiac Bonneville are essentially similar. The 3.8-liter V6 started easily and ran well. The overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly. Vague but safe handling. Excellent braking. Very comfortable split-bench front seat, roomy enough for three. Very comfortable, though low, driving position. Rear seat fairly comfortable even for three. Exceptionally quiet inside. Smooth ride on expressways, rough on secondary roads. (Handling suspension is recommended.) Excellent climate control. Old-fashioned, familiar controls in Buick and Olds models. Minimal displays.

OLDSMOBILE FIRENZA

Chevrolet Cavalier, Buick Skyhawk and Pontiac Sunbird J-cars are essentially similar. The 2-liter 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model handled well. Very good brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats; very good driving position. Rear seat uncomfortable for two, worse for three. Moderate noise level. Generally soft ride, but abrupt on rough roads. Excellent climate-control system. Gauges were hard to read in daytime because of reflections. Most controls were convenient.

OLDSMOBILE NINETY EIGHT REGENCY

Buick Electra is essentially similar. The 3.8-liter V6 always started and ran well. The smooth-shifting 4-speed automatic transmission shifted into and out of overdrive lock-up too often. In this front-wheel-drive car, directional stability felt uncertain at times, and the rear wheels tended to step out in bumpy turns. Responsive steering. Very good braking, though abrupt in short stops. Front seating exceptionally comfortable for two or three. Rear seating very comfortable for two, uncomfortable for three on long trips. Ride very good on smooth roads, much worse on bumpy roads. Quiet inside. Coarse pavement increased interior noise. Excellent climate-control system. Most controls were convenient. Mostly clear displays.

OLDSMOBILE TORONADO

The 3.8-liter V6 started and ran without a problem. The overdrive automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Sluggish routine handling. Car tended to shift direction slightly in bumpy turns. Emergency handling was sloppy and vague. The tail wagged and steering response lagged during abrupt maneuvers. Mediocre brakes. Excessive nose-dive contributed to long stopping distances. Very comfortable front seats. Driving position nearly ideal for all but very short drivers. Uncomfortable rear seat. Barely enough head room for six-footers. Standard suspension gave smooth ride on good roads, but topped and bottomed badly on back roads. Access to rear seat awkward. Extremely quiet. Excellent heating, ventilation and air-conditioning. Conventional controls, but too many tiny buttons. Clear digital displays.

PEUGEOT 505

The 2-liter 4 (Liberte) started easily and ran well. The overdrive automatic transmission shifted fairly smoothly but occasionally delayed its upshifts too long. Very precise and responsive handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Driving position very good, except the pedals were a bit too close to tall drivers. Rear seat very comfortable for two or three. Moderate noise level. Very competent ride. Satisfactory heating, marginal defrosting, weak air-conditioning. Confusing, awkward controls, very legible displays.

PEUGEOT 505 WAGON

The 2-liter 4 (Liberte) started easily and ran well. The overdrive automatic transmission shifted fairly smoothly but occasionally delayed its upshifts too long. Very precise and responsive handling. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Driving position very good, except the pedals were a bit too close to tall drivers. Rear seat very comfortable for two or three. Rear seat very comfortable for two or three. Moderate noise level. Very competent ride. Satisfactory heating, marginal defrosting, weak air-conditioning. Confusing, awkward controls, very legible displays.

PLYMOUTH CARAVELLE

Chrysler New Yorker, and The Dodge 600 are essentially similar. The 2.2-liter 4 started and ran well. The 2.5-liter 4 and the turbocharged 2.2-liter 4 also ran without problems. The automatic transmission generally shifted smoothly. Handling of this front-wheel-drive model was somewhat vague and sluggish. Very good brakes. Very comfortable front seat. Good driving position, but a tilt steering column would have been welcome. Uncomfortable rear seat. Very good climate-control system. Generally logical controls. Clear displays.

PLYMOUTH COLT

Dodge Colt and Mitsubishi Mirage are essentially similar. The 1.5-liter 4 ran well except for occasional stumbling during warm-up. Weak acceleration, especially in fourth and fifth gears. Crisp, easy-shifting manual 5-speed transmission. This front-wheel-drive model handled very precisely and responsively. Slight fade was the only problem with the brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats, but too little leg room for tall drivers. Rear seat uncomfortable for two, very tight for three. Moderate noise level. Very good air-conditioning and ventilation, adequate windshield defrosting, weak heating. Very good controls, excellent displays.

PLYMOUTH GRAN FURY

Chrysler Fifth Avenue and Dodge Diplomat are essentially similar. The 5.2-liter V8 started and ran well. Very smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Constant steering corrections needed to keep car from wandering on highways. In very short stops, a front or rear brake often locked, making the car weave from side to side. Exceptionally comfortable split-bench seat for two, but cramped for a third occupant in the center. Uncomfortable rear seat, although just roomy enough for six-footers and just wide enough for three adults. Good ride on smooth roads, snappy on rough ones. Moderate noise level. Excellent climate-control system. Crowded but easy-to-reach controls. Daytime reflections spoiled the clearly marked displays.

PLYMOUTH HORIZON AMERICA/TURISMO

Dodge Omni America/Charger is a twin. The 2.2-liter 4 sometimes died after a cold start, then sagged occasionally during acceleration. The 5-speed manual transmission was vague and balky at times. This front-wheel-drive model handled clumsily for a small car, and its steering felt heavy and vague. Excellent brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats. Awkward driving position, tight leg room and bad clutch placement. Uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Soft ride, but lacked control over rural roads. Crude and archaic heater, and especially poor ventilation in cars without air-conditioning. Very

poor controls. Turn signal out of easy reach of the driver. Some reflections on gauges.

PLYMOUTH RELIANT

Dodge Aries is a twin. The 2.2-liter 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission occasionally shifted abruptly. This front-wheel-drive model handled somewhat vaguely in emergency maneuvers. Very good brakes. Bench front seat fairly comfortable for two or three. Rear seat uncomfortable for two or three. Moderate noise level. Ride was busy, too soft with full load. Very good climate system.

PLYMOUTH SUNDANCE

Dodge Shadow is a twin. The 2.2-liter 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model was a bit skittish in emergency maneuvers. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats. Some instruments cut off from tall driver's view. Rear seat very uncomfortable for two or three. Ride was comfortable on expressways, busy on rural roads. Moderate noise level. Unimpressive heater. Excellent air-conditioner. Logical controls and displays.

PLYMOUTH VOYAGER

Dodge Caravan is a twin. The optional 2.6-liter 4 started and ran well. (A 2.2-liter 4 is standard, a 3-liter V6 be optional later in the year.) The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive van handled much like a typical passenger car in normal driving but was sluggish and vague in emergency maneuvers. The front brakes locked a bit too soon, extending stopping distances, but fade was slight. Exceptionally comfortable front seats and driving position. Passenger's seat is not adjustable. Second seat fairly comfortable for two. Third seat fairly comfortable for two or three. Moderate noise level. The Voyager rode more like a car than a truck. The ride was pleasant on good roads but rough on back roads. Excellent climate-control system. Very good controls and displays.

PONTIAC 6000

This applies to the performance-oriented 6000 STE. Only the 4-cylinder version is recommended. The 2.8-liter HO V6 started and ran flawlessly. The automatic transmission with lock-up feature shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model (with standard performance suspension and tires) had very good routine handling, excellent emergency handling. Excellent brakes. Short and straight stops. Exceptionally comfortable front seats and driving position. Rear seating very good for two or three. Moderate noise level. Exhaust noise was irritating. Steady ride on fairly good roads. Pitching on bad roads. Heater was slow to warm and slow to respond to temperature adjustments. Otherwise, the climate-control system was excellent. Pretentious but functional displays.

PONTIAC BONNEVILLE

Oldsmobile Delta 88 Royale and Buick Le Sabre are essentially similar. The 3.8-liter V6 started easily and ran well. The overdrive automatic transmission usually shifted smoothly. Vague but safe handling. Excellent braking. Very comfortable split-bench front seat, roomy enough for three. Very comfortable, though low, driving position. Rear seat fairly comfortable even for three. Exceptionally quiet inside. Smooth ride on expressways, rough on secondary roads. (Handling suspension is recommended.) Excellent climate control. Old-fashioned, familiar controls in Buick and Olds models. Minimal displays.

PONTIAC FIERO

The 2.5-liter 4 started and ran well. The powerful 2.8-liter V6, standard in the GT, started and ran faultlessly. All versions of this mid-engine, rear-wheel-drive model now have a 5-speed manual transmission, not tested. Handling in the standard version was tricky, especially on wet or snowy roads. The GT gave very good routine handling, excellent emergency handling. Excellent brakes. This very low 2-seater provides difficult access. Fairly comfortable seats. Awkward driving position for short drivers. Moderate noise level. Busy and jiggly ride, punishing on rough roads. Excellent climate-control system. Some important controls were hard to see. Gauges were clear except for daytime reflections. Minimal trunk space.

PONTIAC FIREBIRD

Chevrolet Camaro is essentially similar. The Camaro and Firebird are vintage sporty cars, large and heavy, with very stiff suspension. Although a V6 is standard, most of these cars are sold with V8.

PONTIAC GRAND AM

Buick Skylark/Somerset and Oldsmobile Calais are essentially similar. The 2.5-liter 4 started reliably but occasionally hesitated on initial acceleration. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model with optional suspension handled very well. Excellent brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats. Fairly low driving position. Rear seat uncomfortable for two or three. Stiff ride. Would be better with the standard suspension. Moderate noise level. Excellent climate-control system. Logical controls. Better displays than in Buick or Oldsmobile counterparts.

PONTIAC GRAND PRIX

The Grand Prix and Chevrolet Monte Carlo are still hanging on as GM's aging rear-wheel-drive specialty cars. In recent years, the Monte Carlo, in the SS version with the optional V8, has developed a performance image.

PONTIAC SUNBIRD

Chevrolet Cavalier, Buick Skyhawk and Oldsmobile Firenza J-cars are essentially similar. The 2-liter 4 started and ran well. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. This front-wheel-drive model handled well. Very good brakes. Fairly comfortable front seats; very good driving position. Rear seat uncomfortable for two, worse for three. Moderate noise level. Generally soft ride, but abrupt on rough roads. Excellent climate-control system. Gauges were hard to read in daytime because of reflections. Most controls were convenient.

PORSCHE 944

The 2.5-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. Strong acceleration. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted competently. Excellent handling, with smooth and very predictable response. Extremely short, straight, and controllable stops. Low front seats, very comfortable but awkward access. Awkward driving position for short drivers. Very uncomfortable rear seat. Moderate noise level. Stiff, harsh ride, especially over patched or broken pavement. Adequate climate-control system. Logical, easy-to-use controls. Some displays hidden by driver's hands on the wheel.

RENAULT ALLIANCE

The optional 1.7-liter 4 started easily and ran well. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted smoothly into the first four gears but awkwardly into fifth and reverse. The automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Weak acceleration with automatic and 1.4-liter 4. This front-wheel-drive car handled very well in normal driving, somewhat imprecisely at the track. Excellent braking. The front seats were very comfortable except for tall people, who needed more leg room. Most drivers wanted to sit higher. The steering wheel was too high and too horizontal. Uncomfortable rear seat. Fairly comfortable ride. Moderate noise level. Effective air-conditioning and ample ventilation, but slow, hard-to-modulate heating. Poorly designed horn control, not on steering wheel. Clear displays.

RENAULT GTA

The GTA is a sporty version of the Renault Alliance. It has a unique 2-liter engine and unique suspension, wheels and tires.

SAAB 900

The 2-liter, turbocharged, 16-valve 4 started and ran without a hitch and gave more-than-ample acceleration. The 5-speed manual transmission occasionally balked when shifts were hurried. Steering response was a bit slow in this front-wheel-drive model, but emergency handling was very stable and precise. The brakes were somewhat difficult to modulate. Extremely comfortable, heated front seats. Some drivers wanted a higher seat or a lower steering wheel. Rear seat fairly comfortable for three. Moderate noise level. Road noise was prominent over coarse pavement. The firm suspension absorbed large bumps but transmitted harshness. A full load didn't worsen the ride much. Powerful, versatile air-conditioning

and effective ventilation. The heater warmed up slowly. Competent windshield defroster. Marginal rear defroster. Some controls (such as the ignition key on the floor) are odd. Displays were clear and easy to read.

SAAB 9000

The 9000 is an all-new front-wheel-drive model that shares only its engine with the Saab 900 line. The interior is very roomy and the level of standard equipment is very high. The front safety belts have an automatic pretensioning system similar to that in the Mercedes. It eliminates belt slack when a crash occurs.

SUBARU JUSTY

The Justy is a true mini-car, much like the Chevrolet Sprint. With its very tiny engine, light weight, and front-wheel drive, it should be nimble in traffic and economical. Automatic transmission and 4-wheel drive should be coming soon.

SUBARU XT

The 1.8-liter 4 started easily but surged briefly during sharp acceleration and deceleration. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted smoothly. A "hill-holder" feature keeps the car from rolling back when starting uphill. This front-wheel-drive model was easy to control, but steering was a bit sluggish. Excellent brakes. Very comfortable front seats and driving position. Rear seat comfortable for two, cramped for three. Moderate noise level. Fairly pleasant ride except with full load. Excellent heating, but rather weak air-conditioning. Poor ventilation with air-conditioning. Excellent controls and displays.

SUZUKI SAMURAI

Rated Not Acceptable because of its tendency to roll over during a hard turn. We found this tiny 4-wheel-drive vehicle wretched in most other respects as well.

TOYOTA CAMRY

The 2-liter 4 started and ran very well. The automatic overdrive transmission shifted smoothly; it provides a choice of Power or Normal range. This front-wheel-drive model handled steadily and accurately. Excellent brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Excellent driving position, with plenty of adjustment. Rear seat very comfortable for two, comfortable for three. Moderate noise level. Smooth, soft ride. Excellent climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

TOYOTA CAMRY WAGON

The 2-liter 4 started and ran very well. The automatic overdrive transmission shifted smoothly; it provides a choice of Power or Normal range. This front-wheel-drive model handled steadily and accurately. Excellent brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Excellent driving position, with plenty of adjustment. Rear seat very comfortable for two, comfortable for three. Moderate noise level. Smooth, soft ride. Excellent climate-control system. Excellent controls and displays.

TOYOTA CELICA

The 2-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted quickly and precisely. Excellent routine handling with quick and precise steering. Excellent emergency handling. Extremely short, straight stops. Excellent driving position because of widely adjustable seat. Extremely comfortable front seats. Awkward access. Rear seat unsuitable even for children. Moderate noise level, worse on coarse pavement. Stiff, nervous ride, but good for a sporty car. Excellent climate-control system. Controls worked well. Displays were extremely clear.

TOYOTA COROLLA

The 1.6-liter 4 started easily and ran well except for occasional hesitation during acceleration from standstill. Crisp-shifting 5-speed manual transmission. Smooth automatic transmission. This front-wheel-drive model handled very well. Excellent brakes. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Excellent driving position. Rear seat uncomfortable for two, very uncomfortable for three. Moderate noise level. Rode well for a small car except with full load. Excellent climate-control system, operating controls, and displays.

TOYOTA COROLLA FX-16

The front-wheel-drive FX-16 is a product of the joint venture between General Motors and Toyota and is built on the Chevrolet Nova assembly line. It is essentially a sporty hatchback version of the Nova/Corolla.

TOYOTA COROLLA SPORT

The Sport series retains the rear-wheel-drive chassis of the pre-1984 Corolla, a model we rated highly. The Sport shares its engine with the front-wheel-drive Corolla sedan and can be expected to deliver about the same performance.

TOYOTA CRESSIDA

The 2.8-liter 6 started and ran perfectly and accelerated briskly. Smooth-shifting overdrive automatic transmission. Steady, though slightly vague, handling. Faultless braking. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Excellent driving position. Rear seat fairly comfortable for two, less so for three. Quiet inside. Ride was smooth with light load, markedly worse with full load. Excellent automatic climate-control system. Nice but complicated controls. Very legible displays.

TOYOTA MR2

The 1.6-liter 4, a high-revving and responsive engine, started and ran faultlessly. The 5-speed manual transmission was one of the best. This mid-engined, rear-wheel-drive model had excellent routine handling. Very good emergency handling, a bit tricky, but very responsive. Very short, straight stops. This two-seater had low but comfortable seats. Very good driving position. Awkward access. Fairly noisy but comfortable ride. Excellent climate-control system. Very good controls. Excellent displays. Minimal trunk space.

TOYOTA SUPRA

The Supra, the top-line sporty Toyota, was new for mid-1986. It has rear-wheel drive and a powerful 3-liter, 24-valve 6.

TOYOTA TERCEL

The 1.5-liter 4 started easily but sagged during warm-up. The 4-speed manual transmission shifted crisply. This front-wheel-drive model handled fairly clumsily for a small car. Excellent braking. Very comfortable front seat. Very good driving position. Very uncomfortable rear seats. Fairly noisy. Typical small-car ride. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

TOYOTA VAN

The engine, mounted amidships, prevents the easy access from the front to the rear seats that the domestic passenger vans offer. The van didn't ride well, and it was very sensitive to crosswinds.

VOLKSWAGEN FOX

The front-wheel-drive Fox is Volkswagen's new entry-level small car. Its engine is the familiar VW 1-8-liter 4. The transmission is a manual 4-speed. Quite a lot of standard equipment.

VOLKSWAGEN GOLF

The 1.8-liter 4 started easily and ran flawlessly. Responsive acceleration. Crisp but stiff 5-speed manual transmission. This front-wheel-drive model handled very precisely, but some drivers may want optional power steering. Noticeable brake fade after 10 fairly hard stops. Exceptionally comfortable front seats. Nearly ideal driving position. Fairly comfortable rear seat, even for three. Moderate noise level. Firm ride, seldom harsh. Powerful air-conditioning and generous ventilation, but marginal heating and defrosting. Generally clear gauges. Controls could be better.

VOLKSWAGEN GTI

The GTI has a new, 16-valve engine. The previous GTI model is now the Volkswagen Golf GT. Expect this model to have handling of a very high order.

VOLKSWAGEN JETTA

The 1.8-liter 4 started and ran flawlessly. The 5-speed manual transmission shifted stiffly and, at times, reluctantly. This front-wheel-drive model handled responsively and controllable. Brakes were somewhat hard to modulate. Very comfortable front seats. Fairly comfortable driving position. Uncomfortable rear seats for two or three. Stiff, fairly noisy ride. Excellent climate-control system, controls and displays.

VOLKSWAGEN QUANTUM

The 2.2-liter 5 started and ran solidly, but its valve lifters clattered briefly after a cold start. Smooth-shifting automatic transmission. Very good routine handling in this front-wheel-drive model (Syncro version not tested). Excellent emergency handling. Excellent brakes. Very short stops from 60 mph. Very comfortable front seats. Very good driving position. Rear seat uncomfortable for two or three. Moderate noise level. Well-controlled but harsh ride. Mediocre heater. Ample but drafty ventilation. Excellent air-conditioner. Disappointing controls. Excellent displays.

VOLKSWAGEN SCIROCCO

The Scirocco remains one of VW's oldest designs. This front-wheel-drive car still handles very well, but the GTI has considerably better passenger accommodations. The new 16-valve engine is the same as that in the GTI.

VOLKSWAGEN VANAGON

The rear-engined Vanagon is very roomy for passengers, but it doesn't convert to a flat-floored cargo carrier. Previous tests have shown the van to be a slow and poor-handling vehicle, especially in crosswinds. Winter traction was also poor. Heating and air-conditioning were weak.

VOLVO 240

The 2.3-liter 4 started easily and generally ran well. While warming up, it occasionally hesitated briefly on takeoff. The 4-speed automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Stable handling, sloppy but safe in emergency maneuvers. The brakes felt overly sensitive at the track, but the car stopped well. Exceptionally comfortable front seats, with adjustment for lower-back support. Height and angle of driver's seat is adjustable. Uncomfortable driving position for tall people. Fairly comfortable rear seat. Plenty of room for two six-footers, crowded for three adults. Firm, rather harsh ride. Moderate noise level. A loud exhaust boom and vibration in the driveline and steering wheel were problems. Very good climate-control system, but slow response to temperature setting. Well-designed controls.

VOLVO 240 WAGON

The 2.3-liter 4 started easily and generally ran well. While warming up, it occasionally hesitated briefly on takeoff. The 4-speed automatic transmission shifted smoothly. Stable handling, sloppy but safe in emergency maneuvers. The brakes felt overly sensitive at the track, but the car stopped well. Exceptionally comfortable front seats, with adjustment for lower-back support. Height and angle of driver's seat is adjustable. Uncomfortable driving position for tall people. Fairly comfortable rear seat. Plenty of room for two six-footers, crowded for three adults. Firm, rather harsh ride. Moderate noise level. A loud exhaust boom and vibration in the driveline and steering wheel were problems. Very good climate-control system, but slow response to temperature setting. Well-designed controls.

VOLVO 740/760

The 740 and 769 are essentially the same car, especially in the turbo versions, which share the same engine. The level of standard equipment is very high. Antilock braking systems are standard or optional in all sedans but are standard or optional in all sedans but are not available in the wagons.

YUGO

The 1.1-liter 4 started easily. Except for a slight hitch, it ran well, but it strained on highway upgrades in high gear. The 4-speed manual transmission was very imprecise and often balky, the worst we've tried in years. In routine driving, the steering of this front-wheel-drive model felt heavy during low-speed cornering, especially when we accelerated. Excellent emergency handling. Excellent braking. Small, insufficiently contoured front seats. Extremely awkward driving position. Poor rear seat. Noisy, harsh ride. Marginal heater and defroster. Modest ventilation. Poor controls. Generally easy-to-read displays.

