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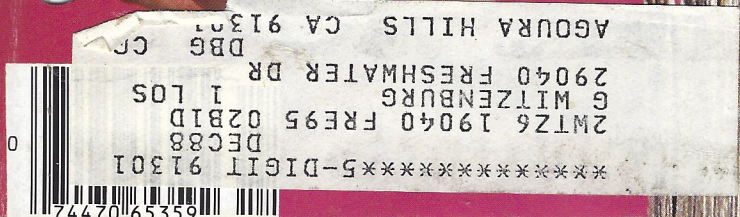
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THE LONG RIDERS

A holiday guide to renting—or buying—a limo

By Gary Witzenburg

Even in a *non*-holiday season, limousines have become as common in L.A. as cockroaches are in New York. The city is crawling with every species of our favorite new symbol of success, and the competition has progressed far beyond housing the obligatory full bar and tape-stocked VCR.

Which means that if you want to ride in style to your round of Christmas and New Year's events this year, the sky really is the limit. How about a five-and-a-half-car-length, double-axle stretch with its own wading pool? Or perhaps an exotic Stutz Bearcat or a gull-winged DeLoorean-like stretch job or one of the handful of \$150,000 bulletproof Mercedes-Benz sedans left over from the Olympics is more suited to your taste.

You don't even need to be a movie star or corporation president to ride in one. Standard limousines can be rented for \$30 to \$50 an hour, plus a 15 to 20 percent gratuity. This includes a fully stocked bar, TV, stereo, VCR, door-to-door delivery and all the courteous service you can stand. In fact, if you figure four or five hours for the usual night out and divide that two or three ways, a limousine is not all that extravagant. Furthermore, an increasing number of people are buying limos as tax write-offs or investments.

"We think of limousines as being for the rich, but 75 percent of the runs most drivers make are for regular people like you and me," says Sherrie Van Vliet, president of the state-approved Executive Chauffeuring School in Torrance. One Westside lady, for example, spends \$240 to have her three Dobermans chauffeured to their regular appointment at the vet . . . while she rests at home. A UCLA fraternity recently rented more than 50 stretch Caddys for a rollicking shebang. At high-school senior proms from Beverly Hills to Newport Beach, limousines have become



de rigueur. "We had the largest prom season ever," boasts David Klein, president of Dav-El Livery, who adds that more and more people are renting limos to get to and from LAX, sporting events at the Coliseum and evening entertainment.

What's behind Los Angeles' growing love affair with the limousine? "TV shows like *Dynasty* and *Dallas* have helped, and so have drunk-driving laws," according to Klein. Consider also that the chauffeur knows the best way to get where you're going and how long it takes. He or she fights the traffic while you relax and party in the back. You're dropped elegantly at the door (no parking and walking) and picked up the same way when you're ready to leave. The car is always there waiting, the chauffeur at your command. There's no worry about drinking and driving.

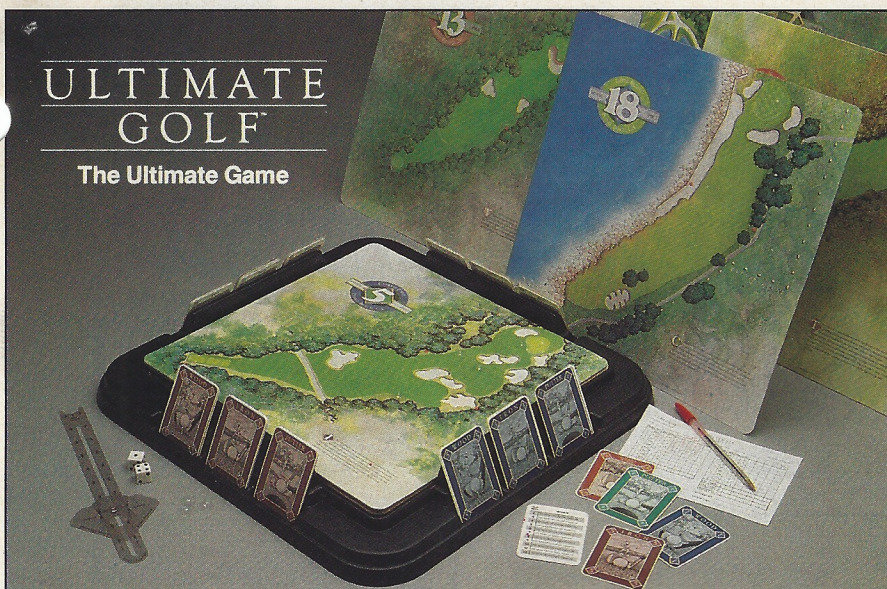
Even owning a limousine is not as outrageous an expenditure as you might think. Fifty percent of limo purchases are

made by people looking for an investment or a tax write-off, according to Dan Williams, president of Williams Motor Works in Gardena. Robi Sinclair, his marketing vice president, explains: "Because of the tax benefits, it makes sense for an individual to buy a car and sublease it to a livery company. He has his car when he wants it, and the livery rents it when he doesn't. He doesn't have the headaches of housing the car and paying wages to a chauffeur. He gets a percentage of the rentals, makes his payment each month and has green cash money left over."

"We know one man who has more money than he knows what to do with," Sinclair continues. "He needed a tax write-off, so he opened his own livery company. He put three cars into service, investing the money for a tax benefit. Now he asks his girlfriends whether they'd prefer to be picked up in a limo or in his Ferrari, and they always want the

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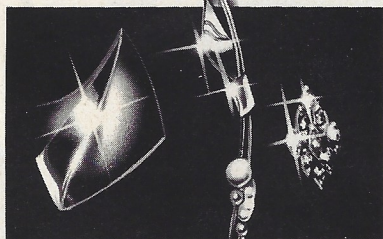
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limo. So he's real glad he bought the limos."

And the executive-commuter rationale? "We don't know what that executive and his secretary may be doing in the back seat with the divider window up," Williams laughs. "But if he's got a cellular phone, a dictating machine, maybe a personal computer, he can get as much done back there as he could in his office. It does make sense as a business tool."

Bob Johnson of O'Gara Coachworks in Simi Valley concurs and says that corporations are buying limousines for top executives so they can punch the time clock as soon as they leave the house.

Renting a limousine is simple enough. In addition to biggies like 5-Star, Dav-El and Starlite, about 20 or so independent one- or two-car services have popped up, offering more personalized care and lower rates. And although the going bill is usually around \$40 an hour, bargain hunters know to ask for multiple-hour rates, which drop the price of a Jefferson for every sweep of the minute hand.

"Call around and talk to several service representatives," suggests Greg Childs of Childs Limousine Services in Moor Park. "How cooperative are they? Are they willing to work with you, maybe give you a break on the rate? Do they charge for travel time? Do they give you the feeling that they really want your business? Ask what kind of cars they have and in what colors. How is the bar stocked, and are the beverages extra or included? What other features and equipment do their cars have?"

Ken Faggetter of Pacific Coast Limousine, with locations in Woodland Hills and Valencia, says he'll provide free samples to serious clients. "We'll drive them around for an hour or so, let them experience what it's all about, show them some video material."

And anyone can *make* a limo: All you have to do is cut a new car in half or thirds and add some additional steel. Some 30 coach builders do so, welding in extensions of various lengths and equipping interiors with the buyer's choice of just about any and every comfort, convenience and luxury imaginable. Obviously, with so many to choose from, you'd best be informed.

First off, you should know that all coach-built limos are sawed in half and stretched behind the front doors and some have extended rear doors for easier entry and exit. A double-cut car has been cut and stretched again behind the rear doors as well, which moves the rear seat back behind the door opening for added com-



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fort and privacy. Except for in the driver's compartment, which remains essentially unchanged, the windows are one-way; you can see out but nobody can see in.

Added length means more room and comfort. So-called corporate limos, normally used for airport, hotel and short-run private use, are the shortest, least expensive and most sparsely equipped, while the more luxurious stretch cars (often double-cut) are favored by rental services and their customers. East Coast limos are typically shorter (because of bad roads and more congestion), while West Coast ones are longer. "Length is power here in L.A.," says O'Gara Coachworks' publicist Joe Molina.

Most reputable builders feel that about 56 inches is the maximum practical extension for safety and durability, though Executive Coach Builders of Springfield, Missouri, makes an excellent 62-inch-stretch Lincoln. Ultra Limos of La Palma, California—best known for its awesome 48-foot, 10-wheel show-car limo, complete with kitchen facilities, big-screen TV and a 12-foot swimming pool in back—starts at 63 inches and goes to 75.

And then you get into the assorted makes and categories of limos.

LINCOLNS AND CADILLACS

Most custom coach builders make standard Lincoln and Cadillac conversions, with prices ranging from \$28,000 for the most basic corporate cars to \$65,000 for loaded superlongs. Williams puts the same full-equipment package into all of his 46-inch stretch and 56-inch double-cut Lincoln models and charges \$3,500 more for the equivalent Cadillacs. O'Gara sells several different models of Lincolns and Cadillacs in 46- and 52-inch versions, each with its own specific content and name, such as Moritz, Savoy, Claridge and Regent. Executive offers almost any length of stretch from 46 to 75 inches, with a long list of standard equipment and a longer list of options, from diplomatic-flag stanchions to full-interior bed sections.

Full-size Cadillacs were the preferred vehicles for limo conversions, but the Lincoln Town Car has achieved at least equal status in the last year or so. Cadillac had planned to stop building its large rear-drive sedans this year, so coach builders started favoring the Lincoln. Caddy's top-of-the-line Fleetwood Brougham now has a stay of execution, but it's more expensive and, in some ways, not as desirable as the Town Car. "Lincoln changed the styl-

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ing for '85," says Williams' Sinclair. "It's sleeker now, and people like it better. Also, the Lincoln's interior is four inches wider and has two inches more headroom. The Lincoln factory warranty is better, and service is less expensive. And it has a bigger engine, which is both a plus and a minus: It has more power but uses more gas."

Recently Williams unveiled the country's first *contemporary* limousine based on a stretch Lincoln Town Car. It features body-color bumpers and trim (as does the high-status AMG Mercedes), a painted steel roof (instead of padded vinyl), performance-look black-wall tires on styled-aluminum wheels (instead of the usual wire wheel covers and white walls) and a specially designed interior with cabinetry and upholstery fashioned after Scandinavian furniture, plus state-of-the-art electronic features. "The idea is contemporary, rather than traditional, elegance," he explains. If reaction to the prototype is as positive as Williams believes it will be, this special new model will go into production in 1986. And it will obsolete everyone else's limos overnight.

THE NEW FRONT-DRIVE CARS

Some builders are still leery of GM's new front-wheel drive, unibody (no full frame) C-body Cadillacs for limo conversions, while others (who say they worked closely with Cadillac during development) are building and selling them with no reported problems. Most notable among these are Armbruster/Stageway of Fort Smith, Arkansas, and Dillinger/Gaines of Brooklyn, New York. Stretch lengths

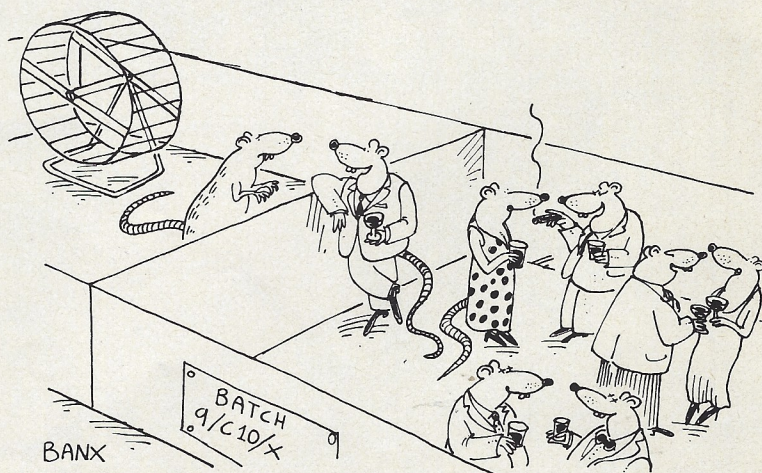
run from 18 to 54 inches, and prices range from \$32,000 to \$50,000. The latter also does C-body Oldsmobile-based limos starting at \$34,000.

FACTORY LIMOS

Cadillac continues to offer its own corporate limo, but it's now based on the new smaller, lighter and more fuel-efficient C-body de Ville, with the same seating capacity (up to eight) and nearly the same interior room as previous factory Caddys. Chrysler offers a considerably smaller limo. Based on a stretched front-wheel-drive LeBaron sedan, it's frugal with fuel, easy to park and maneuver and has a turbocharged engine standard for '86. It sells for about \$26,000 compared with \$32,640 for the Cadillac.

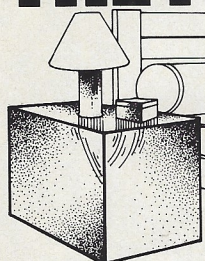
MINILIMOS

Marquis Custom Coach of Canoga Park reports good sales on its new Honda Accord-based limo and has just introduced a similar-sized Cadillac Cimarron limo. Both are stretched 52 inches and priced from \$23,000 to \$31,000, depending on equipment. Much smaller in width and headroom than the big Lincolns and Caddys, these cars are fuel efficient, fun for their novelty value and a lot less expensive. "It's reverse snobbery," says Marquis president Jules Kaplan, "intended for people who want a limo but prefer a lower profile." Somewhat larger in size and image are the \$38,000-to-\$55,000 double-cut Volvo limos converted by Dillinger/Gaines and sold by Volvoville of Massapequa, New York.



"Now this is what I call psychological research."

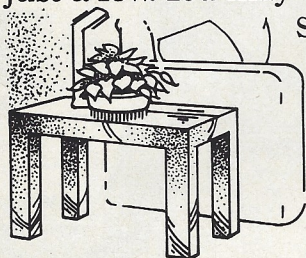
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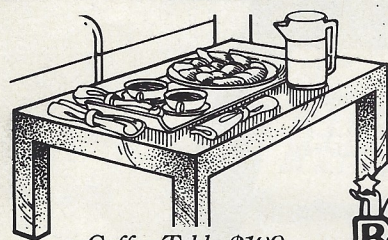
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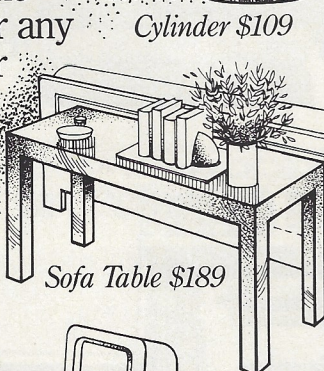


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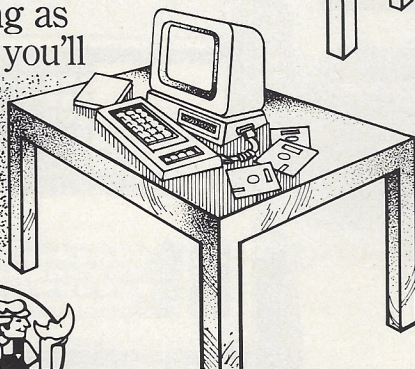
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HIGH-STATUS IMPORTS

A considerable cut above the Volvo are the Jaguar, Mercedes and Rolls-Royce limos offered by several coach builders. These start at \$68,000 for a 40-inch stretch Jaguar by Picasso Coach Builders of New York City and go up to \$100,000 for a decently equipped Mercedes and upwards of \$160,000 or more for a stretch Rolls. Rolls-Royce, predictably, is less than thrilled with other people converting its cars, so a new 36-inch-stretch factory Rolls limo was announced this year at a hefty \$185,000. Be aware that most of these luxury-import conversions (other than the factory Rolls) are based on European-spec models that do not meet U.S. safety and emissions requirements. They are brought in as "gray market" imports and certified here, a process that is neither simple nor inexpensive, if done right. Extreme caution is advised. One interesting exception is a Swiss company called Trasco, which offers U.S.-legal stretched Mercedes limos (36 or 44 inches) starting at \$92,000, plus shipping.

THE UNUSUAL AND BIZARRE

Obviously, almost any kind of car or truck can be equipped or stretched into a luxury limo; and whatever it is, if someone will buy it, someone else will build it. The LondonCoach Company of Mount Clemens, Michigan, has revived the famous '50s-style London Taxi (with a Ford four-cylinder engine for U.S. use) and offers a luxury London Sterling limo version of it for \$26,000. Royale Carriage Limited of Anaheim markets an elegant and very roomy limousine van for \$39,000 and a dual-axle maxivan version (for 10 to 14 passengers) for \$45,000. Ultra Limo of La Palma makes North-Forty stretched crew-cab pickups and sells them for \$50,000 and up.

Some of these are marketed by the builders themselves, others by dealers. Engineering, craftsmanship, service, warranty and reputation vary widely in the limo business. Do your homework, ask around, and compare carefully before buying anything.

Any questions, class? What's that funny-looking boomerang thing on the trunk? That's the TV antenna, my dear. Would you like to step inside for a little ride? Watch a little MTV? See my video etchings? ...

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