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Lesux adds second sport utility vehicle to line up. See page 14B.

Passenger air bags expensive

By Catherine Strong
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Passenger-side air bags cost almost three times as much as driver-side air bags for every year of life they save, a new study released today found.

But researchers writing in The Journal of the American Medical Association said air bags still were a good investment.

"The passenger bag appears to be a worthwhile investment. But we have an ethical obligation to correct a problem that we have created for children," said lead author John D. Graham, director of the Harvard Center for Injury Control at the Harvard School of Public Health.

The authors found that passenger-side air bags cost \$61,000 for every year of life they save individuals, while driver-side air bags cost \$24,000.

The researchers concluded air bags were a worthwhile investment compared with the cost of other preventive health treatments such as screening for hypertension (\$120,000 per year of life saved) or kidney dialysis (\$30,000-\$35,000).

However, air bags do not approach the benefit from seat belts, which provide a net cost savings even when only half the population uses them, Graham said.

The authors measured air bag cost-effectiveness with a computer model to track a hypothetical fleet of 10 million vehicles on American roads over 20 years. They put casualty figures from actual crashes into the model along with assessing medical and other costs.

The analysis indicated one child would be killed on the passenger side for every 10 adult lives saved — similar to the 1:7 ratio derived from current government statistics.

The researchers said the ratio might become worse as cars with front passenger air bags are resold to owners with less income and education who use seat belts less.

"Imagine that we proposed a mandatory vaccine that everybody in the country would take," Graham said. "If it would kill one child for every 10 adults saved, it would be very unlikely to be approved as an appropriate measure."

Air bags now are required by the federal government on all new cars.

Passenger-side air bags are blamed for 52 deaths, including 49 children and infants, according to government statistics. Driver-side air bags have killed 35 adults.

The government estimates air bags have saved 2,620 lives, but only 332 of those were on the passenger side.



Ready for round II

Nissan's dandy Altima gets new duds, better ride



1998 Nissan Altima



Winfred B. Cross



Nissan's Altima sedan is a car that I would recommend to anyone. But for some reason I never remember it unless I'm in it.

That's puzzling considering how good a car it is. It's stylish, competent and affordable — the ingredients for success.

And it is successful. Every other sedan on the road seems to be an Altima. Nissan has been very happy with sales. But it blends in with much of

what is out there.

It should be even happier in 1998. The company has revamped its Altima, giving it a fresh look, a more quiet engine and a lower price.

The new look is evolutionary, and not by accident. Nissan found customers liked the car, even though it was five years old. So an entirely new look wasn't needed. The wheelbase remains unchanged, but the body is longer, wider and taller. It's more aerodynamic, dropping from 0.34 coefficient of drag to 0.32cd. The trunk gets the most dramatic treatment. It's more stylish and larger with a better looking tail light assembly.

The interior has been restyled as well. The instrument cluster is hooded, keeping glare away. The instruments

are large, especially the speedometer and tachometer. Numbers are clean and large, making them easy to see at a glance. The clean design is spoiled by a number of idiot lights which make the dash look like a Christmas tree when the ignition is switched on. The audio and climate controls are housed in a center console that is used in several other models. Dual air bags are standard.

Extra cup and coin holders, map pockets and cubby holes abound, making it a snap to store small items.

There is a touch more leg, hip and head room, which makes the car even more generous in those proportions. Front seat passengers are treated to exceptionally comfortable front seats which are multi-adjustable. The rear bench is comfortable for three, cavernous for two.

The Altima's 2.4-liter, four-cylinder engine has been massaged to offer more quiet operation and better low-end torque. It still makes 150 horsepower — one of the most powerful in its class. That's better than some six-cylinders. It uses lighter pistons, low-friction rings and reduced camshaft and crankshaft friction. It's mated to an easy to shift five-speed transmission or a four-speed automatic shared with the Maxima.

The original Altima was a pleasant driving car. This one's even better. The body is 20 percent more rigid, giving it a

more substantial feel on the road. Bumps, dips and other road imperfections are soaked up with no problem. Handling feels a bit sharper, especially turn-ins. The steering feels as precise as ever and the brakes work like a charm.

The car's cabin is as quiet as some luxury cars. There is a pronounced absence of wind, road and engine noise. Traveling at 65 mph barely raised a peep. Conversations can be held without shouting, even if you are listening to the better than average-sounding stereo system.

Any problems? One. My Altima was finished in a sick shade of green, which is offered on a few other Nissans. It needs to be banished from the color chart.

Otherwise, the Altima is as pleasant as it was, maybe better in the driving department. The GXE is equipped with lots of standard stuff, including air conditioning, four-speaker stereo system with compact disc player, cruise control, illuminated entry and exit system, 60/40 split-fold down rear seat and wood grain trim.

The price is certainly right — \$17,990, more than \$1,500 less than a comparably equipped 1997 model. That makes this car an even bigger bargain, and possibly a bit more memorable. It certainly has gotten better.



PHOTO/NISSAN MOTORS

1998 Nissan Altima

Mustangs are all in the family

By Becky Vollmer
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

EDWARDSVILLE, Ill. — Filling the better part of three acres of prime land in Edwarsville is what Bernie Harville calls his "retired Pony farm," where old Ford Mustangs that have seen better days can "live out their years in quiet seclusion."

There are about 175 old Ponies living there, some in better shape than others. Time slowly is eating away at most of them, and what rust hasn't got quickly becomes wrapped in weeds and vines.

But Harville's Mustang Corral, which has been around for 17 years, isn't the final resting place for all of the Mustangs. It's true that the ones out back generally are sitting ducks for parts hunters, but some that limp through the Corral's doors are whisked off to Pony heaven — where they are restored to their former glory.

"I sometimes remember them sitting in the showroom, all shiny and bright," Harville said while walking the grounds under a cloudless August sky. He said resurrecting the old Mustangs isn't just about restoring cars but more like a second chance at dreams.

"Say you buy a new car for \$25,000. Was that a Plymouth or a Ford or maybe a Pontiac?" people say. All the cars look the same today," Harville said.

"But when a Mustang goes by, they look," he said. "Yeah, I had one like this," they remember."

Convertible models are the most popular candidates for face lifts, Harville said. Next come the fastback models, followed by the hardtops.

"We've got 'em lined up," he said.

Harville remembers being drawn in by the "Mustang mystique" when the car first was introduced late in 1964. He wasn't interested in sports, he said, but he needed something to talk about with his sons, Tim and Shawn. With baseball or football out of the question, Bernie Harville said he focused on cars, Mustangs in particular.

"I think later I created a monster," he said.

The "monster" was born in 1980 in a three-car garage on historic U.S. Route 66, just down the road from the Corral's present spot. A photograph hanging prominently in Harville's cluttered office shows his sons standing in that garage, ready to tackle the new business' first projects.

Three years later, the Harvilles built on the present site, over the years filling

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South Carolina officials scratch heads over who gets BMW taxes

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SPARTANBURG, S.C. — BMW has paid 11 Upstate counties about \$500,000 in special license plate taxes, but local officials do not know how to distribute the money because they do not have addresses for the automakers' employees.

A state law passed in July says BMW, which has a plant in Greer, must pay a \$697 tax for each car it provides employees through an agreement similar to a lease. Of that, \$677 goes to the county where the employee lives. The state gets

the rest.

The taxes should benefit only the employees' home cities, school districts and fire districts, according to Rep. Lewis Vaughn, R-Taylors.

The problem is, BMW is not required to give out employees' addresses, and the state Public Safety Department says it is not responsible either.

So Spartanburg County has \$160,557 on hand, and Treasurer Oren L. Brady III says his hands are tied.

With 300 tax districts county-wide, figuring out how to evenly distribute the money could

be a nightmare, County Administrator Roland Windham said.

"I'm sitting here with \$229,000, and I have to find out how to distribute it," Greenville County Auditor George Hendrix said.

He expects a solution next week when auditors and treasurers from around the state meet in Greenville for an annual convention. "I'm just treading water until next week," he said.

State law does not require BMW to supply names and addresses to the Public Safety

Department. But the law does require the agency to find a way to distribute the tax money properly.

Brady said that means getting the addresses.

BMW spokesman Bobby Hitt said he met with Public Safety officials this summer and asked them what information they wanted. They told him to supply the number of license plates issued in each county, which he did.

BMW has met its obligations and the counties must fix their own problems, Hitt said. "Our obligation was to pay the tax,"



One of the BMW produced at the Greenville Plant