

Fuel-Crisis Fun

Five sport coupes that offer all the fun you can stand at 20 mpg.

BY MIKE KNEPPER

• Doom and gloom. That's what the future seems to hold for car enthusiasts. As we head—irreversibly, it would seem—toward Crisis II later this summer, what have we to look forward to other than little econoboxes that wring astronomical miles out of each precious gallon of fuel, and are about as much fun as a boil?

Well, as it turns out, things aren't quite as gloomy and doomy as they

might at first seem. No, I don't have any good news about the supply of your car's favorite liquid. But I do have some good news for you. When it comes to having some automotive fun and keeping your fuel consumption to a reasonable level, you can have the best of both worlds. It's quite possible, as you will soon see, to own an automobile that is not only quite economical, but can also dish up a healthy portion of fun. How's

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LARRY GRIFFIN

that for having a cake you can eat?

This is not a test as much as the real-world proof of a theory we conjured up around the office one day last winter when the news of impending fuel shortages and skyrocketing prices had us a bit down. Ever optimistic bunch that we are, we started looking for a way around the problem. We found it, through the simple expedient of going through the current list of the EPA's fuel-consump-

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FUEL-CRISIS FUN

tion results. We looked for cars that offer a minimum of 20 mpg in the city cycle, which is the EPA figure we have found most comparable to a real-world all-around mpg figure. But we wanted more than a minimum 20 mpg. We wanted a combination of handling, performance, technological sophistication, and style.

Our choices were Volkswagen's Scirocco, Dodge's Omni 024, Mazda's new 626, Mercury's Capri, and Honda's new Prelude. The Scirocco, Omni, and Prelude are front-wheel-drivers; the Scirocco,

Mazda, and Prelude have five-speed manual transmissions; and every one is equipped—either standard or as extra-cost options—with a full complement of performance wheels, tires, and stripes. There were others that came close to the 20-mpg cutoff but didn't quite make it, like the Celica, and a couple that could have been included, like Plymouth's Arrow, but frankly didn't find much support among the staff. Our choices were known quantities—we had tested or, in the Honda's case, spent a lot of time with each over the past few

months. Each was known to turn, go, and stop with the alacrity an enthusiast demands, each was handsomely styled, and each could boast of some impressive technological sophistication. And we liked them. What more could we ask for? Another Griffin Grind over the byways of eastern Ohio to get to know them better, that's what.

You may remember our "America versus the World" test in the February 1979 issue, wherein we pitted a BMW 528i against Pontiac's Grand Am in a who-does-it-better showdown. A major

car	base price	price as tested	engine	transmission	horsepower	torque
DODGE OMNI 024	\$4638	\$6041	SOHC 4-in-line, 105 cu in (1710cc), cast-iron block and aluminum head, 1x2-bbl Holley carburetor	4-speed	75 bhp @ 5600 rpm	90 lbs-ft @ 3200 rpm
HONDA PRELUDE	6445	6445	SOHC 4-in-line, 107 cu in (1751cc), cast-iron block and aluminum head, 1x3-bbl Keihin carburetor	5-speed	72 bhp @ 4500 rpm	94 lbs-ft @ 3000 rpm
MAZDA 626	5795	6135	SOHC 4-in-line, 120 cu in (1970cc), cast-iron block and aluminum head, 1x2-bbl Nikki carburetor	5-speed	80 bhp @ 4500 rpm	105 lbs-ft @ 2500 rpm
MERCURY CAPRI	5097	7317	V-6, 171 cu in (2793cc), cast-iron block and heads, 1x2-bbl Motorcraft carburetor	4-speed	109 bhp @ 4800 rpm	142 lbs-ft @ 2800 rpm
VOLKSWAGEN SCIROCCO	6850	7580	SOHC 4-in-line, 97 cu in (1588cc), cast-iron block and aluminum head, Bosch K-Jetronic fuel injection	5-speed	78 bhp @ 5500 rpm	84 lbs-ft @ 3200 rpm



portion of that test was a subjective evaluation of the two automobiles over a long and challenging—not to mention tortuous, twisty, and tight—loop that Larry Griffin had scouted in Ohio. We decided to run the super coupes, our CAFE racers, over some of the same roads, even passing the Larry Griffin “Stupidity’s Own Reward” Roadside Memorial, the actual location where a rented, overloaded, shock-less, and bald-tired Pontiac Grand Prix had been fetched up against a dirt bank, the victim of what can only be described as a

fit of overenthusiastic driving.

The test, rather, the trip would be an overnight affair that would leave the office in Ann Arbor for a bit of steady-speed Interstate touring on the way to an overnight stop in Mansfield, Ohio. The next day we would tackle the Griffin Grind and be back at the office in time for the Eleven O’Clock News. There would be no overall winner in any category other than fuel economy. Favorites would inevitably emerge, but we would not ultimately be crowning a king of the sport coupes.

We chose, arbitrarily of course, to make the first evening’s run down the Interstate at 65 mph. That seems like a good highway cruising speed these days. It’s fast enough to keep the boredom down, but isn’t up in the cop-baiting category. We all make runs much faster, of course, but if you want to travel in your sport coupe this summer, 65 is probably where you’ll be spending most of your time. We weren’t fanatical about 65, mind you, and ran the five-car convoy up to 80 a couple of times to escape strings of semis, but that’s what

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wheelbase, in	curb weight, lbs	front	suspension rear	steering	brakes	tires
96.7	2300	ind, MacPherson strut, coil springs, anti-sway bar	ind, trailing arms integral with trans- verse member, coil springs, anti-sway bar	rack and pinion, power-assisted	front disc, rear drum, power-assisted	Goodyear GT Radial, P185/70R-13
91.3	2180	ind, MacPherson strut, coil springs, anti-sway bar	ind, MacPherson strut, coil springs, anti- sway bar	rack and pinion, power-assisted	front disc, rear drum, power-assisted	Bridgestone RD-106 Steel, 175/70SR-13
98.8	2560	ind, MacPherson strut, coil springs, anti-sway bar	rigid axle, 4 trailing links, coil springs, Panhard rod, anti- sway bar	recirculating ball	front disc, rear drum, power-assisted	Bridgestone Steel Belted Radial, 185/70SR-13
100.4	2940	ind, MacPherson strut, coil springs, anti-sway bar	rigid axle, 4 trailing links, coil springs, anti-sway bar	rack and pinion, power-assisted	front disc, rear drum, power-assisted	Michelin TRX, 190/65HR-390
94.5	1960	ind, MacPherson strut, coil springs	ind, 2 trailing arms integral with anti- sway bar, coil springs	rack and pinion	front disc, rear drum, power-assisted	Goodyear Grand Prix 70, 175/70SR-13



FUEL-CRISIS FUN

you would do in your normal driving. A very unscientific test by Sherman's standards, but also very real-world.

Not surprisingly, the Scirocco and its tiny, 1588cc engine led the pack with 36 mpg. Following along, in order, were the Mazda at 35, the Omni at 32, the Prelude at 31, and the Capri—its 2793cc V-6 engine by far the biggest in the group—at 25. None of them, obviously, will break your bank when it comes to Interstate travel.

Neither will any of them drive you around the proverbial bend with noise, bad seats, or generally bad highway manners. Despite their size and weight, these sport coupes have been bred as proper highway cars. Ambient noise at steady cruise is low, especially in the Mazda and Capri, although the Mazda was the hands-down winner in the who-can-make-the-most-commotion-getting-up-to-cruising-speed derby. The Omni, which frankly seems a bit on the cheap

side when comparing carpet, trim, and general fit and finish, is much quieter than the cheapness leads one to expect. Obviously, the sound deadening and isolation built into the pointy-nosed coupe really work. And of course that aerodynamic shape has to reduce noise considerably, while helping in the mpg derby. The Scirocco's seats—the most racing-bucket-like of the group—are also the best, with very good lateral support for both legs and back. They should be fatigue fighters on day-long jaunts along the Interstate when counting the Stuckey's is the best entertainment you can find. The Prelude and Mazda seats scored well on the highway cruise, but the drivers didn't have much to say about the Capri's seats—not good, not bad—and the Omni's seats were generally disliked for their non-adjustability and bolt-uprightness.

Finally, general manners. Don't worry about it. Work a deal with your banker for any of these little cars without fear of being blown into the weeds—literally—by semis and thunderstorms. They're stable. Let an eighteen-wheeler filled with tons of raw polyester thunder by on its way to Toledo's finest clothing manufacturers. You will not be affected.

In short, these super coupes are well suited to reasonably fast Interstate travel. You can have your 25-plus mpg and not suffer the rattling, cramped, I-hate-being-blown-into-the-next-lane econobox blues.

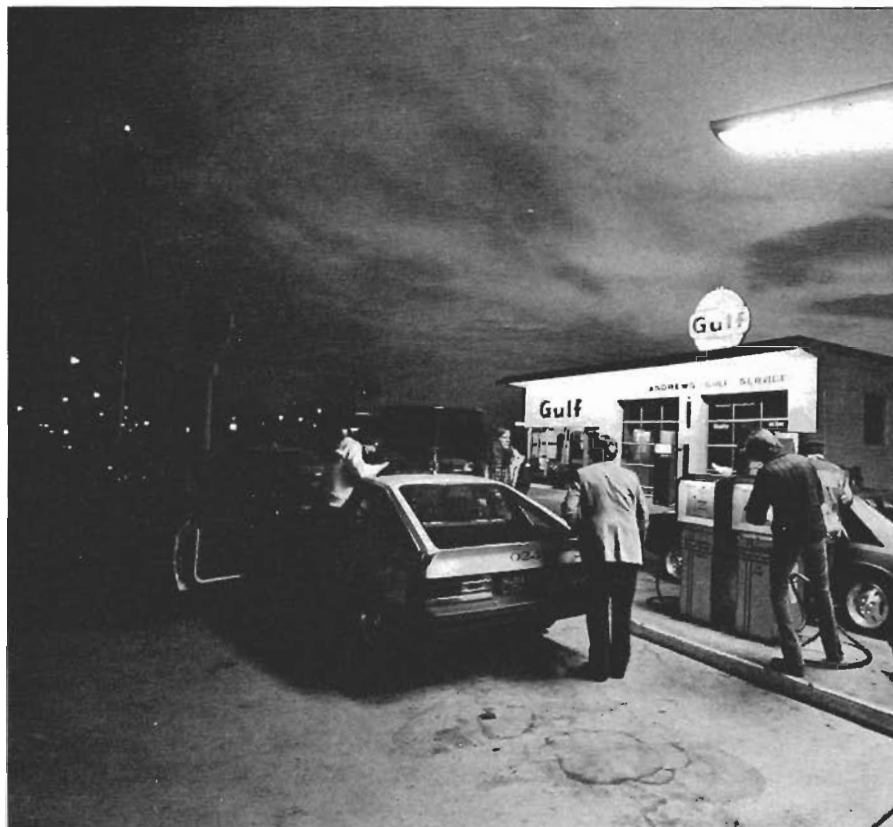
Late in the evening we rolled into Mansfield, straight into the arms of a policeman who felt the Prelude's lack of visible licensing reason enough to warrant a closer look. The car was legal—the papers were in the glove box—and the gendarme, an occasional reader of *C and D*, even recognized the bearded visage behind the wheel. "Nice cop," Mr. Davis opined over our CB linkup. "I should have gotten his name."

After dinner we took a wrong turn trying to find the motel, and a member of our party, who shall remain nameless, made a U-turn at the foot of a hill, and in front of a patrol car. As I pulled onto the shoulder and reached for my driver's license, Mr. Davis went steaming by. So much for parental concern for one's subordinates. Also, so much for getting to renew a friendship.

The officer didn't say, "We have to stop meeting like this." He didn't even smile. He did make it plain he expected his directions to the motel to have us off the streets of Mansfield and out of his



Freight-training through the Ohio countryside in pursuit of the great god Fun. And fuel economy.



FUEL-CRISIS FUN

hair before much more time had passed. He *was* a nice cop. I should have gotten his name.

The first afternoon had been devoted to proving our covey of coupes good, long-legged highway travelers. The second day we were out to prove our "fun" thesis. (Contrary to a viewpoint currently being perpetrated by certain West Coast magazines, we do not go into the Ohio countryside to terrorize. Verifiable instances of rape, pillage, and plunder have fallen off dramatically in recent months. We go to test.)

Although a racetrack means no oncoming traffic, no cops, and nothing to run into when you go off the road, those very advantages are, in a very real sense, disadvantages. It just ain't like that in the real world. That's why we like to make over-the-road runs out there where there are traffic, cops, and things alongside the road—the same things that affect your driving.

We headed into the hills outside Mansfield, changing cars every 30 minutes, not actually racing, but damn near, and keeping up a constant stream of

chatter on the CBs that covered everything from how the cars were handling to traffic advisories. The CB radio "net" was a good system and will become a standard part of future *C/D* multi-car tests. In addition to its safety and amusement value, it permitted instant comparisons. A driver could bend his car into a turn, note its reactions, and then ring up his fellow testers for immediate comparison data. The same system was used for discussions of road noise, ride harshness, seat comfort, and visibility.



AARON KILBY

PERFORMANCE COMPARISON

car	acceleration, sec		top speed, mph	braking, 70-0 mph, ft	maneuverability, 1000-ft slalom, mph	interior sound level		EPA estimated fuel economy, mpg	C/D 500-mile test trip, mpg
	0-60 mph	¼-mile				full-throttle acceleration, dBA	70-mph cruising, dBA		
DODGE OMNI 024	11.6	18.7 @ 74 mph	102	203	63.0	86	77	25	30
HONDA PRELUDE	12.0	19.0 @ 72 mph	96	192	62.8	83	73	26	25
MAZDA 626	11.8	18.8 @ 74 mph	104	196	64.7	79	74	25	28
MERCURY CAPRI	10.7	18.6 @ 75 mph	111	210	63.7	82	77	20	20
VOLKSWAGEN SCIROCCO	10.0	17.9 @ 77 mph	102	176	64.2	92	75	25	28



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CAR and DRIVER

We pitched, twisted, dipped, flew, and slid our way through eastern Ohio until late afternoon, when the route had us within striking distance of an Interstate and the official end of the trip. Since the party was splitting up at that point, a final fuel stop was made and the total fuel consumption for the 500-mile trip figured. There were some surprises. Specifically, that the Omni was the overall mpg champ at 30. The Scirocco and the Mazda tied at 28, followed by the Prelude at 25 and the Capri at 20. An impressive performance: high-speed freeway running, stopping and starting as we frequently changed drivers, foot-to-the-floor back-country flogging, and still 20- to 30-mpg fuel consumption. Take that, Brock Adams and the rest of you air-heads who think the 55-mile-per-hour speed limit is The Answer.

But we got more than good mileage. As suspected, these sport coupes were fun to drive. They may offer their fun in slightly different ways because engines, suspensions, transmissions, tires, and body styles are all different, but the final result is the same: driving enjoyment.



Mercury Capri

Big-car manners, comfort, and convenience wrapped around a very competent road machine. Everyone was surprised at its handling, considering its rather prodigious—for this class—weight. Disadvantages in higher fuel consumption may be offset in many minds by its looks and the endless list of options the other cars have only heard about. Easily the biggest attention-getter at fuel stops on the trip.



Omni 024

Easily the most go-fast-looking in the set. A willing engine that is obviously a gas miser. The seats are, simply, bad, and the steering-wheel position is abominable: too high, too angled, and it's ugly besides. Lots of room for people and packages. The good slalom time belies its slight tail-happiness.



Volkswagen Scirocco

Small on the inside, small on the outside, so don't expect to carry more than yourself and one more if you have long trips in mind. The smallest engine of the five produces the best performance, and the Scirocco's braking is considerably better than that of the other four. As its slalom times show (see the accompanying chart) the Scirocco is also nimble through the pylons. On the road, it is equally proficient in the twisty bits.



Mazda 626

Rather innocuous-looking, with a plain, uninteresting instrument panel that doesn't fit the car's performance capability. Although no one on the test drive flew into raptures about the 626, it was unanimously given high ratings, especially in comfort and quiet. No flash, just good car.



Honda Prelude

Although our early impression of the Prelude was, um, lukewarm, there seems to have been a change of heart among the staff. Look past the gimmicks on the dash and find a nimble handler. The power steering seems pointless, and in fact reduces road feel too much. Like the Capri, on the luxury side of the sport-coupe family. Typically Honda-built: tight, solid, and things fit.

See. It isn't all doom and gloom. Turns out things are looking pretty good. I mean, what more do you want than all the fun you can stand for (at the very least) 20 miles per gallon? ●

