

A driver shops the 10 classes of cars

One man's best value is another's econobox. One woman's status symbol is another's over-priced whim. With more than 200 models to choose from, you can't test drive them all; you have to start somewhere.

by Gary Witzenburg

The 1987 U. S. models are so good that shopping for a new car is no longer a question of separating the good from the bad but of choosing from varying degrees of good.

But with the selection so enormous and varied, how can anyone make an intelligent choice?

Glad you asked. First, try separating the new models into logical categories. Then compare price vs. quality, standard and optional features and all-around performance. Some clear "best buys" will emerge. Others not so obvious manage to edge a number of worthy competitors.

Keep in mind that a "best buy" may not be the absolute best in its class, and it is probably not the least expensive. What it does offer is the best overall combination of price, value, quality, styling, engineering, performance, handling, standard features, reliability and probable resale value. A lot of very excellent automobiles are not considered "best buys" because they are simply more expensive (due to either high list prices or excessive dealer markups) than comparable competitors.

Here are today's generally agreed-upon 10 categories:

1. **Econocar** — These are, of course, the least expensive and most fuel-efficient autos on the market.

2. **Econosport** — These are sporty, high-performance, crisp-handling, more fun-to-drive

versions of certain econocars and small sedans. Most list for less than \$10,000.

3. **Small sedan** — These are family four-doors (and some two-doors and wagons) less than 175 inches in length.

4. **Medium sedan** — between 175 and 190 inches long.

5. **Large sedan** — over 190 inches.

6. **Luxury sedan** — Regardless of size, these are sedans with base prices over \$15,000.

7. **Sports sedan** — Includes those special four-doors with high performance, taut suspensions and a certain sporting character that makes them especially enjoyable to drive.

8. **Sports coupe.**

9. **Luxury sports coupe.**

10. **Sports/GT** — The many stylish two-door coupes and hatchbacks on the market are divided into two classes: sports coupes costing less than \$15,000 and luxury sports coupes costing more. Finally, the sports/GT group includes both two-seat sports cars and high-performance "2 plus 2" coupes.

Different versions of the same car can fall into different categories. The basic Dodge and Plymouth Colts, for example, are econocars, but their up-scale versions qualify as small sedans. Add a turbo to the Colt and it is an econosport. Mustangs, Camaros and Firebirds are sports coupes, but Mustang GTs, Camaro Z-28s and Firebird Trans Ams are in the

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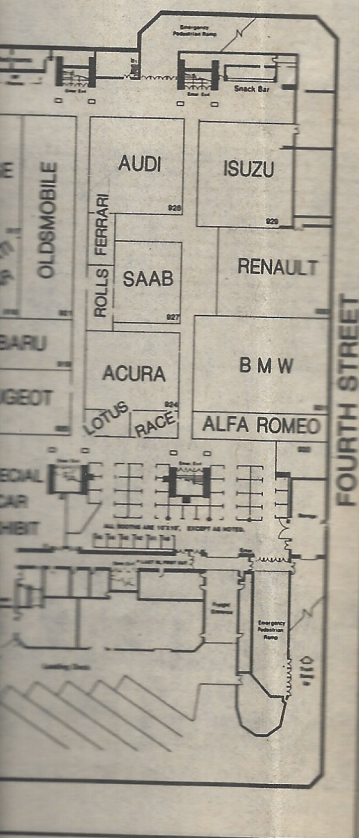


Luxury sports coupe class: the Lincoln Mark VII LSC balanced handling, performance and design with price.



Sports/GT class: a hot new Dodge Daytona Shelby Z earned mention in the most competitive grouping.

s, in one place



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the priceless Hispano Suiza (above),
Dubonnets and the Rothschilds. The
futuristic Trans Sport van (below).



A veteran driver shops the 10 car classes

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s/GT class. Pontiac's 6000 is a medium sedan, the limited-production 6000 STE is very much a sports sedan. You get the idea.

ere, then, in my opinion, are the "best buys" of the impressive '87 litter, and some honorable men-

Econocar: Chevrolet Sprint — The jury's still on Yugoslavia's Yugo and Korea's Hyundai. Japanese subcompacts keep moving up-scale, and its new baby, Fox, has yet to arrive. So Chevy's Saki-built Sprint remains the "best buy" fuel-saver for 1987. Cute, solid and sprightly, the Sprint three-door hatchback starts at just under \$6,000 (a couple hundred more for the slightly longer five-door hatchback), and the economy special "ER" version offers 54 mpg (EPA) city, 58 highway. Honorable mention: Toyota Tercel, Nissan Sentra, Mitsubishi Mirage Turbo, Dodge/Plymouth Colt Turbo.

Econosport: Volkswagen GTI — a bundle of sinew in plain but efficient VW Golf clothes. A loaf grins per dollar for under \$10,000. Honorable mention: Ford Escort GT, Toyota Corolla FX16, Chevrolet Sprint Turbo, Mitsubishi Mirage Turbo, Dodge/Plymouth Colt Turbo.

Small sedan: Plymouth Sundance and Dodge Shadow — These are handsome, well-equipped, esp-handling hatchbacks with the look of up-scale small sedans. You can choose among five versions — three-door or five-door, optional turbo power, and five-speed manual or three-speed automatic. Finer-diving small sedans can't be found for under \$8,000. Honorable mention: Ford Escort, Toyota Corolla, Chevrolet Nova, Mazda 323, Volkswagen Golf.

4. Medium sedan: Ford Taurus and Mercury Sable — These models are domestic Audi 5000s with futuristic good looks, V-6 power and the smoothest, most road-gripping suspensions this side of the Atlantic. There is ample room for six (five with front buckets), plus user-friendly controls and a convenience list as long as a Johnny Carson commercial break. Prices start around \$10,000 for Taurus, \$11,000 for Sable. Honorable mention: Toyota Camry, Nissan Stanza, Mazda 626.

5. Large sedan: Chevrolet Caprice — This is, in my opinion, America's big-car value leader for '87. It has a standard V-6 or optional V-8, and a choice of two-door, four-door or wagon models. The Caprice provides a lot of comfortable bulk for the buck at a bit over \$11,000. Honorable mention: Ford LTD Crown Victoria, Mercury Grand Marquis, Pontiac Bonneville.

6. Luxury sedan: Audi 5000CS Quattro — Audi's flagship sedan weds all-wheel drive, anti-lock brakes and turbo power under a roomy, slippery-sleek four-door body. The ultimate all-weather cruiser, the fully equipped sedan sells for \$30,000, the wagon for \$31,500. Honorable mention: Acura Legend, Saab 9000, Volvo 740/760.

7. Sports sedan: Dodge Lancer and Chrysler LeBaron GTS — These are my "best buys" in the sports sedan class for the third straight year. These roomy, handsome hatchbacks feature glued-to-the-road handling and an optional 2.5-liter balance-shaft engine. Base prices are an amazing \$9,500 for the Lancer and \$9,800 for the GTS. Honorable mention: Nissan Maxima SE, Mazda 626 GT, Pontiac 6000 STE, Volkswagen Jetta GLE.

8. Sports coupe: Acura Integra — powered by a wonderfully lively twin-cam, 16-valve, four-cylinder engine with standard five-speed gearbox, this hatchback coupe is marketed by Honda of America's brand new up-scale Acura Division, at around \$10,000. Honorable mention: Ford Thunderbird, Mercury Cougar, Dodge Daytona, Chrysler LeBaron Coupe, Toyota Celica, Volkswagen Scirocco.

9. Luxury sports coupe: Lincoln Continental Mark VII LSC — This hot-rod Lincoln features a 200-horsepower V-8 engine with port fuel injection, road-hugging air suspension, standard anti-lock brakes and plenty of comfort, quiet and luxury for about \$25,000. Honorable mention: Jaguar XJ-S.

10. Sports/GT: Mazda RX-7 — Lusty rotary power, a sexy new body and a trick rear suspension have moved Mazda's RX-7 well into Porsche territory in both looks and performance. Bend it into a curve and the rear wheels point slightly outward to help turn it in, then they shift inward on cue to keep the back end stable. Prices start at about \$14,000 for the super-fast Turbo. Honorable mention: Chevrolet Corvette, Pontiac Fiero, Ford Mustang GT, Dodge Daytona Shelby Z, Toyota MR2, Merkur XR4Ti.

Five of my 10 "best buys" are designed and produced in America. One, Audi's 5000CS, is thoroughly German; Volkswagen's GTI is a German design built in VW's Pennsylvania plant. The other three are Japanese, but one of them, the Suzuki-built Sprint, is imported and marketed by Chevrolet.

Whatever you do, shop carefully and compare feature-for-feature. Most important, buy a car you really like, one that suits your needs, lifestyle and self-image, and one you're proud to be seen in. □

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