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What's New—Cars of the 1980s

Gas-guzzling luxury cars are fast disappearing from the mainstream American automobiles. They are being replaced by more efficient, gas-stingy models. Here's a look at some of the newest developments.

By M'pingu

The American car is evolving, gradually changing from the fuel eating beast that we remember all too well into a lighter, sleeker and more externally compact road machine that can fit into the average family's budget.

The emphasis in 1980 is not how fast a car can accelerate from 0-60 mph or what it can do on a flat stretch of road with the pedal depressed to the floor, but rather on how far it can make it on a tank of gas and how comfortable it can be while still maintaining a high level of fuel consuming efficiency.

Europeans have always been accutely aware of the merits of driving small, luxurious fuel efficient cars. This is because gas has always been more expensive in Europe than it has been in the United States.

When Americans were paying $.30, $.40 and $.50 a gallon for gas, Europeans were paying $1 and $1.50. Europeans still pay more for gas than consumers in the United States. Now that prices for gasoline have risen to around and beyond the $1 mark, Europeans are paying an average of $3 to $4 a gallon.

This is why European cars have always evolved along compact, fuel-efficient lines. However, most Europeans have never believed in sacrificing comfort for economy, except in the base level models, such as Volkswagon, Renault, Simca and Fiat.

The cars driven by middle and upper - class Europeans are economy cars when it comes to fuel consumption and luxury cars when it comes to comfort, ride and interior appointments. Examples of these cars include: Mercedes Benz, Ferrari, Adui, BMW and Porsche.

However, the declining buying power of the dollar, low availability of parts and the expensive cost of repairs have priced many of these cars out-of-reach of the average American car buyer.

Can Detroit offer us a solution to this dilemna? If that question had been asked just a couple of years ago, many disenchanted American consumers would have answered no.

That's because at that time, Detroit only made two types of automobiles — large, comfortable, gas-guzzling luxury cars and small, uncomfortable and poorly designed and constructed compact cars.

The situation began to change for the better following the gas crisis of 1973 and things have continued to get better since then, with Detroit meeting the import challenge with more fuel efficient large cars and small cars that offer their owners more comfort and better workmanship.

Almost every 1980 model shows fuel economy gains, ranging from slight to terrific. Some of the gains are the resuk of fine tuning various elements in the car's systems, such as torgue converters and electronic controls.

Other fuel economy gains are due to advanced technologies, like the new Ford automatic overdrive transmission and Datsun's changeover to catalytic converters on all models. These technological changes are resulting in mileage improvements of from two to seven miles per gallon, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

Another step in the evolutionary process of the American auto is a drop in weight. Almost every 1980 American car weighs from 50 to 200 pounds less than the model that it replaces. Detroit has finlly realized that lighter cars can be moved with less power than that required by a larger machine.

However, akhough Detroit has placed a great deal of emphasis on the mileage ratings of the cars it manufacturers, the secondary goal of the automakers is luxury and style and the achievement of product differentiation.

The Ford Motor Co. has always been a leader in the production of economical cars, and a look at their 1980 models shows that the company does not intend to give the competition a chance to outrun it.

The company with the most newly redesigned models this year is Ford and the emphasis this year is on luxury cars, with the new 1980 autos being its high priced models: the Thunderbird, the Lincoln Continental Mark VI and the Mercury Cougar XR7.

These three models are smaller and lighter, with redesigned exteriors and interiors and several new components. Ford spokesmen say these redesigned luxury cars will get better gas mileage than 75

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LOOK OF THE 1980s—This is the shape of cars that will gain more and acceptance from the gas-conscious public during the next decade. This, of course, is a Chevette, but all car manufacturers today have a model which looks similar.

Reason for the Change

In case you're wondering what prompted this sudden change of heart—this desire for the evolution of the American car—among the profit-minded Big Three automakers, set mind and spirit at ease.

No, Detroit hasn't really experienced an awakening of conscience and decided to do something nice for the harried American consumer. The federal government has.

Many 1980 cars are considerably more fuel efficient because they have to be. And they have to retain their fancy exteriors and their luxurious interiors or discriminating consumers might decide to give the foreign car market a try.

Martha Casey, a spokeswoman for the Environmental Protection Agency explained that car manufacturers are being required to bring their fleets of cars up to a minimum fuel mileage rating of 20 mpg in 1980.

"This means that the average mileage of all the cars in a particular car manufacturer's fleet must be 20 miles per gallon," Ms. Casey said. "That's why a lot of manufacturers are pushing diesel engines. It's because they get such wonderful mileage."

According to Ms.Casey, the Big Three carmakers have been "consistently lobbying for the relaxation of the federal mileage controls."

She says the controls, which were made law in 1975, took effect in 1978 when car manufacturers were required to bring their overall ratings up to 18 miles per gallon.

In 1981, the figure will increase to 22 mpg, the 1982 figure is 24 mpg, 1983 26 mpg, 1984 mpg and in 1985 the figure will increas to 27.5 mpg.

"At that point we will have to take a look at the figures. The act might have to be amended after that," Ms. Casey said.

She says it isn't yet known if all the car manufacturers have met the 1978 figures, because the car manufacturers and or the Department of Transportation are late in turning in the figures, which were due in March or April of 1979.